

Local Food Systems – International Perspectives
A Review

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Introduction

As the development of the local food movement in Ontario is not happening in isolation, the trends and the lessons of local/regional food initiatives around the world are worthy of consideration. The purpose of this review is to provide a brief overview of research and initiatives in other parts of the world, which may be useful for identifying patterns of successful models for local food hubs. Focusing on European Union countries, with an additional, less comprehensive turn to Australia and New Zealand, this overview is a cursory scan of scholarly and “gray” (government and community) literature on food hubs and regional food systems. There are multiple reasons for this geographical focus: 1. only literature in English was reviewed; 2. initiatives taking place in historical and socioeconomic conditions similar to those in Canada have greater relevance to our work; and 3. Ontario food researchers' ongoing collaborations with researchers in the European Union, particularly in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, provided preliminary direction for this review.

This review is supplementary to the much more thorough review of North American literature developed by Elena Christy, Karen Landman, and Alison Blay-Palmer, and it focuses on a small number of illustrative examples while paying particular attention to ways in which local food initiatives in those places differ from those in North America.

Section 1: Interpretations of “Local” Food

Local food initiatives are often visionary and innovative, and as such could hardly be characterized as reactionary. Nevertheless, they are generally developing *in response* to the industrial food system. While the way in which they approach local food may vary, the goal of providing an alternative to the globalized industrial food system tends to be the common thread among most, if not all such initiatives. Consequently, local food initiatives often embody other values that stand in contrast to global industrial food – such as fair trade, organic, direct sales, shortened supply chain, and so on.

The discourse surrounding the North American turn to local food tends to place a great deal of emphasis on providing *alternatives* to the industrial food system, a system seen to be problematic for public health, the environment, food safety, economy (e.g., imports and outsourcing), and so on. Increasingly, the connection to place (standing in for trust and social value), in contrast to the

placelessness of industrial food, is also seen as a benefit. In Western Europe, the re-localization of the food system is seen to have many of those same benefits, but it is also more strongly linked with tradition and quality. Unlike North America, Europe never really let go of linking food *origin* to value, but that link has historically emphasized location over proximity. In other words, what has typically added value to food in Europe are the place of origin and the traditional preparation methods (e.g., serrano ham) rather than the consumer's proximity to the food's origin. The concepts of terroir, landraces, and geographical indications (see Table 1) all originated in Western Europe – not necessarily to localize food, but more to *locate* it and to protect particular food and practices.

Table 1: Three concepts commonly used to identify foods of particular origin

Concept	Definition
Terroir	A set of location-specific characteristics given to food and beverages by the geographical and climate conditions, soil quality, and traditional preparation practices particular to a place.
Landraces	Plant or animal breeds adapted for a particular location; recognized in Europe since 1890 (see Vetelainen, Negri, & Maxted, 2009) and now legally regulated through multiple legislative tools at national and European Commission levels.
Geographical Indications (GIs)	Legal term introduced by the World Trade Organization in 1994, building on over a century of other trademark agreements and protections in Europe. GIs are legally used to label and protect products considered to embody terroir. Encompassing all sorts of geographically specific products, GIs have mostly been used for food, and most prominently for wine and spirits, which enjoy “additional protection” under the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights. Most familiar examples include Parma cheese and ham, Serrano ham, Champagne, Bordeaux wine, Cognac, and so on.

The more recent work on re-localization of food systems has in many ways shared the motivations of similar work in North America, but it has also relied on this better-established and at least partly formalized framework of locality food.

Section 2: Local Food and “Community”

The concepts such as terroir, landraces, and GIs stand in contrast to placeless, standardized industrial food, but are nevertheless terms meant to distinguish such products in the marketplace and as such are ultimately economic instruments. Still, the terms, albeit somewhat rigid, help locate food and imbue it with a sense of place, which creates space for value-based food systems. The origin of food is then not about simple geography, but about what that geography represents.

It is in this context that the contemporary local food initiatives are taking place in Western Europe. Re-localization of food systems is seen to serve multiple purposes that are more in line with larger social shifts towards sustainability (Renting et al, 2009). Such larger alternative goals are also understood to shorten supply chains and thus ensure greater quality and authenticity of food (Renting et al, 2003; Brunori, 2007; Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000; Maye et al, 2007; Maye and Kirwan, 2010). The multiple values of local food encompass environmental, social, economic, and human value (Holt, 2007). Brunori makes an argument for an even more complex analysis of the *meanings* of local food (see Table 2 below).

Table 2: “some of the meanings that may be attributed to local food” from Brunori, 2007.

Functional	Health
	Taste
Ecological	Food miles
	Biodiversity and landscape
Aesthetic	Diversity vs standardisation
	Distinction
Ethical	Authenticity
	Identity and solidarity
Political	To change the balance of power in the food chain
	To orient production and consumption patterns

In this alternative context food is not necessarily separate from conventional food, but is at the very least more deeply “embedded” in the communities where it is produced, exchanged, and consumed (Sonnino and Marsden, 2006). Winter (2003) suggests that the turn to local food, while motivated by multiple values, is ultimately political and driven by “defensive localism”.

Brunori (2007) argues that re-localization can take physical, symbolic or relational forms, but is in essence an expression of local community. This is in line with how others have connected local food to community and the links between alternative food systems and community development. Where a sense of place is strong, that sense is “often described as a ‘sense of community’ and is related not only to other residents, but to the social order, common norms and, to a lesser extent, civic culture in a neighbourhood” (Dempsey et al. 2011, p.296). Marsden et al. (2010) propose that “sense of place” is essential to sustainable community development and that sense, in turn, is commonly attributed to the people who live in a particular place. They suggest that the sum of social relations and opportunities for face-to-face interactions are what really allows for creation of strong webs that stimulate community skill development and trust and, in turn, build sustainable communities.

Brunori (2007) sees contemporary local food systems as ongoing projects of community building, where local food is really “localism” food and the actors continuously “reconstruct local identities through local food systems” (para. 52). This indicates that the meaning of local (however vague) that is embedded in local food, rather than the actual location of its origins, may be what is essential to the success local food and is more or less equated with social relationships rather than physical space. Such findings may suggest that the contemporary food re-localization in Western Europe may build on the well established understandings of “locality” foods, but are also generating more complex meanings of local food and the relationships it entails. Arguably, it is this socio-cultural dimension that unifies the market-based instruments (described in Table 1 above) and the more recent movement for food re-localization.

Section 3: Current Research

There is substantial research in Europe that explores local or regional food systems, particularly in the context of sustainable development. Here we point to only a handful of the larger projects that have received intentional attention.

Our own work in Ontario has been greatly influenced by the growing body of research at Cardiff University where researchers like Terry Marsden, Kevin Morgan, Roberta Sonnino, and others, are continuously expanding the understanding of local food systems and their relationships to

environmental sustainability, community development, and place-making. This work has placed food at the heart of sustainable place-making, social economy, and rural development (see <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/cplan/research/centre/sustainable-urban-and-regional-food> and <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/research/sustainableplaces/>)

Researchers at Wageningen University explicitly link food security and sustainable development and are currently exploring ways to scale up inclusive agri-food markets and develop urban and peri-urban agriculture (see http://www.wageningenur.nl/en/Expertise-Services/Research-Institutes/centre-for-development-innovation/CSDFS/CSDFS_projects.htm). One of Wageningen University's initiatives is SUPURBFOOD, which looks at short food supply chains and multifunctional agriculture in urban and peri-urban contexts (see <http://www.supurbfood.eu/index.php>).

Wageningen University also coordinates PUREFOODS, a European Commission supported international project interested in the “new food geography: sustainable food supply chains, public sector food procurement practices and (peri-)urban food strategies” and dedicated to training emerging researchers who explore “the socio-economic and socio-spatial dynamics of the (peri-)urban and regional foodscape” (see <http://purefoodnetwork.eu/about/>).

Now completed Facilitating Alternative Agro-food Networks: Stakeholder Perspectives on Research Needs project engaged academic and community researchers in Austria, France, Hungary, Poland, and the United Kingdom to identify a future research agenda on alternative agro-food networks (see <http://www.faanweb.eu/>).

Finally, Foodlinks is another European Commission-funded initiative, but rather than generating research, Foodlinks is interested in connecting scientists, policymakers, and civil society organizations in order to mobilize the existing research for the purpose of promoting sustainable food consumption and production (see <http://www.foodlinkscommunity.net/>).

These examples, though not nearly exhaustive, are representative of the type, scale, and scope of ongoing research efforts in European Union countries that are aimed at strengthening local, sustainable food systems.

Section 4: Community Initiatives

As in North America, some of the most innovative work in the realm of local food is happening at the community level. Described below are just a handful of illustrative examples.

The town of Todmorden, England, for instance, has become an international model for transforming local communities through food. Now in its fifth year, the Incredible Edible Todmorden project was started by a councillor who envisioned transforming public spaces into edible gardens. The outcomes, of course, have included the typical benefits of community gardens (social connection, more enjoyable public spaces, and educational opportunities regarding environmental and economic benefits of local foods) but have also attracted visitors from all over the world who travel to Todmorden just learn more about this project (see <http://www.incredible-edible-todmorden.co.uk>).

Another noteworthy initiative is Stroudco Foodhub, a non-profit virtual hub based in Stroud, England that connects producers and consumers and aims to increase availability and accessibility of local foods in Stroud and area. While the virtual food hub models already exist in Canada and the United States, Stroudco's efforts are of note as the organization is currently developing open-source software to made available to any community groups interested in doing similar work (see www.stroudco.org.uk).

A more business development-oriented initiative can be found in Drumshanbo, Ireland. There, the former site of the Lairds jam factory is now The Food Hub: The Centre for Growth and Excellence. Conceived as a way to counter the loss of 100 jobs in community that followed the closure of the jam factory, the not-for-profit enterprise now hosts food production and preparation training programs and is home to 14 food businesses, a community kitchen and time-share production facility, and a range of other services including computer training suite, business plan consultants and even a “resident” food technologist (see www.thefoodhub.com).

Somewhat similar in intent, though significantly larger, is a foundation-supported Making Local Food Work initiative that connects and supports small food enterprises in England (see <http://www.makinglocalfoodwork.co.uk>).

The final example is one familiar to many, but nevertheless a central force in much of the local food work in Europe. Slow Food International, founded in Italy in 1986 has been instrumental in shaping the discourse of alternative food and agriculture as not only an alternative to the fast, industrial food, but also as a movement links food to taste, quality, nutrition, social justice, and environmental sustainability (see <http://www.slowfood.com/>).

Section 5: Government Support

European Commission has always given a great deal of importance to food and agriculture. The European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) predates the Union by three decades, as it was established by the Union's precursor, European Economic Community, in the early 1960s. CAP was for a long time concerned primarily with food security and productivity, and it still in many ways continues to be an economic policy. However, compared to agricultural policies in North America, CAP has in recent efforts made notable efforts to become more inclusive of social, cultural, and environmental dimensions of agriculture. Current CAP links local food to quality and sustainability, and protects traditional food products under the protections described in Section 1 of this review. Programs that support the development of local food in the European Union typically do so indirectly – though supports for environmental agri-practices, innovation, and diversification in rural development.

European Commissions Network for Rural Development sees local food as key to rural development and gateway to a range of economic, environmental and social benefits (see the Local Food and Short Supply Chains page at <http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/themes/local-food-and-short-supply-chains/en/>). There is also increasing recognition that CAP needs to better facilitate local food and short supply chains (Cioloş, 2012) although it remains to be seen how that will play out in the current CAP redesign efforts.

Finally, as indicated in Section 3 of this review, European Commission is investing substantial funds into research that considers and supports re-localization of food systems.

Aside from the European Commission's efforts, various other levels of government in Europe have been promoting and supporting local and regional food, with most concrete policies addressing public procurement policies. Examples include:

- ⌚ Wales – Welsh Government has an assertive public procurement plan developed in 2009 and titled *Local Sourcing Action Plan - 'Food and Drink for Wales'* with an explicit aim to increase local food sales and consumption.
- ⌚ Scotland – in 2009 Scottish government adopted a national food and drink policy that not only includes public procurement guidelines but also commits to promoting sustainability through supports for environmentally sustainable agricultural practices.

Section 6: Critiques

As is the case in North American context, there is no shortage of critiques of food re-localization. Some criticize local food initiatives in European Union for being protectionist (Driver, 2012), although many of the initiatives are arguably quite forthcoming about that, as is European Commission with respect to CAP as evidenced through the protectionist subsidies structures that CAP facilitates. Some initiatives, such as Slow Food International, are at times viewed as class-based and pretentious (Meneley, 2004). Critics also see local food initiatives as inefficient and potentially inadequate in addressing environmental concerns (Edwards-Jones et al, 2008), or too simplistic and laden with assumptions (Born and Purcell, 2006). While local food is undoubtedly gaining increasing traction, these critiques should not be ignored as they provide important insights and invite continued self-reflection, which can ultimately help re-localization efforts to think more critically and work with greater care.

Section 7: Developments in Australia and New Zealand

Australia and New Zealand have seen a parallel development of local and regional food initiatives, and given their historical and economic similarities to Canada, we also took a cursory look at some of the more prominent initiatives in that part of the world.

Research:

- ⌚ Regional Food Research Network Australasia and *Locale: the Australasian-Pacific Journal of Regional Food Studies* (www.localejournal.orgwww.localejournal.org; see also <http://sustainfood.com.au/research/>)

Community initiatives:

- ⌚ Australian Food Hubs Network at <https://www.facebook.com/AusFoodHubsNetwork>
- ⌚ Cultivating Community at <http://www.cultivatingcommunity.org.au/>
- ⌚ Grow it Local gardening network at <http://www.growitlocal.com.au/about.aspx>
- ⌚ Local Food New Zealand at <http://www.localfood.co.nz/>
- ⌚ Sustainable Table at www.sustainabletable.org.au/
- ⌚ Wellington Local Food Network at <http://www.localfoodnetwork.org.nz/about-u/>

Government support:

- ⌚ Australia recently introduced its National Food Plan (see <http://www.daff.gov.au/nationalfoodplan/white-paper>) – the plan emphasizes sustainability and commits investments into sustainable agriculture; it also commits \$1.5 million to the Community Food Grants program; however, the plan largely favours large industry and export-oriented production.
- ⌚ New Zealand similarly emphasizes the role of industry and exports (see for example <http://www.med.govt.nz/sectors-industries/food-beverage/food-innovation-network>) and as of yet does not provide substantial support for food system re-localization.

Emerging Resources, Kits, and Guides

- ⌚ Centre for Sustainable Development and Food Security at Wageningen University
(<http://www.wageningenur.nl/en/Expertise-Services/Research-Institutes/centre-for-development-innovation/CSDFS.htm>)
- ⌚ Cultivating Community – Australian civil society organization dedicated to community development through “fair, secure and resilient food systems”
(<http://www.cultivatingcommunity.org.au/>)
- ⌚ Foodlinks: Using Knowledge Networks to Promote Sustainable Food – a European Commission initiative to foster a “shared learning agenda” among university, government, and civil society partners, to promote sustainable production and consumption of food
(<http://www.foodlinkscommunity.net/>)
- ⌚ Incredible Edible Todmorden Unlimited toolkit – a wide array of resources, some relevant only locally, but others (such as School Files – a collection of resources for educators) have wider application (<http://www.incredible-edible-todmorden.co.uk/resources>)
- ⌚ Making Local Food Work – collection of toolkits and guides for community food enterprises
(http://www.makinglocalfoodwork.co.uk/practical_guides_toolkits.cfm)
- ⌚ PUREFOOD Network – a European Commission training initiative focused on “the so-called new food geography: sustainable food supply chains, public sector food procurement practices and (peri-)urban food strategies” (<http://purefoodnetwork.eu/>)
- ⌚ Research Centre for Sustainable Urban and Regional Food at Cardiff University
(<http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/cplan/research/centre/sustainable-urban-and-regional-food>)
- ⌚ Sustainable Places Research Institute at Cardiff University
(<http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/research/sustainableplaces/>)
- ⌚ United Nations Environment Programme, Sustainable Public Procurement – a number of reports and guidelines available, and a Public Procurement Toolkit in the works
(<http://www.unep.fr/scp/procurement/docsres/>)

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