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JUST WHAT DOES LOCAL MEAN?

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Food that is locally produced, marketed, and consumed—termed “local food”—is not a particularly new concept in the U.S. food system. Local food and its proponents have origins in the “Slow Food” movement and organic agriculture, and it is common to hear arguments for a relocalization of the food system. Yet recent interest in local food suggests that the term “local” is being used in new and different ways, and by people and organizations that would have previously had no interest in movements that challenge the mainstream food system.

The term “local food” has permeated all types of public discourse on food and eating in the United States. Best-selling books, newspaper and magazine articles, and TV news stories have been devoted to local foods and its adherents, and the term has been promoted at the highest levels of government and codified into Federal law and regulations. But is it possible that among all of the new users of the term “local food” there is a broad consensus on its meaning? Given the diverse interests of those using the term, it is more likely that “local” has come to mean many different things to many different people. Further, different definitions may represent different motivations for local foods advocates or for entrants into the local foods market place.

Many definitions use political boundaries or geographical distance to identify local products, while others focus on how food is produced and distributed. Underlying these definitions is the assumption that local foods can satisfy a set of demands—be they related to quality and freshness, social or environmental sustainability, or economic well being. Examining the different local definitions can help uncover why the term has come to enjoy such broad use, and what individuals, communities, and policymakers hope to achieve by supporting local foods.

Little Agreement Regarding Distance and Political Boundaries

Local food clearly refers to a geographic production area that is circumscribed by boundaries and in close proximity to the consumer. This area may represent an existing or imagined “foodshed”—the area from which a locality derives its food supply (Peters et al., 2008). Beyond this general definition, however, there is little agreement on the geographic circumscription and proximity that are relevant for a given location, food product, or individual consumer. A common geographic definition is within a 100-mile radius of where the food is consumed. But this distance, or other similar definitions, is arbitrarily selected, and may not match well with consumer preferences and attitudes about local food. Consumers exhibit great variation in the distance they consider to be local, and this distance may be different for fresh and processed products (Durham, King, and Roheim, 2009).

Some consumers think of local foods as those that come from within certain political boundaries, such as their county, metropolitan area, state, or region. Studies of consumer purchases indicate that state of origin may be a natural geographic definition of local for some consumers (Darby et al., 2008), and that consumers are willing to pay a premium for in-state products (Giraud, Bond, and Bond, 2005) and products from within the consumers' county (Schneider and Francis, 2005).

State boundaries also fail to fully capture consumer definitions of local food (Ostrom, 2007). State of origin may only be important for some products (Eastwood, Brooker, and Orr, 1987), and consumers may use

regional definitions of local that cross state boundaries (Brown, 2003). Individuals also appear to hold multiple definitions of local: A survey of 120 food shoppers yielded 140 unique responses to an open-ended question of the definition of local foods; only 3% of respondents identified state, county or community boundaries as the relevant local geography (Wilkins, Bowdish, and Sobal, 2002).

The difficulty in identifying a single geographic definition of local is illustrated by a definition adopted by the U.S. Congress in the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008. For certain Federal rural development loan programs, a "locally produced agricultural food product" is, "any agricultural food product that is raised, produced, and distributed in (1) the locality or region in which the final product is marketed, so that the total distance the product is transported is less than 400 miles from the origin of the product, or (2) the State in which the product is produced." In a country where some counties in the West are larger than some states in the East, the concept of "local" must accommodate a wide range of perspectives and definitions.

How Products Get to Consumers May Be Important

An article in *The New York Times* in 2009 explored the limits of a geographic-based definition of local foods by asking the following question (Severson, 2009): Could potato chips produced by a snack food and beverage conglomerate be considered a local product in the geographic area where the potatoes are sourced and processed? Judging from the responses of local food advocates quoted in the article, and in the dozens of online reader comments, the answer is 'no.' Those who rejected this product as fitting a local definition did so because the company and the product did not fit their profile of a local food enterprise and food product. Comments noted the importance of sustainability and small-scale food enterprises in determining what is considered a local product. If geography is not sufficient to define local, what additional information is important for consumers and producers?

Extending the definition of local beyond geographic boundaries suggests that people care about how and by whom food is produced, distributed, and marketed. Local foods may represent a break from most food products available in the predominant grocery supply chain in terms of both origin and production processes (Hinrichs, 2000). Or, they may represent a difference in how customers interact with producers; rather than a nameless and faceless market transaction, a local product may be one that involves personal interaction with producers. In this case, proximity is defined in terms of social distance, rather than geographic distance.

Coupling "how" and "by whom" with "where" in definitions of local vastly expands the universe of potential definitions, and may reflect a desire to support sustainable food system practices. Some consumers may seek out food produced in an environmentally or socially sustainable way. For example, consumers may patronize local food markets to express support for small farmers. Or, consumers of animal products may want to know that animals are treated well. Although these concepts are not necessarily related to geographic or social proximity between producers and consumers, proximity may help consumers verify that the food they purchase meets their demands. Thus, demands for certain production characteristics can become entwined with perceptions of local food, even if those characteristics are not location specific.

Characteristics of the intermediate stages of distribution can also be important for local definitions. That is, a locally sourced product may also require a local supply chain. A useful concept for examining local definitions is the short food supply chain (see Marsden, Banks, and Bristow, 2000). Short supply chains are distinguished by the information conveyed to consumers about the locality of production and distribution activities. Direct interaction between consumers and producers is clearly a type of short food supply chain that may be considered local. Supply chains with additional intermediaries, such as distributors or product aggregators, could also be considered local depending on the location of production and processing and whether information about those activities is conveyed to consumers.

Short food supply chains may be identified by their marketing outlet. Farmers markets and community supported agriculture (CSA) enterprises are a clear signal to consumers that the products they are purchasing are locally produced and are traveling through short supply chains, although not necessarily direct-marketing supply chains. Farm stores and farm stands can also fit the definition of a short supply chain. Other retail outlets could be considered part of a local food supply chain, even if it involves additional intermediaries, if all or most of the links in the supply chain are based within the local geographic area and the supply chain is designed to convey information to the consumer about the product's origin.

Linking Definitions, Characteristics, and Market Performance

Pairing production and distribution characteristics with location characteristics of food products indicates that local definitions are derived from preferences for desirable food system performance outcomes. These may include individual demands for product quality, freshness, and price. Or, they may reflect demand for public benefits, such as reduced fossil fuel use and greenhouse gas emissions, support for jobs and income generated in a community, and improved community health.

Different definitions of local can be thought of as sets of characteristics designed to achieve different market performance outcomes. A definition of local in which products are produced within a certain distance of where they are marketed may be thought to reduce transportation distances and thus transportation fuel use and emissions. A different definition may emphasize direct sales from producers to consumers to eliminate supply chain intermediaries, allow producers to capture a greater share of the retail price, and reduce the retail price paid by consumers; these characteristics may be thought to improve access to healthy foods in underserved communities while simultaneously supporting nearby farmers.

If performance outcomes are the true motivation for adopting local characteristics, why not simply compare different products and supply chains on key market performance measures? Such comparisons would provide a more direct connection between what is demanded of the food system and the ability of different products and supply chains to meet those demands. Although there may be instances where, for example, shorter transport distances reduce greenhouse gas emissions, counter examples can also be observed. Whether or not a local characteristic achieves a market performance demand is an empirical question, and the performance impacts of many local characteristics are ambiguous.

Focusing on desired market performance outcomes minimizes the importance of determining which products or supply chains can be defined as local. There may also be methods to achieve the same outcomes that are unrelated to the food system. But there are reasons for consumers, policy makers, producers, and communities to continue examining different definitions of local, at least in the near term.

Local definitions can help clarify what consumers and communities demand from the food system. The ever-expanding set of food choices available to U.S. consumers can satisfy an array of demands, and these demands may be rapidly shifting. From a policy perspective, local definitions may be useful for identifying the demands for performance outcomes that have broad public benefits and warrant public investments. Revealing these underlying demands may indicate where policymakers can focus resources to support desirable outcomes not currently provided in the marketplace, or where policies may be counter-productive.

Understanding the nuances of local definitions may also be necessary for the public to evaluate whether investments in local food systems yield the expected return of outcomes they demand. That is, it may not be sufficient to demonstrate that public investments—for example, in infrastructure—have localized food production and marketing. It may also be necessary to demonstrate that localization resulted in the desired outcomes that underlie local definitions.

Although local foods are defined in many different ways, uses of the term share a common desire to shape the food system to provide desirable performance outcomes or reduce negative outcomes. But these desired outcomes are numerous, and no single definition can adequately capture the diverse demands that are reflected by support for local foods. Connecting demands of food system performance to the characteristics that can satisfy those demands is key to understanding the different definitions of local foods.

For More Information

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