

Walking the thin line: urban action towards food justice



Local food movements have been criticized in the past for mainly catering for upper middle class people, and even for reinforcing existing inequalities. In an article published in *Planning Theory & Practice*, Megan Horst, from Portland State University, opens the food justice debate.

Food justice is concerned with equity in all steps of the food system (from production to consumption). It covers equity in access to healthy food, participation in decisions about food, and even wider equity in power and resources. It acknowledges the disparities built in the food system.

Megan Horst studied two local governmental food efforts (that of Seattle's municipal food policy, and that of the Puget Sound Regional Food Policy Council). She found that it is not easy for cities or regional governments to tackle food justice issues, but they can still make a valuable contribution. Here is how.

Look beyond food access

One of the first issue that comes into mind when thinking about food justice is that of access - or rather lack of access - to adequate food for some groups. This could be because of financial reasons, for the most deprived households, or for geographical reasons (for instance in food deserts). Local policies to tackle such issues include supporting food banks or fostering community-based solutions to food deserts.

However, if food access is a crucial issue, it is not the only one. Equity challenges can also be found in:

- Labour relationships. Workers' protection is crucial to food justice, especially as the food industry is known for imposing hard working conditions on some of its workers.
- Power relationships along the supply chain, as farmers only receive a portion of the added value they produce. In order to address that, cities such as Seattle support farmers' markets that enable farmers to sell directly to consumers and hence earn more as no intermediary needs to be paid.
- Access to land. Equitable access to land is also part of the food justice agenda. For example, the City of Seattle tries to ensure that people of all backgrounds can access land to grow food. It does so through the support to community gardens or to specific programs that enable young people in deprived areas to grow food. At the regional level, action can also be taken to ensure the protection of farmland.



Forge new alliances outside of the city's boundaries to tackle structural causes of food injustice

Food justice is about acknowledging and acting upon past and existing inequities and traumas, as well as their structural causes (in terms of ethnicity, class, gender...). This raises the question of what cities can do to tackle structural problems that far exceed their remit.

The issue of fairer working relationships is a good example of an issue that is at the same time crucial and frustrating. Crucial, because, as one interviewee puts it in the paper, "we get everyone earning a liveable wage, and enough employment, then hunger is not an issue". Frustrating, also, as the margin of manoeuvre that exist at the local level is limited. Indeed, cities and regions often experience political challenges to labour regulations such as minimum wages or working conditions, and often those policies are influenced by or decided at other levels and by other actors.

However, cities are not powerless: they can forge alliances with other organisations campaigning at the national level.

Always check who is involved, and who benefits

Inside cities' boundaries, good advice for cities to integrate equity into their action is to always look at who is involved, and who benefits. Such a lens can for instance reveal that if farmers' markets are a great equity tool for farmers, the overwhelming majority of them are located in wealthy neighbourhoods, with less well-off inhabitants not being able to access them. A systematic review of policies can therefore avoid reinforcing existing inequalities.

Here, participation from the targeted communities (or their representatives) in food policy is crucial. It ensures that it is tailored to their needs. For instance, in Seattle, Tribal communities said that rather than having access to a farmers' market, they preferred access to fishing salmon or to harvesting berries and plants. However, when these representatives stopped coming to the meetings, the issue faded away from the debates, thus demonstrating the importance of actual participation.

Be prepared for controversies

Since equity is about rebalancing power relationships, it is very likely that food justice actions will raise controversies between members of a Food Policy Council. In the Seattle region, policy could have gone further than protecting farmland. It could have ensured that ownership of land is equitable (not concentrated in a few hands), and that land is cultivated in a sustainable way that ensures equity with the next generations. In the case studied by the paper, the regional Food Policy Council did not manage to go that far. According to Megan Horst, this is mainly because the Council did not want to raise a controversy with its members from the farming sector, that are very diverse.

This raises an interesting issue for all cities, as councils may not have processes in place to acknowledge and deal with controversies. Some councils may choose to tackle less controversial issues first, to help build trust between their members, with a view that once trust is established, stakeholders will be more likely to deal with more contentious ones. In all cases, this points to the need for Food Policy Councils to put conflict management processes in place to move beyond the non controversial issues and fully contribute to food justice.

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Source:

[Megan Horst \(2017\) Food justice and municipal government in the USA, *Planning Theory & Practice*, 18:1, 51-70](#)

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