



Exploring Regional Food Systems in the Northeast

A summary of *Between Global and Local: Exploring Regional Food Systems from the Perspectives of Four Communities in the U.S. Northeast*, by Anne Palmer^a, Raychel Santo^a, Linda Berlin^b, Alessandro Bonanno^c, Kate Clancy^d, Carol Giesecke^e, C. Clare Hinrichs^f, Ryan Lee^a, Philip McNab^a, Sarah Rucker^f. Published in the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, Volume 7, Number 4, December 2017.

Most Americans eat foods that go through supply chains that are local, regional, national and global. The supply chain consists of producers, processors, wholesalers and retailers—each of which might be in different geographic locations. With seasonal availability, production capacity, and desire for food variety, place and scale are important factors in meeting the food needs and preferences of residents in any given locale. Since the mid-1990s, interest in local food has surged for various reasons. The conundrum faced by food system advocates is that the appeal of “local food” obscures a more nuanced discussion about scale. For one thing, “local” is defined in different ways. For another, local and regional are frequently confused or conflated.

In fact, scale in itself has no intrinsic merit; the contribution of a specific scale depends on the goal it serves. While local food supply chains have certain advantages, the regional scale is gaining attention from food systems advocates who contend that it is critical for building more resilient food systems and meeting the food needs of a population.

A regional framework includes local but is more than the sum of its local parts. Regionally scaled food supply chains can maintain efficiencies of scale, thereby supplying a more significant proportion of regional food demand with greater volume, variety, and affordability than traditionally conceived “local” small-scale, niche, direct-to-consumer markets.

Regional approaches may also provide producers more flexibility to implement socially, ecologically and economically sustainable practices through product and market differentiation than producers who aim for maximum volume at minimum costs.

Objectives

EFSNE project researchers set out to examine consumer views of regional food systems. They wanted to learn more about the public’s perception of—and potential role in—demand for regionally produced foods. What would influence consumer buying preferences around “regional foods”? The researchers defined regional as smaller than the national scale but larger than a delimited local community. Regions are fluid; they can be defined by political boundaries, watersheds, or cultural identity, for example.

The study

EFSNE researchers conducted seven focus groups in 2013 that deliberately addressed the regional context. These were held in Maryland (2), Massachusetts (1),

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Delaware (2) and Vermont (2). Fifty-one participants ranged from 25-93 years old; 78 percent were female. Fifty-seven percent participated in federal food or nutrition assistance programs. The researchers designed a discussion guide used in each focus group to elicit reactions to the concept of region and participants' connection to it. Participants were asked about the extent to which they cared about the source of their food, the region with which they identified, and the ways they felt connected to their region. The researchers also explored participant perceptions of the global food system, and their perceived agency to change their local food system.

In addition to the focus group findings, the researchers used data from another EFSNE project effort to inform their analysis. In a shopper-intercept survey that was administered to more than 1,000 participants, they included a question about consumers' geographic food-sourcing preferences.

Findings

Researchers conducted thematic analyses looking for patterns among the transcripts, and created a code-book using these themes. Participants' responses to a focus group query about "their region" varied. They identified their region as the state in which they resided or a region within that state, such as the Eastern Shore of Maryland and the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. One participant noted that people ask, "Where are you from?" not "What region are you from," confirming that "region" is not a familiar construct. Often, place-based foods and foodways figured into the discussion, with mentions of foods such as crabs, blueberries, apples and cheesesteak.

Across focus groups, there were similarities in responses, but no consensus about what constitutes a region, and in general, the regional construct was conflated with local. Store intercept survey results echoed this absence of a definitive regional food system identity or preference, especially in comparison to local foods. Interestingly, shoppers in rural settings were more inclined than their urban counterparts to prefer regional food sourcing over local.

Focus group participants weighed in on the perceived benefits of locally and regionally produced foods, remarking on familiar attributes such as higher quality, freshness, local economic impact and reduced transportation. They diverged on their opinions about food prices, with nuanced conversations about why local and regional foods would be more expensive. A few participants mentioned aspects related to resiliency such as carbon footprint, fuel and weather changes. Several acknowledged that their state would never be food self-sufficient.

In discussion about the global food system, participants raised the issue of food safety and the role of imported foods to meet needs for supply and variety. There was debate about the safety of imported foods and the adequacy of U.S. inspections. (In several groups, this led to remarks about the safety of the domestic food supply.) The focus groups and surveys revealed misperceptions and distrust about the food system, such as around food safety and labeling.

Interestingly, immigrants and rural dwellers expressed more nuanced perspectives than their non-immigrant and urban counterparts on the different scales. For example, they displayed similar greater inclinations to embrace the regional scale. In these discussions, immigrants were more likely to opine that imported foods are appealing and sometimes necessary—especially if they are from that person's country of origin.

When asked about their perceived ability to influence the food system, most focus group participants expressed the view that consumers have little influence, although a few felt that demand for certain products could shift stores' stocking practices. And even if they cared about food origins, most did not use origin as a consideration in food purchases. Also, most did not refer to labels, except to determine freshness and expiration dates.

Conclusion

The concept of regional, compared to local, national and global scales, is difficult for many people to understand. Among the focus group participants,

the concept of region is largely absent as a point of reference or identity. People have differing views about the attributes of local and regional food systems, and the two scales were frequently conflated. Even what constitutes local (within state? direct market?) was not clearly or uniformly conceived.

Despite the not-unexpected findings that regions and regional foods do not generally resonate with consumers, there are opportunities to strengthen both the regional food system and awareness of it. In all EFSNE focus groups, participants mainly focused on fresh foods. This focus obscures the role of foods grown and processed in the region, which can be an important contributor to the regional food economy and to the consumption of regional products, whether or not the buyer identifies them as regional. In fact, regional sourcing of fresh and processed foods exists throughout the Northeast, but it is not clearly identified as such. That said, within any region's production limitations, increasing the amount of food grown, processed, procured and consumed regionally can enhance regional self-reliance.

There may be more opportunities to increase consumer awareness and build appreciation for regional identity; producers, distributors, and other supply chain intermediaries may all benefit from consumer education. However, the concept of regional compared to local food systems is ambiguous and amorphous to consumers at this point. Regional food system proponents might help consumers by reinforcing that thinking regionally means increasing regional self-reliance to assuage concerns about supply and availability.

For that reason, consumers might not be the most effective first line of educational intervention to build a more robust regional food system. Retailers and other supply chain players may be more influential in reshaping production, processing and purchasing patterns such as institutional food procurement. Regional food production and processing infrastructure must be developed, and regional supply chains must be better understood.

About the EFSNE project

The work described here is part of a larger research project called "Enhancing Food Security in the Northeast through Regional Food Systems" (EFSNE). From 2011 to 2017, the EFSNE project engaged more than 40 partners at multiple universities, non-profits and government agencies around the question of whether greater reliance on regionally produced food could improve food access in low-income communities, while also benefiting farmers, food supply chain firms and others in the food system. Learn more at <http://agsci.psu.edu/research/food-security>.

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With the Northeast's size and population, many opportunities present themselves. Large institutional buyers can influence suppliers. Regional producers can align around social justice values that contrast with inequities in national and global food systems. Policymakers, advocacy groups and academics can promote the values of regional production and supply chains that can lay the foundation for a large-scale consumer education effort.

More research is needed to determine how decision makers respond to (and can advance) the regional food system framework, along with evidence of the posited merits of the regional scale to supply a larger proportion of demand while fostering natural resource sustainability, economic development, and diversity. For example, some stores use the regional descriptor on produce point-of-sales labels in response to the co-opting of "local" by some food marketers. Regional food system thinking remains a work in progress. The EFSNE researchers have contributed to an exploration of the concepts in ways that can support work on regional food systems in the Northeast and beyond. ❖