

Alternative Food Initiatives for Environmental Justice: Marginal or Transformative?

Theme: 4. Power, politics, institutions and the reality of achieving change

Sub-theme: 4.2. The role of social movements in the sustainability revolution

Summary

Access to healthy and affordable food on the consumer side and the ability to make a decent living by producing food crops are important areas of exclusion in today's globalised and corporatised food governance regime. Alternative food initiatives (AFIs) and collectives have been established worldwide in order to re-conceptualize production, distribution and consumption processes. These initiatives attempt to address a set of multi-layered issues by creating counter-institutions and practices which can be conceptualized under the general theme of environmental justice. This paper adopts an environmental justice and diverse economies approach in order to evaluate whether AFIs can play a transformative role by focusing on three AFIs from Turkey. The aim is to examine whether such consumer collectives can achieve substantial change within the existing structures causing and perpetuating environmental, social and economic injustices. Transformative role refers to whether AFIs are able to challenge unjust corporate controlled agricultural practices to bring about a more just production, distribution and consumption relations/processes.

Extended Summary

This paper focuses on the AFIs in Turkey to examine whether such consumer collectives can play a transformative role in addressing environmental and social/economic injustices. Transformative role refers to whether AFIs are able to transform unjust corporate controlled agriculture to a more just production, distribution and consumption relations/processes.

Access to healthy and affordable food on the consumer side and the ability to make a decent living by producing food crops on the producer side are important areas of exclusion in today's food governance regime. Alternative food initiatives (AFIs) have been established worldwide in order to reorganize production, distribution and consumption of food. In most cases the target of such initiatives is the corporate control over agriculture and food industry which has social, economic and environmental repercussions. These initiatives attempt to challenge the injustices that emerge in food production, distribution and consumption. On the production side not only does corporate control devastate small holders and family farms but it leads to environmental degradation as well. Distribution of food through corporate channels maximizes corporations' profits at the expense of farmers' gains. Consumers are either unable to access sufficient amount of nutritious food due to lack of income or even when they can afford what is being sold in the market, they are subjected to the side-effects of industrial agricultural practices such as health threatening impacts of chemical residues in food. AFIs attempt to

address these multi-layered issues by creating counter-institutions and practices (Schlossberg, 2013). This paper adopts an environmental justice and diverse economies approach in order to evaluate whether AFIs can play a transformative role.

Having emerged as movements challenging the unequal distribution of environmental hazards as a form of social injustice, environmental justice has in time evolved into a more comprehensive frame that brings together multiple layers of justice such as recognition, participation and capability building. An encounter and collaboration of earlier environmentalist groups with various other movements like civil rights, indigenous, labour or alter-globalisationist movements have practically contributed to the broadening of the scope of issues to be discussed within the environmental justice discourse. Such vertical extension of the environmental justice framework, as Schlossberg refers to, enables re-theorization of justice in a pluralistic way which encompasses environmental, social and economic dimensions. A multi-dimensional approach to justice also necessitates working at the levels of community and individual, human and non-human (Schlossberg, 2013).

Diverse (agrifood) economies approach enables us to be cautious enough not to overlook viable alternative capitalist or non-capitalist forms of enterprises and transactions where the defining features of their capitalist counterparts like profit drive or private extraction of the surplus are replaced or mediated by the primacy of certain ethical considerations in managing production and exchange relations (Gibson-Graham 2006). Such initiatives certainly contribute to the broadening of our imaginative horizons and practically constitute the early steps of possible future transformations within agrifood industry. This stands in sharp contrast to the widespread affectual investment in despair and incapability shared by the social agents - individuals, communities - vis-à-vis the solid global capitalist food structure, as well as “lamenting the effects of existing systems” (Levkoe, 2011: 690). In this paper, relying on the environmental justice framework and adopting the diverse economies approach together with the performativity it evokes, we will examine three cases of AFIs from Turkey in order to evaluate whether they have the potential to offer a more just (both environmentally, socially and economically) system of food production, distribution and consumption. The transformatory potential and the prospects of these AFIs in addressing different types of injustices may also provide opportunities for other such initiatives to emerge. Therefore, their effect may be larger than the small and seemingly insignificant transformation they may be bringing about.

AFIs’ stance against corporate-led agrifood regime resonates with the principles of the international peasant movement La Vía Campesina in terms of their common efforts to build

supportive mechanisms for the maintenance of “family farm based production, sustainable agriculture and food sovereignty” (Wittman, 2009: 813). However, it has been widely questioned within the academic circles whether the political project of the AFIs is as counter-hegemonic as the one of La Vía Campesina. Fairbairn (2012), for instance, emphasizes that the US-based community food security organizations (which are considered among AFIs here) do not have the same transformative potential as La Vía Campesina, since their consumerist orientation overwhelms their original political orientation. AFIs are considered as “alternative” rather than “oppositional”, since they do not challenge the current agrifood system explicitly, but prefer to work incrementally within existing market structures through creation of alternatives while the dominant system stays intact (Allen et. al. 2003).

This paper focuses on three AFIs in Turkey, namely BUKOOP, CAYEK and DBB, through in-depth interviews with their members to examine whether such consumer collectives can play a transformative role in addressing environmental and social/economic injustices. Agricultural production in Turkey was traditionally small peasant based even though large and powerful landlords were dominant in some regions. Having already commercialized and mechanized agriculture in the early 20th century, state policies during the planned growth era of the 1960s favoured industrialization through import substitution. In this era, agricultural support policies mostly benefited large farmers. Export oriented development model in the 1980s marked a break in agricultural policies (Koymen, 1999). Mechanisms that lead to exclusion in food systems intensified in the 1990s with the entrenchment of neoliberal policies such as the cutback on agricultural subsidies and support mechanisms. There are two sides to the exclusionary practices within the food governance regime of the past three decades in Turkey. On the one hand, these policies led to even more pressure on small peasant/family agriculture. On the other hand, consumers are excluded from access to healthy and affordable food as a result of processes such as unregulated use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers in agriculture and growth hormones in livestock and poultry.

This paper argues that even though such AFIs are usually considered as creating alternative spaces that remain disjointed from oppositional movements that ask for system-level change, the cases under examination show that their practices and principles are an important step in rectifying the injustices that are being experienced on the side of both producers and consumers. Hence, not only do they challenge the globalised and corporatised food systems, they also attempt to bring about a transformation at the local, national and ultimately potentially at the global level.

References

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