

Food Safety Regulations and Sustainable Local Food Systems: Scale, Culture and Marginalization



UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA



M.F. Ramsay¹, C.R. Anderson², A. Desmarais³, S.M. McLachlan¹, N.K. Baird¹

¹ (Environmental Conservation Lab) University of Manitoba, Canada

² (Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience) Coventry University, UK

³ (Canada Research Chair in Human Rights, Social Justice and Food Sovereignty) University of Manitoba, Canada

colinrayanderson@gmail.com
mjframsay@gmail.com

Introduction

Food safety regulations predominantly favor large-scale and industrial food systems and marginalize farmers, hunters, fishers and consumers who are promoting and building local, sustainable and indigenous food systems.

Methodology

This study is a part of an ongoing Participatory Action Research program between community and academic partners in Manitoba working to shape food policy to support a just and sustainable local food system. This research purposefully reflects a range of perspectives (farmer, chef, consumer, etc.) and draws from field-notes, semi-structured interviews (n=13), group interviews, meeting transcripts, and media analysis.

Results & Discussion

One-Culture-Fits All Regulations

Food safety regulations have uneven impact on different cultural food systems, for example relating to First Nation, Métis and ethnic cultural diets.

"A lot of northern communities have to incorporate traditional foods again into snack programs or sharing with communities and...regulation around that...impedes their ability to more fully utilize country foods or local foods and sometimes it doesn't survive"

- Julie Price, Community Organizer



"We can't kill animals on the farm, so people who want Halal kill, for example, they can't access the food that we produce because we can't do, we can't allow them to do that on our farm"

- Lydia Carpenter, Farmer



"I guess it [food safety regulation] has a lot of tunnel vision...when food safety puts its views on farms it is looking at all farms as if they are the same thing...it can be really very destructive to anyone who doesn't really fit their model of what a farm is"

- Daniel Kanu, Community Organizer



"The problem is, when you impose that complicated rigorous food safety inspection system on a small farm, it's impossible... I sell eggs, I wash them and that's considered processing. I do it in a safe way... I don't need to fill out a 300-page binder every day to prove what I'm doing"

- Kate Storey, Farmer



One-Size-Fits-All Regulations

Compliance with one-size-fits-all regulation places a disproportional burden on smaller scale farms, processors and fishers.

Many argue that direct relations can replace third party government inspection systems by providing relational traceability and direct accountability between fully informed and consenting parties (Figure 1)

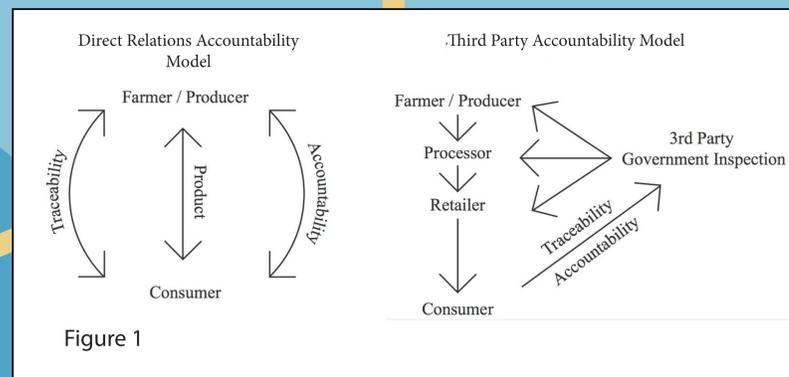


Figure 1



"Through history, humans have nurtured trusting relationships through direct exchange to ensure the safest, healthiest and most diverse food. These direct relationships, we contend, are more reliable than regulations"

- David Neufeld, Farmer

Moving Forward

Citizen-consumers are demanding food that is sustainable, culturally appropriate and that reflects their values and needs.



"The world is actually moving in this direction, thinking more about holistic or broadly defined food safety" while "governments are getting increasingly cut off from popular sentiment"

- David Neufeld, Farmer

However, the dominant food safety system adopts a narrow technical or biomedical approach that undermines **more holistic approaches to food systems governance** that simultaneously consider food safety with issues related to the environment, community development and social justice.



"When the government talks about safe food, they're talking about provincially inspected facilities, disinfectants, inspection and all of that. And when our customers talk about safe food, they talk about no antibiotics, no hormones, not raised knee-deep in a feed lot in their own feces and raised outdoors"

- Lydia Carpenter, Farmer

Regulatory compliance mechanisms systematically exclude and marginalize knowledge, actors and "proofs" that do not conform to the dominant food safety paradigm.



"What if you come together and the producer has one scientific "proof" and MAFRD has a conflicting one, who wins? Obviously MAFRD [provincial agricultural agency]. We need an ombudsman, an independent examiner or an appeal process"

- Alexander Svenne, Chef

Policy-making processes and regulatory spaces are unevenly shaped by agro-industrial interests. **Food citizens** (farmers, harvesters, consumers, etc) **are mobilizing to assert their rights** to determine food and agriculture policy and practice.



"One of the things that is highlighted by the currently regulatory regime is the lack of participation in developing policy and regulation...Diverse stakeholder advisory committees, meaningful consultation that takes seriously the imperative of 'involve early and often' and processes that ensure that citizens voices have a place in policy formulation"

- Kenton Lobe, University Instructor

Conclusion

One-size-fits all and one-culture-fits all regulatory systems are systematically undermining local, sustainable and culturally appropriate food systems. In Manitoba, and beyond, citizens are mobilizing to challenge the dominant regulatory regime and to assert the rights of citizens in policy-making processes. Visit www.realmanitobafoodfight.ca for more information about this research and these citizen-led efforts.



RealManitoba FoodFight.ca