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Extending Roots: Building Alliances through Urban Agricultural Initiatives

ABSTRACT

In order to resist it helps to be organized. The development of alliances between progressive and radical food movement activists and organizations is viewed as a way to build a stronger food movement that has the power to demand and realize a transformed global agrifood system that meets the tenets of the food sovereignty movement (Holt-Giménez and Wang 2011). Utilizing the civil society literature and the civic agriculture framework (Lyson 2004) provides ideas on actions that can be taken toward realizing change. Drawing on fieldwork completed in 2012 focused on civic agriculture and urban agriculture in Kansas City, this paper reveals how participants and supporters have been building diverse alliances as they work to reconfigure agrifood relations. I emphasize the experiences of growers at 26 different sites and 12 community members. The focus of the paper is on agrifood initiatives in the city and the potential ways in which others can learn from their activities. Whether the growers or the consumers are low-income, white, people of color, or middle class, in Kansas City there are diverse approaches and linkages being made across initiatives. While they are not impacting the global agrifood system in any noticeable way, arguably, they are building capacity for what could become a forceful social movement.

Keywords: agrifood alliances, civic and urban agriculture

INTRODUCTION

Differing from the local and organic food movements (Pollan 2006) and sustainable agriculture movements (Goodman 2000), the U.S. food movement(s) that maintain a social justice focus are roughly separated into community food security (CFS), food justice, and food sovereignty movements (Alkon and Mares 2012; Holt-Giménez and Wang 2011). While the discourse of food security focuses on food access for individuals, households, or nations, the CFS movement goes beyond this by, as Hamm and Bellows (2003) discuss, additionally promoting local food production, culturally appropriate and nutritious food access, and food security for communities and beyond. Food justice, with its focus on CFS and racial inequalities, has emerged as a discourse and an aim for many practitioners (Allen 2008; Alkon 2012; Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Alkon and Norgaard 2009; Gottlieb and Joshi 2010; Griffith 2003; Guthman 2011; Levkoe 2006; Wekerle 2004). For Via Campesina, the International Peasant Movement, food sovereignty is their "demand that all people have the right 'to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems'" (Alkon and Mares 2012:347).

Currently food sovereignty discourse is receiving a lot of attention in the agrifood literature and by practitioners. One point of discussion is a call for alliances to be developed between various agrifood movements, such as localism, organics, food security, fair trade, food safety, food sovereignty, bringing together rural and urban initiatives, and uniting endeavors occurring in the global South and the global North. The argument is that building these alliances could build a powerful movement that could potentially alter the global agrifood system to the

benefit of the people and decrease the power of corporations in shaping how food gets from seeds to people's plates. Utilizing the civil society literature and the civic agriculture framework (Lyson 2004) in analyzing agrifood activities in one locale can provide ideas on actions that can be taken toward building alliances and actualizing change.

The urban core of Kansas City (KC) is encompassed by Wyandotte County in Kansas and Jackson County in Missouri. In 2012, 19.2 percent of the households in Wyandotte County and 18.3 percent in Jackson County were considered food insecure (Feeding America 2014). This means that at times during the year the food needs of all household member were not met, because they did not have sufficient resources (Coleman-Jensen, Nord, and Singh 2013). These county percentages are higher than the national average in 2012 of 14.5 percent (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2013). Typically lower median household incomes, higher percentages of people below poverty, and higher percentages of people of color in Kansas City, Kansas (KCK) and Kansas City, Missouri (KCMO) compared to the national averages (U.S. Census Bureau 2016) could be partial explanations for it. People of color are more likely to experience food insecurity. In the United States in 2012, 24.6 percent of black, non-Hispanic households, 23.3 percent of Hispanic households, and 11.2 percent of white non-Hispanic households were considered food insecure (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2013). In KC, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) standards, there are census tracts considered food deserts where the ability to access healthy, affordable food is challenged by reasons such as low incomes, the lack of full-service grocery stores in the vicinity, and/or because of the lack of access to transportation to get to the stores. In the urban core of KCMO and KCK there are a number of urban agricultural and civic agricultural activities occurring. This makes KC a suitable case to explore these activities and alliance building.

The aim of the paper is to address the following question: How can participants and groups involved in agrifood movements unite toward food sovereignty? Drawing on fieldwork I completed in 2012 focused on civic agriculture and urban agriculture in KCMO and KCK this paper reveals how participants and supporters have been building diverse alliances and the capacity for strengthening civil society as they work to reconfigure agrifood relations. I emphasize the experiences of those I interviewed, which included growers at 26 different sites and 12 community members. Whether the growers or the consumers are low-income, white, people of color, or middle class, in KC there are diverse approaches and linkages being made across initiatives. The perception of many of the interviewees is that in some places urban agricultural activities are dampening the food deserts. Participants of the initiatives could be willing to be a part of larger campaigns that exert pressure on the state to democratize the food system.

AGRIFOOD ACTIVITIES AND CALLS FOR ALLIANCES

The development of alliances between progressive (e.g., some community food security organizations and food justice based organizations) and radical food movement activists and organizations (e.g., food sovereignty based organizations and some food justice based organizations) is viewed as a way to build a stronger and more united food movement that has the power to demand and realize a transformed global agrifood system that meets the criteria of the tenets of the food sovereignty movement (Holt-Giménez and Wang 2011). The benefits of building alliances between rural and urban producer and consumer constituencies (DuPuis, Harrison, and Goodman 2011; McMichael 2015), urban, peri-urban, and rural farmers (Edelman

et al. 2014), food justice based organizations (Slocum and Cadieux 2015), and food justice based organizations, farmworkers, and food processors (Alkon and Agyeman 2011) are highlighted as ways to strengthen efforts towards agrifood system change.

Civil Society and Agrifood Activities

Utilizing the civil society literature and civic agriculture framework (Lyson 2004) which has roots in the civic community perspective (Lyson 2004; Tolbert et al. 1998; Tolbert et al. 2002; Tolbert 2005) provides ideas on actions that can be taken toward realizing agrifood system change, whether the goal is community food security, food justice, and/or food sovereignty. Civil society, or civic spaces, are the places where we speak with community members regarding issues we face on a regular basis in neighborhoods, at schools, and with community residents (Barber 1995:281). Building on early studies by C. Wright Mills and Melville Ulmer (1946) and Walter Goldschmidt (1978), from a civic community perspective, civically engaging institutions, such as associations, civic churches, and third places (e.g., coffee shops, grocery stores, and barber shops (Oldenburg 1991)) along with local capitalism (e.g., locally oriented businesses, the self-employed, and family farms) promote civic welfare (Lyson 2004; Tolbert et al. 1998; Tolbert et al. 2002; Tolbert 2005). Engaging in political and civic associations (Bellah et al. [1985] 1996; Tocqueville 1935), developing social capital (Putnam 1993), participating in social movements (Bellah et al. [1985] 1996), and building weak ties with people in social locations different from one's own (Granovetter 1973; Putnam 1993) are argued as ways to strengthen civil society. Civic groups also need to make claims for citizens' rights and expect the state to have adequate laws and social programs in place to support citizens and to regulate the market, thus keeping market fundamentalism (i.e., neoliberalism) at bay (Somers 2008).

Lyson (2000, 2004) applies civic concepts to analyze the U.S. agrifood system and to differentiate between commodity agriculture and civic agriculture. Conventional commodity agriculture (i.e., industrial agriculture) tends to be larger-scale production which utilizes synthetic chemical inputs, such as pesticides and fertilizers, focuses on efficiency and productivity, and extensively uses land to intensively produce crops for distant markets (Lyson 2004). Civic agriculture tends to be smaller-scale, more sustainable production focused less on profit maximization and more on socio-economic connections with local consumers often through direct marketing at, for example, farmers' markets (Lyson 2004). Drawing on Karl Polanyi's (1944) concept of embeddedness, for Lyson the goal of civic agriculture is to have agriculture and food production nestled in local communities with active resident participation.

Using the concept of civic agriculture allows for discussion of and direct connections between any geographic locations, whether urban, suburban, peri-urban, or rural. Focusing on two rural Iowa food deserts, Morton et al. (2005) point out that in rural areas a lack of quality, fresh foods is a problem for "the whole community, not just those with resource limitations"; and community groups are important in strengthening communities in relation to food, but also regarding transportation systems and livable wage employment (p. 110). Community groups, whether rural, urban, or suburban can help strengthen the civic structure of the locale. Relatedly, urban agriculture, which is the growing, processing, and distributing of agricultural products within and near cities (Bailkey and Nasr 2000), is a locale-based phenomenon that can be, but not necessarily is, civic agriculture. Urban agricultural activities allow some to learn how to grow food, to increase their knowledge of nutrition, and to attain affordable, fresh fruits and vegetables. While urban agriculture is not a cure-all for our social ills or a replacement for

significant structural changes (see Passidomo 2013; H. Lyson 2014), it can provide physical and social spaces for civic engagement (see Bradley and Galt 2014; McClintock 2014; McIvor and Hale 2015; Obach and Tobin 2014). Arguably, civic engagement can set the building blocks in place for a stronger civil society (Lyson 2004). Facing the market-focused and individualistic nature of neoliberalism that has taken control of the global agrifood system (see Holt-Gimenez and Wang 2011; McMichael 2005; Bonanno 2004), civic agriculture is a concept that emphasizes the rights and responsibilities of residents and governments in promoting more democratic food systems. Use of the food justice concept can build upon the civic agriculture discourse by emphasizing the need to address inequalities associated with race, class, and food simultaneously.

DATA AND METHODS

Data for this paper are drawn from fieldwork I mostly completed in KC between June and December 2012, and this timeframe is the focus of the paper. I utilized the ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviewing along with analysis of primary and secondary data sources.[1] I attended agrifood events and meetings, farmers' markets, and gardening workshops; and I volunteered with a number of the growers I interviewed. Purposive and theoretical sampling was utilized to select interviewees (Lofland et al. 2006; Neuman 2011). I aimed to reach a wide array of people based on age, race/ethnicity, gender, class, and grower and community group status. In the 38 interviews I spoke with 39 people including 3 charitable growers, 6 community gardeners, 4 school gardeners, 7 educational growers, 7 market growers, 4 food advocates, 5 community organizers, and 3 governmental employees. Regarding class status, 16 characterized theirs as lower middle class or below. The predominant discourse was not of food sovereignty or food justice, but of food security. However, many of the activities and actions promote food justice and some would argue food sovereignty as well.

URBAN AGRICULTURE IN KC

There are various urban agricultural activities underway in KC, which includes home, community, and school gardens, charitable gardens, and market farms. While not all of the participants are directly linked to each other or one of the many organizations that support the phenomenon, there is an array of overlapping connections across the city. Through these various efforts diverse people and groups have been uniting to promote their causes, such as food security, nutrition education, and/or building community. I asked all of the growers what makes them want to continue to associate with the groups they are connected to in relation to their gardens/farms. The interviewees' perceptions reveal that community around food and small-scale food production in the city is being bolstered. Arguably, civil society is being strengthened and opportunities for future collaborations with and beyond food issues are being created. However, some locales are more advanced than others, and there are social challenges that need to be dealt with inside and outside of the initiatives, including class, race, and gender inequalities.

[1] Pseudonyms are used, and at times details are withheld in order to protect interviewees' identities. An informed consent statement was covered and verbal consent was audio recorded for the interviews. The mention of a particular garden, farm, or group does not mean I interviewed someone from that entity.

Organizations and Networking

When I asked about the organizations they are involved with in relation to their growing activities the growers referenced more than 54 groups. The organizations mentioned ranged from schools to businesses and from non-profit organizations to departments in city governments, such as the Black Health Care Coalition, Latino Health for All, Catholic Charities, State Farm, local professional athletes, and the Kansas City Health Department. Throughout all of the interviews the two most frequently mentioned groups were Cultivate Kansas City (CKC) and Kansas City Community Gardens (KCCG). The connections these and other organization have show how interlinked and diverse these groups are, how they support urban agriculture and broader agrifood system activities, and how urban, suburban, and rural areas are being linked.

CKC, founded in 2005, is a non-profit organization prominent in KC's urban agricultural activities. In addition to managing a two acre, organic production farm and an eight acre training farm, Juniper Gardens Training Farm, CKC associates also provide educational and technical assistance on urban farming, engage in research and policy advocacy and creation, and collaborate with others on these issues (CKC 2012). The Juniper Gardens Training Farm is home to a collaborative program with Catholic Charities of Greater Kansas City, called New Roots for Refugees, which trains re-settled refugees--many of whom were farmers in their home countries--on how to grow, market, and sell food at markets in the city (CKC 2012). Another collaborative program, Growing Growers, is an apprenticeship program which places apprentices at nearby urban, suburban, and rural fruit and vegetable farms for a growing season where they learn how to run a farm. A series of workshops and events assists them in further developing their skills and networks. Along with CKC, the Kansas City Food Circle is one of the collaborators. Founded in 1994, the KC Food Circle is a non-profit organization that promotes urban, suburban, and rural organic producers in the area and connects them with consumers (Hendrickson 2009).

Kansas City Community Gardens (KCCG) and KC Healthy Kids (KCHK) are also non-profit organizations influential in agrifood activities that have collaborated with CKC and others. KCCG, founded in 1980, is active in promoting, creating, and maintaining home, community, and school gardens. Through advocacy, educational outreach, and building and maintaining active networks, KCHK focuses on decreasing obesity and improving the overall well-being of children in the area (KC Healthy Kids 2013). A program KCHK works on in conjunction with numerous other organizations is their Neighborhood Initiatives. In 2012, they were working with three neighborhoods in the urban core, which are considered food deserts: (1) the area of Northeast KCK, including the Quindaro and Douglass-Sumner neighborhoods, (2) the Rosedale neighborhood in KCK, and (3) the Ivanhoe neighborhood in KCMO. The aims are to increase access to healthy food, promote active lifestyles, and improve the infrastructure in the communities. The neighborhood associations are involved and an area resident manages the programming. These initiatives are very place based where many of the residents are not only re-connecting with their neighbors, but also with the land around them via over 30 gardens.

KCHK's off-shoot the Greater Kansas City Food Policy Coalition (GKCFPC) is a broad alliance that focuses on improving the health and sustainability of the Greater KC food system via advocacy, events, and initiatives, such as increasing access to food in food deserts and increasing institutional purchasing of local foods (KC Healthy Kids 2013). Along with CKC and others, they were instrumental in working with KCMO's city council to update ordinances to make them more supportive of urban agriculture. KCHK and GKCFPC also work with organizations such as the Kansas Rural Center, LISC of Greater Kansas City, the Mid-America

Regional Council, Society of St. Andrew-West, Good Natured Family Farms, and area hospitals and universities on agriculture and/or food issues. This networking involving such a variety of groups that are able to come together to work on issues they have in common (Granovetter 1973; Putnam 1993; Tocqueville 1935) and to politically advocate for improved conditions (Somers 2008) is building social capital and giving voice to those in need.

Continuing Associations

A common answer as to why growers want to continue their associations with groups they currently work with was stated by Dana, an African American community gardener in her 30s, "[b]ecause they offer support, education, and networking opportunities." Veneshia, an African American school garden coordinator in her 40s, explained she continues to work with groups because they "do what they say they're going to do." She continued:

> those kinds of partnerships help to extend our curriculum and make a well-rounded child, so as long as it's a partner that's going to meet our mission of building a well-rounded child that's, uh, healthy and happy and well adjusted, you know meets . . . our leadership service [expectations] . . . and those kinds of things, then we'll keep partnering with them.

The growers see how working with other groups who have similar missions provides opportunities to expand their connections (i.e., build social capital), learn new knowledge, and strengthen their efforts toward reaching their goals.

Successes in and Challenges to Building Community

Overall, interviewees feel the phenomenon of urban agriculture is doing well meeting its goals of increasing access to fresh foods and stimulating civic engagement. While all of the 39 interviewees view urban agriculture positively, a few did mention that not everyone agrees. A few interviewees conveyed that white people are more likely to be participants and to be in positions of power. People and neighborhoods have differing ideas on the types of food production they support or that they are willing to tolerate in their areas. Casey, a white market grower in her 30s, explained that support for urban agriculture differs, in part, by location:

> . . . it really depends where you are. . . . which is so sad, and I wish that would change, but frankly, I mean, it's not going to change because it's a product of-, of racism and classism, you know, discriminating sorts of ideas and values that have been a part of our society and our culture for centuries. . . . So, like, that's not just going to up and go away, you know.

These comments illuminate some of the challenges for urban agriculture and society in general. Urban agriculture alone cannot solve all of the problems associated with class, race, and gender disparities in life chances and outcomes. However, this phenomenon can help allow social space for people to come together and potentially work on these complex social issues.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In KC's urban core growers and community participants in urban agriculture are diverse. Although the term food justice only came up a couple of times during my fieldwork, many of the activities and programs in place are promoting food justice and some would argue food

sovereignty as well. Growers and community members expressed that it is important to work with other groups as they strive for their goals. They conveyed that this expands their connections and the resources available to them (Lyson 2004; Morton et al. 2005; Putnam 1993; Tocqueville 1935; Tolbert et al. 1998; Tolbert et al. 2002).

If practitioners and scholars want the agrifood system to move toward community food security, food justice, and/or food sovereignty, then I argue they need to think outside of the urban and also build alliances with rural and suburban constituencies. At the outset the civic agriculture conceptualization may be more accessible to commodity farmers than food justice and/or food sovereignty. Many commodity farmers are already active in civil society, and instead of branding them as enemies it would be more fruitful to show them how to become part of agrifood alliances that could benefit them and others. Food justice and food sovereignty can be goals, but many need to be ushered into understanding how this would work instead of being cast aside as opponents.

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APPENDIX

List of Acronyms

community food security (CFS)
Cultivate Kansas City (CKC)
Greater Kansas City Food Policy Coalition (GKCFPC)
Kansas City (KC)
Kansas City Community Gardens (KCCG)
Kansas City, Kansas (KCK)
Kansas City, Missouri (KCMO)
KC Healthy Kids (KCHK)
U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)