Community Action, Government Support, and Historical Distance: Enabling and Constraining Food Justice in Kenya

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Introduction

Neoliberalism involves changes to the ways that material resources are managed and its processes include the privatization of public goods, the proliferation of free trade agreements, and the opening of borders (Friel et al. 2013; Guthman 2008; Harris 2009; Peck and Tickell 2002, 2012; Wolf and Bonanno 2013). Yet if neoliberalism takes place vis-à-vis changes to the production, distribution, and control of resources, alongside justificatory logics, then it can be understood that neoliberal processes are not evenly “rolled out” in all parts of the world since context impacts how processes are implemented (Peck and Tickell 2002, see also Peck and Tickell 2012). Despite research on the growth of “Western” (i.e. minority world) capitals in “developing” (i.e. majority world) countries, and claims as to how neoliberal practices should be resisted, lived experiences of economic reform, oppression, and resistance are varied (Abrahams 2009; Boyer 2010; Canterbury 2007; Goodfellow 2013; Njeru 2013; O’Neill 2015; Patel 2007; Stuckler and Nestle 2012).

Scholars have examined how neoliberalism took root in majority world countries as states entered into structural adjustment loans through the late 1970s and early 1990s (Hahn 2008; Harvey 2009). Neoliberalism is currently being entrenched through the privatization of public parks for biofuels and tourism, through the exponential growth of NGOs and civil society organizations (CSOs) that deliver social services and public goods, and the integration of local markets with global dynamics (Hahn 2008; Harvey 2009; Mati 2014; in Murunga, Okello, and Sjögren 2014; Njeru 2013; Zoomers 2010). In this regard, Kenya seems to be an obvious case
for illustrating neoliberal processes, after all, it entered into a structural adjustment loan in the 1980s and had lands privatized by elites (Njeru 2013; Southall 2005; Swamy 1994; Zoomers 2010). The new Constitution (2010) calls for devolution, and the growth of NGOs and CSOs has been remarkable, increasing more than three-fold from 1997 to 2005 (Kanyinga, Mitullah, and Njagi 2007: 16-17, also see Mati 2014 and Murunga, Okello, and Sjögren 2014). Furthermore, Kenya was an early entrant into horticultural global value chains (Dolan 2004; Hale and Opondo 2005; Interviews 2014). It would appear that Kenya has taken a neoliberal turn, yet if we look beyond the surface dynamics, we can recognize that Kenya’s experiences of economic reform involve greater complexities that warrant attention.

This paper seeks to examine how restructuring projects in Kenyan rural food systems are “…produced within national, regional and local contexts defined by the legacies of inherited institutional frameworks, policy regimes, regulatory practices, and political struggles” (Brenner and Theodore 2002: 351). I examine how farmers in three different counties work with locally-found government agencies in different food and farming projects. Paying attention to how community groups work with governments raises some uncomfortable questions about the degree to which local food systems are able to challenge the power imbalances that characterize modern and historical legacies of marginalization in the international political economy of food in parts of the world marked by limited, versus heightened, global integration.

**Neoliberal domination and agricultural restructuring**

Research illustrates how the corporate dominated industrial food system involves food capitals contracting production in different parts of the globe, the dumping of surplus foods by minority world countries into majority world centres, pitting farmers in competition in a “race to
the bottom,” and creating physical, social, and ecological destruction (Albritton 2009; Barndt 2008; Friedmann 2005; Friel et al. 2013; Nestle 2008; Stuckler and Nestle 2012; Patel 2007). As scholars track the growth of typically US and Western Europe-based agribusiness and food companies there is an implication that minority world food systems are being reorganized (Barndt 2008; Hawkes 2005; Friel et al. 2013; Raschke and Cheema 2008; Stuckler and Nestle 2012). Yet as Ferguson (2006) writes, “…African examples are…awkward for those termed “anti-globalization” critics, who often equate globalization with an expanding capitalism in search of new cheap labor for its factories and new markets for its consumer goods…the inconvenient fact is that Africa’s hardships have very little to do with being overrun by Western factories and consumer goods” (28).

The growth of corporate control and the degree of minority world dumping of surplus foods rests on changes to the ways that states regulate food and national agricultures (Daviron 2008; Friedmann and McMichael 1989; Friedmann 2005; McMichael 2005; Pechlaner and Otero 2010). The specific “external pressures imposed” on food producers and consumers “by markets and the state” vary, as states implement “…ordering principles for action” (Schneider and Niederle 2010: 400). Ordering principles are oriented to the dynamics of food production and trade in the international political economy of food, as well as the particular national agricultural legacies that states inherit. Instead of assuming a trajectory of minority-world corporate control of local agricultures in majority world countries, it is important to examine the actually existing “new constraints – but also…new opportunities – posed to agriculture and to the rural world by the globalization of food markets” (Schneider and Niederle 2010: 379). The point is not to ignore the threat of domination, but to recognize different possibilities for food systems and track their transformations.
Much analysis on food and farming in Africa focuses on neoliberalism vis-à-vis farmer marginalization, World Bank and agribusiness dominance (Amanor 2009; Hahn 2009; Raschke and Cheema 2008; Zoomers 2010). Kenya’s official agribusiness plan can be read through the lens of enforcing the will of the market as it centres on turning farms into small-production units. In this vision of “agribusiness for development,” which resonates with World Bank development reports, the locus of control remains with donors (Amanor 2009). As Amanor (2009), reflecting on World Bank recommendations, explains:

“the expectation is that smallholder farms and large-scale agricultural enterprises can enter into… (‘win-win’) institutional arrangements in which the family farm independently engages in farm-level production and assumes the risk, while corporations provide or arrange services, credit, technical advice and input support, at the same time as they control the bulk produce for marketing, and establish recommendations and quality control” (Binswanger and Deininger 1993; Lipton 1993)” (Amanor 2009: 252).

Yet changes to way that food and farming are organized may reflect another agenda. It is important to recognize that since sub-Saharan Africa experiences acute moments of widespread hunger and its food supplies are strongly exposed to weather fluctuations and global warming. In this respect, regional market integration can reflect attempts to coordinate food priorities across borders. Most of what is produced on Kenyan farms is sold to domestic markets, and “[a]round three quarters depend on the [agricultural] sector for their livelihood and survival, and around 90 percent of rural incomes come from agriculture” (Government of Kenya 2012:4). Of the produce that is exported, 70% is sent to Southern and Eastern African countries via the COMESA agreement (Government of Kenya 2012: 14). As Abrahams (2009) explains the formalization of African food systems can “suggest that they are progressively more resilient to,
and thus competitive in spite of, the impact of [food capitals and global markets]” (116). Thus, in order to understand the opportunities and constraints farmers experience in the face of global food markets, it is important to recognize how states work in ways that organize farmers’ experiences, generate possibilities for action, and the kinds of actions farmers undertake.

**Neoliberalism in Kenya: Organizing processes and paradoxes**

Kenya’s experiences offer insight into understanding the possibilities of food transformations. Since the 1980s, the presence of major supermarket chains like Nakumatt, Tusky’s, and Uchumi has grown, with some stores offering lifestyle experiences including make-up advice, home decorating tips and housewares, and wine and ice cream tasting (Kimani 2012; Fieldwork 2010, 2014, also see Nakumatt 2016; Tusky’s 2016). Fast-food restaurants like KFC and Subway and growing in number, but are outnumber by African and Kenyan franchises like Galito’s, Pizza Inn, Java House, and Creamy Inn (Fieldwork 2010, 2014, also see Galito’s 2011; Dial a Delivery n.d.). The presence of supermarkets, fast-food chains, and brand wars such as that which is taking place between Coke and Pepsi leave some asking how Kenyan farmers can link up to supermarkets, restaurants, and manufacturers to stock shelves with domestic produce and supply primary ingredients (Neven and Reardon 2004; Rao, Brümmer, and Qaim 2012).

The major changes that have taken place in food retailing starting in the 1980s follow Kenya’s entrance into structural adjustment. The austerity measures imposed by structural adjustment dramatically reduced social safety nets and gains to quality of life forged in Kenya during the post-WWII period, and the harshness of their effects cannot be understated (Ferguson 2006; Parsitau 2008). While Kenyans now struggle with school fees and health care costs (Interviews 2010, 2014), the resulting and emerging picture of laissez-faire market activities in
Kenya is complex and deviates from meta-narratives of how neoliberal reforms unfold (see Njeru 2013). For instance, the Kenyan government did not consistently withdraw from managing different agricultural sectors nor did it consistently implement reforms after entering the structural adjustment loan (Nyangito et al., 2006; Odame, Musyoka, & Kere, 2009; Swamy, 1994). According to Ariga, Jayne, and Njukia (2010):

“Despite the fact that markets were reformed in the early 1990s to allow for private trade, the National Cereals and Produce Board still continues to exert a major indirect effect on maize prices….Jayne et al. (2008) estimated both the separate and joint impacts of the NCPB’s purchase and sale operations on wholesale prices and their results indicate that the NCPB’s operations have, between 1995 and 2005, raised wholesale market prices by 17 to 20 percent” (4).

Maize continues to be a principal crop grown by Kenyans and is a major component of diets, even though parastatals like the NCPB were expected to be of limited influence (O’Neill 2015).

Governments have enacted price guarantees to consumers and have also rallied around the importance of “buying Kenyan” (Ariga, Jaayne, and Njukia 2010; Government of Kenya 2012; also see Okoth 2016; O’Neill 2015). There are also plans to grow imported food like rice and wheat, and this emphasis on national self-sufficiency echoes colonial and post-colonial strategies (Government of Kenya 2012; O’Neill 2015). Although some produce may be threatened by cheap imports, and supermarkets and fast food outlets may be tied to Kenyans’ changing dietary inclinations, the COMESA agreement allows Kenya to use import tariffs to protect some of its domestic industries (in O’Neill 2015; Raschke and Cheema 2008). It is difficult to argue that Kenyan systems are currently “neocolonized,” which is not to say that capitals and countries will not try or are not trying.
While major changes have come about in care of economic reforms, it is not always obvious if and how neoliberal agendas are being advanced and resisted on the ground. For instance, food justice activities like alternative food networks and food sovereignty involve decommodifying food and socially re-embedding food systems by prioritizing livelihoods, ecologies, and social and animal welfare above market principles (Friedberg and Goldstein 2010; Friedmann 2007; Patel 2009). Yet Kenya’s food-based constraints are different than the centres of Western Europe, the US, and Canada that produce much food justice research. Local markets and shortened food chains dominate Kenya’s food retailing, and Kenyans who shop at “wet markets” (as opposed to the trendier named “farmer’s markets”) do so because the foods are more affordable, markets are next to busy transit hubs and estates, and people can quickly find foods that better match their needs and tastes (Abrahams 2007, 2009; Friedberg and Goldstein 2010; Interviews 2010, 2014). Kenyans are not necessarily working to socially embed food markets that have become dislodged by an industrial food system, or forge relational bonds of community (Abrahams 2006; Friedberg and Goldstein 2010; Interviews 2010, 2014). Wet markets are an historical way of getting food, including to customers who may only want to buy a tablespoon of cooking fat or a thin slice of watermelon (Interviews 2010, 2014).

Additionally, that trade should take a domestic and local focus may make sense in contexts where producers and consumers are seeking to resist cheap imports and retain domestic culinary identities (O’Neill forthcoming, de Soucey 2010). But in areas of Kenya where roads are poor and refrigeration is costly, local markets may be the only destination that farmers can send unspoiled produce. When brokers visit, they may offer better prices and/or alternative outlets for produce that would otherwise flood town centres (Interviews 2010, 2014). Still, how to reconcile food exports with food justice, when export currently heralds images of off-season
and expensive foods being shipped to wealthy consumers (see Dolan 2010) needs further elaboration. Burnett and Murphy (2014) point to the importance of specifying how international trade can work with food sovereignty practices, given that “[t]ens of millions of small-scale producers and farm workers earn their living from crops raised for export” (1071; see also Agarwal 2014).

Instead of anticipating the shape of neoliberal processes in Kenya and what Kenyans may want, it may be better to understand that Kenya is situated in a global food system marked by changing structural constraints and possibilities. How farmers “establish a reconnection between agriculture, society, and nature” (Schneider and Niederle 2010: 385) may not happen in contexts of their choosing (McMichael 2008), but can only be tracked by looking to the actual work being done by people in food and farming projects.

**Methodology**

In order to learn the actual processes of how Kenyan farmers are working with government officers in their locales, I drew selectively on the principles of institutional ethnography. Institutional ethnography investigates the work that is done in a particular setting and seeks to understand “how people’s work is actually connected in concrete ways, in sequences of action and courses of action” (Turner and O’Neill 2009; see also Smith and Turner 2014). As we ask questions of the knowledgeable agents who work in particular settings, we can learn about how work is accomplished in its specific form from beginning to end. To be clear though, the ways that people learn to speak of the work they are sustaining through their activities reflect organized practices of work that sustain relations of ruling (Smith 1987; Smith and Turner 2014; also see Escobar 2011).
My methodological approach is informed by institutional ethnography, but is not faithful to it. I did not pay close attention to texts (see Smith and Turner 2014). Instead in 2010 and 2014, I lived in homestays in rural and urban areas across three different counties. I visited farms and diverse food retailing outlets frequently, often daily. I attended meetings of local NGOs and CSOs, government representatives, international NGOs and CSOs, and farmer training workshops. I performed semi-structured interviews with more than 70 farmers, NGO and CSO representatives, and government officials. My analysis reveals that community farming projects contain fundamental tensions involving autonomy and markets, but not in ways that are well-captured by current scholarly framings of “neoliberalism” or “resistance.”

**Individualization versus independence: Group formation, legitimization, and project-based support**

Neoliberalism in farming manifests as individualized farmers are coordinated to global market demands, yet support apparatus in Kenya is built around groups, not individuals. As one national officer explained, “The government does not help individuals; it helps groups and projects in order to achieve a certain positive goal” (Interviews 2014). When a farmer was asked what he thought about working in groups, he was surprised by the question. “Groups are the African way” he said (Interviews 2014). Kenyan community group action has long-standing roots: “*Harambee*, meaning ‘let’s all pull together,’” would be used to mobilize local resources and would involve local participation…Harambee is the collective and cooperative participation of a community in an attempt to fill perceived needs through utilization of its own resources” (Ngau 1987: 523-524; see also Brownhill 2006; Cowen and Shenton 1996). The word
“harambee” came up periodically in interviews, however, community groups typically referred to groups using characteristics and goals like “uplift,” “Inity” (a Rastafarian vision of unity), “self-help,” “NGO,” “CSO,” “social movement,” “cooperative,” and “assist.” The synonyms used for harambee suggest, but do not prove, shifting forms of community action in Kenya.

Governments work with community groups in food and farming in two key ways. The first involves setting up barazas or public meetings. In these cases, government officials call a public meeting to explain pre-set program objectives to attendees and have community members identify possible beneficiaries. Representatives then assess the needs and circumstances of possible recipients. Officers follow up and “…call another community meeting and say ‘These are the people, do you think they need help? Me, I don’t know them.’ The community verifies and validates’” (Interviews 2014). Even though the implementation of projects rests on community support, officers readily acknowledged that there were not enough funds to help all of the people who could be supported by programs. One officer reported than when she launched an income supplement for a food security project, she had to set an age-related eligibility requirement of 90 years plus in order to narrow down the pool of eligible recipients (Interviews 2014).

Community groups are an integral part of Kenyan life. When describing the results of the food security project, the officer stated, “Now [after receiving the supplement, people] would be invited to Harambee, are able to contribute 50KSh and feel part of the community, and lead reasonable lives” (Interviews 2014). On that note, different residents will often initiate group formation. For instance, residents will independently identify people with shared interests in their social circles, churches, and towns and ask them to form a group. They will establish a one-time membership fee, and will charge bimonthly or monthly fees for table banking (i.e.
within-group lending). Most of the people I visited stated that they were current members of three to four groups, while one Rastafarian group with multiple chapters required members to only belong to it. Community groups are also assembled by governments and organizations seeking to implement specific projects like value-added dairying or irrigation for kale and tomatoes. Governments partner with universities, the World Bank, and foreign NGOs to hold assemblies, and the individuals who turn out and express interest will be assembled into groups even though they may not know one another.

The groups that are self-assembled must be formally certified in order for officers to put them in touch with project opportunities, and/or to receive financial and technical support for self-directed projects. Certification requires groups to create a constitution, take meeting minutes, bring these documents plus personal identification, proof of a bank account, and an annual fee of 500KSh to nearby national offices. Government officers photocopy identification, enter the group’s name and contact information into a database, collect the fee, and provide the group with a certificate and registration number. One officer explained how he forges connections amongst groups and with sponsors: “We have a list in our database, we check if the group is active, and then give the university or whoever a list of groups… [We ask] Have they registered every year since they started and go and work on the ground?” When asked about the database, he stated that there were more than 16,000 groups registered with his office dating back to 2005. So how do officers narrow down the list of potential groups in areas where many farm the same crops, share interests, and belong to multiple groups? Officers explained that they worked with groups that they knew to be current, and “suitable” for the project (Interviews 2014).
Once groups have a registration number, they are able to apply for different loans to fund their table banking schemes and projects. Revolving funds are particularly popular, and are government-issued interest-free loans. Groups apply for these loans by filling in an application form and if approved are charged a 5% administrative fee, with anywhere from a three-month to six-month grace period for repayment. While officers reported 90% or higher repayment rate, and groups spoke highly of the funds, one officer stated: “Groups are registering because they hear that there is a [revolving] fund, they share the money and the group disintegrates” (Interviews 2014).

Groups are expected to be “self-sufficient” (Interviews 2014), and when sponsored, are typically trained in conflict resolution and management alongside training in farm applications and technology. But even with no-interest credit and support, farmers do not always understand how to improve their livelihoods. Agriculture Business Development (ABD) and internationally-based NGOs will map out possibilities for on-farm improvements, and provide assistance in this respect. As one NGO official stated, “Farmers said the problem is marketing, that we need to help with this, but the farmers were not able to supply consistently … We realize it’s not just marketing – it’s supply, consistency, disease control, feed, and housing” (Interviews 2014).

ABDs and Savings and Credit Cooperative Organizations (SAACO) will provide farmers with loans if they are engaged in projects that can be integrated into value chains. One SAACO I visited stated that geography impacted one’s eligibility for loans: “We don’t finance along the river, because the conditions are unreliable” (Interviews 2014). Kenyan homesteads are often inherited, making it difficult to adjust to the demands of lenders. Yet groups, not individuals, often take out the actual interest-bearing loans. As one ABD officer stated, “The loans target
groups, but members can drop out. The group can fall apart, [and loans are] not always available to the individual” (Interviews 2014). When groups that have secured a loan fall apart, the onus is on the original signatories to repay them. As she stated:

There are issues of over-lending the same farmer with different loans, a farmer can have four loans, very little money to pay, and the farmer ends up straining. The lack of collateral is another issue… and the repayment is fierce. For instance, a farmer will give the same share to different people, get a few people to guarantee the loan, and if they cannot repay the guarantors lose their assets (ABD Officer, 2014).

ABDs, government offices, and foreign NGOs work together and approach farmer groups about developing produce collection centres throughout counties. The point, as heard in all offices, is to collectively broker prices above what individual farmers can get, and to sell produce more easily from home bases (Interviews 2010, 2014). Still, where will produce be sold to? One farmer and organization proudly discussed a large contract to an Asian city. The contract expired two years prior and was not renewed, and those asked said they did not know why. Yet the organization appeared to be expanding, and membership fees were out of reach for many at 15,000KSh. One of the farmers stated that the organization wanted to accept only those new members who were already trained in internationally-standardized labour practices or who were able to invest in the training in order to keep up with sister organizations (Interviews 2014).

Farming groups described their assets, with assets ranging from rentable patio furniture, tents, and business signs, all justifying higher membership fees. One organization had a freezer full of meat, but no regular customer base. With rain-fed, non-industrial farming, without regular consumer demand, and with alongside food capitals seeking predictable supplies based on certified labour practices and quality standards, how to make projects longer term and inclusive was a question that governments and farmers were trying to address.
Given the burden of fees, responsibilities, and uncertainty, I asked a government officer and farmer why farmers would join so many groups. The women looked surprised and replied:

Officer: Why they join…they feel insecure, so they join many groups, they have many groups to go to: you want to be everywhere so that you can be helped by everyone. Want to be everywhere, so you can borrow from everyone. They feel incapacitated, they don’t have that competence to start something, they fear failing, if it doesn’t work they feel like they lose their money, they will lose everything.

Farmer: It’s psychological, they lack self-esteem. [When we] see someone who fails [to fulfill the assigned role in the group] they will sweet talk and will get their same job back and if you complain about it you are seen as a spoiler.

Officer: Yes! It’s the same feeling of being incapacitated.

As the officer and farmer indicated, groups’ efforts in food and farming exist in part due to farmers’ awareness that they are not individually capable of overcoming logistical dynamics and successfully implementing new farming strategies. Yet at the same time, individuals may find themselves grouped with others who are in similar positions of constraint, and who may not have the time, interest, or capabilities to execute plans. Group formation and contact with sponsors and projects involves social politics, and cannot eradicate the uncertainty of shifting global market dynamics.

**Conclusion**

The global food system is characterized by changing structural constraints and possibilities, as businesses seek to gain profit, states rely on ordering principles to set the conditions in which profits can be realized, and people work meaningfully to ensure the conditions of their survival. The examination of farmers’ work in Kenya does not reveal a clear cut case of getting people oriented towards markets as individuals, as governments support
farmers as they work collectively on food and farming. But with limited infrastructure in some areas, limited refrigeration, and limited market outlets, Kenyan farmers are exposed to the harshness of the disinterest of global markets, as opposed to foreign takeover.

Formal practices of collectivity buffer individuals from some of the individualizing effects of laissez-faire markets. Individual rights are firmly situated in community contexts and individual economic improvement is organized with respect to community-oriented principles of fairness and equality, as was seen in the barazas which are oriented around communities deciding who is the most in need. In the case of groups assembled by or for farmers, common issues and concerns unite them, and individuals work together to improve their livelihoods. There is spontaneity that may reflect a break with prior forms of harambee, whereby efforts were tightly monitored (Ngau 1987). Yet at the same time, the community-group format structures farmers’ experiences, as they are dependent on government officials to recognize their legitimacy, to recognize their group’s potential amongst other plausible groups, and to put them in touch with projects of interest. That projects may be untenable or that there are limited options for farming income are not fundamentally addressed.

Furthermore, how voluntary these groups are is debatable. While those who joined the faith-based Rastafarian chapters expressed a clear vision of social development that meaningfully involved coordinated, non-political, day to day “good work”, most of the rural farming groups I met with focused on their daily financial insecurities. Groups described a need to pay for health care, funerals, improve their family’s nutrition, improve their food storage, grow more profitable crops, and find additional city centres in Kenya and abroad to market their foods to. These strategies are enacted in the context of loans and expectations that groups can resolve their own conflicts. In the Kenyan context, individualism is expected to be aligned with
community in order to avoid being a spoiler. Group dynamics allow farmers to escape some of the individualizing effects of markets and gain support from governments, but not necessarily on farmers’ terms.

Works Cited


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