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Reconfiguring local food governance in an age of austerity: towards a place-based approach

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Abstract

In this paper we examine the dynamic nature of local food governance by considering the potential for (and barriers to) developing a more robust approach that can enhance the socio-ecological resilience of the food system. Fusing insights from Eliasian sociology with the literature on local food governance, we focus on a region of northern England to explore understandings of “local food” and the problems local food actors encounter while working within and across the territorial boundaries of “the local”. This is underpinned by an examination of the pressures local governments face as a result of financial austerity and competing neoliberal policy priorities that, we argue, undermine attempts to create synergies between diverse food system actors. We conclude by outlining the potential for developing a more relational approach to (and understanding of) place-based food governance.

Keywords Figurations; governance; local food; place; relational; territorial

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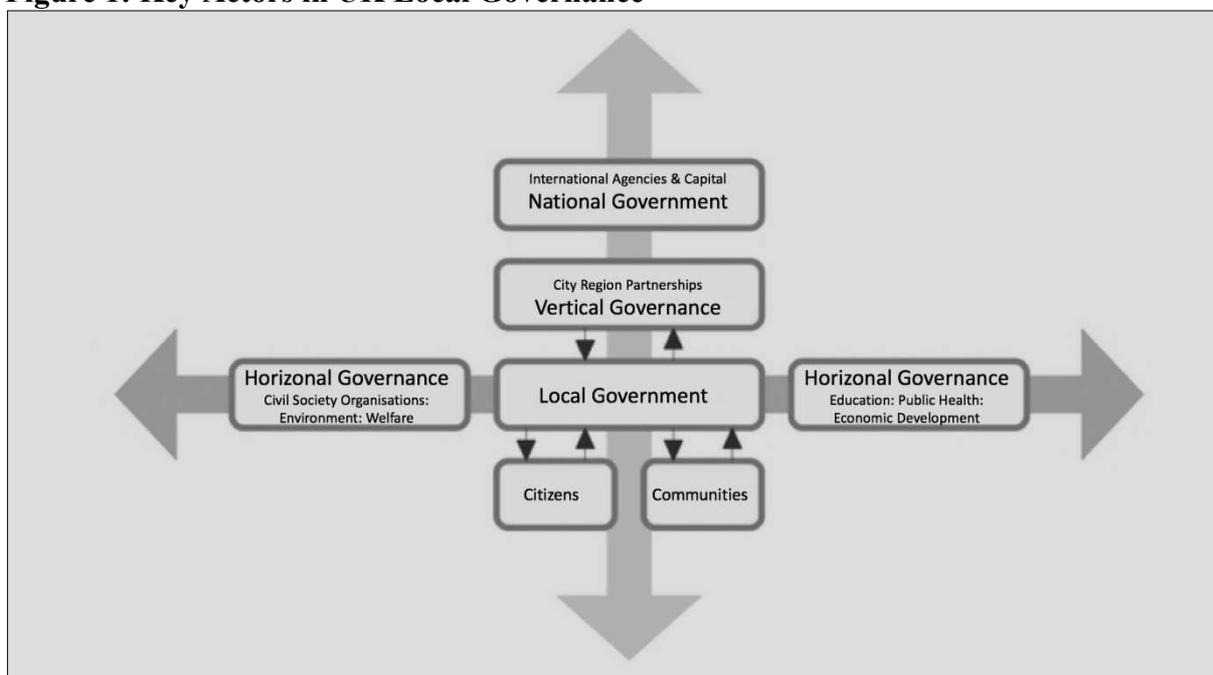
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Introduction

The last three decades have witnessed a general shift away from a centralised model of government towards multi-sector governance arrangements. In many countries, civil society and business organisations have been drawn into partnerships with public sector agencies to formulate and implement policy – a development Rhodes and Marsh (1992) refer to through the notion of “policy networks”. In the UK, these developments signify a series of managerial changes away from the top-down mode of government towards a more open and flexible set of arrangements characterised by self-organising, inter-organisational networks (Rhodes 1997). While many accounts of governance recognise the potential for democratic renewal, this can only occur, theorists argue, if networks are managed effectively (Bevir and Rhodes 2003) and network managers engender trust and shape institutional rules (Sorensen and Torfing 2007).

From the late 1990s onwards, network governance became the new orthodoxy (Marinetto 2003) under successive New Labour administrations and it was widely seen as way of overcoming ‘*the limitations of anarchic market exchange and top-down planning*’ (Jessop, 2003: 101–02). A central tenet of the underlying approach is the idea that multi-dimensional governance is shaped by ‘*the outcome of action at many different institutional levels (from the EU to national, regional, local and neighbourhood levels) and in different institutional locations (within the political, commercial, and civil society domains)*’ (Lowndes & Roberts 2013, p.180). The impact of these changes has been particularly evident at the local level, where networked governance is seen as a way of addressing complex socioeconomic problems alongside a new coordinating role for local government (Stoker 2004; 2011) based on inclusive policy-making and enhanced citizen participation (Howard and Lever 2011; Blanco 2015).

Figure 1: Key Actors in UK Local Governance



Critics, however, see little in the network governance narrative to suggest that inclusive forms of governance are emerging, and it has been widely argued that power is simply being concentrated into the hands of new urban political and business elites (Geddes 2006; Davies

2011; Lever 2011). In an early critique, Newman (2001) claimed that governance has a ‘*generic weakness*’ that pushes power out of the equation by overemphasising the need for new forms of coordination, consensus and collaboration, while Swyngedouw (2005) argues that good governance stresses an ‘*idealised normative model*’ of government in order to bypass political tension and division. Others claim that governance constructs social and political entities that cut across dense webs of interdependent actors (Brenner 2004; Lever 2005) and geographical scales (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003; Bulkeley 2005) at the local, national and international level in ways that prioritise *policies* over *politics* (Mouffe 2005). More recently, in a national context characterized by increasing state withdrawal and financial austerity, governance has arguably become central to neoliberal processes that transfer responsibility for issues arising from complex structural problems to individuals and groups lacking the ‘power’ to bring about change effectively (Peck and Tickell 2002; Dagdeviren et al. 2018). The local state has thus been tasked, some argue, with attempts to normalise austerity through collaborative mechanisms that ‘*intensify distributional conflict*’ over resources (Bau et al. 2018:16) in order to contain and disorganise resistance to neoliberalism (Davies and Blanco 2017; Davies et al. 2018).

Food provides a useful lens to examine these developments. In recent years, local food governance has become a central feature of debates about national food policy in a number of countries, including the UK, with an increasing number of scholars pointing to the potential of local governments to overcome the “*inconsistencies, overlaps and gaps*” (Slade et al., 2016: 37) produced by fragmented food policies and neoliberal governance arrangements (Sonnino, 2016; IPES-FOOD, 2017). In this paper, we aim to move beyond such normative characterizations. Specifically, we take a closer look at the dynamic nature of local food governance by considering its potential *for* developing a more robust place-based approach that can enhance the socio-ecological resilience of the food system (Sonnino 2016; Klassen and Wittman 2017; Moragues-Faus and Sonnino 2018). Building on the *local trap* critique of the tendency within food localization discourses to view local food as inherently better or more sustainable than food produced in the conventional or global food system (Born and Purcell, 2006; Purcell, 2006), we emphasize the socially and politically constructed nature of “the local” scale – that is, the contingent, interactive and often contested social and political relations that inform and shape all re-localization processes. We argue that a focus on “place” as constituted relationally through temporal, spatial and social processes and struggles (Sonnino et al., 2016) is crucial to identify an approach to food governance that can contribute to food system reform in an age of austerity.

Accounts of ‘local’ and ‘place-based’ food both tend to focus on concerns about food system reform. But while definitions of ‘local’ food tend to emphasise the significance of specificity and proximity, ‘place’ brings to the fore a more nuanced emphasis on the socio-environmental specificities of food and agriculture across diverse histories and geographical scales (O’Neill 2014a; Hinrichs 2015). In this light, scholars of food governance are starting to explore how cities and regions are attempting to expand the productive and consumptive boundaries of the local in order to counter the pressures created by financial austerity and move towards place-based food governance (Sonnino 2016; Moragues-Faus and Sonnino 2018). Neoliberal governance has, in this context, we contend, thus provided an opportunity to pursue food system reform.

To extend the scope of these debates and examine what is possible we draw on the concept of ‘figuration’ from Eliasian sociology¹ (Elias 1978; 2012; Elias and Scotson 2008; Lever 2005; Lever 2011; Lever and Smith 2013). Characterised by asymmetrical power relations between competing social groups, figurations bind individuals together in relational networks of human interdependence that cut across the assumed micro(local) – macro(global) divide in distinct yet overlapping ways (in societies, cities and communities, for example) (Elias 2012). On this account, the individual actions are entangled with social, political and economic forms of organisation in ways that enable the power and agency of some groups *vis-à-vis* the power and agency of others. A conceptual apparatus that brings accounts of place-based food governance into dialogue with Eliasian sociology thus provides a useful framework, we argue, to examine the potential *for* (and barriers *to*) developing synergies between interdependent food system actors that cut across the territorial and administrative boundaries of “the local” (see Hogenstijn et al. 2008; Lever 2005; 2011).

The paper draws on an extended period of research between 2014 and 2018 that examined local food governance in the Metropolitan Borough of Kirklees in northern England. During the first period of research (2014-15), we set out to explore how a local food partnership could improve the health of local people, make the economy and environment more resilient, thus helping to consolidate Kirklees’s position within the Sustainable Food Cities Network² (SFCN) – a translocal network governance initiative set up to create a more sustainable food system. During the second period of research (2016-18), we explored the changing landscape of local food governance and politics in Kirklees after attempts to develop a local food partnership were superseded by national policies aligned with corporate food sector priorities. Across the five-year period, two funded projects and one piece of commissioned work were completed. More than 50 semi-structured interviews were conducted overall with a diverse range of food system actors, with each interview lasting between 1-2 hours.³ Interviews were complemented with sustained periods of observation, including attendance at policy meetings and briefings; the interview and observational data was open-coded and thematically analysed to identify key issues and changes to actions carried out in the sector with a particular focus on the local level.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, we examine recent geographical debates about local food governance and place, highlighting the usefulness of insights from Eliasian sociology to progress the research agenda in these burgeoning fields. We next turn our attention to the emergence of an overarching governance polity in Kirklees in recent decades, before focusing on an empirical case study of local food governance, culture and politics in the borough. We conclude with some reflections on the potential *for* (and the barriers *to*) developing a “placed-based” approach to food governance that can encourage synergies and figural connections between diverse food system actors at multiple scales.

Local food governance

In recent decades, food scholars have critiqued the constructed divide between sustainable “local” or “alternative” food systems and an unsustainable “global” or “conventional” food system. A central feature of early debates in this area was the emergence at the local level of

¹ Eliasian sociology is also known as ‘figural’ or ‘process’ sociology.

² The Sustainable Food Cities Network’s (<http://sustainablefoodcities.org>) wider aim is address a range of interconnected social, economic and environmental challenges (i.e. obesity and diet-related ill-health, food poverty and waste, climate change, biodiversity, and social dislocation) through cross sector partnership work.

³ Interviews were conducted with individuals from local growing groups, producers and retailers; local farmers; representatives of the National Farmers Union (NFU); NGOs; community and neighbourhood groups; members of local food partnerships across the UK; Kirklees Council; an environmental consultant; and representatives of national supermarket chains.

the need to link *'product'* with *'place'* through a process of *re-localization* that reconnected (physically and socially) local producers with local consumers (Ilbery and Kneafsey 1998; Goodman 2003; Feagan, 2007). Ongoing debates about the importance of furthering citizen participation (Hassanein 2003) in the development of food policy are reflected in attempts to reconfigure local food governance across cities and their rural hinterlands through various policy initiatives. In the UK, we can see this in debates about the emergence of urban food strategies (UFSs) involving a broad range of actors from across civil society (Sonnino and Spayde, 2014; Sonnino 2016).

The literature suggests that many UFSs adopt a holistic approach to food system reform that considers policy linkages at the local authority level between diverse groups of actors on the horizontal governance plane (i.e. from health and well-being, community and economic development, environment and education) and different food sectors on the vertical governance dimension (food production, consumption, processing, distribution and waste, for example). Using a fundamentally normative tone, scholars have highlighted the potential of local (usually urban) governance to facilitate greater civic engagement, transparency and participation in the food system (Sonnino 2016). While civil society groups are deemed to have the drive and capacity to bring about change through community growing and urban agriculture initiatives, for instance, local authorities are seen to have the ability to influence longer-term priorities through public procurement, territorial and spatial planning and the development of local infrastructure (Hassanein, 2003; Levkoe, 2011; Sonnino, 2009; Sonnino et al. 2016).

Drawing on examples from across Europe (Moragues-Faus and Morgan 2015; Morgan 2015), North America (Blay-Palmer 2009, MacRae and Donahue 2013) and Latin America (Rocha and Lessa 2009; Ashe and Sonnino 2012), this body of work has celebrated urban food governance as part of an attempt to put environmentally sustainable and nutritious food on the political agenda (Morgan 2015) by enabling collaboration across traditionally disjointed policy domains (Wiskerke 2009). There is, however, a danger that the normative characterization evident in this literature leads food scholars to overlook the political tensions and power asymmetries that have characterised studies of local food governance. According to Mendes (2008), for example, set alongside the inequitable access to resources on both the horizontal and vertical planes, there are significant structural and procedural factors that inhibit the ability of those involved in local food governance – including local government – to implement food policy effectively. To succeed at all in this context, local food governance relies heavily on committed public-sector workers and engaged civil society activists – what have been referred to as “food policy champions” (Sonnino and Spayde, 2014; Moragues-Faus and Morgan 2015; Coulson and Sonnino, 2018) or “innovation brokers” (Klerks et al., 2009).

As noted, food re-localization discourses have typically associated “place” with a physically-bounded territorial entity within which food is produced and consumed. As early critics pointed out (see, for example, Sonnino and Marsden, 2006), an important implication of these conceptualizations has been a simplistic characterization of the food system as sub-divided between a place-less “global” and a place-based “local” (see Morgan et al. 2006; Hinrichs 2015). Over time, this dichotomized spatiality has been widely challenged by geographical theories that frame place (and scale) not as bounded and static entities, but as relationally constructed by the interplay of temporal and spatial dynamics that call into question other places (and scales) (Jackson et al. 2009; Cohen and Bakker 2015). In the case of food, this has helped to dismantle normative assumptions about “the local” being inherently better

and/or more sustainable than “the global” or “conventional” food system (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Born and Purcell, 2006; Purcell, 2006).

From a governance perspective, a key outcome of this critique has been an expanded focus on the importance of dynamics that unfold at higher scales. Under this relational approach, “the local” is no longer just a physical location; it is a process (Staheli, 2003) – an entity constructed over time that depends on the interconnections between scales (Sonnino et al., 2016). Exploring the contingent and dynamic nature of place entails understanding the ways in which power flows across scales, shaping and mediating social and economic relations within communities that are both “local” and “global” (Jackson et al. 2009; Cohen and Bakker 2015). The Eliasian concept of figuration provides a useful way of furthering these debates by enabling an exploration of the ways in which diverse food system actors are connected relationally *within* and *beyond* constructed notions of “the local” (Hogenstijn et al. 2008; Lever 2015; 2011). Indeed, when power is viewed as a structural characteristic of all human relationships (Elias 1978; Lever 2005), the position and strength of established actors within the ‘global’ food system can be linked not simply to an accumulation of power, but to an increase in the number of coordinated positions within a figuration (Elias 1978; Elias and Scotson 2008; Lever 2005). It follows that power can be equated with control over diverse groups of food system actors at “the local” level; with the attempts of established groups to control these relationships to achieve specific social and economic outcomes; and with the inability of some groups to exercise agency and bring about change. As we observe, these insights provide a useful lens to progress a dynamic approach to local food governance that captures its developments and the power relations behind them.

Local food governance in Kirklees

Constructed in 1974 through the provisions of the Local Government Act 1972, the Metropolitan Borough of Kirklees has a well-established local governance framework encompassing eleven former local government districts, of which Huddersfield is the administrative centre. Bordering Manchester to the West, Leeds and Bradford to the north, and Sheffield in the south, Kirklees covers a mixed urban and rural area of 408.6 km² in West Yorkshire in the north of England (see Figure 2). With a population of 422, 458, Kirklees is a diverse region socially and economically. On average residents in the borough’s most deprived areas around Batley and Dewsbury in the urban north have a life expectancy up to five years less than residents in the more prosperous parts of the rural south (Kirklees 2013), which has a more rural character.

By the early 1990s, Kirklees had started to consolidate its local governance polity in partnership with local businesses, communities and the university (then a polytechnic) (Heatley 1990; Wood and Taylor 2004). The development of governance as a ‘*defining narrative*’ (Newman, 2001) continued after the election of New Labour in the late 1990s through a new phase of local government modernisation encompassing a plethora of policy initiatives linked to strategic partnership working and increased participation at the local level (Wood and Taylor 2004; Lever 2005). Over the last decade, governance has continued to move in new directions under successive Coalition and Conservative administrations. In a rapidly changing neoliberal context driven by financial austerity and private sector growth, Kirklees has become more closely aligned with economic priorities emanating from the Leeds City Region Enterprise Partnership, which are underpinned by reform of the planning system and pressures to release land for house building and industrial development (Reomy and Street 2018).

meals are also provided at local events, and in recent years the group has made links with local food businesses across the borough in an attempt to extend the local food figuration. The Golcar Food Growers Co-operative nearby works in a similar way. The group has also planted thousands of trees to transform local pasture into woodland and their community orchard has over thirty varieties of Yorkshire apples.

While proximity is a key issue for the actors involved, an interviewee from a third growing project, Edibles, highlighted the social, economic and environmental benefits that potentially emerge from these ways of working:

'So growing food is one outcome... but you've also got the people who are employed on the land, so you've got local economic development potential... you've also got the social aspect of getting people with perhaps mental health issues onto the land, and then you've got things like managing land better... So you've got win, win, win.'

There was great enthusiasm for Kirklees to set up a independent food partnership to increase these ways of working and enable the success of the 2020 agenda. Yet the dominance of Council's economic priorities was seen by many to impede partnership working and the development of such benefits for the wider population.

Particularly relevant here, it was argued, have been attempts to establish links between the Joint Health and Well Being Strategy and the Kirklees Economic Strategy (KES) as laid out in the Local Plan (Kirklees 2015; Lever 2015). However, in a dynamic and fast moving figural context characterised by asymmetrical power relations, this was far from straightforward, and a number of interviewees highlighted a contradiction between plans for the use of land in *Food 2020* (which are aligned with the public health agenda) and those contained in KES (which largely focus on house building and job creation). A council employee – who was also a local food activist – explained her concerns about these issues in the following way:

'That's one of the things about this view of land for jobs and homes, land's about more than that and that's one of the things that worries me a lot. In terms of the health and well-being strategy, food's right up there as... really important, but it's got to be there in the economic side as well and reflected in your planning policy.'

As this example illustrates, at the local authority level neoliberalism aligns 'land use' with economic exchange values (Warde and Swyngedouw 2018) in ways that are not easily reconcilable with environmental values. Indeed, KES contains no specific plans for the environment or the rural economy in this sense, and it largely focusses on priorities for growth within the Leeds City Region.

This situation was recognised by a government planning inspector, who expressed concerns about the 'chaotic' Local Plan to use vast swathes of protected green belt land for new housing and industrial development (TPIW 2017). All this is not to say, however, that there is enough land for Kirklees to be self-sufficient in food production (see Cooper 2012). Rather, it is to draw attention to the complex issues involved and the need to foster resilience and well-being in current and future generations (Carolan 2013). To facilitate these objectives and make better use of the pockets of fertile land that could be used to build a small-scale food industry in Kirklees, it was again argued that better strategic and spatial planning policy is needed.

Other related barriers to the expansion of the local food figuration were identified. Edibles had recently received a £5000 grant from the *Plunkett Foundation*⁵ to explore the potential for furthering the development of a local food network revolving around a village in rural south Kirklees. The project was effectively a micro study of Edibles, with the Green Valley Grocer (a community owned co-operative and shop with 350 members) and the Handmade Bakery (a not-for-profit workers' cooperative and café producing over 1000 loaves of bread weekly) acting as retailers serving the community. These retailers were already having a positive impact in the village. The grocer had raised £30,000 in equity through a community share issue made up of financial investment and commitments of time and expertise; local businesses had helped out with running costs and investors had received a dividend within a couple of years. The bakery had also raised finance to expand and open a café by offering customers bread bonds that paid interest weekly in loaves of bread.

The difficulties of expanding these ways of working, however, soon became apparent, as the owner of Edibles confirmed:

'We realised that on a small scale it was very difficult for us to make any [money], to run any sort of coherent business where we can pay ourselves a reasonable salary, even a minimum wage salary, with the prices that the Green Valley Grocer are prepared to pay... the economics of that just doesn't work.'

This was not a criticism of their retail partners, nor to say that the rural south cannot support a small-scale food industry; it was more to suggest, once again, that better planning policy, support and investment in local infrastructure and supply chains is needed if the local food figuration is to be strengthened and local resilience enhanced.

The complexities of furthering these ways of working came to the fore when, after a long drawn out planning application, a new Aldi supermarket opened in the village.⁶ An interviewee from the Green Valley Grocer explained how this came about and the priority given to economic development over local concerns about social and environmental sustainability:

'The whole village was involved with this, it went three times to planning, it was a massive campaign for a year... some people on the traffic and the highways and the safety aspects of it... a lot of people on the impact on the high street, and they would not listen.'

At this example illustrates, an increase in the number of coordinated positions between established food system actors at the local level entrenched asymmetrical power relations within the wider food figuration, thus undermining the ability of local food system actors to exercise agency and initiate food system reform.

Definitions of local food and the complexity of "local" supply chains

Redefining what can be classed as '*local food*' and overcoming the complexity of local supply chains were also seen as significant barriers to the expansion of the local food

⁵ The Plunkett Foundation helps and supports communities to overcome the challenges they face by working together (<https://plunkett.co.uk>)

⁶ Aldi is a German owned discount supermarket chain with more 10,000 stores in 20 countries and an estimated turnover of more than €50 billion.

economy. These issues were evident in the experiences of a local food entrepreneur who was struggling to source rhubarb to make ‘locally made chutneys’ from within the world-renowned Rhubarb Triangle – a 23 km² area in West Yorkshire that overlaps with Kirklees in the west. From the early 20th century until the outbreak of the Second World War, the rhubarb industry expanded, and at its peak the area covered about 78 km², producing 90% of the world’s forced rhubarb. All rhubarb produced in the triangle was recently awarded Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) status by the European Commission, yet while the majority of the UK’s rhubarb crop still comes from the area, little was available locally at this time.

Sourcing of rhubarb from across a wider geographical scale was a double-edged sword for the business. While increasing the volume of products allowed the entrepreneur to expand with national retailers, it also raised questions about whether it was still legitimate to market his goods as ‘locally-produced’. The need to expand into national markets was also linked to the ongoing inability of local food businesses to access local supply chains and local institutions. This was a controversial issue. A local councillor, for instance, argued that most local food businesses do not have the capacity to meet local needs and become part of established networks, yet a number of local food actors vehemently questioned this assertion. Such discussions, it was claimed, have never taken place, and it was argued that there needs to be much more dialogue about sourcing and procuring ‘*local food products*’ through local supply chains if a more resilient local economy is to emerge. Even if such products are slightly ‘*more expensive*’, and the ingredients are from slightly ‘*further afield*’, it was argued that they would be ‘*better for the local economy*’ and ‘*intangibly good for the area*’.

Forging figurational connections across distinct historical boundaries and geographical scales is a crucial element of any attempt to develop a more robust place-based food system (Hinrichs 2015; Klassen and Wittman 2017). For many local food businesses, however, working in this way challenges assumptions about what “local food” should or should not be (O’Neill 2014a). For example, when the Handmade Bakery expanded to open a café, a decision was made to focus on local suppliers. Much of the flour used by the bakery at this time was sourced from a mill in North Yorkshire 65 km away, which located the cooperative, theoretically at least, within wider food networks. This flour was, however, sometimes imported from North America and Russia, which was clearly against the ethos of the bakery, and a defensive stance was taken to source more expensive organic flour from Yorkshire millers in order to emphasise their proximity with, and support for, local communities.

Debates about what can be classed as “local food” were also evident in the agricultural sector in the rural south. A conventional farmer, for example, suggested that there should be mechanisms in place that allow produce to be sourced from the next nearest supplier when there is a shortage locally:

‘...the thing is, local definition should be the closest you can get it fresh... Not processed, stored, so you have to redefine what local is, can we get it closer, so it’s that procurement process, so the best value.’

This was seen to the case for fresh produce from larger farms, and also for fish, for example, which might come Fleetwood on the west coast of England or Scarborough on the east coast. All such products should be classed as ‘local’, it was argued, if they are from the nearest available source, as opposed to fish that is flown in from overseas ‘*in a refrigerated tank.*’

Hybrid combinations of food system actors do indeed work in ways that obscure the boundaries between ‘alternative’ and ‘conventional’ food systems in many instances (Morgan et al. 2006; O’Neill 2014). Building figurational connections *beyond* “the local” is thus just as significant, we contend, as the need to forge figurational connections between diverse food system actors *within* the boundaries of Kirklees, for it is only by connecting sustainable food system niches that food system reform can be initiated and maintained.

Institutional provision

Despite the intensity of local food debates during the first period of research period, the ways of working needed to facilitate movement in this direction were already unfolding through work initiated in schools through the Food for Life Partnership (FfL) (Jones 2018). Kirklees Catering Service had twice achieved the FfL silver catering award for school meals, which had turned the region into something of a hotspot for sustainable school meal provision. To achieve a gold award, schools must be acting as hubs for local communities; all food served on site must be healthy, ethical and based on local ingredients, including a minimum of 15% organic and 5% free range; it must also be animal and climate-friendly. More than 60% of pupils must be choosing to eat school meals, be actively involved in the life of a local farm, and in the planning and growing of organic food (Jones 2018). Significantly, as these criteria suggest, engagement in the conventional food system is a necessary aspect of FfL.

Out of 67,228 school pupils across the Kirklees, 13,025 are of Pakistani heritage (Kirklees 2017) and concerns were expressed during the first period of research that the Asian population in north Kirklees is often overlooked in local food circles. However, it soon became clear that the work going on in schools across diverse Kirklees communities is providing appropriate meals for children (including those with vegetarian, halal and other dietary requirements) across the rural south *and* the urbanized north. Around 100 schools enrolled in FfL in Kirklees throughout the commission, during which time two schools in the urban north achieved the FfL gold award.⁷

In this dynamic figurational context, stimulating the procurement of sustainable food not only enhanced awareness of the benefits of locally-grown and organic food, it also created significant economic benefits for local farmers, processors and wholesalers in the form of new or enhanced business and employment opportunities. As power asymmetries within the school food figuration lessened, there were also wider community benefits in terms of improved educational performance associated with better-quality diet, increasing job satisfaction for teachers, and wider school engagement in community events such as markets. For national government, there was the added benefit of improved tax revenues and reduced welfare expenditure (Jones 2018), all of which suggests it was worthwhile extending these ways of working and relocalizing food supply chains through the development of a new food partnership. Indeed, as Ashe and Sonnino (2012; 1022) confirm, because school food reform is systematic rather than segmented, it has the potential and power ‘*to provoke structural changes throughout the entirety of the food system*’. Expanding these ways of working, however, was far from straightforward, and there was a clear lack of awareness amongst the conventional farming community in the rural south about what was happening within the local food figuration more generally.

Relocalizing local supply chains

⁷ Ashbrow Primary School in 2016 and Field Lane Junior and Infant and Nursery School in 2017.

Although conventional farmers and their representatives agreed that there is great potential to relocalize local supply chains, there was also criticism of the public health agenda initiated by the Soil Association. As one interviewee noted: *'If you want to work with farmers around Kirklees... one of the biggest turn offs would be... the Soil Association.'* At the same time, however, there was a clear lack of understanding about the nature of the work being conducted in schools through FfL. An interviewee from the local branch of the National Farmers Union (NFU) – which campaigns and lobbies on behalf of conventional farmers – found it hard to see the links between improving health outcomes in urban north Kirklees and building economic resilience in the rural south. These were seen as competing rather than interdependent and related priorities, as the interviewee suggested:

'So it depends on what you are actually wanting, are they wanting to improve the health in North Kirklees or are they wanting to build an economic resilience for the agricultural... business sector [in the rural south]?'

The interviewee argued further that it is *'important to find out what food 'Kirklees... are using in the schools and the public-sector'* if conventional farms are to be engaged and a more sustainable local food figuration is to emerge. As this discussion illustrates, however, there is very little difference between the ideas being put forward by the NFU representative and the work taking place through FfL.

The complexities surrounding attempts to relocalize local supply chains also surfaced in discussions about selling produce on 'local' markets, with a number of interviewees arguing that local food businesses do not have the same opportunities at local markets as they once did. As the private sector has moved in to fill the funding gap created by financial austerity, their argument goes, the model for organizing local markets and other food events has changed considerably. A farmer explained how events now focus on generating income from larger corporate businesses, and how this makes it difficult for local food businesses to compete:

'We do a lot less farmers' markets now than what we used to; we used to do quite a lot of food festivals, we haven't done any this year... they're charging too much money for the rent and we're not getting the takings that we were.'

This particular farmer was planning to open a farm shop to counter these developments, while another argued that Kirklees needs to create the *'right environment for market traders to come back in on fresh produce'*.

Two food artisans sourcing local ingredients made similar claims about local events. Unable to find *"affordable opportunities"* locally, they were attending farmers' markets outside the territorial boundaries of Kirklees where, although the need to work in this way was questioned, they found better opportunities:

'We deal with like Selby Farmers Market and it was awesome, Selby's like fifty mile away, why do I need to go to Selby to do a farmer's market, there's not a decent one nearer one to home that we can do.'

While these developments once again illustrate the need to enhance interdependencies between diverse food system actors within the territorial boundaries of the borough to

strengthen the local food figuration, they also highlight the potential to expand figurational connections between diverse food system actors across wider geographical scales. As we observe below, however, local food actors are often constrained by competing policy priorities cascading down the vertical governance axis from national government – a situation that, we would argue, underpins much of the complexity observed and raises important and broader questions about the nature and functioning of multi-level governance systems.

Responding to complex and changing neoliberal policy priorities in the UK food sector

Discussing the problem of understanding the public health agenda in relation to agricultural priorities in the rural south, a conventional farmer expressed his frustration at the confusion created by competing national policy priorities:

‘Now that [the local food agenda] is coming out of public health isn’t it, and this is what we were saying... there is that many departments and they all have conflicting priorities, there is all this tension and it’s impossible.’

The impact of neoliberal policy on local food governance became much clearer during the second period of research. Indeed, such were the financial pressures facing Kirklees Council (BBC 2015) at this time, it soon became clear that they would find it all but impossible to commit resources to support a local food partnership that could enable and strengthen the local food figuration and position Kirklees more centrally within SFCN.

Until this point, the FfL Steering Group and the SFCN Steering Group formed a broad cross sector policy grouping in the borough, and it was from the work of the group that the *Kirklees Food Charter* (Kirklees 2014a) emerged to reinforce the *Food 2020* strategy (Kirklees 2014). Although these ways of working were not openly publicised, they were the foundations on which plans to develop a more wide-ranging local food partnership stood. However, when the local food policy champion in Public Health left in 2016, momentum behind the local food agenda slowed considerably. It ended abruptly after the Soil Association FfL funding commission came to an end in 2017, and the infrastructure on which Kirklees’ embryonic food partnership stood quickly disintegrated.

An interviewee from SFCN confirmed the fragility of these ways of working and the wider implications for partnership development:

‘I think the reason wasn’t a stable food partnership [in Kirklees] ... is because there was such a piggybacking on the Food for Life steering group meetings... [that] when Food for Life went, it [the unofficial food partnership] went with it.’

As food poverty moved up the national political agenda during this period, a number of towns and cities across the UK had started to implement the *Beyond the Food Bank* campaign, which aims to ensure that healthy, ethical and sustainable food remains on the political agenda. It was at this juncture, however, in a national food policy context focussed corporate food sustainability, that key actors within Kirklees Council made the strategic decision to address local food issues by developing a “place-restricted” approach to partnership work (McFarlane, 2009; Moragues-Faus and Sonnino 2018).

Going forward, Kirklees developed a series of collaborations with national supermarket chains and local food banks to redistribute supermarket food waste to individuals

experiencing ‘food poverty’ via what has been called ‘food charity’ (Lambie Mumford 2017). Rather than building on the success of FfL to develop a more dynamic place-based approach to food governance that could push the local food economy in new directions by strengthening figurational connections between key food system actors *within* and *beyond* the borough, supermarket funding required Kirklees to work *in* communities and schools on food waste reduction initiatives and cooking skills programmes that individualized a range of issues connected to structural problems within the food system. As Evans et al. (2017) note, this type of neoliberal governance solution is unsustainable, not least because it makes local authorities, communities and individuals responsible *for* food system problems created *by* the food system in the first place (see also Dagdeviren et al. 2018).

A local food activist made a comparable argument, aligning Kirklees’ decision to work in this way directly with the pressures created by financial austerity and the need to secure political support and funding:

‘So some places are trying to see sustainable food issues through the lens of food poverty to get political support, cos it seems to be... the only issue politicians seem to be interested in at the moment regarding food, that and the economy.’

A similar point was made by a Kirklees’ policy officer. Emphasizing the problems that emerge when responsibility for issues such as public health and food poverty are transferred to local authorities as competing policy priorities amongst many others, she highlighted the dilemma local governments face in a complex neoliberal policy making environment:

‘I can understand a lot of things that national government are doing, and I can understand lots of other things that other authorities are doing differently to us. But it’s just a bit of a minefield... [and] ...if you don’t focus enough in one area you could find yourself stuck in that minefield.’

It is this situation, we contend, that constructs *the local* in very particular ways, thus undermining attempts to pursue food system reform and bring about much needed socio-ecological change.

Concluding discussion

Until now, scholars have celebrated the potential of local food governance to facilitate greater transparency and participation in the food system. Our analysis suggests that these objectives are not as straightforward to achieve in practice as they often appear in theory, not least because local food governance is always shaped by distinctive historical, geographical and administrative contexts that hinder or facilitate change across diverse and overlapping ways.

This situation is particularly evident in Kirklees – a constructed local governance polity spanning deprived urban and relatively wealthy rural areas in the north of England. Across the borough, as we have seen, neoliberal policies bind established actors in the ‘global food’ system together in ways that enable them to control access to relational networks of food production, provisioning and consumption. By reinforcing asymmetrical power relations between diverse food system actors in this way, neoliberal governance bypasses local politics, thus hindering the ability of individuals and groups to exercise agency and build synergies between diverse food system actors. As Lever (2011) emphasizes, while neoliberal governance ostensibly brings diverse groups of actors together to foster collaborative

endeavour, on a practical level it *paralyses rebellion* from within by restricting the parameters of what is achievable.

Approaches focussing on *the local* tend to privilege specific spatial scales of analytic focus and action, making generalized assumptions about their inherent attributes and agendas. As Born and Purcell (2006) emphasize, this has produced a hierarchical scalar imaginary through which the local scale is naively evoked as an inherently progressive vantage point for socio-ecological change. These romanticised understandings of the ‘local’ or ‘alternative’ obscure more than they reveal, undermining the inherent hybridity of the food system (Sonnino and Marsden 2006). “Place”, in contrast, gives prominence to the mutually constituted nature of all spatial scales. It highlights, in other words, a way of examining the complex multi-scalar interconnections between context-specific development strategies and global drivers of change (Sonnino et al. 2016). In relation to food, a place-based approach eschewing ‘defensive localism’ (DuPuis and Goodman 2005) thus helps to disrupt the oppositional stance between isolated (but assumed progressive) local initiatives and the global (and apparently unsustainable) conventional food system.

Eliasian sociology adds to these debates by emphasising the importance of coordinated networks of independence as means of understanding the expression of power. Forging connections between diverse food system actors across geographical scales and administrative boundaries is a key element of any attempt to develop a more robust place-based food system, and the notion of overlapping figurations – of collaborating as well as competing individuals and groups (Elias 1978) – thus allows us to see connections *within* and *beyond* the territorial boundaries of *the local* more clearly. There is no one path to better food system governance and reform, so highlighting coordinated positions between diverse food system actors not only helps to highlight barriers to reform, it also provides a useful way of visualising and coordinating reform. This is crucial if we are to understand the ways in which new governance figurations are shaped over time (Coulson and Sonnino 2018).

Given its central location in the north of England between Manchester, Leeds and Sheffield, and its proximity to other regional centres of food production in North Yorkshire, for example, Kirklees has the potential to progress this type of approach by fostering better horizontal collaboration *within* and *beyond* its territorial and administrative boundaries. Similar opportunities are evident across Europe, Latin America, and North America, where those involved in local food governance can, alongside other sites of struggle, help to further the development of a place-based food system that is both “local” and “global”. Sustainable food activities are often confined to small niches, but the vision of local food actors can, we conclude, help to facilitate movement in this direction by building bridges between actors in a range of overlapping figurational contexts.

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