

Chapter 52

Sustainable Food Consumption in the Neoliberal Order: Challenges and Policy Implications

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, we have seen the rise of the sustainable food consumption field and its push for disciplinary space in development studies. This chapter turns to the original impetus of sustainable food consumption and the question of how neoliberal order can be reconciled with the need to save the ecology. Beyond the fundamental objectives, there is a need to assess the links between the global food system, as influenced by neoliberal order, and the signs that it leads to adversity for low-income countries. A review of relevant literature in the sustainable consumption field is explored using content analysis to examine links between neoliberal food consumption dynamics, the logic of global food politics, and the emerging terminological shifts from food consumption to food system. The world systems theory and the Marxian political ecology framework are used to show that sustainability is notable for emphasizing resource efficiency and equitability, which can be useful when sustainability challenges are matched with ecological policies. This chapter makes some policy recommendations.

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Cold War sustainable food consumption has been a major concern in development studies. In the Earth Summit of 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, world leaders came to a conclusion that “the major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production” (UN, 1992). The phases of food production encompass agriculture, food

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processing, warehouse/retail, consumption (including storage and preparation) and waste management (Åström, et al., 2013).

This process provides some lucid explication of the patterns of sustainable or unsustainable food consumption. In particular, the inverse relationship between increasing food consumption in the affluent North and ecological breakdown in the poor South has resulted in the destruction of the environment. This partly includes the emergence of genetically modified(GM) seeds or genetically engineered(GE) foods which suggests that “genetic engineering is one type of genetic modification that involves the intention to introduce a targeted change in a plant, animal or microbial gene sequence to effect a specific result” (NRC, 2004). The notion is that “genetic engineering has increased the number and type of substances that can be intentionally introduced into the food supply”(NRC,2004).

A critical perspective suggests that the reliance on technology by the affluent societies including globalization, free trade and the methods of production impact directly on climate change variables like green house /carbon emission, deforestation, land grab and degradation arising from capitalist farming, plantation agriculture and the use of organic fertilizers (Wise, 2015).

For neo liberal proponents, consumption represents the liberal ideals of freedom of choice in a market society. The consumer is the King of modern freedoms according to which he/she freely chooses from a broad offering of goods and services (Lock & Ikeda, 2005). The U.S. food system provides a remarkably varied food supply to the U.S. consumer at lower cost than nearly anywhere else in the world’ (National Research Council, 2015). However, freedom of choice results in lower costs but leads to choices that might not be sustainable. With billions of people on earth, freedom of choice might not comply necessarily with ecological requirements.

By 2050, the world’s population is projected to grow by one-third, reaching between 9 billion and 10 billion people (FAO, 2010). Meeting the food needs of this population draws policy attention to sustainable food consumption. This has pressured scholarly engagement with the question of sustainable food consumption as food is inevitably at the center of both human survival and sustainable development.

The objective of this chapter is to stimulate synergies to mitigate unsustainable consumption and related efforts to strengthen proactive policy initiatives. In particular, the chapter suggests ways to provide food for an increasing population on sustainable basis. The central argument is that unsustainable consumption and lifestyles of the affluent societies framed in the context of the neo liberal policies, may lead to increasing and unsustainable food demands which consequently have deleterious effects on both food system and the environment.

Sustainable Food Consumption

Recent trends suggest that debates on sustainable food consumption have moved to the center of development discourse (Lock & Ikeda, 2005). A number of factors account for this emphasis. First is that food is essential for human life and secondly its consumption is interwoven with the natural environment which has implications for sustainability. In their views, Jongen and Meerdink (1998) and Vitterso et al., (1999) recount that “close to half of all human impact on the environment, such as loss of biodiversity, is directly and/or indirectly related to food production and consumption”.

Since the end of the Cold War, neo liberal ideology has dominated much of the thinking in most of the powerful industrialized societies and in supranational institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, which in turn have imposed this ideology on countries in the global South.

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