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Agroecological transitions confronting climate breakdown: Food planning for post-carbon city

The transformative potential of community kitchens for an agroecological urbanism. Preliminary insights and a research agenda.

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Abstract

A large part of contemporary discussions on sustainable food planning in the Global North is focused on interventions on the food supply chain (i.e. AFN, farmers-consumers reconnections, food miles) alongside campaigns for (individualized) responsible and healthy food behaviors, such as eating local, seasonal and organic, or food waste reduction. Collective, rather than individualized, arrangements for food system transformation (if we exclude those focused on charity and food poverty aid) are however less prominent and under-researched within the sustainable food planning community.

Through an overview of literature debates and some preliminary (mostly exploratory) empirical material, this paper will make the case for a renewed attention to collective interdependencies, and in particular the role of *community kitchens* as building blocks of a 'reproductive, resourceful, agroecological urbanism' (Deh-Tor 2017).

Departing from the extensive (and forgotten) work of Dolores Hayden (1985), the first part of the paper will offer a review of the literature, starting from ideas and contributions developed in the 18th and 19th century (i.e. utopian, feminist, communards, socialist models etc.), such as in Fourier's work, until more recent debates. In the second part, reflecting on one or more examples of community kitchens in the UK context, and in particular their aims and their socio-political, economic and organizational aspects, the paper will discuss potential and limits of contemporary community kitchens to shaping agroecological behaviours in urban contexts and building viable alternatives to the food regime.

Introduction

In recent years urban food growing and cooking has become the object of intense interest and exploration in community, policy and research contexts -particularly in the cities of the Global North. Urban communities' interest for gardening, food cooking and food sharing has been documented in connection to a number of trends: the revitalization of disused urban spaces, the desire to reconnect to their neighbours, the rediscovery of the pleasure of gardening, ecological concerns for food miles and food quality, or simply just the need to provide food in difficult times.

Within this context, a relatively smaller attention has received the realm of collective food preparation and consumption. Existing research (and policy) in this context has been predominantly focused on two areas:

- reskilling programmes in food preparation (i.e. Eat Well program), which are largely targeting vulnerable individuals rather than food outlets or communities, and tend to reinforce the general approach that food provisioning -particularly healthy eating and non-wasteful behaviours - is an individual responsibility;

- the use of food surplus and food waste for the provision of food to vulnerable individuals, such as through the creation of community pantries, pay as you feel cafes, community shops, and social supermarkets (Saxena-Tornaghi 2018), as a way to tackle simultaneously wasteful food chains and urban poverty.

This paper aims to move away from these two predominant areas of research: we explore emerging collective and **community kitchens** that are **linked to self-growing of food** (hence do not -or not exclusively- use surplus food) and that are **focused on collective practice** and community empowerment.

Our interest for the self-growing aspect of food sourcing in community kitchens is related to our embracing of the agroecological ethics of soil stewardship and farmers sovereignty, aspects which are largely disregarded by conventional food approaches, and especially by wasteful and farmer-screwing supermarkets approaches to food sourcing.

Our interest for the collective aspect of food reskilling and empowerment is rooted in understanding of food as a central ecological and metabolic practice, which requires a sympoietic approach (Haraway 2016), the recognition of our entanglements with others (humans and non-humans) for the production of food and the reproduction of knowledge and life.

Feminist approaches have historically and systematically stressed the importance to think and build collective approaches to food as ways to decolonize these practices from patriarchal, extractive, productivist and oppressive regimes (Federici 2019, Hayden 1985, Puig de la Bellacasa 2017).

Within this framework, the exploratory empirical research illustrated below interrogates the potential of community kitchens to become building blocks of an agroecological urbanism (Deh-Tor 2017): of social arrangements for urban life in which food is not a commodity among others, to be allocated on the market on a first-come-first-served-basis, but rather the core of our ecological and metabolic entanglements with nature, and the basis for our survival.

The remaining of this paper is structured as follows: in section 2 we provide an historical overview of the debates and contexts of community kitchens. In section 3 we briefly present the methodology used to select the practices discussed in this paper. In section 4 we present a preliminary analysis of these practices. In the 5th and concluding section we highlight some tensions, further research questions and draw some conclusions on the potential role of community kitchens for an agroecological urbanism.

A brief history of urban community kitchens

The idea of community kitchen has its historical roots in the 18th and 19th Centuries' debates around the commons, especially those related to 'social reproduction' - or the making and maintenance of life- which were put into practice through communitarian dwelling, cooperative housekeeping and consumers/producers cooperative.

One of the first highly provocative theorizations in this field are signed by the French philosopher - and co-founder of utopian socialism - Charles Fourier. He proposed the *phalanstères* as an alternative collective housing characterized by the lack of private spaces and designed to produce a shift from the nuclear family to communitarian ways of living. The fourierist ideas of communitarization of food practices - and living - inspired experiences worldwide especially under the influence of feminists and socialists in the United States, liberals and

nationalist governments during the first World War in England and the Soviet elites which was trying to shape a cultural change- 'novyi byt' or 'new everyday life'- through the built environment, like the kitchens (Ruscitti Harshman, 2016). The brief overview that follows below is largely taken from Dolores Hayden's exhaustive work "The Grand Domestic Revolution" (1981), where she explores the cooperatives and communitarian experiments realized in the US between the second half of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, as part of a broader movement for women's emancipation and the collectivization of reproductive work.

Fourier, the phalanstere and communal households

Charles Fourier's (1772-1837) revolutionary and feminist ideas on housing design were part of a broader critique on the mercantile culture and bourgeois society of his time in France and of a greater project for a new economical and political organization that would lead to liberated 'passions' and women, and to egalitarian stateless societies. In his vision the private dwelling was one of the greatest obstacles to improving women's position in civilization; for him, improved housing design was as essential to women's rights as improved settlement design was to the reform of industrial workers' lives. The communal household, or *phalanstere*¹⁰, in which a diverse group of people (about 1600 individuals) would live together according to affinity rather than family units, was based on the collective care of all tasks - including food preparation - needed for their survival and thriving, and was described by communitarian socialists as "a miniature of the world that at once *domesticated political economy and politicized domestic economy*" (Hayden 1981, p. 33). The phalanstery or "unitary dwelling" was the Fourierist way to overcome the separation and the contraposition between city and country¹¹, men and women, rich and poor, by an enlightened arrangement of economic and social resources (Hayden, 1981) and it is one of the earliest political accounts of collective food provision.

Material feminists and communitarian socialists: cooperative housekeeping and public kitchens

About a century later, at a time of intensive political organizing of social movements against an industrial and alienating society, "material feminists" (i.e. Pierce and Gilman) and communitarian socialists (Fourierists and Owenites) criticizing both the spatial and economic separation of domestic work and women's role in social reproduction, put forward a number of ideas trying to redefine them at the household, neighbourhood and city level. They theorized re-organized communities where household labour and industrial labour had the same weight. Some alternative societies were realized in the mid 19th century in the United States and Europe and they included dormitories, communal kitchens, laundries and bakeries. In many of these experiments members were allowed to have their own family units and private dwellings (with or without kitchens) on the domain. At that time the first utopian socialist colony was also founded in Topolobampo, Mexico, and it represented the transition from the Fourierist idea of single phalanstery housing for an entire community to a broader notion of mass housing¹² with mixed building types and a range of communitarian services in the urban and suburban areas (Hayden, 1981).

Amelia Bloomer, an activist against the isolated dwelling, introduced the idea of cooperative housekeeping but it was Melusina Fay Peirce the one who actually theorized it as a formalised cooperative

¹⁰ The most durable example of a Fourierist phalanstery was the North American Phalanx, realized in 1843 in New Jersey.

¹¹ See Olerich's fictional city on Mars "A Cityless and Countryless World - An Outline of Practical Co-Operative Individualism" 1893

¹² See the Brudenhof and Hutterian communities in the United States and Canada

society with membership fees, whose goal was to centralise and collectivise the work among groups of 12 to 15 women, by creating a dedicated building with shared facilities, employ some of them (or external workers) and charge the husbands for the services, enabling women to improve talents and careers more freely and on a paid-basis (Hayden, p. 68).

These changes in domestic organisation and economic cooperation had deep implications in neighbourhood planning and design, which included sophisticated common building with a wide range of rooms for all the different tasks (pantry/storage, baking, cooking, dining, accounting, sewing, laundry, ironing, relaxation, reading, etc.) and movable walls, as well as simplified kitchen-less houses (ibid. p. 69). Peirce and a group of women started to pilot this initiative in 1869, in Cambridge, MA, but failed three years later, largely under the oppression of their husbands.

A further evolution of this idea came through the work of Ellen Swallow Richards (a scientist at the MIT) and her assistant and nutritionist Mary Hinman Avel who strongly fuelled a scientific approach to domesticity and tested a model of public kitchen, inspired by popular kitchens in Europe (p. 157). They tested and advertised their approach by actually running a kitchen at the World Columbian Exposition of Chicago in 1893, where they fed thousands of visitors. One of the context in which the public kitchen was implemented was the social settlement houses (social housing) that adopted a cooperative housekeeping model, such as the Hull House in Chicago, led by Jane Addams. Hull House was a project run by a group of reformists who, by settling in a poor immigrant neighbourhood wanted to deeply understand the living changes of these communities, experiment alternatives and lobby politically to devise social reforms.

An innovative residential community with a strong socio-political commitment, they had in fact political influence through the 1890s, lobbying for industrial health and safety and the legal recognition of trade unions. Every night people were dining together and talking about the Hull House so that they could constantly adjust its organization in a cooperative way: one of the improvements was the introduction of a Public Kitchen in 1894, after discovering that most of the immigrants were suffering malnutrition.

At the Hull House cooked food was sold in the Public Kitchen itself and also in the factories to serve the local workers. Hayden underlines the difference from Pierce's cooperative kitchens and the Public Kitchen: the main aim of the cooperative housekeeping was giving a salary to (middle-class) women just like the ones paid to men for skilled work while Richards and Abel' Public Kitchen focused on the needs of working women and immigrants, the optimization of the inputs, in order to meet health and economic needs. Some of the reasons for a later failing of the Hull House to survive, were mainly two: on the one hand the skilled professional and reformists - both housekeepers and home economists - remained quite low-paid; on the other hand the attempt for scientific and skilled care created a distance from other collective efforts for spontaneous, non-scientific cooperative housekeeping (Hayden, 1981). The lack of a common cultural ground regarding food was also a limitation for cooking in cooperative ways in large and diverse communities like the settlements.

Probably aware of the Hull House limitations - after living there for three months- Charlotte Perkin Gilman - another key thinker of the time - moved away from the "scientific" approach to housekeeping. She led the material feminists in demanding new forms of collective domesticity in the name of *improved motherhood*. She popularized the idea of *homes without kitchens and towns without homework* (Hayden, 1981). The questions raised by Gilman regarded economics and private property; her influence and the enthusiasm about socialized domestic work and kitchen-less housing inspired several new forms of housing between 1898 and 1930.

Ebenizer Howard's famous garden city idea, which he himself tried to implement in Letchworth (UK), was also designed around collective land ownership, common gardens and common kitchens. The city offered a variety of garden apartments, standard houses, kitchen-less houses, a central communal kitchen and other facilities. The cooperative housekeeping units of Howard's garden cities provided services to a variety of housing needs: from single parents to childless couples, etc (Hayden, 1981). In Howard's utopic vision the cooperating tenants shared all domestic work and owned collectively the city, including agricultural lands and public infrastructure, in a financial model that is today known as a land trust.

Nationalists and communists experiences of communalisation of food in the early 20th century

Ideas about communalized food practices have also arisen in Russia by the end of the 19th century due to sanitarian and political concerns. The governments of the Late Imperial Russia had to face huge epidemics of cholera, often caused by contaminated water or food. In addition both the late imperial reformers and the soviets, sharing some aspects of their vision of modernity, considered the kitchen a limitation to women's independence. Due to these political and sanitarian urgencies many reformers of the late imperial period started re-thinking the use of kitchens, even if the majority of the Russian population, especially the peasant and urban working class, didn't even have a space designed as a kitchen in their houses but instead they usually had a multi-functional room (Ruscitti Harshman, 2016). Because of the increasing number of peasants moving to the city, the houses were overcrowded and the kitchens - or multi-use space- started having a social functioning which was discouraged by the reformers afraid of any kind of communalization raised out of their control. In addition to that, the reformers also thought that they would eradicate cholera and other diseases by taking food preparation under their control and creating communal kitchens in the residential areas. There they tried to improve women's situation by promoting the presence of waged professionals for cooking even if it never happened because of lack of resources (Ruscitti Harshman, 2016).

The same interest for "planned communalisation of food" was shared by the Bolsheviks of the early Soviet period. Due to their priorities - more focused on the class struggle than on gender issues - the Bolsheviks proposed community cafés in working places which achieved both the sanitarian goals and the need for better managing of resources in time of scarcity. Later on in Moscow women were hired for professional food preparation inside the individual cooperative houses, eliminating the unpaid domestic labour - but without considering their professional will. In this way they determined the gendering of domestic labour, making steps backwards for women conditions. Ruscitti Harshman (2016) concludes her analyses of communal kitchens between 1890 and 1935 in Russia underlining how both sides tried to control the use of the kitchen for their political and economical purposes but their decisions regarding the communalization of kitchens were extremely top down, limiting their success in time.

In the same years in England many community kitchens were created through grassroots movements of workers as a response to food scarcity and inflation in war time (Evans, 2016). By mid-1918 there were 1000 national kitchens in Britain but one year later they all disappeared. Their origin was in 1914, when the Salvation Army founded some communal soup kitchens for serving nutritious and cheap food to the people: those were mostly run by volunteering working class women. In 1917 the war intensified so the Ministry of Food created a new division dedicated to "mass dining" in the attempt to reduce food inflation. In this phase canteens were created in industrial buildings, making the communal soup kitchens obsolete. Due to the increasing of anti communism they also changed the name of the community kitchens into National Kitchens and the government took total control over them also making sure that private entrepreneurs could run them for economic profit.

The government shifted from encouraging the charity culture to imposing profit-based management, because of the fear of socialist radicalisation during the conflict (Evans, 2016). With the new state control the kitchens were now private businesses with a small grant from the government, and they could get the status of National Kitchens being fully funded only after proving their financial viability (Evans, 2016). In this way working class women found themselves very isolated by the system, and they were not allowed to run their communal kitchens unless they were approved by the authorities. National kitchens really multiplied in Britain in the second half of 1918 since the government made them more appealing than soup kitchens: they were considered “cheap restaurants”. The government standardized the kitchens and the scarce food through a Food Control Committee (FCC) (Evans, 2016). The centralized control on one side made the kitchens very diffused (imposed) all over the country, on the other side the standardization and rationing would make them unpopular later on. The responsible for the “mass dining” policies was considering it in a long-term way to continue providing nutritious food to the people, especially because of the massive unemployment they would experience after the war. On the other side the FCC was very concerned about the public finances, and even the private sector was really against the kitchens. The “fair-play” culture of the private sector and the excessive political control over the kitchens made the National Kitchens disappear after the First World War. They were opened again during the IWW but only as an emergency measure, hence without the hostility of the private sector (Evans, 2016).

The discourse around the kitchens was historically a political territory and even Richard Nixon and Nikita Chruščëv experienced “The kitchen debate” during the inauguration of the National American Exhibition in Moscow in 1959 (CIA 1959). They were discussing their opposite political visions inside the prototype kitchen that the Americans were presenting at the exhibition, as the example of the capitalist success: a kitchen full of tools and labour-saving devices that, as the American vice-president affirmed, every single American could afford.

The second half of the 19th century was in fact dominated by the capitalist economic boom, which determined the peculiar food culture and behaviours we know well today.

A pilot exploration of community kitchen in contemporary Britain: research questions and methodology

While many contemporary communitarian households or co-housing still retain some collective food growing and cooking facilities (although many have only collectivised the purchase, rather than the preparation of food), the large majority of community kitchens appear in isolation from housing projects and collective living. While in the past community kitchens and communitarian households were largely inspired by holistic socio-political visions, today we see a proliferation of collective kitchens that offer meals in the context of capitalist co-optation of communities (the Big Society idea - what Levitas calls “work for free”), the political acceptance of the dismantling of welfare state services. In the framework of austerity politics we observe an increase of volunteering, charities and other bottom-up activities trying to cover the lack of public interest (and budget) for some services and sectors of the population (Levitas 2012). Most of those activities - either volunteering or social labour- are run by women whose unpaid work is often normalized alongside poverty. The normalization of unpaid work is also considered by Federici (2019) when she describes how capitalism has been re-using the idea of the ‘commons’ instrumentally for promoting unpaid work; she also underlines how women, which have historically been in contact with natural resources more than men because of their primary role in reproductive work, are inevitably more affected by the privatization of the resources and the commons (energy, healthcare, water, land, etc). For the same reasons they are also the ones who can change things, and in fact she calls for a

feminist reconstruction. Federici (2019) describes some examples of communalization of goods (see *ollas comunes* in Peru and Chile) for responding at economically and socially hard times:

“The first lesson we can gain from these struggles is that the ‘commoning’ of the material means of reproduction is the primary mechanism by which a collective interest and mutual bonds are created”
[Federici, 2019, p. 108]

Both Levitas and Federici try to retain some positive aspects needed for overcoming the capitalist societies and the unsustainability of these ways of living:

“we need to overcome the state of irresponsibility concerning the consequences of our actions that results from the destructive ways in which the social division of labour is organized in capitalism; short of that, the production of our life inevitably becomes a production of death for others”. [Federici, 2019, p. 109]

Levitas (2012) invites us to see the Big Society not as an ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ but as an ‘hermeneutic of faith’ (Ricoeur, 1981) which can inspire what seems utopic today: a world ecologically sustainable and with better conditions of life for the majority of its population.

In line with the spirit of building alternatives from the ground up, and particularly with the intent of contributing to the political, ecological and planning framework of an agroecological urbanism (Deh-Tor 2017) we have embarked in a small pilot research on three community kitchens in the UK (two in England and one in Scotland). Our aims were: 1) to explore kitchens that were openly embracing an empowering rather than a charity-ethos, rejecting the normalisation of poverty, food waste and unpaid work; 2) to understand what they had in common with experiences of the past and whether they would be useful to become bricks of an agroecological urbanism, and 3) to understand critical issues in their day-to-day running and identify a research agenda.

The reasons for implementing community kitchens - and making food production and consumption a collective responsibility - today still have characteristics in common with the past experiences but depend also on the new needs of contemporary cities in times of austerity, overcrowded cities, climate and environmental crisis. The purpose of the research is understanding if communalized food practices through community kitchens are a possible way for overcoming what Federici (2019) defines as ‘sense of irresponsibility’, trying to shift from the individual blaming to a collective responsabilization about food: can community kitchens represent a collective alternative to the food regime, as described by McMichael (2009)? How can they enable agroecological behaviours and increase access to agroecological food? How do they contribute to an alternative society where food, culture and caring are decommodified?

According to our vision of a ‘reproductive, resourceful, agroecological urbanism’ (Deh-Tor 2017) we are interested in community kitchens because of their political, territorial and communitarian dimension bearing in mind also the concept of ‘*ethical foodscape*’ (Goodman & Maye, 2010) which consist in “*engaging critically with the processes, politics, spaces, and places of the praxis of ethical relationalities embedded and produced in and through the provisioning of food*”.

The research was carried out by the first author between April and July 2019, using desk research, face-to-face semi-structured interviews, site visits, and online follow-up with the people involved in the practice, as

part of an Erasmus+ funded research-based internship at the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, at Coventry University.

Looking for ‘agroecological behaviours’ in London, Birmingham and Edinburgh: preliminary insights

The UK is a peculiar context where tackling the topic of community kitchens with a focus on urban agroecology. On the one hand there is an increasing interest for cuisine and a long tradition of allotment gardening, on the other hand a pervasive presence of food outlets selling very cheap, highly processed meals and “junk food” (all features of so called “food deserts”) leading to the third highest obesity rate in Europe (Eurostat 2014). The UK is also facing years of severe cuts in the welfare and an on-going social benefits reform, which increasingly leads a big part of the population to food poverty¹³. Charity-based initiatives, such as food banks and soup kitchens to feed low-income and homeless people with free or ‘pay-as-you-feel’ meals are multiplying, and while these are certainly important (and sometimes the only available) emergency measure, they don’t represent the eradication of the problem.

On the contrary, given that they often rely on the wide availability of food surplus taken for free from the retail sector (relieving supermarkets from the cost of disposal to landfill), they indirectly support wasteful stocking choices and a regime of oversupply enabled by excessively low prices paid to farmers. Another contradiction of charity-based kitchens and food provisioning is that they mostly count on unpaid labour (provided by volunteers), or random grants which limits their potential to evolve¹⁴. In looking at the three community kitchens described below, we took inspiration from -among others- Di Vito Wilson’s (2012) critique to the Alternative Food Networks discourse, searching for experiences that, while grounding their food sourcing at least partially in self-grown food, allow a transformative politics open to all.

South Norwood Community Kitchen: Humanizing aid food within the community

The **South Norwood Community Kitchen (SNCK)** in London serves free meals every Saturday at noon in a space provided by the local Baptist Church. They differentiate themselves from a soup kitchen (in which they worked in the past), because they aim to create a warmer and more comfortable environment for the local community to meet and socialise. The menu combines sophisticated and nutritious meals, cooked by volunteers using supermarket’s surplus food collected every Saturday morning¹⁵ but they recently started growing vegetables in a council allotment. The SNCK is focused on de-stigmatization of food poverty and community-building and for these purposes they are in the process of relocating to a council venue¹⁶ shared with the other local social enterprises where they already have access to an allotment for self-growing. Using both the supermarket’s surplus food and the self-grown food (people from the community who already have an allotment offers their vegetables for communal use too) they will be able to serve meals on a daily basis with the scheme of ‘pay-as-you-feel’, still maintaining the Saturday’s lunch for free. In the new venue they will also organize collective cooking and food growing sessions opened to all the community, promoting communalization of food

¹³ According to Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty 20,247,042 meals were given to people in food poverty only in 2013/14 by the three main food aid providers (+54% compared to the previous year).

¹⁴ Kitchens supported with continued public funding are exceptions. See ‘Cozinha Popular da Mouraria’: a community kitchen in a central area of Lisbon designed and realized by a woman through public funding for urban regeneration projects (Bip/zip 2011).

¹⁵ Due to a policy of the City of London the ‘pay-as-you-feel’ scheme allows social enterprises to get public fundings.

¹⁶ See ‘Socco Cheta Community Hub’

as a way of mutual care, moving away from the idea of mere food aid¹⁷. Having a proper space they would be able to run other 'pay-as-you-feel' activities not exclusively related to food in collaboration with other enterprises, for example providing clothes and a community cinema. The SNCK was firstly known by the local people of Croydon (not only low-income), but after a while people from different areas of London started to join their Saturday lunches. Decisions are regularly discussed and shared with the volunteers and the community; their aim is to turn food into both their produce for the regular meals and a commodity for allowing other activities for free (cinema, Saturday's lunch, etc). However, while putting their efforts on the community-building and humanized aid, the SNCK doesn't question their dependency from the industrial surplus food and from the 'pay-as-you-feel' scheme which inevitably feeds the vicious cycle of overproduction and low paid/free work: they consider volunteerism a necessary stage for creating the social enterprise.

The Forest Cafe': Decommodifying art through ethical food

The **Forest Cafe'** in Edinburgh is a project with a clear political commitment to anarchism and was founded by a group of friends for promoting local artists and for making independent art accessible for free to everybody, particularly the local community. To keep themselves independent they don't accept any funding and they rely solely on the cafe's incomes to cover all their costs. Being anti capitalist and environmentally conscious they use only local, organic and ethical food¹⁸, and they serve vegetarian and vegan meals. The food comes mainly from a workers-owned cooperative of local products and from a social bakery¹⁹. Their commitment to vegetarianism started years ago for bureaucratic reasons: they didn't have the necessary conditions for passing the hygienic controls asked for meat. Now environmental justice and ecology are consciously taken into consideration and a matter of activism within the Forest community through food consumption, talks and other activities (composting, recycling, etc.). The volunteers are organized in five working groups (kitchen, administration, graphic & exhibitions, events, HR) and everyone can join one or more of them. The Forest always encourages new people to join them by running a variety of activities proposed by the community itself. For promoting community empowerment and politicization they have a regular meeting every month for discussing openly about organizational, political and social problems they experience (gender-related issues, work time, etc). They constantly struggle with financial and organizational problems but their autonomy is also key for their political positionality. They do not accept funding for two reasons: firstly they want to keep the organization out of hierarchical processes and in control of the decision-making; secondly they want to be resilient relying exclusively on their resources without taking the risk of expanding due to funding and then shrink when they come to an end. They survived over 20 years in this way. Legally they are a consensus based non-profit charity where the 'pay-back' of volunteering is the independence and resilience in time despite the financial problems.

Kingstanding Food Community: Enabling community empowerment through food and care

The third case study is the **Kingstanding Food Community (KFC)**, a charity-based project operating in a disadvantaged area of Birmingham. The KFC is also focused on community-building and caring but has a strong pedagogical dimension. Through free workshops and activities they aim to empower the community: even if is not always possible to explicitly discuss people's poverty conditions they try to enable their independency teaching them how to cook with a low budget and how to grow their own food. It was created 6 years ago with

¹⁷Normally accessible only in precise time/days and in venues which is not opened to the community otherwise.

¹⁸By ethical food we refer to local enterprises products which guarantee workers and environmental rights.

¹⁹They hire people with learning difficulties.

a specific focus around healthy food for low budgets but due to public cuts to the national mental-health service their mission changed, now focusing on mental-health. They still give great attention to the food since they run a café opened 3 days a week serving very cheap meals. They take care of local low-income people through free workshops and other activities of caring: some people spend everyday of the week at the KFC. For 9 months they also got funding for a group of children between 10 and 16 years old, which are normally taking care of a parent/relative: the Young Carers Project gave them training for their domestic activities and asked them to run the café every afternoon of the week until the funding finished. Their organization mainly depends on volunteering, a lot of whom are vulnerable people from the community itself and they receive a full training for the tasks they are required. Only three people are paid, even if they used to be more: a wellbeing officer (previously food officer), a person in charge of the administration and a gardener who runs activities and workshops in the allotment and takes care of the compost production for the allotment. Being completely dependent on external funding their project is vulnerable, their resources unpredictable and limited in time.

Conclusion

As we have seen above, the three community kitchens we have presented above share the aim to offer alternatives to the existing mainstream options for food access in the city. While they are widely different in terms of their ecological, social and political models, they all manifest a number of contradictions. We reflect on these in turns, to then return to what agenda we can imagine, taking research on community kitchens forward.

- The ecological considerations along the whole cycle from seeds to produce, to food and back to soil are rather limited and inconsistent. Locally sourced or self-grown food is sometimes used alongside industrial food surplus, and ecological considerations around soils and composting were also not systematic, or not necessarily coupled with a radical stance on using only agroecologically-produced food.
- Regarding community empowering, it was difficult given the exploratory character of this research, to assess the extent to which these projects relate to the territorial milieu and its community. While we know that some were quite focussed on providing space for the community to meet (especially SNCK and to some extent KFC), charity or social economy narrative were still playing an important part in the organisation of the initiatives. It is not yet clear to what extent the users of these facilities are part of a local community involved in self-provisioning, self-reskilling, and mutuality. In at least two cases, food was partially or totally used as a commodity to fund other aspects of the project such as free cultural events. While community self- organisation around alternative cultural facilities is surely important, the treatment of food as a commodity defeats the spirit of the community kitchen as an empowering tool in the sphere of food sovereignty.
- In assessing the political engagement and transformative action against the food system, it is not clear what political positions these kitchen have towards the disabling effects of the current food system, and what they effectively aim to transform. Further research should focus in understanding what devices they have set in place for avoiding being co opted into upper classes unorthodox dine-outs, what trajectories for empowerment are they designing (if any) and what is their horizon of action.

While this pilot research has been the opportunity to raise questions more than to find answers, we take these questions as backbones for further research.

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Tools for the ecological transition. A proposal of indicators for the community of Madrid.

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Abstract

Agroecology offers complex and comprehensive solutions for the necessary and prevailing eco-social transition and is postulated as a paradigm from which to think the transformation of the agri-food system. Despite being a concept and a series of practices and methodologies that are increasingly booming in the agricultural sector, in the Community of Madrid is far from being recognized and, furthermore, there is a wide debate on their complementarity and / or overlap with organic farming. Therefore, tools are necessary that allow us us to characterize how an agroecological project is defined and that also serve as a guide for the transformations that must be made for the agro-ecological transition of the agri-food sector.

One consequence of this lack of recognition is the small number of food production and transformation projects that are considered as agroecological in the Community of Madrid. Under the assumption that the agroecological sector includes more projects than those that recognize as such, the present work has the objective of characterizing the agroecological food production and transformation projects as well as contributing to generate a definition of agroecological practice adapted to the context of the Community of Madrid.

The methodology used for this purpose is based on a system of 34 indicators grouped in 5 dimensions contemplated within the concept and principles of Agroecology: ecological-productive, socio-labor, economic, political-cultural and distribution and marketing system. These indicators are weighted according to the Hierarchical Analytical Process, obtaining in this way a quantitative reference for each dimension that serves as a tool to characterize how agroecological production is defined in relation to its practices and situates the position of this sector in the Community of Madrid.

The results indicate that, in spite of the existing difficulties, mainly in the economic and social and employment dimensions, we find ourselves with a booming sector that presents itself as an alternative for the transformation of the current dominant agri-food system and for the sustainable development of the rural environment.

Introduction

The industrialized and globalized organization way of the agri-food system has generated significant ecological and social impacts in recent decades. On one hand, the energy consumption increasing, specifically fossil energy, has generated the increase in emissions, and its contribution to global change. Emissions due to the whole agri-food system, according to GRAIN, account for 44% to 57% of total global emissions (GRAIN, 2014). In Spain, a fifth of all the primary energy consumed is due to the agri-food sector (Infante-Amate, Aguilera, & González de Molina, 2014).