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Urban food sovereignty: urgent need for agroecology and systems thinking in a post-COVID-19 future

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Abstract

The current COVID-19 pandemic has brought attention to challenges associated with our dominant industrial food system in the U.S. The general public now has more appreciation for farm workers and meatpacking employees, as well as those in grocery stores and in food transportation who are suddenly recognized as essential frontline workers. It apparently takes a crisis for us to focus clearly on the fragility of this system and the lives of people on whom we depend. In this commentary we discuss the definition of food sovereignty, how it manifests in urban areas, and how the COVID-19 pandemic can trigger viable responses to increase urban food sovereignty. While recognizing and appreciating the value of trade and comparative advantages of some regions with long seasons to produce food for others, there is strong reason to explore the potentials of local and urban production and governance to avoid serious impacts of unexpected interruptions in the world order.

Keywords: Food sovereignty, urban agriculture, urban agroecology, COVID-19

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Introduction

To free ourselves, we must feed ourselves. The time for food sovereignty is now! (Anderson 2018). This cry for food sovereignty has rung true across three decades since its formal definition by the Latin American farmworker organization *La Via Campesina*. The current COVID-19 pandemic has brought attention to challenges associated with our dominant industrial food system in the U.S. The general public now has more appreciation for farm workers and meatpacking employees, as well as those in grocery stores and in food transportation who are suddenly recognized as essential frontline workers. Many of these people, especially minorities, are not being treated as essential in the long term, with low pay, lack of benefits, and poor working conditions (Coleman 2020). It apparently takes a crisis for us to focus clearly on the fragility of this system and the lives of people on whom we depend.

Many impacts of COVID-19 are centered in urban areas, and in rural communities hosting giant meat packing facilities, both of which find racial and ethnic minorities disproportionately affected by the virus for multiple reasons (CDC 2020; Elving 2020). As we holistically envision what the U.S. food system should look like in a post-coronavirus society, food sovereignty must be at the forefront. The goal cannot be a return to 'business as usual' with vast societal and power inequities that perpetuate racism, classism, xenophobia, homophobia, and disproportionate impacts of a unjust healthcare system and human-induced climate change.

In this commentary we discuss the definition of food sovereignty, how it manifests in urban areas, and how the COVID-19 pandemic can trigger viable responses to increase urban food sovereignty. While recognizing and appreciating the value of trade and comparative advantages of some regions with long seasons to produce food for others, there is strong reason to explore the potentials of local and urban production and governance to avoid serious impacts of unexpected interruptions in the world order. The situation is complicated in the U.S. by perceived immediate human 'wants' that lead to hoarding of toilet paper, meats, and lower cost staples that may provide a short-term individual security but ignore the 'needs' of others in the big picture.

Food sovereignty

The concept of *food sovereignty* has origins in the peasant movements of South and Central America, and one key organization *La Via Campesina* has elevated the concept to the global stage. The 2007 International Forum on Food Sovereignty in Sélingué, Mali developed a commonly-cited definition of food sovereignty: “The right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and culturally appropriate methods, and their right to define their own food and agricultural systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations . . .” (Nyeleni 2007, 1).

Food sovereignty is more human rights based than similar concepts of food security and, to a lesser extent, food justice (Clendenning, Dressler, and Richards 2016). Food sovereignty emphasizes the reclamation of land, food, livelihoods, and identities of food insecure individuals via their direct participation in the design and implementation of food systems (Clendenning, Dressler, and Richards 2016). Food security is a social condition that emphasizes knowing where one’s next meal will come from, and does not address production, distribution, or control of food access (Hossfeld, Kelly, and Waity 2018). Food justice is a progressive social movement that seeks to address injustices based on race and class (Hossfeld, Kelly, and Waity 2018). The food justice movement also develops strategies to ‘work around and outside’ the larger food system to provide food access to marginalized groups (Clendenning, Dressler, and Richards 2016).

The distinctions among these concepts influences who participates in each sphere, who benefits, and what form this work takes. In urban areas, food sovereignty can be seen in urban agriculture, home and community gardens, and direct-to-consumer markets (e.g., farmers markets, community-supported agriculture). In the last 90 days, internet searches for “urban agriculture” and “community-supported agriculture” have increased as the impacts of COVID-19 on the food system have become more apparent (Google Trends 2020). Urban agriculture, gardening, and direct-to-consumer markets can all play a role to increase urban food sovereignty in the intra- and post-COVID-19 U.S. food system.

Urban agriculture and gardening

United Nations projections anticipate that over two-thirds of the global population will live in cities by 2050 (Chandran 2020). Some estimates predict that urban agriculture could produce up to 10% of the global supply of pulses and vegetables (Clinton et al. 2018). From 2001–2016, 11 million acres of farm and ranch land in the U.S. were converted to urban and low-density residential land use (Freedgood et al. 2020). Given these trends, food production in cities may become essential and holds great potential for increasing food sovereignty. Urban agriculture initiatives, such as Urban Tilth in Richmond, California and D-Town Farm in Detroit, Michigan, reclaim public urban land for agricultural use (USFSA 2019). They also create educational opportunities to empower ‘landless’ urban residents to grow their own food and thus actively participate in their food system (D-Town Farm n.d.; USFSA 2019). The politicization of urban agriculture can contribute to a paradigm shift toward urban food sovereignty. Tornaghi and Dehaene (2020) argue that urban political agroecology can disrupt current capitalist urbanism by valuing goods based on ecological and social justice values, embodying “an ecology of care”, and creating a socialized urban infrastructure. City governments and planners should incentivize and support urban agroecology initiatives as the shorter-term impacts of COVID-19 on the food supply in U.S. continue to develop. This should also include recognizing the social and cultural role urban agroecology plays, in addition to its contributions to food access.

Two historical examples within the past century serve to illustrate how challenges can arise. During World War II food production was seriously disrupted in Europe, and the U.S. responded by planting over 18 million backyard gardens to supply food to military troops and others. Two-thirds of these were in urban areas, and 40% of all vegetables consumed in the U.S. were produced close to home (Lingeman 1970). Shortly after the war, in 1948 Russia built a wall and imposed a partial blockade on Berlin that required a massive airlift of food and other necessary products to the isolated city (Miller 1998). Capable of producing only two percent of the food needed by residents, the population of West Berlin was sustained by over two million tons of food sent by the Allies. Although these are historical events, they remind

us that recent tariff battles over food import/export between U.S. and China can cause massive shortage in large cities and make urban and peri-urban local production a present necessity.

Community and home gardening have long been important for the survival and independence of marginalized communities (Brimm 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has generated an increased interest in gardening. This has resulted in temporary seed and supply shortages and the development of a national 'Cooperative Gardens Commission', which is calling for 50 million volunteers to promote education and help connect individuals to land, soil, and labor resources (Brimm 2020). Community gardens across the country have developed health and safety guidelines to remain in operation during the pandemic. This response demonstrates the potential importance of gardening as a safe, secure, local route to greater urban food sovereignty. The production of food in urban areas, via urban agriculture or gardening, can substantially shorten the supply chain and provide food-insecure families with the opportunity to design their own appropriate solutions and participate in food production.

Direct-to-consumer models

Urban food sovereignty goals often have not been met by current direct-to-consumer models like community-supported agriculture, which have frequently been identified and aligned with elite upper-middle-class 'foodie' audiences, and most often not involved in any socio-political engagement (Clendenning, Dressler, and Richards 2016). However, the politicization of direct-to-consumer models offers some hope for future contributions to food sovereignty. As more urbanites seek out direct-to-consumer relationships due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the rural-urban physical interface can promote new opportunities for mutual learning about food sovereignty and agroecology. Creative and mutually supportive alliances among committed groups with shared goals and mutual understandings can help to politicize our food system in new directions and begin to challenge the unjust systems that underpin the current system (Holt-Giménez 2018).

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply impacted every facet of life in the U.S. and around the world – the post-COVID-19 world will look very different. The fragility of the industrial food system has become exposed in new ways during the pandemic, along with an appreciation of associated issues of supply, distribution, food access, worker welfare, and inequities in the system. The present system has generally served us well during the pandemic, yet great inequities in food access have been exposed, and large quantities of produce are being left in the field due to shortage of labor and loss of foodservice markets. Urban and peri-urban agriculture, community gardens, and direct-to -consumer models produce food closer to where it is consumed and offer urbanites the opportunity to reclaim and politicize the current food system in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The time is ripe to design and implement a more sovereign food system, one that focuses on food for people, values food providers, localizes food systems, brings control locally, builds knowledge and skills, and works with nature (Anderson 2018). The time for conversations and actions on urban food sovereignty is now! Although the current pandemic will pass, we will learn about how society responds to any challenge to the food system such as tariffs, political alliances, and locally extreme weather events plus climate change. These lessons will provide insight on how to build greater resilience into local systems and how these can interact cooperatively on a global basis. Principles from agroecology and holistic thinking can help inform the process.

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