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Sustainable Consumption and Production: a political space for agri-food studies?

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Abstract

This editorial introduction discusses the science-policy interface at a global level focused on the linking of sustainable consumption and production. It examines how political spaces can offer opportunities for epistemic communities to enter into this space in order to advance the co-production of knowledge and politics on sustainable consumption and production. The editorial also introduces the innovative approach to book reviews that the journal has adopted.

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Introduction

In global discourse, the need to feed a growing population in a world of diminishing resources, has rapidly become a core societal challenge (Conway, 2012; FAO, 2012). The declaration of the Anthropocene and the speed of biodiversity loss (Hallmann et al., 2017) has brought concern over the ability of the planet to support Western dietary habits front and centre in neo-Malthusian debates over food security for growing urban centres (Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2013). But who is actually responsible for achieving sustainable consumption and production? Producers, who are tilling the earth with machines of variable complexity and are responsible for any toxins entering the soil and water; or those companies who make the chemicals and machines responsible for the impact of their products on the environment? What about the processors who purchase the produce from the farms and turn these into products that can be consumed by people, animals and machines? What then is the responsibility of aggregators and distributors, who collect, pack and transport the produce and products? Where is the responsibility of retailers and brands, which turn fresh and transformed products into consumables that are easily recognised by consumers? What role do consumers play when they decide to purchase something that has, through all of these steps, become a 'sustainable' product? Where is the responsibility of researchers and actors in the agricultural knowledge and innovation systems (AKIS) who are creating and sharing knowledge about what is or could be sustainable? Finally, what is the responsibility of a State, and its various administrations working at different levels of engagement, who is supposed to govern what sustainability ought to be across geo-political boundaries?

The creation of the sustainable development goals (SDGs), as a new form of governance (Kanie and Biermann, 2017), suggests that the issue is more complex: contemporary societal challenges are interdependent, they cut across scales of action and all societal actors have roles to play. Within the 17 indicators, SDG 12 - Responsible consumption and production - is viewed as the glue that brings all of the other SDGs together (Le Blanc, 2015); but, SDG 12 has a semantic problem that might well be ontological. First, the official title (and icon) of the goal is "Responsible consumption and production", while in the text of the original UN Declaration, the title is "ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns" (UN, 2015: 22). This creates epistemic confusion over what

is to be valued in consumption and production: is it the sustainability (of the patterns or specific sustainable practices) and/or the responsibility (of whom and for doing what, acting responsibly or ensuring the responsibility of others)? The epistemic confusion continues through the second part of the goal definition, which is: 'consumption and production', meaning both practices, but what links them together? To link them, the new concept must be knowable; to know it, scientists, practitioners and policy-makers want to measure it (Pintér et al., 2017; Dagiral et al., 2016). But how do you measure a missing space, the 'and' between two processes that are relatively stabilised (in large-scale production and retail systems), with their own definitions of sustainability and metrics to prove it (Constance et al., 2018)? Moreover, it matters who the people are that are defining, measuring and linking these concepts as they come from different socio-cultural and economic situations and rely upon different ways of knowing (Haraway, 1988) and valuing that cannot always be understood or reconciled (Blok, 2019).

Current debates at the science-policy interface

To understand what taking responsibility for sustainability means within the context of food system transformations, it is important to build on the definitions of actors who are making these changes in practice and policy. One important definition has been proposed by the 10 Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Production and Consumption (10YFP)¹, specifically through the Sustainable Food Systems Programme (SFSP), whose implementation is Indicator 12.1 of the 2030 Agenda. Set up as a multi-stakeholder, systems-based response to the multi-faceted challenges of malnutrition, biodiversity loss and climate change, this programme was co-led by two national governments (South Africa and Switzerland, then Costa Rica and Switzerland) and two international NGOs (WWF and Hivos²) and counts over 200 partners from government agencies, civil society organizations, research and technical institutions, private sector, UN agencies and other international organizations. Relying upon the technical expertise from among its partners, the SFSP holds global conferences every two years to report on project activities and engage with policy makers in the region of the conference (South Africa in 2017, Costa Rica in 2019, Thailand in 2020 (virtual) and Vietnam in 2023 (hybrid)).

One of the joint projects within the programme, led by UN Environment, is the writing, piloting and disseminating of a Framework for Collaborative Food Systems Transformation.³ This approach clearly allocates responsibility to all types of organised actors in society and attempts to offer guidance on how to make food system change within multi-stakeholder processes. The proposed process remains, at this stage, based on literature and a few qualitative case studies of innovative institutions, but has not yet been put into action. The 4th Global Conference of the Sustainable Food Systems Programme "The Transformation We Need" took place between 24-27 April 2023 in Ha Noi, Viet Nam, convening over 350 on-site and 1000 virtual participants from a range of actor groups. This conference was meant to be a place where the transformations outlined in the common framework could be put into action. Unfortunately, this space created to debate sustainable production and consumption did not enable this to be achieved.

In 2021, the United Nations Secretary General held a Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) in New York, which was highly criticized and even boycotted by civil society organizations for having derailed ongoing collective efforts to advance negotiations on equitable, inclusive and agroecological transitions of food systems (Anderson et al., 2022; Canfield et al., 2021; Chandrasekaran et al., 2021; Covic et al., 2021; Haas, 2004; McMichael, 2021; Montenegro de Wit and Iles, 2021). The members of the OPN-SFSP leadership (3 co-leads) and Multi-stakeholder Advisory committee (23 members from five colleges) and include many of the actors who had raised concern about the UNFSS conference. Therefore, the preparations made for the 4th Global Conference attempted to redress some of the core problems with the UNFSS meeting, i.e., the co-optation of knowledge from small-scale farmers and indigenous populations, the domination of business-as-usual actors (e.g., AGRA) and national level government complacency about the food system transformation agenda.

These critiques had already been raised in the SFS Programme's 3rd global conference in 2020, therefore the conference's aim was to provide an overview of transformational actions, tools and initiatives to overcome key barriers and address the well-known bottlenecks faced by countries. At the same time, the OPN-SFSP members expressed need to further promote the food systems approach and inclusive governance. For this reason, there was a special portion of the conference dedicated sharing experiences and strengthening capacities among National Food Systems Convenors in preparation of the UNFSS's first Stocktaking Moment on 24-26 July 2023.

While the general agreement among attendees was that this conference was a success, thanks to the tireless work of the civil servants working in the Vietnamese Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, there was a general feeling among participants that there was a lot of talk about the transformation (in the singular) that we want, but very little about the transformations that are underway. A good example of this is found in the official press release:

The inaugural keynote speech by Estrella "Esther" Penunia, Secretary General of the Asian Farmer's Association for Sustainable Rural Development, sounded an ever-louder alarm indicating that not only are we nowhere near achieving the SDGs but that the multiple and interconnected crises of inequality, climate change, violent conflicts, and the

¹ Recently renamed the One Planet Network (OPN-SFSP) <http://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/>

² Hivos did not renew its mandate in 2021 due to staff changes and the institutional effects of COVID.

³ <http://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/initiative/setting-table-our-children-improving-governance-food-systems-through-multi-stakeholder>



pandemic and its consequences are increasing poverty and hunger across the globe. Ms. Penunia stressed that the key obstacles we face are a lack of policy coherence and coordination for the implementation of food systems transformation pathways, lack of stakeholder participation, especially the poor and marginalized, and a lack of political will to address power imbalances and provide adequate financing. The opening session further stressed that we face an implementation gap with regard to National Pathways for Food Systems Transformation and other key commitments, which needs to be urgently addressed at this critical time for people and planet. (One Planet Network Sustainable Food Systems Programme, 2023b)

Indeed, one of the common remarks made by participants after the event was that the plenary speakers used all of the right talking points about the need for sustainable food systems and many claimed that they had indeed achieved sustainable consumption and production in their countries. But the session dedicated to the open and honest analysis of the national pathways showed clearly how far the discourse had strayed from the reality. Nonetheless, five “levers of change” were agreed upon by participants:

Global, regional, national, and sub-national inclusive governance to lay the foundation for applying a holistic/integrated approach towards sustainable and healthy food systems; Collaborative, multisectoral, integrated policies based on a holistic approach to advance the transformation we need: improving consumption and production patterns in our food systems; Mobilizing means of implementation, including science, finance, human rights and innovation; Monitoring and accountability frameworks to measure transformation, supported by metrics and data; and Research and innovation, including in collaboration with the private sector. (One Planet Network Sustainable Food Systems Programme, 2023a)

As the debates progressed, it became clear that despite the references made to science and data there was barely any time dedicated to discuss what was behind these keywords. As Turnhout et al. (2021) have pointed out, current science-policy interfaces that deal with food systems are breaking down. Although collaboration among policymakers, scientists, and other actors is crucial for the successful operation of the science-policy interface, the demands for credibility and salience often conflict since generating credible knowledge requires time that political processes frequently cannot afford. Consequently, in practice, policymakers more often rely on existing knowledge to provide them with “usable knowledge” (Haas, 2004), a more understandable language to non-scientists without losing the core value of the scientific knowledge. In practice, this “usable knowledge” tends to result in a procedural system, notably guidelines or standards, as boundary objects. One need only look at the two volume special issue of this journal in 2013 to understand that this is not a new problem (Bain et al., 2013), but rather a classic issue of technopolitics in agrifood systems that is at least as old as is this journal.

Contents of the issue

This point is an excellent segue into the articles included in this first issue of IJSAF in 2023, which deals with questions of science and policy in current food systems. Śpiewak and Goszczyński (2023) examine the institutional diversity in alternative food networks in Poland and explore how well institutions deliver on their tasks. The diversity that they found among the networks that are linking consumption and production speak to the need for tailored knowledge and policy that is well grounded in the innovative production-consumption communities and has gained legitimacy from local public authorities. The importance of local level policy is also a finding of Kortetmäki (2023) who analyses food systems from the perspective of sustainability transitions and dietary transitions. She explores why it is so difficult to switch to local plant proteins in Finnish public catering. Her institutional analysis demonstrates that the underlying rationalities in public catering that are based on performance indicators, catering resources and dominant local perceptions of ‘normal’ dietary patterns. Here again, there seems to be a mismatch between rationalities governing production and consumption.

The third article in this issue deals with food security policy in South Africa following the COVID-19 pandemic. Manduna (2023) found that the policy measures implemented by the national government exacerbated pre-existing economic vulnerabilities. Thus, the hunger and food insecurity that was triggered by the pandemic was racialized, gendered and regionalized – in line with the structural legacies left by colonial and apartheid policies. A do-it-yourself approach to linking food production and consumption is proposed here as the only logical solution. This idea of logical solutions is the topic that is addressed by the fourth article in this special issue, which focuses on co-creation in city-level policy-making. van Dis et al. (2023) argue that while the opening up of a public space for social learning is important, it is insufficient for impacting the scientific outcome that is desired in mission-driven policy. The authors explain that continued engagement is fundamental to systems change, thus spaces for these science-policy dialogues must remain places on long term engagement. For this reason, there may still be hope for the OPN-SFSP, as this “ten year framework program” has now been engaging multiple stakeholders for more than twenty years and the possibility for more constructive dialogue might just be possible if it can extract itself from the UNFSS process and return to more community-rooted efforts.

We close this editorial with the introduction of the innovative new approach to book reviews that is launched with this issue of the journal. Our governing body – the Research Committee on the Sociology of Agriculture and Food (RC40) of the International Sociological Association – decided to launch a reading club in order to improve cross-continental debate about some of the most recent scientific studies in our field. IJSAF has agreed to publish a summary of this debate as a book review. We are truly excited about this new initiative as it allows us to give voice both to the author of the book and to the readers who are engaging with the topic in constructive ways. As you will see with the discussion of *The Immaculate Conception of Data* by Kelly Bronson, that is reviewed in this issue (Legun et al., 2023), the dialogic style of the presents the different points of view from scholars from around the world in a constructive way that does justice to the richness of the book.

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