INVITING COMMUNITY INTO THE DEVELOPMENT OF GLOBALLY SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS

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Abstract

Food systems and human diets contribute to unsustainable socioecological conditions, which in turn negatively affect human health. These driver-impact relationships span multiple scales, prompting international governance bodies, nations, and communities alike to grapple with solutions for a better food future. Collaborative action across scales and sectors is necessary; however, how communities can align contributions with efforts at broader scales is unclear.

The aim of this research is to develop theoretical and procedural supports for community engagement in globally sustainable food systems (SFS), and to provide concrete results relevant to one case community.

The community of nutrition and dietetics professionals was chosen as the case community given its history of engagement with SFS, its integration throughout food system sectors, and because dietary shifts have significant potential to contribute to SFS. Furthermore, the researcher’s position as a member of this community supported the case study work.

The research uses transdisciplinary methods guided by the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD) and Community Development theory. The FSSD provides a concrete definition of sustainability and includes methodological supports for co-creation of sustainability transitions. Community Development theory supports participatory approaches and welcomes different knowledge cultures in such co-creation. The Delphi Inquiry method was used to facilitate data collection and community engagement. For measurement-specific elements of the research, causal loop diagrams (CLD) informed by the Cultural Adaptation Template (CAT) theory were used, and Critical Dietetics was used as a framework for dietetics-specific analysis.

High level insights include that: (i) participatory and multidimensional approaches are important to facilitate community engagement in SFS development; (ii) objective parameters for defining sustainability are critical to guide concerted action and can provide an innovation space that invites creative and diverse solutions within; (iii) systems thinking and related tools help simplify the complexity of food systems without disregarding broader context, and support assessment in the absence of all data. Specifically in relation to the case community explored, insights include that, (i) integrating an SFS lens into existing roles and activities is important, because dietitians already work across sectors and scales, making them well positioned to contribute in diverse ways; (ii) a shared language based on transdisciplinary understandings of SFS is required; (iii) engaging in activities that facilitate SFS knowledge development within the profession, prior to integrating it into roles and activities, is an important first step; (iv) collaborative and reflexive approaches to continued knowledge development and practice are important, such that in the end sustainability becomes integrated into a cultural way of thinking about food.

Based on these insights, this dissertation outlines a procedure for collaborative community work for globally SFS. The procedure is adaptable to various community settings. The dissertation also provides specific guidance for how dietitians could utilize their strategic positions throughout food systems to contribute to SFS development.

Keywords: Sustainable food systems; strategic sustainable development; sustainable community development; nutrition; dietetics