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Introduction

Special Issue: Mapping the Global Food Landscape

Mapping the state of play on the global food landscape

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The global food landscape is changing rapidly. In 2007–08 food prices soared and remained volatile in the following years, effectively leading to a world food crisis that drove tens of millions of people into poverty and hunger. A phenomenal increase in large-scale farmland acquisitions in developing countries by a range of investors is leaving land rights in question for many small-scale producers while land grabbing is also occurring in the global North. There is also growing corporate concentration in the international food industry, from agricultural input firms to trading firms to production and processing and food retail. A changing global climate with associated unpredictable weather and crop yields complicates this picture, as does a steady increase in the application of agricultural biotechnology worldwide. To counter these global forces, communities around the world are imagining and building alternative locally-based and interconnected food systems grounded in the idea of food sovereignty to ensure food security, ecological sustainability and social justice.

The breadth, scale, and speed of the changes on the global food landscape are forcing a major rethink of how we conceptualize problems and solutions to the production and distribution of food, and the persistence of hunger. They are also prompting more debate concerning critical issues related to the equitable access to and control over food and food producing resources such as land, seeds, and of course, decision-making power. Research on global food issues is rapidly

evolving in this context, and groundbreaking conceptual and empirical work is taking place at both the grassroots level and in academic arenas. The insights emerging from recent studies conducted by social movements, non-governmental organizations and academics are critical, with wide reaching impact and relevance for policy-making and for the broader fields of global food studies and rural development. Bringing these different kinds of researchers together is an important step in fostering research that better connects theory and praxis.

This special issue is unique in that it shares insights and experience of academics with those of social movement activists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). It is vital to incorporate insights of those working on the ground who are often much closer to the daily realities of those most affected by changes in the global food economy. As such, the special issue provides an integrated overview and analysis of some important changes that have occurred to the food system landscape over the past decade. The articles are deliberately short and accessible, and seek not only to take stock and make sense of recent changes, but also to map out potential future research directions. We believe that this knowledge integration and synthesis is crucial to reshaping global food studies and informing future local, national, and international deliberations on food policies.

A secondary aim of this special issue is to advance the field of Critical Global Food Studies in Canada. Food Studies is a growing field of scholarly and public interest as evidenced by the rapid growth of the Canadian Association of Food Studies (CAFS) and the launch of this journal, *Canadian Food Studies*, in 2014. Canadian scholars and institutions of higher learning have been at the forefront of food studies. The vast topography of Canada and existence of diverse food systems and practices places Canadian scholars in a strong position to influence this growing field.

As long-time scholars of food issues, we see these as exciting and welcome developments. However, we are also concerned by what might be an emerging divide between locally- and globally-oriented critical food studies in Canada. In our view, this is a false dichotomy; food systems are multi-scalar by nature in that they are constituted by complex and dynamic local-global and global-local flows of seeds, agricultural practices and systems, price signals, social customs, consumer tastes, models of regulation, and perhaps most importantly, forms and sites of political struggles and solidarity. Whereas the analytical lens on issues presented here often starts at the global-level—in part due to what we see as wider trends—there is always a deep connection to local developments and the lived experiences of food producers and consumers around the world, as well as to changing relations among humans and nature across landscapes. We contend that the global lens offered here can in turn shed light on local food issues—just as local development influences how we analyze the global—and encourage research collaborations that leads us toward multi-sited and multi-scalar understandings of food systems and pathways for change.

The Waterloo workshop

The articles in this special issue are the result of an innovative workshop held in Waterloo, Ontario September 25–26, 2014, that sought to expand a conversation that integrated multiple sources and forms of knowledge—including experience in the field, expertise in policymaking, and scholarly research—about the changing global food landscape.

The workshop focused on 10 key themes that we felt best characterized significant changes and challenges on the global food landscape today. We chose the following 10 themes: the current state of hunger, production, and distribution in the world food system; development on the human right to food; deepening financialization of food systems; controversies in international food trade; local and global struggles for food sovereignty; global land grabs and land reform; emerging issues in genetic resources and agricultural biotechnology; the strategies of transnational agri-food corporations; the prospects for sustainable food security in the context of global environmental change; and reflections on new forms of global food governance.

We recognize this list of ten themes is quite limited and does not holistically capture all the key challenges. Upon critical self-reflection, we realized, for example, that issues such as health and nutrition, agroecology, and the linkages between food and energy systems—each addressed in some way through the existing organizational structure—could have featured as important themes in their own right. As workshop organizers, we had to make difficult decisions based on time, financial constraints, and availability of participants. In our view, although the 10 themes explored in this special issue help deepen conversations to advance multi-sited and multi-scalar approaches arising from recent changes on the global food landscape, we fully recognize that they by no means represent what we perceive to be the totality of issues relevant to Critical Global Food Studies today.

Workshop participants came from a range of social movements, NGOs, and academic institutions, and importantly, different career stages. This deliberate choice, on our part, ensured not only that there were perspectives and knowledge from inside and outside the academy, but also to consider inter-generational perspectives in order to capture a wider range of lived experiences, research, and imagined food futures. This cross-fertilization of academic and non-academic ideas was an important feature of the workshop. As NGO and social movement activists emphasized, when compared to academics, they have far more limited resources available for research and knowledge mobilization. The workshop certainly was successful in taking steps toward expanding a “networks of networks” of food research and advocacy; however more imaginative and dynamic forms of collaboration are required, including new institutional arrangements within and outside the academy to support alternative global food systems.

Although from diverse backgrounds, what connected participants was their experience and/or their research as well as a commitment to engaging with practice and social change. Our aim was to build stronger connections among these varied constituencies, engage in discussion and develop a collective analysis of some key issues on the global food landscape today. This

kind of exchange is important for Critical Global Food Studies because it provides a counterpoint to the dominant productivist model that is deeply entrenched in relationships between (land grant and agricultural research) universities, industry, government, and international organizations. We believe that diverse and often marginalized forms of knowledge are all important to better explore alternatives and ways of moving away from the current environmentally and socially unsustainable model of industrial agriculture.

Beyond providing a space for a productive conversation across disciplines, between areas of expertise and at the nexus of research and praxis, the workshop also sought to capture the insights with a compilation of written outputs that will be both widely accessible and relevant for informing policy and public opinion. The authors were asked to address the following three key questions: (1) What do scholars and civil society organizations need to know on that topic given changes in the world food system in the past decade? (2) What policy directions are the most promising? and (3) What are the key challenges we now face on that issue? Each theme is explored by a combination of academics and social movement or NGO representatives. Each theme also includes a paper providing synthesis and reflections prepared by a graduate student who served as a rapporteur for that session at the workshop. Following the workshop the articles were peer-reviewed and revised to incorporate insights from the conversations among participants. The final result, that is presented here, we believe, is unique as it begins to stitch insights together from a variety of different angles.

Key lessons from the papers

The articles in this collection connect to each other in many ways. Here we highlight four key insights that we as editors see emerging from the contributions:

- **Deep interconnections between all of these issues and with changes in the global economy.** As we collectively analyzed the various trends that are now reshaping the global food landscape, it became increasingly clear that they were not entirely distinct phenomena. Rather there are deeply connecting roots. As the articles make clear, many of the problems outlined here have emerged from, or are a reaction to, the global economic and financial crisis, and change in one arena, such as finance, has wide-ranging impacts on other sectors such as trade, corporate concentration, land grabs, and efforts to respond with bottom-up food sovereignty based initiatives.
- **Competing paradigms regarding how to build sustainable food systems.** There are highly polarized debates on how to address some of the most pressing issues in the global food landscape today. On one hand are those who argue for an expansion of a large-scale, industrial, neoliberal, and corporate-led model global food system. On the other hand, there

is increasing research pointing to the need for a paradigm shift to small-scale, farmer-led, agro-ecological, locally-based food systems. Indeed, in exploring more sustainable food systems, a number of authors highlight the role of peasants who are protagonists in an on-going process of repeasantization that also seeks to close the urban-rural divide. The contributions address the possible pathways for policy on this divided terrain, carefully analyzing how progressive initiatives might successfully navigate this fault-line.

- **Governance has lagged behind in addressing the implications of rapid change in the food system.** There are some signs of positive change, for example, the reform of the United Nations Committee on World Food Security (CFS) has spearheaded important initiatives. But other global structures, such as the Group of 20, have taken a “business as usual” approach that entails very limited (if any) governance reform in the major industrialized countries. As the articles highlight, the governance changes at the global level over the last decade have on the whole been largely voluntary and ineffective. More substantive governance reform is required to direct the global food system onto a positive and more sustainable track.
- **Importance of fostering collaboration and co-production of knowledge for alternative global food systems.** Despite the proliferation of scholarly research on food systems, including critical applied research for alternative food systems, there remain significant obstacles to co-production and mobilization of knowledge to advance transnational advocacy and effective international food policymaking for just and sustainable food systems. The articles in this special issue seek to address this weakness by drawing on a range of sources, including academic, policy, social movement, and NGO contributions, and by engaging with each other to foster integrated collaboration for positive food system change.

Together, the purpose of this collection is to provide a highly accessible overview and critical analysis of the state of play across a range of key issues. The events of the past decade have presented new and challenging situations that the academic and food advocacy communities have yet to fully address. Thus far, both scholarship and advocacy have largely documented and reacted to events such as volatile food prices, a deepening crisis of climate change, and changes in access to land in a context of the growing power of financial and corporate actors in the global food system. This work has been important in helping to understand the challenges faced in the on-the-ground work of farmers, peasants, and urban-based groups who are engaged in the everyday struggles of building alternative food systems. There is a need to take stock of all these developments—not just as discreet individual issues, but also as a synthetic whole—in order to better understand how the global community could collectively respond to these developments, particularly in terms of governance and public policy.

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