

Concept Paper

Eating Our Way to Sustainability? Leisure, Food and Community Economic Development

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Abstract: This article reviews and synthesizes critical literature in the areas of food, leisure, sustainability and community economic development to answer the question of whether we can eat our way to sustainability. It begins with the work of John Loxley and his approach to community economic development, by emphasizing linkages, leakages and leveraging. It then turns to the imprecise concept of sustainability and gives it a more precise meaning, linking it with McMurtry's idea of the civil commons. The article goes on to apply this new meaning to three important terms: sustainable leisure, sustainable communities and sustainable community economic development. With these understandings in place, it then examines four examples of using leisure activities in the realm of food to support sustainable community economic development: community gardens, community-supported agriculture, gleaning and community kitchens. The article concludes that we can indeed eat our way to sustainability if we choose food-related leisure activities that enable others to eat as well.

Keywords: sustainability; leisure; food; community economic development

1. Introduction

Although vastly different, leisure and sustainability are both deeply complex concepts that are widely discussed and hotly contested. Leisure encompasses place-based activities, as well as travel, with a growing critical component that reflects the negative impacts it can have on individuals, communities and the environment. Sustainability ranges from the Dow Jones Sustainability Index to Deep Ecology, and has often been co-opted by large corporations as window-dressing for their ongoing unsustainable activities. Bringing these two concepts together multiplies their complexities exponentially: leisure activities can either compromise or contribute to sustainability—or both—while sustainability considerations can reconfigure leisure as well as eliminate it. Adding community economic development (CED) to this complexity raises the stakes, given the divisions within the CED literature itself and the unfolding ramifications of relating it to issues of leisure and sustainability. Combining these concepts with food seems almost incomprehensible, and yet initiatives such as culinary tourism can exhibit aspects of all four concepts.

This paper cannot address all the permutations involved in bringing together leisure, sustainability, community economic development and food, but it does outline some of the parameters to consider when doing so. In particular, it will look at community economic development through food-related leisure activities with a focus on sustainability. To accomplish this, it will first examine the work of John Loxley [1] and his conceptualization of community economic development. It will then filter Loxley's work through McMurtry's [2] idea of the civil commons and Sumner's [3] conceptualization of sustainability before using the lens of sustainable community economic development to assess a number of food-related leisure activities. By doing so, this paper will provide a template for better understanding

and organizing the dynamic mix of leisure, sustainability, community economic development and food, and consider whether we can eat our way to sustainability.

2. Community Economic Development

John Loxley's [1] book *Transforming or Reforming Capitalism* presents a novel approach to community economic development whereby individuals can both conceptualize and develop their economic activity to avoid being reduced to isolated players within the global market. This reframing is crucial because if local initiatives are going to be scaled up and out, a clear comprehension of how they will operate in the market is a necessary precondition to any transformative change.

Loxley's [1] approach is based on the concepts of linkages and leakages, with his main focus on the former. At the local level, Loxley argues, linkages illustrate how organizations associated with community economic development can understand and scale up their activity. For example, a backward linkage measures how the demands of one sector can create economic benefit, and therefore strengthen, another sector. In terms of food, this could be the demand created by a local family-run grocery store for local food products, such as apples, cheese or chicken. This backward-linked demand would strengthen the economic activity of the local food sector by linking two sets of actors—stores and farmers. In a similar manner, forward linkages measure how the outputs of one sector connect to other sectors. In terms of food, this could involve the local grocery store selling its goods on to local restaurants or bed and breakfast operations. In this way, it becomes clear how local food organizations can link their activities forwards and backwards to create a stronger local food sector, instead of automatically buying from or selling to the global market. Overall, the richer the linkages, the greater the impacts of this local initiative on community economic development.

The second concept Loxley [1] emphasizes is leakages. In contrast to linkages, which measure the connections between sectors, leakages measure how the opportunity for value capture by a sector has been lost. In terms of food, leakage occurs where the dominant food system supplies inputs into or acquires outputs from the local food system. While linkages indicate the strength of local food systems, leakages highlight their weaknesses. Such analysis can be crucial to the survival of a sector because it shows where food system actors can intervene to transform leakages into linkages and thus strengthen community economic development.

Loxley [1] (p. 61) articulates a final point regarding linkages and leakages: we cannot think of linkages or leakages solely in terms of products; we must also consider "supply-side factors of production" such as labor, capital and technology, and these can emerge from local or global sources. Envisioning community economic development, therefore, entails also thinking in terms of local labor, local capital, and local technical capacity being nurtured and developed. This is an important conceptual move for CED because the focus is often on the local nature of the product, and not on the factors of production, that allow that product to make its way through the value chain.

A third concept that is also valuable when considering community economic development is leveraging. This concept is not directly derived from Loxley, but it does have its genesis in his idea that communities need to emphasize two things to every level of government. First, they need to articulate the value of "small scale production to meet local need" in economic terms in order to secure support through subsidies and, second, they need to present a united movement with the capacity for "collective action" [1] (p. 81). That is, community economic development organizations need to realize their capacity to improve their impacts and role in transformative change by leveraging their potential power to influence public policy as a social movement [4].

In short, communities must learn to encourage linkages, avoid leakages and leverage their collective action in the political realm in order to optimize their economic development. These interrelated concepts of linkages, leakages and leveraging provide a promising framework for strategizing community economic development through food-related leisure activities. This strategy, however, cannot blindly assume that all things local are automatically sustainable—that would mean falling into the local trap, a concept developed by Born and Purcell [5] to emphasize that scale, such as

local or global, has no inherent characteristics. The impact of going local depends on the agenda of those who are empowered at the local scale. “Localizing food systems, therefore, does not lead inherently to greater sustainability or to any other goal. It leads wherever those it empowers want it to lead” (p. 196). If the agenda of those empowered at the local scale is private enrichment, then this strategy will not lead to overall environmental, social or economic sustainability. However, if the agenda of those empowered at the local scale is sustainability, then it is important to know just what this actually means.

3. Sustainability

Sustainability is a fairly recent addition to the English language, having first been used in the early 1970s and gaining momentum with the publication of The Brundtland Report in 1987 [6]. Since that time, its meaning has moved from its roots in the environment to include social and economic aspects as well, often conceptualized as a three-legged stool, three pillars or a Venn diagram, with each aspect being considered equally important in the search for sustainability.

In spite of its entry into everyday language, sustainability is “often hard to define precisely” [7] (p. 1). This imprecision makes it difficult to know whether deciding on a particular community economic development strategy will lead to greater or less sustainability. One definition that allows for more precise decision-making has been put forward by Sumner [3], who ties sustainability to the concept of the civil commons—understood as co-operative human constructions that protect and/or enable universal access to life goods [2]. The civil commons is all around us, but until recently has not been recognized. Public education, universal healthcare, civil rights and environmental legislation are all examples of the civil commons. In other words, it is society’s organized and community-funded capacity of universally accessible resources to provide for the life preservation and growth of society’s members and their environmental life-host, and as such “defines a society’s true level of life evolution” (p. 371).

Sumner [3] argues that sustainability involves building the civil commons—environmentally, socially and economically. Environmental examples of the civil commons include public parks, town squares, the Kyoto Agreement and the Montreal Protocol. Social examples include women’s rights, public libraries, universal daycare/eldercare programs, community centers and workplace health and safety regulations. Economic examples include a guaranteed annual income, old-age pensions, child benefits and unemployment insurance. The more we build the civil commons—environmentally, socially and economically—the more sustainable we become. But the more we defund, destroy or enclose the civil commons, the less sustainable we become. Underfunding public education, encouraging for-profit healthcare, dismissing environmental regulations as “red tape”, clear cutting in national parks and ignoring the Kyoto Agreement are all attacks on the civil commons and lead to unsustainability.

Understanding sustainability as building the civil commons adds a new perspective to well-known compound terms, such as sustainable development, in which sustainability morphs from a noun to an adjective. Shearman [8] illuminates this issue when he observes that using “sustainability” as a modifier in compound terms, such as sustainable development, changes the way we come to understand the second half of those terms. In this way, the word sustainable is used not only as an adjective, but also as a contradiction. For Shearman, sustainability as a modifier implies that the status quo is inconsistent with the facts. If not, then terms like sustainable development would be redundant, because development would already be sustainable. Using Shearman’s observation and Sumner’s [3] definition, sustainable development would entail development projects that build the civil commons (like community health clinics, hiking trails or public pools and skating rinks), not private entrepreneurial projects. Following this approach, we can examine terms like sustainable leisure, sustainable communities and sustainable community economic development.

3.1. Sustainable Leisure

If sustainability entails building the civil commons—co-operative human constructions that protect and/or enable universal access to life goods—then this understanding has important

implications for the concept of sustainable leisure. In their article on leisure and sustainability, Sumner and Mair [9], while acknowledging a few exceptions, note that leisure scholars have avoided working with the concept of sustainability because of the difficulty of defining the term. They step into this gap by positing leisure as a life good and using Sumner's [3] definition of sustainability. For these authors:

Sustainable leisure involves building the civil commons through leisure. For example, people can use their leisure time to volunteer at a food bank, participate in a park or neighbourhood clean-up program, start a renewable energy co-operative or carry out trail or river maintenance projects. In this way, they use their life good of leisure to build various forms of the civil commons and thus provide life goods to others in a virtuous circle of sustainable development. [9] (p. 7)

They go on to observe that, in light of this definition, not all leisure is sustainable.

Indeed, some leisure forms degrade the civil commons, leading to unsustainability. Leaving trash behind while camping, participating in child sex tourism, joining the Ku Klux Klan, campaigning against gay rights or staying in a vacation hotel constructed on land seized from the local inhabitants are all examples of what we would describe as unsustainable leisure, particularly because they reduce access to life goods for other people. (pp. 7–8)

Sumner and Mair [9] conclude that this definition of sustainable leisure can be used as a conceptual tool for “making meaningful assessments of leisure forms” (p. 12). Following this logic, we can examine another compound term: sustainable communities.

3.2. Sustainable Communities

Like sustainable leisure, the concept of sustainable communities has been considered difficult to define. Those who do attempt to define it often provide vague and unassessable meanings, as in Egan's [10] suggestion that

Sustainable communities meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, their children and other users, contribute to a high quality of life and provide opportunity and choice. (p. 7)

But linking Sumner's definition of sustainability to the word community results in an understanding of sustainable communities as centered on building the civil commons, environmentally, socially and economically [11]. Environmentally, this includes protecting parks, passing legislation that bans the cosmetic use of pesticides and enforcing laws that prohibit corporations from polluting local land, air and water. Socially, it includes providing schools, libraries, health-care facilities and affordable housing. Economically, it includes supporting co-operatives, nonprofit businesses and fair-trade networks.

McDonald et al. [12] capture some of this meaning when they report that the Government of the United Kingdom has defined sustainable communities as:

Places where people want to live and work, now and in the future. They meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, are sensitive to their environment and contribute to a high quality of life. They are safe and inclusive, well planned, built and run and offer equality of opportunities and good services for all. For communities to be sustainable, they must offer hospitals, schools, shops, good public transport, as well as a clean and safe environment. People also need public open space . . . where they can relax and interact and the ability to have a say on the way their neighborhood is run. Most importantly, sustainable communities must offer decent homes at prices people can afford. (p. 50)

With the civil commons being central to sustainable leisure and sustainable communities, we can now look at Loxley's [1] work on community economic development—linkages, leakages and leveraging—with a new focus.

3.3. Sustainable Community Economic Development

Following Sumner [3], sustainable community economic development would entail building the civil commons when developing the economy of a community. Applying this understanding to Loxley [1] yields insights that can make sustainable community economic development clear and assessable. From this perspective, encouraging linkages means not just any linkages, but linking the civil commons at the local level—food co-operatives, nonprofit grocery stores, farmers' markets and food banks—whenever possible. Conversely, avoiding leakages means eschewing enclosure of the civil commons by preferring not to deal with large corporate supermarkets, distributors and restaurant chains. And leveraging means taking collective action in the political realm as a united, local, sustainable food movement to pressure all levels of government to support the development of a local, sustainable community-based economy anchored in the civil commons. All three components provide opportunities for people—both residents and visitors—to participate in food-related leisure activities that build the civil commons in support of sustainable community economic development.

4. Discussion: Leisure, Food and Sustainable Community Economic Development

Following Loxley [1], the road to community economic development has three interconnected aspects—encouraging linkages, avoiding leakages and leveraging collective action politically—with respect to local inputs and outputs. The more this is accomplished, the greater the community economic development. But such accomplishment does not take into consideration whether this development is sustainable or not. Filtering Loxley through Sumner's understanding of sustainability as the civil commons results in a more robust framework that weeds out unsustainable forms of community economic development, such as privatizing public amenities, hosting polluting industries or attracting low-wage multinational corporations. In short, encouraging linkages, avoiding leakages and leveraging collective action politically, all with the civil commons in mind, can lead to sustainable community economic development in many areas of production and consumption. Applying this framework means looking at community economic development through two filters: one focused on linkages, leakages and leveraging and the other on the civil commons. With respect to food, this means emphasizing and finding support for local inputs and outputs of food (as well as the labor, capital and technology associated with food) through civil commons organizations, such as co-operatives, nonprofits and community-owned enterprises. In terms of leisure activities in the realm of food to support sustainable community economic development, many opportunities are available. This paper will investigate four: community gardens, community-supported agriculture, gleaning and community kitchens.

4.1. Community Gardens

Community gardens provide a promising site for applying the framework of sustainable community economic development in terms of leisure activities in the realm of food. Community gardens have been defined as

Any piece of land gardened by a group of people . . . It can be urban, suburban, or rural. It can grow flowers, vegetables or community. It can be one community plot, or can be many individual plots. It can be at a school, hospital, or in a neighborhood. It can also be a series of plots dedicated to 'urban agriculture' where the produce is grown for a market. [13] (p. 523)

Community gardens can be examples of the civil commons—co-operative human constructions that protect and/or enable universal access to a range of life goods. Following Sumner and Mair [9], community gardens can involve sustainable leisure, i.e., using the life good of leisure to build the civil commons and provide life goods for others. As such, community gardens become vehicles for sustainability as people participate in the leisure activities community gardens can offer. While Walter [13] sees them as sites of community development in general, they can also be incorporated into a sustainable community economic development framework if the food-related leisure activities

contribute to the development of a community economy by sharing the life good of food with needy community members, selling the food to raise money for other community projects, trading the food for things the community needs (such as garden tools for a tool library) or petitioning the local government for more land dedicated to community gardens. In this way, leisure activities associated with food from community gardens can contribute to sustainable community economic development by creating linkages, plugging leakages and promoting leveraging, all with the civil commons in mind.

4.2. Community-Supported Agriculture

Community supported agriculture (CSA) provides another opportunity for applying the framework of sustainable community economic development in terms of leisure activities in the realm of food. A CSA involves “an arrangement whereby a group of people, one of whom is a farmer, agree to share the costs and products of a seasonal vegetable garden” [14] (p. 43). Begun by housewives in Japan in the 1960s, the concept “teikei”, when translated, literally means partnership, but philosophically means “food with the farmer’s face on it” [15] (p. 1). In their study of a CSA in Michigan, DeLind and Ferguson [16] (p. 191) argue that community supported agriculture “provides a social and economic alternative to the conventional, large-scale, corporately managed food system”. They describe how farmers gain a reliable market and the financial, labor and social support of members prior to each season, while members receive weekly shares of fresh, locally grown produce 22–52 weeks of the year, depending on the region. Overall, CSAs are “designed to share the risks and rewards of farming” (p. 191). While CSAs can be understood as forms of direct marketing [17], some include “a kind of ‘sweat equity’ reduced-rate share to members who volunteer in the garden” [18] (p. 208). In addition, many CSAs are also associated with a number of leisure activities because of their connection with civic engagement, community and the celebration of local food [4]. CSAs can be incorporated into a sustainable economic community development framework if these leisure activities contribute to the development of a community economy by members accessing fresh, nutritious food, taking leftover produce from the pick-up location to a local shelter, arranging to harvest designated crops to donate to the local food bank or banding together to approach the town council about holding a food festival and providing transportation for low-income participants. In this way, leisure activities associated with food from CSAs can contribute to sustainable community economic development by creating linkages, plugging leakages and promoting leveraging, all with the civil commons in mind.

4.3. Gleaning

Gleaning is an ancient term that has experienced a modern makeover, which provides an opportunity for applying the framework of sustainable community economic development in terms of leisure activities in the realm of food. Historically, gleaning occurred in farmers’ fields after the harvest, when peasants gathered what had been left on the ground to amplify their meagre subsistence. In recent years, gleaning has taken on new meaning, as volunteers in both rural and urban locations gather fresh produce that would otherwise go to waste and donate it to organizations that focus on food security.

One interesting example of modern gleaning occurs at Marin Organic—a non-governmental organization located north of San Francisco, California—that focuses on the environmental soundness and economic viability of farming and ranching in Marin County. Marin Organic has developed an innovative organic school lunch and gleaning program that is helping to transform children’s school lunch choices by offering a combination of purchased and gleaned foods from local farms to participating schools throughout the county. The gleaned food comes from produce that would otherwise be left in the fields because it does not meet the strict aesthetic requirements of restaurants and retail markets. This requirement can account for up to 20% of what is grown, and throughout the year may include potatoes, squashes, spinach, leeks, beets, carrots, arugula, lettuces, meats, eggs, yogurt, ice cream and more. To date, 90,000 pounds of local, certified organic products have been gleaned by volunteers and delivered to participating schools, camps and underserved communities

throughout Marin. In return for this donation, the schools use their food budgets to buy organic food from local producers [19].

Other examples of modern gleaning have appeared in North American cities, where both individuals and groups volunteer to gather food growing in urban spaces and donate some or all of it to social-service organizations. For example, Marshman and Scott [20] report that over the last decade, more than 28 formal gleaning projects emerged across Canada. In the province of Ontario, they add, gleaning projects recovered more than 50,000 pounds of fruit in 2014.

Volunteering to glean to help alleviate food insecurity is a prime example of sustainable leisure—using the life good of leisure to collect food and donate it to those who are food insecure. In this way, gleaning projects are an example of the civil commons—co-operative human constructions that protect and/or enable universal access to the life good of food. Gleaning can also be incorporated into a sustainable community economic development framework by contributing to a real sharing economy through donating the food to needy community members or food-security organizations, coordinating among food-security organizations and bringing attention to hunger to all levels of government. In this way, leisure activities associated with food from gleaning projects can contribute to sustainable community economic development by creating linkages, plugging leakages and promoting leveraging, all with the civil commons in mind.

4.4. Community Kitchens

Community kitchens offer a final site for applying the framework of sustainable community economic development in terms of leisure activities in the realm of food. Broadly speaking, community kitchens can be understood as community-based cooking programs that involve small groups of people meeting regularly to prepare one or more meals together [21]. Furbur et al. [22] (p. 145) note that community kitchens alleviate food insecurity, offer the potential to redress health and social problems associated with poverty and disadvantage, and can have “a positive effect on the lives of socially isolated people”.

One example of this positive effect can be found at *Depanneur*, a former corner store turned dining venue that celebrates the wide diversity of Toronto’s culinary talent through unique food events [23]. One project it began involves Syrian refugee women. Upon arrival in Canada, many of these women found themselves isolated and unable to integrate into the larger society. This isolation resulted in unwanted leisure, often because of language issues. To help them overcome this problem, the owner of the *Depanneur* began the *Newcomer Kitchen*, a nonprofit organization that invites Syrian refugee women to come and share their cooking skills with others. Through the efforts of the *Depanneur*, the women left behind their unwanted leisure as they volunteered to teach others about Syrian cuisine. The result was not only increased socialization and a new sense of confidence and belonging, but also an economic foothold in their adopted country. The meals they went on to make are sold online for pickup or delivery, and the proceeds shared among the women. To date, over 4000 meals have been made, resulting in over \$53,000 earned by these newcomers to Canada and prompting a visit by the Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau [24].

Regardless of which model of participatory programming around food that community kitchens instantiate—collective kitchens, cooking classes, communal meal programs [21] or social enterprises like the example above—they are examples of the civil commons in action. In addition, local labor, local expertise, local capital from fundraising and local venue and equipment all contribute to a novel form of sustainable community economic development that creates linkages, plugs leakages and promotes leveraging, all with the civil commons in mind.

5. Conclusions

Over a quarter of a century ago, Stuart Hill [25] (p. 1) lamented that “there is something seriously wrong with a society that requires one to argue for sustainability”. Sadly, we find ourselves in

this predicament. On the bright side, such a predicament challenges us to explore novel ways of contributing to sustainable community economic development through food-related leisure activities.

This concept paper has taken up the challenge by presenting a framework for sustainable community economic development that combines the tripartite model of linkages, leakages and leveraging with Sumner's work on sustainability, and applying it to four examples of food-related leisure activities. While this framework only deals with community economic development, it can also help to address broader issues such as health and climate change, as long as they are considered to be part of CED, such as lobbying for community-owned health clinics or supporting local farms transitioning to organic agriculture to aid in carbon sequestration projects.

This framework could be scaled up to encompass sustainable regional economic development and sustainable national economic development. Such upscaling would challenge the neoliberal myth of "protectionism"—asking why it is wrong to want to protect our farmers, our workers, our public sector and our environment? And it would provide a more sustainable alternative to the global corporate food system, which is premised on unsustainability [11].

Can we eat our way to sustainability? Yes, we can, if we choose food-related leisure activities associated with sustainable community economic development. Leisure, sustainability and community economic development can all be galvanized through understanding food as a "solution, a cause for joy and positive energy" [26] (p. 18), which can open a portal to a more sustainable world.

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