Establishing a Northland Food Policy Council

What is food policy in the Northland context?

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April 2017

Policy ranges from international to local (organisation, community, and family) and ranges from compliance (legislation) to cultural and aspirational.

The Collins English Dictionary (2017) defines policy as "a set of ideas or plans that is used as a basis for making decisions, especially in politics, economics, or business". By extension, food policy is those sets of ideas and plans impacting the decisions about what we eat. Using this very broad definition of policy in the context of food, we can consider its influence in a range of decisions from personal choices around consumption to international policy crafted by the United Nations and its agencies. With the proliferation of long food chains, the food we eat is typically impacted by a host of actors and the policies that shape their behaviour (Obenchain & Spark, 2015). Well-crafted policy can manifest in sustainable economic, social and environmental justice.

The reach of policy

As food chains[1] lengthen and become more complex, the policies guiding decision-making proliferate. In pre-industrial times, when many people grew their own food, food chains were very short. Now, a processed supermarket product might have raw ingredients sourced from several countries with processing possibly occurring in several places before the food reaches the consumer. Policies guiding these processes originate from the public realm and from private stakeholders (Henson & Humphrey, 2010).

Consider Coca Cola as an example. Iowa State University research finds that ...

> The international sugar market is not a "free" market because of extensive use of production quotas, import controls, government support prices, and preferential trade agreements of rich countries (Elobeid & Beghin, 2015).

Just this one ingredient in the product, sugar, is governed by a plethora of policy. Beyond the production process, policy also shapes other aspects of the company's decisions, for example in finances, human resource and marketing. An example of the latter is Coca Cola's marketing strategy "Through the stories we tell, we will provoke conversations and earn a disproportionate share of popular culture" (Forward Marketing, 2012). This sophisticated strategy, that influences consumer choice through cultural control, builds on decades of marketing strategy. In 1971, the advertisement "I'd like to buy the world a coke" associated

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[1] Food chains are a food system application of "supply chains". Over the last few decades, the notion of the supply chain, often embedding competitive behaviours, has been complimented by the concept of the value chain, or the value web, where the various stakeholders work to create value collaboratively rather than seeking to extract value for themselves (Block et al., 2008). The inequities in industrial food systems can be attributed to the extractive supply chain ethos.

the brand with peace, love and youthful vitality accelerating the process of coca-colonisation (Kroes, 1999).

Following Mexico, France, Hungary and New York, South Africa now plans to implement a sugar tax - a policy measure targeting reduced sugar consumption and therefore non-communicable diseases (Erizanu, 2017). In Northland the District Health Board's *Healthy Eating Food and Drink Policy* states "sugar-sweetened beverages (SSB's) are a major risk factor for obesity, type II diabetes, tooth decay and a number of other diseases" (Northland DHB, 2015, pg.8).

Policy as a social construct

Much of society is socially constructed. The ideas that we hold as true and take for granted, e.g. taxation, road rules, even race, were at some time in the past spoken into existence (Berger & Luckmann, 1984). Either through force or conversation they became accepted reality (even if reluctantly).

In the context of food policy examples of construction are embodied in the words or phrases, organic, food miles, food security. Even the word "food" is loaded.

Policy and Power

Power dynamics must be unpacked to understand the origins of policy. The powerful most influence the policy environment. For example, Gilens and Page, (2014) conclude that the U.S. is an oligarchy, with economic elites dominating government and therefore policy making. In Aotearoa, before European contact, Māori had autonomy over "policy" including food policy. By the establishment of imperial and then colonial governance a Eurocentric hegemony dominated, arguably, to the end of the twentieth century.

A Notable Act of Parliament impacting on food systems include the Tohunga Suppression Act, (Jones, 2007) passed in 1907 and not repealed until 1962. This Act discouraged the use of rongoa (Māori herbal medicine). The Discharged Soldiers Settlement Act 1915 was established to provide soldiers returning from the First World War with farms and vocational training. More than 10,500 men were assisted onto the land. Most of these were Pākehā "as Māori veterans were assumed to have tribal land already available to them" (Derby, 2102). Thus, policy determined who would be the recipients of land that might well be the source of intergenerational wealth through food production.

More recently, the current Government seeks to pass legislation to remove the local authorities' power to make decisions on the exclusion of GMOs.

Policy approaches

In its intent, policy ranges from altruistic to exploitative. Often policy makers create unintended consequences in their attempts to shape human behaviour. Schneider and Ingram's (2005) book, *Deserving and Entitled: Social Constructions and Public Policy* identifies how some populations are rewarded and others punished through the application of public policy.

The United Nations generates policy at the global level. There are four mechanisms for compliance, charters, treaties or conventions, mechanisms developed by UN agencies and rapporteurs (Advocates for Human Rights, 2010). Arguably UN policy are ultimately not enforceable as nation-states remain sovereign. Much UN policy is therefore aspirational. Most, if not all the UN's Sustainable Development Goals relate to food systems. These aspirations are not universally supported and compliance mechanisms are largely absent.

Broad societal aspirations, focussed in international policy, provide impetus for change.

Figure 1:The UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015)

Culture – a third force shaping behaviour

Both formal policy and aspiration shape human behaviour. A third force that cannot be overlooked in shaping behaviour is culture and tradition. The cake, for example is a cultural icon, often at the centre of celebrations including birthdays and weddings. As with Coca Cola, fast food companies develop cultural icons to position themselves, not just as food sellers, but institutions embedded in the lives of our young people. It is difficult to evaluate the contribution of culture to the obesity epidemic. Those that want to reverse the trend need

to be mindful of the significance in culture as a force to both change, or entrench human behaviour.

Conclusion

In New Zealand we are in the early days of attempts to move towards more sustainable food systems through policy initiatives. Policy will complement the grass roots momentum for change. Those operating in the policy realm need to understand the how policy, (either enacted through regulation or aspiration) and culture can work together for positive food systems change.

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