Sustainable Consumption, the Middle Classes and Agri-food Ethics in the Global South

Aims

A: To identify the different institutional forms of sustainable food consumption mobilised in the three countries, their historical and geographical influences, and their potential as levers for change.

B: To identify and explain consumer agency in forms of sustainable food consumption, including forms intentionally linked to civic action as well as ordinary practices of food consumption with ethical effects.

C: To delimit and evaluate the cultural influences, trends and technologies affecting ethical consumption of food in and across the three country case studies.

Objectives

A1. What roles are played by the state in framing sustainable food consumption in each country, and how and why do these roles contrast between the case studies?

A2. How do different forms of sustainable food consumption develop and travel through different retail structures, channels and 'modes of provisioning', e.g. the different 'foodscapes' of supermarkets, restaurants, fast food outlets, online retail and markets?

A3. What kinds of programmes, procurement policies, codes and standards have emerged in the food sector in the three country case studies from state and non-state actors?

A4. How do the socio-political contexts of these countries shape the ethics and values that are bound up in these programmes, policies and standards?

B1. What forms and practices of ordinary food consumption do consumers see as being ethical in each case study country, and why?

B2. Which ethical initiatives, codes and campaigns for sustainable food consumption identified in Objective A gain traction with consumers in and across the three country case studies? Why do these succeed and how do they do so?

B3. What kinds of consumer values, ethical decisions and understandings of sustainability linked to wider processes of social reproduction influence everyday food consumption patterns and practices in the three case studies?

B4. In what ways are consumers' identities shaped by the social emotions around, and embodied materiality of, their food practices? How do their economic positions (secure or insecure) shape their understandings and practices of food consumption?

C1. How are the growing middle classes influencing the availability and regulation of sustainable foods in and across the three country case studies?

C2. How do trends in ethical and sustainable food consumption in the three country case studies relate to wider cultures of consumption in these contexts?

C3. How are social media/online platforms, digital technologies and factors such as celebrity endorsement influencing the communication, encouragement and practice of sustainable food consumption in and across the three countries?

C4. In what ways are emerging trends of sustainable food consumption distinct from, or connected to, forms of aspirational consumption in the three countries, and what are the reasons for this?

C5: What are the transnational influences on the different trends of ethical food consumption in and across the three country case studies?

Methodology

The research design builds on previous funded research in each country and has been co-produced with academic and non-academic partners through an N8 Agri-food Strategic Pump Priming Project. The programme of research combined four distinct phases (a Newton/British Academy Advanced Fellowship effectively covers half of the South African element of Phase 2)

The desk-based research included:

i. a review of publicly available international, governmental, industry and NGO data on ethical and sustainable food consumption as it pertained to each local context.

ii. reviews of local ethical and sustainability codes as they relate to food production, consumption and imports.

ii. a review of the social science sustainable and ethical food literature;

iii. analysis of ethical and sustainable food coverage in local media;

iv. analysis of online activity regarding sustainable and ethical food policies and campaigns.

In Phase One, in each country we met with 30 food system actors including people working in government, civil society, wholesale, retail, hospitality, public procurement, NGO’s, production and campaign groups, influencers and celebrities. Each interview explored the background and role of the interviewee in the organisation; their understandings and criteria of sustainable and ethical food; their understandings of middle class demographics and their consumption of sustainable and ethical food; organisation policies and practices as they pertain to sustainable and ethical food; and key influences and trends that they saw as influencing their organisation and wider publics.

In Phase Two, we extended our research to food consumer/citizens. In each of our cities we interviewed 30 people from a range of middle-class backgrounds and followed up a smaller sub-set of 10 households from each case study city for ethnographic work. Interviews addressed household food consumption practices, judgments about ‘good’ food and influences on notions of ethicality and environmental and social values. Respondents were also asked to reflect on (and demonstrate) their online practices as consumer-citizens, including how they collect information, shop and/or review online. Ethnographic research involved ‘go-along’ (Kusenbach 2012), accompanied shopping interviews and co-cooking sessions to capture the complexities and nuances of food choices, judgments, engagement with government and corporate ethical initiatives, and the ordinary ethics of food purchase and use. As part of this phase, digital ethnography explored the role of social media and online tools as devices implicated in ethical judgement and the creation of markets for sustainable foods

In Phase 3, to evaluate the cultural influences, trends and technologies affecting ethical consumption of food in and across the three country case studies we undertook research focusing specifically on the digital sphere. Phase 2 produced culturally specific understandings of which platforms, apps and tools are relevant to consumers. Participants were asked: a) which top 3 search terms they use to look for information on consumption choices online; b) which top 3 key accounts (e.g. of campaign organisations) they follow on social media, and; c) whether they follow celebrities who might influence their buying decisions. These terms and account names guided text mining of social media in Brazil and South Africa to examine the traction of key values, actors and lines of influence. For a period of 12 months, cloud-based Discovertext software was used to mine the public Facebook and Twitter accounts of the campaign organisations and celebrity accounts named by participants (in English in South Africa and in Portuguese in Brazil). Government restrictions and technical differences inhibited access to social media for text-mining purposes in China.

To widen the reach of the research, and produce material with traction with policy and commercial actors, in Phase 4 we built on the in-depth analysis of phases 1 and 2 to gather quantitative data to assess how values and behaviours identified in each country apply across a larger sample of consumers and identify values and behaviours transcending local context and scale. Quantitative data was gathered through a web-based survey of the drivers of sustainable food consumption and the behavioural intentions arising from these (e.g. intentions to purchase sustainable food).Comparable samples of the middle-class demographic in each of the three case study countries were selected to obtain a total of 1500 responses (500 per country). The questionnaire was developed in English (the most commonly-spoken second language and the lingua franca of the public domain) for use in South Africa and professionally translated into Portuguese, Cantonese and Mandarin using double-back translation procedures for use in Brazil and China respectively. For quality and cost effectiveness, survey participants in the three countries were accessed using Qualtrics.