Local food activity in the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain

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Recent changes in local food supply systems have attracted substantial research interest, but little consideration has been paid to exactly where they occur. This article combines data from three studies to compare local food system development in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland using a single index of food relocalisation, thereby exploring the usefulness of the Index across different social and political contexts. Four diagnostic indicators suggest that local food systems in the south west of Ireland and Britain are particularly well developed. The Index itself is a useful tool for making international comparisons, being easy to replicate and allowing the integration of different data sets. Perhaps its greatest utility is that it opens up new avenues for further research.

Keywords: relocalisation; local food; alternative food networks

Introduction

Local food systems have received considerable attention in recent years, with efforts being made to develop more sustainable, local products and networks. This can be seen throughout the Irish and British food sectors, from small farmers producing artisanal cheese, to the publication of ‘good food guides’ by Bridgestone in Ireland and the Regional Food Groups in Britain, to ministerial encouragement for farmers’ markets in Ireland (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food 2008) and governmental support for reconnecting products, people and places in the UK (e.g. England’s Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food, 2002). Academic interest has also been extensive: reviews of recent debates have been undertaken by, among others, Winter (2003, 2004, 2005), Watts \textit{et al.} (2005) and Feagan (2007). In addition, numerous books (usually lavishly illustrated) have been published that combine recipes and a celebration of local food in particular areas, such as Cotter (2007) and Curtin (2007) in County Cork and Trewin (2005) in Cornwall.

The impression conveyed by much of this work is that certain areas are more developed than others in terms of local food systems. However, Ricketts Hein \textit{et al.} (2006) argue that an assessment of where local food systems are more or less developed is lacking and that a ‘geography of local food systems’ is called for. They used an index measure to calculate where such activity is taking place at a county scale, which has since been used by Watts \textit{et al.} (forthcoming) in Scotland and Ricketts Hein (in preparation) in Ireland. A test of the effectiveness of this Index is to assess whether it can be used to compare systems in different countries.

This article combines data from these three studies to compare local food system developments in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, using a single Index, thereby
exploring its usefulness across different political and social contexts. The article first reviews where the Index fits into current debates surrounding local food, before discussing the adaptations made to it in the present study. It then uses the Index to map local food activity in Ireland and Britain. It concludes by reflecting on the issues highlighted by the use of the Index and on its international applicability.

Alternative? Local?
Definitions of ‘alternative’ food networks and ‘local’ food continue to be debated, particularly by Anglophone geographers. A particular difficulty with the former stems from the breadth of food networks to which the adjective ‘alternative’ has been applied. Thus, alternative food networks can encompass: short food supply chains (Marsden et al. 2000, Renting et al. 2003); labelling that associates products with a given place – such as the European Union’s protected names schemes (Henchion and McIntyre 2000, Ilbery and Kneafsey 2000b, Parrott et al. 2002) – or quality standard (Ilbery and Kneafsey 2000a, Ilbery et al. 2001); the ‘foodshed’ (a concept based on the idea of the watershed–Kloppenburg et al., 1996); and consumer involvement with food production, such as Community Supported Agriculture (Cox et al. 2008) and allotments (Buckingham 2006). Exchange has also been studied, particularly direct sales, whether face-to-face as at farmers’ markets or farm shops (Hinrichs 2000, Holloway and Kneafsey 2000, La Trobe 2001, Kirwan 2004, 2006), or via the internet (Holloway et al. 2006).

A single definition of ‘local’ food also remains elusive. Feagan (2007), for instance, calls for place and space to be returned to the centre of debates about local food systems, but acknowledges the difficulties of knowing exactly where ‘local’ is and how it relates to ‘global’. This apparent distinction between ‘local’ and ‘global’, and the associated inference of the former being alternative to the latter, remains problematic. Sonnino and Marsden (2006), for example, describe ‘alternative’ and ‘conventional’ food chains as two spheres with links that are often ambiguous and competitive. This is illustrated in Ireland by Tovey’s (2009) analysis of attempts to harness ‘local’ food for rural development in south County Tipperary. Tovey found ambiguities in the relationship between ‘alternative’ and ‘conventional’ actors that make the project of an alternative local food system vulnerable to transition into forms more compatible with capitalist development policy (Tovey 2009, p. 34). Ilbery and Maye’s (2005) analysis of the supply chains of specialist livestock producers in the Scottish/English borders found that both ‘upstream’ (inputs) and ‘downstream’ (distribution of products to retailers and consumers) parts of their supply chains blur the distinction between the ‘alternative’ and the ‘conventional’. Moreover, some of the producers they interviewed expressed a preference for the greater volumes and greater perceived financial security provided by ‘conventional’ networks. Similarly, Kirwan (2004) has argued that, for producers participating in ‘alternative’ networks, such as farmers’ markets, participation will tend to be predicated on an economic calculation about the commercial viability of doing so. Indeed, the distinction between ‘alternative’ and ‘conventional’, in the context of local food, has now been problematised further, with Harris (2009, p. 57) suggesting that ‘many AFNs [alternative food networks] that are represented as explicitly alternative to the neoliberal mainstream food system in fact reproduce the very neoliberal forms and
subjectivities that they seek to oppose’. While this may be rather an extreme view, the difficulties of defining and locating the ‘local’ and the ‘alternative’ remain.

Nevertheless, the co-existence of both systems is evident in Ireland. Fonte (2008), for example, describes the agro-food system in Tipperary as ‘agro-industrial’, being export- and productivity-oriented. However, the persistence of distinct agricultural pathways – ongoing productivism, with commercialisation and integration into mainstream agro-food supply chains, alongside diversification, the production of public ‘goods’ and pluriactivity – is noted by Crowley et al. (2008). A similar distinction is discernible among consumers. For instance, Fonte (2008, p. 204) claims that ‘most Irish people regard food as fuel’. However, Sage (2003) highlights increasing consumer interest in ‘quality’ and speciality food production and the forging of reconnections between producers and consumers through, for example, farmers’ markets and ‘good food’ networks.

Despite the plethora of studies into ‘alternative’ and ‘local’ systems, Ricketts Hein et al. (2006) argue that little consideration has been paid to exactly where they occur. Thus, this article combines their indices of food relocalisation for England and Wales with Watts et al.’s (forthcoming) work in Scotland and Ricketts Hein’s work in Ireland. The calculation and international applicability of a combined index for these countries are discussed in the following sections.

### Developing an ‘Index of food relocalisation’ for Ireland and Britain

The Index of food relocalisation uses diagnostic indicators as a measure of local food activity. Knox (1974, p. 13), in one of the papers on which the Index is based, stated that the number of indicators used ‘is necessarily arbitrary’ and utilised four. In another application, Ilbery (1984) used six. Table 1 shows the indicators used in each Index. For England and Wales, Ricketts Hein et al. (2006) identified six, five of which were replicated by Watts et al. (forthcoming). The main difference between these two indices is that Scotland does not have Women’s Institute co-operative markets (variable 6). Variables 2, 4 and 5 are identical, and while slight differences across variables 1 and 3 may have produced a small over-representation of Scottish enterprises (e.g. Scottish organic producers can register with three bodies), this was not considered significant. However, equivalent Irish data were only available for three of these five variables. Therefore, an additional data set was required. As with the earlier studies, it had to be associated with local food systems, broadly reflective of their character and composition, and normative. Given the data already collected and the potential sources available, it was decided to create a measure that would correspond with indicator 4 in England, Wales and Scotland, specifically a measure of shops selling local food in Ireland.

Thus, the four indicators used in this Index are:

- number of local food producers per county;
- number of organic producers per county;
- number of farmers’ markets per county;
- members of the Farm Retail Association in England and Wales, Farmers’ Retail and Markets Association (FARMA) members in Scotland, and retailers selling local food listed in the Bridgestone Irish Food Guide (McKenna and McKenna, 2007), also measured per county.
Two distinct types of indicator were selected, relating to production (local and organic) and marketing activities (farmers’ markets and shops). There are two reasons for this. First, they reflect a key element of ‘local’ and ‘alternative’ food systems, that of reconnecting producers and consumers. Both production and marketing/retail components must be present (among others) for such systems to develop. Secondly, Knox (1974) highlights a weakness of an overall index, which is that it hides local variability. The use of two types of indicators enables sub-indices to be created that aid the comparison of these constituent parts of the local food system.

It proved impractical to use two of the pre-existing indicators in Ireland. First, local food directories in Britain (in Wales and England, in particular) are published by a variety of governmental and non-governmental organisations at differing scales and with diverse interests in local food and rural development. However, there were many fewer such listings available to the public in Ireland and this was judged to undermine the usefulness of this as an indicator for a system that values connections between producers and consumers. Secondly, while Women’s Institute co-operative markets in England and Wales and Country Markets in Ireland have a very similar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>England and Wales Numbers of</th>
<th>Scotland Numbers of</th>
<th>Ireland Numbers of</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Paper-based local food directories</td>
<td>Paper- and internet-based local food directories</td>
<td>no data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Local food producers listed in Indicator 1</td>
<td>Local food producers listed in Indicator 1</td>
<td>Local food producers listed in <em>The Bridgestone Irish Food Guide</em> (2007), Good Food Ireland’s 2008 Touring Map leaflet and in local food directories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Organic producers listed by the Soil Association</td>
<td>Organic producers listed in food directories</td>
<td>Organic producers listed by Irish Organic Farmers and Growers and the Organic Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Farm Retail Association members</td>
<td>FARMA members</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Farmers’ markets listed by the National Association of Farmers’ Markets</td>
<td>Farmers’ markets listed by FARMA</td>
<td>Farmers’ markets listed by Bord Bia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Women’s Institute co-operative markets</td>
<td>no data</td>
<td>Country Markets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>no data</td>
<td>no data</td>
<td>Restaurants/cafés listed by Bridgestone Guides and Good Food Ireland</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: From Ricketts Hein et al. (2006), Watts et al. (forthcoming) and Ricketts Hein (forthcoming).
ethos, and are considered to be equivalent indicators in terms of local food systems, there is no corresponding market organisation in Scotland.

The counts for each indicator per county were ranked, with 1 being given to the county with the highest count, and entered into the index formula developed by Knox (1974). The index was calculated as follows:

$$I_j = 100 \frac{R_j}{N.C}$$

where:
- $I_j$ = Index of food relocalisation for county j;
- $R_j$ = sum of individual indicator rank-scores for county j;
- $N$ = number of indicators; and
- $C$ = number of cases (counties).

Potential scores for this index range from 0.84 for a county that ranks highest (1st) in every indicator to 100 for a county that ranks lowest (119th) each time. The index values are mapped in Figure 1, in order to illustrate broad trends, and listed in Table 2.

Based on the original studies (i.e. Ricketts Hein et al., 2006; Watts et al., forthcoming; Ricketts Hein, in preparation), it was expected that Cork, Tipperary and Mayo in Ireland, Devon, Kent and Somerset in England, and Highland in Scotland, would form the top level of the Index, with a clear bias towards the south and west of both Britain and Ireland being seen in terms of local food development. In general terms, Figure 1 does indeed show such a distribution. However, a couple of notable exceptions are North Yorkshire and Dublin: the former ranked eighth in the number of local food producers, while the latter ranked joint first (with Cornwall and Devon) for the number of farmers’ markets, and second for shops selling local produce. In addition, Scotland seems to perform poorly, with no counties in the top quintile and only Highland and Aberdeenshire appearing in the top third of Table 2.

Examining Table 2 in more detail, it is apparent that the counties of Cork and Devon contain much higher levels of local food activity than any others, as the difference between their Index scores (Cork 2.1, Devon 3.36) and that of the next county, Gloucestershire (9.03), is greater than at any other point in the Index. At the other end of the table, 16 of the bottom 20 are Scottish local authority areas, the great majority of which are located in the urbanised central belt around Glasgow and Edinburgh. While such areas would not be expected to contain many food producers, the Index allows a comparison with other extensive urban areas in England and Wales that also have histories of heavy industrialisation. Five such areas appear in the bottom quintile of Table 2: Mid Glamorgan (South Wales valleys) and the former metropolitan regions of Merseyside, Greater Manchester, Tyne and Wear, and Cleveland. Thus, the preponderance of Scottish local authority areas at the foot of Table 2 arises, in part, because they have not been aggregated into their former regional council areas (most were in Strathclyde). Nevertheless, looking again at Figure 1, it is difficult to resist the hypothesis that the Scottish diet, which is notoriously low in fruit and vegetables (which appear to be important components of local food systems; see Ilbery et al. 2006; Watts et al. forthcoming), may play a part in explaining Scotland’s relatively poor standing overall. Further discussion of the results at a more local scale may be found in the papers resulting from the original
studies (Ricketts Hein et al., 2006; Watts et al., forthcoming; Ricketts Hein, in preparation).

In order to take account of variations in the overall index score that might result from a high degree of urbanisation, the ten lowest index scores for the production
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<th>Rank</th>
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<th>Score</th>
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<td>Gloucestershire</td>
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</tr>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Cornwall</td>
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</tr>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Somerset</td>
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</tr>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Dorset</td>
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</tr>
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<td>6</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Wiltshire</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Kerry</td>
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<td>Galway</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>Dublin</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Norfolk</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Suffolk</td>
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<td>Tipperary</td>
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<td>Cumbria</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Mayo</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Highland</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>Perth &amp; Kinross</td>
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Table 2 (Continued)

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<td>Fife</td>
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<tr>
<td>95</td>
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and marketing sub-indices are given in Table 3. For many counties, rank scores do not change significantly between the producer-based sub-index (number of local food producers and number of organic producers) and one using the marketing indicators (numbers of farmers’ markets and numbers of Farm Retail Association members in England and Wales, FARMA members in Scotland and retailers selling local food

Table 3. Leading county ranks for producer and marketing sub-indices

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Producer sub-index</th>
<th>Marketing sub-index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Cork</td>
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<tr>
<td>=5</td>
<td>Dorset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Gloucestershire</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Wiltshire</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Pembrokeshire</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>East Sussex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>=10</td>
<td>Kerry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>=10</td>
<td>Norfolk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>=10</td>
<td>North Yorkshire</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
listed in the Bridgestone Irish Food Guide). For example, 20 local authority areas saw a change in their rankings of 5 places or less. However, 15 areas recorded more than 40 places’ difference in their rankings between the two sub-indices. Pembroke-shire sees the largest change, being 8th in the producer sub-index and 91st in the marketing sub-index. Indeed, Welsh areas account for 40% of these inconsistent ratings, all ranking higher on producer indicators. This suggests that local marketing opportunities may be being missed. Nevertheless, rurality plays a role here, with production being largely located in such counties. The corollary of this is that Dublin, ranked 31st in the producer sub-index, is ranked 1st in the marketing sub-index, with Cork 2nd. Both are ranked far higher than the areas containing Britain’s capital cities (Greater London 39th; Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan 55th; City of Edinburgh 65th). However, it is notable that three counties contiguous to Greater London appear in the top decile of the marketing sub-index (Kent, Surrey and Essex). It seems likely, therefore, that there is a degree of concentration of local food marketing in prosperous ‘commuter belts’. However, the causes of such concentration (and its absence around other major cities) await further research.

Towards a research agenda: applying the Index of food relocalisation

Three main difficulties were encountered when applying the Index internationally. The first was the need to find equivalent indicators in the absence of readily-available statistics. Some indicators simply did not exist (e.g. there is no equivalent to Women’s Institute co-operative markets in Scotland). The only remedy for this would appear to be to start by collecting data for as many indicators as possible.

Secondly, apparently similar indicators can prove problematic. For example, most British farmers’ markets are certified. In England and Wales, this is done by FARMA, which defines them as:

a market in which farmers, growers or producers from a defined local area are present in person to sell their own produce, direct to the public. All products sold should have been grown, reared, caught, brewed, pickled, baked, smoked or processed by the stallholder. (FARMA, undated)

In Scotland, certification is in the hands of the Scottish Association of Farmers’ Markets (undated), whose definition is similar to that of FARMA, with the exception that the geographical stipulation is Scotland, not the local area. By contrast, Irish farmers’ markets are largely independent, being organised at a local community or county level. However, Bord Bia’s (undated) website describes how ‘farmers, growers or producers (usually from a defined local area) are present in person to sell their own produce direct to the public’. Thus, while variations may exist in what is allowed at markets in each country (e.g. supplementing produce with bought-in items) the markets’ ethos remains sufficiently comparable to provide useful data.

Finally, a difficulty arose with regard to the use of county and local authority boundaries. In England and Wales, recent reorganisation has created 109 local authority areas (unitary authorities, counties and metropolitan counties). Many of these are geographically small, urban areas, and scored badly on production indicators. Thus, Ricketts Hein et al. (2006) amalgamated some of them, often
back into their former counties (e.g. Avon, Cleveland and Gwent), in order to overcome the problem. This proved not to be an issue in Ireland, where county boundaries have remained relatively stable. However, it was problematic in Scotland, not least because the use of former county boundaries (e.g. Strathclyde, Tayside and Grampian) would have produced an uneven mix of very large former regional council and much smaller local authority areas (e.g. Fife). This helps to account for the relatively high number of geographically compact Scottish local authorities found in the bottom quintile of Table 2.

Notwithstanding such problems, the authors remain convinced that counties (however defined) are the most convenient spatial units for gathering data and displaying results, at least in Ireland and Britain. The main reason for this is that they are one of the most widely-used geographical identifiers. This magnifies their importance in situations, such as here, where the analysis depends on locational data from secondary sources. Such sources are almost invariably organised by county. Although they also often contain postcodes, postcode sectors and districts are rarely coterminous with government administrative units (at least in Britain). County boundaries, even where the authority itself no longer exists, almost always are. This makes them useful when conducting further quantitative analysis (as undertaken by Watts et al. forthcoming). Nevertheless, their varying geographical and population sizes, along with other physical, economic and social differences, can affect the results. Attempts at making direct comparisons between the countries studied here and larger nations with different local administrative areas should take account of this.

Despite these difficulties, the authors conclude that the Index is a useful tool for making international comparisons of the geography of local food activity. It is fairly easy to replicate, and the integration of the different data sets was relatively straightforward. It has provided useful quantitative data that identifies possible spatial patterns, thereby generating further research questions. For example, do the results reflect patterns of tourism, population, wealth, in-migration or other factors? What exactly is the link between the distribution of local food activity and different farming styles? The most obvious next step is a measure of the local food system in Northern Ireland. This would enable further comparisons to be made, leading to explorations of the effects of policy, history, social and cultural difference within the island of Ireland, within the United Kingdom and within the Celtic nations following devolution.

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Notes
1. The research for this article was undertaken while Jane Ricketts Hein was a Lecturer in the Department of Geography, University College Cork.
2. The Farm Retail Association and the National Association of Farmers’ Markets became part of FARMA after Ricketts Hein et al. (2006) had conducted their research.

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