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Alternative food in the global south: Reflections on a direct marketing initiative in Kenya

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A B S T R A C T

Amidst booming scholarship on alternative food networks (AFNs) in the global North, research on AFN in the global South remains scarce. Partly this is because explicitly alternative initiatives are themselves scarce, except for those focused on export markets. Yet in countries such as Kenya, urban consumers and rural smallholders have good reason to want alternatives to agrichemical dependency, insecure marketing channels, and food of dubious safety. This article describes one attempt to provide an alternative. A pilot box scheme launched by the Kenya Institute of Organic Farming (KIOF) in 2007 aimed to connect organic smallholders to consumers in Nairobi, the capital city. It did not last long, and we reflect on the reasons why. In particular, we argue that efforts to build AFN in "developing" countries must take account of the problematic history of development itself, both as an ideology and as a set of institutions, policies and activities. In the case of the Kenyan box scheme, the pervasive yet often ineffectual presence of aid-dispensing non-governmental organizations, in particular, influenced different actors' perceptions and participation in ways we did not fully anticipate. More broadly, this article emphasizes the need to appreciate the macro-historical and socioeconomic contexts that inform on-the-ground practices and understandings of alternative food.

1. Introduction

Across the global North, a growing number of direct marketing networks offer small and mid-sized farmers attractive alternatives to mainstream channels. Options for farmers located near cities, in particular, include greenmarkets, community supported agriculture (CSAs) and box schemes, "u-pick" and on-farm stores, and direct sales to restaurants and specialty shops. Besides helping individual farms survive, many of these alternative channels both encourage more ecologically sustainable agriculture and educate consumers about its value—while also, of course, providing them access to fresh, tasty food and the satisfaction of knowing where it came from.

In sub-Saharan Africa, what counts as an "alternative" food network (AFN) is less obvious. Fair Trade and certified organic production have taken off in some regions, but both are geared towards export markets (Binns et al., 2007; Parrott et al., 2006). At the same time, corporate supermarkets are so new across much of the continent that urban consumers might understandably see *them* as the novel alternative to traditional marketplaces. Whether supermarket expansion in Africa will benefit its poorer consumers and smallholders remains unclear (Neven et al., 2009). So too are the ramifications of the current campaign for a "African Green Revolution," which promises the continent's smallholders an alternative to decades of neglect yet promotes a fairly conventional package of agro-inputs and market reforms (Holt-Gimenez, 2008). In light of these uncertainties, scholars and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have begun to explore the potential of AFN within Africa to improve smallholders' livelihoods while assuring consumers' access to safe, tasty and affordable food (Abrahams, 2007).

This article joins in that exploration. It recounts our experience with a pilot box scheme in Kenya, which one of us helped to design and manage. Launched by the Kenya Institute of Organic Farming (KIOF) in 2007, the program delivered smallholders' produce to consumers in Nairobi, the capital city. More broadly, it sought to promote organic methods among resource-poor farmers by providing them with a secure and remunerative market. Despite initial enthusiasm on all sides, the program fell apart after several months. This disappointing outcome does not invalidate the box scheme's original goals. But it does highlight the significance of the geographic, socioeconomic and cultural contexts in which AFNs either take root or wither.

More specifically, this case study illustrates how attempts to build AFN in Sub-Saharan Africa and other parts of the global South

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must take into account the problematic history of *development*, both as an ideology and as a set of institutions, policies and activities. AFN scholarship has not traditionally paid much heed to critical development studies; this article aims to show why it should. We see at least three possible benefits. First, the field of development studies has long explored concepts and themes of central concern to alternative food scholars, among them community, voluntary organizations, moral economies, agrarian livelihoods, and the relationship between sustenance and well-being. This article illustrates some of the many points of intellectual overlap. Second and more practically, Northern-based AFNs that seek to expand their activities in the global South could gain cautionary insights from the many studies of less than successful aid interventions in global South agriculture and food economies.[1] Lastly, development scholarship analyzes such interventions in light of the larger history and structural forces that, by producing poverty, have made aid seem necessary (Allen and Thomas, 2000; Lines, 2008; McMichael, 2004). We believe that analyses of AFNs in general—not just in Africa—could benefit from this degree of attentiveness to the macro-historical and socioeconomic contexts that inform on-the-ground practices and understandings of alternative food.

We begin with a brief discussion of AFNs as conceived in the global North and South. The aim is to show how regionally specific histories of incorporation into the global food system have given rise to distinctive normative ideals and practical challenges in alternative provisioning. The next section examines how this history has played out in Kenya. In particular, we argue that the country's experience as an "object of development" over the past few decades (Mitchell, 2002) has shaped not just the infrastructure, institutions and social relations characterizing its agri-food system, but also consumers' and producers' views of projects to improve that system (Li, 2007). Through the story of the box scheme itself, we seek to show that the specific causes of its demise must be understood in light of conditions commonly found in developing countries. We conclude with reflections (cf. DeLind, 1999) on what the story tells us about the prospects for AFN advocacy in the global South.

2. Uneven geographies of alternative food

Now vast in size, the literature on AFNs remains narrow in its geographic scope.[2] The overwhelming focus on Europe, North America, and the wealthier parts of the Asia-Pacific reflects less a Eurocentric bias than the simple fact that most efforts to forge explicitly "alternative" food networks have originated in the industrialized world. More precisely, they have emerged in response to the many problems associated with industrial food, broadly understood. Within the global North, Goodman (among others) distinguishes between European and North American AFNs, on the basis of their different histories of food crisis and resistance: while European networks have been influenced by successive food scares and concerns about declining rural livelihoods, North American AFNs have more often framed themselves in opposition to a corporate-controlled food supply (Goodman, 2004; DuPuis et al., 2005).

One can find many exceptions to this broad regional typology, as well as a cross-cutting distinction between "weaker" AFNs that focus mainly on selling alternative food *qualities* versus "stronger" ones that also aim to build genuinely alternative food *networks* (Watts et al., 2005). We will return to the question of how quality is constructed, in and beyond AFNs. Here, though, we want to consider two goals widely shared by participants in alternative food networks in the global North: provisioning based firstly on *shorter food supply chains* (SFSC) and secondly on *community*. As many scholars have observed, these two ideals draw some of their potency from consumers' nostalgia (Dowler et al., 2010; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000). But popular longing for a bucolic, better-fed imagined past does not by itself explain the ongoing explosion of AFNs in the global North. Certain concrete conditions have made these ideals seem both desirable and viable, and they are not universal.

2.1. Shorter is relative

While diverse, SFSC tend to share the following characteristics: first, they "short-circuit" the industrial system of food provisioning by cutting out at least some of the typical intermediaries. Second, "value-laden" information about provenance serves to improve transparency and thus forge a closer connection between producers and consumers. And lastly, many SFSC are localized, and thus literally shorter (Renting et al., 2003). For producers, SFSC appeal insofar as they offer higher and more reliable returns, and outlets for goods or services unmarketable through conventional channels, e.g. those controlled by supermarkets, processors and other intermediary firms. SFSC that circumvent these intermediaries can help to sustain producer livelihoods that would not otherwise be viable—livelihoods that may in turn help to preserve valued cultivars, culinary traditions, landscapes and ecosystems (Ilbery and Maye, 2005; Sage, 2003).

For many consumers, part of the appeal of SFSC lies in knowing that their food purchases can play this preservative role (Winter, 2003a). Indeed, this knowledge helps to justify the commonly higher price of food sourced through shorter chains—a price, in popular rhetoric, that reflects food's "true cost" (Pollan, 2006). Here many contemporary SFSC differ from earlier generations of consumer cooperatives, which offered members not just the satisfaction of circumventing "parasitic" middlemen, but also *lower* prices (Furlough and Strikwerda, 1999; Meusy, 2001).

Yet now as in the past, values alone do not sell alternative food. At a time of rampant fraud and adulteration, late nineteenth century co-ops promised their members fair measures and pure products. Similarly, at a time when many food scares have implicated imports and industrial producers, today's SFSC promise goods direct (or nearly so) from small farmers and purveyors. *Shorter* implies safer—as well as fresher, more healthful, and tastier than whatever the industrial food system has been able to provide, at least in recent history. It is worth noting, however, that consumers' understandings of these qualities have been shaped by the longer history of industrial food in the global North (Freidberg, 2009;

[1] This literature is immense; older but still relevant studies include Ferguson, J., 1990. The Anti-politics Machine: "Development", Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [England]; New York, Schroeder, 1999b. Shady Practices: Agroforestry and Gender Politics in the Gambia. University of California Press, Berkeley. Crewe and Harrison, 1998. Whose Development?: An Ethnography of Aid. Zed Books, London.

[2] Useful overviews include Follett, 2009. Choosing a food future: differentiating among alternative food options. Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics 22, 31–51, Maye et al., 2007. Introducing alternative food geographies. In: Maye, D., Holloway, L., Kneafsey, M. (Eds.), Alternative Food Geographies: Representation and Practice, first ed. Elsevier, Oxford, pp. 1–22, Watts, D., Ilbery, B., Maye, D., 2005. Making reconnections in agro-food geography: alternative systems of food provision. Progress in Human Geography 29, 22, Whatmore et al., 2003. What's alternative about alternative food networks? Environment and Planning A 35, 389–392, Winter, 2003b. Geographies of food: agro-food geographies making reconnections. Progress in Human Geography 27, 505. For discussions of why the scholarship on alternative food and "post-productivist" agriculture has neglected the global South, see Abrahams, 2008. Illegitimate voices, peripheral debates, valid alternatives: A developing world articulation of alternative food networks. School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies. University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, Wilson and Rigg, 2003. 'Post-productivist' agricultural regimes and the South: discordant concepts? Progress in Human Geography 27, 681–707.

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Levenstein, 2003) and by the conventions used to market it (Goodman, 2003; Ponte, 2009). While AFNs can and often do seek to change quality norms—by encouraging farm shop customers, for example, to see muddy produce as fresh, not dirty (Eden et al., 2007)—they cannot ignore them.

On the contrary: producers selling through SFSC must understand and deliver on consumers' expectations about how they will benefit *as* consumers from a more direct relationship to the sources of their food. As Hinrichs points out, even the most "embedded" markets are still markets (Hinrichs, 2000), and selling from a stall or farm shop can actually demand much more salesmanship than dealing with a wholesale buyer. Even when the selling does not require face-to-face people skills it does demand some degree of market savvy. Producers have to package their goods, their production processes and ultimately themselves in ways that will attract and keep customers (Ilbery et al., 2005). Exactly how they do this—what qualities they aim to deliver, and through what conventions they earn consumers' trust—is an empirical question (Eden et al., 2007; Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000; Morris and Young, 2000; Ponte, 2009).

In addition, successful marketing within SFSC demands adequate technology and infrastructure. In the industrialized world it is easy to forget how much food's basic edibility and appearance depend on decent roads, reliable transport, electricity and logistic systems, clean water, and refrigeration (Freidberg, 2009). The various stages of food marketing also obviously require communication technologies, even at the local scale. SFSC may rely less on some technologies than conventional supply chains (i.e., refrigerated semi-trucks) yet more on others (i.e., social media for recruiting CSA subscribers).

The "short" in SFSC needs not mean literally nearby. Proximity may be cultural, as in the trades that bring immigrants valued foods from their home countries (Renne, 2007). It may imply like-mindedness and solidarity (Dürrschmidt, 1999). Or it may refer simply to the attachments forged through geographic appellations and other forms of place-based promotion (Parrott et al., 2002; Tregear, 2003). Thus Renting et al.'s definition of SFSC includes both fair trade and the global marketing of gourmet regional specialties such as champagne. Other far-flung examples might include the European organic box schemes that source from hundreds of producers in several countries, and the remote Alaskan communities that use Internet images of pristine fishing grounds to sell wild salmon (Lamine, 2005; Torjusen et al., 2008). In all these cases, "value-laden" information serves as one form of shortening technology—but not the only one.

In the abstract, nothing about this broad definition of SFSC seems to exclude the global South; indeed, most certified fair trade networks source all their raw materials (coffee, cocoa, etc) from there. However it is worth emphasizing that these and other "extended" SFSC hinge on a range of technologies that render distance less important, either by slowing down decay or speeding up transport. The quality implicit in short can in fact travel far. But this is not true everywhere. No distance is short for farmers who have no easy access to motorized vehicles, or even wheeled ones. In Kenya, just reaching the nearest village or town can be a challenge for such farmers, especially during the rainy season. Even if they can access price information via mobile phone (an increasingly common possession in rural Africa (Molony, 2008)) actually getting to market costs more time and money than they have. So instead they settle for the prices offered by itinerant brokers. Among the fortunate exceptions are the farmers who contract with horticultural export firms that pick up their produce at the farmgate. We return later to export horticulture; for now it suffices to say that the industry's sophisticated cold chain bears little resemblance to the rest of Kenya's food marketing infrastructure. Today its London-bound green beans enjoy a swifter, smoother journey than much of the produce destined for domestic markets. Even over relatively short distances, difficult transport takes a toll on more than the produce itself; it also limits communication between producers and consumers.

2.2. Community in context

Wealth and good infrastructure obviously do not protect against all the trials and risks of agriculture—or eating, for that matter. Food scares linked to rich countries' agro-industries, alongside and sometimes hastening the ongoing loss of small and mid-sized farms, have made this point abundantly clear (Stassart and Whatmore, 2003). And they have added to the appeal of *community*, as promised by AFN direct marketing initiatives, as a source of "good food" and decent livelihoods. Here we do not want to delve too deeply into the definitional debates surrounding these terms (for a fuller discussion, see Feagan, 2007; Sage, 2003). The more pertinent question is how different AFN participants' ideas about the benefits and obligations of community have taken shape in a broader social and historical context.

In the case of North American CSA—the original inspiration for our Kenyan project albeit not, as it turned out, a particularly suitable model—the role of community has its own history (Mcfadden, 2003). The CSAs founded in the 1980s in Japan, Europe and New England tended to operate more like collectives, requiring shareholders both to work on the farms and help to run them (Parker, 2005). As CSA schemes have multiplied they have also diversified. Most, however, are started by farmers, many of whom maintain diversified income strategies (DeLind, 2003). Relatively few expect or even want members to participate regularly in on-farm activities (Ostrom, 2008). In this sense, they differ little from European box schemes, except for the pre-season payment required for CSA membership (Lamine, 2005; Torjusen et al., 2008).

As a commitment to shared risk, however, a payment of at least a few hundred dollars is not trivial. In addition, both CSAs and box schemes typically expect their members to accept a limited and unpredictable choice of produce, and oftentimes to pick it up at an odd time or in an out-of-the-way place. Some subscribers tire of these inconveniences after a season or two. But growing numbers accept them as a fair price to pay for the food quality and safety presumed in the direct relationship with local farmers, and for the satisfaction of using their spending power to support them (Brehm and Eisenhauer, 2008; Cone and Myhre, 2000; Cooley and Lass, 1998; Goland, 2002; Hinrichs and Kremer, 2002).

In short, this vision of community is very much a product of the global North's experience of an increasingly industrialized, anonymous food supply. Contemporary CSA owes its vitality less to regular social contact among participants than to a shared discontent with the food status quo, and to the shared belief that provisioning needs to be re-embedded in relations of trust and loyalty like those that presumably once existed between producers and consumers who *did* have regular social contact. Food needs to come "with a face" (Ross, 2007, 117) even if one never actually encounters that face in person. It is a nostalgic prescription, with an important proviso. Historically "community" implied social relations that offered some sort of refuge from the market, however weak or partial (Joseph, 2002; Tonnies, 1988; Williams, 1976). By contrast, CSA is more like "a small business arrangement in which farmers and members negotiate their respective positions across a more personable market divide" (DeLind, 2003, 203). The growth of the movement has depended on both farmers' entrepreneurialism and subscribers' identities and capabilities as consumers. Altogether it is a notion of community deeply embedded in market logic.

How much do these observations about community and alternative food apply outside the industrialized global North? The existing AFN literature provides no direct answers. However Abrahams' characterization of AFNs in the global South—"the entire food supply that, in part or in fully, contests or opposes the dominance of the conventional food networks in urban areas" (Abrahams, 2007)—emphasizes that what drives them is "no romanticized return to the local and no quest of the idyllic countryside lifestyle (105)." Her research on direct marketing relationships around Johannesburg, South Africa shows that such AFNs instead "represent an alternative consumption space for the urban poor and culturally diverse communities" (Ibid). Members of these groups, for example, often prefer unplucked or Halaal poultry products, which are easier to find in peri-urban farming areas than at supermarkets.

We agree with Abrahams' general distinctions between AFNs in the global South and North. However South Africa is itself a distinctive case. It is the richest, most urbanized and industrialized country in Sub-Saharan Africa, and the country where supermarkets control the largest share of food retailing (D'Haese and Van Huylenbroeck, 2005). In addition, South Africa's apartheid history has arguably given culturally specific diets special significance (Wylie, 2001). Community identities forged out of common experiences of racism and segregation are now expressed and sustained through dietary choices.

Culturally specific foodways abound elsewhere in Africa, but they may not matter as much to popular conceptions of urban community as in post-apartheid South Africa (Flynn, 2005; Rich, 2007; SYFIA, 1994). More to the point, African foodways are not understood as either "alternative" or community building simply because they are provisioned outside of supermarkets. The latter's recent expansion across the continent has been rapid but uneven (Abrahams, 2009; Humphrey, 2007; Neven et al., 2006; Weatherspoon et al., 2004). Fresh fruits and vegetables, in particular, are still bought and sold mostly by individual intermediaries—brokers, wholesalers and marketplace retailers—who survive by offering credit and other services needed by their clients and customers. Even in Kenya, a country wealthier and with a larger European population than many of its neighbors, supermarkets account for less than 10% of fresh produce sales (Ayieko et al., 2005; Tschirley et al., 2004).

For the majority of consumers, then, much of the "conventional" food supply comes via neighborhood or village marketplaces, small shops, and itinerant hawkers. Provisioning is not dis-embedded or anonymous. Trade liberalization has, as in other countries, filled shop shelves with cheap imports, often of dubious origins. And as elsewhere, food scares linked to imports have drawn attention to weak laws and poorly policed borders and markets (Caswell and Bach, 2007; Freidberg, 2004; Igidi, 2009; Kirunda, 2008; Musaba, 2008; Palitza, 2008). However local food is not always a trusted alternative. Urban and peri-urban farms, for example, are a common source of fresh produce in many African cities, including Nairobi (Foeken and Mwangi, 1998; Freeman, 1991). But their soil and water are often dangerously polluted, and Nairobites know it (BBC, 2007; Thatiah, 2005).

These circumstances remind us that no matter how a "community" is defined, how well its members can provision each other (and what kinds of food quality they can assure) depends partly on conditions beyond community control, such as public sanitation and infrastructure, the effectiveness of regulatory institutions, and the overall prosperity of regional and national economies (DeFilippis et al., 2006). Again, these larger conditions cannot be taken for granted everywhere.

3. Development and its legacies in Kenya

So far we have argued that the success of AFN in the global North owes much to levels of prosperity that facilitate alternative forms of consumption, production and exchange. The industrialization that produced this prosperity has also informed ideas about what kinds of alternatives are needed. But this does not mean that the *absence* of prosperity is the only obstacle to AFN initiatives in developing countries such as Kenya. Rather, the very experience of "intentional development"—the policies, institutions and activities meant to bring socioeconomic progress (Cowen and Shenton, 1996)—has affected how people are likely to perceive and participate in such initiatives. Here we briefly describe how Kenya's development history has shaped ideas, practices and social relations surrounding interventions in the agro-food system, alternative and otherwise. Our aim is not only to contextualize the story of the organic box scheme, but also to show why the specific difficulties we encountered reflect conditions commonly found in the global South.

One of the most typical aspects of Kenya's development experience has been its reliance on rural land and labor both to generate economic growth and to absorb growth's social and ecological casualties (Cowen and Shenton, 1998). In its early years of independence from British colonial rule, Kenya's rural areas assumed these burdens better than most. Its predominantly agrarian economy grew more than twice as fast as other African countries, and western development experts praised the government policies that had unleashed the "Kenyan miracle" (Bates, 2005). These policies included land reform and generous funding for agricultural extension, research and subsidies, all of which led to gains in smallholder productivity, especially in the most fertile regions (Nyangito and Okello, 1998). In addition, the government supported the rural self-help movement known as *harambee* ("let's pull together"). Harambee describes local, collective efforts to mobilize resources for projects such as schools, clinics and wells. They depend primarily on cash and labor contributed by residents of villages and towns, as well as by their successful city-dwelling offspring. Local politicians and other leaders, however, have traditionally been expected not only to show extra largesse, but also to seek additional resources from the state. This was easier when projects aligned with the state's own development objectives (Wilson, 1992).

Similar self-help institutions exist across Africa and other poorer parts of the global South (Barkan et al., 1991; Esman and Uphoff, 1984). For a while, harambee appeared to exemplify how such organizations gave rural people a stake in national development while also keeping national governments accountable to their people—or at least some of them (Barkan and Holmquist, 1989). As Thomas writes, "Harambee has fostered an *ad hoc* approach directed towards 'the squeakiest wheel'… those communities which collect the most money and have the most articulate and well-connected leadership can command the most attention from outside donors, including the Central Government" (Thomas, 1987, 477).

Local self-help built many schools (Kremer et al., 2003). In the 1980s, however, it proved no protection against the global recession and tighter lending conditions that sent many countries in Africa and Latin America into a sharp economic downturn. Talk of Kenya's "miracle" ended as poverty rates climbed, especially in cities (Legovini, 2002; Robertson, 1997). State support for community self-help initiatives, then, did not bring development in any broad or lasting sense, but it did prove to rural people that showing community spirit could pay off. It encouraged performances of community for outsiders, and enhanced the status of individuals with the skills and social networks needed to act as "squeaky wheels" on behalf of others (Berry, 1989; Ngau, 1987). Increasingly, though, such performances were directed towards foreign donors rather than cash-strapped governments.

The many donor organizations active in Kenya vary widely both in size and in their strategies for tackling poverty and food insecurity. By the early twenty-first century, the country's rural landscape illustrated three distinct albeit overlapping approaches. The

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first is "non-traditional" export production, which in Kenya has centered on high-value horticulture. This deserves brief mention simply because it has so often been cited as a development "success story" (Dijkstra, 1997; Jaffee, 2003; Jaffee and Gordon, 1993; Minot and Ngigi, 2004; Weinberger and Lumpkin, 2007). Thanks to strong demand and a burst of new investment, exports of fresh fruit, flowers and vegetables took off in the 1980s even as traditional export sectors stagnated (Dijkstra, 1997; Jaffee, 1995; Jaffee and Gordon, 1993). Now horticulture ranks as Kenya's top foreign exchange earner, and Kenya as Africa's biggest and most dynamic horticultural exporter (Njoka, 2008). Although large commercial farms account for the bulk of export volume, some also contract with smallholder groups. Donors such as the World Bank praise these arrangements for providing valuable extension as well as a secure market for high-value crops (Dolan, 2005; McCulloch and Ota, 2002; Minot and Ngigi, 2004).

Some studies have found that smallholders producing these crops can earn five times more per capita than they might otherwise (McCulloch and Ota, 2002). But their participation has always depended on access to irrigation, roads and proper soil types, as well as sufficient household labor. In recent years it has also been threatened by overseas supermarkets' increasingly strict quality, hygiene and social responsibility standards (de Battisti et al., 2009; Dolan, 2001; Humphrey et al., 2004; Jaffee, 2003). Given that only about two percent of the country's smallholders engage in horticultural export production (Bawden et al., 2002; cited in Tschirley et al., 2004, 1), it hardly offers a cure for rural poverty. But it has made many rural Kenyans aware of the high market value of certain "European" fresh fruit and vegetable crops.

A second approach focuses on using technology, training and credit to radically increase African food production. In the early 2000s, calls for an "African green revolution" coalesced in the Rockefeller Foundation's launch of the Alliance for a Green Revolution for Africa (AGRA) (AGRA, 2009; Blaustein, 2008). Headquartered in Nairobi and backed by the Gates Foundation, the World Bank, and other major donors, AGRA emphasizes that it is much more attuned to the needs of African smallholders than was the original Green Revolution (Blaustein, 2008; Sanchez, 2002; Toenniessen et al., 2008; Vitousek et al., 2009). Most of its initiatives are still too new to judge. Skeptics, however, point to AGRA's heavy promotion of nitrogen fertilizer and hybrid seeds—the basic ingredients of the first Green Revolution—as evidence of an ulterior motive to turn Africa into a bigger and more lucrative market for global agro-input purveyors such as Monsanto (Holt-Gimenez, 2008; Mayet, 2007).

Lastly, Kenya's longstanding sustainable agriculture movement has gained momentum in recent years, due at least partly to international skepticism about AGRA (Halberg et al., 2006). Two umbrella organizations promote organic agriculture in particular: the Forum for Organic Resource Management and Agricultural Technologies (FORMAT, created in 2000) and the Kenya Organic Agriculture Network (KOAN, created in 2005). Several NGOs concentrate on training smallholders in organic methods. These NGOs have found a receptive audience among smallholders who want to improve the yields and fertility of their land but wish to avoid reliance on costly inputs. Many cannot afford as much nitrogen fertilizer as their land would need; many have also seen its returns diminish over time. Relatively few trainees are major commercial producers, and most do not bother with costly official certification (though Kenya has more certified organic land—182,438 ha—than most African countries (Parrott et al., 2006)). Indeed, trainees typically adopt organic practices selectively, depending on the local ecology and their own supply of labor and other resources (Goldberger, 2008a).

On paper, Kenya's organic NGOs share at least some of the core beliefs and goals of AFNs elsewhere in the world. They oppose corporate agribusiness's efforts to make farmers dependent on purchased inputs and overseas markets. They want to lessen their own country's dependence on imported foodstuffs and often food relief. They want smallholders to have the resources, monetary and otherwise, needed to steward their land, feed their families and produce healthy and safe food for a growing population. On the ground, however, these NGOs operate under radically different conditions than do AFNs in wealthy countries. As suggested earlier, poverty limits the mobility and market access of many farmers. It also limits the buying power of urban consumers—key players in most AFNs in the global North. In Nairobi, for example, much of the demand for organic food comes from expatriate aid and diplomatic workers. As we discuss shortly, these relatively affluent consumers can afford to support alternative food, but they do not necessarily aspire to forge community with the producers.

Kenya's organic NGOs also depend heavily on foreign donors. Although some are small charities that traditionally support "alternative" causes, they still expect to see concrete results (i.e., in the number of farmers trained or workshops held) and proof of competence. Thus despite the movement's stated commitment to smallholders' knowledge, the NGOs promote a "scientized" form of organic agriculture in order to legitimate their work to donors, adversaries (i.e., proponents of AGRA) and even the smallholders themselves (Goldberger, 2008b). Their skillful tapping of outside funding and expertise has helped the movement grow in size and influence. But it has also made the movement's training and marketing activities appear part of the larger development project—in other words, they look like an alternative form of aid rather than an alternative *to* aid (Mitlin et al., 2007).

This perception is compounded by the increasingly visible role of NGOs more generally in the delivery of resources and services to rural areas. In part this reflects the scaling-back of government activities that the World Bank and other major financiers have mandated across much of the global South (Edwards and Hulme, 1996). Both international and indigenous NGOs have taken over what were once basic state services, with mixed results. But the latter's growing numbers in particular also reflect a tendency similar to the one that turned harambee into a contest among politicians and other well-connected "squeaky wheels." At a time when many other channels of upward mobility have narrowed, forming an NGO remains an attractive business and influence-building strategy (Makoba, 2002). And many have formed: Kenya had 124 registered NGOs in 1975; by 2003 it had more than 2500. Countries across the poorer parts of the global South have seen similar trends (Manji and O'Coill, 2002; World Resources Institute, 2003).

Some observers see NGOs' prominence in development work as evidence of a flourishing civil society (Hearn, 1998; World Resources Institute, 2003). Others question the accountability and efficacy especially of "briefcase NGOs"—that is, small operations whose founders may be primarily interested in access to donor funds (Cammack, 2007, 31; see also Dicklitch, 2001). Here what matters is that an AFN initiative in this context takes on a very different significance than in the affluent global North. It is likely to be viewed not so much as activism or the building of a community around the cause of better food and sustainable livelihoods, but rather as yet another development project. Smallholders who agree to participate know that it will likely require listening to outside experts, contributing labor and showing some degree of community spirit. The time and effort invested in this performance may or may not be worthwhile, depending on what aid it brings. For other participants, a project entails other potential duties and benefits, as our case study illustrates. What we want to reiterate, though, is that the attitudes and practices that undermined the box scheme—opportunism, petty corruption, eventual indifference—must be understood in light of the broader history of development. We are not implying that all these problems can be blamed on development's shortcomings, as some "postdevelopment" scholarship might argue (for a critical review, see Corbridge, 1998), or that all AFNs in the global South would meet the same fate as ours. But they might well face similar challenges.

4. An African organic box scheme

The organization behind our vegetable box scheme was the Kenya Institute of Organic Farming (KIOF). Founded in 1986 with support from the German church-based NGO Misereor, KIOF has trained thousands of smallholders in organic, low external input agriculture. Many other trainees have gone on to work for the government or NGOs. Over time KIOF's donor base has broadened (the Dutch NGO HIVOS is another major supporter) along with its range of activities. Like the region's organic movement more generally, KIOF promotes organic production as a way to reduce input expenses and improve soil fertility, rather than as a source of price premiums. Prior to the box scheme, it only sold produce at its own small shop on the outskirts of Nairobi. Marketing became a more important part of KIOF's agenda once it became clear that urban demand for organic food was growing (as witnessed by the popularity of Nairobi's handful of organic restaurants and shops) and that more trainees were interested in selling. Already they sold some produce locally, usually for very low prices. KIOF saw access to a bigger and more lucrative market as a means to improve its trainees livelihoods as well the appeal of organic production amongst other smallholders.

As one of the oldest and best-known members of this movement in East Africa, KIOF has always portrayed itself as a grassroots, community-based NGO with a small, all-Kenyan staff. Its longtime director, John Ngoroge, is a widely published agronomist, savvy fundraiser and frequent participant in international conferences on organic and alternative agriculture. Ngoroge's entrepreneurialism has helped turn organic farming into a popular cause in Kenya. It has also helped attract foreign volunteers, many who visit through the World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) program. One of us first came to Kenya as a WWOOF volunteer, and then returned in 2007 as a marketing intern for KIOF. An external grant paid for one year's living expenses. The plan, reached after discussions with Ngoroge and other KIOF staff members, was to start a direct marketing scheme for farmers trained in organic methods.

From the beginning we knew that this scheme could not require the season-long, paid-in-advance subscriptions that characterize American CSA, or at least not initially. However much the farmers would have appreciated the pre-planting capital, we could not expect first-time customers to provide it. Instead it seemed to make the most sense to create a hybrid direct marketing program, combining elements of European-style box schemes and buying clubs. It would charge customers on a weekly basis, and source produce from numerous farmers in different locations, none of whom would likely be able to live entirely off the scheme's earnings. Although the most immediate priorities were to improve these farmers' livelihoods and thereby demonstrate the value of organic methods, we hoped that over the longer term the scheme would generate social benefits, namely a sense of connection and trust between farmers and their urban customers.

4.1. Finding farmers

In early 2007 we initiated the box scheme by approaching two pre-existing farmers' groups, both located relatively near KIOF extension centers. The first group was based in a mountainside town in Central Province, about a 2-h drive from Nairobi. They could grow cool weather produce such as cabbage, potatoes, carrots, and peas. Although only recently trained in organic methods, the group had previously grown export crops on contract, so its members were accustomed to deadlines and quality standards. The second group was based in Eastern Province, nearly 3 h from Nairobi. The climate there is warmer and suited to a wider variety of fruits. This group's farmers had received organic training ten years before, but most sold little or no produce. A few had tried growing French beans and peas on contract.

We proposed to these groups a marketing arrangement of mutual commitment. KIOF would commit to purchase available produce in return for their agreeing to supply certain crops on a weekly schedule. Though the farmers would not participate in distribution, we explained how the box scheme would work and how their produce would be presented. They had many questions about this unfamiliar marketing arrangement, but generally expressed enthusiasm about the idea of a guaranteed market in Nairobi, where they knew people paid extraordinarily high prices (by their standards) for food—and particularly for the kinds of the "European" crops (i.e., carrots rather than cassava leaves) that we wanted to buy.

Once the farmers had agreed to the basic plan, we spent several days in both locations with one of KIOF's farmer trainers. We met with individual farmers in their fields, learned which crops they could grow, and discussed planting calendars. We also reviewed the principles of KIOF's Internal Control System (ICS). Similar to IFOAM's Participatory Guarantee System, ICS is a form of peer group governance that serves as a low-cost alternative to third-party organic certification. Members take responsibility for ensuring each others' compliance with the basic organic standards (IFOAM, 2008). The trainer encouraged the farmers to practice the soil and water conservation methods they had learned from KIOF. For the purposes of the box scheme, however, our main concern was that they did not use synthetic fertilizers or pesticides.

Besides the two farmer groups, KIOF supplemented the boxes with produce sourced from several trained farmers who were either located nearer Nairobi or who had their own transport. Some of these farmers were already producing a wide variety of commercial vegetable crops, such as broccoli and cauliflower. Their production thus helped increase not just weekly volume, but also selection.

4.2. Finding customers

When looking for customers for the box scheme, we expected it would be easiest to find them among Nairobi's large expatriate population. Not only did the city's European and North American residents already frequent its organic shops and restaurants; at least some would already be familiar with box schemes. And, of course, most expatriates would have more disposable income than the average Kenyan. This mattered because a weekly box worth 1000 KSH (about 15 US dollars), while cheaper than the equivalent organic produce at a Nairobi supermarket, would still cost too much for many of the city's households.

Perhaps most importantly, we knew that Nairobi's expatriates were generally supportive of local NGO initiatives. Many of them worked for development and relief agencies, and their lives as aid workers often included attendance at local charity benefits. And that in fact is where we found our first customers: at an event commemorating the centennial of Nairobi's arboretum. The people who stopped at KIOF's exhibit were mostly foreigners concerned about the environment and development, as well as the safety of the local food supply. The box scheme thus appealed to both their philanthropic spirit and their consumer self-interest. It also attracted their friends and colleagues: soon after one United Nations employee signed up, for example, we were flooded with emails from U.N. workers, foreign and Kenyan alike.

Not surprisingly, some customers wanted to know how they could be sure that the produce was organic, given that it was not certified. We explained the farmers' training in organic methods and in ICS, and how this form of peer "checking up" would avoid the costs and bureaucracy of third-party certification. We also worked on building trust and transparency by publishing a weekly newsletter, with stories about individual growers and their villages, and by taking customers on a day-trip to meet the farmers' group in Eastern province. Both sides seemed to enjoy the encounter, though some of the customers were less than enthusiastic about the lunch featuring the farmers' staple dish boiled squash and arrowroot.

We delivered between seven to ten boxes per week, since some customers only wanted them intermittently. Overall more than fifty households participated as customers, and more than thirty as growers. By European standards, it remained a relatively small box scheme. But it was more than enough work for two KIOF employees and a volunteer intern. Although KIOF's director participated little in the day-to-day running of the scheme, he had the final say on all major decisions.

4.3. *Short life, lasting lessons*

Six months after the first deliveries, the box scheme's problems began to mount. First it became apparent that one of KIOF's extension workers was pocketing money owed to farmers. The director showed no interest in confronting the worker who, it turned out, was a close relative. This obviously angered the farmers, but most likely did not surprise them. Rural Kenyans refer to this kind of small-scale corruption as illegitimate "eating," and they see plenty of it around development projects (Orvis, 2001, 24; see also Bayart, 1993). The extension worker's pilfering probably confirmed the farmers' suspicion that the KIOF director had created the box scheme for the benefit of himself and his family rather than for them.

It also became clear that getting the produce to Nairobi was even costlier and more difficult than we originally anticipated. KIOF's van and pick-up truck were both old and unreliable. When they broke down we had to resort to buses and minibuses, which ran on erratic schedules, often demanded hefty surcharges for our produce, and then damaged it with rough handling. And as in many poor countries with underpaid police forces, bribes extracted en route drove the travel costs up even further. While none of these logistical problems were unexpected, we admittedly underestimated their combined toll. After a while, KIOF's director decided that the scheme should source more of its produce from farmers just outside Nairobi—an obvious departure from the original intent to support rural smallholders.

For their part, customers began to complain that the quality and diversity of produce had declined. It was true that our reliance on fewer farmers led to a less varied vegetable selection. But meeting our customers' quality standards had always been a challenge. This was partly because of the rough roads and lack of refrigeration, but partly too because the farmers had little sense of what kind of quality their customers expected. In retrospect, this also was no surprise. Like Kenyan smallholders more generally, many of the farmers who supplied KIOF had never been to Nairobi. They had certainly not seen the displays of uniform, unblemished produce in the upscale supermarkets where many of our customers otherwise shopped.

Instead, the farmers tried to sell as much of their harvest as possible, often regardless of variations in size, ripeness and appearance. Traditional produce wholesalers are accustomed to this; they expect to find less attractive tomatoes at the bottom of the basket, for example, and bargain accordingly. They also find buyers for such tomatoes in the many Nairobi marketplaces where consumers do not equate a few spots or bruises with poor quality. But the box scheme customers, for the most part, were not typical Nairobi consumers.

Meanwhile, the director was losing interest in the whole project. The box scheme generated no revenue for KIOF, yet consumed much of its employees' time and energy. For him, it did not look worthwhile to find a new manager for the scheme after our own volunteer position ended in late 2007. And so with no manager, it collapsed. The one overworked KIOF employee left to run the scheme soon resigned in frustration, after writing a formal goodbye to the customers.

What does this experience say about the prospects of AFN activism in the global South? The project was not, ultimately, a total failure. While it lasted, the box scheme boosted the incomes of more than thirty farm households, and demonstrated that demand exists in Nairobi for directly marketed organic produce, even if it is non-certified. Equally important, its demise cannot be blamed just on petty corruption and poor infrastructure. Rather, these obstacles were symptomatic of the deeper problems created by development ideology and practice.

One of these problems is simply that development aid has not worked, in the sense that it has brought neither prosperity nor empowerment to many people in Kenya or other aid-dependent countries. This is not the place to discuss the reasons for development's failures (but see Glennie, 2008). The point here is that stubborn, widespread poverty has both increased the cost of direct marketing initiatives (due to poor infrastructure) and limited potential demand. Even operating on a shoestring budget, we could not price the produce at a level affordable for many Nairobi households. Poverty, in other words, makes the market in general a much weaker tool for positive agri-food change.

The box scheme targeted some of Nairobi's most affluent consumers, namely expatriates. At the time this strategy seemed justified, since the primary goal was to find a remunerative market for organic smallholders. But it led to a second problem. In Kenya as in many other poor countries, the major cities are full of development workers who are professionally obliged to "aid" rural regions but otherwise feel little attachment to them. Even during the short lifespan of the box scheme it was clear that most (though not all) of our customers saw it primarily as an organic grocery delivery service that doubled as a charity. However much they cared about rural poverty and environmental degradation in the abstract, they did not see themselves and the scheme's farmers as part of the same community. The bond so critical to many northern AFNs—however steeped in nostalgia—was not one they felt. Newsletters and a field trip by themselves could hardly hope to create a sense of community, even if they did build some customers' confidence in the produce itself. This is understandable. By definition, expatriates live away from the places they call home. In Nairobi as in many African capitals, they live in a community defined by its social and residential exclusiveness. All this meant that most our box scheme customers ultimately had limited patience for what they perceived as substandard service. Their loyalties lay elsewhere.

The farmers, for their part, treated the box scheme as just another NGO aid project, to be exploited for maximum gain at minimal risk. Herein lies a third problem. In Kenya as in other poor countries, a long history of demands on rural peoples' labor in the name of "development" has, on one hand, left many understandably wary of outsiders promising prosperity if they will only plant trees, dig irrigation ditches, or fence their livestock (Rocheleau et al., 1995; Schroeder, 1999a). On the other hand, many rural people have also become savvy negotiators of aid, tapping resources without committing too many of their own. From the donor perspective, such aid projects do not typically turn out as planned, due to the apparent recalcitrance or laziness of the locals. More broadly, they do not achieve development, so aid still appears needed.

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Once again, this is not a new problem (Ferguson, 1990). We hoped that the very nature of organic agriculture, reliant on minimal external inputs, would make our box scheme appear different to the farmers—that it would not seem like development aid *per se*. In retrospect, this was overly optimistic, even naïve. After all, they depended entirely on KIOF's intermediary role. And not only the scheme itself but also the entire concept of organic production has been introduced to the Kenyan countryside much the same way as conventional aid: as an NGO initiative, based on outside expertise, quality standards, and notions of community. Ultimately it is not surprising that the farmers saw the scheme as KIOF's project, not theirs.

5. Conclusion

For months after the box scheme's demise, we received emails from Nairobi residents who wanted to sign up. These inquiries made us wonder about how, with more resources and experience, the scheme might have worked better. But then we realized that this line of thinking was in some ways the main problem. Like many development projects, our box scheme started from the assumption that outside intervention was needed. Like many AFNs, ours assumed that both small farmers and urban consumers needed, in particular, an alternative form of provisioning, initiated and run through a non-governmental (or otherwise private) body, and based on models that have worked elsewhere.

Recent research on AFNs that target putative "food deserts" in the global North suggests why these assumptions are problematic (Short et al., 2007). As Guthman points out, the universalism and "missionary impulses" behind at least some projects resemble those that helped justify colonial conquest—and, we would add, international development (Guthman, 2008a, b). They seek to enlighten and "improve the other" while ignoring the historical forces that have produced apparent deprivation, whether manifested as sparse, unhealthy food shopping options in the United States and Europe or as rural hunger in Africa (Guthman, 2008a). In the former, the intended beneficiaries of AFN projects may not always want alternative food at all. Some research indicates that they would prefer ordinary supermarkets (Tattenham, 2006; cited in Guthman, 2008b, 440; see also Webber et al., 2010). The issue here is not which kind of provisioning is better, but rather how AFN proponents tend to see the food desert as the basic problem, rather than as a visible symptom of deeper ills—i.e., poverty, racism, shortsighted urban planning—which farmers' markets and community gardens cannot by themselves cure.

This does not mean that our box scheme's own "alternative" objectives—to promote organic agriculture as an alternative to smallholders' reliance on Green Revolution technologies and niche export crops, and direct marketing as an alternative to the typically rigid standards and high mark-ups of corporate supermarkets—have no merit in a country such as Kenya. On the contrary, increasing evidence suggests that organic and agroecological practices can enhance African smallholders' household food security and overall livelihoods whether or not they sell any of their harvest (Badgley et al., 2007; Edwards, 2007; Parrott et al., 2006). Provided they have sufficient labor, smallholders hardly need convincing about the benefits of improved soil fertility, water conservation, lower input costs, and less exposure to toxic chemicals (Goldberger, 2008a). There remains, then, a need for training in organic methods, as well as for advocacy and public awareness-raising. Indeed, NGOs such as KIOF are arguably much better suited to these roles than to alternative food marketing *per se* (cf. Sanders, 2006).

If both supply and demand for organic produce continue to grow in Kenya and other countries, it is not hard to imagine more merchants and growers' cooperatives specializing in its provision. Whether they would attempt to market directly to consumers or instead sell to supermarkets is harder to say, partly because of the latter's rapid spread and partly because, as we found, the direct marketing experience does not necessarily have the same meaning and appeal to consumers everywhere. Indeed, supermarkets' customer base is growing in Africa in part because consumers want their assurances of food safety, quality and transparency—the very concerns that have made direct marketing so popular in the United States and Europe.

We do not pretend to have a definitive answer to the question of what *should* constitute "alternative" food supply channels in Kenya, much less in Africa or the global South. But Abrahams is right to warn against assuming that the "supermarket revolution" has rendered traditional marketplaces obsolete (Abrahams, 2009). Besides the fact that they still feed (and employ) a greater share of most African cities' and towns' populations than do corporate retailers, these markets bring a healthy diversity to the food supply, not only in terms of what products they offer but also where they operate and who sells at and through them. Worth preserving for their traditional strengths alone, they are also promising sites for promoting the causes of just, safe and sustainable food.[3]

Many urban marketplaces in Africa are admittedly overcrowded, lacking in refrigeration, clean water and sanitary facilities, and known for attracting petty thieves (Brown et al., 2010). Their deterioration has helped drive middle-class shoppers into supermarkets. But again, this decline is not inevitable, given adequate government and/or donor investment in the basic marketing infrastructure. In Hong Kong, for example, state-funded renovations of traditional wet markets have helped them compete against corporate retailers (Goldman et al., 1999; Ho, 2005; Reardon and Gulati, 2008). In Brazil, the municipal government of Bela Horizonte oversees a "Straight from the Country" direct marketing program, as well as the locations and hygiene standards of fresh produce vendors citywide (Rocha and Lessa, 2009). Even in Zambia, a much poorer country, the major public markets in the capital of Lusaka have benefited from recent upgrades and more transparent management (Abrahams, 2009).

AFN scholarship does not normally dwell on infrastructure, partly because it often seems like a non-issue in the places where AFNs have thrived. This is just one reason why the field could benefit from closer attention to the global South's agri-food systems: a broader geographic perspective forces us to consider the historical forces and contemporary conditions that have shaped not just the "alternative" character of particular AFNs in the North, but also their appeal and feasibility. This perspective warns against assuming that such AFNs can or should be transplanted into other contexts. In addition, more engagement with critical development studies could help agri-food scholars better understand which types of alternative food initiatives have the most potential for achieving positive change in the global South (again, in particular contexts). Perhaps most importantly, a big-picture perspective on development makes clear a point that holds true across the hemispheres: sometimes the only way to address the injustices and ecological damage of the food status quo is to turn the focus away from food itself, and towards the root causes of unfairness and harm.

[3] Africa's urban food markets have long served as sites for political organizing and protest, especially on the part of women traders. Eames, 1988. Why the women went to war: women and wealth in Ondo Town, Southwestern Nigeria. In: Clark, G. (Ed.), Traders Versus the State. Westview Press, Boulder, pp. 81–97, Robertson, 1983. The death of Makola and other tragedies. Canadian Journal of African Studies 17, 469–498, Robertson, 1993. Traders and urban struggles: the creation of a militant female underclass in Nairobi, 1960–1990. Journal of Women's History 4, 9–42.

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