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Who Defines Local? Multiple Standards and Local Labeling Schemes

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As markets for ‘ethical’ products grow, activists, producers, and retailers vie to control the definition of these standards (Cashore et al, 2010; Taylor, 2005; Bartley, 2010). The ‘buy local’ movement provides one current example: in the US, several competing activist-sponsored and corporate labels encourage consumers to purchase ‘local’ products. Some localism activists see a need to harmonize their standards for ‘local’ in order to set the terms of the debate, influence government policy, and preempt co-option by large corporations. However, harmonizing standards comes at a cost: it risks alienating some activists and rendering ‘buy local’ campaigns *more* susceptible to co-option. What impedes the emergence of a dominant standard, and would harmonization further activists’ aims? This paper compares the evolution ‘local’ markets to the developments in the organic and fair trade movements. We then draw from 38 interviews with ‘buy local’ leaders to identify five competing definitions for ‘local’ within the movement, and assess the impact of tolerating multiple standards in the market and in the policy arena. We argue that the continued existence of competing standards may indeed impede the localism movement’s national policy objectives and does empower large corporations *define down* ‘local’ in mass markets. However, maintaining multiple competing standards also preserves the power of NGOs and small producers in the ‘buy local’ movement, allows for the relatively easy realignment of ethical priorities within the localism organizations, and leaves room for a focus on product differentiation instead of a guarantee of a minimum standard.

I. Introduction

‘Local’ has become a very messy five letter word in the five years that I’ve been doing this work.

-- ‘Buy Local’ Leader (Respondent B12), 2011

Standards for ‘fair trade’ products and ‘environmentally sourced’ goods provide activists and high road producers with opportunities to clarify decisions for so-called ‘ethical consumers’ and spur further growth in these new markets (Cashore, 2002; Low and Davenport, 2007). Organizers of these certification schemes face a careful balancing act: To encourage rapid growth, certifying organizations must respond to demands from all stakeholders, including powerful corporations that enable mass distribution (Taylor, 2005). But in accommodating the needs of large-scale, profit-driven firms, ethical consumption advocates risk neglecting the concerns of less powerful stakeholders, including poor producers (Bacon, 2010) and environmental activists, thus undermining the legitimacy of schemes.

Deciding whether and how to compromise in order to agree on a common standard is a key strategic choice for organizers of ‘ethical’ trade, affecting both organizational legitimacy and market impact of any certification scheme. Indeed, the trade off between access to mass markets and high standards for responsible production remains a source of much debate in the academic literature (Taylor, 2005; Bacon, 2010; Bartley, 2010; Cashore et al, 2010). Given the risks of co-optation, the problems of monitoring, and the inflexibility of many certification schemes, does it make sense for activists to attempt to harmonize ethical standards? Should they encourage a single, clear certification program? In this paper, we address this dilemma via an emerging ethical market: the market for ‘local’ goods in the US.

Localism is a growing social movement throughout the developed world, and in the United States, three national, federated non-government organizations authorize chapters to display 'buy local' labels. However, these organizations allow local chapters to define the criteria for products and firms that wish to qualify to use the labels. At the same time, various national retailers have targeted the growing market for 'local' products (in particular, local foods), each adopting their own definition for ‘local’ and affixing their own ‘local’ labels. The struggle to create and police the market for ‘local’ products is similar, in many ways, to the movements that established fair trade and environmentally conscious products. Like fair trade and green activists, ‘buy local’ advocates face a choice as to whether and how to institutionalize their labeling schemes. The ‘buy local’ case has implications for theory on the development of ethical production standards.

The paper proceeds as follows: the next section reviews the literature on ethical consumption labels and the problems of creating and maintaining these standards. We briefly highlight the trajectories for ethical products from market creation to standard institutionalization of a state-defined standard (for certified organic food in the US) and an international, non-state market driven standard (Fair Trade). In section III, we introduce localism as a social movement in the US, outline the structure of three ‘buy local’ organizations that claim the authority to

certify local goods, and present information on the growth of the market for these products (which has drawn the interest of global retailers). Section IV presents data from interviews with 38 leaders of US localism networks. We show that competing definitions for ‘local’ within the movement stem from deep underlying conflicts as to the goals and values of the movement. In the conclusion, we argue that the continued existence of these competing standards may indeed impede the localism movement’s national policy objectives and does empower national corporations *define down* ‘local’ in mass markets. However, maintaining multiple competing standards also preserves the power of NGOs and small producers, allows for the relatively easy realignment of ethical priorities within the movement, and leaves room for a focus on product differentiation instead of a guarantee on a minimum standard. We also discuss how the power and favorable geographic position of ‘buy local’ producers and advocates (relative to advocates for ethical production across global value chains) provides them with a different set of strategic options in ethical markets.

II. ‘Responsible’ Standards, Growing Markets? Successes and Challenges

Since 1980, cross-border trade has ballooned: large manufacturing firms have disaggregated production across firm boundaries and state borders, and large retailers have imported an ever-greater share of the offerings on their shelves. Though consumers benefited via lower prices and broader selection of goods, the increasing distance between production and consumption was not an unmitigated good. Increased global competition and the resulting price pressure encouraged domestic producers to cut costs, often at the expense of the environment and labor. This competition was exacerbated by WTO rules, which prohibited states from excluding imports based on labor abuses or environmentally damaging production in member states (Schouten and Glasbergen, 2011), and from barring imports based on health and safety standards outside mainstream global scientific consensus (Winham, 2009). At the same time, price pressure from low-cost imports inhibited the adoption of stricter regulations for domestic production in rich countries (Bacon, 2010).

In response to the spread of neo-liberal capitalism, social movements in advanced economies emerged to champion fair labor conditions for sweatshop workers and peasants (Bartley, 2011; Brown, 2011) and environmentally sound production practices in endangered forests and American fields (Cashore, 2002; Green, 2009). Faced with the inability to regulate these supply chains through democratic means in rich countries (short of withdrawal from the WTO), activists pushed for private regulatory schemes. While concerned consumers failed to bar entry to environmentally objectionable goods produced by mistreated workers, these consumers were free to choose to pay more for products from firms that promised to treat workers fairly and do minimal damage to the physical environment. These advocates, by targeting consumers willing to pay a premium for ‘ethical’ products, aimed to provide incentives for producers to adhere to higher social and environmental standards, and create new markets for ‘ethical’ goods.

Marketers call ‘responsibly produced’ a *credence* attribute of a product’s quality (Wirth et al, 2011). Unlike *search* attributes, qualities that can be ascertained by consumers at the time of purchase (color and size are examples), or *experience* attributes, which can be tested via use (taste and freshness), credence attributes rely on the buyer’s trust (see Ponte and Gibbon, 2005). Consumers can’t taste the difference between fair trade chocolate and chocolate made from beans harvested by children. Buyers of timber can’t ascertain from a wooden board whether the tree from which it was made was harvested responsibly. Consumers can benefit from higher quality of a credence attribute only if the seller (or the brand or the label) communicates the added quality, and only if the buyer trusts that workers received a fair return or that timber was sustainably harvested. For ‘responsible’ or ‘ethical’ products, consumers will only be willing to pay more if they believe that seller has specified responsible production processes for the supplier, and inspectors verified that production conditions were indeed responsible.

But consumers’ trust can be costly to gain and difficult to maintain in crowded and chaotic markets. When a producer or group of producers succeeds in gaining a price premium in the market for a credence attribute, competitors have an incentive to enter the market (see Green,

2009). Some producers may claim the same credence attribute ('ethically sourced') while applying less rigorous standards than the original, high ethical quality sellers. Cheaters may attempt to pass off low quality goods as higher quality, deceiving consumers while undercutting the prices of the market creators. Increased supply will drive down prices, putting pressure on truly 'ethical' producers with higher cost production standards. Success in creating a market 'ethical' products risks undermining trust, and therefore risks destroying the price premium.

Fractured production and long distribution chains make creating and maintaining such trust a challenge. Advocates for 'ethical' products developed institutions for ensuring compliance with process standards, and maintaining the legitimacy of the market: 1) state regulation for domestic production (like organic agriculture), and 2) non-state market driven standards to govern global value chains (like Fair Trade coffee and FSC timber) (see Cashore, 2002). However, as we detail below, the process of developing both these types of institutions risks *defining down* the ethical content of standards, and thus undermining the legitimacy of 'ethical' product labels.

The problem of credence attributes, particularly in responsible products, suggests that higher quality producers will seek regulation to protect their market niche. One such example is the US organic farming industry.

From Many Private Standards to Harmonized State Regulated Certification: US Organics

One family of (initially) private regulation in the US concentrated on domestic goods, and was largely motivated by environmentalists and animal rights activists. The US organic farming movement began in the 1970s, as a small number of 'back to the land' hippies rejected corporate, factory-style farming in favor of traditional, chemical-free methods.¹ Organic food was marketed to high-end consumers, as an option healthier for humans and beneficial to the natural environment. The market grew rapidly, and when consumers demonstrated a willingness to pay

¹ This account of the development of organic standards in the US draws heavily from Green (2007).

significant premiums for ‘organic’ food, enough falsely-labeled goods entered the market to prompt regulation at the US state level of the term ‘organic’: between 1973 and 1990, twenty-two American states legislated standards for products legally allowed to bear an ‘organic’ label (Green: 802). But these standards were hardly uniform. Consumer confusion and organic producers’ desires to limit fraudulently labeled competition prompted the adoption of the national Organic Foods Production Act of 1990.

The 1990 act authorized a national organic process certification system based on third party inspections of farms, creating the National Organic Standards Board, with fifteen appointed members to “assist in development of standards” and advise on “any other aspects of implementation” of the law. Rapid growth of the organic foods market in the US drew corporate entrants: large retailers, like Whole Foods and Walmart, global food processors, including Kellogg and General Mills, and increasingly, international agriculture firms. These new market players lobbied for lower organic standards (Green: 819). Corporate organic producers gained seats on the NOSB, leading one activist to charge that the “proverbial fox [was] watching the organic chicken coop,” (RT, 2012). Environmental activists claim that lax standards undermine the market for US organics, and charge that “ ‘corporate’ organics. . . has the potential to destroy healthy markets for other retailers, distributors, manufacturers/processors, and family-scale domestic farmers” (Cornucopia Institute, 2006). Of particular concern was the rapid increase of certified organic imports, many distributed through large retailers, which ballooned from \$300,000 in 1995 to about \$500 million in 2008; critics charged that Chinese producers’ record of safety scandals and counterfeiting undermined the price premium for certified ‘organic’ products (Allison, 2012).

Did the harmonization of standards for ‘organic’ help the organic food movement? Activists were divided. Some environmentalists argue with their massive scale, big box retailers like Walmart pushed the organic movement faster and farther than thousands of small farms and farmers markets ever could. But skeptics remained:

Whether these benefits [of scale and lower price] are worth the damage that corporate organics are having on small-scale organic farmers, the thousands of cows cramped in feedlots, the importation of questionable organic ingredients, and the potential misleading of the uninformed consumer who needs strong organic food regulations to rely upon before paying even ten percent more for a product, is of course a source of controversy. To more organic consumers, these costs are certainly not worth the benefits (Green, 2006: 828).

This short history of the institutionalization of organic certification from a loose ‘ethical’ label into a state-regulated standard suggests that large, for-profit firms – once guaranteed a seat at the table – are able to leverage their power to capture regulatory processes and dominate standard-setting. Corporate power to dictate ‘ethical’ standards, in this case, had implications far outside the US domestic market. Low standards for ‘organic’ in one of the world’s largest markets discouraged developing country producers from adopting more stringent production systems. Moreover, in 2012, the US and EU granted producers reciprocal recognition for certified organic goods (Richardson, 2012), despite higher EU standards for organic. This reciprocity gave EU producers access to the US market, but carried a risk of undermining consumer confidence in ‘certified organic’ far in their home markets.

Non-State ‘Ethical’ Certifications to Govern Global Value Chains

Alternatives to state regulation of responsible process labels include private attempts to govern production. Fair Trade International (FTO) and Forest Sustainability Council (FSC) certification are two prominent examples, each attempting to encourage ethical production in trans-national markets. With increasingly complex value chains, no longer dominated by lead firms who owned key suppliers, industries evolved complicated and various forms of supply chain governance (Gereffi et al 2005). Private governance schemes like Fair Trade and FSC (or ‘non-state market driven’ certification systems; see Cashore: 2002) were built to “address the negative consequences of neoliberal globalization, which, it is asserted, frees multinational firms from inconvenient national regulation while discouraging countries seeking foreign investment and trade from enacting and/or enforcing social or environmental standards” (Auld et al 2010:1; also McDermott, Noah and Cashore 2006). An important component of this new system of

global governance has been the creation and invigoration of product and process standards, many certified by third-party inspectors, which serve to lower transaction costs (see Abbot and Snidal, 2008). In 'ethical' product markets, certification bodies take the burden of researching purchases off the consumer; a 'Fair Trade' or 'FSC' label attests to 'credence' attributes of ethical products. Though some producers in advanced economies seek these 'ethical' certifications (FSC certification is one example), the impetus for these schemes was activists' desire to alter production in developing countries and bridge the distance between poor country producers and rich country consumers.

This aim to embed globally dispersed production back into a social and ethical framework was the major goal of 'ethical' certification advocates (Bacon, 2010). The founders of Fair Trade, disturbed by the poor economic return and often abusive labor conditions of workers in the global South, conceived the Fair Trade label as way to connect northern consumers with the people producing their coffee, and a way to create opportunity via a higher value added market for disadvantaged coffee growers (Taylor, 2005). Fair Trade initially emphasized activist trips to coffee plantations, and (less frequently) coffee growers' visits to end markets, in order to foster social ties between that would undergird and serve as a check on responsible production (Brown, 2011). Some of these standards proved useful for ethical consumers and powerful in pushing change back into the supply chain (Taylor, 2005). Though several 'ethical' standard certifications have demonstrated marked success in raising awareness of social and environmental issues, and some have created large new markets for 'ethical' products, problems remain. First, even strong international institutions and motivated global corporations have found monitoring production in complex global supply chains to be challenging (Bartley, 2010; Locke and Romis, 2010).

Second, co-option of standard development by corporate interests has been common in cases of private regulation to the detriment of vulnerable producers. Fuchs and Kalfagianni (2010) find that responsible certification schemes harm small farmers, who are unable to bear the

costs of certification, and highlight the power of large retail in global standards setting. Hatanaka et al, though recognizing that third party certification schemes offer “opportunities to create alternative practices that are more socially and environmentally sustainable”, agree that such programs reflect the power of global retail firms in the supply chain and the “growing power of supermarkets to regulate global agri-food systems” (2005:12).

Finally, though these schemes increase diversity offerings on the supermarket shelves in rich countries, critics charge they have had “minimal” impact on the environmental characteristics of global food production, at the same time they “also foster the weakening of the organic movement’s second-order principles, such as sourcing from local networks and privileging small suppliers. The latter are especially vulnerable” (Hatanaka et al: 2005:6).

Clearly, as Peter Taylor wrote, ‘ethical’ product advocates face a delicate balancing act of being “in the market, but not of it” (2005). While harmonization of standards may provide ‘ethical’ producers access to large markets and streamline the communication to consumers of the products’ credence attributes, clear and widely-accepted standards invite non-ethically motivated actors into the arena, where they soon dominate the process of defining standards. As we have seen in the above examples of certified organics and Fair Trade, new markets may grow, but the ‘ethical’ component of those markets seems to shrink. How should advocates for ‘ethical’ product markets navigate this strategic challenge? We now turn to a more recent ‘ethical’ market, the market for ‘local’ products.

III. After Globalization, ‘Buy Local’?

As US activists noted the disappearance of local businesses and the ever-increasing share of imports on shelves of big box stores, the ‘buy local’ movement exploded after 2000. Markets, particularly for retailers, had been liberalizing since the 1970s, when relaxed zoning laws and the resultant suburban sprawl that encouraged the growth of retail behemoths on the edges of towns and cities in the 1970s (Jackson, 1996; see also Hess, 2009). Concentration within the US retail industry increased rapidly (Basker et al, 2010), allowing Walmart and Target to bargain hard with

suppliers (for whom space on big box shelves was ever more crucial). After the 1980s, US imports from low wage nations ticked up, and large retailers began to pressure US suppliers, many of whom could not compete on cost with imports from China.² Though consumers benefitted from lower prices (Hausman and Leibtag, 2007), critics argued that the ‘Walmart’ effect – including closure of Mom and Pop stores downtown and the jobs lost to off-shored production – was a bad bargain. Walmart has been accused of destroying local businesses and local economies in rich countries³, sourcing from abusive suppliers in poor countries, substituting living wage jobs with low paying jobs⁴, and contributing to environmental pollution through the degradation of open space and encouragement of suburban sprawl (Mitchell, 2006; Longworth, 2007). Though Wal-Mart has long been the chosen foil of anti-big box activists, competitors in the big box segment (including the slightly more upscale Target) have successfully replicated the Wal-Mart model (Milchen, 2011).⁵

As big box stores, responsible to far-flung shareholders and filled increasingly with computer made in China and grapes from Chile, grew in power despite repeated scandals, community activists saw a need to create alternative markets that could serve consumers uncomfortable buying goods of murky provenance. Parallel to the fair trade movement (which corralled advocates of ethical global sourcing into schemes for private certifications), and organic and animal rights activists (who created markets for organic foods), another group of activists,

² Small suppliers were particularly likely to get to the short end of a Walmart deal: see Bloom and Perry, 2001.

³ Basker (2005) finds that each new Wal-Mart displaces four small retailers, while Jia (2005, cited in Irwin and Clark, 2006) estimates that Wal-Mart expansion is responsible for 50-70% of the decline in small discount retailers.

⁴ In addition to low pay and few protections for employees, Wal-Mart managed to shift many of its burdens as an employer onto government: one leaked internal memo acknowledged that 46% of the children of Wal-Mart employees either lacked insurance or relied on Medicaid for healthcare (Greenhouse and Barbaro, 2005).

⁵ Costco, a big box retailer, has adopted high road employment strategies, with higher salaries (42% higher than Wal-Mart’s Sam’s Club outlets), more training, and better benefits than rivals (Greenhouse, 2005). However, Costco’s large-scale, suburban, big box strategy has similar impact on independent retailers.

with similar goals of creating connections counter to market liberalization, concentrated on local responses. ‘Buy local’ leaders largely deny that they are opposed to globalization (interview notes), but the movement is clearly a response to the explosion of factory farming and big box retailing fueled by international trade (see Mitchell, 2006).

In the 2000s, ‘buy local’ campaigns sprang up throughout the US. In essence, the ‘buy local’ movement advocates the co-location of production and consumption, in both goods and services. Given the importance of economies of scale and the lack of local production in sectors like automobiles and electronics, ‘buy local’ campaigns tend to target service industries (including retail and restaurants) and the food industry, where the locavore movement (which encourages people to eat food grown near their homes) has been a strong motivator.

‘Buy local’ advocates claim strong environmental, economic, and social returns to communities where citizens ‘buy local’ and support independent businesses. Environmentally, activists aim to reduce the carbon footprint of the food they eat and the goods they use (interview notes). Smith and MacKinnon, for example, adherents of the “100 Mile Diet”, fretted that

food typically travels between 1500 and 3000 miles from farm to plate . . . this distance had increased by up to 50 percent between 1980 and 2001. . . . What we could not ignore was the gut feeling, more common and more important than policy makers or even scientists like to admit that *things have gone sideways*. That the winter snow is less deep that it was when we were children, the crabs fewer under the rocks by the shore, the birds at down too quiet, the forest oddly lonesome. . . . And that we, the human species, are in one way or another responsible. Not *guilty*, but responsible (Smith and MacKinnon, 2010).

Many locavores share this gut belief that eating food from nearby farms is better for the physical environment (Hess, 2009). Proponents of local retail and locally-owned businesses argue that firms owned by local residents are more likely act responsibly to physical environment than managers who need to answer to absentee or far-flung corporate owners.⁶ In addition, ‘buy local’ leaders argue that supporting shops in walkable downtowns helps to cut down car trips, and carbon emissions, to big box stores in exurbs.

⁶ Spencer (2008) makes this argument about small firms, which are almost all local.

Economically, activists argue that spending money at locally-owned firms boosts employment and growth in the home community. According to one study sponsored by the Institute for Local Living Economies, an activist think tank, local retailers returned 52% of their revenue to the local economy, compare with 14% for national retailers; local restaurants spent 79% of revenue in the local economy, compared with 30% for franchises and national chains (Civic Economics, 2012). Small and medium-sized banks execute a disproportionate share of their loans to small firms (ILSR, 2012). In the agricultural sector, activists argue that buying local produce, particularly from farmers' markets, can help ensure a fair return for farmers by eliminating middlemen.

Socially, localism advocates claim that supporting local businesses weaves communities closer together. Researchers Blanchard and Matthews (2006) found that communities with highly concentrated economic activity had lower levels of social capital, as evidenced by electoral participation and protests. Stacey Mitchell, a prominent localism activist and author, argues local business owners sponsor youth sports teams and coordinate town volunteering; supporting local firms and farmers revitalizes community "hearts" (2006). In addition, local firms establish and maintain the individuality of communities over chain store sameness, creating a sense of belonging and meaning in society. For example, one prominent pro-local organization urges shoppers to "Keep Austin Weird".

'Buy local' campaigns, as we discuss below, have grown rapidly in the past decade, but the movement has also drawn criticism. Analysts dispute the environmental benefits of localism (Weber and Matthews, 2008; McWilliams, 2007; Desrochers and Shimizu, 2012), and charge that social and economic benefits accrue to relatively privileged farmer and business owners at the expense of low-wage laborers, both in the community and in the global South (Hinrichs and Allen, 2008). A protectionist strain clearly runs through 'buy local' campaigns (Winter, 2003). Nonetheless, as with fair trade certification schemes, the attempt to personalize exchange is clearly aimed at embedding the market back into the community. Supporters and a good number

of the leaders of ‘buy local’ campaigns have been drawn to the movement for ethical, not instrumental, reasons (interview notes). Their sincerity is key to the creating additional value for ‘local’ products and justifies placing ‘buy local’ campaigns along side other ethical consumption movements.

Localism’s Recent Growth and Organization

Localism has deep roots in the United States (Ingram and Rao, 2004; Kurland et al 2012), but the movement’s latest incarnation took shape in the 1990s. Three organizations, one concerned primarily with food and two others in support of local economies more generally, took the lead in creating markets for ‘local’ goods and promoting ‘buy local’ campaigns. These organizations, and their chapters, developed labels for affiliated sellers (see Figure 1).

In food and farming, ‘buy local’ began as a response to the rise of domestic factory-style farms, but has accelerated in tandem with increases in food imports to the US over the last decade (see Figure 2). Many small and medium-sized American farmers have struggled throughout the postwar years to compete with well-capitalized factory farms. A counter-culture to large-scale farming dates back to the 1970s, (Green 2008: 2), and limited government support for this market niche began as early as 1985 (Gray and Poston, 2006).

Support for localism in the food industry increased in the 1990s. The Kellogg Foundation awarded grants to campaigns that would encourage consumers to “Be a local hero, buy locally grown” (Hesterman, 2006). Kellogg support later helped launch the Food Routes Network (Francis, Poincelot, & Bird, 2006), an organization dedicated to reintroducing Americans to their food, encouraging consumer familiarity of foods’ routes from farms to their tables. By 1999, Food Routes Network (FRN) expanded into a national organization to promote local food markets, largely via the ‘Buy Fresh, Buy Local’.

Little more than a decade later, Food Routes counted a total of 78 “Buy Fresh, Buy Local” chapters in 24 states.⁷ Member farms and firms are authorized to use the ‘Buy Fresh, Buy Local’ logo, which was created and market tested by Food Routes (see Figure 1; also Hinrichs and Allen, 2002). Most members of ‘Buy Fresh, Buy Local’ chapters are farmers or restaurants. Leaders of the movement tend to emphasize economic gains (to farmers) and health benefits (to consumers) of buying local, though we found BFBL leaders increasingly concerned food justice and access to fresh food for poor consumers as well (interview notes).

During the same period of rapid growth of ‘buy fresh, buy local’ campaigns, supporters of locally-owned firms established two networks dedicated to promoting local sourcing and consumption, particularly (but not exclusively) in services and retail. One group of activists, led by an independent bookstore owner, set up an organization to protect the interests of local business owners in Boulder, CO. The resulting American Independent Business Association (AMIBA) grew to 70 independent business alliance chapters in 33 states.⁸ AMIBA promoted independent, local firms in their communities through marketing initiatives like the “10% shift” (which asks people to shift 10% of their spending away from chain stores and to local businesses) and Independents’ Day (a July 4th promotion). BALLE, the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies, also supported of local ownership but added a triple bottom line philosophy that promotes the planet and people alongside profit (Hollender and Fenichell, 2004). Like AMIBA, BALLE was founded in 1998. BALLE’s “Think Local First” campaign asks consumers to buy locally and business managers to source locally. BALLE’s 78 chapters span 29 states, and represent more than 20,000 firms and organizations.⁹

⁷ <http://www.foodroutes.org/bfbl-chapters.jsp#chapter-list> (accessed 6/17/11)

⁸ <http://www.amiba.net/find-iba> (accessed 6/17/11)

⁹ <http://www.livingeconomies.org/netview> (accessed 6/17/11)

How successful have these ‘buy local’ campaigns been? The market for ‘local’ foods has clearly taken off in the past decade. In 2008, according to US Department of Agriculture estimates, ‘local’ food sales totaled \$4.8 billion, accounting for 1.6% of the market for agricultural products in the country (Johnson et al, 2012: 2). Though just 5% of US farms were involved in the ‘local’ food market, the market has grown rapidly; direct to consumer sales of agricultural products, for example, grew from \$591.7 million in 1997 to \$1.21 billion in 2007 (Johnson et al, 2012: 7). In studies of consumers ‘willingness to pay’, researchers found a clear price premium for ‘local’ agricultural products over non-local but otherwise identical goods (Park and Gomez, 2011 see Figure 3).

Indeed, market growth and price premiums for ‘local’ foods attracted the interest increasing number of firms, including large corporations. If one measure of market success is imitation, ‘buy local’ campaigns have made a mark. The ‘local’ food market attracted the attention of large retailers who generally source globally: Walmart and other mega-retailers introduced ‘local’ food products in their grocery offerings, often marketing them aggressively. Walmart reported \$400 million in sales of ‘locally grown’ produce in one year (see Figure 4). These corporations, it is important to note, created their own standards for ‘local’ that were often undefined or much more broad than ‘buy local’ activists would recognize. Walmart’s definition, within state borders, applies equally to Delaware (2,489 square miles) and California (163,695 square miles).

Outside of the food sector, metrics for the impact of ‘buy local’ campaigns can be elusive. Growth of membership in BFBL, AMIBA, and BALLE –in numbers of chapters and numbers of individual firm members – suggests that for-profit firms perceive some advantage from participating in ‘local’ marketing. In addition, BALLE and AMIBA both cite data from the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, a think tank promoted to preserving local economies, as evidence that ‘local first’ type campaigns increase sales at independently-owned local businesses (see figure 5).

Large corporations can sell ‘local’ products, but have a harder time passing themselves off as locally-owned, independent businesses. Nonetheless, a few have tried: HSBC markets its branches as ‘the world’s local bank’, and Starbucks has introduced ‘stealth’ stores branded as ‘The Roy St. Café’ and ‘15th Avenue Coffee and Tea’ (Mitchell, 2009; Tepper, 2012). American Express, the financial services firm, announced in 2012 that the corporation would partner with AMIBA to sponsor ‘buy local’ campaigns around the US (<http://about.americanexpress.com/news/pr/2012/amiba.aspx>). Though the co-option of ‘buy local’ movement beyond local foods seems structurally difficult, ‘local-washing’ and de-branding concerns some activists:

To be sure, Starbucks is responding to strain of public opinion that says local is better than global, small is better than big and independent is better than chain-owned. . . . You can imagine where this un-branding campaign could lead. A little neighborhood burger place run by McDonald's? A little neighborhood hardware store owned by Home Depot? A little neighborhood five-and-dime operated by Wal-Mart? (Gunther, 2009)

As with Fair Trade, the success of ‘buy local’ campaigns attracted corporate interest. For Fair Trade, corporate interest held the promise of exponentially larger markets for ethically grown commodities, along with the risk that corporate pressure would undermine the organization’s ethical standards. With ‘buy local’, corporate interest may benefit local food producers by increasing market size for their products. At the same time, large corporations could successfully define down the meaning of ‘local’, undermining the ethical legitimacy of the market. Moreover, corporate interest and potential co-option directly threaten much of the non-farm contingent of the ‘buy local’ movement. Risks are particularly high from low price big box retailers, like WalMart. None of our respondents saw much potential in WalMart’s entrance into ‘local’ food marketing:

I think it's first of all we can be pretty proud – if Wal-Mart is doing that, then we must be doing something right (laughs). Because they feel like they need to compete with the local food movement. That's a huge achievement. But beyond that, I don't think anybody has any illusions that Walmart is really going to transform itself into some kind of locally based business; it's still, what, the biggest grocery sales corporation in the world? And they may have some token local food at different stores, but what they're really doing is using that as some kind of loss leader to get you in the store and sell you a bunch of stuff

that comes from all over the place and is highly processed. So no one, I don't think anybody in our community is excited about it, except for the symbolism that even Walmart has to pay attention to its geographical sources now (Respondent F3).

Given the risk of co-option and the desire to maintain legitimacy with consumers in this new market, should 'buy local' advocates close ranks, and settle on a clear and defensible standard for what is 'local'?

IV. What is 'local' for 'buy local' leaders?

As the market for 'local' goods expanded, and more corporate players entered with their own 'local' standards, some activists report a need for the 'buy local' community to converge on a common definition for what is 'local'. Each of the three national organizations highlighted in this study suggests criteria for membership, including independent ownership (defined by AMIBA as majority owned by people living within the community) and local management (franchises, which may locally owned, are not locally controlled and thus ineligible for 'buy local' campaigns).

However, national organizations do no monitoring of chapters' members. In fact, one chapter included the local Walmart store as a member: its leader, also the leader of the Chamber of Commerce chapter, argued that Walmart should be considered 'local' because the store employed people and paid taxes in his community (Respondent A10). In another state, a leader of a 'buy fresh, buy local' chapter reported that some of her members offered imported products for sale:

[At farmers' markets], people will bring in food that was bought wholesale and they will resell it. It's misrepresentation We're trying to convince the [farm stands] that you're way more authentic, you're supporting your local economy more, if you source locally. Sometimes it's a hard sell (Respondent F8).

Rather than revoke 'buy fresh, buy local' memberships, this leader tried to work with transgressors.

In addition to lax monitoring of accepted standards, interviews with 'buy local' leaders unearthed great disparity in understanding of the definition of 'local'. In fact, our 39 interviews

revealed five families of definitions for the term (some respondents identified with more than one of these ‘local’ logics).¹⁰ Below, we identify the five families of definitions for ‘local’, and discuss the challenges involved in harmonizing them.

1. Political/ measured on a map

The most common way activists defined ‘local’ was via existing political boundaries, and /or distance in miles (often, 100 miles). In most cases, these definitions had been formally adopted by the board of the ‘Buy Fresh, Buy Local’, AMIBA, or BALLE chapter. One advantage of these definitions was apparent clarity and transparency: whether a product or business was be considered ‘local’ could be confirmed by looking at a standard map.

However, this family of standards for ‘local’ was less clear than it seemed. ‘Buy local’ organizations that adopted existing political boundaries as their standard for ‘local’ chose various demarcations, including state borders, county lines, federally-defined scenic area designations, and metropolitan statistical area groups. The result was a high degree of heterogeneity for ‘local’: some organizations promoted firms within a (small) city; others encompassed entire states where ‘local’ encompassed firms several hours’ drive away from each other. In addition, since domestic political boundaries separated people on one side of a map line from neighbors on the other side of the line, political definitions of ‘local’ could seem arbitrary, and bump up against market or social conditions. As one leader reported: “if you are in Philadelphia, there are multiple state boundaries, and multiple counties, within that given region”(Respondent B4).

Several leaders reported their organization had expanded their definition of ‘local’ to let in near neighbors. These and others adopted a standard for ‘local’ that augmented political demarcations with distance in miles: “100 miles”, “30 miles as the crow flies” or “within 50 miles of the state border” (respondents A1, A4, A9, B13). These standards, like definitions of ‘local’

¹⁰ 214 interview targets were selected randomly from website lists of chapter leaders; 37 agreed to participate and we interviewed 25 of them, a response rate of 12%. We also interviewed an addition twelve leaders, who we identified as key leaders of the ‘buy local’ movement. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded with NVIVO. Interview protocol is available from the corresponding author.

based on mileage from the point of production to the point of sale, seemed clear but would be difficult to monitor. Moreover, since many groups aimed to change local policies, including producers from different states or counties could undermine policy objectives.

2. *concentric / relative understandings*

Though their organizations may have formally adopted a clear, political/geographic standard for local, several leaders reported a more relative understanding of the term. In general, they argued that closer was better than farther: “We’re trying to encourage people, if they can’t support a locally-owned business in our community, to buy from our neighbors. For example, there are no locally-owned grocery chains [in our defined area]. The nearest grocery chain is based 85 or 90 miles away. But we’d consider them local” (Respondent A6). This group of respondents favored a concentric definition of ‘local’. These leaders realized that sourcing locally is not always feasible: “In terms of food, we try to get people to buy in Massachusetts, and then we’ll go from Massachusetts to New England. And we can get a lot – right now, 5% of our food comes from Massachusetts. But if you include New England, we can probably get that up to 20%” (Respondent B6). The leader of one ‘buy local’ organization described ‘local’ as aspirational:

If you were looking at it as a continuum – being able to purchase things that were not only sourced locally, but completely produced locally, would be absolutely the best. And absolutely the worst would be just buying it online or through a catalogue, sourcing it so that it is totally outside of the community and no benefit comes to the community (except for the fact that the goods arrived) It’s like everything in life there is hardly anything that is totally black and white (Respondent B15).

This view of ‘local’ resonated with many activists, and made sense for a movement that adherents insist must adopt positive and non-threatening messages to be successful.¹¹ The concentric view of ‘local’ seemed consistent with the mindset of AMIBA’s “10% shift”, which asks consumers to make marginal changes in where they buy. Despite the popularity of the concentric understanding of ‘local’, creating movement-wide ‘buy local’ standards based on this

¹¹ Add footnote with # of respondents who mentioned positive/ non-threatening.

logic could prove troublesome. Responsible fishing certification schemes have adopted a ‘green – yellow – red’ system to get beyond the simple black and white judgment most standards offer. But for ‘local’, a concentric understanding would be a massive challenge to codify (as production varies geographically) and even more difficult monitor.

3. *ecological/food shed based definitions*

Eight of the 38 ‘buy local’ leaders thought the definition of local should be based on ecology, and in particular, on watersheds or food sheds:

People are really trying to think more about food following the watersheds model. And, it makes sense – it just doesn’t make sense to regulate the food that’s grown within a mile of each other in very different ways just because you are across state boundaries.
(Respondent F4)

All but one of these respondents were ‘buy fresh, buy local’ leaders, indicating that local food advocates were more concerned with water and food ecology than ‘buy local’ advocates more generally. An emphasis on the natural environment, for many non-food localism advocates, was no more important than the perceived social and economic benefits of localism:

So, environmentally it makes more sense to shop at something that's geographically situated in our locale but you have to realize you know that most of that money is going out of the community and of course most of the stuff they're bringing in is imported. It's on the outside edge of what local means (Respondent A8).

As with organic foods, local food advocates who emphasized preserving the natural environment could calculate that maximizing market share via partnering with non-local mass retailers, would maximize their goals. Though none of our respondents reported favorable views of (discounter) Walmart’s forays into the ‘local’ market, one respondent did consider other, higher-end national firms as potential partners (Respondent F5). Given the emphasis throughout the ‘buy local’ movement on small scale production, a schism separating local food producers from ‘buy local’ networks like AMIBA and BALLE (which represent many small retailers) seemed unlikely. However, the fervently held views of the minority of ecologically-motivated activists suggests that converging on a single standard might be difficult.

4. *relationship/story-driven commerce*

If local food activists believed ‘local’ standards should be rooted in the physical environment, a few non-food localists advocated for a social definition of the term. These ‘buy local’ advocates echo reports of ‘Fair Trade’ activists who aimed to forge personal connections between farmers in the global South and rich world consumers: commerce, in this view, was appropriate when specific people, who know each other, benefit from the exchange:

I also look at food – how does it get to me? For example, I have wild salmon that’s caught in the Copper River in Alaska in my freezer. I consider that local, for an interesting reason. The person who catches the salmon is the sister of a guy who lives in our town. And the guy in our town does a salmon sale every year. Has his kids deliver it. His kids are all involved in choir, and music programs, and they use it as a fundraiser for the kids to go to choir camp or on a music trip. There’s a story, a local story, behind it. (Respondent B10)

Though only two of 39 respondents volunteered a relationship-based definition of ‘local’, the connections approach pervades the movement. A workshop on local, sustainable farming provided another example: the lunch caterer recited where she sourced the bread (naming a local bakery), the ham (a nearby hog farm), the lettuce (identifying the farmer). She then explained that the spices for the salad were not grown locally, but passed local muster because she bought them herself from an outdoor market in Paris.

Clearly, a relationship-based definition of ‘local’ defies codification; adherents to this position would likely push against a focus on standardization and arms-length transactions that certifications enable.

5. *moral and just*

A final definition of ‘local’ articulated by a few advocates centered on moral calculations. All ‘buy local’ advocates shared an assumption that the products they promoted were more ethical than typical offerings in large corporate stores and chain restaurants, but a small a subgroup of respondents explicitly incorporated a moral component into their definitions of ‘local’:

So it boils down to, for me, “is the farmer getting a fair price?” But it’s not that simplistic. It also has to do with, what does the supply chain look like? How far [are the animals shipped]? Is it appropriate?” (F5)

Some people say as long as it's within a day's drive. But you know I don't consider the CAFO [concentrated animal feeding operation, or factory farm] that is 3 miles down the road that won't allow you to come in and even look at the animals to be local.”
(Respondent F3)

Other respondents mentioned that consumers need to consider labor condition for workers (in Fair Trade certified products (Respondent B12)) and the carbon footprint of goods (because if a local manufacturer “may not have the greatest environmental practices in place, there's a lot of things to consider there”) (Respondent B5). Given the big tent mentality of the ‘buy local’ movement, prioritizing the movement’s values in order to determine a common standard for ‘local’ – never mind settling on specific metrics amenable to monitoring – could threaten to divide the movement.

V. Conclusions: Harmonization of ‘Local’?

If you're organizing around ‘local’, particularly local food, but also local businesses of any kind, you have to know what that means. And there is no meaningful concept or model that I'm aware of that helps define that, because they're all over the place (Respondent F3).

When it comes to what is ‘local’? -- that's where there needs to be flexibility by the local groups. . . . So that's something we feel is a decision that needs to be left up to the local community (Respondent A13).

The ‘buy local’ movement faces a dilemma: some leaders argued that the movement must standardize its definition of ‘local’ in order to increase its impact on markets and policy. As the size of the ‘local’ market grew, and corporations like Walmart and Starbucks scrambled for a share using standards much different (and weaker) than those of most activists, ‘buy local’ advocates feared co-option of the movement. As with other ‘ethical’ products, success in creating a new market risked delegitimizing the market. In theory, harmonizing activists’ standards for ‘local’ could help pre-empt co-option and reinforce a clear idea of ‘local’ in the minds of consumers.

Other activists believed local organizations needed the freedom to identify their own communities, and create their own (non-standard) definitions of ‘local’. Though ‘buy local’

advocates shared many values, individual activists differed in the priority they placed on the social and environmental goals. Given the loose organization of the three (at times competing) ‘buy local’ networks in the US, finding consensus on standards for ‘local’ that were both clear and amenable to monitoring would be difficult. As with US organic certifications and fair trade standards, a process to harmonize standards risks defining down the ethical standard – omitting or softening the environmental, social, and moral criteria contained in the existing, competing standards. Would such a tradeoff make sense?

One benefit of adopting clear standards for ‘buy local’ advocates could be clarity in the market, and in particular, transparency for consumers of ‘local’ goods. At present, it remains unclear whether and how much the existence of multiple, competing standards (including industry-sponsored standards) confuses local consumers and depresses demand for ‘local’ goods. The market for local products continues to increase in share and value, and despite advocates fears of co-option, few reports of ‘local-washing’ or local counterfeiting exist. Do shoppers believe the ‘local’ goods at upscale farmers’ markets are equivalent to ‘local’ produce at Walmart, and if so, is big box retailing eroding the price premium in ‘local’ markets? Further research is needed on this question.

However, we note that the position of ‘buy local’ advocates and producers is materially different from producers of ‘fair trade’ goods and environmentally responsible goods from developing countries, who are geographically disadvantaged. Unlike fair trade and FSC producers, ‘buy local’ producers live in their potential markets. They may be less powerful than big box retailers, national restaurant chains, and factory-style farms, but ‘buy local’ advocates are not without resources to communicate to consumers. They have more strategic options than far-flung, marginalized producers of ‘ethical’ products.

Moreover, by virtue of this proximity to their market, ‘buy local’ advocates are in a better position to differentiate their products. One mechanism for this would be to adopt and communicate higher than typical environmental or social standards (“chemical free”, or ‘picked

by workers paid a living wage', for example). A second mechanism for differentiation, stressed more and more by 'buy local' advocates, highlights the experience attributes rather than the credence attributes of local products. Advocates stress how singular it is to eat at a diner known for the world's biggest pancakes, or to benefit from the tailored service provided by an independent bookseller, or to enjoy the sweetness of the corn picked yesterday at Landis Farm. While this kind of product differentiation may provide a lasting basis for competitiveness, it also removes or obscures the 'ethical' component of the transactions.

A second potential gain from clear standards could be, for food producers, access to large retailers who distribute the lion's share of the country's food. Farm shares and farmers' markets do not offer the convenience or selection consumers have grown accustomed to from large retailers; some potential 'local' consumers might pay a premium for 'local' goods, but only if the logistics are not daunting. Just as for fair trade coffee and cacao farmers, big box outlets could be tempting to some 'local' producers. Alternative market channels for small farmers are risky, can be emotionally draining (Hinrichs, 2001), and demand marketing talent that may not be in the skill set of many excellent farmers. However, our interview data suggests that leaders of 'buy local' campaigns remain highly suspicious of large retailers, perhaps with good reason. Just as partnership with global retailers has led developing country producers to neglect their second order priorities, like supporting small firms (Hatanaka et al 2005), harmonizing standards for 'local' would likely diminish the importance of components of 'local' beyond geographic proximity. Given that many 'buy local' producers and advocates seem primarily motivated by desire reconnect communities, harmonizing standards to lower transaction costs and facilitate arm's length trading in mass retail stores seems counter to many activists' goals (see also Guthman, 2008).

Finally, harmonizing standards for 'local' might foster the 'buy local' movement's political goals. Proponents of localism aim to influence US policy at the municipal, state, and federal levels to level the playing field for local independent businesses and to foster the

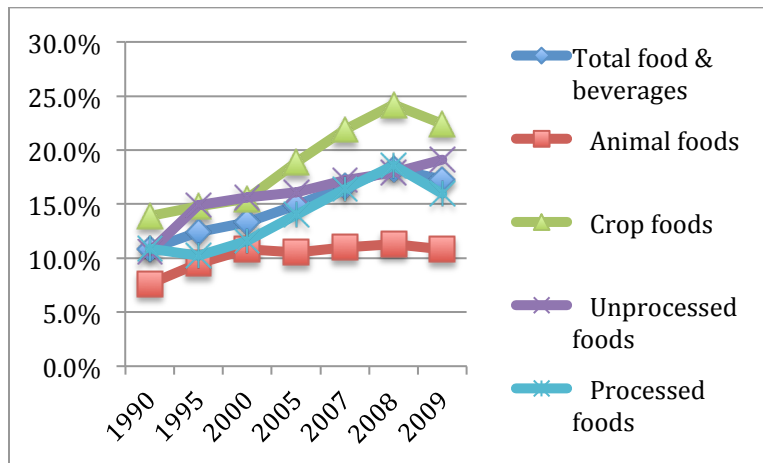
development of local food systems (interview notes). These policy goals include preferential government purchasing programs, the reduction of tax abatements for large retailers, and lowered levels of regulation for some local firms. In the 2011 Food Safety Bill, for example, local food activists lobbied for an exemption from onerous safety procedures and inspections for ‘local’ firms. In the final text of the law, the exemption applied to firms selling food within their home state and/or within 400 miles of their location (Johnson et al, 2012). As shown above, this definition would satisfy few activists outside of large mid-western states. Nonetheless, ‘buy local’ advocates may find it strategically advantageous to harmonize their definitions of ‘local’ in certain policy debates. But the experience of the organic movement suggests that a state-regulated, politically defined labeling scheme would be susceptible to co-option by powerful corporations.

In the end, maintaining multiple, somewhat amorphous standards for ‘local’ may be to the ‘buy local’ movement’s advantage. Where one critic might see a lack of transparency, another might see the benefit of such flexible institutions for evolving social movement. Ratcheting up standards, beyond merely geographically ‘local’ toward a moral understanding of ‘local’ may prove easier with more fluid institutions.

Figure 1: 'Buy Local' Labels and Certifications from Food Routes, AMIBA, and BALLE



Figure 2: Share of Imported Food in the US, by Value



Source: USDA download, 9/1/2012

Figure 3: Willingness-to-Pay Price Premiums for ‘Local’ Products

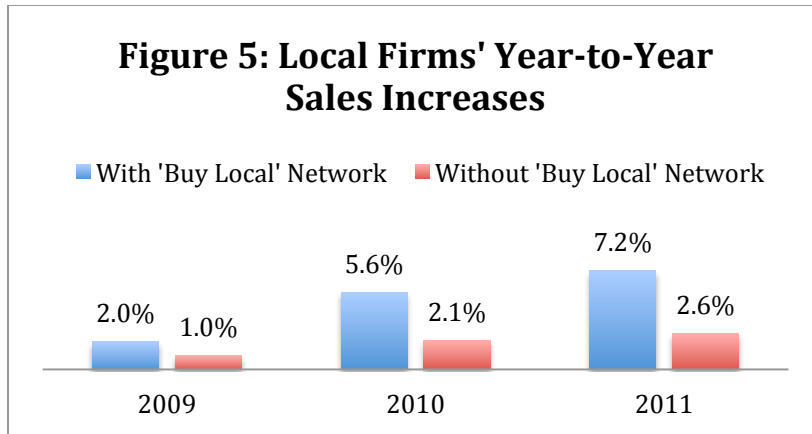
	% Premium
Colorado potatoes	9
Ohio Strawberries	27
Michigan greens	36
South Carolina produce	27
South Carolina animal products	23
Florida fresh produce	50
PA applesauce	31

Source: Martinez, 2010.

Figure 4: Selected Large Retail Sellers of ‘Local’ Foods

Store	Definition of ‘local’	Extent of ‘local’ marketing
Walmart	Grown and available for purchase within state borders.	\$400 million in locally grown produce. During summer season, locally-sourced produce accounts for one-fifth of produce available.
Whole Foods	‘locally grown’ – less than seven hours by truck	\$100M low interest loans to small scale local producers
Kroger	Not defined	Local produce sourced in June, July, and August. Field inspectors examine produce in fields near store to ensure quality and sanitation guidelines are followed.
Safeway	“Regional” growing partners	Reported as part of CSR accounting
Meijer	Not defined	30 percent of produce are local during peak season.

Source: Park and Gomez, 2011.



Source: Institute for Local Self-Reliance, 2011.

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