

The Ecopolitics Podcast 3.6: Is the Local a Romantic Eco-Myth: A Critical Appraisal of 'Thinking Globally, Acting Locally'
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Hosts: Ryan Katz-Rosene and Peter Andrée

Guests: Navin Ramankutty, and Ken Meter

Summary: *Does the environmentalist motto, 'Think Globally, Act Locally', point us towards sustainable food systems' solutions? In this episode, Dr. Navin Ramankutty from UBC and Ken Meter from the Crossroads Resource Centre in Minneapolis explore whether locally produced foods, provided by small-scale farmers, are inherently more sustainable than that which comes from larger producers many miles away. The discussion suggests that scale and proximity are not necessarily correlated with better environmental performance across the board, but that there are still good reasons for building strong food systems at the community level, and ensuring that small scale farmers can earn a sustainable livelihood.*

Navin Ramankutty (00:00):

We need to move to what some people call a circular economy, where our system is more tightly connected, where the waste becomes nutrients for growing crops and so on. And we have lost it with going to a global food system. But it's not the case that eating locally will solve all our problems, but you know local food systems can have benefits.

Ryan Katz-Rosene (00:25):

Hello and welcome to the Ecopolitics Podcast, mini-season three: Everyday Ecopolitics." This is a podcast for university students tackling some of the key questions and challenges in the field of environmental politics. I'm Ryan Katz-Rosene from the University of Ottawa, and my co-host for the show, Dr. Peter Andrée, is here as well. How's it going, Peter?

Peter Andrée (00:48):

I'm doing really well Ryan. Thanks. I'm really looking forward today to digging into the environmental politics of food systems again. You know, we've come back to this theme a number of times in our series, and today we're looking at questions of, as well as the debate about, the benefits and maybe the drawbacks of local versus global supply chains.

Ryan Katz-Rosene (01:09):

That's right. So indeed, our focus today is on scale. And the overarching question we're bringing to our guests in this episode is: Is small-scale local production an environmental solution or a romantic eco-myth? So there's a lot of ways we can tackle this question, but we decided to engage with it through the lens of agriculture and food systems, both because this is a field we both work in as co-hosts and as well because it's an area where this question comes up a lot.

Ryan Katz-Rosene (01:39):

For example, in April of 2021, the UN Food and Agricultural Organization, the FAO, put out a report saying that small-scale farmers, and that's defined as farmers growing food on less than two hectares, produce about 35% of the food consumed in. So while this data point shows that small scale food

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production is a big deal, the reports still generated a lot of controversy and pushback from civil society organizations and governments who believe small scale producers need to be considered as a more central, you know, as more central players in the global food system. Some of these organizations like GRAIN, The Oakland Institute and the ETC Group and, and Peter, that's a group that's based, not too far from where you and I live. So it's over in Val-David, Quebec. These groups often cite a statistic repeated by some of our guests on earlier podcasts that small-scale producers produce more like 70% of the world's food, but they do so with only 30% of the resources. The implication, and this way of looking at the question, is that small-scale producers tend to be more efficient, both economically and in ecological terms. And indeed, a previous FAO report from 2014 stated that nine out of 10 of the world's 570 million farmers were family farms and that they produced about 80% of the world's food.

Ryan Katz-Rosene (02:29):

So, as you can kind of tell, at the heart of this debate is what's considered a small farmer? How do we define small farmer? How do we define family farm? And it's important to note that in these reports that I just mentioned, those terms are not really defined the same way, and their definitions have changed over time. And this relates to the question of whether certain scales of production, large versus small and so on, are more sustainable than others. And we're going to get into these questions in much greater depth and detail today.

Peter Andrée (03:43):

That's right, Ryan. We also want to get into the question of whether shorter supply chains are a better way of achieving sustainability. So environmentalists have long used the expression, I think you've heard it a lot, "think globally, act locally." In the realm of food systems, environmentalists often encourage us to buy local, like support your local farmers through farmer's markets, as an example, as a way to build resilient local economies that involve fewer, what is sometimes termed, food miles associated with the distance food travels.

Peter Andrée (04:15):

So, they point out that the food in our supermarkets can travel thousands of miles and that the transportation of that food can incur huge environmental costs. On the other hand, there are people like University of Toronto geographer Pierre Desrochers who argues that there are actually huge environmental benefits associated with scale and that the distance that food travels can also not be as bad as environmentalists can portray it.

Peter Andrée (04:43):

So, he's got a book called *The Locavore's Dilemma*, this sort of homage to Michael Pollan there, and with a subtitle: "in praise of the 10,000 miles diet." In which he argues that transport impacts are actually rather small for most foods and that the benefits of having access to diverse foods from around the world outweigh the costs, both economic and ecological.

Peter Andrée (05:05):

So, this brings us back to the question that we're asking today. Is small-scale, local production an environmental solution, or a romantic eco-myth?

Ryan Katz-Rosene (05:17):

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That's right. And I'm excited to get into these questions of scale and supply chain distances with two experts who come at these questions from quite different perspectives. So let's take a minute for our two guests to tell us a little bit more about themselves, starting with Dr. Navin Ramankutty.

Navin Ramankutty (05:33):

My name is Navin Ramankutty. I'm a professor at the University of British Columbia. My work is on studying sustainable land and food systems. I essentially try to understand what makes a farm, a farming system, or farming characteristics more sustainable.

Navin Ramankutty (05:50):

In my work, I use data and models. I essentially say we have all these claims or beliefs about what makes farming more sustainable. My students and I work with collecting data and putting together models to see what does the data tell us about those things?

Ryan Katz-Rosene (06:06):

Excellent. Well, we're really pleased to have you with us today, Navin, and our second guest is Ken Meter.

Ken Meter (06:13):

My name is Ken Meter, and I'm the director of Crossroads Resource Center, that's a nonprofit research and consulting firm in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I've had an amazing experience in the last 20 years to visit and work with about 144 regions across the United States, two Canadian provinces, and also for tribal sovereignty projects, primarily focused on the economics of food systems and understanding the underlying economics that really drives a lot of our decisions about food and some of the mythology we have about economics as well. In April, I came up with a book called Building Community Food Webs, published by Island Press. And it summarizes some of the key themes that I've run across in my work and also highlights eight, really very interesting profiles of community food system efforts that really take a very broad, comprehensive view of reshaping our food system.

Ryan Katz-Rosene (07:06):

Well, thanks, Ken. We're really glad to have both of you joining us for this discussion, and we're going to get straight into the first topic of our discussion. So, as I mentioned earlier, there's this debate about scale of production and food systems and whether either small or large scale production is inherently more sustainable than the other. And at the heart of this is a debate about, you know, the definition of scale, small-scale and large-scale.

Ryan Katz-Rosene (07:32):

So Navin, starting with you, from your perspective, how do you characterize the different food production systems in the world, in terms of what it actually means to talk about small-scale or even local, or family farm production?

Navin Ramankutty (07:48):

Yeah, that's a great question, Ryan. There is no single good definition. There are many different ways of defining what is a small scale. I can discuss a few of those. The simplest way may be to just start with

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size. And so, people talk about how many hectares or acres of farm is small. Globally, a number that's often used is a farm less than two hectares. But that's obviously very context dependent. If you use that definition in Brazil, you know, only 20% of the farms will be small, but if you use the same number in India, something like 80% of the farms will be considered small. So another way to do it is to do them relatively, to define the size of a farm that's small country by country.

Navin Ramankutty (08:31):

Another way people do it is by economic terms. So, for example, in Canada, they use economic receipts to define small, like the smallest definition is something like less than \$10,000 is considered small.

Navin Ramankutty (08:43):

Another way to do it might be through ownership. You mentioned this earlier, we might define small-scale as being whether it's family-owned or not. You might also look at subsistence, so there are many different ways to define small, and there is no consensus definition of what this is.

Ryan Katz-Rosene (09:03):

Well, that's a really good lay of the land of a couple of different ways to interpret that definition. And I appreciate starting off with that, that definition. I'm going to turn to Ken; you work mostly in the context of the US food system. What do you think of when you hear the term small-scale or local or family farm production?

Ken Meter (09:23):

Well, I think there are several issues in that question. First of all, I really focus on the entire food system, which in my work, I have discovered that the size of the farm is really dictated in many ways by the infrastructure that the economy has created through public policy. And I'm much more concerned about having food systems that are accountable to the people who live inside the system and inside that geographic region.

Ken Meter (09:48):

I would also say that, you know, one of the reasons that the counts we have about how many, how important small farms are, are different is that most of the commodity farms in the United States are essentially producing raw materials for industrial processing, not strictly food for humans to eat directly. And I think we get confused because we count commodities as food items when often, you know, it's livestock destined for a slaughterhouse and processing at an industrial scale. And that makes small farms very inefficient.

Ken Meter (10:18):

But I would also say that while we need the commodities, most food that's really meant for human consumption directly is primarily grown in smaller settings. Some of it's transported a long ways, and I agree that the transportation costs themselves are not all that expensive. But really, it turns out to be the most expensive part of the process is when I go to a store and drive in a big car, it's consuming fossil fuels and bring groceries back home. That's actually the most – one of the most expensive parts of the process. So it also is a matter of how far the consumers are from the stores and from the farms.

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Ken Meter (10:53):

I would also say that in a healthy food system, we need small farms run by families because if you want new farmers, they have to be able to start at a small scale. Very few people can start by introducing a very large farm. And so if you think about the whole system, you think of a system which has entry points that are small, that has mid-sized farms that are healthy and commercially viable, and larger farmers that can have efficiencies as well. And you might have all of those in a healthy food system.

Ryan Katz-Rosene (11:21):

I appreciate those thoughts as well. And it gives us a sense of maybe the heterogeneity in a food system and what you're calling a healthy food system overall, which we'll get into a little bit later as well. You also mentioned efficiency, and I'm wondering your thoughts. Starting with Ken, you know, it's commonly asserted that large-scale systems of production are more efficient. Do you think that's true? And what does efficiency really mean in that?

Ken Meter (11:50):

That's really a great question, Ryan. I think what I would say about that is that we don't have food systems very, very efficient for local food transport. Again, you can certainly produce more food per dollar or per unit of input if you have a large-scale farm. But the efficiencies that drive a single farm or a single food processing firm are different than the efficiencies a community faces.

Ken Meter (12:15):

One of the terms that economists use just to distinguish between is the economics of scale and economics of scope. Technically as economies of size, where you realize efficiencies by getting larger and being able to reduce your cost per unit. Those are very real and very valid, but also having one large farm or one large food business in a community is not efficient for the community itself. I really think the economics of scope is much more interesting in the community side because you have small farms, small food businesses, appropriate infrastructure that creates local efficiencies that can trade together, and they create efficiency by coordinating well by sharing information transparently by building trust with each other.

Ryan Katz-Rosene (12:58):

Well, thank you for that. I'm going to ask the same question to Navin cause I know there was a pretty influential paper that you were, I believe you were a co-author on about this very question. What's your response to the fundamental question of whether large-scale systems of production are more efficient? Is that true?

Navin Ramankutty (13:17):

I mean, the simplest way to define efficiency might be to say we get more for less, but it gets pretty complicated on what – based on what kinds of metrics we use to measure efficiency. So, you know, typically, economists would measure efficiency based on the amount of receipts, the amount of money you make compared to the amount of money you put into doing the farming.

Navin Ramankutty (13:39):

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But ecologists or environmentalists might look at efficiency in a different way. They might look at, you know, how much harm is being done to the environment compared to the amount of food we get from agricultural production.

Navin Ramankutty (13:50):

So there are many different ways of looking at efficiency. In the publication that you just mentioned, we try to look at several different factors. We essentially tried to compare smaller farms to larger farms across yields, which is how much production happens per unit area. We try to look at greenhouse gas emissions from small versus large. Greenhouse gas emissions, which caused climate change. We'll try to look at biodiversity in two different ways. We looked at both crop diversity, so the kind of biodiversity within the farm, but also how much biodiversity exists, other kinds of animals and plants in farms. We also tried to look at resource use efficiency, which is how are the resources being used in small versus large farms and we didn't find too many clear results. We did find that in our study, at least that smaller farms seem to have higher yields, which is actually not very surprising. Lots of studies have shown that over the last 50 years or so, but we also found that smaller farms seem to have more biodiversity. We did not find much evidence for any of the other metrics that I mentioned.

Ryan Katz-Rosene (14:56):

And Ken, when you hear Navin talking about this is what comes to your mind?

Ken Meter (15:01):

Well, I think I really like what Navin is saying. It's a much more complicated field, than often our studies have really reflected, and I really endorse what Navin has said. I think what I could add to that is that I did a review of studies in the literature a number of years ago. This is probably 15 years ago now, so things may have changed since then, but not only found that small farms with basically a family-run farm with maybe perhaps one employee were the most efficient scale.

Ken Meter (15:32):

The other thing that was sort of striking is that most of these studies that talked about larger farms being more efficient were actually model studies. You know, someone statistically wrote a program to measure the efficiency of the farm, and there was a terrific chance for that to be shaped by the assumptions of the person doing the model more than the reality of what's happening on the ground.

Ryan Katz-Rosene (15:54):

Ken, can you elaborate a little bit more on that final point you just made about the assumptions going into that?

Ken Meter (16:00):

Well, you know, I think, you know, my experience was modeling is that models often are very helpful, very useful, but, of course, they never reflect reality totally. So every model is a simplification, and models are good if they're useful, but they're never a perfect representation of reality.

Ken Meter (16:19):

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And every time you model something, you sort of have the chance for the person doing the model to input assumptions. Often the models reflect the assumptions made by the modeler more than what's happening on the ground. So it struck me that the studies I looked at, at the time, and we've had much more studies that I have not been able to see since then. The ones that concluded the scale was always more efficient were all studies where someone had crunched numbers on a computer and concluded that size made it more efficient. But that introduces the possibility that those results came because the person doing the modeling simply assumed that, that efficiency would be there and built that into the model they created.

Ryan Katz-Rosene (17:03):

That's quite interesting. So what I'm hearing from both of you to a certain extent is on one level, there's an enormous amount of complexity in even just trying to define scale – terms like scale and efficiency. There's a tremendous amount of heterogeneity between small and large and, and what is in between those two and how do we define them. And also in terms of our knowledge about the systems, and how we come to understand them and the different sort of modeling that goes into interpreting these definitions. I'm hoping that we can kind of dig in a little bit further.

Ryan Katz-Rosene (17:39):

I know Peter has some questions to follow up that get into maybe some of the more specific dynamics about local food systems and their environmental impacts. So Peter, on to you.

Peter Andrée (17:49):

Thanks, Ryan. You know what I was hearing from both Navin and Ken is that maybe we have the question wrong here. So I'm going to ask them in a second how they would frame the question because we started asking about, you know, small scale or large scale, which is better. You know, are local systems really better than global systems. And what I'm hearing is how we define these terms really matters. What I heard from Ken is there's a role of public policy in shaping the systems that we have that are so different, and so we need to think about that.

Peter Andrée (18:25):

But what I also heard from Ken is this idea that maybe there's a place for different sizes of production units within healthy food systems. And then what I heard from Navin around the sort of the ecological and environmental sort of comparisons of different scales is that there aren't necessarily clear cut answers, or if they are, they tend to be biased towards the smaller scale units being more efficient in terms of production, presumably per unit of size, and also in terms of biodiversity and so on.

Peter Andrée (18:58):

So I'm going to throw out the script a little bit here and turn to, to both our guests and kind of say, you know, how would you define the issues that we should thinking about when we ask this question of what does a sustainable food system look like?

Ken Meter (19:16):

I think that's a really good way to shift the conversation, Peter. I think it really helps a lot to kind of ask a more open-ended question. And obviously, I think that I'm agreeing with Navin's analysis quite a bit.

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Ken Meter (19:29):

My sense is that the language that I'm hearing people using now is more around having a resilient food system or even a regenerative food system. Scale is sort of one factor in that, but it's not the determining factor. It's really sort of more of a choice we get to make place by place because planning a food system in India is very different than planning a food system in France, is very different from planning and food system in Ontario. And so the question becomes, according to each place where people are putting their heads together to plan foods, what is the most efficient thing to do to get to a resilient food system for that locale, for that geographic area. And I think to me, that's the more open-ended and more complicated question, but I think it's also a very good one to be asking.

Ken Meter (20:10):

I would also take a challenge to that – we've sort of talked about the term supply chain a little bit too. And what I've, I've had this discussion with my colleagues for a number of years, and it's never really been fully satisfied, but a lot of my colleagues use the term supply chain because it's the industry standard and a lot of industries talk about the way food moves from farm to wholesalers, to consumers as a supply chain. I've always felt uncomfortable with that terminology, partly because it suggests a linear flow. When in fact, every food system I've been part of is a very complicated network. It's changing rapidly. It's by no means a single line. And I also dislike the imagery of a chain because, to me, it resonates with slavery. And it suggests that one person on one end of the chain or one business on one end of the chain can pull the chain and yank the other one into what they want to have done.

Ken Meter (21:10):

So I'm really trying to work on language a little bit, but also not simply to be politically correct, but to be more effective in doing this work, to really talk about value networks. And also, that kind of leads into the term community food webs, which I've used in my book. That understanding that these are complex and changing and the understanding that multiple players at different scales all work together or they don't, that really invites a much more difficult conversation, but I think a much more accurate one reflecting the reality we face.

Peter Andrée (21:43):

Thanks, Ken. That's really interesting. And I want to ask some follow-ups based on the kind of work you do around what resilience in food systems in the US can look like. But I want to turn it to you first, Navin. What do you see as the main considerations that need to come into the conversation about whether a given food system is sustainable or resilient? How would you characterize what we should be talking about?

Navin Ramankutty (22:08):

That's a really good question, Peter. And I think it is good that we are shifting the conversation a little bit, and I have to agree with a lot of what was said before, which is Ken's comment that we may need to think about these issues from place to place differently.

Navin Ramankutty (22:26):

The food system is complex. The world is complex. And we always strive to find simple answers to a complex system. A few years ago, you know, I got fascinated by this question of whether small is

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beautiful and asking the question of whether smaller farms are better. And after having thought about that for a few years now, I'm not really sure whether that's the right question.

Navin Ramankutty (22:48):

In the worst case it is just one of many different possible solutions to making the food system more sustainable. Another way to think about it, as Ken pointed out, is that in different parts of the world, we have different kinds of farms that exist, and all of them need to be sustainable, whether they are small or whether they're big. And of course, there are historical legacies of why these things have happened and possibly historical injustices that need to be dealt with. But in all cases, instead of trying to find a single kind of solution, we can start looking at, you know, what kind of context are we in? And within that context, how can we make larger farms more sustainable, but also smaller farms more sustainable, more profitable and so on.

Navin Ramankutty (23:32):

In the world as a whole, about 85% of all the world's farms are considered small in the sense that they're less than two hectares. That's a lot of people, and those smallholder farmers, especially in developing countries, are some of the poorest people on the planet as well. So purely from a humanitarian perspective, I feel that we have to support smallholders in, in their livelihoods. Whatever that may be. I mean, some of them may choose to transition out of farming, but if they want to remain in farming, we do have to provide them with some development support. And the other side, we also have environmental and social objectives. So we might want to think about a system context by context in terms of finding more sustainable solution.

Peter Andrée (24:17):

Thank you, Navin. This is a really interesting conversation, and I think I'm going to turn back to Ken, drawing on some of what Navin just said, because Navin was talking about smallholder farmers and kind of how they are such a big part of the farming community globally, and they deserve a place in the food system.

Peter Andrée (24:38):

And I was thinking about, you know, previous conversations I've had with you, Ken, in which you've discussed how family farm in the United States, some of which are huge, are really having, having a difficult time these days. And you know, just from an economic perspective, how some of them are moving out of commodities and moving back into producing food for communities.

Peter Andrée (25:02):

I'm just sort of, my mind is going down this path because I'd like to get a sense from you of what you see as a resilient or community-based food system in the US context and how that fits into this conversation?

Ken Meter (25:17):

You know, the irony of the US food system is that a lot of our farmers in the United States claim that we're feeding the world, and yet hunger is increased. Farm income has decreased. And even though farmers have doubled productivity, and become massive and the amount of food sold has increased

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over the last 100 years. Actually, there's been more and more wealth taken out of rural America by the economic structures that commodity farmers sell into. It's really a set of tragedies that we are so mystified about the role that our commodity farming plays in the global system and that we, we sort of confuse the fact that we have large combines, large tractors, thousands of acres per field that are producing very efficiently. But all of the outcomes you'd want a food system to really attain are not being met. So that's really striking.

Ken Meter (26:11):

I also think about a trip I had to Europe in 1984, where in the post-war years, I learned Italy had done a remarkable job of making sure that farms of about two hectars were able to make a living with two hectars. They had a subsidy system, they had protections which allow very small farmers to be commercially viable and support families. In the United States, we made a very different decision, which was to support large-scale production of commodities at the expense of rural communities. And I think that what really dictates the outcomes in my view is the infrastructure we create through public policy and the habits we have and the ways we do trading that, those overwhelm, you know, the efficiency of a single farm or, you know, a single operation or a single business. It's really a matter of our social priorities. If we believe that we need small farms, because we think of a food system that has small farms is more accountable to consumers, we will get that if we support it with proper policy. If we believe that raw scale is the answer, which is what the United States has tended to believe, then we will get that. And we are now suffering from the outcomes of that decision.

Peter Andrée (27:22):

Thanks, Ken. And I just want to turn it to Navin and get his thoughts on what you've just said.

Navin Ramankutty (27:27):

Yeah. I just wanted to follow up when something Ken said, you know, when we talk about agriculture, we often equate that with food systems, but something Ken just said about the US agriculture makes a lot of sense. Like on our world's farms, people are not really growing food. They're growing commodities; they're growing crops. And as we know globally, about 30% of all the grain that's produced is not going to humans. It's going to feed animals that then we later eat. A lot of the commodities are used for making industrial products biofuels and so on. So crop production and food production are not, not necessarily the same thing. I think Ken really pointed that out very nicely.

Peter Andrée (28:10):

Navin, I'd like to ask one more question of you before passing it on to Ryan. We are both comfortable with saying these are very complex questions. And yet earlier on, Navin, you were also saying, you know, we have to remember the important role that small producers play globally. And I'm thinking back to the FAO report that Ryan mentioned off the top that suggested that maybe pay less attention to small-scale farmers. That was the way some people interpreted that report. I'm wondering what would your advice be to the FAO about where small-scale producers – subsistence producers, the role they play in sustainable food systems moving forward?

Navin Ramankutty (28:53):

Thanks, Peter. That's a really good question. And I must admit that I've been struggling with this question for the last several months, following up on the studies I've done on this question. The

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question is really about whether small farmers contribute disproportionately to global public goods. Our studies seem to suggest that even though we estimated that small farmers only produce 30% of the world's food, they do so on much smaller amounts of – they do seem to have benefits for biodiversity. And so, if they're producing global public goods from a public policy perspective, we should be supporting them.

Navin Ramankutty (29:31):

But even if that's controversial, I, I keep going back to the humanitarian perspective that I mentioned earlier, which is that most of the world's poorest people are also farmers, and that's a tragedy. And so, we need to be supporting them from a humanitarian perspective. Our study also shows that if you purely look at it from a perspective of, you know, not the total global production, but if you ask how much food do smallholders produce compared to large holders. So you compare a small farm to a large farm, the kinds of crops that smallholders grow are food crops versus the kind of crops that are large farmer grows, which are more feed crops. Similarly, we find that food waste is higher in a larger farm than in a smaller farm. So there are lots of benefits possibly for smallholders, but ultimately we also have to remember that there are some of the poorest people on the planet.

Navin Ramankutty (30:19):

So from a policy perspective, I would say we do need to focus on them. There are still a lot of unknown questions about what does our current public policy support. For example, subsidies. Are most of our subsidy is going to support smallholders or large holders? I don't think we know the answers to those questions, but those are the kinds of questions we need to be.

Peter Andréé (30:37):

This has been a really interesting segment. What I'm hearing from you, Navin, you know, it's interesting that you brought in the point that many of the poorest people in the world are also smallholder farmers. And so there, you know, that becomes a public policy question that needs to be in the mix as we think about these questions of sustainable food systems.

Peter Andréé (30:59):

And then what I was hearing from Ken is from the US context, you know, many of the commodity-producing large farms are not making it economically within that system. And, and for them, there are good reasons to turn towards maybe different scales of production or shorter supply chain.

Peter Andréé (31:18):

So, you know, just both of you, again, adding more complexity to this discussion today. I'm going to pass it over to Ryan to get some of what he's thinking and for a last round of questions.

Ryan Katz-Rosene (31:31):

Sure. I'm just going to make the comment that one thing I also really struggle with is what to do with the nature of a discussion that seems to suggest this is complicated. This is nuanced. This is something that we can't just say definitively one form of agriculture is, is more quote "sustainable" than another. From a policy or a political perspective, how do you kind of reconcile that need for what I would call agri-food pluralism, and the value that agri-food pluralism provides? And how you reconcile that with the need to

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really transition to more sustainable food systems and to confront problems that various corners of the food studies crowd have identified?

Ryan Katz-Rosene (32:21):

You know, we previously heard how a large chunk of agricultural production in some parts of the world, goes towards things like the industrial, you know, animal feed sector and an even bigger chunk maybe goes towards a biofuel production in some commodity context. You know, who am I, as some, somebody who's thinking about these questions or, or anyone else to go in and say, you big time, commodity corn producer, who's catering to, you know, large scale industrial feed markets for animal agriculture like you need to change what you're doing. How do I confront that with the need for, you know, this value that we're placing on agri-food pluralism? And maybe that's something we can turn to later on.

Ryan Katz-Rosene (33:05):

But I want to first ask a question about proximity. We've been talking a lot about size, but we haven't addressed so much the local dimension here. And that's part of the question, the theme for today. So what would you guys say – somebody comes up to you, they know you have expertise in this field, and they say, is it really true that if I go and support my local farmer's market, that, that's a more sustainable type of food that I'm supporting?

Ken Meter (33:35):

Well, I hear that discussion a lot when I'm going around the communities that I work with, and I know a number of farmers, who used to sell at farmer's market, who found that there wasn't enough business there and they decided to go to wholesaling because they could make more money. And there's a real question in many small communities, whether there are enough farmers to supply a farmer's market or enough consumers with enough spending power to support farmers that are at farmer's market. So that's a very interesting conundrum.

Ken Meter (34:24):

I think at the same time, farmer's markets play multiple roles. It's not simply a place where you buy fresh produce. By going to a farmer's market, you get to meet your neighbors. You get to meet the farmer personally. So you actually have a sense of who that farmer is, or you can ask them about their practices directly.

Ken Meter (34:24):

For a lot of farmers markets are places where small food businesses get their start. And they flourished because they make direct connection with a few customers, and that allows them to open up a bigger facility and supply a bigger market. Often the farmers themselves talk with each other at the farmer's market, and it starts getting a sense of what's happening with their economy. And often, a farmer's market is a place that makes farmers visible to policymakers. So all those things happen in a farmer's market.

Ken Meter (34:53):

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You have multiple benefits from shopping at that farmer's market. The food is generally going to be fresher for sure. But you would only know that if you know the farmer and know how close they are. I can routinely buy fresh enough lettuce that comes from California. It's been shipped for 24, 48 hours before it gets to the store, and I don't know how long it's been since I got there. It's actually fairly good, healthy food in many respects. But I get something else out of buying direct from a farmer that I know, and I have a better sense of how to calculate whether I'm getting what I need when I'm having those conversations right, directly, with people who are proximate to me.

Ryan Katz-Rosene (35:34):

And what do you answer to this question, Navin, when you get asked?

Navin Ramankutty (35:38):

I like a lot of what Ken said. I mean, I think this whole controversy started with the idea of food miles and climate miles. So people started talking about the a hundred mile diet. The idea was that a lot of our foods move around the world and that a lot of greenhouse gas emissions occur when we ship our food around the world. And that if you ate from within a hundred miles, then you reduce your climate impact. But that has been challenged, and lots of studies have rightly shown that most of the emissions occur on the farm and not through transportation. And so this food miles idea that by eating locally would help climate change that's been I think shown not to be true.

Navin Ramankutty (36:27):

But on the flip side, that does not mean local food systems don't have benefits, as Ken pointed out. You know, I think by going to a farmer's market, people get more engaged with their food or engage with the food system. They don't think anymore that food comes from a grocery store. They realize where their food comes from. They get maybe more politically engaged to think about climate change or food system sustainability.

Navin Ramankutty (36:43):

So I think a local food system can have benefits. Local food system also has benefits of connecting sort of production to impacts. So, you know, on a global food system, you may produce food in Brazil that causes tropical deforestation, and you're eating it here in North America, and you're, as a consumer, completely disconnected from where the impacts happen. But if the impacts happen locally, maybe you'll be more connected to that system.

Peter Andrée (37:10):

Thanks, Navin and Ken. This has been a really interesting discussion today. Unfortunately, time has caught up with us, and so we're gonna wrap it up, but I have to say that I feel like we actually came to a bit of an answer. You know, notwithstanding Ryan saying with all this complexity, how do we know what to say to public policymakers. But, you know, I feel like we've actually come to a bit of an answer. If public policy over the, you know, certainly in the post-war era, both in North America and globally has gone towards efficiencies of scale and favoring large scale industrial production and commodity production what I'm hearing from this conversation today is while there may be some benefits in certain ways to those systems overall we've tipped the balance too far in that direction.

Peter Andrée (38:10):

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There is a place for small-scale and local production. That thinking globally and acting locally, and supporting local farmers' markets have myriad benefits. And so there's a place for public policy to think about supporting those scales and those types of producers moving onwards for a variety of economic, environmental, and social reasons.

Peter Andrée (38:21):

That's my takeaway. And I didn't know we'd come to a pretty clear answer on that. I have to say, I want to ask both of you whether you think I'm right and I'd love to continue the conversation, but I actually know that we're at the end of our podcasts. And so, I just want to say thank you to both Ken and Navin for joining us today.

Navin Ramankutty (38:46):

Thanks, Peter and Ryan. And again, this was a great conversation. Here, here, Peter, on the last thing you said, I agree about your synthesis. Really nicely done.

Ken Meter (38:55):

I really have enjoyed talking with all of you. And, and I think what I would just add in the final it is that the complexity we're facing isn't in fact, a reflection of how big our systems have become, and the scale is creating the problems that we're having trouble unpacking.

Ryan Katz-Rosene (39:10):

Okay. Well, thanks for adding that, Ken, and it's been great to chat with you and with Navin as well. Thank you guys so much for joining us.

Ryan Katz-Rosene (39:19):

With that, I'm gonna turn it over to our listeners now. Get in touch let us know what you think on these issues that we've discussed in today's episode. Is small-scale local production an environmental solution, or is it a romantic eco myth?

Ryan Katz-Rosene (39:33):

We're also curious to hear whether you think the way we discuss these issues in the context of the food system translates to other systems? Whether it's transportation, how we get our other consumer goods or the houses we live in and materials these are built from, how does scale ownership, structure, and length of supply chain matter when it comes to the resilience and sustainability of our economy?

Ryan Katz-Rosene (39:56):

So let us know what you think. You can get in touch with us on Twitter. We're @EcopoliticsP. That's Eco politics P with a capital P at the end of it and check out the artwork and additional resources we've put together for each and every episode at our website that's ecopoliticspodcast.ca.

Ryan Katz-Rosene (40:13):

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