

THE CURRENT STATUS AND POTENTIAL OF LOCAL FOOD IN SOUTH KOREA

Man-Chul Jung and David Pearson

Food Matters Research Program, University of Canberra

Abstract

Due to the deterioration of small-scale agriculture in rural regions, and increasing concerns over population health, the local food movement in South Korea has recently attracted interest from many local governments and non-governmental organisations. This paper examines its potential to address some of the social and environmental challenges associated with current forms of food provisioning.

This includes an assessment of farmers' markets, school meals, box schemes, and traditional markets. It concludes with identification of six issues that need to be managed for local food to continue expanding in South Korea. These being: reducing ambiguity surrounding the meaning of local food; greater sharing of production risks with consumers; improving co-ordination of government involvement; increasing up-take of appropriate production methods such as organic; maintaining opportunities for diversity of local food producers including small-scale family farmers; and finally, embracing local food sales in dominant retail outlets such as supermarkets.

Keywords

Local food, South Korea, farmers markets, school meals, box schemes, traditional markets

Introduction

Since the 1970s, the South Korean agricultural sector has undergone significant structural changes, profoundly affecting the country's landscape and people. Prior to the 1970s a significant proportion of the population were suffering from poverty which included extreme hunger for many. In order to address this, production and consumption self-sufficiency in the staple product of rice was set as a priority by the National Government. Through development of high-yield rice varieties and more intensive cultivation techniques South Korea achieved self-sufficiency in rice less than a decade later. This contributed to forming a platform for rapid economic development that has continued into the current era.

The food system in South Korea is now dominated by global companies with production characterised by large scale, single cropping, and intensive chemical use. Food is now abundant, due to both increased domestic agricultural production and the import of a variety of foreign food products. At present, the calorific self-sufficiency rate is 50 per cent, meaning that around half of South Korea's food is imported (Kim et al., 2011).

These changes to production and distribution have had a profound impact on peoples' diets; rice consumption has decreased while more wheat and meat is consumed. For example, annual per capita rice consumption has decreased to almost half over last 15 years (1985 to 2010) from 128kg to 71kg, while pork and beef consumption nearly tripled from 11kg to 28kg (Kim et al., 2011). Today many South Korean's are now relying more on fast and processed foods, and some are even suffering from obesity.

Whilst food availability has improved, communities in some rural regions have suffered. Traditional forms of food production and consumption – which tend to rely on local products, recipes, and culture (Kim, 2010b) – have been undermined by the industrialisation and urbanisation associated with the global food system. In addition, small-scale family farms, which make up the majority of the rural population, are struggling to maintain financial viability. The main cause being

limited access to suitable distribution channels, and associated buyers, for their production. There are also new burdens for the environment (Byun, 2009; Rosset, 2000). The shift to large commercial farms and long-distance transportation has meant that energy use has increased. As has the reliance on commercial pesticides and fertilisers which not only have detrimental impacts on the environment, but are also linked to soil fertility problems (Kim, 2011). In addition, the large amount of manure produced by concentrated livestock activities requires careful management to avoid negative impacts on water and soil quality (Byun, 2009).

Globally, the strengthening of local food production, and its associated distribution networks, has been proposed as a viable way of countering the negative consequences of the increasingly industrialised food system (Feenstra, 1997; Pearson et al., 2011a). In South Korea, the idea of local food was not discussed until relatively recently. In the mid 2000s the desire to resist the negative consequences of the global food system then dominating the South Korean food market; and the desire to secure stable incomes for small family farms sparked renewed conversations.

The focus of this paper is on a food distribution approach—being local, rather than the production method—such as organic. Although it is recognised that in many cases local food is organic, and some consumers value this. In order to investigate the role of local food in South Korea, this paper examines issues arising from different understandings of local food. It then summarises the origins of the Korean local food movement from two perspectives: the sociological and the agricultural economic. The former is based on concerns related to food security and safety, and the need to prevent the collapse of agricultural communities under the global food system. The latter focuses on the practical elements of how local food could function as a complementary distribution system (also referred to as alternative) and hence be able to provide stable incomes for small family farms. Examples of activities undertaken by the local food movement in South Korea are then discussed and evaluated. These activities include: farmers' markets, school meals, box schemes, and traditional markets. This analysis provides an indication to policy makers of the most appropriate avenues for the expansion of local food. Finally, key challenges and future directions for the local food movement in South Korea are discussed.

Background Discourses on Local Food Systems

Defining local food

To date, many studies have demonstrated that local food systems can offer a practical and enduring alternative to much larger scale operations, often organised by multinational corporations with global sourcing and distribution, which collectively are referred to as the conventional food system (Kloppenburg et al., 1996; Steve, 2010; Pearson and Bailey, 2012). Despite popularity of the concept in academic and political discourses, a standard definition does not yet exist and the term local food remains ambiguous (Hong et al., 2009).

The geographical distance between production and consumption is an essential consideration (Steve, 2010), yet it does not encompass the multitude of meanings and values that local food has come to acquire. For instance, the social distance associated with different forms of food production and consumption is important (Pearson and Bailey, 2012). As an example, a short geographical distance between producers and consumers can, but does not always, reduce the social distance between them. This is supported by research which found that geographical closeness within the local food network studied in Austria contributed to the social closeness of the participants (Milestad et al., 2010).

In different countries geographical distance is understood and discussed in different ways. For example, in the United Kingdom (UK), local food is defined by some as food produced, processed, purchased, and consumed within 30 miles (50 kilometres) of production (DEFRA, 2007). In the United States (US), local food is defined in the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act, as food that has travelled less than 400 miles from its origin, or within the State in which it is produced (Steve, 2010). Even though there is no existing definition in South Korea, the consensus of experts is that 'less than 100km' is appropriate for local food (Hong, 2010).

In a country with a small land mass and many mountainous areas, like South Korea, it is very difficult to discuss geographical distance according to the same standard as

larger countries like the USA. It is reasonable to argue that, to overcome such limits, travel distance should be applied instead, for example, within one hour of travel. However, the most common method of classifying local food in South Korea is by administrative divisions, such as city (over 50,000 population) or county (less than 50,000 population).

In addition to discussing local food based on divisions associated with place and space (Lee, 2012b), it may be approached from a relational viewpoint. If the global food system is a “competitive market”, the food flows in local food systems can be thought of as a “relational market.” Local food can promote social values such as trust, reciprocity, democracy, participation, and strong community among participants, rather than simply providing food (Kim, 2011).

For these reasons, local food is often understood differently depending on the size of the country’s land, socio-cultural background, geographical conditions, and who is advocating it.

The sociological perspective

Many discussions about local food have emerged in the field of rural sociology. From this perspective, the local food concept represents a desire to resist the power of the global food system (Kim 2005; Kim 2010a). Some argued that action by consumers against the large corporations in the global food system was necessary. This distrust towards modernised food production systems gave rise to a range of activities similar to local food including organic agriculture, slow food, and cooperative movements (Byun, 2009). All of these emphasise the social consequences of the food system rather than its economic impacts.

Distribution in the global food system is characterised by increased distances between producers and consumers (Kim, 2010a). As such, there is often limited interaction and connection between them. This is conducive to a situation in which consumers behave more according to perceived economic benefits, than social

responsibility. Such a disconnection between producers and consumers can make it harder for consumers to receive accurate information regarding where food comes from, who produced it, through what manufacturing process, how it was transported and how it was distributed (Pretty, 2002).

Also, as global food brands and fast food chains spread, local food cultures and identities that have lasted for thousands of years can disappear (Kim, 2010a). Local food systems can play a role in the preservation of these cultures through the maintenance of food traditions.

Agricultural economic perspective

To address food self-sufficiency concerns during the 1970s the government in South Korea focussed on developing larger production systems that specialise in a limited number of products. As a result, many small rural landholders lost their livelihoods and migrated to urban areas. However, there are still many small landholdings located in mountainous areas. Of the farming families who remain, 66% have less than 1 hectare (2.5 acres) and an average farm income only 27,000,000 South Korean Won (SKW) [approximately 27,000 Australian dollars (AUD)]. In addition, the agricultural population is aging, as many farms (63%) are owned by people who are 60 or older (Statistics Korea, 2012). These older farmers seem to have a disadvantage in marketing and accessing new distribution channels.

Furthermore, the opening of South Korea to global agricultural markets in the late 1980s meant that production of crops that have low global competitiveness, such as corn, wheat, and beans, decreased. This, in turn, has increased the country's reliance on foreign imports. Increases in food imports have also been caused by the changing food consumption patterns of increasingly affluent consumers. Consumption of meat, flour and processed foods has increased with an associated reduction in consumption of traditional vegetables and fruits.

There is a tendency in agricultural economics to discuss local food in terms of its value as a niche market for agricultural products. From this perspective local food is proposed as a complementary distribution system in which small family farms can sell to outlets such as farmers’ markets, school meals’ programs, Community Supported Agriculture schemes (CSA) and through direct trade. Small-scale processing of agricultural products is also suggested. This creates jobs and hence boosts the local rural community (Jeong, 2012; Ko, 2011).

Current State of Local Food in South Korea

Although interest in local food among producers, consumers, government officials, and researchers is increasing, many producers and consumers are still not aware of the local food movement. The following section examines activities that include local food. These being: farmers’ markets, school meal schemes, box schemes and traditional markets. Their profile in relation to geographic distance between producers and consumers, versus the social distance is shown in Figure 1.

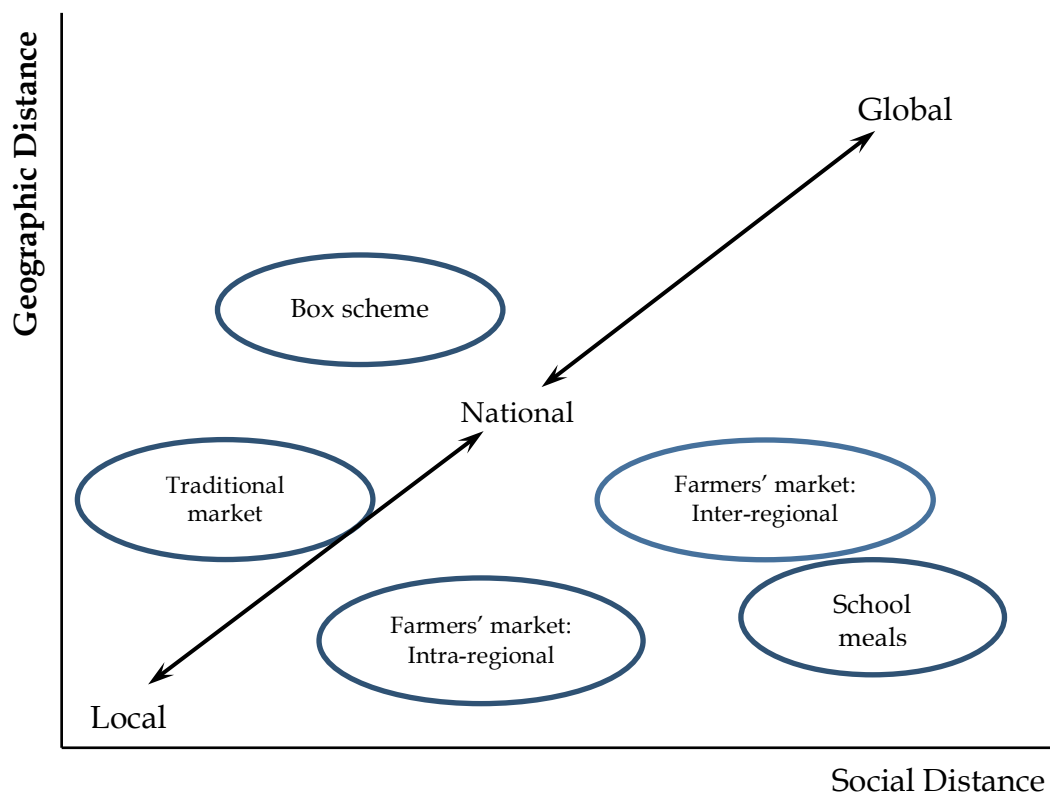


Figure 1 – Profile of local food activities in South Korea

Farmers' markets

Farmers' markets are a well-established and common form of direct trading. They have the potential to encourage closer relationships between producers and consumers (Feagan and Morris, 2009; Kim, 2011). There are many forms of farmers' markets in South Korea, for this paper they can be divided into 'intra-regional farmers' markets' and 'inter-regional farmers' markets'. Intra-regional farmers' markets refer to places where producers within a region sell their own agricultural products to consumers within that region or from an area close to the region. In contrast, inter-regional farmers' markets refer to places where producers sell directly (without wholesalers) in outlets in large cities like the capital Seoul. The former is likely to minimise both geographical and social distance in relation to the latter.

Intra-regional farmers' markets

Typical examples of intra-regional farmers' markets include Wonju Morning Market (Morning Market) which is 150 km east of Seoul, and Wanju Local Food Outlet (Local Food Outlet) which is 200 km south of Seoul.

The Morning Market began in 1994 and is held every day from 4am to 9am for the eight warmer months (mid-April to mid-December). Only farms in the region (Wonju) are allowed to participate with an annual membership fee of 60,000 SKW (60 AUD). There are 420 members with around 200 participating on any one day, most of whom (76%) live within 30 minutes of the markets by car. Individuals, green grocers, and restaurants buy from the market. On average, about 1,000 consumers visit the market per day. Most of them (85%) live within 5km (3 miles) of the market. Sales have increased (12% each year from 5 billion SKW [5 million AUD] in 2007 to 9 billion SKW [9 million AUD] in 2012) (Yoon et al., 2011).

The Local Food Outlet operates two stores, built as local government projects and opened 2012. They are operated by a farmer association with around 270 farmers as members. Each store receives supplies from about 60 farmers and 30 small-scale agricultural processing companies on any particular day. Daily sales per store total

about 22 million SKW (22,000 AUD), 80% of which are agricultural products, while 20% is processed food and household items. It has been estimated that around 1,000 consumers visit each store every day, and more than 80% of them live less than 30 minutes drive away. Although the stores are open between 8:30 am to 9 pm, most products are generally sold out by 4 pm. It is very rare that producers meet consumers in either of the Local Food Outlets.

Inter-regional farmers' markets

Baro Market in the South Korean capital of Seoul is an example of an inter-regional farmers' market. It is co-operated by the Ministry for Food, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, the owner of the site (Korea Racing Authority), and National Agricultural Cooperative Federation (NACF). It has been located in the Horserace Park of Seoul Racetrack since 2009, and opens only on Wednesdays and Thursdays. The market sells over 800 kinds of agricultural and fisheries products supplied by over 90 organisations from throughout South Korea. Every day about 5,000 customers from metropolitan areas shop at the market where they have direct contact with farmers. Yearly sales are about 10 trillion SKW (approximately 10 billion AUD), which makes it the largest direct trading marketplace in South Korea.

School meals service

In South Korea, the official school meal service in elementary schools began in 1997, high schools in 1999, and middle schools in 2003 (Ko, 2011). The school meal service is based on 'Article 1 of Law for School Feeding' enacted in 1981 for the purpose of "improving the quality of school meal and contributing to wholesome development of the mind and body of students by defining provisions relating to school meals... ." In 2012, around 11,000 schools in South Korea provided a meal to 7 million students each day (MEST, 2011). Most schools (73%) provide a free school meal service (Kim, 2013).

An increasing number of counties and cities are using local food for school meals (Kim et al., 2009). Some have built 'School Meal Support Centres' which collect

locally grown ingredients for school meals. Some of these governments support local food products by compensating schools with payments in cash or goods. This suggests that the school meal service has a great potential as a large-scale buyer of local produce. However, there are several problems with using local food for the entire school meal service due to seasonal production and limited range of processed products.

Box schemes

Box schemes in South Korea have been likened to the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) schemes in Europe, United States of America (USA) and to a lesser extent Australia (Park, 2005; Kim, 2011).

Most South Korean box schemes are a form of direct trading between farmers and consumers, most of whom live in large cities where produce is delivered through an extremely cost effective point to point courier system.

Box schemes have only recently begun to embrace the local food movement, with a prominent example being the In-Season Vegetables Box project. This commenced with five family farms from the Korea Women Peasant Association (KWPA) packaging and supplying their seasonal produce to 21 members in urban areas in 2009 (Jeong, 2012). Most are small-scale women farmers, and supply seasonal produce grown with native seeds from their own garden, free range eggs, hand-made tofu, cooking oil, and processed side dishes once a week through a courier. In addition, they enable women farmers to play a key role in production and decision-making, as the project emphasises the importance of their economic independence and status (Chong et. al. 2011). The project has expanded and consumer members number about 1,500 who pay 100,000 SKW (approximately 100 AUD) per month for weekly supply. The total sales in the project are around 1 billion SKW (approximately 1 million AUD).

Other box schemes are run by local government, some in association with the private sector, such as “Healthy dinner table” which commenced in 2010 and includes local food support centre where the contents of boxes are decided and packaged for consumers. Currently, about 250 farmers and processed food producers participate in this box scheme which supplies up to 150 kinds of products each year. The box is composed of, on average, 10 to 11 kinds of fruit, vegetables, meat (once per month), processed food, and cereals, and costs 25,000 SKW (approximately 25 AUD) per box. Members can join for 3, 6, or 12 months and are divided into weekly and bi-weekly members. There are about 2,300 consumers, most of whom (80%) receive a box every second week, whilst the remainder (20%) receive weekly supplies. Total annual sales are estimated to be around 2.5 billion SKW (approximately 2.5 million AUD).

In addition to KWPA and Healthy Dinner Table box schemes, there are increasing numbers of situations where individual farmers or farmer groups promote box schemes by collecting consumer members through personal networks or on the Internet. For example, the South Korean web search engine Naver lists over 20 farms, farmers’ groups, or local government websites promoting box schemes (as of January 2013).

Traditional markets

Traditional markets in South Korea have different characteristics in each region and are divided into permanent markets, which are held permanently in a set place; periodic markets, which are held every 5 days; and non-periodic markets. Most traditional markets in rural areas are periodic markets and also called ‘5-day market’ as they are held every 5 days. As of the end of 2012, 68% of the total 1511 traditional markets in South Korea are permanent, 16% periodic, and 16% non-periodic (Kim and Hwangbo, 2010).

Until the 1970s, traditional markets played a major role in agricultural product distribution. However, the introduction of wholesale markets in the early 1980s with their global sourcing of products and an increase in the direct purchases by large

buyers (such as supermarket chains) has resulted in a loss of many traditional markets as the distribution system has become increasingly centralised.

It is difficult to determine how much local food is distributed by traditional markets, because agricultural products sold there are not separately identified as local food. Nonetheless, traditional markets mainly sell agricultural products including vegetables, fruits, and meat (36%); fisheries and dried fish (27%), and snack and side dishes (16%) so it is likely that much of it is locally sourced (Lee, 2005).

There have been recent attempts to rejuvenate traditional markets. A characteristic example is the Saturday Market in Jangheung County which is 300 km south of Seoul. Since 2005 it has ceased to be held every five days and now only opens on Saturdays. The market sells local agricultural products, traditional craft, food, and holds various performances. This is an example of a local government leading a program that aims to attract visitors to rural areas, with the traditional market being part of the potential experience for tourists.

Challenges and Future Directions for Development of Local Food

The first significant challenge faced by the local food movement in South Korea is the ambiguity surrounding the meaning of local food. For example, governments tend to focus on the administrative division rather than geographical distance between the producer and the retailer with the latter approach tending to be more meaningful for producers and consumers. Further confusion emerges with box schemes which are generally perceived by consumers as involving local food, despite the fact that this is not a requirement for them.

The second major issue is the lack of risk sharing in production activities. Despite the fact that many consumers have a positive attitude towards local food their efforts to share risks of production activities through local food are minimal. Other local food provisioning systems, such as Teikei in Japan and CSA in Europe and USA, often

involve risk-sharing between producers and consumers (JOAA, 1993; Jung and Kang, 2003; Jung, 2010; Janssen 2010). In the Teikei and CSA systems, members are subscribed on a yearly basis, which helps promote stable income for producers.

The third problem involves the administration and promotion of local food by governments. Government policy has included small family farms as part of their strategy to address food security. However, when local governments lead the promotion of local food, 'local' tends to be defied according to administrative divisions. In addition, the local governments' budget for local food activities has primarily been concentrated in logistics and sales facilities. Furthermore, agricultural policies of local governments are often decided on by the elected chief of the government. This can lead to populist projects, such as those that benefit the individual or organisation funding them, rather than the long-term participants in the local food system. Notwithstanding these challenges contributions from local governments are generally vital in the initial stages of setting up local food activities (Pearson and Firth, 2012). However, efforts should be made to ensure that government involvement does not turn local food activities, which should be diverse and creative, into unified and bureaucratic ones (Kim, 2011).

The fourth issue is the potential marginalisation of some producers, such as small-scale family farmers, as the demand for local food increases. Hence it is desirable to provide market access opportunities for the diverse range of producers who contribute to local food sales. Furthermore, although current local food activities are mostly based on seasonal produce, to satisfy year-round consumer demand for diverse ingredients local food sales would benefit from farmers who have access additional infrastructure, such as green houses, to extend their production season.

The fifth key issue is the current lack of discussion about production methods. Local food can minimise the negative environmental impacts associated with food packaging and transportation, by minimising the physical distance between producers and consumers (Hinrichs 2000; Hong et al., 2009; Hand, 2010; Pearson and Bailey, 2012). Further advantages may be achieved by using production methods that

suit the unique, social and cultural conditions of each region. One promising method is organic farming (Kloppenburger et al. 1996; Pearson et al 2011b, Sassi, 2012; Seyfang, 2006). The CSA movement in the US and Europe, and Japan's Teikei system, although they began for the purpose of sharing risks in production activities for stable and sustainable production on small farms, now all support the use of organic farming methods (JOAA, 1993; Jung and Kang, 2003; Janssen, 2010).

The sixth issue is that of embracing opportunities for local food sales in the dominant retail outlets including supermarkets. Large retail outlets, including supermarkets, are increasing their market share by providing convenience of opening hours, parking, one-stop shopping, relatively low prices, year-round availability, and guaranteed consistency in product quality (Ilbery and Maye, 2006; Pearson and Bailey, 2012). An option to increase local food sales may therefore be to sell in large retail outlets or on their site, such as farmer stalls in the carpark near the store entrance. This is beginning to happen in South Korea, as one of the largest chains of discount grocery and consumer goods (E-Mart) signed Memorandum of Understanding with a city Government (Asan which adjoins the Seoul metropolitan area) to supply local produce (Lee, 2012a).

Conclusion

The globalisation of numerous industries, including food, inadvertently transforms the lives of ordinary people around the world. Consequently many people's dietary choices are now influenced by a globalised food system. In the process of globalisation, agricultural production has increasingly become capital and resource intensive resulting in many large-scale operations that provide a limited number of products. In this situation many small-scale farmers are struggling to maintain their livelihoods. Active development of local food in South Korea started as a way of resisting these negative social and economic effects.

Traditional food production and distribution mechanisms in South Korea provide a platform for the protection and potential expansion of its local food activities. Each specific activity tends to have unique characteristics as they have evolved in

response to each region's landscapes and lifestyles. Therefore, it is important to ensure they maintain their essential characteristics rather than being integrated into the increasingly dominant large-scale food markets in South Korea.

Continuation of interest in local food in South Korea from consumers and governments has the potential to assist in maintaining opportunities for small-scale family farmers. Whilst it is difficult them to supply products into global distribution systems, local food offers them the potential of an enduring niche marketing strategy.

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