From “Informal” to “Local:” the role of data in legitimizing and supporting the local food economy in Malawi
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Outline

- Abstractions and Reality
- Mainstream framing and what it Obscures
- Alternative framing and what it Reveals
- Research: Lilongwe Food Economy
Current Mainstream Framing

Food systems transformation: a story based on western economic models

Changing patterns of demand are being driven by rising incomes + urbanization.

Leads to uniform changes in demand

Requires a similar response

A frame that is uniformly selective across time and space.

Obscuring Frames

Traditional (informal) (least ‘advanced’)
- Spatially short (local)
- No contracts or formal standards
- Little capital, much labor
- Fragmented

Transitional
- Spatially long
- Still fragmented
- Mix of labor-intensive, capital-intensive

Modern (formal) (most ‘advanced’)
- Spatially long, consolidating in various segments
- Private standards are emerging

A civilization reflecting the relationships between these abstract entities, however well founded in truth, by the nature of the case, you have abstracted from the remainder of things. In so far as the excluded things are important in your experience, your modes of thought are not fitted to deal with them. You cannot think without abstractions; accordingly, it is of the utmost importance to be vigilant in critically revising your modes of abstraction.
Figure 5.3  Drivers of neighborhood wellbeing
Analyzing Data Using Frames Attuned to Place

Place-making as politics:

“Start with an accurate account of how services are delivered: the configuration of the value chain; the actors enrolled and activated in these hybrid architectures; the cost structure of both supply and consumption; the nature and dynamics of the surplus value extracted….Triangulate the relationship between resources flows, institutional control and power. This kind of knowledge project implies purpose-built collaborations between knowledge intermediaries, social movements, grassroots associations and key allies in the state.”
Three-day commodity basket inflow.

Notable is the size of Area 36 which is a new ‘spontaneous‘ market that is housed on private land. It is opposed by the municipal government, but traders say the market suits their needs because spots are available on a first-come, first-serve basis, which is in contrast to other markets and allows some added flexibility.
Concluding Thoughts

- Expose theoretical weakness
- Be political
- Frame market-based ideologies as just that: Ideology
- Insist on empiricism
- Reject trickle-down, focus on material wellbeing in context of bounded planet
- Privilege and validate other forms of knowledge/other ways of being. Ontological plurality!


The End. Questions?

Zikomo. Thank you.
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