

# Why acknowledging and celebrating diversity in food is not just an aesthetic thing to do

---

Harrison Esam Awuh and Esther Veen,  
Flevo Campus and Aeres University of Applied Sciences Almere

# Why acknowledging and celebrating diversity in food is not just an aesthetic thing to do

It is believed that recognising and celebrating diversity in our foodscapes is the right thing to do. But why, really? What benefits make it paramount for this diversity to be lauded? This question needs answering to add more legitimacy to promoting urban food diversity. In this essay we try to do so by investigating the link between 'recognition justice' – the celebration of diversity – and inclusion, and understanding inclusion as vital for (social) sustainability. We use two research projects to demonstrate empirically-based lessons which can be drawn to support the need to recognise and celebrate diversity in our urban foodscape.

## Celebrating diversity as recognition justice

Recognition justice is an underestimated or undervalued concept. It is about recognising that different people need, want, value or expect different things at different times and for different purposes (Douglas,

2020). Despite laudable progress in the domain of social inclusion globally, marginalisation and exclusion persist. One approach that has not gathered sufficient attention in academic and policy circles especially is to understand acts of (in)justice or in- and exclusion in terms of recognition. Exclusion is a misrecognition of another human and denies that that person is worthy of ethical consideration. Scholars such as Georg Wilhelm Freidrich Hegel (2014), Charles Taylor (2021), Jürgen Habermas (2018) and Axel Honneth (1992) have written about the role of recognition in social relations and politics. Honneth in particular wrote extensively about the human need to be accepted and valued by others: being recognized is essential for all people to develop a positive relation to themselves and others. When we recognize others and their different views and values, we facilitate social interactions. This helps holding society together. Recognition then, requires viewing difference in a positive light. In other words, the key to social justice is discovering how we as a society can maximize positive and minimize negative recognition.

According to Douglas (2020), social justice is defined by what and who we value, and who we include in and exclude from the rights and privileges of our society. This implies that framing social issues in the context of recognition can humanize complex issues that too often are considered only in the abstract or as political conflicts. To recognize that we may think differently about a core issue such as food, is therefore an essential ingredient of a just society. This recognition is the first step to inclusion. Hence, in order to build an inclusive society, we need to first recognise that people are different and have different values. This recognition of difference should be seen in a positive light because negative recognition can be counter-productive – leading to prejudice and exclusion instead. Positive social recognition norms, then, are the foundation to a socially just and inclusive society.

### **Inclusion through diversity for sustainability**

Inclusion, in turn, promotes social sustainability: diversity and inclusion are key concepts within current debates on sustainability. Sustainable development, defined in 1987 as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to

meet their own needs (Brundtland, 1987), is now more important than ever. The widespread and generally agreed understanding of sustainable development contains three dimensions which include: the ecological, the social and the economic. These components are consistent with the notion of the triple bottom line of sustainability: people, planet and profit (Pava, 2007). Although the sustainable development paradigm has been put forward in the last 30 years or more as a panacea for the socio-ecological crisis the world is facing, the 'people part' or 'the social' is often the most downplayed component in talk about sustainability. That said, there is broad agreement that the global economy needs more *inclusive* growth (Scholz & Brandi, 2020).

To put this more vividly, we turn to Kate Raworth's (2017) concept of doughnut economics. In 'Doughnut Economics; Seven Ways to Think Like a 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Economist', Raworth introduces the doughnut model, representing the state of humanity in a single image (Raworth, 2017; page 51). The hole at the doughnut's centre reveals the proportion of people worldwide falling short on life's essentials, such as food, water, healthcare and political freedom of expression. Raworth argues that one of humanity's major challenges is to get everyone out of that hole. However, we cannot afford to be overshooting the doughnut's outer crust if we are to safeguard Earth's life-giving systems, such as a stable climate, healthy oceans and a protective ozone layer, on which all our wellbeing fundamentally depends. Raworth contends, therefore, that the biggest goal and challenge of this century is to get into the doughnut's safe and just space between these social and planetary boundaries. In Raworth's view, inclusion is the key to preventing a shortfall into the middle of the doughnut. Inclusion ensures that everyone has a fair access to energy, water, food, health, education and, above all, representation in all domains of public life - including the foodscape.

The argument that we try to bring forward in this essay, therefore, is that recognition justice leads to inclusion, whereas inclusion is a first step towards drawing people away from the middle of the doughnut towards the safe centre: inclusion enables social sustainability. Assuming that celebrating (a happier or cheerier way of recognizing)

diversity is a form of recognition justice, this is the reason that such celebration is useful beyond its aesthetics. We now turn to two examples – one on a local, and one on a global scale - of how we celebrated difference around food and the values surrounding it.

## A journey into Almere's diverse diet

The first of the two empirical cases to support our argument is an on-going project conducted in Almere, the Netherlands<sup>1</sup>. Almere is a multicultural city, where people from different cultural backgrounds have found their homes. The wider aim of this project is to understand how this multiculturalism effects the foodscape, and how that in turn effects the diets of Almere's residents. One of the sub-projects of this wider project, and the one with which it started, concerned taking pictures of Almere people with their favourite ingredient. Through these pictures, accompanied by short conversations, the ingredients people enjoy cooking with were documented: a simple way to illustrate the diversity of diets and eating in Almere.

For some of the chosen ingredients short background stories were written, showing that food has travelled the world for millennia. This makes it difficult if not impossible to pinpoint where foods are 'from'. Nevertheless, the foods that people associate with the cuisines from their home countries remind them of these places. Indeed, a short survey conducted in tandem with the photo project, also asking for people's favourite ingredients, confirms that such favourites often remind people of their home countries:

*'It's big part of Swedish culture so we use it a lot. So, it feels a bit like home'*

*'Back in my home country we have a similar kind of seasoning ingredient like the maggi cube (sometimes beef based or crayfish based) which we use in many different dishes. So, the maggi cube to me is the closest substitute I could find here in the Netherlands'*

*'It reminds me of the food back home'*

<sup>1</sup> Flevo Campus and Aeres University of Applied Sciences, project leader dr. Esther Veen

Documenting the diversity of people and their food in Almere, and creating links with people's home countries, is a way to recognise difference. The simple act of making diversity visible, and celebrating it with pictures, fosters inclusion: recognizing the diversity of the foodscape that was created by the arrival of immigrants, is a form of recognition justice. The project is now focusing on how this foodscape is used by Almere's population more widely, another way to recognise that a varying foodscape has value.

### Recognising global food diversity: Seeing the world the way the world sees the world

The second empirical case we present is a study covering 27 countries and all continents (beginning with the Netherlands where the first data were collected)<sup>2</sup>. Using photo voice techniques, this research sought to understand diverse meanings and understandings of healthy and unhealthy food. It investigated people's multiple visions of what a healthier food future should be, and what people in these various countries see as inhibitors and enhancers of a healthier food system. A key lesson from this project is that recognising and celebrating global diversity around food enables us to confront and deal with some of the unconscious biases we harbour about what or how the rest of the world is eating. In other words, the implicit biases created by seeing the world only from our own world view, as well as the perpetuation of negative stereotypes about eating habits of people in other countries, become explicit. For instance, it is through recognising global diversity in foodscapes that we realise that falafel is not really the healthy food we may think it to be just because it is vegetarian. In other countries, falafel is nothing but a deep-fried unhealthy snack, as Stephanie from Israel sees it:

*I went to Europe and I was surprised that falafel is considered as one of the healthier dishes because it is usually vegetarian. In Israel, falafel is bad fast food. (...)  
To me the combination of deep-fried falafel and pita bread is too heavy in 40 degrees heat and that also why I consider it unhealthy. (Stephanie, 29, Netanya, Israel)*

<sup>2</sup> Flevo Campus and Aeres University of Applied Sciences, principal investigator dr. Harrison Esam Awuh. Collaborating partners: Johan Coetzer (Cape Vulture Conservancy, South Africa), Gina Delima and Christopher Galgo (Visayas State University, Philippines), Winnie Narvaez (ABACOenRed, Esteli, Nicaragua), Shachi Phadke (Mumbai, India), Vincent Konadu (Brock University, Canada), Emmanuel Acheampong (COCOBOD, Kumasi, Ghana), Robin Breedevelde (University of Cape Town, South Africa), Antonio Pietropolli (Italy) and Ravenstein Nyugap (University of Bamenda, Cameroon).

Also, while in countries in the Global North people tend to think healthy food is expensive, in some lower-income countries, having money to spend drives people into eating more unhealthily. Himanshu, a participant from India, explains how in his country being rich can be a curse because it exposes people to usually unaffordable unhealthy foods. He said with reference to Figure 1:

*The more money people have, the unhealthier they eat. The well-to-do can afford a lot of tasty but unhealthy foods. Those who are less well-to-do do not have that luxury and tend to eat more basic food which tends to be healthier. So, if you go to a village in India and see what a farmer is eating, they eat very naturally healthy food. They eat curries with less spices, eat less vegetables and they burn a lot of calories with the manual labour. Richer people eat more luxurious food items which often contain high calories and often do not exercise enough since most well-to-do people do white collar jobs.*  
(Himanshu, Jaipur, India)



Figure 1: Himanshu's image of wealth as an unhealthy food curse - Rupees

This study thus reveals that there are several points of contradiction in how people relate to food and how they understand healthy and unhealthy food. We argue, however, that we can approach these contradictions as a form of positive recognition: we might not always agree with what others eat, or what they consider as healthy or unhealthy food, but that is okay. This is not to say that there cannot be any 'objective' knowledge about (un)healthy eating. Rather, we contend that a form of curiousness and open-mindedness about other people's eating habits, including their beliefs, rationales and the contexts in which these habits take place, is needed to foster inclusion.

## Conclusion

In this essay we argued that recognition justice is a prelude to inclusion, and that inclusion is necessary for sustainable food system transformation. Narratives in the food domain which can lead to food system transformation are often largely expert-driven (technocentric, technocratic), based on ideas developed by a middle-class niche

movement. Others follow standards set by Western consumers. However, all people, in all contexts, have deeply engrained biological, psychological and cultural relationships to food. These need to be acknowledged and recognised, because these different relationships to food determine how they understand it. Therefore, basing knowledge of food excessively on one group's interpretation of what healthy food is, or what proper meals are, can enhance or initiate a resistance strategy amongst excluded groups rather than contributing to system-wide changes in the food system. In the words of de Zeeuw (2021: pp 31, translated by authors) 'if we want food to flourish in a culture, then not only diversity but also inclusivity is important'. Hence, we need to recognise everyone's point of view before making better informed decisions about healthier eating: if we want to eat healthier and more sustainably, then everyone's vision should be at the dinner table.

## References

- Brundtland, G.H.** (1987). World Commission on Environment and Development. In: *Our Common Future*, pages 8-9.
- Douglas, G.** (2020). Recognition and Social Justice. A Concept Little-Known Outside Academic Philosophy May Be The Key To Social Justice. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/inserting-philosophy/a-concept-little-known-outside-academic-philosophy-may-be-the-key-to-social-justice-648e04732238>
- Habermas, J.** (2018). The concept of human dignity and the realistic utopia of human rights. In *Human Dignity* (pp. 52-70). London: Routledge.
- Hegel, G. W. F.** (2014). *Science of logic*. London: Routledge.
- Honneth, A.** (1992). Integrity and disrespect: Principles of a conception of morality based on the theory of recognition. *Political theory*, 20(2), 187-201.
- Pava, M. L.** (2007). A response to "getting to the bottom of 'triple bottom line'". *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 17(1), 105-110.
- Raworth, K.** (2017). *Doughnut economics: seven ways to think like a 21st-century economist*. London: Chelsea Green Publishing.
- Scholz, I., & Brandi, C.** (2020). The G20 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In *ECONOMICS OF G20: A World Scientific Reference Vol 2: How Developing Countries can Achieve Sustainable Development Goals* (pp. 117-133).
- Taylor, C.** (2021). The politics of recognition. In *Campus wars* (pp. 249-263). London: Routledge.
- Zeeuw, J. de** (2021). *All inclusive aan de keukentafel. Een culinair pamflet voor alle Nederlanders*. Utrecht/Antwerpen: Kosmos Uitgevers.