Sustainable Consumption, the Middle Classes and Agri-food Ethics in the Global South

ESRC Responsive Mode Grant, 2018-2020
Project themes

• Spotlight on growing middle classes in global South and, given their increasing spending power, issues of ethics and sustainability regarding their food consumption choices, values and practices.

• Food consumption studies literature prioritising global North and food-related research in global South concentrated on food security.

• Burgeoning global middle classes suggest consumption in global South, the values it expresses, the changing food cultures and consequent environmental pressure are also becoming ever more relevant and in need of critical research.

• Grasping the current and potential roles of consumption in the global South in terms of addressing major global sustainability challenges in the food sector.
International and Interdisciplinary Team

• Geography, Development Studies, Management
• Ethnographic methods, quantitative approaches, engagement and activism
• Seven universities in UK, Brazil, China and South Africa
  • Collaborative research
  • Impact & engagement
Project Phases

• Case studies of Rio (Brazil), Guangzhou (China) and Johannesburg (South Africa) offer comparisons of the potential of different drivers of sustainable food consumption.

• Phase 1: Institutional & cultural drivers of sustainable food consumption. Analysing policy & media reports, business strategies, codes, campaigns and initiatives in policy & popular domains. Key informant interviews with government departments responsible for food procurement and standards, campaigners, and leading food retailers, wholesalers and restaurateurs.

• Phase 2: Consumer practices & everyday trends, comprising ethnographic research in middle-class residential areas of Guangzhou, Rio de Janeiro and Johannesburg. Digital ethnographies examine online practices of consumers, including how they collect information, shop or review online, and the influence of social media on ethical judgment and creating markets for sustainable foods. Accompanied shopping interviews and co-cooking sessions capture the nuances of food choices, moral judgments, engagement with government and corporate ethical initiatives, & ordinary ethics of food purchase and use.
Project Plans cont.

- Phase 3 focuses on fashion and trends, uses text mining of social media to trace lines of influence in sustainable food consumption. To widen the reach of the research, and provide material with traction with policy and commercial actors.

- Phase 4 gathers quantitative data through a web-based survey of the drivers of sustainable food consumption and the behavioural intentions arising from these.