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Promoting Land-Based Food Practices in the not so Rural Idyll of Northern Lebanon: Dietary Solutions from Urban Perspectives

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Abstract

This article is the result of two months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in rural Lebanon, studying local food harvesting, preparation and consumption practices. The study revealed the complexities of maintaining land-based lifestyles in contemporary Lebanon. It also exposed the paradoxical constructions of rural existence. In this paper, we deconstruct the mythical constructions of the rural idyll in the Lebanese village of Arsal and describe the multiple facets of local food production. If proponents of local food production are advocating for the preservation of local practices, it is critical to understand what is taking place in the communities and the environmental and economic factors they face engaging in the new global economy.

Keywords: rural, rural idyll, Lebanon, land-based food practices, agriculture, health

1.0 Introduction

In May 2010, the authors of this paper were attending a ten-year anniversary celebration of the Environment and Sustainable Development Unit (ESDU) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) in Lebanon. We were about to begin the first phase of fieldwork in the rural community of Arsal in Northeastern Lebanon to study traditional food harvesting and consumption practices, but prior to leaving, we were invited to attend an event made up of presentations by various AUB faculty, professionals and community partners involved in the Unit discussing the achievements and challenges it experienced over the past ten years. At the outset of the event, two students from AUB performed a mime theatrical piece of urban sensibilities being awakened to the blissful abundance of rural existence. On stage, the two mimes silently expressed the perpetual monotony of urban life, fettered by traffic, technology and unhealthy diets, until one mime discovered another world of pure air, food and communal serenity. With much persuasion, the other mime is convinced to discover this rural paradise, which dramatically unfolds with the two mimes dancing and eating with the sounds of nature ringing in the background. The performance culminated with the mimes bringing out a cake with 10 burning candles demarcating the ten-year anniversary

and to celebrate the efforts of ESDU in improving environmental and socio-economic conditions in rural Lebanon.

The dramatization of romantic constructions of the rural only truly began to resonate with us as we engaged in fieldwork in Arsal, a community only 120 km from Beirut, yet politically, religiously, and to a certain extent economically isolated from the rest of the country. Here, where quarry and stone-cutting operations symbiotically exist with residual pastoral and agricultural practices, ecosystem bliss was difficult to fathom. Instead, one encounters dust dense air that hinders breathing at various points of the day. Quarry and stone-cutting residues, along with a defunct waste-management system, lead families to burn their refuse (see Figure 1) over underground water basins, compromising water and soil quality.

Figure 1. Burning household waste, including television set, in household backyard, which backs on to a privately-owned quarry.

Source:Carla Haibi.

Pesticide or fungicide use, limited food preservation and pasteurization, and inadequate nutritional information undermine any notion of rural food purity. Despite this, while working in the field with a father from one of the participating agricultural households in the study, he explained to us that when working with bare hands in this soil, one is purified; the land is pure and cleanses as you work it. He proudly proclaimed that at sixty-seven years old he had only been to a medical doctor once in his life and was in perfect health, which he accredited to living off the land. Such rhetoric was expressed to us in conversation with local community members when asked about their life in Arsal, but while living with families and sharing in their daily work routines, the rhetoric quickly dissipated. This same father was in fact suffering from an undisclosed health problem that prevented him from working his land for more than thirty minutes at a time, which required his sons and daughters-in-law to perform the grueling agricultural tasks required to maintain his land. Interestingly, his sons and daughters-in-law were openly critical

of the work required to maintain the land and were transitioning away from the land-based livelihoods. Life in this remote community is far from the rural idyllic academics and artists like to envision, and, in relative isolation, people persevere with little regard for their actual wellbeing or way of life.

This article is the result of two months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in rural Lebanon, studying local food harvesting, preparation, and consumption practices. The research involved documenting the extent to which land-based food practices persist in rural settings and understanding what is involved in maintaining local food traditions. The study revealed the complexities of maintaining land-based lifestyles in contemporary Lebanon. It also exposed the paradoxical constructions of rural existence as being on the one hand, a more pure, healthy alternative to urban life, versus an economically irrelevant, gender discriminating, bleak existence one strives to rise above. In this paper, we deconstruct the mythical constructions of the rural idyll (Short, 2006) in the Lebanese village of Arsal and describe the multiple facets of local food production. If proponents of rural traditions and local food production are truly interested in advocating for the preservation and maintenance of land-based food practices, it is critical to understand what is taking place in the communities and the myriad environmental and economic factors they face engaging in the new global economy.

2.0 The Project

Prior to describing the methods for this research, it is important to stress that the fieldwork conducted for this project took place in 2010, one year prior to Syrian protests to the Bashar al-Assad regime, and eventual escalation to the devastating and ongoing Syrian civil war. The impact of the war on Arsal, a town that borders Syria, has been profound which will be discussed in greater detail later in the article. Since the fieldwork was conducted prior to the war, it describes a very different situation than what is currently being experienced in this region today. What has since taken place does not, however, diminish the importance of the findings or the credibility of the fieldwork; instead, as we argue below, it further reveals the precariousness of land-based food systems, especially in regions vulnerable to military conflict.

It is also important to situate us within this project, which was the second phase of a larger research initiative funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). The first phase involved a multidisciplinary team of researchers from the American University of Beirut (AUB) working with four rural communities in Lebanon promoting local food practices as important health strategies in regions struggling to get regular access to healthy foods. The lead author was invited to participate in the second phase of the study, analyzing the benefits, viability and risks associated with local food practices, again with intention of promoting the procurement and consumption of local foods. With the assistance of the second author, who was born and raised in Lebanon, a fluid Arabic speaker, and whose research focuses on Middle Eastern foodways, our involvement in the project was to ethnographically document local food practices, focusing on food harvesting, preparation and local dietary and culinary behaviors. The participating communities in this second phase were the same as in phase one, but it was decided for reasons of cost and feasibility that we would conduct field research in two of the four communities: one in the Bekaa valley and another in the

Shouf district. The focus of this paper is on the research conducted in Arsal in the Bekaa.

The research employed a highly participatory approach where researchers lived in a rented house in the heart of the village and involved themselves in all aspects of daily food production and domestic activity within periods of high land usage. It was decided that it was not enough to simply speak or survey people about their daily activities, their labor practices, food preparation, food choices or culinary customs, but to have the opportunity to participate and share in them whenever possible. By being physically engaged in the activities, we sought to gain an appreciation for what is involved in maintaining, even to a limited degree, land-based food practices. Following community-based research principles, recruitment strategies were designed in full consultation with community representatives. A local community coordinator was hired to identify families who utilized the land for local food production and consumption. Once identified, families were contacted and informed of the general objectives of the study and what participation would consist of, if willing to being involved. If agreeable, the local coordinator organized visits with the researchers—accompanied by the coordinator—and families to explore the possibility of their participation in the project. At that point, researchers provided further details about participant involvement emphasizing the participatory framework of the study. It was stressed that researchers were not wishing to be perceived as guests, but rather active participants in domestic activity, as active or banal as they might be. This meant participating and observing in all aspects of people's lives, which was a mixture of domestic labor and leisure. The intention was to ascertain how active males and females were over the course of the day and of what these activities consisted. Depending on their schedules and the extent to which each family was involved in land-based food production, daily routines were either extremely active or relatively light in terms of domestic labor. What was critical was that researchers participate in and observe daily family activities from the time people woke up in the morning until the end of the day. In an attempt to offset the highly intrusive nature of the fieldwork, it was stressed that researcher involvement meant active contribution to all domestic labor, which depending on the household, involved assisting in planting crops, harvesting crops, milking goats, food preparation, household chores, socializing with neighbors or sitting around watching soap operas.

To get an appreciation for how lives were gendered in the community we divided our time with the men and women. It was intended that we work two days with the women and two days with the men, but the variation in people's schedule made this approach impractical. If there were female or male specific activities we did them with men or women independently, and when activities were done collectively, we simply followed work schedules. Documentation involved still and video recording and extensive fieldnote taking. During rest periods, formal and informal interviews were conducted with participating family members and accompanying workers to gain further insight into the activities. A total of 40 people participated in the study: 7 family units and 1 agricultural unit—made up of two males who jointly worked a large plot of land in the mountains. Documentation consisted of recording the structure of the activities, the length, duration, intensity, actors involved and their general frequency. In terms of food preparation, all recipes and preparation techniques were documented through still and video recording. While food was being prepared, questions were asked throughout specific to the recipes and more general questions about

perceptions of food, gender roles around food preparation and cultural significance.

At the outset of the project there were concerns about how open the community would be to our presence, but right from the first day families were eager to have us share in all aspects of daily life and expressed disappointment when we would move on to the next family. In addition to participating in all domestic labor, families were keen on spending time with us in their leisure time, whether relaxing on the floors of their homes watching soap operas during breaks in the day or in the evenings, or visiting with neighbors and friends drinking coffee or mate and eating fruit and snacks. Despite the relatively short time we were there, we felt extremely close to all the families we worked with and developed strong friendships with many of the people in the community.

3.0 The Rural Idyll

It was mentioned at the outset of this paper that this research was part of a larger study attempting to understand the benefits, viability, and risks of local food practices in rural Lebanon. The foundation of the project was based on three underlying themes: (a) rural communities in Lebanon are undergoing dramatic lifestyle changes brought upon by urbanization and westernization; (b) the loss of rural traditions, in particular agriculture, are having deleterious effects on diet and overall health; (c) restoring and promoting land-based practices such as small-scale agriculture will increase the consumption of locally produced foods, improve diets, and valorize rural cultures. While these themes do characterize much of what has happened throughout Lebanon over the past fifty years (Gulick, 1953; Makhoul & Harrison, 2002; Tannous, 1942), a 'rural idyll' undercurrent influenced the project design and direction. Acknowledging this in no way intends to dismiss the importance of the project, or the direction this multidisciplinary group has taken to address critical health and social issues. In fact, the research objectives are grounded in what has been referred to as the agrarian crisis (Patnaik & Moyo, 2011) and the compelling critique of the global agri-food system. It is a call for 'ecological revolutions' (Merchant, 1989) and a return to subsistence and small-scale agriculture that has been swallowed by large scale producers driven by the global market rather than humane and sustainable food production. It is as much about challenging an agri-food system that is committed "to unlimited accumulation of capital and to an order that places artificially generated private wants over individual and social needs [as it is about transforming] "the human relation to nature" (Foster, 2009, p. 12). But with this being said, to effectively undertake the project objectives, it is imperative to separate the perceived importance and value of rural practices from the actual rural practices taking place. In other words, the promotion of rural restoration without critically examining what constitutes the rural is not only disingenuous but potentially dangerous. To start, it would be useful to consider the idea of the rural and its often idyllic characterizations.

For those outside of rural studies—and we include ourselves here—rural is often a descriptive and static term that takes into consideration population density and geographic positioning. For policy makers, rural would be defined as a region with a minimally-dense population and removed from a more intensely-populated geographic center—'minimally' populated and 'removed' are both relative constructs influenced by state population density and land mass. Rural and cultural studies scholars, sociologists and anthropologists have identified and emphasized

the constructive element to rurality, describing it as a dynamic interplay between humans and geography laden with cultural, political and socio-economic meanings (Williams, 1973). For Cloke (1997), the rural imaginative is a combination of space and behaviors that occur within a geographic setting outside of what has been similarly constructed (albeit less scrutinized) urban imaginary:

> While cities are usually understood in their own terms, and certainly without any detectable nervousness about defining or justifying that understanding, rural areas represent more of a site of conceptual struggle, where the other-than-urban meets the multifarious conditions of vastly differing scales and styles of living. (Cloke, 1997, p. 19)

The 'other-than-urban' is critical here in that the rural cannot exist without the urban, in that it is defined against what the urban has come to mean or represent within a specific cultural and historical framework. For scholars in this field, the constructive duality of the rural is critical, not simply for exposing how the rural is imagined, but to expose it as the politicized value laden dichotomy it is (Bosworth & Somerville, 2014; Cloke, Marsden & Mooney, 2006). In other words, the relationship is never neutral, as the positioning of one is made possible at the expense of the other. The dichotomy is unstable and alters in different cultural contexts. At one place and time, urbanity might be privileged, associated with sophistication, intelligence and advancement, in contrast to rural associations of backwardness, vulgarity and simplemindedness. Conversely, there is a long history of rural romanticism, which inversely characterizes the urban as artificial, selfish and corrupt, and the rural as natural, communal and pure. From this valorization of the rural, emerges the idea of the 'rural idyll', a characterization expressed as early as the 9th century BC in Greek poetry (Short, 2006).

Like the concept of rural, the rural idyll is intrinsically dualistic in that it too cannot be defined without an urban comparator. The rural idyll is the construction of rural life as simple and pure, unfettered by the equally constructed complexities and vice of urbanity. It is also a concept derived from an urban elite consciousness disconnected from the daily life of rural existence. In ancient Greek and Roman antiquity, poetic traditions were shaped around nostalgic depictions of rural life, which on the one hand expressed a longing for a lost golden age, and on the other, a lament for what urban life had become. Brian Short explains how "Theocritus had set his idylls in the Sicily of his youth [whereas Virgil] sets his *Eclogues* or bucolics… in an imaginary Arcadia… a remote and escapist space" (p. 134). This genre of pastoral poetry was somewhat lost during the dark ages but was enthusiastically restored during the Renaissance, again much disconnected from the rural worlds being described. Renaissance poets infused the pastoral with magical qualities and figures further emphasizing the connections between rural life and a 'paradise lost'. The genre had obvious allegorical and nationalist overtones but captured also the growing disdain for the rapidly growing urban centers. By the late 18th and early 19th century, much of Europe experienced unprecedented levels of urbanization which placed tremendous strain on urban infrastructure and services. Walker (2014) explains that "commentators emphasized the city's poor housing, low wages and unemployment, made worse by a trade depression coinciding with the long-term decline of established

industries such as shipbuilding" (p.92). Urban disdain only fueled rural romanticism, to the extent wealthy landowners began occupying and reconstructing 'rural' landscapes so that the mythical escapes imagined by poets and artists were becoming 'civilized' retreats for a wealthy elite.

The enactment of a rural idyll by wealthy landowners points to an interesting blurring of the rural–urban dichotomy where in occupying the rural, the rural must become tamed to capture urban imaginings while offering the comforts privileged classes might expect. But according to Andrew Walker (2014), blurring the urban and rural can reinforce the dichotomy when the process is reversed and the rural bleeds into the urban. From his research of 19th and 20th century livestock practices in the small British town of Lincoln, he describes how the town struggled to maintain urban propriety in light of the rural incursions that were occurring within town boundaries. He explains how animal fairs were increasingly becoming part of the local economy, but the animals—their smells, their excrement, their disease, their slaughter and butchering—were causing great concern for town officials and residents. Walker (2014) writes, that in "addition to the offence caused to the urbane citizens of Lincoln by the influx of horse breeders and dealers, very real dangers presented themselves" (p.101). He describes accounts of animals breaking free from their bullocks such as one in 1897 when "an elderly gentleman narrowly escaped being knocked down in the incident" (Walker, 2014, p.101). At the conclusion of a summer horse fair, a local commentator complained that "the city's streets looked and smelt like a farm yard" (Walker, 2014, pp.103–104). Walker (2014) concluded from this particular case study that "Far from the idyllic rustic imagery which attracted the eye of the metropolitan sophisticate, to many inhabitants of smaller urban centers such as Lincoln, the 'rural' denoted inconvenience, disorder, lawlessness and the unwelcome smell of the farmyard" (p.106). Walker's research also points to the disconnect between the rural idyllic and rural life, which is interestingly captured by Short (2006) when describing rural idyllic imaginings in pastoral writings of Ben Johnson and Thomas Carew: "Christian virtue and the Golden Age of plenty combine to offer the poet and visitor a 'natural' bounty, although one which obscures the labor required to provide the food and drink" (p.137). There is almost a comic absurdity to some of these rural delusions, but this should not obscure the implications of these constructions for those living in these 'real' spaces and conditions.

The rural idyll is as much about escapism as it is about nostalgia, in part seeking refuge from the perils of city life but also longing for a once purer, simpler existence. In a contemporary context, these yearnings proliferate in diverse and complex ways imposing rural idyll designs without fully—if at all—appreciating the basis from which these imaginings are derived. In David Bell's (2006) discussion of the rural idyll and globalization, he offers various examples of the diffusion of the rural idyll within a contemporary western market economy. In one of his examples he asks: "How does the global agro-food business redefine the idyll as a source of endless nourishment? And how do these (and other) sites for the production of the idyll intersect and interact?" (Bell, 2006, p.154). He later describes these interactions as "gastro-idyll" and the "tension between *the production of idyllic food* and *the idyllic production of food*" (Bell, 2006, p.157). In part critique of large scale agriculture and certain areas of food science (e.g., GMOs, Nano-technology) and a valorization of small-scale family farms and organic food production, gastro idyll embodies the same desires of escapism and nostalgia. These sentiments have important economic implications as consumers

increasingly seek out to consume idyllic food idyllically produced. New food industries have emerged capitalizing on the perceived health benefits of eating organically, eating slow food and eating foods harvested within a 100km radius (see http://www.100kmfoods.com).

The economic growth around the gastro-idyll is matched by food activism with organizations and researchers seeking to restore food quality and build local food capacity in places most vulnerable to food insecurity. In Canada, for example, researchers and government officials have suggested northern Indigenous peoples restore land-based food practices of hunting and fishing to help address the high levels of food insecurity experienced as a result of the high costs and limited availability of healthy foods throughout much of northern Canada (Ford, 2009; Rudolph & Mclachlan, 2013). These advocacy efforts, however, do not necessarily take into full consideration the tremendous costs, knowledge and labor involved in maintaining traditional food practices (Pal, Haman & Robidoux, 2013), factors that must be understood if such food strategies are realistically going to increase access to healthy foods. In other contexts, with more established agricultural histories, solutions to food security challenges are envisioned through the restoration and optimization of subsistence-based and/or small-scale agriculture (Altieri, Anderson & Merrick, 1987).

It is in this vein that this current project emerged, situating rural food production as an ethical response to the agri-food question (Moyo, Jha, & Yeros, 2013) and promoting the potential of subsistence and small-scale food production as a means of addressing surmounting food security challenges. The research involved studying local food practices in two communities in rural Lebanon to understand what contribution locally harvested foods are having on local dietary practices and if such practices can help solve the increasing levels of food insecurity in these regions. While conducting the fieldwork in both communities, we struggled to contend with idyllic discourses that embraced notions of pure and healthy food and lifestyles associated with agriculture, countered by a more prevailing dismissal of this way of life by participants in the study describing agricultural practices as highly laborious, economically unrewarding and generally undesirable. But it was perhaps because of our own experiences physically engaging in these practices that idyllic formulations were most vividly disrupted, undermining any of the pure, health affirming associations our project was espousing by returning to locally procured foods.

4.0 Rural but not so Idyll Arsal

The town of Arsal is located within a larger highland region (also called Arsal) in the northeastern part of Lebanon, bordering Syria. At the time of this fieldwork, it was estimated that there were 36,000 people living in this 36,000 hectare region (Zurayk et al., 2001), but most of the population is concentrated within the stone houses of the town itself. The community is considered to be an isolated community, both geographically and socio-culturally. While only approximately 120 km from Beirut, the road past Baalbek—the next major center located in the heart of the Bekaa—increasingly erodes as you approach Arsal. The road is away from any destination routes (major city or tourist location) and therefore traffic is primarily local. Aside from its geographic isolation, Arsal is predominately a Sunni Muslim community in a region that is predominantly Shiite, which has led to critical tensions in this region for decades (International Crisis Group, 2016). This geographic and religious isolation has led to what residents describe as a lack

of representation at a larger political level. Important issues, such as regulating the quarry industry, do not receive the public attention they deserve and are generally ignored at all levels of government (Brooks, 2002).

Historically, the people of Arsal were primarily herders, an occupation that continues today, but over the past fifty years the community has undergone significant transformations. The first was the innovative introduction of fruit trees into the nearby mountains, which despite great skepticism at the time that fruit trees could grow in this rugged terrain, there is now significant cherry, apple and apricot production. According to Carden (2009):

> At a time when deforestation is a major concern elsewhere, one of Lebanon's driest places is getting greener. Arsal now has some two million trees, mostly cherry and apricot, that provide a major source of income for 60 per cent of its population (p.94).

There was also the discovery of underground water sources in an area directly adjacent to the town itself where arid agriculture is being replaced by newly irrigated small-scale farming practices. The area called Chebib is increasingly becoming occupied by families who have ancestral ties to the land or those with enough financial resources to purchase land to develop farms that grow crops (e.g., wheat), fruit trees and a wide variety of vegetables. The farms are primarily subsistence-based, but there is an element of commercial production which will be discussed below.

Alongside these agricultural developments was the sudden onset of quarrying, which is producing a highly sought-after limestone sold throughout Lebanon and internationally. The stone literally surrounds the village, as if the houses were born out of it, which has brought on—official and unofficial—quarry development in close proximity to the town itself and in parts of Chebib. This proliferation of quarries has provided men of all ages with minimal skills, relatively high-paying jobs. It has also become the primary industry. There are, however, well documented (Darwish et al., 2001) environmental concerns with this industry, such as contaminating ground water, dismantling landscapes and increased air pollution. In addition to the environmental impact, the introduction of quarrying in Arsal has been described as a source of conflict for community residents because "the practice started during Lebanon's civil war when Arsal had no functioning municipal government, quarry operators did not need to worry about permits or community oversight—often they just grabbed the land and shut out traditional users" (Dale, 2001, "Looming Ecological Problems," para. 2). The land has therefore become highly contested in and around Arsal with multiple stakeholders envisioning land use in very different ways. Some struggle to maintain traditional herding practices, others are turning to small-scale and commercial agriculture, and other groups are maximizing short-term profit from quarrying. What was apparent over the course of the fieldwork was that certain land practices were privileged over others and the promotion of agriculture and local food production seemed to resonate more with us as researchers than for most people we encountered in the community. Whatever tensions there were among land use groups were not observed in our fieldwork. In fact, in some cases there were families who worked the land for food and also owned quarries with family members working in them.

It is important to stress that much has changed in Arsal since this fieldwork was conducted, which is not part of the overall analysis for this article. The year following our fieldwork was the rebel uprising in Syria and ongoing civil war which has dramatically affected the people in this region. As a village bordering Syria with strong ties to the predominantly Sunni Syrian population, Arsal was inundated with Syrian refugees fleeing for safety and Syrian rebels strategically situating themselves for armed conflict against President Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian army. Estimates of over 40,000 Syrian refugees and rebels were reported to be living in Arsal from 2012–2017 (Enders, 2017). This influx of Syrian refugees and rebels prompted the Shiite militant group Hezbollah, which supported the Assad regime, to take military action against the rebels despite the official stance of the Lebanese government to remain neutral for the sake of national stability (Gade & Moussa, 2017). As the military conflict escalated, terrorist groups such as ISIL and the Al Qaeda supported Fatah Tahrir Al Sham also moved in to fight alongside the rebels and assisted in orchestrating hostage taking of Lebanese soldiers. Arsal became a site of full blown military conflict and experienced massive human and environmental destruction. In one report, the situation was described as follows:

> Arsal, a Sunni town sympathetic to the uprising against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, has over the past three years become the temporary home for almost 100,000 Syrians—more than double the number of the Lebanese residents. Civilians caught up in the latest fighting say the town is more and more resembling a big prison. (Atassi, 2014)

In 2017, the Lebanese government arranged for safe passage for thousands of Syrian refugees and rebels to leave Arsal and return to Syria after a successful military offensive driving out rebel and terrorist groups earlier in the year. The area has since stabilized, yet tensions remain high and residents are struggling to come to terms with the massive destruction and devastation experienced over the past seven years. For example, recent reports indicate that local residents have not been able to return to their orchards or farms since the war broke out. In one Al Jezeera report, a resident "determined that unless he was able to access his crops and remedy their condition by the end of May, more than a year of overgrowth would take its toll on the harvest, destroying a generation's worth of toil" (Kullab, 2015). The resident was quoted as saying "If our work is not carried out before then, the trees will dry up and we will lose our crops. It will take another 15 years before they can give fruit again" (Kullab, 2015). The conflict in Arsal has since ended, yet aside from the damaged or destroyed orchards, farmers now face the threat of landmines that have killed five local residents since 2017. The most recent being three men being "killed when they drove their pick-up truck over a mine that was planted on the road leading to the al-Taroush farm, which is their source of income" (3 Killed by Mine, 2018).

5.0 Local Perspectives on Local Food Production

Prior to the military conflict there were essentially three types of food production in Arsal: (a) subsistence-based farming; (b) small-scale commercial agriculture; and (c) higher elevation fruit tree orchards, also for commercial production. The distinction between the second and third types of agriculture is made because fruit

tree orchards are owned and maintained by many Arsal residents, but families do not live up in the mountains. People from the town will drive up the windy dirt road at various times in the year to work the land and take care of the orchards but for the most part the land is uninhabited (see Figure 2). The subsistence-based and small-scale commercial agriculture takes place in close proximity to the town and families live in stone farmhouses year-round or seasonally. By participating in each type of agricultural setting, we were able to observe firsthand what was involved in local food production and the work that was required to plant, maintain and harvest crops. Working the land was extremely difficult and required at different times multiple generations to participate in the various activities. During these interactions in the field, harvesting wheat, planting seeds and picking fruit from the trees, people began telling us about what they thought about rural life, and their participation in local food production. While select individuals embraced the rural idyllic notion of the purity of land and rural living, for those who actually worked the land, they spoke about it as antiquated, highly laborious, unprofitable and whenever possible avoided. A vivid example of this was observed during a wheat picking event where we assisted one extended family hand-pick an entire field of wheat. The labour was tremendously arduous and the primarily female pickers did not conceal their disdain for the activity.

Figure 2. An elderly couple travelling the windy road into the lower highlands to work in their fruit orchard.

Source: Carla Haibi.

On this day the wheat picking began around 6:30 am and involved a mother and father, two daughters and a family friend lining up in rows and hand picking the wheat. The wheat is hand-picked because it is too short and too sparse for any type of mechanized cutting or picking device. Pickers are required to bend down or crouch and with two hands pull out the wheat stalks from the roots (see Figure 3). The picking took place in three stages, each stage lasting approximately 90 minutes, and each stage increasingly difficult to finish. During the lunch break, which was prepared by the women after picking their sections of the field, we

asked the daughters if they enjoyed coming out to help their parents with this type of work. They openly stated that they did not like this work at all and that none of their friends did this with their families. They said that their friends' parents simply preferred to buy their food. The youngest daughter followed up with a story about picking cherries with her father when she was a young girl:

> When I was nine years old, I was picking cherries from an orchard with my dad. We picked all day. At the end of day, we brought the cherries to the middlemen to sell. When we received the money, I asked my dad how much money we received. He gave it to me and said 'I earned it' and 'it was mine'. When I saw how little it was, I gave it back to him saying, 'Keep it. After all this work, that's all we've got? It isn't worth it'.

She concluded by saying that she now attends the university in Zahlé—a major city in the Bekaa, some 2 hours drive away—studying business, so that she will not have to harvest food when she gets older. This was a repeated theme throughout our fieldwork and profoundly resonated with us on this particular day. At the end of the final interval of picking, we saw the mother keeled over beside the canopy exhausted and sick. She managed to get herself up and went to the outdoor toilet and could be heard vomiting. She then returned to the shade of the canopy, laid on the ground and curled up in obvious discomfort. That was the conclusion of one day of wheat harvesting.

Figure 3. Woman handpicking wheat.

Source: Carla Haibi.

Participating in ploughing and planting seeds in the higher elevation fruit tree orchards also provided unique insights about what is involved in local food production, as the type of labour is more specialized, and the people involved are typically older and more knowledgeable about agricultural practices. To get up to

this region requires driving up a dirt road that winds up the mountain and takes approximately 40 minutes to climb 2,000 m. Because the terrain is steep and rugged, modern agricultural technologies are rarely used. Instead of tractors or tillers, donkeys and homemade ploughs are used to till the land (See Figure 4). The men we worked with lived in the village of Arsal and would come up to work the land when time permitted. They held the land in high regard explaining that "the land was like a mother; it was pure and nurturing giving back life. The more one cares for the land and tends to it, the more it gives back". But when asked if this was a view widely shared amongst people in the village, the one man responded:

> No. Only until one works the land and experiences the rewards you get from working hard physically on the land can you appreciate what the land gives you. The only way kids will gain this appreciation of the land is if they need the land to live, for subsistence. Younger people don't need to use the land; they have other sources of generating revenue and buy their foods. They don't need the land and don't work it. It's not something that is economically appealing, and having other jobs, they don't share in these land practices.

Figure 4. Working the land in highlands with donkey and plough.

Source: Carla Haibi.

The comments provided by this man are evidence of a generational divide but also coupled with a poignant empathy in that he acknowledges the practical choices many youths are making instead of working the land. At no point in the conversation was he critical of youths looking to taking up more modernized lifestyles and seeking economic opportunities outside of local agriculture. Similar sentiments about the economic impracticality of land-based practices were shared

with us during cherry picking in the lower highlands with a family who owned one of the larger farms in the town. The family owned land half way up to the higher elevation fruit tree orchards and maintained a large orchard of fruit trees. It was the duty of the sons and their wives or fiancées to harvest the fruit and bring the produce to middlemen to be sold at market. While cherry picking is not as arduous as wheat picking, it is laborious and involves a full day of picking. During lunch the eldest son discussed with us at great length what he thought about this type of work and the limited economic return. The conversation started with a question posed about who relies more on locally harvested foods, those who are more economically disadvantaged, or the more affluent. The eldest son responded: "No one is too down out here. For those who are short on cash, they simply do without a certain type of food if they don't have it or can't afford it". Asked if there were any economic advantages to eating more from the land versus the store, he said, "there are costs associated with working the land, whether it be for fuel, the vehicles, tractors, trucks, fertilizer, pesticide, etc. It all requires resources". His family was able to own and work the land because they were one of the wealthier families in the town, but this was not something he enjoyed. He explained that work is "very hard" and "not economically viable", so he "spends his time doing other things whenever possible".

After lunch and working with the ladies as they were cleaning up the dishes, Author 2 was able to speak with the women without the men around and the conversation took a darker tone. The women explained that in this area, once a woman is married she is essentially adopted by the husband's family and takes up a life according to him and his family. Women typically do not work outside of the home, even if they are educated. They are responsible for the husband and his family. One of the women expressed serious resentment to her situation, saying she had to give away her independence and immediately have children and assist with her husband's work which involved working on the farm. She also was expected to assist in planting crops and harvesting. In various conversations with the daughters they openly expressed their disdain for agriculture and resented the fact that they were required to work the land, whether it be planting, harvesting, or simply visiting the farm.

The three examples provided here are embedded within the contradictions we experienced throughout the fieldwork. The land did hold special value to many people and they saw local food production as a healthy and even pure alternative to modern life in the town itself. These expressions were regularly undermined vocally by town residents and by the activities that we experienced. The tension between the production of idyllic food and the idyllic production of food was apparent in all facets of food production. For example, when working with women in one household proudly displaying the laborious task of bread making in their tanoor oven, we learned that the oven was fueled not by wood, but rather pressed board from discarded furniture they had salvaged from various waste sites. Pressed wood typically contains formaldehyde, a carcinogenic substance which is found in the glue that binds the board particles (See http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ewh-semt/air/in/poll/construction/formaldehyde-eng.php). While cooking the bread, the sharp smell of the irritant was literally choking us as we worked with the ladies making the bread.

In a similar vein, as we were introduced to local food producers, we were told with pride that all food grown within the region was organic. And while there have been

sound critiques of what constitutes organic food (de Lisle, 1999) and the merits of organic consumption (James, 1993), the farming practices we observed in Arsal were far from any working definition of organically grown foods. As a starting point, each household explained to us matter-of-factly that pesticides were used in all crops, whether be it fruit trees or cereal and vegetable crops. When asked about the potential health risks of using pesticides, people responded pragmatically: they were necessary to prevent insect infestation. For the people in this region, organic food production simply meant growing food locally ('baladi') as opposed to foods that were available in the market which came from large scale agriculture companies. But again, contradictions exist as vegetable crops are grown under swaths of quarry dust that literally fills the air. In one case, a family farm had a quarry literally in their backyard, which was also a place where household waste was burned. Without any proper waste management site in the area, households are forced to devise their own waste management system which for this family meant hauling trash up a hill in their backyard and burning it. During our time there we saw various household items being burnt, including a television set. The environmental concerns of improper—or in this case, non-existent—waste management are abundant, but they are especially concerning in the Chebib area of Arsal which has become the central agricultural location because of the easily accessible groundwater that was recently discovered. Burning waste that contains harmful and toxic materials will potentially contaminate ground water sources that are used for drinking water and for irrigating crops. The extent to which people's health is being affected by these living conditions is uncertain, but it is the context in that 'organic' food production is occurring, which makes the production of idyllic food and the idyllic production of food improbable.

6.0 Conclusion

The incongruities between rural idyllic perceptions of local food production and the brutal realities of food production in Arsal are identified here not only to reinforce the constructive nature of the 'rural idyll', but to stress how rural idyllic imaginaries are permeating food and health studies. Promoting the enhancement or adoption of local food procurement as a food security strategy for rural remote communities has gained traction over the past two decades. Our most recent research in northern Canada has followed this trend working with Indigenous populations to build local food capacity to address health food scarcity and the high costs of market food. Whether working in rural Lebanon or in the Canadian Arctic, it is critical that the contexts of local food production must be understood. The effort involved in procuring one's own food is tremendous, whatever the context, and if researchers are not fully aware of what is involved in local food production, advocating its adoption is disingenuous and impractical. In espousing the health advantages of growing and harvesting food locally and engaging in the physical activity required to procure one's own food, we were confronted with practical responses indicating their awareness of these health advantages but that such lifestyles were antiquated, inconvenient and unprofitable. Why do we as researchers choose to live and eat from the land? Moreover, our efforts in this project were to help address food security issues for those most disadvantaged, but over the course of the research we discovered that those most disadvantaged did not have the resources to own land or grow their own food. Only those with enough resources and time were interested and willing to invest in land-based food practices to supplement their existing incomes or to supplement their primarily

market-based diets with locally-grown foods—not unlike the food supplementation that occurs with individual gardens in urban contexts. The rural idyll construct provides an interesting avenue to consider the potentially dangerous disconnect between researchers and the rural remote communities with which we work. By gaining a deeper appreciation of what rural lives exist and what is involved in local food traditions, a more realistic and meaningful approach to addressing food security issues may be achieved.

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