The Role of the Social Economy in Scaling Up Alternative Food Initiatives

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Food—what we eat, where we get it, how it’s produced and distributed—can act as a catalyst for social, economic, and environmental transformation. The essential and multifunctional nature of food gives rise to a number of crucial and overlapping societal goals including aims related to nutrition, health, culture, community building, social equity, local economic development, and ecological integrity. Thus, food creates both an important platform for developing an integrative approach to sustainable community development and the strategic cross-sector collaboration needed to foster this transformative approach.

In this chapter, we describe and analyze collaborative innovations emerging from the social economy that are contributing to community transformation through the resocialization and relocalization of food. The case studies presented below—Edmonton’s Good Food Box, the Rimbey Farmers’ Market, and the New City Market local food hub in Vancouver—render visible some specific nodes at the intersection of the social economy and nascent alternative food systems. There are a growing number of alternative food initiatives that are influencing changes in the ways in which food is produced, distributed, and consumed. They provide an alternative work-in-progress narrative to conventional, industrial, and globalized agri-food systems and are drawing on social economy strategies to achieve their goals. The challenges they face in scaling up these innovations so as to increase their individual impacts and contribute to the development of a more comprehensive (field to plate to waste) alternative food system underline the essential role of social values and social infrastructure (collaboration, strategic alliances, and networks) in building
the physical infrastructure that is also needed to realize the strong sustainability and strong social economy potential of alternative food systems.

A key similarity between strong sustainability and strong social economy approaches to social, environmental, and economic problems is the turn to the local, with emphasis on place-based and community-based responses to local and global problems. The fundamental characteristic that links alternative food initiatives to strong sustainability and strong social economy approaches is the overlap of the spatial concept of local with the values and principles of embeddedness, the rooting of food products and systems in a particular place and social context, where “local” becomes a strategy for values-based transformation of the food system. Attempts to embed food systems in particular locales reflect a key strategy behind the alternative food movement’s goal of creating shorter value chains that reconnect consumers and producers (Goodman 2003; Winter 2003) and thus provide opportunities for generating the reciprocity, trust, transparency, and accountability that are critical to developing a more ecologically sustainable and socially just food system.

As Branden Born and Mark Purcell (2006) demonstrate, the localness of a food system should not be seen as having any inherent qualities—it is merely a strategy that can be applied by any group of actors to advance particular agendas. For this reason, local food initiatives benefit from explicit linkages to the value-based commitments of strong approaches to social economy and sustainable community development. Local food initiatives have the potential for broader transformation, but proponents need to be aware of and closely tied to the politics of alternative food systems (Guthman 2008a). Much of the focus of the local and alternative food movement is based on the need to pay the full costs of the environmental, social, and economic impacts of food, but if this movement is to contribute to food security and social justice, participation must be universal (Guthman 2011). Without attention to the underlying values of the local food movement, the localization of consumption and production risks being limited to the fetishization of local food for wealthier consumers. Such localization is based on principles that correspond more to weak sustainability and weak social economy approaches (as discussed in chapter 1).

The case studies of alternative food initiatives presented in this chapter provide insight into some of the challenges and successes in creating a sustainable local food system. Opposing the status quo of the conventional, globalized food system is a daunting David-and-Goliath task, yet the fact that these alternative food initiatives exist, are growing in number, and are part of broader global food...
security and sovereignty movements whose goal is to remake the food system (Larder, Lyons, and Woolcock 2014) illustrates the “politics of possibility in the here and now” (Gibson-Graham 2006, xxvi). These seemingly small initiatives can be seen as local sites of the transformation of global politics (Gibson-Graham 2006). Before launching into the description and analysis of these cases, we provide a brief background on the conventional industrialized food system, the rise of alternative agri-food initiatives, and the role of the social economy.

EMERGING ALTERNATIVES TO THE GLOBALIZED FOOD SYSTEM

Over the past century, significant scientific, economic, and political efforts have modernized and industrialized agriculture and the entire food system. Improvements in technology and technique have been nothing short of revolutionary, but much of this progress has come at the expense of ecosystems and communities. Agriculture now has the largest and most wide-ranging environmental impacts of any human activity, including loss of soil, water quality, biodiversity, and natural habitats (Millenium Ecosystem Assessment 2005). The conventional agri-food system is also heavily dependent on fossil fuels, from production to processing and distribution, producing approximately 25 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions (Foley et al. 2011). Within the context of climate change and a finite supply of fossil fuels, the ability of the industrial food system to provide global food security now and into the future is a topic of growing concern. As oil prices rise, so does the cost of food; currently, at least one billion people around the world are food insecure (FAO 2011). There are also growing concerns about food health and safety due to the prevalent use of pesticides, growth hormones, antibiotics, and preservatives in increasingly standardized and processed food.

The structure and viability of family farms and farming communities have also been severely affected by industrialized agriculture (Douglas 2010; Epp and Whitson 2001). Local control over production processes and markets is decreasing, while dependence on industrial inputs and long-distance markets intensifies. As agriculture and food have become increasingly drawn into the global economy, there has been a steady withdrawal of many interventionist policies and programs that once supported agriculture (Wibe and Wipf 2011). The role of the nation-state in shaping agriculture development is diminishing with the implementation of liberalized trade arrangements; food is big business, and global markets and transnational agribusiness corporations are now key players affecting change in the food system (Heffernan and Constance 1994; Juillet, Roy, and Scala 1997). As a result of
this shift, farmers are earning a declining share of the food dollar, while the cost of production continues to rise, driving many farmers into debt and bankruptcy (Qualman 2011). These structural conditions cause farmers to become chained to the “agricultural treadmill”: they respond to worsening economic returns by further intensifying production through high-cost scientific and technological inputs in search of production efficiencies at greater scales (Ward 1993).

Much has been published recently to expose the sustainability challenges of the conventional food system. Such documentaries as Food Inc. (2008) and Supersize Me (2004) and books like Michael Pollan’s In Defence of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto (2008) and The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals (2006) argue persuasively that reliance on a globalized and industrialized food system is eroding the ecological integrity, nutritional value, safety, sovereignty, and security of our food system. Initiatives exploring alternative approaches to food production, distribution, retailing, and consumption have blossomed in recent years, as evidenced by the exponential growth in farmers’ markets in North America over the past ten years (FMC 2009; USDA 2011). Some participants in these and other alternative food initiatives take their cue from the hundred-mile diet or the organic movement, motivated by health concerns or issues such as peak oil and climate change, or by the community benefits associated with relocalizing economic activity, preserving farmland, and supporting local farmers and farming communities.

As part of the evolving response to the conventional food system, social economy entities and activities have emerged within the local food movement that are contributing to the “re-socialization” and “re-spatialization” of food (Sonnino and Marsden 2006, 183). The numerous examples include food banks, collective kitchens, community gardens, community supported agriculture (CSA), farmers’ markets, good food boxes, and local food hubs. Through a long and rich history, the social economy has demonstrated a capacity to respond to social need through groups of citizens acting in collaborative and democratic ways to achieve common goals (Defourny and Develtere 1999; Moulaert and Ailenei 2005; Pearce 2003). For example, the development of the agricultural economy of western Canada relied on co-operatives, which provided the collective infrastructure to get farmers’ products to markets and ensured that farmers received fair prices for their products and had access to machinery, equipment, and financing at fair rates (Faucher 1947). However, these social economy initiatives also struggled with the tensions involved in maintaining organizational stability and pursuing broader transformational change; in some cases (e.g., grain marketing), they were unable to achieve their objectives without state support (Lipset 1950).
For contemporary producers, alternative food initiatives offer several important benefits over the conventional supply chain, such as immediate payment and higher revenues (Verhaegen and Van Huylenbroeck 2001), as well as independence and greater control over production and marketing (Hunt 2007). The “quest for fresh products” has made farmers’ markets and other alternative food venues popular with consumers (Sanderson et al. 2005, 6), who also seek “attributes not found in globally produced commodity goods”—such qualities as “authenticity and a sense of local community” (Hunt 2007, 54). Consumers point to a variety of ethical and environmental considerations influencing their purchasing of locally produced food, including “concerns about farmland protection” and “small farm viability” (Brown and Miller 2008, 20), interest in supporting “organic conditions and animal welfare” (Holloway and Kneafsey 2000, 286), and issues around food safety, food security, and diversity (Sanderson et al. 2005).

Typical of the social economy, relationships and linkages among public, private, and social economy sectors are being strengthened and expanded in alternative food initiatives, and reciprocity and mutual benefits are being achieved through the integration of a broad range of social, economic, and environmental objectives. In part because of these relationships, many see these alternative food initiatives as new consumption spaces defined by the interactions of local, ethical, and environmental discourses involving networks of producers, consumers, and institutions (Holloway and Kneafsey 2000). From this perspective, alternative food systems are considered “a means of taking back control from the multinationals and contributing to local community revitalization” (Sanderson et al. 2005, 12). In contrast to a corporately controlled global food system, social economy and alternative food initiatives are often self-organizing, locally embedded, and locally controlled (Feagan and Morris 2009), responding in size and character to local supply and demand, and are “conditioned by local community norms, values and culture” (Lyson, Gillespie, and Hilchey 1995, 108).

By mobilizing public resources and resources generated by the marketplace as well as through voluntary involvement, the social economy strives to build relationships that are linked by a common purpose and to create new knowledge and benefits for its members or the community as a whole (Fonteneau et al. 2010). The social economy, however, is not without its challenges and shortcomings. Moulaert and Ailenei (2005) identify sustainable financing, fluctuating government and institutional support, and higher-level organizational development as prevalent challenges for the development of this sector. Amin, Cameron, and Hudson (2002) critique social economy players who fail to uphold the guiding
principles and goals of this sector and in some cases embrace the larger capitalist system. A similar analysis can be applied to alternative food initiatives.

Despite growing interest in alternatives to the conventional food system, the scale of production and distribution focused on supplying local demand constitutes only a small percentage of total food sales, and conventional retailers remain the primary source for food acquisition, whether local or imported (Alberta 2008; FMC 2009; Smithers, Lamarche, and Joseph 2008). In addition to scale, a number of other constraints limit the role of local and alternative food initiatives within the larger food system, including scope (range of products, particularly in a northern climate), accessibility and convenience, physical infrastructure (storage, processing), and organizational capacity. Issues related to affordability, social exclusion, gender, and labour practices have also raised concern about the values and goals shaping the development of alternative food initiatives (Allen 2008; Delind 2011; Guthman 2008b; Hinrichs 2003). The key challenge facing the local food movement is how to evolve to the point of transforming rather than merely informing the food system—from farm to plate to waste. Achieving this goal will require strategies and innovations that meet both quantitative and qualitative objectives, that build the “social and physical infrastructure” (Connelly, Roseland, and Markey 2011) needed to scale up and scale out community-oriented food projects such as farmers’ markets and community supported agriculture (Beckie, Huddart Kennedy, and Wittman 2012; Friedmann 2007; Johnston and Baker 2005; Wittman, Beckie, and Hergesheimer 2012).

In the three case studies that follow, we highlight the successes and challenges of scaling up alternative food systems based on greater convergence of the social economy and sustainability. Our starting point is the recognition that in order to scale up, a rebuilding of the infrastructure to support local and alternative food systems is required and that this infrastructure has both social and physical components.

THE GOOD FOOD BOX, EDMONTON

The provincial capital of Edmonton and the surrounding rural municipalities in northern Alberta (also known as the Capital Region) constitute a metropolitan population of over a million. Like the rest of the province, this region is characterized by a dry continental climate with warm summers and cold winters. The productive black prairie soils of the area support viable large-scale crop and livestock operations. There is also a concentration of market gardens in the peri-urban area surrounding Edmonton; most notable is the northeast area of the city, which
supports a number of successful small-scale fruit and vegetable operations due to a unique microclimate that creates an extended growing season similar to that in the southern-most parts of the province.

The Good Food Box (GFB) program emerged at a time when there was considerable local-level organizing in opposition to redevelopment of agricultural land in the northeast part of the city between 2006 and 2010. The non-profit organization Greater Edmonton Alliance (GEA) was successful in leading a broad-based citizen’s movement focused on preserving the last tract of agricultural land within the city limits, raising awareness of problems with the existing food system, and linking food and land-use policy for city planners, politicians, and the broader public. The movement—which included farmers in northeast Edmonton, faith-based organizations, local businesses, and citizens—was successful in ensuring that any future planning and development for the northeast sector of the city recognize the value of its agricultural characteristics—including micro-climate, soil capabilities, and moisture content—and their contribution to sustainable food and agriculture systems for Edmonton (City of Edmonton 2010). Widespread public concern for local agriculture in the Capital Region encouraged the City of Edmonton to develop a local food and agriculture strategy (see Beckie, Hanson, and Schrader 2013). The GFB program was able to build on the emerging enthusiasm for local food and to effectively link concerns over redevelopment with the local food system more generally.

GFB organizers recognized that a key strategy for farmland preservation was to increase the viability and profitability of local farmers and to raise the awareness of the potential for local food for consumers (GEA, 2010). Yet there were three key barriers to achieving both goals: lack of collaboration across the food chain, limited consumer access to and awareness of local food, and limited distribution opportunities for producers. The conventional food system provides little incentive for collaboration. Growers, consumers, institutional buyers, processors, and restaurant owners have few opportunities to interact, and personal relationships and connections have been eclipsed by the pursuit of efficiencies and economies of scale. As one local producer put it (interview with authors, Edmonton, February 2, 2010), “Producers need to work together to create a sense of interdependency rather than competition so that the significant costs, risks and benefits of investing in local food infrastructure can be shared.” In other words, it is trust, reciprocity, and collaboration that are critical for rebuilding the food system.

Consumers’ limited access to and awareness of local food options was a challenge for rebuilding the food system. Beyond the weekly farmers’ markets, there are few alternative venues for convenient access to local food in the Capital Region. As
a result, consumers committed to supporting local food systems find themselves shopping at supermarkets in the middle of the week. Likewise, local farmers and producers have limited options for marketing their goods to local customers. For example, while selling at the farmers’ market provides direct access to consumers, it also takes the farmer off the farm at critical points of the growing season. In addition, the lack of local food wholesalers makes it difficult to access the restaurant industry. Chefs wishing to source local food often have to buy from multiple producers in order to get the volume required, and they face challenges in addressing other parameters such as similar quality, size, shape, flavour, and consistency.

The distribution of local food is fragmented and underdeveloped within Edmonton, and the Good Food Box program was seen as a way to build connections between farmers and the consumers who want to buy the product; it could provide an alternative to supermarkets while also maintaining a connection to the social and environmental values that gave rise to interest and concern about local-food issues in the Edmonton region. As one GFB customer stated (interview with authors, Edmonton, January 27, 2010):

I think most of the people I know that have joined up with the GFB did it as much for the good food as for the political reasons because they didn't want it to fail. Right now we are hoping to try and reach out to people who maybe aren't that, who just want the convenience and I think you still have to be a little bit convinced that it's good because you don't get to choose your vegetables and choices are made for you.

The GFB was set up as a social enterprise in 2009. It was designed to increase the availability of locally produced food for all families in the Edmonton area beyond the weekly farmers’ markets. The objectives of the project were to provide convenient access to affordable fresh produce to Edmonton residents, to provide fair market value to producers, to expand marketing and distribution for producers beyond the farmers markets, to be accessible to all, and to create jobs for low-income residents. The pilot project ran for six continuous weeks of delivery in 2009 and was expanded to the entire growing season for the two years following. The idea at the proposal stage was to evolve into a fully independent co-operative (GFB organizer, interview with authors, Edmonton, January 26, 2010).

The project was originally designed for 110 participants, but when a call for interest was put out, more than a thousand people signed up. The project delivered 236 bags of fresh produce per week, 31 of which were subsidized for low-income clients of the Edmonton Food Bank. Customer surveys at the end of the
year indicated that 88 percent of participants were extremely or very satisfied with the quality of the produce and the price. When asked why they participated, the primary response was to support local farmers (63%) and the secondary response was to support local food security (53%), demonstrating a values-based commitment to local food that goes beyond food as a commodity (GFB organizer, interview with authors, Edmonton, January 28, 2010).

The GFB was expanded for the 2010 and 2011 seasons to include a pre-order purchasing website that connected consumers to all of the products that were available at the farmers’ markets, increasing convenience for consumers and increasing sales of food products outside the mainstream food system, primarily to suburban residents. While it was no longer run explicitly as a social enterprise (the grant for subsidizing low-income access was not renewed), the local non-profit organization dedicated to supporting independent and local businesses in the Edmonton area that began managing the program donated 1 percent of total sales to the Mennonite Central Committee. Although the GFB was still committed to organic and sustainable production, it was no longer limited to locally sourced products; rather, it had expanded to businesses that operate locally, in part as a result of the difficulty in obtaining year-round access to a range of products in a northern climate. The program expanded to cater to niche foodie and middle-class markets, with prices that reflect those demographics. For example, consumers were able to purchase prepared meals, seafood, meats, seasonings, chocolates, breads, and vegetables, in addition to the standard range of products available during the growing season (GFB employee, interview with authors, January 28, 2010).

Moving to online pre-order sales and expanding product offerings for middle-class suburban consumers not only provided the opportunity to scale up connections between local producers and consumers but also yielded a critical mass that made further infrastructure investments viable. For example, securing warehousing space with cold storage, more delivery trucks, and additional labour would not have been feasible based on the numbers involved with the GFB project alone, and without that critical infrastructure, it was impossible to expand the GFB program so as to include more participants and neighbourhoods (GFB employee, interview with authors, 28 January, 2010). However, to cover the costs of scaling up, there was increasing pressure to prioritize higher-revenue boutique options over functions and options that improve equitable access to local food. The online ordering included offerings such as precooked frozen meals as well as seafood and chocolate, which were obviously not local but were provided by local businesses. These tensions resulted in some of the original GFB members leaving the program and running their
own bulk-buying clubs out of their kitchens because they did not feel that the GFB program was paying enough attention to the values and politics of local food.

The GFB ceased operations in 2012, as it was not generating enough revenue to justify the expenses. Attempts to expand the customer base in the suburban market based on convenience were unable to compete with the convenience and price of the mainstream food system. Meanwhile, the values of the social economy and sustainability that created the interest and rationale for the GFB initially were no longer emphasized as strongly. The demise of the GFB can be explained in part by the project attempting to scale up too quickly, paying too much attention to building the physical infrastructure for local food, and not cultivating the social infrastructure required to build a long-lasting movement around the social, political, and environmental issues associated with where our food comes from.

Meet Your Maker

Sean Connelly

FarmFolk CityFolk, a Vancouver-based non-profit organization that focuses on creating a local, sustainable food system, runs a number of projects that seek to provide access to and protection of farmland, to support local growers and producers, and to engage citizens in addressing local food issues. The organization has been particularly effective at building relationships, networks, and trust all along the food value chain, thus contributing to both the physical and social local food infrastructure (MYM 2014). They bring together representatives from hundreds of local food businesses for workshops, speed-dating roundtables, resource information sessions, and a delicious local food potluck lunch. Meet Your Maker provides an on-the-spot opportunity for networking and contracting among local food producers, processors, distributors, and commercial buyers. MYM events develop and solidify relationships between food producers and retail buyers and chefs. It has resulted in new business contacts, immediate sale contracts, and education on the challenges that both producers and buyers face in advancing local food. Over $1 million in contracts has been generated since the inaugural event in 2008.

Located along the corridor between Edmonton and Calgary, the region of Central Alberta is characterized by a strong agricultural heritage that continues to support a viable, rural-based economy. The towns and their surrounding farming communities have a combined population of approximately fifty thousand. During the summer months, thousands more are drawn to the many lakes and other recreational amenities of the region: Sylvan Lake, for example, received over 760,000 tourists in 2014 (CMBAC 2014). This influx of activity, paired with the region’s rich resource base, significantly shapes the local economy and creates employment and income opportunities. Unlike the many agricultural communities in the prairie region that are declining due to out-migration, the communities within this region have remained relatively stable and economically viable. Black prairie soils are prevalent here, and large-scale crop and livestock operations are the mainstay of the regional economy. However, vegetable and fruit production is increasing, as is the direct marketing of fresh produce through seasonally operated farmers’ markets; there are currently twelve farmers’ markets operating in this region. Similar to other regions of Alberta and the rest of Canada, these farmers’ markets are predominately non-profit or co-operative organizations; as such, they are agents of the social economy. The following case study focuses on the farmers’ market in the town of Rimbey.

Describing itself as a “community on the move,” the town of Rimbey (population 2,496) is located in Ponoka County, within close proximity to three large lakes (Pigeon Lake, Gull Lake, and Sylvan Lake) and within 150 kilometres of Alberta’s three largest cities (Calgary, Edmonton, and Red Deer). Rimbey has a stable economy, supported by well-established agricultural and oil and gas industries, and provides most essential services to the town and surrounding farming population of approximately twelve thousand. While strong local economies can be an important factor in the development of viable farmers’ markets, this is not always a given. As will be discussed below, the success of farmers’ markets ultimately depends on local leadership and the embeddedness of the market in the community and the region.

The Rimbey farmers’ market was established in the late 1980s, but by 2006, it was on the verge of shutting down, with only seven vendors remaining (Gail Rondeel, interview with the authors, Rimbey, April 8, 2008). A number of factors influenced the market’s decline including lack of leadership, vision and direction; a poor location; fading interest and support from the town; and a reputation “for
being such a terrible market” (Gail Rondeel, interview with the authors, Rimbey, April 8, 2008) within close proximity to a number of other, highly successful markets in the region. In 2007, however, the market experienced a dramatic turnaround with a new market manager and board of directors, and forty-two vendors. By mid-summer, a number of other new vendors had signed up. Within a short period of time, the Rimbey market succeeded in becoming a “great reason to get up on Saturday mornings”—a rallying call that has become the market’s slogan.

The market manager explained that the market’s renewed success began with the transition away from the for-profit model under which it was previously operating and towards an emphasis on contributing to the social aspects of the community. She emphasized that a locally embedded market generates a unique community atmosphere not typically offered in the conventional food retail sector:

I wanted to make the market a community event where people wanted to go on a Saturday morning, where they wanted to do their shopping, where they wanted to go meet for coffee, meet their friends. If you can make the market a really fun place to be, which is something that is lacking in our society . . . well, I think this is why farmers’ markets are so important. We have people coming to the market and dancing. We have older senior couples actually ballroom dancing at the market. All this stuff gives a real sense of community. (Gail Rondeel, interview with the authors, Rimbey, April 8, 2008)

Hiring a small bus to pick up seniors, having a volunteer band play each market day, providing family-directed entertainment, and garnering support from local businesses through donations (such as doughnuts and coffee) are other innovative ways in which a spirit of community has been brought back into the Rimbey market. Rather than being in competition with local businesses, the market has drawn people to the town. The market’s leadership has also made efforts to make the market environmentally friendly. People are encouraged to bring their own shopping bags and coffee cups and efforts are made to get children and youth involved. Every fourth Saturday is an “environmental solutions day,” with a focus on local best practices and “green” inventions. This market is not about “bigger is better”; rather, it focuses on community needs and values. In fact, the manager plans to limit the number of vendors at the market to “keep its community atmosphere” and to avoid the hectic frenzy of some of the larger, tourist-oriented markets. Unlike those markets, Rimbey’s market has a predominantly local customer base, which shapes what vendors sell and what social and educational activities are included. The market is also viewed as an opportune entry point for expanding
and diversifying production in the area and increasing residents’ access to local foods: for example, a contract has been secured with the seniors’ lodge for fresh vegetables sourced from market vendors, and there are plans to partner with the 100 Mile Kitchen, another local food initiative, to offer classes at the market on canning and preserving food.

The success of the market is largely due to strengthened relationships with local community organizations and town administration: for example, the market partnered with the Rimbey Historical Society and is now located on their grounds and has access to buildings and infrastructure at a reasonable cost. The market has also developed better linkages with other markets clustered in Central Alberta. The region has a strong network of experienced managers who network with one another, sharing tips on market development and potential new vendors and investigating ways to share costs and resources such as using a joint promotional campaign. Market managers in the region also collaborate to arrange market days and hours in order to avoid competition and overlap. This coordination enables the development of a “market circuit,” making it possible for customers and vendors to attend multiple markets during the week. For example, Innisfail Growers, based in this region, is a partnership of five family farms that sell fresh vegetables at thirteen different markets in central, northern, and southern Alberta, on every day of the week except Monday. This kind of collaboration and reciprocity is typical of the social economy. When vendors and customers are given more market options, and when vendors can expand production to meet greater demand and can enter into new market relations, the entire supply chain is strengthened. But participation in the cluster of markets of Central Alberta not only fosters the development of individual firms and markets; it also creates a collective competitive advantage through expanded horizontal and vertical linkages among public, private, and social economy sectors, facilitating a scaling up and scaling out of regional food networks as a whole while retaining the authenticity of the market experience.

The Rimbey market thus provides a good example of the benefits of investing in social infrastructure for the scaling up of alternative food initiatives. The commitment to building relationships among community partners, responding to local needs and values, and the farmers’ market creating a unique atmosphere that cannot be replicated by the conventional food system have all contributed to the success of this initiative. The regional clustering of farmers’ markets has also provided a valuable mechanism for scaling up and scaling out the social and environmental benefits without having to make a major investment in physical infrastructure, such as would be required for the development of a regional food

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hub. Hence, clustering can be an important and useful strategy for scaling alternative food initiatives; however, without subsequent development of physical infrastructure (e.g., storage, processing, distribution), challenges of scale, scope, and impact remain. While offering an alternative to the conventional food system and generating important environmental, health, and social impacts for the local community, the Rimbey market and other markets in the region still play only a minor role in terms of total regional food sales.

THE NEW CITY MARKET LOCAL FOOD HUB, VANCOUVER

Metro Vancouver, situated in the Fraser River Delta region of the Pacific coast, comprises twenty-two municipalities and one treaty First Nation. With a population of over two million, it is one of the most densely populated metropolitan areas of Canada. The moderate oceanic climate of the BC Lower Mainland, with its extended growing season, rich soil, and flat terrain, enables diverse agriculture production, ranging from a variety of horticultural crops (vegetables, fruits, berries, nuts, and flowers) to dairy and livestock operations. Increasing population density has driven up land prices in recent years, causing farm sizes to decrease, but the productive farmland in the province is, to a large extent, protected as the British Columbia Agricultural Land Reserve.

In 2005, the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority released the Vancouver Food System Assessment (Barbolet et al. 2005), which identified investment in local-food infrastructure as a key component to creating a more just and sustainable local food system. Drawing on experiences in other jurisdictions, the report indicated that social enterprises and supportive policies could drive this reinvestment on a system-wide basis. The report catalyzed action by local food organizations in Vancouver to further explore the potential of social enterprises in initiating change across the local food system. One organization that emerged was Local Food First (LFF), a multistakeholder, collaborative initiative whose mission was to build and strengthen a just and sustainable local food system. Throughout 2007, LFF hosted and engaged in a range of interviews, workshops, and community consultations with farmers, food-based businesses, development organizations, funders, and government to identify the key leverage points for reorienting the local food system along sustainability principles.

These various research, partnership development, engagement, and outreach activities confirmed the need to rebuild the systems and value chains related to local food so that farmers could have more direct access to the growing local food
market. There is no shortage of small-scale local food initiatives in Vancouver. Urban farming, community gardening, and multiple farmers’ markets and Good Food Box programs exist throughout the region. At all points along the food system, there are examples of small innovative solutions to reorienting the food system to respond to social, economic, health, and environmental concerns. However, as in Edmonton and Rimbey, the challenge was how to connect and scale up these initiatives so that they would have a more significant impact.

The recurring barrier to each proposed initiative was the lack of coordination across the local food value chain and the lack of physical and social infrastructure to support increased food security across the region. A critical component of that missing infrastructure is the need for a new, permanent home for the Winter Farmer’s Market in Vancouver. As a result, in 2009 LFF began to focus its energies on rebuilding the local food infrastructure based on a proposed New City Market (NCM) local food hub. The idea was that the need for a permanent home for the Winter Farmers’ Market could serve as the catalyst to bring together all aspects of the food chain and provide a physical space where consumers, producers, retailers, and restauranteurs could address common challenges that prohibit the scaling up of their individual initiatives.

The food service industry—restaurants, cafeterias, caterers, and so on—was identified as a key component for shifting consumption towards local food and providing a stable source of sales for producers. However, food service actors raised concerns about reliability of supply and the absence of a local food distribution system to make that food more accessible. From a producer perspective, the lack of collaboration and coordination among farmers in terms of what to grow and the absence of facilities for processing and prepping food were key barriers to increasing supply for the food service industry. Without local food infrastructure in place—such as wholesale and retail marketing, office space, cold storage, small-scale processing facilities, and distribution systems—the start-up costs for new food enterprises committed to an alternative food system are too prohibitive for any one enterprise to undertake. As one producer stated (interview with authors, Vancouver, February 5, 2008):

We all need a localized distribution system if we want to expand production and access to local food. It only makes sense to do it as a shared system, where producers can collaborate to share and address the risks. For example, the movement to shared distribution requires producers to think of the bigger picture in terms of advancing a more resilient food system. It is not a question of seeing each other as competition and conflicts between
individual producers, but rather an opportunity to increase options and connections to consumers.

The key challenge from an economic development perspective was how to address the issue of scale while still maintaining the connection to the values-based appeal of alternative food systems. How do you get producers, consumers, and everyone in between working together to justify all the dedicated elements of infrastructure necessary for an alternative food system? Building the NCM was seen by proponents of alternative food systems in Vancouver as a means to build partnerships and social capital around local food issues, which would in turn support broader capacity building to scale up the alternative food movement through the development of the physical infrastructure.

The NCM was envisioned as a physical space that could strengthen connections between consumers and producers, provide functions that model all aspects of a local food system, and supply the infrastructure necessary for making local food more accessible for consumers and improving the viability of local farming in terms of fair wages and working conditions. Key functions envisioned for the NCM include wholesale and retail food sales, processing and food preparation facilities, cold storage and warehousing services, and office space for local food organizations (HB Lanarc Consultants 2010). The project is still in the predevelopment phase, but negotiations are underway with the City of Vancouver to identify potential sites, explore different business and governance models, and lay the groundwork for the capital campaign.

Over a hundred different stakeholders came together to contribute to visioning exercises regarding the role and function of the NCM. There is considerable support from the City. As one participant stated (interview with authors, Vancouver, January 10, 2010): “The local food hub is a great idea. You don’t have to sell it to the planning department—they are behind it because it addresses so many areas they are concerned with. But to work with the City in getting access to land, the department of real estate needs to see the business plan. They want to know, how will this make money?”

In addition, the NCM is an attractive proposition for property developers, who see the potential to add value to their developments through association with the NCM. However, in the excitement of securing land and capital for what promised to be an innovative food hub, proponents ran the risk of focusing exclusively on the physical components of the NCM and neglecting the equally important social aspects that have made the Rimbey markets a success. Working on the business case limited options, as the focus was on the physical infrastructure and how it
could be used by individual stakeholders (i.e. what would you pay per square foot for cold storage). The process was criticized for failing to sufficiently bring local food system stakeholders together to imagine how the food system infrastructure might be used differently (Kimmet, 2011). The NCM is now a project of the Vancouver’s Farmers Market Society, where the proposed functions of the NCM are being modeled at existing markets to explore how they might be organized and to build support with the goal of transitioning the farmers markets from a temporary, weather dependent event towards a permanent network of community-based food distribution system that could be housed in the NCM when it is built (Vancouver Farmers Market, 2013).

The success of the NCM will ultimately depend not simply providing the missing food system infrastructure, but also on innovative governance and business models that ensure that the infrastructure is used to foster relationships among food system actors and to promote greater consumer awareness of local food. Scaling up local food system infrastructure based on activities that make the most sense from an economic standpoint runs the risk of simply replicating the mainstream food system on a local basis. Careful attention must be paid to alleviating the tensions between business case planning, on the one hand, and commitment to the values and activities that can bring about structural changes in our food system, on the other.

CONCLUSION

The case studies described above provide three different examples of local food initiatives operating within the social economy. In various and unique ways, these initiatives have attempted to build capacity through innovative strategies emerging from collaborative relationships. Some of these relationships, such as producer partnerships and farmers’ market clusters and circuits, are horizontal in nature, while others, such as those involving organizational and physical infrastructure development, public procurement, and expansion into other market options, also involve vertical linkages to public and private sectors. However, the case studies also illustrate some particular challenges associated with moving from visionary ideals of strong sustainability and strong social economy approaches to transforming local food systems to on-the-ground projects in competition and in cooperation with the conventional food system. Despite some laudable successes, the major challenge for these and other alternative food initiatives remains: how to access the resources (both social and physical) required to scale up their impact
without sacrificing the commitment to strong social economy and strong sustainability that distinguishes them from the conventional food system.

Securing the investments (in terms of resources, time, commitment, and trust) needed to scale up local production and consumption can result in efforts that are, due to risk management concerns, incremental and relatively uninvolved in politically contentious issues such as equity, redistribution, and solidarity. The challenges, costs, and risks of scaling up reduce the potential for structural change as limited resources are directed to filling gaps and meeting the conditions for basic business viability. For example, in order for New City Market to access City-owned land, a business plan was required by the City of Vancouver. Although that is a reasonable requirement, prioritizing social justice is not a common feature of business plans or development pro forma practices. If we agree that we need to transform the local food system to make it both more sustainable and more just, we cannot be limited to and bound by the economic constraints of the existing food system, which views food purely as a subsidized commodity. Social economy strategies provide a means of addressing what Smith and Seyfang (2013, 827) refer to as the “dilemma of scale” by providing alternative means of organizing, such as the regional clustering of farmers’ markets, that provide the benefits of scaling up collaboration while avoiding the risks associated with capital investment, capture, and instrumentality. Resolving the tensions between activities that make the most sense from an economic standpoint and those that are required for deep structural changes in human-environment interactions is clearly a difficult and complex process that requires an integrated approach. Reflective practice, which is emphasized in some research on alternative food movements (Guthman 2008b; Lockie 2009), may help to resolve these tensions. Furthermore, placing those efforts within the framework of strong sustainable community development and strong social economy can lead to initiatives that enhance well-being through the development of different forms of community capital—social, human, cultural, physical, economic and natural (Roseland 2012)—and not just through quantitative measures of growth, wealth, and consumption. In each of the case studies profiled here, emphasis was placed on co-operation and coordination as part of the solution to the context-specific challenges of innovation and as a way to contribute to a growing global movement that is attempting to remake the food system (Larder, Lyons, and Woolcock 2014).

A second dimension of the pursuit of both sustainability and social justice as illustrated by the cases above concerns behavioural dimensions of change. Food security, food sovereignty, justice, and sustainability are goals identified by the
alternative food movement, yet these are extremely complex social and political issues that are dependent upon underlying community values (Feagan and Morris 2009). In Alberta and British Columbia, local food initiatives have emerged out of a commitment to values-based transformation which recognizes that the conventional food system is not environmentally sustainable, is socially unjust, and is not economically viable in a full-cost sense. However, as noted in the discussions of the Good Food Box project and the New City Market local food hub, moving from conceptual planning to actual implementation can result in shifting priorities as a pragmatic response to get projects funded and engaged with a broader cross-section of the population. Linking concepts of food security and food justice to other local social and political issues creates the foundation for broader coalitions and capacity building, which can then be applied to developing the social infrastructure needed to support local food.

Despite commitments to strong social economy and strong sustainability, the Good Food Box and the New City Market local food hub show that difficulties and tensions result from values-based commitment to structural change (strong) and incremental implementation (weak). Investments in physical infrastructure can aid in scaling up the impact and reach of alternative food initiatives. However, these investments are insufficient on their own. A strong social infrastructure—one that maintains and reinforces underlying values and goals and gives rise to collaboration, coalition building, and partnering—is a necessary foundation for building the physical infrastructure (for production, storage, distribution, and retail) required for a robust and resilient local food movement.

Critical engagement and dialogue by citizens is fundamental to supporting the iterative process of reflection and action needed to develop a values-based strong social infrastructure. Nourishing the social foundation of alternative food systems while making strategic investments in physical infrastructure can catalyze transformative change that matches the goals and values of strong sustainability and strong social economy.

REFERENCES


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