

## RE-IMAGING THE FOOD VALUE CHAIN<sup>1</sup>

*i4*

Although there are people who insist that the local food movement has "gone mainstream" in this country, Canadians remain by and large Big Fans of Big Food. Two-thirds of the fruits and vegetables consumed here are imported. Food items consumed in Ontario's Waterloo region, adjoining our biggest farm belt, travel an average of 4,497 km. In 2007, Canadians spent 10.2% of their income on food - 2½ percent less than in 1997 - thanks to the massive volumes that giant farms and processors turn out far away. Of course, food produced and processed in the same vicinity as it is consumed is a passion for thousands of Canadians. Yet local food remains at best a hobby for many, many more.

Can local food get big - so big as to supply most of us with a substantial portion of our diet? It is surprising how uncertain people are about how to answer that question. For while many proponents of local food do reckon that it can "achieve scale" and that it should ... they recoil at the possibility that growth will go wrong. It could realize greater demand and/or sales revenue ... while missing the target that makes local food worth doing in the first place: tasty, nutritious food that personally connects and commits its producers, processors, marketers, and consumers to one another and to the planet itself.

Unless this entire **food value chain** (see diagram at right) grows in mutual respect and collaboration, growth is a mistake.



Achieving scale in local food, then, has everything to do with changing the relationships between people in the food value chain. With their diverse experiences, abilities, and interests, how are they to get and stay reconciled?

Take consumers and producers, for example. Especially in cities, **consumers** pull together the demand for local food, link it to producers and processors, and promote it to the greater public and government. Many of these initiatives originate in the desire to get low-income households properly fed or in the desire to break the city's addiction to imported foods. By contrast, **producers** - small farmers, to be exact - are likely to champion innovations that reserve for them a much greater share of the price of food. Until their farms are viable, don't expect to see a viable local food system. The trouble is, their viability may well depend on specialization and vertical integration among small growers and processors - the very behaviour that many urban consumers associate with agro-corporations. (Read more about this in the accompanying article *Size Does Matter*.)

<sup>1</sup> *i4* is an ejournal about Inspiring, Innovating, Inciting, and Inventing ways of life and work that sustain both people and planet in this century of unprecedented challenges. *i4* is a publication of the **Canadian Centre for Community Renewal**©

How are such differences to be overcome? One way is undertake growth in terms of two types of infrastructure. Over the last two generations a huge portion of this country's wholesale and retail marketing space, processing equipment, cold storage, and delivery systems has been sold off. Rebuilding this **"hard" infrastructure** is a central task in the growth of the local food sector. (For more details, read accompanying article, *Regenerating Regional Food Systems*.)

But just as important (not more important, mind you) are the interpersonal relationships, values, and organizational capacity called **"soft" infrastructure**. These are the factors that will keep local food from growing into a carbon copy of the mainstream food system, or, maddeningly, from developing products that Food Giants can pick up and resell as it suits them. When investments are made expressly to build both these infrastructures, local food initiatives can indeed grow to transform the way whole communities feed themselves. (The *i4* article *Scaling Up Local Food* explains how Japan's Seikatsu Consumer Cooperative accomplishes just that.)

### Dig Deeper

- In Wisconsin, the Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems has documented eleven strategies that American producers are using to aggregate and distribute food regionally. The report, *Scaling Up: Meeting the Demand for Local Food* is available in whole, or chapter by chapter.
- Riots broke out in Niger's cities when food prices jumped in 2008. *Et si la crise alimentaire profitait aux paysans africains?* describes how farmers in that country have had to organize so that their views on food security can be heard above the expectations of urban consumers and despite the terms of international trade agreements.
- For a brief but incisive analysis of the factors that constrain the scale of local food, read *Local Food: The Untold Story* by Martin Gooch of the George Morris Centre in Guelph, Ontario. The sector faces huge challenges, not the least of which is the minor contribution that transportation makes to food's carbon footprint.
- The Canadian Centre for Community Renewal's report *Strengthening Yukon Local Food* identifies strategic points in that region's food value chain and the types of initiative that currently can give food security the greatest boost