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Scaling Up Local Food

By Sean Connelly

Much has been published recently to expose problems with our existing food system. Such documentaries as “Food Inc.” or “Supersize Me” and popular books like *In Defence of Food* argue persuasively that the control now exercised over our food by huge, profit-fixated corporations is eroding the nutritional value, safety, and diversity of the Western diet. Initiatives have blossomed to explore alternative approaches to food production and consumption. Some take their cue from the 100-mile diet, organic food, or health and equity. Others are driven by peak oil and climate change, the re-localization of economic activity, or the preservation of farmland and farm employment.

Despite all this, the scale of food systems geared towards local production and consumption remains tiny when compared with global and industrial food systems. The key challenge facing local food initiatives is how to scale up to the point of transforming (rather than merely “informing”) the much larger conventional food system.

For example, the sales of organic food grew to an estimated \$1.1-1.3 billion in 2006.¹ Yet that figure is less than 1% of total food sales in Canada. Moreover, only 7% of organic food sales (\$70 million) occur through farmers markets, community-supported agriculture projects, or food box programs. In brief, increased consumer demand for organic food has not resulted in much change to the food system. Rather, food giants have simply added organic food to their array of product offerings.

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 interplay of social, environmental, and economic objectives inherent in food systems and their multi-faceted appeal to diverse and overlapping issues of community-building, health, equity, culture, and local economic development lend themselves to building cross-sectoral partnerships. Attention to local food has already transformed the lives of many households and neighbourhoods. But to see that happen at the community level requires scaling up locally-produced food throughout the food system – from farm to plate to waste.

How do we achieve that scale without diminishing the enthusiasm, initiative, and commitment of households and neighbourhoods? How do we ensure that the splendid work of such local food initiatives as the Edmonton Good Food Box and Vancouver’s New City Market is not “harvested,” “washed” of its values-based commitment, and then “repackaged” by mainstream food system actors? What

(photo) In Edmonton, the revenue from on-line sales has enabled the Good Food Box (GFB) to afford a bigger fleet of delivery trucks. Photo courtesy of GFB.

light can the experience of a “success story” of local food, Japan’s Seikatsu Consumer Co-op, shed on the challenges that local food initiatives face in Canada?

The Good Food Box

The Good Food Box (GFB) was set up in Edmonton, Alberta in 2009 to increase the availability of locally-produced food for all families in the metropolitan area. It was intended to provide residents with convenient access to affordable, fresh produce and producers with fair market value. It was also designed to expand marketing and distribution

system and to make the link between food and land-use policy for city planners, politicians, and the broader public. The GFB was able to build on the emerging enthusiasm for local food and to link people’s concerns over a specific redevelopment proposal with the local food system in general.

Although the project was originally designed for 110 participants, over 1,000 signed up in response to a call for interest. The project delivered a selection of fresh produce to 236 people per week, of whom 31 were subsidized as low-income clients of the Edmonton Food Bank. Customer surveys at the end of 2009 indicated that 88% of participants were

is now managing the program. GFB is still committed to organic and sustainable production, but also features non-local products, so long as local businesses do the sourcing. In addition, to justify added investments in infrastructure, the program caters to suburban middle-class markets with increased attention to convenience, more value-added options, and priced to suit those demographics. For example, consumers are now able to purchase prepared meals, seafood, meats, seasonings, chocolates, breads, and vegetables through the GFB.

Moving to on-line sales presents opportunities to multiply connections between local producers and consumers. It also provides a critical mass that makes further investments in the local food infrastructure viable. Warehouse space with cold storage, additional delivery trucks, and additional labour would not have been feasible based on the number of people originally participating in the GFB. Without that critical infrastructure, it would be impossible to make the program accessible to more households and neighbourhoods, whatever their level of income.

The GFB successfully scaled up access to markets for producers and provided increased options for consumers to access local food. However, due to resource constraints and competition with mainstream grocers, tensions emerge over the need to prioritize efficiency, convenience, and higher revenue boutique food items over commitments to changes in the broader food system: equitable access, greater engagement with local food politics, and building greater trust, solidarity, and collaboration across the local food value chain.



opportunities for producers beyond the weekly farmers markets and to create jobs for low-income residents.

The pilot project ran for six continuous weeks. Launched as a social enterprise, GFB was ultimately supposed to evolve into a fully independent co-operative.

The GFB emerged at a time when there was considerable local organizing in opposition to the redevelopment of agricultural land in the city’s northeast. A broad-based citizen’s movement used the opportunity to raise awareness of problems with the existing food

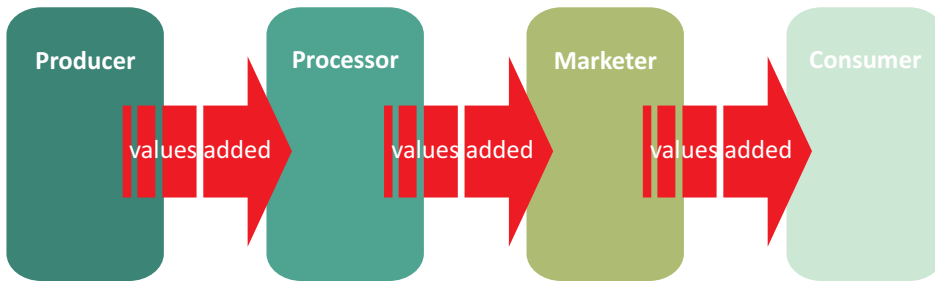
extremely or very satisfied with the quality of the produce and the price. When asked why they participated, the primary reason was to support local farmers (63%) and the secondary reason was to support local food security (53%).

The success of the pilot led to expansion for the entire 2010 growing season. A website also has been developed at which consumers can pre-order the products that are available at the farmer’s market. It is no longer being run explicitly as a social enterprise. A local nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting independent and local businesses in the Edmonton area

Vancouver New City Market Local Food Hub

Released in 2005, the “Vancouver Food System Assessment” identified the need for reinvestment in local food infrastructure as a key component in the creation of a more just and more sustainable food system. Research into experiences in other jurisdictions indicated how social enterprises and supportive policies could make this re-investment occur system-wide.

The Food Value Chain



The report prompted local food organizations in Vancouver to further explore the potential of social enterprises as catalysts of change across the city's food system.

One organization that has emerged as a result is Local Food First (LFF), a multi-stakeholder collaboration whose mission it is to build and strengthen a just and sustainable local food system. To identify the key leverage points for re-orienting Vancouver's food system along sustainability principles, LFF undertook a vast range of activities in 2007: interviews, workshops, and community consultations with farmers, food-based businesses, development organizations, funders, and government.

This combination of research, partnership development, engagement, and outreach confirmed that local food value chains (see diagram, above) are essential to rebuilding the food system. These chains have to be redeveloped in order to provide farmers with more direct access to the growing local food market. It is not just consumption and production that needs to be localized. Embedding the entire value chain in local places ensures that local food economies

materialize at each stage, from production, to processing, distribution, and consumption.

There is a lack of co-ordination within local food value chains, and a lack of physical and social infrastructure across the region (e.g., distribution, warehousing, cold storage, small-scale processing opportunities) to support increased food security. A permanent home for the Winter Farmer's Market was identified as a critical component of that missing infrastructure.

As a result, since 2009 LFF has focussed its energies on re-building the local food infrastructure based on the New City Market Local Food Hub. (See below.) It is envisioned as a physical space that, in addition to making local food easier to get, will strengthen connections between consumers and producers and provide functions that bring all aspects of a local food system (from farm to plate) under one roof. It will also improve the viability of local farming in terms of fair wages and working conditions by increasing options for local sales and value-added production. The project is currently in the pre-development phase. Negotiations are underway to identify possible sites and business and governance models, and to lay the groundwork for a capital campaign.

The success of the New City Market will ultimately depend on how local food system infrastructure is used differently to foster relationships between 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 on the other, the commitment to the values and activities that can bring about structural changes in our food system.

Seikatsu Consumer Cooperative (SCC)

Despite tremendous differences of history and culture, there is much that Canadians can learn about scaling up local food from Japan's Seikatsu Consumer Co-op. SCC aims not simply to expand members' access to healthy, local, and more environmentally friendly food, but to create a food system infrastructure that producers can use to put their agriculture on a more local and sustainable footing. It originates in a buying-club established in 1965 by female residents of Tokyo's Setagaya Ward to "reform life and society democratically by independent women." Although its founders were initially unaware of the co-op movement, they rooted the organization in principles and values of autonomy, decentralization, participation, and democratic control.

SCC has since grown into a union of 32 autonomous place-based co-operatives throughout Japan (although most are in the Tokyo Metropolitan area) that are linked through a federated model by the SCC Union. There are over 350,000 members with annual sales of approximately C\$800 million, of which 90% is food-related products. SCC has also raised over \$1 billion in capital from members through membership fees and voluntary investments.²



(left) An artist's suggestion of one possible look for the New City Market Hub. Photocredit: Citylab. (photos, pp. 2 and 6) Local fare at the Trout Lake Farmers Market. Photocredit: Your Local Farmers Market Society.

Three factors were critical to scaling up the SCC so successfully while maintaining commitment to values-based consumption.

First, SCC members recognized that by pooling their buying power they could develop relationships with producers that more effectively met members' needs in terms of values, type, quality, and production processes, as well as price. This is in stark contrast to the common North American refrain that we each as individual consumers can "vote with our dollars." Through collective buying, SCC members were empowered to specify criteria for food and other consumer products: materials, production processes, packaging, environmental and labour practices, for example. In other words, they use their collective "votes" to gain a say in the production process itself.

Making consumption a collective rather than individual practice has had other implications, too. It enables members to question the necessity of certain items. For example, the SCC provides access to 1,600 items annually,

compared to over 9,000 items offered by other co-ops. The limited product offering is a direct result of an approach that is against mass production and mass consumption. It also provides producers with a stable customer base and develops relationships, trust, and solidarity between consumers and producers. Agreements between the SCC union and producers engage the latter as partners in the co-op's evolution. SCC's commitment to pre-ordering minimizes the risks to producers that investments in improvements to agricultural and production processes will involve. Producers are also guaranteed prices, given full disclosure of production practices, quality of products, and storage and distribution methods. Producers allow SCC audits guided by principles of health, safety, and environmental responsibility.

Second, the values and principles that serve as the foundation of the SCC were developed and reinforced through organizing at the neighbourhood level. A federated model then linked up these autonomous coops and allowed

them to engage at larger scales. Organizing at the neighbourhood level provided an opportunity for consumers to engage in neighbourhood politics, primarily concerned with food and other fundamental household issues. The foundation upon which the federated model of the SCC rests is the Han System, groups of 7-10 neighbouring households that collectively make decisions about monthly purchases and collect orders for bulk buying. Experience taught that the Han also serve well as a venue for local organizing, learning, discussion, and decision-making. It is at the Han level that community-based active citizenship is put into practice. The self-management of the Han unit permits considerable savings in terms of overhead and labour. The social capital developed there acts as the foundation for addressing gaps in food system infrastructure.

Finally, the SCC has developed very clear mechanisms for accountability and transparency that guide their product offerings and engage producers in the consumption process.

There is no shortage of small-scale local food initiatives across Canada. There is a reason for that. Once you start to talk about increased scale, local food initiatives confront the possibility of becoming "too" radical, "too" transformative, and "too" risky. An incremental approach to change, often focussed on "low-hanging fruit," is therefore adopted as a risk management strategy.



(photo) An early meeting of the Seikatsu Club Consumers' Co-operative. Photo courtesy of the Archive of the Right Livelihood Award Foundation.

The bottom-up, decentralized model enables the members of local SCC groups to see their concerns and values reflected in the SCC Union's product offering. Individual members are expected to contribute to a variety of committees locally and at the level of the SCC union.

Of these, perhaps the most unusual is the Auditing and Control Committee that comprises both co-op members and producers. It implements health, safety, and environmental principles through raising awareness of impacts of consumption decisions and through annual independent audits of producers. Sub-committees set independent standards for quality and methods of production in agriculture, fisheries, livestock, processed goods, etc. Transparency in production is critical to developing partnerships with producers and these committees provide opportunities for mass auditing. Spot-checks on production facilities ensure that standards are met and frequent information workshops with producers encourage them to innovate and improve standards. For example, the Committee monitors the levels of energy use, CO² emissions, and pesticide and fertilizer use. The results of these detailed audits are made available annually to all members and producers. As a result, relationships and trust are developed that foster solidarity between them.

SCC's commitment to producer-consumer partnerships, to place-based organizing, and to mechanisms for transparency and accountability go a long way to making the array of values associated with local food a *means* of achieving scale, rather than baggage lost on the trip. The result is a truly alternative food system, instead of an assortment of consumer preferences that mainstream actors can adopt at will.

Challenges and Barriers

The Good Food Box and New City Market offer two inspiring and innovative approaches to re-building a city's food system in accordance with the principles of sustainability. They both strive not simply to expand market access to existing locally-oriented producers, but also to create the infrastructure that can enable the transition of other producers from export-oriented agriculture towards more local and sustainable operations.

However, these two initiatives also illustrate some serious challenges associated with moving from visionary ideals to on-the-ground projects that are in competition and in co-operation with existing food systems.

For starters, there is the issue of physical and social infrastructure. Without small-scale wholesale and retail marketing systems, office space, cold storage, processing facilities, and distribution systems in place, the start-up costs for new enterprises committed to local food are prohibitive. The capital costs of such "hard" infrastructure are beyond what any single enterprise can afford. Until the playing field is levelled in terms of hard infrastructure, local food initiatives will never be able to compete with the mainstream food system on the basis of price or convenience alone. Initially, therefore, value-based concepts of food security, food sovereignty, food justice, and sustainability have to provide the rationale for individuals to produce, sell, market, and consume local food.

This is not to suggest that values can act as an outright substitute for physical infrastructure. As one farmer said, "There are considerable risks and challenges associated with investing in scaling up local production and I don't think those risks can be placed entirely on the back of producers. I'm not willing to put my business on the line for things that might work. Values are important but they are not something that can take over my business." He's correct. Values are not sufficient to a vibrant system of local food consumption and production. They are critical, however. As the Seikatsu example demonstrates, the "soft," social infrastructure is equally important as the hard.

For example, the existing food system provides little opportunity for collaboration. Growers, consumers, institutional buyers, processors, and restaurant owners have limited opportunities to interact. As a result, personal relationships and connections have been neglected in favour of pursuing efficiencies and economies of scale. As we scale up local food initiatives, it is important not to replicate this situation. Investments in local food infrastructure need to incorporate mechanisms that foster trust, reciprocity, and collaboration between producers, consumers, and everyone in-between.

The reverse is also true. Linking concepts of food security, justice, etc. to other local political issues creates the foundation for broader coalitions and capacity-building that can then be applied to developing the physical infrastructure needed to support local food.

Finally, consumers need to recognize the trade-offs, costs, and benefits that standardized global food systems and flexible local food systems involve.



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The Edmonton and Vancouver examples illustrate the need for investments in local food infrastructure and recognize that these investments cannot occur until the local food movement itself scales up.

If consumers really want a more resilient food system, they need to be willing to accept that food is not a standardized product; it will come at different times and in different shapes and sizes. A shared labelling and marketing system can contribute to building consumer awareness of local food. It can create an environment where local producers see themselves not as competitors but as participants in a collaborative environment that can generate increased opportunities and revenues.

Conclusion

Local food systems, given their appeal to community, health, and quality of life, provide a compelling gateway to realizing community transformation. As the Seikatsu case illustrates, their true potential is realized through close linkages to other initiatives concerned with community and societal change. Local food initiatives do not in themselves create more environmentally sustainable or socially just communities; however, they do create a space where broad-based citizen movements can take their practice of local food politics well beyond mere discussion of consumption habits, food miles, or organic production. Attention turns to investments in physical and social infrastructure that contribute to the development of

coalitions and partnerships, and to the achievement of scale. Systemic change becomes possible.

There is no shortage of small-scale local food initiatives across Canada. There is a reason for that. Once you start to talk about increased scale, local food initiatives confront the possibility of becoming “too” radical, “too” transformative, and “too” risky. An incremental approach to change, often focussed on “low-hanging fruit,” is therefore adopted as a risk management strategy.

Both the Edmonton and Vancouver examples illustrate the challenge and the need for investments in local food infrastructure and recognize that these investments cannot occur until the *local food movement* itself scales up. The Seikatsu Consumer Coop (and Équiterre in Québec) shows how to link small-scale producers and local food advocacy groups to larger customer bases and to essential physical infrastructure, while remaining committed to a values-based transformation of the food system. The key is to recognize and search out the incremental changes that, by matching increased investments in physical infrastructure with investments in the equally important social infrastructure, can serve as levers and catalysts of transformative change.

For initiatives to realize their transformative potential, however, policy-makers and practitioners must ensure that the appropriate operational, funding, and regulatory settings are also in place. Currently, local food initiatives that incorporate multiple-bottom line outcomes are competing with mainstream economic activities that are heavily subsidized and do not have to account for much of the social, economic, and environmental harm they do. This playing field needs to be levelled. Measures of success must explicitly acknowledge that fact. In the recent article, “Realizing justice in local food systems,” Patricia Allen³ suggests local food initiatives benefit from constant reflection on their values and practice and from recognition that their activities are embedded in particular places and particular social and economic structures. Local food initiatives can provide a focus for the measures and popular mobilization necessary to change these structures. Nevertheless, given the scope of transformation required, local food initiatives are better thought of as contributing to a larger social movement rather than simply as a goal in and of themselves.⁴

References

- ¹ *The State of Organic Food and Cooperatives: Baseline Market Research* (Ontario Co-operative Association, May 2010).
- ² For more details, see Connelly, “Seikatsu Consumer Coop: Scaling-up Food System Transformation” (BC-Alberta Social Economy Research Alliance, September 2010), 21 October 2010 <<http://auspace.athabascau.ca:8080/dspace/bitstream/2149/2822/1/BALTA%20B8%20-%20Seikatsu%20Case%20Study.pdf>>.
- ³ Allen, P. (2010). *Regions, Economy and Society*, 3(2), 295-308.

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⁴ *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. ⁴ is a publication of the Canadian Centre for Community Renewal.