



Size Does Matter

We know how big is too big. But how small is too small?

By PAUL CABAJ

Almost every practitioner of community economic development and social enterprise these days seems to be thinking about scaling up. We have to scale up in order to employ more constituents, to earn more revenue – to have a real impact on the mainstream. Yet when it comes to food, many of us are concerned with scaling *down*.

That's because when it comes to food, we all know when Big is too big. Big has kept our food cheap – it now accounts for around 10% of the expenditure of the average Canadian household – but at the cost of a range of compromises of which we are only now growing fully aware.

Big food compromises nutrition by breeding for growth and appearance, and for resilience to early picking, refrigeration, and long travel. Big food compromises our environment with massive applications of fertilizer, with erosion, and with transport emissions. It over-

crowds meat animals and instigates an over-reliance on antibiotics and accelerated growth regimes. Big food endangers the food supply by leaving it at the hands of a few giant producers and processors whose smallest error is magnified – witness last month's listeria outbreak in Canada, salmonellae-infected tomatoes in the U.S., and tainted milk in China. One mistake can affect millions.

Above all, the gargantuan scale of our current food system cheapens not just our food, but the lives and labours of the people who grow, process, and sell it. Never before has Canadians' connection to the production of their food been so impersonal. For the majority of us, the furthest we reach up the food supply chain is when bantering with an over-worked and underpaid grocery clerk or waiter. Few have the time for a vegetable garden, even fewer know a farmer.

Yes, when it comes to food we know when Big is too big, and we yearn for something smaller, more personal, something defined by the distance of a handshake. Many of us, including me, share E.F. Schumacher's conviction that

large-scale, depersonalized production processes induce a poverty of the human spirit.

Of the many factors motivating efforts to relocalize food systems – economic, environmental, nutritional, among others – this need to repersonalize may be the most pervasive, if least discussed. As one of my colleagues has said, "For some people, the farmers market is their church. It is where they go to reconnect with their neighbours and community." Whether it is food boxes for low-income families, marketing co-ops for small-scale farmers, farmers markets, or building a local food warehousing and distribution system, the common chord is a desire to reconnect personally with how food is produced, processed, distributed, and consumed.

(photo) Larry Anderson introduces his grandson, a possible fourth-generation farmer, to Pinzgauer cattle in Sexsmith, Alberta. Anderson's son Jason is co-founder of Peace Country Tender Beef Cooperative (www.peacecountrytenderbeef.com). It will bring grass- and grain-fed, hormone-free meat more economically to market while securing for producers a larger portion of the consumer dollar. Photo courtesy of Don Thompson.

Like Schumacher, I too believe that “small is beautiful.” But how small is too small? In the local food movement, out of our zeal to counter Big, we often go too far. A visceral reaction to economies of scale is hampering efforts to change the way Canadians get their food.

Ironically, I think this is in part a symptom of our pervasive disconnection from the reality of food production. When local food advocates tell me how the ideal, scaled-down food system would look, many describe small, mixed farms, increased direct sales, and very localized processing and distribution. It’s all quite reminiscent of the way my own family used to make a living.

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My grandparents’ farm was no more than 100 acres, like the vast majority of farms in northern Alberta up to the 1960s. They raised a mix of crops and array of animals, with their harvest and animals feeding into relatively short value chains. Most food production, processing, distribution, and consumption all took place within a very confined area, quite often in the distance from the backyard to the kitchen. My uncle (most of my very large family was involved in agriculture in some form at the time) ran a creamery that processed the output from cows for 30 miles around.

Still, you have to ask, what made such small-scale food production and processing feasible? Proximity of supply to demand was one factor. But perhaps more important than proximity was

price. Farmers in my grandparents’ time received roughly 30 cents for every dollar’s worth of food served at people’s tables. Right now, farmers average about 8 cents on that dollar and in many cases lower. *If we truly want to make local food systems work, every initiative has in one way or another to increase the amount of money that farmers receive from the dollars we consumers spend on food.*

Unfortunately, that critical factor of farm income is extraneous to some of the most creative and dedicated local efforts taking place in the country right now. They are driven primarily by a determination to provide better nutrition to low-income populations.

I have been involved with a number of these initiatives, and know how exasperating it is to find myself bidding farmers down to their lowest possible price in order to bring in the greatest quantity of fresh, nutritious food for the constituents. What is conceived to be an act of solidarity can, if we are not careful, act as no more than a transfer of impoverishment to the farm.

We can’t revitalize a local food system this way. If local food efforts do not lead directly to more income for the people who produce our food, they may be doing more long-term harm than good to the local food movement. This does not mean we ignore the needs of low income populations. It does mean we need to think much more comprehensively about the market for local

food, particularly the higher-end markets – buyers with the ability and willingness to pay premiums for local food. Making that connection means employing at minimum two strategies.

One is vertical integration. I know, I know – it’s a term that conjures up nightmarish visions of Wal-Mart. Yet it is one we should get very comfortable with. In order for primary producers to make more money they have to capture a much larger amount of the food pie, and in many cases this means cutting out the middle man. That is the thinking behind the proliferation of farm direct sales, farmers markets, and community-shared agriculture (CSA) programs. It’s also the reason why farmers dedicated to the local market are trying to process, package, warehouse, distribute, and retail their own product the way my grandmother used to.

But let’s take a reality check. While we celebrate and support these local food micro-preneurs, let’s not expect to build a sustainable local food system simply by replicating them.

Take CSAs, for example. There are few single-farm CSAs in the country. Why? One key reason is that farming alone is back-breaking labour, and CSA just adds to the burden. According to some CSA farmers I have talked to, shareholders expect to receive a wide variety of produce in their box. This requires the farmer to grow a wider variety of crops with lower total output, since each crop involves a particular regime of planting, weed/pest control, and harvesting. The farmer foregoes the efficiencies achieved from specializing in a few crops. The need to harvest so many crops weekly, in addition to cleaning and sorting, adds labour costs that make it difficult for many CSA farmers to break even. Finally, the common requirement that shareholders help with CSA farm operations is generally nominal or symbolic in practice. Most farms find that the co-ordination and training of shareholder labour is rarely worth the effort.

Vertical integration in the food system should not mean still greater diversification on individual farms.

Rather, we need it to involve an interconnection of small but specialized farmers after the example set by the United Farmers Association and the early agricultural co-ops. Peace Country Tender Beef Cooperative, set to launch this fall with close to 500 beef producers, is going in the right direction. Rather than cutting out the middle man, they are becoming the middle man. PCTBC not only owns its own brand, it is building its own abattoir and value-added packaging facilities, and is launching dedicated retail outlets. (See photo, p. 9.)

Economies of scale are a second strategy. No matter how you slice it, the more you produce of one thing the less it costs per kilo or per unit. In order for food box schemes, CSAs, farmers markets, and the like to become economically viable, they have to think

overstates the quantity of local food available. Should local food become truly “mainstreamable” (another doubling of the price of oil would likely do it), it is inevitable that Big Food will move into the market, watering down the already loose definition of local food and bidding down producers’ selling prices.

If you wonder why I say that, then look no further than the experience of the Fair Trade and organics movements. Both started small, building on direct relationships between producers and consumers. Early on, substantial price premiums for organic foods supported the launch of a great number of small farms by idealistic Back To The Landers. No sooner did their sacrifices start to break into mainstream markets and turn a profit than Big moved in. Wal-Mart is now the largest purveyor

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bigger – much bigger. We have to move our thinking beyond support for one farm, to supporting a whole range of farms, from feeding one community to feeding a series of communities, even entire regions. And we have to do this quickly.

Why? Well, as much as we might like to think it, local food has no naturally ingrained resistance to Big. In fact, a casual walk through the brightly lit aisles of Safeway, Loblaws, or any other chain shows how interested Big Food has become in local, even if the number of “local produce” signs

of organics in the world. Organic certification standards have been steadily worn down to meet the needs of transnational food corporations.

Fair Trade underwent a very similar shift. It started off with direct purchase arrangements between farmer co-operatives in the southern hemisphere and small coffee roasters in the North. Sure enough, coffee farmers saw their standards of living significantly increase when compared with their conventionally growing neighbours. As with organic food production, success attracted participants with no interest



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Résumé : La grosseur fait une différence

Contrairement à l’emploi ou au développement de ressources, l’hébergement ou l’énergie, lorsqu’il est question du secteur de l’alimentation, les praticien.nes du développement économique communautaire et de l’économie sociale semblent décidés à rapetisser et non à agrandir. Nous sommes devenus profondément conscients de l’impact d’un système alimentaire énorme et impersonnel sur l’environnement, la nutrition, l’élevage des animaux et même sur l’esprit humain.

Malheureusement, cette hypersensibilité au Big Food nous donne tendance à surestimer la capacité du Small Food à nourrir des milliers de Canadien.nes. Trop d’initiatives alimentaires sont confinées à obtenir des produits au meilleur marché possible des agriculteurs locaux pour compléter les diètes des ménages à faible revenu. Afin de faire fonctionner des systèmes d’alimentation locaux (comme ils l’ont fait jusque dans les années 1960), chaque initiative doit servir à augmenter la part que les agriculteurs reçoivent de chaque dollar que les consommateurs dépensent sur la nourriture.

Deux stratégies sont essentielles. Premièrement, de petites fermes spécialisées doivent s’intégrer verticalement pour prendre contrôle des chaînes logistiques complètes, de la culture et la transformation jusqu’à l’emballage et aux ventes. Deuxièmement, les initiatives alimentaires locales doivent réduire leurs coûts par unité en impliquant beaucoup plus de partenaires et de consommateurs, surtout parmi les groupes à revenu moyen et élevé. Si le Small Food n’est pas « assez gros » pour faire compétition aux sociétés géantes d’alimentation, vous pouvez gager qu’elles prendraient sa part du marché. ■

in keeping Fair Trade small. Starbucks is now the largest purchaser of Fair Trade coffee in the world, and its alternatives to Fair Trade are helping to reduce the price differential that coffee growers once enjoyed.

Don't misunderstand me. *I am firmly convinced that the most interesting experiments, the most fruitful challenges to the status quo, are small experiments that begin in the margins, and that this innovation should be supported on a continual basis.* Nevertheless, if we truly want our dedicated and creative efforts to change anything apart from the margins, we have to start thinking on a greater scale. Putting it another way, if we in the social justice/ecological movements don't get big *enough*, we will have lost another opportunity to permanently insert social and environmental concerns into economic relations.

So next time you're establishing outcomes for a projected initiative, add a zero or two. Rather than thinking about what you can do to support one farm, figure out how could you could support 10 or 100. Rather than supplement the diets of 500 low-income families, how about 5,000, no

50,000? Even Schumacher suggested that we organize our production patterns on a scale that would support about 100,000 people. If we truly want to develop systems that support the disadvantaged, it is only at these sizes (and perhaps not even then) that we will start to achieve the efficiencies that will make fresh, nutritious food affordable to low-income households and remunerative to farmers.

Happily, this move to scale is beginning to occur. CSA models are moving from 50 to 100 shareholders supporting one farm, to 500 or 1,000 shareholders supporting a number of farms. Groups like *Équiterre* in Québec and Intervale Farms in Vermont are developing CSA structures that exceed even these numbers. The Intervale structure now provides the city of Burlington with close to 8% of its yearly fresh vegetable supply. On the west coast, groups like Ecotrust and Local Food First are trying to expand from CSA to "RSA." In this Retail Supported Agriculture, independent stores and restaurants, even chains, are the shareholders working with a range of farms.

Educational efforts and local food campaigns are inspiring and necessary (see "Redesigning Canada's Food System," p. 13), but they alone cannot reverse two generations of learned consumer behaviour. Face it: we like the fact that we spend less than 10% of our household income on food. In fact, with food prices inflating in recent months, we may be about to witness a softening of demand for local food. Our addiction to oil has led to an equally large addiction to Big Food. To shake the multi-billion dollar Big Food habit, we require production chains in which growers have a significant stake and are big enough to supply delicious and nutritious foods plentifully and affordably to markets numbering in the tens and hundreds of thousands.

Not too Big and not too Small, but Just Right.



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CCEDNet's Food Policy Working Group

By Matthew Thompson

In its latest Communities Agenda,¹ the Canadian CED Network (CCEDNet) promotes the inclusion of CED approaches to local food security and agriculture in the development of Canada's Agricultural Policy Framework (APF). This focus on local food policy was nurtured through the "Growing Hope" project² undertaken in 2006 with partner Edible Strategies Enterprises Ltd. Funded by the Advancing Canadian Agricultural and Agri-Food Program (ACAAF), Growing Hope sought to ensure that local food policies were integrated into the renewed APF. The project led to the development of the Food Policy Working Group, a subcommittee of CCEDNet's Policy Council.

The Food Policy Working Group operates from the understanding that CED initiatives and strategies are essential to the development of sustainable and healthy domestic food systems. Its overarching purpose is to investigate and develop food policy that will ensure the local production and distribution of sustainably-produced food in Canada.

In its investigations, the Working Group noted that no national "community voice" exists for the diverse and growing number of groups engaged in local food initiatives across the country. Yet small-scale producers face many challenges when trying to meet consumer demand for local agricultural products that are ecologically sustainable, safe, nutritious, and a viable economic

alternative to carbon-intensive food imports. The demand is real, as a recent Ipsos Reid poll indicates: 42% of Canadians always or usually purchase locally-grown food, while 71% see local food production as benefiting their local economy.³

The Working Group is currently striving to develop a national consultation involving small- to medium-sized agricultural food producers, their associations, community development organizations concerned with environmental, social, and health conditions, and other key stakeholders (e.g., government, co-operative associations, credit unions, etc.). The consultation will serve as an initial step towards developing a national voice or network that articulates and lobbies for sustainable domestic food policies and local food systems. ■

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¹ Retrieve from <http://ccednet-rcdec.ca/files/ccednet/Communities_Agenda_Brochure_Eng_LR.pdf>.

² For more details, go to <http://ccednet-rcdec.ca/files/Growing%20Hope_Canadian%20Agriculture.pdf>.

³ Retrieve from <<http://www.ediblestrategies.com/fsd/AppenN.pdf>>.