



# **FOOD COMMUNITIES AND RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

*Field Notes from Food Community of the Upper Skeena/Bulkley Valley Region*

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# A FOOD SYSTEM ANALYSIS FOR THE CANADIAN SOCIAL ECONOMY HUB

## Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	3
INTRODUCTION .....	5
Food Systems: some definitions .....	6
Historical and Economic Context .....	8
Local Context.....	10
Why Agriculture? .....	11
Scope of the Study .....	13
FOOD COMMUNITY LANDMARKS.....	14
May All be Fed.....	14
Developing Community Capacity.....	16
Developing Production Capacity.....	23
Food as Livelihood .....	27
FUTURE DIRECTIONS .....	27
Towards Community Food Policies.....	27
Future Options for Food Community Development .....	28
Community Partnership Opportunities .....	28
CONCLUSIONS.....	29
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	<b>ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.</b>
APPENDICES.....	33

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## FOREWORD

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The Canadian Social Economy Research Partnerships (CSERP) is a research program funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council to strengthen knowledge, policy and action for a vibrant Social Economy in Canada. CSERP is comprised of six regional community-university research nodes across Canada, and one national centre (Canadian Social Economy Hub) co-led by the University of Victoria and the Canadian Community Economic Development Network. The program began in 2006, and has involved over 300 community and university based researchers, including faculty, students, and practitioners.

This paper is one of five commissioned by the Canadian Social Economy Hub through a competitive scholarship program to support research by both student and practitioner “Emerging Leaders” to strengthen the Social Economy in Canada. A small fellowship grant was awarded to each successful proponent based on a rigorous review process. The papers each deal with a strategic issue of interest to the study and practice of the Social Economy, and emerge from collective efforts of CSERP to encourage ground breaking thinking by practitioners and students who represent the “next generation” of leaders, thinkers and movement builders in the Social Economy. At a time when society, governments, citizens and stakeholders of all kinds are seeking new and innovative ways of addressing inter-related social, economic and environmental challenges we hope that these papers contribute to informed debate on how we can strengthen the Social Economy as a means to a more sustainable approach to our futures.

On behalf of the board of the Canadian Social Economy Hub we thank our authors, their partners, and representatives of the university and practitioner organizations who helped with the development and implementation of this Emerging Leaders in the Social Economy Research Scholarship Program.

Rupert Downing, CSEHub Co-director

## INTRODUCTION

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*“We all eat for a living.”*

This simple truth from the agrarian writer, cultural critic and small farmer Wendell Berry is laden with opportunity for struggling rural economies. We all eat, and the first place we can look for sustenance is into the hearts of our home communities. When even a modest percentage of a community begins this introspective exploration the results are striking: farming and market gardening become more viable livelihoods; informed consumers hold farmers accountable for sound land stewardship practices; value-added cottage industries and related services grow into sound business options; disparities in food access grow more evident and community members come together to address these. From community farms and thriving farmers’ markets to new co-operatives and social enterprises, synergistic activities supported by a new consumer ethic are shifting the economic development of communities and entire regions. The result of these trends is likely to be rural economies that are more diverse, healthy and resilient to economic and demographic challenges.

The case for investigating new rural economic strategies or renovating old ones for today’s context cannot be overstated. In keeping with a global trend, rural communities in Canada have seen a steady decline in their populations over the past thirty years. Between 1980 and 2006, the population of one third of all communities in Canada experienced overall population growth while another third experienced population decline (Alasia, 2010). Strikingly, those communities that experienced progressive downsizing were concentrated in core or peripheral rural areas while communities characterized by expanding populations are located in core urban regions (Alasia, 2010). These trends in demographic restructuring run parallel to contemporary processes of economic restructuring that have seen significant ongoing declines in the traditional primary industries upon which most rural economies are based. In the long term, these socioeconomic shifts could threaten the viability of many rural communities. Population decline lowers the density of economic activity, making future economic sustainability that much more difficult (Alasia, 2010).

Most communities in northwest BC are in a state of gradual population decline that has been ongoing for the past decade – a trend reinforced by the shift of political influence and economic development toward the south of the province (Chipeniuk *et al.*, 2009). If unchecked by strong policy responses, some analysts fear that the future results of these trends will include deeper inter-regional disparities and deprivation, social alienation between regions, and a continued southward movement of economic and political power (Chipeniuk *et al.*, 2009). The long-term effects of this trend would include the gradual erosion of rural and remote communities, their economies, amenities and, by implication, the social and cultural wellbeing of their inhabitants.

Economists and community development practitioners have long focused on economic diversification as a crucial strategy for long term community sustainability and population stability. The wisdom in this approach is clearly shown by statistics that positively correlate a diversified regional economy with long term population growth along with increased community resilience to a variety of shocks and changes (Alasia, 2010).

This paper is therefore not a treatise on the well-established health, environmental, and community benefits of local eating. Instead, it is a testament to the vital contribution that food, farms and various ancillary initiatives can and do make to the development of diverse, healthy, sustainable rural economies

and to the quality of life in the Upper Skeena/Bulkley Valley region. It takes as its starting point the principle that when foodstuffs are brought into communities from other regions, dollars leave. Along with them, clear opportunities for exchanging and multiplying this wealth, creating tighter community bonds and building the human capital so vital to community stability and growth are lost.

As a whole, the importance of agriculture to the mainstream economy of the northwest has declined significantly over the years (Johnstone, 2010, pers. comm.), but the social economy provides vibrant new alternatives. As the initiatives profiled here demonstrate, food is proving to be an excellent tool for community education and for sparking involvement in the community development process. All of the initiatives described here use food production, processing and distribution to catalyze solutions to broader socio-political and environmental issues. They point the way towards a thriving place-based food system, an opportunity to maintain the land-based livelihoods so valued by the people of the region and new takes on existing economic opportunities.

## Food Systems: some definitions

### **Food Systems**

The term food system refers to the entire food value chain from the farmer's field (whether in Smithers or California) through to the processing, distribution, marketing and consumption of food. The resource intensive nature of our highly centralized industrial food system is implicated in a range of environmental issues while its products are largely responsible for the increasing incidence of health issues in our society. Our societal reliance on and complicity with this system saps economic potential from rural communities which are well-endowed with the land and resources needed to fulfil much of their local and regional food demand. In contrast, localized food systems, would see produce raised by local farmers travel a short distance to processing or marketing facilities and would arrive at consumers' homes with a minimal expenditure of time, labour or fossil fuel energy. In this model, wealth is retained in the community and a wide range of small businesses are supported.

### **Food Security**

Food security is a complex community issue that includes economic and social systems, food production, processing, and distribution and the policies and legislation in which these activities are embedded. The continuing evolution of the concept and definition of food security and the public policy response reflects the complexities of the technical and policy issues involved (FAO, 2003). Household food security is closely linked to income and other socioeconomic indicators, illustrating that addressing the issue of food security ultimately requires attention to a host of social issues (Kerstetter and Goldberg, 2007).

A widely accepted definition of community food security adapted from Hamm and Bellows (2003) defines food security as "a situation in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice."

The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (2003) provides a working definition of food security as a condition in which “all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”

Ryerson University’s Centre for the Study of Food Security works with the “Five A’s” of Food Security in its definition (2010):

*Availability*- sufficient food for all people at all times

*Accessibility*- physical and economic access to food for all at all times

*Adequacy*- access to food that is nutritious and safe, and produced in environmentally sustainable ways

*Acceptability*- access to culturally acceptable food, which is produced and obtained in ways that do not compromise people's dignity, self-respect or human rights

*Agency*- the policies and processes that enable the achievement of food security

### **Food sovereignty**

*“Food sovereignty is aimed not only at feeding today’s population but also feeding future generations, and therefore at the preservation of natural resources and the environment.” ~ Via Campesina*

According to Food First/Institute for Food and Development Policy, food sovereignty is the *right* of peoples, communities, and countries to define their own agricultural, labour, fishing, food and land policies which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. Beyond assured access to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food, it asserts that this ability of people to sustain themselves and their societies is a fundamental human right.

The term “food sovereignty”, coined in 1996 by the global peasant movement Via Campesina, is intended to replace the relatively narrower term “food security”, which primarily addresses issues of access, with a concept more appropriate in a global context where issues of commodity dumping, subsidies, international trade, human rights and the politics of land ownership all combine to create significant issues for food communities around the world.

### **Foodshed**

From roots in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when it was used to describe the global flow of food, the term “foodshed” now describes the origins and pathways of food products as they make their way from their source to our plates. Much like a watershed, a foodshed refers to a catchment area – in this case, the area that supplies a given regional food market. The foodshed of the typical North American consumer is now truly global in scale; many of our foods travel thousands, even tens of thousands, of kilometres from their source to various production and distribution facilities before reaching our plate. Foodshed is therefore a useful term in conceptualizing ways to reduce these pathways through the localization of production and supply systems and is increasingly used to describe and promote local food.

## Food Community

Food community is a concept coined by the organization Slow Food International in its bid to foster alternatives to the conventional industrialized food system. Food communities comprise everyone involved in the provision of food – from field, forest or water to table – including promotional and cultural contributors. Food communities have strong linkages to specific geographical areas and their associated historical, social, economic and cultural context. Developing this sort of place-centred food system helps build community identity and pride. It also fosters economic self sufficiency, keeping money circulating within regional economies longer.

## Historical and Economic Context

Agriculture in northwest BC reached a peak from 1909 to 1914 during the construction of the Pacific Grand Trunk Railway when the influx of construction crews brought thousands of men and dozens of workhorses all in need of reliable food supplies (Stevenson, 2010, pers. comm.). Prices of locally produced crops – potatoes and root vegetables, wheat and hay – reached an all time high and farmers throughout the region finally reaped a reward for their years of backbreaking work clearing land and establishing farmsteads (*ibid*).

The outbreak of World War I coincided with the completion of the railway. With the sudden departure of a large segment of the population, agriculture slid into a decline that continued throughout the Great Depression and World War II (Stevenson, 2010, pers. comm.). During this time, society – and the role of agriculture in it – changed dramatically. Rising incomes in the post-WWII years together with increased agricultural productivity drove down prices of agricultural products. Year by year, consumers spent decreasing proportions of their income on food. At the same time, the cost of human time in the primary resource sectors increased relative to the capital and operational costs of machinery (Alasia, 2010). Like other primary producers, farmers sought capital intensive solutions to the problem of expensive labour to maintain their profits in the face of falling commodity prices. The predictable result in all traditional sectors has been a steadily declining workforce and a clear need for rural communities to identify new export opportunities (Alasia, 2010).

In remote regions and outports – including northwest BC – industrialization was more gradual. For much of the twentieth century, a limited transportation infrastructure meant that keeping a backyard vegetable garden and preserving its bounty was still the best way to be sure of having a reliable supply of fresh food. Electricity didn't arrive in some parts of the study region until the 1970s. These factors combined to encourage traditional lifestyles of farming, gardening, hunting and fishing to persist as the dominant way of life much longer than in much of the rest of the continent.

## Engel's Law

*"The proportion of personal expenditure devoted to necessities decreases as income rises." Hill, 2006*

A basic tenet of income and consumption, Engel's Law states that as consumer incomes rise, the proportion of this income spent on food and other basic necessities will drop. The result, seen again and



again as economies shift from agrarian to industrialized, is that just as farms reach their maximum efficiency in terms of productivity per land unit cultivated, rising consumer incomes resulting from this industrialization result in proportionally more of each income being spent on luxuries rather than food and other necessities. These spending patterns make existing modes of farming less economically viable, so farmers must reduce input costs, either by making capital investments in equipment to replace costly labour or seeking new ways to increase the productivity of a given land base. In most of North America, this shift happened following the second world war when technologies, production methods and labour trends changed significantly and government policies and interventions directly supported the development of large scale agribusiness (Kuyek, 2007).

The rising tide of industrialization failed to bring real economic benefits to farmers. Although gross farm revenue in Canada more than doubled between 1940 and 2000 from \$17 billion to \$35 billion, net farm incomes over the same period fell from \$11 billion to \$5 billion (Kuyek, 2007). The change in net income is a result of a steady increase in both upstream costs (*e.g.* seed, fertilizers, machinery) and downstream costs (*e.g.* processing, marketing, distribution). The overall result is that a slew of other players in the increasingly complex and consolidated food system, not the farmers, claim the \$18 billion gained from increased land productivity along with the \$8 billion that farmers no longer receive (*ibid*).

A growing consumer awareness of these sorts of economic absurdities has led many to question where their food comes from and where their food dollars go. Consumer incomes and awareness levels are now such that many people base their purchases on many considerations besides finances. This values-based purchasing supports a variety of social and economic goals, including economic sustainability, quality of life and family and community bonds. The social economy is ideally poised to advance these goals by drawing on growing consumer interests in food provenance, nutrition and access.

### **What is the Social Economy?**

The Social Economy is an increasingly accepted way to refer to enterprises and initiatives based on principles of community solidarity and wellbeing. The initiatives themselves are not new. They include social assets such as housing and childcare; social enterprises including co-operatives, credit unions, and social purpose businesses; community training and skills development; integrated social and economic planning; and capacity building and community empowerment.

What is new are the widespread and growing awareness of the importance of these assets and enterprises to community economies, and the innovative new ways to approach partnerships, linkages and strategic planning.

The Canadian Community Economic Development Network (CCEDNet) National Policy Council defines the Social Economy as association-based economic initiatives founded on values of:

- Service to members of community rather than generating profits,
- Autonomous management (not government or market controlled),
- Democratic decision-making,
- Primacy of people and work over capital; and
- Based on principles of participation and empowerment.

It spans a continuum extending from voluntary and non-profit organizations to private sector activity that strives to meet social goals and improve community well-being. In many cases, social economy initiatives embody distinctive forms of organization and governance that help achieve their social goals.

## Community Economic Development

According to the Canadian CED Network, Community Economic Development (CED) is an alternative approach to economic development that recognizes that solutions to complex economic, environmental and social challenges must be rooted in local knowledge and led by community members. At its core is the principle that community issues such as poverty, unemployment and environmental degradation must be addressed in holistic and participatory ways that facilitate participation and empowerment.

## Local Context

*“The question is whether the communities of northern British Columbia west of the Rockies will recognize the seriousness of their demographic crisis before it becomes irreversible.”*

*~Chipeniuk et al., 2009*

This research focuses on food-centred initiatives within the social economy of the main communities of the Upper Skeena and Bulkley Valley region: Smithers, Telkwa and the Hazeltons. Several important regional features frame this inquiry. First, the unique climatic and geographical features of this region make it one of the most northerly areas in North America where agriculture in a traditional western sense is both viable and widely practiced. The Upper Skeena is also an area experiencing the worst socio-economic indicators in the province. Unemployment rates, classed as “extreme” by Human Resources Development Canada, reach 60% in some communities, 90% in others (Cameron, 2002). These numbers clearly show the importance of developing a diverse, stable and socially oriented economy.

Statistics also show that unlike nearly all other regions of British Columbia, the population of northern BC west of Prince George has remained static or in decline ever since the last period of resource-driven expansion came to an end around 1985 (Chipeniuk *et al.*, 2009). A major reason for this stagnation is that the northwest economy has remained largely reliant on the forest sector, which has experienced ongoing decline (Chipeniuk *et al.*, 2009).

A diverse economic base is positively correlated with population growth (Alasia, 2010). In contrast, communities across Canada whose economies remain largely tied to traditional primary industries (fishing, agriculture and resource extraction) have experienced steady population declines (Alasia, 2010). The population trends for the northwest region shown in Table 1 therefore point towards a critical need to explore new ways to strengthen and diversify the regional economic base.

**Table 1.** Percent Change in Population of Towns: 2001 Census over 1996 Census and 2006 over 2001 (from Chipeniuk *et al.*, 2009)

Community	2001/2006	2006/2001
Prince George	-3.7	-2.0
Vanderhoof	-0.2	-7.4
Burns Lake	13.1	8.2
Houston	-9.1	-11.6
Smithers	-3.7	-3.6
Terrace	-1.1	-6.5
Kitimat	-7.6	-12.8
Prince Rupert	-12.4	-12.6

## Why Agriculture?

Of course, the obvious question that arises in considering these various tendencies is why agriculture should be promoted as a positive economic option at all given its role as a primary industry and the ongoing struggle involved in keeping Canadian farms financially viable in a globalized marketplace. In spite of changing consumer trends, the most scrupulous of consumers are unlikely to pay for local vegetables whose price reflects the true cost of the labour, skill and capital investment involved in producing them.

Some answers to these questions are provided in “Gaining Ground: Upper Skeena Agriculture Plan”, a strategic document based on extensive consultation with residents of the Upper Skeena region. The report found that the visions and values that the people of the region hold dear (a rural lifestyle, love of the land, independence and a desire to work on the land) make agriculture a potentially desirable livelihood option. It is also a more sustainable option than other primary industries: it can be based on sustainable land management practices and it need not involve corporations based outside the region. Agriculture is unique among the primary industries in that its products are not only something that we cannot live without, they are of deep social and cultural importance. As the Hazelton Food Charter Food states, food is central to the identity of citizens of the Upper Skeena, to their social relationships, how they work on the land, their health and a healthy economy. More than just an economic activity, agriculture embodies a range of critically important values. It is this set of values that drives the creative endeavours of the social economy.

Through an intensive review of the literature, Blouin *et al.* (2009) have identified a range of potential benefits of a localized food system summarized in the table below.

**Table 2.** Potential benefits of a localized food system (Blouin *et al.*, 2009)

Environmental Impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reduced CO2 emissions</li><li>• Encourages sustainable agriculture (sound soil and water management, attention to animal welfare, on-farm biodiversity etc.)</li><li>• Reduced use of fertilizers, pesticides and other agro-chemicals</li><li>• Reduced packaging and waste</li></ul>
Economic Impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Control over prices and sharing of risks</li><li>• Greater share of value added</li><li>• Greater income for farmers</li><li>• Better price for consumers</li><li>• Economic spill-over</li><li>• Employment</li><li>• Business skills development</li></ul>
Social Impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Creates social bonds between producers and consumers</li><li>• Increases food security for at-risk populations</li><li>• Better nutrition and health</li><li>• More equitable market access for small farmers</li></ul>

The reality is that agriculture is in transition. Traditionally, the region's commercial agriculture sector has focused on individual farmers producing food for export from the region (Cameron, 2009). In today's food system, this business model puts farmers in direct competition with producers from around the globe, making it difficult for agriculture to remain financially viable in the region. Many agricultural stakeholders, however, have expressed a desire to build a more dynamic, diverse and energetic agricultural sector (Cameron, 2009). The recent Agriculture Sector Strategy commissioned by the Omineca Beetle Action Coalition defined the vision for agriculture in the Omineca region (which encompasses the study area east of Moricetown):

“The communities of the region envision a future with an active, diversified, and profitable agriculture sector that is supported by regionally situated, responsive education and training, and effective research programs. The sector emphasizes food production that is sustainable and responsible; a sector that collaborates with health agencies, educational institutions, local governments, community groups, and others to develop measures to expand and diversify the industry. Using multiple strategies, the agriculture sector will be successful in local markets, be profitable with established products, develop new specialty and other products, and grow to serve broader provincial, national and international markets.”

To achieve this vision, participants and observers alike feel that a new model is needed that emphasizes regional production, producer collaboration and increased consumer responsibility for supporting the sector and, by implication, the regional economy.

Within the social economy, a number of food-centred initiatives are pointing the way forward. These projects, programs and organizations demonstrate applications of alternative governance structures and economic approaches as they illustrate how food can act as a catalyst for community involvement,

capacity development and innovation. The new way of thinking about agriculture in the region embodied in these initiatives steers clear of the traditional commodity model and instead embraces a regional integration of primary (production), secondary (manufacturing and processing) and tertiary (distribution and marketing) industries in order to extract the maximum economic value from resources produced locally.

Successes within the social economy are often not directly transferrable to the mainstream economy. Many of the initiatives described here will, for one reason or another, remain dependent on outside financial support. Others are dependent on a dedicated team of volunteers unavailable to private industry. It is not intended that the initiatives included in this report be regarded as general models of the route that food production, processing or distribution should take, nor as ideal business models for the food sector. Instead, these initiatives can be seen as incubators of innovative approaches and practices in sustainable development in general and sustainable food systems in particular. They provide ample evidence that people can indeed come together to create successes in many aspects of food production, processing and distribution and in the process bring about significant social change.

## Scope of the Study

This report examines some of the notable food-centred initiatives underway in the communities of the Upper Skeena and Bulkley Valley. The study region extends from Telkwa west to the Hazeltons but is focused on the larger communities in the region. Time constraints restricted the study to formalized projects, programs and organizations; unfortunately, informal food-centred initiatives and exchanges, especially in First Nations communities, have not been included in this report. Likewise, wild salmon, a major food source in the region of tremendous cultural importance, has been omitted simply because the political, cultural, economic and environmental concerns are too vast and complex for this report to address. Other wild foods (mushrooms, berries and wild medicinal plants) and their associated exchange networks were also not included in this report, again because of the time needed to conduct a meaningful exploration of this topic.

These shortfalls are in no way reflective of the importance of informal food exchange networks, which make up a fundamentally important part of community economies and relations in the region, but rather the author's lack of familiarity with these cultures and traditions. Further study into the structure, role and potential of the informal food economy by someone with a greater expertise on this topic is recommended.

## FOOD COMMUNITY LANDMARKS

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*Agriculture has always been an important activity for settlers and First Nations living in the Upper Skeena. Whether defined in a conventional Western sense of growing crops and animal husbandry, or in a traditional First Nation perspective of management of the natural landscape, deriving sustenance from local soil and waters is central to the existence and identity of the people living here. ~ Ryan and Associates, 2002*

In this section, many (not all) of the landmark initiatives in the local food community are gathered into three general categories based on the principle aims of the project or organization. “May All be Fed” includes those initiatives whose main focus is increase community food security by increasing basic access to nutritious food for all members of the community. “Building Community Capacity” profiles initiatives that develop human potential through education and skill development while “Building Production Capacity” includes organizations, projects and initiatives that aim to increase the amount of food produced locally.

### May All be Fed

In spite of its prosperity, BC has the second highest rate of food insecurity in Canada at 5.4% (Kerstetter and Goldberg, 2007). Of the fourteen provincial health regions, combined data from the Northwest and Northeast indicate that these regions rank fourth in terms of overall food insecurity (*ibid.*). Both food insecurity and the poverty that underlies it are challenging issues to address, making meaningful change a long term, multidisciplinary process. In the meantime, ensuring that all members of the community can access nutritious and culturally appropriate food with dignity is critically important to both the wellbeing of individuals and communities and to their ongoing development. This section provides a brief inventory of some of the community initiatives that address this basic need.

#### St. James’ Soup Kitchen

**Activity:** Providing a free hot meal and donated food to community members on a weekly basis

**Structure:** Charitable society

**Location:** St. James Anglican Church, Smithers

The St. James Anglican Church soup kitchen is renowned for the diversity and quality of its soups and the top notch hospitality of the volunteers who serve it. Year round, a team of soup kitchen volunteers stir up five varieties of soup each Saturday that are served to dozens of community citizens. On their way home, soup kitchen patrons can help themselves to bread and baked goods along with and are offered various other donated food items from food retailers in the community.

## Salvation Army

**Activity:** Providing community drop-in space, a food bank and hot meal three days a week

**Structure:** Charitable society

**Location:** Main Street, Smithers

The Salvation Army provides the only food bank in Smithers and serves upwards of sixty families on any given day. Patrons may receive one bag of food each month that they order in advance for pick-up between 10:30 and 1:30 on Wednesday, Thursday or Friday. During these times, the Salvation Army hosts a community drop-in, providing soup, coffee, a warm space and a listening ear to anyone in need. The food provided is always saleable quality; no expired food or food in damaged packages is offered. Thanks to the generosity of the Smithers community, food is rarely in short supply.

## Broadway Place Emergency Shelter

**Activity:** Providing a biweekly hot meal and food bank to community members

**Structure:** Program run by Smithers Community Services Society

**Location:** Broadway Avenue, Smithers

Along with emergency accommodations, Broadway Place provides snacks and sandwiches from Monday to Thursday to anyone in the community who needs them.

## Innovation Foods

**Activity:** An affordable retail food outlet for low-income individuals and families

**Structure:** Social enterprise under the umbrella of High Roads Services Society, a non-profit society

**Location:** 3488 Highway 16, Smithers

Innovation Foods is a low cost retail food outlet that partners with several organizations and businesses to rescue surplus food from around the province and redistribute it through its storefront on Highway 16 in Smithers. The social enterprise is modelled after the food exchange run by the Quest Outreach Society, a Vancouver-based organization that addresses hunger by diverting almost six million pounds of surplus food from landfills each year and redistributing it in the community.

Several parents of children with special needs saw the need for Innovation Foods and came together to organize the venture under the umbrella of the High Road Services Society. The low cost grocery store opened in the spring of 2009 and prides itself on being “membership fuelled, volunteer driven and community raised.”

“We’re a model community in BC, maybe in Western Canada,” says program coordinator Lorna Butz, referring to the facility’s unique role in providing affordable food by salvaging society’s surplus. At this time, Innovation Foods sells only to its members, who must fall within a certain income bracket to qualify for the service.

A team of volunteers repackages donated food along with bulk purchases into smaller, vacuum-sealed packages. This allows members to purchase food in smaller quantities without losing out on the bulk

discount – a valuable option for people without extra cash for bulk buying and often without vehicles to get large purchases home.

Already a win-win story for the community, Innovation Foods’ plans for future expansion include a larger facility, more local meats and produce and a two tiered pricing system to let the community at large benefit from its services.

## Developing Community Capacity

Food sovereignty, supported by robust localized food systems, has been described as way to create engines of sustainable development and social justice (Blouin *et al.*, 2009). Yet a variety of barriers exist in scaling up local food systems. These range from current limits to production capacity to financial constraints faced by producers to policies at various levels of government that favour centralized, industrial food supply chains.

This section describes a cornucopia of community initiatives that aim to build the human capacity needed to support more resilient communities and a more localized food system through activities that, in themselves, accomplish these goals. From creating opportunities for dialogue to hands-on horticultural training, these programs and projects strive to increase community engagement and empowerment while broadening community awareness of the importance of eating well and supporting the local agricultural sector.

### Smithers Good Food Box

**Activity:** Providing a monthly box of fresh, affordable produce to community members

**Structure:** Program run by Smithers Community Services Association, a charitable organization

**Location:** St. James’ Anglican Church, Smithers

The Smithers Good Food Box is an initiative to increase community health, awareness and capacity through improved access to fresh, affordable, nutritious fruits and vegetables for all members of the community. There are no criteria for joining the GFB program. Although it targets children, seniors and people living on a fixed income, it is available to anyone in the community interested in purchasing food co-operatively.

Jodie Eskelin, Program Co-ordinator of the Smithers Good Food Box emphasizes that while the health benefits are clear, the underlying goals of the program are to increase community empowerment and capacity.

“Of all the things out there for building capacity,” she says, “the Good Food Box works.”

The program, which began in 2006 and has now expanded to collaborate with and organization in Houston, provides up to 100 boxes to participants each month, though the average number is closer to



80. The GFB increases consumer awareness about food, encourages volunteer participation and skill development and supports the self-sufficiency of all individuals involved. By sourcing as much food locally as participants can afford, the Good Food Box also directly contributes to a healthier, more secure and more accessible local food system.

## **Grendal Group**

**Activity:** A community catering service providing supported employment opportunities for people with developmental delays

**Structure:** Social enterprise

**Location:** St. Paul's Anglican Church, Smithers

In the fall of 2005, the Grendal Group, which for several years had developed programs for community integration and skill building for people with disabilities, began planning a social enterprise. In early 2006 it launched a business that would quickly develop into Grendelivery, a successful catering and delivery service. While the business is based on the philosophy of providing a source of healthy, natural food to the community, the true aims of the program are to provide participants with training, work experience and opportunities for social interaction and engagement. With these program aims underlying the operations of the social enterprise, it is unlikely to ever become fully self-sufficient financially. Participant training is thorough and production is slower than in a standard business, resulting in significantly higher wage costs.

For larger jobs, people skilled in food preparation are hired from the community to work alongside participants. "It's quite a shift from the high production environment the staff are used to," says founder and long time project co-ordinator Mark Fisher, "The interaction between the staff and participants working together and learning from each other is amazing."

The success of the Grendal Group is due largely to the strength of its program. Once a week, an average of 12 participants gather for a training session where they gain a variety of food preparation skills. The impact on participants of learning to cook and providing a service to the community is profound.

"Food is such an important thing," explains Mark, "For people who've been marginalized, providing that essential need is significant in helping them develop a sense of their own value."

## **Ground Breakers Collective**

**Activity:** Managing urban garden plots to increase production of and community access to healthy, locally produced vegetables

**Structure:** Social enterprise run by a non-profit co-operative (under development)

**Location:** 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue Neighbourhood Garden, across from the hospital

The Ground Breakers Collective is a new community group with a unique vision for developing human potential and local food production capacity. Inspired by the success of the Princess Neighbourhood Garden, a program of the Smithers Community Services Association that for the past two years has provided communally managed garden space and shared produce for the Princess Street neighbourhood,

the Collective plans to replicate this concept in other parts of town. Beginning with a vacant lot across from the hospital generously contributed by Northern Health, the group aims to develop a network of communally managed community and backyard gardens. In particular, the project will highlight the link between healthy, fresh, affordable produce and community health.

Over the coming year, the Ground Breakers plan to form a non-profit co-operative and have applied for funding through the Co-operative Development Initiative to assist with business planning and marketing. The co-operative would help link rural and urban agriculture initiatives in the community, helping both to increase local production of sustainably produced vegetables and further improve community access to fresh local food. By developing a social enterprise involving a Community Supported Agriculture box program, the group plans to work towards becoming economically self-sufficient in their operations.

### **Northern Roots Community Gardens**

**Activity:** Providing garden space, training and other resources necessary for households to grow healthy, affordable food.

**Structure:** Non-profit society

**Location:** Corner of Railway and Pacific, Smithers

Northern Roots Community Garden began in 2001 with Northern Health Grant and a vision of creating a market garden on its leased land at the Old Experimental Farm just east of Smithers. The initial grant has long since run out and the original land was sold but the garden is still going strong. Now located at Railway Avenue and Pacific Street on a piece of land generously provided by the Town of Smithers, the Society's focus has shifted from running a commercial market garden to providing a space where community members can increase their household food security.

The society provides land, tools, a rototiller and everything else needed for some 30-40 participating gardeners to care for their plots. The 15'x30' garden beds are rented out at a rate of \$50 per year; the 7' x 8' greenhouse plots at \$15 per year.

Like other local food initiatives, Northern Roots thrives in part thanks to a dedicated team of volunteers and in part due to the partnerships built between the Society and other community groups. It provides a space for visionary garden activities: the Grendal Group has a plot where it grows food for its catering service while some gardeners market their surplus produce at the Smithers Farmers' Market.

"Each year we have a few more people," says Co-ordinator Johanna Pfalz, "and there's room to expand, but if we grow, we want to grow slowly. We rely mostly on volunteers and it's important not to burn out."

From January to March, Northern Roots Garden hosts monthly gardening talks that are growing in popularity, thanks in part to their new venue at Barista's coffee shop. This year, a federal grant will add to the garden's ability to serve children and seniors through improved walkways and other facilities.

## Ground to Griddle Community Kitchen

**Activity:** Providing literacy training, college access and a unique social and community development opportunity

**Structure:** Program run by Smithers Community Services Association, a charitable organization

**Location:** St. Paul's Anglican Church, Smithers

When Literacy Now programmers in Smithers realized that attendance at literacy programs was affected by peoples' difficulties in meeting their basic needs, they decided that a new approach was needed. Their brainstorming resulted in the Ground to Griddle Community Kitchen, a program that helps address people's need for a secure, healthy food source. The relaxed social setting provides fertile conditions for learning and social development and helps build participants' self esteem, personal capacity and confidence in their abilities.

"Many people are surprised when they hear that the Literacy Program is running a Community Kitchen," says Joanne, "but when you look at what the Federal Government considers basic needs, it's far more than reading and writing. It's also community engagement, document comprehension and health. Educating people about these issues is an important component of the program."

Community kitchens have been run by other organizations in Smithers in the past, but several features set Ground to Griddle apart. Programmers place a strong emphasis on food origins, issues and politics, helping to increase participant awareness of health issues and encourage civic engagement.

"We talk a lot about food policy, food issues, health issues and marketing," says Joanne. "If you provide training in a practical setting it's more relevant."

A tight linkage between the community kitchen and the Princess Neighbourhood Garden means that through the summer, much of the produce used in the kitchen is grown in the vacant lot next door by participants themselves. At the same time, a grant from Northern Health has provided the funding needed for food gathering trips. Berry picking, wild plant harvesting and fishing expeditions all help build connections to the land and regional food sources.

Most importantly, a formal partnership with the local community college means that regular participation in the Ground to Griddle program earns participants student cards, computer access and college credit. This helps create a bridge between learning environments, enabling people to transition more easily into college programs. Writing Out Loud sessions are free writing sessions integrated into planning days that aim to develop literacy skills and encourage self reflection.

Now into its second year, the Community Kitchen will launch a new program, "Cultivating Wisdom," this spring. This program will involve seniors in the project planning phase providing them with opportunities to mentor others and enable them to assume leadership roles. The program is a direct result of the programmers' appreciation of participant diversity and their goal of providing a program that a broad cross section of the community can participate in.

## Senden Sustainable Agriculture Resource Centre

**Activity:** Creating economic and community development opportunities via a demonstration and training garden, resource centre and value-added processing facility

**Structure:** Social enterprise initiated by the Upper Skeena Development Centre

**Location:** Hazelton Hi Level Road, Two Mile

In 2002, *Gaining Ground: Upper Skeena Sustainable Agriculture Plan* was commissioned to address the economic crisis brought about by the sudden downturn in the forest sector. It mapped an optimistic, forward thinking strategy for communities from Cedarvale to the Kispiox and Suskwa Valleys. It involves capitalizing on the region's assets – fertile soils, moderate climate and land-based lifestyles of its people – along with the growing consumer awareness of the benefits of eating locally to shift from subsistence-based to income-generating agricultural enterprises. The Upper Skeena Development Centre, whose mandate is to support community economic development initiatives and the creation of a sustainable economy in the Upper Skeena, has become the main driver in implementing the plan.

The compelling conclusions of *Gaining Ground* led the USDC to purchase the historic Senden farm when it came up for sale in 2007. Over the following years, Project Co-ordinator Jane Boulton secured funds to renovate the historic farm house and establish a community farm.

“It was the missing piece,” says Boulton, referring to the region's lack of a central agriculture facility to serve as a resource centre and demonstration/training site. The farm will provide a nexus for agricultural entrepreneurs looking for new ways to share information and co-operatively purchase expensive equipment and share marketing costs.

To support these goals over the long term, Senden includes a social enterprise component that will enable it to become self-sustaining. Birch syrup, which retails in high-end markets for \$100/litre, will be the facility's first product in a plan that involves hiring and training local crews, investing in an evaporator and tapping into lucrative markets throughout the province.

“This is a niche market,” says Boulton, “and there's a huge demand.”

One of the ongoing challenges faced by project managers has been clarifying its role in the community. Designed to stimulate and complement, not compete with, other local enterprises and community groups, Senden aims to increase local food production and inspire new private initiatives in this sector of the economy.

“Nominally, this is an agricultural venue,” says Boulton, “but really it's a community development venue. And community development is about engagement and empowerment.”

Engagement and empowerment began with an employment program to renovate the farmhouse and prepare the land and will continue this year with a program for women experiencing violence, youth outreach, community workshops and a lending library. Future projects could include horticultural training programs, a commercial kitchen, large scale dehydrator or storefront to provide another marketing opportunity for local producers.

“Above all we want to support producers,” says Boulton, “What does this look like? What supports do people feel are lacking? These are key questions as we continue to plan and develop Senden.”

### **Senden Farm History**

In the early part of the 1920s, the Sendens left Holland for what they believed would be a better life in Canada. Like others, they soon found that the promises of immigration officials were exaggerated and that their prospects in the new country were not what they had hoped. After following various jobs from Vancouver to Haida Gwaii to Edmonton, the couple finally arrived in Hazelton in 1930 – only to find that the promised work was again only a false hope. Desperate for some means of making a living, the Sendens asked the local dairy farmer if they could buy a single cow from his herd. The farmer refused, insisting that they purchase his entire dairy operation: a horse, six cows and a supply of milk bottles. It was the start of what would become a thriving community dairy business. Using their last \$10 as a down payment, the Sendens were able to pay off the remaining \$720 over the next year and a half. In the years that followed, the family steadily increased the size of the farm until they were milking 12 cows by hand and delivering milk – by horse and buggy – to 75 customers, including Silver Standard and Red Rose mines, the general store and the hospital. In 1954, the family shut down the dairy and moved on to less gruelling enterprises. The historic 1941 farm house they built still stands and now houses the Senden Sustainable Agriculture Resource Centre.

### **Skeena Bakery**

**Activity:** Organic, artisan bakery specializing in fresh bread and healthy snacks

**Structure:** Social enterprise run by the Skeena Supported Employment Society

**Location:** Highway 16, New Hazelton

In July 2009, The Skeena Bakery opened its doors in downtown New Hazelton and began selling its trademark selection of organic artisan breads, buns and snacks. Nearly a year later, the social enterprise is on solid financial footing and is in the process of formalizing a work training program for people with a variety of disabilities. The success of the bakery is the result of the hard work of a group of citizens who recognized the lack of suitable opportunities in the Hazeltons for people with disabilities to gain work experience and job skills and came together to address this need. After two years of planning, organizers secured storefront space on Highway 16, sufficient funds to renovate it, and an experienced Project Coordinator to direct and administer the start-up phase of the enterprise.

## Storytellers' Foundation

**Activity:** Supporting community capacity and economic development through a range of food-related and other initiatives

**Structure:** Non-profit organization

**Location:** Old Hazelton

The Storytellers' Foundation is a community development organization that evolved from the 1994 treaty talks with the Gitksan Nation. It now animates community dialogue and provides a variety of opportunities for informal learning. In the course of its work empowering citizens to become active in their communities, Storytellers' came to recognize food's close ties to citizenship and its value in bringing together and inspiring people to initiate social change. Storytellers' is now a regional hub that, among other activities, creates community action through a variety of food-related initiatives.

Now in its fifth year, the **Hazelton Garden Challenge** is a sustainable backyard development project that supports and encourages more people to produce their own food and to consider trading or selling any surplus. The group, kept to a maximum of 18 participants, meets once a week to visit each others' backyards. Once a month, Storytellers' organizes more lengthy tours to notable farms and gardens in the region.

During the summer of 2009, the **Field to Surplus** project created a community market garden in Gitanmaax to develop agricultural knowledge and skills, encourage local production at a more intensive level and raise awareness of the livelihood potential of agricultural activities.

Each month, the **Good Food Box** distributes 250 boxes of produce throughout the Hazeltons. "There is the potential to do more," says Ann Docherty, Community Learning Director, "but we just don't have the capacity." This year, the program, which involves 17 community partnerships, will move to Senden Farm as Storytellers' continues to seek ways to integrate local food into this program.

**Hub Lunches** take place on a monthly basis at the Learning Shop in downtown Hazelton. Participating community members receive a healthy lunch and an opportunity to come together to discuss various topics of interest in the community.

The **Hazelton Farm to School Project** is a breakfast and lunch program offered at the nearby John Field Elementary School.

The **Fish Nation Project** brought together groups of friends, neighbours and families to discuss feelings and perspectives of the role of salmon in the community. The project, which took place over two months, centered on several themes designed to encourage insight and reflection not only on fish but on the community and political processes needed to ensure the continued health of fisheries.

Through **Genuine Progress Indicators**, Storytellers aims to create alternative economic indicators of community progress. These indicators would be capable of measuring non-monetary exchanges (bartering, gifting, volunteerism) along with other aspects of a healthy local economy in order to measure changes in community well-being over time.

**Youthworks** is a self-directed, youth solidarity co-op that provides youth with an opportunity to develop job skills in a supportive, co-operative environment. Along with catering Hub lunches at the Learning

Shop, the five participants tend a demonstration garden and uses the produce at Hub lunches and other catering jobs.

As a next step, Storytellers has begun focussing more on food and agricultural policy at multiple levels of government to influence food and agriculture policy.

## Developing Production Capacity

Canada is a net exporter of agricultural products (Ngo and Dorff, 2009) and has the potential to satisfy most of its domestic food needs. Yet we continue to import vast quantities of food. Studies suggest that consumer trends support local food production: Canadians are increasingly concerned about the origins and traceability of their foods, production standards and health effects (Serecon, 2005) – issues that are easily addressed by sourcing foods locally from trusted producers.

Throughout the study region, successful community engagement and education projects combined with broader societal trends towards fresh, healthy eating have raised the profile of local food to the point where demand now exceeds supply in spite of the marginally higher cost of locally produced foods. Increased emphasis is now needed on supporting growers, food processors and distributors in order to bolster local food production and processing capacity and further develop a vibrant regional food system.

The economic challenges associated with generating a viable income through food production and processing means that the social economy continues to play an important role. Co-operatives, non-profit societies, producer associations and social enterprises are all examples of ways in which food producers have pooled their resources to address a variety of common needs. The results of these efforts over time have been mixed and further work is needed. Notably, the Northwest Premium Meat Co-op met with significant challenges related to marketing and operating a food processing business at the scale necessary to service its substantial debt. This scenario illustrates that underlying human resource needs (i.e. specialized knowledge, experience and training) as well as streamlined ways to market regional products to a broader provincial market should be addressed if agriculture and food processing are to become truly sustainable components of a diversified regional economy.



## Northwest Premium Meat Co-operative

**Activity:** Providing a provincially inspected custom slaughter service to the farming community

**Structure:** Producer and consumer co-operative

**Location:** Hankin Avenue, Telkwa

In northwest BC, farming and cattle ranching are nearly synonymous terms. Yet in spite of the prevalence of cattle and other livestock, there were no slaughter facilities west of Vanderhoof prior to 2008. This meant that anyone interested in purchasing local meat would buy directly from farmers who slaughtered their animals in the field or from the rare butchers who bought local beef that had travelled to the abattoir in Prince George and back. As a result, the cattle industry built up around a practice of shipping calves to Alberta to finish in feedlots or shipping full-sized animals to large scale meat packers at commodity prices. Over the years, rising capital costs and declining cattle prices have made this an increasingly untenable business model.

Things began to change rapidly in 2003 when crisis hit the Canadian beef industry. An outbreak of BSE in Canada halted US exports. Overnight, beef prices plummeted by about 65%. Without a market for their animals, cattle ranchers in BC's northwest formed a cooperative and started raising what would eventually total over \$600,000 in individual contributions from surrounding rural communities. They landed a \$150,000 grant and some sound development advice from the provincial Meat Industry Enhancement Strategy, and with a loan guarantee from the Northern Development Initiative they were able to access a further \$430,000 from the local credit union.

In 2004, new provincial meat production legislation further strengthened community resolve. The new regulations, effective September 2007, required all livestock to be slaughtered in a provincially inspected facility. This put an end to previous rules that allowed private farm gate sales subject only to municipal health regulations in rural parts of the province. With the nearest provincially inspected abattoir in Vanderhoof a three to four hour drive from Smithers, the new regulations would effectively wipe out the direct marketing option for small farmers from Smithers west. This unwelcome prospect helped put communities in the northwest fully behind the co-operative as operational and business planning got underway.

The Northwest Premium Meat Co-op opened for business in April 2008. Its facilities included a newly constructed, provincially inspected abattoir at the edge of the village of Telkwa, ten kilometres outside of Smithers. An old dairy building in the village centre houses the cut and wrap facility and retail storefront downstairs with co-op offices above. The two buildings, run by 16 staff and a Board of Directors, have a combined value of \$1.7 million.

Unfortunately, despite the efforts and capital outlay of the 250 members involved, the Co-op was unable to keep up to its payments. A year after opening it was forced to shut down. Although the abattoir has since reopened and continues to operate, the Co-op has been forced to put its assets up for sale in order to resolve its debt. The story is an unhappy one for the citizens who invested significantly both in time and finances as well as for the lost opportunities for farmers who may soon be unable to have their animals slaughtered locally. In a worst case scenario, farmers will again be hard pressed to reap the financial benefits of direct marketing to consumers and building up a trusting relationship over time.



## **Bulkley Valley Farmers' Market**

*The Town of Smithers has a very active farmer's market, located in the centre of our community that is well supported at the local level and is the key venue for producers of local agricultural products to market agricultural products. Local organic food production and marketing is a critical factor with respect to encouraging sustainability of food sources given rising fuel costs, global warming and related food security issues.*

~ James A. Davidson, Mayor, Town of Smithers  
Quoted in: The British Columbia Agriculture Plan

The Bulkley Valley Farmers' Market was established in 1986 and for many years remained a small group of six to eight vendors. The past few years, however, have seen 15-20% annual growth in vendors.

Currently, the market functions as a social enterprise that contributes to a culture of supporting local producers, eating close to home and in the process developing a sustainable, local economic system. Customers and producers alike are genuinely committed to this philosophy and the results are felt throughout the community. According to Economic and Community Impact Study (Connell *et al.*, 2006), the BVFM contributes an estimated \$442,000 to the local economy annually.

With consumers firmly on board, the next step for the society has been to investigate how to structure future growth and encourage increased local production.

"It's a problem of supply, not demand," says former President Mark Fisher, "We see a lot of money and resources going towards educating consumers but the demand is already there. More money should be put towards helping farmers make a living at what they do. There is room for more support."

## **Community Futures Nadina**

Community Futures is dedicated to community-based and community-directed development that combines an inclusive approach to programs, relevant and timely economic supports, and environmental consciousness to ensure long term community viability.

Currently, CF Nadina is working in partnership with other regional CF offices to develop a co-ordinated approach to agricultural development from Prince George to Terrace. Their community-based approach involves individual consultations and advisory committees to investigate the full spectrum of options and opportunities at all production and distribution scales. Their work could provide sound strategies for moving forward on the recommendations laid out in the Agriculture Sector Strategy for the Omineca region and the Upper Skeena agriculture plan.

## **Great Bear Co-operative**

This fledgling marketing co-operative aims to encourage production and manufacturing in the north by streamlining the marketing of regionally produced products. By developing a regional brand, communication systems to link primary producers with processors, and co-operatively supported marketing, shipping and distribution strategies, the co-op hopes to further develop sustainable, high-end, value-added regional industries. Examples of possible products include non-timber forest products (birch syrup, teas, dried mushrooms), arts and crafts and value added agricultural products (jams, cheeses, sausages).

### **Smithers Farmers' Institute**

One of 59 operating institutes in BC, the Smithers Farmers' Institute aims to support farmers, improve the conditions of rural life, agriculture and rural development. A key activity of the Institute is to maintain a "Local Food and Farms" column in the Smithers Interior News to keep the community informed on key food and agriculture events in the region.

### **Pacific Northwest Poultry Association**

Formed in 2009 with a mission to promote the local production, processing and marketing of poultry, rabbits and game birds in the Pacific Northwest, the PNPA has established an efficient and reliable mobile processing facility. The Association has hosted a series of informative meetings for producers in order to increase poultry and rabbit production and to keep the processing facility up and running at various regional docking stations.

### **Hazelton Farmers' Market**

The Hazelton Farmers' Market Society began its first season in May, 2009. The Society, a member of the BC Association of Farmers' Markets, requires that vendors "make, bake or grow" all goods offered for sale. The question of where in the Hazeltons to locate the market involved much discussion among the members and between the Society and the Town Councils of Hazelton and New Hazelton. The Hazelton arena was eventually chosen for its amenities (a large paved parking and sales area as well as access to water, power and washrooms) and for its central location in the communities. The Society anticipates an increase in both customers and vendors in the season ahead.

### **Bulkley Valley Cattlemen's Association/Skeena Stockmen's Association**

The BV Cattlemen's Association and the Skeena Stockmen's Association are two out of 56 local associations that together make up the British Columbia Cattlemen's Association. Since 1929, the BCCA has represented the interests of beef cattle producers in BC and currently has a membership of close to 1500 ranchers. The Association strives to maintain a healthy, sustainable cattle industry that provides quality beef products to consumers and is guided by strong volunteer membership, environmental stewardship, respect for stakeholders and excellent business practices. A major objective of the BCCA is to give a voice to cattle producers at the Federal and Provincial government level to help enact and enforce legislation necessary for the development of the industry and market conditions. Members of the BCCA benefit from the allegiances and partnerships developed by the association as well as representation at the Canadian Cattlemen's Association and the British Columbia Agriculture Council as well as a subscription to the BCCA's bimonthly magazine.

### **Bulkley Valley Dairymen's Association**

The Bulkley Valley Dairymen's Association represents one of the thriving dairy farming regions in the province. About a dozen dairy farms are in operation in the region, a number that has declined little over the years relative to other areas. Currently, milk is shipped to the lower mainland for processing and distribution. Dairy farmers in the area have explored many options for local processing and marketing over the decades, but it appears that the difficulties and expense involved in this kind of venture are simply too onerous and risky for anyone to undertake at this time.

## Food as Livelihood

Many of the social activists and change agents involved in the initiatives profiled above have livelihoods centred on food. The social service orientation of their work, however, makes it a very different kind of food centred livelihood than that of a farmer, baker or restaurateur.

The for-profit businesses involved in sustainable food systems are oriented towards goals other than maximizing profit. These businesses exist in large part to serve the greater good. Their proprietors strive to be model citizens, are community minded, concerned with public health and environmental sustainability, and strive to provide wholesome consumer choice – all generally in lieu of generating personal wealth.

These businesses include family farms whose practices are oriented towards sustainability, stewardship and sound land management practices. They also include a range of value-added businesses who aim to support farmers both within the region and beyond who practice sustainable production methods: butchers and sausage makers, bakers, tea producers, coffee roasters, wildcrafters and caterers. These businesses add to the rich tapestry of small businesses in the region and are finding that their businesses are much sought after by concerned and aware consumers – thanks in part to the momentum generated by the social economy and broader societal trends.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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### Towards Community Food Policies

*Access to safe, locally produced food, an emphasis on climate change, environment and healthy eating, and a shared understanding of urban and rural interests are all key to the agriculture industry's long-term growth and sustainability.* ~The British Columbia Agriculture Plan

Policies provide a framework for decision-making and help determine investment priorities at different governance levels. Food policies can refer to food access, land use and more generally to income policies that promote

The Hazelton Food Charter developed by the Storytellers' Foundation is an excellent example of a participatory process that is gradually creating significant social change in the Hazeltons. In the future, more detailed policies could expand on the basic principles laid out in the policy.

This research did not find that any documents similar to the Hazelton Food Charter exist in the Town of Smithers. Developing such a document, or a set of community food policies, through a community-driven process would be a productive activity for the Town. It would help identify community priorities, current gaps in community food security and next steps towards developing this important economic sector.

## Future Options for Food Community Development

May All be Fed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify and address barriers to participation in food access and capacity building programs</li> </ul>
Capacity Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop a college level agricultural certification program at NWCC</li> <li>Provide a high school agriculture course at Senden Farm</li> <li>Increase training and support for producers starting out or looking to expand production</li> <li>Develop programs to preserve and enhance regional agricultural biodiversity (seed saving initiatives, breeding and cultivar research)</li> </ul>
Production Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create a year round facility for local food distribution in Smithers</li> <li>Investigate the feasibility of a medium scale vegetable storage facility</li> <li>Develop a regional brand/image for marketing at home and beyond</li> <li>Pilot alternative land tenure and succession models</li> <li>Encourage additional value-added processing industries (cottage scale or larger)</li> <li>Continue to investigate and promote options for marketing non-timber forest products</li> </ul>

## Community Partnership Opportunities

### Northwest Community College

Established in Terrace in 1975, Northwest Community College is one of the few remaining colleges that still has the word "community" in its name. This is by design and not accident. In the College's strategic and educational plans, NWCC ensures that the programming it offers reflects the education and training needs of the communities it serves. Students are able to choose from a variety of academic, career and trades programming. The Continuing Education and Industry Training department of the College provides applied learning opportunities in areas ranging from industry training to general interest and customized programming.

### Northern Health

Northern Health works with communities and organizations to support Northern people to live well and prevent injury and illness. The health status of Northern people is improving faster than the rest of BC. Work with communities and organizational partners to identify and act on key issues where a population health approach can have a significant positive impact on the health of Northern people.

### Woodmere Nursery

Joe Wong, the owner/operator of Woodmere Nursery Ltd., has run a thriving business since 1985, producing up to 12.5 million tree seedlings per year for the forest industry. The nursery, located on the

outskirts of Telkwa, comprises seven acres of greenhouses with a computer system that monitors the environment every twenty seconds and maintains a history of each greenhouse.

With the downturn in the forest industry, the scale of seedling production needed has declined. In the past two years, Joe has expanded his production to include bedding plants and tomatoes. This is potentially a valuable food production facility as well as a valuable source of greenhouse production expertise.

## **CKIC Community Radio**

Now well into its first year of operation, CKIC offers commercial-free independent radio programmed by volunteers. By making public media creation accessible to all community residents, CKIC aims to provide a forum for the region's diverse perspectives, promote awareness of community-based organizations and services and offer an effective instrument for community development.

## **Wetzin'Kwa Community Forest Corporation**

Wetzin'Kwa Community Forest Corporation operates a community forest license in the Bulkley Valley. The tenure area is over 32,000 hectares covering the north, west, and south slopes of Hudson Bay Mountain. Although commercial tree species form the basis of forest management within the license area, Wetzin'Kwa Community Forest Corporation requested that harvesting of botanical forest products, in addition to the harvesting of timber, be included in the Probationary Community Forest Agreement. Future ventures into harvesting and processing non-timber forest products could be assisted through partnerships with Senden Sustainable Agriculture Resource Centre, the Great Bear Co-operative or the Centre for Non-Timber Resources based at Royal Roads University in Victoria, BC.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

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Food-centred projects and programs in the Upper Skeena and Bulkley Valley are innovative, well-supported by communities, and effective in achieving a variety of social objectives. Although some initiatives, such as the Northwest Premium Meat Co-operative and similar co-operatives in the past, have fallen short of their original goals, they provide compelling evidence of the ability of the region's citizens to collectively envision new directions for their economy and invest impressive time and capital in carrying out their vision.

Such dedication is crucial to the long-term economic and social well-being of these communities. Many features of the communities in northwest BC predispose them to ongoing population decline: distance from urban centres, economic dependence on primary industries, and low population densities. Population declines lead in turn to lower density economic activities, making it increasingly difficult for communities to remain economically viable.

Despite agriculture's role as a primary industry, reports have identified it as a promising economic alternative for the region (Cameron, 2009; Ryan, 2002). Farming and ranching play an important role in the region's culture and identity, and can provide desirable land-based livelihoods for this population that has maintained close ties to the land. Given the economic challenges faced by food producers and processors in a global marketplace, the social economy has played – and will continue to play – a key

role in the revitalization and long term development of this sector. As a source of training, public education, innovation and vision of a better society, practitioners within the social economy contribute significant energy to the regional food community and regional economic development. Their efforts to bring all citizens to the table can only lead to more active, healthy and well-integrated communities that are ultimately more resilient.

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## APPENDIX

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### Authorities Interviewed

Joanne Nugent, Program Co-ordinator  
Ground to Griddle Community Kitchen

Mark Fisher, President  
Bulkley Valley Farmers' Market  
Founder, Grendal Group  
Farmer, High Slopes Acres

Joanna Pfalz, President  
Northern Roots Community Garden

Gail Jenne, Project Co-ordinator  
Princess Neighbourhood Gardens  
& Steering Committee Member,  
Ground Breakers Collective

Lorna Butz, Program Co-ordinator  
Innovation Foods

Jane Boulton, Program Co-ordinator  
Senden Sustainable Agriculture Resource Centre

Graeme Johnstone, Former District  
Agronomist  
BC Ministry of Agriculture and Lands

Jane Stevenson, Historian  
Cobweb Historical Research and Archival  
Services

Jodie Eskelin, Program Co-ordinator  
Smithers Good Food Box

Bridie O'Brien, Executive Director  
Storytellers' Foundation

Jonathan Knight, Treasurer  
Skeena Supported Employment Society  
President, Hazelton Farmers' Market

Megan D'Arcy, President

Pacific Northwest Poultry Association

Anne Docherty, Community Learning Director  
Storytellers' Foundation

Pauline Goertzen, Operations and Contract  
Manager  
Community Futures Nadina, Smithers Office

Walter Wilson, Fisheries Manager  
Office of the Wet'suwet'en