

Redesigning Canada's Food System

The role of the social economy in rebuilding community food security

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The media is full of stories about global food crises. There are concerns about poverty and hunger, food safety and food-borne illness, and the effect of increasing energy prices on food costs; the security of our food systems has fallen into question.

Each of these food crises can be examined through different lenses, and each lens brings into focus different solutions with their own necessary changes in policy. From one perspective, the solution is to "overhaul our economic paradigm." Others call for equitable international trade policies, a National Food Policy, or progressive social policy in Canada. Yet another solution is to buy local and organic food.

The diversity of possible solutions demonstrates one of the greatest challenges to food security – the complexity of the issue. To resolve such a complex issue requires action be taken to address all the determinants of food security, including those related to food supply and food access. It also requires that policy change happen at multiple levels – all the way from personal, to organizational, to public policy.

Clearly no magic bullet will fix our food system for us. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Yet one factor may prove critical.

The Canadian Social Economy Research Partnerships (CSERP) comprise six research nodes and a national hub, all community-university partnerships engaged in research on the social economy. One of CSERP's many research themes is the role of the social economy in food security. Working out of Mount Saint Vincent University (Halifax), members of the Social Economy and Sustainability Research Network partnered with CSERP's National Hub in 2007-2008 to complete a National Scan and inventory of over 25 CSERP projects involving food security issues.¹ Based on this Scan, we then asked two questions:

- What does CSERP research reveal about key strategies being used to move from short-term towards medium- and long-term solutions to food security?
- How is Canada's social economy helping to bring about policy change and system redesign for food security?

We believe a food system created and shaped by people to meet their own needs, in other words, *a food system grounded in the social economy*, can lead us toward food security for all. But for that to happen we require heightened public awareness of the social economy and food security, strategic thinking, robust social economy networks, and effective policies.



Kid's Action Program staff prepare to deliver food boxes to 50 prenatal and early infancy program participants in Annapolis Valley - Hants, Nova Scotia. Photo courtesy of KAP.

Social Economy Strategies for Food Security

Trying to squeeze the Social Economy into the boundaries of a definition is like trying to stuff strawberries into your quart box at the U-pick. Some always spill out over the top.

For the purposes of CSERP research, social economy describes economic activities and initiatives that have grown out of collective entrepreneurship and are committed to community service, include autonomous management, democratic decision-making, and primacy of people over profits.² The social economy is founded on the principles of participation and empowerment, solidarity and mutual self-help. It includes individuals (e.g., conscious consumers and social entrepreneurs) as well as organizations that are oriented toward social and environmental values, not (or at least not only) profit.

Rooted in their communities and emphasizing engagement of people in shaping the fabric of their own lives, social economy

that maximizes healthy choices, community self-reliance and equal access for everyone”.³ This commitment to people’s exercise of some degree of control over decisions that impact their food supply is critical to the concept of community food security. Such common principles make the social economy a logical vehicle for moving toward *long-term* community food security.⁴

Our scan of CSERP projects drew up an inventory of over 25 food and food security-related research projects currently underway. The projects are remarkably diverse. Some research the conditions for successful social enterprise start-ups, information that can increase the likelihood of successful intervention by SEOs. Others study the impacts of food-related SEOs on local economies. Still others use participatory action research approaches to inform initiatives underway in Canadian communities.

We classified each project along a continuum according to its focus on short/initial, medium/transitional, and long-term/sustainable approaches to community food security.⁵



organizations (SEOs) can effectively pull together many types of resources. While many SEOs intend to make a profit, they do so in a context that sees profit as a means to meet a variety of goals, not primarily as a means to create individual wealth.

Many of the organizations that are *already* important to local food systems are part of the Social Economy. These include the increasingly popular farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture arrangements, local food marketing co-operatives, community gardens, Fair Trade organizations, food or food security networks, and municipal food policy councils.

These SEOs are helping to ensure that individuals, households, and even communities have access to “... a safe, personally acceptable, nutritious diet through a sustainable food system

- **Stage One**, or short-term strategies, *initiate* food system changes through educational campaigns or emergency or charitable food programs; some initiatives are temporary while others such as food banks have become more permanent.
- Strategies considered in **Stage Two** involve communities in the building of partnerships, networks, and ultimately capacity to guide the *transition* of their food system toward sustainability and equity and are framed as medium-term.
- **Stage Three** strategies focus on fundamental change. They require long-term commitment from leaders to *redesign* the entire food system to meet the demands of health, sustainability, democracy, and justice. Stage Three strategies also involve policies to both decrease socio-economic disparities and support sustainable food systems.

Towards Community Food Security: Research & Action within CSERP

The research profiled in the Scan allows us to see how organizations and communities are addressing community food security at each stage of the continuum. Many SEOs are addressing needs at two or even three stages.

Short-Term Strategies

Some projects are contributing to short-term, initial food system changes through education, while others are working directly with community organizations to begin making short-term changes.

Tools such as the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) manual, an educational “how-to” tool developed by members of the Northern Ontario Node, are teaching people about food security and what we can do about it. In Québec, l’Alliance de recherche universités-communautés en économie sociale (ARUC-ÉS) are preparing an inventory of community gardens and describing their impact. This tool can be useful in public education activities.

Similarly, Northern Ontario’s Penokean Hills Beef Marketing project began by identifying a demand for local beef through surveys (and in the process perhaps raising awareness of local beef). The project researcher then began working directly with the community by developing a business and marketing plan that would position local farmers to access a local market.

Medium-Term Strategies

Networks and co-operatives might be considered medium-term strategies that *build capacity*. Capacity-building is essential to achieving momentum and lasting change.

Food networks are made up of individuals and organizations organized to accomplish a common goal in terms of the produc-

tion or distribution of food. For example, the Algoma Food Network in Northern Ontario is committed to building community food security. This network supports food security activities at all stages of the continuum, acting as an umbrella organization that sets priorities to guide combined efforts to transition the food system to one that is more sustainable. Members within the network represent a diverse range of stakeholders in the food system, including youth.

In Manitoba, the constraints of the global system prompted farmers to explore co-operative local marketing as an alternative. Seventeen farm families united around the concept of *local food* to form the Harvest Moon Society Local Food Initiative. Integral to its development was a commitment to balancing economic viability with social and environmental justice in a sustainable food system. The co-operative contributes to social cohesion and social capital on a broad and diverse level, facilitates knowledge and risk sharing, and ultimately benefits the community as well as the co-operative members.

Long-Term Strategies

Long-term strategies are those that work on a broad level, engage a wide range of actors and often develop policies supportive of a sustainable, equitable food system.

For example, one project in southern Ontario is exploring public Fair Trade procurement policies in Canada, their origins and impacts. Focussed on policy analysis, this project aims to develop recommendations around sustainable and ethical international trade policy, an integral part of global food security.

In Atlantic Canada, survey research involving provincial watershed groups and the monitoring of septic tank quality was prompted by a government decision to cut back funding for a program that allowed low-income families to purchase or upgrade their septic tanks. The research ultimately led to the continuation of the program, and as a result, improvements in

Résumé : Redéfinir le système alimentaire canadien

Aucune « balle magique » renversera le déclin dans la sécurité alimentaire au Canada. De l’action efficace requiert que nous tenions compte de plusieurs facteurs, incluant l’approvisionnement alimentaire, l’accès à la nourriture et des changements de politiques à de multiples niveaux. Un sondage national récent de projets de sécurité alimentaire suggère toutefois que l’économie sociale pourrait être la clé du succès.

En 2007-2008, le Partenariat sur l’économie sociale et la durabilité du Canada Atlantique s’est joint au Centre canadien de recherche partenariale en économie sociale (ccrpes) pour découvrir

deux choses. Comment des projets vont de solutions à court terme vers des solutions à moyen et long terme pour la sécurité alimentaire? Qu’est-ce que leur travail révèle à propos de la redéfinition de notre système alimentaire et des politiques pour appuyer cette redéfinition?

Des 25 projets étudiés, certains utilisent des stratégies à court terme de secours d’urgence. Certains ciblent le moyen terme avec des stratégies de renforcement des capacités. D’autres encore s’acharnent sur la sécurité alimentaire communautaire viable à long terme. Plusieurs projets, tel que Kids Action Program en Nouvelle-Écosse,

mèlent les trois étapes de ce continuum. Ils travaillent sur les besoins alimentaires urgents et le renforcement des capacités ainsi que sur le lobbying à long terme ou les changements de politiques.

Est-ce que ces initiatives devraient croître pour avoir un plus grand impact? Une piste d’action plus sage pourrait être de conserver l’autonomie locale en permettant à ces innovations d’entrer en réseau et de se multiplier. Pour ceci, les outils principaux sont le lobbying, l’éducation des consommateurs ainsi que la recherche et l’analyse pour donner le fondement aux politiques qui soutiennent l’agriculture, la santé, le social, l’industriel et l’alimentaire. ■

Perhaps we should approach the issue of scale differently. What if we focus on supporting locally-oriented initiatives that foster local food secure communities, instead of a “bigger fix”? ... Local social economies do not exist in a vacuum; they are part of a web that stretches outward ... to government & the private for-profit sector. We need to understand & support this web.



(photo) Aven, a son of the Algoma Food Network's (AFN) co-ordinator, hides in corn raised by a young farmer just outside Sault Ste. Marie. In 2007 AFN helped her enterprise lift off with a Community Supported Agriculture project. Since then she has increased her CSA membership and production, and has generated greater revenue. Through community food security initiatives, AFN is working to build a healthy and sustainable local food economy for the Sault. Photo courtesy of Lee-Ann Chevrette, AFN (www.algomafoodnetwork.wordpress.com).

water quality. The research process also had a spin-off. It engaged low-income families in advocacy and education activities through their local watershed groups that led ultimately to greater social cohesion, empowerment, and inclusion.

Weaving the Threads Together

Many projects are blending and merging the multiple stages of the continuum, working simultaneously on emergency food needs, capacity-building, and long-term advocacy or policy change.

For example, The Kids Action Program, an SEO in Nova Scotia's Annapolis Valley, offers immediate but *short-term* relief for affected families by partnering with public health to deliver subsidized boxes of nutritious foods purchased directly from a local organic farm. Importantly, the Kids Action Program is complementing this short-term initiative with strategies further along the continuum. For example, the food boxes are supplemented with educational materials and, for some families, with on-farm, farmer-led workshops that show recipients how to use and preserve the foods, gain practical knowledge and skills, and ultimately connect the recipient to the farmer. The workshops are intended to build food-related skills and develop capacity within families for power over their food supply.

The Kids Action Program also builds capacity beyond their own program participants and engages in longer-term solutions through their active membership in the Steering Committee of the Nova Scotia Food Security Network. The Network, established in 2006 through a series of participatory food security research projects, has four priorities: to establish a provincial system for monitoring food insecurity; to promote policy change for food security; to increase awareness of the extent/reality of food insecurity; and to foster the development of an accessible, affordable, sustainable, and just food system.

The CSERP Scan suggests that the social economy is a locus for significant Canadian advancement in the area of food security with strategies at each stage of the continuum aiming to address the unique needs of communities. This breadth and diversity of approaches highlights a key strength of social economy contributions to food security. CSERP is systematically studying and reporting on the multiple approaches being taken at local, regional, and national levels. It is documenting locally-rooted approaches that fit specific community conditions in a way that “one-size-fits-all” strategies could never do.

The Way Forward

CSERP's projects seek to identify local food initiatives that work and those that don't and offer explanations for patterns that are identified. The research can enhance the capacity of individuals and communities to make long-term changes in their food system thus facilitating the exchange of ideas and innovative, collaborative action. It can also help to balance social, cultural, environmental, and economic priorities. The work so far suggests that a food system created and shaped by people to meet their own needs, in other words *a food system grounded in the social economy*, can move us towards food security for all.

But even if local initiatives can be effective, do they need to “scale up” to have a greater impact? If so, how will this be accomplished without reducing local autonomy to address local needs? Moreover, how can local initiatives be successful in the long run given the overwhelming “realities” of the current global food system: rural depopulation, loss of agricultural land, transportation costs, environmental costs, concerns about food quality and safety, unequal access to food and water, and more?

Perhaps we should approach the issue of scale differently. What if we focus on supporting locally-oriented initiatives that foster local food secure communities instead of a “bigger fix”? Many of the projects in the CSERP research do just that. Local social economies do not exist in a vacuum; they are part of a web that stretches outward, linking the local social economy to national and international sectors.⁶ Far from being exclusive, this web connects the social economy to government and the private for-profit sector. We need to understand and support this web.

A supportive public policy environment is essential. Some of the research identified in the scan will contribute significantly to knowledge of the conditions under which particular policies can or cannot work. There are some surprises here. Some policy and regulatory arenas previously considered irrelevant have turned out to be anything but. Taxation and transportation policies, water/environmental regulations, and income support policies are all examples.

Policy change is needed at all levels, organizational, local, provincial, regional, national, and (ultimately) international. The process of making policy is also a focus for change. Some CSERP research looks at innovative models for policy development, models that offer venues for broad engagement in policy-making (e.g., the co-construction of policy, a research area of the Québec Node). The impetus for such changes grows out of and fosters a cultural shift in many arenas of society – personal, family and community, organizational and beyond. Strategic thinking, healthy social economy networks, and heightened public awareness of the potentials of the social economy are all vital.

Long term, this web of innovation and action must be supported and enabled by agricultural, health, social, industrial, and in the end *food policy*. It must be transformed by concentrated advocacy, and policy analysis and development must be informed by research. This requires citizens who are conscious of their role as consumers. They need to act from the idea that there are many more options available to them than they may have realized and that the vision of a sustainable and just food system is more than an impractical dream. The metaphor of weaving a web helps make this easier to envision – incremental shifts in many arenas can result in qualitative and comprehensive change.

The research within CSERP has the potential to contribute to a strong Canadian network of social economy organizations, individuals, and researchers. This network of diverse actors can work collaboratively to build capacity and develop enabling

policies for long-term food security, drawing on the fundamental and mutually-reinforcing principles of the social economy, Canadian food security, and food sovereignty.

Consider this vision: As the web increases in density and complexity, rural areas will again flourish. Small- and medium-sized Canadian farms will be involved in a variety of social economy initiatives, thriving in their local economies, valued as contributors to quality of life as well as to food security and addressing the challenges of global competition supported by responsible public policies. A web of initiatives (local and beyond) engages the food insecure and is supported by social and economic policies. The decreasing gap between the rich and the poor reduces the demand for short-term, charitable, and emergency food relief organizations such as food banks and soup kitchens. Ongoing collaborative research monitors these initiatives, evaluates impacts, identifies gaps in the policy framework, and disseminates findings widely. An engaged public and key opinion leaders participate in decisions about the directions to take.

Humans create the institutions and relationships we call society. We build and sustain the institutions and relationships we call the economy. As anthropologist Margaret Mead famously commented, “A small group of thoughtful people could change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

References

- ¹ The Scan and presentations at recent conferences can be accessed at <<http://www.msvu.ca/socialeconomyatlantic>>.
- ² “What is the Social Economy?” *Canadian Social Economy Hub*, retrieved 8 October 2008 <http://www.socialeconomyhub.ca/hub/index.php?page_id=9#def>.
- ³ M.W. Hamm and A.C. Bellows, “Community food security and nutrition educators,” *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 35,1 (2003):37-43.
- ⁴ The same principle is reflected in the concept of food sovereignty, which hinges on “*who makes decisions* about the nature, shape, and purpose of the food system” (“Food Policy and Food Sovereignty,” p. 1, retrieved 7 October 2008 <http://www.foodsecurecanada.org/sites/foodsecure.openconcept.ca/files/Food_policy_and_food_sovereignty.rtf>).
- ⁵ C. McCullum, E. Desjardins, V.I. Kraak, P. Ladipo, and H. Costello, “Evidence-based strategies to build community food security,” *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 105,2 (2005):278.
- ⁶ Existing networks within Canada include the Canadian Community Economic Development Network’s Food Policy Working Group, and Food Secure Canada.



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