

# **Dining On the Social Economy: Local, Sustainable Food Systems and Policy Development**

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## **Abstract**

*Although the social economy has a long historical connection to food, these links have not been well explored or understood, particularly with respect to social policy. But given the well-documented range of negative impacts brought on by a world economy dominated by large multinational corporations engaged in global trade, social economy organizations associated with food are more necessary than ever. This paper will examine the connections between the social economy, sustainability, and sustainable food systems, before moving on to look at the role of the social economy in our current global unsustainable food system and in a projected local, sustainable food system. It will conclude with a discussion of the social economy and the enactment of local sustainable food policy that can model alternatives to help reorient the economy and social institutions toward ensuring everyone is fed within the ecological limits of the planet.*

## **Résumé**

*Si les liens entre l'économie sociale et l'alimentation sont loin d'être nouveaux, ils restent peu étudiés ou peu compris, surtout en matière de politique sociale. On n'ignore pourtant rien des répercussions néfastes de notre économie, où le commerce mondial est le fait de grandes multinationales, et dans un tel contexte, on a plus que jamais besoin d'organismes d'économie sociale en rapport avec l'alimentation. Nous commencerons par nous pencher sur ce qui unit l'économie sociale, la durabilité et les systèmes alimentaires durables. Nous comparerons ensuite le rôle de l'économie sociale dans le système alimentaire non durable actuellement en place à l'échelle mondiale et celui qu'elle jouerait dans un système alimentaire durable local. Nous terminerons par une discussion sur l'économie sociale et la mise en place d'une politique alimentaire durable à l'échelle locale, capable de créer des solutions qui contribueront à réorienter les institutions économiques et sociales, afin de veiller à ce que l'alimentation des êtres humains s'inscrive dans les limites écologiques de la planète.*

## **Introduction**

The social economy has been defined as economic activity neither controlled directly by the state nor by the profit logic of the market – activity that prioritizes the social well being of communities and marginalized individuals over partisan political directives or individual gain

(McMurtry, 2010). This economic activity can take many forms: co-operatives, credit unions, non-profit mutual associations, public-sector nonprofits, and mutual insurers.

Food production and consumption has long been associated with the social economy, from the earliest co-ops in England to counter the adulteration of food, and in Canada to protect farmers and fishers against the predations of big business. More recent examples include the soup kitchens of the Great Depression, consumer co-ops, and that ongoing symptom of neoliberalism – food banks. Like other forms of the social economy, such food-related institutions not only help to address the “great and permanent evils” (Polanyi, 2001, p. 136) of a market economy, but also model a working alternative to that economy.

This article will link food and the social economy, and explore the challenges and opportunities for social policy focused on local, sustainable food in a world increasingly structured to accommodate global trade. It will begin by examining the connections between the social economy, sustainability, and sustainable food systems. With this context established, the article will look at the role of the social economy in our current global unsustainable food system, and in a projected local sustainable food system. It will then discuss policy development for a local sustainable food system anchored in the social economy.

### **The Social Economy, Sustainability and Sustainable Food Systems**

The social economy can be understood as part of a larger category called the civil commons. Conceptualized by philosopher John McMurtry (1999), the civil commons involves co-operative human constructions that protect and/or enable universal access to life goods. In this way, the civil commons is based on cooperation, not competition. It does not occur naturally, but is built by people and centres on human agency. It protects through rules and regulations, and it enables human potential by opening up new possibilities and opportunities. The civil commons is predicated on universal access to life goods, such as clean air, unadulterated food, potable water, education, and health care; it is not built on not destructive goods like junk food, violent entertainment, and weapons. Although examples of the civil commons have always existed – public education, provincial parks, universal healthcare programs, old-age security plans, and environmental charters – it is only recently that these cooperative constructions have been assembled under the umbrella of the civil commons.

According to Mook and Sumner (2009), the social economy can be considered part of the civil commons because it is a cooperative human construct that protects and/or enables universal access to a range of life goods, such as food, housing, employment, and leisure opportunities. “By filling life-good gaps or initiating alternative life-good provision, people involved in the social economy contribute constructively to their own well-being and to the well-being of others” (p. 158). As a subset of the civil commons, the social economy is also closely associated with sustainability. The connection between sustainability and the civil commons was demonstrated in a previous study showing that sustainability involves a set of structures and processes that build the civil commons (Sumner, 2005). Such processes can include negotiating, decision-making, delegating and co-operating, while the structures can include social economy organizations such as co-operatives and non-profits, as long as they build the civil commons. One example is the Atkinson Housing Co-operative in Toronto. This was the first public housing complex to convert to a non-profit housing co-operative in Canada, and gave residents a greater role in the community through tenant self-management (Atkinson Housing Co-operative, 2011). Another example is the Learning Enrichment Foundation, a charitable organization based

in Toronto that, among other services to its low-income community, offers newcomers to Canada free English-language training (Learning Enrichment Foundation, 2011). A final example is the Desjardins Credit Union, the largest financial co-operative group in Canada that not only offers a wide range of banking services to members and clients, but also contributes to the economic and social development of their communities (Desjardins, 2011).

There are also many examples of food-related civil commons structures across Canada. One is FarmFolk CityFolk, a not-for-profit society in Vancouver. Its mission is “to cultivate a local, sustainable food system. ... provide access to and protection of farmland; support local growers and producers; and engage communities in the celebration of local food” (FarmFolk CityFolk, 2011, p. 1). In Victoria B.C., the Moss Street Community Market focuses on sustainability and eco-awareness, and provides market space at reduced rates to local, not-for-profit education and community groups so they can “convey information to their neighbours concerning important local, social, political and environmental issues” (Moss Street Community Market, 2011, p. 1). The Falls Brook Centre is a sustainable community demonstration and training centre in rural New Brunswick. Through on-site demonstrations, it models how “it is possible to live more lightly in our environment while contributing positively to the local economy” (Falls Brook Centre, 2011,p.1). Yet another example is the Toronto Food Policy Council, a sub-committee of the Board of Health that provides services to individuals and communities, and advocates for public policies that make the city healthier (Toronto Food Policy Council, 2011).

If sustainability is closely linked to the civil commons, then nouns modified by the adjective “sustainable” would carry the same connotation. For example, sustainable development would focus on building the civil commons, in opposition to private business projects that enrich only a few groups. Sustainable communities should be centred on the civil commons, not on private entrepreneurship that benefits a local elite. In this vein, sustainable food systems would involve food systems anchored in the civil commons (Sumner, 2012), not in vertically integrated transnational corporations that aim to increase private shareholder value. Given that they help to build the civil commons, social economy organizations that focus on food can contribute substantially to sustainable food systems.

### **The Role of the Social Economy in Food Systems**

The social economy has a long association with food production and consumption. Social economy organizations have been part of many food systems both in Canada and around the world. They mitigate the failings of our current system while pointing the way to a more sustainable future. In other words, these organizations not only function within conventional market structures to balance out inequities, but also form part of the “diverse economies” that model other possibilities (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 1). To borrow a description of the social economy sector concerned with fair trade, social economy organizations operate “in, as well as against, the market” (Raynolds, 2002, p. 419).

### **The Role of the Social Economy in Our Current Food System**

Around the world, the social economy helps to fill the gaps created by our current food system’s built-in problems. This global, corporate food system sources foodstuffs from around the planet as cheaply as possible and sells them to whoever can afford them in targeted markets, without regard for human need or environmental protection. This system has changed food from an

article of local provisioning to a commodity traded on world markets, with all the instabilities associated with a speculative economy. For these reasons and many more, the global, corporate food system is unsustainable by any definition – the culmination of the shortcomings of a market economy that Polanyi (2001) warned of. Rosset (as cited in Albritton, 2009) exposes these shortcomings when he asks:

Why must we put up with a global food system that ruins rural economies worldwide, drives family and peasant farmers off the land in droves, and into slums, ghettos and international migrant streams? ... That imposes a kind of agriculture that destroys the soil, contaminates ground water, eliminates trees from rural areas, creates pests that are resistant to pesticides, and puts the future productivity of agriculture in doubt? ... Food that is laden with sugar, salt, fat, starch, carcinogenic colours and preservatives, pesticide residues and genetically modified organisms, and that may well be driving global epidemics of obesity for some (and hunger for others), heart disease, diabetes and cancer? A food system that bloats the coffers of unaccountable corporations, corrupts governments and kills farmers and consumers while wrecking the environment? (p. 200)

According to Patel (2007), the central problem in the global corporate food system is hunger. In 2004 there were “842 million people suffering from undernourishment in a world that already grows more than enough food to feed the global population” (Ziegler, 2004, p. 20). By 2010, over 1 billion people were estimated to be undernourished – “there are more hungry people than at any time since 1970, the earliest year for which comparable statistics are available” (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2010). Social economy organizations have emerged to try to address the issue of ongoing hunger. In Canada, some of the most common organizations dealing with food insecurity are food banks.

### **Food Banks**

A food bank is a non-profit, charitable organization that solicits private donations of food, money, and in-kind services, and then distributes these donations either to smaller regional emergency food programs or directly to households in need (Suschnigg, 2012). These organizations not only pool supplies of food that have lost retail value because of mislabelling, overproduction, and approaching expiry dates, but also hold food drives to which residents of a community can contribute (Quarter, 1992). After the first food bank opened in Canada in 1981, the number of food banks had climbed to 300 ten years later (Riches, 1997), and then doubled to 620 in the following decade (Wilson & Toas, 2002). In 2010 almost 870,000 people sought assistance from a local food bank or an affiliated emergency food program – this represented a 28% increase from 2008 and was the highest level of food bank use on record (Food Banks Canada, 2010).

As social economy organizations, food banks were created to funnel food to people in need at a time when food programs provided through social agencies proved insufficient (Quarter, 1992). Suschnigg (2012) points out, however, that critics of food banks believe that they represent a temporary solution to a fundamentally flawed economic system. This debate over food banks illustrates some of the tensions inherent within the larger social economy. On the one hand, food banks provide a vital emergency service to people in immediate need. People have to eat every day, so food banks work within the current global corporate food system to feed those who get left behind in the rush for profits. On the other hand, food banks support this

dysfunctional food system, repairing its most egregious failings and perpetuating the use of monopolistic power.

These conflicting tensions, however, do not exhaust circumscribe the role that food-related social economy organizations can play. As Quarter points out,

The emergence of the social economy goes beyond serving those on low income or those unable to help themselves for other reasons. In other words, the social economy is not simply a response to weaknesses of the private or government sectors, but also reflects a preferred model for organizing services. (1992, p. 171)

Shrage and Fontan (2000) move the argument one step further when they propose that “a social economy implies the basic reorientation of the whole economy and related social institutions” (9). This reorientation of the economy is the role for the social economy envisioned in a local sustainable food system.

### **The Role of the Social Economy in a Local Sustainable Food System**

If sustainable food systems are anchored in the civil commons, and the social economy is a subset of the civil commons, then the social economy has a central role to play in a sustainable food system. But how does the local aspect fit into this scenario? To begin with, a local food system is not necessarily sustainable (see Born & Purcell’s (2006) seminal article “Avoiding the Local Trap”): for instance, a local food system could be controlled by local warlords or the company store. And a sustainable food system is not necessarily local – it could be regional or national (or even global). On any scale, however, the primary objective of a sustainable food system should be to provide nourishing food to everyone within the ecological limits of the planet (Sumner, 2011). Could this be done at the local level? The answer depends on a basic re-orientation of the economy, not only at the local level but also in terms of what Gibson-Graham (2008, p. 617) refers to as “globally local activities” – local alternative economic activities that occur around the world and are “actually more prevalent, and account for more hours worked and/or more value produced, than the capitalist sector.”

There are a number of reasons to encourage the development of a local sustainable food system. The first involves food security – access to food. The “just-in-time” inventory approach and the inherent fragility of the long supply chains that are characteristic of the global economy can be disrupted not only for political reasons, but also for environmental ones, like a natural disaster. Just being able to muster basic food supplies at the local level would cushion communities against food insecurity. The second reason to encourage a local sustainable food system is food sovereignty – human rights with respect to food. Developed by La Via Campesina, an international farmers’ movement, food sovereignty involves the right of peoples and governments to choose their own forms of agriculture, food markets, and modes of production. A diverse range of local food grown by local farmers and sold to local consumers at local markets would help to address the issue of food sovereignty. A third reason to encourage a local sustainable food system is to support local farmers and other food system workers, local communities, local economies, and the local environment. This virtuous circle becomes self-reinforcing over time, countering the faceless, placeless food that arrives from the global corporate food system. And while few people in Canada would want to forego such non-local foods as tea, coffee, bananas, and chocolate, these commodities would be made available through global fair trade networks that connect local sustainable food systems around the world. In this way, a sustainable food system would combine local, basic provisioning with global,

fairly traded, non-competing imports to form an international co-operative network of “globally local” (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 617) social economy organizations.

The local rationale dovetails well with the objective of any sustainable food system – to provide nourishing food to all people, within the ecological limits of the planet. And as a locally-based alternative to the market economy, a sustainable food system would be anchored in the civil commons, including social economy organizations.

### **The Social Economy in a Local Sustainable Food System**

Like any system, a local sustainable food system is a web or network made up of nodes and connections. The nodes represent the different aspects of the food system – production, processing, distribution, consumption, and disposal. In a sustainable food system, the social economy would be present in all of these nodes.

#### **Production**

Food production involves growing crops or raising animals for the purpose of human consumption. Much of our food production is unsustainable given that it depends on vast quantities of non-renewable fossil fuels (for making pesticides and fertilizers), depletes and pollutes water resources, degrades the soil, contributes to global warming, bankrupts farmers, and decimates rural communities (Albritton, 2009; Patel, 2007; Sumner, 2005; Weis, 2012). In a local sustainable food system, the social economy would be found at the production nodes of the system, helping to overcome problems of unsustainability. Two current examples of social economy organizations – co-ops and non-profits – show how this could occur.

In Canada, some farmers have chosen to avoid the problems with unsustainable food production by farming organically and joining together to create producers’ co-operatives (Sumner & Llewelyn, 2010). One example is Organic Meadow Co-operative – a social economy organization created by organic dairy farmers in southwestern Ontario. Begun in 1989, it now markets organic milk across the country. In Saskatchewan, Farmer Direct is a co-op of 70 certified organic farms and is the first business in North America to receive a domestic fair trade certification. Finally, the Innisfail Growers Co-operative in Innisfail, Alberta, is made up of five farm families that pool their locally grown produce and sell it at 20 different farmers’ markets between Calgary and Edmonton.

In addition to co-ops, non-profits would also have a role in the production nodes of a sustainable food system. Local Food Plus (LFP), for instance, is a non-profit group based in Toronto that has developed a certification system that puts environmental, social and economic sustainability at the forefront. LFP certifies food as local in addition to a number of other criteria, such as sustainable production, safe and fair working conditions for on-farm labour, healthy and humane care for livestock, habitat and biodiversity protection and enhancement, and reduced energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions (LFP, 2011a). By requiring higher standards with each round of re-certification, LFP encourages farmers to become increasingly sustainable. Another example is FarmStart, a not-for-profit organization that encourages young and new farmers to take up farming. Its mission is to facilitate, support, and encourage a new generation of farmers drawn from four different demographic groups: young people from farm backgrounds and those new to farming, second-career farmers, and new Canadian farmers (FarmStart, 2011). One of the programs it offers is the New Farmers Incubator Program that “supports new farm enterprises by offering access to land, equipment and infrastructure at reasonable rates, along

with business planning support, technical training, mentorship and experience with ecological and emerging farming methods” (FarmStart, 2011, p. 1).

### **Processing**

Processing involves changing or “adding value” to basic foods, by freezing, drying, slaughtering, cooking, etc., in order to preserve food long past its harvest. With the rise of the global economy, much processing has become centralized, thus destroying the web of local and regional processing infrastructure so vital to a sustainable food system.

Social economy organizations are now working to fill this gap and rebuild this node in the sustainable food system. On the west coast of Canada, the Queen Charlotte Islands, also known as Haida Gwaii, are home to the Haida Gwaii Local Food Processing Co-op. The aim of this co-op is to “create local employment and ensure that wild food resources are harvested sustainably with local benefits” (Haida Gwaii Local Food Processing Co-op, 2011). In Ontario, Niagara Presents is a community-based network that provides, among other services, a government-inspected facility where local processors can prepare their products. To support the restoration of this vital infrastructure, the public-sector non-profit Conestoga College in Ontario, started offering a new program in food processing techniques in the fall of 2011.

### **Distribution**

In a food system, distribution involves moving food from producers to consumers either directly or indirectly. Direct distribution includes farm stores and farm-gate sales, community supported agriculture (CSA) programs, and farmers’ markets. Indirect distribution goes through wholesalers and/or retailers before reaching the consumer. While direct distribution happens at the local and regional level, indirect distribution can range from the local to the global without producers and consumers ever meeting.

Social economy organizations in a sustainable food system would be part of the distribution nodes whether indirect or direct. Their future role can be understood by looking at some current examples. FoodRoots Distributors Co-op in Victoria, British Columbia is a local food storage and distribution facility and has established itself as the link between growers, processors, and consumers. Its vision is “to promote a local sustainable food system by creating the infrastructure link between the eaters/consumers and the growers and processors in our region” (FoodRoots, 2011). In the eastern part of Canada, the Ontario Natural Food Co-op (ONFC) distributes natural, organic, and local food to member co-ops. Its mission is to support a sustainable food system “by providing, with integrity, quality service in the distribution of organic and natural foods and products within a socially responsible, co-operative network” (ONFC, 2010). For the ONFC, the development of a sustainable food system includes support of the local economy, organic farmers, buying clubs, and community-based co-ops. Other current examples include Live Local and The Organic Box in Edmonton, Skipper Otto’s Community Supported Fishery in Vancouver, and Spruce View Family Farms Community Supported Agriculture Co-operative in Spruce View, Alberta.

### **Consumption**

Consumption is both the acquisition and eating of food. People can acquire food through hunting and gathering, purchasing, trading, or receiving it as a gift or charity. In Canada, most people purchase their food, and this consumption occurs at a variety of outlets, such as corner stores, retail shops, supermarkets, or farmers’ markets. In an effort to keep prices low, some people

have banded together to form consumers' co-operatives that allow collective buying power in the market. For example, on the west coast of Canada, the Hornby Island Co-op was started in 1955 as a way for island residents to provide themselves with food, fuel, household and hardware needs at fair, reasonable prices. It was, and is still, a way to combine buying power and resources for common advantage. (Hornby Island Co-op, 2011, p. 1)

In addition to charging members reasonable prices, this co-op supports community sustainability by providing employment, distributing local products, offering education opportunities for employees and islanders, donating goods and services to community organizations, providing information, and hosting a local artist each month.

### **Disposal**

Finally, all food systems must include disposal. Forms of food disposal include composting, recycling, and adding to a landfill. While much of Canada's food waste currently ends up in landfills, the introduction of municipal composting programs has reduced this loss of a valuable resource. Only an unsustainable food system would consider discarded food a liability (garbage), and not an asset (a soil amendment). Of course, the type of food in the system affects the quality of the compost: highly processed, industrial food makes much lower quality compost (because of such ingredients as antibiotics, dyes, pesticide residues, and genetically modified organisms) than organic food.

Not all left-over food needs to be composted – it can be recycled. For example, Second Harvest, a non-profit located in Toronto, picks up excess fresh food that would otherwise go to waste. It then prepares this perishable food and delivers it to approximately 250 social service programs in the Greater Toronto Area (Second Harvest, 2011). And food banks recycle non-perishable foodstuffs, such as pasta and canned goods.

### **Local Sustainable Food Policy**

According to policy analyst Rod MacRae (2012), policy is the set of rules, spoken or unspoken, that determines how things are run. Food policy is, by definition, social policy because it provides guidelines for the range of conditions that promote human welfare. And, like other types of social policy, the main challenge of local sustainable food policy is neoliberalism.

Over the last few decades, neoliberalism has become the predominant ideological influence on social policy. Geographer David Harvey (2006, p. 145) argues that neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices which proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.

According to Harvey (2006), the trade rules established through the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) instantiate neoliberalism as a global set of rules. And this set of rules determines how things are run around the world. All member states of the WTO and the IMF agree to abide by these rules or face severe penalties.

In terms of food, Guthman (2008) maintains that neoliberal policies have fostered the restructuring of the agriculture and food sectors through the privatization of land and water rights, the use of free trade agreements to dismantle national-level food safety regulations, and



the protracted dismantling of food-oriented entitlement programs set up to combat hunger. Further, she argues, neoliberalism has become so pervasive that it has even had a lasting influence on attempts to oppose these policies in the food and agricultural sectors. In other words, neoliberalism has also shaped the “politics of the possible” (p. 1180), so that efforts to develop alternatives and/or to redress some of the negative implications of neoliberal policies are still framed within its worldview, thereby continuing to condition our relationship to food and significantly narrowing how we imagine the future.

Therefore, neoliberalism continues to inform the greater context in which local sustainable food policy is developed. Its emphasis on entrepreneurship, private property, competition, and free trade challenges the basic principles of the social economy, including collective ownership, co-operation and fair trade, as well as the life values (McMurtry, 1998) that help form the building blocks of sustainability (Sumner, 2005). In this neoliberal climate, a local sustainable food policy appears to be ruled out of the politics of the possible. And yet, examples of local sustainable food policy have been developed throughout Canada, instantiating Gramsci’s (1971) observation that hegemony is never complete, but always contested.

### **Local Food Purchasing Policy - Local Food Plus**

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the non-profit group Local Food Plus (LFP) has developed a certification system that puts environmental, social and economic sustainability at the forefront. LFP is committed to creating local sustainable food systems that reduce reliance on fossil fuels, create meaningful jobs, and foster the preservation of farmland – and farmers (LFP, 2011b).

To provide their certified farmers with a market in which to sell their produce, LFP partners with institutions such as universities and municipalities, as well as restaurants, food wholesalers and supermarkets, helping them to develop food policy that requires them to purchase an increasing percentage of local food. For example, the University of Toronto’s food services division now serves 25% LFP-certified food across its operations (J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, 2011). Such policy development helps to satisfy farmers’ economic need to make a reasonable living.

### **Greenbelt Policy – Ontario Greenbelt**

In an era marked by unrelenting urban sprawl, greenbelt policy has been developed to prevent land close to urban settlements from being paved over and thus permanently lost to other uses, such as food production or recreation. Hoare (2000, p. 321) describes a greenbelt as “an area of open, low-density land use surrounding existing major cities and conurbations whose further extension, including the merging of urban areas, is strictly controlled.” The province of Ontario has enacted greenbelt policy to create the world’s largest and most diverse greenbelt. According to its website,

The Greenbelt’s 1.8 million acres (728,000 hectares) wraps around the Golden Horseshoe and is vital to the quality of life of Ontarians. It encompasses the Niagara Escarpment, the Oak Ridges Moraine, Rouge Park, agricultural land, pristine environment and hundreds of rural towns and villages. (Ontario Greenbelt, 2008, p. 1)

This policy helps to guarantee that some the best farmland in the country will remain available for food production.

### **Fair Trade Policy – Fair Trade Towns**

Based on the guarantee of fair pricing, not market pricing, fair trade can be understood as “a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect that seeks better trading conditions for, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers, especially in the South” (European Fair Trade Association, 2001, p. 1). As part of the social economy, fair trade has social and environmental goals rather than self-maximizing ones. For example,

Generalizing across commodities, at a minimum, fair trade standards are enacted by a price premium, a guaranteed price floor, long-term trading contracts, easier access to credit, and shorter supply chains. In turn, the cooperatives growing these products must be democratically organized and utilize the fair trade premium for the benefit of members. Also, producers commit themselves to improving the environmental conditions of production by reducing or avoiding pesticide use. (Goodman, 2004, p. 897)

When creating social policy for a sustainable food system, it is important to remember that fair trade “is not just a theoretical option but a practical alternative that’s already in place” (Ransom, 2001, p. 134). One example of such policy in action is a fair trade town. According to Fairtrade Canada (2011), this idea began in England in 1999 when an Oxfam group in the town of Garstang wanted to promote fair trade as part of a community effort. In Canada, the movement is still young, with Wolfville, Nova Scotia, being the first city to be awarded Fair Trade Town status on April 17, 2007. Since then, additional cities such as La Peche, Quebec; Gimli, Manitoba; and Golden, British Columbia have joined in.

To become a fair trade town, communities must achieve six goals:

1. The local council uses fair trade certified products and supports the fair trade towns campaign
2. Stores and restaurants serve fair trade certified products
3. Workplaces, faith groups, and schools use and promote fair trade certified products
4. Public awareness events and media coverage are held on fair trade and the campaign
5. A steering group is created for continued commitment
6. Other ethical and sustainable initiatives are promoted within the community (Fairtrade Canada 2011).

Such policy development help to ensure that small farmers in developing countries will be able to make a reasonable living through global fair trade networks that co-operatively connect local sustainable food systems around the world.

### **Food Access Policy – Mincome**

Mincome is a guaranteed annual income (GAI) demonstration project that was implemented in Manitoba during the 1970s. In that decade “a federal-provincial social policy review led to a large-scale negative income tax experiment” (Hum & Simpson, 2001, p. 78) that was jointly funded by the Canadian and Manitoba governments. From 1974 to 1978, a GAI was offered to those who lived below the poverty line in a number of sites, and in Dauphin, Manitoba, there were no restrictions – “every family in Dauphin and its rural municipality, with a population of approximately 10,000, was eligible to participate in a GAI programme” (Forget, 2008, p. 13). The project ended in 1978 and due to lack of further funding the collected data was not analyzed, but instead stored in hundreds of boxes until Evelyn Forget, a professor in the Community Health Sciences Department at the University of Manitoba, gained access to it. After completing her first analysis of the data, she dubbed Dauphin “the town with no poverty” (Forget, 2008).

A GAI project like Mincome has enormous implications for local sustainable food policy because it can help to create a set of rules that finds a balance between the economic need of farmers to make a reasonable living and the food security needs of low-income populations who do not have much, if any, money to spend on food. In other words, high prices benefit farmers but are out of reach of consumers; low prices bankrupt farmers but cater to low-income households. Stepping back from this tension to ensure that everyone had a GAI would go a long way to keeping farmers in business and putting local sustainable (and fairly traded) food on the tables of low-income families.

### Conclusion

As a subset of the civil commons, the social economy has a vital role to play in the creation and maintenance of local sustainable food systems. At every node in the system – production, processing, distribution, consumption, and disposal – social economy organizations could operationalize social policies put in place to feed the people and cool the planet. The social economy approach “clearly provides an important vehicle for facilitating and nurturing nascent transformative initiatives” (Connelly et al, 2011, p. 320). In Canada, the social economy is already beginning to facilitate and nurture local sustainable food initiatives:

While some are waiting for government policies to address these concerns and for corporations to start changing their practices, others have already started developing alternatives to our conventional food system. There are municipal food charters, farmers markets, Community Shared Agriculture (CSA) projects, co-operative food stores, community gardens, Fair Trade organizations, and food security networks. All of these groups are founded on principles of engagement, empowerment, solidarity and mutual self-help – in other words the values embodied by the Social Economy. Social Economy organizations are providing a model for food production, processing, and distribution and are proving that our communities can truly be sustainable (Downing & Thompson, n.d., p. 1).

Such local sustainable food initiatives broaden the politics of the possible in the realm of food by modelling alternatives to the global corporate food system, while providing a vision that another world is possible. This does not imply that these initiatives are perfect or problem free. In many ways they are hybrid, imperfect, evolving projects interacting with conventional market structures, cultures, and actors. And yet, without these initiatives, we would be left with only the grim realities of the great and permanent evils of a market economy. These initiatives help us to understand how the social economy could be at the forefront of enacting local sustainable food policy and reorienting the economy and social institutions – inviting us to dine well from the bounty of a common table.

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