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## Navigating the fault lines in civic food networks

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### Abstract

Civic food networks have emerged as a civil society–driven response to the social, economic, and environmental shortcomings of the industrial

food system. They are differentiated from other forms of alternative food networks in that they emphasize cooperation over independence, focus on participatory democratic governance over hierarchy, and serve both social and economic functions for participants. Yet there is little understanding of the processes of cooperation, particularly among farmers, in civic food networks. In this five-year action research project we documented the development of a farmer-driven civic food network in southern Manitoba on the Canadian Prairies. We explore the relations among farmers to better understand the potential of civic food networks to contribute to a more resilient and locally controlled food system. Our findings highlight the tensions and power dynamics that arise through the processes of re-embedding farmers in more interdependent relations. Fractures occurred in the group when negotiating the diverse needs and values of participants, which manifested in disputes over the balance of economic and extra-economic organizational pursuits, over the nature of the

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cooperative distribution model, and over quality standards. Asymmetrical power relations also emerged related to gender and generational differences. Although social embeddedness and civic governance did lead to enhanced relations and trust, these positive outcomes were unevenly distributed and coexisted with feelings of distrust and acrimony. In order to realize their full potential, proponents of civic food networks must confront difference in order to embrace the strength that comes from diversity in the process of building more resilient, and civic, food networks.

### **Keywords**

alternative food networks, civic agriculture, civic food networks, community development, conflict, cooperatives, local food, participatory action research, quality standards, social embeddedness

### **Civic Food Networks: A Subset of Alternative Food Networks that Emphasize Civic Governance Mechanisms**

The processes of agro-industrial intensification has generally destabilized the livelihoods of small and medium-sized farms and eroded the social, economic, and environmental capital that underpins the resilience of rural communities around the world (Wilson, 2010). Growing concerns over the human and environmental impacts of commodity agriculture have led to a wide diversity of alternative food networks that revalorize rural space and work toward a more just and sustainable food system (Blay-Palmer, Landman, Knezevic, & Hayhurst, 2013; Goodman, D., & Goodman, M., 2007; Renting, Marsden, & Banks, 2003).

Alternative food networks broadly represent “forms of food provisioning with characteristics deemed to be different from, perhaps counteractive to, mainstream modes which dominate in developed countries” (Tregear, 2011, p. 419). This marks a shift in emphasis from a generic focus on maximizing export commodity production toward a multifunctional understanding of agrarian landscapes and communities (Wilson, 2010). Alternative food networks pursue rural land uses that emphasize ecologically sustainable and humane agriculture practices, produce value-added “quality” food products, and reconnect consumers and farm-

ers in a moral economy of food (Goodman, D., 2003; Goodman, M. K., 2004; Kneafsey & Holloway, 2008).

The concept of civic food networks (CFNs) was recently developed by Renting, Schermer, and Rossi (2012) in the European context and represents a subset of alternative food networks. Rather than relying on conventional food system infrastructure (Bloom & Hinrichs, 2011), citizen participants in CFNs cooperate to coordinate and control most, if not all, of the steps from farmer to consumer. In contrast to the conventional food system and market-focused alternative food networks, CFNs de-emphasize market-based governance mechanisms such as labeling, price, and marketing. Rather, they emphasize civic governance mechanisms that include cooperation, participatory democracy, solidarity, self-organization, local control, and autonomy, all of which reflect an attempt to empower citizens to shape their food provisioning system (Hassanein, 2003; Seyfang, 2006).

In North America, the earlier conceptualizations of “civic agriculture” were rural in orientation and emphasized the processes of collective problem-solving as the foundation of resilient agrarian communities (Lyson, 2004). More recently, the focus has turned toward conceptualizing CFNs as urban and consumer-driven through research on sustainable and green consumption (Johnston & Szabo, 2011), on the consumer-citizen hybrid (Lehner, 2013) and on the active role of consumers in organizing CFNs (Brunori, Rossi, & Guidi, 2012; Franklin, Newton, & McEntee, 2011; Little, Maye, & Ilbery, 2010). Renting et al. (2012) follow this pattern in their latest definition of CFNs as requiring the active participation of consumers in CFN governance. This emphasis on urban actors and on citizen-consumers inadvertently excludes CFNs that are primarily farmer-driven and that emerge from rural space. However, citizen-farmers can also play a key role in building civic food networks, regardless of any direct and active participation of consumers in their governance (e.g., Trauger and Passidomo, 2012). Cooperation, especially among farmers, has received relatively little attention across the civic and alternative food network literature, which generally overlooks the organizational

processes and social relations that underpin collective problem solving.

#### *Embedding and Disembedding Relations in CFNs*

CFNs are defined by their explicit focus on re-embedding food exchange in a deeper relational context as a counterpoint to the abstract logic, anonymous relations and the market-calculus that undergird the conventional food system (Higgins, Dibden, & Cocklin, 2008; Hinrichs, 2000; Izumi, Wright, & Hamm, 2010; Milestad, Bartel-Kratochvil, Leitner, & Axmann, 2010; Sonnino, 2007). Alternative food network research has focused primarily on farmer-consumer market relations and often draws on Granovetter's (1985) notions of social embeddedness to characterize these relations as being based on trust, regard, and reciprocity (Izumi et al., 2010; Milestad et al., 2010; Sage, 2003; Sonnino, 2007).

The limited research on cooperative relations among farmers in alternative food networks has focused primarily on informal networking, loose ties, and bilateral relations, for example among vendors at farmers' markets (e.g., Griffin & Frongillo, 2003). These informal relationships have been found to produce both economic and social benefits through the exchange of knowledge and skills, the fostering of new friendships, and providing of relief at each other's stalls (Chiffolleau, 2009; Griffin & Frongillo, 2003; Lawson, Guthrie, Cameron, & Fischer, 2008; Milestad et al., 2010).

However, Wittman, Beckie, and Hergesheimer (2012) found that vendors at farmers' markets were averse to engaging in any form of cooperation that threatened the direct connection between farmers and consumers. Further, Glowacki-Dudka, Murray, and Isaacs (2013) conclude that diverging goals and a lack of trust among actors involved in local food production can obstruct cooperativism. These findings allude to the potential relational challenges that arise from the more substantial and interdependent forms of cooperation required in CFNs and suggest that cooperation itself can be a contested practice.

More involved and formalized cooperation between farmers in CFNs can reduce transaction costs (Verhaegen & Van Huylenbroeck, 2001) and help farmers located in remote rural locations to

overcome the "tyranny of distance" (Trauger, 2009). Yet CFNs may also reproduce the problems associated with the conventional food system, including the exploitation of farm workers (Trauger, 2009), the marginalization of smaller farms (Brunori, Cerruti, Medeot, & Rossi, 2008) and social exclusion (Franklin et al., 2011). Internal fissures have been identified in these initiatives reflecting the often-conflicting needs, values, and quality claims (e.g., organic versus local) among members (Brunori et al., 2008; Sonnino, 2007).

These findings suggest that any conceptualization of social embeddedness and cooperation must also consider disembedding forces (Sayer, 1997) that express themselves in the form of self-interest (Hinrichs, 2000) and socio-cultural differences among participants. Indeed, the most recent conceptualization of CFNs (Renting et al., 2012) appears to place too much emphasis on the positive outcomes of these renewed civic relationships, and could be augmented by considering how culture and power shape these embedded economies (Sayer, 2001; Sonnino, 2007). This is especially important as a growing number and diversity of farmers, consumers, and other actors are attracted to local food (Mount, 2012), bringing with them multiple and often conflicting values and agendas that must be negotiated in the development of CFNs.

#### *Local Food as a Contested Concept: Meeting Place or Arena of Struggle*

Local food is positioned as a core discourse in CFNs, but the term "local" has been widely criticized as being vague in meaning, subject to multiple interpretations, and malleable in application (Born & Purcell, 2006; Eriksen, 2013; Mount, 2012; Selfa & Qazi, 2005; Tovey, 2009). The flexibility of the "local food" concept has provided purchase across the political spectrum and underpins its growing resonance as a mobilizing concept. Thus, "local food" has been incorporated in CFNs but also into top-down state policy (Hinrichs, 2013) and as a corporate marketing strategy (Johnston, Biro, & MacKendrick, 2009). As such, local food has been criticized for being susceptible to cooptation by powerful elites, which can undermine its legitimacy and its potential for leading to more

substantial food systems change (Johnston et al., 2009; Tovey, 2009).

The flexibility of local food as an organizing concept, however, also makes it useful for bringing together otherwise diverse and disconnected rural constituents in community development efforts (Chiffolleau, 2009; Connell, Smithers, & Joseph, 2008; Milestad et al., 2010; Sage, 2003). Local food can be interpreted differently between groups and individuals, yet is often assumed to represent a shared set of values where the multidimensional qualities of “good food” gets bundled into a ‘local food systems package’ wherein organic is good, family-scale farming is good, local is good, natural is good, and shopping at farmers’ markets is good” (Connell et al., 2008, p. 181; also see: Sage, 2003).

However, because local food draws together actors with diverse values, needs, and priorities (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005), local food may not always be a benign meeting place, but can also become an arena of contention and struggle between competing interpretations and practices of local food (Tovey, 2009). In *specific* practice, CFN participants ascribe idiosyncratic meaning not only to local food but also to what constitutes good food and good farming (Ostrom, 2006; Selfa & Qazi, 2005). The diverse interpretations and practices of local food are not necessarily compatible and can lead to a politicized terrain for the further development of collective action (Tovey, 2009).

In this paper, we examine the relations among farmers in CFNs to better understand the potential for CFNs to expand the relevance of local food and contribute to a more resilient and locally controlled food system. The objectives of our study were to explore to what extent “local food” can create a meeting space for farmers to engage in CFNs; to understand what motivates farmers to get involved in CFNs; to examine how these initiatives evolve over time and why; and to understand the barriers that confront CFNs and how these can be overcome.

## Methods

In this paper we present a single case study documented as a part of a long-term participatory action research project (Anderson, 2014) that involved the development of a CFN in the Canadian Prairies

called the Harvest Moon Local Food Initiative (HMLFI). Participatory action research (PAR) is increasingly used in agri-food studies (e.g., Charles, 2011; Lyons, 2014; Pimbert & Wakeford, 2004) and reflects a range of research approaches where community and academic researchers work together in deliberate processes of organizational and social transformation (Creswell, 2013). Through iterative cycles of inquiry, PAR involves the integration of research and action and of theory and practice, “in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities” (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 4).

Conventional research approaches are often extractive in nature and produce few tangible benefits for research subjects (Cameron & Gibson, 2005). In contrast, PAR explicitly seeks to produce and apply knowledge that is immediately relevant in the local context (Kindon, 2005). This however does not preclude the simultaneous production of conceptual and theoretical contributions that are transferable to other settings through diverse forms of knowledge mobilization (Anderson, 2014). For example, our research team produced a diversity of research outcomes including, most immediately, the development of a successful CFN, and also the publication of videos, academic articles, and blog postings to more broadly communicate our findings.

In contrast to the positivist notion that researchers must be objective, value-free, and separate from research subjects (England, 1994; Maguire, 2001), PAR practitioner-researchers are actively involved as contributors to the organization or situation under study. Our research project was structured as a collaborative process of reflective community development where academic and community co-researchers cooperated in the design of the research agenda and in the implementation of the “action.”

The research questions addressed in this paper emerged from the experience of the larger group of participants, and they evolved iteratively as the project unfolded. Four HMLFI contributors participated on a research committee that authored this final paper-based outcome. The senior author

(Anderson) was an active and central participant throughout the entire project (in the action) and facilitated data analysis and writing. Gardiner and McDonald were farmer members of the HMLFI and provided ongoing input through collaborative analysis and writing workshops. McLachlan was a founding member of Harvest Moon Society, the not-for-profit organization that initially housed the CFN. McLachlan also helped to shape the overall project and contributed to the collaborative analysis and writing process.

This paper is based on five years of data collection and draws from the experiences of the research committee, organizational documents, field notes, and interview transcripts that were initiated at the very first meeting of an informal group that would go on to form the HMLFI. The authors participated in over 50 formal meetings over this period. We also drew from a review of meeting minutes, three funding applications, reports to funders, a prefeasibility study, a feasibility study, a business plan, and the HMLFI website. We conducted 19 in-depth interviews with 25 members of participating farm families. These interviews ranged from one to four hours in length and were transcribed and coded in NVivo qualitative data analysis software to identify emergent themes. All interviews and several meetings and group events were captured using video and, when appropriate, we present these data as video clips to give active voice to research participants and allow the reader to better visualize, and thus further understand, the narrative and context. Finally, a draft of this paper was circulated to all participants in the HMLFI and follow-up phone calls or face-to-face meetings ( $n = 12$ ) were arranged to review the paper for the purpose of soliciting feedback, thus confirming the validity of the analysis.

### *The Territorial Context*

The Harvest Moon Local Food Initiative is located approximately 124 miles (200 km) southwest of Winnipeg, Manitoba's largest city, in the Canadian Prairies. Since the late 1800s, settler agriculture in the region has been based on agro-industrial, high-input, intensive, and export-focused modes of grain, oilseed, and livestock production (Rudolf & McLachlan, 2013). Prairie agriculture has been

described as being in a state of chronic crisis (Bessant, 2007), contributing to the declining profitability of family farming, environmental degradation, and rural depopulation. On May 23, 2003, the discovery of the zoonotic cattle disease bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in Canada triggered a socio-economic crisis that exacerbated this longer rural emergency. Direct farm marketing, cooperatives, and value-added niche food production emerged as important grassroots responses in Canada (Anderson & McLachlan, 2012; Mount, this issue), providing a point of departure for the development of the HMLFI — a cooperative local food initiative that would market value-added food (more) directly to consumers.

### **Case Study: The Harvest Moon Local Food Initiative**

#### *Phase I: The Honeymoon Phase — Celebrating Common Ground?*

In August 2006, two of the authors (Anderson and McLachlan) toured three local livestock farms in the Clearwater area. Each of the farmers was minimally engaged in direct farm marketing and expressed enthusiasm over the growing consumer interest in local food. However, they also indicated that the time and resource demands of direct marketing prohibited them from expanding their engagement in the growing opportunities related to local food. These preliminary discussions suggested that a CFN might help farmers overcome these challenges. Based on these interactions, Anderson and McLachlan initiated a scoping meeting in December 2006, inviting farmers who originally expressed an interest in developing a CFN and others identified through referral. Most participants in this initial meeting agreed that the concept was sound, and the group went on to develop the HMLFI.

#### *Group Profile*

The 14 founding farm families managed 4,365 acres (1,766 ha) of land dedicated to field crops, 8,965 acres (3,628 ha) of hay and pastureland that supported 1,660 head of beef cattle, 750 pigs, 500 ewes, and 4,200 meat chickens. One participant

operated a feedlot, another was a meat processor, and an additional member family established a butcher shop after the HMLFI was formed. One family also had a market garden and another a well-established organic flour direct marketing enterprise. While almost all members produced livestock, the group was heterogeneous in terms of production practices (e.g., organic, conventional, holistic resource management), marketing approaches (e.g., degree of experience in direct marketing) and previous relations with other group members (e.g., kinship, friendship, weak ties, or no previous acquaintance).

### *Motivations for Participation*

Motivations for forming the CFN are categorized as either instrumental/market or non-instrumental/extra-market (cf. Hinrichs, 2000; Izumi et al., 2010). Members related to all of these motivations to some degree; however, each individual had distinct priorities.

#### *Instrumental/Market*

Some participants sought to expand the customer base of their already established direct marketing business (what we term *expansion motivation*): “With Harvest Moon’s help I think within another two years I could probably be selling almost everything directly” (Wayne McDonald). Others hoped the collaboration would reduce opportunity costs associated with managing multiple relationships in their direct marketing businesses (*time saving motivation*): “Our hands are full now just with the production and processing; we really don’t have time for the marketing and delivering any more” (Dan DeRuyck). Members expressed a desire for learning and for pooling intellectual resources (*innovation motivation*): “One producer can make a lot of mistakes, but you get a half a dozen together, you make a lot less mistakes and make better decisions” (Anonymous). Those who were primarily selling through commodity markets wanted to reduce dependence on corporate intermediaries and gain more control

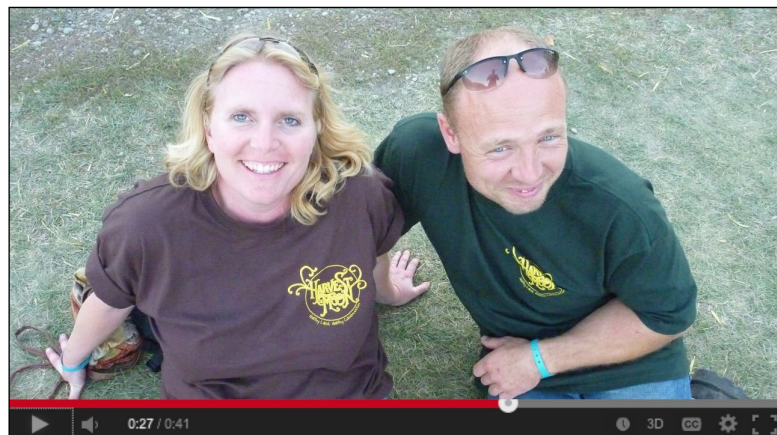
over price setting (*control motivation; price motivation*): “If we create our own market and our own chain to get it to the consumer then we have a little more control over what our bottom line is going to be...” (Don Guilford).

#### *Non-instrumental/Extra-market*

Many participants expressed a desire for closer social connections with other farmers practicing sustainable agriculture, reflecting in part a need for a support network for otherwise isolated “alternative” farmers (*community-building motivation*):

I feel because we’re a part of this, and we’ve felt so isolated as far as the kind of things we’ve been doing for so long. I’m a lot more relaxed, because I don’t feel like such a weirdo anymore. I am still weird [*laughs*], but it doesn’t feel as bad. (Clint Cavers; see Video 1)

For others, who were mainly selling into commodity markets, the CFN offered an opportunity to receive positive feedback from peers, customers, and the general public, supporting a sense of pride in providing a high quality and differentiated product (what we term *pride motivation*): “That’s why I’m so enthused about the Harvest Moon, it’s just going to be able to produce a better product” (Anonymous). Some farmers



**Video 1. Pam and Clint Cavers describe how the Harvest Moon Local Food Initiative gave them a peer support network that affirmed their values and allowed them to become more effective educators.** <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9JlaVfYeY>



described their interest in experimenting with social-economic projects that offered an alternative to conventional economic enterprise (*alterity motivation*): “I’m there because I’m so interested in the whole social [economy] concept, communication, how people talk about things like this” (Sandy DeRuyck). Finally, members saw the CFN as an opportunity to help support the next generation of farmers (*succession motivation*): “The big benefit from this group I may never see in my farming days. It’s the next generation...that’s going to benefit from this” (Anonymous). In many cases, the meaning of the “next generation” extended beyond kinship and included any youth interested in pursuing agriculture as a livelihood.

Together, the members subsumed all of these individual motivations under one common vision statement, “We are a local community committed to ethically producing and marketing high quality, healthy food for the betterment of humankind and the environment now and for generations to come” (HMLFI, 2007). This vision unfolded into three main objectives: (1) increasing their proportion of each food dollar; (2) broadening public outreach; and (3) developing farmer training relating to sustainable agriculture and local food, and sharing what was learned with other farmers (HMLFI, 2007). The vision and objectives were intentionally ambiguous and inclusive to accommodate the wide diversity of founding participants. Some felt that the excitement of the ‘honeymoon phase’ led to a false sense of unity because it lacked specificity: “It went too fast...We needed to spend more time at the beginning figuring out what we really wanted to do...It was very philosophical... It’s a wonderful idea, but it’s got to be focused” (Sandy DeRuyck).

Although originally envisioned as a multiproduct food hub, the group members instead focused their efforts exclusively on marketing meat, whereby farmers would pool their products in a collectively owned entity (HMLFI) that would then coordinate all aspects of marketing and distribution (see figure 1, the “we sell” model). The

group sought to appeal to consumers, first by harnessing the growing interest in local food, and second by differentiating their food products from “conventional food” as superior in taste, animal welfare, and environmental sustainability. Customers would buy HMLFI food through a web portal, while wholesale buyers would be approached directly to negotiate bulk orders. After almost two years of planning, the HMLFI launched in September 2008 with much fanfare reflecting a sense of hope and optimism: “It’s a culmination of a lot of...nights and a lot of hard work...It’s pretty exciting...For me, it’s a future in farming” (Wian Prinsloo, Video 2).

## Phase II: Domestic Disputes: Finding Difference

The HMLFI sold only CA\$10,000 worth of products over the next six months, well short of members’ expectations. During this period a range of unresolved conflict surfaced, ultimately leading to the dissolution of the CFN in its original form. These divisions, discussed in the next sections, were related to disputes over the prioritization of economic versus non-economic organizational pursuits, the distribution model, and the quality standards; they also reflected divisions based on gender, electronic communication literacy, and generational differences.



**Video 2. Launch of the Harvest Moon Local Food Initiative at the fall music and rural culture festival in 2008.**

[http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8uv5e\\_harvest-moon-local-food-initiative\\_people](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8uv5e_harvest-moon-local-food-initiative_people)



*First Divide: Economic Versus Non-Economic Organizational Pursuits*

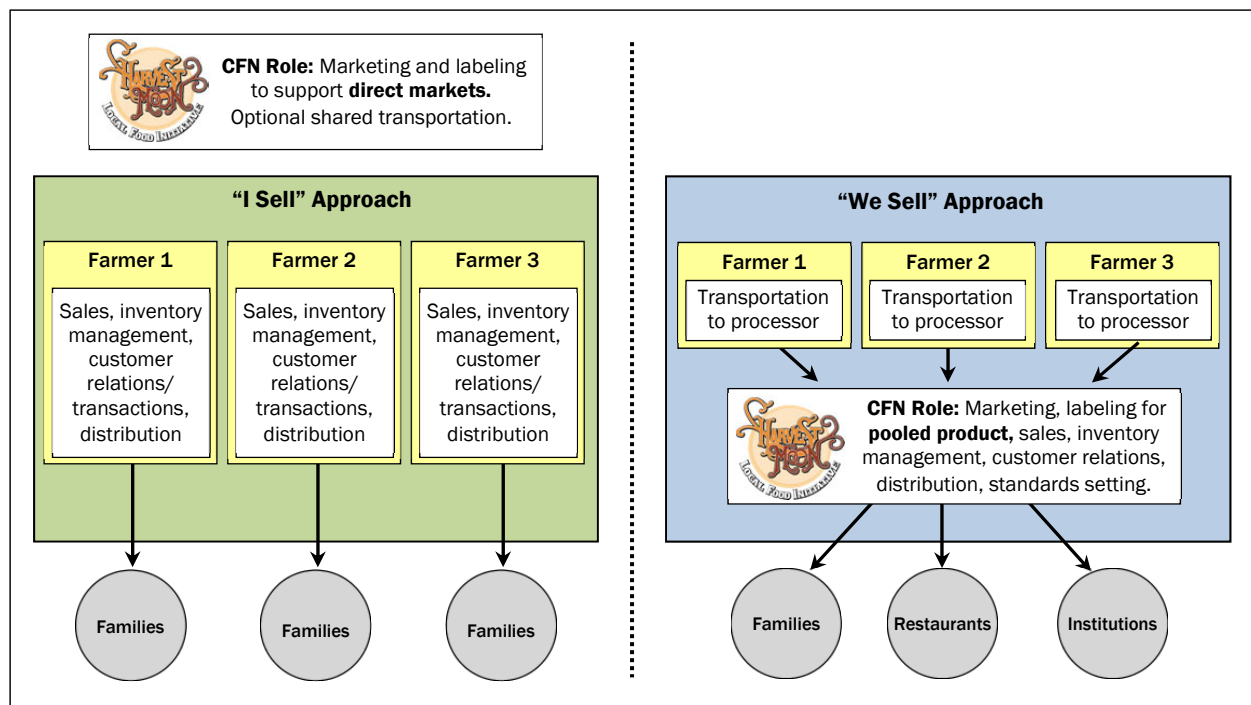
The first HMLFI organizational objective suggested that the most common and immediate collective goal was economic in nature. The second and third objectives, however, reflected that the group was simultaneously interested in pursuing social and ecological outcomes. This mixing of the social, economic, environmental, and political in the workings of the HMLFI later emerged as a source of tension. Some members viewed the initiative primarily as a business: “To me you’ve got to look at it from business-type thinking and it’s not just put together to promote idealistic thinking?” (Don Guilford). In contrast, others emphasized that alterity and challenging the status quo was an important end in of itself for some participants: “I keep hearing from people who are looking for a TRUE alternative to the conventional food system and selling boxes of meat wholesale is no alternative... I don’t see how we’re doing anything really different here” (Jason Andrich, coordinator of HMLFI). McDonald indicated that many members felt that, “This isn’t just a marketing group,” and

were frustrated when only some members contributed toward, “the youth projects etc. [that] became a point of contention within the group and contributed to the bunker mentality that emerged” (Wayne McDonald).

*Second Divide: Distribution Model(s)*

Although the HMLFI proceeded with a single distribution model as a seemingly cohesive group, it later emerged that almost half of the participants were disinterested in the chosen model (pooling products, selling to restaurants, focusing on meat products), and had been all along. Soon after the launch, some members perceived an irreconcilable division between farmers who wanted to aggregate their products under a single brand, or what the group called the pooled or “we sell” approach, and those who wanted to sell directly from farmer to consumer under the label of the Harvest Moon with the option of coordinating transportation and ordering, or what the group called the direct or “I sell” approach (Figure 1).

As the focus on the “We sell” approach was consolidated through funder support and business



**Figure 1. Schematic of “I sell” and “We sell” distribution models that divided the members of the Harvest Moon Local Food Initiative.**

planning and market development processes, all alternative development pathways were effaced and those interested in the “I sell” model became excluded: “What were they going to do? They had no control, they had no power, they didn’t know what to do; what could they do?” (Sandy DeRuyck). The sidelining of these voices was exacerbated by business planning advisors who recommended focusing exclusively on the “we sell” meat marketing model, as it was most easily accommodated within a conventional business planning approach that focused on volume sales: “It was the consultants who set us down a path that focused on meat and the business instead of the farmers and the food” (Clint Cavers).

The split between “I sell” and “we sell” reflected, in part, differences in the degree to which farmers were open, or able, to establish more involved relationships with their customers. One of the “I sellers” noted, “There is no reason that we shouldn’t see our customers all the time” (Clint Cavers), while in direct contrast, a “we-seller” commented, “I mean we can’t have our consumers here all the time...” (Don Guilford). Thus, many “we-sellers” resisted the idea that their farm should regularly be open to consumers, whereas “I sellers” often saw this as an integral function of the farm and an important way to generate consumer trust. Don and Clint’s diametrically opposed sentiments

also reflect that not all farmers derive personal fulfillment from interacting with consumers, which has been identified as an important mediating factor in direct farm marketing relationships (Kirwan, 2006; Sage, 2003). Indeed, Don later indicated that the relationships with industry professionals in the conventional food system (e.g., cattle buyers) were based in an exchange of mutual technical understanding of agriculture and thus for him were more socially enriching than interacting with many urban consumers.

Yet, the “I sell” approach was criticized by the “we-sellers” as being too burdensome for farmers and as creating the very same barriers that they experienced previously as individual direct farm marketers that the midsized farmers sought to overcome through cooperation. Gardiner described how the “I sell” approach aligned well with goals of educating urbanites about sustainable agriculture and local food: “Direct marketing is perhaps more effective for changing the way that people think about food. It however, isn’t necessarily better for the farmer” (Jo-Lene Gardiner).

The “we-sellers” were uninterested in taking on the additional labor that the “I sell” model required and sought a substantial degree of cooperation and thus a greater degree of interdependence. Keith describes, “I have no interest of marketing on my own...in getting beef done, putting it in the freezer and selling it piece by piece, not at all...I want to be able to take my animal to the abattoir, and then the food group markets it...” (Keith Gardiner, Video 3).

Don, one of the prominent “We sellers,” expressed his frustration with some of the “I seller” goals in that they, “Saw this being successful even if we didn’t end up with a group at the end of the day...I’d be very disappointed if we don’t have a group that continues on” (Don Guilford). Indeed, the “I sellers” often referred to the HMLFI as a “stepping stone” for individual producers to build their own businesses and to cycle out of



**Video 3. Keith Gardiner describes the reasons he is not interested in direct farm marketing.**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H2M7t88YEyc>

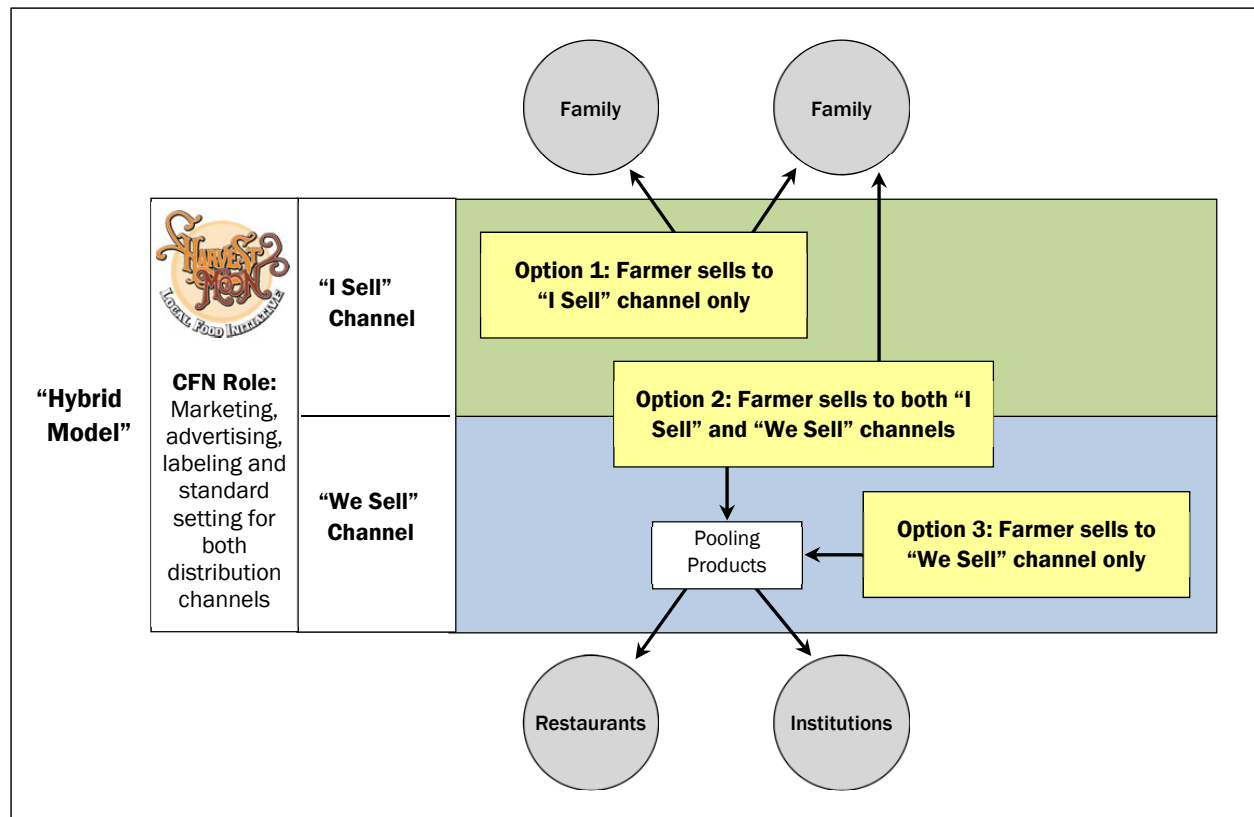
the CFN (as suppliers) once they generated a sufficient consumer base.

Sandy explained how the importance of a robust individual identity for direct marketers acted as a barrier to a more collective approach: “They’ll lose their identity, they’ll lose their direct contact with the customer and customers that they’ve worked hard to find” (Sandy DeRuyck). Thus the “I sellers” resisted any proposal that weakened their individual identity and autonomy. A “We seller” expressed his frustration with this more individualistic mindset: “Through not marketing collectively, I believe the sense of community that develops when people work together for a common goal has broken down” (Don McIntyre).

Late in the process, a hybrid approach was proposed where both the “I sell” and “We sell” distribution channels would be accommodated (Figure 2). These two approaches would be synergistic in that the “I sellers,” who typically turned away larger institutional buyers, could

instead refer them to the “We sell” branch of HMLFI. Likewise, the “We sellers” who were uninterested in relationships with hundreds of smaller buyers could instead direct smaller-volume buyers to the “I sell” branch. The hybrid approach would allow for autonomy between the two distribution channels, but would allow them to remain within a common and mutually supportive organizational structure and common brand. Although this may have been a viable solution earlier in the process, by this point the group cohesion had disintegrated beyond repair: “The hybrid model... could have worked, but the trust issues and relationships by that point had been so fractured...” (Wayne McDonald).

*Third Divide: Good Food and Good Farming*  
 Quality standards are used to generate added value by defining, codifying, and regulating production practices, thus differentiating products and guaranteeing product quality (however defined) to



**Figure 2. The proposed hybrid distribution model that accommodated and supported both “I sellers” and “We sellers.”**

consumers. Rather than adopting a pre-existing quality certification and monitoring regime (e.g., organic), the HMLFI opted to develop its own. This choice reflected a desire to further maximize local control rather than delegating this power and responsibility to a third party (Dubuisson-Quellier & Lamine, 2008). This decision also reflected a philosophy of inclusivity whereby adopting any available third-party standard would have immediately excluded many of the founding members. The group recognized that in order to be relevant for most farmers on the prairies, that the standards needed to be flexible enough to support transition over time, as Don described: “If we can move to things over time maybe we can change our production to make it work. But...there’s got to be a long window there for people to adapt to change” (Don Guilford, Video 4).

Despite these aims of inclusivity, the cohesiveness of the group was undermined when these flexible standards became more rigid as diverging visions of “good food” and “good farming” were proposed and negotiated. On the one hand, some members (largely the “We sellers”) were concerned with ensuring that all beef sold through the group was of a certain grade (which indicates quality primarily in terms of texture, color, and fat marbling) reflecting standardized industrial quality conventions that characterize the commodity beef market. These farmers recognized that grading systems

were developed to provide a consistent eating experience (taste, tenderness), which has conditioned and homogenized the taste preferences of eaters (Stassart & Jamar, 2008). These standards, however, marginalized those farmers raising heritage breeds and those grass-finishing their livestock, as their products did not easily conform to grading standards developed for more conventional breeds and for grain-finished livestock. The “alternative standards” group (largely the “I sellers”) were often penalized by lower payments in the commodity market and thus largely rejected the conventional grading system, and instead prioritized more stringent measures of humane animal husbandry, environmental responsibility, and ‘closeness’ and connection. They believed that quality was more legitimate and robust if constructed through interpersonal relationships and that the “We seller” emphasis on grading marginalized both their personal values and the value of their product.

Interestingly, both “I sellers” and “We sellers” anticipated that consumers would have negative experiences with the other’s products, which by association would reflect poorly on the CFN and on their own operations. One “We seller” described how forgoing a grading standard was untenable for him: “I’m not interested in being a part of something like that, because with one bad carcass like that, they’ll tell a hundred people and it takes years to develop these markets” (Don Guilford).

Both “We sellers” and “I sellers” were concerned that adopting the other’s quality standards would become too prohibitive and restricting. Clint Cavers, an “I seller,” commented,

There are abattoirs that are closer than the ones that grade. I don’t want to be cornered into a grade standard. I want to do my own processing...Trust in people’s own products and from customers knowing where their product comes from. By having trust, there isn’t a need for [grading].



**Video 4. Don Guilford explains the need for adaptive quality standards that allow for transitional farmers.**

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n7\\_IRsR8FOk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n7_IRsR8FOk)

Clint's experience with direct marketing indicated that his customers define quality based on knowing their farmer and where their food comes from and that they could tolerate, appreciate, or even desire variations in eating experiences among participating farms. Such inconsistencies, however, would be intolerable for the larger buyers sought out by the "We sellers" (e.g., university food services, hospitals, etc.) who typically demand standardized products. At one point the "We sellers" proposed that all animals sold through HMLFI be finished at a central member-owned feedlot to further maximize consistency of product, representing a further homogenization that threatened the individual identity of "I sellers" and their products.

#### *The Worm Turns*

The most contentious issue related to quality standards was the use of synthetic (chemical) dewormers, particularly ivermectin, to control intestinal worms and lice in livestock. Those who abstained from using ivermectin felt that it posed unacceptable risks to human health and the environment, while ivermectin users felt that these risks were negligible. Two ivermectin users in the group agreed to abstain from using any synthetic dewormers, and a ban on ivermectin was written into the group's standards. Eighteen months later, the cattle herd of one "We seller" contracted a severe intestinal worm infestation, causing the death of five animals. Upon veterinary recommendation, the farmer administered ivermectin to all his yearlings. Another "We seller," anticipating a similar infestation, then also treated his entire herd. According to the existing standards, these two farmers were barred from marketing these cattle through the HMLFI, effectively excluding them from the group.

At this point, ivermectin users advocated that the standards be changed to allow for the use of synthetic dewormers. Some viewed the need for the dewormer as a scale issue, in that alternative internal parasite management strategies were only viable for small farmers: "When someone who has 700 head is told that he can't delice or control worms, well that's just stupidity. With 700 head you have to do it" (Arvid Dalzel). They positioned

ivermectin use as necessary, relatively harmless, and indeed an important tool for avoiding animal suffering. Further, they asserted that not using synthetic dewormers resulted in ragged and hairless livestock and to inefficient feed conversion that reflected poor husbandry practice and even animal cruelty. Yet, those who eschewed ivermectin use believed that the environmental and human and animal health risks of the chemical outweighed any benefits and thus tolerated worm infestations. Instead they opted to use alternative, albeit less complete, parasite management practices (e.g., multispecies grazing, lower stocking densities) and natural dewormers (e.g., garlic) in order to co-exist with the parasites.

At one critical meeting, the group decided that, rather than revising the standards, they would allow an exemption where, "whole herd treatment using synthetic de-wormer will be allowed in this one instance with triple the recommended withdrawal period (150 days). No synthetic de-wormers will be allowed at any other time in the future as per the standards" (Meeting minutes, December 11, 2008). Although the group had ostensibly reached consensus, this decision did not resonate with the ivermectin users, whose recent experience reinforced their belief in the necessity of ivermectin in their management systems.

#### *Fourth Divide: Gender, Technology, and Age*

Communication technologies created power imbalances when important discussions and decisions were carried out through email: "The decision on these proposals should not be made on-line by e-mail... Some of us do not check e-mails regularly and then 3-4 producers could pass something that the rest have no knowledge about!" (Arvid Dalzel). Although the Internet may enhance communication among members in joint initiatives (Knickel, Zerger, Jahn, & Renting, 2008), it can thus also create new inequalities and exclusions based on differential access to, and competency with, new media and electronic communication.

The digital divide was age-related, as older farmers were less interested in email and web-based communication, in part due to a skill deficit but also due to a belief in the importance of face-to-face meetings. Generational differences in

priorities were also implicated in tensions between older members (largely “We sellers”) who felt the need to reach CA\$1 million in sales within three to five years, and younger members (largely “I sellers”) who advocated for, and who could accommodate, a slower approach.

The members who were most firmly polarized and who identified most strongly with either the “I sellers” or “We sellers” groups tended to be men. As the discussions became more fractious, many women who had been involved at the onset began dropping out. Indeed, the ratio of men to women in the group went from 15:9 at the initial meetings to 14:3 at the peak of the conflict. The gradual departure of these women, who tended to provide more moderate voices and who had a tempering influence on interactions, only seemed to exacerbate the conflict. Pam Cavers commented,

I dropped out because of the same reasons as lots of the other women...As soon as all that conflict comes in, the first thing you're going to do as a woman is to make sure you're preserving what's important. That's definitely a gender thing...Men are more likely to be headstrong and try to get it fixed and, you know, more linear.

Pam thus suggested that the women in the group were more holistic in their approach, seeking to shield valued relationships from the destructive competitive dynamic that emerged in the group. Unfortunately, this led to most of the women stepping back and deferring to their male partner as their family representative at meetings. The growing imbalance acted to further marginalize any women who remained involved. For example, it was Sandy DeRuyck who had initially suggested the possibility of a hybrid distribution model, but it was only recognized as relevant when one of the more influential men later rearticulated the concept. It is important to recognize that this gender analysis was contentious and, upon reviewing this paper, that some male members rejected the notion that gender had any bearing on the conflict, stating that at least some women in the group had been equally adversarial and that some of the men had also stopped attending meetings to avoid conflict.

### *Phase III: Group Dissolution*

By early 2010, most of the “We sellers” had resigned from the HMLFI, realizing that the ongoing stalemate was unlikely to be resolved and that the more stringent standards (largely related to the use of synthetic dewormers) would preclude their participation. Andrew Grift commented,

The standards would do more to exclude than include farmers. I don't know if this is good for either group. If someone doesn't go with the flow they are out. I've heard this said, “He was never really a believer.” I would still like to know believe in what? It is getting to be a pretty small box.

Don McIntyre left the group questioning the relevance of the “I sell” model for rural development in the province:

As an average size Manitoba farm, we see the problems that our industrial agriculture model brings and willingly seek to develop more ethical markets for our produce while caring sustainably for the land. Farms of this size form the backbone of the local community and must be included if true change is to occur.

### *Phase IV: New Beginnings*

After the dissolution of the original HMLFI, the group split into two. The “I sellers” ceased any collective marketing, but continued to meet under the auspices of the HMLFI, retaining the group's function as a support network and coordinating youth training and public education programs. Approximately six months later, the HMLFI re-engaged in collective marketing, this time focusing on an “I sell” approach that operated through a network of local food-buying clubs. Moving beyond a singular focus on beef products, the HMLFI offered customers a wide diversity of local food products. Orders from each farm were combined and delivered monthly by each farm family on an alternating basis to seven central drop-off points in Winnipeg, one in Brandon, and three in rural Manitoba. Importantly for the “I sellers,” this model allowed farmers to retain their individual



identities and afforded them almost complete autonomy in terms of product specialization, production practices, and pricing.

A smaller subset of the “We sell” farmers formed a separate corporation called “Prairie Sky” that focused on a pooled approach that targeted restaurants and other institutional food buyers. Despite early positive contacts with a large institutional buyer and a restaurant, the group encountered a number of ultimately fatal barriers and has since disbanded. Restaurant managers and institutional food buyers preferred and even demanded that meat products be processed in a processing facility inspected by federal food safety regulators. However, there was only one federally inspected slaughterhouse in Manitoba, which made access difficult. The large buyers that Prairie Sky worked with also proved to be unreliable: “There were a ton of meetings with some really big numbers and pie in the sky kind of thing that ultimately amounted to nothing” (Wayne McDonald). Prairie Sky also encountered scale issues, where their pooled cattle represented a substantial supply of animals yet was still insufficient to meet the needs of most restaurants: “100 lbs. of beef tenderloin every two weeks. XL Foods can do that but we can’t” (Wayne McDonald).

## Discussion

The Harvest Moon Local Food Initiative (HMLFI) was a civic food network (CFN) initiated by a group of 14 farm families in the Canadian Prairies. CFNs are generally theorized as highly socially embedded, both in terms of the close and cooperative relations among participants, and also in terms of embodying a holistic development agenda that balances economic pursuits against social, political, and cultural ones (Renting et al., 2012). Our findings emphasize the need to account for power, disembeddedness and conflict in CFNs as a counterpoint to the dominant focus on social embeddedness and consensus in the existing literature. The civic governance mechanisms that define CFNs, such as participation and cooperation, are arguably as, or perhaps even more, likely to lead to tension and conflict as the individualistic, hierarchical, and alienating relations of the conventional food system or in alternative food networks

dominated by market governance mechanisms. Although participation and democracy are fundamental to CFNs, these are also messy and uncomfortable processes (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005; Hassanein, 2003).

We found that the ambiguous nature of “local food” as a mobilizing concept fostered a heterogeneous membership in terms of product type, production practices, and marketing, as well as underlying values and philosophies. The heterogeneity and inclusivity of the initiative was initially celebrated internally and by observers as an organizational strength and for its potential role in large-scale transformative rural development. This hopeful and perhaps naive view of the process and politics of building CFNs led to an imagined space of consensus. Indeed, the focus on commonality in the honeymoon phase sidetracked any opportunity to unpack the different needs and values that informed member’s often-colliding understanding and practice of local food.

Farmers are often ideologically and materially locked in to the conventional food system, which can undermine engagement in new innovative forms of diversification such as CFNs (Marsden & Smith, 2005; Stassart & Jamar, 2008). This was indeed reflected in our case particularly where farmers accustomed to commodity agriculture advocated for quality standards and production practices that reflected industrial agriculture conventions (e.g., grading, standardization, corporate branding, use of chemical dewormers). At the same time, the “I sellers” were locked into individualistic business models where these direct marketers were only marginally amenable to cooperation, but resisted any collective intervention that undermined their individual autonomy and farm identity. This hesitancy reflects the importance of farm identity as a brand in direct marketing, the individualistic nature of local food entrepreneurialism, and also the belief by many local-food advocates that the direct connection between farmers and eaters is fundamental to the legitimacy of local food (Mount, 2012; Wittman et al., 2012). While Chiffoleau (2009) suggests that local food promotes greater ties among farmers, this may only apply in the context of informal networking or less involved forms of cooperation where interdepen-

dence is minimal, or at early stages of organizational development. Interestingly, it was the mid-scale farmers in our case, who would normally be considered to be less “alternative” in terms of their otherwise greater engagement with productivist agriculture, who advocated for a more interdependent approach — one that is arguably more congruent with the cooperative ideals of CFNs.

Some farmers viewed the CFN predominantly as a business entity and acted to externalize discussions and actions that were not directly related to the marketing initiative. Paradoxically, outside the context of the HMLFI, most of these business-focused farmers were active educators, leaders in the sustainable agriculture community, and committed volunteers in their local community. Other HMLFI members prioritized the non-economic organizational pursuits related to training young farmers, educating the urban public on the importance of sustainable agriculture and alternative food systems, and in providing support for the development of similar projects in other regions. Those who valued these extra-economic motivations better tolerated the suboptimal economic performance and incremental growth of the HMLFI. These members were also frustrated when more business-oriented members allocated less time and attention to the group’s extra-economic pursuits.

Regardless of their business priorities, all the members valued the peer support network gained through the HMLFI, which was viewed as particularly important in regions dominated by industrial agriculture where rural communities, agriculture institutions, and universities are often dismissive or even hostile toward alternative agricultural knowledge, production, and marketing approaches. All participants indicated that they felt validated through the relationships with other farmers in the group, irrespective of any market benefit they derived from participation. These mutually reinforcing relationships were an important incentive for continued participation, especially in light of the suboptimal economic performance of the CFN. For many members, this social support reduced feelings of isolation, increased self-worth, and, in many cases, empowered members to continue pursuing their own alternative farm development pathways while assisting others in doing the same.

These gratifying face-to-face encounters reflect what has been referred to as the exchange of “regard” in the context of farmer-consumer relations in local food networks (Sage, 2003). These social and affective exchanges occur in tandem with economic exchange (Lee, 2000), where the interpersonal acknowledgement of trust and expertise is a powerful reward in its own right.

The exchange of regard, however, was highly uneven and largely confined to each of the emergent factions within the group. Interactions between these subgroups might be better characterized as the exchange of dis-regard or anti-regard, where the expertise, professional knowledge, and integrity of members were often openly criticized. These conflictual encounters reflected the diverging interpretations and negotiations among members around what represented good food and good farming. Such negative knowledge exchanges undermine trust and act as a disincentive for participation, and in the case of HMLFI, prompted some members (especially women) to withdraw from the initiative.

We found that as group meetings and interactions became more acrimonious, women who had initially played important roles as organizers began to drop out, leading to a highly male-gendered organizational dynamic. It is now widely suggested that, compared to the male-dominated spaces that pervade conventional agriculture, women are better represented in the sustainable agriculture industry and often occupy leadership positions in alternative food and agriculture organizations (DeLind & Ferguson, 1999; Jarosz, 2011; McMahan, 2011; Trauger, Sachs, Barbercheck, Brasier, & Kiernan, 2010). However, as much as the cooperative nature of CFNs might represent feminized organizational forms that are “resistant to a hegemonic masculinity (i.e., individual, corporate, competitive ethic)” (Harter, 2004), this does not preclude the emergence of a strongly male-gendered space, which indeed occurred in the HMLFI and led to the intensification of conflict within the group. Many of the women felt that remaining within the HMLFI as active participants would undermine valued and sometimes long-standing relationships, ones that they did not wish to jeopardize. While women have been found to

play an important role in generating and maintaining social capital within rural communities (Healy, Haynes, & Hampshire, 2007), that role ran at odds with the social dynamics that were emerging in the HMLFI.

Although the original form of the HMLFI was ultimately dissolved, a diversity of innovations emerged as participants responded to the opportunities and challenges that the HMLFI itself generated. Members of HMLFI were forced to reflect in new ways about their farms and values, thus stimulating individual and collective innovation — whether this included new cooperative ventures, new farm management practices, identification of new education and mentorship opportunities, and/or the eventual reincarnation of the HMLFI in its modified form. Based on the relative success of the latest iteration of HMLFI, numerous groups in Manitoba and beyond have interacted with HMLFI members to explore developing their own CFNs (Laforge & Avent, 2013).

While such grassroots experiments may at first glance seemingly fail, the excitement and the learning that results from these initiatives is often redirected into re-imagined individual and collective innovations that constitute a broader process of socio-economic change. Evaluating the *cumulative impacts* of these projects by looking beyond the analytic, spatial, and temporal boundaries of any given organization may provide important insights into their evolution and wider rural development implications and how they fit into a longer narrative of grassroots innovation.

In retrospect, participants unanimously agreed that the group should have confronted their differences from the outset. As the group was splitting up one farmer commented, “separate we might be able to do this but together we’ll never survive. It was a marriage that was doomed to failure” (Clint Cavers). To effectively work across difference there may be a need for a preliminary interactive space to foster mutual understanding and trust and to identify common values and goals, and as importantly to explicitly discuss intergroup difference, before more interdependent economic enterprises are pursued. Working together on smaller and more readily achievable projects might have provided an opportunity to bridge many differences and to

build the social capital required to sustain more involved collaboration (Glowacki-Dudka et al., 2013). Such a space could have supported the development of more organic enterprise(s), which in our case would likely have led to the formation of two separate groups at the outset, rather than one. Once established, these two groups, having met their own needs, might have then explored the hybrid model or other modes of collaboration as a way of better harnessing their complementary interests and strengths.

### Conclusions

The progression of agri-industrialism has led to the consolidation of corporate power and declining sustainability of family farming, which in turn have compromised the resiliency of rural communities (Anderson & McLachlan, 2012; Wilson, 2010). Civic food networks, with their emphasis on participation, democratic governance, and local control, offer an alternative pathway for farmers and rural communities to meet these challenges through a place-contingent, cooperative approach to agrarian community development. They challenge the individualistic and competitive logics that have disconnected and divided farmers and rural communities. These CFNs can play an important role in scaling up local food, cultivating a cooperative ethos, and delivering a wide range of economic and social benefits.


At the onset of this study we were steeped in the excitement of the emerging organization and in a literature on alternative food networks that celebrated social embeddedness and consensus. We did not anticipate the conflict that would later emerge and ultimately compromise the cohesiveness of the CFN. Arguably, it was our long-term and active involvement as researcher-participants that allowed us to document *and experience* group negotiations and tensions that may be less accessible using more detached (i.e., more extractive) social research approaches where research “informants” reflect retroactively on their experiences. Long-term, community-engaged, and participatory action research approaches are ideally suited to accessing and understanding these underlying processes and tensions.

This research suggests a range of potential

directions for future research. First, our in-depth analysis of the tensions that occurred among farmers and also between the farmers and the not-for-profit organization suggests that there is a need to better understand the tensions between eaters and farmers in the emerging multistakeholder forms of CFNs. Another potentially fruitful area of inquiry would focus on the intersection of food justice and CFNs and better describe barriers to farmer participation in these networks, including those related to income, gender, race, and geography. Finally, our research approach raises important questions about the role of university researchers in community development; future research might explore the benefits and risks of academic involvement in the fast-growing number of food-related action research projects.

Our case study suggests that the predominant focus on civic harmony and inclusion in CFNs can obscure the capacity to make sense of and effectively contend with the inevitable power struggles and conflict that permeate these alternatives. Mount (2012) suggests that local food projects are defined “not so much by their shared goals and values, as by the processes through which goals and values come to be shared” (Mount, 2012, p. 115). In our case study, this process ultimately excluded dissenting voices, rather than negotiating a shared and mutually supportive space. From a purely economic rationale, this minimizing of difference among participants can allow for more efficient and expedient business development. However, a more holistic and longer-term vision of CFNs requires that participants confront and reconcile their differences to enable a wider diversity of economic, social, and environmental outcomes.

Failing to confront these differences in CFNs will only perpetuate the fragmentation of rural communities and foster individualistic approaches that limit the capacity for collective problem-solving. By reimagining the challenges of diversity as an opportunity for grassroots innovation we can shift our praxis toward a politics of the possible (Harris, 2009). This will encourage CFNs to focus on strategies that build bridges to harness the diversity of resources, skills and ideas brought together by the wide range of participants attracted

to CFNs. We should envision both “successful” and “unsuccessful” CFNs projects as imperfect works-in-progress, and, ultimately, as embedded within a long-term agenda to build more resilient, and civic, food networks. It is only by embracing the strength in our diversity that the full potential of these networks will be realized. 

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