Canadian Organic Growers
Cultivons Biologique Canada
Perth-Waterloo-Wellington

An Exploration of the Local & Organic Food System in Perth-Waterloo-Wellington

Prepared by Theresa Schumilas, Garden Party
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Executive Summary

This study explores the local and organic food system in the Perth-Waterloo-Wellington area of Ontario. It describes the interactions, patterns and perspectives of a broad range of local food actors, including consumers, producers, alternative retail ventures, distributors, processors, restaurants and caterers. The report illustrates this system as an emerging economy and documents the characteristics and qualities that define a local and organic food system. In doing so, it has uncovered interactions and transactions that are not counted in conventional work on value chains and markets, and recognizes the worth and value of non-capitalist practices in local food systems. The emerging system is deeply based in trust relationships and entrepreneurship. The report concludes with recommendations to help the system further develop and expand without losing its authenticity.

Introduction

This project is another in a series of initiatives undertaken by the Perth-Waterloo-Wellington Chapter of Canadian Organic Growers (COG PWW). Since 2006 COG PWW has been building a mix of market opportunities for organic and transitioning producers that includes institutions and direct-to-consumer mechanisms. This has been an integrated and multi-faceted approach addressing both the supply and demand sides of the equation, in order to build a stronger local and organic sector in the area. A key focus of COG PWW's work has been to expand the diversity of local markets as a "pull" strategy to give smaller scale organic farmers access to stable income sources and draw greater acreage into certified organic production. Reports of this work can be found on the COG PWW website at www.cogwaterloo.ca.

Purpose

The broad purpose of this exploration is to gain insights into the relationships, interactions, values and exchanges of actors involved in the local and organic food system in the Perth-Waterloo-Wellington area of Ontario (PWW). Through the process of conceptually mapping the local organic food system, it is hoped the research can identify challenges and opportunities to help inform COG's and others' next strategic projects.

What is a Local Organic Food System?

The term "food system" is commonly defined as the complex relationships related to production, processing, distribution, retail, preparation, consumption and disposal. Food system thinking is a way of seeing the bigger picture.

To be sustainable, food systems need to concentrate greater value with producers and rural communities. In short, more of the retail dollar needs to be returned to the producer. Current trends indicate an increasing consumer demand for local foods, which presents new direct-to-consumer marketing opportunities for small-scale producers (Le Roux, 2009). A wide range of "alternative food networks" are evolving in developed and developing countries, against the logic of bulk commodity production. This movement is being studied from multiple perspectives and is variously described as 'alternative agro-food networks' (Watts, 2005), 'community food security' (Anderson, 2000); (Bellows, 2001), 'alternative food initiatives' (Allen, 2003), 'post productivism' (Whatmore, 2003), 'shortened food chains' (Ilbery, 2005), 'the quality turn' (Goodman, 2003), 'eco-localism' (Curtis, 2003), 're-localisation', 'spatially-based networks' (Marsden, 2005) and 'local food systems' (Feagan, 2007); (Jarosz, 2008).

The term "local food system" has been singled out for use in this project. However, regardless of the label, there is an evolving (although not complete) consensus in terms of the elements that define these systems. We hope to advance this definition through this work.

Approach

The study is exploratory, not comprehensive. Through a deviant sampling approach we first identified a group of dedicated local and organic consumers. Through discussions with this unique group of "eaters", we then interviewed a range of other local organic [1] food system players, including different scales of organic producers, buying clubs, food box schemes, natural food stores, restaurants, caterers, processors and distributors. These food system actors generously talked with the researchers about how they see their role in the local organic food system, their connections, transactions, motivators, values, challenges and dreams. An iterative process was used throughout, with periodic discussions with local organic food system "thought leaders" to guide and inform subsequent interviews and interpretation.

Figure 1 below presents a simplified picture of the local organic system and illustrates the range of players the "eaters" identified.

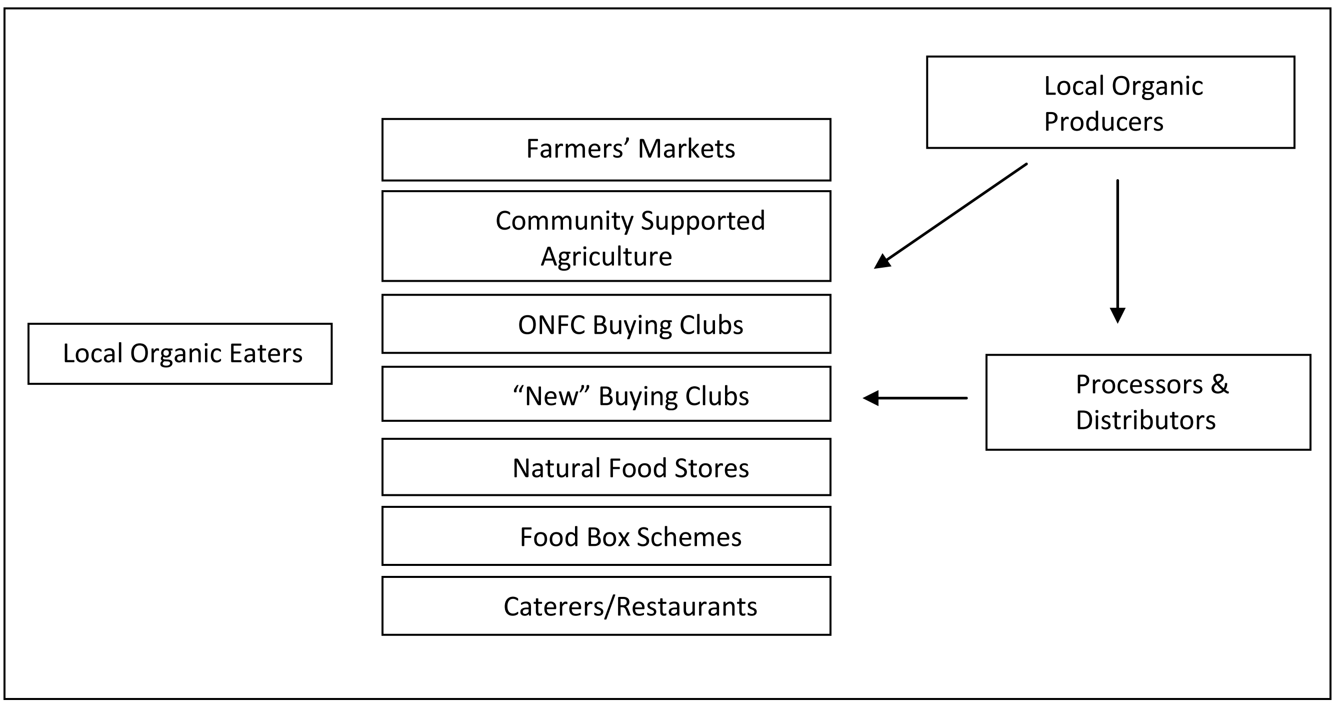

Figure 1: Actors in the Local and Organic Food System

[1] In reviewing literature on alternative food systems, it seems that this criteria – regarding *how* the food is produced – is often assumed or very weakly defined. Indeed, assessing the sustainability of production in a food system is a challenge and there is little consensus on the specific agronomic methods this phrase describes. (Is GMO feed to meat animals sustainable? Is reduced, but not eliminated use, of synthetic pesticides sustainable – and if so, how much reduction of which chemicals in particular? Is use of fossil-fuel based fertilizer sustainable? etc). To resolve the dilemma, this project considers the agronomic practices outlined in the Canadian Organic Standard as sustainable, and hence interviewed only "certified organic" production and processing operations.

Limitations

Before proceeding, a few limitations need to be highlighted:

- This is not an economic analysis. Detailed economic information was not requested from food system actors.
- This is not an analysis of any particular value chain. Such an analysis would quantify and explore a particular product (such as organic beef, bread or milk) from farm to table, and identify the value added at each step. This analysis looks at the system overall and therefore is of a more general nature.
- This analysis only addresses the organic food products in the local system, and not all the inputs and outputs associated with those products. (i.e., Producer inputs such as certification services, natural insect control products, organic feed, packaging, etc are not explored).
- We have not included an assessment of farmers' markets as part of this analysis. Certainly, these are key retail outlets in the local and organic system. However, a detailed audit of the organic vendors at these outlets, while necessary, was beyond the scope of this work.

Results

To describe the local organic food system in Perth-Waterloo-Wellington, this report first discusses the perspectives and relationships of a unique group of consumers (subsequently referred to as "eaters"), followed by a description of the organic producers in the area. Finally, "the middle" of the system, including a diversity of institutions and arrangements helping to "move" local and organic goods from the feeders to the eaters is explored.

The Eaters

This report refers to "eaters" not "consumers". Discussions with these eight individuals suggest that this is a very empowered group, and their food procurement practices suggest that they are quite distinct from more passive "consumers" in conventional food networks and systems. The reason for interviewing this unique group was primarily to help us identify other actors in the local organic system. All of the eaters interviewed were women, but other than that, could not be characterized by a particular demographic. Some were mothers of young or grown children while some were students, and some worked outside the home while others owned their own businesses.

The eaters in this local organic system are active and innovative change agents. They pursue and value trust-based relationships with others in the local system, and see themselves as partners with food suppliers. They are highly skilled with regard to food, understanding seasonal availability, ideal product storage, product metrics and measurement, etc. They are motivated by health, social justice and concern for the environment. They place equal importance on the local and organic aspects of their food, and they do not see themselves choosing between these characteristics. As one eater said*,*

"I want to have my organic broccoli and eat it too, and if that means I have to go to multiple places to find things, then I will. My health and the planet's health are worth my effort."

Consistently, local organic eaters seek to avoid *"anything corporate*". Most said that they ventured into a supermarket only out of absolute necessity. For these eaters, securing food is a non- market activity. This is nicely illustrated in one interview where the eater describes their weekly procurement of food by stating,

"It just doesn't feel like shopping."

While this study did not look closely at personal finances, most of the eaters told us that they do not think they spend any more on food than most people. They choose, however, to prioritize food purchases very highly. Several believe they spend less on food than their friends and neighbours because the food they are buying is much less processed and closer to its authentic and raw form, so less of their food dollar is allocated to processing industries.

The eaters love being *"in the know"* about local food system elements and are constantly seeking additional information. More than one eater remarked,

"Can I get a copy of this report and will you tell me about other places I can visit for local and organic food that I might not know about already?"

Perhaps most importantly, all the eaters have an in-depth knowledge of the local organic food system itself. They are the ideal source of information on "who's who" in the local system. They could tell us (and did) who sells what, when, where and how. Each eater was immediately and without prompting able to identify at least six different places where they purchase local and organic food regularly (usually weekly). Further, these six types of establishments consistently included a CSA farm, a buying club type of arrangement (often two different clubs), a natural food store (usually two different stores), direct from farm gate (in addition to the CSA farm) and a farmers' market.

The Feeders: “Near” and “Distant” Farms

The Perth-Waterloo-Wellington area is characterized by smaller than average farms generating higher than average net revenues (Cummings, 2003). The area makes an important contribution to organic agriculture in Ontario with the largest concentration of organic producers in the province. Close to 400 farms in the region produce certified, transitional and organically grown (but not certified) products, comprising 10.4% of Ontario’s organic farms (Schumilas, 2007). Organic farms in this region are increasing by 10% annually and are more likely to be certified organic compared to the province (30% versus 25% of farms, respectively). Most certified organic farms in the region produce field crops (55%), with 25% producing livestock and 18% producing fruits and vegetables.

CSAs Farms – Entrepreneurial Engines of Local Food Systems

Community Supported Agriculture has been called the “darling” of the alternative food system as it is the most consistently identified alternative business model in such systems. Despite its prevalence, there is an absence of research on the CSA sector in Canadian agriculture. A recent survey (Organic Council of Ontario, 2009) indicates that CSA operators are younger and more highly educated (with 90% having post secondary education) than conventional farmers. They are also more likely to have alternative land access arrangements. As part of this project, we also undertook a preliminary “census” of CSA farms in the PWW region. The results suggest:

- 12 CSA farms in the PWW area
- Collectively these farms offer approximately 1,300 produce shares
- Average share cost is $613 for 18-20 weeks of produce
- Collectively CSAs directly contribute an estimated $1 million to the local farm economy (without considering multiplier effects).

The CSA farmers interviewed here are strong entrepreneurs in the local food system. All the CSA farmers we spoke with are in the process of expanding either the number of shares, the diversity of products they distribute, or the number of months they operate.

These farmers are in close contact with their members, and they see this “partnership” with eaters as a source of innovation. Like the eaters in this system, they are motivated by health, social justice and concerns for the environment. All of the CSA farmers interviewed here offer flexible and alternative economic arrangements (such as sliding scale of cost, subsidized shares, or labour-exchange systems), suggesting that high value is placed on the non-monetary aspects of the exchange.

They are involved in the local food system with a multitude of actors in addition to their members. Some partnerships are business arrangements (selling to caterers or restaurants, for example), but typically they are also involved extensively in educational activities (farm tours, courses, mentorship of urban gardeners, internship arrangements).

CSA farmers enjoy the challenge of low-input farming, and trying to ensure diverse produce for as many weeks as possible. They describe it as “back breaking” work with a strong sense of accomplishment and pride at CSA delivery or pick-up time. One producer said,

> “*I go full out for 12 hours a day, going to bed absolutely exhausted physically and mentally. Then when my members come to pick up their shares, and someone says, “Wow – your beets look amazing”, I feel so proud and rewarded. Growing food for someone is the most amazing thing. It’s a privilege.”*

The CSA farmers work closely with each other to help address the technical challenges they face. In fact, most CSA farms cross-refer to each other. Unlike other more business-focused actors in the food system, these producers are actively trying to make sure that the eater is well-matched to the program that works best for them.

These farmers enjoy marketing, but find it time-consuming and get frustrated when it competes too much with the time the need to give to farming activities. One producer laments*,*

> *“I have all these marketing ideas. I’ve got all day out there hoeing to think them through. But then, I’m too exhausted after a day’s work to implement them.”*

Distant Organic Farms

The exuberance of the near-urban CSA farmer is not necessarily felt by more distant and larger organic farms. Larger farms were much less likely to return calls for interviews for example. At a recent meeting of a number of these farms hosted by COG PWW in late 2010, the mood was cautious. All these farms experienced a difficult year in 2010 with several farmers wondering, *“Is the local thing over?”* and deciding to

> *“Really cut back on what I’m planting this year. Last year I just made expensive compost. I’d rather not grow it in the first place then be faced with so much un-sold produce again.”*

These farms are typically (but not always) located further from urban centres. Similar to CSA farms they are selling direct to consumers at farm gate and farmers’ markets, but in addition they are also spreading their supply across multiple marketing channels and selling to wholesalers often for distribution both within and outside the region. Many are seeking arrangements with buying clubs where they can draw a slightly better price than selling to a wholesaler.

The challenge here is that they need help with marketing and delivery. These farms are caught. First, to sell wholesale means competing with distant organic products (often from the US) “being dumped” into the value chain at less than cost, which subsequently drives their wholesale prices down. Second, the “local trend” has meant they are competing with local and conventionally grown product at farmers' markets and farm gate, produced without the same production costs. One producer said,

"I had hoped that the new organic regulation would solve this, and consumers would realize that local does not mean organic, but that doesn't seem to matter. I think consumers just think that it is those farmers from far way who are spraying pesticides and fumigating soil. They don't realize that all of those practices are happening right here on local produce."

Despite these concerns, it is important to note that both the distant and the near farms identified that scaling up production is possible:

"We don't have a shortage of supply. We have a shortage of informed demand, and people are hooked on the convenience of grocery stores."

The "Middle"

New Buying Clubs

Food buying clubs have a deep history. An earlier wave of alternative food purchasing approaches rooted in the 1970s concern for wholesome foods launched numerous such ventures. Many of these still exist and are now beginning to revitalize themselves to embrace localism and anti-corporate values. Much can be learned from the Ontario Natural Food Cooperative (ONFC) model where a multitude of small (some only ten families), dispersed groups order and purchase foods from a centralized warehouse at less than retail prices. New buying clubs are seeking ways to replicate that type of efficiency, but with the addition of embedding products to a greater extent in local communities.

This study located four of these new-model buying clubs in the PWW area with the following characteristics:

- Collective venture with some type of "membership" process
- Focus is on sourcing products meeting both local and organic criteria
- Pre-order system with no or low inventory to keep prices as low as possible
- Purchasing power to buy in bulk or at wholesale prices
- Inclusion of a wide range of goods (produce, dairy, meats, grains).

In each instance examined here, the buying club was started by an empowered eater. The story was always the same:

"I started out being committed to eating healthier and supporting my local community. Then I found myself going to all these different places every week, so I offered to pick up goods for others as well – my family, people I work with, my neighbour... Then one day someone I didn't know called me and asked if I'd get something for them as well. Then more called ... So then I thought, I want to at least collect money for gas.... Finally, I thought, maybe this could be a fun business."

Like the CSA farmers, these women show a strong entrepreneurial spirit. They are solution brokers. They have enabled product chains to meet their needs, and then expanded that to meet the needs of others. They are trying to balance an emphasis on quality, price, transparency and community engagement. They prefer trusting relationships to simply economic rules of exchange. One person said,

"I only buy from people I know. I need to be able to not only vouch for the product, but also for how it's produced."

These buying clubs are still evolving and the proprietors are still trying to figure out their own motives:

"I'm not sure if this is about profit for me or not. I know that I want to keep getting these healthy foods for my family and there would be no other way to get them if I didn't do this, but I've just kind of fallen into this – I didn't have this plan in the beginning."

Food Box Schemes

"Food box schemes" are innovations often referred to in alternative food systems literature. Typically the term refers to a range of ventures, including CSAs. In this report, we distinguish "food box schemes" from CSAs in that they are more closely aligned to more typical retail situations where:

- Anyone can order; they are not membership-based
- Goods are typically pre-packaged and delivered to homes or common drop spots
- A wide inventory is available, and includes produce, staples, dairy, meats, as well as pre-packaged and processed goods
- The inventory is often a mix of local/distant and organic/conventional products
- There is a limited social aspect to the program – consumers are independent and purchase without interaction.

This research identified four such businesses located in the PWW area. Although there could be many more as many retail firms are prepared to add pre-ordering and delivery options to their operations as retail becomes increasingly competitive. Unlike the buying clubs described above, these ventures were started as businesses, and the proprietors have cultivated typical market relations with suppliers. Purchasing power is important to them; they are striving for an economy of scale, so typically they have larger orders than buying clubs. Despite many attempts, none of these businesses agreed to participate in this study.

Independent Natural Food Stores

Research in the organic sector suggests at least 45% of certified organic grocery product sales are through natural food stores in Ontario (Macey, 2007). Indeed all of the eaters interviewed in this study purchased food at natural food stores on a weekly basis because the products they were seeking were not available in conventional supermarket retail. (Despite the huge size of supermarkets, there seems to be an absence of choice for the eaters interviewed here).

It is the product mix, and not the retail approach, that defines these businesses as "alternative". The proprietors of these stores spoke to us primarily about issues of price and margins:

"I am continually squeezed. People really want cheap food, and they want high quality too. It is nearly impossible."

These interviewees identified items that they could not locate using both local and organic criteria. Interestingly, often the items they indicated were known to be available and found elsewhere by the eaters we described above. For example, one natural food retailer mentions,

"Carrots for example. Here we are in March so there are no longer local and organic carrots available so mine are now from California."

The same week however, a local buying club is offering local and organic carrots. The proprietor notes,

"Sure, there are still local and organic carrots. I'll be able to get them until there are new fresh carrots available likely. The problem is that they are not as nice looking any longer. They are broken and some are starting to show signs of storage. They are great tasting carrots still though! My members love them. I go through 50 lbs a week."

The contradiction illustrates the issue may not be availability (as the store owner suggests), but instead one of consumer concern about produce appearance.

Typically the natural food store proprietors interviewed here indicate that under-supply of local and organic goods is a significant challenge in the system. This stands in contradiction to the experiences of local organic producers who are drawing up plans to plant less next season having had trouble selling this year's crop. It is not clear from this study if the issue is one of price or distribution mechanisms. It is clear, however, that natural food store proprietors see producers quite differently than eaters or buying club operators. One store proprietor explained difficulties in procuring local and organic produce:

"I'd like to source direct from local growers – but they have to be prepared to deliver and sell at wholesale prices. It's kind of crazy all this calling around to find out what they've got. I don't have time for that mess."

Another store owner thought that the local organic farmers must not be "*very serious about business*" because they are not very systematic about wholesale price lists and delivery, and don't have someone answering a phone every day.

Processors and Distributors

Not surprisingly processors and distributors play central roles in local food systems, as well as in larger and extra-regional value chains. As with the food box scheme operators, this group was difficult to engage in the current study. In the end we briefly interviewed four local and primarily organic processors, and two distributors. These businesses serve all of the actors described above, from the buying clubs to the natural food stores.

Most (not all) of these actors gravitate toward larger scaled chains. Their products are not exclusively organic and local. They sell other products, and they sell in other communities. To quote one proprietor, "*A sale is a sale*". One distributor said,

> *"It's pretty easy. You just get the wholesale list and you place an order. We keep the minimum small to keep it easy for smaller guys."*

For them, the emphasis on economic viability generally overshadows (but does not replace) the social relations so evident in the system transactions.

As with the discussions with natural food store proprietors, the processors and distributors focused on cost and being "squeezed". In several instances, processors indicated they wanted to use local organic inputs, but were making substitutions to non-organic ingredients (butter in particular) due to higher cost.

Restaurants and Caterers

We interviewed one restaurant and two caterers who told us that they try to source local and organic to the greatest extent possible. The caterers in particular demonstrated a striking solidarity with the values of the eaters and buying clubs described earlier in this report. They are challenged, however, to make ends meet, with one of them telling us,

> *"I keep trying, but realistically, I don't know if I'll be doing this next year. I don't want to focus on the money, but it is a reality. I just am too squeezed between paying organic farmers a fair price – which I insist on – and giving the consumers a product at the price they want. It just can't be done."*

Similar to the contradiction highlighted above with the natural food stores, several of the restaurants/caterers interviewed expressed difficulty sourcing local and organic items that the eaters had available for sale at buying clubs. It isn't clear if restaurants were unaware of the availability, unable to access the product through an easy distribution system, or if the price was unacceptable to them.

Recommendations

The following recommendations and suggestions focus on moving raw and minimally processed, local organic food to local organic eaters with moderate incomes. These are not "high end" strategies like tourism projects and elite chef programs. The local organic food system is not for tourists or the rich. This is fundamentally a system that knits together local citizens in a multitude of relationships to access everyday foods. This is "food we can do".

- **Combine social and economic system elements to expand reach**

Sustainable development thrives in the blending of market and non-market realms, where actors are not simply businesses in a value chain, but are also citizens with social interests. There are both market-oriented and relationship-oriented activities inter-woven in the local organic system dynamics in Perth-Waterloo-Wellington. These can be combined into exciting new business ventures that make local and organic food more accessible to consumers who value convenience. One option could be merging a buying club, CSA and natural food store. The store offers the benefits of a fixed location and more diverse customer base, the CSA ensures access to local organic produce, and the buying club offers the social interaction that many eaters in the local system are seeking. Such projects would leverage the strengths of all players while addressing respective challenges. Perhaps it would be possible to pilot several of these "organic food hubs" in different areas of the PWW region. Keeping the resulting entity authentic and relationship-based is the key.

- **Follow the Entrepreneurs!**

Play to the system's strengths! New-model buying clubs and CSAs represent the most entrepreneurial elements in the system. Actions to help this vibrancy expand will help to grow the system. Examples of such supportive actions include:

- Developing a "Buying Club How To" start-up program
- Holding a third CSA Mini School similar to the one held at the 2010 Bring Food Home Conference to kick start new ventures, and perhaps to help invent more diverse types of CSAs (baked goods, dairy, meat)
- Following the example of the CRAFT (Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training in Ontario) website for intern recruitment, and keeping an updated on-line listing of CSA shares available (perhaps in partnership with CSA Ontario)

- **Focus more on natural food retail**

In this study the natural food stores were not always aware of local and organic food availability. There is work to be done with natural food stores to update their connections with the local and organic community. Concentration in conventional retail is resulting in a disconnect between consumers and food. The natural food store proprietors know that and would welcome help to attract consumers looking for food authenticity. A local organic retailer program could be developed and might include:

- Signage and/or shelf talkers giving local AND organic products special promotion
- Meet-and-greet programs between natural food stores and local organic producers

- **Go for the low hanging fruit**

While it is tempting to suggest the development of a local organic distribution system, such systems are capital and time intensive. The concern is that such a system will be scale-dependent, and hence will move the focus away from the local market. That may attract additional consumers, but it could lose the "eaters" interviewed here, who value those authentic and local connections. Bigger is not better in this case. Instead, these actions may be advisable:

- Continue and expand such tools as COG PWW's Local Organic Farm Directory, and find ways to distribute them more broadly
- See CSAs as integral partners; these programs are in touch with an enthusiastic group of consumers that could help multiply the message
- Help the distant farms connect with natural food stores and buying clubs by organizing an on-line weekly "what's available in PWW" website that includes both wholesale and retail prices for both delivered and picked-up goods

- **Continue to distinguish local and organic at every available opportunity**

Some of the actors interviewed here were confused about local and organic. If these folks are getting muddled, then for sure most consumers are very confused! Every available opportunity should be taken to differentiate "how" food is produced (organic versus conventional) from "where" food is produced (local versus distant). Excellent materials to do this have been developed by COG PWW. We need to find ways to circulate the message more broadly on very tight budgets. It is important to stand with organic producers to uphold the integrity of organic in the retail chain and to explain to consumers that "food miles" is simply a conceptual tool, not a holistic measure of energy use in the system.

- **Demystify Organic Prices**

While it's not popular to say so, the reality is, organic food prices represent an un-subsidized and fair market value of food without externalities. As we watch conventional food prices rise (and riots over food around the globe), this will become more and more clear to everyone. In the short term however, this study found some misconceptions about organic prices. While it is true that the premium for organic seems significant for some products (especially dairy and meat), often times the price premium at alternative retail (e.g., in a CSA) is modest or even non-existent. Collaboration with researchers (perhaps university students) to develop and continually update a local and organic price comparison website is recommended. This site could illustrate prices for consumers, assist local producers in setting their own prices, and could be used to explain externalities embedded in conventional pricing.

- **Forge alliances with social justice groups**

Food purchases in the local organic system described here are framed in an ethical approach. Rather than trying to market broadly to consumers (even if necessary budgets existed) we recommend adopting an approach targeting "like-minded" groups and networks. Historically, the organic movement has worked in solidarity with environmental groups. In addition, the time seems right to reach out to social justice groups and movements whose values are coherent with those seen in this local organic food system, but who have not yet realized the ways in which their food actions can send important solidarity messages to local organic producers.

- **Expand work on food skills**

Consumers are increasingly interested in developing new food skills, and this study shows that they need those skills to effectively participate in a local organic food system because of the greater reliance on raw and minimally processed foods. A practical set of resources (e.g., how to stock a pantry for winter, how to store produce, what the measurements and metrics of buying local foods are) would be welcomed and distributed by all the actors in the current system.

Conclusion

The local organic food system explored here is characterized by a high degree of solidarity and a blend of informal and formal networks. The defining elements of the system include:

- Grassroots or locality-based – Stakeholders buy and sell *primarily* (not exclusively) to other stakeholders in the same geographical community
- Short-distance chains – Products change hands fewer times than in larger chains and products travel less physical distance between producers and consumers
- Multiple small-scale enterprises
- Alternative food purchasing venues including buying clubs, CSAs, farmers' markets, on-line purchasing, home delivery options, and small retail stores
- Relationship-based – Stakeholders generally have a level of personal or non-business contact with others in the system
- Knowledge intensive – Both buyers and sellers in the system require a comparatively high degree of food knowledge and skills
- Active roles – Both producers and purchasers in local systems play active roles in moving the products; consumers are not passive
- Emphasis on food authenticity – Generally these networks buy, sell and barter foods that are closer to their authentic states or are less processed
- Organic – In contrast to local food systems dominated by products grown conventionally, this system is transparent to consumers about how food is produced (organically) in addition to where it is produced (local).

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