

Good Food For All: The Role of the Social Economy in Sustainable Food Systems

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Introduction

As the global corporate food system spreads around the world, hunger is not alleviated, but rather intensifies. Over 1 billion people are now estimated to be undernourished – more than at any time since 1970, the earliest year for which comparable statistics are available (FAO, 2010). At the same time, an equal number of people are obese, as a result of a predatory food system that pushes cheap, empty calories on vulnerable populations. By these or most other measures, the global corporate food system is unsustainable.

In response to this growing malnutrition crisis, social economy organizations have emerged to try to address the problem. By doing so, they ride the familiar tensions faced by the ‘third sector’: some prop up an unsustainable food system, while others model more sustainable ones.

This paper will examine the role of the social economy in the struggle for sustainable food systems. It will begin with an overview of food systems, and briefly discuss the global corporate food system and sustainable food systems. It will then examine how three types of social economy organizations in our current food system – co-operatives, non-profits and social enterprises – can be understood as models for a sustainable food system. The paper concludes with some observations about the presence of social economy organizations at every node of a sustainable food system, helping to ensure that everyone is fed, within the ecological limits of the planet.

Food Systems

At its most basic, a system is a group of interacting, interrelated, and often interdependent, elements that function together as a complex, unified whole – change in one element of a system has an impact, either directly or indirectly, on one or more additional elements of that system (Wilkins and Eames-Sheavly 2003). Using this baseline, we can argue that a food system is a group of interacting, interrelated, and often interdependent, elements related to food – including production, processing, distribution, wholesaling, retailing, consumption and disposal – that function together as a complex, unified whole.

Since we all need to eat, humans have developed a range of startlingly complex food systems – from local hunting and gathering to global supply chains and markets. When considering local and global food systems, Born and Purcell (2006) remind us that one is not necessarily better than the other – it’s not the scale that matters so much as the agenda of those who are empowered by the scalar strategy. And since food has long been about wealth as well as power (Friedmann 1993), food systems at any scale can become systems of power and exploitation. Nowhere is this more evident than in the global corporate food system.

Global Corporate Food System

While global trade in food has been carried out for centuries, the global corporate food system emerged over the last forty years as supranational institutions, cheap oil and enhanced transportation and food preservation technologies combined to enable its development. In particular, neoliberal policies have removed the so-called barriers to trade, paving the way for the consolidation of huge multinational food conglomerates that seek to control an increasing share of the global market. In the US, for example, ninety-five percent of the food Americans eat is a corporate product (McMichael, 2000). Lappé (2011) maintains that these food conglomerates have one rule to follow – to bring the highest return to their shareholders and executives – and every step degrading our food flows from that rule. In addition, she argues, the degradation of our environment and our social fabric is also associated with this “one-rule economy” (177).

Following the definition of a food system, we can understand the global corporate food system as a group of interacting, interrelated, and often interdependent, privately owned elements related to food – including production, processing, distribution, wholesaling, retailing, consumption and disposal – that function together as a complex, unified whole at the global level. The power and exploitation of this food system are lamented by Rosset (as cited in Albritton, 2009, p. 200) when he asks:

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

Can we create food systems not based on power and exploitation – systems that ensure food security, farm security and environmental security – systems that are more sustainable?

Sustainable Food Systems

Sustainability is a term that is often called upon, but seldom defined. But without a definition to ground us, it would be difficult to understand whether we were becoming more or less sustainable. It would also be difficult to establish the guidelines for a sustainable food system.

One definition that incorporates social, economic and environmental parameters links sustainability with the idea of the civil commons. Conceptualized by McMurtry (1999a, 1), the civil commons is “any co-operative human construction that protects and/or enables the universal access to life goods.” In this way, the civil commons is co-operative, not competitive. It does not occur naturally, but is built by human agency. The civil commons protects through rules and

regulations, and enables by opening up spaces and opportunities. It involves universal access, not paid access, to life goods, such as food, water, shelter, education, and healthcare. The civil commons can be described as “society’s long-evolving system of conscious human protection of the larger life-host humanity lives from” (1999b, p. 213).

The civil commons is all around us, but until recently has never been collectively recognized and named: public education systems, universal health-care programs, building regulations, water and power installations, bridges, social safety protections, laws, libraries, public broadcasting, sewage systems, social assistance and environmental legislation.

The civil commons is central to a life-coherent understanding of sustainability, defined by Sumner (2005) as a set of structures and processes that build the civil commons.

The structures can range from universities, governments and corporations to NGOs, neighbourhood associations and social businesses, as long as they build the civil commons. The processes can include teaching, learning, decision-making, facilitating, governing and researching, as long as they build the civil commons. These structures and processes interact dynamically to create, support and spread the civil commons. The wider and deeper the civil commons – socially, economically and environmentally – the higher the level of sustainability. The more the civil commons is enclosed, the lower the level of sustainability (Sumner, 2011).

If sustainability involves building the civil commons, then the term sustainable food system would carry the same meaning – it would be a food system based in the civil commons. In other words, such a food system would consist of a variety of co-operative human constructions that protected and/or enabled universal access to the life good of food. Following the original definition of a food system, we can understand a sustainable food system as a group of interacting, interrelated, and often interdependent, co-operatively constructed and collectively owned elements generated by a set of structures and processes that build the civil commons related to food – including production, processing, distribution, wholesaling, retailing, consumption and disposal – that function together as a complex, unified whole.

How does the social economy fit into a sustainable food system?

Sustainable Food Systems and the Social Economy

Unlike the ‘one-rule economy’ that only rewards shareholders and top-level executives, the social economy abides by social as well as economic rules intended to benefit a wide range of people. Indeed, its social values can even precede its economic import (Quarter 1992). As such, it shares many of the general parameters associated with sustainability:

At its core, the social economy is concerned with questions of sustainability, that is, how to protect people from the effects of neo-liberal restructuring, how to create meaningful employment, and how to build humane alternatives to the self-regulating market (Mook and Sumner 2010, 155).

In particular, Mook and Sumner (2010) argue that the social economy can be considered as part of the civil commons because it is a cooperative human construct that protects and/or enables universal access to a range of life goods, such as food, housing, employment, and leisure opportunities. “By filling life-good gaps or initiating alternative life-good provision, people involved in the social economy contribute constructively to their own well-being and to the well-being of others” (p. 158).

Given the crises engendered by the global corporate food system, some social economy organizations have focussed on food. A classic example is food banks, described by Suschnigg (forthcoming 2012) as non-profit, charitable organizations that solicit private donations of food, money and services in kind and distribute mainly food to smaller emergency food programs in the region or directly to households in need. She points out, however, that critics have long complained that food banks are a band-aid solution to a fundamentally flawed economic system. For this reason,

food banks play out some of the tensions inherent within the larger social economy. On the one hand, food banks provide a vital emergency service to people in immediate need. People have to eat every day, so food banks work within the current global corporate food system by trying to feed those who get left behind in the rush for profits. On the other hand, food banks prop up this dysfunctional food system, repairing its most egregious failings and perpetuating the use of monopolistic power (Sumner 2012).

It is important to note, however, that social economy organizations have a larger role to play than simply supporting the status quo. In the words of Shragge and Fontan (2000) “A social economy implies the basic reorientation of the whole economy and related social institutions” (9). A number of social economy organizations are moving beyond the status quo to model a sustainable food system.

1. Co-operatives

A co-operative is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise (International Co-operative Association, 2008). There are three main types of co-operatives – producer co-ops, worker co-ops, and consumer co-ops. All three types are examples of the civil commons in action and provide examples of how social economy organizations associated with food contribute to sustainable food systems.

i) Producer co-ops are social economy organizations made up of primary producers such as farmers. Some of the economic needs producer co-ops meet are marketing and income generation; some of the social needs they meet are mentoring, companionship and advocacy (Sumner and Llewelyn 2010). Organic Meadow Co-operative is a producer co-op that markets eggs, grain, and dairy. Formed in 1989 by a group of organic grain producers faced with the closure of the region’s only organic grain mill, it now markets its products across the country. In his history of the co-op, President Ted Zettel describes the farmers’ frustration with conventional marketing models, and articulates their desire to create a new food system, rooted in social economy activity:

Organic Meadow was born out of urgent need, powerful vision and persistent determination. The urgent need was to have a means of getting our crops to the market. The entire organic food business was only in its infancy at the time, with no reliable infrastructure. While regular farmers had many marketing options, the pioneers of organics were very much on their own, unnoticed by the business world and shunned by the powerful academia-government alliance that was insistent on moving agriculture toward industrialization. The radical vision of the founders was of a separate model, a totally new food system that would deliver highest quality, certified organic, local food to a willing, well informed citizenry, who were more than happy to support the stewards of the land. We were a unique mixture of new converts from chemical farming and ‘dyed in the wool’ environmentalists with one belief in common; the thing was not working and we would rebuild it, from the ground up. (Zettel, 2008)

ii) Worker co-ops are described by MacPherson (2010) as co-operatives that define their membership as their workers. Some of the economic needs workers co-ops meet are “wages and sustainable and meaningful work”; some of the social needs they meet are “employment and member empowerment” (52). Planet Bean is a worker co-operative in Guelph, Ontario, that deals in fair trade coffee and tea. According to its website, “Planet Bean is an innovative business model that is fair, sustainable and passionate” (Planet Bean 2012). The co-op sees its success as “grounded in a moral economy informed by the principals of fair trade for our producers, our workers, our shareholders and our customers.” In addition, it believes that a democratic workplace, based on the international principals of co-operation, is the way to create a model for a people-centred economy.

iii) Consumer co-ops are described by MacPherson (2010) as co-operatives that define their membership as their consumers. Some of the economic needs they meet are “quality or hard-to-source goods at affordable prices”; some of the social needs they meet are “community decision making, quality control, and member empowerment” (51). Karma Co-op is a consumer co-operative established in Toronto in 1972, specializing in organic, local, and fair trade products. By operating a co-operative food store, it aims to:

- Create a community of actively participating members
- Foster a healthy connection to the food we eat, the people who grow it, and the other organizations who share our beliefs
- Co-operatively educate ourselves on environmental issues
- Exercise political and economic control over our food (Karma Co-op 2012).

2. Nonprofit Organizations

Nonprofit organizations can also contribute to sustainable food systems. As part of the social economy, they either serve a defined membership by satisfying a mutual interest (non-profit mutual association) or serve the public by providing humanitarian and social services (non-profit serving the public) (Mook and Sumner 2010). FoodShare Toronto and Local Food Plus are examples of the latter – nonprofits serving the public. FoodShare describes itself as a non-profit community food advocacy and program provider (FoodShare 2012). Begun as a temporary food bank, it quickly realized that simply providing food to hungry people did nothing to address the

root cause of their hunger: lack of access to food, particularly, but not restricted to, monetary access. To overcome this problem, it has developed, among many other programs, the Good Food Box and the Good Food Market. While the Good Food Box provides a range of low-cost fruits and vegetables in a weekly subscription box, the Good Food Markets target residents of low-income neighbourhoods who cannot even afford the Good Food Box, thus providing fresh produce to food-insecure people at the bottom of the income scale.

Another non-profit group based in Toronto, Local Food Plus (LFP) is “committed to growing local sustainable food systems” (LFP, 2012) and has developed a certification program that puts environmental, social and economic sustainability at the forefront. LFP certifies food not only as local, but also under a number of other criteria, such as sustainable production, safe and fair working conditions for on-farm labour, healthy and humane care for livestock, habitat and biodiversity protection and enhancement, and reduced energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions (LFP, 2011).

3. Social Enterprises

Social enterprises can also contribute to sustainable food systems. As businesses that sell goods or provide services in the market for the purpose of creating a blended return on investment, both financial and social, their profits are returned to the business or to a social purpose, rather than maximizing profits for shareholders (BC Social Enterprise Summit 2008 in Sousa 2010). Lemon & Allspice Cookery and The Coffee Shed are both social enterprises that operate under the umbrella of the Common Ground Co-operative. Lemon & Allspice is a food catering service that employs 15 adults with developmental disabilities. The Coffee Shed is made up of three coffee kiosks that sell baked goods and sandwiches made by Lemon & Allspice, plus beverages, snack foods and organic fair trade coffee. All three Coffee Sheds are “business partnerships of people with developmental disabilities who are using the skills and talents they have to create employment for themselves” (Common Ground Co-op 2012).

These three types of social economy organizations provide a glimpse of the role that the social economy already plays in modeling sustainable food systems. All around the country, the social economy is stepping up to facilitate and nurture sustainable food initiatives:

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

This robust participation in providing one of the means life – food – highlights the enormous potential of the social economy to contribute to sustainable food systems. At all the nodes that make up the web of a sustainable food system – production, processing, distribution,

consumption or disposal – the social economy would be present (Sumner 2012). And such innovation in the realm of food could be supported by some of the newest members of the social economy – groups like FarmWorks in Nova Scotia – a for-profit co-op that aims to “promote and provide strategic and responsible community investment in food production and distribution to increase access to a sustainable local food supply for all Nova Scotians” (FarmWorks 2012).

Conclusion

The ‘one-rule’ economy espoused by the global corporate food system privileges “corporate agriculture, in the service of capital accumulation on a world scale and at the expense of smallholder agriculture, local ecologies and ‘redundant’ urban fringe-dwellers” (McMichael 2009, 289). In contrast, the social economy involves “economic activity neither controlled directly by the state nor by the profit logic of the market; activity that prioritizes the social well-being of communities and marginalized individuals over partisan-political directives or individual gain” (McMurtry 2010).

A sustainable food system would by definition, prioritize such economic activity, both to counter the neoliberal politics and private enrichment behind the global corporate food system, and to underwrite the well-being of individuals, communities and the environment by ensuring that everyone is fed, within the ecological limits of the planet.

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