



Values in Motion: The Local Organic Food Co-ops Network in Ontario, Canada

JENNIFER SUMNER

Abstract. Values-based food chains (VBFCs) are gaining recognition as people seek alternatives to the unsustainable environmental and social outcomes of the corporate food system. One example of a VBFC can be found in the Local Organic Food Co-ops (LOFC) Network, a coalition of cooperatives that specialize in locally and sustainably produced food in Ontario, Canada. In just a few years, the LOFC Network has built a values-based food chain comprised of producer co-ops, worker co-ops, consumer co-ops and multi-stakeholder co-ops. As a VBFC, it combines three complementary sets of values: local, organic and cooperative. Together, they form a tripartite values matrix that clearly differentiates the LOFC Network from conventional food chains, and models an alternative approach to food production, distribution and consumption. This article will present the findings of a pilot study of the LOFC Network and argue that this type of VBFC can contribute to a more sustainable food system.

Introduction

Values-based food chains (VBFCs) are being increasingly recognized as sustainable alternatives to conventional food chains and as an opportunity to integrate farms, businesses and regional economies into rural and urban development strategies. One dynamic example involves the Local Organic Food Co-ops (LOFC) Network, a group of cooperatives that produce local and sustainable food in the province of Ontario, Canada. As a VBFC, the LOFC Network brings together three complementary sets of guiding values: local, organic and cooperative. Together, they form a values matrix that clearly differentiates the LOFC Network from conventional food chains.

This article will present the findings of a pilot study of the LOFC Network and argue that this type of VBFC can contribute to a more sustainable food system. It will begin with an overview of values-based food chains, then move to an examination of the LOFC Network as a VBFC, using Stevenson et al.'s (2011) dual model of values and the umbrella concept of life values. The article will then consider how the LOFC Network combines the best aspects of its three sets of values and whether this combination can address the weaknesses inherent in each type of value chain and thus contribute to a more sustainable food system.

Jennifer Sumner is Lecturer at the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education, University of Toronto, 252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, ON M5S 1V6, Canada; email <jennifer.sumner@utoronto.ca>.

Values-based Food Chains

Value, in its broadest sense, is the worth of something (Lemos, 1995) and, as such, includes the notion of individual or social values. But in these neo-liberal times the meaning has largely narrowed to monetary value, as exemplified by Pass et al.'s (1991, p. 541) definition of value as 'the exchange or economic worth of an asset or product'. Values, in turn, coalesce into value systems – an underlying set of rules of how to live (McMurtry, 2013). Over the centuries, value systems have galvanized people and guided action, both as individuals and as larger social groups. Values-based food chains are only one of the expressions of these value systems, as people work together to resist the narrowing of values to the neo-liberal norm and champion values that promote more sustainable agri-food systems. These values are commonly seen as encompassing environmental and social parameters as well as economic ones.

In general, food supply chains can be understood as networks of food-related business enterprises through which products move from pre-production to post-consumption (Kvam and Bjørkhaug, 2013). Over the last number of years, food chains based in a range of values that differentiate them from conventional supply chains have been gaining attention (e.g., Renting et al., 2003; Diamond and Barham, 2011; Stevenson et al., 2011; Furtschegger and Schermer, 2014). Feenstra et al. (2011a, p. 3) propose that these 'values-based' supply chains have three aspects: they involve fair pricing for producers, distributors and consumers; they identify the source and production system throughout the supply chain; and they include both small and medium-sized growers. Stevenson et al. (2011, p. 27) add to the discussion when they argue that value chain business models emphasize 'both the values associated with the food and the values associated with the business relationships within the food supply chain'. This dual model is corroborated by Hingley and Lindgreen (2013), who found two distinct streams in the value literature: the value of the object of exchange and the value of the process of exchange.

The values associated with the object of exchange – the food – are introduced by Ikerd (2011), when he proposes that although the creation of such value chains has been motivated by the search for greater economic efficiency regarding sustainably produced foods, this cannot be allowed to assume priority over the ecological, social, and economic principles of sustainability. In this vein, surveys indicate that an increasing number of consumers are committed to buying food that is differentiated by such values-based attributes as organic, grass-fed, regionally sourced, socially just or environmentally responsible (Stevenson et al., 2011).

The values associated with the process of exchange – the relationship – are also brought into focus by Ikerd (2011), who suggests that food value chains are distinguished from conventional food supply chains because the relationships among participants are not solely, or even primarily, economic. Stevenson et al. (2011, p. 30) highlight these relationships when they contend that ideal 'value chains are based on commitments to the welfare of all partners in the supply chain, including fair profits, fair wages, and business agreements of appropriate extended duration.' In other words, given the interdependence of the partners who form food value chains, the self-interest of participants is tied to the performance and well-being of each other, which includes treating producers as 'strategic partners, not as interchangeable input suppliers' (Stevenson et al., 2011, p. 27). Hilchey (2011) ties the two types of values together when he sees values-based food chains as strategic alliances dealing in high quality, differentiated food products and distributing rewards equitably

across the supply chain.

The broad umbrella of 'life values' offers one way of understanding the values associated with these differentiated qualities and equitable rewards. Value theorist John McMurtry (1998) developed the concepts of 'life values' and the 'life code of value', which reproduces or increases life by providing means of life, such as clean air, nutritious food, water and shelter. This 'code of value' is expressed as Life = Means of Life = More Life. In the life code of value, life is the regulating objective of thought and action, and a higher quality of life is always better by definition, regardless of the money that can be made. Life values can be found in non-economic international measures such as the United Nations Human Development Index (Jahan, 2016) and the World Happiness Index (Helliwell et al., 2017), which dovetail with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, 2015). The life code of value also acts as a convenient, collective term for the type of values found in public education programmes, universal healthcare systems, common land and water sources, and values-based food chains. Such values consistently enable human and ecological life, thus fulfilling what McMurtry (2011) refers to as the life-coherence principle, which he argues underlies all authentic human advance.

Three types of values-based food chains fall under McMurtry's (1998) conceptual umbrella of life values by exemplifying the values associated with Stevenson et al.'s (2011) dual model, thus differentiating them from conventional food chains: local food chains, organic food chains and cooperative food chains.

Local Food Chains

Local food chains are based in values associated with the local food movement, such as embeddedness, trust and close personal connections (Goodman et al., 2014), keeping in mind Born and Purcell's (2006) warning that local is no more sustainable than any other scale – it depends on the agenda of those who are empowered by the scalar choice. Although there is lack of general agreement regarding the meaning of local, which can be understood as a weakness of local food chains, the particular organization involved in this study, the Local Organic Food Co-ops Network, defines local as meaning within the province of Ontario.

Local food chains are perceived to have beneficial impacts because they are smaller (and hence may have a positive local economic impact), reduce transport costs, save energy resources, may operate faster, strengthen the structure of local business interactions and should favour both small- and medium-sized businesses, which enhances the diversity of the chain (Flynn and Bailey, 2014). One weakness of local food chains is encompassed in Hinrichs's (2000) warning that many of them take ethical relations for granted, thus conflating spatial relations with social relations. In addition, they can tend toward social homogeneity and exclusion if their membership is mainly white, middle-class, and professional (Hinrichs and Kremer, 2002), can be weak in the area of social justice (Goodman et al., 2014), and sometimes exhibit what is referred to as 'defensive localism' – the construction of rigid barriers to protect local spaces while exhibiting reluctance toward difference (Hinrichs, 2003; Levkoe, 2011).

One example of an organization embodying local values is Local Food Plus, a charitable, non-profit organization that certified food as local and sustainable. Incorporated in 2005 in Toronto, it arose in direct response to some of the challenges facing

producers who were trying to supply local markets, such as environmental degradation, economic difficulties and loss of farmland to urban development (Campbell and MacRae, 2013). On its website, LFP (2011) announced that it recognized the need for a community economic development and job creation strategy, the importance of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and the benefits of a food system that supports positive change for all stakeholders—so it developed values-based standards that put these economic, environmental and social issues at the forefront. The LFP system addressed production, labour, native habitat preservation, animal welfare, and on-farm energy use, and used these standards to open new markets for farmers and processors. In essence, it saw itself as the only organization in Canada developing supply chains and other infrastructure to link small and medium-sized producers with purchasers of all sizes to create food system change. For this reason, LFP sought to make it easy to raise standards of sustainability, not only in terms of proximity (operating within the boundaries of the province of Ontario), but also in five other areas: sustainable agronomy, labour standards, wildlife management, energy and animal welfare (Friedmann and McNair, 2008). In 2014, LFP discontinued its market facilitation role because of a rise in for-profit enterprises that offered similar services as well as dwindling grant resources, but is retaining its certification role (Mann, 2014).

This example of a local food chain clearly instantiated Stevenson et al.'s (2011) dual values model. In terms of the values associated with the food, LFP included a labelling system that let consumers know that the food they bought was local to the province of Ontario and much more. In terms of the values associated with the relationships, it promoted remunerative markets for farmers and fair wages for farm labour. Overall, LFP was committed to creating local sustainable food systems that reduced reliance on fossil fuels, created meaningful jobs, and fostered the preservation of farmland—and farmers (LFP, 2011). Its problems lay in being competitive in the context of dominant market forces and being dependent on grants.

As this example illustrates, there are many strengths that can be associated with local food chains. In Canada, for example, these include freshness, taste, health, the environment, local economic development and support for local farmers (CCA, 2009). In addition, they can foster a heightened awareness of place and the land (Barndt, 2012), highlight the social context of the economy (Hinrichs, 2000) and help us to reclaim our capacity to feed ourselves (Barndt, 2012).

Organic Food Chains

Organic food chains originated in values associated with the organic movement. These values are incorporated into four principles that have been developed and promoted by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM, 2016) to guide organic practice around the world. The first is the principle of health: organic agriculture should sustain and advance the health of soil, plant, animal and human as one and indivisible. The second is the principle of ecology: organic agriculture should be based on living ecological systems and cycles, work with them, emulate them and help sustain them. The third is the principle of fairness: organic agriculture should build on relationships that ensure fairness with regard to the common environment and life opportunities. And the fourth is the principle of care: organic agriculture should be managed in a precautionary and responsible manner to protect the health and well-being of current and future generations and

the environment.

Organic food chains that adhere to IFOAM's principles also mirror Stevenson et al.'s (2011) dual values model. In terms of the values associated with the food, the principle of health includes healthy food, in the broadest sense of the term. With respect to the values associated with the relationships, the principle of fairness encourages fair relationships at all levels of the food chain. Overall, IFOAM is committed to sustainability – environmental, social and economic – and encourages member organizations to adopt its principles. Its weakness is that the principles are voluntary; national governments and certifying organizations are not bound to adopt them.

There are many strengths that can be associated with organic food chains. For example, Schmid et al. (2004) report that organic food chains help farmers pool ideas, capital and skills, and collectively increase the added value of products and market power in the supply chain. They can also promote and support regional food production, environmentally friendly farming systems, the availability of high quality food and rural development (Pugliese, 2001; Schmid et al., 2004), as well as building alliances between producers and consumers (Goodman et al., 2014).

In terms of weaknesses, many organic food chains have diverged from the broad principles set out by IFOAM (Howard, 2009) and may increasingly resemble conventional food chains. Most certifying agencies tend to focus on generic production standards to the exclusion of social standards or innovative practices that exceed the base standards. Further, many organic companies have been purchased and incorporated into major agri-food corporations (Jaffee and Howard, 2010). Other dangers include the emergence of a two-tiered food system (Saul and Curtis, 2013), neglect for social sustainability issues (Shreck et al., 2006) and lack of collaboration (Kottila and Rönni, 2008).

Cooperative Food Chains

Cooperative food chains are based in values associated with the cooperative movement, which includes producer co-ops, consumer co-ops, worker co-ops and multi-stakeholder co-ops. These values are elucidated by the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA), an apex organization for cooperatives around the world. According to the ICA (2016), cooperatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity, and follow the traditions of their founders by believing in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others. Cooperatives put their values into practice through six cooperative principles: voluntary and open membership, democratic member control, member economic participation, autonomy and independence, education, training and information, and cooperation among cooperatives.

Cooperative food chains also embody Stevenson et al.'s (2011) dual values model, although somewhat less strongly than the other two value chains. The values associated with the food itself are indirectly professed through the fact that the food is affiliated with a co-op, not a conventional business, and directly addressed by some particular co-ops in their mission statements. The values associated with the relationships, on the other hand, are front and centre through the development of democratic work environments (one person/one vote – an anomaly in a neo-liberal era) and deliberately collaborating with other cooperatives.

Overall, the strengths of cooperative food chains include collaboration, mutual aid, a democratic workplace (MacPherson, 2010) and potential alliances between

producers and consumers (Goodman et al., 2014). They also offer a haven from some of the worst excesses of the neo-liberal market (Sumner et al., 2014), such as avoiding disabling competition by following the sixth cooperative principle of cooperation among cooperatives and avoiding the hierarchy of conventional businesses by fostering democratic workplaces.

The weaknesses of cooperative food chains may include a lack of values focused on the environment (Sumner and Wever, 2015), stakeholder exclusion (for example, farmers may not be included in consumer co-ops), the threat of demutualization (i.e. cooperatives devolving to conventional businesses) (McMurtry, 2010) and, in common with other social-economy initiatives, cooperative food chains are not up to the structural challenge of equalizing access to healthy food (Goodman et al., 2014).

These three types of values-based food chains amply illustrate the dual model of values and clearly differentiate themselves from conventional value chains. For this reason, they provide a glimpse of what values-based food chains can achieve. However, each of these types of VBFCs suffers from weaknesses. Could an alliance of these value chains help to overcome their problems and pave the way to a more sustainable food system? An answer may be found in the Local Organic Food Co-ops Network.

The Local Organic Food Co-ops Network

Founded in the province of Ontario in 2010, the Local Organic Food Co-ops Network has increased from an initial group of 18 cooperatives to over 75 rural and urban co-ops (LOFC Network, 2012). It was created with the help of the Ontario Co-operative Association to facilitate information sharing and realize the potential for collaboration between new and established co-ops. The Ontario Natural Food Co-op, a large distributor of organic food in Ontario and eastern Canada, stepped forward to house and support the fledgling Network and hired an animator to coordinate and develop all areas related to the Network. The person in this position champions the roles and needs of the cooperatives in the Network, liaises with academics and their research, creates opportunities for member-based and public education, advocates for policy change, supports emerging cooperatives, and facilitates connections and relationship building among the co-ops in the Network (Sumner et al., 2014).

The purpose of the LOFC Network is three-fold: to educate about and advocate for local and organic co-ops; to facilitate and support the growth of existing co-ops; and to connect and scale up for regional food processing and distribution hubs. Although there are differences among the members of the Network, they all have six common characteristics:

1. bringing local farmers and eaters closer together;
2. growing and supplying fresh, healthy food locally;
3. keeping money in the community;
4. trading fairly, whether domestically or internationally;
5. saving energy, building the soil, and protecting water;
6. celebrating good food, culture and community (LOFC Network, 2012).

These common characteristics form the groundwork for what has become a dynamic values-based food chain.

The LOFC Network as a Values-Based Food Chain

A pilot study of the LOFC Network was funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Institutional Grant administered through the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. It involved semi-structured interviews of seven people involved in six co-ops, plus the animator of the LOFC Network. Five interviews were conducted face-to-face and three by telephone, using a set of open-ended questions, with each interview lasting approximately one hour. Participants were suggested by the Animator and represent a mix of old and new member co-ops from around the province. Although not representative of the LOFC as a whole, this purposeful sampling strategy provides important information that cannot be obtained from other choices (Maxwell, 1996) and paints a rich picture of the values inherent in the Network.

Overall, the study found that the LOFC Network has built a values-based food chain comprised of producer co-ops, worker co-ops, consumer co-ops and multi-stakeholder co-ops, which all share information and create a platform for collaboration and cooperation, with the aim of establishing a sustainable food system. This values-based food chain is unique in that it operates from the perspectives of food-chain producers, consumers and workers, and embodies the values of three alternative food chains: local, organic and cooperative. These values combine to produce a values matrix that is a conscious and constant part of the way members of the Network engage with each other and the world around them.

To begin with, the study revealed that values are critical to the LOFC Network. For example, one participant in the study declared:

‘We have a set of criteria which all co-ops in the Network ascribe to, and they... span a range of values.’ (Interview partner 2, 16 September 2014)

If a co-op wants to join the Network, either the animator or a steering committee member would have a conversation with the prospective applicant ‘in order to understand if the values feel aligned’. In addition, farmers are central to these values:

‘And so it became an ongoing effort for us to prioritize our farmer members, recognizing that this is the heart of our food system and of our network that they need to be doing well in order for us to be promoting all of our other values around food.’ (Interview partner 2, 16 September 2014)

One of the benefits participants in the study enjoy is a value-centric workplace. As one participant explained:

‘We get other benefits, like being able to work at a place that aligns with our own personal values. I mean, that’s tremendously valuable. That helps you go to sleep at night.’ (Interview partner 4, 29 September 2014)

Another observed that the LOFC Network was the only place she felt normal, because of ‘the value system’ (Interview partner 7, 13 November 2014). In terms of consumers, one participant felt that many members could trust the LOFC Network’s sourcing values and know that their shopping supported producers who shared their values. In terms of producers, the same participant noted that in particular the small producers and processors appreciated,

‘being able to network into markets that value the products they’re producing’ (Interview partner 5, 8 October 2014).

In addition to these general observations about values, the data from the interviews also align with Stevenson et al.'s (2011) dual model of values: those associated with food and those associated with relationships.

LOFC Network Values Associated with Food

Historically, associating values with food has not been prevalent in conventional commodity markets in North America. As one participant maintained:

'As a society, we don't value the work that goes into food production [nor do we] want to pay what the product is worth.' (Interview partner 4, 29 September 2014)

Members of the LOFC Network, however, deeply value food and these values coalesce around local and organic. In terms of local values, one participant observed that local meant having a direct relationship with food producers. Another found that her members were more concerned about local than organic:

'people really want to know where their food is coming from' (Interview partner 5, 8 October 2014).

Yet another participant mentioned the desire for:

'more communication about the values of local food and educating people about where their food comes from' (Interview partner 3, 6 October 2014),

However, they were restricted by lack of money. And another noted that even though the potential for local food might be overwhelmed by the industrial mindset, the LOFC Network was moving toward something that has a different impact on the local economy, on meaningful work, on healthy communities and on healthy bodies.

In terms of organic values associated with food in the LOFC Network, one participant pointed out that carrying organic food and fair-trade items that were not local (like tea and coffee) but were sustainable was 'part of our values' (Interview partner 3, 6 October 2014). Another added that those particularly looking for organic food want to know that what they're buying is actually organic and,

'That's where in terms of our values organic, if it's going to be organic, if we're going to say it's organic, it needs to be organic.' (Interview partner 5, 8 October 2014)

LOFC Network Values Associated with Relationships

In Stevenson et al.'s (2011) dual model of values, some of the values are associated with the relationships between actors along the supply chain. However, in a search of the literature, Furtschegger and Schermer (2014) found there was a lack of studies that focused on the relations between actors along organic values-based chains. This pilot study of the LOFC Network helps to shine a light on such relationships.

In general, the relationships among the cooperatives that belong to the LOFC Network are perceived as positive and supportive. As one participant offered:

'We have to stay open, we have to make sure we have adequate cash flow, and keep our bills paid. Things like being a living wage employer is more expensive than being a minimum wage employer, so things like that. We

haven't jettisoned those kind of values in order to make sure that we're prioritizing capital.' (Interview partner 5, 8 October 2014)

Relationships among the cooperatives are reinforced through a number of mechanisms, including an annual general meeting (AGM). One interesting mode of relationship building is called a virtual campfire, which in reality is a telephone conference organized by the animator, but without a set agenda:

'There was no particular topic. There were five or six of us on the line and [the animator] was kind of coordinating it, but we were just kind of like talking about whatever. And it was a campfire for coordinators or managers of food co-ops so that was a neat way to connect.' (Interview partner 8, 4 February 2015)

When asked about the value of the Network, a participant highlighted sharing relationships among the co-ops that belong to the Network:

'Sharing best practices and information about how we do things. We share our margins, we share our business plans, we share how do we get food, we get different ideas, we get marketing ideas.' (Interview partner 1, 15 September 2014)

This sharing approach has been confirmed by Sumner and Wever (2015), who found that the cooperatives in the LOFC Network built relationships by cultivating alliances: among member co-ops, through the creation of the Network, with other types of organizations (such as NGOs and academic groups) and with other social movements. Relationships are also built through the consensus model that the Board of the LOFC Network uses. Through the consensus process, a participant found that,

'When we make a decision, everybody's OK with the decision because we value everybody's opinion.' (Interview partner 1, 15 September 2014)

Not surprisingly, many of the values associated with relationships in the LOFC Network centre on cooperative values. This focus is illustrated by one participant, who contended that co-ops are,

'about dollars and cents but they're also about kindness and compassion, and again those are values that I was trying to keep with me.' (Interview partner 6, 13 November 2014)

These values were foremost in the mind of another participant, who explained how one long-standing local, organic food co-op almost went bankrupt because of financial problems, but members of the Network did not want it to close because,

'They like this historical institution that represents co-operative values.' (Interview partner 8, 4 February 2015)

This same participant found that both older and younger people liked these values and deliberately sought them out.

In day-to-day practice, the LOFC Network uses cooperative values to develop distribution systems, negotiate decisions and build relationships. As one participant noted:

'And then I also think that the co-op, the LOFC Network in particular, is in a unique position to be able to develop a cooperative distribution system that is trading and moving products throughout the province and even in-

ternationally, while at the same time adhering to the values of the co-ops, which, again, no private business can do in the same way we can.' (Interview partner 3, 6 October 2014)

Stevenson et al.'s (2011) dual model of values associated with food and relationships was succinctly summed up by one participant who observed,

'We see the absolute value in the Network and we feel if food co-ops are going to grow and be sustainable we need to organize in this way.' (Interview partner 1, 15 September 2014)

Her observation raises a third set of values found in the LOFC Network, but not elaborated in this dual model of food and relationships: environmental values.

LOFC Network Values Associated with the Environment

Stevenson et al.'s (2011) dual model emphasizes both the values associated with food and those associated with the business relationships along the food chain. Although the values associated with food have environmental connections (see Conner et al., 2011; Diamond and Barham, 2011), food remains the focus. Feenstra et al. (2011b) come closest to directly espousing values associated with the environment when they suggest that social and environmental values are emerging as important additions in farm-to-institution programmes.

The participants in the study made it clear that the environment plays a central role in the LOFC Network. To begin with, as one participant pointed out, environmental responsibility is one of the Network's key values, so they try to promote producers who are environmentally conscious. The animator saw environmental sustainability as 'a really core value':

'A big part of the reason so many of these groups are doing their work is because of their concern for the environment, and climate change, and the way that this manifests in their operations can be ranging from sourcing food locally to reusing and upcycling various forms of objects into space design and interior decoration, to low-flow toilets, to solar panels on roofs. And so when we get together it's always interesting to hear groups talk about what kind of environmental commitments they have and how that comes into being.' (Interview partner 2, 16 September 2014)

The LOFC website includes a robust section dedicated to environmental sustainability and addresses co-ops and their role in the environmental movement. When vetting prospective new members, the animator shared that,

'In terms of environmental commitment, we ask that folks have some sort of ecological ethic of care embedded in their work' (Interview partner 2, 16 September 2014)

The environmental values of the LOFC Network extend to their purchasing policy, which is based on the values of environmental sustainability, as well as packaging policy. As another participant declared:

'It's part of our values to move toward minimal packaging or packaging that can be composted or reused or whatever.' (Interview partner 5, 8 October 2014)

Discussion

Overall, the LOFC Network is clearly a values-based food chain. The data collected from participants show a strong and conscious commitment to values, particularly local, organic and cooperative values associated with food, relationships and the environment. This tripartite matrix of values corresponds with the actual stated values of the Network, which align with the interests of the various types of cooperatives involved: fair prices and income for farmers, fresh healthy food for eaters, and fulfilling work and fair wages for workers (LOFC Network, 2012).

As a values-based food chain, the LOFC Network is helping to overcome some of the problematic weaknesses associated with local, organic and cooperative food chains. As mentioned earlier, criticisms of local food chains centre on questions of defensive localism, social justice, ethical relations and homogeneity. The study of the LOFC Network revealed no signs of defensive localism. On the contrary, its cooperative principles encourage it to reach out to other co-ops and the network is a clear example of this expanding, outward orientation. In addition, one of its members that was not part of the pilot study – Harvest Noon cooperative café – is addressing the area of social justice by offering low-cost healthy meals to students at the University of Toronto and members of the surrounding community. The LOFC Network as a whole, however, does not have a mandate to ensure food security, thus reflecting Goodman et al.'s (2014) judgement that alternative food networks (AFNs) are weak in the area of social justice related to food access. In terms of ethical labour practices, the Network does advocate for fair wages for farmers and workers, but in practice this only applies to those farmers and workers who have formed themselves into co-ops, not necessarily those people who, for example, work for farmers who are part of a farmers' co-op. And, finally, judging from the make-up of the participants in this pilot study, the LOFC Network, like other local food chains has a fairly white, middle-class, professional membership, although this is changing with the addition of a number of co-ops that serve First Nations communities.

The problems associated with organic food chains centre around questions of co-optation, collaboration, social sustainability and a two-tiered food system. Overall, the LOFC Network represents a form of resistance to co-optation by neo-liberal market forces – members chose to join a co-op and join the Network to find another path. Their active membership in the Network helps to reinforce their choice and minimize the threat of co-optation. The LOFC Network also shows an enormous amount of collaboration, as exhibited by the examples of the AGM, the virtual campfires, the open sharing of information and resources, and the rescue of the co-op that was close to bankruptcy. Some of the members of the LOFC Network not included in the study are also working to overcome the issue of social sustainability pointed out by Shreck et al. (2006): the low wages of farm labour. A number of co-ops in the LOFC Network are farm worker co-ops, such as 123 Farm! Worker Co-operative Inc. and Agri-Cultural Renewal Co-operative. As mentioned above, however, the LOFC Network may be committed to a fair income for farmers and workers, but there is little evidence that this form of social justice extends to farm labour throughout the whole Network. The problem of a two-tiered food system (with exceptions such as Harvest Noon) remains unaddressed, speaking once again to the weakness of AFNs in the area of social justice.

The problems associated with cooperative food chains focus on questions of the environment, demutualization and access to healthy food. One of the strengths of organic food chains – environmentally friendly farming systems – helps the LOFC

Network to address the problem of lack of attention to environmental issues. In other words, although none of the six cooperative principles address the environment, the inclusion of organic approaches to farming in cooperative food chains, as well as attention to environmental sustainability along the entire food chain, fills this gap. In addition, as a growing network that represents a form of resistance to neo-liberal market forces, the threat of demutualization (which represents co-optation and assimilation) is non-existent. Whether this continues to be the case as the Network grows and matures, remains to be seen. In terms of equalizing access to healthy food, Goodman et al.'s (2014) judgement still stands: as a part of the social economy, the LOFC Network is weak in the area of social justice.

Overall, the alliance of these three value chains – local, organic and cooperative – has worked to overcome some of the problems associated with these individual value chains, but not all of them. Some problems, like co-optation, defensive localism, demutualization, lack of collaboration and lack of attention to the environment are fully addressed by the LOFC Network. Other problems, such as homogeneity of membership and fair wages for farmers and farm labour, are beginning to be addressed. But the alliance of these three value chains has not overcome the problem of social justice pointed out by Goodman et al. (2014): access to healthy food. In other words, 'social justice is the Achilles heel of these networks as the poor and disadvantaged continue to be ill-served' (Goodman et al., 2014, p. 84). This Achilles heel reaches deep into the heart of considerations about sustainability and the role of VBFCs in building a sustainable food system.

As the example of the LOFC shows, discussions about the sustainability of values-based food chains lend themselves to a further analysis of life values (Sumner, 2007). When considering these food chains, we can posit that food chains driven by values subsumed under the umbrella concept of life values offer a deeper and wider view of sustainability than those that focus more on profitability and minimize established parameters of sustainability, such as environmental integrity, social justice and economic fairness. Morgan (2008, p. 1242) opens the door to this life-values orientation when he argues that the key feature of a sustainable food chain is 'the internalization of the costs that are externalized in conventional food chains by, for example, factoring into the equation the effects on human health and the environment of the entire agri-food cycle from farm to fork.' The aim of values-based food chains is, ultimately, more sustainable food systems, which is also the aim of the LOFC Network.

From a life-values perspective, sustainable food systems would ensure everyone is fed, within the ecological limits of the planet (Sumner, 2012). Allen and Sachs (1992) broached these holistic parameters almost 25 years ago when they argued that sustainable agriculture included: the provision of adequate amounts of healthy food and fibre for everyone who requires it, with production for need, not only for effective demand; non-exploitative relations in terms of race, ethnicity, class, gender and species; and equal access to decision-making for those involved in all aspects of the food and agricultural system. Sumner (2016) has added another parameter: a not-for-profit orientation. This is in keeping with Winson's (2013) observation that the pressure to grow profits compromises food environments because it creates the incentive to degrade food to lower input costs. It also creates the incentive to degrade the environment and working conditions to lower input costs – all hallmarks of unsustainability and all characteristic of the corporate food system and its global value chains, referred to by Selwyn (2016) as global poverty chains.

As a life values-based food chain, the LOFC Network meets some, but not all, of the parameters associated with sustainable food systems. In practice, it seeks to operate within the ecological limits of the planet, broaches non-exploitative relationships and ensures equal access to democratic decision-making. But it currently is made up of mostly for-profit enterprises and it cannot by itself ensure that everyone is fed. These unmet parameters would need to be developed as part of a coherent and integrated national food policy that ‘must now be designed and implemented to reflect fully the essential reality of our dependence on food’ (MacRae, 2017, p. 307).

Conclusion

In summary, this study illustrates that values-based food chains that combine a range of life values from different food chains can leverage their strengths and overcome some of their weaknesses, thus moving in the direction of a more sustainable food system. While these food chains can contribute to some of the parameters of a more sustainable food system, they cannot solve the social justice parameters of such a system.

Values-based food chains foreground the worth of food in the world. Their very existence allows us to ask which values food chains actually promote. This question is crucial because ‘the shape of the food supply chain is the outcome of myriad decisions and actions from production to consumption’ (Lang and Heasman, 2015, p. 18), and these decisions and actions are based in values. Food chains that focus on monetary values continue to reap not only profits, but also the ‘fatal harvest’ (Kimbrell, 2002) that the industrialization of agriculture ushered in. This is consistent with a food system that espouses values and practices that are geared for ‘profit-maximization, growth and accumulation’ (Wallis, 2010, p. 35). As a result, the sustainability of food production systems and the quality of foodstuffs are under threat as never before, with the food system lurching from crisis to crisis (Lang and Heasman, 2015).

In contrast, food chains based in values that can be subsumed under the umbrella concept of life values have a broader and deeper sense of worth. They strive to meet the interests of the public sector, including increased health, equity and environmental integrity. As such, they work to overcome the challenges posed by the corporate food system and help to pave the way to a more sustainable food system. The LOFC Network is an example of such a values-based food chain and thus is part of the struggle being waged to decide our food future.

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