
Regional Food Economies

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Introduction

The original use by ancient Greeks of the word economy – ἡ οἰκονομία – meant the management of a household, ensuring that the needs of those living there were being met. Economies were the exchange of goods and services to sustain human life and activities. Thus it is clear that regional food economies have existed as long as humans have, delimited by how far we could travel with goods. Before contact with European settlers, the Indigenous Nations of this continent had sophisticated trade routes and arrangements to meet their nutritional, physical and cultural needs. More recent human history has seen the rise and prevalence of foods traded very long distances. This globalizing trend in food systems was not an accident but was aided by specific agreements and policies undertaken by governments around the world.

British Columbia used to have the infrastructure in place to support regional food economies. Where there was a critical mass for a given sector, the processing plant, flash freezer, abattoir or cheese plant operated. However, free trade agreements entered into by Canada, starting in the 1980s, launched a pattern of the seemingly inevitable decline and closure of ancillary businesses that had once flourished on the basis of available local product at sufficient volumes. Primary producers in agriculture and fisheries followed this trend, with declining and aging farmers and fishers across Canada posing a crisis of succession. Almost every facet of British Columbia food sectors (agriculture, fisheries, processing) faces significant challenges associated with our short production seasons and small markets, in contrast to many of our trade agreement partners.

However, the last few decades have seen a resurgence of interest in regional and local food economies. The vast space enabled by globalization is giving way to a commitment to place.¹ The multiple benefits of place-based economies – food and others – are being recognized and valued by many, including all levels of governments in Canada, for their positive repercussions on communities' social, cultural, ecological and monetary wealth.

In their 2013 report, *Understanding Values in Canada's North Pacific*, EcoTrust Canada and the T Buck Suzuki Foundation “document the full suite of tangible financial, other tangible, and intangible values that wild-capture-commercial fishing brings to families and communities...Because less tangible values, like social capital, describe the structure and functioning of communities, understanding these values will lead to better-informed fisheries management and social objectives for integrated marine planning... and will support economic objectives because less tangible values affect the formal economy.”² Economic, environmental and social sustainability priorities are being integrated into purchasing decisions of consumers sourcing local food. As reported by Steve Martinez and colleagues at the Economic Research Service of the US Department of Agriculture:

¹ Markey, Halseth and Manson provide a detailed and useful analysis of space- and place-based economies in their 2012 publication *Investing in Place: Economic Renewal in Northern British Columbia*.

² Kerrie O'Donnell et al. *Understanding values in Canada's Pacific North: capturing values from commercial fisheries*. (T Buck Suzuki Foundation & EcoTrust Canada, 2013), 4-5.

Several studies have explored consumer preferences for locally produced food. Motives for “buying local” include perceived quality and freshness of local food and support for the local economy. Consumers who are willing to pay higher prices for locally produced foods place importance on product quality, nutritional value, methods of raising a product and those methods’ effects on the environment, and support for local farmers.³

The *B.C Agrifood and Seafood Strategic Growth Plan* published in late 2015 sets a target for a growth in domestic markets of 43%.⁴ This goal is to be achieved through a set of proposed actions such as “encourage the development and adoption of buy local policies” and “support access to retail for local producers and processors, including commercial kitchen space, cold chains and distribution necessities”.⁵ Complementing the provincial strategic plan are recommendations from the Real Estate Foundation’s 2014 *Regional Dialogues*, including to “provide regionally and provincially based evidence on the social, economic and environmental benefits of a sustainable local food system”.⁶

To achieve significant growth in domestic markets and provide an evidence base for sustainable food systems, it will be necessary to rebuild the regional food economies that flourished as recently as 50 years ago in BC. Yet the factors that brought about the closure of so many of the building blocks of regional food economies persist today. Nevertheless, here in the home province of the 100-Mile Diet,⁷ new factors hint at the possible economic viability of food enterprises that could not survive as recently as a decade ago. These include the financial and environmental costs of long-distance transportation; the ever-expanding interest in and loyalty to local food and food with a story; a recognition that the quality of food, including how it was produced has an impact on the health of the eater; and more engaged consumers on issues such as animal welfare, genetic engineering, loss of biodiversity, and the ecological costs of the dominant production models.

Rebuilding regional food economies poses the classic chicken and egg dilemma, further complicated by the inevitable price competition in our globalized food system. In order for egg producers to get their product to market, they need an egg grading station; in order to make an egg grading station a wise investment, the owner needs to be assured of sufficient and committed poultry farmers. Abattoirs are an essential service in meat supply chains – without the specialized facilities and skill sets, animals cannot be harvested and transformed into meat. But an abattoir is a particularly risky business, completely dependent on sufficient volume of throughput in order to sustain a year-round facility and staffing. Yet the sector is constrained by short production seasons and by the fertility

³ Martinez, Steve, et al. *Local Food Systems: Concepts, Impacts, and Issues*, ERR 97. (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, May 2010), iv.

⁴ BC Ministry of Agriculture, *B.C Agrifood and Seafood Strategic Growth Plan*, 2015, 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁶ Sussmann, Cornelia. *Local Food Futures for British Columbia*. (Real Estate Foundation of British Columbia. March 2015), 18.

⁷ Based on the book of the same name, published in 2007 and written by Alisa Smith and J. B. McKinnon, documenting their year of eating locally that helped to increase consumer awareness.

cycles of animals and is also dominated by a handful of very powerful global players. Livestock, fisheries, egg, dairy, soft fruit, tree fruit, vegetables – each sector has specific needs in order to transform the harvested items into something that is both marketable and can get to market.

Rebuilding the infrastructure that best suits and serves the food enterprises of a particular region is a necessary step in recreating vibrant regional food economies. (see appended). Determining what is the most effective intervention for an entrepreneur, funder or government is complicated by the factors outlined in the paragraph above. However, when one adds in broader societal goals, such as sustainability and food security, it becomes even more complex.

It is worth reflecting on what sectors and scales of production are being best served or compromised by current conditions and which contribute most significantly to the range of values that many consumers now want to apply to food systems, from adaptability to climate change to animal welfare, from resilient ecologies to hunger and access. And in terms of the most impactful interventions and of the sectors, scales and places most handicapped by our dominant food system, full-time family farms and fishers warrant special consideration. The term, “agriculture of the middle”,⁸ was coined by Frederick Kirschenmann and colleagues to draw attention to the portion of the farming population that was and still is disappearing most rapidly from the landscape. Small-scale farms benefit⁹ from the increasingly interest among consumers in direct farm marketing, from farm-gate sales, to community supported agriculture schemes and the farmers markets that continue to proliferate across North America. Large-scale operations can achieve the economies of scale and externalization of costs that enable access to and benefit from the food supply chains from which the vast majority of food is acquired by consumers. It is full-time, family scaled commercial farms and fisheries that are the most marginalized by the dominant food system, not well served by direct farm marketing and yet those best suited over the longer term to both provide the scale and quality of food our population needs while incorporating ecological, welfare and social values.

Public and private institutions with local procurement policies can be hugely impactful and beneficial to regional food economies due to the volume of food many of them source. Where their purchasing policy enables collaboration and fair negotiation with the producers on price, packaging, food safety procedures and delivery schedules, contracts with institutions can offer stability that supports solid business planning on the part of producers and the opportunity for expansion. Menu planning on the part of institutions that aligns to the degree possible with local production capability and strengths, seasonal availability, and cost of production can enable real and effective partnerships between the producers and institutions.

Market proximity and size is another key factor in rebuilding regional food economies. Historically, human settlements only occurred where a regional food economy could exist – without access to food, water and shelter, humans could not survive. In the 21st century, however, metropolitan populations outstrip the carrying capacity of the surrounding landscape and waters. The locavore

⁸ See www.agofthemiddle.org/ for analysis and sector-specific reports.

⁹ The US Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service has a useful series analyzing concepts of data related to the function of local food systems that can be found at: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-markets-prices/local-foods.aspx> .

movement encourages people to eat from their own foodsheds – but much of what is needed to sustain a large population must, inevitably, come from coastal and rural regions where larger volumes of food production takes place. The corollary to that point is that too much food can be produced in regions of sparse human population but that are well suited, for example, to volumes of fish catch or grain production that would quickly overwhelm their local population. Supply chains with few links (“middle men”) that cover long distances can contribute to the economic viability of rural and coastal producers, enabling them to retain most of the value of their product while accessing larger populations and markets.

Public policy has an enormous impact on food systems – for better or for worse. Egg grading stations are required by law to ensure that the eggs being sold have been candled (for the presence of fertilized eggs) and sorted for size, thereby meeting most consumers’ aesthetic and size expectations. Yet for many small-scale poultry producers, the cost of building and operating a grading station is prohibitive relative to the volume of chickens allowed without the purchase of egg quota. The meat sector in BC underwent an enormous transformation when the entire province was brought under meat inspection in 2007. The sector in the province has not yet recovered fully from the impact of this policy change. However, public policy can be amended to better support regional food economies and the meat regulation again proves the point: When the extent of the negative repercussions for the meat sector was made clear to the government, they introduced a graduated licensing system that recognizes the uniqueness of place and the particular challenges that sparse populations (human or livestock) can place on meat sector businesses.¹⁰

This innovative licensing system is lauded around the world for its ability to achieve the stated goals of the policy – namely safe meat from humanely slaughtered animals – while being adapted to the specific characteristics of place. The specificities of place and actors and the collaborations necessary for effective regional economic development are captured by Markey, Halseth and Manson in their book entitled *Investing in Place*. They apply equally to rebuilding regional food economies:

Researchers have provided lists of characteristics and indicators, but the reality of what works in one place versus what works in another is perhaps best captured by the phrase: it depends. The robustness of the network of social relations and the capacity of the actors involved are complex and interacting ingredients in the development process. What is certain is that bottom-up activities and plans still need supportive top-down policy supports to assist with economic renewal and diversification.¹¹

There are many models of renewed regional food economies in the United States. They benefit to some degree, by longer growing seasons in many parts of the USA. A population base and market that is ten times that of Canada helps as well. However, it may be that one of the more significant factors in fostering renewed food economies is the long-standing support infrastructure that exists in

¹⁰ Information on the model and the requirements for the graduated licenses can be found at: <http://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/industry/agriculture-seafood/food-safety/meat-inspection-licensing>

¹¹ Markey, Sean et al., *Investing in Place: economic renewal in northern British Columbia*, (UBC Press, 2012), 274.

the United States, through the land-grant universities, the widely available agricultural extension services, and funding programs that target sustainable agriculture, food hubs, and beginning farmers, among others.

To build vibrant and sustainable regional food economies in British Columbia the solutions and interventions will need to be adapted to each foodshed. They will also need to be integrated, since no foodshed or economy stands alone but interacts with others, close at hand and far distant. And common to both fisheries and farming, succession will have to be successfully addressed, as fully and soon as possible. Enormous investment in the land, boats, quota, equipment and related infrastructure, as well as the significant knowledge base that can only be achieved through a lifetime of work in the sector – all of this is under threat as the vast majority of these individuals who are so vital to our regional food economies and our provincial food security rapidly approach retirement age. According to Christie Young, the founder of FarmStart, in less than ten years, 50% of Canadian farm assets will be transferred due to retirement, and among those retiring farmers, 75% do not have successors.¹² The statistics are much harder to obtain for fishers, but all indicators are that they are very similar.

The supports for production, from training and apprenticeship programs to physical facilities will need to be tailored and co-ordinated to meet the specific needs of each region, recognizing what its strengths are and how to enhance them. Such co-ordination will also contribute to the overall food security of British Columbians, who are, according to a Ministry of Agriculture 2006 report,¹³ 48% food self-reliant, based on food produced and consumed within BC. Nurturing the production capacity and strengths of specific regions, ensuring that infrastructure, training and succession, distribution and market access are in place, we can grow and sustain our regional food economies.

No discussion of regional food economies in British Columbia can be complete without recognizing the first peoples of the region. Contrary to the *Doctrine of Discovery*, this land was not discovered as if it had dropped from the sky. Nor, contrary to the concept of *terra nullius*, was it empty of human inhabitants, but rather was populated by twenty-seven Indigenous Nations across the length of breadth of the region now called British Columbia. The findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission call on Canadians to educate ourselves about our colonial history and the current structures and attitudes that perpetuate the removal of Indigenous people from their rightful land.

Here in British Columbia, the vast majority of the land is un-ceded Indigenous territory. As settlers, we must make the effort to understand what that means for our place on the land and how we share the land in a way that acknowledges the priority of Indigenous people in time and place. Agriculture, even sustainable agriculture, has been a tool for removing Indigenous people from the land and disallowing access to their traditional spaces for cultural, spiritual, medicinal and culinary practices. As Dawn Morrison, Director of the Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty urges, we must:

¹² Personal communication but also found in various FarmStart (www.farmstart.ca) and other documents, such as Places to Farm, by Sally Miller.

¹³ Ministry of Agriculture, *B.C.'s Food Self-Reliance: Can B.C.'s Farmers Feed Our Growing Population?* (2006), 1.

change conversations at policy and planning tables by expanding the scope of “food lands” conversations to promote the conservation of the remaining fragments of **Indigenous hunting, fishing, farming and gathering areas**. The health and wellbeing of our present and future generations is intimately linked to the protection of our complex system of bio-cultural heritage in the forests, fields and waterways, and the conservation of biological and cultural diversity is of benefit to the health and wellbeing of all Canadians!¹⁴

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [<http://hdl.handle.net/1974/6874>], the Truth and Reconciliation Commission findings [<http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=890>], the Canada country mission report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples [<http://unsr.jamesanaya.org/docs/countries/2014-report-canada-a-hrc-27-52-add-2-en.pdf>], and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf] all clearly indicate that we can no longer hide behind ignorance of our historical and current colonial practices and policies. However, it is more than a matter of justice. Canadians must recognize the deep relationship that Indigenous People have with the land and the knowledge that comes from a long history of living upon it sustainably. There are tremendous opportunities in collaborating, with integrity and with justice, with Indigenous Nations in BC – their intimate relationship with the land and waterways can contribute greatly to the sustainability of regional food economies that support both settler and Indigenous wellbeing.

¹⁴ Dawn Morrison, *Indigenous Food, Land and Heritage Primer*, (Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty, October 2015), 1.

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