Organic Agriculture and the Social Economy

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COMMUNITY PARTNERS: ORGANIC MEADOW COOPERATIVE FOODSHARE

PROJECT # 4
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Introduction

This study aims to mobilize knowledge to support organic SEOs and rural community development by:

- Documenting the extent of the social economy among organic farmers in southern Ontario
- Studying the spread of the social economy among and beyond organic farmers in southern Ontario
- Analyzing the relationship between organic farmers’ involvement in the social economy and their contributions to rural community development
- Identifying challenges faced by social-economy organizations in Ontario’s organic farming movement
Background

The study builds upon previous research on the links between the organic farming movement and sustainable rural communities.
Rationale

- Increasing demand for organics
- Changing market realities
- Negative effects of industrial agriculture on farmers and rural communities
- Is there a role for social economy organizations?
Project Methodology

- Semi-structured qualitative interviews with organic farmers
- 49 interviews with organic farmers across southern Ontario
  - 16 couples
  - 23 male farmers
  - 10 women farmers
  - 65 respondents in total
- Respondents were selected using sequential sampling from a database created by two community partners
- Interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 3 hours in length
- Interviews were recorded using a digital recorder
- Data analysis with ATLAS.ti
- Inductive coding approach
Organic Meadow Cooperative and FoodShare both provided a list of their producers, from which a sample of research participants could be drawn.

Organic Meadow Cooperative liaised with producers to express the organization’s support for the project.
Main Findings/Deliverables

- The social economy is an integral part of the organic movement in southern Ontario.
- Farmer-founded SEOs have facilitated the growth of organics in the province for the last 30 years.
- Organic SEOs have emerged and spread in response to a failure on the part of both government and the private sector to meet organic farmers’ diverse needs:
  - Education, training, and knowledge sharing
  - Social support
  - Assistance with production challenges
  - Sourcing organic inputs
  - Processing products
  - Marketing and distribution
  - Influencing government policy and consumer behaviour
Main Findings/Deliverables

- Organic SEOs contribute to rural community development through:
  - their support for sustainable local food systems
  - their efforts to promote inclusive social values
- Farmers who are active with organic SEOs also tend to contribute to other community-based organizations.
- With success comes significant challenges: As demand for organic products outstrips supply, organic SEOs face increasing pressure from corporate actors.
How Students Benefited from the Project

- Improved qualitative research skills
- New competency using qualitative data analysis software
- Opportunity to co-author a book chapter summarizing the research
- Work with a social economy organization
Implications for the Social Economy

- Greening the social economy
- Links between the social economy and sustainable rural communities
- Links between the social economy and sustainable local food systems
- Links between the social economy and organic philosophy
Conclusions

- Organic farming is a vital part of the social economy
- Important links between the social economy and sustainability
- Challenges of balancing the success of the social economy with the pressures from corporate actors
Next Steps

- Spreading the social economy
- Building alliances
- Formulating public policy
Thank you!

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