

# Organic Agriculture and the Social Economy



**JENNIFER SUMNER, E. ANN CLARK  
AND SOPHIE LLEWELYN  
UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH**

**COMMUNITY PARTNERS:  
ORGANIC MEADOW COOPERATIVE  
FOODSHARE**

**PROJECT # 4  
MAY 2, 2008**

# 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

# Role and participation of community partners



- 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!



Jennifer Sumner  
School of Environmental Design  
and Rural Development,  
University of Guelph  
jsumner@uoguelph.ca

Sophie Llewelyn  
MSc, Capacity Development  
and Extension  
University of Guelph  
sllwely@uoguelph.ca