FARMER PERSPECTIVES ON AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS
AT THE LOCAL LEVEL:
A HAMILTON, ONTARIO CASE STUDY

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
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Abstract

Farmer perspectives on agrifood systems at the local level: A Hamilton, Ontario case study

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Exploring ways in which local farmers articulate their place and discuss various pressures and opportunities in the food system is critical to understanding how communities are positioned to respond to growing concerns around environmental and social sustainability in agriculture. To address this issue, in-depth interviews were conducted with farmers from 23 small/medium peri-urban farms in Hamilton, Ontario, and analyzed using a critical ethnographic approach. Results reveal participating farmers have complex understandings of their place in the food system; espousing strong counter-hegemonic values, utilizing opportunities at different scales, and drawing on conflicting political-economic theories in order to balance values with economic survival. Tensions running throughout farmers’ comments point to barriers for advancing a much-needed collaborative movement towards sustainability and justice in the food system. These findings ground some of the abstract debates in the agrifood literature and offer insights for those working ‘on the ground’ to build more transformative food movements.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction and research objectives

The environmental and social sustainability of the food system – how we produce, process, distribute and consume food – is a widespread and growing concern across Canada. The topic has received a great deal of attention from Canadian academics in the social sciences (Tarasuk and Eakin, 2005; Feagan, 2007; Friedmann, 2007; Wakefield, 2007; Wormsbecker, 2007; Eaton, 2008); and has occupied much space in popular media and journalistic books (Pawlick, 2006; Pollan, 2006; Smith and MacKinnon, 2007; Cuthbert, 2008). What is more, the topic has become the platform for numerous environmental, rural and social justice agencies and NGOs (Environment Hamilton, 2008; Food Secure Canada, 2008; FoodLink Waterloo, 2008; FoodShare, 2008). While agricultural and farm issues have been central to many of the discussions (Allen, 2004), farmers’ own in-depth views on the interconnections and workings of the food system are rarely primary to the study or story, with some notable exceptions (Salatin, 2007). Instead, farmers are often positioned in relation to other principal actors and issues, for example, eaters and consumer culture (Smith and MacKinnon, 2007), big business and land exploitation (Kneen, 1999; Burch and Lawrence, 2007), or health policy and food-scares (DeLind and Howard, 2008).

Indeed, there is much room for further study on the day-to-day experiences, perceptions and views of local farmers, and how these positions shape the food system and its environmental and social sustainability in specific locales. Dupuis and Goodman (2005) confirm there is a need for more case study and empirical research to examine local food system actors and their “politics in place”, as opposed to assuming a “politics of place” (p. 364). One unresolved issue is how farmers position themselves within different scales of food system activity – i.e., global, national, local, big, small. The system is “multi-scaled” in the sense that activities take place and decisions are made at different scales: around kitchen tables, in town halls, provincial legislatures, trade organization boardrooms, and the global pathways of the Internet. The costs and benefits of these decisions (and the opportunities they present) also have an affect on the entire system. For example, a rule implemented by the World Trade Organization (WTO) will...
affect national and provincial trade policies, and will eventually have some impact at the farm gate. A second unresolved issue is how local farmers understand and situate themselves with respect to the free market and social policy intervention, where a major division is seen between “alternative” market activity (e.g., niche products, organics, local branding, etc.) and more “oppositional” approaches that directly challenge the status quo and call for major change to the structure of the food economy (Allen et al., 2003). A third issue that remains somewhat unresolved is how farmers view opportunities for collaboration and partnership in the agricultural community, and food system at large, and how these factors might be important to strengthening their place in the food system.

Focusing on these knowledge gaps, this research has set out to explore how small and medium-scale
peri-urban farmers in one locality in Ontario negotiate and explain their place in the food system. The specific objectives of the study are to investigate:

1. How farmers experience and understand the current food system;
2. How they discuss multi-scaled pressures and opportunities in their stories; and,
3. What factors facilitate or hinder their participation in alternative and oppositional activities and movements.

These objectives were addressed using qualitative research methods to explore depth and complexity in the views of a diverse sample of small/medium-scale peri-urban farmers from 23 farms in Hamilton, Ontario. Participants all sold some (or all) of their product “locally” and were situated within 45 km of the city’s downtown. Farmers were identified using a range of sampling methods, e.g., conversations with leaders in the

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1 All farmers participating in the study fall within the category of small or medium-size farm. While certain factors distinguish small from medium, this study focuses on their shared experience, and unites them in one category. For the sake of brevity and simplicity, in some cases, both are described together as “small farm producers”. A specific description of small/medium-size is provided in the methods section.

2 For the purposes of this study “sold locally” means sold within Ontario. This definition conforms to the certification standards of “Local Food Plus (LFP)” <http://www.localfoodplus.ca/protocol_cert.htm>. However, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency defines ‘local’ or ‘locally grown’ to mean that “the domestic goods being advertised originated within 50 km of the place where they are sold, measured directly, point to point, or meets the requirements of section B.01.012 of the Food and Drug Regulations, whichever condition is least restrictive. <http://www.inspection.gc.ca/english/issa/labeti/decisions/compoeh.shtml>. Conforming to this more proximate definition, all, except one farmer (a dairy farmer selling under supply management), sold some (or all) of his/her product within the Hamilton-area.
community and snowball sampling. All respondents participated in a 1-2 hour semi-
structured in-depth interview, which was later transcribed and coded for important
themes using qualitative software. Through the coding process, the following three issues
emerged, each of which will be discussed in a separate chapter of the thesis:

1. Fairness and economic justice for farmers;
2. Environmental sustainability in food production and distribution; and,
3. Health and nutrition in the food system.

It is important to note that while these issues speak directly to how farmers understand
the food system (objective one), each chapter also deals with farmers’ perspectives on
multi-scaled pressures and opportunities in the food system (objective two) and factors
that influence participation in alternative and oppositional movements (objective three).
Additionally, each chapter addresses the topic of collaboration and partnership.

By addressing these objectives, the thesis will be making a contribution to human
geography, and the agrifood literature in particular, by helping us to better understand
how small/medium-scaled peri-urban farmers in southern Ontario are responding to
different external pressures and opportunities in efforts to preserve their livelihoods.
What is more, the research could shed light on how food producers around major cities in
Ontario are positioned to respond to growing concerns about the sustainability of
agriculture.

In addition to contributing to academic scholarship, this research will be of
practical benefit to the study community. Filling these gaps of knowledge could help
peri-urban farmers in advancing their situation through new perspectives on strategies for
change, it may help bridge divisions of communication between urban and rural groups,
and may assist the community at large in developing new tactics for advancing
community food security and sustainability goals. What is more, the research findings
may have relevance to other locales, as cities both within and outside Ontario – and
indeed across North America and Europe – are experiencing similar global and local
food system trends. While the specific findings from the case study cannot be over-
generalized, the results may inspire new visions and ideas in other communities, and
could lead to further studies that examine the experiences of localized groups in similar
situations.
Thesis outline and format

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. This chapter has introduced the main topic and outlined research objectives that set the stage for the overall project. It has drawn attention to core elements of the thesis argument, and has provided a summary of the content in each thesis chapter, below.

Chapter two presents a brief review of the main themes and accompanying literature that build a foundation for the thesis. Whereas each of the results chapters (four to six) includes its own individual literature review pertaining specifically to the chapter, the themes and literature discussed in chapter two are relevant to all three and ultimately tie the thesis together. The key issues taken up in the literature review are 1) scale in the food system, 2) alternative versus oppositional movements, and 3) collaboration and conflict in agrifood activities. These three issues are addressed in each of the results chapters; however, the relationship between them and other implications are discussed more extensively in the closing discussion of chapter seven.

Chapter three delves into the research methods that were used to gather necessary data for the thesis analysis. The chapter begins with a discussion of methodological issues, exploring why certain theories and research strategies were chosen to guide the work; in particular, describing the study’s critical ethnographic framework, its qualitative methodology, in-depth (semi-structured) interviewing strategies and positionality of the researcher. This is followed by an overview of the specific procedures and methods used, first describing the case study community, then explaining participant recruitment, the interview process and stages of research analysis.

Chapters four to six focus on research results, each chapter including a brief literature review, a presentation of the data and a discussion of the results. Chapter four - Fairness and economic justice for farmers - examines farmer perspectives on multi-scaled pressures within the food system (all centred on problems in the market), followed by a presentation of farmers’ views on how to move forward to revive small/medium farm production in Ontario. While the chapter is consumed with the tensions that populate farmers’ comments – specifically with regard to neoliberal ideology, the role of government and possibilities for resistance – it closes with an exploration of reasons and
avenues for collaboration among small farm producers in the interest of preserving their livelihoods.

Chapter five - Common ground for a sustainable food system - takes a slightly different approach to addressing the thesis’ main objectives and themes. This chapter moves away from examining the interaction of different geographic scales and instead asks how the local scale could be made most sustainable. The chapter offers a much more focused discussion of farm size as a scalar issue; exploring why small/medium scales may be environmentally advantageous and why farmers (organic and conventional) might choose to collaborate. Chapter five gives much more attention to farmers’ ideals and values; and while it questions the merit of a system that asks people (farmers and consumers) to balance ethical decisions with economic survival, the discussion is less focused on pragmatic financial matters. Nevertheless, it is still highly concerned with alternative versus oppositional approaches to change in the food system and raises concerns around the ecological and social justice consequences of excluding substantial policy change and government involvement from the organic/sustainable food agenda.

Both chapters four and five query the authority we have given the neoliberal marketplace to facilitate change in the food system.

Chapter six - Health, nutrition and safety in the food system - builds on ideas raised in chapters four and five. This chapter demonstrates, with a more specific focus, how small/mid-sized farms experience marginalization in the dominant food system, specifically with regard to health and safety regimes favouring big business, processors and retailers. Again, pressures and opportunities are experienced at various geographic scales, for example, through transnational supermarkets, provincial policy and municipal tax legislation. Also on the topic of scale, the chapter explores the proposition that small/mid-sized farmers are in the best position to supply healthy, safe food to local communities. Farmers’ views on alternative markets and oppositional strategies to advance health and safety are also taken up in chapter six, and it is argued, again, that views solely promoting market alternatives mirror the neoliberal values of the dominant system they oppose. The theme of collaboration is raised in the chapters’ calls for community cooperation (between farmers, public health bodies, consumers, etc.) to promote a healthier food system for all.
In the concluding chapter, chapter seven, the main themes of the thesis are discussed in reference to research findings and literature from chapter two. The chapter also explores limitations of the study, directions for future research and recommendations for government and local communities to enhance the position of small/medium farm producers in Ontario.
Chapter 2: literature review

The follow chapter provides a brief review of the literature and key themes running throughout the thesis. While each of the results chapters (four to six) contains its own literature review pertaining to that particular chapter topic, the purpose of this review is to provide a unifying theoretical framework for the thesis and its main contributions. The chapter specifically deals with three key themes: scale in the food system, alternative versus oppositional food movements, and collaboration and conflict in agrifood activities. Each theme is addressed in all results chapters; however, the relationship between themes will be taken up in the thesis’ conclusion in relation to research findings.

The “making” and “shaping” of scale

Two separate issues of scale are addressed in the thesis: geographic scale (i.e., global, national, regional, local) and farm size (i.e., big, medium, small farm production). While geographic scale has received most attention in the food localism literature, small farm size is often invoked or assumed in discussions of ‘the local’. The tendency to collapse the two scalar issues – along with other values, such as fairness or sustainability – has been widely critiqued (Goodman, 2003; Allen, 2004; Born and Purcell, 2007), and is similarly problematized here. Specifically, the thesis explores the validity of popular views that construct rigid categories of global, large-scale, homogenized and corporate agricultures associated with neoliberalism, and localized alternatives that emphasize smaller-scale production (and family farms), environmental stewardship, cultural integrity and social justice.

Drawing on the work of geographers like David Harvey and Erik Swyngedouw, scholars have argued that food localism literature and movements often ignore the “established truism” in human geography that geographic scale is constructed and produced through cultural and socio-political struggle (Hinrichs, 2003; Dupuis and Goodman, 2005). Hinrichs (2003), for example, explains how the “Iowa state banquet meal” is pitched as locally grown to build support for the state’s agricultural industry, even though geographically this boundary encompasses fifty-six thousand square miles
In other words, “local” is often used fluidly to describe very proximate and very expansive distances at the same time. What is more, scholars have reasoned that the dialectic relationship between the local, regional, national and international means these scales ‘make’ and ‘shape’ one another on a daily basis (Goodman, 2003; Allen, 2004; Dupuis and Goodman, 2005). For instance, global food systems depend on local communities to produce traded food. Whatmore and Thorne (1997) use actor-network theory (ANT) to paint a picture of a food system that transgresses categorical distinction between local and global and instead present a complex map of connectivity (p. 290).

As mentioned, much criticism has been directed towards the tendency to assign values to scales, for example, assuming global is always exploitative and local always sustainable and fair. In response, scholars have argued that nothing can be assumed a priori about any scale of organizing, and thus, it is problematic to “conflate the scale of a food system with desired outcome … and confuse ends with means, or goals with strategies” (Born and Purcell, 2006, p. 196). In other words, an environmentally sound local food system – or a socially just global system of trade – must be crafted, not taken for granted.

Similar critiques have been raised with respect to values and scales in big and small farming. Guthman (2004a), for instance, has argued that agrifood activists wrongly assume scale is an accurate measure of industrialization/exploitation, where they often regard the “small-scale family farm a proxy for social justice” (p. 174-175). Instead, Guthman holds the crisis of agribusiness has been its “legacy of social and ecological exploitation” not its scale of production per se (p. 61). Much of this broader criticism has focused on the socially conservative values of agrarianism and “family farming” that are often associated with small farm production (Allen, 2004; Guthman, 2004a).

These critiques are valid and must be taken seriously, yet there remains an important relationship between large and small/medium-scale farming. To be sure, the growth of large-scale corporate farms and economies of scale in agriculture have contributed to the squeezing out of “less capitalized” farmers, thus “leaving food production to a small class of agrarian industrialists” (Guthman, 2004a, p. 63). There is much evidence to suggest that large farms are the ones best able to take advantage of high volume demands and contractual supply chains within the corporate food economy.
Through interviews with 64 peri-urban farmers in the Toronto region, Bunce and Maurer (2005) found that “large or highly capitalized operations with resources for investment and expansion”, and those who had been “aggressive in assembling a large land base”, appeared to be in reasonably good fiscal shape (p. 29). On the other hand, small and medium farms are at a disadvantaged with high input costs, low commodity prices and poor access to commodity markets (Fisher, 2002). Fisher (2002) observes, “The number of farmers is in such decline that farming is no longer listed as an occupation on [American] census forms” (Fisher, 2002, p. 293). Indeed, there is little contention that small and midsize farms have been most marginalized in the corporate, industrial food system (Wen, 2001; Desjardins et al., 2002; Kimbrell, 2002). This loss is widely seen to be a “deepening cultural tragedy” (Hoffman, 2007, p. 317).

Others have discussed the relationship between growth in the number of large farms and increased environmental degradation. Badgley (2002) contends, “As farm size has increased, woodlots, hedgerows, and shelter belts have disappeared, resulting in reduced protection against soil erosion and reduced habitat for wildlife” (p. 204). Still, it cannot be assumed that small or medium scale means sustainability. It is perhaps most prudent to move forward on the premise that smaller farms hold significant potential for environmental and other benefits (Kimbrell, 2002), but these characteristics must be assessed (and pursued) in specific cases.

With this in mind, the thesis aims to ground some of these abstract debates, giving voice to actors who are central to the playing out of scalar struggles. This will contribute to theory by illustrating where (in this particular case) the aforementioned theoretical cautioning is necessary or helpful and where opportunities for progressive change in local and small/medium farming might still lie.

**Alternative and oppositional food movements**

The difference between alternative and oppositional food movements has been a major topic in the agrifood literature. Perhaps the most important contribution has come from Allen et al. (2003), where empirical results from 37 interviews with leaders in alternative agrifood initiatives in California were analyzed. The central question posed by
the authors was: “To what degree do [initiatives] seek to create a new structural configuration – a shifting of the plates in the agrifood landscape – and to what degree are their efforts limited to incremental erosion at the edges of the political-economic structure that currently constitute those plates?” (p. 61). Their research holds that contemporary agrifood agencies in California are best classified as “alternative” in their approach to change. The authors draw attention to the loss of “structural critique” and the “rise of a political culture of entrepreneurialism” as a way of describing this positioning. The thesis adopts these categories to examine the prevalence of alternative and oppositional trends among small/medium farmers in the local food movement.

This “shifting of the plates” in the agrifood landscape has also been described in terms of the counter-hegemonic potential of agrifood initiatives (Johnston, 2003; Shreck, 2005). Johnston (2003) uses the case of FoodShare, a Toronto-based community food security organization, to flesh out her counter-hegemonic criteria for a transformative food politics, which she centres on two principles: reclaiming the commons and creating post-consumer values. She argues, “Counter-hegemonic challengers question the benefits of commodity markets, challenge the centralization of power in a corporate-driven food system, and demand public policy solutions and community control over food” (p. 18). These criteria could certainly be applied to other aspects of the food system, including the perspectives and strategies of farmers. Indeed, the way in which farmers articulate their position and engage in resistance is especially relevant given the great deal of attention paid to alternative/capitalistic food economies (e.g., fair trade and organics) as potential avenues for food system transformation.

Shreck (2005), for example, has focused on counter-hegemonic potential in the fair trade movement where actors work both “in and against” the global capitalist marketplace (p. 17). She introduces a useful chart (see Table 1) within which she categorizes forms of resistance; ultimately arguing that fair trade has been limited in its ability to provoke transformative change, with acts mostly confined to “resistance” and “redistribution”. She suggests that some of the movement’s limits lie with “power asymmetry”, “conservative understanding of empowerment by the movement” and “unequal responsibilities along the … commodity chain” (p. 26-27). These limiting
factors are likely relevant to other agrifood initiatives that attempt to affect change through the capitalist marketplace.

A number of food movements have come to embody these more oppositional criteria for radical social action – e.g., reclaiming the commons, post-consumer values, structural transformation and altering patterns of inequality and injustice. Three movements in particular are taken up in the thesis: specifically, food security, community food security, and the food sovereignty movement. It is argued here that some of these movements hold more counter-hegemonic potential than others.

Table 1. Three forms of counter-hegemonic social action

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forms of action</th>
<th>Possible implications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Acts of resistance      | • Non-participation or partial refusal to participate in the hegemonic system, determined by the actor to be unacceptable  
                            | • An explicit expression of non-participation and a challenge to the working of the hegemonic system |
| • Redistributive action   | • Reform of the system to redistribute resources to the benefit of less powerful and/or disadvantaged members of society  
                            | • Redistribution might be seen as a step towards more transformative change that must be fought for in the future |
| • Radical social action   | • Positive, structural transformation of the system resulting in something qualitatively different  
                            | • The transformed system significantly alters patterns of inequality and injustice in the prevailing system to the advantage of those previously disadvantaged |

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN defines food security as a condition in which “all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food for a healthy and active life” (FAO, 2008b). In this definition, food security is fully oriented towards consumption rights, and, as such, has been incorporated easily into the lexicon of organizations that focus on commodity trade and food aid as a solution to global hunger and food insecurity (Menezes, 2001). Other
groups engaged in food security work have been more specific in their criteria, exhibiting greater objection to elements of the dominant food system. For example, the food security definition put forward by Ryerson University’s Centre for Studies in Food Security includes attention to adequacy and acceptability in the food system, stressing that food must be “produced in environmentally friendly ways … and obtained in ways that do not compromise people’s dignity, self-respect or human rights” (Ryerson University, 2008).

Community food security (CFS) also includes principles of sustainability and dignity, but again offers more specific criteria and a deeper challenge to the status quo, stressing the importance of low-income food needs, community development, empowerment and engagement, interconnections in the food system, community self-reliance, fair wages for farmers and protection of farmland from urban sprawl, among others (CFSC, 2008). Still, the literature suggests that even within these movements, associated farmers tend to focus on their own social justice needs – e.g., fair income – as opposed to broader community issues, or other actors, such as low-income consumers. Allen (2004) has argued that this “farm centrism is widespread in alternative agrifood movements” (p. 120). This claim will be interrogated in the thesis.

A third social movement, perhaps one that demonstrates the most radical counter-hegemonic potential, is the food sovereignty movement. In addition to declaring that all people have a right to eat healthy and culturally appropriate foods produced in ecologically sounds ways, food sovereignty claims that communities should be entitled to “define their own food and agriculture systems … [and] put the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations” (Nyeleni Declaration, 2007). In this case, post-consumer values are located front and centre (Johnston, 2003). In many ways, food sovereignty is positioned against “market sovereignty”, where market players – producers, processors, distributors, retailers – share a common faith in individual choice and market trends to ameliorate social and environmental problems. In contrast, the needs and welfare of food system actors are placed at the centre of the food sovereignty movement framework, demonstrating a more progressive understanding of empowerment. What is more, the declaration positions itself against “imperialism,
neoliberalism, neo-colonialism and patriarchy”, specifically rejecting the World Trade Organization, free trade agreements, transnational corporations and “governments that are antagonistic to their peoples” (Nyeleni Declaration, 2007).

One of the characteristics of a counter-hegemonic challenge is the demand for public policy solutions and community control over food (Johnston, 2003). Scholars have argued that current systems of power and control have significantly weakened the possibility of this kind of transformative change in the Canadian context. MacRae (1999) states, “One might argue that Canadian agribusiness has intentionally acted, in collusion with government, to ensure that Canada has no coherent food policy” (p. 182). The agrifood industry is supported by many policies that favour “a growing, competitive, market oriented agriculture”, but within this framework, there is no unifying policy to promote health and sustainability in the food system (MacRae, 1999, p. 183). Farmers’ thoughts on policy as oppositional action will be considered and evaluated in the following chapters.

This discussion of alternative and oppositional food movements provides a framework for evaluating the transformative potential of activities seeking to create a more sustainable and just food system. In summary, movements that focus on changes through the market and incremental adjustments to the dominant system (e.g., the fair trade movement, FAO food security) differ from those that aim to significantly challenge the status quo (e.g., community food security, food sovereignty, lobbying for a Canadian food policy). The following chapters of the thesis will use the categories of alternative and oppositional to assess the transformative potential of farmers’ perspectives within alternative agrifood activity in the study community.

Collaboration through social movements

Collaboration and conflict between farmers and other food system actors is another theme that reoccurs throughout the thesis. As such, it is important to consider some of the literature that takes up the issue of collaboration in social change. When discussing counter-hegemony in food movements, Johnston (2003) argues that empowerment, or the “positive, collective side of power,” is necessarily a group project, requiring “cooperation of many people and collectives to generate a meaningful capacity
to affect outcome” (p. 5). With this in mind, attention must be given to social movements theory in the context of alternative agrifood initiatives.

There is some debate in the literature on whether or not alternative agrifood initiatives should be considered social movements (Henderson, 1998, Goodman, 2000, Stevenson et al., 2007). This is likely due to contention over what exactly constitutes a social movement and the divergent attributes of agrifood activity (Allen, 2004; Stevenson et al, 2007). However, Goodwin and Jasper (2003) define social movements as “conscious, concerted, and sustained efforts by ordinary people to change some aspect of their sociality by using extra-institutional means” (Goodwin and Jasper, 2003 p. 3). They suggest social movements must be “thoroughly organized”, either formally through organizations, or informally through social networks; activists must construct a collective identity around core issues of concern; and the group must apply pressure to existing structures in order to affect change. This definition complements much alternative agrifood activity.

Stevenson et al. (2007) use their “warrior, builder, weaver” analysis to apply social movements theory specifically to alternative agrifood initiatives. What they call “warrior work” denotes publicly confrontational and political acts that might otherwise be described as oppositional; “builder work” seeks to create alternative food initiatives/models and focuses primarily on the economic realm; and “weaver work” symbolizes the “strategic and conceptual linkages” made between these different actors and types of work (Stevenson et al., 2007, 34/56). Thus, from their definition, there is room for alternative consumer projects in “builder work”, but warrior and weaver activities must not be excluded. The authors also propose three factors which they believe determine power and efficacy in social movements. First, in the “framing process”, shared meanings and definitions are articulated to describe problems and solutions (Allen, 2004; Stevenson, 2007). Here Stevenson et al. (2007) suggest four frames for agrifood movements, specifically, environmental sustainability, economic justice for farmers, community food security, and health and food safety. The second factor that influences the strength of a social movement is the process of “mobilizing structures”, which refers to the tactics and organizational capacity of the group. And
finally, “political opportunities” describe the political climate or “openings for change” available to social movement actors (Stevenson, 2007, p. 35-38).

In combination with alternative (builder) and oppositional (warrior) categories, the thesis uses the weaver analogy to assess collaborative potential for transformation in food system activity with farmers. Stevenson et al. (2007) draw on Johnston and Baker (2003) to discuss weaver work in community food security projects in terms of their capacity to “scale out” (i.e., broaden their scope to have greater impact at the local level), and also “scale up” (i.e., to incorporate more structural critique at various levels, so as to challenge inequality more comprehensively). In terms of strategies for farmers, Stevenson et al. (2007) suggest “scaling out” by organizing producer cooperatives or listserves to network farmers, and “scaling up” to engage non-farm groups like food policy councils and policymakers at various scales (p. 47).

Some scholars have claimed that in contrast to industrial farming, driven by market competition, sustainable agriculture has its roots in “community cooperative relationships” and “collective problem solving” (Lyson, 2000, Hoffman, 2007). Hoffman’s (2007) empirical research with farmers in southeastern Vermont led him to conclude that this was indeed the case. The following study queries the universality of this conclusion and asks whether such an association can be assumed, or whether it is better articulated as a goal to be pursued within farming circles.

**Conclusion**

In summary, this brief review of the literature has provided a rich context within which to evaluate how farmers in particular agrifood movements express their understanding of current food system trends: specifically, how they understand multi-scaled pressures and opportunities, and how they choose strategies and tactic to resist oppressive structures in order to improve their situation. The review has provided a platform from which the following questions can be asked: How do farmers construct local scale and what is the relationship of this concept to other non-local scales? Do they assign value to scale, given their unique position as smaller-scale producers marketing locally? Do farmers views and strategies hold much transformative or counter-hegemonic
potential within the dominant food system? And what is the possibility of building a collaborative social movement that effectively addresses their concerns?

While much of the theory in this review is grounded in empirical research, there is considerable scope to apply the theoretical insights generated in this collective body of work to an analysis of small/medium-scale farmers whose own in-depth views on the food system have not received as much attention as other actors. Greater insight into farmers’ personal perspectives and views will contribute to a more complete picture of how certain communities are positioned to respond to concerns around environmental and social sustainability in the food system. This exploration may also provide insight into how farmers’ perspectives and strategies complement or challenge categories and conclusions drawn in the agrifood literature.
Chapter Three: Methods

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of methods used to explore peri-urban farmers’ day-to-day experiences, perceptions and views on food issues in one locale in Ontario. This case study was developed using qualitative research theories to guide in-depth interviews with 30 farmers from 23 farms, all selling some of their product at the local level. Participants were identified through conversations with “gatekeepers” or leaders in the agricultural community, through online agricultural directories, previous contact and snowball sampling methods.

Interviews explored various topics, including farm descriptions, thoughts on current food system trends, ideas on what an ideal food system might look like, factors facilitating or hindering participation in different food movements/activities, and thoughts on collaboration and networking. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis using NVivo qualitative software. Descriptive and analytic categories were developed to organize themes within the interviews, and through this process interesting relationships, linkages and trends emerged. This was part of an iterative analysis, drawing on both the interviews and literature in order to develop a critical ethnographic perspective on emerging themes.

The following chapter begins with an overview of methodological issues and a discussion of why certain theories, strategies and instruments were chosen to guide the work. This includes a review of critical ethnography, qualitative methodology and in-depth semi-structured interviewing. The section closes with comments on researcher positionality. The second part of the chapter describes the methods used in greater detail, providing an overview of the case study community, the participant recruitment process, and instrumentation. The chapter concludes with an explanation of the research analysis process and mechanisms for ensuring validity.
Methodological issues

Critical Ethnography

This research explores farmers’ perspectives using a critical ethnographic approach, also known as critical qualitative research or CQR. Scholars have argued that critical ethnography is a useful tool for exploring the ways people “interpret and experience” the world (Lees, 2003, p. 111). The theory holds that a cultural group’s reality and their claims to truth are discursively situated within (and shaped by) relations of power and must be interrogated with attention to outside factors. Given this, the goal of critical ethnography is to move beyond simply describing or reconstructing a group’s reality, to show how their thoughts and actions are shaped by often-invisible social structures (Georgiou and Carspecken, 2002; Hardcastle et al., 2006).

Carspecken (1996) has provided a methodological theory of critical ethnography, outlining five core stages in the research process. These cyclical stages include “observation and description; analysis of observational data; dialogical data generation; analysis to discover relationships between individuals, groups, and systems; and examining findings in relation to existing theories of society” (Cook, 2005, p. 132). Whereas the first three stages involve describing structures and themes through “cultural reconstruction”, the last two stages centre on “system analysis”, where the researcher links observations to the broader context in an effort to better understand the underlying role of power (Hardcastle et al., 2006, p. 153). In this process, power struggle is placed at the centre of the epistemology (Georgiou and Carspecken, 2002).

What is more, so-called “criticalists” are social activists who make it their role to challenge repressive structures and empower the oppressed (Hardcastle et al., 2006). They confess to believing that “contemporary society [is] unfair, unequal, and both subtly and overtly oppressive for many people,” and openly state, “we do not like it and we want to change it” (Carspecken, 1996, p. 7). As a result of this explicitly value-oriented stance, it is important for critical ethnography that researchers identify their own position of power within the research context and reflect upon/articulate their personal biases and value orientations (Hardcastle et al., 2006). Indeed, social location and personal values have a strong influence on the conclusions researchers draw. As Donna Haraway (1997) states, “Reality is not independent of our explorations of it” (p. 116).
Thus, within this mode of research, investigators must be as transparent and reflexive as possible in their process.

**Qualitative data collection**

The ways in which researchers approach questions and seek answers to particular problems shape the methods they choose to use in a particular research context. For example, whereas quantitative techniques seek to *measure* phenomena with statistics and scientific methods, qualitative techniques pursue detailed understanding, depth and richness of information (Clifford and Valentine, p. 8). Rasmussen et al. (2006) claim it is best to use qualitative methods in studies that take up complex issues and endeavour to explore “less tangible precursors of behaviour such as attitudes, feelings and motives” (p. 93). Given the articulated research problem and stated purpose of the thesis – to examine the day-to-day experiences, perceptions and views of local farmers – qualitative methodologies were deemed most appropriate for the project.

In 2006, the City of Hamilton conducted a survey with 49 farmers as part of its recent Agricultural Action Plan (City of Hamilton, 2006c). The report charted and graphed responses to questions on issues such as value-added processing, marketing, succession plans, finances, municipal regulations and threats to agriculture sustainability. While the responses gathered through surveys and quantitative methods verify much of what will be discussed in the following study, it is clear that these techniques do not permit the kind of in-depth exploration available to qualitative researchers. What is more, in line with the goals of critical ethnography, qualitative methodologies allow greater room for researchers to explore social/power relations within participants’ responses, and also, to incorporate a critique of their own subjective position into the research process (Clifford and Valentine, p. 4).

**In-depth interviews**

In-depth semi-structured interviews were the primary instrument for data collection in the qualitative study. The method was chosen for several reasons that complement the purpose of the research project. For example, Dunn (2000) argues that interviewing is useful for the purposes of investigating complex behaviours and
motivations, and also for demonstrating respect and giving voice to marginalized groups. In-depth interviews encourage informal and conversational exchanges, so that respondents can contribute to topics openly and in their own words, thus capturing texture and complexity of feelings and thought (Longhurst, 2003, p. 119). These factors, along with a conscious effort to create a comfortable interview setting, can encourage greater trust, security and a sense of equality between researcher and interviewee(s) (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998, p. 88; Rasmussen et al., 2006, p. 100-102).

A semi-structured interview style was chosen intentionally. In contrast to methods where interviews are completely unstructured, the semi-structured approach suited the clearly defined focus of the research project (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998, p. 88). The structure allowed for a relatively high level of consistency between interviews (Rasmussen et al., 2006, p. 100). For example, each farmer addressed what an ideal food system would look like, but actual descriptions varied from interview to interview. Not being locked into a rigid structure, however, allowed for the exploration of fresh ideas and personal stories as they emerged, so that the respondent’s views, interests and concerns could be captured faithfully (Rasmussen et al., 2006, p. 104).

In contrast to more extensive and detailed methodologies, such as participant observation, in-depth interviewing was chosen in order to maximize diversity in the sample and accommodate time pressures, specifically the need to complete data collection during farmers’ off-season, from December-March (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998, p. 88). This decision allowed the researcher to practice sensitivity to farmers’ busy schedules and non-interference at the height of their growing season. However, some participant observation was practiced informally; for example, through previous volunteer/work experiences on three of the farms, patronizing market stalls, on-farm markets and pick-your-own operations, and through informal conversations with research participants in the community, at events, etc. These informal interactions did not contribute significantly to data used in the study, but rather provided a context within which the results could be better situated.
Positionality

The recognition in critical ethnography that researchers must identify their own positions of power, along with their biases and values, demands a thorough discussion of positionality and reflexivity. Acknowledging the “power laden nature of interviewing encounters” (Valentine, 1997, p. 113), special attention must be given to how a researchers’ identity shapes his or her interactions with informants, and ultimately, how this shapes the quality and validity of the information gathered (Longhurst, 2003, p. 123). Power can of course lie with researcher or interviewee, or some combination of both. Thus, for the purposes of positioning myself as researcher, I will address my experience and history in the case study community, my interests and perspectives on the thesis topic, and my identity, including positions of power. On the whole, I will argue that these factors in combination with one another support a fairly balanced relationship between researcher and research participants.

Initial interest in the project grew from my experience (over three years) working on local agrifood initiatives in the study community - specifically, an Eat Local program, an urban fruit-gleaning project and an urban gardening initiative (run through an environmental non-profit organization), as well as work with a food policy group. The majority of farmers interviewed were familiar with my role in these local initiatives, and what is more, a fair number were acquainted with me through community events, visits to their farm stores, participation in CSA programs, and in one case, from a summer working on their farm. A general awareness among participants of my sympathetic position towards the plight of small/medium farm (and alterative) producers, and my interest in seeing a revaluing of local food, also seemed to foster a sense of trust and camaraderie in the interview setting. While this insider position has its limits – e.g., knowledge of my position may have swayed their answers – it certainly helped in building an important level of participant trust, which was displayed in farmers’ comfort sharing their stories and more controversial and personal ideas.

While many participants felt exploited and marginalized within the larger agricultural political economy, the group was not visibly marginalized in terms of identity politics, such as race or class. Still, aspects of my identity and social location meant that participants would have perceived and received me in different ways. My
position as a white Canadian (interviewing mostly white Canadians) meant there was little negotiation of power around the issue of race. In contrast, my identity as a young woman certainly influenced interactions with different respondents. While all were respectful and gracious, I, as interviewer, felt greater comfort in speaking with younger and/or female participants, which likely affected the ways in which I was received (e.g., more or less confident and knowledgeable). This power relationship was also evident in terms of my farming experience. Farmers with more experience in the industry would likely have shared other details or different information had I demonstrated greater expertise in their language and culture (Cope, 2003, p. 457). However, it is likely that in speaking with respondents who held more power (male, older, experienced), my role as researcher helped to foster a sense of validity in my position, while at the same time situating me as little threat and potentially encouraging openness.

Overall, my location and identity were probably quite advantageous, given the balance of gender, age groups and levels of farm experience in the research sample. More marginalized individuals would have felt comfortable in my presence, while dominant voices would have felt confident in their role as expert. My youth and freshness to the field kept me curious, sympathetic and open to myriad views and perspectives while interviewing. What is more, conducting the research under the auspices of an academic institution likely opened doors for the project, giving participants confidence that the research would be rigorous and the interviews well used. It could also be that a positioning within the university created cultural distance from some of the participants, particularly those who did not know me from other roles in the community and may have perceived me as an urban outsider.

My academic and ideological positioning (i.e., my biases) also deserves some attention. Previous study in Environmental Studies, Peace and Conflict Studies and Food Security Studies have oriented me towards a belief that all people have a right to produce and access/eat foods through a food system that is healthful, sustainable, empowering, life-giving and just. As part of this, I am deeply invested in the belief that farms and sustainable/socially just food systems should be supported and preserved to ensure local communities are able to meet their food needs fairly. My interdisciplinary background has led me to conclude that pursuing this goal will require the collaboration of myriad
groups and people (perspectives and bodies of knowledge), and particularly, the empowerment of those currently marginalized in systems of domination. I am sympathetic to the struggles of all small/medium farmers, and believe their survival and success is urgently important to achieving a right to food. However, environmentally, I feel there is a need to move towards more ecological (e.g., organic) ways of growing food. While I have attempted to be objective in my use of data around the issue of organics, this belief has likely influenced many of my conclusions. What is more, while the paper is preoccupied with local food issues, I also feel that readers should be mindful of the global foodshed and the dangers of defensive localism (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Winter; 2003). I strongly feel that those involved in organizing at the local level must not neglect the concerns and needs of producers and eaters across the globe, and more importantly, the potential negative impact of unreflexive and closed localization activity (Freidberg, 2004; BBC, 2007).

Methods

Case Study: Hamilton, Ontario

This research uses the local food and farming system in the municipality of Hamilton, Ontario as a case study. Whereas the overall purpose of this critical ethnography is to examine the views of small/medium-scale peri-urban farmers, the case study approach provides a useful tool for focusing the research further on a particular region of interest (Miller et al., 2002, p. 147). It is the opinion of the researcher that these two methodological approaches are highly complementary.

Hamilton is a city of approximately 500,000 people. It is located at the western end of Lake Ontario in the Golden Horseshoe area, about 70 km southwest of Toronto, nestled in between the lakeshore fruit and vegetable belt and Niagara’s fruit belt (Encarta, 2008). See Figure 1 below (City of Hamilton, 2003).

More than 60% of its total land base is in farm production and 70% of this area is designated as first grade agricultural land (City of Hamilton, 2006a). In terms of marketing potential, Hamilton farmers are within a day’s drive of a marketplace of over 130 million people and are situated in a major transportation hub. It has been estimated that the city’s agricultural industry has an economic impact of $1 billion annually (City
of Hamilton, 2006b). Still, Hamilton farmers report difficulty in maintaining their farm operations in the face of economic pressure and uncertainty (City of Hamilton, 2003). In a 2006 questionnaire with 49 Hamilton farmers, the City of Hamilton found that 40% of participants felt their farm operation’s financial situation had deteriorated, while 38% stated it had stayed the same, and only 23% noted improvement (City of Hamilton, 2006c). Farmland continues to be threatened by development in this peri-urban location (Hamiltonians for Progressive Development, 2008). The City estimates that between 1971 and 2001, 32,186 acres of Hamilton’s land went out of production (City of Hamilton, 2003, p. iii). Selling to developers often provides the only feasible exit for aging or cash-strapped farmers, many of who see farmland preservation policy (e.g., the Ontario Greenbelt Act) as a threat to their investment and land development rights (Bunce and Maurer, 2005). A fair amount of Hamilton’s agricultural land now lies within the Ontario Greenbelt, which was created by legislation in February of 2005 (Ontario Greenbelt, 2008).

Average farm size in Hamilton in 2003 was 135 acres (City of Hamilton, 2003), making the city an excellent case for investigating the perspectives of small/medium-sized farmers. What is more, the location offers a good example of a food system that contains multi-scaled pressures and opportunities. The City claims that growth in the food sector has been driven by “multinational, homegrown operations and successful small business” (City of Hamilton, 2006b). Much of the produce found on grocery store shelves in the region is imported, even during periods of peak productivity. While Hamilton-specific data is hard to find, a provincial example of “redundant trade” is telling: “In tomato season in Ontario (July, August, and September 2005), Ontario exported $69 million worth of fresh tomatoes. During those same months, Ontario also imported $17 million worth of fresh tomatoes” (Maan, 2006). Still, a recent survey of Hamilton farmers suggested that about thirty percent of farmers ship their products exclusively within the city boundaries, while another 55% ship to destinations within the province, mostly to cities within 250 kilometres (City of Hamilton, 2003). Between 15 and 20% of farmers surveyed reported that they engage in some sort of direct or local marketing strategy, including farm gate sales, customer delivery, agri-education tours, and participation in local farmers’ markets (City of Hamilton, 2003). However, while there is a growing
interest in buying local farm fresh foods (Environment Hamilton, 2008), another important feature of the case study community is that over 10% of the city’s population experiences food insecurity and insufficient access to nutritious food (City of Hamilton, 2005).

Clearly, this case study does not represent farmers everywhere. Hamilton is a unique community with prime growing conditions, relatively small farm sizes and dominance of certain farm products/styles that require small acreages, such as poultry, fruit, nursery and green house production (City of Hamilton, 2003). Proximity to a major and expanding city brings opportunities and costs. While this sort of location is ideal for direct-to-consumer sales, farmers often complain about the shortage of affordable land to purchase or rent, unsupportive (urban-oriented) governments, increased taxes, traffic/congested roads, and friction with non-farm neighbours over farming practices (Bunce and Maurer, 2005, p. 37-41).

A number of city committees, organizations and grassroots groups currently operate within the City of Hamilton to address agricultural and food system issues. For example, the City of Hamilton Economic Development department, Hamilton Agriculture and Rural Affairs Advisory Committee, Hamilton Federation of Agriculture, Canadian Organic Growers (Hamilton chapter); and newer groups, including Hamilton Eat Local (formed in 2005), Slow Food Hamilton (formed 2007), and the City of Hamilton’s Community Food Security Stakeholders’ Committee (formed in 2008).
Figure 1. Map of the City of Hamilton and surrounding area, 2003
Participant recruitment and sample size

The research sample was limited to peri-urban farmers who sold some of their product “locally”, which for the purpose of this study is defined as occurring within the province of Ontario. As noted in the literature review, geographic scales are socially constructed, and here, Ontario has been chosen to represent the broadest popular category of “local” used by study participants. Of course, some respondents deviated from this definition (e.g., local meaning within 50 km or 100 km to them). Except for one dairy farmer who was selling under supply management, all participants sold a significant portion of their product direct to consumers in the Hamilton area. Given this, the sample best reflects the experiences and perspectives of the 15-20% of Hamilton farmers who are reported to engage in some sort of local marketing strategy – e.g., farm gate sales, local farmers’ markets – and does not reflect Hamilton’s agricultural sector at large (City of Hamilton, 2003). Still, this is an appropriate sub-sector to focus on given the centrality of food localism to the study. While farmers growing solely for the export/commodity market represent an important group for future inquiry, in this case, it was thought to be unlikely that these growers would have an interest in speaking at length about the local food system or small farm production. It was also assumed their responses would not speak directly to the research objectives.

While farm size and scale were not rigorously assessed in the selection process, all research participants are considered small/medium farm producers. Some refer to themselves in this way, while others have been assigned the label. The literature and study participants use the term small-scale loosely and pinning down a concrete definition was difficult. Some define farm size in terms of acreage, others measure size by farm income, and still others, describe size by functionality, e.g., selling directly to consumers. For the purposes of this study, farm size will be measured by acreage. Other definitions seem more ambiguous; for example, a small farm could bring in high revenue, charging premiums for niche products (e.g., organics), and might participate in myriad marketing schemes. As mentioned, the average farm-size in Hamilton in 2003 was 135 acres (City of Hamilton, 2003). In this study, small/medium scale has been defined as 100-300 acres (or smaller). The study was intentionally limited to rural food producers and does not include those “urban farmers” growing food within the city.
No attempt was made to select farmer participants at random. Rather, as common in qualitative research, the sample was generated purposively (Patton, 2002; Rice, 2003, p. 225). Here, the purpose was to maximize variation in terms of gender, age, ethnicity; type of farm; marketing styles; and any obvious positions or perspectives on the food system. The reason for maximizing diversity in the sample was to capture a wide range of farmer experiences, perceptions and views. This diversity was achieved in all categories except for ethnicity, reflecting Hamilton’s homogenous farm demographic in the category. A breakdown of diversity among the 30 participants (and 23 farms) is found in Table 2, below.

Table 2. Diversity in the research sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Main product(s)</th>
<th>Farm method</th>
<th>Direct sales methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>gender</td>
<td>age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male - 15</td>
<td>20 to 40 - 6</td>
<td>Vegetables - 9</td>
<td>Conventional -16</td>
<td>Farm-gate- 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female - 15</td>
<td>40 to 50 - 11</td>
<td>Fruit - 6</td>
<td>Organic - 7</td>
<td>Markets - 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50 to 70 - 10</td>
<td>Beef - 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>U-Pick - 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Over 70 - 3</td>
<td>Chicken - 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Restaurants -3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hogs - 2</td>
<td>Dairy - 1</td>
<td>CSA - 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Goats - 1</td>
<td>Greenhouse veg - 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hay/feed - 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Honey/hive - 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vineyard - 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number of organic farms included in the sample is not a realistic reflection of the farming community. Hamilton’s 2006 Agricultural Census shows that only 8% of Hamilton farmers grow organically, whereas our sample is comprised of approximately 30%. Nevertheless, the decision to include this larger number of organic growers was intentionally made in order to capture diversity in the organic group (e.g., decisions to certify or not and experiences growing produce versus organic meat).

Study participants were identified through conversations with “gatekeepers”, leaders in the agricultural community ($n=10$); online agricultural directories ($n = 3$), previous contact ($n = 6$) and snowball sampling ($n = 4$). Gatekeepers are “individuals in
an organization that have the power to grant or withhold access to people or situations for the purposes of research” (Valentine, 1997, p. 115). In this study, two gatekeepers were utilized: one, a city councillor and opinion leader in the rural community, another, the head of an environmental organization with numerous connections to farmers selling locally in the Hamilton area. The two gatekeepers represent very different groups of farmers. They also facilitated contact with people they knew well and others they had only heard about (Valentine, 1997, p. 116). While suggestions from gatekeepers made up much of the research sample, this was not the only method used. Online agricultural directories were consulted (specifically, the Hamilton Local Food Directory and Harvest Ontario) in order to select some participants randomly. Previous contacts were also used, mostly within the organic community, as this is a small and tight-knit group of farmers. Finally, the snowball sampling method was used for a few remaining participants. In each interview, respondents were asked to recommend other farmers whom they felt might be interested in participating. These recommendations were collected throughout the interview process and a small number of farmers were chosen from these suggestions to fill remaining gaps in the research sample (Patton, 2002). These four sampling methods worked together to generate a diverse and highly relevant group of farmer participants for the project.

It is important at this point to address the small size of the sample group. The particular size (23 farms) was chosen in order to maximize the number of in-depth interviews for credibility/validity, while at the same time acknowledging time constraints to complete the interviews (December to March), limited financial resources for transcription, mileage to farms, gifts for farmers, etc. (Patton, 2002, p. 244). Indeed, the research sample represents a small percentage of Hamilton’s total 975 farms, specifically 2.4% (Statistics Canada, 2006b). The sample is better representative of the 15%–20% of Hamilton farmers who participate in some direct-to-consumer sales, where the research sample represents 12%–16% of these growers. While the diversity of the purposive sample helps in capturing a wide range of perspectives, it has been argued that a small sample size with a high level of heterogeneity can cause problems in terms of respondent commonalities. It also means that common patterns are of particular interest and value in capturing the primary experience of participants (Patton, 2002, p. 235). The farmers
involved in the study shared many similar issues and views, and thus, the small sample size is not deemed to be a major problem in this case.

**Instrumentation**

All interviews took place between January and April of 2008. The timing was important, as these months are considered to be most growers’ rest time or down season, and as such, farmers are more likely to be available and less likely to experience the interview process as an intrusion into their busy lives. In this case, once the desired interviewee list had been developed (in November), potential participants were contacted in one of two ways. If an email address was available, they were emailed an introductory note with attached letter explaining the project and inviting them to participate (see Appendix A). Where an email address was not available, individuals received a phone call in which the same information was communicated. At this point, some farmers shared their email address and a copy of the introductory letter was sent. Most people replied within a week and those who did not were contacted a second time. While no one verbally declined the invitation to participate, a very small number of people ($n=5$) chose not to reply to calls/emails. Interview dates were set up over the phone or through email with 23 farms. Overall, this was deemed a very positive response. Prior to each interview, some preliminary research was done to learn about the specific farm operation, if websites, web information, or other literature was available. As mentioned earlier, driving distance to participating farms did not exceed 45 km from Hamilton’s downtown core.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 30 peri-urban farmers from 23 different farms within (or near) the City of Hamilton. All interviews took place in participants’ homes, offices, barns, or another comfortable place of their choosing. Prior to the interview, participants were given a consent form to read and sign (see Appendix B). The form indicated types of questions that would be asked and stated that farmers could refuse to answer any of the questions, stop the interview, or withdraw from the study at any point. The consent form also stated that the participants’ name would not be used in any published report/presentation and that the primary data would only be available to principle investigators and the professional transcriber. Permission to tape record the
interview was also sought, and farmers were asked if they wanted to receive a copy of the final report.

Each interview lasted 1-2 hours and followed a semi-structured interview checklist. The checklist included main topics, key questions and probes, but was not followed in a rigorous order. Rather, it was used to guide the interview flexibly and ensure consistency of information between interviews. Only a couple of participants requested the questions prior to the interview, at which point they were provided. Questions centred on farm description, current food system trends, thoughts on what a vibrant, sustainable and fair food system might look like, factors that facilitate or hinder participation in different food movements/activities, and collaboration and networks (see Appendix C). Interviews were tape-recorded and all participants seemed comfortable with this process. In one case the tape malfunctioned and this interview was unfortunately not used directly in the analysis.

In addition to tape-recorded information, the researcher kept a journal of field notes. Very few notes were taken during the actual interviews. Instead, thoughts, reflections and impressions were recorded at home directly after the interview had taken place, while all information was still fresh and current. The journal was used to make note on emerging themes, hunches, non-verbal communications and preliminary analyses. It was also used to document relevant conversation that took place prior to, or after, tape recording (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998, p. 115).

No monetary compensation was provided to participants and all agreed to the interview on a completely voluntary basis. However, all interviewees were given a gift basket after the interview was complete to show thanks for their involvement. This was a token of appreciation and did not sway individual’s decision to participate.

Analysis

Interview transcripts and field notes were the primary basis for analysis in this study. As interviews proceeded, emergent themes and topics were recorded in the researcher’s journal, along with notes on their meaning and importance. The interview questions and outside literature were also used as an initial guide in thinking about what main themes might structure the study. What is more, some coding began before all
interviews were complete/transcribed, thus allowing for emerging themes to shape the questions of later interviews. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis using NVivo qualitative software. Once all interviews were transcribed, transcripts were skimmed and tapes were replayed to help build a preliminary list of core themes and issues raised in the interviews.

Themes were identified based on their frequency across the research sample and their relative importance to individuals, which was gauged by the degree and depth to which respondents addressed the theme and their emphasis or emotional response. Strong differences in participants’ views were not initially used in developing codes, but became important in later stages of the analysis (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998).

The entire data set was coded towards the end of April for a single theme – “farming and organics”.$^3$ This theme was addressed widely across the research sample, a range of farmers took strong (often emotional) positions on the matter, and it was an issue around which some respondents confessed to feeling misunderstood by the public. As this specific theme was being coded, other topics were noted as significant for later analysis. Some time elapsed before the researcher returned to the data, re-coding for another two major themes in June and July, specifically “fairness and economic justice” and “health in the food system”. These three themes came to comprise the main categories under which all information was organized and ultimately set the structure for how results would be presented.

Within each of these three categories multiple sub-themes were coded. Key words were used to denote each code, for example, under “fairness and economic justice” codes emerged such as “cheap food”, “supply management”, “consumers need to change”, “processing”, and “free market”. Cope (2005) distinguishes between these sorts of descriptive codes that organize clearly stated issues in the data, and analytic codes, which are revealed by descriptive patterns and reflect themes/connections made by the researcher (p. 224-225). As Crang (1997) states, categorization serves as a tool to help “organize the material so that interesting relationships can be seen” (p. 188), but also argues that the categories themselves must not be seen as absolute. This is where the intuitive and inductive (and iterative) development of theory comes into play in

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$^3$ The analysis was used for a class paper, which ultimately came to constitute chapter four.
qualitative ethnographic research. Analytic memos were used for this purpose, in order to summarize major findings and connections, for example, exploring what quotes have in common, where they differ, and how they relate to one another (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998, p. 152). Exploring literatures during the coding process helped in developing critical perspectives on emerging themes.

As Cope states, some codes “die a natural death through lack of use” (Cope, 2005, p. 227). This was the case for a few issues that appeared interesting and relevant at the beginning of the study, but were abandoned for various reasons. For example, it was decided that the issue of “culturally appropriate food provisioning” would not be discussed, as only one interviewee addressed the issue in-depth, meaning there was insufficient information to form an additional chapter.

Validity and communication

An assessment of the validity of methods and “trustworthiness” of results is far more important in qualitative research than in quantitative, where despite the increased popularity of qualitative methods, uncertainty often remain as to levels of rigor and credibility from study to study (Rasmussen et al., 2006, p. 116). In this case, a number of factors have been considered to help ensure research validity.

First of all, a high level of comfort and familiarity with the literature in agrifood studies has enabled the development of interview questions deemed most appropriate for filling existing gaps of knowledge. What is more, the research purpose and premise have been communicated openly and transparently and the researcher has thought critically about appropriate methodology. It has been argued throughout this chapter that a qualitative, in-depth interview-based study is a highly appropriate design for capturing the complex experiences, perception and views of small-scale peri-urban farmers (Rasmussen et al., 2006, p. 117). What is more, the critical ethnographic foundations of the study give validity to the researcher’s goal of using results to explore how often-invisible social structures and power relations shape the way in which farmers think and act, as opposed to simply describing their reality (Georgiou and Carspecken, 2002). It is not the intent of the approach to take advantage of respondents’ contributions or assume
their identity, but rather to weave the researcher’s voice and perspectives into the analysis with honesty.

The chapter has also argued that validity lies in the careful selection of the research sample, which aimed to maximize diversity among small/medium-scale farmers in Hamilton selling locally and direct to consumers. Still, given the sample’s small size, care has been taken throughout the analysis to not over-generalize findings from the purposeful sample to larger categories, such as Hamilton farmers or Canadian farmers (Patton, 2002, p. 246). In terms of validity in analysis, Rasmussen et al. (2006) ask whether developed categories have sufficient foundation in the data, or whether large amounts of information were omitted. As Taylor and Bogdan (1998) state, “The cardinal rule of coding in qualitative analysis is to make the codes fit the data and not vice versa” (p. 152). Every effort was made to follow this rule. The three overarching themes that were initially identified (economic justice, environment and health) include almost all major issues raised by participants. Where minor categories/codes were omitted, it was consciously decided that omission would not drastically affect the validity of the overall findings.

The primary mechanism for ensuring validity of the interview analysis will be feedback from the research community. All participants will be provided with a summary of the results prior to the study’s publication. At this time, farmers will be encouraged to review their quotes to ensure the researcher has used the comments accurately and fairly. In other words, the research participants will vet all results and data used. It is the researcher’s hope that participating farmers will recognize the rigor with which the study has been conducted. The following comment was made by one farmer prior to an interview: “I find sometimes [sharing information in an interview] is a disservice to people who are doing more progressive projects and that’s why sometimes I feel like – no I’m going to hang on to this for now and not share it, because it’s not always the right thing to do with certain people, so it depends who gets their hands on it.” With this concern in mind, it is hoped that the thesis will be seen as a benefit and service to all who participated and that its contribution will work in complement with the progressive goals of those working “in the field”.
Communicating final results to the research community is of great importance in this research. In this case, during the consent form process, participants indicated whether or not they wanted to receive a final copy of the report (these will all be sent as promised). In addition to sharing the results with participants, it is important that the findings are given an opportunity to speak to wider audiences and influence food policy. As such, a final report of the project will be shared with various community stakeholders and groups in the city. Contacts from previous work in the community will greatly facilitate this process.
Chapter Four: Fairness and economic justice for farmers

“If the farming doesn’t change, then farming is going to be a thing of the past before long, because it’s too costly and what you get in return doesn’t warrant the effort. You know, really. I hope I’m wrong. We need the farmers of course.” ~ ‘Charles’ and ‘Andy’, 81 and 83 yrs old

Introduction

Recent news articles and press releases from Canadian farm organizations have been remarkably grim, emphasizing the “desperate circumstances” and “deepening crisis” of farming in North America (NFU, 2008a; NFU 2008b). One news piece, focusing on agriculture in Prince Edward Island, claims, “Farmers have stopped talking about how making a living is difficult. The conversation has turned to thinking about what P.E.I. might look like without agriculture” (CBC News, 2007).

The following chapter takes up these issues, exploring the economic concerns of peri-urban farmers in Hamilton, Ontario, with a specific focus on fairness and economic justice in the food system. Examining points of agreement and divergence in research interviews, the chapter considers how small and medium farm producers experience and understand existing pressures and marginalization, and further, how they discuss possible solutions and ways forward in order to improve their situation. The findings contribute to existing literature by confirming that farmers draw on various scales – the local, national and global – when explaining problems and solutions. Results also illustrate that farmers’ views are fraught with conflict on the role of corporations and the free market in addressing economic concerns, whereby farmers demonstrate comfort with (and hope in) both alternative approaches to change through the market and more oppositional methods through policy and regulatory action. Drawing on the political economy of agriculture, food security and alternative agrifood literatures, this chapter asks what the best way forward might be for reviving small/medium farm production in Ontario given these farmers’ perspectives.

The paper begins with a literature review exploring power and resistance in the food system at various scales, followed by a presentation of the results from 23 interviews with a mix of organic and conventional peri-urban farmers in Hamilton. This is followed by a discussion of the interview results in relation to major themes and arguments raised in the literature.
Power and resistance in the food system

Global trade, national protections and the big players

The historical roots of our contemporary global food system can be traced back to Europe’s establishment of colonial monocultures that operated to meet the needs of European capitalist development and imperial expansion (Friedmann, 2005; McMichael, 2007). These systems of large-scale production and distribution have been adapted to a post-colonial world, where international food trade (and aid) has become a cornerstone of neoliberal globalization (McMichael, 2007). Throughout this time, access to cheap food for industrialized nations has remained of paramount importance. While mechanisms for acquiring cheap food continue to evolve, abundant access to beef, wheat, sugar, coffee, tea, cocoa and tropical fruit (tastes acquires during the colonial era) still play an important role in the global food economy (Friedman, 2005).

These international origins aside, academics have argued that agrifood commodities have been globalized unevenly and incorporated into the world economy at varying rates and to different degrees. Compared to other “globalized” products, like cars and electronics, it has been suggested that foods often follow fairly simple paths from site of production to sale (Freidberg, 2004; Friedland, 2004). Commodities are also subject to different degrees and moments of corporate control within their movement (Pinstrup-Andersen, 2002; Friedland, 2004). Whereas major supermarket chains have grown beyond the control of federal governments in their international sourcing and global presence (McMichael and Friedmann, 2007), other aspects of the food system remain highly regulated, especially in Canada. Food marketing boards and supply management systems, for example, continue to control the production and sale of Canadian dairy, poultry, eggs, and wheat/barley (OECD, 2006; Tamilia and Charlebois, 2007; see also, Canadian Hatching Egg Producers, 2008; Canadian Turkey Marketing Agency, 2008; Chicken Farmers of Canada, 2008; Eggs Farmers of Canada, 2008; The Canadian Dairy Commission, 2008; The Canadian Wheat Board, 2008). Such national protections are under intense international pressure to liberalize (Easter, 2005; Mousseau and Mittal, 2006). For example, Tamilia and Charlebois (2007) quote the president of the Canadian

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4 U.S. retailers “rely on imports for 27 percent of their current produce offerings and are expecting them to grow by a third in five years” (Konefal et al., 2007, p. 276).
Wheat Board, reflecting on a 2004 World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting: “It was one against 146. We had absolutely no allies at the negotiating table, so there’s no doubt that the WTO is not going to be a friend of either supply management or the Canadian Wheat Board” (p. 120).

Yet even at the international level the situation is made extremely complex by the contradictory manner in which nation-states approach trade liberalization in food and agriculture. An analysis of the WTO’s on-going Doha Round multilateral negotiations – which aim to liberalize agricultural trade on an unprecedented scale – provides insight into these economic dynamics and political tensions (Das, 2008). Some parties have blamed the reoccurring breakdown of talks on U.S. resistance to eliminating or lightening agricultural export subsidies (Das, 2008). According to WTO principles, subsidy programs create a competitive disadvantage for trading nations, especially when they result in international dumping and “predatory pricing”, where commodities are sold to neighbouring markets below their domestic value and/or costs of production (Menezes, 2001; Wainio et al., 2003). In contrast, the U.S. has blamed the Doha breakdown on nations seeking exceptions to farm tariff cuts, specifically China, India, Brazil and the EU (Das, 2008; Gallagher, 2008). This simultaneous expectation that others should liberalize while domestic interests are protected through subsidies or tariffs points to real tensions within national agendas on agriculture (Pinstrup-Andersen, 2002; Friedmann, 2005; McMichael and Friedmann, 2007; Stevenson et al., 2007).

The literature has also emphasized corporate influence within agrifood systems; and indeed, it is widely held that transnational corporations have thrived under neoliberal reform (Konefal et al., 2004; Yoon, 2006; Martinelli and Marchi, 2007). Part of the transnational advantage is that a liberal global marketplace offers endless and diverse opportunity for investment and capital accumulation (Dumenil and Levy, 2006; Yoon, 2006). Corporate involvement permeates all areas of agriculture, from plant genetics, to agricultural inputs, food processing and packing, distribution and, of course, retail. Those dealing in multiple agrifood products and services enjoy great levels of market resilience and control over food’s movement (Yoon, 2006; Martinelli and Marchi, 2007). Cargill Canada’s website, for instance, lists product information on “grain origination”, crop input supplies, natural gas, animal nutrition, beef, canola, chicken and chocolate.
processing, grain handling and exporting, “kitchen solutions”, and “flavour systems” (Cargill, 2003). Cargill is also directly involved in farm operations. Their website advertises a year–round program called CropSense™, providing “timely planning, monitoring and management assistance by agronomic experts” (Cargill, 2007). Specifically, CropSense™ offers record keeping of field history; planning in fertility; assistance in determining proper herbicide choice, dosage and timing; insect management; and a consultant newsletter (Cargill, 2007).

The Canadian meatpacking industry provides another example of corporate concentration and power in agrifood systems. Whereas Cargill and Tyson Foods account for 75% of federally inspected slaughter capacity in beef processing, Olymel, Maple Leaf and Quality Meat Packers account for 74% in pork (OECD, 2006, p. 43). Economies of size tend to dictate packers’ success, increasing efficiency and reducing operating costs per animal (Martin et al., 1997; OECD, 2006; Omidvar et al., 2006). Table 3 illustrates the relative success of packers between 1987 and 1998 in comparison to weekly processing volume; clearly big equals survival in this arena (Omidvar et al., 2006). As another example of corporate muscle, the Canadian National Farmers’ Union (NFU) notes that packers will often buy or control large numbers of cattle in feedlots through vertical integration. When cattle prices rise too high, these packers will exit the market, relying on “captive supplies” until their absence has sufficiently lowered market prices in their favour (NFU, 2005).

Table 3. Cattle slaughter and processing in Alberta, 1987–1998

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Firm</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Avg. weekly slaughter in 1987</th>
<th>Avg. weekly slaughter in 1998</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canada Packers</td>
<td>Red Deer</td>
<td>3,250</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada Packers</td>
<td>Lethbridge</td>
<td>3,600</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada Packers</td>
<td>Calgary</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dvorkin Meat Packer</td>
<td>Calgary</td>
<td>3,100</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gainers</td>
<td>Edmonton</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burns Meats</td>
<td>Lethbridge</td>
<td>1,800</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakeside Packers</td>
<td>Brooks</td>
<td>3,200</td>
<td>28,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cargill Foods</td>
<td>High River</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>23,100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Finally, the influence of the grocery industry in food and agricultural markets has also received a fair amount of attention (Wen, 2001; Konefal et al., 2004; Criner et al., 2007; Schwartz and Lyson, 2007). Where market power once lay with producers, wholesalers and manufacturers, it has now largely shifted to retailers (Burch and Lawrence, 2005; Hingley, M., 2005; Konefal et al., 2007; Lawrence and Burch, 2007; Schwartz and Lyson, 2007). The five main Canadian supermarket chains listed in Table 4 account for approximately 90% of total supermarket sales in the country (OECD, 2006, p. 45). Mass merchandising, regional distribution centres and other supply chain management techniques have allowed the big chains to beat out most independent grocers and competitors (Harvey, 2007; Konefal et al., 2007; Lawrence and Burch, 2007).

Table 4. Canada’s largest supermarket chains in 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supermarket chain</th>
<th>Total sales</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loblaw Companies</td>
<td>$18,780,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sobeys</td>
<td>$11,000,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada Safeway</td>
<td>$4,940,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>$3,995,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great A&amp;P</td>
<td>$3,200,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Sales of the Top Five</strong></td>
<td><strong>$41,915,000,000</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Canadian Grocer, Who’s Who 2000-2001*

Many supermarkets have developed wholesale operations alongside their retail stores in order to ensure regular supply and standardization (Connor, 1997; Konefal et al., 2007). What is more, they exercise increasing control over the production process (Harvey, 2007), paying low prices to farmers, while at the same time demanding extremely high quality/conformity standards (Dixon, 2007; Konefal et al., 2007). As Wen (2001) observes, small farm producers are lost in the “indiscriminate application of the large-scale modern procurement systems of the supermarket” (p. 53).
It is thus apparent from these examples that the big players – trade organizations, nation states and corporations – have considerable power and significant impact on farmers’ experience within the food system.

**Enter Canadian farmer and consumer**

The question of how Canadian farmers have fared in these changing economic times is as complex as the system itself, and of course some farmers have done much better than others. However, the following trends and aggregate statistics offer some insight into the overall situation, where two important indicators of economic hardship are increased reliance on off-farm income, and loss of farms/farmland. Statistics Canada (2005) notes that in 2003 small and medium-sized farms relied on off-farm sources for approximately 90% of their total income, and large farms for 52.1%. This was a 5.5% (small), 23.7% (medium), and 14.8% (large) increase from 1990. Secondly, in the specific region investigated in this study, farm losses have been significant. As mentioned in chapter three, the City of Hamilton saw the “disappearance” of 837 farms between 1971 and 2001 – a 45% decline. Even with farm consolidation, 32,186 acres of Hamilton’s land went out of production during this period, under considerable pressure from urban growth (City of Hamilton, 2003, p. iii). In Bunce and Maurer’s (2005) study with 64 variously sized peri-urban farmers in the Toronto region (widely defined), over half the sample stated that economic viability was a “major threat to continuing to work their farms, with urban development a close second” (p. 19). While the province of Ontario has introduced Greenbelt legislation to delineate a broad band of permanently protected agricultural land that includes some of the study region (Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2005, p. 4), farmers have not been unanimously pleased. Many argue the Act infringes on their development rights, devalues their property, and is a misguided way of protecting farmland. Rather, they state the government should work to “ensure that farmers can make a decent living” (Bunce and Maurer, 2005, p. 2).

In terms of cash receipts, Table 5 (Statistics Canada, 2008a) shows that the aggregate net income for Ontario farmers has declined dramatically since 2004, to

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5 Here, a small farm is defined as a farm generating an annual revenue between $10,000 and $49,999, a medium farm between $50,000 and $99,999, and a large farm between $100,000 and $499,999.
approximately negative $178 million in 2007. By way of comparison, average net income for Ontario between 1981 and 2002 was around $502 million, never falling to negative numbers. Likewise, Canada’s total net income saw a severe decline, where 2006 (-$67 million) and 2007 ($368 million) were the lowest values recorded since 1981. In comparison, net income for Canadian farmers between 1981 and 2002 averaged around $2.7 billion per year. The Canada-wide rebound from 2006 to 2007 is understood to be a result of rising grain and oilseed prices, something that has not been of equal benefit to all producers.

Table 5. Net farm income for Ontario and Canada

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ontario</td>
<td>$172,298,000</td>
<td>$513,636,000</td>
<td>$341,844,000</td>
<td>$-33,687,000</td>
<td>$-179,770,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>$2,871,154,000</td>
<td>$3,889,240,000</td>
<td>$2,286,400,000</td>
<td>$-67,771,000</td>
<td>$368,900,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why farmers are experiencing such all-time lows has been explained variously as the result of consumer expectation and demand for cheap food, corporate muscle and the liberalization of agricultural markets. For example, in 2008, the Canadian Federation of Agriculture (CAF) estimated that the average Canadian had earned enough income to cover their yearly grocery bill by February 3 (just 34 days), dubbed “Food Freedom Day”. Moreover, CAF has estimated that Canadians spend on average just 10.2% of their disposable income on food (CFA, 2007; CFA 2008). While Canada-specific information is unavailable, USDA statistics show that the percentage of income consumers spend on food as a share of disposable income has decreased fairly consistently from 23.4% in 1929 to 9.8% in 2007 (USDA, 2008). This percentage for food is significantly less than what much of the world pays. UN research in the 1990s revealed that Japan and most of Western Europe spent between 15% and 24% of their income on food, and nearly all Afro-Asian and Latin American countries spent over 35% (Grigg, 1994). Recent data is less comprehensive in its global comparison, but these trends appear to have persisted.
(Chicken Farmers of Canada, 2007; UN, 2007; CFA, 2008). In terms of how Canadian food prices compare to farmer income, Table 6 shows that between 2003 and 2007 the amount consumers paid for food increased 10.1% (Statistics Canada, 2008b), while the price Canadian farmers received for their product increased only 6.4%. Note the price farmers received actually decreased from 2003–2006 (Statistics Canada, 2008c).

Table 6. Consumer Price Index (for food) and Farm Produce Price Index 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consumer Price Index</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(food) (2002 = 100)</td>
<td>101.7</td>
<td>103.8</td>
<td>106.4</td>
<td>108.9</td>
<td>111.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm Produce Price</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index (1997 = 100)</td>
<td>101.3</td>
<td>98.9</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>97.5</td>
<td>107.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While these numbers illustrate important trends in consumer spending, it is worth noting that such aggregates hide substantial differences that exist between individual consumers and producers. Some Canadians, for instance, spend all of their disposable income on food. In fact, around 10.2% of Canadians report episodes of household food insecurity due to low incomes and poverty (Rainville and Brink, 2001), with many others running tight budgets and balancing multiple work schedules in order to make ends meet (McMichael and Friedmann, 2007). Part of the problem is that Canadians spend a considerably large percentage of their income on housing, leaving little for other essentials. To be sure, Statistics Canada notes that half the Canadian population spends more than 30% of their income on rent/housing (Statistics Canada, 2006a). Desjardins et al. (2002, p. 8) explain the problem as follows in *A Systemic Approach to Community Food Security, A Role for Public Health*:

Low food prices in Canada make most citizens food secure; however, the pressure to keep food prices low also results in low prices paid to farmers (in Canada and the rest of the world) … The resulting loss of smaller-sized farms contributes to long-term food insecurity for Canadians … The solution, clearly, is not to advocate for lower food prices. Advocacy

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6 Statistics Canada tracks the retail price of a representative shopping basket of food for the average household. If the base year of the index is 2002 (as in this case) and the basket for that year is given the value of 100, where by 2007 the CPI has reached 111.8, that means what you could buy for $100 in 2002 cost $111.8 in 2007.
campaigns like “Pay the Rent or Feed the Kids” point to other systemic solutions like affordable housing, so that a larger portion of a family’s income is available for food.

As this quote indicates, the trend towards low food prices and hardship for farmers is global in its dimensions and perpetuates food insecurity throughout the world.

Issues of food pricing and hunger aside, farmers receive an incredibly small share of the dollar paid for food (Yoon, 2006). An NFU report notes that in 2004 when Canadian farmers experienced net income in the negative thousands, the top 57 agribusiness corporations – including food processors, meat packers, food retail/restaurants and those trading in fuel, fertilizer, vet drugs and machinery – reached record or near record profits (NFU, 2005). In part, the NFU explains this as a case of profit increases for agribusiness through consolidation and profit decreases for farmers facing greater competition (NFU, 2002). The disparity is also explained as the result of externalization of corporate costs to farmers, input dependence (e.g., privatization of plant genetics), raising input costs when commodity prices rise, corporate lobbying against farmer cooperatives and marketing boards, and monopolies within the industry (NFU, 2005). These trends have lead groups like the NFU to conclude that free trade is not working for most Canadian farmers.

**Food security and sovereignty, in tension and in complement**

Significant debate surrounds the question of how to stimulate agricultural economies worldwide to ensure that farming is viable and food supplies sufficient (World Food Summit – archive, 1996; Pretty and Hine, 2001; Reid, 2002; Mousseau and Mittal, 2006). Whereas some argue that free trade has been agriculture’s most serious problem (NFU, 2002 Martin, 2003; Yoon, 2006), others believe that increased trade liberalization is the answer to its woes (Das, 2008). The same philosophical division colours the global food security debate. As mentioned earlier, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN defines food security as a condition in which “all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food for a healthy and active life” (FAO, 2008b). This “right to food” is a widely proclaimed principle (FAO, 2008a; Food Secure Canada, 2008; IFPRI, 2008; UN Committee on
World Food Security 2008), yet strategies for achieving the goal have no doubt been highly inconsistent and variable over the decades. Whereas confidence in global food stocks to meet the world’s need was once widespread, by the late 1970s agencies were beginning to “question trade dependency on international food stocks and called for increased food production autonomy” (Bellows and Hamm, 2002, p. 33). Today, global leaders have reverted back to more globally integrated, liberal notions of food trade and aid, where the language and mandate of food security have in many ways been incorporated into neoliberal agendas of the IMF, World Bank and the WTO (Menezes, 2001). Canada’s own position is no exception, as seen here in its Action Plan for Food Security progress report, submitted by the Global Affairs Bureau of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada to the FAO:

Canada is committed to working through the World Trade Organization (WTO) toward a fair and market-oriented agricultural trading system. For Canada, this means a continuation of the agricultural trade reform process to improve market access, to reduce trade and production-distorting support, and to eliminate export subsidies … Differences in priority remain—official policies focus on further agricultural trade liberalization; civil society is pushing for attention to the development needs of the poor and hungry. In many (though not all instances) these objectives can be complementary. Still, more can be done to support Canada’s commitment to ensure that trade and trade policies are conducive to fostering food security, particularly for the poor. (Reid, 2002)

Opinions on the recent world food crisis have also ranged from recommendations to increase global production through agricultural technologies, so as to increase supply and shrink global food costs (Lewis, 2008), to more radical positions that call for a reorganization of the food system. The Canadian Food Security Policy Group – a coalition of NGOs – published a press release in response to the crisis, drawing attention to the plight of smallholder farmers who feed much of the world. They urged the Canadian government to make international trade agreements work for small farm producers (Canadian Food Security Policy Group, 2008). Likewise, groups focusing on “community food security” (CFS) in the industrialized north emphasize the crisis of disappearing farmland and family farms, placing the long-term viability of local agriculture at the centre of their work (Kloppenburg et al., 2000; Bellows and Hamm, 2002; CFSC, 2008). The Community Food Security Coalition (North America) states:
“A stable local agricultural base is key to a community responsive food system. Farmers need increased access to markets that pay them a decent wage for their labour” (CFSC, 2008).

This advocacy for support to regional small farm producers in the global north has taken various shapes and forms. Perhaps the most obvious division is between those who see the capitalist marketplace as a positive locus for social, environmental and economic change (i.e., through alternatives markets) and those seeking more overt political action outside the marketplace (i.e., more oppositional approaches). On the one hand, for example, the “food citizenship” literature (Morris and Buller, 2003; Wilkins, 2005; Seyfang, 2006) communicates an enthusiastic faith in the market, asserting that “change will come by small decisions made by consumers” (Wilkins, 2005, p. 272). Yet movements centred on the role of the individual shopper to “vote with their food dollar”, practice citizen responsibility through product education and advocate for grocers to carry certain ‘ethical’ products have been widely criticized as insufficient and in some cases misdirected (Allen, 2004; Dupuis and Goodman, 2005; Guthman, 2007; Johnston, 2008). The evolution of Organics and Slow Food activism, often excluding low-income groups, demonstrate how elitism and exclusionism can arise in movements that focus primarily on the role of the consumer to affect change (Guthman 2004a; Meneley, 2004; Johnston, 2008). What is more, Johnston (2008) has drawn attention to the marked ideological conflict that characterizes the hybrid “citizen-consumer”, while others have critiqued the tendency for such movements to shun broad and substantive public regulation (Guthman, 2007, p. 263).

This is perhaps why ‘food sovereignty’ activism and literature – explicitly refuting the trade deregulation process, positioning itself against neoliberalism in agriculture and endorsing political involvement through supply management and “orderly marketing” (Menezes, 2001; Desmarais, 2003; Patel, 2005) – stands as such a radical alternative and unique social movement in defending regional food systems. Perhaps most importantly, food sovereignty moves away from the food security movement’s exclusive focus on consumption rights, to include the right to produce food, as seen in the following definition:

Food Sovereignty is the right of peoples, communities, and countries to define their own agricultural, labour, fishing, food and land policies, which
are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. It includes the true right to food and to produce food, which means that all people have the right to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food and to food-producing resources and the ability to sustain themselves and their societies. (IPC Food Sovereignty, 2008)

While food sovereignty is often associated with peasant farmers in the global south, the movement’s mother organization La Via Campesina has grown to global dimensions with members from 56 countries representing Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas (Desmarais, 2003). The Canadian National Farmers Union was in fact a founding member of the global organization (NFU, 2008c). Food sovereignty literature speaks to many of the issues faced by small and medium farm producers in the global north, and indeed, its attention to market/supply management systems highlights the role of these “inherently political agencies” in stabilizing food prices, supporting farmers and ensuring a secure national food supply (Mousseau and Mittal, 2006; Tamalia and Charlebois, 2007).

To conclude, this overview of the literature has presented a picture of the main players competing for survival and power in the current food system, including those who are currently thriving and those who are marginalized and resisting the status quo. The following results section advances this discussion by examining how farmers themselves discuss these multi-scaled pressures, and furthermore, how they position themselves in proposing possible solutions and ways forward for small/medium farm production.

**Results**

The following results summarize Hamilton farmers’ perspectives on fairness and economic justice in the food system, with a particular focus on how they position themselves in relation to the market and state at various scales. The results are organized into four parts, where the first section addresses farmers’ experience of economic hardship, and the second section discusses their understanding of dominant economic systems in agriculture. The final two sections summarize respondents’ views on possible ways forward using the market and/or policy to promote farm survival and success. In each quote, farmer’s main product(s) and growing method – organic (O), certified
organic (CO), or conventional (C) – have been noted. The five chief contributors to the section are conventional farmers and differences in male and female responses have been highlighted where appropriate. All except three participating farmers are included in the chapter; those left out focused less explicitly on the economy in their interviews.

**Economic hardship for Ontario farmers**

A prominent topic of discussion in interviewing Hamilton farmers was the current state of the global food economy and its deleterious effects on small and medium-sized farmer incomes and livelihoods. On the whole, farmers were despondent and pessimistic when discussing their financial situation and felt that major changes were needed in order to save farming from its current course. In terms of farm income, the following growers explained their situation:

You invest so much money; I don’t even want to venture a guess at what I have put into that thing [the greenhouse business]. My wife calls it the money pit. (‘Jim’, C – greenhouse vegetables)

I’ve been very pessimistic for the last five years. When you look at the income level you did have at one time and that income level begins to become eroded, and we can’t figure out why it’s being eroded, because we’re not doing anything different, it’s very demoralizing. (‘Mike’, C – fruit/vegetables)

We’re working poor still, even though we’re running what’s now like a million-dollar business. Every one of us here organizes and bills it as working poor, because of the tiny margins, because of the extremely capital-intensive costs of building a farm. (‘Marc’, CO – vegetables)

We have invested millions of dollars in this operation, millions, and we will never get a return on our investment, ever … I’ve spent more money than anyone in this whole peninsula on making a go in farming and I’ve learned the hard way that it’s economically not viable in the commodity sense that we’re trying to do things … If somebody can come and show us an economic plan, a viable plan, we’ll be the first ones there. To this date I haven’t found one. (‘Leonard’, C – fruit)

As mentioned in the literature review, one sign of economic hardship is the increasing number of farmers who have been forced to take off-farm jobs in order to make ends meet. Eleven interviewees spoke of having an off-farm job, relying to some extent on a
spouse’s income, or being at a stage in life where earning a full wage from the farm was not necessary. As these farmers tell:

I drive a school bus. And [‘Phil’] has a seed business, so yes, we supplement the farm … The farm is not able to stay afloat on its own … Our question is how long do we want to be feeding the multitudes for nothing? (‘Phil’ and ‘Sheila’, C – beef/hogs)

We’ll do snow ploughing or we’ll do supplemental stuff to bring more income into the farm … [Most young farmers] are working off the farm, or they have a partner who is working off the farm … Both probably, a lot of them will do trucking a couple days a week and … their parents will still do full-time farming, so that they can go off-farm and do something else … But the biggest goal is to be able to work on the farm, live on the farm and not have to go off your farm to pay for the farm. (‘Karen’, C – chicken/beef)

The opportunity to supplement income through off-farm work is enhanced by Hamilton farmers’ close proximity to a major city. Another sign of economic hardship is the fact that many respondents were discouraging their children from entering the farm business. Ten respondents expressed feelings similar to the following:

So none of your children wanted to go into farming?
I wouldn’t want them to. There’s nothing in it for them. My son, he worked with us for one year and I told him go back to school … No one’s going into farming, they just can’t afford it. You know, a young man, the cost of our implements and stuff … It’s scary because so many of the farmers are going out and the younger ones are not replacing them. (‘Chris’ and ‘Ellie’, C – vegetables)

I don’t think any of our kids will farm. You can’t get big enough around here with what you need to be … We can’t compete against a doctor that can buy an 100-acre farm up the road for his summer cottage. We can’t pay the price that he can afford to pay … We would never encourage our children, our son would love to do farming for a living, but he knows that there’s no future for him … How people go into farming is a mystery to me … and it’s not really happening … I’m in my mid-50s and I’m probably one of the youngest guys there. There are no young people in their 30s coming into farming. (‘Phil’ and ‘Sheila’, C – beef/hogs)

As a result, many growers are forced to sell their land. In this peri-urban location developers are ready to pay high prices for farmland that lies outside the provincially protected Greenbelt. While a couple of research participants had their farms up for sale at
the time of the interview (some clearly pleased to be lying outside the Greenbelt), others spoke of farm loss more theoretically, as seen below:

My ace in the hole undoubtedly is the fact that I’m not in the Greenbelt, and thank God I’m not. I might have strung myself up from the rafters five years ago if I was. But those people who are locked into this Greenbelt don’t have any choice whatsoever … My land is worth speculative value, you know, anywhere from 10 to 100 times more than what it is two miles over from here … They try to paint the [Greenbelt] picture nice and rosy and say ‘It’s too bad, your farm is designated to be farmed even though you’re not making any money in farming’… These people are stuck with that property and it’s not increasing in value … We’re gonna preserve the land but not preserve the business that keeps the land running prosperously. It’s ridiculous. (‘Mike’, C – fruit/vegetables)

A farmer’s biggest asset is the land that they use to survive. I mean, it would kind of be like a mechanic, in order to retire, selling his tools for scrap metal, which is basically what farmers do. They take their means of production and they sell it to a developer who destroys it and puts houses on there. So what it means is that the industry as a whole isn’t sustainable, because it can’t be if we’re constantly chewing up all of the land, destroying it and putting houses on it. It’s a difficult issue for a lot of people, because you can’t direct criticism at the farmers, because you know, what are they supposed to do? They’ve never been paid properly their entire lives. Very few farmers have retirement … The line that everybody uses: ‘farming is the only business where you buy retail and sell wholesale’. But it’s true. It’s such a messed up economy … If you could actually make money off farming, the farmer who retires either has his son or daughter continue the farm and they can make enough money to support their parents, or they buy the farm off their parents and they can make enough money to pay the mortgage. Or they sell it to somebody else who’s going to farm, as farmland, because farmland as farmland is worth nothing. (‘Peter’, C – vegetables)

These comments illustrate farmers’ experience of economic hardship, including examples of eroded income and investment loss, the need for off-farm jobs to subsidize farm activities, and lack of succession planning with an accompanying need to sell the land, some farmers feeling stuck without the ability to do so profitably.
Big players and the small farm producer

Research participants had much to say in explanation of their dismal returns and overall economic struggle. For example, many expressed their belief that food prices no longer reflect the true cost of production, and that part of the problem is consumer expectation for cheap food:

- People are spoiled. Food is cheap. It is cheap and they are used to cheap food. The 99-cent cucumber in the spring is a staple – it is incredible. It used to be a sale item, but now a lot of times they are 99 cents, even right now, $1.49 [in February]. (‘Jim’, C – greenhouse vegetables)

- We’re the cheapest country after the U.S., 9% or 10% of disposable income goes to food. No other country is anywhere near that. They have a good Food Freedom Day … We don’t realize how cheap our food is. I have two children in Switzerland … they easily spend $250 a week on groceries. (‘William’, C – dairy)

- We need to get better prices for our produce … compared to what we have to spend to plant it … you end up with nothing left for you. That’s the sorry part. That part has got to be changed… You gotta live and keep up all this. You never get paid for it. (‘Charles’ and ‘Andy’, C – hay/feed)

There was an accompanying belief that corporate concentration in the food system is largely to blame for these low returns and consumer expectations. Consolidation in the grocery and meatpacking industries were of utmost concern, as seen here:

- These big, mega private interests are compromising the well being of everyone … Having two grocery store chains in Canada, versus, we used to have ten … there isn’t enough competition in the marketplace for the grocery stores anymore, because Loblaws supplies eight different stores, but with different names. They can fight really hard to get a certain price. We sell sunflowers to them and every year our price of growing goes up, but everybody wants them cheaper. (‘Karen’, C – chicken/beef)

- We’ve got two or three big packers controlling all the processing … Cargill is the biggest factory in North America now, isn’t it? … They don’t just have relationships with feedlots, they in fact own the feedlots … You have the huge players in the industry organizing themselves this way … The bottom line is if I take my animal to Kitchener stockyards or something, I might as well forget it … I guess you’d cover your feed costs, I’m not sure you’d do anything for overhead and labour or anything right now. (‘Gord’, C – beef)
There was also a general consensus that the international free market (in its current form) is not working in favour of small farm producers (globally). Farmers raised concerns around export subsidies in other countries, trade agreements that favour foreign business, exchange rates and general competitive disadvantage for Canadian growers. These views are seen below:

When you can have tomatoes come in from Israel that compete with local greenhouse tomatoes this time of year, there’s something wrong there. How can that be? The only way it can be is if the Israeli government is subsidizing those farmers heavily in order to be able to ship those tomatoes over here … And China’s putting apple growers out of business … by bringing in concentrated cheap apple juice … this is a government policy created through free trade with China or whoever it may be … Those types of situations either put farmers out of business or put them in such a grave economic state … I mean you need to support your own home first before you start supporting other places. (‘Mike’, C – fruit/vegetables)

[We] have a competitive disadvantage with products coming in from other countries because they don’t have these requirements [processing regulations] … The dollar makes a big difference too with the exchange rate … I know right now guys can ship a potload of cattle to Nebraska and make more money sending them there then if they sent the same cattle to Guelph [half-hour drive]. So something is wrong. (‘Phil’ and ‘Sheila’, C – beef/hogs)

Free trade is not too fair … some genius figures out that there’s a huge market for coffee … so they buy up all these farms, tell everyone to grow just this one thing and then they market it and export it, but farmers are still getting paid basically whatever for it and they’re not being able to choose what they want to grow, or they’re not being able to grow a little bit of this and that, just one thing … Even in Canada, anybody who can’t compete with the global market is having to be really inventive or they’re getting bought up by big farms or they’re just going to have one heck of a time staying viable. (‘Karen’, C – chicken/beef)

In addition to these comments positioned against the global free market, the following conventional farmers complained about international threats to Canadian supply management systems and other national protections:

When free trade came in, came in the late ’80s, it did away with any protection that we had at the borders, like there used to be tariffs on different fruits and vegetables and other things … that is totally done away with … [Protections] would guarantee people still have a choice between imported and local. At least it gives us a fair shot at getting rid of our product, because
right now you can import as much as you want from wherever you want. (‘Julia’ and ‘Paul’, C – fruit/vineyard)

There are all sorts of interests that are gnawing away at our supply management system the way it exists, because they’re trying to trade it off … This is the big world of trade, international trade … I know the battle the milk producers and the chicken producers had just to get their legislation in place. That was huge. And I think the environment that they would face to do the beef industry is even less friendly to that type of political action … Because we’re more inclined to be free traders now, because of these agreements and because other countries are putting such pressure on us. (‘Gord’, C – beef)

Thus, in general, the woes of participating farmers’ are seen to lie with the market. At the local scale, this trouble manifests itself in consumer behaviour. At various other scales (local, national, global) it is seen to be the result of corporate megalomania, unsupportive free trade agreements and threats to existing/future national protections. The next section illustrates how farmers also draw on multiple scales in suggesting possible solutions to their financial difficulty, where, interestingly, solutions are both market and non-market oriented.

**Ways forward: Using the market**

In terms of changes that might be possible through the market, research participants felt strongly that consumers would need to play a much more active role in the food system at the local level, and indeed, many felt that shoppers could make important changes simply through their buying power. As these respondents explain:

> You start by educating consumers to make decisions that are actually good for communities and for the environment as a whole … All of this stuff is just information, it’s just people not being aware of the significance of certain things. And also not being aware of our food distribution system, like most people are not aware of seasons … They’re not aware of the damage that they do by buying certain things. They don’t think about it. They go to the grocery store and they buy what’s in front of them and that’s it. (‘Peter’, C – vegetables)

> I think once the market gets it, it will take the stranglehold off the farm, which is a financial stranglehold … People don’t understand, don’t value local food, don’t understand the significance of having local farmers … They don’t realize there is something more here than what’s in a store. They are used to what the store has to offer. The stores sell very cheap
product and you can get what you want, when you want it any time of the year … [But my local customers] like the quality and they also like the fact that it is supporting the local economy. It is not degrading the environment and they don’t mind eating in season … It’s about people understanding that you need to eat what is around you. (‘James’, O – vegetables)

The following respondent was enthusiastic about a new branding program that promotes “naturally raised” Ontario beef through the grocery stores. ‘Phil’ felt hopeful this could set his product apart in the grocery store:

In Ontario there’s what they call a “corn-fed beef program” … it’s only Ontario beef that goes into that program … the farmers are very conscious of how their animals are treated and how they’re raised; it’s very safe. Consumers are buying into that idea … We’re thinking about [getting involved]. We’ve been raising cattle that way for years. We’ve always raised our cattle that way. (‘Phil’ and ‘Shelia’, C – beef/hogs)

Other farmers had much to say about how consumers should change the ways in which they eat, shop, cook and organize their time/budget around food. For example, the following comments address concerns related to consumer busyness and attachment to convenience and choice:

People have gotten so lazy, it’s easier to just stop at a grocery store and grab something … It used to be that you took Sunday and you went and stopped in at the farm, or you went out and picked things out of your garden … And we have farmers’ markets for that reason, but they are falling by the wayside, because it’s not convenient. (‘Sarah’, C – vegetables)

This generation and the last generation are too busy to cook. I don’t know. At the market there are a lot of younger families that go … they appreciate the market … so I think it is starting – [interest in] fresh foods, you know? (‘Linda’, C – fruit/vegetables)

It’s so difficult nowadays because we’re so used to having choice. We’re so used to being able to get the product that we enjoy when we want it … To train people to eat only local or to eat only foods that are sustainably grown would take a lot of concentrated effort. (‘Jennifer’, CO – chicken)

Interestingly, ‘Sarah’ and ‘Jennifer’ – both women and both relatively new to farming – spoke at some length about their own consumption habits and commitment to cooking
with farm fresh foods. At the same time, they recognized that income and other barriers would keep many people from such a lifestyle change. At least in response to time/convenience barriers, respondents felt the grocery industry could adjust its buying practices in order to make local food more accessible to consumers, as illustrated by these comments:

[Customers] really have to have that value of the local foods in [their] mind… people have to know where it comes from and that it’s safe … The question is though, how do you get away from a mom, she’s got four kids, she goes to the Wal-Mart, gets all her groceries, and all her clothes and shampoo … Buys her apple juices there from China. How do you get away from that, and convenience too? That’s the one thing that I find is time and convenience … you’re still not going to get to that percentage [of the population] … And if we can try and get that wave [interest in local food] to the grocery stores, because they are selling a lot, they’re moving the volume, then that will help too. (‘Shelley’ and ‘Mae’, C – fruit/vegetables)

Unless the corporate heads of these stores have a change of heart, and the only change of heart would be dollars and cents, I don’t know that farming is sustainable in Ontario, because today’s society wants one-stop shopping … And people with two income families don’t have time to go to a farmers’ market … to go to a butcher’s. (‘Sally’, C – pork processing)

While these (female) farmers were sensitive to issues of poverty and consumer busyness, none of them spoke of solutions to the problem in a substantive way.

Finally, farmers also suggested ways in which the global marketplace could be reorganized in order to create more of an advantage for Canadian agriculture. Whereas some expressed confidence that market liberalism would be the best economic model if trade were truly liberalized (e.g., no export subsidies), other perspectives on how to address the trade imbalance were more internally conflicted, as seen here:

Globally, farmers have to be on the same plane. If you’re all on the same plane, you all have equal opportunity. The most efficient producers would be the people who would succeed … So we wouldn’t have any subsidies or anything else, and Canadian farmers, I’m sure, would be at the top, because we’re very efficient in terms of the practices that we use to produce fruit, and we’d have no trouble whatsoever. (‘Mike’, C – fruit/vegetables)

It would be great to control imports, put tariffs on. It is tough, if we put a tariff on something coming in from a country, obviously it is a tit for tat. We
sell to that country and maybe they don’t have a tariff on what we are selling them, but … they will put a tariff on … That is not good either. I think the supply and demand is good, free market enterprise is good, just give us some subsidies for what we are doing. (‘Jim’, C – greenhouse vegetables)

Interestingly, this last respondent espouses principles of market liberalism, but at the same time shows an interest in government intervention (through Canadian subsidies). Only a couple of farmers demonstrated this sort of blatant internal conflict. In most cases, the tension was not as explicit and farmers simply saw a role for government (again at various scales) alongside market change, as described in the next section.

Ways forward: For politics and policy

This section explores the belief of participating farmers that action through the market alone will not be sufficient to ameliorate the damage that has been done to the local food system, and thus, political action is needed. To begin with, the following two farmers express their dissatisfaction with current levels of political involvement in the food system:

Considering the [amount of subsidized food] being dumped into this country … I think [there’s] a complete lack of political will to change that from our [agricultural] minister on down … He thinks we should get out of [farming] because we can’t compete; instead of looking at it from a perspective of national sovereignty maybe, and food security and local and regional stability … These political parties have huge money coming in to fill their coffers, from business that’s profiting from wrecking our local food system and from undermining our farms … I think we have the least supportive environment of any farmer ever in history, essentially, yes, I would say the least by far … Government sells the responsibility, its social responsibility. (‘Marc’, CO – vegetables)

[Change] has to come from the top. It has to be a decision that’s made either at the federal or provincial level, or both … Back in the ’60s, the processing line industry realized that there was starting to be a problem with imports … They went to Ottawa and the then Minister of Agriculture recognized the problem and told the committee, basically, if you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen. If you can’t compete, then quit … So it was quite evident, forty some odd years ago, that the federal government was not really interested in our local problem. (‘Julia’ and ‘Paul’, C – fruit/vineyard)
Farmers suggested a number of ways in which government could increase its support to agriculture, again, at various scales. The simplest suggestions involve creating more supportive local and provincial regulatory/policy environments for small and medium farm producers, as suggested here:

Government puts so many regulations on processing plants … The big processing plants could have thousands of chickens going through per day and then their costs for renovations or upgrades would come from thousands of chickens, right? Whereas [small processors are] only doing, let’s say under 3,000 chickens a week. So they’re really challenged because they don’t have volume … they still have to have the same standards as the large processing plants. They’re not as automated, they do a lot by hand … they have staffing issues … I would like to see more exemptions coming on because you’re doing the different product … It would be nice to have special exemptions. (‘Jennifer’, CO – chicken)

Oh, the regulations! You have to have a permit, you have to do inspections, facilities, daily or weekly or monthly, it’s just too many loops you have to jump through. It’s not supportive … Part of why [U.S. beef farmers] are getting paid more is because of these regulations that we’re under … The City of Hamilton slaps you on your fingers because you’re trying to make ends meet … You try to expand your business, what you produce. So in their instance [a neighbour], they package their potatoes, and I think one of their little subsidiaries is a peeler or something and they put it in bags and distribute it. Well the City of Hamilton wants you to be taxed as a processing facility. (‘Phil’ and ‘Sheila’, C – beef/hogs)

There’s a law to everything … you have to have a licence for everything, they bog you down with paperwork for all that stuff, you’ve got regulation boards for everything, it’s a lot of paperwork … You don’t have time for that, what do they want you to do? … Every group out there has a different mandate and every one of those mandates comes down to a law in legislation and that falls on the shoulders of the farmer. (‘Sarah’, C – vegetables)

Other producers emphasized the need to coordinate food distribution through stores. While the following comment does not explicitly speak of government involvement in retail policy, it does emphasize the need for the Canadian food supply to be “organized” (including the products of remote farmers), something that has not happened well through the free market. Interestingly, this respondent draws attention to his unique position as a peri-urban farmer who can take advantage of direct marketing
opportunities, something that certainly does not reflect the experience of all Canadian farmers:

The local food movement is going to help us, but we have to be very careful … there’s half a million people within half an hour of my farm, so I’m in an ideal place. Let’s say we’re in the middle of Saskatchewan having this discussion, we wouldn’t be talking about the same type of beef industry. It’s not practical for you to drive to my farm just to buy a steak … We have to have it organized somehow, still in terms of stores. (‘Gord’, C – beef)

Still others felt supply management was an area in which federal and provincial governments could and should play an active role. The following dairy farmer, for instance, spoke of his successful experience in the supply management system, noting elsewhere that about 95% of the milk produced in Ontario stays in Ontario:

[Supply management] guarantees us a market for our product … The price has been stable for us. We don’t run into the fluctuations that many of the people in the agricultural community run into … As long as the government is willing to do that [provide protections], we’re okay, but if the government, if for whatever reason, because of free trade, because of pressure from groups that rely on exports from other countries, if they decide they’re going to open the borders to dairy products, then the system crumbles and we’re in some trouble. (‘William’, C – dairy)

Many who spoke of political action and intervention in this way emphasized the need for a secure regional/national food supply in order to guarantee a certain level of food independence, as illustrated here:

I’m afraid that we’ve come into a situation where we actually trust that our food will be delivered, all the time, no matter what, even though we see market changes and things like, well, the stock market changes in the last couple of days and gas prices going up … I’m afraid to say that if we’re 100% dependent on those systems and for some reason we didn’t have oil … We need to be a little bit more independent. (‘Beth’, O – vegetables)

If we had gone through major wars – like, there’s not very many people left in this country who ever went through a major war where there was a food shortage, but the odd person still alive from the Second World War would remember rationing, people who emigrated from Europe where they had famines. It’s a different attitude. They say it’s foolish to go and buy all your food from offshore … I think we should be
concerned … if we lose our ability to feed ourselves, then we become really vulnerable down the road. (‘Gord’, C – beef)

I think it’s always important [for a country to be able to meet its food needs], that’s my personal opinion for the future of the country, because it means being independent. When you’re not able as a country to feed your own people, how are you independent? You’re dependent on China, or Korea … We have tomatoes in the summer; we have root vegetables in the winter … Encourage farmers, even smaller farmers, to produce our own things, so that we can survive without [other countries]. I mean, let something happen like Chernobyl in China. Why not? It can happen … [But] we shouldn’t use control, that’s the wrong way. When you have control then it’s again a few people that say, ‘You have to do this and that’. I think it should be more going through the education system. (‘Martina’, O – goats)

The closing sentence of this last comment provides another example of farmers’ internal conflict. Despite the desire for independence and government involvement in securing national food supplies, there is still a discomfort with the possibility of heavy-handed government involvement. To some extent, this was also seen in respondents’ frustration with unsupportive regulations, overly demanding inspections, “licences”, “loopholes”, “paperwork”, “permits”, etc. Whereas farmers are seeking a more supportive policy environment, they also resent government involvement that is unsupportive.

Discussion

The story that emerges in the comments of participating farmers is one that might be characterized as a cheap food story – not only in the sense that consumers pay very little for food, and producers receive even less, but perhaps more importantly, it is a cheap food story because farmers feel the food they grow is undervalued by their consumers, communities and governments. Their personal experiences of economic hardship are validated by statistics on declining income, alongside the increasing need for off-farm jobs, loss of farms/farmland, etc. In general, the problems of agriculture were framed in terms of multi-scaled faults in the marketplace, including uninformed consumers, power-hungry corporations, unfair trade agreements and threats to supply management. Solutions (while also multi-scaled) were seen to fall both within the market and with non-market policy interventions. Most farmers saw a place for government
alongside market transformation, but it is important to note that a number of comments were quite internally conflicted (e.g., calling for free trade, but also for supply management). Moreover, tensions were apparent between and within individuals who desired national independence and food sovereignty, but felt uneasy with the idea of too much government involvement and meddling. Still, the common element amid their different perspectives was a yearning to foster new appreciation and higher value for food and farming, both culturally and economically. The following discussion focuses on tensions within farmers’ comments, as these issues – specifically, market change through consumer action, a turn to local in the supermarket, free market/state incompatibilities and government involvement – point to possible problems and barriers that might prohibit farmers from moving forward to achieve their goals in a cohesive and effective manner.

Beginning with the desire to see a revaluing of food through conscientious consumer action – as celebrated in the food citizenship literature – the important contribution here is farmers’ attention to the political ramifications of consumer choice, along with cultural norms that shape choices/tastes and the infrastructures that limit consumer options. Yet while alternative markets (e.g., organics, naturally raised, locally branded) offer peri-urban farmers a sense of hope that conscientious consumers might be willing to pay more for a ‘better’ product, their comments seem to fall short of addressing some deeply embedded political-economic barriers to a widespread revaluing of food. For example, while they acknowledged that poverty and low incomes would be an impediment to receiving higher prices for their food, no one offered a perspective on how consumer poverty might be addressed, nor did they explicitly link this needed change to their own survival and success. However, if the wide majority of Canadian consumers are to pay more for their food, and spend more time working with food, considerable changes to basic elements of the economy will be needed. For example, minimum incomes will need to be higher, rent and housing prices will need to occupy a smaller percentage of family income and we will likely need shorter work weeks to allow more time for food procurement and preparation. Essentially, buy local movements that focus solely on consumer initiative to make alternative shopping choices often ignore important issues of class (i.e., who is afforded the chance to pay premiums and travel to
farms/farmers’ markets?); exploitation (e.g., why has food work – cooking, canning and preserving – come to be seen as leisure?); and gender (i.e., who must find this extra time for food?) (Allen, 2004; Allen and Sachs, 2007; Szabo, 2008).

What appears to be missing from farmers’ analysis is recognition that any petition for a cultural culinary revival at this point in time is economically relevant to a fairly small and affluent segment of the population. Any meaningful change through the market will require that government intervene significantly in order to ensure that all consumers have more income to spend on food, better access to farm fresh goods (especially in communities where consumer/food movements are less organized), and, perhaps least often acknowledged, more time to work with food. These issues suggest that embracing alternative markets without accompanying policy intervention will not be sufficient for widespread change to occur.

With regard to a buy local ‘revolution’ through the grocery stores, farmers’ perspectives were mixed and quite conflicting. On the one hand, they identified concentration in retail and meatpacking as a significant problem for agriculture. Participants were largely in agreement with voices like the NFU that current processing and retail structures do not operate in their favour, and in fact, work against small and medium farmers to extract maximum profits, often to their detriment (e.g., lobbying against cooperatives and marketing boards, pushing for lower prices when input costs continue to rise, or manipulating the market through captive supplies). Conversely, farmers were not willing to disregard the possibility that supermarkets could help them in the future, moving large volumes of local product with sustained pressure from concerned consumers, or creating specialty niche lines and branded products that set local and/or naturally raised foods apart from cheaper mass-produced products. But again, widely missing from this analysis was the conviction that government could or should be in a position to intervene and mandate that retail-corporations purchase a certain amount of product from local growers. ‘Gord’ makes an important point when stating that in order to support prairie farmers (or those in commodity production) the Canadian food supply will still need to be “organized” through stores. Yet if we are to rely on the market alone, retail purchasing policies may change in major cities with strong eat local consumer movements (demanding change from produce managers), but
how far will this kind of change reach and whom will it include? (Prairie farmers? Budget grocery stores?) Why do we shy away from suggesting that communities/government ought to regulate corporate buying practices?

The third tension – still related to revaluing food through the marketplace – lies with incompatibilities in farmers’ perspectives on international free trade. On one hand, all 17 respondents who engaged in the topic spoke strongly against the effects of current international free trade agreements on their local survival and success. Whereas in some cases this was very explicit (with mostly male participants engaging confidently in the language of economics), in other cases it was implied, where farmers complained of cheap imports, U.S. product flooding the market, etc. Quite a few farmers also spoke in defence of supply management and marketing boards, and saw free trade as antagonistic to these ‘justified’ national protections and controls. At the same time, a handful of these critical farmers celebrated the principles of free market capitalism (again all male). Yet their internal conflicts all looked slightly different. For example, one farmer praised the free market, but sought subsidies for Canadian growers. Another called for a level playing field with no subsidies, yet advocated that government support its “own home” before supporting other places. And still another saw the free market as the unquestionable way of the future, but praised supply management. It appears these individuals felt that change through both arenas (market and state) could deliver better prices and curb dumping activity, yet they did not explicitly draw attention to the philosophical conflict that lingered. This complexity and tension likely reflects similar market/state contradictions in domestic and international agricultural policy (as seen in the literature review), and perhaps a personal investment in other (more locally beneficial) aspects of the neoliberal economy. Still, it would be fair to conclude that the large majority of farmers were more antagonistic towards global free trade than they were supportive.

This covers some of the major conflicts apparent in farmers’ comments on change through the market, pointing to the conclusion that government involvement would in fact be very important to achieving farmers’ stated goal of revaluing local food, even through market mechanisms. In complement to this, all farmers saw some role for government and policy intervention at various scales. At the municipal and provincial
level, suggestions included more supportive tax structures for farmers adding value to their product through on-farm processing (‘Phil’ and ‘Sheila’); legislation that preserves/promotes farming instead of focusing solely on farmland (‘Mike’); support to smaller-scale, provincially regulated meat processors who in turn support small and medium-sized farmers (‘Jennifer’), and reducing paperwork or making applications and forms more user-friendly (‘Sarah’). It is arguable that these sorts of policy changes would strengthen small and medium farm production without requiring major shifts in national agricultural policy, or inciting serious backlash from the international community.

However, considering more controversial protections at the national/global scale, most farmer participants were convinced of needed protection, or at least entitlement to protect the national food supply through regulation. Farmer support for supply management, for example, was discussed in terms of fair, guaranteed prices to producers and a steady/affordable food supply to Canadians. However, again, it is worth considering the conflict that exists within and among different perspectives on government involvement. As seen in the results, the desire for national (and regional) food sovereignty is checked by a real distrust and fear that government could abuse its power. Where ‘Martina’ states that change should happen more “through the education system”, she is pointing, if subtly, to the idea that the community – the people – should be guiding a democratic movement to resist and oppose power abuses in the market. Likewise, where others call for supportive local/provincial regulatory change, they are asking for a very specific set of changes that will help farmers – people – not corporations. Government needs to be acting in the interests of its citizens, ultimately guided by their welfare and requests.

The purpose of discussing these tensions within farmers’ comments is twofold. First of all, they point to a serious problem for collaboration in the agricultural community, with opinion split (between farmers and within farmers) on the power of the sovereign market versus the need for a political shift to food sovereignty. To summarize, peri-urban farmers see hope in consumer movements, yet recognize structural barriers to such change; they rebuke the retail industry, but see it as a potential saviour; and they resent free trade policies that result in dumping and threats to supply management, but some still see neoliberalism as the way forward. Indeed, with such a mixed philosophical
bag, it will be hard (and clearly, it has been hard) for smaller farm producers to agree on a strategy to confront the power abuses that continue to marginalize them in the marketplace. Whereas farmers are currently forced to spend much of their time figuring out how to survive in a competitive market – through creative business planning and innovation – these conclusions suggest it might be useful to commit more time to discussing issues and strategies with one another politically. With greater cooperation, farmers may see opportunity/value in taking a more oppositional stance against the status quo. Of course, myriad political-economic forces are positioned against this sort of grassroots organizing, posing yet another barrier to their success.

The second reason for discussing these complexities in the research results is to highlight the logical place for a food sovereignty movement – in Hamilton, in Ontario, across North America and across the world. A core principle of food sovereignty is the right to prioritize food production for regional consumption over export (Martin, 2003), and in many ways farmers’ comments point to this conclusion. The WTO considers this ‘right’ protectionist, defensive and closed, yet there is nothing in the global mandate of the food sovereignty movement to prevent nations from trading their excess (fairly) or aiding others in crisis. Furthermore, the food sovereignty movement is intentionally ambiguous about exactly who (i.e., which “community”) is sovereign: the nation, region, locale or farm (Patel, 2005). Yet, interestingly, Hamilton farmers appear to be calling for sovereignty at multiple scales: at larger scales, in terms of national/provincial protections, but also at more localized scales in terms of policies that support the specific needs of individual small and medium farm producers and alternative movements. These differing scales of protection/support do not necessarily need to be in conflict. The critical point is that the people comprising the sovereign community direct their own agricultural future, as opposed to being directed by the invisible hand of the free market or the heavy hand of the state. With the many intersecting crises of the twenty-first century – financial, fuel, food and climate – it appears it is time for citizens throughout the world to reconsider the authority we have given neoliberal principles in guiding our global, national and local food policies and future.
Chapter Five: Common ground for a sustainable local food system

Introduction

Topics of sustainability in farming and food systems have received widespread and sustained attention in the academic literature over the years (Shiva and Bedi, 2002; Allen, 2004; Hinrichs, 2007; also see Journal of Sustainable Agriculture 1990–present). However, the topic’s prevalence in popular culture has increased significantly and heated debates now abound in media and popular books (Pawlick, 2006; Pollan, 2006; Smith and MacKinnon, 2007; Cuthbert, 2008). A recent article entitled “Local Schmocal” in Maclean’s magazine – which claims a readership of 2.8 million people – picked up on some of the big issues, including organic versus local farm advocacy, fair trade and Canadian farm labour standards, and others, only to conclude, “there are no simple answers” (Cuthbert, 2008).

The following chapter considers some of the existing tensions and contradictions in the sustainable agrifood literature and its associated social movement (Goodwin and Jasper, 2003) by examining how peri-urban farmers in one city in southern Ontario position themselves when discussing environmental sustainability and organics. Focusing on the relationship between two key environmental themes – ecological integrity on the farm and environmental impact of scale in production and distribution – this chapter reviews common concerns and points of divergence among local organic and local conventional farmers. The findings build on existing literature by evaluating the interactions of different environmental activities and players whose roles have traditionally been discussed in isolation from one another. The efficacy or impact of environmental action is not here evaluated; rather, focus remains on farmers’ motivations and the ways in which they position themselves as environmentally concerned citizens. In general, the chapter asks how farmers discuss their environmental values in the context of economic hardship and what role the market plays in opening spaces for small and medium farm producers. The chapter also asks if there is common ground for smaller-scale organic and conventional farmers to collaborate in building a more

7 Conventional farmers are defined here as those who do not identify themselves as organic or biodynamic.
sustainable local food system, given their shared experiences of multi-scaled pressures and marginalization.

After a brief review of the agricultural sustainability literature, results from the in-depth interviews are presented, followed by a discussion of these findings in the context of existing literature on sustainable food systems.

**Sustainable agriculture in tension**

The literature on sustainability in farming and food systems is voluminous, and much of it has centred on the ecological integrity of individual farms. For example, natural scientists have been examining the soil food web and have reported on the negative effects of physical and chemical disruption to beneficial microbial life. These studies have pointed to the advantages of organic and low-input (low-intensity) farming for soil health (Foissner, 1992; Moore, 1994; Wardle et al., 2001; Briar et al., 2007; Sańchez-Moreno and Ferris, 2007). This research has been accompanied by academic and popular literature that discusses holistic farming systems like biodynamics\(^8\) and permaculture\(^9\) (Reganold et al., 1993; Mollison, 2000; Holmgren, 2002; Jordan, 2004; Steiner, 2006). Additionally, a number of studies, global in scope, have highlighted the positive relationship between organic farming and biodiversity in bird species, pollinators, bats, etc. (Oehl et al., 2004; Wickramasinge et al., 2004). Small organic farms have demonstrated the strongest results (Belfrage et al., 2005; Rundlof and Smith, 2006). These studies suggest that minimal disturbance to the soil food web, healthy soil systems, and biodiversity – if not goals in themselves – can sustain strong and bountiful agroecosystems without recourse to chemical- and energy-intensive solutions (Smil, 2000; Pimentel et al., 2005). On this evidence, there has been compelling reason for

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\(^8\) According to the Biodynamic Agricultural Association, biodynamic can be distinguished from organic farming by the following principles: “Every biodynamic farm aims to become self-sufficient in compost, manures and animal feeds; all external inputs are kept to a minimum; compost is treated with special herb-based preparations; crop quality is improved using natural manure and quartz based preparations; ecological diversity is a goal of landscape management; an astronomical calendar is used to determine auspicious planting, cultivating and harvesting times.” [http://www.biodynamic.org.uk/FAQ.htm#howis](http://www.biodynamic.org.uk/FAQ.htm#howis)

\(^9\) The Permaculture Institute defines permaculture as “an ecological design system for sustainability in all aspects of human endeavour. It teaches us how to build natural homes, grow our own food, restore diminished landscapes and ecosystems, catch rainwater, build communities and much more”. [http://www.permaculture.org/nm/index.php/site/classroom/](http://www.permaculture.org/nm/index.php/site/classroom/)
farmers to move away from chemically intensive and ecologically disruptive farm practices towards more sustainable methods, wherever possible.

In complement to this conclusion, a growing body of literature has taken up the environmental contradictions of “conventionalization” and “treadmills of production” in the burgeoning organic sector (Guthman, 2000; Guthman, 2004a; Lockie and Halpin, 2005; Fromartz 2006; Obach, 2007). Scholars have criticized the way in which ecological ideals have been commodified (and modified) by the lucrative industry (DeLind, 2000; Qazi and Selfa, 2005). In some cases, so-called industrial organic farms span thousands of acres in monoculture, rely on purchased inputs instead of nutrient cycling and rotations, and supply major food manufacturers/supermarkets with bulk organic commodities (Guthman, 2004a; Guthman, 2004b; Fromartz, 2006). It is estimated that over 85% of the organic food consumed in Canada is imported, while much of the country’s own organic product is used for export (OMAFRA, 2008a). In contrast, although little statistical information is available, it appears that most of Ontario’s organic fruit and vegetable growers are involved in alternative supply chains and direct marketing initiatives. In other words, they have not oriented themselves towards export in the same way as many organic farmers in places like California (Guthman, 2004a) and British Columbia (British Columbia Ministry of Agriculture and Lands, 2007). They are also generally smaller farms. Hall and Mogyorody (2002) show through their research with over 259 organic farmers and farm organizations in Ontario that the majority (57%) of fruit and vegetable farmers in their sample were growing on less than five acres of land; 86% reported participating in direct sales to consumers; and 23% were engaged in community supported agriculture (CSA). In many ways, these smaller-scale organic farms, with their direct marketing strategies, preserve the original spirit of organic, often described in terms of soil health and fertility, biodiversity, bioregionalism, and social decentralization (Howard, 1940; Kimbrell; 2002; Guthman 2004a).

10 The USDA describes community supported agriculture (CSA) as: “a community of individuals who pledge support to a farm operation so that the farmland becomes, either legally or spiritually, the community’s farm, with the growers and consumers providing mutual support and sharing the risks and benefits of food production. Typically, members or “share-holders” of the farm or garden pledge in advance to cover the anticipated costs of the farm operation and farmer’s salary. In return, they receive shares in the farm’s bounty throughout the growing season, as well as satisfaction gained from reconnecting to the land and participating directly in food production. Members also share in the risks of farming, including poor harvests due to unfavorable weather or pests.” <http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/csa/csa.shtml>
academics have argued that large farms can be ecological farms (Guthman, 2004a), it is important to make a distinction between these two organic paradigms, the organic industry and the more oppositional organic movement. To generalize, while one model is perhaps just a “greener version” of the agribusiness system (DeLind, 2000), the other is deeply ecological in its principles and presents a compelling counter-hegemonic challenge to agro-industry (Adkin, 1992).

Concern for the environmental impact of farming has not been confined to those involved in organic advocacy. In fact, there has been growing pressure to make conventional farming more environmentally friendly, especially in light of new concerns around global warming (Shrestha et al., 2001; Scotta et al., 2002; Desjardins et al., 2007; Lal et al., 2007). Yet much of this attention to the environment has excluded organics. A review of the main pages of the Environment section on the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs’ website reveals no reference to organic agriculture at all. Instead, the pages focus on programs like the Environmental Farm Plan, Integrated Pest Management (IMP), nutrient management and pesticide storage (OMAFRA, 2008b). Organic supporters have criticized industry, government and agricultural organizations for working to convince farmers and the general public that sufficient steps are being taken to ensure food safety and environmental responsibility within conventional agriculture (Hall and Mogyorody, 2002, p. 22). Indeed, while conventional smaller-scale growers in Ontario may be concerned about the environment, they are not jumping in great numbers at the opportunity to transition to organic. Hall and Mogyorody’s (2002) study found that 70% of the organic fruit and vegetable growers in their sample began farming in organics; they had not transitioned from the conventional sector (p. 12).

The field of policy ecology (Zimmerer and Basssett, 2003; Robbins, 2004; Paulson and Gezon, 2005) provides a useful framework for interrogating dominant apolitical ecologies, which fail to consider the significant influence of political-economic, ecological and cultural factors when addressing environmental issues. These scholars argue that apolitical critiques – for example, assuming that conventional farmers reject organics because they are not concerned about soil health or their environmental impact, or simply do not understand the issues – neglects some of “the most fundamental problems in contemporary ecology” (Robbins, 2004, p. 11). Robbins’ (2007) inquiry into
North America’s dependence on lawn chemicals uncovers the various ways in which political-economic forces (e.g., chemical and lawn industries), biophysical properties of the lawn (e.g., the need for frequent mowing and chemical application), and cultural pressure (e.g., the neighbourly virtue of a pretty green lawn) all shape the subjectivities and condition the actions of “lawn people”. He demonstrates how challenging, if not impossible, it is for individuals who are deeply entangled in these biophysical and political systems to change their behaviour, even with sufficient awareness and conviction. In much the same way, pressures and information from agro-industry, cultural conventions in farming, and the ecological and economic risks associated with major transitions all shape farmers’ environmental actions.

Despite these limiting factors, smaller farm size appears to present some advantages for moving towards a more ecological way of farming. While it would be wrong to equate small size with alternative values or anti-industrial ideals\(^{11}\) (Hinrichs, 2003; Guthman, 2004a), it is arguably easier to transition to less chemically intensive farm systems, with more planned biodiversity, on a smaller acreage (Hinrichs 2003; Belfrage et al., 2005). What is more, smaller size likely means more appropriate scales of production for direct or alternative marketing, and thus, less reliance on the corporate food system for bulk sales\(^{12}\) (Murdoch et al., 2000; Feagan et al, 2004). Most literature equates lower-tech, labour-intensive farming with the traditional family farm, an often-romanticized model, professing a rather conservative set of values (Allen, 2004; Salitin, 2007). However, those in the local organic movement (along with “back to the landers” of the 1960s) have demonstrated that other labour arrangements and socially progressive values can support similar ecological farm goals, for example, through collective land ownership, cooperative living arrangements, farm apprenticeship programs, and volunteer opportunities for global travellers or others interested in farm life (Guthman, 2004a; Ostrom, 2007; CRAFT Ontario, 2008; WWOOF, 2008).

Political ecology can also provide insight into the complex forces acting on those engaged in alternative food and farming networks. Various scholars have argued that

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\(^{11}\) Small farms do adopt high-tech machinery and methods, GM technologies, monocropping, cash cropping, etc.

\(^{12}\) This factor specifically pertains to peri-urban farmers surrounding larger cities like Hamilton, Ontario, and would not necessarily apply to those in a more rural setting. It also does not include those involved in supply management systems, like dairy.
relocalization – including the local organic movement – complements the self-regulated, competitive nature of a neoliberal marketplace, where individuals and communities must coordinate alternatives alone without collective or state support (Dupuis and Goodman 2005; Eaton, 2008). They argue that “progressiveness” is now largely framed in terms of diversity of alternatives in the market, instead of a politics based on equality and social justice, or a call for deep structural change (Allen, 2004). Arguing that food politics has become the “progenitor of a neoliberal anti-politics”, Guthman (2007) states emphatically: “I don’t harbor the fantasy that individual, yuppified, organic, slow food consumption choices are the vehicles to move toward a more just and ecological way of producing and consuming food” (p. 263). As it happens, those with economic privilege are afforded access to environmentally friendly products and ‘eco-identities’, while those without generally make do on substandard food choices and suffer the environmental and health consequences. Nevertheless, it is in this context that concerned farmers find themselves working and confined. With little government support for their own ventures (Hall and Mogyorody, 2002), ecological farmers must generally take advantage of the much-needed organic premiums to cover the costs of additional labour and the demands of organic ecology, e.g., hand weeding to avoid chemical use. These political-economic and ecological factors seem to perpetuate a two-tier food system.

Putting aside soil health, biodiversity and issues of ecological integrity, other scholars have been engaged in debate around the environmental impact of energy consumption and greenhouse gas emission in farming and food distribution systems. Topics have included the production and application of petrochemical inputs (Buttel and Youngberg, 1982; Scotta et al., 2002; Weersink et al., 2005); energy-consumptive machinery, refrigeration and greenhouse heating (Jones, 2002; Buttel and Youngberg, 1982); and perhaps most relevant to the food localism movements, transport-related fossil fuel consumption and emissions (Jones, 2002; Cowell and Parkinson, 2003; Andreé, 2006; Wallgren, 2006). Thus, while popular movements have focused on the relative accumulation of “food miles” from place of production to consumption (Xuereb, 2006; Smith and MacKinnon, 2007), others have challenged this simple formula with questions related to overall energy consumption in food’s production (Jungbluth and Demmeler, 2005; Schlich and Fleissner, 2005; Andreé, 2006). Referring to a Waterloo,
Ontario study (2006) on redundant trade that promotes the buying local mandate, André (2006) contends, “purchasing food that is produced in environmentally responsible ways, and processed and transported efficiently, can make more ecological sense than buying directly from less efficient neighbours” (p. 19). Christine Wallgren’s (2006) energy comparison of locally and globally travelled foods in the U.K. led her to conclude that other parameters – such as transport mode, quantity loaded and energy efficiency of the vehicle – must be taken into consideration (p. 247). Wallgren’s study showed that in some cases overall “transport energy intensity” was comparable in the conventional and alternative systems, even though food travelled its shortest distance to the farmers’ market. High loading capacity, for example, can counteract the energy impact of long transportation distance (pp. 246–247). These studies do not undermine the environmental potential of local food systems altogether, but rather encourage rigorous attention to overall energy use in food storage and distribution.

Most of these sustainability studies have dealt with environmental goals in isolation from one another, or have otherwise considered their interaction in a way that fails to acknowledge environmental contradictions. An Ontario study that reviewed cases of conventional crop production systems throughout the 1970s and 1980s concluded that increased use of herbicide results in greater energy efficiency on the farm, but did not acknowledge the environmental impact of chemical production and application (Swanton et al., 1996). In contrast, the following study attempts to deal with some of these issues in a way that recognizes their contradictions and encourages new models that better optimize overall environmental gain.

**Results**

The following results are presented in four sections, organized around the two central environmental themes, ecological integrity on the farm and environmental impact of scale in production and distribution. The first two sections present findings from organic farmers under these themes, while the final two sections focus on comments from conventional growers. Again, direct quotations have been used in order to accurately present farmers’ perspectives and pseudonyms conceal their real identity.
Moreover, each quote includes a description of the farmer’s main product(s) and growing method – organic (O), certified organic (CO), or conventional (C).

Table 7. Organic & conventional farmers in the sample, Hamilton and Ontario

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Research sample 2006, Hamilton</th>
<th>Ag. Census 2006, Ontario</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organic, total</td>
<td>7 (30%)*</td>
<td>76 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certified organic or transitioning</td>
<td>3 (13%)</td>
<td>13 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organic methods, not certified</td>
<td>4 (17%)</td>
<td>67 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventional, total</td>
<td>16 (70%)</td>
<td>899 (92%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced pesticides/antibiotics</td>
<td>5 (21%)</td>
<td>899 (92%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved in environmental programs</td>
<td>3 (13%)</td>
<td>3 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other comments about environment</td>
<td>4 (17%)</td>
<td>67 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No comments about environment</td>
<td>4 (17%)</td>
<td>67 (7%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Number of farms and percent of total sample

**Organic growers and the land**

In his research with small-scale organic producers in southern Ontario and Wales, Maxey (2006) found that “without exception participants were motivated by a concern to reduce negative environmental impacts of food and enhance positive impacts by reducing food miles and external inputs and encouraging biodiversity” (p. 236). Indeed, the seven organic farmers interviewed in Hamilton expressed a similar set of motivations, which were articulated most succinctly in their effort to define organic agriculture. Most of these farmers had something to say about their personal commitment to soil health and avoidance of synthetic inputs, as exemplified in the following comments:

To me [organic] means working with the soil and the plant the way that I see that they’ve been designed to function. So for me it means not adding artificial fertilizers, pesticides or herbicides and it means nurturing the health of the soil and not just plugging in the certain elements that I need to grow crops. (‘Tim’ and ‘Keri’, O – fruits/vegetables)

Organic is soil building. Building your soil. Anything that you do to your soil that kills microorganisms or depletes the micronutrients, the macronutrients, from your soil, anything that does that is not organic.
Any time you put a spray on your fields, certainly the synthetic ones, it is going to be killing things, screwing up the balance and hurting the soil. For me, organic, you start with the soil and you go from there. There are all sorts of things that you do instead of chemicals, instead of synthetic fertilizers. (‘James’, O – vegetables)

We’ve got the soil food web mapped, and we know with peer-reviewed science that we should not be farming synthetic fertilizers … those petrochemicals kill the fungus in the soil, period. (‘Marc’, CO – vegetables)

A few farmers discussed biodiversity, biodynamics and closed-loop farming as part of their definition of organic. These growers were generally producing on a smaller scale and relied on some off-farm income. The following three respondents run fruit and/or vegetable operations and two of them use animals in the farming system:

The move to organic wasn’t much of a move because that was basically the way it was, what I grew up with … there was a closed loop in terms of biodynamic … when you think about the animal and the part that was pasture and wetland and the hay fields, the vegetable fields … using the animals. (‘Cynthia’, O – fruit)

Closing the loop is biodynamic as well as organic … we grow grain and hay for [the animals], so we are trying to close the loop and do everything on the farm and try not to buy or bring in inputs … You have your circle. You, the sun and the rain, soil and you have your piece of land, your marketplace, and you have cows. It all fits in there. (‘James’, O – vegetables)

I’m not sure that organic farming in the way of monoculture and stuff like that is ideal, so our goal is to continually have as much diversity as we possibly can … and to have more permaculture type things if possible. (‘Beth’, O – vegetables)

**Organic growers, scale and sustainability**

Also in agreement with Maxey’s (2006) findings, all seven organic farmers interviewed stressed their commitment to local distribution systems. There was variation in their interpretations of local scale and their understandings of why local was important (e.g., not everyone spoke about food miles), but a relationship between local scale and environmental sustainability was apparent in all their comments. For example, ‘Beth’
spoke about local food provisioning as part of her concern that people are disconnected from the local environment and food landscape:

I just wonder who we have decided to be in making the decision that we need food from all over the world, instead of from our local area, but also, it scares me because the further away that we require food, then we don’t require the food nearby and I’m very concerned about our local sustainability… If [food imports] didn’t happen, suddenly we would be scurrying to find out … where is the food here? (‘Beth’, O – vegetables)

‘James’ definition of organic was, in fact, predicated on local scale:

My organic idea means local. It means working with people in your community … If you buy food from 1,000 miles away, or 3,000 miles away, you are doing bad things for everybody. You are hurting the environment … It is pretty clear that organic food [mainstream] is not going to be organic, it is going to be corporate. There may be less residues on it, but it won’t be organic in the sense that it won’t build community. It will still exhaust fossil fuels. Labourers will still be paid very low wages and on top of that soil building may be compromised. (‘James’, O – vegetables)

While all of the organic farmers interviewed shared a general commitment to environmental sustainability, there was some divergence in understandings of what the most ideal local organic system would look like. The two certified organic farmers interviewed had chosen to go the route of certification, at least in part, to extend their sphere of influence beyond direct consumer-producer sales. Although direct selling was an important part of their business, these growers were involved in fairly substantial networks throughout southern Ontario. Not only did they support other local organic growers by buying and reselling product, they distributed to Toronto health food stores or farmers markets and other proximate communities. Their aspirations to expand were not simply economic; rather, these farmers shared a desire to be part of building a more substantial local organic food system in order to reach more people and create a competitive sustainable alternative to the mainstream. These two respondents were both skeptical of what could be achieved by smaller, less coordinated organic farms, given their scale of production. ‘Marc’, a certified organic vegetable grower who is well networked across southern Ontario, explained himself in the following way:

I know lots of farmers or people who want to go organic, essentially run these little gardens and step away from society a bit more and have a nice
lifestyle in the country and what not, but we’re not going to feed cities like Toronto or Hamilton, we’re not going to feed our bigger cities with better food doing that, so we’ve decided, we made a conscious decision to step forward and try to grow more food, even contract more food into being locally grown for people and take responsibility for it. (‘Marc’, CO – vegetables)

Jennifer, a certified organic chicken farmer, explained her position as follows:

We’re seeing more of the larger picture, we’re beyond, ‘I’m only here; I just have to serve myself.’ We’re looking at the big picture of a system that works for all of Ontario. You know, if you’ve got 1,000 little farms having 300 chickens each there’s no economy of scale. I mean you’re still not being really sustainable. (‘Jennifer’, CO – chicken)

In contrast, ‘Beth’, ‘James’ and other growers who had chosen not to become certified had partly made the decision because certification was unnecessary given their farm size and marketing styles. These farmers were running their businesses in such a way that the majority of their customers could take a trip out to the farm in order to see how the food was being grown, obviously a unique position given their proximity to the city. These farmers expressed confidence in their style of certification by the consumer:

If [my customers] are actually here on the farm, then certification isn’t necessary, because you are actually dealing with your customer and they are dealing with you, the farmer, so they know what you’re doing or not doing. But I understand that for marketing your food elsewhere, you have to have something that says that you’re honest. (‘Beth’, O – vegetables)

Everyone can get to my farm within 15 minutes, if they got in their car and drove straight here. They are always welcome, I invite them up twice a year and that is my certification. That is why I don’t certify; the standard is being compromised. (‘James’, O – vegetables)

While in general the smaller-scale growers spoke less about the relative impact of their scale of production, some were still concerned about impact and scope. For example, ‘Beth’ expressed worry that an interruption in steady food imports would create a major crisis for the community given the dearth of local sustainably grown food:

I am afraid of it more than anybody, I’m so afraid of it because I am afraid that we don’t have enough people who are supplying. (‘Beth’, O – vegetables)
Others were less troubled by the larger community’s vulnerability. ‘Tim’, who was growing most of his food for subsistence, seemed to fit ‘Marc’’s description of a grower running a “little garden” “away from society”. ‘Tim’’s disillusionment with wage labour and social service systems had initially motivated him to become a grower. He had hoped to demonstrate an alternative model of self-sufficiency, but as he explains, his influence on the community became less important to him over time:

I think trying to sustain yourself with food from your own space; by your own labour … if people were able to provide themselves with their own food … we wouldn’t see hunger. But at the same time, that’s not really my motivation. Now I’m into doing it because I really think it makes for the richest experience of my own life. I feel like those things are elemental to human experience, like a relationship with the earth … it just so happens that the best life that I can live for myself also does help my neighbour too. But that’s not my focus. I’m just a skeptic. (‘Tim’ and ‘Keri’, O – vegetables)

So while there was general consensus among organic growers that a local organic food system was essential to addressing sustainability and food security issues, there were differing perspectives on best practices and models. Where larger certified organic farms had less on-farm diversity and participated in more buying and selling, they were able to supply greater numbers of people with local organic food through their economies (and ecologies) of scale. By contrast, smaller farm producers emphasized on-farm diversity and closed-loop farming and had greater opportunity to build personal relationships with their customers, yet the model required a relatively small customer base and more modest goals in terms of the numbers of people reached.

**Conventional farmers and the land**

“I don’t think everybody should be organic, I think people need to focus more on sustainable farming, like putting green crops down, buying less nitrogen which is just another fossil fuel … I think you could do a lot less.”

~ ‘Karen’, C – chicken/beef

In-depth interviews with 16 conventional farmers in Hamilton seem to confirm that, by and large, conventional growers are concerned about the environmental impact and sustainability of their farming practices, but are skeptical of the viability or
desirability of transitioning to organic methods (a few where sympathetic to the organic movement, while others showed confusion and hostility). A significant number of these growers (75%) positioned themselves as environmental stewards, described steps they had taken to be more sustainable, or otherwise expressed a desire to improve their growing practices in the future. The remaining 25% did not pick up on the topic (see Table 7). ‘Gord’, a long-time dairy farmer who had recently switched to farming ‘naturally raised’ beef, expressed his environmental commitment with the following statement:

We’re serious about producing a product that we’re proud of and doing it in an environmentally conscious way and doing it in a way that is friendly to the animals, which is something that we are committed to … When we started this whole thing, bought my dad out in 1974 … we wanted to do a good job of it and we wanted to look after this farm … So I don’t want to sound too altruistic, but in the back of my mind for all these years has been the idea that somehow when I walk off this piece of land I want it to be better than when I got here. (‘Gord’, C – beef)

Others spoke in more depth about the actions they were taking to make their farmers more sustainable. ‘Sally’, who rented out most of her farmland, but ran a small-scale pork processing facility on the farm, described her participation in Ontario’s Environmental Farm Plan. As part of the program she and her husband had recently planted a section of their property with trees and she was eager to share that they had received certification as “an environmentally friendly farm”. As another example, two fruit and vegetable growers were practicing Integrated Pest Management, while another had recently gone “pesticide and fungicide free”. These growers explained their farming methods and each provided some explanation of why they had not transitioned to organic:

Blossom Acres, ‘Leonard’:

Rather than just spray according to the calendar we monitor for the levels of these two pests in the [fruit] orchard and only spray when necessary … Minimizing the use of pesticides is important to us. In the year 2000 we sprayed our young [fruit] trees for black cherry aphids with an insecticide. We haven’t sprayed for aphids since. A large number of ladybugs arrived in the orchard so now we let nature do the work for us. (Blossom Acres website)
We’re not organic here; we wish we could be. We have two bugs we spray for and without it we have worms in our [fruit]. (‘Leonard’, C – fruit)

Pumpkin Lane, ‘Mike’:

Instead of putting poisons on my crop every 10–15 days in order to prevent disease and insects, I’m putting fertilizers. I put organic fertilizers onto the leaf surface which the plant takes in, which then uses this to ward off insects and disease, and one of the main products, if you can believe, is molasses, which is a pure sugar … Insects do not like the taste of sugar at all … I’m producing better quality crops now than I ever have with poison. If you’d have told me that, you know, seven or eight years ago, I would have said you’re nuts. (‘Mike’, C – fruit/vegetables)

I’m not really happy with all the organic regulation that’s required in order to become organic … I’d rather be biological and be able to use a whole bunch of different tools … being a conventionalist and taking different parts and different segments of agriculture, I can put together, I think, a better product than just using organic. (‘Mike’, C – fruit/vegetables)

An interesting relationship between generations became apparent in an interview with a young female farmer (under 30) who was taking over the family farm. ‘Karen’ had recently completed a two-day introductory training program with the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario. She described in great detail her plans to introduce more sustainable farming techniques to the farm operation instead of fully transitioning to organic certification, something she had once desired. She explained she needed to make changes slowly in order to prove to herself and her father that the new methods would be beneficial and effective. As she expressed it,

I guess with my dad, the way he’s been doing it for the last 30 years has always worked, so it’s hard to change some people’s perceptions. (‘Karen’, C – chicken/beef)

These conventional farmers thus demonstrate a desire to be more sustainable in their growing practices. They were actively grappling with pressures to be more environmentally oriented, especially in the context of the growing organic movement. There was, however, a general feeling that the public misunderstood their awareness and efforts:

People don’t understand … they think we’re taking a bottle of [pesticide] and just walking down and just dowsing each ear of corn, right? I don’t
know where they get this … We’ve seen the effects of what chemicals do to the ground better than you ever will; we see what happens. (‘Sarah’, C – vegetables)

A lot of people have this mentality out there that the conventional farmer’s just spraying whatever and anything will make do for one bug and that is absolutely not true … You want to grow another crop on that same field the next year … you want it healthy for generations. (‘Shelley’ and ‘Mae’, C – fruit/vegetables)

[My father uses] the safest [chemicals] he can because he has to deal with them. A lot of times he will find solutions that are a little more difficult or expensive, but they are exponentially safer. And also we as children, he was sending his own kids out into the fields … so if it meant that we had to go out and weeds things by hand, then we did that, we didn’t just spray anything. (‘Peter’, C – vegetables)

In addition to feeling misunderstood, a number of farmers thought organic standards were confusing, inconsistent or simply a sham:

If you look up ‘organic’ in Canada … you’re going to find different definitions, because a farmer is going to have one definition, a consumer’s going to have another definition and a scientist is going to differ from both, so it’s just … that whole thing is just bull … it’s just like the organic beef … now tell me what organic beef is, and tell me how you’re going to control that, especially on farms that are right around Hamilton … It doesn’t make any sense to me, the people are standing right by Dofasco [at the Centre Mall farmers’ market] and you’re asking me if the food is organic, are you freaking kidding, are you mad? (‘Sarah’, C – vegetables)

Whether or not the organically farmed alternative is in fact a better choice, others felt the following:

The standards of enforcement are questionable. I don’t really know how they can ensure that this stuff is organic… no one really knows what organic should be and if they did, they don’t know how to enforce it. (‘Gord’, C – beef)

[There are some] people out there who unfortunately abuse that system and there’s some organic products out there that I wouldn’t ever spray on my crops. (‘Shelley’ and ‘Mae’, C – fruit/vegetable)

[Organics] coming from California; now it’s wrapped in plastic, now you’re transporting it all across the country, so there’s a huge environmental impact there, and some of them are trying to make a fast dollar on it. I know some, a couple of big dairies … they’ve had their
organic certification pulled because of what they were doing and what they said they were doing. (‘William’, C – dairy)

One of the frustrations felt by conventional growers was consumer demand for “perfect” food that is aesthetically comparable to conventionally grown, but also carries a label communicating abstract ideals of health and environmental responsibility:

People still want perfection whether it is the regular way of growing or organic product. They still want perfection. It is very difficult to get perfection growing organically. (‘Jim’, C – greenhouse vegetables)

It’s like everything is getting to be very costly because people won’t buy it if they have a scab on it, for an apple. It has to be perfect. And they don’t want sprays either. (‘Phil’ and ‘Sheila’, C – beef/hogs)

People will say, ‘is your stuff organic’ and ‘Tom’ will say ‘no, it’s disease free’… People say, ‘I want it organic’, as they’re peeling back an ear of corn. Like this year we couldn’t spray the corn. There’s no reason to put chemicals on corn if it’s so hot, the chemical won’t work anyway … you’re putting chemicals into the ground that are unnecessary, we’re very careful about that kind of stuff. They’ll open up the corn and be like, ‘eeow, there’s a worm in it’, well, yeah, I just told you it’s too dry, we can’t spray and furthermore you were just telling me that you wanted to go organic, but when the worm jumps out at you and you’re like, ‘oh my god’ … It does suck, they’ll say they don’t want any chemicals on anything, which is virtually impossible to produce the kind of vegetable or fruit that they’re looking for without using chemicals. (‘Sarah’, C – vegetables)

There was clearly a lot of skepticism towards organic, and although it was not articulated as such, much of this was directed towards aspects of the corporate organic sector. In agreement with Hall and Mogyorody (2002), some growers pointed out that ambition on the part of conventional farmers to grow organically would be in tension with pressures from the agro-industry and its supporters:

The biggest problem I think is that even if you talk to farmers now, they still don’t believe that it’s wrong [chemical use] …the companies have done such a good job of making us all believe that it’s fine, it’s necessary, you can’t save your own seed … I think a lot of big companies have such a big hold on how people perceive what they can do to save time and money. (‘Karen’, C – chicken/beef)

The seed companies … they’re like the pharmaceuticals, they’re trying to take over the world in a sense because they’re saying these are the only
seeds [GMO] that we want to be made available and it’s really a terrible thing. (‘Lillian’, beekeeper and apitherapist)

Agricultural extension, that’s another wing of government that has been starved while these corporations, who have these other products, all petrochemical based, have hundreds and thousands of sales agents paid to go out and do this work. (‘Marc’, CO – vegetables)

The capacity of chemical, auto and farm machine industries to sway consumer opinion is considerable. A review of 12 volumes of *Better Farming: The Business Magazine for Ontario Agriculture* from August 2006 to November 2007 (see Table 8) revealed a disproportionately large number of 1–2 page advertisements (77%) dedicated to agri-chemicals, GM seeds and heavy on-farm (and off-farm) machinery. This is compared to a much smaller number of 1–2 page advertisements (3.3%) dealing with environmental programs, organizations and energy saving products.

**Table 8. Breakdown of 1–2 page advertisements by topic in Better Farming magazine**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of advertisement</th>
<th>Number of advertisements &amp; percent of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agrochemical company (various products)</td>
<td>12 (5.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GM or treated seeds</td>
<td>25 (11.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herbicide or pesticide</td>
<td>16 (7.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-farm machinery (tractors, farms trucks)</td>
<td>85 (39.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other cars and trucks (not specific to farming)</td>
<td>27 (12.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental focus¹</td>
<td>7 (3.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other²</td>
<td>43 (20%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total number of 1–2 page advertisements = 215

¹ E.g., Environmental Farm Plan, energy saving light bulbs, Conservation Authority  
² E.g., farm shows, OFA, 4H, TD Canada Trust, Anglers and Hunters
Conventional farmers, scale and sustainability

Conventional farmers also spoke to the issue of environmental stewardship in terms of scale in production and distribution. One important topic of discussion was the way in which farm size and scale of production force farmers into a “chemical trap”. The following comments relate specifically to field crop production:

[Farmers are] stuck, they’re in a groove. They can’t help themselves more or less … Years ago when we were kids we used to do the hoeing. People wouldn’t know where their hoe was today … they control it with spray. They couldn’t think of doing it with a hoe, with a thousand acres you know, you couldn’t think of it. When we were kids, we used to have five acres of land we used to call ‘hoe crop’. (‘Charles’ and ‘Andy’, C – hay/feed)

This is the difference between managed farming, corporate farming, as opposed to someone who sits out in the field all day … they’re dealing with such vast spaces, so instead of locating a small area of the pest, and the stakes are so much higher when you have $100,000 invested in just the seed involved in the field and then the labour and the fuel costs and everything. Then you do everything you can to protect that, so if it means spraying everything three or four times then that’s what you do … We have smaller solutions, you know, you can just run a cultivator through the field or hoe, or in some cases you just destroy the part of the crop that’s the problem … you’re not going to lose $1,000 or $1,000,000. You’re losing a couple hundred bucks in seed and some of your time. (‘Peter’, C – vegetables)

According to this logic, the political economy and ecology of large farm systems restricts a move away from chemicals, whereas smaller farm scale creates more possibilities. Nonetheless, it was clearly apparent in farmers’ comments that small-scale, alongside the corporate food system, with little government support, means economic suicide:

The writing is on the wall, you cannot compete, you cannot fight these big guys ’cause they will keep their prices so low or they will keep inundating you with products until you can’t survive, so why fight the system, we’re not big enough individually to fight the system. (‘Julia’ and ‘Paul’, C – fruit/vineyard)

A lot of people think this, but nobody can actually prove it, but [the government] actually wants to get rid of all the small [processing] plants, so you know, the government doesn’t have to be bothered with looking after them. (‘Phil’ and ‘Sheila’, C – beef/hogs)

All the big stores buy off shore … they’re not going to buy stuff from local Canadian farmers, yeah, ’cause they only want big farmers, some with thousands of acres. (‘Linda’ and ‘John’, C – fruit/vegetables)
For these peri-urban farmers, selling at the local level through direct markets has helped them capture a greater share of the dollar. Still, bearing this in mind, a final comment draws attention to the environmental contradictions that must be considered (as in the organic network) when thinking about how best to pursue a local strategy in support of smaller farms. ‘Gord’ highlights a tension in the food miles debate:

_Interviewer:_ Why do you think people are moving towards local?

I guess concern for a perception that imported food is environmentally bad because of the high transportation costs and the amount of fuel it takes to get the stuff here, and a perception that if you buy local you can save energy, it would be good for the environment … But you have to be careful because if you drive to my farm for the beef and somebody else’s farm for the poultry and somebody else’s farm for the vegetables, then you’re probably spending as much fossil fuel as if you brought it all to the supermarket in a truck. Right? So if the local food movement gets fragmented and we still have to have efficient distribution, it makes sense, that’s all, and the local food movement doesn’t necessarily do that … And so there’s a perception that we’re being environmentally more friendly and if we are that’s great, but we have to really think about how we do this. (‘Gord’, C – beef)

**Discussion**

The following section interprets these results by first discussing contradictions, tensions and opportunities within Hamilton’s local organic movement. It then explores the parallel experiences of small and medium-scale conventional growers, followed by comments on why the two movements often find themselves at odds, concluding with a discussion of opportunities for local policy efforts to encourage cooperation, given the environmental benefits of a cohesive (environmentally oriented) local strategy.¹³

Results suggest that those who have chosen to identify as organic farmers demonstrate a multifaceted awareness and concern for the social and environmental impact of their farming practices; in other words, they are not just “farming without chemicals” (Hall and Mogyorody, 2001). However, the interviews also show that there exists no collective community definition of an ideal local, organic food system. Balancing goals of biodiversity and soil health, energy used on the farm (in relation to

¹³ This is not to suggest that we can conflate local scale with environmental sustainability in general, but rather to say that in this particular case, and given the specific objectives, the scalar strategy would be advantageous.
amount of food produced), and energy consumed in storage and distribution is no simple task. Different models exhibit different strengths and it is beyond the scope of this study to account for the environmental impact of each one; or furthermore, to weigh these costs (e.g., consumers’ fuel consumption driving to on-farm stores) against less tangible, qualitative benefits, like educational impact of time on the farm. Some organic farmers in Hamilton have attempted to negotiate a balance between ecological integrity on the farm and the environmental impacts of production and distribution by developing networks in southern Ontario that assist smaller, organic growers in marketing their products.14

What makes this balancing game most challenging is that farmers’ decisions are not solely determined by their ethics and ideals. Rather, they must balance their values against the struggle to survive as farmers in a cheap food society with little government support. For most, their role as land steward depends on their ability to make money from their piece of land. Hall and Mogyorody found that for 69% of the organic farmers in their study profitability was “at least somewhat of a problem”, while 33% stated that their operation was or had recently been in danger of bankruptcy, and 61% relied on off-farm income (Hall and Mogyorody, 2002, p.14). Farmers must creatively negotiate their convictions with economic survival and many have attempted to do this through value-added alternatives in the market.

Difficulty in striking a healthy balance might point to some of the problems inherent in a system that relies on free markets to address complex environmental and social issues in farming (Allen, 2004; Guthman 2007; Eaton, 2008). While growers must be at the fore in directing change for more sustainable food systems, it seems risky and unwise (and perhaps unfair) that they be entirely responsible for the environmental impact of “trying to provide the alternative” (‘Marc’, CO – vegetables). In some cases, the NGO community has played a role in “scaling up” the local sustainable food system, e.g., Local Food Plus (Friedmann, 2007); however, conversely, widespread government and policy support for organic growers remains absent in Ontario (Hall and Mogyorody, 2002, p. 23-24). Participating farmers did not necessarily suggest that government should play a more active role in promoting the ecological goals of local organic food

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14 Again, it is not necessarily size that determines ecological integrity, but nevertheless, many farms practising good environmental stewardship are small, and do face barriers to entering the market in an environmentally sustainable way.
systems. Indeed, their positions seem to demonstrate more comfort with alternatives markets and less comfort with oppositional policy stances. Of course, this may simply reflect their cultural-economic milieu.

Similar contradictions and tensions are apparent in the results of conventional farmers. For example, as seen, some conventional growers believe that smaller farm size encourages the ecological and economic conditions that are necessary for escaping the chemical trap and other pressures from agro-industry. Yet while local direct sales offer promising opportunities for smaller peri-urban farmers, the environmental implications of a fragmented local food system comprised of many small and uncoordinated farms are undeniable. When arguing that local growers need to “get organized” to reduce consumer food miles, ‘Gord’ drew on the example of his daughter’s participation in a Toronto CSA program. He felt all local growers could adopt this sort of coordination; it did not need to be restricted to organic networks. Still, few conventional farmers spoke about the possibility of policy intervention/change to help coordinate better distribution systems for ecologically grown food, nor did they address the need for broader environmental movements/government to overtly resist corporate control of food’s movement.

It is important to note that smaller farm size does not necessarily mean sustainability. One larger-scale livestock farmer (‘William’) used the Walkerton incident\(^{15}\) to illustrate how small farms with few resources to invest in farm safety pose the greatest environmental risk (note, courts ruled the Walkerton farmer had used due diligence and the crisis was instead a regulatory failure on the part of the town’s Public Utility Commission (O’Connor, 2002; O’Connor and Prudham, 2004; Entis, 2007)). ‘William’’s argument led him to conclude that bigger was better, but it could also lead us to conclude that improved income for smaller farmers would address some of these real and perceived risks. Further, more empirical research is needed in order to examine overall energy use in larger-scale operations attempting to maximize energy efficiency,

\(^{15}\) In 2000, the municipality of Walkerton, Ontario experienced contamination of its water supply with the O157:H7 strain of E.coli, which results from farm runoff into a local well. At least seven people died and approximately 2,5000 fell ill.
as compared to energy use on smaller farms, considering effects on agro-ecology. Such information appears to be mostly speculative at this time.

While organic and conventional farmers alike must manage and negotiate many of the same environmental contradictions, real differences in the two rural cultures pose challenges to cooperation. Each rural group has its own biases and perspectives. For example, few conventional farmers in our sample made the distinction between the organic movement and industrial organics. This tendency to collapse the two is likely the result of messages in conventional agriculture that undermine the ecological legitimacy of organics and instead formulate the trend as merely a “marketing opportunity” (Hall and Mogyorody, 2002). However, as seen in the literature review, many small farmers in Ontario’s organic sector have not taken to export markets and do not readily supply grocery stores and big brand organics. The “perfect” organic foods that infuriate conventional growers – wrapped in plastic, well travelled across the country, with no-scab-no-worm guarantees – are not the same foods being sold direct to consumers by Hamilton’s local organic growers. Nor did our study find that these organic farmers were in a position to bring in big dollars or had an interest in cheating the system. Rather, smaller organic and conventional growers interviewed were facing similar challenges, all born of a political-economic regime that does not promote their survival. Big business threatens both groups. Conventional growers must contend with the commodity food system’s artificially low food prices and industry’s efforts to keep them reliant on inputs and privately owned genetics, while organic growers must not only compete with these challenges, but also face the cooptation and corruption of their original ethics and ideals (Guthman, 2004a).

Those in the organic movement bring their own biases. While one organic farmer in our sample admitted to not knowing what was happening in terms of sustainability on small and medium conventional farms, others were less generous and saw conventional farm advocacy as simply helping farmers to “push more petrochemicals”. The pressure organic farmers feel from the commodity food system likely lends to their haste in lumping all conventional growers into the same homogenous category. In fact, both groups were directing their attention to problems in such a way that divisions were much more apparent than opportunities for collaboration.
Confusions, myths and prejudices aside, there might in fact be complementary reason for these two groups to collaborate. In most cases, both share a similar set of concerns, where relatively small farm size carries ecological advantages and leverage for resisting corporate co-optation and control (Qazi and Selfa, 2000). Both groups must contend with economic pressures from the commodity food system, as well as an unsupportive policy environment, and widespread lack of knowledge among consumers on issues related to farming. Opportunities and areas for potential collaboration to increase political influence are many. For example, 1) knowledge sharing among farmers in order to build common ground for ecological farming and sustainable distribution systems; 2) the chance for a stronger collective voice for small and medium farmers, their supporters and labourers, to oppose corporate control of the food system; 3) enhancing community food security through increased access to ‘good food’ for consumers and preservation of farmland; and finally, 4) an opportunity to challenge some of the social justice concerns related to exclusivity and elitism in the organic consumer movement.

Vociferous debate over local versus global has kept us from digging into important questions on how we might make either (ideally both) scales of food provisioning most sustainable. This study suggests that beyond the local-global debate lies the much messier task of crafting and coordinating sustainable food systems at different levels.
Chapter Six: Health, nutrition and safety in the food system

Introduction

In addition to topics of economic justice and sustainability in the food system, issues of health, nutrition and safety have received a significant amount of attention in social science literatures and other scholarly fields (Serafini et al., 2002; Entis, 2007; DeLind and Howard, 2008; Podsedek et al., 2008). What is more, stories of global food scares and debates on health and nutrition continue to pepper the popular media (Ang, 2008; McKinley, 2006; Pollen, 2008). Journalist Michael Pollen (2008) claims in his most recent book, In Defence of Food, “A great conspiracy of scientific complexity has gathered around the simplest questions of nutrition – much to the advantage of everyone involved, except the supposed beneficiaries of all this nutritional advice: the eaters”.

Focusing on a very unique group of people is these debates – the grower-eaters – this chapter examines Hamilton peri-urban farmers’ perspectives on health, nutrition and safety in the food system. It explores participants’ belief that small farm products and methods of production are superior to dominant corporate/industrial models, in terms of both health promotion and food safety. However, the results contribute to existing literature by suggesting that the two competing avenues for health and safety promotion – one dominant, multi-scaled and corporate, the other alternative, local and smaller-scale – are both largely oriented towards markets and neoliberal value systems that yearn to see the exclusion of government. Challenging the possible limits of this false dichotomy, the chapter brings attention back to themes of democracy, community participation and food sovereignty, with focus on community involvement and regulation. Using a range of literatures from rural sociology, nutrition and medicine, food science/technology, industry journals and others, the chapter asks how we can promote a truly healthful and safe food system, given competing spheres of power and the marginalization of small and medium farm producers. The findings suggest there is in fact room for a highly complementary relationship between health, safety and smaller-scale agricultural production.

After reviewing a range of relevant literature, the perspectives of peri-urban farmers from 23 farms in Hamilton, Ontario are presented, followed by a discussion of
these specific research results in the context of current debates on health and safety in the agrifood system.

**Review of relevant literature**

*The discursive war on quality and freshness*

The literature on local food movements in agrifood studies has been highly concerned with consumer perspectives on local food as superior in quality, taste, and freshness (Wilkins, 1996; Hinrichs, 2000; Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000; Feagan et al., 2004; Mindi and Schneider, 2005; Ostrom, 2006; Chambers et al., 2007; Hunt, 2007). A series of empirical studies with consumers has shown that shoppers choose locally grown foods because they regard the products as “‘fresh’, ‘good quality’, and ‘tasty’” (Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000); because they think “local fruits and vegetables [are] fresher, [look] better, and [taste] better than those imported from other places” (Wilkins, 1996; Wilkins et al., 2002); and because of the “association with freshness, or the superior quality of the food” (Ostrom, 2006). These studies also show that local food shoppers link freshness and nutritional value freely (Feagan et al., 2004; Ostrom, 2006). In complement, farmers and farm organizations emphasize that food bought directly from farmers (e.g., through farmers’ markets) is always “fresh-picked” (Farmers’ Markets Ontario, 2008), and is thus the “freshest, best tasting” choice for consumers (FoodLink Waterloo, 2008; Ontario Farm Fresh Marketing Association, 2008).

In response to this body of research, social scientists have questioned the easy associations consumers and food activists make between “local” and “quality” (Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000; Hinrichs, 2003; Winter, 2003; Born and Purcell, 2006). For example, they have pointed to the often-fluid meaning of local and the tendency to “fetishize” local scale as intrinsically better, without probing local particularities (Hinrichs, 2003; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Ilbery and Maye, 2005). They have also drawn on the French concept of *terroir*, which describes how locales impart distinct qualities to their food through microclimate, soil conditions, etc., in order to show how local flavour might be marketed to distance places (Barham, 2003; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006). What is more, academic and industry journals have argued that non-local foods may be kept comparably fresh through efficient airfreight delivery
(Freidberg, 2004; Konefal et al., 2007), integrated transportation systems and refrigeration equipment (Yee 1999; Karolefski, 2008), and technologies that preserve freshness, like film wrapping and irradiation – other health, safety and environmental concerns aside (Diehl, 1995; Isaac et al., 1996; Pigal et al., 1997; Chaudry et al., 2004; Maki, 2006; Entis, 2007; Song et al., 2007). Of course, these technologies offer ways of ensuring freshness that would unlikely be available to smaller farm producers/distributors operating within a local food system.

The point, however, is that high consumer standards for “freshness” and “quality” have not escaped the attention of retailers in the grocery industry. Supermarket executives understand that in addition to convenience and choice, their patrons are seeking top “quality”, superior “freshness”, and a certain ideal aesthetic (Morris and Young, 2004; OECD, 2006; Lawrence and Burch, 2007; Beswick and Isotta, 2008; Karolesfski, 2008; Major, 2008a). Indeed, concentration in the grocery industry has engendered increasingly fierce competition, and with tight profit margins and benefits from consumer loyalty, supermarkets are developing “economies of quality”, where variety and specialty niche products mean competitive advantage (Konefal et al., 2007, p. 277). This has led to new developments in supermarket “own brands” – like Loblaw’s President’s Choice and Sobeys’ Compliments – where their purpose is no longer just to beat out other brand names with low-priced economy lines, but also to seek premiums for a second tier of supermarket brands based on high quality and healthfulness; “products designated as ‘healthy’, ‘natural’, ‘organic’, ‘low-carb’ and ‘free-from’” (Konefal et al., 2007, p. 278). A supermarket executive interviewed by the Progressive Grocer states: “When you look at the food that we can offer and prepare no one [else’s products] are more nutritious or fresher for family meals than supermarkets” (Major, 2008a, p. 82).

In contrast to venues like the farm-gate or farmers’ markets, grocery stores have unique criteria for quality and complex mechanisms for preserving freshness, in large part due to their unparalleled place in the current food system. As mentioned, “cool chain technologies” and airfreight have enabled supermarkets to thrive in the international trade of “quality” fresh produce, cut fruits, fresh flowers, etc., filling particular consumer niches and maximizing product diversity (Konefal et al., 2007). Supermarket brands have also come to dominate the market for “fresh” “home-ready” meals (Lawrence and Burch,
2007). And moreover, the unprecedented buying power of supermarkets and their strong influence upstream of the supply chain means that retailers can demand “quality” characteristics from suppliers/producers based on extremely strict standards of product conformity (Peters, 1998; Konefal et al., 2007), thus lining their shelves with shiny, symmetrical, aesthetically perfect produce year round. Often, these quality controls mean produce is shipped to a central warehouse before travelling to retail outlets (Vorley, et al., 2007). The U.S. supermarket chain Winn Dixie, for example, claims that “more than 1,000 stores in 12 states and the Bahamas are serviced from 13 distribution centres” (Gentry, 2002).

With these competing discourses of quality one is left wondering what “freshness” really means (Morris and Young, 2000; Morris and Young, 2004). Whereas in some cases fresh is understood as whole, unprocessed or unadulterated food, in other cases fresh is a function of time from field to fork, accounting for any degradation that may have occurred. In the wider health and nutrition literature, health through fresh produce tends to mean unprocessed (Health Canada, 2008; Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada, 2008). Here, studies show that people who eat more whole fruits/vegetables have lower rates of chronic disease (Farrell, et al., 1995; Desjardins, et al., 2002; Australian Nursing Journal, 2006; Liu, and Russell, 2008). Some of these arguments also emphasize the health benefits of minimal cooking or eating foods raw (Masala et al., 2007; Podsedek et al., 2008). For example, studying red cabbage and antioxidant loss through cooking, Podsedek et al. (2008) found that in conventional cooking 35.5%–67.3% of vitamin C and 33.1%–54.3% of total phenolics were lost in the cooking process, whereas with steam-cooking (a gentler process), the vitamin C content decreased by only 2.1%–22.7% and losses of total phenolics were around 10%.

In these studies, the benefits of fresh as whole have no clear relationship to local. Nevertheless, the health importance of consuming less processed or unprocessed foods cannot be denied and its promotion is becoming an increasingly popular policy directive, the most commonly cited example being food policy change in the U.K. school system (Morgan, 2006; Sharp, 2007). Food standards that were implemented by the British government in 2006 include: “school lunches [being] free from low-quality meat products, fizzy drinks, crisps and chocolate or other confectionary … Pupils [being]
served a minimum of two fruits and vegetables with every meal … [and] deep-fried items restricted to no more than two portions in a week” (Morgan, 2006, p. 382). Morgan (2006) states these changes signal “the most significant reform of the school meal service since the founding of the welfare state in the 1940s” (Morgan, 2006, p. 379). Clearly, this sort of state intervention stands out against movements that promote health solely through alternative markets in the neoliberal marketplace (e.g., organics, locally branded). But without this kind of state intervention or support, literature suggests there are problematic implications for class (and gender) inequalities, where, as mentioned in chapter four, issues are raised around which groups have time to regularly prepare whole food meals and who is expected to do this work (Allen, 2004; Allen and Sachs, 2007; Szabo, 2008)?

Other freshness debates and literatures in food science have concerned themselves more with freshness as a function of time from field to fork. Here, studies provide evidence that nutritional indicators (colour, nutrient content, etc.) degrade once food is harvested. Muratore’s (2009) study shows that the colour intensity and firmness of fresh celery decreases with storage time, fluctuating temperatures and levels of humidity. Gomes et al. (2008), monitoring changes in fresh broccoli over a 14-day period, observed degradation in colour, vitamin C content, chlorophyll and carotenoids, and thus postulate diminished health benefits. This research suggests that optimizing health through food is not just a matter of eating whole and unprocessed; rather, attention must also be given to selecting foods that have not degraded significantly over time. In this case, food’s relative localness may play a role. Serafini et al. (2002), for instance, monitored total “radical-trapping antioxidant potential” (TRAP) in volunteers who consumed a sample of fresh-picked lettuce. They later monitored their TRAP after consuming a sample of the same lettuce stored for three days using modified-atmosphere packaging (MAP), a common industry technique for extending product shelf life. Results showed that ingestion of the fresh-picked lettuce yielded a “significantly higher” level of TRAP. It must be recognized, of course, that these findings and arguments speak to freshness in fruits and vegetables that can be bought from farmers (or grown by home gardeners) in season – definitely limiting for consumers in northern climates.
Still, considering both notions of fresh as indicators of health (whole and just-picked), an important relationship between freshness, agricultural scale and systems of distribution becomes apparent. The grocery industry – which generally excludes small farm producers with its strict standards and volume requirements (Dixon, 2007; Konefal et al., 2007) – offers whole “fresh” foods year-round, mostly bought from large-scale producers and suppliers (Wen, 2001; Hingley, 2005). Arguably, however, supermarkets do not encourage a truly healthful culinary culture, pushing highly processed, more lucrative foods alongside their cheaper produce (Tillotson, 2006; Elliott, 2008). What is more, as seen in the literature, the supermarket’s image of freshness and health may be quite misleading. On the other hand, the dearth of local processing facilities that use locally sourced products (Region of Waterloo Public Health, 2005) means that to “eat local” at this moment in time almost necessarily means to eat unprocessed. As a result, local food systems supported by small and medium farmer producers currently promote whole food culture. Furthermore, foods produced and sold/eaten within short distances and time periods, using the right handling practices, offer a very different notion and standard of freshness, one the literature seems to suggest is nutritionally superior.

**Balancing health and food safety**

Food safety is another health issue that has dominated the literature. As in the freshness debate, there is also an interesting relationship between food safety, agricultural scale and systems of food distribution. Much has been written, for instance, on the ways in which public health bodies and bio-security/food safety concerns conflict with the practices of small and medium farm producers, especially those using direct-to-consumer sales (Hall, et al., 2004; Kuyek, 2006; Ontario Small Farm Producers Association; 2007). In his book *Everything I Want to Do Is Illegal: War Stories from the Local Food Front*, Joseph Salatin of Polyface Farm asserts: “Would-be local food farmers literally spend their days looking over their shoulders wondering what bureaucrat will assault them next … If a little girl wants to make cornbread muffins and sell them to families in her church, why should the first question be ‘but it is illegal?’” Among other things, Salatin rails against state regulations that prevent him from “opting out” of the system (Salatin, 2007).
The marketing of unpasteurized milk in Europe and North America is one case that has been prolifically discussed in recent studies and media reports (Enticott, 2003; Paxton, 2008; Canadian Press, 2008; West, 2008). “Raw milk” proponents argue that its health benefits – e.g., enzyme, vitamin and beneficial bacteria retention – outweigh the risks (Fallon, 2001; Entis, 2007), especially given high standards of sanitation in the milk industry (Fallon, 2001). Small farm producers/activists in Ontario, such as the infamous Michael Schmidt,16 have been struggling unrelentingly to win back the right to sell raw milk (Canadian Press, 2008). In contrast, food safety bodies and other critics feel it is too great a risk to the public’s health. Links to Listeria have received a fair amount of attention (USFDA, 2004), while Entis (2007) lists hundreds of cases of illness (through C. jejuni, Salmonella, E. coli, etc.) resulting from consumption of unpasteurized milk products between 1983 and 2005, incidents she thinks raw milk advocates selectively neglect to acknowledge (p. 276–277).

It is important to mention that the supermarket industry has become a major player in the food safety arena. Partly as a result of well-publicized food scares and the high cost of consumer disloyalty, many supermarkets have shifted to private standards, third-party certifiers and increased pressure on suppliers/producers to standardize safety protocol (Lawrence and Burch, 2007; Konefal, 2007; McMichael and Friedmann, 2007). As Dixon (2007) notes, supermarkets now position themselves as “legitimate health promotion authorities” (p. 29–30), often bringing them into direct conflict with small and medium farm producers, alongside public health agencies. Other examples of discord between farmers and food safety groups include concerns over small-holder/pasture-fed chickens contracting and spreading avian flu (Kuyek, 2006), the standardization of meat processing as prohibitively expensive for smaller-scale farmers and processors (MacDonald, et al., 1996; FAO, 2007; DeLind and Howard, 2008), and small/medium sized farmers lacking resources to conform to other costly safety measures (DeLind and Howard, 2008).

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16 Michael Schmidt of Glencolton Farms near Owen Sound has become well known for his fight against the Ontario provincial government to win the right to sell raw milk. The battle has resulted in various police raids and a four-week hunger strike in which Schmidt lost 50 pounds drinking only unpasteurized milk and other fluids. He has attempted to skirt the law by providing milk to around 150 families through a scheme where consumers co-own the cattle (CBC News, 2006).
At the same time, researchers have drawn important connections between “productionist”/“productivist” agricultural paradigms and public health scares, such as bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), avian influenza, and E. coli (Weiss and McMichael, 2004; Greger, 2006; Kuyek, 2006; Entis, 2007; Sharp 2007). The spread of BSE, for instance, has been linked to “industrialized cannibalism” (Weiss and McMichael, 2004, p. S73), where feed is prepared using (infected) ruminant meat and bone meal (Entis, 2007, 187). The global scope of BSE has further been attributed to “large-scale continuous rendering” – spreading the disease through nationwide sourcing of raw materials, further compounded by the international trade of infected cattle, beef and other bovine products (Entis, 2007). In contrast, farmers and special interest groups emphasize that grass or pasture-fed cattle provide a safer alternative for beef consumers (Biosecurity New Zealand, 2008; National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service, 2008; Wyoming Natural Grassfed Beef and Lamb, 2008).

Likewise, the spread of avian influenza has been linked to the intensive production and transnational trade of poultry (Weiss and McMichael, 2004; Greger, 2006; Kuyek, 2006). Perhaps naively, smallholder production has been a major target of popular criticism, as backyard chickens are difficult to regulate/control and experience greater exposure to wild migratory (flu-carrying) birds (Kuyek, 2006; FAO, 2007). Some have reasoned that poultry farming should be limited to industrial production, so that outbreaks can be easily identified and birds efficiently culled (Greger, 2006). Yet there is much evidence to suggest that industrial production acts as “an amplifier for the virus” (Greger, 2006, p. 322), where crowding causes a mild strain to “evolve rapidly towards more pathogenic and highly transmissible forms” (Kuyek, 2006, p. 16). Critics of industrial production have argued that the best way to guard against avian influenza is to breed birds with “functional immune systems … raising them at a modest stocking density in a sufficiently clean, ventilated, and low-stress environment” (Greger, 2006, p. 323).

The case of E. coli is more complex. On the one hand, E. coli outbreaks in beef production – over 1,000 cases in the U.S. between 1982 and 2006 (Entis, 2007, p. 97) – can unequivocally be traced to large-scale industrial agriculture. Cases occurred in restaurants, nursing homes, banquet halls and cafeterias, where infected food was traced
to large processors, like Hudson Foods and ConAgra. Hudson Foods, for example, recalled over 1.2 million pounds of meat in 1997 in an incident where contamination was caused by a “standard industry practice” of “mixing leftover scraps of meat from one day’s production into another production batch” (Entis, 2007, p. 112). ConAgra’s recall of 354,000 pounds of beef was traced to fecal contamination in beef carcasses. Yet on the other hand, hundreds of cases of E. coli involving U.S. produce – e.g., unpasteurized cider, lettuce and sprouts – have been traced to smaller mixed farms with poor food handling practices (Entis, 2007, p. 136–148). Thus, E. coli incidents cannot be blamed squarely on industrial agriculture, but at the same time, the far-reaching impact of major outbreaks is connected to the scale at which industry contamination occurs and the distance disease spreads through mass distribution (DeLind and Howard, 2008).

DeLind and Howard (2008) use the 2006 case of an E. coli outbreak in bagged Californian spinach to illustrate how politicians and food analysts responded with recommendations to create more centralized agencies, tighter bureaucratic control (e.g., increasing paperwork, fees, transportation costs) and more unified production standards. In reply, DeLind and Howard (2008) ask rhetorically: “Why should responses that only reinforce the problem be proffered?” They hold that such scale-insensitive solutions ultimately benefit large industry (the ones most responsible for sweeping food scares), and consequently marginalize small and medium farm production, thus diminishing agricultural alternatives. In complement to this argument, some health professionals have rallied around the idea that smaller scale farmers – supplying grass-fed beef and chickens with strong immune systems – might be the best way forward for community health and safety concerns. The Dieticians of Canada, for example, state the following in their 2007 position paper on community food security:

CFS [community food security]17 involves food production and distribution methods that promote health and the safety of the food supply … Changes in food production methods over recent decades, including intensified livestock production, changes in animal feed, increased shelf life of foods, and transportation of foods across great distances, have resulted in the emergence of certain food-borne pathogens as significant hazards, such as Campylobacter, Listeria, and Escherichia coli 0157:H7. The recent

17 “Community food security is a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice.” (Community Food Security Coalition, 2008)
Mainstream awareness of how sustainable, local agriculture and health/safety promotion might exist in complement to one another is demonstrated in the following excerpt from a consultation document of the British Department for Education and Skills, proposing that all schools “be models of healthy, local and sustainable food and drink produced or prepared on site (where possible), with strong commitments to the environment, social responsibility and animal welfare, and with increased opportunity to involve local suppliers” (Sharp, 2007, p. 117). Similar connections between farm fresh food and community health/safety are being made more regionally and sporadically across North America, through municipal farm to school programs, Public Health departments promoting Eat Local maps that link consumers to local farmers, and agricultural organizations promoting the health benefits of farm fresh food (Farm to School, 2008; Foodland Ontario, 2008; FoodLink Waterloo, 2008; Toronto Food Share, 2008).

This interdisciplinary review of literatures on health, nutrition and food safety explains why many small and medium farm producers feel great pressure existing within the mainstream food system. To be sure, their production practices (or desired practices) often come into direct conflict with health and safety standards geared towards large scale production and capital accumulation (e.g., Intensive Livestock Operations). At the same time, the literature suggests that smaller farm producers are in a very good position to promote and improve health and safety for food consumers; a conclusion that is strongly supported by the following interview results with Hamilton peri-urban farmers.

**Results**

When asked about their thoughts on the attributes and benefits of a local food system, a number of farmers referred to issues of health, nutrition and food safety. While slightly fewer interviewees contributed to this topic than to topics of economic justice and the environment, the following results still include a rather diverse group of farmers. Interestingly, a number of them were women, organic farmers and people who were
relatively new to farming and/or had not grown up on farms. Over half of them also
demonstrated an enthusiastic interest in their own health and wellness. And while all of
these farmers sold some of their product direct to consumers, half of them sold a portion
to grocery stores and/or food processors.

Direct quotations are used to present farmers’ comments accurately and
pseudonyms maintain their anonymity. Again, in addition, each farmer is described in
terms of his/her main farm product and growing method – organic (O), certified organic
(CO), or conventional (C).

Fresh and local as best for health

Farmers participating in this study appeared to be in strong agreement that one of
the motivating factors behind the new interest in “local” is a belief that food grown
closer to home is fresher, more nutritious, higher quality and safer to eat. While a few
farmers discussed this as consumer perception, most agreed that their products were
higher quality and more reliable than foods available in the grocery store. The following
farmer focused his attention on the various health benefits of fresh food. Intriguingly, he
had made a significant move away from the conventional fruit-processing sector
(making jams, ketchup, etc.) to a fresh pick-your-own operation, and here celebrates the
community health benefits of both whole/unprocessed and freshly picked fruit:

Being a conventional food guy for 25 years … [I saw] that the stuff I was
producing wasn’t the best for one’s health. I’m now saying, oh, the light’s on,
I better go and change direction and do something that’s much better for
people’s health … What’s best? Well, fresh food is best. A lot of nutrients get
lost when food’s not fresh. And then when they get processed, it’s done. And
then there’s a whole lot of additives, preservatives added in for that, for
marketing purposes. So I said, we’ve got to go back and look at fresh. We run
a fresh operation. With pick-your-own, you can’t get better cherries than the
ones on our farm. You cannot do it because they’re fresh, right off the tree …
In Ontario we grow the best peaches in North America … and unfortunately,
we pick them underripe, we cool them, pack them, so they don’t spoil in the
supermarket and that they last a certain number of days. The product is
terrible compared to a fresh-picked peach that’s at its ripeness. And if people
had that opportunity to really see and taste what a real peach is all about!
That’s where my local food comes in. That’s my connection for local food.
Local food is a better quality than non-local food. (‘Leonard’, C – fruit)
A number of other farmers addressed similar issues. The following two respondents reiterate the idea that processing and cooking ‘kills’ food, or otherwise undermines its nutritional content:

[Food] should be picked fresh, within a day or two, or three at least, within three days you should really eat what you have, and as close to raw as you can get it … food cooked above a certain degree is dead … dead is dead. That means there is nothing alive about it … [People] eat a lot of crap – even stuff they don’t consider to be crap, like canned vegetables … It’s processed, it’s still processed … at the end of the day, you are still eating processed food, even if you froze it at home, it is still processed … That means there is nothing alive about it … and food should be alive. (‘Sarah’, C – vegetables)

[Some people have] been getting this Chinese pasteurized honey for years, but once you’ve tried local (multi-floral) honey direct from the Beekeeper’s apiary, you will notice this taste much different than anything that’s pasteurized … The only reason to pasteurize honey is to keep it liquid longer … The trade-off is that you’ve killed all the goodness of the honey. So you shouldn’t ever have pasteurized honey. (‘Lillian’, beekeeper and apitherapist)

Others reinforced ‘Leonard’’s views on compromised freshness and nutrient loss as a structural problem within the food economy and grocery industry. Farmers especially stressed quality degradation when products are picked prematurely and ripened en route to their final destination. Here we see the emergence of ‘freshness’ as a concept that precludes grocery store technologies:

As recent as three or four years ago, we would deliver to specific stores in the Hamilton, Grimsby area, but then with the amalgamation of all the little guys being bought up by the big guys, they wanted all central warehouses, either in London or Toronto … And then it sits in the warehouse … it could be in their warehouse for quite a few weeks … They know it’s not to be consumed for the next 7–10 days before it gets to the shelf; they’re picking it immature. It may look pretty, but there’s no flavour and the sugar content isn’t high … It’s coming from thousands of miles away … By the time it gets through the whole network of trucks and warehouses and so on, you’re looking at least a week, if not more … Mine are 20 miles down the road, they’re picked yesterday. (‘Julia’ and ‘Paul’, C – fruit/vineyard)

The actual product is inferior, nutritionally, because seed companies are developing products not based on taste or nutrition. They’re strictly looking at how something looks in a grocery store after it’s travelled 2,000 miles … It’s like buying a car that can sit on the floor and look shiny, not that drives really well or gets good gas mileage. (‘Peter’, C – vegetables)
There’s information out there that if a strawberry is picked half ripe, which is happening down there in the States, and then shipped up here, the nutrient value is less than a strawberry straight out of the field … The sugar level of our strawberries is phenomenal … you don’t need any sugar on the strawberries, it’s unbelievable. (‘Shelley’ and ‘Mae’, C – fruit/vegetables)

Celebrating the health benefits and superior taste of fresh-picked whole foods, a number of farmers (mostly organic) spoke about the importance of growing a home garden. They felt this was the best way to access the healthiest food and develop a taste for farm freshness:

People should be growing their own gardens. If you want to be healthy you should be in a garden – end of story. We [as a local farm] are the closest that some people can get to that … The only thing better than what we are doing is growing it yourself. (‘James’, O – vegetables)

Everybody should be growing stuff in their backyard … As a farmer I am certainly encouraging all the people who come to my farm to discover by themselves what they can grow. (‘Beth’, O – vegetables)

When I’m at the market I’m telling people ‘this plant’s a very good one to put in your backyard if you really like raspberries’ … Or ‘gooseberries are really easy to grow’ … I’m encouraging my customers to stop being my customers! … But it all becomes part of the experience, and if they enjoy that really fresh ‘whatever it is’, then they’ll enjoy that really fresh ‘whatever it is’ from the farm as well … The corn that they’re going to grow, they’re going to appreciate that, realize what it’s supposed to taste like, because they know fresh makes a difference. And if the corn has come up last week from the States it’s not going to taste as good as [corn from] the guy who just picked it this morning. (‘Cynthia’, O – fruit)

A taste for quality

Building on this issue of local quality, there was a widespread feeling that consumers have lost their appreciation for superior taste and farm freshness. The following story of an elderly shopper at the farmers’ market illustrates the kind of heightened awareness and enjoyment of local flavour that growers appreciate. This woman’s taste for local echoes the language of terroir:

The way I see things today, people don’t even know what good is anymore, they don’t know what quality is, it’s all about what it looks like, it’s not about quality … You can take some [of our] potatoes home with you and you just eat them one time, because I guarantee you they don’t taste like anything you can get anywhere else … In fact, when I first came here, one of the very first
lessons I got at the market was from a woman who was a customer of my in-laws. And she said, ‘You know, I’ll tell you how good your potatoes are … I used to buy potatoes from this one lady and that lady had the best ground, her potatoes didn’t taste like anybody else’s … This lady, her husband got hurt in a farming accident and she quit farming and for about 10 years I couldn’t find her… I couldn’t get those potatoes anymore, I was just devastated.’ And she said, ‘One day I … started buying potatoes off you guys because they tasted identical to the potatoes that I got from her … When I tasted them again, I knew where they came from … Do you know the farm that you guys have on [Concession ___]? … Your father-in-law bought that farm off this woman, because her husband got hurt in a farming accident … when I tasted the potatoes that came off that ground, I knew that that was where they came from’. (‘Sarah’, C – vegetables)

Farmers made reference to a number of barriers within the commodity food system that prevent people from developing a taste for local flavour. The following participant mentioned an interesting example of competitiveness in the local marketplace that undermines consumer appreciation for farm fresh quality:

There are growers that produce volume, volume, volume; and they get these units out and they pick [the peaches] premature because the price is high at the start of the season, and their season is a little bit earlier than the rest of the people down there, and they’re putting the stuff on the market and it’s going out when it’s a little bit on the greener side and that’s the first stuff to hit the market from Ontario. So that’s throwing the consumer off, saying why am I getting these golf balls and the flavour’s not there, and of course once … everybody else gets into production, then the real nice stuff is there, they say, ‘Well, I bought a basket of peaches last week and they were crap, I’m not gonna buy another basket, I’m gonna buy peaches from California or the Carolinas’. (‘Julia’ and ‘Paul’, C – fruit/vineyard)

While there are many factors that prohibit access to local food and keep people from “knowing what good is” – such as poor access to local farmers and busy schedules – in this context, participating farmers seemed most concerned about ‘de-skilling’ in the food system:

The next generation, they don’t even cook! They don’t. Everything has to be pre-made, like that was my son a little while ago [on the phone] and he wanted to know how long to cook an egg … A lot of the problem is education. And our system fails the next generation by taking out Home Economics. It may seem very simple, but our next generation … doesn’t know how to cook. (‘Phil’ and ‘Sheila’, C – beef/hogs)
Hamilton is very blue collar in annual income, people don’t know how to cook anymore, so you’re offering all these whole grains or beans or fresh vegetables [but they don’t know how to use them] … Buying through a CSA [an organic vegetable box program], when you get that box of vegetables you have to be like, okay … so I start with the most perishable and then figure out how to cook everything … That’s kind of why the organic movement is going towards more packaged, ready-made foods like pizzas and baby food and everything … you just stick it in the oven … so it’s like conventional type food with organic ingredients, right? … But if you’re just a grower, you still want to sell your raw product … you still want to be able to grow black beans or wheat or apples and make a profit on them … Some CSAs will send out recipe books or things to do with your box of food … The education part seems to be pretty huge … people just need to remember how to cook, or learn how to cook, or want to eat fresh, local products. (‘Karen’, C – chicken/beef)

These comments draw attention to unhealthy cultural/consumer trends, suggesting that a revival in farm fresh sales would require that our food culture re-orient itself towards whole and fresh. Yet consumers would have to “remember” or “learn” how to cook. Of course, these suggestions for a culinary revival through alternative local food markets, and perhaps home gardens, have implications for class and gender inequalities when considering which groups have income and time to access farm fresh foods and relearn lost food skills amid their busy lives. Thus, in closing this section on nutrition, the following two comments points to a notable interest in supportive policy interventions (for health) that lie beyond the marketplace:

Rather than grow for quantity and grow revenue in a profit-making mode … our mindset is we’d run [the farm] as a non-profit organization, because basically it is, that’s what it is. Change our focus to education and try to build a nucleus of people who can educate others on proper food intake … But the big thing is to try and improve people’s health. And if we can get people to live healthier lifestyles, the millions of dollars that we’ll save in health care expenditures in our hospitals and the amount of money being spent in the pharmaceutical industry, then we can make a dent in it. (‘Leonard’, C – fruit)

Agricultural policies [in Britain] have to have as their prime directive human health … And they’ve changed dramatically now in England, they now have whole foods in most of the schools and they’re switching to all the schools … [Without this kind of policy support] food will only be managed for profit and not for dependable relationships and health. (‘Marc’, CO – vegetables)
Interestingly, this last farmer is deeply engaged in the alternative organic market, and while celebrating policy reform in Britain, he currently sees the marketplace as the only viable arena for change to occur in Ontario at this point in time.

**Health and safety policy in tension**

In addition to providing healthy fresh food, small and medium farm producers also felt they were in a good position to ensure a very safe food supply. Interestingly, many of the research participants celebrated Canada’s rigorous food safety standards – especially when reflecting on imported foods and food scares – even though they felt certain food safety regulations geared towards big business infringed on their survival and success. However, to begin with, the following comments capture farmers’ belief that Canadian standards and safety regulations (for foods grown here) guarantee a high level of safety in the food supply:

I can’t remember ever having had a recall of Ontario strawberries or a recall of Ontario spinach because of Salmonella or E. coli … The countries that we’re importing these foods from are completely different to North American, that’s why it’s cheaper. We’re paying people less and we’re getting something less. So we need to educate the consumers to know this … And actually we, Canadian companies, manufacture pesticides that are illegal in Canada, but they’re sprayed on our food and sent back up here. I mean that’s just ridiculous. (‘Peter’, C – vegetables)

I don’t think [government] worries about [not having local product]. They figure they can get it somewhere else – they figure they can bring it in. You can bring it in, but you don’t know what you’re getting. And I think you’ll find that with everything that’s going on with toys and the pet food scares, you have to be worried about this food coming from other countries. (‘Phil’ and ‘Shelia’, C – beef/hogs)

I’ve been to some of these countries, I just got back from Haiti, I don’t want to buy food from South America, their standards are not like ours are. Nowhere near what ours are; so something from China? No … I think the best thing that has come along has been the ‘home grown’ Eat Local food and it’s just come along at the right time, when we are seeing atrocities in China or big manufacturing … you do not see that with local producers. Not anything that affects so much of society. (‘Sally’, C – pork processing)
Perhaps more importantly than placing blame on stigmatized imported foods, the following comments build on ‘Sally’’s concern that safety hazards (and poor quality) lie with big manufacturing:

People are learning why Canada had bird flu, mad cow… We need to find out why that is. It is not happening in the third world\(^\text{18}\), it is happening in Canada, Britain, United States, Italy and Belgium. It is happening in the first world… We are doing something wrong… Bird flu is created in ILOs – Intensive Livestock Operations – that is where it is bred; it’s not bred on small farms… It has to be in a humid environment, which is a large chicken farm, with birds closely situated to each other. That is how it spreads. (‘James’, O – vegetables)

The main farming is big-time farming, and of course when you have … 530 goats instead of 200 goats [in an open barn like this] then it affects them, because they are stressed … If you keep the animals happy, then the product is high quality. If you stress them, then their milk or the meat or whatever you use, can’t be good quality, or not as good. (‘Martina’, O – goats)

These two respondents suggest that small and medium farm production offers potentially safer products; yet their comments are somewhat in tension with previous remarks, in the sense that the rigorous Canadian standards, of which farmers are proud, are some of the same standards that cause them great stress and strain. As illustrated below, the tension lies mostly with scale of production, where smaller farmers are inevitably enveloped into a regulatory framework geared towards big business:

The wholesalers that [‘Phil’] sells to, they’re being required to only accept federal product from CFIA. So unless [the processor] gets that federal designation he can’t sell to them. And it just all trickles back down then … It’s almost as if [government] got paranoid over this whole food safety thing … And they’re trying to filter it down to the smaller person … like CFIA comes down with all these new rules for handling SRMs (segregations at-risk materials), which all goes back to the BSE … So that’s costing the people that process those animals more money. So then they have a competitive disadvantage with products coming in from other countries because they don’t have these requirements. (‘Phil’ and ‘Sheila’, C – beef/hogs)

The work of making sausage, and the regulations involved in that, has become so huge because of food safety. (‘Sally’, C – pork processing)

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\(^{18}\) NB – Most outbreaks of avian influenza have occurred in Southeast Asia, specifically Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam; however, industrial production has been seen as central to the spreading of the epidemic (Kuyek, 2006).
With regard to bird flu, I think that next year all, even outdoor birds, especially turkeys, have to be in something covered, they can have mesh on the sides, and they can be open air, but they have to have a roof, so that other animals can’t get in. (‘Karen’, C – chicken/beef)

No, no [we’ve never had a scare on our farm]. But what we’ve seen evolve over the last few years is a strict vaccination program to prevent a lot of diseases. So I hate to admit it, but consequently, we’re out there quite a bit vaccinating cows to prevent this. (‘William’, C – dairy)

In the next two comments, ‘Jennifer’ and ‘Gord’ make a link between consumer pressure to lift mainstream safety regulations around raw milk, the survival of family farms and availability of quality “alternative” products:

This whole new surge of ‘we want the right to drink raw milk, as opposed to pasteurized’, it’s an important thing, where consumers say, we’d like to have a choice. And it’s when there’s no family farmers around anymore, that’s when your choices … get diminished. (‘Jennifer’, CO – chicken)

Unpasteurized milk is a missed opportunity … I have people who don’t agree with me, they say that we pasteurize milk because people died before we had pasteurization, but I’m saying there is a market out there. We have better techniques now, we have refrigeration; we have ways of ensuring that the product is pretty safe without pasteurization. There’s a huge ethnic market that wants this stuff, so why don’t we try to cater to this market. Why do we shut ourselves off from an obvious market? (‘Gord’, C - beef)

According to these farmers, the local food system provides important, arguably safer, alternatives to imported goods, or perhaps more accurately (and less stigmatically), mass-produced foods with fewer regulations. However, the results point to a fine balance that must be achieved in maintaining the high standards of which Canadian farmers are proud, while at the same time challenging regulations that marginalize small and medium farm production and its added health and safety benefits.

**Discussion**

Results show that farmer participants collectively feel they are in the best position to provide the freshest, healthiest food to Hamilton (and area) consumers, albeit alongside home gardeners. In general, both notions of “fresh” discussed in the literature
review – unprocessed and freshly picked – were important and relevant to farmers’ understanding of food and health. Research participants demonstrate awareness that supermarkets maintain a certain concept of quality (i.e., variety, aesthetics, etc.), and in response, they emphasize their own unique criteria of superior taste and flavour. Where the literature criticizes tendencies to “fetishize” local food as unquestionably better, here participating farmers place great confidence in the consumer’s role as auditor and judge of good taste. For example, ‘Sarah’ ‘guaranteeing’ that her potatoes “don’t taste like anything you can get anywhere else”.

While this kind of confidence in product taste is clearly subjective to producer and consumer, the literature does suggest that other quality and health criteria have been more rigorously evaluated. For example, Serafini et al.’s (2002) study provides evidence that fresh-picked lettuce (from farm or garden) would indeed offer superior health benefits, at least in terms of “antioxidant potential”. Of course, a limit in both Serafini’s (2002) findings and participants’ comments is that no one raises the question of seasonality. Both speak of freshness in terms of fruits and vegetables that can be bought or grown in season, but in Ontario, avid consumers of locally grown must choose winter products that have either been kept in cold storage, or dried/preserved/canned (or grown in greenhouses, sprouted in kitchens). ‘Sarah’’s remark that “even if you froze it at home, it is still processed” must be taken seriously. While not negating the importance of farm fresh food during the growing season (or fresh winter alternatives, like sprouts), further research is needed in order to evaluate the comparative health benefits of a winter diet based on stored local foods versus one based on imported variety.

Another health benefit raised by participating farmers is the less obvious and less often discussed idea that purchasing farm fresh food challenges unhealthy consumer trends and encourages whole food cooking or “re-skilling” in the food system, if only for lack of local processing capacity. Yet while farmers demonstrated an awareness of structural barriers that might inhibit consumers from experiencing farm fresh “quality” and developing necessary food skills (e.g., lacking education in schools and grocery store purchasing policies), there was still an overwhelming sense from participants that the problem was ‘cultural’ and solutions lay with individual consumers. Few farmers made connections to the ways in which supermarkets in fact shape individual
behaviours/lifestyles and consumer culture in its own economic interest. Farmers saw great potential for consumers to pressure supermarkets to change their food purchasing policies, but there was little sensitivity to the incredible pressure supermarkets exert over consumers through calculated marketing strategies (Dixon, 2007; Lawrence and Burch, 2007). There was also little discussion of gender/class inequalities prohibiting a consumer shift (back) towards whole food cooking – e.g., the gendered nature of food work, sacrifices made to leisure time, and questions of who has access to certain buying opportunities and the time needed to prepare whole food meals.

These issues all point to possible problems with seeing the market as a prime or sole locus for change, whether it be consumers pressuring grocery stores to buy from local suppliers, or consumers seeking alternative local food markets/opportunities through which they can experience or discover superior taste, quality and nutrition. If farm fresh food truly offers the health benefits of which these farmers and literatures speak, then governments in Ontario and Canada need to adopt supportive policy structures, whereby food can be managed for “dependable relationships and health” - as articulated by ‘Marc’. Policies will need to address barriers such as skills education, income insufficiencies and time constraints in the current work economy. If left to the market alone, critics suggest access to healthier, local food alternatives will be limited to privileged “middle-class consumers and their fortunate few farmer friends” (Goodman and Dupuis, 2002, p. 17).

Results also suggest that small and medium farm producers believe they are in a strong position to provide very safe food to Canadian consumers. Part of their conviction comes from the belief that Canadian standards and regulation ensure a high level of safety. This is in no small part due to the great amount of time, money and effort many small/medium farmers commit to (and often lose) meeting Canadian standards. They thus spoke of Canadian standards with both pride and frustration, as of course certain regulations create disincentives for small and medium farm producers and seem unnecessary given their scale of production. What is more, respondents felt they were in a good position to provide safe food given their scale and unique production methods, for instance, with respect to avian influenza, keeping fewer animals in more spacious living environments. Here, the results and literature point to ironies in food safety where certain
rules oriented towards intensive livestock industry (e.g., keeping chickens indoors or requiring high tech infrastructure) may in fact compromise the viability of small and medium farms that would potentially provide safer alternatives.

While it would be a misrepresentation of the data to suggest that participating Hamilton farmers felt regulatory bodies should be done away with and farmers/consumers should assume all risks associated with food production, there was a sense in some of the comments that food safety regulations should be relaxed to create some freedom within alternative markets – e.g., exemptions for small-scale processors or giving raw milk advocates the choice to buy from family farmers. While it is not clear how willing smaller-scale farmers/processors would actually be to assume responsibility for risk – pointing to problems with those advocating for non-involvement of government, or the right to “opt out”, like Joseph Salatin – it is clear that food safety regimes could create more scale-appropriate policies for different groups of farmers instead of lumping all into the same homogeneous category.

Perhaps the most problematic issue to consider from the literature review is the deregulation and privatization of safety standards. As governments acquiesce to (or even encourage) supermarket private standards, third-party certifiers and increasing control over food production processes, we lose the possibility of developing policies that support multiple scales of agriculture. Currently, small and medium farm producers feel the pressure of having to conform to large industry regulations, yet a re-gearing is possible with enough public pressure. However, if health and safety standards are off-loaded to private industry, we lose the democratic right to demand support for small farm producers, access to raw milk, etc. This has serious implications for democracy and the potential for food sovereignty. Indeed, it seems unlikely that we would be successfully able to ensure a truly safe food supply that supports small and medium farm producers through the private standards of the corporate grocery system, or an unregulated market where individual farmers assume entire responsibility for risk.

A more tempered middle position might be a strong safety regime that orients itself towards small and medium farm producers and the local food system; one that is responsible to the community’s needs and involves growers and eaters democratically.
Interestingly, this sort of orientation towards smaller farm production for food safety would also support the health and nutrition benefits of fresh foods from local growers.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of the research findings, along with conclusions and inferences to be drawn from the results and relevant literature. It also includes an assessment of the study’s limitations and relevance, and recommendations for further research on the topic. It concludes with a discussion of implications of the research for both theory and practice.

In setting out, the purpose of the study was to examine the day-to-day experiences, perceptions and views of small and medium-sized peri-urban farmers in one locale in southern Ontario. The study paid special attention to the ways in which farmers position themselves within different scales of food system activity – local, national, global, big, small – and with respect to the free market and more oppositional policy interventions. It also explored how farmers view opportunities for collaboration and partnership, and how this might be important to strengthening their place in the food system. Three specific questions/objectives were identified at the study’s outset:

1. How do farmers experience and understand the current food system?
2. How do they discuss multi-scaled pressures and opportunities in their stories?
3. What factors influence their participation in alternative (market-oriented) versus oppositional (social policy-oriented) actions and activities?

These questions were addressed using qualitative research methods to facilitate in-depth interviews with farmers from 23 small and medium-scale peri-urban farms in Hamilton, Ontario. All participants sold some of their product locally within Hamilton, except for one farmer selling under supply management. Interviews lasted 1-2 hours and focused on farm descriptions, farmers’ thoughts on current food system trends, ideas of what an ideal food system might look like, factors facilitating or hindering participation in different food movements/activities, and partnership/networks. Interviews were transcribed and coded for important themes using qualitative software, and results were organized into three main issues: economic justice for farmers, environmental sustainability, and health in the food system. The following analysis uses a critical
ethnographic approach to interpret these findings in the context of literature presented in chapter two. First, however, the chapter presents a summary of research findings.

Key research findings

Findings from the research interviews were organized into three main themes, which came to represent the central topics of the three results chapters. These themes were fairness and economic justice for farmers (chapter four), environmental sustainability in food production and distribution (chapter five), and health and safety in the food system (chapter six). In general, farmers felt that each issue was a major problem in the mainstream food system and would require significant attention and change in order to promote greater sustainability and fairness in agriculture. The thematic research results presented in these chapters can also be summarized according to the themes introduced in chapter two, namely: scale in the food system, alternative versus oppositional food movements, and collaboration and conflict in agrifood activities. The following results will be discussed in relation to these three overarching themes.

In terms of scalar issues, farmers used scale in different ways to makes sense of pressures, opportunities and their place in the current food system. All participants were involved in locally scaled marketing strategies, were classified as small or medium-sized producers, and felt marginalized working within or alongside the industrial, corporate food system. Here it was apparent that scale of production had some influence on their competitive disadvantage. Despite these common experiences and concerns, results indicate that scalar meanings (geographic and farm size) were highly contested among farmer participants. For instance, farmers referred to city (Hamilton-grown), province (Ontario-grown) and nation (grown in Canada) when discussing the local food system. They also drew on multiple scales when describing their problems and constructing images of an ideal alternative. For example, in their analyses, they considered the buying habits of local consumers (local), the strength of national marketing bodies (national), and levels of threat/support from transnational grocery stores (global). There was no agreement among participants that problems or solutions lay exclusively with any one scale.
What is more, where farmers attached ethical values to scale (e.g., local and small as sustainable and healthful), results from the health and environment chapters indicate they practice these values in very different ways. Many felt “smaller-scale” would promote less reliance on nutrient and chemical-inputs, heavy machinery, monoculture, etc., and minimizing “food miles” through local marketing would have important environmental benefits. Yet at the same time, there was disagreement about the environmental impact of a fragmented local food system, comprised of many small gardens, where energy would be lost through inefficient scales of production and distribution. Different understandings of local and smaller-scale appeared to result in diverse and often conflicting environmental outcomes. In terms of health and safety in the food system, fluid interpretations of local meant that farmers could discuss the safety advantages of a local food system in terms of Canada’s high regulatory standards (a provincial/national reference). Yet it was also their small scale that led some to believe they were in the best position to provide safe food to the community (e.g., raising healthier animals and containing risk). These results draw attention to the complex ways in which farmers understand small and local scales when thinking through environmental and health issues. Contested meanings in scalar discourse give rise to a messy picture of what an ideal local food system would actually look like.

On the second theme – alternative versus oppositional food movements – findings suggest that farmers’ perspectives can be categorized into those that valorize the market as an important locus of change (i.e., promoting market alternatives, like locally, naturally-raised or organically branded), and those that demonstrate more interest in oppositional policy interventions and substantial transformation of the food system. However, results also show that many of the farmers adopted values from both categories, which appeared to co-exist (and conflict) within and among individuals.

According to the findings, farmers were critical of the market in its current form and perceived most of their problems to lie with market failures, e.g., power hungry corporations, unfair trade agreements and uninformed consumers. In other words, the sovereign market is not working in their favour. Many positioned themselves against the industrial global commodity market, believing there is an important place for local farmers to meet the needs of local communities (along the lines of food sovereignty).
With regard to personal values, participating farmers championed a number of the ideals found in more oppositional social/environmental movements. This is illustrated by their interest in economic justice (e.g., resistance to corporate power abuses), environmental responsibility (e.g., sustainable farming practices), and health in the food system (e.g., promoting access to fresh, nutritious foods). However, it would be inaccurate to say that their comments completely reflect any one platform. For example, with respect to the community food security movement (CFS), farmers were highly concerned with social justice issues pertaining to their own fair income and livelihood needs, but generally did not communicate the same concern for fair a income to consumers (CFSC, 2008).

In contrast to this market antagonism, many of the solutions offered by farmers demonstrate a high level of faith in the local neoliberal marketplace, e.g., selling their products with special brands through the grocery store, or seeking premiums for value-added sustainably grown food. On the topic of sustainability, farmers focused almost exclusively on alternative markets and shied away from suggesting that government should play an active role in promoting the ecological goals of local and local/organic food. With regard to freshness in the food system, alternative local markets – e.g., farmers’ market, direct sales – were also widely praised, even though some farmers recognized that income, time restrictions and consumer skills would prohibit widespread change. Finally, on the topic of food safety, results show much more enthusiasm for state involvement, especially where farmers felt proud of Canada’s high safety standards. At the same time, there was a feeling that some regulations should be relaxed in order to make room for niche market alternatives, like raw milk.

Yet despite these hopes in alternative value-added sales, all market-oriented solutions were laced with contradictions that pointed to the need for some government intervention; for example, income/education support to consumers, pressuring grocery stores to change purchasing policies, defending supply management, or keeping food safety policies within the public sphere. While not explicitly raised by farmers, the findings query reliance on neoliberal market mechanisms to affect substantial and progressive change within the food system.

Under the third theme of collaboration and conflict, farmers demonstrated mixed interest in cooperative action through alternative markets and policy interventions. They
were variously interested in collaborative marketing strategies, national/provincial supply management systems, support to small and medium growers through policy/legislation, etc. Whereas some respondents spoke enthusiastically about working together towards collective goals – and utilizing networking agencies, such as the NFU or local agrifood organizations – others spoke of the need without demonstrating much desire to participate. Still others were not interested in partnership and thought that working independently was the best approach. Dominant political-economic forces appear to discourage collaboration in many ways. As an example from chapter five, it was seen that popular discourse encourages local conventional farmers to collapse big/corporate and small/local organic farmers into the same category, while local organic growers often lump all conventional farms into a homogenous industrial sector. In this process of focusing on each other’s differences (e.g., aspects they resent from the dominant system), they lose sight of their many similarities as small and medium-sized local farmers.

However, findings in all three results chapters indicate there is good reason for small and medium farmers to collaborate in order to escape their position of marginalization and advance environmental and health goals. Results suggest that conflicting perspectives on the nature of problems and solutions in the food system mean ‘going it alone’ – or cooperating loosely through market mechanisms – will give rise to a fragmented and contradictory movement for change.

Thus, to conclude, results demonstrate that participating farmers have a multifaceted understanding of their place and role within the food system. They utilize opportunities available to them at different scales and draw on conflicting political-economic theories and models in order to balance economic survival with social and environmental values. Many of their espoused ideals complement the community food security (and other) mandate(s) to improve access to nutritious food through a sustainable and fair food system that maximizes community self-reliance (Nyeleni Declaration, 2007; CFSC, 2008; Ryerson University, 2008). This positions them against notions of food security and agriculture that seek to guarantee food access through large-scale industrial production and trade. Still, the conflicts and contradictions that run throughout farmers’ comments point to significant barriers for a unified movement towards a truly fair, sustainable and healthful food system.
Discussion of findings

Thus far, the thesis has examined day-to-day experiences, perceptions and views of local farmers in Hamilton, Ontario – i.e., their “politics in place” (Dupuis and Goodman, 2005) – and has started to analyze the social structures that shape these views. In so doing, the study has set the stage for further exploration of how farmers’ negotiations shape the food system and its environmental and social sustainability. The way in which farmers deal with issues of scale, alternative/oppositional ideology and collaboration all have a significant impact on the transformative potential of their resistance.

Confirming much of what has been discussed in the literature, farmers’ comments reflect the observation that “scale” is socially constructed, and scalar discourse, messy and contested (Brenner, 2001; Hinrichs, 2003; Dupuis and Goodman, 2005). In using various scalar references – municipal, provincial and national – to construct ideas of ‘local’ scale, farmers’ fluid application of scalar discourse is closely aligned to what scholars have observed in other communities, e.g., Hinrichs’ (2003) seemingly non-local “Iowa state” local banquet meal. What is more, a dialectic shaping and connectivity of scale is illustrated in the way farmers discuss problems and solutions in the food system (Whatmore and Thorne, 1997). For example, it is believed that defending their livelihoods will require change from conscientious local consumers, as well as national-scale protections and policies (e.g., marketing boards and supply management). In other words, the farm cannot be preserved without attention to the ways in which national and global structures shape local experience. However, while these “established truisms” of human geography (Dupuis and Goodman, 2005) are exemplified in farmers’ comments, an actual awareness of the complexity and its implications for practice appears to be is missing.

Specifically, the problematic practice of assigning ethical values to scale in ways that have not be rigorously assessed and debated, or conflating scale with desired outcome (Born and Purcell, 2006) is clearly seen in the research sample. Some applications of value to scale appear less problematic than others. For instance, farmers’ confidence that health is maximized through fresh foods made available at the local level (e.g. farmers’ markets or backyard gardens) is quite compelling and appears least
relevant to the critique. On the other hand, farmers’ mixed and divergent opinion on what a sustainable local food system should look like raises more concerns. While many farmers saw small-scale as a recipe for sustainability, the fact that some small farm producers still engage in elements of the industrial food system (GMOs, pesticide use, etc.) confirms that scale is not an accurate measure of industrialization or progressive green politics (Guthman, 2004a). Some larger organic farms within the sample were arguably using more ecological practices. This sort of contradiction confirms that nothing should be assumed *a priori* about scale. While “small” and “local” may play a valuable role in terms of tactics and strategies for achieving environmental and health goals – and the results from this study provide some evidence for this claim – both goals and tactics (and resulting outcomes) require much more collective examination and discussion with agrifood circles. The research findings validate that there is a strong need to “readmit politics” into food localism and create political spaces where issues of scale can be debated by food system actors (Dupuis and Goodman, 2005). Ignoring these debates and allowing scalar ambiguity to endure will result in a fragmented local food system that is unlikely to achieve its full environmental/health potential.

It was stated in chapter two that alternative and oppositional categories from the literature (Allen et al., 2003; Johnston, 2003; Shreck, 2005) would be used to assess the transformative potential of participating farmers’ perspectives, as they fit with alternative agrifood movements. The research results confirm that these categories are extremely useful in describing how farmers experience and understand the current food system, especially in terms of how they formulate their response to injustice. The relationship between the first theme (scale) and the second theme is quite simple: market ideology (including alternative niche markets) exists at all geographic scales and farm sizes, and oppositional ideology (including more transformative politics) is multi-scaled as well. The thesis argues that in order to enhance counter-hegemonic potential, acts of resistance must be oriented more explicitly towards oppositional solutions at all scales.

Farmers appear to exhibit a strong structural critique of the dominant neoliberal economy. The values that many profess, especially with respect to economic justice for farmers, conform to the counter-hegemonic challenges discussed by Johnston (2003) - e.g., resistance to centralization of corporate power and hostility towards commodity
markets. What is more, many of their espoused values conform to elements of more oppositional and radical social movements, such as community food security and food sovereignty. Farmers are variously interested in sustainability, community self-reliance, fair wages, protection of farmland, power to define their own agricultural system, and neo-colonialism (where some expressed concerned about agricultural exploitation in the global south). However, what appears to be lacking is widespread confidence in the possibility that structural or oppositional solutions may be viable and best. Celebration of Canada’s food safety standards and praise for market management-systems, among other things, suggest farmers are somewhat open to more transformative collective solutions. Still, they did not speak widely or strongly in favour of a coherent or powerful food policy to direct the future of food in Canada, as recommended by scholars like MacRae (1999). In contrast to a powerful counter-hegemonic movement that pushes for “post-consumer values” and a “reclaiming of the commons” (Johnston, 2003), farmers’ strategies appeared to be more closely aligned to Shreck’s (2005) assessment of the fair trade movement. Specifically, their commitment to “resistance” and “redistribution” within the dominant system is strong, but their potential to “radically alter” or substantially transform inequalities and injustice through their actions is unlikely (Shreck, 2005).

Findings also confirm that farmers are mixed in their oppositional concern for other actors in the food system, as Allen (2004) has claimed. For example, whereas farmers demonstrated an interest in access to healthy food for eaters, they were not overly concerned about consumers’ income needs, dignity, empowerment, etc. This is particularly important when considering who might be excluded from market-oriented solutions and what the impact of these exclusions may be for movements that do not attempt to “scale out” or “scale up” their activities (Johnston and Baker, 2003).

This orientation towards local neoliberal market strategies – as opposed to strong opposition – likely speaks to the rich alternative marketing opportunities available to farmers in a peri-urban location (in close proximity to progressive alternative consumer movements). It might also speak to the “political culture of entrepreneurialism” that Allen et al. (2003) identify in their California case study. What is more, farmers interested in social justice and environmental issues face the extra pressure of having to
balance their values with the need to make money from their land (through the market) in order to survive as an entity/group, where presently there are few other options. These political-economic factors and structures likely shape farmers’ views and keep them from seeing other solutions that possess more counter-hegemonic muscle. This has serious implications for the environmental and social sustainability of the food system. Still, the fact that farmers show a certain level of interest in policy intervention and collective action suggests there is potential to re-orient towards more oppositional strategies and counter-hegemonic frameworks. What is more, the contradictions that exist among and within farmers’ perspectives point again to the need for increased political debate to clarify positions that might help in building a stronger, more united resistance (Dupuis and Goodman, 2005).

If the literature is correct in asserting that “empowerment is necessarily a group project” (Johnston, 2003), then it is worth discussing potential for greater collaboration in the Hamilton context. Themes one (scale) and two (alternative/oppositional ideology) confirm there is an pressing need for farmers to collaborate, engage with one another, debate, and work together to improve their economic situation and advance shared environmental and health goals. Stevenson et al.’s (2007) “warrior, builder, weaver” model for agrifood movements is useful in its emphasis on the importance of “weaver work”. Unfortunately, it appears that networking with other farmers – “scaling out” – and networking with other actors and policy groups at various levels – “scaling up” (Johnston and Baker, 2003) are under utilized at this time. The claim that sustainable agriculture is inherently or necessarily rooted in “community cooperative relationships” and “collective problem solving” (Lyson, 2000 Hoffman, 2007) is not substantiated by the research findings in this case.

Farmers in the study community do not make up a coherent social movement. Some would claim to be part of the ‘local food movement’ or the ‘organic movement’, but as an entity of small and medium (organic and conventional) local farmers in the Hamilton area, they are not “thoroughly organized”, even informally; their collective identity is fragmented and often contradictory (though they share many of the same concerns); and the pressure they apply to affect change is not well coordinated (Goodwin and Jasper, 2003). In many ways, dominant spheres of power (corporate and industrial)
have kept small and medium farmers from seeing their commonalities and working together (i.e., “scaling out”). This is apparent in the way corporations have appropriated original organic values to create a ‘mythical’ eco-ideal, one which conventional growers are unable to distinguish from more bona fide organic methods, ultimately causing these farmer to resent the idea of organic. The competitive market system also appears to divide farmers and consumers, preventing the “scaling up” of their resistance. These groups are set against each other in the competitive market, where farmers are led to believe that consumers do not value local food and consumers often see alternative farmers as simply serving the needs of an elite group that can pay premiums. Some agrifood entities within the Hamilton community show promise for encouraging and creating a more cohesive movement (e.g., the Hamilton-Wentworth Farmers Association, Hamilton Eat Local, the City of Hamilton’s Food Security Stakeholders Committee, Slow Food Hamilton). However, many of these networking entities are new, and participating farmers’ affinity to them was often unclear or partial.

Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that farmers could form a more cohesive social movement in order to achieve their goals. Significantly, the main issues raised in farmers’ interviews – environmental sustainability, economic justice for farmers, and health and food safety (p. 35) – mirror three of the four agrifood (social) movement frames introduced by Stevenson et al. (2007). These commonalities suggest great potential for small and medium scale farmers in Hamilton to pursue collaborative relationship more activity and politically. Whereas a lack of necessary “mobilizing structures” (i.e., resources/time) might be prohibitive, the high interest in sustainable and just food systems – seen in the rise of new food movements, policy groups, etc., – suggests there is indeed a “political opportunity” (Stevenson et al., 2007). What is more, the peri-urban location and proximity of participating farmers to major cities with growing food movements, relevant NGOs, research institutions, etc. – e.g., Hamilton, Toronto, and Waterloo, Ontario – provides great opportunity for farmers to engage in work that “scales up” their political agenda. Current political-economic structures that prevent farmers from seeing one another (and other actors in the community) as collaborators will have potentially detrimental effects on long-term environmental and social sustainability. Collaboration is vitally important to creating a strong counter-
hegemonic movement, one where ideological contradictions might be clarified, environmental and health agendas fleshed out, and inclusive food movements that aim to “reclaim the commons” and embrace “post-consumer values” pursued. Those interested in strong, sustainable and fair agrifood systems must seriously consider this call to collaborate.

**Study limitations and relevance**

In terms of achieving the study’s stated goals, there were many benefits to choosing the semi-structured in-depth interview methodology. For one, the chosen level of structure permitted a certain amount of consistency between interview topics, but also enabled interviewees to explore topics freely without too much structure. Nevertheless, taking this balanced approach meant the benefit of a completely free-flowing interaction, with no structure or very little structure – e.g., through extensive participant observation – were missed. Without this level of freedom, one is deprived of gaining a deep understanding of the interviewees’ context and subtleties that might be captured in a less formal setting. Participant observation was done informally in the research community, wherein most interviews took place on the farm (some in barns), the researcher volunteered informally on a few of the farms, and also patronized farm stores and pick-your-own operations. These experiences provided many benefits and insights. However, they were not consciously recorded or integrated into the research process, something that might have added to the study had the researcher been able to practice this method consistently across the sample with more time and resources.

Still, compared to a questionnaire or interview following a rigid interview schedule, the semi-structured interview process encouraged conversational exchanges. Questions asked were intentionally general and broad, giving respondents space to speak freely about issues that mattered most to them, and to use their own words to express those views. This methodology enabled the researcher to capture layers of meaning and feeling that might otherwise have been missed. Results were also formed based on what respondents chose to emphasize (i.e., what was most important to them). At the same time, a relatively free-flowing conversation meant that gaps in reasoning sometimes needed to be filled with logical assumptions on the part of the researcher. While this is
inevitable and common practice in qualitative research, it is important to note that some of these assumptions could have been wrong.

Another unavoidable limit in the study was the small sample size. The research scope was limited to a Hamilton, Ontario case study and to a particular sub-group of farmers within the community. Whereas the size had many benefits in terms of accommodating qualitative methods and allowing for a deep exploration of participants’ attitudes, motivation, feeling, and perspectives, scholars have argued that a fundamental limit to the case study approach is that the generality of the case remains unknown (Clifford and Valentine, 225). For one, the over-representation of organic farmers in the research sample may have led to a somewhat distorted presentation of environmental concern within the study community. Certainly, the sample does not represent all farmers in Hamilton, e.g., larger-scale growers or those selling exclusively within the commodity market. It also does not necessarily represent small and medium-scale farmers selling locally in other cities or areas. This is particularly true given Hamilton’s unique agricultural positioning, e.g., its favourable climate and prime growing conditions, relatively small farm sizes and types of production, its peri-urban positioning and farmers’ close proximity to a major city. Still, Clifford and Valentine (2003) state that case studies should be judged by “the quality of the theoretical reasoning they generate” (Clifford and Valentine, 226). Given the community characteristics mentioned above, the experiences of this sample group speak to many broad themes that have been raised in agrifood literature and should be of interest regardless of their direct applicability to farmers in other communities. Indeed, the findings and theoretical reasoning could inspire similar case studies in other communities.

In attempting to follow the cardinal rule of “making the codes fit the data” (and not vice versa), it was surprising, and perhaps very significant, that the theoretical framework developed in the thesis closely mirrored other literatures discovered later on after the coding process was complete. Most surprising was the relationship between the three main issues that came to constitute the results chapters, and the social movement frames offered by Stevenson et al. (2007), specifically: economic justice for farmers, sustainability in the food system, and health and safety. Whereas the thesis results did not address Stevenson et al.’s (2007) fourth frame – community food security – it was
suggested throughout the thesis that elements of this frame were evident in farmers’ views. This overlap is striking and might speak to a number of different factors, for example: 1) widespread consensus in agrifood circles that encouraged farmers to emphasize the same dominant issues in their interviews; 2) the researcher’s familiarity with other agrifood literature and frames in the food movement that shaped her interpretation of the data similarly; 3) confirmation that the frames Stevenson et al. (2007) developed are highly relevant to small/medium farmers’ experience; and/or 4) evidence that Hamilton-area farmers are positioned fairly well in their framing of the issues to move forward in forming an alternative agrifood social movement. This surprise might well provide evidence that the study is highly relevant to the alternative agrifood the literature.

**Suggestions for future research**

A few specific knowledge gaps were identified within the research findings. These issues were not taken up, given time/resource constraints and the amount of work that would be required to answer the questions. Nevertheless, they represent opportunities for future research, where findings would make an important contribution to issues raised in this study. For example, there is need for more quantitative empirical research to evaluate the overall energy used in smaller-scale versus larger-scale operations, especially those consciously attempting to maximize energy efficiency. Theoretical or quantitative tools could be developed to compare and measure these energy values against other environmental factors (biodiversity, nutrient-cycling, etc.). However, the thesis findings suggest it may not be necessary or best to set different environmental goals against one another in this way, but rather seek to coordinate the system to encompass multiple benefits. Still, filling gaps of knowledge around energy efficiency would be useful for discussing.debating how to build the most sustainable local food system.

A second gap explicitly mentioned in the research results was the need to develop more concrete information on the benefits of a (northern) winter diet based on stored local foods versus a diet based on imported variety. While this could be done in order to assess the relative health benefits of the two diets (e.g., by measuring nutrient loss over
months in storage), it might also be useful to conduct a similar study assessing the environmental impact of the two diets, taking into account energy used in cold storage technologies or greenhouse production versus freight.

In addition to these specific areas of quantitative research, some of the study’s unavoidable limitations resulted in gaps that could be addressed in future research projects. Within the study community and sample group, future research could be used to validate or add new perspective to the findings presented here. For example, researchers might choose to engage in more participant observation with small and medium peri-urban farmers – volunteering or working on farms in the area, attending rural meetings, etc. This would allow for greater witness and recording of farmers experiences and views as seen in their daily lives (uninhibited by the interview process), and could help to enrich our understanding of the thesis findings. Additionally, it might be useful to confirm some of the major findings through interviews that focus in more detail on specific conclusions that have been raised. For example, it would be useful to conduct another study that delves into community interest in networking and collaboration to “scale out” and “scale up” farmers’ resistance.

On the other hand, it might also be enlightening to interview an entirely different sub-group of farmers in the Hamilton community, e.g., large-scale farmers, or those selling through commodity food networks. This would enable us to see how farmers’ experiences differ. For example, are large-scale farmers indeed thriving in the dominant food system? What do they think of local and alternative food movements? Research opportunities also exist for applying some of the theoretical conclusions drawn in this study to other communities experiencing similar food system pressures and opportunities; for example, farmer perspectives on alternative and oppositional movements. This type of research could be conducted in communities that share similar characteristics to Hamilton, Ontario (e.g., peri-urban, smaller-scale farms), or communities that are very different.

**Recommendations for practice**

In examining the perceptions and views of local farmers in Hamilton, Ontario, and exploring how these shape the food system, it was hoped the study would build an
understand of how farmers are positioned to respond to growing concerns about sustainability in agriculture. It was also hoped these findings would be of interests and benefit to the study community and perhaps communities beyond. The following recommendations are thus directed to three specific groups: 1) Hamilton farmers and community at large, e.g., food policy circles, grassroots groups, civil society and those who share a common concern for the survival and revival of small and medium farm production, sustainability and social justice in the food system; 2) wider grassroots/civil society circles in the agrifood movement; and 3) food and agricultural policy organizations/agencies in Canada (at various scales).

The first set of recommendations to the Hamilton community centre on “framing” the issues. Here it is recommended that individuals and organizations move away from visions that support and replicate the principles of markets sovereignty, even at the local level and through alternative markets. Analyses of existing power structures in the current foods system (many of which were acknowledged by participating farmers), suggest there is good reason to position food movements against privatization of the commons, competitive markets, corporate power and consumer sovereignty. These philosophies and structures are obvious within the dominant system, but permeate alternative markets subtly. For example, principles of market sovereignty are embodied in corporate/industrial organics, elite/privileged consumer identities, conservative values of the private and independent “family farm”, and niche markets. Positioning agrifood movements against market sovereignty and instead reframing issues in terms of food sovereignty – in policy circles, campaigns, agricultural meetings and casual conversations – will enable a more successful resistance against the political/economic structures that undermine farmers’ survival and success. This includes a recommendation to embrace the potential for public policy to create more substantial change in the food system at different levels. Two specific recommendations are to push for keeping food safety policies within the public realm and to defend supply management systems.

A second recommendation is for farmers and community groups to engage in more focused public discussion about how to build local and small-scale food systems, instead of valorizing these entities without analysis. There is a temptation when operating within a market-oriented society to focus on simple messaging, branding and selling the
idea of “local food” or “small farms”, especially to conscientious consumers. Instead, we must re-politicize scalar debates and put power back at the centre of the analysis. Food movement activists must engage in debate around what a non-exploitative and sustainable system would look like – emphasizing why their understanding is transformative – as opposed to assuming that all local, small and organic farm possess this potential. This recommendation will require a new engagement with local food politics.

A third recommendation to Hamilton farmers and community groups is to engage in more “weaver work”, both “scaling out” and “scaling up”. Farmers must forge stronger networks and coalitions within the agricultural community. Instead of dialoguing in pockets, all small and medium farmers (e.g., organic, conventional, and those with differing ideas of local) must work together to improve their situation, and to promote environmental sustainability and health in the local food system. Communication and debate can illuminate and clarify philosophical tensions and contradictions that underlie these movements. As such, these differences should be framed as opportunities for developing more sustainable and just food system models. Additionally, farmers need to “scale up” and work with other actors in the food system. As part of this, the community must broaden its analysis to include the concerns of consumers (e.g., income issues, re-skilling), realizing that economic justice for farmers is intimately tied to the social welfare of consumers. “Scaling up” must also involve confronting and working with groups that present threats to farmer goals – e.g., public officials and policy makers – as these bodies are important to ensuring the food system remains within the hands of the people. Finally, farmers and other activist must educate the wider community on political issues associated with local food systems. We cannot be content to simply provide alternatives to small segments of the population through the free market.

These specific recommendations may well apply to wider grassroots/civil society circles beyond Hamilton, Ontario. However, the most important general recommendation is the need to reorient food movements towards food sovereignty. As a global body of citizens concerned with sustainability and justice is the food system, we must collectively question the authority we have given neoliberal principles to guiding our global, national
and local food policies. If we are to present a meaningful challenge to the dominant corporate and industrial food system, we will need a global effort that is “conscious, concerted, and sustained” (Goodwin and Jasper, 2003, p. 3).

Finally, movement towards food sovereignty will require the involvement of those directing food and agricultural policy in Hamilton, Ontario and Canada at large. It is recommended that municipal, provincial and national legislation be used to strengthen, protect and enhance smaller farm production (e.g., through supportive tax structures, support to smaller-scale processors, and protection of supply management). This includes an accompanying recommendation that policy bodies be responsive to the real needs of citizens (not the needs of corporations). As part of this, policy bodies must pay attention to the unintended consequences of regulations that favour big business and manufacturing. This will require developing a more comprehensive food systems framework, wherein connections between actions are made more apparent in policymaking processes.

Indeed, there is a need for the development of more comprehensive food policy and food policy councils to direct the decisions of government at municipal, provincial and national levels. Ideally, community food security and food sovereignty frameworks would direct these policies. Making connections between different issues within the food system is imperative to the development of good policy, as illustrated by the fact that the welfare of small and medium farmers is tied to the need for governments to provide greater support to consumers to change their eating habits/patterns. Food and agricultural policy organizations/agencies in Canada must also promote organics and sustainability in the food system (as opposed to simply framing “organic” as a marketing opportunity). They must also promote and build agricultural and food policy around health (e.g., through school nutrition programs, government purchasing policies, and support to farmers’ market development). And while policy organizations must continue to maintain high standards of safety in the food supply – keeping regulations within the public realm – they must also work to ensure that small and medium farms are supported in the development of any future health and safety policy around food.
Conclusion

The objective of this study was to examine the perceptions and views of local farmers in one Ontario locale in order to assess how their understandings shape the food system and its environmental and social sustainability. It is evident that various political-economic and other structures act to shape farmers’ views in certain ways, including their conception of scale, comfort with alternative/opposition activity, and inclination to collaborate. For example, farmers’ propensity to engage in neoliberal entrepreneurialism (as opposed to more oppositional resistance strategies) likely reflects their proximity to major cities with progressive consumer movements, broader ideologies of social/environmental change, cultures of market competitiveness, and the need to balance values with economic survival where few other options exist. Other realities (such as market competitiveness) likely make it difficult for farmers to see how their welfare and success is intimately tied to that of other actors in the food system – e.g., consumers with little money to pay a ‘fair’ price for food. While these factors have created many divisions within the food system, there is evidence to suggest collaboration is much needed.

Farmers’ stated and implied goals of subverting corporate/industrial hegemony in agricultural and food system, and crafting environmentally sustainable and healthful alternatives, are grand and challenging goals. The literature and results suggest farmers will need to engage in much more overt oppositional tactics and pursue high levels of cooperation (with farmers and others, ideally through a cohesive social movement) in order to achieve their goals. These findings imply it may be necessary for farmers to take a step back from their deeply embedded position in the food economy in order to (re)evaluate strategies and tactics, which have largely centred on building food market alternatives.

This study has led me to believe that the path forward to building a sustainable and just food system will be extremely challenging. Myriad forces are acting against small and medium farm producers, especially those situated around major cities. While many see the peri-urban location as most valuable in terms of proximity to conscientious consumers and alternative markets, it is my opinion that the real advantage lies in opportunities to network and connect with other progressive actors in the food system.
who can support farmers is staging a more potent and political resistance against oppressive structures. Indeed, these forces not only compromise farm viability and survival, but also threaten food system sustainability, which increases the vulnerability of all people. Given the close relationships between the food system and many of our current crises (economic, food, fuel, climate), we must take up this challenge to collaborate, swiftly and courageously.
Appendix A: Information letter

[Printed on departmental letterhead]

[Date]

Dear ______________,

I am conducting an interview-based study through the University of Toronto that explores farming and local food sales in Hamilton. The success and sustainability of local agriculture is a growing concern across Canada, yet farmers often find it difficult to take advantage of local markets. Individuals and organizations in Hamilton are trying to address some of these concerns in order to make the food economy work better for farmers and local communities. Through my research, I hope to explore how farmers, retailers, consumers, and policymakers explain current trends; as well as relationships that exist between these groups; and factors that encourage or prevent people from creating a more locally-based ‘food system’.

I am hoping that you, or someone from your farm, would volunteer to participate in this research project. This would involve a one-on-one interview at a time and place that works for you. The interview would last about one hour and would be tape-recorded. In the interview, I would like to know about:

a) Your farm, its history, and your goals for the future;
b) How local and/or global trends have affected your farm business; and,
c) Factors that affect whether or not you’re able to sell your product locally.

All information gathered during this study will stay confidential. You are free to raise questions or concerns with me at any time. You are under no obligation to participate in an interview and may withdraw from the study if you choose. You will be able to review parts of unpublished reports in which your information is used when they are ready. You will also be sent a copy of the full report, when completed, if you are interested.

Thank you for considering this request. Please contact me by phone 905-745-4065 or by email fleming.julie@gmail.com with any questions or concerns you have, or if you wish to set up an interview.

Sincerely,

Julie Fleming
Department of Geography
University of Toronto
Appendix B: Consent form

[Printed on departmental letterhead]

Growing Locally, Eating Globally?
CONSENT FORM

You are invited to take part in a research study on Hamilton’s local food system. Please take a moment to read this form carefully. Please clarify any questions or concerns with me before agreeing to participate.

****

I understand that as a participant in the study I will be asked questions in an interview. I understand that participation in the study may involve answering questions about:

a) My farm and/or business, as well as goals for the future;
b) How local and global trends have affected my farm and/or business; and,
c) Factors that affect whether or not I can sell my product locally.

I understand that the interview will take about one hour. I understand that the interview will be tape recorded, as long as that is okay with me.

I understand that I don’t have to agree to participate in an interview. I understand that I can refuse to answer any questions, and that I can stop the interview at any time. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time up until the final report is finished. I understand that what I say in the interview will be taken to represent my own personal opinion. I understand that my name will not be used in any report or presentation that comes out of this study. I understand that only the principal investigators and the transcriber will have access to the information collected.

I understand that while I may not benefit directly from the study, the information that is collected will help researchers to better understand the ways we produce, distribute, and consume food in Hamilton. I understand that a summary of the findings of the study will be sent to me, and that if I wish I may obtain a copy of the final report. I understand what this study involves and agree to participate. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

I am willing to have the interview tape recorded …………………YES …… NO
I would like to obtain a copy of the final report …………………..YES …… NO

_______________________________________
Signature

________________________
Date

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please contact Dr. Sarah Wakefield (phone: 416-978-3653; email: sarah.wakefield@utoronto.ca). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant in general, please contact the Ethics Review Office of the University of Toronto (phone: 416-946-3273; email: ethics.review@utoronto.ca).
Appendix C: In-depth interview guiding questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Probes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farm</td>
<td>Please describe your farm</td>
<td>• Size, what’s grown, methods, marketing, value-added processing, additional farm features/activities?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Changes made over the last five years?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are you a fulltime farmer?</td>
<td>• Changes in role?</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Past experiences/jobs/roles that relate to Hamilton’s food system?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What are some of your goals for the farm?</td>
<td>• Financial, environmental, community?</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Succession plan?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Farming and the Food System</td>
<td>How do trends at the local/provincial level affect your farm?</td>
<td>• Local food movement, Greenbelt legislation, amalgamation, loss of food processing facilities, fewer buyers/grocery store consolidation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trends at the international level?</td>
<td>• Economic, health/food safety, environment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The local food system</td>
<td>Are you familiar with the term “local food system”?</td>
<td>• YES: Where? In what context? What defines local (scale/characteristics)?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• NO: provide definition. Do you think a local food system is a good idea? Why? Why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What would a vibrant, sustainable and fair food system look like to you?</td>
<td>• What defines Vibrant? Sustainable?</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Fairness to whom (farmers, workers, consumers, etc)?</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Would it be local?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitators and barriers to</td>
<td>What factors support your ability to sell food locally?</td>
<td>• Local/global</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participation in localized food</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Policies, networks, consumer trends?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>system</td>
<td>What are some of the barriers to selling your food locally?</td>
<td>• Local, national, international barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Attitudes, policies?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networks</td>
<td>Does it help you to work with others?</td>
<td>• E.g., other farmers, organizations, government?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• For what purpose/why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Partnerships useful? Potential for future partnerships?</td>
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</table>
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