

# Co-operatives in the Ontario, Canada, Local Food System: Promoting Food Skills and Community Development

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Co-operatives in Ontario, Canada, have taken up a number of educational activities aimed at re-introducing food to their members. These food educational programmes extend the entire length of the food system from production practices to further processing such as canning and preserving food. Specific food skills training programmes focusing on selection, preparation and cooking represent a sub-set of Ontario co-operatives which will be discussed in this paper. The food skills co-operatives use food skills training as a means to educate their membership on food products as well as a means of building communities through improved community interaction.

This paper presents preliminary findings on a sub-set of six co-operatives offering food skills training programmes within a larger research study on the role of food co-operatives in Ontario, Canada. Managers from the food skills co-operatives participated in one hour, semi-structured interviews outlining their policies, programmes and activities around food skills programmes. The managers' desired outcomes of the food skills programmes included community building through greater interclass interaction as well as addressing asymmetries of information and consolidation of power within the current food system.

## Introduction

The North American food system is a complex and convoluted system of interconnected actors. Producers, distributors, processors and retailers interact to move food from farm to fork in the most efficient, cost-effective way possible. Over the years the actors within the system have sought efficiencies through integration of activities along the food chain. Food retailers have moved into processing to reap the benefits of private-labelled products. Producers have moved into processing to extract the value added monetary gain from further processing of their raw product. Through vertical integration, the food chain in North America has increased in complexity making it difficult for the consumer to know exactly where their food is coming from, what their food contains, how it was prepared and how their food choices affect their community.

This paper will outline how food co-operatives in Ontario, Canada, provide food skills programmes as a basis for understanding the food system, providing greater opportunities for co-operative members to act within the food system and addressing the co-operative principle of education, information and training. The research outcomes presented in this paper are part of a larger research project examining nine food co-operatives across the Province of Ontario, Canada — co-operatives presented in the context of a diversifying Ontario co-operative movement. What was found upon review of the results from the larger project was that six of the nine co-operatives studied had developed food skills programmes for their membership. These six food co-operatives focus on food skills, in part because of their food imperative, but also because of the co-operative managers' perceptions of an educational gap or information asymmetry within the current food system as seen by the. This asymmetry of information will be discussed, along with the nature of the food skills programmes offered by the food co-operatives.

## Background

It is through vertical integration that food companies find profit within the North American food system. The margins found in selling raw product, such as fruits and vegetables, are very small,

but controlling the amount paid for the raw product and the retail prices helps food companies to increase the margins of the further processed products found on retail shelves. By controlling costs through vertical integration, food companies have, perhaps inadvertently, taken control of consumer food and food choices.

The pinnacle of vertical integration can be found in convenience foods and prepared meals. These products provide high margins for food companies and allow consumers to delegate the washing, cutting, cooking and even plating of their everyday meals to food companies. Through this delegation of food preparation, consumers have distanced themselves from their food and left choices regarding the healthfulness, freshness and quality of their food to food companies.

Distancing or disconnection from food by consumers is outlined in a 2005 Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) report that indicates consumers are moving toward more portable meals with over fifty percent of the meals including a prepared or semi-prepared item (AAFC, 2005). By relegating the role of chief cook and planner to food companies, consumers are allowing the food system to determine what is best for them to eat to keep them satiated as well as healthy. Unfortunately, it is not the primary focus of food companies to ensure the health of their customers. The food system focuses on profit and loss or increased value for their shareholders, not necessarily the quality or healthfulness of their food products (Tansey, 1994). As Shapiro (2004: 252-253) states:

Today our staggering rates of obesity and diabetes are testimony to the faith we put in corporations to feed us well. But the food industry is a business, not a parent; it doesn't care what we eat as long as we're willing to pay for it.

Webster, Dunford and Neal (2010) illustrate the food system's lack of focus on consumer health presenting survey results of the sodium content of processed foods indicating that sixty-three food categories had mean sodium concentrations above the United Kingdom Food Standards Agency's targets. High food sodium levels are a known contributor to cardiovascular disease (CVD), but these high sodium levels are also known to affect taste and storage capacity of food which is of greater importance to the food company's bottom line. Food companies could argue that they are serving consumers' needs and that consumers make their choice at the checkout counter when they make their purchase. This assumes, however, that consumers are aware of the composition of their purchase and its effect on their health. Jaffe and Gertler (2006: 143) posit that consumers are more than just unaware; they are "systematically deprived of the information, knowledge and analytical frameworks needed to make informed decisions that reflect their own 'fully costed' interests". In her influential book, *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*, Nestle (2007) outlines just how confusing food labelling is and how food companies strive to keep consumers unaware of the contents of their products. By making food labelling complicated and confusing, food companies add to the loss of consumer food skills as consumers find it difficult to be active members of the food system.

The confusion in the food system adds to the distancing of consumers from the system which allows food companies to focus on lowering processing costs through the production of cheap foods; that is, foods that are inexpensive to make, not inexpensive to purchase. As long as consumers continue to distance themselves from an understanding of freshness, quality, production and processing traits of food products, food companies can take the lead in determining what is or is not acceptable within a food product. As an example of how a lack of understanding of food can lead to a greater reliance on the food system, Shapiro (2004) demonstrates how a decreased memory of food, or the skills to prepare food, makes us reliant on the prepared food provided for us by food companies.

How do consumers break out of the reliance on prepared foods? How do consumers build food skills to help them understand a complex and convoluted food system? Community kitchens in local food co-operatives within Ontario, Canada, have been developed to provide food skills programmes for their members to broaden their understanding of food. Ontario co-operatives have used food skills and food education programmes to empower their community members

by educating them on the various aspects of food, from production and processing to retailing. By gaining a greater understanding of the food system, consumers can act as more efficient players within the system. Newly acquired food skills provided by Ontario co-operatives allow consumers to effectively evaluate the offerings from food companies in terms of healthfulness, freshness and quality.

These food skills co-operatives are part of a co-operative movement in Ontario today that has extended and diversified itself beyond its agrarian roots to encompass housing, child-care, financial services, transportation, renewable energy, employment, vulnerable population services and local food (Heneberry and Laforest, 2011; Canadian Co-operative Association, 2009). In the 1970s, food safety and environmental concerns emerging from agricultural production practices resulted in an influx of regional and natural food co-operatives in Ontario. Food co-operatives emerged as a response to the mounting consumer concern stemming from the conventional food system's agricultural and processing practices. Food co-operatives have become integral to Ontario's local and regional food systems since the early 1970s as a result.

The co-operative model is currently being used in many regional and local food systems in Ontario such as farmers' markets, produce auctions and retail stores. There are approximately twenty-three co-operatives involved in the Ontario local food system (Canadian Co-operative Association, 2009). There are over eleven co-operative grocery or food retail stores and four co-operative farmers markets currently operating in Ontario (Canadian Co-operative Association, 2009). Several case studies of Ontario co-operatives have shown the success of the co-operative business model for developing local food systems. Examples of successful local and regional food co-operatives in Ontario include the Elmira Produce Auction, the Ottawa Food Co-operative and Eat Local Sudbury (Miller, 2010). These successful food co-operatives offer a unique perspective into the food system that needs to be explored.

The next section will provide an overview of the research undertaken on nine food co-operatives across five regions of Ontario (Golden Horseshoe, Eastern Ontario, Southwestern Ontario, Central Ontario and Northern Ontario) before focusing on the six food skills co-operatives. How these food co-operatives are offering consumers new ways of acting within the food system through food skills programmes and volunteer opportunities will be presented.

## **Methodology and Case Studies**

A case study approach was the chosen methodology for this research study because this would allow for a deep look at specific food co-operatives and their missions, goals and actions. Case studies were selected based on the following criteria:

1. Ontario based: The co-operative had to be headquartered in Ontario.
2. Local food focus: In the co-operative's mission and vision statements there had to be a focus on local food.
3. Co-operative business model: The co-operative had to be incorporated as one of five types of legal co-operatives.
4. Inventory control: Through an analysis of the co-operative's inventory there was a eye for healthful products.
5. Member database: This analysis provided the details for spatial analysis within larger co-operative project.
6. New co-operatives: Is the co-operative less than 5 years in operation?
7. Established co-operatives: Does the co-operative have greater than 5 years of operation?

**Table 1: Years of Operation and Regional Location of Ontario Co-operatives**

Region	Golden Horseshoe	Eastern	Southwestern	Central	Northern
Years in Operation/ Business Model	38 years/ For-Profit	14 years/ For-Profit	2 years/ For-Profit	11 years/ Not-For-Profit	6 years/ For-Profit
	5 years/ Not-For-Profit		41 years/ Not-For-Profit	<1 year/ Not-For-Profit	
	6 years/ For-Profit				

The first criterion for participation in the study was the Ontario-based nature of the co-operative. The Ontario-based criterion was established through the location of the co-operatives headquarters. In some cases the co-operatives had business dealings outside the province and even outside the country, but the co-operative headquarters had to be established and maintained within Ontario to be considered an Ontario co-operative for this study.

To establish the co-operative's local food focus, the research examined the mission and vision statements as well as the marketing information of each co-operative. Each and every co-operative within this research project maintained a mission and vision statement or a marketing presence that focused their business practices on the sale of local food products. Vision statements for some co-operatives provided additional information about the food products to be sold. These differentiations in food products included categories such as organic, natural, biodynamic, or a food culture component that stressed the link between producers and consumers via direct marketing.

To determine the type of co-operative that participated in the research, co-operative managers self-selected which co-operative types they believed their co-operative to be. The five types of co-operatives are listed: producer, multi-stakeholder, worker, worker-shareholder and consumer.

The co-operatives within this study were also classified as large, medium and small based on their sales revenue. Large co-operatives represented sales over two million dollars annually, medium co-operatives are those with sales between fifty thousand and two million dollars annually and small co-operatives are those with sales less than fifty thousand a year. Five of the six food skills co-operatives were considered medium with only one considered small.

The inventory control and member database selection criteria were part of the larger co-operative research project to help define the healthful qualities of the food products sold and the scope of the distribution of Ontario food co-operatives. This aspect of the larger research project is on-going with results expected in late 2014.

Interviews with the managers of the co-operatives were conducted between April and September 2013. Interviews were completed in a face-to-face meeting with each manager at their place of work or via Skype when distance was an issue. During the one hour, semi-structured interview, co-operative managers were questioned on issues of community definition, personal challenges, financial decision making, marketing and education.

All responses from the interviewee were recorded on an electronic recorder to ensure accurate capture of responses and the ability to review responses to provide rigour for the analysis. Initially two of the interviews were coded for common categories and content based on the interviewees' responses. Four categories common across the two interviews were defined: 1) food skill programme desired outcome, 2) community development, 3) information asymmetry and 4) consolidation of power in the food system. Interviewee's responses from the remaining four cases were compared and coded based on these categories (Dye et al, 2000). These categories were then systematically compared across all six interviews for common phrases.

Rigour was demonstrated through the use of verbatim transcription of the common phrases within each category, constant comparison and reflexive journaling.

Three new co-operatives were identified; however, lack of capacity meant that most new co-operatives did not have the staff or time to participate in the research project. As an example, a co-operative from the Northern region of Ontario offered to participate, but a strictly volunteer status prevented the manager from participating in the study. In the end the research was able to obtain case study information from nine co-operatives, six established and three new co-operatives. Below there is a description of each of the six food skills co-operatives.

### **Case Study 1:**

This multi-stakeholder, not-for-profit co-operative is located in a lower income neighbourhood of a large urban centre in the Golden Horseshoe region of Ontario. The co-operative includes consumers, producers, workers and community partners. With just over five years in operation, this is an established co-operative. The aim of the co-operative is to provide viable food security initiatives that are specific to the needs of their community. Examples of the food security initiatives include a farmers' market, community cannery, food mapping project and a retail store. These initiatives provide a gross revenue stream for the co-operative of just over fifty thousand a year in sales making it a medium sized co-operative.

The co-operative aims to create a fair, democratic and meaningful workplace for their workers as well as an inspiring, community-driven and welcoming place to shop, learn and connect for consumers within the community. The co-operative sees itself as a resource and partner working with community groups to improve access to good, healthy food in their neighbourhood, improve food security and provide the means for people to make empowering food choices.

### **Case Study 2:**

This co-operative is a medium-sized, worker-owner business with six years of operations that is strongly focused on local food production and distribution. The co-operative is located in a small urban centre in the Golden Horseshoe region of Ontario. This co-operative operates as a for-profit business, but has a strong community focused mission. With a mission statement that focuses on values of land stewardship, social empowerment and economic sustainability this co-operative is very active in its local community incorporating workshops, invited speakers and external courses to empower its community members.

### **Case Study 3:**

A not-for-profit, worker-owner co-operative located in a small urban centre within the Southwestern region of Ontario, this co-operative has been in operation since 2011. With sales revenue of less than fifty thousand dollars per year this is a small co-operative. This co-operative does have large fluctuations in its revenue stream at the moment as well as long term capital expansion plans which it hopes to finance through external community investment.

The co-operative prefers to deal directly with farmers and producers. However, as a new developing business with fluctuating volume requirements, it is not always able to purchase directly from the producers. The co-operative also has an issue with its capacity to pick up directly from all producers or farmers that cannot deliver making it difficult to ensure product supply.

The co-operative has a strong vision of sustainable, local production and how it affects the environment and community development. The interaction of its local community from producer to eater is a strong driver of the co-operative's mission to build community around food.

### **Case Study 4:**

This co-operative operates as a not-for-profit, vegetarian business and has over eleven years of operational experience. The co-operative is structured as a consumer co-operative. The

unique aspect of this co-operative is its close association with an institution of higher learning in Ontario's Central region. The co-operative serves delicious, affordable, local and organic food, as well as providing a number of educational initiatives through volunteer opportunities, workshops, speakers and conferences. The co-operative has over 400 members, most of whom are staff and students within the academic institution. With annual sales over fifty thousand dollars this is a medium sized co-operative located in an institution of higher learning within a small urban centre in Central Ontario.

### **Case Study 5:**

Located in a small urban city in Ontario's Central region this co-operative operates as a not-for-profit business. The co-operative functions as a consumer co-operative and has less than one year of operational experience making it the youngest of the case studies in this research project. The co-operative is medium in size with sales just over fifty thousand dollars annually.

The co-operative actively supports the local community with foods and products that are as natural, organic, local and accessible as possible within the confines of the not-for-profit, co-operative structure.

### **Case Study 6:**

This co-operative has a retail store and acts as a distributor that connects consumers with producers. The store primarily sells produce from farms within a 150-mile radius of its store located in a small urban centre in Northern Ontario. The co-operative is a consumer co-operative that has sales of over fifty thousand dollars annually making it a medium sized co-operative. The co-operative was incorporated as a for-profit business in 2007 giving it just over six years of operational experience. The bulk of the co-operative staff are volunteers with only one full-time position in the form of the co-operative manager.

## **Discussion**

The food skills programmes offered by the Ontario food skills co-operatives provide their members with hands-on experience with food selection, preparation and cooking. These skills could be considered the ABCs of the food system. Without an understanding of the raw products produced by the food system, it is impossible to negotiate the more complex processing, storage, distribution and retailing activities required to service large populations. It is this lack of basic ABC knowledge that puts consumers in the position of passenger rather than driver of the food system in Ontario. Similar to the deskilling and loss of control over the labour process outlined by Braverman, (1974), the loss of food skills by Ontario consumers means the loss of control over their food system. Braverman (1974) argues that the efforts of capitalist firms to control the workforce and reap maximum profits leads to the deskilling of workers through separation of "conception" and "execution". The separation of conception and execution can be seen within the current food system as consumers are distanced from basic food skills. As food companies increase the prevalence of pre-prepared foods, consumers become more distant from the concepts of food preparation pushing them into the role of executors within the system.

As consumers are distanced from food preparation their understanding of the basic food product is compromised. Concepts of quality, freshness and nutritional content become difficult for consumers to maintain as they drift away from food preparation. As a basic understanding of any product, including a food product, is necessary for actors within a market to act efficiently it could be argued that the current food system lacks efficiencies and thus represents a market failure. Co-operatives in Ontario have traditionally developed around market failures (Fairbairn et al, 2000). This research shows that Ontario food co-operatives continue the history of responding to market failures through their implementation of food skills programmes to address the asymmetry of information with the current food system created by the distancing of consumers from food preparation.

By implementing food skills programmes the managers of the food skills co-operatives seek to address what they see as the asymmetry of information created by the consolidation of power held by the corporate oligopoly of the food system (Bhuyan and Lopez, 1997). The food skills co-operative managers indicated that the lack of information provided by the current food system and the lack of power held by the consumer proved detrimental to healthy, community development. By implementing food skills programmes, the co-operatives were able to bring together different socio-economic groups from within the community to address economic inequality within the food system. Food skills offered by the co-operatives allowed the co-operative members to have greater opportunities to act within the food system and within their community. Implementation of food skills training can be used as a community development tool similar to the literacy focused community development tool box presented by the Work Group for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas:

addressing a specific issue serves to address efficacy, and, in the case of literacy training, economic inequality as well. Depending on how programs are structured, most can also address social connectedness, either by **bringing a community or population group together to work on an issue, or by creating a community among those involved** (in literacy classes, for example.). (Work Group for Community Health, 2013: Chapter 17) (bold added by authors)

The food skills co-operatives in Ontario have brought groups together around the specific issue of food skills creating a more interconnected community and providing greater opportunities for members to act within the food system. This approach to interconnectedness is unlike the current food system's approach that seeks to differentiate consumers into subgroups for the purpose of selling new product types. As Jaffe and Gertler (2006:153) state, "Consumers are targeted by the food industry according to demographics, region, ethnicity and class. We are sorted and re-sorted into market segments for purposes of marketing, product positioning and product development."

By sorting communities into demographic groups, the current food system dismantles rather than builds communities. The "flexible consumer" presented by Jaffe and Gertler (2006) is arguably the basis of the food system's dismantling of communities: "Each new meaning and each new consumer subgroup created signifies a new market and enhanced possibilities for successful selling" (Jaffe and Gertler, 2006:153).

The food skills co-operatives, by contrast, have put forward programmes that bring community members together and allow individual actors to understand and participate more fully in the food system. The members that participate in the food skills programmes are from differing socio-economic groups, ages, ethnicities and genders who come together to interact as a community.

By encouraging communal action the food skills programmes offered by the Ontario co-operatives provide greater opportunities for co-operative members to act within the food system. As a group the co-operative members can determine what food characteristics, production practices and retail markups are acceptable. In Case 2 the co-operative implemented a transparent markup system to provide members with a greater understanding of where their food dollars were going. Through the democratic principle of one member, one vote the co-operative membership democratically decide on what will be acceptable within their retail store or used in their food skills programmes.

Arguably, introducing members to products selected with specific characteristics such as ethical and quality standards is itself a form of education. The simple introduction of pre-screened products is insufficient, however, without the basic food skills education to properly interpret the information presented. It is the food skills programmes within the Ontario food skills co-operatives that allow their membership to interpret and make informed decisions about the food the co-operatives sell and members eat. Without the ABCs of food, co-operative members would find it difficult to interpret what an organic, natural, local apple really means and act on that information.

The food skills programmes offered by the co-operatives allow co-operative members to understand and influence the food system. The ability to directly influence what a food retail operation sells to the public is an opportunity that is not provided by the current food system. Consumer preferences are edited to include food corporation's needs. As Jaffe and Gertler (2006) state,

The growing distance and separation between producer and consumer means that farmer-producers receive information on "what the consumer demands" only via food processors, manufacturers and retailers. (146).

This editing of consumer preferences allows food corporations to manipulate the food system to include their need for profit, storage, transportation and decreased spoilage within the end product of the system; that is, food.

Against this background, Ontario food skills co-operatives have provided greater opportunities for their members to act within the food system, allowing members to define the food products offered, to purchase food products through different means such as volunteer hours and even to create food products to sell at the co-operative. To define the food products for sale at the co-operative, the democratic principle of one member, one vote engages co-operative customers in the food product decision making process. Volunteer opportunities are offered to lower income members, allowing them access to the food system in a different manner than the standard cash sales method to make food purchases. If these additional opportunities were not enough, the food skills co-operatives offer their industrial kitchens to members to produce further processed food products for sale at their co-operative greatly increasing their members' ability to act within the food system. The use of the kitchens in the food skills co-operatives is reminiscent of the community kitchens which were started in Canada back in 1985 by three low-income women as a way of pooling resources allowing the women to become actors within the exclusionary economic food system that they did not have access to due to limited funds (Engler-Stringer and Berenbaum, 2005).

Through the development of community kitchens food skills co-operatives in Ontario not only break down socio-economic barriers but provide much needed information about the food system to its members. It is possible to see Engler-Stringer and Berenbaum's (2005) vision of community kitchens encompassing a larger food systems perspective in the food skills co-operatives activities presented in this study. As Fano, Tyminski and Flynn (2004) indicate, there is an element of learning associated with community kitchens used to build skills, break down social isolation and encourage other health promoting activities. These learning activities presented by Fano et al can be seen in the Ontario food skills co-operatives' attempts to address the co-operative principle of education, information and training as the co-operatives educate their members about the food system, inform their members on food issues and train their members on food skills. The food skills co-operatives act importantly as community kitchens and as intermediaries for information about the food system among primary producers, distributors, processors and consumers.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

This study has several limitations. The study participants were limited to co-operative managers, while co-operative members and other stakeholders' perspectives are not represented. There is also the limitation of the number of co-operatives within the study. The larger number of co-operatives operating in Ontario, Canada, is beyond the financial and time constraints of this research project, so could not be explored to its fullest. Further, the geographic limitation of this study means that results presented cannot be attributed to all Canadian co-operatives.

Future research in the area of Ontario food co-operatives should include the views of community residents outside of the co-operative structure, primary producers within and outside the co-operative, as well as consumers to gain a holistic picture of the co-operative within

the community. A broader Canada-wide co-operative research study would provide results applicable to the unique characteristics of the regions and communities of Canada.

## Conclusion

The food system in Ontario, Canada, continues to grow more complex as players within the system continue to consolidate their hold on the food chain excluding consumers from the food system. This study presents the actions of Ontario food skills co-operatives to include consumers within the food system through food skills training programmes and provide an alternative to the consolidated food system. The six food skills co-operatives provide these food skills programmes to allow their members to effectively participate with the food system through an improved understanding of food. While the food skills programmes offered by the co-operatives do not represent a panacea to the exclusion of consumers from the food system, the food skills programmes do represent a response to the distancing of consumers from their food system.

The distancing of consumers from the food system has created an asymmetry of information between consumers and other actors within the food system. Food skills co-operatives have attempted to address the asymmetry of information through food skills programmes. By educating their members on the ABCs of food Ontario food skills co-operatives assist their members in being more effective players within food system through greater knowledge of the basic product of the system; food.

Ontario co-operatives have also begun to bridge socio-economic gaps within the community through interactions around the specific issue of food skills. The food skills programmes offered by the co-operatives provide an outlet for community interaction on the common ground of food preparation.

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