

**BUILDING BRIDGES:
HOW ORGANIC AGRICULTURE CAN STRENGTHEN THE RELATIONSHIPS
BETWEEN RURAL AND URBAN COMMUNITIES**

**Jennifer Sumner, PhD
Co-ordinator, Adult Education for Sustainability
Adult Education and Community Development Program
OISE/University of Toronto
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Introduction

In his classic text, *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams (1973, 1) begins with the following observation: “‘Country’ and ‘city’ are very powerful words, and this is not surprising when we remember how much they seem to stand for in the experience of human communities.”

In an age when globalization has pressed humanity to its limits and the environment beyond its carrying capacity, the experience of many communities – both rural and urban – has not been positive (see, for example, Mander and Goldsmith 1996; Rees 2002; Sumner 2005a; Leichenko and O’Brien 2008). In order to address the problems communities face and build sustainable alternatives, we need to strengthen the relationships between rural and urban communities. While there will be many players in this enterprise, organic agriculture is strategically placed to build bridges for the future.

This paper will assess how organic agriculture can strengthen the relationships between rural and urban communities. It will begin with an overview of the historical context of rural and urban communities in Canada. Then the paper will explore traditional arenas that are ripe for building bridges, such as farmers’ markets, CSAs and NGOs, as well as investigate more recent arenas, such as 100-mile markets, social movements, urban agriculture and greenbelts. It will conclude with a discussion of sustainable food systems, a new arena through which organic agriculture can also help to reduce the so-called ‘rural-urban divide’ and bring these two solitudes closer together in the ongoing quest for sustainability.

Historical Context

Although humans have existed in communities for millennia, the now-entrenched distinction between rural and urban has resulted in divergent experiences among people who live in these areas. Many factors have contributed to, and intensified, this distinction. For example, historian J.M.S. Careless (1989, 35) saw the relationships between what he called metropolis and hinterland in nineteenth-century Canada as essentially “relations between a dominant urban power centre and its supplying, serviced territory.” While history makes it clear that the metropolis and the hinterland benefited from each other, the relationships between them were not equitable: “hinterland societies assuredly might come to perceive their lot as one of subservience and exploitation, as pawns of high-powered city interests, and they recurrently expressed this view in frontier and regional protest movements” (12). Exploitation of hinterland resources, Careless argued, could lead to their depletion or exhaustion, resulting in despoiled farmlands, clearcut forests or abandoned mines and settlements. In this way, “popular images of the ruthless big city and the victimized countryside reflected the plain perceptions of inequity” (13).

During the twentieth century, modern industrialism and growing economic nationalism reinforced this inequitable trend, resulting in what political economist Harold Innis (1934 in Drache 1995, 216) described as “the increasing disparity between standards of living of urban and rural populations.”

The relationships between rural and urban communities have been described by Pahl (1966, 321) as “a whole series of meshes of different textures superimposed on each other.” Given the historical inequities embedded within these meshes, why should the relationships between rural and urban communities be strengthened? The answer lies in the uncertainties and insecurities of our current era. Interrelated problems associated with globalization, such as climate destabilization, peak oil, the implosion of the global financial system and endless war for control of diminishing resources, call for increased local and regional solidarity and co-operation to not only address these challenges, but also envision alternatives not based on human and environmental exploitation. Strengthening the relationships between rural and urban communities will contribute to the co-operative solidarity needed to address current challenges and create more equitable alternatives. And since food will be central to this scenario, organic agriculture has a vital role to play in building bridges between rural and urban communities.

Traditional Arenas

There are a number of traditional arenas where organic agriculture could either begin or continue to strengthen the relationships between rural and urban communities. These include farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture and non-governmental organizations.

1. Farmers’ Markets

Farmers’ markets are public spaces set aside for the purpose of facilitating direct sales between agricultural producers and consumers. Although the existence of farmers’ markets in Canada was seriously challenged by the rise of the supermarket phenomenon in the mid-twentieth century, they have experienced a resurgence in recent years. For example, Cummings et al (1998) reported that farmers’ markets in Ontario had increased from around 60 in the 1970s to 127 in 1998. This resurgence was due not only to government initiatives, but also to:

the desire of community residents to have a shopping experience closer to the food producer and the community – a more personal approach. New Markets were established, older Markets revitalized, and a new customer base was introduced to the Farmers’ Market experience (7).

This research highlights the opportunities for strengthening the relationships between rural and urban communities by creating spaces – farmers’ markets – where producers and consumers can meet face to face and learn about each other. These opportunities are reflected in the words of the Manager of the all-organic Dufferin Grove Farmers’ Market in Toronto:

Successful farmers' markets are a great example of rural-urban partnership. Ideally, markets facilitate effective access to strong sales opportunities for local producers, and increase awareness and availability for healthy, fresh foods for city dwellers. Farmers' markets build loyal support for our farmers, and also create terrific spaces for neighbours to come together, offering many benefits to communities both in and out of the city (Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation 2008).

As farmers' markets become more successful, they are being challenged by supermarkets, which are beginning to feel the negative effects of the consumer search for more proximate shopping experiences. Not only are supermarkets trying to rebrand themselves as 'markets,' but they are also applying pressure to farmers' markets to provide such amenities as washrooms and washing and cooling facilities to overcome what they see as an unfair advantage and to create a 'level playing field.' Research is needed to understand the implications of such pressures on farmers' markets and on the organic producers who use these public resources.

Farmers' markets provide a prime opportunity for organic farmers to interact with an urban customer base that is already committed to connecting with rural producers. And while individual organic farmers may have difficulties attending these markets every week, especially during the growing season, some have found innovative ways to create and maintain a presence at farmers' markets, such as forming producers' co-operatives that pool produce and only send one farmer to market.

2. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

Community supported agriculture (also known as community shared agriculture) creates another space where organic producers meet urban consumers, thus providing the opportunity for strengthening the relationships between urban and rural communities. A CSA is "an arrangement whereby a group of people, one of whom is a farmer, agree to share the costs and products of a seasonal vegetable garden" (Fieldhouse 1996, 43). In this way, CSAs are "designed to share the risks and rewards of farming" (DeLind and Ferguson 1999, 191). The opportunities for strengthening relationships take place through pickups and deliveries, as well as 'field days' and special events, all of which could help to build a common community and expose urbanites to the importance of maintaining farmers on the land, preventing loss of farmland, sourcing local food and eating seasonally, while closing the gap between field and fork.

3. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

According to Rosen (1999), non-governmental organizations have no governmental status or function, are not created by governments, nor are their agendas set by governments. While their focus may be local, national or international, "the range of their concerns and objectives is almost infinite" (589). In Canada, a number of NGOs embrace organic agriculture, including the

Canadian Organic Growers (COG), the Ecological Farmers of Ontario (EFAO) and FoodShare Toronto. These NGOs educate the public about organics through conferences, websites, food baskets and outreach. Such education is a vital building block that could help to strengthen the relationships between rural and urban communities.

Another NGO that could provide opportunities for organic agriculture to strengthen the relationships between rural and urban communities is Local Food Plus (LFP), which is committed to building and fostering local, sustainable food systems. Unlike organic certification, LFP certification uses incremental standards that go beyond local to include such areas as labour standards, pesticide use, animal welfare, wildlife habitat and diversity, and energy consumption.

In her study of this NGO, Friedmann (2007) explains that Local Food Plus involves coordinating local, sustainable food provision among a range of players: public institutions, transnational food services corporations, and local organic and conventional farmers. “LFP created a collaborative and flexible model of standards and verification that gives ladders to farmers and corporations to scale up to local supply chains for sustainably grown products” (392). Although LFP automatically recognizes organic production systems, farmers also have to meet other requirements in areas such as “biodiversity, labor, animal welfare and energy use, as well as proximity” (392).

One of the advantages of Local Food Plus is that it builds bridges between rural and urban communities by including farmers as crucial players in a local, sustainable food system. Farmers with LFP certification are invited to attend retail outlets to promote their products, meet with chefs and advise institutional food procurement operations. Since the aim of LFP is to eventually move all farmers up to the organic level, affiliation with this NGO can offer yet more opportunities for organic agriculture to help strengthen the ties between rural and urban communities.

One of the disadvantages of Local Food Plus is that it does not completely rule out the use of genetically modified organisms, which are contrary to organic certification and philosophy. Although LFP “does not permit in its programme plants or livestock destined directly for human consumption that are derived from genetically modified constructs,” this NGO finds it “unrealistic to require that all participants feed verified non-GMO rations at this time” because “government regulations do not currently require segregation or identification of GMOs,” so “most livestock feed is formulated with co-mingled supply” (LFP 2008, 14). As a result, some organic farmers may consider dropping out of the program to avoid confusing loyal customers, who might conclude that organic farmers sell GMO produce. Research is needed to understand more fully the implications of participating in programs such as LFP.

Recent Arenas

A number of new opportunities have arisen where organic agriculture could strengthen the relationships between rural and urban communities. These include 100-mile markets, social movements, urban agriculture and greenbelts.

1. 100-Mile Markets

Recently, 100-mile markets have begun to appear, taking inspiration from Alisa Smith and J.B. MacKinnon's 100-mile diet. These retail outlets only offer food products (many of which are organic) from within one hundred miles of the establishment, and every product has a story. Farmers set their own prices, while paying the store a percentage of the weekly sales plus a monthly 'rent' for having their items in the store.

In Ontario, the first such market opened in Meaford in 2007, followed by a second in Creemore in 2008, with each outlet offering unique opportunities for a positive interface between rural and urban communities. For example, Creemore's new 100-mile store is located within a 100-mile radius of Toronto. As a picturesque, fully functioning rural community in south-central Ontario, Creemore already attracts urbanites as one-time tourists, as weekenders or as retirees moving away from city life. The addition of the 100-mile store means these urban people interface with this rural community more deeply and more knowledgeably, paving the way for strengthened relationships between rural and urban communities.

2. Social Movements

Social movements involve "a wide variety of collective attempts to bring about a change in social institutions or to create a new social order" (Morris 2005, 589). A number of the so-called New Social Movements focus on food, such as the Slow Food Movement, the organic farming movement, the local food movement, food justice movements and the fair trade movement. While these movements may not concentrate exclusively on organic food, they offer an unparalleled opportunity for organic agriculture to strengthen the relationships between rural and urban communities by helping to educate both movement members and the larger public who become aware of the movements' activities. Like NGOs, social movements have the potential to provide educational building blocks that could help to bridge the rural-urban divide.

3. Urban Agriculture

Urban agriculture (and peri-urban agriculture) is the practice of cultivating, processing and distributing food in, or around (peri-urban), a village, town or city (Wikipedia 2008). While prevalent in many developing countries, it is becoming more popular in developed countries as well. For example, in Victoria, the Moss Street Market provides retail space for women who farm in backyards within the city. In Edmonton, a pilot project has provided urban agriculture opportunities for immigrant seniors. In Toronto, FoodShare operates two urban gardening

programs that support individuals and groups who want to learn more about growing their own food in the city.

Cuba provides an inspiring model for urban agriculture through its *organoponicos* – “urban gardens that utilize horse manure, leaves and biological controls to produce fresh, organic vegetables” (Martin 2000, 2). In 2002, TVE (2004) reports, Cuba produced 3.2 million tonnes of food in urban farms and gardens, which occupy approximately 3.4 percent of urban land (8 percent in Havana) and are tended by 18,000 individuals. Overall, more than 35,000 hectares of urban land in Cuba have been dedicated to the intensive production of fresh fruits, vegetables and spices. Within Havana itself, according to Snyder (2003), there is now enough organic produce grown to feed each of the city’s 2.5 million residents a minimum of 300 grams of fruits and vegetables each day.

Whether through city allotments, community gardens, SPIN (Small Plot Intensive) farming or remedial projects, urban agriculture generates opportunities to bring the expertise of the country to the city. Organic agriculture could spearhead this expertise by participating in ‘urban extension’ – teaching urbanites the newest techniques for growing food organically, while sharing the organic philosophy of non-exploitation.

4. Greenbelts

A greenbelt is “an area of open, low-density land use surrounding existing major cities and conurbations whose further extension, including the merging of urban areas, is strictly controlled” (Hoare 2000, 321). In an era marked by unrelenting urban sprawl, greenbelts prevent land close to urban settlements from being paved over and thus permanently lost to other uses, such as organic farming.

The British Columbia Agricultural Land Reserve represents an early Canadian attempt to secure farmland, while a current example exists in southern Ontario – home to the world’s largest and most diverse greenbelt. According to its website,

The Greenbelt’s 1.8 million acres (728,000 hectares) wraps around the Golden Horseshoe and is vital to the quality of life of Ontarians. It encompasses the Niagara Escarpment, the Oak Ridges Moraine, Rouge Park, agricultural land, pristine environment and hundreds of rural towns and villages (Ontario Greenbelt 2008).

The establishment of greenbelts offers a unique opportunity for organic agriculture to strengthen the relationships between rural and urban communities because greenbelts occur at the interface between them. Organic farms, with their diverse crops, unconfined animals and welcoming attitude, could help to maintain the traditional rural landscape that urban dwellers love to visit. In addition, the proximity of such farms to the growing number of urban farmers’ markets could

contribute to bridging the divide between rural and urban communities by bringing rural producers together with urban consumers.

Sustainable Food Systems

The concept of sustainable food systems offers the newest opportunity to strengthen relationships between rural and urban communities while correcting the inequities of the past. According to Kaufman (2004), a food system encompasses a chain of activities that begins with the production of food and moves on to include the processing, distribution, wholesaling, retailing and consumption of food and, eventually, to the disposal of food waste. While this definition covers the main components of a food system, it does not convey the idea of a dynamic, interconnected system. For this aspect, we can turn to Hay (2000), who defines a system as a group of elements organized such that one is in some way interdependent (either directly or indirectly) with every other element. He adds that “the concept of a system is sometimes used relatively loosely to stress the interdependence of phenomena” (819).

We can fruitfully combine these two explanations to define a food system as *an interdependent web of activities that include the production, processing, distribution, retailing, consumption and disposal of food*. This interdependent web can be very local, as in the self-provisioning of small, isolated groups, or huge, as in the global corporate food system. Regardless of scale, food systems are dynamic entities that are socially constructed – built by people to satisfy needs and desires. In this way, food systems are relational – they embody relations among humans, and between humans and the environment. And since food has always been about power and money (Friedmann 1993), these relations are seldom positive.

For food systems to become sustainable, they must at the very least model positive, non-exploitative relationships, both among humans and between humans and the environment. To begin with, sustainable food systems should mimic natural processes. This requirement highlights the insufficiency of Kaufman’s definition of a food system because it stresses a linear configuration. Such a configuration brings to mind Rees’ (2004) critique of conventional agriculture, which exemplifies the thermodynamic problem of converting natural cycles into terminal throughput. In addition to being cyclical, sustainable food systems should at the very least follow the precautionary principle, internalize costs and be energy efficient.

A food system that is fully sustainable must also include positive relationships among humans as well. In other words, a food system would not be sustainable if people within the system went hungry. From here we can define a sustainable food system as *an interdependent web of activities that model positive human-human and human-environmental relationships in the production, processing, distribution, retailing, consumption and disposal of food*.

Sustainable food systems strengthen the relationships between rural and urban communities through their interdependent webs of activities involved in food production and provision. For example, the Metcalf Foundation’s (2008, 4) report, *Food Connects Us All: Sustainable Local*

Food in Southern Ontario, argues that “Ontario’s working landscapes, farms, rural communities, and cities are linked in a web of complex exchanges:”

Local farmers’ markets, community and school gardens, food co-ops, urban gardens, farmer training programs, Alternative Land Use Services, new certification regimes – all of these emerging possibilities support healthier, tastier food for all ... As this happens, everyone benefits and communities become stronger and more inclusive (4).

By definition, sustainable food systems would not only strengthen the relationships between rural and urban communities through their webs of activities between city and countryside, but also ensure that these relationships were positive, thus moving beyond the inequities of the past. How could organic agriculture become part of sustainable food systems and help to strengthen the relationships between rural and urban communities?

Organic Agriculture and Sustainable Food Systems

If the basis of any food system is agriculture, then the basis of sustainable food systems is sustainable agriculture. This means that organic agriculture is strategically placed to participate in sustainable food systems, given its traditional commitment to environmentally positive practices. But this commitment must move beyond production to include socially positive practices as well, in order to reflect the requirement of sustainable food systems that everyone is fed. While some organic farmers have expressed lukewarm support for social certification (see, for example, Shreck et al 2006), organic agriculture is being nudged in this direction by policies such as IFOAM’s (2006) four new principles, developed after years of consultation:

1. The Principle of Health - organic agriculture should sustain and enhance the health of soil, plant, animal and human as one and indivisible.
2. The Principle of Ecology - organic agriculture should be based on living ecological systems and cycles, work with them, emulate them and help sustain them.
3. The Principle of Fairness - organic agriculture should build on relationships that ensure fairness with regard to the common environment and life opportunities.
4. The Principle of Care - organic agriculture should be managed in a precautionary and responsible manner to protect the health and well-being of current and future generations and the environment.

The IFOAM principles enshrine both environmental and social responsibilities. By committing to these principles and participating in sustainable food systems, organic agriculture could become part of an interdependent web of activities that model positive human-human and human-environmental relationships in the production, processing, distribution, retailing,

consumption and disposal of food. These activities, in turn, could help to strengthen the relationships between rural and urban communities, while building sustainable communities.

Opportunities for Future Research

Over the last decade, social-science research has documented the positive impacts of organic agriculture on rural communities. For example, Pugliese (2001) investigated the multifaceted and promising convergence of organic farming and sustainable rural development in Europe. Sumner (2005b) looked at the links between organic farmers and rural community sustainability in Ontario, as well as the contributions of organic farmers to rural community development through their participation in the social economy (Sumner and Llewelyn, forthcoming). And in 2006, MacKinnon identified and differentiated farm-community linkages in organic farming in Ontario. There has also been research into the connections between organic agriculture and urban areas. For example, Beauchesne and Bryant (1999) explored organic agriculture and the urban fringe in Quebec.

To date, however, there has been little, if any, field research on how organic agriculture could strengthen the relationships between rural and urban communities. But as the economy becomes more risky, the climate more unpredictable and society more polarized, such research will become crucial if we want to survive, and thrive, in the twenty-first century. As the Metcalf Foundation (2008) reminds us, food connects us all, and we need a clearer understanding of how to forge, maintain and multiply the positive connections that organic agriculture can catalyze between rural and urban communities. Potential areas include, but are not limited to, those discussed in this paper: farmers' markets, NGOs, CSAs, 100-Mile Markets, social movements, urban agriculture, greenbelts and, in particular, sustainable food systems. Sustainable food systems represent, at this point in time, our best hope for modelling the positive relationships we need to cultivate in order to learn to live equitably within our means, and within the limits of the environment. Research is especially needed to ascertain how to attract the best and the brightest young people from both rural and urban communities to work with the natural and human resources we have to sustainably produce food, feed, fuel and fibre.

Conclusion

Although farming and rural communities have an historically close association, "cities and agriculture have long been thought of as adversaries" (Beauchesne and Bryant 1999, 320). But interrelated phenomena such as peak oil, climate destabilization and the threat of financial collapse prompt us to rethink this separation. We must all eat, and the kind of agriculture we practise can reinforce these phenomena or lead us down more sustainable paths. If we choose the latter, then the traditional disconnections between agriculture and cities, and between rural and urban communities, no longer make sense, and actually create barriers to progressive change. Movement away from this disconnection has been occurring over the last few years. For example, in a *Globe and Mail* article, Pearce (2004) asked readers, "Do you know who your organic farmer is?" And in his keynote address to the Guelph Organic Conference, Michael

Ableman (2007) advised the mixed urban/rural audience to get to know an organic farmer - "you're going to need them."

In a more sustainable world, people in both rural and urban communities would change from passive consumers to active co-producers, using organic agriculture to build bridges between rural and urban communities, to correct historical inequities and to model positive relationships with each other and with the environment. Research is needed to discover the most fruitful connections, to enable the most empowering experiences and to map our way to a more sustainable future.

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