

Farmers' Markets in Low-Income Neighbourhoods: Confronting the Dilemma Between Social Justice and Environmental Sustainability

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Farmers' markets have proliferated in North America over the last decade. Seemingly a panacea for local, organic food, most successful markets in Canada are located in middle class neighbourhoods. Community food security advocates across the U.S., however, have linked food access for low-income communities with farmers' markets through an interesting federal program, "the farmers' market nutrition program". These markets confront the central dilemma for community food security: how to address social justice and environmental sustainability simultaneously. This paper draws on the results of a community-based research project undertaken in 2002 by two low-income communities in Toronto to assess the feasibility of starting farmers' markets in their neighbourhoods.

In 2003, farmers' markets were started in both communities, which are located in two of Canada's most ethno-culturally diverse neighbourhoods. A reflection on this experience reveals the complexity of addressing food access issues and supporting organic agriculture in diverse, low-income neighbourhoods. I argue that the two issues cannot be addressed simultaneously without subsidies, incentives and policy support. In addition, creativity and compromise on behalf of market organizers is essential. This paper will explore the lessons learned through these market projects, and the differences between the Canadian and U.S. contexts related to community food security programs. I suggest that farmers' markets are under researched spaces, and offer a valuable place for beginning to understand – theoretically and practically – the challenges involved in marrying social justice and environmental sustainability.

Introduction

Over the last decade, farmers' markets have proliferated in North America. This trend can be seen in Toronto, where in the last two years at least six neighbourhood farmers' markets have been started. In a rapidly urbanizing city like Toronto, farmers' markets offer an opportunity to small farmers to directly market to consumers in the city. At the same time, consumers are becoming more concerned about the safety and quality of the food they eat, searching out locally produced, organic food from farmers they can trust. Markets are proving to be an effective way for local communities to address social and economic development and revitalization. Many non-profit organizations and community groups are involved in these new markets.

Seemingly a panacea for local, organic food distribution, most successful markets in Canada are primarily located in middle class neighbourhoods. Recent attempts by

community food security advocates and organizations in Toronto to start farmers markets in low income communities reveal the challenges and opportunities for addressing social justice issues and environmental sustainability simultaneously.

In September of 2002, Parkdale Liberty Economic Development Corporation with support from a committee of organizations from the Flemingdon Park community wrote a proposal to the Community Economic Development Technical Assistance Program to obtain funding for the “Neighbourhood Based Community Market Feasibility Study.” The idea for the study grew out of interest in starting farmers’ markets in two ethno-culturally diverse neighbourhoods in Toronto, Parkdale Liberty and Flemingdon Park. Farmers’ markets have not operated in these kinds of diverse neighbourhoods in Canada, and the two groups recognized that their research would be valuable for other groups across the country interested in the same idea.

FoodShare Toronto, hired as the technical assistant for the project, was asked to assess the community economic development potential of community farmers’ markets and their ability to provide the communities with fresh locally grown produce.

As part of the feasibility study, a variety of information was collected and compiled, including:

- Background information about PLEDC and Flemingdon Park, as well as demographic data on the two neighbourhoods;
- Survey and focus group data from each community;
- Social and economic benefits of community markets;
- Intersections between community markets and community food security;
- Context and trends that support the increase in farmers’ markets over the past decade;
- Potential for community markets in low income neighbourhoods;
- Case studies from successful markets across North America;
- Policy opportunities and barriers to starting new markets;
- Survey information from organic and conventional farmers;
- Crop list that reflect Toronto’s ethnocultural diversity;
- Business and operating plans for two community markets;
- Literature review and annotated bibliography;
- Recommendations.

Farmers’ markets in Toronto

Toronto has a rich community farmers’ market tradition. Historically, markets have been supported by the municipality and have included weekly markets at the Toronto City Hall, the East York Civic Centre, and perhaps most famously the St. Lawrence Market. Several small, independent markets also thrive in the Toronto area. In 2001, at Riverdale Park, an organic market was started by the community, with the support of the city’s Parks and Recreation staff. The success of this initiative led to other communities to start neighbourhood-based markets. Dufferin Grove Park has started a thriving organic market.

The City of Toronto, in its *Growing Seasons* report published by the Food and Hunger Action Committee, made two recommendations related to farmers markets:

1. The City of Toronto should encourage Economic, Development, Culture and Tourism to continue providing space for farmers' markets at civic centres to add vitality to these public spaces as well as to provide an opportunity for Torontonians to meet local farmers and buy the freshest food possible.
2. The City of Toronto should pilot a special community market for neighbourhoods underserved by conventional food stores to increase Toronto residents' opportunities to purchase fresh and affordable food.

These two recommendations address public space revitalization and food access issues. In the fall of 2002, the city made funding available through a food access grant to communities interested in starting food security initiatives. The Parkdale-Liberty and Flemingdon Park communities successfully applied for funding to implement their farmers' market ideas.

The two communities involved in the project had specific goals for their future markets.

- To help meet the food access and food security needs of the community.
- To provide a source of local, culturally appropriate produce.
- To bring farmers and urban consumers together to provide community economic development opportunities for both groups.
- To provide a source of food in whose quality residents can have legitimate confidence.
- To focus on food and nutrition education, teaching residents about access issues, nutrition, healthy cooking on a budget, the local food system, and foods from other cultures.
- To create a dynamic cultural and social meeting places in neighbourhoods, where many residents currently feel isolated or unsafe.
- To develop and test models for creating farmers' markets in low income neighbourhoods that will be relevant for urban centres across Canada.

These goals reflect social justice issues, as well as environmental sustainability.

Farmers' markets in North America

What is a farmers market? According to the US Department of Agriculture, a farmers' market is "an association of local farmers who assemble at a defined location for the purpose of selling their produce directly to consumers" (USDA, 1996). There are three main benefits of public markets (Spitzer, 1995).

First, public markets create vibrant community space. When coming to markets, people get out of their cars, homes and workplaces, making neighbourhoods more dynamic and safe. At markets, people tend to interact with each other and engage with local

businesses. This interaction raises awareness about community social, economic and environmental issues.

Secondly, public markets stimulate local economic opportunity, benefiting local entrepreneurs, customers and the broader community. Vendors at markets tend to have small or part-time businesses and thrive in an environment where little risk or capital is needed for them to participate. This is especially important for those groups who find it difficult to access resources such as capital from conventional institutions. Women, recent immigrants and minorities tend to benefit most from the economic opportunities available at markets. In fact, markets are business incubators. First time businesses are able to test their product without taking too much risk.

Markets can also play a significant role in preserving local farmland by keeping small farmers in business through the direct marketing opportunities available to them through the market. Consumers also benefit economically from public markets. Competition among vendors keeps prices low. Seasonal produce tends to be priced lower at markets than in supermarkets. Often markets are located in neighbourhoods where supermarket chains do not exist, making it easier for people to access food. In addition, customer service tends to be superior at markets. Markets have broader community benefits as well. They generate jobs in the local community, and the multiplier effect can be significant as vendors purchase from each other. Surrounding community businesses also benefit from the increased activity in the neighbourhood.

The third broad benefit of markets is that they create a sense of community and are infused with spirit. Markets encourage people to talk to each other, to interact with others of different background, ages and income levels. Markets offer an opportunity for communities to develop new traditions and festivals. Through markets, local social service agencies gain visibility, and the public is informed of the services they provide, be it childcare, emergency food or volunteer opportunities.

Farmers' markets have significant social and economic impacts for the surrounding community. Research indicates that markets create vibrant community and public spaces, stimulate the local economy, and encourage communities to come together in new ways, through new traditions.

Farmers' markets are a growing trend across North America. In the US, the Department of Agriculture counted more than 2000 markets in 1996, up from 1755 in 1994. There were fewer than 100 markets in the mid 1980's, at the height of the supermarket retail boom. The number of markets is increasing in Canada as well. There are currently over 130 farmers' markets in Ontario (Cummings, et al. 1998). In Toronto, four new markets were started last year alone, and many communities such as Parkdale/Liberty and Flemingdon Park are interested in starting markets.

Farmers' markets and community food security: addressing social justice and environmental sustainability

Over the past decade community nutritionists, educators, progressive agricultural researchers, grassroots activists, anti-hunger activists and community developers have come together to contribute to the growing area of community food security. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization's definition of food security states (Koc, et al. 1999): "food security" means that food is available at all times; that all persons have means of access to it; that it is nutritionally adequate in terms of quantity, quality and variety; and that it is acceptable within the given culture. Only when all these conditions are in place can a population be "food secure."

Community food security (CFS) emerged from the North American context in the late 1980s and early 1990s to expand international food security theory beyond the medical model developed by international health organizations, and include more subjective dimensions of addressing hunger. The central dilemma faced by food systems activists is the fact that poor people cannot afford fresh produce and farmers cannot survive in a market where imports are less expensive than their local production costs. Farmers' markets in low income neighbourhoods are forced to address these issues directly in their daily operations.

CFS initiatives across North America attempt to address this dilemma by linking urban consumers with local farmers, with a focus on improving food access in low income communities. Many initiatives, however, focus unevenly on food access (for example, emergency food delivery) or encouraging sustainable agricultural methods (for example, establishing organic farmers markets in middle/upper income neighbourhoods). Some programs attempt to address the issues together. One such example, FoodShare's Good Food Box, aims to provide healthy, affordable food to low income families through a bulk buying program. Over the years, program coordinators have spent endless energy mulling over the dilemma of how to provide low cost, quality, culturally appropriate food while supporting local, organic farmers. Several principals guide FoodShare's purchasing. First, a nutritious, high quality mix is chosen. Second, local food is purchased above imported food. Third, small and medium organic or transitioning farmers are supported directly. The cost of the basket is kept affordable, and the hope is to build a network of farmers that can grow produce in bulk for the box so that over time, more and more organic/transitioning items can be purchased for the box. The program, however, is subsidized. Participants pay for the cost of the food in the box, but not for any of the administration costs associated with the program. FoodShare often uses this model as an example of how public policy could support healthy eating as a health prevention strategy. The Good Food Box, like farmers' markets, provides a clear example of the tensions faced by CFS activists attempting to address food access and agricultural sustainability issues.

Farmers' markets in low income communities

Although the number of community food security programs, including farmers' markets, have increased over the last decade, many lower income communities continue to have difficulty accessing fresh fruit and vegetables, and rely on emergency food. With one exception, very little research has been done about the potential for or impact of farmers'

markets in low income neighbourhoods. The report published by the Community Food Security Coalition, *Hot Peppers and Parking Lot Peaches: Evaluating Farmers' Markets in Low Income Communities*, provides valuable market research, case studies, recommendations and guidelines for starting markets in low income communities (Fisher, 1995).

Fisher notes that there are two categories of low income markets. The first includes markets that are located in low income neighbourhoods and are almost solely attended by residents from that neighbourhood. The second type of market is perhaps located in a low income neighbourhood, but draws both low income and wealthier customers.

Fisher has observed that markets with only low income customers have trouble operating profitably. These markets are dependent on subsidies and tend to come and go. It is difficult to attract farmers to these markets, as the volume of sales is low. There are some examples of successful markets in low income communities, and these tend to be long established in the neighbourhood.

Markets that draw from a more diverse customer base have shown to be more successful. Often, however, they do not serve the needs of people living in core poor communities. The focus of the market is easily taken over by the interests of wealthier customers, and once the market is recognized as providing higher end goods, the low income customers stop attending. These markets can serve low income communities if the market coordinator focuses on providing products that are useful to low income customers, is continuously involved in outreach to the community, and monitors the response of low income customers to the market.

There are several barriers that are common among low income markets. There is a fundamental tension between local farmers who are trying to make a living off their land and low income customers trying to survive on fixed incomes. Increased production prices make it almost impossible for small, local farmers to compete with supermarket prices. Low income customers with fixed incomes have very little room in their budgets to pay more for food. At the end of the month, many low income people run out of money, making it impossible for them to shop at a market during this time. Over all, low income people have fewer resources, and are often strapped for time and experience high levels of stress that affect their ability to attend a farmers market. Transportation is also an issue. Unless the market is located very close to where people live, they might not be able to attend the market. Low income communities, especially in Canada, tend to be very culturally diverse. This diversity is a strength of the community, but presents difficulties for market organizers. Finding farmers to supply the appropriate product mix is often difficult and takes time. Several growing seasons are necessary for farmers to experiment with new crops and begin to grow them for the market. Sometimes the market does not survive this period. Local farmers usually do not speak the same language as the low income customers. Market coordinators can encourage farmers to hire local staff who speak the languages of the people in the community.

In summary Fisher (1995) outlines several guidelines that determine the success of markets in low income communities. Low income markets need to be subsidized. Community organizing is an essential component of any successful market in a low-income community. Low income markets should tailor their product mix to focus on basic foods at affordable prices. The market's product mix should reflect the cultural diversity of the community. Farmers should consider hiring sales staff from the neighbourhood, to break down racial and language barriers. Finally, market organizers should not minimize the importance of a good location.

Issues for organic farmers supplying to low income farmers markets

Two broad trends are immediately impacting farmers' ability to survive economically. First, the global nature of the agricultural market means that farmers face not only local and national competition, but fierce international competition as well. This challenge has resulted in consolidated farms growing for the export market and increased corporatization of the agricultural sector. Second, in the regions surrounding Canada's largest cities, development pressures have resulted in higher land values and urban sprawl, raising production costs and making other uses of farmland more profitable.

In this difficult context, farmers have been encouraged to be flexible and respond to niche market opportunities. This is challenging for many farmers who would like to market to consumers in urban centres like Toronto, as they do not have access to smaller markets, and find it extremely difficult to sell to the supermarkets. This makes farmers' markets attractive to farmers who are interested in direct market opportunities in urban centres.

Toronto has a diverse population, providing an opportunity for farmers' markets that can be established in convenient locations. These markets are ideal for smaller farmers and market gardeners who find it impossible to compete with large commercial producers, but can quickly respond to changing consumer demands and seize new market opportunities.

Selling directly to the consumer is beneficial for farmers in several ways. Farmers' markets can be piggybacked onto existing market strategies. One farmer states that the farmers' markets he attended last year were a way for him to market his excess produce. A greater share of the consumers' dollar can be kept by farmers who sell directly to their customers. Close contact with consumers at the market allows the farmer to quickly adjust packaging, marketing strategies, and production to meet customers' changing preferences.

In low income communities, however, it is difficult for farmers to sell enough produce to make the trip into the city worth their while. Farmers often depend on value added products or unusual items to make a few extra dollars. These items do not sell in low income communities. In Toronto, community food security advocates have been exploring how local produce can be provided to low income communities in a way that is profitable for farmers. The research done for Parkdale/Liberty and Flemingdon Park offers recommendations for how to proceed.

Research recommendations: the need for subsidies, incentives and policy support as well as creativity and compromise on behalf of market organizers

The primary reason for the relative success of farmers markets in low income communities in the U.S. is the Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program. This subsidized program funded by the Department of Agriculture has promoted farmers’ markets to be established in low income communities (Joy et al, 2001). The Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) provides coupons to low income women and children specially designated for them to spend at farmers’ markets. These coupons, distributed through local social assistance offices, have the dual benefit of providing means for low income people to access local fresh fruits and vegetables, and directing social assistance funding towards local farmers and the local agricultural community. The program addresses the tension between the ability of low income customers surviving on a fixed income to purchase consistently at a farmers’ market, and the farmers’ needs to cover raising production costs. Farmers participating in the program register with the Department of Agriculture, and can cash in the coupons they receive on a weekly basis.

The FMNP has two broad goals (Joy et al, 2001):

1. to provide fresh nutritious unprepared food such as fruit and vegetables from farmers markets to WIC participants who are nutritionally at risk; and,
2. to expand consumer awareness and use of farmers markets.

In 2001 results from a survey undertaken of women participating in the FMNP program were published. Of the respondents who visited a farmers’ market at least once in 1997, 67% increased their fruit consumption by 4.2% and 64% increased their vegetable consumption by 14.7%. 58.2% of the respondents said the quality at the farmers’ market was better than that at the grocery store. 51% said they spent their own cash, in addition to FMNP coupons (Joy et al 2001).

Below is a partial list of the FMNP regulations.

USDA’s Farmers Market Nutrition Program Regulations (partial list)

Allowable	Not Allowable
Eligible foods are fresh fruit and vegetables and edible herbs, locally grown and unprocessed.	Ineligible foods include cider, juices, honey, maple syrup, seeds, nuts, eggs, meat, cheese, seafood, flowers, ornamental produce and foods grown outside the United States.
Recipients must be women, infants over 4 months or a child who receives WIC (women, infant and children) benefits.	Unauthorized farmers’ markets cannot accept FMNP coupons. Participating farmers’ markets must display a sign stating that they are authorized to redeem coupons.

Nutrition education is required.	Sales tax cannot be collected.
Farmers must be trained in FMNP procedures, agree to be monitored, display sign, accept coupons within the dates at the current price or less, and assure that FMNP coupons are redeemed only for eligible foods. They may not discriminate against coupon users. Farmers may accept cash in addition to coupons.	Cash change cannot be provided for purchases less than the amount of the coupons. If the amount of sale is less than the amount on the coupon, additional fruits and vegetables can be added to make up the difference.

Joy et al 2001.

There is no doubt that the success of farmers' markets in low income neighbourhoods in the United States is due to this innovative program. Starting a market in a low income neighbourhood with out this substantial level of subsidy could prove extremely difficult. Recommendations generated by this research fall into three categories.

Policy support

- The City of Toronto should research the wider potential of markets to address food security and support local agriculture. This research should have a specific focus on how city can support these initiatives, looking at models such as the city-run community garden program and Public Health's peer nutrition program.
- In recognition that farmers' markets in low income neighbourhoods will have to be subsidized to some extent, the Toronto Food Policy Council should advocate for a pilot project similar to the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program in the United States. This advocacy work could be done in partnership with FoodShare and the Food Justice Coalition, working to involve the Ontario Ministry of Food and Rural Affairs and Agriculture Canada.
- The City's Economic Development and Trade department should develop a partnership with OMAFRA to build rural-urban links and opportunities for farmers' markets.
- The City should provide blanket liability insurance for markets located on public property, and develop special guidelines reflecting the unique health and safety requirements of markets.
- OMAFRA should support research on season extension and ethno-cultural varieties local farmers could grow for farmers' markets, building on the Toronto Food Policy Council's recently published Season Extension report.

Market coordination

- Farmers' markets in Toronto need to respond to the cultural diversity of local communities, and not become niche marketing opportunities for middle income/upper

income families. At the same time, markets must focus on providing high quality, local food from farmers who are fairly paid.

- Successful low income markets tend to have skilled staff, a good location (visible, well traveled with parking), are involved in community outreach, know the needs of community, have ways to communicate with the community on an ongoing basis, are good at recruiting farmers, know how to work the political system, and have adequate funding.
- Farmers' markets should link to other food security initiatives in the community and beyond.
- A network of market coordinators should be initiated to strategize, trouble shoot and share information about farmers' markets in the city.
- It is necessary for markets to have a paid coordinator and staff. Staff should speak the languages represented in the community.

Producer coordination

- PLEDC and Flemingdon Park should support the formation of a producer cooperative that would supply produce for urban farmers' markets.
- Individual farmers need to be approached individually and directly about the financial viability of attending markets in the city. Farmers need to commit to the market for the whole season. Market coordinators need to monitor if farmers are meeting their income targets on an on-going basis.
- At least 15 food vendors need to attend a market to make it successful. A minimum of four fresh fruit and vegetable vendors, complimented by other vendors such as bakers, honey, preserves, etc. are needed to attract a large enough customer base.
- Market coordinators, to outreach to farmers, should attend some of the markets operating in the GTA, in season, to talk to vendors about attending their markets. Incentives to attract farmers to the market, especially during the first weeks, should be considered. Market coordinators should network with local OMAFRA regional economic development staff, as well as other farmer organizations (CFFO, Catholic Farmers, etc.) as a means to approach farmers.
- In the late fall or early winter, market coordinators should meet with farmers to talk about growing culturally appropriate produce for the local neighbourhood. A list of products can be developed from market research throughout the season, and farmers can research, with the assistance of market coordinators, growing techniques and methods, and seed sources, for these items.

On-going farmers' market work in Toronto

The low income farmers' market question continues to be a pressing issue for food security advocates in Toronto. A new initiative involving several CFS organizations in the city is focusing on creating local markets in low income communities. A recent conversation with a program coordinator illustrates the tension between food access and agricultural sustainability. "These issues are still on parallel paths," states Jennifer Reynolds, community animator at FoodShare. "I see them converging eventually, but not in the short term." Reynolds talks about three principles that guide the market work at FoodShare: cost, quality and cultural appropriateness. The markets that are established might have imported mangos for example. But the organization is working with local organic producers to form a producer coop that might grow culturally appropriate food to sell at these markets. And of course, the organization is advocating for policy support.

Conclusion

Farmers' markets are under researched spaces, and offer a valuable place for beginning to understand – theoretically and practically – the challenges involved in marrying social justice and environmental sustainability. Low income farmers' markets force CFS advocates to simultaneously and creatively address disparate issues such as food and agriculture subsidies, organic agriculture, community economic development, public space revitalization, the growing cultural diversity of our population, poverty, urban sprawl and farmland preservation.

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