



## Original Research Article

**The public plate in the transnational city: Tensions among food procurement, global trade, and local legislation**Jennifer Sumner<sup>a\*</sup> and Hayley Lapalme<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> University of Toronto<sup>b</sup> Nourish, J.W. McConnell Family Foundation**Abstract**

Local food systems are crucial to sustainability, and one of the most effective ways to develop them is to harness the buying power of large public institutions, such as hospitals and universities. Steering public funds toward local food systems, however, is not as easy as it might appear. Institutions must navigate a maze of regulations that can become significant barriers to effecting change. In Ontario, for example, public institutions are squeezed between two contradictory policies: the Broader Public Sector Directive, which mandates a level playing field and prohibits preferential buying based on geography, and the Local Food Act, which aims to increase the consumption of local food (with a specific focus on procurement in Ontario public institutions) and to foster successful and resilient local food economies and systems. Adding to this tension, global trade treaties are drilling down to the local level, proscribing preferential procurement of local food as ‘protectionist’ and a barrier to trade. Public institutions are caught in the middle, wanting to purchase more local products but unwilling to risk reprisals. This paper follows these tensions by reporting on a recent study of institutional buyers and government officials in the Toronto area to investigate the barriers to operationalizing a local food system, while recognizing that sustainable food systems require a judicious combination of values associated with “local and green” and “global and fair” (Morgan, 2008).

**Keywords:** food procurement; global trade; Local Food Act; local food systems; public plate

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## Introduction

Institutional food purchasing has been identified as a key point of leverage in food systems (MacRae, 2011; Morgan & Morley, 2014; Reynolds & Hunter, 2017). The potential of the public plate to effect change is illustrated by the fact that in the province of Ontario alone, the public procurement of food and beverages deploys a budget of \$1.8 billion per year (Sustain Ontario, 2015). Drawing on their curatorial powers as significant purchasers, those involved in institutional procurement can disrupt existing patterns of production and distribution to contribute to the emergence of local food systems.

Steering public funds toward local food systems, however, is no easy task: Indeed, the barriers to undertaking strategic institutional procurement efforts can be overwhelming, particularly in the neoliberal context of global trade agreements, shrinking public sector budgets, the decoupling of food from the provision of care and education, and the challenge of creating a shared vision and measures of success (Lapalme, 2015, p. 2).

In particular, institutions must navigate a maze of regulations that can become significant barriers to effecting change. In the province of Ontario, for example, public institutions are squeezed between policies, such as the Broader Public Sector Procurement Directive, which mandates a level playing field and prohibits preferential buying based on geography, and the Local Food Act (LFA), which aims to increase the consumption of local food (with a specific focus on procurement in Ontario public institutions) and to foster successful and resilient local food economies and systems. Adding to this tension, global trade treaties are drilling down to the local level, proscribing preferential procurement of local food as a barrier to trade.

Public institutions are caught in the middle, wanting to purchase more local products but unwilling to risk reprisals. This paper will follow these tensions by reporting on a recent study of institutional buyers, food distributors, and government officials around the city of Toronto to investigate the barriers to operationalizing a local food system. It will begin by looking at procurement in general, followed by food procurement and local food procurement. It will then describe the study and discuss the findings. It will conclude by offering a values perspective on intervening in a system during a time of transition, which can provide a framework for understanding and operationalizing the public plate in the transnational city.

## Procurement

Procurement is the action or process of obtaining equipment or supplies (OED, 2016). Public-sector procurement involves a competitive tendering process for goods and services that should adhere to the regulatory framework(s) of the public-sector jurisdiction, which prescribe the

parameters for fair, open, and transparent competition. McMurtry (2014, p. 537) adds to this understanding when he argues that although procurement is recognized as a key area of economic concern, it is “not often understood as reflecting *ethical* decisions.” Olivier de Schutter (2014, p. 2), United Nations Rapporteur on the Right to Food, highlights these ethical decisions when he points out that including certain non-economic objectives in public procurement programs – what he refers to as “buying social justice” – is not new. Indeed, “governments have used their purchasing power to achieve important redistributive and developmental goals,” such as promoting racial equality, gender equity, and the empowerment of Indigenous people (p. 2).

Over the last fifty years, however, the rise of neoliberal globalization has slowly squeezed ethical decisions into one set of values – economic values that rally around a mantra of continuous private-sector growth – through the penetration of the market into all aspects of human life, including procurement. At the same time, social and environmental values have been denounced as ‘protectionist’ and ‘barriers to trade’. This marketization has been legitimized through the ideological rhetoric of trade agreements and enabled by lack of public awareness about the effects of these agreements and a climate of affinity with trade liberalization (McMurtry, 2014).

In spite of this conducive climate, resistance to neoliberal globalization has emerged in the form of a reconnection to the local. As increasingly powerful transnational corporations have targeted communities around the globe for the extraction of private profit, local agents have countered with ‘buy local’ campaigns, community economic development schemes, and social policy aimed at marginalized populations. In consequence, a general values struggle exists that pits local communities against the profit motive – a struggle that has become more focused with recent trade treaties, particularly the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) with the European Union, that “further restrict the democratic ability of communities to choose where and how they procure needed goods and services” (McMurtry, 2014, pp. 526-527). One of these needed goods is food.

### *Food procurement*

Food procurement includes the purchase of food through a tendering process. Within the public realm, food procurement covers a range of public institutions. Public food procurement has been referred to as “the public plate,” a term coined by Morgan and Sonnino (2013). Morgan (2014, p. 254) describes it as “shorthand, or a metaphor if you like, for public food provisioning whether delivered in the form of school food, hospital food, through care homes, kindergartens, prisons and so on.” According to this author, these seemingly disparate settings share one important aspect – they all deal with vulnerable consumers such as pupils, patients, pensioners, and prisoners. He goes on to argue that reclaiming the public plate depends on two things in danger of being lost: reaffirming the right to good food and recovering our collective belief in the creativity of the public sector.

Morgan (2008, p. 1240) explains how the untapped potential of public food procurement in a country like the UK is due to a combination of lack of project management skills, a bureaucratic preference for policy design over project delivery, the restriction of the dissemination of good practice because of siloed government ministries, and lack of political confidence “to assert public sector priorities over private sector interests.”

In spite of such barriers, food procurement carries enormous potential for the evolution of the food system. Morgan and Morley (2014) see food procurement as one of the most powerful instruments available to governments for creating social, economic, and environmental change, which they find paradoxical because policy makers have hitherto shown little or no interest in it. Recently, however, food procurement has moved to centre stage and begun to focus on the local, exhibiting the ethical decisions and values struggles associated with other forms of procurement.

### *Local food procurement*

Local food procurement can use the tendering process to target the purchase of local food, however that term may be defined. For example, the Province of Ontario defines local food as “food produced or harvested in Ontario, including forest or freshwater food, and....food and beverages made in Ontario if they include ingredients produced or harvested in Ontario” (Local Food Act, 2013). In addition to providing well-recognized environmental, social, and economic benefits, local food procurement addresses both supply and demand issues in the local economy:

On the supply side, procurement offers market access for small-scale producers and cushions them from market shocks. On the demand side, the availability of local food not only increases consumer choice, but generates local economic activity as well (Wood, 2016, p. 32).

Like other forms of procurement, local food procurement reflects ethical decisions and thus exhibits a general values struggle. For example, local food procurement involves the formal acquisition of food defined as local (Sustain Ontario, 2015), which emphasizes difference. On the other hand, many trade agreements are based on similarities, expressed as according no less favourable treatment to imported products than that accorded to like products of national origin (see WTO, n.d.), keeping in mind that “pertinent instrument design features” could be implemented to allow governments to support local and sustainable food without triggering trade disputes (MacRae 2014, p. 103). To date, this issue has not been a large problem for Canadian communities even though many trade agreements applied to some extent at the provincial and even municipal levels. However, the lure of profits from provincial and municipal procurement has become more apparent in recent years and thus been more directly woven into trade agreements, in particular CETA. This trade agreement places restrictions on public procurement at the provincial, municipal, and MASH (municipalities, academic institutions, school boards and hospitals) sector levels (Wood, 2016). In particular, CETA prohibits these sectors from

“giving purchasing preference to goods or services from local companies or individuals if the contract exceeds 200,000 Special Drawing Rights (SDRs), which is about \$315,500 in approximate 2012-13 Canadian dollars” (p. 33). Any contracts above this threshold could be vulnerable to trade disputes if they exhibit local preferences.

This penetration of the global market into local food procurement will have severe and long-lasting consequences for many communities across Canada. For example, the arrival of CETA restricts municipalities’ right to use food procurement for sustainable development or job creation and risks reinforcing a paradigm based in competition where ‘lowest cost’ is mistaken for ‘best value.’ As a result, the economic benefits of procurement will not necessarily be retained within communities, but flow to transnational corporations, which can negatively impact community economic well-being rather than improve it (McMurtry, 2014). In essence,

the Canadian state is bargaining sub-national procurement (which benefits communities, local governments, and the marginalized) to achieve European market access for corporations most aligned with those governments’ political interests (resource extraction and services) (p. 535).

In other words, Canada is trading away the ability of Canadian communities to embed social policies in local food procurement and thus bolster themselves against the depredations of neoliberal globalization in exchange for the chance that some private Canadian corporations might be able to penetrate European markets (and thus potentially destroy the ability of communities in those markets to carry out their own forms of development).

The ethical differences between the aims of local food procurement and international trade agreements like CETA are reinforced at the national level by legislation that also reflects an ideological affinity with narrow neoliberal values. In Canada, the Agreement on Internal Trade (AIT) has a number of guiding principles that reflect these tensions: non-discrimination (i.e., establishing equal treatment for all Canadian persons, goods, services, and investments), right of entry and exit (i.e., prohibiting measures that restrict the movement of persons, goods, services or investments across provincial or territorial boundaries), no obstacles (i.e., ensuring provincial/territorial government policies and practices do not create obstacles to trade), and reconciliation (i.e., providing the basis for eliminating trade barriers caused by differences in standards and regulations across Canada) (Industry Canada, 2011). In terms of procurement, AIT establishes a framework “that will ensure equal access to procurement for all Canadian suppliers” (ibid.), which could restrict the opportunity to use local food procurement for local sustainable development.

Ethical differences are further reinforced at the provincial level. In Ontario, for example, the Discriminatory Business Practices Act (DBPA) prevents discrimination on a number of grounds, including geographical location. And the Broader Public Sector (BPS) Procurement Directive aims to “create a level playing field” and “achieve value for money” (Ministry of

Finance, 2011, 2), and helps to enforce the rules of the AIT. Both pieces of legislation are inimical to targeting local food procurement toward local sustainable development.

In seeming contrast, the Local Food Act (LFA) of Ontario proposes to foster successful and resilient local food economies and systems throughout Ontario, to increase awareness of local food in Ontario, including the diversity of local food, and to encourage the development of new markets for local food (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2013). A closer read, however, reveals that the Local Food Act does not counter the neoliberal imperative of market penetration, but assumes this penetration as a given and tries to make local players better competitors in the market. In addition, the LFA is aspirational, not binding, *unlike any of the other legislation pertaining to procurement*. In the words of the LFA, “The Minister of Agriculture and Food must establish local food goals or targets to aspire to in respect of the matters listed in the Bill” (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2013).

All of these pieces of legislation reflect the ethical decision to promote the narrow economic values of the global market over broader values involving community well-being. In practice, this pits recognized community need against private profit – a values struggle that plays out at the local level in day-to-day procurement activities. This struggle is reflected in the tensions we found in the study we conducted in late winter of 2016.

## The study

This study was funded by a SSHRC Institutional Grant and involved sixty- to ninety-minute semi-structured interviews of nine key experts in the Toronto area who are involved in various areas of institutional food procurement (hospitals, municipalities, provincial government, law, food distribution, charity), plus document review and participant observation. The interviewees were chosen because of their experience with, and knowledge of, institutional procurement. Although not a comprehensive list of those working in the field of institutional procurement in the Toronto area, the participants provide an opening to explore some of the many complexities of food procurement.

## The findings

Two major tensions and six minor tensions emerged from the data. Although presented separately, these tensions are interconnected and reflect some of the many complexities surrounding food procurement, global trade, and local legislation.

## *Major tensions*

Two major tensions found in the study related to designed ambiguity and defining value. These major tensions highlight some of the many complexities of institutional food procurement.

### *1. Designed ambiguity*

The major tension of designed ambiguity circles around three aspects: a murkiness with respect to legislation, a lack of specific targets, and an information deficit that flows from these first two aspects. To begin with, the Local Food Act is very murky, making it difficult for those involved in procurement to ascertain just what is allowed and what are the targets. This murkiness is intentional, given “OMAFRA’s [Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs] long-standing focus on food exports, which downplays food for local populations” (Stahlbrand, 2019). In the face of growing consumer interest in local food and the increasing cachet of the local food movement, however, the government engaged in what can only be described as green washing – appearing to make an important shift while reinforcing the status quo. The fact that the Local Food Act is a non-binding piece of legislation means it lacks clear supports and does nothing to encourage an understanding of food systems or the importance of concepts like *terroir*.

In terms of targets, the Local Food Act stipulates that the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs will set aspirational targets in three areas: improving food literacy in respect of local food, encouraging increased use of local food by public-sector organizations, and increasing access to local food. In addition, an Explanatory Note to the Act states that the Minister may also set additional targets, but must engage in consultation before setting such targets (Local Food Act, 2013). These consultations have started but have not yet led to any targets being set. The first and the third targets have been proclaimed (OMAFRA, 2017), but not the second. As one of the participants [4] noted, the government is acting on the first target – food literacy – and beginning to act on the third target – increased access to local food (as seen by the increase in farmers’ markets). But it is the operationalization of the second target – increased use of local food by public sector organizations – that the institutional food procurement field is waiting for.

Another participant [6] tentatively embraced the idea of targets, while having grave reservations. For this person, actual purchasing targets “would go a long way” to ensuring that small producers were doing the right things and still able to supply an institutional market (for example, developing tiered food safety that is more accessible for a small producer by accepting provincially inspected meat as an alternative to federally inspected meat). However, this participant also felt that pre-emptive targets would set up a system that is unattainable for the vast majority of producers.

There will be many that can’t get certified in time, and those people will be excluded right out of the gate. The capacity of those

producers and processors would need to be built – from a volume and aggregation perspective but also from a food safety perspective – to bring them up to standard.

This participant added that there could even be a supply issue around targeting local procurement. For example, if such procurement dealt with 5 to 10 percent of the farms in Ontario, it would have to assess whether the supply could even be met (and have the appropriate food safety certifications) and that process could drive up the cost. He summed up by saying that there were a great many things to consider before the government tried to finalize the targets. One of these considerations was brought up by another participant [3], who saw targets as a challenge because availability or price point of local food could shift.

Another participant [5] contributed some ideas about hard versus aspirational targets. From his perspective:

If the government set hard targets, the vast majority of institutions will do their best to hit the minimum requirement. But if you inspire them you could get them to do much more than what you could legislate. If I am told what to do I will do the minimum, but if I am challenged to do something, I will do much more. You will have more effect if you inspire than if you mandate. (5)

Yet another participant [2] seemed to concur, positing that “at the end of the day, I don’t know if specific targets would work anyhow.”

Deepening the tension around targets, one participant [9] argued that customers ask for local food, but they are not asking the hard questions: pushing institutions to do more, asking institutions how they can do more, how they can develop more, how they can raise their local percentage. In addition, he adds, everyone is waiting for the Ministry to put together specific targets. But they also expect it to do due diligence, so as time passes, the interest is fading away. In terms of local procurement, this person concluded that “institutions want to allocate their resources toward it, build their systems around it, but they want to know what to build for.”

The targets that these institutions will aim for are currently vague and aspirational. One participant [2] advised that there is no appetite on the part of the government for a more regulatory approach. This means that the tensions around targets may not be resolved in the near future.

As a result of ambiguity in the legislation and a lack of clear targets, information about local food systems and local food procurement is in short supply, leading to an information deficit that is not being addressed. For example, supply chains are long, with many links between the public plate and the farmer. The end users of the public plate, and the purchasers who get the food to that plate, are disconnected from the system that produces the food. When it comes to local food procurement, one respondent [5] maintained that more information on how to procure local food would advance efforts in this area.



This is directly in the food service manager's role. If the managers and chefs can't figure it out, it can't happen. So making it easier for them – making sure distributors can identify it, that there are recipes that makes it easier, all the work we're doing in the BPS Funding stream – that makes it easier. How can we make people more literate? How to source, cook, serve, and promote [local food]? How to promote it to consumers. This is important; that is, when the consumer is going to start to care and choose local, and to identify that. But the biggest frustration from consumers is they don't see the local option.

## *2. Defining Value*

The second major tension found in the study centres on defining value. In its broadest sense, value is the worth of something (Lemos, 1995), and as such includes both individual and collective value. Under the influence of neoliberal globalization, however, the meaning has predictably narrowed to monetary value, as exemplified by Pass, Lowes, Davies, & Kronish's (1991, p. 541) definition of value as “the exchange or economic worth of an asset or product.” This tension in values is evident in the field of procurement, where value is equated with the lowest price. In the words of one respondent [2], “price trumps everything,” including the value of buying local, supporting community development and targeting marginalized populations. He explained that in the narrow terms of value for money, “It is hard to make the case that a California carrot that is half the price of an Ontario carrot is of less value.” However, using a broader definition, “you are talking about putting money back in the local economy, and about the multiplier effect. And if the public sector were calculating that, that would make a difference.” Using a broader definition of value allows us to ask, what impact does “the \$2 carrot from Ontario have on the local economy that the \$1 California carrot does not have?”

In the same vein, another respondent [6] referred to Jaco Lokker, Director of Food Services and Executive Chef, University of Toronto, when he wondered:

Jaco Lokker kicked Aramark [a global food service provider] out of UofT. They are going to do it all in-house. I would be interested to hear from the client-side ... and understanding their tension with their food service operator because it looks like Jaco got frustrated and cut them out. But I want to know what is driving them – is it student driven? What are the values behind it – how do they feel that tension between the caterer and their values?

In contrast, from another respondent's perspective [4], there is no tension between value for money and broader values. Looking at the BPS Directive, he argued that

...it is really not incompatible at all. We can be protectionist on some files. We can argue that buying local has a slew of benefits that serve the tax payer – so when I look at the broad principles of

BPS I see it aligned with the principles of the LFA. Things are murky, but all this legislation usually leaves space for the Minister to do what they need to do. I don't think they are out of line or conflicting.

Focusing on the BPS Directive, he added that: “So long as ministers take a more holistic view of what value for money means, then local food totally makes sense here.” Then switching to the Local Food Act, he concluded that:

The LFA is a conceptual piece to force us to explore what food should look like in institutions and municipalities... it would direct the Minister to ask in the back of their mind, ‘is there a local food solution here?’ And to work on the outcomes that the government is looking at.

These two major tensions are crosscut by a number of minor tensions.

### *Minor tensions*

A number of minor tensions also emerged from the data: disempowerment, risk aversion, champion flight, the commodification of food, supply and demand barriers, and siloed thinking. These minor tensions reinforce some of the many complexities of institutional procurement.

#### *1. Disempowerment*

In the field of institutional food procurement, participants are disempowered to think creatively within the context of designed ambiguity. Sensemaking is difficult in the absence of clear regulations of what is permissible, which leads to a complacency concerning the status quo. In effect, participants are disempowered or stand back from creative thinking – or simply thinking outside the box – which is essential for navigating tensions. In terms of food procurement, creative thinking can entail initiatives like unbundling contracts, growing to order contracts or changing the makeup of a contract, such as crafting a contract around what local food producers can supply (keeping in mind that much creativity in tendering language is required to get around trade deals and that procurement officers need to know how local supply chains actually work and whether their interventions can improve how things function). And though there are some examples of this elsewhere in Canada, none of our participants discussed using these strategies, although some expressed a desire to have clear guidance on whether or not they could think creatively. In the words of one participant [7], “In order to truly encourage community benefit, sustainability, and economic benefit, policy needs to change to allow for this type of procurement.”

This same participant identified her disappointment with the Local Food Act:

Our understanding of the Act and how it would roll out is that it would require benchmarks and target setting and we haven't seen it yet. I thought targets were going to come out of this – or at least benchmarks. It has no teeth... I would like to see some metrics around measuring for community benefit and sustainability in food procurement. Then people will feel confident that they have the tools necessary to include this in their RFP [request for proposal] evaluations. As far as the conflict between the regulations, we have none because we have no requirements – there is nothing to answer to, sadly.

## 2. *Risk aversion*

Procurement managers tend to be risk averse. In the context of tight budgets and an imposing oversight from various regulatory frameworks and senior departments, there is little appetite for risk. This is particularly true in public institutions where employees are governed by the BPS Directive. As one respondent [5] explained:

Most people are risk averse - they are worried they are going to do the wrong thing, especially in an environment where there are so many things to think about - especially in healthcare where there are few resources.

Another respondent [2] outlined the risk of favouring local food when choosing a food service provider. When big companies like Sysco start losing contracts, they have the means to fight back. If they go through the procurement process and they don't win, they can request a formal interview (known as a debrief) to understand why they were not successful. The company could then refer back to the contract, which falls under the BPS Directive, and point out that the public institution cannot prefer local.

Yet another respondent [7] explained:

There is a strong desire on the part of institutions to explore regional alternatives in their food procurement. Often, the result is that the buyer finds themselves in a position where upon evaluation, awarding to the local player would put them at risk of non-compliance with the BPS Procurement Directive. There may be a slight increment in cost or a benefit that wasn't identified at the time of the Request for Proposal which now cannot influence the evaluation to tip the scale.

The same respondent [7] summed up her position with regard to risk: “our role is to facilitate a fully compliant, open, competitive procurement process for the purchase of food products.” In

essence, she did not want to exploit loopholes in the legislation (i.e., take a risk), but “would like to see the ability to award evaluation points to local offerings.”

### *3. Champion flight*

Champions can make the difference between success and failure of a new initiative that challenges the existing practices or culture of an institution. A champion can be instrumental in helping others to leave old ways behind and to think innovatively. That said, when the champion moves on, the initiative can flounder. One respondent [6] described how he used to supply some local food to Ryerson University. But when the champion left Ryerson, “the will dropped off.”

Champions are difficult to seed and to sustain in the context of the protracted murkiness in legislation. They are systematically eliminated by the inertia of the status quo – unless they are successful in shifting the institutional culture and building institution-level ownership across the institutional hierarchy for more progressive procurement policies that have a more expansive understanding of value. In the absence of deep ownership, ‘champion flight’ undermines the institutional change that might be possible.

### *4. Commodification of food*

Although food is closely associated with such human interests as healing, culture, heritage, commensality, community building, and identity, it is just seen as a commodity by the global corporate food system. This perspective was evident in many of the interviews, but also challenged by some respondents. One respondent [7] explained this tension:

It is difficult to honour your personal food buying beliefs in your professional space because the legislation doesn’t necessarily support the responsibility to be mindful of the food system when making purchasing decisions with tax dollars. It should. ... In a perfect world, the [BPS] Directive would not apply to food. It is not like purchasing equipment, band aids or legal advice. It is a different beast and a cookie cutter approach to regulation is awkward.

### *5. Supply and demand barriers*

Some of the tensions are generated by barriers on both the supply and demand side of local food. On the supply side, barriers could include adequate volume, food safety accreditation, and the capacity to bid on contracts. For example, one respondent [5] argued that there were things the government could do to help small and medium-sized enterprises [SMEs] overcome supply barriers and gain access to the tendering process.

If we could find a way to make it easier for SMEs to gain access to those processes, that would be something and I think the Directive does limit this. For example, saying that they have to apply for the full contract, not just a portion of it. Or if a contract was for a health centre and you had to supply all the products – that would be difficult if you only sell tomatoes.

Small and medium-sized enterprises can also find themselves being squeezed out in a global economic climate that favours consolidation and mergers. As mentioned above, government could help SMEs gain access to the tendering process. That respondent [5] went on to ask,

What could you do to make it easier for SMEs to gain access to these contracts? And to help them scale up more quickly? That would create jobs, invest back in the local economy, and that is where you would see more change happening.

On the demand side, another respondent [7] felt that the future expectation that her organization benchmark and track their product of origin spending while having their hands tied regarding regional preference through the BPS Directive was going to create a barrier to success. Yet another respondent [6] pointed out that his organization did not provide ready-to-eat food, which is what health care cooking infrastructure is set up for, so he was locked out of that market. In other words, hospitals' food reheating systems were incompatible with increasing their demand for fresh, unprocessed food.

## 6. *Siloed thinking*

Like many people, those who work in the area of food procurement can become mired down in siloed thinking – understood as thinking strictly within the box when it comes to the day-to-day practice of food procurement. For example, regardless of the seeming contradictions between many pieces of legislation and the Local Food Act, some respondents did not change, or even reflect on, their longstanding procurement habits. When asked about such tensions, one respondent [1] briefly answered that “we haven’t bumped into this,” while another [8] offered that he hadn’t run into that problem. Yet another respondent [6] described how a major hospital was trying to revamp its retail operations around local food, but when the purchaser got involved, everything ground to a halt: “they had their existing relationships and their way of doing things, and they didn’t want to re-orient their job description around getting more local food into the cafeteria.” He also reported that the chef at another hospital “just couldn’t get organized to use us – he couldn’t get used to our system, and cost was not even an issue.” A final respondent [9] referred to the buying habits of those involved in institutional procurement. For example, he explained that

people were used to buying the same chicken breast all the time ... we could show them something else for the same cost; for example Maple Leaf grows something locally at the same price point ... But you still get those large GPOs still bidding on the cheaper/best value ones.

Such siloed thinking creates an elemental tension between doing business as usual and steering the food system toward more local procurement.

One participant [7] also remarked that the same pattern of siloed thinking was visible in government:

I would argue that the reason that these things happen [the confusion between these regulations] is because the different parts of government work in silos. Does another branch of government [Ministry of Government and Consumer Services] know how much OMAFRA is putting into local economic development? Lack of communication is the real problem. I've been trying to fire up OMAFRA to address the BPS Directive. They [OMAFRA] say, 'oh there are ways to get around it,' and there really isn't.

This combination of major and minor tensions alerts us to some of the many complexities of food procurement. What do these findings mean for developing local food systems and addressing community needs?

## Discussion

These findings provide a window into some of the multiple complexities of food procurement. In many ways, the tensions we found are confusing and contradictory, like the terrain from which they emerge. Food procurement is a convoluted amalgamation of reduced funding, best practices, old habits, binding legislation, and aspirational targets. Within this context, fulfilling the potential of institutions to act as anchors of local food systems is made more challenging. And yet, a decision must be made to enable institutions to work toward this vision; failure to do so preserves a status quo that benefits global corporate food interests and undermines communities. In pursuit of this vision, we argue that the tensions revealed in this study reflect a general values struggle and result from being in a time of transition, not only for food procurement but also for food systems in general. In the view of Lang and Heasman (2015), we are in the middle of a paradigm transition as the Productionist Paradigm that governed food production throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century collapses under the weight of its own contradictions. The outcome as yet is unclear, but they posit a paradigm shift to one of two emerging paradigms. The first is the Life Sciences Integrated Paradigm, which reduces biology to genetics and mines the life sciences. It “seeks control and improvement of nature,” and at its core has “a mechanistic and fairly medicalized interpretation of human and environmental health” (p. 31). With this

paradigm, they argue, the long-term implications for both agricultural environments and the structure and power relationships in the food chain are not known. The second emerging paradigm is the Ecologically Integrated Paradigm, which “emphasizes working with and for ecosystems” (p. 31). It takes an integrative and less industrial approach to nature, recognizing “mutual dependencies, symbiotic relationships and the complexity of interactions” (p. 35). Examples include agroecology, agroforestry, permaculture, organic food systems and “some low impact, resource-conserving short food supply chains” (p. 35). Key factors associated with this paradigm include a high level of social inclusiveness, engaging with small-scale producers, and an overall commitment to low-impact living and food systems, backed by a view of sustainability that encompasses social, environmental, and economic criteria.

This time of transition between paradigms is marked on the one side by a growing public preference for greater transparency and reconnection to food, increased worry about climate destabilization, and unease about the exponentially growing gap between rich and poor, and on the other side by the ongoing consolidation of global corporations, a plethora of trade agreements that reinforce their power, and a concerted attempt on the part of global elites to frame the solutions to the chronic economic, social, and environmental crises in their own interests. One ironic example of the many contradictions of this transition involves global food corporations competing with each other to sell local food.

The tensions we uncovered through the interviews are a symptom of this transition. In the words of one respondent [2], we see “public perception leveraged against companies that don’t buy local.” At the same time an unending parade of trade agreements restrict buying local and proscribe protectionism. Lang and Hines (1993) disrupt this neoliberal interpretation when they maintain that interesting questions arise when we inquire into the meaning of protection, including: “Protection of what? For whom? For what ends? To whose benefit?” (p. 4). To answer these questions, they distinguish between old protectionism, used by big and powerful interests to pursue their own goals, and what they refer to as New Protectionism, which “seeks to protect *public* interests, like health or the environment or safety standards or reduction of poverty, against the interests of unrestrained trade” (p. 7).

Protecting the local, however, does not automatically result in protecting public interests or anything else. As Born and Purcell (2006) remind us, there is nothing inherent in any scale: global is not necessarily bad and local is not necessarily good.

Scale is a means that may help achieve any of many different goals. Which goal is achieved will depend not on the scale itself but on the agenda of those who are empowered by the scalar strategy. Localizing food systems, therefore, does not lead inherently to greater sustainability or to any other goal. It leads wherever those it empowers want it to lead (p. 196).

If the agenda of those empowered at the local scale involves protecting public interests, then protecting the local can provide an opportunity for steering the current transition toward the

Ecologically Integrated Paradigm, keeping in mind Meadows' (2008) advice that one of the most effective places to intervene in a system is at the paradigm level. For Meadows, "The shared idea in the minds of society, the great big unstated assumptions, constitute that society's paradigm, or deepest set of beliefs about how the world works" (pp. 162-163). She goes on to provide examples of these paradigmatic beliefs, such as growth is good, nature's resources were created for human use or people can 'own' land.

In the next section, we briefly outline an intervention at the paradigm level for protecting the local in a time of transition – an intervention based on reframing conceptions of value. This intervention aims for a more ecologically integrated paradigm than the one we are leaving behind.

### Intervening in a system at the paradigm level: Reframing value

The tensions associated with public-sector purchasing can reinforce a culture of cheap food that mistakes best value for lowest cost. This reductionist understanding of value in fact misses the positive externalities of food sourced from and with a system that is resilient and local. Reframing value to a more expansive understanding that extends beyond monetary value to a whole systems understanding of value could be transformational – enhancing value to the institution, its eaters/users, and the food system.

In Ontario, the BPS Procurement Directive sets out that "Contracting and purchasing activities must be fair, transparent, and conducted with a view to obtaining the best value for public money," (BPS, 2011, p. 6). The request for proposal (RFP) is the mechanism that codifies the values of buyers. A more expansive conception of best value beyond lowest cost is possible, but only if there is a way to account for value outside the existing paradigm. The dominant paradigm in institutional purchasing is one that sees value for money in the present, "discounts the future and discounts the impacts of procurement beyond the balance sheet" (Lapalme, 2015, p. 11). A more expansive conception of value that includes social and environmental wellbeing – or a whole systems understanding of value – would empower institutional procurement to leverage its RFP to better deliver greater social and environmental good through its purchasing and menu-setting decisions. Through strategic procurement that leverages the RFP, those who carry out institutional procurement could be curators in a "value constellation" (Normann & Ramirez, 1993) that seeks to optimize the value generated for the whole system. With this objective in mind, value is conceived in such a way that the pattern of extraction across a supply chain consciously transforms into a constellation of stakeholders whose activities increase the total value generated by their interactions. The mechanisms of the system, for example the RFP, are consciously used to affect the roles and relationships within the food system, to better align structural incentives with desired outcomes. For example, institutions can engage in a process of revising their RFP evaluation criteria to catalyze collaborations in the local supply chain that increase community wealth and achieve the desired outcomes of procurement.



Such an enhanced conception of value is encompassed by the work of philosopher John McMurtry (1998; 2002), who posits the life code of value, which reproduces or increases life by providing life goods, or means of life, such as clean air, food, water, and shelter. In the life code of value, life is the regulating objective of thought and action, and a higher quality of life is always better by definition, regardless of the money that can be made. In contrast, he argues, the money code of value increases money through such means as the sale of commodities or speculation in the stock market. In essence, it is the transformation of money into more money. In the money code of value, money is the regulating objective of thought and action, and a larger quantity of money is always better by definition, whatever happens to life. According to McMurtry (2002), we find ourselves in the midst of “value wars” – struggles between the two codes of value.

McMurtry’s value theory can be mapped onto Lang and Heasman’s (2015) theory of paradigm transition. Their Ecologically Integrated Paradigm expresses many life values, while their Life Sciences Integrated Paradigm (a term the reconstructed sector linking food with pharmaceuticals calls itself, which could more aptly be called the Money Sciences Paradigm (Sumner, 2017)) exudes money values. Public health attorney Michelle Simon (2006, p. 318) illustrates the general values struggle in a time of transition when she asks:

Like water (and unlike most other commodities such as toys or electronics), food is indispensable and a basic human right. Why have we turned its production over to private interests? Shouldn’t at least some aspects of society remain off-limits to corporate control?

In the best of all possible worlds, public institutions would operate within the life code of value. However, neoliberal pressures, expressed in trade agreements at the provincial, national, and international level, erode this code of value and insert the money code of value into public policy and decision making. In the area of food procurement, nowhere is this general values struggle more evident than in the phrase, ‘value for money.’

Over 15 years ago, value for money was being touted in a sustainable value-adding model for procurement (Gershon, 2001 in Morgan, 2008, p. 1240):

Our attention is firmly focused on value for money – not simply the lowest price. This means looking at quality and whole life costs, including disposal and packaging, which are areas where environmentally friendly products tend to score well.

In spite of this recognition that value for money should not be confused with low cost, Morgan (2008, p. 1241) observed that “the pressure to realize ‘efficiency savings’ often means that, in practice, these can easily become one and the same thing.” This observation has been confirmed by Olivier de Schutter (2014, p. 5), United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, who points out that since the 1980s, a number of countries have developed “cost-based contracting cultures that systematically favour ‘low cost’ options by stressing value for money in

a limited sense.” He adds that this tendency has empowered traders, intermediaries, and large-scale corporate agri-food companies to lower the prices they pay to farmers. This tendency also plays out in public institutions, where “The measures of success in institutions where value is framed in terms of immediate return to the institution provide few incentives to conceive of value more broadly” (Lapalme, 2015, p. 11).

And yet, if we are looking to intervene in the system at the paradigm level, we need to broaden our conception of value. In the words of Fisher (2013), “the power of purchase must capture a paradigmatic shift from ‘doing things better’ to ‘doing better things’.” Doing better things includes replacing the narrow money values that reduce value to the bottom line with life values that open up the possibilities for protecting the local and supporting communities. Morgan and Morley (2014) provide an outline for such an intervention when they change the conversation by discussing “values for money.”

In their chapter on harnessing the purchasing power of the public plate, Morgan and Morley (2014) observe that for many years “low cost was allowed to masquerade as ‘best value’” (p. 95). In contrast, they emphasize that if the public sector is going to become a credible change agent and champion a more sustainable food system, then it must explicitly adopt a more expansive understanding of value, and measure it as such – embedding and measuring this new understanding in its menus, RFPs, engagements with supply chain actors, and key performance indicators. This paradigm shift on value reframes the service provided by the public institution – and adopts a more expansive understanding of the value that can be claimed or created by the public plate.

We propose that Morgan and Morley’s (2014) concept of values for money represents the life code of value – values that reproduce or increase life (such as public health, social justice, and ecological integrity) and protect communities. Intervening in the food system with such a paradigmatic concept would help us to move through this time of transition toward a new paradigm, one that more closely corresponds to Lang and Heasman’s (2015) Ecologically Integrated Paradigm rather than the Life Sciences Integrated Paradigm. The anchor institution movement (see, for example, Dubb & Howard, 2012; Birch, Perry, & Taylor, 2013) is one example of where we see this happening, and there are many other efforts across multiple jurisdictions, such as the work of MEALexchange to reclaim the student plate and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and its Nourish program to reclaim the health-care plate.

## Conclusion

This study has revealed that food procurement is a complex process exhibiting tensions that reflect the confusion and uncertainty endemic in a time of transition. The tensions that characterize this transition are, in turn, a symptom of the general values struggle being waged in the food system. Intervening in the system at the paradigm level by reframing the concept of value toward a more expansive, whole system understanding of values for money would disrupt

the money values of neoliberalism and infuse life values into the procurement process, thus opening the door to serving up a more transformative public plate in the transnational city. To empower the shift of public sector procurement toward local food systems – a crucial step on the road to sustainability – the ambiguity around ‘best value’ must be resolved, with a more expansive definition supported by measures and evaluation criteria that are supported at the institutional level or broadly mandated at the policy level.

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