



## Perspective Article

**A perspective on social economy and food systems: Key insights and thoughts on future research**

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## Abstract

For a concept that was largely outside of the public gaze a decade ago, “social economy” has, in a short time, captured the attention and imaginations of civil society organizations, mainstream institutions, and funders. Local and national governments, international agencies and foundations are embracing the social economy in an effort to generate new models for development and sustainability. This turn requires clarity and critical reflection on what “the social economy” entails, and its possible future directions. In this Perspective, we shed light on these areas, focusing on issues of sustainability and food systems, and in the process, we advance three arguments. First, context-dependent diversity is a defining characteristic of social economy. Second, though frequently positioned as a counter-point to neoliberalism, the social economy is far broader and more nuanced. Third, research in the social and informal economies of food has opened critical discussions on the appropriate pathways, effectiveness and viability of such initiatives to transform food systems that structurally promote marginalization, exclusion, food insecurity and ill-health for many. In the current rush to brand all things “social economy”, such critical reflection will play a valuable role in shaping the discussion around those transformative pathways. We conclude by suggesting that the study of social economy has to include deliberate

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consideration of its informal manifestations, and that food studies scholars are challenged now to develop a comprehensive body of scholarship that articulates impacts and value of social economy in creative and compelling ways.

Keywords: social economy; informal economy; context-dependent diversity; food systems; social economy of food

## Introduction

For a concept that was largely outside of the public gaze a decade ago, social economy has, in a short time, captured the attention and imaginations of civil society organizations, mainstream institutions, and funders. As evidence of its recent popularity, in September 2018, the McConnell Foundation launched “Garantie Solidaire”, a pilot initiative designed to help Quebec’s social economy organizations. If successful the model could be replicated in other provinces (McConnell Foundation, 2018). In November 2018 the Government of Canada announced the creation of the Social Finance Fund with \$755 million over ten years to help charities and non-profits fund social projects (Dept. of Finance, 2018, pp. 37-38). These initiatives reflect a trend where local and national governments, international agencies and foundations are embracing a particular version of the social economy, in an effort to generate new models for development and sustainability (Downing, McElroy, & Tremblay, 2012, p. 361). This turn requires clarity and critical reflection on what the social economy<sup>1</sup> entails, and its possible future directions. In this Perspective article, we shed light on these areas, focusing on issues of sustainability and food systems, and in the process, we advance three arguments.

First, context-dependent regional diversity is a defining characteristic of social economy. Manifestations of social economy are fluid and intimately connected to their local environment; the rich diversity of social economy initiatives has arisen precisely because they have responded to specific regional needs. While it is possible to identify common attributes that help sustain social economies, the particularity of local context means that attempts at identifying “good practices” to stimulate social economies tend to be in vain.

Second, though frequently positioned as a counter-point to neoliberalism, the social economy is far broader and more nuanced. Today’s social economy grows from deep historical roots with a shared quality: the prioritization of other-than-economic value in the activities that shape society. In this way, the social economy can be seen as responding to the challenges fostered by the neoliberal agenda. But it does so only by overlooking the continuity between the values

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of the “social economy” has no broadly accepted single definition. The breadth of initiatives and practices that can be considered part of the social economy require a flexible understanding of the concept.

promoted in the social economy and historical—often mainstream—efforts to address inequality and social exclusion.

Third, research in the social and informal economies of food has opened critical discussions on the appropriate pathways, effectiveness and viability of such initiatives to transform food systems that structurally promote marginalization, exclusion, food insecurity and ill-health for many. Bringing this new research into conversation with existing food systems work on social and ecological justice will deepen the discussion around those transformative pathways.

We conclude by identifying potential areas for future research, hoping to encourage intellectual and practical collaboration.

### Situating the Social Economy

The early cooperative movement, seen as the foundation of the modern social economy, was catalyzed by working conditions in the early industrial revolution, and offered an alternative vision of the organization of industry based on a balance of social values and priorities (Thompson, 2012). The contemporary social economy similarly responds to a diversity of challenges, exclusions and inequalities with solutions that foreground other-than-economic social priorities.

Aspects of what we now call social economy have existed for centuries in the sense that they can be found wherever “humans have worked communally and shared in the results of their labour” (Fontan & Shragge, 2000, p. 3). The term was formally used for the first time in Canada in *Canada’s Social Economy: Co-operatives, Non-profits, and other Community Enterprises* (Quarter, 1992). In it, Quarter describes the growing third sector in the Canadian economy and explores alternative ownership models and alternatives for managing social services. Since then, a body of scholarship has developed on Canada’s social economy. Amin, Cameron, and Hudson (2002) offer the following definition of social economy in their frequently cited book, *Placing the Social Economy*:

The social economy...consists of non-profit activities designed to combat social exclusion through socially useful goods sold in the market and which are not provided for by the state or the private sector. The social economy generates jobs and entrepreneurship by meeting social needs and very often by deploying the socially excluded (p. vii).

This explanation positions the economy as filling a gap that the state and free market are unable, or unwilling, to fill. This familiar characterization suggests that crises are prerequisite—Defourny and Develterre maintain that social economy organizations develop out of “conditions of necessity” (1999, p. 22). Yet, while specific pre-conditions may define the gap, the nature of a social economy initiative is defined by how it goes about filling that gap.

Echoing original cooperative movement principles, Sonnino and Trevarthen-Griggs (2013) identify “the synergy between economic and social goals, rather than the pursuit of profit” as the baseline for defining social economy (p. 274). This theme runs through the academic literature and is championed within practitioner communities. The Canadian Community Economic Development Network’s definition, premised on the one upheld by the Chantier de l’économie sociale, Québec’s institutionalized social economy network, similarly states:

The Social Economy consists of association-based economic initiatives founded on values of:

- service to members of community rather than generating profits
- autonomous management (not government or market controlled)
- democratic decision making
- primacy of persons and work over capital
- based on principles of participation, empowerment

(Canadian Social Economy Research Partnership, n.d., p. 3)

The emphasis on participation and democratic decision-making in this list of values is noteworthy. Downing et al. (2012) compare strong versus weak social economy, highlighting the role of political actions in maximizing the potential of and benefits to communities. Weak social economy approaches fail to fundamentally challenge the structures that constrain social, economic and environmental outcomes.

Equality and redistribution remain high on the agenda within a strong social economy (Downing et al. 2012, p. 342). As Jan (2009) explains “The social economy is a ‘bottom-up’ concept co-constructed by the actors who make up or take up space in the social economy in their localities. Place, community and participatory democracy can be seen to be important cornerstones for engaged social and economic activity” (p. 20). Social economy thus upholds a number of principles that aim to redirect economies to produce greater social and ecological benefits.

### Context-dependent diversity

Social economy’s common elements can be identified, but an all-encompassing definition remains elusive. We argue that context (most often, though not exclusively, place-based) is a critical aspect behind the diversity of social economies that have emerged across Canada and continue to unfold today. To illustrate this, we briefly explore the unique manifestations of social economy in Québec and Northern Ontario.

Québec’s advanced model of social economy has garnered interest from around the world. Some argue that Québec is the only Canadian province to boast a formal social economy

sector thanks, in good measure, to provincial government policies (Arsenault, 2018, p. 77). While farmer-owned, non-profit cooperatives profoundly shaped the economic and social landscape of many rural communities across Canada in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the last thirty years many of these efforts have been dismantled. Quebec's collective enterprises, social movements and territorial intermediaries are woven together through participatory networks and multi-stakeholder partnerships (Mendell & Neamtam, 2009, p. 1). The Chantier de L'économie sociale—an independent, non-partisan organization that supports social enterprises and participatory governance—a pillar of Québec's social economy.

The reasons behind Québec's success are many, with some pointing to its well-developed cooperative movement, a progressive political tradition and a culture rich in social capital (Charron, 2012, p. 4). Participatory governance is another feature of Québec's social economy and has led to the uptake of comprehensive policy tools (Mendell & Neamtam, 2009). This complexity of factors may be helpful as others seek to develop equally advanced social economies in their particular locales.

The influences of place on the development of the regional social economy can also be observed in the case of Northern Ontario. As with many regions of Canada's North, Northern Ontario has a mixed economy. Communities are sustained through a combination of wage-labour alongside traditional hunting and subsistence activities. Southcott and Walker (2009) also identify the continued importance of the State in Northern communities, the dependence on large-scale resource extraction projects as well as a lack of "stakeholder" culture as impacting the way the social economy continues to uniquely develop in these areas (p. 16).

The particular way in which the social economy and its informal incarnations manifest in Northern Ontario is likely rooted in the strength of long-held traditional values such as sharing, interdependence, cooperation and reciprocity—evident amongst the region's Indigenous populations (Abele & Southcott, 2007). These values are intimately aligned with the concept of social economy but predate it by thousands of years. Within traditional economies, consumption is practiced as a reciprocal exchange, meant to benefit communities as a whole, including other living beings and the nature upon which we all depend (LeBlanc, 2014; Simpson & Driben, 2000).

Geographic and demographic constraints limit the neoliberal economy's reach in Canada's North. Indeed, Nelson and Stroink (forthcoming) note how, "the mechanisms of the capitalist economy do not in and of themselves enable the development of the transportation and distribution networks that are required for market access by small processors and producers in a large geographic area with sparse population". In such remote areas, only the most "efficient" options—as measured by global food system standards—tend to prevail. This leaves consumers who want more choice and producers looking for greater control over their markets with little option but to establish informal market activity. Therefore, when scale, social consensus and organization is warranted, these underserved regions mobilize to support social economy initiatives.

The thwarted reach of neoliberalism in Northern Ontario and the semi-institutionalized development of the social economy in Quebec are evidence of two complementary realities: the “uneven development of neoliberalization”, spawned by unique contextual variations (Brenner et al. 2010, p. 331); and post-neoliberal governance, which embraces “(re)mobilization, recognition, and valuation of multiple, local forms of development, rooted in local cultures, values, and movements” (Brenner et al, 2010). Mount and Andrée (2013) suggest that this subtle shift toward non-neoliberal governance “constitutes an important point of egress... allowing local and regional actors to re-frame their relations in a common-sense manner, and negotiate regionally responsive policies and regulation” (p. 588). This assertion adds breadth and nuance to the common interpretation of social economy as a response to or refinement of neoliberal capitalism. The case of Northern Ontario and the uneven application of neoliberalism bring to the light the necessarily place-based nature of social economy.

### Relationship to neoliberalism

Since the concept and many of the associated initiatives arose in a void framed by the withdrawal of the state and the rise of unfettered corporate interests, the social economy is sometimes referred to as the “third sector” (see e.g., Beckie and Bacon, 2019). This description draws attention to the fact that, in the current global context, the state has in many ways abdicated the roles that offered a counterbalance to laissez-faire ideology, while those who work to fill the void have been ghettoized. Where Polanyi (1944) identified a counter-movement encouraging the state to protect against the destruction and excess inherent in market forces, that role increasingly falls to civil society actors who are constructing social economy alternatives while operating without the power and resources of the state.

However, the term “social economy” conceals a diversity of approaches, interests and goals. For some, the social economy is a reaction to social inequalities and environmental degradation that have been exacerbated by neoliberalism (Amin, 2009a). But the social economy is not merely the antithesis to neoliberalism, indeed:

- 1) It can run in parallel, rather than counter, to capitalism particularly where initiatives arise within communities;
- 2) It can be used as a tool of neoliberalism, as is the case when needs are turned into markets;
- 3) It can deepen neoliberalism, which is evident through the rapidly growing impact investment sector where social and environmental values are conceptualized as add-ons to traditional investing

This list suggests a more nuanced relationship between neoliberal capitalism and social economy than may be evident at first blush. Meanwhile, other scholars view social economy more as a subversive force, one that has transformative potential to “prize open the possibilities

of a post-capitalist future” (Hudson, 2009, p. 508). The contours of the social economy differ considerably amongst scholars.

Empirical evidence shows that all of these scholars are correct to some extent. While some social economy initiatives—explicitly or surreptitiously—stand in stark contrast with neoliberal economy, others work alongside it (Amin, 2009b). However, all engage to some extent with this ubiquitous system. One of the most significant challenges many of them face is the ability to effectively demonstrate the value of their work in a political and economic environment that constricts our notions of value (i.e., that defines value on neoliberal terms). In some cases, that challenge may account for the apparent variations in initiatives’ alignment with the neoliberal economy.

### The social economy of food

Focusing on the social economy of food extends previous work on alternative food systems that actively integrates social values, alternative economic models, ecologically sound practices, cultural meanings, and environmental values (Blay-Palmer et al., 2013; Knezevic, Blay Palmer, Levkoe, Mount, & Nelson, 2017). To date, significant research has been undertaken to understand food-related issues embedded within contemporary food systems (Friedmann, 2009; Koc, Sumner & Winson, 2016; Weiss, 2007; Winson, 2013), the cost of food and food access (Williams et al., 2012a, 2012b), the impacts of food insecurity on disadvantaged communities (Green-Lapierre et al. 2012; Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2011; Power 2008), organic agriculture networks (Sumner & Llewelyn, 2010), sustainable community food initiatives (Levkoe, 2014) and more general food policy (MacRae & Abergel, 2012).

As well, literature on grassroots food initiatives demonstrates opportunities for greater equity, sustainability and development through activities outside of the formal economy that aim to reconnect communities and their natural and built environments (Patel, 2009; Connelly et al., 2011; Sonnino & Trevathen-Griggs, 2013; Sumner, 2012; Wittman, Beckie, & Hergesheimer, 2012). Building from feminist, political economy, and political ecology literatures, this work documents the value(s) and spaces for change to include food system and related activities that are categorized as informal and therefore not widely perceived as contributing to the economy. It also allows for creative consideration of ways in which marginalized economic activities can be mainstreamed to build economic resilience where the neoliberal economy has failed to do so, creating space for a social economy analysis (Donald, 2009; Blay-Palmer, 2008).

From a food systems perspective, critics of neo-liberalism suggest that the neo-liberal economic system undervalues the informal economy by marginalizing small-scale (or peasant) producers and production, especially subsistence production by women (Shiva, 1988), and perpetuates neo-imperialist notions of development (Knezevic, 2014). Close examination of informal economic activity within the food system offers an opportunity to make the social and environmental justice—as well as economic—contributions of such activities more transparent.

As Alkon and Agyeman (2011) explain, “Our desire is not merely to better understand the effects of institutional racism and economic inequality in the food system but also to help to create a broad, multiracial, and multiclass movement that can challenge the dominance of industrial agriculture and help to create something more sustainable and just” (p. 322). Central here is the intersection of food and social justice, including questions of gender and class inequalities in relation to food production and distribution, food access and quality, and income and health (Patel, 2009). In the Canadian context, this raises questions about the issues of migrant labour, creating living-wage jobs in food production, the lack of small-scale food processing, and Indigenous people’s loss of food-producing lands. Alternative food systems research explores how a social economy, particularly its informal manifestations, counters neoliberal inequities and creates space for alternatives—for social relations, gifting and sharing, exchange (of material goods and labour), fostering traditional knowledge (Turner, Davidson-Hunt & O’Flaherty, 2003), and community development (Wekerle, 2004). Social economy also focuses on the range of stewardship activities undertaken by volunteers, farmers and other citizens to remediate or mitigate environmental degradation (Francis et al., 2003; IPES-Food, 2016). Our empirical work with community partners also indicates that such initiatives foster civic engagement, political literacy, and advocacy, working to not only embody the change they want to see, but also to influence traditional levers of power (Andrée, Clark, Levkoe & Lowitt, 2019; Knezevic et al., 2017; Levkoe, 2011; Mount et al., 2013).

Research on the social economy of food provides opportunities to add to the critical literature on alternative and industrial food systems. It also enables an exploration of how communities challenge socially constructed markets and forms of governance and instead reconstruct their socio-economic relations in ways that better support their individual and collective well-being, ecosystems, and cultural and knowledge systems. However, the research must critically assess whether projects are facilitating a turn to a more socially and environmentally informed economy, whether they provide what Portes and Haller (2005) described as “social cushioning”, or whether these activities are letting the state off the hook and further marginalizing those who need assistance the most.

## Conclusion and future research

The social economy has and will continue to support alternative sustainable food systems in Canada and is worthy of more engaged research from food scholars. The literature that explores the intersection between food systems and social economy remains quite limited but is beginning to garner interest. We see two directions for future research, acknowledging that there is much more to explore.

First, the study of social economy has to include deliberate consideration of its informal manifestations. Food sharing, for instance, is garnering attention of Indigenous and Indigenist scholars, but does not seem to be given the same consideration by social economy researchers.



The study of food and foodways may offer an opportunity to bridge the gap between social and informal economy scholarship.

Second, the growing interest in social economy from academics, practitioners and policy-makers is testament to its potential in addressing some of today's most pressing issues. However, practitioners and scholars alike struggle to make compelling arguments about the value of social economy activities. Constrained by contemporary language that tends to associate "value" with monetary, capitalist economy, they find it difficult to demonstrate the social and environmental impacts of such activities in ways that effectively impact policy and institutions. This is changing, as noted in the opening paragraphs of this essay, and we are challenged now to make the case for social economy by developing a comprehensive body of scholarship that articulates impacts and value in creative and compelling ways. We invite fellow food scholars to join us in that effort.

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