



Guest Editorial

Introduction to the special issue on the social and informal economy of foodIrena Knezevic^{a*}, Charles Z. Levkoe^b, Phil Mount^a, Connie Nelson^b^a Carleton University^b Lakehead University

Within the dominant political and economic logic, people are considered to be self-interested, profit-seeking, utility-maximizing creatures. Critics, however, argue that people are better conceived of as members of complex social and ecological systems, whose choices are deeply embedded in social relationships and ecological context (Bourdieu, 1998; Ophuls 2000; Patel, 2009; Siebenhüner, 2000). Recent work on the concept of *social economy* focuses on actual and existing initiatives that foreground social and environmental values, yet still recognize the importance of economic viability. While research suggests that such initiatives may be sites of significant innovation and creativity (Downing, 2012, Gibson-Graham 2006, Leyshon et al. 2003), work to date has focused heavily on cooperatives and social enterprises, with significantly less attention paid to activities that are not so formally structured.

While both the concepts of *social economy* and *informal economy* have traditionally been regarded as separate areas of research, findings from a number of Canadian studies indicate significant overlap between the two (Knezevic, 2015; Teitelbaum & Beckley, 2006; Thomson & Emmanuel, 2012). First, both share an emphasis on personal relationships, trust, and non-market values—which are inherently challenging to define, and often impossible to quantify. Second, both offer spaces for non-traditional forms of innovation as well as opportunities for deep insights into social relationships, cultural meanings, and environmental values. Most importantly, both challenge us to think of economic systems in far more complex ways than mainstream economic theory would propose (Ostrom, 2010).

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*Corresponding author: irena.knezevic@carleton.ca

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As the Nourishing Communities Research Group¹, we have been engaged in community-based research of food systems for over a decade. In 2014, and with the financial support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, we started exploring social and informal economies of food. We aimed to examine the transformative potential of food initiatives committed to social and environmental values that included, but went far beyond, economic benefit. Nourishing Communities is based at the Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems in Waterloo, Ontario, but it is community-based, and its academic researchers are scattered throughout Canada and beyond.

This expansive network allowed us to work-in-place with community food initiatives that operate in diverse geographic and social contexts. We have used case studies to identify and document a spectrum of multifunctional social economy of food activities where people trade and share material resources and skills, at times, in informal ways. The case studies and interviews have been grounded in community-based research as a way to develop a clearer sense of issues, and dig into specific challenges as identified by the community partners. Working within groups over an extended period of time has enabled a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities, which we are exploring through ongoing engagement.

After five years of this research, we reflect on what we learned—from each individual case study, and from those studies as a whole. In this special issue, we offer a set of papers and field reports that detail the work of several community food initiatives, link our observations to broader bodies of literature in food studies and in social economy, and invite other researchers to engage in this discussion and collective efforts.

Our collection is driven by the following questions: What are the gaps in our current understandings of food economies? How do social and informal economy initiatives contribute to community well-being? How do we find better ways to demonstrate the value and acknowledge the under-recognized contributions of community food initiatives to social and environmental well-being, and how do we support them in continuing this work?

The collection begins with a perspective piece by Stephens, Nelson, Levkoe, Mount, Knezevic, Blay-Palmer, and Martin, which synthesizes key concepts of social economy as relevant to the study of food and food systems. Next, Poitevin DesRivières examines fruit rescue as an exemplar of initiatives that blur the line of social and informal economy. Nelson, Stroink, Levkoe, Kakegamic, McKay, Stolz, and Streutker draw on a complexity science approach to analyse four case studies situated in Northwestern Ontario to demonstrate key features of social economy of food systems. Stephens, Knezevic and Best analyze community investment in Nova Scotia, as a pathway to both economic development and community resilience. Martin offers a feminist perspective on how community food initiatives contribute to social reproduction. Worden-Rogers, Glasgow, Knezevic, and Hughes consider how collective efforts of seed saving

¹ See www.nourishingcommunities.ca

offer insights into other-than-economic value generated by such initiatives, from biological biodiversity to social capital. Barron looks to community orchards to examine gift economy and the complex social interactions involved in organizing and maintaining contemporary “commons”. Finally, Martin, Knezevic, and Ballamingie synthesize the collective work we undertook, by examining how food initiatives nourish communities through “power-with” practices.

Several of the articles come with accompanying videos that we co-produced with the community partners.² As a collection, these writings and videos are intended to contribute to existing debates and enrich a long overdue conversation in food studies.

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² Readers can find the complete video playlist at <https://tinyurl.com/y355smnv>.

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