

Organizing for Food Systems Change

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Chapter Highlights

- A case study of farmers and engaged citizens working collectively to better their communities, challenge government policy and to fight for a more just and sustainable food system.
- The case chronicles and analyzes the creation of different dynamic organizational or “mobilizing structures” in the Canadian Province of Manitoba that emerged in response to a controversial food safety raid on a local farm.
- Through critical self-analysis, Participatory Action Research can open up opportunities for protagonists in social movement organizing to critically examine their own practice in order to strategically resist cooptation and pursue transformative change.



Photo 1 -

Introduction

Discontent with the shortcomings of the global corporate food system is giving rise to a wide range of projects, organizations and groups working to develop alternatives and to transform the food system (Holt-Giménez and Shuttuck, 2011). In North America and Europe, there has been an upsurge of local food initiatives seeking to connect farmers and eaters as co-producers of localized food systems (Renting et al., 2012). These initiatives include direct farm marketing schemes, farmers markets, food hubs, community supported agriculture and local food cooperatives; they generally seek autonomy from the corporate food regime and to create more just and sustainable relations around food.

While sustainable local food systems have grown over the last decade, many challenges prevent these grassroots innovations from reaching their full potential. Some have argued that local food proponents are too focused on individualism and entrepreneurship (Guthman, 2008), that local food activism mostly caters to the white middle class (Cadieux and Slocum, 2015a, b) and that a focus on local pragmatism can undermine broader processes of transformation (Holt-Gimenez, 2015). Indeed, decades of neoliberalism have shaped the way people think about food activism and how to achieve food system change. Further, government regulation and policy, food prices, and consumer expectations have all be influenced by corporate industrial food in ways that undermine the development and scaling up and out of alternative food systems and politics (Laforge, Anderson and McLachlan, forthcoming). Thus, while local food systems are emerging from the bottom up, carried out by individuals and groups developing pragmatic alternatives, it is essential to strategically address how food producers and citizens can enact a wider range of tactics, strategies and politics to take back control over food and agriculture policy and practice. In this context, any efforts to transform the food system must involve a conscious and strategic struggle to build food sovereignty at multiple scales.

Food sovereignty provides a framework that is uniting citizens around the world in a global struggle for a more just and sustainable food system (Desmarais and Wittman, 2015; Wittman, Desmarais and Wiebe, 2010). It represents an alternative, politicized, and radical approach to food system transformation emphasizing the need to place control over food systems and food policy into the hands of farmers and eaters rather than with elite institutions and corporations (Nyéléni Declaration, 2007). For those involved in the pragmatic work of developing local food systems in the global north, food sovereignty implies a re-orientation towards working collectively to challenge the politics, institutions and structures of the dominant

food system, to focus on power relations in the food system and to work across scales of organization (Iles & Montenegro de Witt, 2015). Fundamental to this process, is the development of collective mobilizing structures (Tarrow, 1998), such as networks and organizations that provide the organizational mechanisms to develop collective identity, critical analysis and platforms for sustained collective action.

Tarrow (1998) suggests that there is no single model of social movement organization but discusses how the different types of mobilizing structures available to social movements are implicated in the agency and success of movements. More formalized and hierarchical non-government organizations are often well resourced and more conducive to sustained activities. They are also better suited to interfacing with authorities and more mainstream allies (Levkoe, 2015). However, formal NGOs have also been criticized for losing much of their capacity for disruption and for their propensity to become coopted into the agenda of mainstream or reformist projects (Choudry and Kapoor, 2013). In this regard, more autonomous, horizontally organized groups and networks are better suited as a mobilizing structure for more politicized and contentious activity. Yet, decentralized and autonomous groups can lack coordination and connectivity. Thus, Tarrow (1998, p. 137) proposes, “a delicate balance between formal organization and autonomy - one that can only be bridged by strong, informal, nonhierarchical connective structures.”

In this chapter we focus on and argue that it is important to understand the politics, strategies, collective structures and organizational governance that arise as farmers and allies come together to ‘organize for food system change’. We present a participatory action research (PAR) project from the Canadian Prairies where citizens are self-organizing to challenge the policies and regulations that limit the development of sustainable local food systems. Our narrative begins with a controversial raid by government food safety inspectors on a local farm and tracks the various grassroots responses and organizational forms that emerged in the wake of this catalyzing event. We critically examine how established norms, practices and pressures towards mainstream forms of Non-Government Organizations have the potential to de-politicize, channel dissent and undermine more confrontational approaches. We chronicle our struggle to cope with the difficult tension between addressing the immediate need for pragmatic reform and the longer-term aspirations towards transformative change. Our PAR approach has provided an important opportunity to engage in reflective self-critical dialogue to contend with these dilemmas in collective processes of learning and action. Indeed, we discuss the potential of PAR as an approach that can help social movement actors collectively contend with the contradictions that arise when interacting with mainstream policies, institutions and culture while organizing for social change. The remainder of this chapter provides an account of our PAR project, focusing first on describing the background of the case study, then on the different mobilizing structures that have been pursued in our case, and finally by reflecting on some of the main debates and choices made by participants in these efforts.

The Participatory Action Research Case Study

This chapter is based on a PAR process carried out by participants in a network called Sharing the Table Manitoba (STM). PAR is a collaborative process that combines critical analysis and action to work towards addressing practical and political challenges (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). For us, this has been comprised of iterative cycles of observation, reflection, planning and action with each cycle leading to increased capacity for action, learning and change (Anderson and McLachlan, 2015; Kemmis et al., 2014). Our goal through this process was to apply our collective analysis to better understand how we could most effectively organize our efforts to gain political agency and to adapt our strategies based on this analysis. In this way, we wanted to learn more about the world by working together to try to change it. The PAR team has been facilitated by Sivilay and Anderson, but has involved a wider evolving collective of farmers, researchers and eaters involved in Sharing the Table who committed to adopting a PAR approach to develop and document our work and whose voices are represented in the case study below. We facilitated the PAR process as a part of a commitment to collectively observing and analyzing the evolving political situation in the province, carrying out actions as individuals or as a group and reflecting on these actions to inform further planning and action. We documented this process through note-taking, recordings of our group debates and from qualitative interviews, which form the basis of the narrative presented as a case study for this chapter.

In August 2013, the Provincial Government in Manitoba (Canada) raided and confiscated the cured meats from the local, mixed farm of Clint and Pam Cavers. Ironically, just months earlier, the same Provincial Government had awarded a prize to the Cavers for these same cured meats as the most exciting new farm product in Manitoba (Anderson 2013). The raid resulted in the destruction of their products, a \$1600 fine, damages to their reputation and loss of years of testing and product development. While the province claimed to have ‘non-physical evidence’ that the Cavers sold these meat products illegally, these allegations were denied by the Cavers and the government would eventually drop the charges without ever producing any evidence.

The raid was widely considered to be unwarranted and unfair, but also to reflect more pervasive problems with a provincial regulatory and policy framework and culture that undermines the autonomy of food producers and inhibits the development of localised food systems (Laforge et al., 2016). The event sparked a surge of political organising amongst farmers, citizens and other allies in Manitoba to advocate for changes to these policies and institutions and to ensure that small farmers have more control over policy and practice related to local food systems.

Who are “we”?

Jeanette, Colin and Kenton have all been actively involved as participants and animators in the work described in this article and have written this through their work as members of the action research committee of Sharing the Table Manitoba. Jeanette is a farmer and community organizer and has acted as the coordinator of Sharing the Table Manitoba. Colin is a Participatory Action Researcher, worked as an organizer in the Real Manitoba Food Fight and has been involved in other related community food organizations in Manitoba over the last eight years. Kenton is a food grower, teacher at Canadian Mennonite University, a member of the Sharing the Table Manitoba steering committee and has been involved in a range of related community food initiatives in Manitoba over the past decade including the Manitoba CSA network and the Manitoba Food Charter. This narrative and analysis is based on a participatory action research project and draws on the experiences of the authors as well as dialogue with the wider group of participants involved in Sharing that Table Manitoba.



Video 1 – video about the Real Manitoba Food fight – a campaign to contest the industrial orientation of food safety regulations in Manitoba and the lack of support for community food systems. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1F6sCPMlm8>

While there have been many food activists in Manitoba who embrace a more critical stance and push a more radical agenda in their work, there has generally been an absence in the province of an organization to amplify these critical voices in debates around local food. The most prominent province-wide NGO working to promote local food systems is Food Matters Manitoba, which emerged out of the process of creating the Manitoba Food Charter. In 2005 an ad hoc volunteer group made up of individuals and representatives from grassroots groups led an extensive process of community deliberation through seventy public meetings between people from rural, urban and northern Manitoba to write the Manitoba Food Charter (Manitoba Food Charter, 2005). The Food Charter, as a document, represented a broad call for citizens and government to work towards community food security, food justice and for greater involvement of the public in policy making (Lobe, 2005).

The participatory process that led to the food charter was an important moment of grassroots organizing, solidarity building and articulation of a holistic vision of food systems change for Manitoba. It also led to the formation of Food Matters Manitoba as an NGO that would carry forward the vision and momentum of the Food Charter. Over the last decade, close ties with public health department of the Provincial Government and a strong track record in securing funding from multiple levels of government has allowed Food Matters Manitoba to bring together a diversity of actors from civil society, and the private and public sector to work towards community food security and to deliver a wide range of community food programs. However,

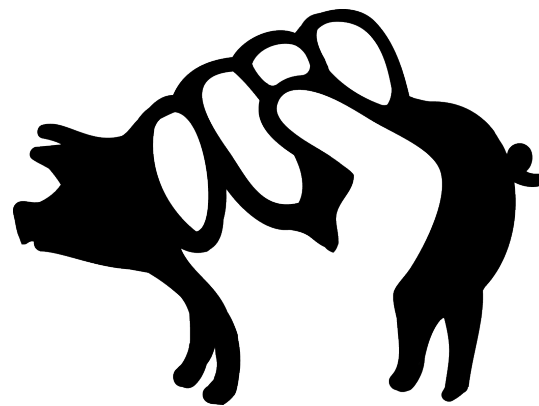


Figure 1 - The Real Manitoba Food Fight logo.

Food Matters Manitoba has also avoided advancing a more critical perspective that directly confronts government – for example they intentionally avoid using the explicitly radical food sovereignty discourse to frame their work. Further, while Food Matters has had a strong presence in Northern and Urban areas of the province, they have had less success in connecting with small farmers and rural areas. In this context, when the Cavers farm raid occurred, many felt that there was an absence of an organizational body that represented the needs of small farmers engaged in local food networks and there was a need to develop collective capacity to engage in more critical and political strategies to affect change.

Three mobilizing structures developed in the wake of the Cavers Farm Raid

The incident on the Cavers farm led to the emergence of three interrelated mobilizing structures that developed chronologically and were advanced as vehicles through which farmers, eaters and allies could work politically to develop local food systems in Manitoba.

1. The Real Manitoba Food Fight (Established in August 2013)

The raid on the Cavers Farm coincidentally occurred as a class from the University of Manitoba was scheduled to visit the farm. Members of the class recorded video of the confrontation, and used the footage as the basis of a short video to raise awareness about the issues, beginning the first of these collective structures: a campaign called “The Real Manitoba Food Fight” (video 1, figure 1). Originally coordinated by a student group from the class, the campaign became animated by an ad hoc collective of farmers, chefs, students and researchers through a series of meetings, op-eds and social media communications. The campaign aimed to develop a critical and politicized voice around local food systems in Manitoba, focusing on discussing the raid, raising awareness of the unclear and inconsistent regulatory environment that small farmers and processors are subject to, and establishing a place where citizens could participate in dialogue around these issues. While the website and social media platforms for the Real Manitoba Food Fight remain on-line, the campaign has been largely inactive. The campaign was effective as a single-issue mobilizing structure in a particular political moment, however was not viewed as a suitable structure for long-term mobilization. As the initial enthusiasm and political tensions that arose in response to the Cavers incident subsided, participants in these efforts grappled with the challenge of how to extend these energies to enable more proactive and sustained political organizing on these issues in Manitoba.

Sharing the Table Manitoba (Established in September, 2013)

The Real Manitoba Food Fight thus foregrounded the formation of a network called “Sharing the Table Manitoba” (STM)¹ which involved a similar contingent of people, but was intended to be a more durable entity that could bring together different actors to work together. Sharing the Table Manitoba was developed as an informal network, rather than a formally constituted non-government organization, driven forward initially by a transitional steering group. STM has involved participation from individuals from long established organizations working on food issues in the province including from the National Farmers Union, the Farmers Market Association of Manitoba, Food Matters Manitoba, Small Farms Manitoba, Manitoba Alternative Food Research Alliance, the University of Manitoba, the University of Winnipeg, Canadian Mennonite University, various chefs, small farmers and their eater allies. The breadth of these perspectives has allowed the network to strategically discuss the issues from multiple perspectives in ways that enable the individuals and groups to pursue joint strategies and to support the decentralized work represented by each participant.

¹ Early on, this network was named “Farmers and Eaters Sharing the Table” or FEAST but the name was changed to be more inclusive of a wider diversity of actors including hunters, fisherfolk, chefs, retailers and other allies in grassroots struggle to build local food systems.

Sharing the Table Manitoba has thus operated as a horizontally structured meeting place, modelled after the metaphor of a community meal, where people can come together regularly and convivially to share ideas, strengthen relationships and to contribute to a grassroots food movement in the province. The name also implies a certain level of informality, which has been a defining feature of STM where the intent has been to remain as a coordinated yet decentralized network rather than a structured organization. The effectiveness of this informal format and mode of organizing as the basis for this mobilizing structure was however debated by the council of Sharing the Table Manitoba, especially in light of calls for a formal NGO to represent the interests of small farmers to government.

Direct Farm Marketing Association of Manitoba (Established in March, 2016)

In January 2015, partly in response to the pressure exerted through the Real Manitoba Food Fight, the Provincial Government mandated a Small Scale Food Working Group to address the concerns of small-scale farmers and direct farm marketing in Manitoba. This group coordinated a process of consultation to generate a report of over twenty recommendations to government on how to increase support for small farms in Manitoba (Small Scale Food Working Group). Several members of this working group were also participants in Sharing the Table Manitoba, engaging the wider network in conversations on these issues, sharing information and gathering feedback. The report was considered by many to include a range of promising recommendations, some of which have since been acted upon including adding new extension staff focusing on supporting local food systems, examining methods through which small farms can better operate within the supply management system and, most directly relevant to this chapter, that government should, “facilitate a process to allow small scale producers to organize themselves” (Small Scale Food Working Group, 2015, p. 48).

Following this latter recommendation, the Provincial Government – along with farmers who participated in the production of the report – hosted a meeting in November 2015 to develop interest in starting this organization. The meeting included over fifty farmers and resulted in the formation of a volunteer steering committee to move forward with the creation of a formal, sector-based organization. This group decided to approach an already existing, but largely inactive organization, called the Farmers Market Association of Manitoba as a potential home for a new sector based organization that in March 2015 would be constituted as the, “Direct Farm Marketers Association of Manitoba.” Some of the key individuals at the helm of this new working group are also participants in STM. Indeed, individuals moved fluidly between these different mobilizing structures reflecting shifting priorities and opportunities over time.

Unpacking the Politics of Organizing

Seeking Legitimacy

If mobilizing structures are to be effective as vehicles of social change, they must gain legitimacy and recognition in order to encourage participation. Thus, participants in Sharing the Table Manitoba frequently discussed how and with whom to gain legitimacy as an important element of engaging effectively with farmers, policy makers, the public and other actors implicated in efforts to create change in practice and policy. Legitimacy can be seen as a form of social capital; a mobilizing structure obtains legitimacy if considered an appropriate body, network, or space to pursue collective goals. Where legitimacy is lacking in mobilizing structures, initiatives and efforts can be hampered and participants demoralized over time as it becomes apparent they are not taken seriously (Iles & Montenegro de Witt, 2015).

It was clear however that the question of ‘with whom’ to gain legitimacy was important in terms of choosing how the group presented itself externally, what kinds of actions were taken and what organizational form was developed. Some felt strongly the network should focus on working

closely with, and gaining legitimacy from government, which aligned well with the recommendations of the government commissioned Small Farm Working Group report. Others, felt legitimacy should be sought among grassroots actors involved in local food systems, to create an organizational space and structure that was more autonomous of government. The latter were more interested in a critical and possibly confrontational approach to bring citizens together to debate key issues, raise public consciousness about food sovereignty and challenge the dominance of large-scale industrial food systems. The hope was to provide an otherwise absent critical and politicized voice that would hold government to account and push for the inclusion of grassroots actors in policy-making.



It's essential. Not only to form a lobby group to government, to [also] be reactionary. I mean, we have to if government is going to... maintain an attitude of control, then there is going to be constant need for that kind of public reaction. (David Neufeld)

These debates played out in the discussions around organizational governance. Some felt that a formal member-based organization was the best and only path to being recognized by institutional actors and to gaining access to decision-making spaces of the Provincial Government.

... you have to have had your validity step. The step where you show who your members are. (Kate Storey)

For participants accustomed to working on advocacy with government, a member-based organisation was the most obvious route to having influence over policy. However, others sought to pursue a more open ended, flexible, network-based approach not driven by the desire for legitimacy from government and one that would avoid cordoning off participation to members-only.



...there are more ways to create legitimacy than being recognized by the government. We speak up and make our voice louder we create that kind of legitimacy as well. (Terry Mireau)



...legitimacy comes from the people involved. There is a lot of power in us meeting and having on-going meetings and inviting other people to meet because these discussions are always important. Even to support each other – people who are eating the food, growing the food, people who are interested in food sovereignty issues – it is valuable for us to get together. (Lydia Carpenter)



Thus, participants felt that the wider networking, public awareness and discussion that were facilitated by STM and the Real Manitoba Food Fight could be the basis of a social form of legitimacy that may be considered more relevant to many than formal recognition by government,



I agree that we probably do need a valid structure for some activities as Kate has said. But then to agree with Lydia that that structure, the official structure does not really confirm our legitimacy or validity in terms of popular opinion or appearing as though we represent the groups that we do or getting our side of the story known in the media. The PR does not really require a valid structure at this point. We probably need both but in the mean time, before we have a valid structure, we should still be pushing forward on putting out press releases and meeting and talking to other groups and things like that. (Curtis Brown)

Compartmentalization

In response to the government-mandated Small Scale Food Working Group report, both government and other farmers called for the creation of a new *industry* or *sector group* for small-scale farmers. However, participants in STM were concerned that the 'sector' group model conflicted with the more holistic and alternative aims and values of STM to be based on collaboration amongst a wider set of actors in the food system,



[There is a recommendation that puts] small-scale food marketing people into one of the boxes that the government has already created for everybody else. They put pigs in a box, beef in a box, eggs in a box, they create a commodity organization and they like to look at everything in isolation. (Kate Storey)

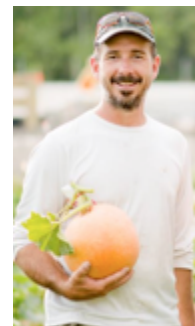
The exclusion of consumers was considered to be problematic. Indeed, STM took the position that local food system development should be farmer-led, but be inclusive of the participation of consumer-citizens and other allies. Thus, the reductive sector-based approach risked undermining the strength of an approach that would include the active participation of urban people who co-produce local food systems:



But with direct farm marketers we all know our customers, and we know all our processors, we know all the people who handle our food and so it's natural and right that it be a more diverse group. (David Neufeld)

The sector approach is based on an implicit framing of farmers as removed from eaters, and these groups as having competing interests despite the intention of direct connections and solidarity that is promoted as a basis of local food systems. A compartmentalized approach also hijacks the intention to pursue joint interests between farmers and eaters, and opportunities to form cooperative and mutually beneficial modes of exchange and social relationships. Kenton articulated these concerns in one of the STM meetings:

[We need to hold on to] that piece that invites a broader understanding of the food system that includes eaters and does not segment... Yes, there are difficult policy conversations, but part of our argument, I think – part of the food sovereignty argument, anyway – is that eaters and growers are inherently connected. Growers are eaters. We do not want to participate in that segmenting out. (Kenton Lobe, STM meeting)



The exclusion of consumers also frames their input and participation in matters of agriculture, processing and food distribution as irrelevant and effectively leaves consumers without a voice in these debates.

It is also clear that the dominant emphasis of this work has been on western white settler food systems, which has inadvertently excluded indigenous food producers. None of the three mobilizing structures - the Real Manitoba Food Fight, Sharing the Table Manitoba and the Direct Farm Marketers Association – have made efforts to widen their network out to include first nations groups, who clearly have common issues, although from a different historical, cultural and political positioning. There is a strong network of indigenous organizations working on food issues in the province and indeed as much a need to build solidarity and mutual support between indigenous and settler communities as there are between rural and urban people. David Neufeld pointed this out, “I hear Aboriginal providers and eaters are as keen to be part of a radically diverse organisation as most smaller scale farmers are.” – David Neufeld. Although addressing this gap has been a recurring conversation in STM, it has yet to be acted on in any meaningful way.

The compartmentalization between constituents in grassroots food movements fragments an already small base of active citizens advocating for change, hollowing out the capacity and potential of more diverse and broadly constituted grassroots coordination. During the Real Manitoba Food Fight the collaboration between farmers and urban eater-allies was fundamental in holding the government to account. The contributions of urban allies in the campaign pressured the government to drop the charges against the Cavers family and raised public awareness about the wider issues. The widespread public discontent expressed through letters, a petition, and writing in the popular media pressured the government to commission the Small Scale Food Working Group and examine support for small farmers and local food in the province. Many in the group recognized the importance of working with supportive urban allies who were better positioned to publically critique government, whereas many farmers expressed fears of being targeted by inspectors if they stuck their neck out.

...a good portion of the folks who ought to be at the table simply will not stick their heads up because their livelihoods are at risk. Those that eat their food are the ones who are able to advocate. (David Neufeld)



STM participants expressed concerns about the prescription to form an ‘industry group’ by the Provincial Government. This focus on ‘industry’ frames local food in narrow economic terms and was viewed as a reductionist and de-politicizing channelling of an otherwise highly social, cultural and political movement. To focus on developing the industry, without attending to the wider set of relations within which local food is embedded was seen to erode the scope of possible change that any local food industry group could achieve. Drawing from his experience with the organic movement, Terry discussed parallels with the development of the organic industry:



I saw what was happening... when [Canada Organic Regime] was coming in, when the Canadian government was basically saying ‘we want to legitimate the organic industry’ which we fought hard against – the word ‘industry’ – and, in my opinion gave in to the word ‘sector’... but what I saw from that moment on, was that the organic movement in the country has been dead. As a movement it is dead, as an industry it has taken off... I am saying this as a precautionary tale to seeking legitimacy, or seeking recognition for who you are as a group or organization... I really feel strongly about the language of movement and about the idea of becoming legitimized. Legitimacy comes with people. (Terry Mierau, STM Meeting)

The emphasis on the economic development of organics served to separate and support organics as an industry -- based on more modest reforms of the existing corporate controlled industrial system -- from the organic movement, which was based on shifting control of food systems away from corporations and decommodifying food, amongst other transformative aims. Indeed, organics is now considered to have gone down the road of ‘conventionalization,’ resembling a lite version of industrialized agriculture with large-scale mono-cultivation controlled by powerful multinational food corporations (Guthman, 2004). Thus, seeking legitimacy in the eyes of dominant actors (government in this case) and within a sectoral, compartmentalized and economic framework was viewed as a way that NGOs often become coopted when they attempt to align with government expectations.

Conclusion

The urgency and clarity of the problems in the wake of the raid on the Cavers Farm prompted farmers and allies to recognize and discuss common experiences and concerns about food safety regulations and other barriers to building sustainable local food systems. This was thus an important political moment that crystalized a sense of a collective political identity, prompting critical questions and strategic thinking about how to create a more enabling environment for local food systems. It inspired thinking about the need for transformative change and for greater citizen control of food systems through longer-term processes of political mobilization.

Over the last three years, members of our research group have been embedded in a wider collective of farmers and citizens working through three interrelated mobilizing structures that emerged chronologically: 1) The Real Manitoba Food Fight; 2) Sharing the Table Manitoba; and c) the Direct Farm Marketing Association of Manitoba. It is clear that the more confrontational tactics carried out through the Real Manitoba Food Fight and Sharing the Table Manitoba were instrumental in forcing government to address the grievances of small direct market farmers.

These opportunities were however considered by many to be under-realized, which largely reflected the absence of an organization that government would consider as a legitimate voice for small direct market farmers. In order to fill this gap, the Direct Farm Marketing Association was established, which was structured as a producer-only industry group designed specifically to interface with government.

This progression from a confrontational campaign, towards a sector-based formal non-governmental organization may reflect a relative depoliticisation of the grassroots response. Indeed, as grassroots movements gain legitimacy and resources, there is a risk that their efforts can become coopted. By gaining minor concessions from governments and traction within an institutionalized arena, confrontational and broad-ranging politics can be transformed into more routinized and conventional political strategies (Choudry and Shragge, 2011). Further, leaders can become preoccupied with running organizations, pursuing isolated projects and competing to reform government policy. Indeed, NGOs similar to the Direct Farm Marketing Association have been criticized for being a part of the mainstream institutional apparatus that is often used by governments to channel dissent into sanctioned, bureaucratic, legal and permissible forms of expression that may ultimately have very little influence over policy (Choudry and Shragge, 2011).

Participants in this project are aware of this dynamic and have strategically viewed the three organizational forms, not as mutually exclusive but, as complimentary tools that can be animated in response to the opportunities available in any given political moment. There are clearly limitations to each particular organizational approach and choosing one over another can limit the potential to create change. The approach has thus been to experiment with maintaining a diverse organizational ecosystem based on cooperation and overlap between the more conciliatory and confrontational components. In this instance, key individuals participate in each, cross-fertilizing ideas and aligning strategies. An ongoing process of critical reflection and learning will be essential to adapt to changing circumstances and to ensure the balance and emphasis on the different approaches can maximize impact of this work.

While sustained overt political mobilization may be desirable and necessary to advance food system change, there are many unanswered questions about how to realize these more radical aspirations in the absence of an urgent and catalytic need, such as the Cavers farm raid. Currently, Sharing the Table Manitoba is functioning as a space to facilitate virtual and in-person discussions around the politics of food in Manitoba and to bring together individuals and groups to discuss political opportunities and potential joint efforts. It has however been relatively inactive in terms of overt political organizing where most of the energy has shifted towards the Direct Farm Marketing Association of Manitoba. In this way, STM may at times act as a latent yet reactive resource that can be animated in response to specific grievances or political opportunities, rather than engaging in consistent and proactive political activity. Indeed, as we are finishing writing this very chapter, another situation is developing in which a local farmer is being targeted by regulators, prompting new efforts within STM to organize in support of this farmer and use the opportunity to further pressure government to make changes in policy. Interestingly, the STM steering group has discussed reanimating the Real Manitoba Food Fight (name, logo, website, social media), indicating that its nature as an edgy campaign provides the best tool for this more confrontational work. Again, this demonstrates the value of the multiple organizational tools and the importance of remaining agile and flexible in order to re-orientate efforts in response to changing circumstances and opportunities.

Issues around who is included, who is excluded and who has power within these mobilizing structures are looming and troubling questions in our work and a question requires more attention in food system activism (see: Slocum, 2007). When we talk about and work towards food system “change” or transformation it is too easy to gloss over the differences in general claims of a ‘grassroots’ or of a general ‘citizen’ that is said to be mobilized and empowered through activism and organizing. It is vital that we begin to ask hard questions about who is included and excluded? Who benefits, who does not? Participation for whom? Transformation and change for whom? In Canada, there is no escaping the legacy and the ongoing structures of colonialism (Kepewitz et al, this volume), and it is vital to come to grips with how grassroots activism and participatory research can inadvertently reproduce colonial relationships. Indeed, this hard reflective work will require that proponents of alternative food systems incorporate decolonial practices to challenge our own understanding, relations and practices of transformation.

There has always been an optimistic tone amongst our collective that we are engaging in imperfect but forward looking strategies to advance a long-term project that builds capacity for food system change. But how do we “know” when our collective choices about self-organization limit our potential and inadvertently lead us down a path that undermines our more radical demands and aspirations, such as experienced in the organic movement? How do we see exclusion in our practices? How do we begin to engage with decolonial thinking and practice? How do we balance the immediate concerns and concessions required to make incremental pragmatic changes with the desire for more radical systemic change? How do we deal with uncertainty: these choices about how to organize for transformation today have uncertain outcomes for the future? The collective of farmers, eaters, researchers and activists involved in STM have engaged in a process of self-analysis through cycles of PAR that has, through dialogue and reflection, allowed us to name these contradictions and strategize about how to contend with them. It is vitally important to engage in collective critical reflection, not only on the ways that we are discussing the problems and solutions we face (e.g. food sovereignty vs. food security), but about how we choose to organize ourselves and why. The process of PAR, and the cycles of action and reflection, have provided us with an opportunity for what Holst (2002, pp. 87–88) calls a pedagogy of mobilization, or the:

learning inherent in the building and maintaining of a social movement and its organizations. Through participation in a social movement, people learn numerous skills and ways of thinking analytically and strategically as they struggle to understand their movement in motion.

PAR opens space for reflection and dialogue amongst social movement participants to engage in a continuous deepening of what Paulo Freire (1970) calls conscientization or developing critical consciousness. This process involves becoming aware of the inevitable objectivization of social movements by powerful actors that attempt to enrol and re-shape dissent into mainstream development agendas. Through critical self-analysis, PAR can generate knowledge as a resource for continually fighting for autonomy and to act as self-determining subjects. In this way, the use of PAR can open up opportunities for protagonists in social movement organizing to critically examine their own practice and the mobilizing structures they maintain in order to identify internal and external contradictions and to strategically resist cooptation and pursue transformative change.

The collective self-analysis, discussed in this chapter, is exploratory and provisional and we are in the midst of ongoing cycles of action and reflection. We have been experimenting with alternatives, both innovating and making mistakes, grappling with these questions and struggling to find the resources and time to pursue the organizing and activism that we believe is necessary

to push for change. We have used this writing project as an opportunity to critically discuss the dilemmas that we are facing. We are working through the challenges, trade-offs and compromises made when pursuing legitimacy with government while also recognizing the limitations of these institutionalized strategies. We are using and promoting self-critical reflection and dialogue as way to contend with these issues, which has provided some opportunity to strategically adapt our efforts. We feel that this process of reflection, however, should not be an inwards one carried out amongst our collective alone. Wider dialogue and reflection amongst allies in similar struggles are essential to sharing with and learning from others, developing our critical analysis and building solidarity. It is in this spirit – a desire to both share and to learn in a multi-voiced dialogue – that we wrote this chapter and participated in this work. To this end, we hope these ideas provoke your thinking and welcome your feedback and engagement as critical friends seeking a more just and sustainable world.

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