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Could an Ecosystem Perspective Support the Creation of a Nonprofit Food System? A Theoretical Exploration of the Possibilities

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ABSTRACT

Although food has been designated a human right, most countries do not provide the means for their citizens to exercise that right. As a result, food is treated as a commodity and sold for a profit to those who can afford it, leaving millions of people undernourished as food prices rise. One solution to this problem is the establishment of a nonprofit food system. A daunting prospect—how could this be carried out? One potentially useful approach that is increasingly being applied in social economy scholarship involves an ecosystem perspective, which takes account of not only social economy organizations but also the wider environments in which they operate. Could such a perspective support the creation of a nonprofit food system? This article explores the possibilities offered by applying an ecosystem perspective to a nonprofit food system. After providing some preliminary background information on food systems, it introduces the ecosystem perspective and affirms that it can indeed support the creation of a nonprofit food system.

RÉSUMÉ

Bien que l'alimentation soit considérée comme un droit humain, la plupart des pays ne donnent pas à leurs citoyens les moyens d'exercer ce droit. En effet, la nourriture est traitée comme marchandise et vendue à profit à ceux et celles qui peuvent se l'offrir, laissant des millions de personnes sous-alimentées dans un contexte où les prix des denrées augmentent de plus en plus. L'une des solutions à ce problème est la mise en place d'un système alimentaire sans but lucratif. De prime abord, cette idée semble chimérique—comment en effet la mettre en œuvre? Une approche potentiellement utile, d'un intérêt croissant dans les études sur l'économie sociale, consisterait à adopter une perspective écosystémique, laquelle prend en compte non seulement les organisations de l'économie sociale, mais aussi les environnements dans lesquels celles-ci opèrent. Une telle approche pourrait-elle entraîner la création d'un système alimentaire sans but lucratif? Cet article explore les possibilités soulevées par l'application d'une perspective écosystémique à un système alimentaire sans but lucratif. Après avoir fourni quelques informations préliminaires sur les systèmes alimentaires, cet article présente la perspective écosystémique et affirme que celle-ci peut effectivement soutenir la création d'un système alimentaire sans but lucratif.

Keywords / Mots clés : nonprofit food system, for-profit food system, ecosystem perspective, systems / système alimentaire sans but lucratif, système alimentaire à but lucratif, perspective écosystémique, systèmes

INTRODUCTION

The social economy can be understood as a means of promoting a vision of economic development in the service of human need (Shragge & Fontan, 2000). One of the greatest human needs is food. Although it has been enshrined as a basic human right (United Nations, 1948), very few countries have created the means for citizens to exercise that right; most simply treat food as another commodity in the marketplace. As a result, even in the developed world, one in five people cannot afford to eat three meals a day or purchase fresh fruit and vegetables, with 15 percent of the population in these countries needing food support through food stamps and food banks (Hitchman, 2023). In the face of such food insecurity, food prices continue to rise, and grocery chains are reaping huge profits (Nocos, 2023). Can we look to the social economy to better serve this human need?

This article will explore the possibility of developing a nonprofit food system to address this question. The basis for this theoretical exploration will be an ecosystem perspective, which involves an approach to the social economy that takes into consideration not only social economy organizations, but also the surrounding environment that influences (and is influenced by) these organizations. As such, it is a holistic approach that can be useful when assessing, planning, or changing aspects of the social economy (see, for example, Bloom & Dees, 2008).

This article begins by providing some preliminary background on systems, food systems, and for-profit food systems in order to more fully understand the parameters of a nonprofit food system. With this context in place, the discussion turns to an ecosystem perspective and its usefulness in exploring the possibilities of a nonprofit food system. The article concludes with an affirmation of the ecosystem perspective and its ability to support the creation of a nonprofit food system.

FOOD SYSTEMS

While we all participate in at least one food system, many of us are not aware of this reality. And yet, that food system continues to operate day after day in ways that we will never fully understand. However, as food-related problems multiply—climate change, soil and water depletion, increasing hunger, rising obesity rates, and escalating food costs—it is time to take stock of our food system and decide whether it is fit for purpose.

Before examining the concept of a food system, we need to have a basic understanding of systems themselves. In her posthumous book, *Thinking in Systems*, Donella Meadows (2008) defines a system as:

> a set of things — people, cells, molecules, or whatever — interconnected in such a way that they produce their own patterns of behavior over time. The system may be buffeted, constricted, triggered, or driven by outside forces. But the system's response to these forces is characteristic of itself, and that response is seldom simple in the real world. (p. 2)

After reminding readers that systems can be embedded in other systems (which can be embedded in yet other systems), Meadows (2008) notes that a system is more than the sum of its parts. "It may exhibit adaptive, dynamic, goal-seeking, self-preserving, and sometimes evolutionary behavior" (p. 12).

When systems fall short of our expectations, Meadows (2008) offers advice on how to change the structure of systems to produce more desirable outcomes (and fewer undesirable ones). She focuses

on what she refers to as leverage points: places in a system where a small change could lead to a large shift in behaviour. For Meadows, the most effective leverage point for changing the structure of systems is at the paradigm level: the mindset out of which the system—its goals, structure, rules, delays, parameters—arises. Paradigms are the great unstated assumptions of a society made up of the deepest set of beliefs about how the world works. In essence, they are the sources of systems because their shared social agreements about the nature of reality produce "the system goals, information flows, feedbacks, stocks, flows and everything else about systems" (p. 163). Meadows goes on to describe some of the unstated paradigmatic beliefs of Western culture:

- Money measures something real and has real meaning; therefore, people who are paid less are worth less;
- Growth is good;
- Nature is a stock of resources to be converted to human purposes;
- Evolution stopped with the emergence of Homo sapiens;
- One can 'own' land (p. 163)

These paradigmatic beliefs, and other similar ones, not only underlie our food system but also provide a leverage point for changing it.

Like all systems, a food system involves a set of interconnected things that behave in a certain way. More precisely, a food system is an interdependent web of activities that include the production, processing, distribution, consumption, and disposal of food (Sumner, 2011). Production can range from biodynamic, regenerative, and organic modes of agriculture through more conventional forms to industrial methods. Processing can be as simple as canning tomatoes or as complex as engineering ultra-processed food or lab-grown meat. Distribution can entail delivering home-made bread to a local store, setting up a regional distribution system or creating a world-wide network. Consumption includes the acquisition of food by consumers and can take many forms, such as hunting, bartering, or buying. And disposal can include sending food to the landfill, composting it, or repurposing it.

Food systems can be simple, as in the self-provisioning of small, isolated groups, or huge, such as the global food system. Although some (e.g., Kaufman, 2004) have described food systems as involving a linear chain of activities from production to disposal, in reality the activities follow Meadows' (2008) description of the dynamic, interconnected workings of a system.

In spite of all the varieties of food systems around the world, one food system increasingly dominates our interaction with food: a for-profit food system that has gone global.

FOR-PROFIT FOOD SYSTEM

Food can be shared, donated, traded, or sold, and how people gain access to food has varied over time, space, and circumstances. While the origins of food being sold for a profit are lost in the distant past, its commodification blossomed under capitalism and exploded more recently. As Winson (2013, p. 8) reminds us, "between food producers and eaters lies a political-economic reality that shapes the food system and food environments within it." The political-economic reality since the 1970s has been a particular form of capitalism based on neoliberalism.

Harvey (2006) describes neoliberalism as a theory of political-economic practices that proposes that human wellbeing can be best advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms and supported by an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, free markets, and free trade. Fundamentally, it can be understood as a political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites (Harvey, 2005). The source of this capital accumulation and power is profit, defined by McMurtry (2010) as wealth created for owners or shareholders.

Profit is central to a neoliberal food system, particularly the global for-profit food system in which the boards and management of global companies such as Tyson, Bayer, or Nestlé "have more power to decide what, where and how food is produced, who is doing the work, and even who gets to eat it than do farmers, workers, eaters or communities" (Hendrickson, 2020, p. 579). As Winson (2013) explains, the impact of profit making on the production of our food is considerable:

> Whole foods are regularly, and extensively, adulterated with sugar, fat, and a wide variety of chemical additives in a system that is oriented to taking the cheapest food ingredients possible and making them durable, and palatable, and therefore more saleable and ultimately highly profitable. (p. 288)

These highly adulterated, addictive, profitable ultra-processed foods now make up "as much as 60% of the average diet in the U.K. and the U.S." (van Tulleken, 2023, p. 5) and are fast spreading to other countries, with the result that a study in *The Lancet* on the health effects of dietary risks in 195 countries found that "suboptimal diet is responsible for more deaths than any other risks globally, including tobacco smoking" (Afshin, Sur, Fay, Cornaby, Ferrara, Salama et al., 2019, p. 1967), which was previously the number one risk.

Within this for-profit food system, where 20 global corporations control the food chain (Hitchman, 2023), food on the one hand is made cheap through the exploitation of nature, farmers, and workers, while on the other hand being too expensive for poor households around the world (Hendrickson, 2020). As Hitchman (2023) reports, one in 10 people in the world are malnourished and hunger is rising. At the same time, as food prices escalate, grocery chains are cashing in and reporting record profits (see Nocos, 2023). Such problems have spurred food studies pioneer Marion Nestle (2017, p. 10) to inquire: "How did something as basic to our existence as food get transformed into an instrument for profit?"

The vast shortcomings of the global for-profit food system have resulted in many people arguing that this food system is failing (see, for example, Duncan, Carolan, & Wiskerke, 2021), on the road to collapse (see, for example, Fraser & Rimas, 2010), or broken (see, for example, Baker, Campsie, & Rabinowicz, 2010). However, Holt-Giménez (2017) argues that this means believing our food system once worked well for people, the economy, and the environment, and ignoring 300 years of violence and destruction that have characterized the global food system. Instead, he emphasizes that "the food system is not broken; rather, it is working precisely as a capitalist food system is supposed to work" (p. 56).

This view is corroborated by Meadows' (2008) observation that since Adam Smith, the free, competitive market has been widely seen as a properly structured, self-regulating system. While in some ways she agrees it was, she also critiques "the overall system's tendency to create monopolies and undesirable side effects (externalities), to discriminate against the poor, or to overshoot its sustainable carrying capacity" (p. 109). Such tendencies have prompted public health attorney Michele Simon (2006, p. 318) to ask:

> 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?

One way to move food away from private, for-profit control is to develop a nonprofit food system.

NONPROFIT FOOD SYSTEM

Given that food is a life good, a daily necessity, and a human right, a nonprofit food system would sit squarely within the social economy, defined by McMurtry (2010, p. 31) as:

> Economic activity neither controlled directly by the state nor by the profit logic of the market; activity that prioritizes the social well-being of communities and marginalized individuals over partisan political directives or individual gain.

In a nonprofit food system, this economic activity would be dominated by nonprofit organizations, which can be understood as self-governing organizations that may be corporations without share capital, societies, trusts, or unincorporated associations, formed not for private gain but for public or mutual benefit purposes (Quarter, Mook, & Armstrong, 2018). According to Quarter (1992), nonprofits can be placed on a continuum based on degree of formality ranging from nonprofit corporations, through formal associations, to informal associations. In other words, nonprofit organizations are incredibly diverse (Salamon, 1994) and the organizations that would make up a nonprofit food system would reflect this observation.

Like other forms of the social economy, the social objectives of nonprofit organizations are central to their mission. The overall social objectives of a nonprofit food system would be twofold, complemented by an environmental objective: everyone would be fed and workers would be paid a living wage, all within the ecological limits of the planet (see, for example, Levkoe, Lefebvre, & Blay-Palmer, 2017). The nonprofit organizations in this food system would direct any surplus into these three objectives.

Although a nonprofit food system would be a radical departure from the dominant for-profit global food system, it is clearly in line with Shragge and Fontan's (2000) contention that a social economy implies the basic reorientation of not only the whole economy but also related social institutions. This reorientation would occur at every node of the food system, from production all the way to disposal. It would also include a range of non-profit organizations, such as co-operatives, social enterprises, and community food centres. Each node of the nonprofit food system is briefly described below, as a prelude to a discussion of the usefulness of an ecosystem perspective.

Production

Food production entails growing crops or raising animals for the purpose of human consumption. Producers in this node of a nonprofit food system would work together to form nonprofit co-ops, networks, or associations. Like other partners in the food system, they would add their produce to the nonprofit food system, receive a living wage (as would any farm labour they hired), and take care of the environment by farming organically.

Processing

Processing involves changing basic foods by freezing, drying, canning, or cooking, mainly for the purpose of preservation. Some examples of processed foods include tinned fish, jars of jam, or smoked meat. Given the consolidation associated with the global food system, most small and mid-sized processing plants and abattoirs have disappeared. This "missing middle" (Veldhuizen, Giller, Oosterveer, Brouwer, Janssen, van Zanten, & Slingerland, 2020) will need to be replaced by nonprofit organizations such as canning co-ops and community-supported abattoirs in order to process the seasonal and perishable foodstuffs needed for a nonprofit food system.

Distribution

Distribution involves moving food from producers and processors to consumers, either directly or indirectly. Direct distribution would include community-supported food programs, farm-to-table programs, or farm-to-school programs, where producers/processors meet consumers face to face. Indirect distribution lacks the face-to-face element and would go through a third party such as the Ontario Food Terminal.

Consumption

Consumption entails not only eating food but also acquiring it. This acquisition can be in the form of hunting and gathering, sharing and bartering, or purchasing, with the latter form of acquisition being by far the most common. Consumer co-ops, buying clubs, social enterprises, and community-supported agriculture or fisheries would be just some of the options in this node of the food system, with an emphasis on local food sourcing.

Disposal

All food systems need some kind of disposal for leftover or unwanted food. To stay within the ecological limits of the planet, sending food to the landfill would have to be avoided (so as not to increase both the size of landfills and amount of methane produced by rotting food). This would leave a number of options: redistributing the food to target groups, repurposing the food for livestock feed, or composting the food. Currently, food recovery nonprofit organizations such as Second Harvest or Not Far From the Tree pick up excess food or harvest unpicked produce and take it to food banks or other destinations. This would be expanded and formalized in a nonprofit food system.

AN ECOSYSTEM PERSPECTIVE OF A NONPROFIT FOOD SYSTEM

Having outlined the broader context and parameters of a nonprofit food system, it is time to explore whether an ecosystem perspective could support the creation of such a food system. This explora-

tion will begin with the recognition that food systems and social economy ecosystems are both systems, in the sense that Meadows (2008) described them, and thus share many similarities.

In terms of the social economy, the ecosystem concept covers the environment that surrounds organizations within it (unlike systems theory, which carries a more generic understanding). In particular, it "refers to multiple actors of a diverse nature existing in a territory, interrelated and interdependent, sharing factors and a common destiny" (Catala, Savall, & Chaves-Avila, 2023, p. 1). Domanski and Kaletka (2019) add to this understanding when they maintain that the ecosystem perspective moves beyond actor-centred concepts to include other aspects, such as "governance models, potentially supportive infrastructures, and even legal and cultural norms which take effect in a specific ecosystem and which make a difference" (p. 209). These other aspects are acknowledged by Biggeri, Testi, and Ferrannini (2019) in their use of the term "enabling ecosystem," which they argue gives social enterprises (SEs) "the power, means, opportunities, and authority to pursue their goals" (p. 180). They add that if SEs are considered part of the ecosystem, this implies a strong relationship, or even dependency, between SEs and other parts of the ecosystem. For these authors, it also implies reaching beyond the locality the SE serves, thus broadening the casual chain of (reciprocal) influence between SEs and the different parts of the ecosystem at the macro, meso, and micro levels.

In this way, an ecosystem perspective moves beyond individual social economy organizations to incorporate the multiple actors and the broader environment in which these organizations operate, including both social ecosystems and natural ecosystems. Fontan and Lévesque (2023) note that both types of ecosystems share similarities, such as high complexity, interdependence, and feedback between entities. However, they emphasize that these ecosystems also exhibit significant qualitative differences:

> Ecological ecosystems are self-organizing and operate based on objective factors without reflexive capacity. Entrepreneurial ecosystems, on the other hand, include entities based on subjective factors, such as the reflexivity and preferences of entrepreneurs or consumers. These components are subject to institutional regulation based on political choices that vary according to specific ideological orientations. (p. 443)

Overall, this dual ecosystem perspective is important when considering a nonprofit food system because it shines a (eco) system lens on a (food) system question, thus allowing a more holistic understanding of whether such a perspective could support the creation of a nonprofit food system. Using an ecosystem perspective, some of the interacting components of a nonprofit food system would include:

- Social and solidarity economy (SSE) organizations: nonprofit co-operatives, associations, and societies; community food centres, community food hubs, community farms, community food enterprises, and community orchards; food banks; farming incubators; community-supported agriculture and fishing organizations.
- Agents, champions, and volunteers: farmers, consumers, community organizers, gleaners, hunters, fishers, food movements (e.g., organic movement, fair trade movement, food sovereignty movement, Slow Food movement).

- Spaces: community centres, schools, town squares, town halls, community gardens, restaurants, food forests, and farmers' markets.
- Political-economic context: neoliberalism and its failures; resistance.
- Legislation: organic food certification; local food act.
- Land: farmland, orchards, vineyards, forests, and pastures.
- Waterways: lakes, oceans, rivers, and ponds.

Just like systems can be embedded within other systems (Meadows, 2008), an ecosystem can be made up of other ecosystems, which can be more or less well integrated with each other (Fontan & Lévesque, 2023). The same can be said of food systems. A local nonprofit food system could be embedded in a regional nonprofit food system that could then be linked to a national nonprofit food system. Any of these nodes could in turn be linked to similar systems in other countries through, for example, a nonprofit trade agreement based in social economy principles. In this way, a nonprofit food system could be understood as an ecosystem of ecosystems by means of integrating one or more social economy ecosystems.

USING AN ECOSYSTEMS FRAMEWORK FOR CULTIVATING A NONPROFIT FOOD SYSTEM

In their article about using an ecosystem framework, Bloom and Dees (2008) offer advice on cultivating a social economy ecosystem to create long-lasting and significant social change. They posit two primary paths for creating systemic change, which are reminiscent of Meadows' (2008) leverage points. The first primary path involves "changing one or more of the environmental conditions that shape the behavior of players" (p. 52), which they see as the clearest form of systemic change. This could include new public policy and regulations, new markets and new ways existing markets operate, new cultural norms and social dynamics, and new infrastructure. In terms of a nonprofit food system, such environmental conditions could include specific allocation of public space and infrastructure in which nonprofit actors could operate, national food policy that ensured the right to food (and the means to exercise that right), organized boycotts of for-profit grocery stores, or the provision of institutional food (e.g., food for hospitals, schools, and prisons).

The second primary path for creating change involves "introducing an innovation that spreads well enough to establish new and stable behavior patterns" (Bloom & Dees, 2008, p. 52). This could include new practices, organizational structures, and business models. With respect to a nonprofit food system, one example of such innovation is the creation of the nonprofit organization Community Food Centres Canada, which has been establishing community food centres across the country that are changing the way people engage with food. Its website states that it "builds health, belonging and social justice in low-income communities across Canada through the power of food" (Community Food Centres Canada, 2024). So far, 15 community food centres offer healthy food access, food skills development, education, and engagement coast to coast to coast, with more planned.

Bloom and Dees (2008) advise that systemic change often requires both primary paths. To accomplish this change, they suggest keeping in mind four practices to create systemic ecosystem change, which they refer to as the Four Cs: coalitions, communications, credibility, and contingencies.

Coalitions

Bloom and Dees (2008, p. 52) maintain that "systemic ecosystem change is usually created by coalitions of social entrepreneurs and organizations, not by the unilateral actions of a single entrepreneur or organization." They warn, however, that this can be challenging on many fronts. In terms of a nonprofit food system, one of these challenges would be finding social entrepreneurs who are willing to work not only in coalitions, but also in a nonprofit environment. Examples of such coalitions already exist, with farmer organizations such as the National Farmers Union teaming up with the food sovereignty movement, faith groups allying with food security organizations, and the nonprofit FoodShare Toronto joining with Fort Albany First Nation on James Bay to cut out the middleman and provide lower-priced food (see Elton, 2013). Such coalitions would help to build a nonprofit food system.

Communications

Bloom and Dees (2008) maintain that many potentially powerful innovations never take off because they are not effectively communicated. They suggest that the key to effective communication is to frame issues in such a way that they help build support for social economy causes but warn that trade-offs may be necessary. In terms of a nonprofit food system, communication via both traditional and social media would be crucial for developing such a food system, as well as communication by word of mouth. One effective way of framing a nonprofit food system would be framing the concept in a positive way, such as "promoting food sovereignty" rather than "fighting against for-profit price gouging."

Credibility

Bloom and Dees (2008) emphasize that it is important for social entrepreneurs to find ways to establish their credibility because it is often hard to convince others that social change is needed and the change they propose will work. They suggest establishing credibility by starting at a small scale and learning from that experience before attempting to create a bigger change. This was the route taken by Nick Saul, the founder of Community Food Centres Canada, who developed the pan-Canadian model while working as the director of The Stop in downtown Toronto. The Stop began as a food bank and expanded to offer emergency food, urban agriculture, and a farmers' market, all the while building community (The Stop, 2024) before morphing into a model for a nation-wide organization.

Contingencies

The final practice Bloom and Dees (2008) suggest for creating systemic change involves planning for contingencies. Given the dynamic nature of systems, they explain that it can be difficult to predict all the consequences of a particular intervention. For this reason, creating change in an ecosystem can be "an experimental and learning process" (p. 53). They advise forecasting reactions to changes and preparing potential countermoves to either ameliorate or capitalize on the contingency. In terms of a nonprofit food system, one contingency to prepare for would be questions about the loss of jobs in the for-profit food system as the nonprofit food system grew. Prepared responses could include answers based on a just transition.

In addition to offering practices for creating systemic change, Bloom and Dees (2008) also put forward five other uses of an ecosystem framework, which could be helpful in cultivating a nonprofit

food system. First, these authors maintain that an ecosystem framework can provide a deeper understanding of an organization's theory of change. Making more visible both the environmental conditions and the relationships on which the social economy organization depends could lead to a revision of the theory, thus making it more relevant to reality. This transparency would be very important for a nonprofit food system as it begins to develop.

Second, Bloom and Dees (2008) posit that the ecosystem framework can help to map the resource flows into and within the ecosystem, thus revealing "constraints, bottlenecks, and underused sources" (p. 53), which could point to alternative resource strategies. In terms of a nonprofit food system, it can be added that mapping the resource flows out of the system could also be enlightening, reminiscent of Loxley's (2007) concept of leakages in community economic development theory.

Third, Bloom and Dees (2008) put forward that the ecosystem framework can identify new operating partnerships or even complementary organizations that can help to realize the impact of the SSE. With respect to a nonprofit food system, identifying new partnerships (e.g., provincial or national co-operative organizations), opportunities (e.g., school lunch programs), and allies (e.g., faith-based organizations, local governments or academics) could help with growth and development.

Fourth, Bloom and Dees (2008) propose that the ecosystem framework can determine the minimum, but critical, environmental conditions needed for the success of an organization's operating model, which could help to take the model in new areas. In terms of a nonprofit food system, this would be crucial, not only for getting the system going, but also for moving it into new directions.

And fifth, Bloom and Dees (2008) contend that the ecosystem framework can develop different or more robust operating models for a variety of ecosystems. This would be vital for a nonprofit food system as it encounters opposition during development.

All in all, Bloom and Dees' (2008) recommendations for using an ecosystems framework illustrate not only the complexity of a social economy ecosystem but also some ways to navigate this complexity. In addition to their recommendations, a number of others seem relevant when considering a nonprofit food system. First, an ecosystem perspective could help to envision what a nonprofit food system could actually look like. This is particularly important when planning such an endeavour and inviting others to join.

Second, following Meadows (2008), an ecosystem perspective would also help users to see the leverage points—places to intervene in a system—for changing the system. Meadows outlines 12 leverage points, from paying attention to numbers and balancing the feedback loops, to understanding the goals of the system and transcending the paradigm. An ecosystem perspective would make these leverage points more apparent and understandable.

Third, an ecosystem perspective would show the importance of the embeddedness of the social economy, including a nonprofit food system, in the society that hosts it. Political economist Karl Polanyi (2001) describes a market economy as disembedded from society and controlled by market prices. In effect, a "market economy involves a society the institutions of which are subordinated to the requirements of the market mechanism" (p. 187). Polanyi argues forcefully that the "market economy if left to evolve according to its own laws would create great and permanent evils" (p. 136). We

see these evils every day in, among other things, the rising profits in the food sector amidst the growing number of hungry people. One solution that would help to re-embed the market in society would be a nonprofit food system that responded to the needs of society, not the desire for private gain.

Fourth, an ecosystem perspective would highlight the importance of relationality in today's fragmented world. Relationality is a complex and evolving term. While older concepts of relationality focused on extending human knowledge beyond linearity and reductionism, Chandler and Pugh (2020) maintain that it is becoming increasingly clear that relationality cannot be contained within such anthropocentric framings. For these authors, recognizing that we are in the Anthropocene encourages a different set of assumptions and practices, and an increasing awareness of existence beyond the human. They add that "the construction and awareness of indigenous knowledge highlights this shift towards a new relationality" (p. 69). The shift toward a new relationality is also emphasized by Lange, O'Neil, and Ross (2021) when they discuss the dominant Separation Paradigm, which promotes individual worldviews and ignores the "incomprehensibly relational nature of our universe" (p. 23). They advocate for a shift to the Relationality Paradigm based on Indigenous perspectives that "we are our relations" (p. 30). An ecosystem perspective is based in relationality and provides a model to help us see not only the importance of the environment surrounding a social economy organization, but also the total interconnectedness of the world we live in. In this way, a relational approach would open our hearts and minds not only to each other, but also to the "more than human" world around us that we need to take into account when envisioning food systems that are more sustainable.

And fifth, an ecosystem perspective would open the door to food sovereignty, which involves "the right of peoples and nations to control their own food and agricultural systems, including their own markets, production modes, food cultures and environments" (Wittman, Desmarais, & Wiebe, 2010, p. 2). As Desmarais (2022, p. 381) notes, food sovereignty "places those who produce and consume food at the centre of decision-making for agriculture and food policies." An ecosystem perspective can reveal not only the environment that surrounds social economies, but also the environment around the for-profit organizations that make up the current global food system. Understanding how this dysfunctional system actually works would provide impetus to change it and create a food system that addressed the needs of consumers, farmers, food system workers, and the environment. Such a food system would be built on the pillars of food sovereignty (see Desmarais, 2022) and operationalized through nonprofit organizations.

All in all, an ecosystem perspective would not only support the creation of a nonprofit food system but enable it to grow. It would help to envision, create, develop, and maintain it, while also providing the groundwork for scaling it up. Such work would not be easy; it would take a great deal of (re)learning and a deep commitment to reorganizing social relations on the part of everyone involved. Thankfully, the foundation for this work already resides in the many nonprofit organizations that exist today.

Like any framework, an ecosystem perspective is not without flaws. For example, some critique it as reductionist (see Cote & Nightingale, 2012), while others see it as lacking a clear definition and theoretical background (see Tsujimoto, Kajikawa, Tomita, & Matsumoto, 2015). In spite of such critiques, many find it a useful tool for understanding complex systems. This special issue is evidence

of its utility. However, more work needs to be done to explore the possibilities of this perspective, especially in terms of how a nonprofit food system would interact with the dominant for-profit food system.

One downside to taking an ecosystem perspective would be the possibility of getting lost in the details—a hazard of any systems analysis. When drowning in data, it is salutary to remember Meadows' (2008) advice that diddling with the details is like arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. She also noted that although systems cannot be controlled, they can be designed and redesigned.

> We can't surge forward with certainty into a world of no surprises, but we can expect surprises and learn from them and even profit from them. We can't impose our will on a system. We can listen to what the system tells us and discover how its properties and our values can work together to bring forth something much better than could ever be produced by our will alone (pp. 169–170).

In the end, she advises that "we can't control systems or figure them out. But we can dance with them" (p. 170), reminding us that living successfully in a world of systems requires more of us than we can imagine. "It requires our full humanity — our rationality, our ability to sort out truth from falsehood, our intuition, our compassion, our vision, and our morality" (p. 170). A nonprofit food system would require nothing less.

CONCLUSION

In their article on the social economy and food systems, Stephens, Nelson, Levkoe, Mount, Knezevic, Blay-Palmer, and Martin (2019) argue that "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" (p. 5). This article adds to these critical discussions by exploring whether an ecosystem perspective could support the creation of a non-profit food system and affirming that it could. Although preliminary and brief, this exploration invites further investigation into the creation of a social economy of food that is "committed to social and environmental values that included, but went far beyond, economic benefit" (Knezevic, Levkoe, Mount, & Nelson, 2019, p. 2).

Creating a nonprofit food system does not necessarily mean starting from scratch. Some communities already host some aspects of a nonprofit food system, such as a community food centre, a farmers' market, a food bank, or community-shared agriculture/fishery. They can become the starting points of a functioning system that produces food without the profit motive. An ecosystem perspective helps us to understand these aspects and a great deal more. In the words of Bloom and Dees (2008, p. 53), "much can be learned by using this idea to illuminate the dynamic, interconnected, and complex character" of social economy ecosystems.

In closing, it is ironic to note that the proliferation of high-priced, adulterated food that is becoming the hallmark of the global for-profit food system is reminiscent of the situation that spurred the creation of the first co-operative in Lancashire, England. In 1844, those who came to be known as the Rochdale Pioneers founded the modern co-operative movement "to provide an affordable alternative to poor-quality and adulterated food and provisions, using any surplus to benefit the com-

munity" (International Cooperative Alliance, 2024). Such resistance reminds us that the power of food "lies in its material and symbolic functions of linking nature, human survival, health, culture and livelihood as a focus of resistance to corporate takeover of life itself" (McMichael, 2000, p. 21). A nonprofit food system, informed by an ecosystem perspective, would continue this resistance.

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