Negotiating Difference in Collective Farmers Marketing Initiatives

Family farms in the Canadian Prairies are faced with a growing crisis. A cost-price squeeze has led to chronically low farm incomes exacerbated by episodic stressors such as the BSE crisis, regulatory change, drought and flooding. Yet, farmers are characterized by innovation and resilience and are adapting to meet these challenges.

Recent consumer interest in quality or alternative food production and ‘local food’ is generating opportunities that some farmers are pursuing through Collective Farmers Marketing Initiatives (CFMI). These cooperatives have the potential to help extend the relevance of local or regional food from beyond the shadow of urban centers to more remote farmers and communities and to farmers who are otherwise unlikely to direct farm market.

This action-based research project documented the first four and a half years of the development of the first CFMI of its kind in Manitoba. This project was initiated in August 2006 and brought together 14 farm families to form the Harvest Moon Local Food Initiative (HMLFI).

BEGINNINGS

The HMLFI is based at the town of Clearwater, Manitoba, approximately 200 km southwest of Winnipeg in the Prairie Region of Canada. On May 23, 2003, the Canadian BSE crisis began, triggering a socio-economic crisis that devastated farm households and rural communities prompting farmers, especially cattle producers, to adapt their operations. Direct farm marketing and cooperatives emerged as one important response to the crisis, providing a point of departure for the development of the HMLFI.

Take Home Learnings

► Rather than avoiding the negotiation of difference in CFMI development, it should be recognized and confronted early on and re-visited throughout.
► Establishing group processes that are fair and inclusive is an important step to create a space where difference can be effectively negotiated.
► These cyclical and evolving initiatives are imperfect works in progress and important incubators for innovative ideas, projects and partnerships.
► Initiatives should consider adopting inclusive quality criteria in standards that allow for adaptation and transition.

Individuals expressed diverse motivations for becoming involved in the project that reflected economic, social and political priorities. Some of these were instrumental in focus, where members were driven by a desire to improve their farm businesses, income or develop new skills. In addition, members were driven by non-instrumental motivations where they desired to create alternatives to corporate agriculture, to build community and to create opportunities for the next generation of farmers. These individual motivations were subsumed under one common vision statement:

“We are a local community committed to ethically producing and marketing high quality, healthy food for the betterment of humankind and the environment now and for generations to come”

**CONFLICT**

After almost two years of planning, the HMLFI ‘launched’ in September 2008 with much hope and enthusiasm (video 1). The HMLFI went on to sell only $10,000 worth of farm products over the course of the next six months. During this period, a range of unresolved internal conflict and contradictions surfaced that compromised the effectiveness of the HMLFI and ultimately led to the dissolution of the marketing entity in its original form.

**Distribution Model**

Soon after the launch, some members perceived an irreconcilable division between:

a. those who wanted to distribute food by combining their products and selling under one brand, what the group called the ‘pooled’ or ‘We Sell’ approach
b. those who wished to distribute food directly from their farm to consumers (i.e. no pooling of products) using a collective label, or what the group called the ‘direct’ or ‘I Sell’ approach.

The split between “I Sell” and “We Sell” reflected, in part, differences in the degree to which people were open or able to establish more involved relationships with their customers. One of the “I-sellers” noted, “there is no reason that we shouldn’t see our customers all the time” while in direct contrast, a “we-seller” commented, “I mean we can’t have our consumers here all the time…”

Thus, not all participants were interested in collectivizing in the same way. “I-sellers” wanted to retain their connection to the customer and avoid pooling products. They were interested in cooperating in finding new customers for their own direct marketing business and perhaps sharing transportation and promoting individual farms under the HMLFI banner.

“We-sellers” were uninterested in taking on the additional roles required by direct marketing and hoped that HMLFI take on these responsibilities as described by Keith Gardiner (video 2). Late in the...
process, a hybrid approach was proposed whereby the group would have both an “I sell” and the “We sell” distribution approach. Yet, by this point, the cohesion within the group had disintegrated and progress was undermined by undercurrents of distrust.

**Gender, Generation, Communication & Pace**

A digital divide existed in the group, which seemed to be age-related as it was the older farmers who were less adept in email and web communication, in part because of a skill-deficit but also a belief in the importance of face-to-face meetings.

Generational differences were also implicated in a tension between older members who had aspirations to reach a development goal of $1 million in sales within 3-5 years and younger ones who advocated for and had time to wait for a more gradual approach.

The members who were most firmly polarized tended to be men. As the discussions became more hostile, women who were involved early on began dropping out. The gradual departure of these women, who tended to provide more moderate voices in the group that had a tempering influence on the interactions, only accelerated the conflict. Their departure also seemed to have adverse implications for those women that remained. The role of gender in the group dynamic was however contested. Yet, this discussion points to an important research question: how does gender play a role in shaping the governance of CFMIs?

**Quality & Standards**

Initially, the group developed an open and adaptive set of standards that allowed the group to be inclusive and flexible. The group recognized that many farmers are locked into particular modes of production and that to be effective, the group must allow for transitional farmers (video 3). Despite these aims of inclusivity, the cohesiveness of the group was undermined when these relatively fluid standards became more rigid as diverging visions of appropriate standards were negotiated and proposed.

Because of conflicting notions of ‘quality’, sellers anticipated that any negative eater/customer experience would reflect poorly on their operations. For example, a “We-seller” indicated, “I’m not interested in being a part of something like that, because one bad carcass like that, they’ll tell a hundred people and it takes years to develop these markets.” (Don Guilford).

Conversely, “I-sellers” believed that quality was constructed through interpersonal relationships, ergo grading standards were unnecessary, and that focusing on grade without adequate consideration of the other dimensions of quality (re-connection, health, etc.) placed their operations at risk.

According to the latter, customers define quality based on knowing the farmer and where their food comes from and they tolerate, or even come to appreciate, inconsistencies in the eating experience between foods from each participating farm.

**Separation and Spin-Offs**

These inter-group differences ultimately resulted in conflict that split the group into two groups. A smaller subset of farmers formed a separate corporation called “Prairie Sky” that focused on a pooled or “We Sell” approach that targeted restaurants and institutional food buyers. A few early positive contacts with a large institutional buyer and a restaurant provided an optimistic start, yet the group encountered a number of ultimately fatal barriers and no longer operates.
The remaining members of HMLFI developed a new collective selling approach by organizing a network of local food buying clubs. In this model, customers were able to choose a specific product from a particular farm. These orders were then aggregated and delivered once a month to four central drop-off points (buying clubs) in Winnipeg. A consumer-farmer governance model has led to different group dynamics and grounded decisions in both consumer and farmer priorities presenting new opportunities and challenges. Many participants developed substantial direct-marketing businesses along the way, in part facilitated by the visibility that HMLFI provided. Numerous informal collaborations emerged throughout the project. Thus, farmers started endorsing each other’s farms, referring customers and even selling each other’s products.

A cooperative endeavor also was initiated by two of the pooled group members in collaboration with another member of their holistic management club.

For others, the primary benefit of the group was that it offered a more general peer-support network, which enabled participants to become more effective agents of change (video 4).

**Reflections**

The HMLFI initially focused on exploring a common vision yet members later came to realize that member needs and motivations were far more diverse than anticipated. Farm size appeared to be one of the divisive factors. On the surface, mid-scale farmers and smaller farmers appeared to have different needs and thus required different distribution channels and organizational structures.

Although it was the smaller farmers who were originally the most marginalized when the initiative focused exclusively on the “we sell” approach, it was the larger farmers who were ultimately excluded from the HMLFI and chose to instead form their own separate cooperative.

The most damaging conflict in the group arose from differing visions of what constitutes “good food” and thus “good farming”. While it was clear that all members had a deep connection with their land, community and the environment, each defined and approached responsible stewardship differently. Agriculture is conventionally dominated by individualistic and competitive logic and farmers rarely need to negotiate difference with one another. In CFMIs, however, these differences are forced to the surface and must either be negotiated through inclusive and reflexive processes that allow for difference or avoided through exclusive processes that foster homogeneity.

The HMLFI attempted to embrace a flat organizational structure without any explicit hierarchy, leading to an ostensibly more transparent and inclusive initiative. This fostered greater diversity but also required more extensive negotiation of difference.

The HMLFI attempted to be inclusive and bring together a diversity of farmers. In retrospect, many members thought that this was ultimately a mistake and that two separate initiatives may have been more effective than a hybrid approach. Through their participation in HMLFI, member farmers were forced to reflect in new ways about their farms and values, stimulating individual and collective innovation – whether this included new cooperative ventures, new production or farm management practices (e.g. treatment for intestinal worms) or identifying new education and mentorship opportunities. It was through their participation in the CFMI, that members were able to articulate and act on these projects.

The vast majority of farmers in the Prairies and in the western world are culturally and materially “locked
Conflict in CFMIs is inevitable and perhaps even necessary in the construction of democratic projects. If these experiments are to effectively challenge the status quo, they will necessarily function outside the norms of the mainstream economy, precariously pushing personal, interpersonal and societal boundaries.

Attention should be paid to how difference is approached in these initiatives, to understand how they might involve a greater diversity of participants for more substantial transformative change.

By reimagining these problems as opportunities, we can envision both ‘successful’ and ‘unsuccessful’ CFMIs as cyclical and imperfect works-in progress, and ultimately as means toward more substantial, and perhaps unanticipated, change rather than ends in and of themselves.

Colin Ray Anderson
c_anderson@umanitoba.ca
University of Manitoba, Environmental Conservation Lab
Clayton H Riddell Faculty of Environment, Earth and Resources
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R2M 2B3

PHOTOS: Colin Anderson. BRIEF DESIGN: Greg deJong

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