

**Collaborative Marketing Enterprises:
Local Food Exchanges and the Promise of Sustainability**

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Auburn University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Master of Science

Auburn, Alabama
December 18, 2009

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Abstract

Direct marketing by small-scale, organically-oriented farmers in the United States has risen in popularity in recent decades in the form of farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture, roadside stands and U-pick operations. Yet, some farmers in the rural southeastern United States struggle to find enough demand in their local communities for these high-value organic or natural products. Since marketing to urban areas where demand is higher requires more time and money, some farmers have initiated marketing and distribution businesses that connect local farmers' products with urban customers through online shopping and correspondence. Using interviews, documents and observations gathered from three marketing networks in northeastern Alabama and western Georgia, this study examines the social and economic functions of these businesses. This study explores the impact that the political structure of each business has on the levels of importance given to economic and non-economic concerns. This study uses the conceptual tools of social embeddedness, marketness and instrumentalism to understand the relationship between social ties, economic motivation and non-economic values among farmers and market managers. Although many scholars privilege the democratic organization of economic institutions as the only way for community-based concerns to compete with economic goals, this study finds that community-based values and concerns are often more effectively included by the leadership within these small businesses. Indeed, legal arrangements were often secondary to the goals and leadership skills of the market managers in fostering communication, farmer involvement and relationships of trust.

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I. Introduction

Sustainability

Sustainability became a popular term over the past several decades as the negative social and environmental consequences of rapid industrial development were recognized (Fergus and Rowny 2005). In an attempt to adjust development practices that were narrowly focused on economic growth, sustainable development was promoted in the 1980s as a term to describe a more holistic approach to improving quality of life. Sustainable development considers the ecological and social factors often excluded by narrow market-based approaches to development (Fergus and Rowny 2005). Sustainable development has been described as a guiding principle of “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (UNGA 1987). The goals of sustainable development are often placed into the categories of environmental soundness, economic viability and social justice (Redclift 1987). In practice, however, sustainable development is shrouded in ambiguity (Kloppenburg et al. 2000, Hassanein 2003). While there has been general agreement on the principle of thinking ahead for future generations, applying sustainability to actual development practices has been cumbersome, contested and diluted in a development arena built on economic growth (Fergus and Rowny 2005).

A focus on sustainability within systems of food production and distribution has emerged on the tides of a social movement focused on health and environmentalism (Hassanein 1999). A sustainable food system is defined as “one that equitably balances concerns for environmental

soundness, economic viability and social justice among all sectors of society” (Allen et al. 1991:37). Transnational corporations currently shape many food production, processing and distribution practices. Their priorities are often driven by the instrumental concerns of appearance and product durability based on the distance it must travel (Friedmann 1995, Lyson 2004). However, communities and regions may have their own needs and concerns in relation to food and agriculture, such as taste, nutrition, local employment and water quality (Friedmann 1995). Some argue that sustainable food systems can only exist when the practices and policies are developed locally and democratically (Hassanein 2003, Mooney 2004, Friedmann 1995, Lyson 2004). Local communities and regions must have input into systems of food production, processing and consumption because they are directly affected by the negative or positive consequences (Friedmann 1995, Hassanein 2003). The success of sustainability efforts rests not only in achieving environmental and social goals, but also more importantly in creating a participatory system by which people decide how to practice sustainable development (Redclift 1987, Mooney 2004, Hassanein 2003).

Sustainable development requires that people collectively and individually balance values, needs and desires in relation to the greater common good (Mooney 2004). Conflict and tension is inevitable when groups must democratically balance sustainable ideals with material needs or desires, but conflict can also be helpful in advancing the goals of environmental soundness, economic viability and social justice (Mooney 2004, Hassanein 2003). It is through this process of struggle to balance community-based values with market-oriented goals that the flexibility and innovation needed to foster sustainability is achieved (Mooney 2004). Some argue that the focus of sustainable development should be on understanding and creating new institutions that mediate the human-environment relationship by upholding democratic ideals

while allowing tensions to exist (Mooney 2004, Redclift 1997). This study focuses on three producer-operated marketing businesses in Alabama and Georgia that collectively sell locally produced food products to member-consumers using the Internet. This study of three farmer-managed marketing enterprises elucidates the social and political characteristics that relate to the potential for each group to embody sustainability. Specifically, this study focuses on the ability of each group to balance community needs and assets with material needs and desires.

Industrial Food System

The mainstream, industrial-scale system of food production is capital and resource intensive, generating agricultural products by means of heavy mechanization and chemical usage on large, mono-crop farms (Horrigan, Lawrence and Walker 2002). This food system features vertically coordinated sectors of production, processing, distribution and marketing (Busch and Bain 2004). Smaller scale farms have been bypassed by increases in production from larger farms that are highly productive and require less human labor (Demissie 1990). Agribusiness corporations involved in input supply, marketing, distribution and retailing of food products have gained control over the food system and often directly influence farm operations (Welsh 1997, Busch and Bain 2004). These structures allocate little to no power to communities that grow crops and raise livestock, or to the citizens who rely on this food system (Lyson 2004, Mooney 2004).

Despite growth in the scale and efficiency of modern agriculture, many observers and participants in the industrial agri-food system have criticized the willingness and ability of corporate food actors to provide safe and nutritious food while also maintaining viable economic, environmental and social conditions for those who depend on this system (Lyson 2004, Stuart

2008). In short, food corporations tend to focus narrowly on financial gain without considering the environmental or social costs of the food and farming systems they create (Welch 1997).

From the farm gate to the dinner table, corporate control over production decisions and food options has not come without broad-reaching negative consequences (Bonnano 1991, Horrigan et al. 2002). Rural farming communities have endured an overall decline in the number of farmers as industrialized production has increased and profit margins have fallen (Gardner 2002). Water and soil quality is often compromised under intensive production practices that work against natural ecological systems (Horrigan et al. 2002). Food safety concerns often trouble high volume processing facilities (Stuart 2008). Manufactured foods high in fat and sugar threatened the health of larger portions of the U.S. population (Horrigan et al. 2002). Despite the efficiency and productivity of modern industrial agriculture, many people in the United States still experience hunger and nutrition-related disease (Allen 1999).

Sustainable Food Systems

An increasing number of farmers in the United States are practicing methods of food production and exchange that focus on organic or natural production techniques, high quality whole foods and local, direct marketing (Feenstra 1997, Dimitri and Green 2000, Lyson 2004). The rise of small-scale, ecologically oriented farms and direct marketing practices has been acknowledged as the rise of a new type of food system (Kloppenburger et al. 2000, Lyson 2004, Allen et al. 1991). Organic production techniques include the use of cover crops, crop rotations, mulching and compost additions that build soil health and decrease weed, pest and disease problems. Synthetic pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, fertilizers and hormone or antibiotic treatments to animals are not used and are prohibited in certified organic and certified naturally grown operations (Dimitri and Green 2007).

Through local channels such as farmers' markets, on-farm sales and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) many small-scale and organically oriented producers are selling high quality foods directly to individual customers (Kneen 1995, Ostrom 2007). Such approaches give producers a higher percentage of the food dollar in return (Govindasamy, Hassanein and Adelaha 1999). Community Supported Agriculture is an arrangement in which a group of consumers buy a share of seasonal farm products directly from a local farmer. Customers typically receive a weekly box of mixed vegetables, eggs and/or meat for several months by paying in advance (Hinrichs 2000, Cone and Myhre 2000, Olstrom 2007). These direct marketing outlets have grown in popularity around the United States (Kneen 1995, Lyson 2004). New agricultural and food-related enterprises are appearing in rural and urban areas. They have the potential to allow communities direct input and control over their food production systems (Lacy 2000, Cone and Myhre 2000).

Food Democracy and Civic Agriculture

Locally oriented food systems in which food is produced, processed and consumed within a region or community have the potential to lessen the inequalities brought on by the global industrial agro-food system (Feenstra 1997, Campbell 2004, Friedmann 2007, Kneen 1995, Lyson 2004). Small-scale, sustainable and organic farms coupled with direct, local markets can meet broader community needs by generating economic development, building social capital, improving food security and maintaining land resources (Lyson 2004, Gale 1997, Campbell 2004). Some have described such idealized food systems as participatory, local, transparent and "tightly linked to a community's social and economic development" (Lyson 2004:1, Hassanein 2003, Friedmann 1995). Civic agriculture is a concept that emphasizes community participation in food production, processing, distribution and consumption so that

community assets, goals and concerns can be known, acknowledged and addressed. Local food systems embedded in communities offer an alternative to the destructive practices of conventional agriculture (Lyson 2004).

The virtues of local, direct food systems may not rest solely in their scale or locality, but rather in their ability to balance the values and motivations of the particular actors within each local food system through direct participation fostered in part by food exchange institutions (Hinrichs et al. 1998, Born and Purcell 2006, Mooney 2004). Social inequalities and environmental ills can thrive in any scale of society (Born and Purcell 2006, Duncan 1999), but some believe that democratic participation is the key to creating a fair and just food system that meets the needs of a broader population (Hassanein 2003, Mooney 2004, Friedmann 2007). Food democracy represents “the idea that people can and should be actively participating in shaping the food system, rather than remaining passive spectators...” (Hassanein 2003:79). Transparency, accountability and knowledge sharing occur through active communication between consumers and producers (Friedmann 1995, Hassanein 1999).

Social Embeddedness

Not only can direct marketing arrangements be economically beneficial for farmers and increase food access for consumers, but they can also provide opportunities for meaningful social engagements that build trust and connectivity within the community and expand community knowledge about food, health and natural resources (Lyson 2004, Hinrichs 2000, Sharp, Imerman and Peters 2002, Hassanein 1999). Social embeddedness refers to the extent of social relationships between local food system actors and the surrounding community (Hinrichs 2000). Social embeddedness reflects bonds of trust, cooperation and shared values between participants. Socially embedded entrepreneurs, such as farmers and market managers, are better able to

understand local needs as they relate to food and agriculture (Granovetter 1985, Jack and Anderson 2002). Embeddedness also may influence the community values of farmers and the importance given to those values in relation to market-based goals (Hinrichs 2000).

Farmers practicing organic or low-input agriculture and direct marketing are often concerned with increasing the environmental and social integrity of the food system (Hinrichs 2000, Lyson 2004, Hassanein 1999, Stock 2007). Local networks of farmers practicing organic production and direct marketing may be socially embedded with one another, experiencing relationships of trust, cooperation, shared values and knowledge (Hassanein 1999, Stock 2007). The condition of being embedded in a group of other farmer-entrepreneurs can facilitate the creation and sharing of values (Jack and Anderson 2002). Social embeddedness can affect producers' collective balancing of community and market-based values (Mooney 2004, Block 1990, Hinrichs 2000).

Contemporary food products found in grocery stores in the United States are distributed through national and global supply chains. This food is separated from its ecological and social sources whereas local foods are embedded in the community in which they are produced and consumed (Marsden 1997, Murdoch, Marsden and Banks 2000). As a result, the average grocery store consumer has little knowledge of the environmental and social costs associated with these anonymous food items. Consumers of local food may know more about the social and environmental characteristics of their food (Friedmann 1995, Marsden 1997). In order to create transparency and accountability within food supply chains, the social and ecological attributes of food must be re-embedded in community food systems (Marsden 1997, Friedmann 1995).

Marketness and Instrumentalism

The behavior of farmers within collective marketing businesses also can be understood in terms of their levels of marketness in economic transactions and instrumentalism and operational decisions. Marketness is a measure of the importance that price considerations are given in business transactions (Block 1990). Instrumentalism is the extent to which economic actors privilege market-based goals over other considerations (Block 1990). Other concerns such as environmental stewardship or community food security may compete with price considerations within alternative agri-food networks, altering the influence of market driven behavior (Murdock and Meile 1999). Hinrichs (2000) uses the dimensions of marketness and instrumentalism to analyze economic behavior at farmers' markets and in CSA programs. She finds that although farmers' markets and more notably, CSA programs, feature socially embedded relationships between farmers and consumers, both types of market arrangements are still subject to the some of the same preference for economic goals found in conventional food supply chains (Hinrichs 2000).

Collective Marketing Arrangements

In addition to farmers markets, CSA programs and on-farm sales, some organic and low-input producers in Alabama and Georgia have initiated marketing businesses in which they collaborate with other producers to collectively market and distribute their food products to nearby urban areas. Products are sold to member-customers in urban areas using the Internet. Farmer-managers coordinate orders with the supply of food products and deliver weekly boxes of fresh produce and other items to several pre-arranged urban locations. This study presents three case studies of collective marketing businesses in Alabama and Georgia. It is not clear how the decision-making structures of these marketing enterprises balance economic motivations

with the values of social justice, quality food production and environmental accountability often associated with building sustainable food systems (Lyson 2004, Hassanein 1999). A more thorough understanding of the social and political characteristics of these new institutions of food exchange is sought in order to realize their potential for building sustainable food systems. The analysis explores the values, motivations and goals of these marketing businesses and the corresponding decisions and actions that they pursue. The case studies elucidate how organizational characteristics and varying degrees of social embeddedness affect each collective marketing business's ability to balance the community-based values associated with sustainability and the market-based motives necessary to conduct business.

Balancing Values, Goals and Motivations

In order to promote sustainability within communities, economic institutions within alternative food networks must give priority to community-based values while complying with market-based realities (Mooney 2004). The range of values and motivations held by small-scale organic producers may or may not relate directly to their market considerations (Murdoch and Miele 1999). Although community and market-based goals are not always mutually exclusive, the way that each marketing business understands their values, goals and motivations in reference to their markets is of interest. The strategies of farmer-entrepreneurs to collectively balance the conflicts that arise between motives of economic growth and those based on community improvement are not well understood.

This balance must allow farmers to earn a living while supporting innovation and flexibility needed to foster sustainability within the business and the community (Mooney 2004). By forming collective marketing businesses and online markets, producers may alter their degree of social embeddedness in these economic transactions and also add a new dimension of

organizational complexity to the counterpoint between community and market-based motivations. It is not well understood what kind of effect social embeddedness and varying degrees of democratic participation may have on balancing community and market-based motivations for small, farmer-owned marketing enterprises.

Study Objectives

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. Identify market-based and community-based values and goals present within each collective marketing business.
2. Evaluate the relative primacy of market-based and community-based values and goals in each collective marketing enterprise.
3. Identify tensions or conflicts present between market-based and community-based values and goals within each marketing business.
4. Determine how each marketing business reconciles market-based and community-based values and goals in its operational decisions.

II. Conceptual Framework

Sustainable Food Systems

Sustainable food systems in the United States have been described in both ideal and practical terms as locally oriented, socially just and environmentally sound (Allen et al. 1991). Many descriptions and analyses of sustainability efforts within food and agriculture begin with a critique of the dominant globalizing food system, highlighting concerns over food safety, environmental degradation, food-related health problems, food security and the concentration of corporate power (Hinrichs 2007). New methods of food production and distribution are being practiced across the United States that may represent parts of new sustainable food systems (Kneen 1995). Some food producers in local systems practice organic and low-input techniques that are designed to protect, conserve and enhance surrounding ecosystems and natural resources (Horrigan et al. 2002, Lyson 2004). Producers within new local food systems attempt to create alternative trajectories for food exchange so that food is produced and then directly sold to consumers within a modest radius of the site of production (Hinrichs 2003). In a survey of organic and low-input producers in Alabama, Cui (2008) found that 91 percent market their products locally through on-farm sales, farmers' markets, websites and CSA.

It may be important to clarify the meaning of food-system sustainability beyond the often-vague definitions that can be easily manipulated and co-opted by corporate actors (Kloppenburg et al. 2000). One study gained a richer, more specific definition by asking food system participants and activists about their definitions of a sustainable food system. In a

sustainable food system farmers should receive a fair price for their food products that reflects the cost of production and that farmers should have access to benefits such as health insurance. A sustainable food system would support fair food access to all people regardless of income, ability, age, ethnicity or any other quality (Kloppenburger et al. 2000). Participants believed that information about food production should be widely available from many sources and that efforts to disseminate this information in the form of educational school programs should be a practice (Kloppenburger et al. 2000). Study participants also thought it important that people participate thoroughly and meaningfully in sustainable food systems, including through democratic decision-making where necessary. “A sustainable food system is one in which people participate directly in the operation and governance of multiple components of the food system in ways that are more complex and influential than simple market transactions” (Kloppenburger et al. 2000: 183). Respondents agreed that a sustainable food system should allow and support relationships between farmers, processors, consumers and others. These relationships might also exist in the form of “networks emphasizing responsibility, communication and care for each other and the land” (Kloppenburger et al. 2000:184).

Central to this study is the finding that food system participants want a sustainable food system based on “value-oriented economics” (Kloppenburger et al. 200: 184). “A sustainable food system is one based on an economic system that favors environmental sustainability, relationships between farmers and consumers, fairness and equity, and strong communities over the profit motive” (Kloppenburger et al. 2000: 184). They found that participants felt strongly about “the need to redirect the economic system to reflect values other than the ability to compete in the market with greatest efficiency to generate the greatest profit” (Kloppenburger et al. 2000:184). These specific, community-oriented functions of an idealized sustainable food

system may prove difficult to imitate by corporate food actors that would attempt to redefine sustainability and label unsustainable practices as sustainable (Kloppenburg et al. 2000). This illuminates how local food systems based on participation and democratic involvement can become tailored to the needs and desires of communities and bioregions in real and transparent ways (Friedman 1995, Kloppenburg et al. 2000).

Many have acknowledged the positive community development potential of local, sustainable food systems (Demissie 1990, Friedmann 1995, Gale 1997, Feenstra 1997, Hassanein 1999, Govindasamy et al. 1999, Lacy 2000, Lyson 2004). Importantly, many of these observations are often qualified by the potential creation of new institutional frameworks that equitably reshape the social, political and economic relations within food systems (Hassanein 2003, Lyson 2004, Mooney 2004, Friedmann 1995, Marsden and Smith 2004). Although alternative systems of food production and exchange offer a promise of equality, contention exists over the assumed virtues of alternative systems based solely on their scale and market reach (Born and Purcell 2006, Allen 1999). Some warn against the assumption that local food systems are inherently better than those on national or global scales. “No matter what its scale, the outcomes produced by a food system are contextual: they depend on the actors and agendas that are empowered by the particular social relations in a given food system” (Born and Purcell 2006: 196). Even though local and naturally grown foods may hold promise as a part of the foundation of new sustainable food systems, they must be accompanied by new institutional frameworks that allow local needs to be communicated and honored in tandem with national and global food system oversight (Mooney 2004, Friedmann 1995, Allen 1999).

Civic Agriculture

Civic participation and democratic decision-making have been identified as necessary components of a truly sustainable food system (Lyson 2004, Friedmann 1995, Hassanein 2003, Mooney 2004). Civic agriculture emphasizes participation in community-centered food systems that are committed to “developing and strengthening an economically, environmentally and socially sustainable system of agriculture and food production that relies on local resources and serves local markets and consumers” (Lyson 2004:63). Therefore, while industrial agriculture is driven by profit and efficiency to produce standardized low-cost food items, civic agriculture is driven by community resources, concerns and limitations to produce diverse, high quality foods (Lyson 2004, Hinrichs 2003). In ideal community-oriented food systems, producers work cooperatively to build local food economies by sharing knowledge and sharing marketing resources. Civic agriculture empowers both food producers and food consumers with the responsibility to build their own sustainable food systems (Lyson 2004).

Food Democracy

The concept of food democracy has been used to explain how communities, regions, nations and the global world should create new sustainable food systems that are democratically controlled (Hassanein 2003). In theory, food democracy gives power to ordinary citizens in shaping the food systems in which they participate, embedding the social relations of production and consumption into communities and regions (Hassanein 2003). In practice, institutions such as agricultural cooperatives and food policy councils are the closest representations of democratic decision-making within existing alternative food systems (Hassanein 2003, Mooney 2004). Food policy councils exist in a few North American cities and represent municipal efforts to holistically and democratically address local issues related to agriculture, hunger, health, and

natural resources (Hassanein 2003). Agricultural cooperatives are democratically organized economic institutions that function within conventional and alternative food systems (Mooney 2004).

Friedmann (1995: 30) calls for new institutions of food exchange in which the needs of consumers and other community members are “effectively transmitted” to local producers. When the social relations of agriculture and food are no longer anonymous but become re-embedded into regions and communities, people can become empowered to reshape their food system (Hassanein 2003, Friedman 1995). The re-embedding of land, labor and food into communities and regions is imperative in order to achieve the community-oriented goals of sustainable development because the food system can be tailored to fit community needs as well as assets (Friedmann 1995). Under corporate control of the food system, human and environmental costs such as hunger and water pollution are often considered external to the economic functions of the business (Mooney 2004). However, when members of the community or region are democratically involved in agricultural and food-related enterprises, these costs are no longer external but remain local, visible and real (Mooney 2004). Cooperatives offer a form of regulation that is neither purely economic nor purely political, but one that is rooted in the community of producers and consumers in the food system (Mooney 2004).

Community Supported Agriculture

Producers and consumers have been isolated at opposite ends of the food chain by the corporatization of food processing, distribution and marketing. This gap must be overcome in order to restore power to both groups (Friedmann 1995). Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) may be “an embryonic form that overcomes this disjuncture” because CSA is an informal synthesis between producer and consumer groups with direct communication and exchange

(Mooney 2004:87). CSA is perhaps the most “radical departure from any other form of economic organization in agriculture today” (Kneen 1995:126). It is an arrangement between a farm and a group of local customers in which the customers pay in advance for a subscription to weekly boxes of produce in a growing season (Kneen 1995). In its truest form, CSA represents a shared relationship of trust and dependence between the farmer and the community. Farmers are assured of their income and the community shares the risks and benefits associated with farming. If a crop is damaged by natural causes, customers share the loss with the farmer. Likewise, if some crops produce more abundantly than expected, CSA members would receive more food than they had first imagined (Kneen 1995). Within the United States, member involvement can range from helping make important farm decisions, giving time to work on the farm or no involvement beyond payments to farmers (Cone and Myhre 2000). The original concept of a CSA came from a Japanese model in which community members were broadly engaged in farm practices and decision-making (Cone and Mhyre 2000). The CSA model was introduced in the United States from Europe and Japan during the 1980s and experienced rapid growth during the decades since its introduction (Ostrom 2007, Cone and Mhyre 2000).

Although CSA may come the closest to re-embedding the social relations of land, labor and food into communities and thus contributing to sustainability, the reality of changing peoples’ relationship to food is more complicated (Ostrom 2007). In a 10-year study of 24 CSA operations, Ostrom (2007) found that customers do not often participate in farm activities or decisions. Rather, farmers are burdened with high intensity labor and management of CSA operations. Producers within CSA arrangements typically grow a large variety of fruits and vegetables throughout their growing seasons and may also offer eggs, meat, flowers or herbs

(Ostrom 2007). This type of diversified production is labor intensive, requiring exhaustive management to achieve ecologically based production standards.

Farmers are also responsible for the social coordination of their CSA member network, which can range from 10 to 500 members (Ostrom 2007). They must grapple with high turnover rates and member apathy as most of the social ties tend to “radiate outward from the farmer to the member” instead of between members as idealized in the CSA model (Ostrom 2007:106). Ostrom (2007:110) found that 36 percent of previous CSA members did not renew their memberships because of what she called “supermarket withdrawal.” Because the box of mixed vegetables is chosen by farmers and determined by what they can grow in season, customers may receive the same items for weeks in a row. Customers are often unprepared to deal with seasonally available produce and varieties that are sometimes unfamiliar to them. Members did experience positive dietary changes such as eating higher quantities of fresh vegetables and not shopping for food as often (Ostrom 2007, Cone and Mhyre 2000).

Farmers may find themselves falling short of income goals and going without basic provisions for healthcare and retirement funds. They may be unable to make capital investments in land, housing or equipment. Ostrom (2007:107) compares the problems of these farmers to those experienced by many farmers in conventional agriculture and notes that CSA farmers are still subject to the “cheap food policies of the marketplace” because consumers often would not accept the prices that farmers needed to cover production costs (Ostrom 2007). The shortcomings revealed about CSA illustrate the need for new institutional forms of food exchange that can take some of the financial and managerial burden from the farmer while staying true to community needs and values. Collaborative marketing businesses may hold

promise as a sustainable institution if they are able to balance economic imperatives and community needs.

Cooperatives

Collective action by farmers is a time-honored practice in American history (Groves 1985). As farmer associations have grown in size and complexity, some of these collective efforts have entered into new dimensions of formality and entrepreneurship (Groves and Ingalsbe 1989). One organizational form of collective action and democratic decision making within the food system, whether it has to do with producing, processing or marketing food products, is commonly known as a cooperative. A cooperative is formally defined as “a user-owned and user-controlled business that distributes benefits on the basis of use” (Barton 1989:1).

Cooperatives are democratically controlled and collectively owned businesses that pool the resources of members in order to achieve what might be otherwise unattainable by individuals (Fairbairn 2004, Mooney 2004). The historic and present day formation of cooperatives in the United States has occurred in response to changing agricultural markets and governmental forces which cause economic hardship on farmers and their communities (Fairbairn 2004). In the United States, formal agricultural cooperatives have existed for over two hundred years (Groves and Ingalsbe 1989).

The first U.S. cooperatives were based on a British cooperative designed by the Rochdale society, which formed a consumer cooperative in response to dissatisfaction with local food and clothing retailers (Barton 1989b). The Rochdale principles were later extrapolated from this successful cooperative (Fairbairn 2004). These core principles can still be found in present-day cooperatives. They consist of democratic member-voting so that one member equals one vote, the distribution of net income based on patronage or contribution of members, and limited

returns on member investments so that a proportion of dividends must be reinvested in the cooperative business (Barton 1989b). Following the Civil War, cooperatives began to be recognized as a legitimate business model within agriculture (Groves and Ingalsbe 1989). Cooperatives grew in popularity as groups of farmers became organized in efforts to gain power and a voice against the monopolistic control of railroads, agricultural processors, and suppliers (Dyson 1986).

During the post-war period of the late 1800s, the food system experienced the growth of middlemen. From grain elevators and fertilizer suppliers to barbed wire salesmen, farmers were skeptical about the profits of this new class of businessmen and experienced economic distress as a result of high supply, processing and transportation fees (Fairbairn 2004). In an effort to regain control over their economic positions, farmers increased efforts to organize more cooperatives, including cotton warehouses, grain elevators and supply stores (Dyson 1986). Although these cooperatives reached a gross income of \$18 million in 1876, their success was brief due to poor management and lack of economic resources (Dyson 1986, Mooney 2004). Another wave of cooperatives swept the rural United States around the late 1880s promoted by the National Farmers' Alliance, but these were also short-lived institutions that were hastily organized and met the same quick demise (Dyson 1986). Although cooperatives of the late nineteenth century were not successful in the long run, there is a unifying theme of this cooperative movement that persisted into twentieth century cooperatives (Fairbairn 2004). Farmers organized cooperatives in direct opposition of the growth of monopolies in farm supply, processing, and transportation (Fairbairn 2004). Indeed, farmers were faced with a rapidly changing and expanding market. They would soon lose their majority in the population and their status as the foundation of American economic and political life (Fairbairn 2004, Groves and Igalsbe 1980).

The twentieth century ushered enduring changes into the American food system. The increased scale of production and the declining position of independent farmers reshaped the composition of agribusiness, farm organizations and farmer cooperatives (Welsh 1997). Agricultural processing during the twentieth century is now highly centralized in the hands of only a few agribusiness firms and many markets are only accessible through coordinated agreements with industrial scale or corporately owned farms (Heffernan 1994, Welsh 1997). Howe (1986:106) asserts, “agriculture has periodically been restructured to maintain the conditions of capital accumulation.” The disparity between farmers’ incomes and those of corporate agribusiness processing firms has grown through these readjustments (Howe 1986). As capitalism becomes more organized and powerful, agricultural cooperatives become more similar to corporate agribusiness firms (Fairbairn 2004:32). Twentieth century cooperatives experienced the same fate as that of the family farmers: get big, or get out (Walzer and Merrett 2001).

Cooperatives face new competition as investor-owned firms such as large corporate agribusiness firms, increase in flexibility and conduct mergers, acquisitions, joint ventures and a host of other new activities (Fairbairn 2004). Traditional cooperatives are now more consolidated, merging and increasing their economies of scale in order to remain competitive. Cooperatives lose touch with their members as economic transactions and operational decision become less transparent and more singularly rationalized according to economic concerns (Walzer and Merrett 2001, Mooney 2004).

In a study of small scale fruit and vegetable cooperatives in the northeastern United States, cooperatives were considered small if they had annual gross sales of \$10 million or less, although almost half of those studied (18) grossed less than \$500,000 annually (Hilchey,

Gillespie and Henehan 2006). Cooperatives marketing both vegetables and fruits (mixed) were included in this study and found to be generally newer, smaller and more likely to market organic products than cooperatives marketing vegetables or fruits separately. A higher number of mixed cooperatives sell year-round than do vegetable or fruit cooperatives. This study surveyed managers of cooperatives on a variety of topics. Managers thought “quality,” “products offered,” and being “locally based” gave their small-scale cooperatives a competitive advantage (Hilchey et al. 2006).

A nationwide study of small-scale fruit and vegetable cooperatives with gross annual sales of \$1 million or less was conducted in 1990 and revealed several reasons for the success and failure of these types of cooperatives (Hulse, Biggs and Wissman 1990). The most comprehensive reason for failure among these cooperatives was low sales volume. Other reasons found after conducting four follow-up case studies of failed cooperatives included expiration of supporting grants, lack of understanding about cooperative operation and philosophy, and a lack of member commitment to the cooperative, including member sales to cooperatives only when the price was better (Hulse et al. 1990).

Within the alternative agro-food systems, cooperatives and other collaborative businesses exist as institutions for small-scale farmers to market their produce (Schilthuis 2001). A growing body of research is becoming available about the benefits, challenges and sustainability of collaborative efforts among small-scale farmers to market and distribute their food products. Although most producer marketing cooperatives in general appear to concentrate on selling to larger wholesale markets such as grocery stores, some direct retail marketing has also occurred (Huber and Parker 2002, Seyfang 2004). An important reason why cooperatives have enjoyed success so far is the earnest commitment of the farmers and others offering technical support,

such as non-profit agencies and universities. In addition, almost every marketing cooperative had been started through the support of grants (Lawless 1999, Seyfang 2004, Neely 2007, Organic Valley 2008).

Organic Valley Family of Farms is the largest dairy producer cooperative within the organic sector, marketing a full line of dairy products nationwide. They also have meat and vegetable producers within their cooperative, and the cooperative itself began as a 25-member vegetable cooperative (Organic Valley 2008, Stevenson 2009). In a comprehensive study on the history and present day function of the vegetable and dairy sectors of the cooperative, researchers tried to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to success (Stevenson 2009). This study found that successful marketing for organic producer cooperatives was dependent on a “vibrant community of farmers and consumers” as well as a dependable distribution network and excellent marketing (Stevenson 2009). Some challenges to successful marketing included the perishable nature of vegetables, which require rapid and regular marketing, and the predisposition that consumers have towards cosmetically perfect vegetables. Within the cooperative, low production levels were a key challenge that related back to low profits for farmers, which researchers hypothesized, could actually spawn a “downward spiral,” decreasing consumer and member participation and eventually destroying the cooperative (Stevenson 2009).

The vegetable sector of the Organic Valley cooperative still exists today but the most successful part of the cooperative is its line of dairy products (Organic Valley 2008, Stevenson 2009). The cooperative is organized formally with a board of directors making pricing and business growth decisions. Ranchers are organized by regional location and have semiannual meetings. The cooperative attempts to overcome the space between producers and consumers by

asking members to become “farmer ambassadors” and represent the cooperative to customers and their community by sharing farming stories and visiting wholesale buyers in their region (Stevenson 2009).

The cooperative carefully screens new members by going over the mission, goals and processes of the cooperative business to make sure that farmers value and understand cooperation before they are allowed to become members. The focus on developing cooperative skills and maintaining business autonomy has been important for the success of Organic Valley (Stevenson 2009). The cooperative conducts outreach to retail customers using online tools to convey their values of organic production and safe, higher quality food products (Stevenson 2009).

Organic Valley does struggle with contradictions between community-focused goals and economic growth. The cooperative was criticized from within and outside of the cooperative for agreeing to a temporary contract with a 5,000 organic dairy cow operation in Texas. Organic Valley is committed to supporting family farms, but have struggled to formulate a definition of a “family farm” since variation exists among dairy farms in different regions of the United States (Stevenson 2009). The cooperative did cancel business relations with Wal-Mart after the company tried to turn them against other organic milk suppliers in an effort to get the cooperative to lower prices and increase quantity. Organic Valley determined that this would compromise their relationships with long-term customers as well as compromise the economic returns for dairy farmers (Stevenson 2009). These situations reveal the complexities involved with democratically organized businesses as they attempt to balance growth with community well-being.

The Practical Farmers of Iowa conducted a case study of a cooperative marketing business of farmers in Iowa called GROWN Locally. This cooperative consists of approximately 15 member farms marketing their organically produced fruits and vegetables to individual customers and institutional food service establishments with a 40-mile radius (Huber and Parker 2002). They operate a 200 member CSA and have recently branched out by selling higher quantities at slightly lower prices to institutional food service outlets. Their all-member board meets monthly and invites buyers to their meetings to have input in decision-making. All farmers do not have to be certified organic, but must meet the cooperative's expectations for natural, sustainable production. The cooperative depends on strong relationships with rural customers, both individual and institutional, for market success (Huber and Parker 2002). Institutional buyers do not currently demand organic products, so the cooperative cannot pursue premium pricing. They are able to price their products above conventional prices but below organic prices because of the efficiencies gained through collaborative marketing, processing and distribution (Huber and Parker 2002).

In a case study of a cooperative of farmers in western Montana, Neely (2007) takes the perspective of buyers in order to understand the cooperative's contributions to the local food system in Montana. This cooperative currently sources from approximately 20 member farms and sells products to local grocery stores, restaurants and institutional food services in western Montana. The cooperative aids wholesale buyers in finding local sources of high quality foods by maintaining constant contact with buyers and facilitating market relations between farmers and buyers. However, the cooperative may compromise the integrity of local food exchanges if it does not communicate to buyers and end customers about member farmers and the cooperative's principles (Neely 2007). Although the cooperative may be effective in moving

products from farms to buyers, they lack adequate transfer of information about the quality of products, the sustainability of farms and the vision of a sustainable local food system (Neely 2007).

Contradictions and Tensions

Mooney (2004) argues that the democratic structure within formal cooperatives is essential to sustainable development because it allows tensions between market-based and community-based goals to exist instead of unfailingly giving preference to market-based motivations as investor-owned firms tend to do. Whereas conflicts or tensions within the decision-making apparatus of economic institutions can be viewed as inefficient or negative, tensions between economic and non-economic goals are good because this means that non-economic values are being given some consideration (Mooney 2004).

Within the food system, democratic control over economic decisions “would have the potential to reduce the unequal economic influences on food production and consumption by elevating people’s needs and desires...” (Mooney 2004:87). Although Mooney (2004) prefers formal cooperatives, he does reference CSA programs as an informal way for farmers and consumers to cooperate and communicate. However, informal cooperation may not have the ability to be as consistently responsive to community needs as formal cooperation (Mooney 2004). Mooney (2004) argues that the democratic structure of formal cooperatives is the best and possibly the only way to retain a presence of community-based needs within agricultural enterprises.

Democracy and Capitalism

Building sustainable food systems requires that farmers respond to community needs while accommodating the conditions of capitalism. This process may often foster tensions

within groups of farmers (Mooney 2004). Cooperatives are “institutions of democratic capitalism” (Mooney 2004:82), so tension occurs between the economic and political concerns for profit and solidarity. There is a struggle between the capitalist economic environment in which farmers and consumers must participate and the democratic principle of cooperation (Mooney 2004). Price-based concerns are important for farmers and consumers but other issues are relevant to agricultural businesses and communities such as environmental protection. Deciding which values take priority cannot solely be based on monetary concerns if the goals of sustainable development are to be realized, but price-based concerns are often difficult for capitalist enterprises to balance in relation to community-based goals (Mooney 2004).

The democratic decision-making mechanism within cooperatives may give merit to non-economic goals if it is utilized. However, member voting and input can also be neglected as some cooperatives grow and shift towards more highly competitive forms (Mooney 2004). Cooperatives and other businesses typically hire managers to maintain daily operations. Although they are often members of the cooperative, managers may view the goals of the business in more strictly economic terms than the broader membership (Mooney 2004). If given enough power in the business, managers can steer the business towards more economically motivated directions and reduce the influence of non-economic values (Mooney 2004). This increase in bureaucratic function may lead to a disparity in communication from the manager to the members justified by increasingly complex operating practices. Retaining the participation of members through consistent communication and involvement is important in order to resist bureaucratic tendencies (Mooney 2004).

Production and Consumption

Tensions between production and consumption occur in the space between consumers and producers as efforts persist to embed and localize food systems (Friedmann 1995, Mooney 2004). Producers and consumers are marginalized in the modern global industrial food system that isolates spheres of production and consumption (Friedmann 1995). Tensions between production and consumption appear as alternative food systems emerge to rejoin farmers and consumers in an attempt to bridge the “social relations of production and consumption” (Mooney 2004:90). These tensions are evident in the difficulties that CSA programs have in garnering customer participation or approval of fair food prices (Ostrom 2007). Likewise, the struggle for food consumers to make informed food choices or to afford healthy options reveals the divide between production and consumption (Friedmann 1995). Consumers may also lack food preparation skills necessary to handle raw or whole foods that many producers have to offer (Wilkins 2007). Farmers also may struggle to meet consumer preferences for variety and sustained production as they deal with limitations of seasonality (Ostrom 2007). Mooney (2004) argues that the democratic structure of cooperatives can help overcome the divide between producers and consumers because it fosters communication between and within the groups. Direct food exchange between producers and consumers can also begin to bring both groups out of isolation and thus empower people, not corporations, to shape regional food systems (Friedmann 1995, Hassanein 2003).

Global and Local

Tensions between the local and global concerns of producers and communities intensify when business expansion goals take precedent over community-based concerns of the cooperative (Mooney 2004). The tendency to expand entrepreneurial activities beyond the scope

of the community or region is contradictory to many other concerns that are centered on the local community (Mooney 2004). Member participation may become strained and member influence can diminish as the cooperative business decides to grow larger than is necessary to serve local communities and regions (Mooney 2004). The formation of new methods of local food exchange and locally oriented, specialized products are advantageous to communities if cooperatives remain locally oriented (Mooney 2004, Hassanein 1999).

New and Traditional Social Movements

Finally, tensions between new and traditional social movements are present in the foundations and goals of cooperatives, especially when new social movement ideas challenge the predominance of economic rationality from traditional social movements (Mooney 2004).

Mooney (2004) notes two types of social movements that interact within cooperatives.

Traditional social movements are usually focused on improving the position of a certain group within society, such as miners or farmers. New social movements attempt to bridge class lines, bringing groups together to change whole systems (Mooney 2004). New social movements also challenge the logic of rationalization along purely economic lines, creating new parameters for what can be considered important in collective decision making (Mooney 2004).

Many producers and consumers who participate in sustainable production and direct marketing are also a part of a larger social movement to create new systems of food production that resist the standardizing, isolating forces of globalization (Hassanein 1999). Many organically oriented farmers align themselves with a set of ethical and social values such as environmental stewardship, social engagement and regional sustainability (Hassanein 1999, Ostrom 2007). The democratic structure of the cooperative allows members to balance broader community-based goals of new social movements with the instrumental rationality persistent in

the capitalist system and within traditional social movements (Mooney 2004). The four areas of contradiction and tension overlap and interact within the cooperative struggle and within the struggle for sustainability.

Social Embeddedness

Economies consist in their simplest form of humans interacting with their environment in order to meet material needs (Polanyi 1944). Market economies are shaped by political, social and cultural forces today and throughout history (Polanyi 1944). Although economic behavior is shaped by state regulation and microeconomic choices at the individual level, other social mechanisms exist in society that influence economic behavior (Block 1990). These social mechanisms, such as social norms, values and movements, reveal the greater embeddedness of economic life within a social framework (Block 1990). Social embeddedness refers to the breadth and depth of social relations in economic transactions (Granovetter 1985). Embedded social relations are responsible for the occurrence of trust between economic actors. Ongoing networks of social relationships among economic actors denote a high degree of embeddedness and thus a higher propensity for trust and order as an outcome (Granovetter 1985). Social relations add dimension to economic actions, bringing values that are not always related to price into economic life (Granovetter 1985, Block 1990).

Farmers may be socially embedded within their surrounding community of customers, neighbors and other farmers (Hinrichs 2000). As farmers become more highly embedded, sharing relationships of trust, the power of economic motivations may be tempered (Hinrichs 2000). However, social embeddedness may increase economic gain in local food systems as customers seek more personalized experiences with food producers (Hinrichs 2000). Farmers may also share regular social relationships with other farmers as they navigate sustainable

practices and direct marketing techniques (Hassanein 1999). This may contribute to the sharing of values and the creation of trust between farmers. Deeper social relationships among farmers and consumers may also facilitate the type of direct communication and transparency necessary to build responsive and sustainable food systems (Friedmann 1995).

Marketness and Instrumentalism

Block (1990) has developed two dimensions for evaluating the motivations of economic actors. The first is the continuum of “marketness” which measures the dominance of price considerations in market transactions. An entrepreneur or economic organization exhibits low marketness when their involvement in ongoing economic relationships or contracts is shaped by non-economic factors. An economic actor exhibits high levels of marketness when transactions are based solely on price (Block 1990: 51). Any non-price consideration that affects an economic transaction would decrease the level of marketness exhibited by the economic actors (Block 1990). Likewise, higher levels of social embeddedness would decrease the influence of price on economic transactions (Block 1990).

The second continuum is based on the level of “instrumentalism” that economic actors display through their economic decisions. Levels of instrumentalism are measured in the degree to which economic goals are placed above “family ties, friendship, spiritual considerations or morality” (Block 1990:54). A high level of instrumentalism would require a lower level of embeddedness, while a high level of embeddedness would decrease the level of instrumentalism. This continuum evaluates the motives of economic actors (Block 1990:53-54). Therefore, “the existence of nonopportunistic behavior is evidence of embeddedness, of the power of noneconomic variables, such as the norms of a particular community...” (Block 1990:55).

Hinrichs (2000) employs the marketness and instrumental continua to understand the social embeddedness of local farmers' markets and CSA programs. She found that farmers' markets "create a context for closer social ties between farmers and consumers, but remain fundamentally rooted in commodity relations," while CSA programs "move closer towards the decommodification of food" (Hinrichs 2000:295). This study reveals a balancing act for the producers between price-based motivations and community-based values. Hinrichs (2000) argues that marketness and instrumentalism should not be viewed as absolutely negative, just as "embeddedness" should not be viewed as consistently positive. Rather, injustices occur in all settings, and it is the context that expands the discussion on the purpose and consequences of these behaviors (Hinrichs 2000). Marketness and instrumentalism are used in this study as tools to help identify social and economic values, goals and motivations, and to gauge the importance of economic values in relation to non-economic goals associated with sustainable agriculture.

III. Research Methods

Sample and Data Sources

Descriptive case study research was conducted on three collective marketing businesses run by three groups of farmers in Alabama and Georgia. Case studies use multiple sources of data to understand complex situations within their natural context (Yin 1994). Descriptive case studies include both exploratory and illustrative case study designs and have a more narrow focus than other types of designs (Yin 1994, Morra and Friedlander 1999). This series of case studies primarily follows the illustrative design but also borrows from the exploratory design when necessary. Illustrative case studies provide a description of an event or process and inquire into the reasons behind it in order to reveal the true nature of a situation (Morra and Friedlander 1999). Exploratory case study designs are used when little formal information is known about a situation or a group (Yin 1994). They usually investigate the cause and effects of situations or decisions. Illustrative and exploratory designs have a small number of cases and attempt to represent the diversity between each case (Morra and Friedlander 1999).

Three marketing groups were chosen as unique representations of farmer innovation and cooperation within emerging alternative agricultural enterprises in Alabama and Georgia. This purposive sample was chosen because they represent the only marketing groups of their kind in the upper piedmont and lower foothills regions of Alabama and Georgia. All three groups market organic or natural food products using online marketing and sales, yet they vary in

business structure. The cases focus on the perspectives of the farmers involved and the power structure of each business. Each marketing business as a whole will be the unit of analysis.

Data Collection

Qualitative inquiry techniques were used to investigate the values, goals, motivations and actions of the three marketing enterprises. Qualitative inquiry refers to the practice of understanding social groups and situations in their natural settings by gaining in-depth knowledge through interpreting descriptive data gathered using interviews, observations and available documents (Marshall & Rossman 1999, Bogdan & Bicklen 2007). Semi-formal interviews were conducted with 6 to 7 producers from each marketing group, including those farmers identified as managers, owners or presidents of the respective marketing businesses. A total of 17 producers were interviewed and several of them participated in more than one marketing business. All interviews were conducted in person during visits to each business location or farm. Follow-up telephone conversations were used as needed. Managers and key figures within each business with more extensive, internal knowledge were interviewed more than once for clarity and depth of information. Informal interviews or discussions also took place during visits to the business locations, packing sheds and farms. Two secondary informants were non-profit employees assisting with grant applications.

In addition to interviews, participant observation was conducted during visits to each business location or farm. Some observations occurred in tandem with interviews. Two of the marketing groups were actively selling local produce and other foods during the month of February when this research was conducted, so observations were also made while groups of farmers or other employees of the marketing groups packed boxes for their customers. One

group was not actively selling food, but they did hold a business meeting at which observations were made.

Finally, I examined relevant documents that contain information about the marketing businesses. Documents include information from each business' website including weekly web-logs or newsletters published by the farmer/managers for their customers, grant evaluation reports, business by-laws and any other documents related to the businesses or primary farms involved. Two of the farmer groups coordinated with local non-profit organizations to write grants for starting their businesses, so these documents as well as evaluation reports are available as photocopies. In addition to the web-logs posted weekly, each business runs a website that contains general information about each group, including their mission statements and goals.

Data Reduction

When appropriate and possible, interviews were recorded with a portable digital recording device. All interviews were transcribed from recordings or interview notes. Observations and interviews were followed as closely as possible by reflection and writing. Many of the documents are digital, so digital files were organized and stored. Print documents were also appropriately stored after analysis. The identity of individual farmers and any other informants will be kept confidential.

Analysis

Transcribed interviews were analyzed by first coding the data according to categories relevant to the objectives of the study. Code categories include: economic motivations, non-economic values, farmer relations, customer relations, decision-making structure and Mooney's (2004) tensions. After this initial categorization of the data, working tables were constructed using coded data and a more refined analysis was conducted. Meaningful quotes and phrases

were extracted and more concise tables were developed. Themes that appeared throughout the three different types of data sources were compared to verify consistency.

Through the primary use of interview data, the influence of the community and market-based goals on the economic actions of each business was gauged on the two continua of “marketness” and “instrumentalism.” Each continuum is measured generally by “low, medium and high” levels of marketness or instrumentalism. The levels are determined by descriptions given by Block (1990:51-66), which provides examples of high and low levels on each continuum. Hinrich’s (2000) accompanying study was also used to understand the measurement of marketness and instrumentalism, as well as the role of social embeddedness in economic action. Levels of social embeddedness were determined by analyzing data relevant to customer and farmer relationships. By determining the levels of marketness, instrumentalism and social embeddedness, the primacy of economic and non-economic motivations can be better understood. This informs the overall analysis of the ability for each business to balance the market-based and community-based values.

Finally, data from interviews, observations and documents were analyzed for information regarding the process of decision-making within each business. References to the amount of democratic input on decisions and the conflicts and ensuing tensions that occur between market and community-based motivations will be observed and analyzed in reference to Mooney’s (2004) descriptions. The results should be generalized to Mooney’s (2004) theory about the influence of a business’s organizational structure on the company’s ability to balance tensions and conflicts between community-based values and market-based goals. The results of this research can also be used to expand the general knowledge about small-scale marketing enterprises within the alternative agri-food system so that farmers, community food organizers,

academic researchers and extension agents can understand more about the options for increasing market presence for farmers while also promoting community and economic development for rural and urban communities in the United States.

Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality will be retained for informants. No names are used in the reporting of data.

IV. Results

This chapter presents case studies of three different marketing businesses in Georgia and Alabama that sell food produced by local farmers to individual customers in nearby urban areas. This chapter first considers some of the broader similarities of the three businesses, followed by an in-depth examination of the economic, social and political characteristics of each entity.

These marketing businesses sell organic or natural foods produced by farms near urban centers and suburban areas where customers reside. Each business buys locally produced vegetables, fruits, eggs, meats, honey, bread and other items at wholesale prices from local producers. The businesses then resell the items using the Internet in a weekly online market. All businesses require that farmers produce in accordance with organic standards but do not require that most farmers be certified organic. Each business is operated by a market manager who also participates to varying degrees in her own farming activities. All groups require that customers become members of an online market where products are posted and members place orders each week. Member-customers must pay a yearly fee to participate in the online market, ranging from \$25 to \$100. Each marketing business gives customers the option to purchase a weekly box of seasonal produce and customers can also purchase individual items from the store. Products are delivered to pre-arranged locations where customers pick up their orders.

Table 1. General Characteristics of Collective Marketing Enterprises

Case Study	Date Founded	Current Legal Structure	Customer Base	Number of Producers	Number of Weekly Orders
1	2004	Sole Proprietorship	Metropolitan Atlanta	30+	150
2	2007	Sole Proprietorship	Metropolitan Atlanta	30+	275
3	2007	Limited Liability Company	Huntsville, Alabama	7	60

Case Study 1: The Former Cooperative

The first marketing enterprise was founded in 2004 when a group of farmers began informally pooling their production and delivering to larger volume markets in metropolitan Atlanta, such as restaurants. They also started selling seasonal shares of naturally grown fruits and vegetables from their collective production at retail prices. The group was formalized in 2005 as a corporate cooperative after receiving a three-year grant to develop a collaborative marketing enterprise. The cooperative persisted for three years, doubling sales in 2006 after their second full year. They also expanded their website in this year to begin allowing customers to sign up for their seasonal fruit and vegetable subscriptions online.

In 2007, growers experienced difficult weather conditions, including a late spring freeze and severe drought, which decreased supply and increased production costs. In addition, the market manager, who maintained all customer relationships and coordinated sales, resigned her position. There also were reports that some farmers were not serious about farming and would often bring in dirty, wilted or rotten produce or bring less quantity than they had projected. The cooperative began to lose customers because of the decline in quality and quantity. Grant funds ran out after the 2007 season and the cooperative began struggling to cover costs.

After one year without grant money the cooperative was unable to manage its finances. In the fall of 2008, the marketing business was sold to another member-farmer who had been managing without compensation for one year. In hindsight, many member-farmers felt that the cooperative business structure had been too much trouble. Some said their sole purpose for participation was to sell products and they were not interested in attending member meetings.

The marketing business is now owned and operated as a sole proprietorship with the intention of having three other farmers whom the owner considers “assets” join her in a small corporate partnership. She agreed to honor their work as “sweat equity” which would eventually lead to a partnership in the business. One woman oversees marketing, while another delivers orders and another provides accounting services. The manager/owner conducts all customer and farmer relations as well as decision-making. The manager/owner is paying the women for their time. They all produce small quantities of herbs, flowers and goat milk soap that are sold online through the marketing business. The marketing business still obtains products from many of the same farmers, although the owner renegotiated some prices that had previously been set by the farmers. The new owner has cut some costs and been able to revive the business based on her steady contact with existing customers, marketing efforts to attract new customers and strategic management of local and regional supply.

Economic Motivations and Behavior

Having witnessed the near-failure of the previous cooperative marketing business, the new privately owned marketing enterprise has clear goals to survive, reinvest and grow the operation. The new owner immediately started a small, pre-season vegetable subscription during January and February in order to raise some working capital. She obtained vegetables from a few local farmers but also from a wholesale distributor of certified organic produce. The

manager/owner can specify to the wholesale distributor that she only wants to buy produce that is grown regionally in the Southeast.

Using the wholesaler has allowed me to be bolder in expanding the business. It is better to keep selling consistently than not sell at all. I like the local farmers' produce better in terms of quality, so even if I could get away with using the wholesale distributor more, I probably wouldn't.

By sourcing from the wholesaler, the business can better accommodate customers who expect the same year-round variety that grocery stores offer. Local farmers are subject to the limitations of seasonality but producers in Florida, South Carolina and other surrounding states can produce fruits and vegetables that are out of season for the local farmers of north-central Alabama and Georgia. The owner also asks farmers to increase their production. The owner admits, "This isn't going to make a lot of money," but concludes that she wants to help farmers be successful and reach consumers with healthy, local produce.

The new owner quickly renegotiated wholesale prices to farmers, which she and others said were set too high by the all-farmer board of the cooperative without financial oversight. "If we can't go to Whole Foods and pay that price by marketing it up 20 to 30 percent then we're not paying the right price" says the owner. A few farmers have decreased their sales to the marketing business after the renegotiated prices, but most farmers are still selling to the business. One producer who is also an informal partner in the business said of the new owner: "Part of her strength is that she's willing to negotiate prices. As long the quality is there she will take it from the farmer that she thinks she's getting the best quality for the money." Although farmers are attentive to the fairness of the wholesale prices they receive, no respondents complained about low prices or the fact that the new owner renegotiated prices. Farmers use a variety of methods

for determining fair prices. They reported looking at both conventional and organic grocery store prices, asking other farmers in online farmer forums, and accessing wholesale price lists online.

Customers are asked to join the online market by paying an annual \$100 membership fee, which gives the business more working capital and the members receive a sample bag of some local farm products, including vegetables, fruit, soap and honey. The membership fee also funds an annual farm day for customers to visit a local farm. Customers are primarily from metropolitan Atlanta, where food prices are higher and many people value organic, locally grown foods. Customers pay a standard retail price for the foods from the online market similar to what they would pay in a natural food store. Approximately 70 percent of the price goes back to the farmer and the other 30 percent goes to the marketing business. In addition to the online sales, the marketing business also operates several farmers' market booths during the summer months. This serves primarily as a way to attract new customers by meeting them in person.

Some farmers were not as concerned with maximizing their profits as they were with developing more self-sufficient lifestyles. Others may "sell wherever they can get the best price for that week." One smaller scale farmer generalized, "I think the farmer is really only interested in how much you're going to pay them." Another farmer complained, "farmers are not businessmen" and that "a lot of the farmers are just home gardeners who don't treat farming as a job." This farmer also pointed out that only a few farmers he knew depended on farming as their sole source of income.

Sales to the marketing business do not make up a very large portion of most farmers' income, but many also sell directly to customers at retail prices. Only a few farmers heavily depend on the wholesale market for a large portion of their income. The owner prefers to buy

from a larger, more diverse group of growers. Most farmers report viewing others noncompetitively because there is still a growing demand for organic and local foods. Many farmers tend to specialize in different crops or products and will also recommend other farms to consumers.

Non-Economic Goals and Values

The manager/owner and farmers describe several other goals and motivations they have in relation to their farming and marketing operations. The owner recounted the original purpose of the previous cooperative of farmers, which was to support farmers with information and resource sharing and to help new farmers establish sustainable production operations. “The intent of the cooperative was to be a resource for small farmers. This can still happen and is still the goal but the focus is on giving the farmers a marketing outlet.” A portion of membership fees is set aside for donation to local non-profit organizations that support farmers and sustainable food system initiatives.

The farmers that participate in the marketing business differ somewhat in the range of non-economic values they hold. A few farmers did not talk very much about the values associated with sustainable food systems, such as assisting new farmers, increasing food access of low-income population or protecting the environment. However, most farmers mentioned several of these concerns. “I really want to support the grow local movement. I want to be involved. I really do feel it’s important for people to reconnect with food.” Many farmers went further by joining non-profit organizations, speaking at community events, teaching other farmers or donating to charitable food drives. Farmers were mostly involved in conferences or organizations that were directly related to farming and learning new production techniques.

All were committed to organic production methods even though no farms were certified organic. Some farmers were more interested in becoming certified naturally grown. Certified naturally grown is administered by a non-profit organization that holds the same production standards as certified organic, but requires less money and paperwork to achieve. Local farmers who are certified naturally grown conduct inspections for other farms seeking certification. One farmer said he was interested in pursuing naturally grown status because he “supports their ideology” but not because he needed it for marketing. The manager/owner of this marketing business does not require farmers to be certified organic or naturally grown. “Nobody has really asked for certification. Having the relationship and paying attention to the quality is worth a lot more than a piece of paper to most people.”

Social Embeddedness

The market manager knows the most about customers including their occupations, family size and what types of foods they like. She is in direct email contact with customers but most farmers do not know any customers. Only a few farmers reported knowing some local customers who also buy from them at the local farmers’ market. Customers are promised a farm visit in exchange for their membership and they are informed about farmers and their farms through the market manager’s weekly email newsletter and the business website. The weekly newsletter is sent to approximately 600 people.

Customers may make suggestions about products they would like to buy through their member profile on the website or by contacting the manager. The market manager offers little feedback to the farmers from the customers, but she has provided her own feedback when produce is of lower quality than expected. Most farmers have at least some direct sales outside of the online market, ranging from full CSA operations to a few people who stop by after seeing

their farm from the road. This interaction seems to help the farmers understand more about the needs and desires of customers in general.

Farmers living in closer proximity to each other have more involved social relationships. Farmers share knowledge about sustainable production practices. One farmer appreciates the “one-on-one time with other farmers” that has helped him and others gain more knowledge about farming. Some farmers share equipment and participate in bulk purchasing of supplies such as seeds, irrigation equipment or fertilizer. One farmer pointed out that they seem to have more time to talk when they are dropping off their produce for the marketing group because it is “more laid back and amenable to discussion and chatting.” Although many of them attend the same farmers’ market, there is little time for farmers to talk because it is more fast-paced and customer-oriented. One farmer reports, “there is enough of a network among farmers that production issues are not usually long-term problems.” However, farmers that live further away from the marketing business headquarters felt isolated from the rest of the farmers and did not know them very well.

Primacy of Economic and Non-economic Motivations

Farmers are aware of the fairness of the wholesale prices they receive through the marketing business, but the prices alone do not appear to determine whether or not they sell to the business. The wholesale prices that farmers receive are significantly lower than the retail prices they could obtain, but retail sales require more time and effort than selling to the marketing business. The market manager buys regularly from a core group of farmers even though there is no formal contract between the marketing business and the farmers.

All farmers report viewing other farmers noncompetitively. No farmers report making very much money and most say that they are farming because they want the active outdoor

lifestyle, want to save family farmland, because it “feels right” or because they enjoy selling nutritious, healthy food. It seems as though the farmers’ social relationships and non-economic values are just as important, if not more important than their economic motivations. Overall, farmers exhibit low levels of marketness and instrumentalism. Farmers are not socially embedded with customers of the online market because the farmers do not know these customers. However, farmers do share embedded social relationships with other farmers, building trust and accountability. This may contribute to the lack of competitive dynamics between farmers.

The market manager/owner inherited a deficit when she bought the business and witnessed the mishandling of finances before she bought it. She spoke about needing to “get the right price” from farmers in order to make enough money to run the business. She uses the wholesale distributor when local farmers do not produce enough variety or quantity. Using the wholesale distributor helped her be “bolder in expanding the business.” In this case, the value of “local” is compromised by the need for steady supply.

The business owner strongly believes in the importance of helping new farmers through training and providing market access. She donates to several non-profit organizations that emphasize new farmer training and she also give new farmers an opportunity to sell their produce no matter how small the quantity. She has good relationships with other farmers and the respect of her peers. She is also attempting to bring several other producers into the business as partners based on her relationships with them and the values they share. Although she does compromise some values when faced with economic realities, such as only buying from local farmers in her community, her commercial strategy still seems to be moderately embedded in a network of social relationships with producers.

Customers are the least involved and least embedded group. Communication between the customers and the business manager is primarily conducted through email. Each customer joins the market for one year at a time, so they have a contract with the marketing business for that time. As Block (1990) points out, the presence of a contract decreases the marketness and instrumentalism for both parties involved. Overall, the market manager exhibits relatively low levels of marketness and instrumentalism. Although she conducts direct contact with customers through the use of email and telephone, the manager/owner does not appear to be socially embedded with customers.

Conflicts, Tensions and Contradictions

This business was previously structured as a formal cooperative with a board and member-farmers for the first four years. They hired a market manager to handle the coordination with both farmers and customers. The University of Georgia Cooperative Development program conducted an evaluation and training for the board members of the cooperative after their first year. They reported that the cooperative needed to focus on creating operating procedures for the business. The cooperative was democratically structured so that in theory all farmers had a say in major decisions affecting the business. However, farmers reported varying levels of participation in decision-making. One farmer said that she had repeatedly asked to join after selling to the cooperative for the trial year but that no one would help her. “Finally, I got the application and I filled it out and I sent it in. And they had my check for almost a whole year. Money was just not what they focused on. The president found it in a bunch of papers and I had given it to him. It just wasn’t well-run.” Another farmer said that he was never asked to join but only to sell his products. “If he had known that I could become a member, I would have joined.”

The cooperative had the same board president for all three years. Board members were expected to meet once a month and there were supposed to be two all-member meetings every year. Several farmers reported that this was not always the case because it was difficult to get farmers to come to the meetings. Several farmers reported dissatisfaction with the board structure and one farmer summed it up as “too bureaucratic for the diversity of growers.” The previous market manager also said that it was difficult to get the board to decide on some things, so that they would simply not ever decide, leaving several issues unresolved. “A lot of it was that the board members weren’t very involved in the process. On paper, it looks very easy but they didn’t understand what was really going on.”

Two previous members said there were some decisions made behind closed doors by the board that appeared to be unethical, such as “fixing the books” to make profits look better for the board and loaning money to a board member without notifying anyone. Several farmers agree that the lack of financial oversight drove the cooperative into failure. “Members got together and somebody said, ‘we need to raise the prices’ and nobody had a balance sheet on hand to make an informed decision, yet they did it anyway.” The board members set the prices too high so the cooperative was unable to cover their costs. Several farmers noted that the lack of business skills among farmers detracted from the quality of the board. Additionally, some farmers chronically brought in dirty, rotten or wilted produce without any consequences because the board had failed to set up any procedure for dealing with this sort of problem.

The cooperative had some difficulties fulfilling its promise of democratic participation. Some farmers reported being excluded from becoming a member, infrequent member meetings and an inability of the board to make simple decisions. Although these problems may seem to coincide with Mooney’s (2004) depiction of the influence of capitalism on the democratic

process, a closer look reveals that the problem may not have been an overemphasis on economic goals. The president or the market manager did not likely bypass democratic decisions in order to privilege their own economic motivations. Rather, poor leadership, a lack of business skills and a limited understanding of cooperative principles compromised the democratic process.

The farmer board members raised prices they were paid without restraint, which may illustrate the contradiction between new and traditional social movements. In a traditional social movement, the participants are focused on elevating the position of a single social group (Mooney 2004). In this case, the focus was on increasing the income of the farmers. In a new social movement, such as the sustainable agriculture movement, the focus would be on developing new systems of food production and distribution that meet community needs and build on community assets (Feenstra 1997, Lyson 2004). Although some farmers in the cooperative subscribe to the new social movement ideology to build community-oriented food systems, others are more closely aligned with traditional social movement ideology of improving farmers' social and economic positions. Although this tension existed in the formal cooperative, the traditional ideology seems to have prevailed, possibly because of a breakdown in the democratic function.

Currently, the business owner makes all decisions so there are few public conflicts over the balance between economic and non-economic goals. However, some of the decisions and practices of the business still illustrate areas of contradiction. The cooperative was strict about using an organic produce wholesaler only in emergency situations. Although they could order from regional farms through the wholesale company, the original cooperative board president felt that reselling from another wholesaler made the cooperative more of a broker and less of an accurate representation of local food production. The new owner does not see a conflict in using

the wholesale distributor even though the same produce is available in many grocery stores. She is looking after the profitability of the business by using the wholesale distributor to increase supply. The owner points out that the wholesale company “buys locally and organically, so ideologically they are similar to us.” Without it, she says her production would be inconsistent and she would lose customers. “Its better to keep selling consistently than not sell at all.” In order to maintain a steady market demand for the farmers, she says it is necessary to supplement with the wholesale regional organic produce. It is unclear whether or not the owner differentiates to customers which products are from the wholesaler and which are grown locally.

Some consumers want the same variety available in grocery stores. The market owner compensates for this lack of understanding about seasonality by making the online market more closely resemble the variety of produce found in grocery stores. However, providing food that is not seasonal locally could decrease the value of those food items when they are in season for local farmers. As one farmer notes:

Some customers request products that I don't have, but this is usually just because they don't understand what it takes to produce those products. I've had people ask me for tomatoes in January. Many people are used to the perfect-looking produce of the grocery stores, but this is a false standard and one that local farmers can't live up to most of the time.

Ideal sustainable food exchange institutions include the effective transmission of needs between farmers and consumers (Friedmann 1995). Although the online market is convenient, it may not foster the knowledge sharing, accountability and responsiveness fostered by face-to-face communication between consumers and farmers. By the indication that consumers still request

“cheap food,” they may not understand the true cost of food production and the importance of non-economic values represented by sustainable production techniques.

Neither the manager/owner nor the farmers know the other farmers who produce for the wholesale company. Although using the wholesale distributor may be required to keep the business successful in the short term, it could compromise the transparency and social accountability that can occur within socially embedded arrangements. One farmer previously sold through the wholesale distributor:

With [the wholesaler] it was either their way or the highway. If I came up short or had some sort of situation or wanted a better price, there was no negotiation and they would just buy it from California. They would change prices on me and sometimes not take stuff I had harvested for them simply on a whim with no explanation. I like working with [this marketing group] because there can be negotiation and it is built on their relationship and it's personal.

The needs of farmers selling to the wholesale distributor are not known and may not be addressed by the market owner, other farmers, or consumers because these groups do not know the farmers selling to the wholesaler. This may perpetuate conventional food system norms of obscured relationships between food system actors. Food remains an anonymous commodity disembedded from local communities, so consumer food practices are not in touch with the places of production. This illustrates the tension between production and consumption (Mooney 2004, Ostrom 2007, Friedmann 1995, Hinrichs 2000). The separation between production and consumption is unsustainable because the “links in the food chain” are not visible and therefore the needs of consumers and farmers are not communicated (Friedmann 1995:30). Farmers and consumers are only connected by a chain of economic transactions and may not fulfill extra-

economic functions of social accountability and responsiveness to community needs (Friedmann 1995, Mooney 2004).

The manager does not require that the farmers whom she knows be certified by a third party because she trusts them and can go out to their farm and inspect it herself. “You can meet the technical requirements of being organic without really meeting the sustainability requirements,” says the owner. However, she does trust the organic standards met by the farmers who sell to the regional wholesale distributor. One farmer who previously sold through the same wholesale distributor says, “Wholesalers like them don’t really care about your methods or the environment. They only care about the bottom dollar.” This is an example of the tension that can occur between the local and the global, as the environmental concerns of a community are compromised by the economic concerns of expanding marketing institutions (Mooney 2004). In this case, the marketing business lowers its standard for sustainable production when the profitability of the business is at stake by trusting a certification that the owner and other farmers feel is not truly aligned with sustainability.

Although the marketing services provided by Case Study 1 are described as a CSA, the business does not ask the customer to share in the risks of the farmer. Sourcing from the wholesale distributor also means that customers are not only buying from local farms. Customers can even access items that are out of season but can be grown by regional farmers in different climate zones. Farmers do not know the customers, so the term “CSA” has a very different meaning in this context than its original use. Although some farmers may hold the values associated with traditional CSA such as community involvement and risk sharing, these values are not wholly practiced by the marketing business. Customers are not involved in the business beyond a monetary transaction.

While the marketing business may offer some information about seasonality of produce in weekly newsletters or on the website, they still offer out of season produce to appease the “grocery store mentality” of the consumers. They also try to rotate seasonal vegetables, often at the expense of the farmer who has an abundance of these vegetables, because customers “get tired” of the same thing each week. The farmer still takes most of the risk for a wholesale, non-contracted price. This is another illustration of the divide between production and consumption and how the lack of information about each sphere and a lack of participation in food system activities render incomplete understandings of the situations, needs and desires of both farmers and consumers.

Case Study 2: The Sole Proprietorship

The second marketing business was established in February of 2007 by the original marketing manager for the first marketing cooperative. After leaving the cooperative, she and her husband started their own marketing business the very next week from their home in Alabama. They were able to build on existing contacts with restaurants and farmers and also start their own retail CSA network. The owners formed as a sole proprietorship because they wanted to make their own decisions and felt like they knew the business well. They are currently the most successful marketing business, doubling their sales for two years in a row and growing their market to fit the changing dynamic of demand in metropolitan Atlanta. They currently obtain foods from over 30 producers, including a regionally based, organic wholesale distributor. This marketing business now fills close to 300 retail produce orders for individual customers each week and their weekly newsletter is sent to over 2,000 people.

Economic Motivations and Behavior

This marketing business has been very successful at locating customers for local, organic foods in urban Atlanta. The business is owned and operated by a married couple that also operates a small vegetable farm as a supplement for their online market. When they first began marketing other farmers' products, they were selling to both restaurants and individual customers. Since then, their individual sales have increased substantially while the restaurant sales have declined. The owners report that restaurants pay lower prices for the produce and meats. Restaurants also are more fickle and picky than individual customers. For this reason, they have focused on selling to individual customers in metropolitan Atlanta.

In their second year, the owners kept the online market open through the winter for year-round ordering, which institutionalized weekly ordering. Customers pay an annual fee of \$25 to be a member of the online market. The market is open for customers to place orders each weekend. By opening the market even a few hours earlier and sending out email reminders a few hours before the market closes, the owners have been able to increase their orders by about 12 percent over several months. The business has doubled net sales so far in their third year.

The marketing business keeps supply steady when local farmers' production fluctuates by purchasing fruits and vegetables from the same wholesale organic food distributor. They have used the wholesale distributor from the beginning of their marketing business and report knowing several of the farmers who sell to the wholesale distribution company, such as a farmer who produces Vidalia onions in southern Georgia. According to the owners, using the wholesale distributor is the most efficient way to get produce from this farmer. This marketing business also sells value-added products in their online market such as locally milled flours and baking

mixes, handmade granola, crackers and pastas. They order items that cannot be produced in the southeastern United States such as olive oil from California and fair trade coffee.

The owners let farmers set their own prices and they advise farmers on the reasonability of the price if necessary. They expect the farmers to know their production costs on each food item, but say that some farmers do not. “If they don’t know how much it cost to produce it,” the owners say, “then they’re not managing their business.” Products are marked up 25 to 30 percent to cover marketing costs and generate a profit for the business owners. The owners account 5 to 10 percent of the price of items as their profit. They report satisfaction with being able to help farmers make more money and describe a mutually beneficial relationship with farmers where more production and increased sales leads to more profits for both farmers and the owners. Since their business has been so successful in the year and a half since its inception, they do not want to grow the business very much for the next five years.

For us, it’s not about the bottom line. As long as we can pay our bills and eat well we are satisfied. We are evaluating how big is big enough and at what point our growth would start to compromise our quality of life. We have read about other farmers who got too big and became unhappy because they were constantly overcome with working. We’re taking that to heart and we are trying to understand and implement boundaries for the business. There is a difference between having the ability to do something and needing to do it.

Several farmers are glad they can negotiate pricing with this marketing business. A few farmers report both raising and lowering their prices to the marketing business as their costs change. Farmers determine prices by looking at the prices at Whole Foods grocery stores, looking at wholesale prices online, and by using their experience with direct retail customers.

One farmer was grateful to this marketing group because they had given him chef contacts in Atlanta so that he could sell whole lamb carcasses directly to some high-end restaurants. He said that the whole carcass was too large and messy for the marketing business to transport so they gave him the restaurant contacts for directly selling his lucrative product. He also sells cuts of lamb to the marketing business for their individual sales.

Most of the farmers are not dependent on this marketing business for a large portion of their income. “My CSA covers my costs and that’s my main source of income. I don’t depend on [this marketing business] for my livelihood, but I still want to have those sales as a part of my income.” The owners prefer to keep it that way and say that they have even helped some farmers increase their own direct retail sales. One farmer describes selling to this marketing business as his “safety valve” that he can sell to when he has surplus or needs to increase his income. A few farmers are involved in bartering with other farmers through the marketing business, trading products to increase variety for their own customers. Overall, farmers do not view each other competitively because of the large demand.

Non-Economic Goals and Values

The owners were very articulate in discussing their values having to do with agriculture, food and society. They are concerned with society’s lack of a meaningful relationship to food and the unsustainable agricultural practices used in conventional agriculture. Their method for addressing these concerns goes beyond their position as marketers of local, organic foods. The owners are involved in trying to educate young people about sustainable food and agriculture, participating in three separate school garden initiatives at elementary schools in Atlanta. This involves visiting the schools several times during the year and helping students plant and maintain vegetable gardens, often providing plant starts or seeds. The owners donate money to

several non-profit organizations whose focus is educating consumers about food issues. Hosting interns on their farm through the World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms program (WWOOF) is another way they help young people learn about sustainable food agriculture. They also teach seasonal cooking workshops in Atlanta and participate in Earth Day events at a large Atlanta church.

Through their weekly newsletter, they inform their customers about food and agriculture-related issues at local, state and national levels. The owners speak at a local Master Gardeners club about growing organically and speak to other garden clubs around Atlanta. They donate gift certificates and food baskets to schools for their fundraisers and also write articles for some local publications in Atlanta about food and agriculture issues. The owners are also trying to help some local disadvantaged farmers break into the organic market by helping them understand customers' food preferences and providing transportation and funding for them to attend sustainable agricultural conferences.

Although less articulate about their values than the market managers, most of the farmers who sell to this marketing business expressed concern about the health and sustainability of society in general and the negative impact of the conventional food system. Several farmers are involved in some non-profit organizations that promote sustainable agriculture such as the Alabama Sustainable Agriculture Network, Slowfoods USA and the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group. Others were involved in organizations that promote the cultural aspects of locally grown food such as the Southern Foodways Alliance. Another farmer is involved with a local Future Farmers of America high school club and speaks at the Master Gardeners, the Lions Club, and other community meetings.

Social Embeddedness

This marketing business sources from over 30 producers in their two-state area. They are located less than five miles from the Georgia state line in Alabama, so they know many of the Alabama sustainable farmers. They also know many Georgia farmers and are otherwise well connected. They say that they have had some farmers drop out over time, but have maintained a core set of producers with whom they feel that they are “all in this together.” The owners describe a mutually beneficial relationship with other farmers because they help the farmers make money, although the owners do not give as much customer feedback to the farmers as they feel that they should. They did have a recent event for all of their farmers to come and eat at their farm and socialize together in appreciation of the farmers’ work. The owners are interested in helping farmers understand the importance of properly managing their own farm business and also helping new farmers get into farming.

The farmers who sell to this organization say that they only know a few of the other farmers who sell and live close by. This group buys from farmers in northwest Georgia and southeast Alabama and all points in between. The farmers say there is a little information sharing, but most are connected with farmers in their immediate area and do not know very many farmers who sell through this marketing group. The farmers do not know the customers of this marketing group, but several of them report knowing what kinds of foods the customers like.

The owners of this group sell approximately 250 boxes of produce each week and send their weekly email newsletter to over 2,000 people. They know some of their regular customers well, but there is primarily one-way communication from the owners to the customers. Going to the farmers’ market was a time for them to meet customers in person. Occasionally, their customers’ children would approach them at the market and address them by name. The owners

had no idea who the children were until they found out the names of their parents, but their whole family knew about the owners because of the newsletters. The owners recently hosted an event for customers at their house, providing food, entertainment and a farm tour for the families who attended.

The owners alert customers of issues having to do with food and agriculture, such as proposed changes to state and national laws. They keep their membership informed about food-related events in Atlanta and share their recipes and those from other members. The owners attend food-related conferences and particularly enjoy one in Italy called Terra Madre. They kept in touch with their membership through their newsletters while they were travelling and after they returned they wrote about some of the most interesting and provocative sessions each week in their newsletters. They also spoke about their guarantee of clean, chemical-free food. Some of their customers are cancer patients and other people who are sensitive to chemicals. For this reason, they say that they have personally visited every farm that is not certified organic or naturally grown and stand behind their commitment to provide chemical-free, sustainably grown food.

Primacy of Economic and Non-economic Motivations

Price does not appear to be the highest motivating factor for the farmers selling to this marketing business. For most farmers, sales to the marketing group do not represent a majority of their total sales and for many it represents less than 10 percent. Although farmers are not involved in a contract with the marketing business, some of them do report that the owners loyally buy from them. Farmers may also negotiate their prices with this marketing business, and some of them even report lowering their price to this business when they experience a decrease in cost. Overall, farmers showed low to moderate levels of marketness and instrumentalism and

moderate levels of social embeddedness with the market owners. The farmers are not socially embedded at all with customers of the online market but they do participate in embedded social relationships with some of their own customers.

The owners exhibit some instrumental behavior by using the regional wholesaler to keep supply and demand consistently higher. However, the owners are transparent about their use of this wholesaler by explaining to their customers the fluctuations that occur and difficulty that local farmers have in keeping production steady and consistent. The owners also have recently conducted price comparisons at some Atlanta Whole Foods grocery stores and found that their online market prices are actually lower. They were proud of this because they want to make this high quality food as affordable as possible.

They report having made “good friends” with several market customers. They report a strong sense of responsibility to their customers to ensure that they are getting clean, chemical-free food because their customers trust them. Finally, customers join the market annually, which is a type of contract. The market owners exhibit low levels of marketness and instrumentalism with farmers and consumers, and show moderate levels of social embeddedness with farmers and consumers.

Conflicts, Tensions and Contradictions

In this marketing business, the owners make all of the decisions except allowing the farmers to decide their price. They do, however, reserve the power to decline a farmer’s price if it is too high. They say that most farmers do not want to be involved with the decision-making of the business, but would rather have a place to sell their products. They also say that farmers just want to have the opportunity to farm and are not interested in developing a larger business

structure. The owners claim that they work in a cooperative way without the bureaucracy and inefficiencies of democratic decision-making.

A few farmers were critical of the marketing business, saying that they would not source from farmers that are so far away. Another farmer has started his own delivery business for a few local farmers and says that he wants his business to more closely represent the local growers. Another farmer said that he was not that upset that they bought produce from “less personal outlets” like the wholesaler, but that he just would not do that. He said he did not think they would ever “run a warehouse” but they had become a middleman. One farmer wishes that the owners “would grow more food because they have good land and know what sells.” Another farmer points out, “There is no way to be a farmer and do anything else.” He is glad they are selling his produce and have some farming background so they understand the fluctuation in supply. The owners say that buying from the wholesaler helps them increase supply steadily with demand and also “help other farmers to augment their supply and increase production in a sustainable way.”

The owners struggle over how large to let their business grow. They say that they have read about other farmers whose business grew too large and then they became unhappy because they were working all the time. They say that their business has doubled over the past two years and that if it doubled again in the next five years they would be happy. They are concerned about developing boundaries for their business so that they are not working too hard. Conflict over business growth is evidence of the tension that exists between the local and the global (Mooney 2004). Some farmers already feel that the business has grown too large because the owners source from anonymous farms through the wholesale distributor. Other farmers say that

the owners remain grounded in the real needs and issues facing farmers because they have farmed in the past and continue to keep a large garden.

There is also a conflict between the global and the local as the business achieves more supply than is available locally by using the wholesale distributor. Although the owners claim to know several farmers who sell through the wholesale distributor, other farmers selling to the wholesaler remain anonymous because they are socially and physically outside of the community of farmers. As a result, the needs of local farmers, such as better pricing or more seasonal eating by customers, may be compromised by the business practices of sourcing from farmers that cannot communicate their needs. This helps the business accommodate customer expectations of year-round variety but may underplay the importance of local farmers' needs and conditions.

Another farmer spoke about the struggle of farmers in rural areas. The needs and values of the local, rural community are not always aligned with the needs and values of the farm. Because his products have the added value of being naturally grown and local, these are values that the customers must also hold in order to justify the hassle of seasonal eating, paying more than the conventional grocery store prices, or bypassing the convenience of grocery store shopping. He says that the people in his surrounding rural community do not yet share these values. Consequently, he must do what is necessary for his business and deliver his products to urban areas where people hold these values and also may have higher incomes.

Others point out that people in urban areas are already paying more for produce and that fresh, local produce is often viewed differently in rural areas because more people have gardens and give extra food away. Ideally, this farmer would rather sell to his local community, but this would not support his business. This is also the case with this marketing group as a whole. The business owners are located in rural Alabama yet they transport products into metropolitan

Atlanta in order to be able to sustain their business. This struggle reveals the gap between the realms of production and consumption where the values and needs of both farmers and consumers are not known and therefore not understood by either party (Mooney 2004).

Case Study 3: The Limited Liability Company

The third marketing business was the most recently founded in March of 2007 as a Limited Liability Company in the State of Alabama. The business was formed after several farmers in northeastern Alabama discussed their difficulty in accessing finding enough customers for their high quality, organic produce and meats. With the help of a local non-profit organization, the founding farmers applied for a grant to start a collaborative online farmers' market. They won the grant and immediately set up a steering committee to research business structures. They received advice from the founder of the second marketing business in this study, who warned of the limits of a bureaucratic corporate cooperative structure. The group chose to organize the business as a Limited Liability Company because the rules for such a business were flexible in Alabama. There is no board but each farmer is a member with voting power and a share of the profits at the end of each year. Some farmers can choose not to join and remain vendors, but member-farmers' products are given preference. This marketing business is the smallest, with around 60 weekly orders and only 7 member farms. They are the only group that is not marketing to Atlanta, but are instead marketing to nearby Huntsville, Alabama, which is less than one tenth the size of metropolitan Atlanta.

Economic Motivations and Behavior

This marketing business was founded to help farmers earn more money by collectively accessing higher demand and higher prices in a nearby urban area. The market manager was a founding member of the marketing business. She and her husband run a small but highly

productive vegetable farm. Before the online market was developed, they were going to several different farmers markets each week in order to find buyers for their products. This amount of marketing took so much time away from production and they were still not making enough money. After they won a grant to start the collective online market, the founding couple used their own private expenses on a reimbursement basis with the grant to fund the project. The founding couple also donated half of their existing CSA to the online market.

The market manager has worked diligently to locate customers in the Huntsville area, talking with restaurants, natural health food stores and naturopathic medical offices. Demand has still been slow to increase but the online market has been successful. They actively recruit new producers and encourage existing farmers to plant successions of crops in order to have a steady supply. This marketing business is the only one that does not source from a wholesale distributor. They try to keep the market open as long as possible during each year, closing in winter when crops do not grow. Farmers become members of the market and must pay \$100 annually. Customers also must become members and pay \$25 annually.

The manager and the farmers want the business to grow. The manager compared the business with another successful online market in Athens, Georgia that now sells \$15,000 worth of local food products each week. "I'm waiting on that," she notes. The manager and another farmer-member have been talking with a group of farmers in Chattanooga, Tennessee about the possibility of starting a satellite online market for the Chattanooga area under the existing business. One farmer, who is also the treasurer of the marketing business lives fairly close to Chattanooga and could deliver products to the additional market. All of the producers that sell to this marketing business report that most people in rural areas do not value organic food enough

to pay their prices. Many do not want strange varieties such as heirloom tomatoes or Asian greens.

This marketing business allows farmers to set their own prices, but the market manager advises if prices are too high or low. She also prevents the farmers from undercutting each other. If the farmers have the same products, then they must have the same price. The marketing business gives the farmers 70 percent of the retail price and keeps 30 percent to cover marketing costs. If there is any profit remaining at the end of the fiscal year, farmers can withdraw their share, which is based on the percentage of their sales. Farmers also may leave the amount in the business account to be reinvested, but only the market manager and her husband do so.

All of the farmers interviewed were attentive to the price they receive through the marketing business. One farmer bluntly noted that he would like to influence the business “to take a stronger look at the bottom line because that is our profit.” This farmer was skeptical that the business would survive after the grant money ran out. Several farmers said that they wish there were more sales in the online market, but conceded that the market manager has worked hard to attract more customers.

One farmer who was considering leaving the marketing group commented, “I didn’t feel like we had the volume that I was looking for.” Except for the founding members, other farmers report that their sales to the marketing business represent between 5 and 15 percent of their total sales. One producer who is selling lamb and beef says that he will sell his meat for cheaper than he sells it to Atlanta because he wants to help the business grow.

A few farmers are not so committed to the marketing business, saying that they do not refer customers to the market because they receive a higher price by selling directly. To be fair, this marketing group has a greater challenge in finding and building demand in rural and urban

areas of northern Alabama. These farmers are in more difficult circumstances than their counterparts in Georgia because they do not have the high demand for organic produce that exists in metropolitan Atlanta.

Non-Economic Goals and Values

The manager of this online market expressed very clear values related to public health and the community need for more local sources of healthy food. Part of the mission of this marketing business is to help new farmers get into farming by offering advice and market access. With the help of a local non-profit group, this marketing business also won a small grant to offer bags of produce and other foods like goat cheese to an organization that delivers to local lower-income elderly people. The grant subsidizes the price of the food and the delivery organization pays the difference to this marketing group. An employee of the non-profit organization says that she is glad the business is still making a little bit of money, even though it is charitable work, because this helps the farmers continue producing.

The market manager expressed the importance of including the values of honesty, integrity and compassion in business operations. She said that she is often uncomfortable in the marketing role because she said that there is an element of deception that seems to go along with marketing. She thinks that someone who was more comfortable with stretching the truth could do a better job. She and her husband say that they want to “spread the wealth to everybody” and cooperate with everyone instead of competing. They spoke about some marketing businesses getting too large, like the one mentioned that is making \$15,000 per week. They said that when the business gets that large with over 20 farmers there is a “communication breakdown and less of a community atmosphere and it ends up being more of a corporate atmosphere, and I don’t think that’s really conducive to revitalizing your local community.” They said that they chose to

form as an LLC with cooperative principles because it promoted involvement and ownership by the farmers and there is no single beneficiary.

All of the farms practice natural production techniques and a few are certified naturally grown. No farms are certified organic and one farmer points out that with organic certification “you are dealing with the feds and there are a lot of loopholes.” The market manager makes sure that she knows the farmers and inspects their farms if she thinks it is necessary. One farmer is very committed to working with the State Department of Agriculture and Industries to certify his farm and make sure that he is really growing food and not just a wholesaler. He says this is the only way to enforce accountability. He has also opened his farm as a state demonstration site for sustainable techniques and attends any agriculture and food-related meetings hosted by state and local governments. He recently attended a meeting on the Farmers Market Nutrition Program about being certified to accept food stamps and was disappointed that no other farmers that he knew attended the meeting.

Other farmers do not embrace the government as much but are involved in starting farmers’ markets in rural areas or giving extra produce to homeless shelters. Other farmers also expressed values in having personal relationships with the people who buy their food. One farmer said that she thought the online market “sort of defeats the purpose of selling local food” because “there’s not enough connection between the farmers and the consumers.” Other farmers were not so critical but did say that they enjoyed the personal interaction with customers at farmers markets and within their own CSA programs.

One produce farmer says that sometimes he gives a little more weight for some of his produce because he wants the customer to “feel like they got something.” He says that he does not want any of his food to be wasted and that is one reason he sells to this business. “It’s not just

the money. It's about helping people eat right," says one farmer. Another farmer who produces goat cheese says, "I'm not trying to be the biggest guy on the block. I just want a nice product. I want to sell locally."

The cheese makers talked about their spiritual reasons for their new occupation. "We're real devout Christians and I pray every time I'm up here. I talk to God, 'Ok God, this is your milk. I'm just going to put some stuff in it and it's going to be your cheese.'" They eventually want to have groups of people who come out to visit their goat farm and cheese making facility. "I want to talk to them about shepherds and shepherding and why God used so many shepherds in the bible." Several of the farmers are involved with non-profit organizations that promote sustainable agriculture such as the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group and the Alabama Sustainable Agriculture Network.

Social Embeddedness

Not all of the farmers knew one another before they joined the marketing business, and some of them have still not met. A handful of the farmers knew each other from a farmers' market near Huntsville. The market manager and another member-farm knew each other through a farmer-mentoring program. Most of the farmers met the market manager out of an interest in selling to the business. The farmers do share a common need for a better marketing outlet for their products, although some have found the online market to be more valuable than others. The market manager has helped farmers understand more about succession planting and having successful spring and fall seasons instead of only focusing on the summer. The founding farmers say they know more about a wider variety of plants, so they send regular emails about how to prepare for each season. Another farmer claims that farmers are not very competitive. "Most people in this business are willing to help and share knowledge." Another producer is a

distributor for drip irrigation so he helps the other member-farmers with bulk prices. One is trading onion starts for celery starts with the market manager. A few farmers said that when customers ask for products that they are not currently growing they send them to another farmer they know who has the product.

Although this marketing business represents local farmers, they are scattered throughout northeastern and north central Alabama. Some farmers report knowing the conventional farmers in their immediate area better than other farmers using the online market. Several said that one of the benefits of selling to the marketing group was that they became aware of other farmers who were producing sustainably and this helped subdue a feeling of isolation. “It’s good to know we’re not the only ones.” At least one other farmer says that they are actively trying to find more growers to join the online market.

The market manager does give some feedback to the farmers especially when there is a problem with the quality of their product. Some farmers say that because the online market is structured so that customers can buy from individual farms, they know when customers like their products because they buy from them more than once. There is also a comment section on the website where customers can provide feedback. Most of the information is directed to the market manager, who also makes the deliveries and talks with customers. She reports that customers really like the variety and the freshness of the food. The market manager also posts a weekly entry on the website telling about what the farms are doing and what produce to expect soon. Customers can contact the farmers directly if the farmer chooses to post their contact information on the website, but a few farmers do not want to list their contact information.

The farmers do not know the customers of the marketing business, noting that “the online customers are not my customers.” One farmer describes the absence of a relationship with the customers:

We do not know those customers. We never talk to them. It’s out there in cyberspace. It’s weird. For us to put a little more time invested into it, we need to meet some of those customers. The CSA customers, that’s my favorite relationship with customers because I know them well and they know us. They ask for things that they want and I know what they want. Then the next favorite is the farmers’ market where you see the same people and get to talk with people. Then the third favorite as far as customer relationships would be the network, you know, not talking to people, and I like to talk.

Another farmer admits, “One thing that makes a small farm work is that your customers identify with you.” All of the farmers have their own direct customers. Another farmer who sells goat cheese points out that their product is something a lot of people have to try before they buy it; so selling it online is more difficult.

Primacy of Economic and Non-economic Motivations

The farmers-members of this marketing business seemed more concerned about getting better prices for their products than the farmers selling to the other marketing businesses. However, this is most likely an indication of their geographical location and marketing environment than their level of economic motivation. Metropolitan Atlanta offers high demand and high prices for locally grown organic foods while demand and prices in the Huntsville area are less intense and more difficult to access. Therefore, the farmers trying to sell locally in the Huntsville area struggle to find customers who value their products enough to pay the prices they

need. Although the marketing business was formed to overcome these obstacles, the growth of this business has been slower than the other two marketing enterprises.

There is also a lack of commitment to the marketing group by several member-farmers. These farmers would rather sell directly to customers at retail prices than to the online market, but they struggle to find enough direct customers. One of these member-farmers does not plan on selling to the business in the next year, but feels an obligation to complete the current year because there are only 7 member-farmers. These farmers say that if they are going to sell at wholesale prices they need to sell a higher volume of products. Other farmers do not share these sentiments. Even though they may also like to sell more volume, they are committed to the business as member-owners and feel a collective responsibility to help with marketing or offer ideas and support to the market manager.

Within this marketing group there are varying levels of marketness, instrumentalism and social embeddedness. Because of a lack of social relationships to the online market customers, at least a couple of member farmers occasionally send lower quality produce to the manager. These farmers save their better produce for their own customers since they do not view the online customers as “their” customers. Otherwise, the rest of the farmers have relationships of mutual respect and trust with the market manager and therefore do not engage in this type of instrumental behavior. One farmer even sells his product at a lower price than he sells to another market because he wants to help the business succeed.

Finally, although the market manager has not included the membership on some important business decisions, the interview data reveals a lack of personal economic motivation by the manager. Instead, the market manager expressed her goal to help all farmers achieve success by creating a successful collective market. After all, the manager and her husband

transferred some of their own retail customers to the collective market. If anything, this market manager is more inclined to preference her non-economic values over any economic motivations. Both customers and farmers take part in somewhat contracted relationships to the market by paying their annual fees and becoming market members. The farmers and market manager still exhibit relatively low levels of marketness and instrumentalism when all data is taken into account. Only a few farmers seem to preference economic goals above social relationships or other non-economic values. Social embeddedness remains relatively low between farmers, and nonexistent between farmers and customers of the online market. A few farmers share more highly embedded relationships with one another.

Conflicts, Tensions and Contradictions

All farmers who become members of this marketing group also become partial owners of the business. According to the business by-laws, they all have the power to vote on important business decisions and any changes to the practices and rules in place. All members must be actively producing food according to sustainable production practices. The manager, even though she is a farmer, does not have a vote in business decisions, although her farm does have a vote through her husband. According to the by-laws, she is authorized to make everyday minor decisions for the business. Although the member-farmers are partial owners in the business, many of them were not aware of this until a business meeting almost one year after they became members. During this meeting, the manager distributed the business articles of organization and explained that each member was a partial owner.

There is no board and no director so all members can participate in voting. Then the manager explained what she thought were the needs and priorities of the business during the meeting. There was some discussion, but no voting took place. At least one farmer disagreed

with the manager's evaluation of the business needs but did not voice an opinion during the meeting because he was outnumbered. The manager and another member-farmer had already started talking to some farmers in Chattanooga about creating a satellite marketing business. They represented the situation as if it was already happening, assuming that the other farmers would agree. Therefore, although the by-laws state that member voting must occur on major business decision, no voting took place at this first business meeting.

The absence of member voting and input is not consistent with the laws and values established by the founding members. Indeed, at least one farmer expressed skepticism about the motivations of the market manager, stating that her farm stood to profit more from the online market. Some farmers do not view themselves as partners or members of the business. Instead, they viewed the business as a place to get rid of their excess produce and thought the business would not succeed after the grant money ran out. "Socialized anything doesn't work and this is socialized farmers" retorted one farmer. Some members of this business seem to exhibit poor business skills and lack of an understanding of cooperative operating procedures.

There is a tension in the spatial relations of the business represented by the plan to expand into the Chattanooga area. The market manager and some of the farmers want to be able to sell more products through the market. Nevertheless, the manager laments other online markets growing too large and sourcing from too many farmers. Furthermore, the expansion was not voted on by the membership and therefore does not represent the needs or desires of the local farmers or their communities. The market manager was insistent that the business would not take the form of a typical corporation where decisions are made behind closed doors and only a few people profit. However, this expansion decision gives a different impression since it was made by the market manager and the farmers who live closer to Chattanooga.

Tension occurs when a locally oriented cooperative business expands beyond the members' community (Mooney 2004). The economic motivation of the business leadership can overpower the needs and voices of the membership if these motivations go unchecked and can ultimately compromise the integrity of the democratic economic institution (Mooney 2004). It is possible that the market manager has become preoccupied with the economic success of the business and is neglecting the democratic procedures of the organization. This struggle also relates to the conflict between capitalism and democracy, revealing the power of the manager to bypass democratic decision-making in order to expedite economic success.

V. Conclusion

This chapter summarizes the central findings of the study. It also treats the practical, empirical and theoretical implications of this research.

Food Exchange Institutions

Sustainable food exchange institutions must balance community needs and assets with economic success, but community needs must first be communicated if they are to be addressed. Ideal food exchange arrangements include direct social linkages between and within farmer groups and consumer groups in order to foster communication, transparency, accountability and responsiveness (Freidmann 1995). Direct participation in food systems is required to build relationships and knowledge within communities (Lyson 2004), however, formal democratic structures may be needed if organizations are to acknowledge a range of community needs (Mooney 2004, Hassanein 1999).

Socially embedded relationships among food system actors have the ability to temper economic motives and create relationships of trust and accountability, but these relationships may require more direct contact to than is offered in these online marketing enterprises. Although these collaborative businesses bring the realms of consumption and production into closer proximity than in industrial scale food systems, there is doubt as to whether they can create sustainable institutions of food exchange. Ideally, such arrangements should be responsive, transparent and cognizant of community needs and assets while protecting economic success.

Decision-Making Processes

Although the importance of such cooperative democratic structures within agricultural enterprises has been acknowledged, the implementation of this type of economic organization may be more difficult than imagined. This study reveals that some farmer-members and leadership of the former cooperative in Case Study 1 did not seem to have the business and management skills necessary to understand and implement such cooperative democratic structures. Several farmers from all marketing groups agreed that farmers are too busy with farming to handle very much marketing or other business responsibilities associated with larger business structures. Only Case Study 3 is currently democratically structured, however this business did not utilize democratic member voting. Instead, the market manager and a few farmers made important business decisions. The market manager for this business did not inform all farmers when they joined the business that they also were voting partners and partial owners. In addition, some farmers shared negative sentiments towards a cooperative structure.

Agricultural producers may lack the knowledge and skills necessary to understand, operate, and work within cooperative structures. Therefore, while formal democratic decision-making may be important for giving power to community needs, some farmers may lack the business skills and commitment to cooperation necessary to administer or participate in complex democratic business structures. The frustration this provokes among managers, farmers and consumers could backfire on efforts to create sustainable communities. This study reveals a need for membership training in cooperative principles and procedures if agriculture or food-related enterprises wish to organize as formal democratic institutions.

This study questions the ability of these marketing businesses to remain transparent and responsive to community needs. In the absence of formal democratic structures, alternate methods for creating and maintaining transparency, accountability and responsiveness are needed. Avenues for regular, direct communication between and within farmer and consumer groups is needed. Farmers from all three case studies did not have any contact with customers of the online markets and many did not share regular contact with other farmers selling to the same marketing businesses. Therefore, while a formal democratic structure may be difficult to maintain, the social norms of transparency, accountability and responsiveness to community needs may not occur without direct involvement between producers, consumers and other local food system actors.

Tensions

This study identifies several areas of tension within the spatial, economic, political and social realms of each marketing group (Mooney 2004). However, because no groups were truly operated democratically, most of these conflicts were resolved by executive decisions of business owners or managers. Economic rationalization by owners and managers is strong, but they are still able to retain some sense of community-oriented values. This may be due to the embedded social relationships they experience with some farmers and some consumers, as well as their involvement in the social movement related to sustainable agriculture. However, it may be unsustainable to expect business owners and managers alone to balance community and market-based values because of the tendency to privilege economic concerns over community needs (Mooney 2004).

Participation

Although democratic decision-making may be helpful in promoting sustainable development, some marketing institutions simply do not adhere to formal cooperative principles. In these cases, other attributes of ideal food exchange arrangements can be identified in order to understand the potential for alternate business structures to promote food system sustainability. Many argue that all people should become more involved in food systems because sustainability is a goal related to the needs and assets of whole communities (Freidmann 1995, Hassanein 2003, Lyson 2004, Kloppenburg et al. 2000).

Online marketing businesses offer some opportunities for consumers and farmers to be involved in the local food system in addition to their food exchange transactions. Some market managers are better than others at informing consumers of opportunities to engage with local food-related issues, visit farms or participate in cooking classes. The sole proprietorship of the second case study more thoroughly engaged customers through their weekly newsletters about food or agriculture-related events and issues in which they could participate. All three marketing groups talked about planning to host farm tours for customer-members, but it is not clear whether all groups followed through with this promise.

Marketing businesses must offer opportunities for consumers and farmers to meaningfully participate within local food systems if the needs of all groups are to be realized. Although these online marketing businesses offer some opportunities for consumers and farmers to be involved, higher levels of participation may help farmers and consumers become more aware of the implications of their production and consumption practices. The market managers are currently in touch with consumer needs such as sensitivity to pesticides. If these needs can become real to producers through customer interaction, then producers and consumers may

experience higher levels of social accountability. Transparency in production practices may be better enforced through social relationships.

Farmers also depend on consumers to make sustainable consumption decisions such as supporting local farmers. If consumers know farmers and understand first-hand the needs of farmers, they may be more likely to consistently tailor their consumptive practices to support local and sustainable producers. If these groups can become socially embedded, the opportunities for sustainable community develop can increase (Friedmann 1995, Lyson 2004).

Communication

In order to have the needs of the community considered in business operations, each marketing business must facilitate direct avenues of communication between and within farmer groups and consumer groups (Freidmann 1995). In every case study, market managers communicate with consumers and farmers separately through the use of email. Farmers and consumers do not share direct contact and most farmers do not know the customers. This lack of face-to-face communication, much less an absence of direct virtual communication, is a barrier for producers and consumers in understanding the needs and assets of the whole community.

Dependence on email communication may compromise the personal relationships between producers and may perpetuate the conditions of the conventional food system. By limiting the knowledge that consumers have of farmers' practices, limitations, and assets, the values and characteristics of the foods they purchase are obscured. This is exemplified by the consumer demand for out of season variety and cheaper foods. Producers might try new methods of season extension or plant wider varieties of foods if they were directly aware of consumer food needs and desires.

Although market managers may have the ability to transmit information between and within the groups, they recognize shortcomings in the relationship between farmers and consumers. Market managers alone should not be expected to maintain communication between and within farmer and consumer groups. In order for direct communication to occur, marketing organizations must make direct communication accessible for farmers and consumers. This way, farmers and consumers may express their needs, desires or questions to other groups.

Similarly, opportunities for farmers and consumers to communicate within their peer groups should be available. It may be in the market manager's economic interest to limit farmer communication so that prices are not discussed, however this would give the market manager too much power over farmer incomes. Farmers already benefit from direct communication when they share information about sustainable production practices and other issues, but this communication is scattered and inconsistent. Communication occurs between some farmers, but other farmers are left out because of their location or because they are new to the marketing group. There is some social exchange that takes place between farmers when dropping off their products to the market manager, but this is unpredictable and often infrequent.

Market managers could set up group email lists for farmers and consumers. They could offer message boards for customers on their websites and encourage farmers to read them. Farmer profiles on websites would be helpful in giving consumers more information about the sources of the food they purchase. Opportunities to directly contact farmers should be available. Events where farmers and consumers can meet and socialize would be ideal because this direct social contact could help build deeper and more complex social bonds.

Farmers may understand some community food needs and desires because many also sell a portion of their farm products directly to local consumers. Therefore, although they do not

report knowing the online customers directly, some farmers are able to transfer their understanding of their own customers' needs to those of online market customers. While this may be helpful in some ways, the two customer groups cannot be assumed to have identical needs and desires. Many direct customers may reside in closer proximity to the farms, while many online customers are in urban areas. Therefore, while it may be helpful for farmers to understand the needs of their own direct customers, this situation cannot be considered a substitute for knowing the specific needs of online market customers.

Accountability

Perhaps the most important function that communication and participation can fulfill is social accountability. Embedded social relationships can build trust and provide order to economic behavior (Granovetter 1985). Although the online system offers efficiency and a wider market reach, it also separates important food system actors. This separation decreases the social embeddedness between these groups and therefore diminishes the power of social accountability. If both consumers and farmers do not demand direct contact, they may gamble with the integrity of their food exchange institutions. Farmers must be held accountable for their production methods and authenticity of production. Although no farmers in this study admitted to re-selling vegetables they did not grow as if they did grow them, or breaking the rules of organic production, this practice does occur in other local contexts. Building relationships of trust must be a priority for marketing businesses within alternative food systems if they are to remain accountable and contribute to the sustainability of surrounding communities.

These marketing enterprises have the potential to market on a larger scale than single farms because they source from many farms and coordinate orders and deliveries for a growing number of customers in urban areas. A wider market reach can offer economic benefits to

farmers and fulfill a variety of needs for consumers, but accountability and integrity within online markets may be more difficult to build. Without some forms of social accountability it would be possible for market managers to attribute the food qualities of “natural” or “local” to foods that are acquired through conventional food channels. By using the wholesale distributor, two marketing businesses have already reached outside of their direct relationships with local farmers to procure additional fruits and vegetables, compromising their definitions of “local” and “natural.” If relationships between farmers and consumers are not strong, it may be easier for managers to manipulate the qualities of any food item to fit the desires of customers. In addition to deeper social relationships, democratic business structures may be necessary to maintain transparency as marketing or production arrangements become larger and more complex.

Promise of Sustainability

Despite their shortcomings, these marketing businesses do represent progress for locally oriented food systems. The online markets offer farmers additional income opportunities, which help them continue to practice sustainable agriculture. Some farmers receive other benefits such as knowledge sharing with other farmers selling to the marketing group. The online marketing businesses have the potential to bring more local and natural food products to more people than single farms can manage, scaling up local food systems to meet the growing demand of some urban centers. With this opportunity comes the responsibility to maintain the integrity of local food systems by ensuring fair food prices and authentic natural, local foods. Each marketing group includes some information about farms, production practices and seasonal availability on their websites. While this is helpful, the information offered is not extensive enough and other business entrepreneurs with less integrity could fabricate this information. For this reason, direct relationships between and within farmer and consumer groups are important.

Despite the virtual nature of customer relationships within the online market, customers do receive some timely information about sustainable food system issues. All managers send weekly newsletters to customers, which may include recipes, farm stories and upcoming events or relevant food and agriculture issues. Although ideal food exchange relationships may be more closely linked through personal contact, online markets are communicating with a large number of customers. This may amend the values of more consumers so that they include concerns over sustainability.

Food is a promising arena for sustainability because all community members require it and can potentially participate in direct relationships with producers and other food system actors. Food may be a starting point for developing more meaningful social relationships within communities, which can build bonds of trust, transparency and accountability. However, producers and other actors must be more deliberate in developing social relationships if they want to support transparency within the food system. In addition, democratic business structures may be needed as food exchange arrangements become larger and more complex.

Practical Implications

Farmers' Market Authorities, extension personnel, small business development professionals and others seeking to help farmers develop and maintain collaborative marketing relationships should attend to the following considerations. First, if complex business structures are employed, such as cooperatives, Limited Liability Companies or other types of corporate partnerships, farmers and other market employees should receive training in cooperative principles and general business skills. One market manager complained that many farmers did not know the cost of their production and this was a problem. Even when marketing individually, farmers need training and resources in record keeping, general accounting, financial

management and production planning. When farmers collaborate to form larger businesses, their lack of financial skills becomes a more serious problem. Farmers and managers also need to thoroughly understand and implement operating procedures for their larger business structures. When farmers begin to work collaboratively, they must be able to differentiate collective decision-making, formal or informal, from their everyday individual decisions. The principles of cooperation should not be taken for granted, as this study reveals that many farmers participating in formal cooperatives did not share a vision of cooperation.

Second, in order to retain goals of sustainability, collaborative marketing efforts must be vigilant in closing the gap between producers and consumers. For this reason, organizations, government agencies and others who seek to help farmers maintain collaborative marketing businesses must emphasize the importance of direct communication and participation between and within producer and consumer groups. Without the opportunity for more highly embedded social relationships and higher levels of awareness about community needs, the functions of social accountability and knowledge transmission cannot be properly developed. Therefore, those seeking to help farmers develop collaborative marketing businesses should encourage transparency and access to information about individual farms and their farming practices. They should also encourage businesses to offer opportunities for face-to-face interaction between and within farmer and consumer groups.

Finally, in order for local marketing businesses to develop the ability to respond to community needs while meeting economic requirements, some form of collaborative decision-making may be necessary. The ability of any marketing business to respond effectively to community needs should not rest solely on the virtues of one person. Several farmers expressed concerns about some practices of the marketing businesses, but often they did not communicate

these concerns to market managers. Even though the managers of each business say they work collaboratively with farmers, without a business structure that formalizes input from farmers and consumers, there may not be a sustainable way for managers to respond effectively to the concerns of producers and consumers. Likewise, without a proper understanding of cooperative principles and processes, even the most formal business structure can be ineffective. For this reason, cooperative training should accompany any sort of cooperative business formation.

Future Research

More research is needed to understand the consumer experience within online markets. It may also be necessary to conduct a longitudinal study in order to better understand the ability of online marketing businesses to be flexible and innovative in meeting community needs and utilizing community assets in sustainable ways. A more expansive study of all farmers selling to marketing business would offer a more complete representation of farmer experiences.

Sustainability within local food systems begins with relationships between producers and consumers. This study examines the potential for more complex food exchange situations to support sustainability through social accountability, knowledge-sharing and transparency. As collaborative marketing efforts grow and become more complex, special attention should be given to the extent of direct relationships between producers and consumers. In this way, food exchange relationships can remain meaningful and direct even when Internet marketing systems are utilized. If collaborative marketing groups can provide consumers and producers with channels of communication and opportunities for direct participation, then both groups can begin to expect embedded relationships of food exchange. Food system participants can then recognize and reject dishonest marketing schemes aimed solely at capturing the economic value associated with “local” and “sustainable.” If new collaborative food exchange institutions

cannot withstand the commodifying forces of industrial capitalism which encourages standardized products and anonymous value assignment (Hinrichs 2003), then these marketing businesses may jeopardize their contributions to sustainability within communities and food systems.

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