



# Framing Good Food: Communicating Value of Community Food Initiatives in the Midst of a Food Crisis

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Community-embedded food initiatives exist in market economies, but make more-than-market contributions. They challenge the dominant, industrialized food system, while generating non-monetary benefits in their communities. Yet food policy, regulation, and public spending in much of the world is still framed by the values of market economy. Revenue, yield, and technological advancements remain key formal measurements of the wellbeing of food systems. Community-embedded food initiatives like small local businesses and non-profit organizations, are often committed to advancing social and environmental benefits of non-industrialized food, and they call for clearer recognition of their more-than-market contribution to community wellbeing. The Nourishing Communities network has worked with such initiatives for more than a decade, undertaking community-engaged research with practitioners across sectors. The network has found that these initiatives are impeded by a communication conundrum. On the one hand, they are expected (by funders, governments, and other institutions) to demonstrate their value using market-economy measurements and translating what they do into “social returns on investment.” On the other hand, many of those initiatives need non-market terminology to express the values that they espouse and generate. To balance these needs, Gibson-Graham’s framing of “diverse economies” can potentially offer a pathway to better communication and thus more accurate valuing of the work of such initiatives. Their notion of diverse economies offers endless opportunities to frame community food work as valuable in ways that go beyond market-economy measurements. As such, the diverse economies framing offers new possibilities for alternative food, and for more general discussions of social reform.

**Keywords:** food systems, food policy, framing, diverse economies, community food initiatives

## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic immensely affected food systems with supply chain breakdowns, border closures, outbreaks on farms and in food processing plants, relatively high rates of infection among food retail and restaurant workers, and shifting consumer behaviours. Critics of global industrial food, who have long called attention to food system vulnerabilities, are now seeing their concerns validated. Emerging research suggests that many of their predictions have come to bear, and their calls for robust regional food systems are increasingly resonating with the public (Knezevic et al., 2020).

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Much is being said about plans to “build back better” after the pandemic, which in terms of food will entail developing diverse, redundant, and responsive supply chains (Goupil and Blay-Palmer, 2020). The argument presented here, which builds on more than a decade of collaborative, community-engaged research of the Nourishing Communities<sup>1</sup> network, makes the case that those efforts must not be limited to material recovery. Conceptual reframing of food value chains will be critical for effective post-pandemic recovery. Specifically, reframing food economies to include more-than-monetary values, is now essential, and food systems actors, including researchers, can play a key role in that reframing where the potential exists to inform new policy.

## FOOD SYSTEMS

A food system comprises the full range of actors (human and non-human) and relationships involved in the production, harvesting, processing, distribution, procurement, consumption, and disposal of food (FAO, 2014). There are multiple contemporary food systems ranging from Indigenous food ways to global supply chains. The one that dominates politically and economically, is the global system of industrialized food (Clapp, 2012). It consists of a handful of international conglomerates with concentrated power in seed sales, farm inputs, production, harvesting (e.g., fishing), processing, distribution, and retail (Clapp, 2012; Howard, 2016). It relies on large-scale, intensive, specialized crop and livestock production. The immense economic and political power that food conglomerates wield shapes the range of policy measures implemented by various levels of government (De Schutter, 2019). Still, estimates suggest many of the global eaters depend on subsistence, rather than industrial, farmers and harvesters<sup>2</sup> (ETC Group, 2017). Food systems are not dichotomous, and they comprise a range of initiatives in between industrial farms and small enterprises, but the political power of those very large conglomerates presents the greatest challenges to the smallest of enterprises, and much of that small-scale effort is now framed by its participants as working in opposition to the industrial model.

The political economy of the industrial system, or what food systems theorists termed the industrial “food regime” (Friedmann, 1982; Friedmann and McMichael, 1989),

promotes productivist approaches to food production, harvesting, and distribution (Buttel, 2003). These approaches focus on volume/yield, market efficiencies, and profitability, framing industrial-scale production as necessary. What makes them a “regime” is the very way in which these approaches permeate policy at all levels of governance. Proponents of industrial food argue the model is capable of producing more food at lower costs (Blomqvist et al., 2015; Nordhaus et al., 2015). Yet, a growing body of evidence demonstrates that these approaches are not even close to eradicating hunger and food insecurity (Webb et al., 2018). Though industrial agriculture can produce more in the short term, this only refers to volume, and not to nutrient density or variety. Farms smaller than 2 ha globally generate “28–31% of total crop production and 30–34% of food supply on 24% of gross agricultural area . . . and account for greater crop diversity, while farms over 1,000 ha have the greatest proportion of post-harvest loss” (Ricciardi et al., 2021, p. 64). Industrial-scale production has been linked to extraordinary environmental degradation, including pollution, waste, soil erosion and loss of biodiversity (Qualman, 2019). It has contributed to growing incidence of diet-related disease (Lang et al., 2009; Albritton, 2009), social inequities (Agyeman and McEntee, 2014), and loss of community cohesion through gutting of rural areas and altering food labour (Magnan, 2015; Bronson et al., 2019). Compounded by climate change, destabilization of governments, and most recently a pandemic, these problems now amount to a veritable food crisis (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011; Holt-Gimenez and Patel, 2012; Blay-Palmer et al., 2020; Brescia, 2020).

Contemporary literature calls for transformation of food systems to address these challenges (Levkoe, 2011; Blay-Palmer et al., 2013; Knezevic et al., 2017). Community solutions are increasingly lauded as critical players, though not panacea, in addressing the most pressing crises, be they economic, social, or environmental (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Broad, 2016; Altieri, 2018). Peasant farmers, small-scale processors and distributors, and community activists have converged around “alternative” food (Renting et al., 2003; Whatmore et al., 2003; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006; Brunori, 2007; Guthman, 2008a; Goodman et al., 2012; Levkoe, 2014). These alternative food networks are loosely organized, heterogenous assemblages of individuals, organizations, and business entities, that typically position themselves as working in contrast to globalized industrial food and the political frameworks that underpin it. Some of the alternatives have been to varying degrees co-opted by the industrial system (e.g., organics, Guthman, 2003), but it is still fair to say most of them seek ways to deliver food that is more nutritious and more socially just than its industrial counterpart (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). They aim to ensure equitable access to affordable, healthy, and culturally appropriate food (Broad, 2016). They work with, rather than against, ecosystems, to provide remediation instead of degradation (Knezevic et al., 2017; Altieri, 2018). They tend to engage with policy makers and planners to chip away at the entrenched political assumptions at the heart of food system vulnerabilities (Levkoe, 2014; Andrée et al., 2019). Such alternatives include diverse actors: farmers who embrace agroecology, outdoor

<sup>1</sup>The network, based at the Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems in Waterloo (Ontario, Canada) includes researchers from several of universities in Canada and internationally, along with more than 150 organizations that include non-profit groups, small businesses and cooperatives, farm groups, and informal community initiatives. Led by A. Blay-Palmer, the UNESCO Chair on Food, Biodiversity and Sustainability Studies, the network has undertaken dozens of community-based research projects, most notably through the six-year international partnership Food: Locally Embedded, Globally Engaged (see <https://fledgerresearch.ca/>).

<sup>2</sup>“Harvesting” in this context refers to myriad food procurement practices that do not involve cultivation, such as “wild” or country food harvesting, urban foraging, fishing, and hunting.

classrooms that teach traditional food harvesting, processors and distributors who source locally or use eco-friendly packaging, seed exchange groups and events, community food centres that advance access to food and food literacy, fruit rescue groups that tackle access and waste concurrently, food policy councils that inform planning, community investment groups that offer micro-financing, etc., (Knezevic et al., 2017; Koc et al., 2016; Knezevic, 2021).

Admittedly, some forms of “alternative” food have long been criticized for elitism and for deepening, rather than addressing the injustices in food systems (Guthman, 2003; Allen 2008). Further critiques noted that the alternatives tend to offer reforms rather than systemic transformation (Desmarais and Wittman, 2014; Gordon and Hunt, 2019), and for failing to escape the neoliberal economic model (Guthman 2008b), but as Andrée et al. (2015) point out, these valid criticism must not obscure the ability of some initiatives to “challenge, and potentially alter, neo-liberalization” (2015, p. 1468).

Further, these “alternative” actors, parallel to and in stated opposition of industrial food, are individually not entirely resistant to shocks. Many small businesses and community organizations fail. But jointly, they form a more flexible and stable set of actors with potential to better support food security, and human and environmental health. Researchers and international bodies have been promoting food systems that consist of diverse actors—diverse in scale and production practices, as well as internally diverse, such as farming practices that incorporate multiple species and varieties of plants and animals (IPES-Food, 2016; FAO, 2019).

As one of the many groups advocating for these “alternative” systems, Nourishing Communities’ decade-plus years of research are evidence of the potential of diverse, community-based food systems. The international network integrates theoretical insights and empirical research, relying on both practitioner and scholarly knowledge. Since 2007, the network has been working with community-embedded food initiatives in Canada and several international partners to document the impacts of their work. The findings show that community food initiatives can build social capital, encourage co-operation over competition, stimulate social and environmental innovation, offer spaces for business mentorship and knowledge sharing, and contribute to community well-being. Because they tend to be nimbler, more responsive to community needs, and better supported by their communities, they filled critical gaps during the pandemic and have consequently rapidly gained visibility since early 2020. In Canada, this is most visible in two areas: overwhelming demand for services from community organizations with food focus (food centres, community gardens, and food banks) (Lourenzo, 2020); and unprecedented interest in products from small community-embedded business (producers, processors, farmer’s markets, and food-delivery services) (Food-for-cities, 2020). In recent interviews with small-sale food processors in Canada, for example, participants described how their communities rallied around local businesses to support them and ensure their survival (Knezevic, 2021). Partnerships among community food actors are flourishing, and while still anecdotal, demonstrate the potential of collaboration, in some cases critical to ensuring they can continue

their work. When large food manufacturers had to shut down processing plants due to COVID-19 outbreaks, causing massive supply chain bottlenecks and prompting producers to throw out tonnes of produce (Blake and Walljasper, 2020) and send thousands of animals to landfills (Charlebois, 2020), small-scale community-embedded actors proved able to pivot quickly to the new conditions (Knezevic, 2021). Yet, because many of the community organizations work on shoe-string budgets, and many of the community-embedded businesses have relatively small revenue, they continue to struggle for formal recognition as significant and necessary elements of food systems. Ensuring their wellbeing is deeply integrated into new policy and programs will require a different way of thinking and talking about food, as communities attempt to reorganize after the initial pandemic shocks.

## FRAMING FOOD

Few texts have influenced communication studies as much as Goffman’s, 1974, which posits that humans make sense of and draw meaning from the world by utilizing “frames” of reference. Frames shape understandings of new information and are influenced by a range of rhetorical materials from media, institutions, and other social surroundings. In turn, the rhetorical strategies deployed by institutions are often examples of framing. It matters a great deal whether we think of agriculture as industry or a human and environmental practice, just like it matters if we think about food as fuel or nourishment.

One of the projects of the Nourishing Communities group explored social and informal economies of food in Canada over four years (Knezevic et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2019; Stephens et al., 2019a). The project’s community partners repeatedly pointed to their conundrum in communicating the value of their work. To secure material resources for their operations, such as space/land, equipment, transportation, monetary resources (grants, investments or loans), they felt constant pressure to describe what they do in terms of monetary benefits, as profit remains the ultimate measure of value in the neoliberal order (Otero, 2018). Yet, many of them found that their work supported economies even more significantly in intangible and indirect ways. They were sometimes asked to demonstrate their successes in terms of social return on investments, often in the simplest meaning of that phrase—to translate their social and environmental impact into dollar figures. Some initiatives have done so successfully. Alternative Land Use Services program in Canada (<https://alus.ca/>), for example, allows private sector donors to financially compensate farmers who ecologically restore parts of the farmland by taking them out of production and re-naturalizing them. But most initiatives continue to struggle to see their contributions recognized.

The partners in both the for-profit and non-profit sectors have repeatedly asked Nourishing Communities researchers to assist them in communicating the importance of their work to institutions that typically use narrow market-economy measures of success. The research team experimented with

media styles and formats, but over time that communicative work came to focus on fundamentally transforming how the key food systems issues are framed.

Industrial food has for decades been successfully framed as a modern, efficient path to abundance, despite its unsustainable nature. Community-embedded initiatives interested in more-than-market contributions struggle with the extent to which such framing has permeated policy. As policy reforms begin in the wake of the pandemic, it will be critical to ensure that recognition of such contributions is integrated into policy discussions. This needs to happen systematically and comprehensively, and not just as an add-on to economic considerations.

## REFRAMING FOOD ECONOMIES

Urgent need for food policy changes is no longer debatable. What is still up for debate is what kinds of changes are needed. History shows that the inherently political nature of policy<sup>3</sup> means that evidence alone rarely generates adequate change, due to diverging priorities among actors, including policymakers. Conflicting priorities sometimes translate into actors speaking past each other, or what some scholars describe as intractable policy problems—stubborn policy disagreements complicated by the actors' conflicting frames (Schon and Rein, 1995; McIntyre et al., 2018). We have seen this play out in political forums around the globe in the context of COVID-19, with public health pitted against economy, as if these inextricable issues were separate from—and in competition with—each other. One possible way to address intractable policy problems can be found in frame reflection (Schon and Rein, 1995). Frame reflection refers to efforts to identify and analyze conflicting frames, and understand and transform how frames are constructed (McIntyre et al., 2018).

As one approach to frame reflection, Nourishing Communities' researchers have utilized Gibson-Graham's "diverse economies" (2008). While not the only possible approach, and perhaps not even the best one in certain contexts,<sup>4</sup> it can pave way for reframing values in food systems (Ballamingie et al., 2019; Marshman and Knezevic, 2021). Diverse economies framework conceptualizes economy as a wider frame. In addition to formal (monetary) economy, it recognizes "the plethora of hidden and alternative economic activities that contribute to social well-being and environmental regeneration" (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 618). The model is frequently represented by an iceberg image where the smaller, visible portion of the iceberg above the surface represents monetary economy. The larger, below-the-

surface part of the iceberg encompasses unpaid labour like child and elder care, co-operative and do-it-yourself models, arts and cultural work, education, non-profits, public services, and so on. Two aspects of this framework are notable. First, by referring to these activities as "economies" the approach declares monetary economy as inseparable from non-monetary initiatives. Second, when visually represented by the iceberg, the framework demonstrates that other activities play an even larger role in human and non-human life, and that monetary exchanges rely on the foundation of more-than-monetary contributions. Put simply, a community that values these other dimensions and can build on them is more likely to also develop a sustainable and more equitable monetary economy. Community support that transpired during the COVID-19 pandemic, for local organizations and small food businesses, speaks directly to this.

Gibson-Graham's concept of diverse economies is widely adopted by social and economic geographers, but remains underutilized in communication studies. Although the framework has not been without its critics (Samers, 2005; Ossewaarde and Reijers, 2017), it offers an opportunity to reframe community-embedded food initiatives. Unlike many other theoretical frameworks, this one is highly accessible and it resonates, at least among the Nourishing Communities partners, with community-embedded food initiatives committed to social and environmental wellbeing. The iceberg image has assisted partners in 1) reflecting on their work to recognize their significant albeit barely acknowledged contributions beyond revenue-generation, and 2) articulating this new understanding into how they present their work to funders, supporters, collaborators, and media. The framework can open a pathway to better communication and thus more accurate valuing of their work—a possible way out their communication conundrum. Research on a hospital garden, for example, allowed the partners to taut their work as "concrete evidence" of the multiple benefits of food gardens that in the long run justify initial financial investment (CBC News, 2016). When monetary economy is pitted against other social values, sound policy solutions are difficult to reach. Reframing food systems in terms of diverse economies can open doors to policymaking that favours investments (monetary and otherwise) in a diverse range of actors. These may be financial, but can also come in the form of tax incentives, land access, or any number of other social investments.

Partners in the Nourishing Communities network offer a promising glimpse into how food systems can be transformed by organizations that insist on focusing on more-than-economic successes. Seed-saving organizations like Seeds of Diversity (<https://seeds.ca/>) produce value in biodiversity, food literacy, knowledge conservation and exchange, and social capital (Worden-Rogers et al., 2019), relying on grants that support this critical social infrastructure. Food Share in Toronto provides subsidized fresh produce while advocating for social equity (<https://foodshare.net/>). Funding for such community food centres is an investment that can offset public costs of diet-related disease and social marginalization (often intertwined with un/underemployment, mental health, etc.) (Mikkonen and Raphael, 2010). In Canada's capital city, the food systems organization Just Food Ottawa (<https://>

<sup>3</sup>Unlike the English language, some languages do not distinguish the political decision-making from the resulting directives and programs and use the same word for "politics" and "policy".

<sup>4</sup>The Nourishing Communities network has always been firmly grounded in its position that food solutions are place-specific. Various models of community food work can be informative and inspiring, but they can only in rare circumstances be replicated in their exact forms in other communities.

justfood.ca/), arranged with the regional planning and conservation commission to affordably lease a 160-acre farm property for 25 years. The land remains part of the city's "greenbelt" while providing spaces for new farmer training, public education, farmers' market, and community events. In Nova Scotia, Farm Works Investment Co-operative (<https://farmworks.ca/>) provides low-interest micro-loans and ample mentorship to local farmers and food businesses. It has transformed local food in the province, but its financial model is only possible because of very generous provincial tax incentives for community economic development investments (Stephens et al., 2019b). Small Scale Food Processors Association (<https://www.ssfpa.net/>) based in British Columbia and partly supported by government grants, provides training and mentorship for small businesses, helping them develop products, processes, and business plans, and thus access more financing options. The community-led Ka'a'gee Tu Atlas in the Northwest Territories (<https://kaageetuatlans.wordpress.com/>), partly funded by provincial and federal governments, provides an online tool that tracks environmental changes affecting the land and in turn Indigenous food ways in the region. The examples only scratch the surface of what is possible if we think about food through the lens of diverse economies, as each of them is motivated by more than monetary rewards. These organizations vary in how and if they use the framework—implicitly or explicitly—but without fail recognize themselves in it whenever the framework is part of network consultations.

## DISCUSSION

The Nourishing Communities network has over the years documented countless community-embedded food initiatives—formal and informal organizations and community-embedded small businesses—that produce value. That value is not always monetary, but all of it is still fundamental to thriving monetary economies. Mapping out such initiatives reveals that their distribution is uneven (Nelson et al., 2013) and their existence often precarious. Nevertheless, they are essential for resilient, sustainable food systems. To develop and strengthen such systems, a systemic transformation is needed and it will require a major discursive shift (see also Gordon and Hunt, 2019).

Reframing food economies as diverse economies is one possible way to stimulate the discursive shift that expands

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policy possibilities. Support for diverse food actors can no longer be haphazard. COVID-19 has exposed the cracks in food systems, which if left unchecked can result in dire consequences. The pandemic has made it urgent to construct new framings that can bridge the gap between the economy-focused institutions and those diverse actors with multiple and intertwined values.

As geographers, Gibson-Graham left an indelible footprint on the geographies of food research, but their work has made few inroads into communication scholarship. Their notion of diverse economies can help frame community-embedded food initiatives as valuable beyond market-economy measurements. That framing offers new possibilities for "alternative" food, and for more general discussions of social reform. Practitioners and scholars can find a useful tool in diverse economies of food. This tool can stimulate food system transformation by transforming how we work with food, and how we speak and write about it.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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**Conflict of Interest:** The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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