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CED Food Initiatives in Inner City Saskatoon and Winnipeg: Very Much Alive at the Twenty Year Mark

By Joel Novek

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Executive Summary

Food insecurity is a serious concern in Canadian inner-cities. This is a challenge for grassroots social enterprises that must form partnerships to undertake food initiatives.

This study examines two Community Economic Development (CED) urban food initiatives. CHEP Good Food in Saskatoon provides

a variety of food distribution programs for low income urban residents. Neechi Foods of Winnipeg is a worker cooperative retail store with an aboriginal mandate. Interviews and documents reveal that both organizations have been successful in forming partnerships to meet their responsibilities but in each case significant problems remain.

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Mark Winne (2008) has convincingly argued that a food gap exists for the underprivileged in the United States. There is an abundant food system for the affluent; a stingy one for the poor. There is a food gap in Canada too. Although it is an affluent nation, food insecurity affects nearly one in ten Canadian households (Health Canada 2007: Fig. 3.1), while food bank usage has doubled since 1989 (Canadian Association of Food Banks 2006: 12). Advocates of community food security (CFS) argue that locally-based social enterprises and community organizations can provide a solution to problems of hunger, poor diet, and lack of access to healthy food (Hamm and Bellows 2003; Winne et al 1998; Gottlieb and Fisher 1996). Gottlieb and Fisher (1996: 24) define CFS as “the ability of all persons obtaining, at all times, a culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through local, non emergency sources”. CFS, however, is not a clear concept. It encompasses diverse perspectives involving food production and consumption, social reproduction, and urban and rural interests (Johnston and Baker 2005; Allen 1999; Clancy 1993). What differentiates CFS from other approaches, such as anti-hunger or sustainable agriculture, is the emphasis on community (Winne et al 1998): from a CFS perspective, food security is both an individual’s right and a focus for community action (Gottlieb and Fisher 1996).

The community focus aligns CFS with the movement for community economic development (CED), which advocates local capacity

building and empowerment to address issues of poverty, hunger and unemployment (Shragge and Toye 2006; Shragge 1997). The aims of CED are social and political as well as economic. It takes the position that communities have needs that cannot adequately be met by either the capitalist market or the bureaucratic state (Loxley 2007). CED is designed to improve the material conditions of community residents. It is economic development that is directed by the community from the ground up, not by outsiders. It should result in employment opportunities and job training for residents. CED, like CFS, promises greater nutritional access for the poor and underprivileged, and an end to the cycle of dependence on social assistance and food banks. CED relates well to CFS as both espouse a focus on community, social responsibility, and local self-provisioning. CED advocates assert that CED initiatives can bring about positive food security outcomes in needy communities (Agriculture and Agrifood Canada 2007; Making Waves 2006)

This paper will examine two inner city food security initiatives, one based in Saskatoon, the other in Winnipeg, that adhere to CED principles and that have achieved a degree of prominence in their respective communities. The former is CHEP Good Food (formerly the Child Health and Nutrition Program), which provides a variety of food distribution programs targeted primarily to low income residents; the latter is Neechi Foods, a worker cooperative retail store with a mandate for

Aboriginal economic development. Although they differ in their objectives and organization, the two initiatives were designed to address the problems of poverty, poor nutrition and social exclusion that afflict the inner cores of Western Canadian metropolitan centres. The paper will highlight some of the factors responsible for their success, as well as the sig-

nificant obstacles that need to be overcome, if CED is to become a useful pathway to food security; that is, to the provision of affordable and nutritious food for the inner city poor. It will also deal with the social and political context in Saskatoon and Winnipeg that gave rise to these initiatives.

The Inner City Social Context

The empirical core of this paper is an examination of two established food security initiatives in Western Canada conducted according to CED principles: CHEP Good Food in Saskatoon and Neechi Foods in Winnipeg. The urban context in which these two initiatives emerged is important in understanding their objectives. Saskatoon and Winnipeg are two Western Canadian cities with metropolitan populations estimated at 225,927 and 671,274, respectively (Statistics Canada 2001). Despite differences in size, the two cities are close in the population characteristics that have been found to correlate with food insecurity (Nord et al 2006; Power 2005). These characteristics are generally indicative of poverty: proportion of low income households; percentage of lone parent families; proportion indicating Aboriginal identity; and percentage who rent their dwellings (Health Canada 2007: Fig. 3.1).

Compared to other Canadian metropolitan

areas, Winnipeg and Saskatoon, according to census data, share a distinct profile that suggests relatively high concentrations of poverty. This includes: a median household income below the national norm; a proportion low income greater than the national average; a percentage of lone parent families that is above the national average; and the two highest proportions of persons declaring an Aboriginal identity (Carter et al 2005). Only in the percentage of dwellings rented are the two cities in line with the national average. In addition, Winnipeg and Saskatoon report high food bank usage: more than 36,000 and 12,000 monthly visits, respectively (Winnipeg Harvest 2005; Saskatoon Food Bank n.d.).

Much of the poverty in the two Prairie metropolitan regions is spatially concentrated in the inner city cores. The inner cities of Saskatoon and Winnipeg are marked by a high incidence of low income households, significant unem-

Table One: Correlates of Food Insecurity, Saskatoon and Winnipeg Census Metropolitan Areas 2001 Census of Canada

	Saskatoon	Winnipeg	Canada
Population	225, 927	671, 274	_____
Median Household Income	\$43,392	\$44, 562	\$46,752
% Below Low Income Cutoff	17.7	18.9	16.7
% Lone Parent Families	17.6	17.7	16.5
% Aboriginal Identity	9.1	8.4	2.5
% Rental Dwellings	34.9	34.4	35.3

Sources

Carter, Tom, Chesya Polevychok and Kurt Sargent, *Canada's 25 Major Metropolitan Centres: A Comparison*. Canada Research Chair in Urban Change and Adaptation, 2005. Accessed 1/18/2007 from <<http://ius.uwinnipeg.ca/CRC/RH-06.pdf>>

Statistics Canada, *Community Profiles, Saskatoon and Winnipeg Census Metropolitan Areas, 2001*. Accessed 1/20/2009 from <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/profil01/cp01/Search?SearchForm_Results.cfm>

Statistics Canada, *2000 Household Income and Household Size for Canada, 2001 Census*. Accessed 1/20/2009 from <<http://www12.statcan/english/census01/products/standard/themes/RetrieveProductTable.cfm>>

Statistics Canada, *Low Income in Census Metropolitan Areas, 1980-2000*. Accessed 1/18/2009 from <<http://www.statcan.ca/pub/89-613—m/2004001/4193746-eng.pdf>>

ployment, low levels of education, and many lone parent families (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba 2007; Grosso 2003). These problems are particularly acute among the large Aboriginal population that inhabits the core of each city. In Saskatoon, concentrations of poverty can be found in the city's core west side. This includes the neighbourhoods of Westmount, Pleasant Hill, King George, Caswell and Riverdale where more than 40% of residents live below the Statistics Canada low income cutoff (Grosso 2003:7). In Winnipeg, poverty and related social problems have been concentrated in the city's North End, including North Point Douglas, where more than 50% of households live below the low income cutoff (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba 2006:7), and nearby Lord Selkirk Park, where the figure is an astonishing 87.8% (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives 2007:4). Furthermore, the two inner cities have become "food deserts" (Winne 2008) with a comparative absence of grocery stores and supermarkets offering nutritious food at affordable prices. The closing of the Extra Foods supermarket in 2004, following a spate of other grocery store closures in Saskatoon's core, dealt a serious blow to those needing access to healthy food in the downtown (Gillis 2008; Woods 2003). The situation is similar in Winnipeg. A recent survey found a minimally nutritious diet to be more expensive and less accessible in core areas like the North End than in more affluent sections of the city (Skerrit 2009; Rideout 2008).

Not only do Saskatoon and Winnipeg suffer from similar social problems; they have also, following provincial direction, engaged in a similar in approach to social policy. Canada's political regime has transformed the means by which social services are delivered (Teepie 2000). Many social programs have been reorganized and cut back; others have been offloaded onto the private sector, social enterprises and non profits. In response, provin-

cial governments in Manitoba and Saskatchewan have promoted CED as a pathway to job creation, local empowerment, and poverty reduction. Manitoba has established a "CED lens" (Loxley and Simpson 2007) to incorporate community economic development principles into the government's policy-making practice. Saskatchewan created a network of 28 Regional Economic Development Authorities (REDAs) to promote CED goals throughout the province (Fernandes 2003). The election of the centre-right Saskatchewan Party as the provincial government in 2007, however, placed a question mark over Saskatchewan's future commitment to CED initiatives. The new government's more sceptical lens in this area has already had an impact on the expansion plans of CHEP Good Food, as our research will indicate.

CHEP Good Food and Neechi Foods were selected as cases for study because both are well established social enterprises run according to CED principles and dedicated to urban food provision and security. Both have been in operation for almost twenty years and have weathered various changes in policy and direction. Both have made the inner city, with its concentration of poverty and food insecurity, their main focus of outreach. Despite these similarities of context, the two differ significantly in their vision, strategies and goals. These differences will prove useful in examining their successes and failures, as well as the roles they play as institutional actors in their respective communities.

The research project was qualitative. Interviews were conducted with the directors and managers of the above two CED enterprises: CHEP Good Food and Neechi Foods. In addition, interviews were conducted with the managers of other social enterprises in Saskatoon and Winnipeg that have acted in partnership or association with CHEP or Neechi Foods. This includes Quint Development Corpora-

tion in Saskatoon; and the Manitoba Food Charter, Mount Carmel Clinic, and Manitoba Council on Child Nutrition in Winnipeg. In total, twenty four interviews were carried out. This was in addition to a scrutiny of available documentation in electronic or hard copy formats. The descriptive material is outlined below. The intent of the research was to analyze

what common factors may explain the comparative success or failure of the CED organizations in meeting their CFS goals. This process was subjective, and any conclusions should be viewed as tentative. Similarly, any light shed on the possible connections between CFS goals and CED enterprises should encourage further research on the subject.

CHEP Good Food, Inc.

School food programs usually involve grass roots partnerships of schools, parents and local communities. This was how CHEP started up in Saskatoon. It was founded in 1989 when a group of citizens concerned about poverty, hunger and food bank dependence in their community lobbied city government to institute meal programs in their local schools. Led by local residents, their lobbying efforts were successful. They brought together parents, public health workers, teachers and even some city councillors. They obtained startup funding from the city as well as from the Public Health Department. Following this initial success, the organization grew as more and more schools, and eventually the school boards, signed on.

Today CHEP continues to provide support for children's nutrition programs in the Saskatoon region (Henry et al 2005). CHEP operates through a partnership with the local schools and the parents in the community, as well as the province through the Ministry of Education. It tops up the funding for nutrition programs in designated community schools, which receive a provincial allocation, and provides funding for meals in non-community (public and parochial) schools. CHEP supplies snacks and salad bars in 43 sites, including community centres as well as schools. In 2007, it provided more than 480,000 meals and snacks (CHEP Good Food 2007[a]). A cornerstone of CHEP's success as a school meal provisioner is its community economic development approach that takes the position that food is a basic right and that community empowerment is essential to food security (CHEP Good Food n.d.[a]). This point is emphasized through its commitment to training the nutrition coordinators responsible for providing the meals in Saskatoon's schools. Even more important is its wholesale produce bulk buying operation that sup-

ports school nutrition programs and gives it market leverage as a fruit and vegetable buyer. Bulk buying from local farmers and wholesalers, along with a strong community presence, has given CHEP the ability to branch out into alternative food initiatives in the Saskatoon area, such as cooperative buying clubs and collective kitchens.

Thus, the next major development for CHEP was the establishment of a cooperative buying club (Swabi 2000/2001). Food Share established Canada's first and largest cooperative buying club in Toronto in 1994, based on a model derived from CED projects in the developing world (Field 2006). It uses centralized buying and co-ordination to provide a healthy produce box—called a good food box—to its subscribers. In 1997, CHEP started up a good food box in Saskatoon as an alternative form of food distribution with the goal of supplying affordable and accessible food, especially to low income earners (Brownlee and Cammer 2004). The good food box concept meshed with CHEP's vision of a food secure community achieved through a community economic development approach. The challenge was to distribute food to large numbers of low income citizens at reasonable prices with little risk to people who have no margins for risk. Karen Archibald, Executive Director of CHEP, explained the thinking behind the food box:

“Poor people have less money to risk and so the community shared agriculture model won't work [because] if the year's farming failed people would lose all their food money. They need to get good value and every week we show how much more the produce would cost if bought in a regular store. The box is meant to balance out food bank use, which is a lot of starches and no fresh fruit or vegetables. A CED approach

requires that we listen respectfully and are responsive to our members' needs".

CHEP buys fruits and vegetables in volume to fill over 1000 good food boxes a month, distributed in bi-monthly deliveries to 75 drop-off locations. This makes it Canada's second largest cooperative food buying club. The food is purchased from local producers and wholesalers. CHEP coordinates the bulk buying with the purchases for its school nutrition program. Out of almost \$250,000 spent on food purchases, about 20% goes to 18 local farmers who work closely with CHEP (CHEP Good Food 2007[a]). There are various options for ordering boxes: a \$17 regular fruit and vegetable box, a \$12 small fruit and vegetable box, and a \$30 organic box designed to appeal to the more upscale customer (CHEP Good Food 2007[b]). This follows the Food Share model with more affluent consumers subsidizing those of lower income. For example, CHEP distributes boxes costing only \$5 to three aboriginal communities near Saskatoon. Income from food box sales provides about two thirds of good food box funding. The rest comes from government and private donations. A grant from the Saskatoon Community Foundation for the purchase of a refrigerated truck has greatly facilitated produce deliveries. CHEP also relies heavily on volunteer labour. Seventy five volunteer coordinators manage orders in neighbourhoods across Saskatoon, while about 50 volunteers assemble on delivery days, twice monthly, to pack boxes.

CHEP has also established collective kitchens, which are small groups of people who pool resources to produce low cost and healthy meals for their families. They directly support the social reproduction needs of households by enabling women to stretch family food resources and turn out nutritious meals for those who depend on them. They also fulfill the education and training mission of CED organizations by showing people how to develop their

homemaking and cooking skills and how to manage their budgets. CHEP currently maintains fourteen collective kitchen groups in partnership with Public Health Service of the Saskatoon Health Region and the Community Clinic-Westside (CHEP Good Food 2007[a]). Leadership training for kitchen facilitators is an important part of the program. Each year, 12-20 people complete a course that qualifies them as kitchen facilitators, able to lead collective kitchens on their own. Stability in this role has proven to be somewhat of a problem; in order to maintain commitment, CHEP has found it necessary to pay facilitators an honorarium, similar to the one paid to school nutrition coordinators.

Buying clubs and collective kitchens, however, only involve a limited number of households. In its most recent and most ambitious initiative, CHEP has planned to establish Good Food Junction, a retail cooperative venture located in the city's low income west side (CHEP Good Food n.d.[b]). Good Food Junction was announced in 2006 in response to numerous grocery closures that left Saskatoon's core an urban food desert without a full service food store. It was designed to be part of the large scale Station 20 West project, planned in partnership with Saskatoon Health Region and Quint Development Corporation: an inner city housing enterprise whose operations have been closely interconnected with CHEP (CHEP Good Food 2007[a]). Station 20 West would feature a library, health clinic, community services and 55 units of social housing, as well as a grocery store. Total cost of the project, including construction, was estimated at \$12 million. The plans for Good Food Junction were likewise ambitious. They promised a full range of food and non food items and sought \$1million in grocery shopping commitments from potential members. In the spring of 2008, however, the new centre-right Saskatchewan Party government cancelled a pledge of \$8.1 million in

provincial funding for Station 20 West made by its predecessor (Coolican 2008). As a result, according to CHEP board member Susan Whiting, the plans for a comprehensive community service centre have had to be substantially scaled back. The grocery store is still going ahead but the medical clinic, a key part of the initial proposal, has been cancelled. The estimated cost of the revised project stands at about \$4 million. The partners have purchased the land and are trying to raise \$2 million in private donations and loan guarantees so that the project can move forward.

Despite the success of the good food box and the ability to attract volunteer labour, CHEP requires significant external funding to maintain operations, including a paid staff of twelve. The Province of Saskatchewan has granted core funding since 1991, and now provides about \$400,000 annually, approximately

one third of CHEP's budget of over \$1 million (CHEP Good Food 2006). Other income comes from the City of Saskatoon and the United Way, as well as private fundraising, donations, partnerships and customer contributions. In this respect, CHEP has taken a divergent path from Toronto's Food Share, which has maintained its independence from government and the corporate sector. CHEP has garnered large scale provincial support, and has leveraged that support into becoming a successful nutrition and food provider in Saskatoon. It has also engaged in a close working partnership with Quint Development Corporation, which promotes core area housing and community development initiatives. The dilemma for CHEP is to maintain its momentum of development while guarding its independence as an autonomous community organization dedicated to food security.

Neechi Foods Co-op Ltd.

If CHEP Good Food hopes to enter the cooperative retail food business, then Neechi Foods can serve as a useful example to study. Neechi Foods was founded in 1990 as a worker cooperative that operates a small grocery store in Winnipeg's low income Lord Selkirk Park neighbourhood (Rothney 1991). Its ten worker members run it to serve a community and Aboriginal mandate. Neechi Foods emerged from a coalescence of efforts to encourage Aboriginal economic development in Winnipeg. The idea for the co-op evolved from the Metis Economic Development Training Program, which included participants such as Russ Rothney and Louise Champagne who were to take an instrumental role in Neechi's management (Tupone 2000). At the time of its founding, it was part of a coalition of inner city projects known as Winnipeg Native Family Economic Development, Inc. It took the form of a worker co-op because Neechi's founders believed the low income and often transient population in the community could not support a consumer co-op (Wattunee et al 2008), while worker members were more likely to be committed to the enterprise. Neechi received start-up financing in the form of a mortgage from the Assiniboine Credit Union, public sector capital grants from the Winnipeg Core Area Initiative and the Native Economic Development Program, as well as community loans (Tupone 2000). It is now independent and largely self-financing.

The store sells a variety of fresh produce and dry goods and is known for such local and Aboriginal specialties as bannock, wild rice, wild blueberries, fresh fish and handicrafts. Neechi also supplies food for school lunch programs, for collective kitchens, for the nearby Mount Carmel health clinic, and for community caterers. One of its best known products is a subsidized fresh fruit basket for children (Champagne 2008). The official

goals of the co-op are based on community economic development and food security principles (Wattunee et al 2008). It is strongly committed to economic development for Winnipeg's inner city and Aboriginal population. Employment creation and job training are a major part of this commitment so that money spent in the community stays in the community. This includes ensuring a safe and supportive work environment for its ten worker members. It is also committed to providing neighbourhood residents with low cost, healthy food choices (Wattunee et al 2008). This is particularly important in an area where poor nutrition is a serious concern, and lack of knowledge about good food remains an important barrier to resolving chronic health problems.

Neechi's early years were difficult ones and the co-op found itself struggling to survive. The 1992 recession hit Winnipeg's inner city hard (Tupone 2000). Crime, drugs and gangs afflicted the nearby Lord Selkirk Park area. Many public housing units were boarded up. With high rates of unemployment and poverty, Neechi's cash flow was skewed toward monthly welfare payments. It was forced to finance a significant amount of inventory just to support one day of sales per month (Wattunee et al 2008). In response to hard times, Neechi's worker members agreed to a 25% pay cut. Neechi also came to rely on the unpaid labour of volunteers: three or four members who back up the ten employees. As founder and current treasurer Russ Rothney stated, "We would not have survived without the backup of volunteers". The corporate chain retail competitors could not count on this kind of dedication.

Neechi's troubles continued into the 1990's. It had built a profitable business supplying northern communities with bulk packaged

goods via winter roads. Warmer winters shortened the winter road season and cut into its revenues. Also, the wild blueberry harvest, an important specialty product for Neechi, declined in the late 1990's. A second store established in 1997 to sell specialty items in a more affluent section of Winnipeg was not a success; it closed the following year (Tupone 2000). Institutional sales were hurt when a key staff member responsible for that end of the business took another job. Since 2000, however, the picture has brightened. Recent years have been profitable. Revenues in 2007 approached \$600,000 and Neechi has been able to pay down its debts and raise its wages to 20% above the minimum wage (Wattunee et al 2008).

Neechi has now taken a bold step in the direction of expansion. In August, 2009, it purchased 49,400 square feet of property on Main Street with the intention of developing "Neechi Commons", a community business complex adjacent to the North Point Douglas and Lord Selkirk Park Neighbourhoods, and is currently considering a number of business ideas for the complex. Neechi is planning to raise new capital for the expansion which has received promises of matching federal and provincial infrastructure funding. Similar to Saskatoon's Station 20 West, the goal is to advance community development in a largely neglected corner of the inner city.

The success that Neechi has enjoyed has been largely based on niche markets and specialty products that are resistant to competition from the major retail chains. Wild rice, wild blueberries, bannock and fresh lake fish are some of these products. As Rothney explains, "We have to succeed in niche markets—things which large corporations cannot control". Specialty and value added items are profitable for Neechi, but they threaten to shift the co-op away from its mandate to provide basic food commodities at economy prices for

low income residents. Rothney argues that the co-op has to strike a balance between foods that are profitable and appealing to some as opposed to those—potatoes, apples and white flour, for example—that are more familiar and cheaper. At the same time, it should work to fulfill its food security mandate to educate consumers about nutrition and healthy food choices. He believes that updated and expanded premises would enable Neechi to do a better job of educating its customers about food and health.

An equally important point is that in order to supply to stay in business, Neechi has had to create its own supply chains as an alternative to the conventional marketplace. This has meant partnerships: the co-op has forged ties with other national, regional and local cooperatives, either as suppliers or purchasers (Champagne 2008). Federated Cooperatives is the Western Canadian wholesale supplier that accounts for two thirds of the merchandise Neechi sells. This relationship took some time to develop. At first, Federated was hesitant to deal with Neechi because it was a worker co-op rather than a consumer co-op like most of its retail customers. Kagiwiosa Manomin Worker Cooperative and Wabigoon First Nation Development Corporation in Northwestern Ontario became regular suppliers of wild rice and wild blueberries, respectively. Northern Star is a sister Aboriginal worker cooperative that makes star blankets and hand bags. Tall Grass Prairie, a social enterprise bakery; Organic Planet, a worker co-op grocery, and Mondragon, a co-op coffee shop and eatery, are three Winnipeg retail outlets that purchase supplies through Neechi.

Neechi has also developed partnerships with socially motivated organizations to help it gain access to two resources it lacks yet is absolutely dependent upon: funding and business expertise. Assiniboine Credit Union provided the initial mortgage and has continued as its

major financial partner. The Jubilee Fund, an interfaith community loan fund, has also assisted by facilitating the conversion of a \$40,000 private loan to equity in 2006 (Wattunee et al 2008). Local Investment Towards Employment (LITE), which funds CED initiatives, has also been a major supporter. Among other projects, it purchases \$35,000 worth of groceries annually from Neechi for its alternative Christmas hamper program (LITE, 2009). This helps Neechi through the difficult Christmas period when charitable food donations such as hampers cut down on grocery sales.

Inadequate staff training and business skills have also been significant obstacles to Neechi's expansion. Louise Champagne, a founder and board member, states that lack of or-

ganization skills among worker-members is a barrier that must be overcome. In order to remedy this problem, Neechi and its sister co-op, Northern Star, have entered into an innovative partnership to create the Collaborative Cooperative, a not for profit entity that acts as the management support arm of Neechi and Northern Star; in turn, the latter two co-ops are responsible for the Collaborative Cooperative's governance structure. Neechi is also working with the Collaborative Cooperative on establishing methods of organizational training for its worker-members. Access to financing and business expertise are challenges that will have to be met if Neechi is to expand to carry out its twin mandate of Aboriginal economic development and community food security.

Discussion

The reorganization and devolution of Canada's social safety net has offered new opportunities and challenges for community organizations as actors in the arena of social policy. They can expand their role as service providers, make claims for additional resources and advocate on behalf of their clients. On the negative side, they face almost insatiable demands on their labour, resources and funding, and chronic uncertainties about the viability of their programs. Nowhere is this more evident than in the field of food security where a policy vacuum on the part of government has opened up a niche for CED initiatives. Neechi Foods in Winnipeg and CHEP Good Food in Saskatoon are two CED enterprises that have tried to implement both economic development and food security goals. The question is: what organizational strategies have they implemented in order to meet those goals? Furthermore, how do we assess their success or failure as community organizations? And what can we learn from analyzing their histories?

CHEP and Neechi exemplify a commitment to what Shragge (1997:13) has termed a "progressive" version of CED. This means that they have outlined well articulated principles of social and economic development that stress empowerment for the depressed inner city communities they serve. They have striven to fulfill their communities' needs for food security through cooperative enterprises emphasizing training and skills rather than short term job creation. In a related fashion their strategies reflect Loxley's notion of a "convergence" (Loxley 2007: 14-15) approach to local economic development. Their food distribution outlets feature locally produced and processed food, and create employment for community residents. At least some of the money spent in the community stays in the community, while local residents gain access to nu-

tritious food at affordable prices and learn about nutrition and health.

This does not happen automatically. In order to survive and fulfill their mandates, CHEP and Neechi, limited in capacity and resources, have had to create partnerships outside the formal market system. They have partnered with cooperative, public and some private sector organizations to obtain the food supplies, funding and expertise they needed. In so doing they have forged networks of partners and suppliers and coordinated a variety of economic activities in support of their projects of community empowerment. The most important networks bring together food production, distribution and retailing but they have also had to develop networks for funding and finance; for research and management expertise; and for services to clients. It is by developing these networks that the two CED enterprises gained the necessary resources to survive in a challenging environment.

CHEP's food distribution and retailing network has been central to its ability to grow its activities. It started as a promoter of school meal programs, partnering with schools, parents' groups, as well as city and provincial government agencies. It serviced these programs by developing a bulk buying capacity for fresh food; this led to upstream economic linkages with local farmers plus local wholesalers who are the major suppliers. The bulk buying capacity enabled CHEP to grow as a retail food provisioner, targeting the underserved inner city population. The Good Food Box program was an outcome of this development. Quint Development Corporation partnered with CHEP in these ventures. CHEP also supplies food to stores in seniors' housing and First Nations' communities. The Good Food Junction consumer cooperative, when it comes into operation, will involve

CHEP in another important partnership, this time with a retail food store. CHEP has managed to put together an alternative food distribution network in Saskatoon, with local producers and wholesalers, bulk buying and transportation, and various retail programs such as school meals and buying clubs. It has also drawn other community organizations into its network.

CHEP has been successful in developing funding partnerships with major public and voluntary sector bureaucracies. It receives core funding from the Province of Saskatchewan through the Department of Community Resources, the City of Saskatoon and the United Way. These funding partnerships have enabled CHEP to carry out its mandate of food security for its clients. On the other hand, they raise the concern of potential dependence on government, and on public policies and priorities. This concern was exemplified by the new provincial government's abrupt cancellation of the \$8.1 million promised for the Station 20 West project. The cancellation has forced CHEP to turn more aggressively to private fundraising activities. For client services, notably for running collective kitchens, CHEP has positioned itself as a health provider and partnered with the local Public Health Service and the Community Clinic—Westside. Finally, CHEP also takes part in research at the University of Saskatchewan, where it contributes to studies in such relevant areas as poverty, community nutrition and food access, and then draws on the results for policy-making.

CHEP coordinates these activities through its Executive Director and staff (there are 12 employees) that are responsible for liaison with the various community partners. It also relies on its Board of Directors for coordination by bringing in partner representatives as board members. Thus, to some degree, CHEP negotiates its networks and divisions of labour in-

ternally by incorporating diverse partners into its management structure. This has clear advantages but also dangers. The danger is that by including varied and often powerful interests on its management board—representatives from the university, school boards, foundations, etc.—CHEP risks blunting its critical focus as a progressive CED organization that acts and advocates on behalf of a food insecure inner city population. There is a concurrent risk that funding agencies, public and voluntary, will have too much influence over policy directions.

Neechi's partnership profile has taken it in a somewhat different direction. As a worker co-op operating at the retail level, it is almost wholly dependent on external suppliers to get the products it needs. Federated Co-ops is its number one supplier of grocery and non food items, and this has become a stable partnership. Neechi's survival, however, has stemmed from its ability to feature specialized products not generally available elsewhere. For products such as wild rice, blueberries, fresh fish and crafts, it has secured upstream economic linkages with a number of Aboriginal producer cooperatives in Manitoba and Northern Ontario. These partners provide the products that can draw customers into the store. Neechi has also become a supplier to a variety of community organizations and retail cooperatives in the Winnipeg area. It is enmeshed in a network of local suppliers and purchasers that helps keep it profitable.

Financing has always been a critical issue for Neechi. At the outset, the commercial banks considered it too risky, but Neechi has been able to create community partnerships to gain access to the capital it needs. The Assiniboine Credit Union, a cooperative, has been its leading banking partner. More recently, it has sought and received support from the Jubilee Fund, another socially motivated lender. Neechi's planned expansion will require fi-

nancing from the growing pool of socially motivated capital available in Canada, which is an alternative to the commercial banking system. It may also seek capital grants from government, just as it did for its startup. Inadequate business expertise is also a concern. The innovative partnership with the Collaborative Cooperative to furnish management services and training helps to mitigate this concern. The coalescence of a cooperative network, which can provide financing and business services, is a definite positive. It does not, however, erase the fact that Neechi, like many community organizations, has been challenged by lack of access to capital and inadequate business experience on the part of its worker members.

Neechi's board is composed of its worker members, and so it cannot invite its partner representatives into its governance the way CHEP has. Instead, it has coordinated its economic arrangements more loosely through agreements with its partners. This can sometimes be a problem; for example, Neechi is concerned about product quality and other

management issues at one of its wild blueberry suppliers. On the other hand, by controlling its own governing board, it guards its autonomy, as well as its Aboriginal and inner city mandate, from external pressures.

There is an additional scarce resource that is vital to CED organizations: volunteers and the ability to attract them. In fact, volunteers make up a reserve army of labour for many community organizations that could not survive without them. Rothney has pointed out that many small businesses also rely on the unpaid or underpaid labour of owners and their family members. Volunteers are a big part of the reason Neechi survived difficult times in the 1990s; they are also a big part of the reason CHEP was able to develop its good food box program. Even successful CED organizations require infusions of volunteer labour. Though necessary, access to this resource cannot be fully guaranteed, while over-reliance on it may be a source of concern. This is particularly the case for social enterprises committed to providing on the job training and paid employment for inner city residents.

Conclusions

Community organizations face daunting challenges as they take on the responsibility for the food security of their clients in an era of a shrinking safety net, high rates of poverty, and dependence on food banks. These problems have been concentrated in the inner cores of many Western Canadian metropolitan areas. Both CHEP Good Food and Neechi Foods have had to construct their own supply and marketing chains, starting literally from scratch. They have forged partnerships and put together networks of cooperative, public and some private sector organizations. They have created alternatives to the dominant market system to supply their clients with fresh, nutritious food at reasonable prices. This has been based on a convergence approach to economic development featuring local producers and processors and local retail operations creating jobs for local residents. Not only have they had to create alternative supply networks for food, but they have also had to build equivalent networks for funding and financing, for research and management expertise, and for client services. They have succeeded and have made us aware that alternative, community based forms of economic organization are in fact possible.

This is a major achievement in the face of great obstacles. CHEP and Neechi Foods have taken an important first step towards the goal of what Mark Winne (2008:93) calls “restoring” the urban food deserts of inner city Saskatoon and Winnipeg. They have survived as progressive CED organizations dedicated to community empowerment, despite great difficulties and despite the fact that many similar efforts at cooperative food provisioning elsewhere have failed. As a result of their success, low income and potentially food insecure inner city residents of Saskatoon and Winnipeg have

better access to reasonably priced nutritious food than was formerly the case. They have created jobs and enhanced community pride, while local producers have gained retail outlets for their output. They have not overcome all challenges. CHEP Good Food remains highly dependent on public sector funding and the vagaries of government policy decisions, as the recent cancellation of provincial funding for the Station 20 West project has demonstrated. For Neechi Foods the problems are different. Its difficulties relate to its need for capital and, most importantly, the need to recruit and train worker members of sufficient skill and reliability to keep the organization functioning.

Successful CED organizations can only go so far in closing the food gap, however. They cannot guarantee a resolution of food security concerns in the communities in which they operate. To what extent are citizens of Saskatoon better off because CHEP Good Food has evolved as a cooperative food distributor and marketer? Similarly, how much has the survival of Neechi Foods as a worker cooperative been beneficial to Winnipeg’s large inner city Aboriginal population? It is tempting to say that CED initiatives improve food security outcomes but a lot more research will have to be carried out to ascertain whether this is in fact the case. These programs have emerged at a time when the safety net has been stretched and the economic and social conditions of many of the working poor remain precarious. To the extent that poverty and food insecurity are interrelated, such initiatives would most likely work best with concurrent efforts to improve employment and job training opportunities, raise minimum wages and strengthen the safety net.

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