

Shifting practices and shifting discourses: policy and small-scale agriculture in sustainable food systems past and present

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Abstract:

Small-scale, mixed farms — once the modus operandi of Canadian agriculture in the pre-WWII and early post-WWII era — have been marginalized within modern agriculture. Their marginalization is largely a consequence of their failure to specialize and modernize at the rate of industrial agriculture. In today's agricultural discourse and policy circles they are perceived as the quintessentially failed farms of yesteryear — and some agricultural policy analysts have come to refer to these operations as 'hobby or pension' farms. But in light of the 2008 global food crisis and the call for more sustainable production practices (as a result of the damage to our ecosystems from mono-crop agriculture, its overproduction and pushing of natural ecosystems, and high reliance on herbicides and pesticides), 'small' mixed operations are more compatible with the local food movements' visions of a future food system. Using multiple methods, this paper presents a case study of the relationship between policy development and agricultural practices in New Brunswick, Canada — where rural life remains an integral part of the political and social landscape. By documenting how the meanings and discourses surrounding farm practices shift in tandem with farm practices, it argues agricultural policy development is a key driver in the structural transformation of agriculture. At the local level the case study documents the persistence of small farms and their exclusion from policy debates, while arguing their ongoing existence may provide the space for the development of alternative, more sustainable agricultural practices in the future.

1. Introduction

There is an international struggle going on over farm practices and the desirable shape of the food system. On the one hand, organizations like *La Via Campesina* and *Community Supported Agriculture* are promoting small-scale food production geared to local needs and markets; on the other, corporate agriculture continues to endorse large-scale industrial farming for export markets as the most efficient means of feeding the world. These competing visions of the ideal way to produce and distribute food — and the subsequent practices that they implicitly and explicitly endorse — are not new. Historical accounts of agriculture and food production are filled with tales of multiple farming methods and 'best' practices both within and across communities and commodity sectors. What is new in the debates over how to 'best' grow and produce food is the burgeoning local food movement.

The local food movement is seeking to transform the current food system. By promoting local sourcing and self-provisioning when and where possible, the local food movement is challenging the agri-'business' *status quo*. Rather than abstractedly purchasing the steady supply of imported foodstuffs on their supermarket shelves, 'locavores' want to know who produced their food and under what conditions. By supporting local food production, they are helping to build — and in many cases re-build — small-scale, local farming operations. In our kitchens and on our plates, what is emerging is a challenge between local and global, between small-scale and big-scale, between known and unknown food value chains.

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Figure One:
Food practices are embedded in larger policy processes



The challenge is not an individualistic one to be borne out in our shopping carts or inside the privacy of our homes. As Figure 1 illustrates, the current debate over food production, and what lands on our dinner plate, is embedded in much larger socio-economic, political contexts. Agricultural policy is situated within rural policy frameworks and both are connected to social and economic policy developments. Consequently there are a lot more players involved than the individual farmer and food consumer. Food is very much a part of the larger public domain.

In industrialized countries like Canada, the government

has long been a major player in every facet of food. This paper explores how the national (Canadian) and provincial (New Brunswick) Departments of Agriculture have envisioned food production over the last several decades and the concurrent practices — documented by Statistics Canada, in government reports and face-to-face interviews² — of the farm community. Its premise is that state agricultural policy directives will work in tandem with farmer’s practices: as policy changes, farm practice will change; as farm practices change, policies will change. Each will feed off the other but exactly how effectively each transforms the other is difficult to discern as they are occurring simultaneously; it is regrettably beyond the scope of this research to pinpoint the exact causal relationships between specific policies and subsequent practices.

This paper follows Lightman’s (2003) approach in that it sees policy as more than a particular program delivered by a specific government department or agency. Government policy is developed in order to influence the behavior and direction of society, and its creation involves a set of values, programs and practices meant to “improve” and facilitate a vision of the “collective good” (2003: 37-38). Thus, at least theoretically, agricultural policy development seeks to enhance the work and lives of the farm population while ensuring a safe and steady food supply. Embedded within agricultural policy documents and programs will be a vision of how to achieve the articulated goals; annual reports and reviews will indicate how effective policy developments have been. A recent New Brunswick Department of Agriculture report captures this notion of policy as agenda setting: “The intent of the [NB Agricultural] Summit is to look at the challenges and opportunities of the industry and to develop a long term vision for the agriculture industry in New Brunswick” (2008: 2).

² My research — from which this paper emerges — utilizes a participatory action research model. For example, I routinely attend national and provincial National Farmer’s Union meetings and events, I am an active member of the NB Food Security Action Network, and in 2008-09 I participated in the NB Agriculture Task Force that produced the *New Brunswick Agriculture Strategy: Transforming Agriculture Together* (New Brunswick 2010). In this paper I also draw on semi-structured interviews I conducted in the mid-1990s with 33 farm women on dairy and potato farms in the province. Part of those interviews explored the challenges facing farm families and their vision of farming’s future.

As Lightman also notes, the development of a policy implies choices, and each time a choice is made to follow one direction, another is abandoned. He writes: “Each alternative — including the one that was chosen — carries with it consequences and costs. Different value systems lead to different weightings of benefits and costs” (Lightman 2003: 42). Likewise Hudson *et al.* (2008: 11) observe that policies advantage some, while disadvantaging others; it is not easy to reconcile competing interests within a given policy framework. This paper presents the visions of how New Brunswick food production ought to evolve according to national and provincial agricultural policy documents (and hence the government’s policy makers’ decisions about what path future agricultural directions should take); and the farm landscape that evolved as a consequence of the particular farming practices undertaken. In light of the local food movement it is particularly interested in the role of smaller farmers and their place within the rural landscape and policy documents.

In Canada, agriculture is a joint federal-provincial responsibility and policy development is a shared portfolio (Skogstad 2008). As a consequence each province will have a unique agricultural development trajectory even though provincial agriculture and rural policy developments are occurring in tandem with national, and international policy agendas. The paper focuses on the province of New Brunswick, Canada to investigate the relationship between local agricultural policy development and farm production practices in order to determine the extent to which policy and practice co-evolve; and to ascertain how effective policy development can be for achieving a paradigm shift within the Canadian food system. After Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick has the largest percentage of rural population with close to fifty per cent of the population continuing to live in rural communities (Statistics Canada 2012). Even though less than 2 per cent of the rural population farms, the province remains highly dependent on resource based industries — farming, fishing, forestry, and mining — for economic development.

Before proceeding, it is worth noting that in his work on rurality, Jones (1995: 38) noted there are always multiple discourses (and practices) overlapping and competing for legitimacy in any specific time or place. He argued in the rural context there are four discourses: the popular discourse present within mass media; academic discourses of researchers studying rural phenomena; the lay person or practitioner’s discourse of their actions within rural contexts; and the professional discourses of rural policy makers, agricultural scientists and others whose careers are directly and indirectly tied to rural places. This paper is concerned with the last two categories. Specifically how much has the farm community come to reflect — and thus at least in practice endorse — the discourse prevalent within the policy planning documents? If Jones is correct and discourse is much more than the words, symbols and texts we use to communicate with others, but also ‘the practices through which we make our world(s) meaningful to ourselves and others’ (Jones 1995: 36), then there is likely to be a strong link between what is promoted in policy directives and what emerges on the ground within farm communities. But how congruent are the discourses and spheres of practice with the local food sustainability agenda?

The paper is divided into three substantive sections. The first highlights what has been occurring at the national level in terms of agricultural policy development and the structural transformation of Canadian agriculture. The second presents the more localized provincial level case study findings. Here the aggregate story is supplemented with interview data and participant observations from fieldwork. The third section discusses the implications of ongoing practices and the national and provincial policy directions for the local food system.

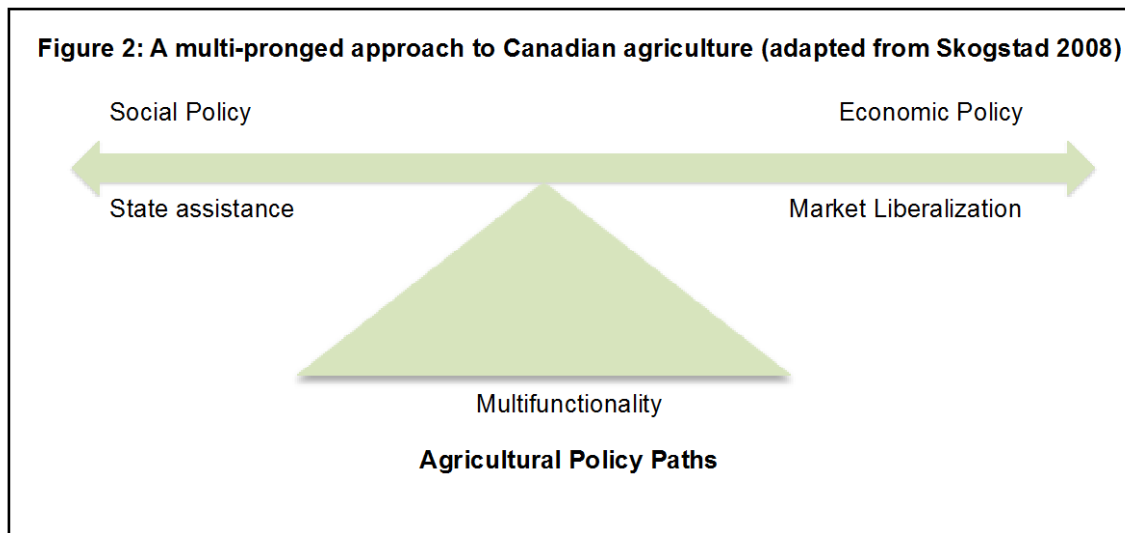
2. Evidence of shifting agricultural discourses and practices

There has been a long and sustained discussion of change within the rural farm community. For decades farming operations have been weathering one crisis after another; as farmers work to maintain and ‘grow’ their operations, policy makers document the changing agricultural scene and debate and decide what direction future initiatives should take. This section first outlines the agricultural policy framework unfolding in Canada; and then it documents the structural transformation that has occurred in Canadian agriculture.

2.1 Agricultural policy development in Canada

In his research on rural transformation, Bollman (2007) contends for much of the last century prices, technology, and demographics were the three 'fundamental drivers' of the social-economic reality facing rural Canada. In contrast, Mattison and Norris (2005) argue that it is the convergence of markets, policy, technology and environment which establish how rural land will be developed. Obviously multiple processes are unfolding; and agricultural policy development is bound to be as much a driver of shifting farm practices as prices, technology and demographics. After all, none of these identified 'drivers' can actually act in and of themselves. It is people who are making decisions about what to do and what not to do. It is people who are acting within the parameters of their localities and markets and making choices based on current prices, available technologies, and changing population demographics within their communities. Demographics change precisely because people decide to move from one locale to another; markets and prices change when people switch the menu on their plates, which in turn affects market supply and subsequent demand. Policy, which aims to change behavior, is thus worthy of investigation.

Skogstad's (2008) detailed review of Canadian agricultural policy over the past four decades concludes that national agricultural policy has followed three distinct paths. At times it has taken a *state assistance* approach, developing programs to improve farm incomes and overall economic wellbeing of family farm households. At other times it has adopted a trade liberalization model seeking to make Canadian agriculture conform to the changing neo-liberal global marketplace goals. And still again it has sometimes promoted the multifunctionality of agriculture to invest in particular programs and income stability schemes. Figure 2 captures the multi-pronged approach used within agricultural policy development circles:



On the one hand agricultural policy embodies a social policy agenda — to improve social wellbeing of farm households, and on the other it represents competitive, free market economic policy objectives of the Canadian state (Bryan 1982). As a recent Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) document testifies reconciling better farm incomes and global markets remains a government priority:

- Canadian farms differ by size, scale, farm type and typology, while farm operators differ in their management skills and business strategies. Differences in performance between farms can be explained by this diversity. Some farm families rely more on off-farm income to help them manage uncertainty due to production and marketing risk, and others diversify production.
- Increased volatility in commodity markets and exchange rates has added an element of heightened uncertainty associated with marketing agriculture and agri-food products in Canada and around the world. This is particularly the case since the agriculture and agri-food sector has become increasingly internationally focussed over the past 15 years. Canada's share of world agriculture and agri-food trade has increased in response to trade liberalization and global economic growth (Kittson 2011: 14, 13).

Skogstad (2008) argues the need to balance the competing interests of multiple stakeholders, and at the same time to respond to changing international markets has led to a paradigm shift within AAFC. Over recent years there has been an agenda to make Canadian farming practices more compatible with international trade regulations. As part of this agenda, AAFC has substantially expanded its regulatory governance work in order to ensure food health and safety standards are of the highest ilk. According to Skogstad (2008: 241), to the extent to which agriculture is being internationalized via free trade agreements and market liberalization, domestic agriculture is being destabilized and is experiencing fundamental reforms.

My own cursory review of Canadian agricultural policy over the past sixty years reveals a keen interest in making agriculture operations, ‘businesses’ like any other. Of course many have argued that agriculture is a special case and needs to be treated differently (Madeley 2002, Rosset 2006). Yet that hasn’t stopped successive governments from believing that farmers’ incomes should be derived solely from farm revenues, despite the ongoing evidence to the contrary (Bessant 2006, Killson 2011). State assistance programs take many forms — from crop insurance programs and farm credit to scientific research stations advising how to improve crop yield. By dictating the kinds of programs to be developed and offered, agricultural policies guide farm management and decision-making processes. They implicitly at least endorse some production techniques and strategies over others. The extent to which policy is adopted or not in turn impacts the aggregate story of Canadian agriculture.

2.2 The structural transformation of Canadian agriculture

Throughout the 1970s and 80s rural sociologists and agricultural economists documented the structural transformation of Canadian agriculture. They captured how farm size and production capacity expanded in the post-WWII era; how farm numbers contracted; how farm capitalization, mechanization and technological innovation were transforming agriculture and the rural landscape for the better. Thanks to agricultural science, farm specialization, chemical fertilizers and other inputs, production rates per unit soared. This same story has prevailed census after census, and the most recent reporting period was no different:

The number of census farms in Canada continues to drop, according to data from the 2006 Census of Agriculture, declining 7.1% to 229,373 farms over the five-year period between the censuses. The number of larger farms, with gross farm receipts of \$250,000 or more (at 2005 constant prices), have increased 13.8% since 2001 while those with less than \$250,000 in receipts declined by 10.5%. As farm numbers drop, the average size of a Canadian farm has increased from 676 acres to 728 acres (Statistics Canada 2008: 1).

Table 1 further illustrates the steady decline in farm numbers while average farm size has continued to expand:

| | 1956 | 1966 | 1976 | 1986 | 1996 | 2006 |
|--|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Total number of farms | 574,993 | 430,503 | 338,552 | 293,089 | 276,548 | 229,373 |
| Average area in acres per farm reporting | 302 | 404 | 499 | 572 | 608 | 728 |

(Statistics Canada, 2007 Catalogue 95-632-XWE)

These aggregate changes in farm size and corresponding expansions in farm revenue classes have been accompanied by shifts in agricultural policy directions.

As the two occur in tandem, it is critical to recognize these structural (i.e. system level) changes are a consequence of changing farm practices [or as Gouttenoire *et al.* (2010) would argue ‘systemic’ changes]. Statistical data reflect people’s practices: if practices do not change neither does the system. While some researchers focused on the aggregate data trends, others investigated the day-to-day decision-making and *modus operandi* of family farm households (Bessant 2006, Canada 1995, Ghorayshi 1986, Goddard *et al.* 1993; Ehrensaft and Bollman 1986; Friedmann 1980, McLaughlin 1990, Shaver 1990, Statistics Canada 1995 and 1997, Trant 1986). This research sought to understand how family farm households juggled family and farm life, how

they were coping with economically challenging circumstances and their ongoing motivation for farming. What emerged from this research agenda was a rich analysis of life and work on the farm. As Sinclair (1984) noted, the purpose of this work was to ‘people the statistics’ — to recognize that the statistics were representative of real live actors engaged in social processes.

What these researchers discovered was that despite the aggregate shifts, farming systems and the rural landscape it was embedded in were as diverse as ever. They captured the range of production strategies embedded in industrial agriculture. Via their development of farm typologies this literature captured the presence of more than one kind of family farm in Canada. From their work it was clear small and large farms, part-time and full-time farmers, petit-bourgeois and capitalist forms of production, family farms and family corporations were present in Canadian (and New Brunswick) agriculture. At the same time they provided a valuable ‘snapshot’ of what farm families were — and are — doing, and the trajectories their operating practices were taking them on (Machum 2011). After all, farm families are not operating in a vacuum. They are responding to external factors as well as taking pro-active steps to guide their farms in particular directions. While all farms may be engaged in food production, *how* they go about producing the same commodity differs from farm to farm (Machum 1998). For example not all potato farms are the same size, have the same kind of labour arrangements, have adopted the same technologies or agricultural inputs. Some farms are using organic practices while others are not. Some farms are specialized while others are not. Some farms are completely dependent on family labour while others have hired help, and so on. On a practical level, farm typologies represent more than day-to-day farming practices. They also capture the farm household’s ideological framework toward farming systems, especially if they document the farm operators’ motivations for farming and visions of sound agricultural practices, past and present (Machum 2011). To truly grasp the policy dynamics of local practices requires a case study approach.

3. The New Brunswick case-study

The food scene in New Brunswick has changed dramatically over recent decades. For example, the Conservation Council of New Brunswick estimates that in 1970s the province was able to supply approximately 75 percent of the food consumed here; but now we are self-sufficient in only five food crops — potatoes (New Brunswick is home to McCain Foods International), blueberries, cranberries, eggs and milk. And while we produce eggs in the province they are shipped out of province to be graded in federally inspected facilities and then re-transported into the province for sale. Shifting consumption patterns and changes in crop production mean 95 per cent of our food dollars are currently being spent on food imports rather than local farm products (Cormier 2012). Given that food crops account for less than 2.1% of the province’s total land area (New Brunswick 2008: 6) and the population size is 751,171 (Statistics Canada 2012), the province does have the potential to meet a significant amount of its food needs.

At present New Brunswick is deeply embedded in the global food system. But it wasn’t always this way. Up until the Second World War, farming was an integral part of rural New Brunswick. In the mid-1950’s family owned and operated farms provided employment to 29.1 per cent of the province’s total population but by 1971 — essentially one generation later — only 4.3 per cent of the population continued to farm (Statistics Canada 1997). The rapid losses in farm population and census farms, prompted the New Brunswick government of the time to commission A. C. Parks to conduct a three year ‘Agricultural Resources Study’. The mandate of the ARS study was:

...to initiate a major study of all aspects of the management and utilization of the Province’s agricultural resources. The overall objective of the Study is to find ways to promote the fullest use of agricultural resources in such a way as to maximize farm income, to strengthen the vitality of the family farm, to encourage new job creation in food processing industries and to increase food production (New Brunswick 1977: 3).

The three years study documented the state’s interest in sustaining family farms while promoting the growth of the food processing industry — an industry which was and is dependent on ever increasing amounts of raw material at ever lower prices for its own sustained growth and profits. Therefore, in order to meet the processors needs, the state encouraged farms to expand, mechanize, and modernize into ‘cost-effective commercial operations’.

This agenda had already been stated a decade earlier when the New Brunswick Department of Agriculture was renamed the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. At that time they wrote their mandate was “to encourage the establishment of economic farm units and efficient food production” while increasing “income and employment opportunities for rural people” (New Brunswick 1967: 10). These goals were to be achieved by “enlarging and consolidating farm units” while at the same time increasing the number of employment opportunities in rural communities (New Brunswick 1967: 35).

| | 1956 | 1966 | 1971 | 1976 | 1986 | 1996 | 2006 |
|--|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Number of farms | 22,116 | 8,706 | 5,485 | 4,551 | 3,554 | 3,405 | 2,776 |
| Average area in acres per farm reporting | 135 | 208 | 244 | 253 | 284 | 280 | 352 |
| Total Number of Potato Farms | 14,953 | 5,471 | 1,212 | 997 | 547 | 439 | 341 |
| Acres in potatoes | 46,190 | 64,901 | 59,421 | 55,521 | 48,466 | 54,064 | 59,870 |
| Average area in acres per farm reporting | 3 | 12 | 49 | 56 | 89 | 123 | 176 |

(Statistics Canada, 2007 Catalogue 95-632-XWE)

While many factors are responsible for system change, an examination of the data presented in Table 2 reveals that the policy outcomes envisioned in the late 1960s for ‘bigger’, more productive farms was coming to fruition: between 1966 and 1971, on potato farms the average potato acreage grew fourfold; and throughout this period farm numbers shrank dramatically. As a result the industry was for the most part able to sustain acreage with a fraction of the number of farms. For example in 1961 and 1996, potato acreage was virtually identical — 54,165 acres versus 54,064 acres — but 1996 farm numbers declined to a mere 5.3% of the 1961 number (Statistics Canada 2007). For the food processing industry it meant being able to attain similar amounts of raw material from a lot fewer sellers.

Over the years, the state’s declared goal has been for family farms to provide an “urban” standard of living and a prosperous business climate for the few farms which would remain (New Brunswick, 1974, 1977, 1988, 2010). To be prosperous, farms had to provide a “reasonable return on investment”; this was to be accomplished by turning hitherto farm livelihood strategies into profit-oriented farm business ventures (New Brunswick, 1974, 1977, 1987, 1988). This vision of farming is clearly advanced in such statements as this one from the Department of Agriculture’s Planning and Development Branch:

It is urgently necessary to provide an economic climate in which farmers can expand their operations and, in which producers can develop the skills and command of resources to join the cadre of large scale and efficient producers. The thrust of the policies of the Department of Agriculture, particularly in meeting market needs must be with aiding the commercial farmer and the efficient producer, and in adding to the numbers of such operators.

The future of agriculture must be oriented towards rationally managed, profit-oriented businesses. Farm mergers and consolidation of holdings result in larger farm-units not only for increased production efficiency, but also to structure units that are large enough to afford better management. As the size of units increase, the financial requirements increase in complexity, and the ease of entry into commercial farming is cut drastically. Furthermore, as agriculture is encouraged to rationalize its management processes and organizational structure, a more clear separation of welfare and commercial farm policy and programs will emerge (New Brunswick, 1974: 9).

In the eyes of government agricultural policy, only the “business-oriented” farms could ever hope to be economically viable. In fact, in internal documents the government went so far as to say maintaining the small, commercial family farm is “in direct conflict with the goals of the agricultural sector” as they do not fill a large percentage of the agri-food systems needs (New Brunswick, 1974: 14). Yet it is very clear such farms have not completely disappeared from New Brunswick agriculture.

Table 3 illustrates that in New Brunswick very small farms — those with less than the equivalent of \$2500 in gross farm sales — remained a significant part of the rural farm landscape for the duration of the policy reform period described herein at the provincial level and by Skogstad (2008) at the national level.

| Table 3: Evidence of the persistence of small farms in New Brunswick | | | | |
|--|----------------|--|--|--|
| | # census farms | # farms with total gross receipts over \$2500* | Farms with receipts under \$2500 or 'very small' census farms ³ | 'Very small' farms as % of total farms |
| 1981 | 4,063 | 3,112 | 951 | 23.4 |
| 1986 | 3,553 | 2,993 | 620 | 17.4 |
| 1991 | 3,252 | 2,706 | 546 | 16.8 |
| 1996 | 3,405 | 2,783 | 622 | 18.3 |
| 2001 | 3,034 | 2,563 | 471 | 15.5 |

Constructed from Statistics Canada (2003: Table 15)

*For the purposes of comparison figures are in constant 2001 dollars (and totals are therefore different than those for 'over 2500 in gross receipts' as reported in each respective agricultural census).

The perpetuation of these very small farms even into the 21st century is significant because it signifies that not all farm households were willing to follow the policy agenda (see Machum 2009). They would fit in Cochrane's (1958) treadmill framework as 'laggards', since they neither lead (early adopters) nor follow (average farmers) the tides of change. My analysis is that these farming operations are actively resisting the call for them to 'get big or get out'. They persist in their practices knowing that they are able to feed themselves and their families and participate in the local food market. They are not interested in large-scale commercial agricultural practices that will have them owing copious amounts to the bank. But even amongst commercial farming operations there are multiple approaches and practices, yet two distinct discourses prevail within the farm community.

On one side, some farm women promoted their farm operations as profitable and expanding businesses:

Cute farms can't make a living. You must be a business first. It should be that way all along. We want a fair return for our product. You can still make money farming but you must be big and farming must be your main concern. Our goal is to have more hired people so we can enjoy life more.

This discourse coincides with the government liberalization policy framework: farms are businesses; first and foremost they must be financially stable; the measure of success is the level of capitalization. On the other side, farm women argued their farms are sized and operated to sustain the ecological base and their participation in farming across generations:

It drives me crazy when people say it's farmers' mismanagement that drove them out of business. Farmers have good management skills. It's really the system ... The government is pushing farmers to get big. ... I don't know why they can't see the mistakes they're making. The government just doesn't realize how easily the ecosystem can be screwed up.

This framing is counter to the dominant provincial government discourse that prevails throughout the sixty year period promoting export-oriented industrial farming, but it does favour and endorse the multifunctionality approach to agriculture that has been pursued more at the national level than the provincial one.

³ No figure can be calculated for 2006 because at this point Statistics Canada amalgamated the lowest three receipt classes into an 'Under \$10,000' category. Nevertheless from the perspective of under \$10,000 in farm revenue, the figures for 2001 were 1,186 farms while in 2006 this revenue class accounted for 991 or 35.7 per cent of the provinces 2,776 farms (New Brunswick 2010: 12) — in other words, a significant portion of the province's farms.

Noteworthy is that each group self-identifies and places themselves in sharp contrast to the other. Each understands the other group as failing: one is failing to be a business while the other is failing to think beyond the short-term to maintain the ecological and social basis for a viable farm community. The expanders have faith in the dictum 'get big or get out' as the key to farm survival. In contrast, the sustainers believe the expanders are following a trajectory that will inevitably bring financial and ecological bankruptcy. Each sees their own agenda as deeply meaningful and enduring, and the other as deeply misguided and delusional. Ironically neither group expects the other to be around much longer (Machum 2011).

Each group implicitly supports state assistance programs that strengthen their farming practices. The expansionist group wanted the province to be providing more investment capital and scientific knowledge (so the maintenance of science labs and management programs were seen as positive). The sustainers preferred programs that kept them operating when extra-local factors like markets and weather problems sabotaged their bottom line. In effect, at ground level, farming operations are pushing agricultural policy to go in directions that favour the trajectory they've adopted while at the same time appreciating and supporting income assistance.

It is this push and pull phenomenon within the farm community that produces the multipronged policy agenda evidenced by Skogstad (2008). Even so, the government has repeatedly promoted an expanding business model for agriculture that explicitly sidelines and excludes smaller operations. For example:

In 1981, there were over 4,000 census farms of which 2,200 could be classified as commercial with the remaining farms being part-time or small-scale (New Brunswick Agri-food Development Coordinating Committee, 1983: 9).

For purposes of statistical tabulations, unincorporated farms showing a gross operating revenue of \$10,000 or less are excluded [from economic analysis] (Statistics Canada, 1993: 7).

While they recognize small farms are part of the agricultural scene, they do not represent major financial investments, nor are they the major suppliers to food processing and retailing companies. The declining but still visible presence of small farms makes them hard to ignore at the provincial level. For example, the recommendations of the *Agriculture Strategy* (New Brunswick 2010) embody these opposing policy directions: *Strategy Two* to "develop markets for New Brunswick agricultural products" and *Strategy Five* to "support the primary production of food as a necessity to life"; these goals are not entirely compatible. This tension between 'growing dollars' versus 'growing food' was evident in many of the taskforce meetings I participated in; and is evident in the agricultural policy; and in the farming practices that evolve into the aggregate picture. In short, the provincial agricultural policy and practice mimics the national one outlined by Skogstad (2008).

4. Implications for the future of agricultural policy and farm practice

Ironically as governments encouraged agricultural expansion, increased farm size and more business oriented farming practices, New Brunswickers grew more dependent on food imports to sustain their food supply. Food import and export patterns are not unrelated. Canada has been a major food exporter *and* food importer for decades (Bryan 1982). Ironically it was (and is) growing participation in the global export market that has undermined local food production for local populations. Assessing the exact role policy played in this transformation is difficult, but these shifts in practice have clearly coincided with policy reform. The policy framework developed in the late 1960s definitely changed farm practices in the 1970s; and undoubtedly continues to do so. Overall, the degree of food self-sufficiency in the province has plunged. Rather than promote diverse crop production for domestic markets, government policies encouraged farmers to grow specialized crops for the export market. Specialized mass production of food represented huge efficiencies — as a result per unit prices dropped precipitously (Frigon 2007) — producing a double-edged sword: as efficiencies climb, prices and incomes drop. The 'product price' and 'market price' treadmills (Levins and Cochrane 1996) have translated into big savings for food processors and distributors further along the food supply chain since they wanted volume whereas local customers wanted less volume but more variety. What amounted to winnings for the provincial and national economy, food processors and the trade policy paradigm, represented losses for local farmers and food systems.

What unfolds will largely depend on what stakeholders have the most sway in policy making; as well as what farming practices are supported by local food consumers. If local consumers bolster the small-scale and medium-sized farms through greater farm gate and market sales, community supported agriculture, farm to cafeteria and other local food production and distribution initiatives then the long-standing practices of smaller-scale farm operations will be vindicated. Not by policy perhaps but by local consumers and as these farms have always been operating outside of the policy circle agenda, they will no doubt be willing to continue to do so. Their challenge will be how to negotiate the new and extensive regulatory regime rules that have been put in place by the larger players. Changes to agricultural policy will depend on significant pressure from locavore consumers for expanded local food options.

5. Conclusion

This paper explored the relationship between national and provincial agricultural policy development and the farming practices that co-exist within these policy frameworks. The aggregate picture is one of structural change, but system change only emerges at the rate of farm level change. In New Brunswick — as elsewhere — multiple production strategies have been followed which results in a diversified farm community pursuing diverse agendas. Policy documents and annual reports reveal that at both levels there has been a conscious push towards the market liberalization governance model; but at the same time governments have not completely abandoned the earlier state assistance agenda. Smaller sized farming operations in New Brunswick have recognized the importance of a multifunctionality approach and they are pushing government to do the same.

Policy is shifting and so too are practices. The exact extent to which policy pushes practice and practice pushes policy is not entirely discernable; but they are obviously working in tandem which supports Mattison and Norris's (2005) claim that policy is a driver of rural land use activities. Policy without uptake is ineffective; and practices that persist completely outside of policy frameworks are generally marginalized. Yet it is here on the margins that the greatest potential for social change and a transformation of the existing food system prevails. It is here that alternatives to the status quo do exist. New Brunswick's small and medium-sized farms prevailed in earlier periods, and they have the potential to re-emerge and contribute to building a sustainable food system: in large part, because they've never entirely disappeared in New Brunswick. These farm families are tenacious; they know how to weather the storm; and they have been contributing all along to local food security. They have protected farmland from other developments. They are ready to participate in the local food movement's agenda. It is what they have been promoting all along.

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