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New Farms and Farmers in Ethno-cultural Communities: Aspirations, Barriers and Needs

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Abstract

In Ontario, and across Canada, the loss of existing farmers through attrition and the low rate of entrance into agriculture by young people are changing the human side of the farm system and may soon have discernable impacts on domestic food supply—at least for that portion of total supply that has come historically from small and medium scale enterprises. At the same time as agriculture is experiencing a demographic shift, so too is Canadian society at large. This paper attempts to intersect these two spheres of change. Anecdotal evidence suggests the existence of a growing number of New Canadians from other cultural backgrounds, many with training and experience in agriculture, who would welcome an opportunity to engage in farming. The paper provides a demographic context for ethno-cultural farming possibilities and frames several existing impediments to progress. It then summarizes selected findings from a reconnaissance-level empirical investigation of challenges and prospects for farm incubation in ethno-cultural communities of producers and eaters in the Greater Toronto area with particular attention to the possible role of non-government and public sector agencies in securing the most basic of startup necessities—land.

Keywords: new farmers, ethno-cultural communities, farm succession, farm planning, immigration

1.0 Introduction

Rural Geographers have long been interested in questions that reside at the intersection of economic and social processes – as evidenced by much of the content of this volume. This article seeks to problematize and explore a challenge and opportunity that sits at one such intersection. As a result of the shifting tides of agriculture, food systems and population change, many developed regions such as Southern Ontario in central Canada find themselves, simultaneously, on the horns of a dilemma and the cusp of an opportunity in relation to the farm sector and the food system. The purpose of this article is to sketch out and link several interacting dynamics concerning food production and consumption demands on one hand and growing cultural diversity on the other, and then report on a

reconnaissance-level analysis exploring prospects for capturing and accommodating a new form of diversity in agriculture with respect to both people and products.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Some Colliding Trends

A progressive restructuring in agriculture and the emergence and dominance of a global food system has fundamentally changed the farm landscape (the causes and dynamics of this transition being rehearsed well elsewhere: see for example, Argent, 2002; Magnan, 2012; Pierce, 1994; Troughton, 1992). Notwithstanding the persistence of dedicated small scale producers and the recent potential lifeline provided by the local food phenomenon, the agricultural mainstream in developed regions is now characterized by fewer but larger farms, highly successful in the production of large volumes of commodities for processing, closely linked to the industrial/corporate food system and involving many fewer participants (Ilbery & Bowler, 1998; Smithers & Johnson, 2004, Woods, 2005). In short, the farm is getting bigger while the population of farmers is shrinking – and fast. In 2009, the farm population accounted for only 2.2% of all Canadians – a figure that stands in sharp contrast to data seven decades earlier (Statistics Canada, 2009). In the period from 1931 to 2006 the proportion of Canadians living on the farm declined from 1 in 3 to 1 in 46 (Bollman & Clemenson, 2008) and this experience is mirrored, to varying degrees, in all the regions reflected in this collection of papers.

Compounding the transformative effects of changing farm economics, trade relations and policy reform, the farm sector is also experiencing change and challenge attributable to simple demographics and the passing time. The most recent census of agriculture in Canada (2011) reveals that the average age of farmers in Ontario was 54.5 – with those 55 and above constituting the largest age cohort (Statistics Canada, 2012). This continues a long running trend of population aging in the provincial and national farm sector. Other related research has revealed that a significant and growing number of farmers have no clear plan or prospect for farm succession in place (McRae, 2002). Indeed across many regions, difficult intergeneration transfer issues loom on the horizon (Lobley et al., 2010).

As the average age of the Canadian farmer continues to edge up, attention quickly shifts to the decline of the number of “younger” farmers. In 2006 the number of farm operators under the age of 40 was 53,690, down 58% from 127,315 in 1991 (AAFC, 2011). This decline reflects both the ongoing and well documented high rates of farm business failures across Canada, particularly amongst less well established (i.e. more recent) operations and the cumulative effects of stubbornly high rates of rural to urban migration by young adults who no longer see (or who have been counselled by parents to abandon) a future in farming or rural areas (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Cook et al., 2011; Ramsey & Smit, 2002). The potential shortfall in “replacement farmers” has been recognized in many jurisdictions as a very real challenge and potential risk to domestic food supply and is creating conversation in both public (Burton, 2012; Young, 2011) and academic (Hamilton, 2010) arenas. In Canada this challenge has also triggered some attempts at analysis and engagement within the agricultural policy realm (AAFC, 2010). However, to date, specific policy and program development targeted directly to the needs of

beginning farmers has yet to materialize. Indeed, many new farmers fail to qualify for existing supports based on their (small) scale of operation or commodity choice.

The third piece of the farm (and food) -“puzzle”-, important for present purposes, is that the “face” of Canada’s and Ontario’s citizenry is changing. Canada has relied historically on immigration for much of its population growth and productivity and immigration remains a principal mechanism of population change – but the roster of “sending countries” has grown and changed in proportional impact.

In Ontario, Canada’s most populous province, the ethnic diversity of the immigrant population has greatly expanded over the past few decades with non-European countries gradually matching, and then surpassing Europe as the primary source of newcomers (Statistics Canada, 2009). While settlement assistance and services have long been important for all immigrant groups, the arrival of large numbers of non-English/French speaking immigrants has heightened the importance of these formal and informal services in specific ethno-cultural communities. This situation is noteworthy because the concentration of formal services and ethno-culturally defined community support groups in Ontario’s cities has served to create an impetus for urban-focused immigrant settlement. Conversely, the relative scarcity of such services in rural areas serves as a frequently noted disincentive for newcomer settlements in some cases. Exceptions to this situation do exist however and can be found in such programs as the Province of Manitoba Provincial Nominee program that seeks to attract immigrants to rural communities and assist with support for settlement and transition (Carter et al., 2008). While these programs are increasing in number, their impact on the farm sector is not yet detectable and as such, international in-migration cannot yet be seen as an effective and impactful response to the impending departure of many of the nation’s farm operators.

Regardless of the reasons, the reality at the present time is that the diversity of the national and provincial population is poorly reflected in the farm sector. Indeed, the current farm population is progressively less representative of the population that relies on its products. Findings from the 2006 National Census reveal that in Ontario, immigrants to Canada comprise nearly 30 percent of the general population, but less than 10% of the farm population – with the very large majority of farmer immigrants originating in Western Europe. In the Greater Toronto Area (Figure 1) the figures are much higher – with nearly 40% of the population being born outside of Canada. With this high level of diversity comes significant demand for non-traditional (to Canada) food products – a situation that is at once a gap and an opportunity in the food system.

2.2 New Foods and New Farmers

It is reasonable to assume that, faced with a new and growing market for ethno-cultural foods, some fraction of the existing/established farm population will seek to transition to new commodities. Indeed, there is evidence that some sectors of the Ontario agricultural community - such as Pork, Lamb and Dairy - are beginning to make local connections to some of these ethno-cultural markets. However, it has been suggested by some commentators that current farmers “don’t have a handle on what they [ethno-cultural consumers] want” (Stoneman, 2006:10). In addition

Figure 1: The Greater Toronto Area.



to a lack of knowledge or understanding of market demands, there are also often many financial, structural and cultural factors that affect a farmer's ability to diversify and take risks on new products (Barbieri & Mahoney, 2009; Evans, 2009). For farmers who may be interested in trying new crops, the microclimate and intensive cultivation required for South Asian, African and Latin American vegetables is often too different for easy adoption in spite of the apparent market (Kelleher et al., 2009). A further "drag effect" is created by the heavy capital investments made by many farmers in their current production systems. Such investments place practical constraints on the ability of many producers to shift their focus to other commodities. So, while it is likely that some existing producers operating within Ontario's traditional commodity sectors will seek to adapt their production systems to culturally distinctive food items, the prospect for a large scale conversion seems unlikely anytime soon.

While the summary above is far from a comprehensive treatment of economic and social change in Canada's and Ontario's farm and rural sector, or of the dynamics of population change, it does serve to connect some important elements that underlie both a challenge and opportunity for innovation in the food system: i) in both the producer and consumer communities, many are seeking to re-imagine the farm sector and food system as part of a growing dissatisfaction with the productivist tendencies of the conventional mainstream; ii) an inevitable period of

transition (and potential transformation) in the farm operator population lies in the not very distant future; that current farmers will depart is not in question, what is less clear is who will replace them, iii) new rapidly expanding and badly (food-wise) served ethno-cultural communities are seeking access to more and better food products that deliver not only the cultural/symbolic elements of identity and tradition, but also the same range of attributes now associated with food quality more broadly — including place and community association. This collision of circumstances leads, inevitably, to some reflection on the prospects for an expanded role for so-called New Canadians in the farm sector and the food system – not just as consumers of new and less familiar products, but also as the producers of such food (Roberts, 2007).

In Ontario strong evidence is emerging that there are many immigrants from other cultural backgrounds, with training and experience in agriculture, who are looking for an opportunity to engage in farming, especially to grow culturally appropriate fresh produce; familiar foods, herbs and flowers (Kelleher et al., 2009). With appropriate support, it is possible that new-Canadian farmers could meet some of the food needs of ethno-cultural communities – perhaps at scales and through channels that challenge conventional visions for Ontario farms and the food system. Cooperative farm purchasing was widely used by new immigrants from India in the Fraser Valley in British Columbia in the 1960's and 70's and may prove useful for new farmers today. New farm enterprises might be built upon more direct forms of marketing and sales such as local Community Shared Agriculture (CSA) or box schemes, which can provide a form of income security to the farmer, or community farmers markets that are connected with cultural foci such as faith-based and community centres (Jarosz, 2008; Schnell, 2007). While this kind of farming may take time to become the sole employment for new immigrant families, these enterprises offer the potential for income supplementation and employment for family members who are at “early days” in their participation in Ontario's economy – including in many cases elder family members who seek to contribute to the economic wellbeing of their families but whose prospect for work in the wage economy is limited. In addition, a successful entry into farming may provide wider benefits in terms of confidence and quality of life and the establishment of community linkages, all of which work to hasten the settlement process.

The opportunities noted above are, of course, hypothetical and speculative. Just as long established members of Ontario's rural/farming regions are confronted with numerous challenges and barriers in the development of viable farm enterprises, the same is true for aspiring immigrant farmers. Indeed, the challenges for newcomers, at first blush, seem almost insurmountable given the long existing economic stresses in the farm sector and the decades-old shift toward scale economies and integration with (or into) agri-business. Nevertheless, the questions are worth asking – and beyond the issues noted above, we can add several more. The importance of sustaining domestic/local food production is increasingly recognized as a component of public health promotion, greenhouse gas reductions, and the assurance of food accessibility (both now and in a potential “peak oil” future). The importation of large quantities of international foods, as is the current norm for many ethno-cultural communities, is at apparent odds with these imperatives.

3.0 Community and the Aspiring Farmer: Early Evidence from the Greater Toronto Area

The balance of this article presents selected findings from a recent collaborative research project that sought to offer a glimpse of some of the challenges faced by aspiring farmers from ethno-cultural communities in Ontario, with a focus on several communities in and near the City of Toronto. The broader parent project spanned a wide range of food considerations on both the supply and demand side within several ethno-cultural communities and was designed as a pilot to provide a first glimpse into the prospects for both the production and marketing of so called “international foods”. However, the interest in this article is narrower and concerns that portion of the project that dealt with a supply side picture that is yet to develop – the production of new foods, by new farmers, for the benefit of their own communities. Hence, the central questions focused on the “new farmer” component of the ethno-cultural food equation and the resulting findings are preliminary in nature.

Research questions spanned both personal and situational considerations to shed at least partial light on why many immigrants are not entering (or even envisioning) farming as a career path and to understand better what might be done to support and encourage new comers to pursue a career in agriculture. The approach was to work with one or more exemplar communities as a means to generate some early insights and pilot research approaches that might inform the development of programs and services offered by support agencies in both the government and nonprofit sectors. One member of the latter sector, Farm Start, was both a subject of interest because of its work with communities and also a partner in the research project as a facilitator because of its pre-existing linkages with certain community groups. Indeed, staff representatives from FarmStart became important intermediaries between the researchers and community members – in some cases by identifying and recruiting community participants and in others by calibrating the need for assistance from language interpreters. In those instances where English language skills were perceived to be a limitation, a community member with adequate language proficiency was employed (by the project through FarmStart) to provide translation during the group discussions.

3.1 Research Methods

The research approach was driven by the need to engage members of ethno-cultural communities directly. At the outset, in-depth interviews were conducted with ethnic community leaders and key personnel in organizations working with new immigrants. This helped to frame discussion questions in ways that would resonate with participants, while ensuring best practice in the areas of cultural appropriateness and communication/contact protocol. The “academic” questions noted above served to define information needs and organize the study design, while the framing of specific questions concerning participant goals, perceptions of existing programs, and broader needs was couched in such a way as to yield real time inputs to FarmStart’s ongoing work in support of new-Canadian farmers. Data were collected in spring and summer 2008 via the use of focus group sessions with two constituencies: recognized community leader / food advocates within specific ethno-cultural communities and self-selecting prospective farmers drawn from across various cultural groups but most notably the Southeast Asian community. The key leaders’ focus group sought to explore community members’

broad knowledge of successes and frustrations in finding opportunities for participation in farming, and to inventory known or anticipated barriers to progress. An additional line of discussion sought to understand how (in both practical and culturally acceptable terms) prospective farmers could be identified or targeted in the form of either formal or informal outreach. A final topic for the workshops concerned perceptions of whether (and how) new ethno- cultural crops can be grown viably in Ontario and the challenges/barriers small scale farming faces in Canada.

Participants for two “prospective farmer” focus group sessions were selected from two sources. One group comprised several individuals producing at small scale on a farm property in the City of Brampton operated by FarmStart. The intent of FarmStart’s McVean Farm initiative was to provide an opportunity for experimentation and incubation for community members wishing to consider a wider engagement in farming. A second producers’ focus group drew on registered participants in a “farm explorers” short course – also delivered by FarmStart. In this case the (reasonable) belief was that individuals attending the course were doing so because of at least a tentative interest in farming and an inclination to think about the prospect for such a change. The new farmer focus groups were organized around questions dealing with:

- 1) Training resources - what training do prospective new farmers to Canada need? What resources do currently exist? What is the role and/or value of mentorship and internships?
- 2) Physical Resources – What access to farmland and appropriate machinery? What is the range of tenure options? To what extent do people experience or anticipate opportunity to link with existing farmers?

Drawing on these two distinct groups provided the prospect for insight at both the level of the community and the household. Discussions with the food activist group aided in understanding better the community-level food related challenges around procurement and the importance of defined production practices for specific food products, including important celebration foods. More importantly for present purposes, the sessions provided an opportunity for these key informants to characterize the general level of interest in farming within the community and to reflect on known barriers. An additional line of discussion sought to understand how (in both practical and culturally acceptable terms) prospective farmers could be identified or targeted in the form of either formal or informal outreach. The subsequent round of focus group sessions with prospective/aspiring producers was designed to distill these broad observations down to the level of lived experience and personal assessments of perceived opportunities, barriers and risks (real or perceived) associated with farm start up. The issue of resources (knowledge and material resources) underpinned much of the discussion by design.

3.2 Community-level Perspectives

Within each ethno-cultural community canvassed in the study it was possible to identify leaders and advocates working in the areas of food security, economic and social development and outreach. Several of these representatives also had varying degrees of direct experience with farm and food agencies seeking to match farmer aspiration to farm opportunity and were able to comment on the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of such programs. The sessions were organized around the theme of

informing service providers (FarmStart and similar agencies) on how they could enhance their program delivery effort and how they might better identify and tap farming expertise and aspiration within newcomer communities. While some of these reflections are specific to a suite of current NGO program activities in the GTA, the insights are shared below in a more generalized manner, as they are transferable to other agencies and initiatives.

Issues with Outreach and Connection. Given the perception within many newcomer communities that the agents of government and institutions are external and apart from communities, particularly where there have been past disappointments in the roll out of social programs and community initiatives, it was deemed to be critical to operate through gatekeepers – insiders who are trusted by the communities – rather than arriving with a ready-made project. Indeed, it was strongly argued that the participation of target communities in the design and delivery of farm(er) incubation programs (NGO, Provincial, etc.) strengthened legitimacy, enhanced relevancy and helped to reduce local skepticism about the sincerity of the initiative (and representatives) and prospect for “follow through”.

Part of the rationale for community participation in program design and delivery was found to relate strongly (though sometimes expressed cautiously) to accessibility and to expectation management. In terms of the former, the research team was reminded (sternly) that many immigrant households live in comparative, and in some cases, absolute, poverty. Food and community leaders expressed frustration that not all outreach and education programs, despite good intentions by farm organizations, are accessible to the poor. It was asserted that even so-called “free” events and resources may necessitate travel and the requirement to be absent from the participants’ workplace. Such conditions are problematic for some community members — particularly those at the economic margins. With respect to the latter issue, expectations, farm groups and program facilitators were reminded to exercise restraint and realism in the framing of farm start up programs. While it was deemed to be helpful and appropriate to provide encouragement and to promote a vision of a potential role in agriculture, it was also seen as damaging to foster high expectations that exceed the real capacity of agencies and potential participants and/or the limitations of circumstances. Participants spoke passionately about past (unrelated) instances where it was perceived that outside agencies had launched initiatives and created expectations around projects, but failed to follow through. The result can be cynicism at the community level with an associated drop off in the willingness of potential candidate farmers to seriously contemplate change.

Finally, farm organizations seeking to encourage immigrant farmers were counselled to connect with pre-existing ethno-specific agencies (e.g. The City of Brampton in the case of Sikh farmers) and work through those groups. This was believed to be most important at the point of first arrival by new farm promotion groups where institutional credibility has not yet been established. Indeed, evidence to date across recent FarmStart projects has shown that early participants exhibit a tendency to trust program delivery agents only if they are aligned with a local “honest broker”. Those holding for the importance of community embedded honest brokers emphasized the importance of this strategy at the introductory stage of any farm incubator program but acknowledged that the necessity for this third party participation may abate as community members become more convinced of the viability initiatives and more familiar with institutional participants. Such

observations are consistent with well established theories and empirical findings in Adoption of Innovation scholarship concerning early, mid and late innovator/adopters.

More Appropriate Strategies and Initiatives. Beyond the obvious and daunting challenge of financing land acquisition, participants noted the challenge of simply finding farm land which may be near the point of being available for purchase or partnering. It was offered that, once land has reached the market place, particularly in the GTA, its value was often no longer defined by its agricultural potential – the effect being that aspiring new farmers are instantly eliminated from potential involvement. More than one participant spoke of the challenge, and the remote prospect of being “in the right place at the right time” in reference to linking to properties about to be released onto the market at farmland prices. Some workshop participants were better able to envision a scenario where new farmers, particularly new-Canadian farmers, moved gradually and progressively toward farm ownership via an ongoing relationship (and partnership) with existing latter career producers. Indeed, it transpired through the course of the community leader focus groups that participants were intrigued by the prospect of arranged “bridges” between retiring and aspiring farmers, but varied in their degree of optimism that such linkages would produce a real prospect for farm transference.

Some of the cautiousness noted above was found to relate to a second dominant issue arising from the dialogue arising in the focus group results – namely those efforts to link exiting and aspiring farmers may be founded on a misplaced belief that newcomer farmers wish to adopt the scale and form of existing farms. The view was expressed by several participants that, for reasons of both financial limitation and cultural (or geographical) familiarity and tradition, the type of farm to which many new-Canadian farmers might aspire would be best categorized by the term “small farming”. What became quickly clear was that this group of community insiders had in the mind’s eye a vision of farms and farming that bears little resemblance to the model that prevails in Ontario’s farm sector today. Here, the cautionary note to would-be farm start up agencies was to match the end goal (a new farm) to the vision and imagination of the new farmer — a challenge indeed.

A final area of guidance for new initiatives and strategies concerned approaches to outreach. Collectively, the groups agreed that current outreach efforts had fallen short of the mark and had been only modestly successful at reaching the target “ready to farm” audience. A number of suggestions for improvement were derived from discussion. First, it was suggested that newcomer settlement agencies should be more active in identifying immigrants with experience and aspirations in agriculture and should make appropriate referrals to farm organizations with programs for such individuals. As noted earlier, newcomer settlement services are increasingly concentrated in the city and it is therefore not surprising that the topic and prospect of a career in agriculture does not form a prominent role in these cases (if it arises at all). There was strong feeling that “point of entry” recognition of agricultural knowledge assets could help direct those candidates with clear farming inclination to appropriate outreach services. Second, and consistent with the use of existing cultural organizations, advice was given to concentrate recruitment and promotion materials in the areas used most frequently by new community members. The suggestion was that promotional efforts have erred in the past by overlooking the everyday venues that are at the centre of many newcomer families’ lives — especially early on: settlement services offices, health care facilities, libraries and, most notably but often forgotten, businesses

(especially food) catering to specific ethno-cultural clienteles. Third, a plea was made for informational material to be presented in plain language format and in as concise a manner as possible in order to avoid a perception of complexity and formality, and for such material to nominate a community embedded entity (or person) as the first point of contact once interest has been created. This seems intuitively important in light of the tendency for many newcomers (and many people in general) to view government and government-like programs and agencies as more a source of regulation than facilitation.

3.3 Farm Explorers: Needs and Issues

In contrast to the community leaders focus group session, where perspectives were offered at a more generalized level, two focus group sessions with prospective farmers were designed to “drill down” with individuals and obtain a more personal sense of the types of practical challenges and needs that prospective farmers might face. The participants were primarily new immigrants with farming experience from their country of origin, some of who had just started a small enterprise at FarmStart’s incubator facility in the City of Brampton. Several participants had also recently participated in a FarmStart designed “Explorer” course — the purpose of which is to present prospective farmers with basic financial and operational information on farming and to allow them to reflect upon their own aspirations and current levels of satisfaction as a means of confirming an interest to go further in evaluating a farming future. The Explorer course also included a session where recently established farmers from previous FarmStart beginner groups presented their experiences and interacted with the participants. The importance of this experience for purposes of the research project is that it brought to the focus groups a sizeable subset of individuals, who were able to offer quite tangible reflections on challenges and barriers they had already identified on the basis of recent engagement with FarmStart’s farm incubation program. The issues and challenges presented below flow directly from the contributions of these participants and from the supplementary observations of participating FarmStart program representatives. In some cases these identified issues are specific to existing programs and in other cases they are general.

Skills and Training. It was found that skills and training in commercial agriculture was almost non-existent amongst attendees, including those who had enrolled in the FarmStart Explorer’s course. Most of the participants reporting previous experience in food production had started on garden plots in their backyards to gain experience and knowledge. Some did indicate childhood experience on their parents’ or grandparents’ farms in the sending country, and some of these participants have their experienced farmer parents with them in Canada. The issue of hands-on training was recognized by virtually all participants as critical and largely absent within the structure of current programming. Particular frustration existed in relation to farm internships — an opportunity often cast as an available and effective opportunity for starter farmer mentorship. It was suggested that, for new Canadians, the realistic prospect for enrolment in such opportunities is remote. In Ontario it is frequently the case that internships cater for people who want to spend an entire farming season (or at least all summer) on commercial scale farms in need of additional labour. This was seen as problematic for newcomers who are, at a minimum, “nervous” about leaving the employment situation they have in order to gain that kind of full-time hands-on mentorship. Indeed, the economic situation of many newcomer households would prohibit this

choice. Virtually all attendees expressed a wish that mentoring opportunities were available on a one or two day per week basis during the entire (crop) farming cycle: soil preparation, planting, maintenance, harvest and preparation of the winter cover crop seasons. Two potential developments were noted that might alleviate this situation; first, the development of a multi-intern model where individual hosting farms might accommodate the participation of a small roster of interns and second, the potential residing in the efforts of FarmStart and similar bodies to liberate parcels of publically-owned land for the creation of training and farm incubator opportunities. On the latter strategy, there has been some encouraging though limited progress as FarmStart has successfully negotiated access and usage agreements with local resource management agencies for the development of two farm properties in the Greater Toronto Area.

Land Access and Costs. Not surprisingly, participants were quick to identify land as the issue they had the least ability to solve. In this urban-dominated study area land costs were seen as prohibitive — and it was observed that this extended well into the surrounding countryside where farms do exist, but exhibit land values that reflect their urban proximity and desirability for rural amenity living. While some participants speculated that they might be able to assemble sufficient funds from savings or family to permit a land purchase in more remote rural locations, the lack of settlement infrastructure in rural Ontario, and the spectre of detachment from community were strong impediments. A small number of participants also invoked the current economics of agriculture in their calculation and noted, astutely, that a remote location might improve the attainability of land but might well have the opposite effect on access to off-farm employment — the latter now seen widely as a critical component of many family scale farms in Ontario and elsewhere.

A number of prospective farmers revisited their previous deliberations on so-called small farming from their recent Explorer course and noted the potential value of “farming together” — in effect the establishment of formal or de facto single farm cooperatives where financial, technical and intellectual resources could be pooled to solve both accessibility issues and the desire for a small farm model. Amongst issues arising in the focus group, there was considerable enthusiasm for cooperative farming and some quite specific calls for targeted information on the legal and procedural details establishing formal cooperatives. Organizations such as FarmStart and the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture Food and Rural Affairs may well prove to be an important source of advice and assistance in this regard.

Monetary Support for Small Farmers. Beyond the barrier of land procurement, participants talked about the financial challenge that faces all small business start-ups — access to operating capital. In communities where newcomers represent a high proportion of the population this can be especially difficult as access to credit can rest heavily on equity in the form of employment earnings or assets. Participants stressed the need for farm organizations to provide or lobby for grants, small business loans and other support from both the public and private/corporate sector. It was the general feeling of the groups that, in the absence of a strong capital base, commercial lenders were unlikely to invest in the type of farming model preferred given both the prevailing difficulties in agriculture and the economic profile of many community members. On the public sector side, there was very little knowledge of the role and mandate of the Provincial Ministry of Agriculture Food and Rural Affairs, and a high degree of expressed uncertainty about how to engage this potential partner. Instead, some people identified this

liaison function as a key contribution from organizations such as FarmStart who are seeking to support the entry of newcomers and ethno-cultural commodities into the food system.

4.0 Final Reflections

The findings reported in this article were intended to provide a “fly-over” appreciation of the complexities that surround the development of a locally-based food system for the expanding ethno-cultural communities of the Greater Toronto Area in Ontario — and in other multi-cultural settings. A basic intention was to suggest productive paths for further investigation. To that end, the following possibilities are suggested:

a) Training Programs for new Canadian Farmers

It is evident that new Canadians who want to become farmers need training on the different and distinctive aspects of farming in Canada. Initial work on this area, done by organizations like FarmStart, proves that crossing this hurdle is crucial for newcomers. There is a need for training programs on the technical aspects of crop productions and on farm management and planning. Though many new Canadians have experience in farming, Canadian conditions (environmental, economic and social) present them with different and unique issues. Training on soils/soil nutrient management, planning and managing a short growing season and season extension are examples of the types of base skill building needed. Accessing credit will demand the ability to prepare a convincing business model that includes both operating and marketing components. Challenges also exist in terms of the “when” and “how” of this training piece. Time flexible education and internship opportunities are critical for aspiring newcomer farmers who face the significant economic and social challenges of successful settlement. And the training and experience provided will, for many, need to accord with a preferred model of farming that features small scale production and local trade.

b) Access to Resources

Access to land is one of the major barriers that new Canadians face when they decide to take up farming. Innovation and imagination seem needed within agencies working in this sector to explore (and probably broker) different tenure arrangements to create access to land for new Canadians. Two such examples are FarmStart’s incubator farm concept noted earlier and an emerging program in Ontario (Farm Link) that seeks to perform the service of a farm match maker – linking interested sellers with aspiring farm buyers from ethno-cultural communities or the wider population. Once land is at hand, access to machinery and basic farm infrastructure is another barrier that needs to be addressed. It was once common on Ontario farms for machinery to be collectively owned and pooled across several farms to reduce purchase and carrying costs. The level of revealed interest for cooperative farming suggests the possible value of a rebirth in this practice. Finally, access to finances through both formal financial

institutions and publically supported programs targeted to farm incubation is needed for both start up and sustained growth.

c) ***Ethno-Cultural Food and Crops***

Prospective new Canadians bring with them, in most cases, a wealth of knowledge around sustainable farming methods and food crops that will cater to ethnic communities that live in Canadian cities. The diverse food needs of the population in the GTA region is ample proof of this. The findings indicate that there is a need to explore the possibilities of growing some of these crops that communities traditionally grew and ate in their countries of origin. Some of these crops are already being grown here on small to medium scale e.g. Okra, Bok Choy, Shitake Mushrooms and Ginseng. These crops have the potential to also benefit existing Canadian farmers by linking them to new crops and new markets. As cities in Canada become increasingly multi-cultural these markets for culturally appropriate foods are bound to increase exponentially. The abiding question is “from where will these foods come – the community or the airport”?

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