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Authors: Heather Mair & Jennifer Sumner

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Critical Thinking for Sustainable Development at the Creemore 100 Mile Store

Heather Mair

University of Waterloo
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada
hmair@uwaterloo.ca

Jennifer Sumner

University of Toronto
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
jennifer.sumner@utoronto.ca

Abstract

Understanding how we can best respond to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals requires a consideration of cases that strive, at least in part, to embody critical thinking and to challenge dominant power relations. The paper reports on a study with women involved with the 100 Mile Store in Creemore, Ontario, Canada, which sells predominantly locally sourced, organic, and fair-trade products to tourists and residents. We explored the origins of the store as well as participants' involvement and perceptions of its transformative impact. Key findings include an understanding of how the store began as a women-only enterprise, which can be viewed as an effort to resist neo-liberal and patriarchal business models. We also gained insights into what participants described as a growing critical awareness about the impacts of industrialized food systems and issues of environmental and community sustainability, as well as a desire to develop and support alternatives. Importantly, participants engaged in critical thinking when they supported and challenged the store's ability to address these issues in a meaningful way. We discuss the implications by engaging Epp's (2016) notion of incremental radicalism and identify lessons for better understanding how locally-driven sustainable development initiatives can inspire more opportunities to meet the Sustainable Development Goals.

Keywords: local food, radical incrementalism, rural women, food patriotism, SDGs Canada

1.0 Introduction

Around the world, rural communities resist, contest, and avoid the capitalist food regime while constructing new forms of production and consumption. These communities sit precariously on the blurry divide between the market economy and the moral economy, employing different forms of production and consumption in ways that provide them with a degree of autonomy from capital. Forms of ownership may be individual, cooperative, communal, or collective; consumption may be local, extended, or mixed; labour may be performed by family, paid, reciprocal, permanent, or temporary; production may be rural, urban, organic, or not. The mix of farming and consumption styles depends on the context of each local food system. (Holt-Giménez, 2017, p. 105)

The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a global call to action that should

—and must—inspire students of sustainable and rural development to engage their work critically and with sound methodological approaches. As Boluk, Cavaliere, & Higgins-Desbiolles (2017) make clear, meeting the SDGs also requires critical thinking skills to challenge the dominant, neoliberal assumptions that shape development practices more broadly.

While some may argue that the case of one small store in one small community in Ontario, Canada is too far removed from the big questions the SDGs are asking us to consider, our work with the women who founded and support the Creemore 100 Mile Store offers a hopeful, if imperfect, example of efforts to engage at least some of the aspirations of the SDGs. Further, we would argue, especially when it comes to considerations of sustainability, understanding local initiatives offers insights into generating change on a bigger scale. As Reimer (2006) has argued, “local development does not take place in a vacuum” (p. 155) and understanding rural development without considering the broader, global context can leave opportunities for agency unseen.

Indeed, this small case illuminates the ways in which those who started and support the Creemore 100 Mile Store are linked to a growing movement that engenders critical thinking about the mainstream food system and social change more broadly. Moreover, the store has brought women in the community together, fostered individual and community transformation, and challenged traditional–patriarchal structures and power relations. Understanding this case, we argue, offers fodder for encouraging members of small communities everywhere to take at least some steps towards achieving the UN’s goal of transforming the world.

This paper has four main parts. First, we briefly present a background discussion of the community of Creemore, Ontario, introduce the 100 Mile Store and describe the research project and methodology. Second, we present the main findings from the analysis of the interview and observation data, which are organised into two main themes (i.e., supporting the 100 Mile Store and transformations). Interview data are presented in support of each theme and sub-theme. Taken together, these themes provide a foundation for the third section, where we discuss the findings in light of the four SDGs most relevant to our project. We then deepen the discussion by taking up the notion of critical thinking to illuminate how the case illustrates questioning and challenging of dominant (food) systems, which may be an essential factor in achieving the SDGs. Last, a consideration of Epp’s (2016) notion of radical incrementalism for sustainable communities and development is utilised as we engage critically with ideas linking the 100 Mile Store with the SDGs. The paper concludes with a look at what might be next for understanding what role rural communities can—and must—play in achieving the SDGs by 2030.

2.0 The project: Creemore’s 100 Mile Store

2.1 Background

As expressions of the local food movement, 100-mile stores have begun to appear in the foodscape, taking inspiration from Alisa Smith and J. B. MacKinnon’s (2007) 100-mile diet, a food regimen composed entirely of products found within 100 miles of the consumer. In Ontario, the first such store opened in the town of Meaford in 2007, followed by a second in the village of Creemore, a community with a population of approximately 1,170 residents (Statistics Canada, 2016). These innovative retail outlets only offer food products from within a hundred-mile radius, drawing on the output of farmers and processors from the region. Since store owners interact directly with

producers, every product has a story, which they pass on to consumers. This narrative results in ‘food with a face,’ a rare phenomenon in a world now dominated by an impersonal, industrialized global food system.

The emergence of 100-mile stores heralds a change in the ways people relate to food. While farmers’ markets can include products brought in from around the world, and tourist shops may offer some local products as part of their retail mix, 100-mile stores are exclusively dedicated to local food. They deliberately buy food grown, raised, and/or processed by local producers and sell it to local consumers. In so doing, they are becoming a nexus for local supply and demand. On the supply side, they create dependable, year-round markets for local food producers, allowing them to create, maintain, or expand their operations while encouraging innovation. On the demand side, they satisfy the growing desire for safe, abundant, secure sources of sustainably grown food. In effect, 100-mile stores epitomize the advice on a European bumper sticker reported by Michael Pollan—eat your view. In the words of Pollan (2006), “If you want to preserve those views, then eat from the food chain that created them.” Eating locally changes the relations people have with the land and with each other. The 100-mile store in Creemore provides an example of how these relations can be transformed.

Creemore is a one-hour drive north-west of Toronto, Ontario. It is set on the edge of the Niagara Escarpment, a long ridge of elevated land running through the northern United States and southern Canada that is a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. The village also hosts festivals, maintains its heritage buildings, features upscale boutiques, boasts a number of pubs and restaurants, and offers accommodation. It is a fully functioning rural community of approximately 1100 people that is part of Clearview Township, with a post office, hardware store, grocery store, weekly newspaper, and the renowned Creemore Springs Brewery—a tourist attraction and a major employer. In addition, it is the gateway to skiing, snowshoeing, cycling, and hiking opportunities in the region. These amenities attract tourists, ‘weekenders’—who have bought property in and around Creemore—and urban pensioners who have retired to the community.

As part of the ‘local turn’—the growing interest in all things local—two women in Creemore decided to open a 100-mile store. As they described to us during our interviews in May of 2016, they lacked start-up funds. To overcome this problem, they needed to raise money, but knew that if they put out a call for funds, the ‘usual suspects’ would get involved—that is, the men in the village. Against the advice of their accountant, they put out a call for shares, but stipulated that only women could buy them. The response was ‘overwhelming’. They met their target of \$47,000, created a syndicate of local and regional women—who individually or in partnership with other women put in \$1000 per share—and opened their doors in 2008.

According to the website of the 100 Mile Store (<https://www.100milestore.ca/>) its philosophy is to provide local food, with a preference for organic or naturally grown. Its mission matches the philosophy of the local food movement:

Supporting small to midsize natural and organic farms, artisanal and fair trade producers by offering fair compensation and by providing a larger market presence and increased accessibility by consumers to this group and their products (100 Mile Store, 2018).

The 100 Mile Store stocks local vegetables, fruit, nuts, meat, dairy, and eggs, as well as value-added products such as jams, breads, soaps, desserts, and food-

related crafts. Each product sold in the store carries a sign indicating the name of the farm or business and the distance from the store. While Organic Meadow dairy products may originate 70 miles from the store, some of the bread has a sign that says, ‘around the corner’, indicating that the retired man on the side street next to the shop brings in his home-made bread several days a week. Given the face-to-face interactions, narratives about the food are passed from producer to store owner to customer. From these narratives, people learn “food patriotism” (Bell & Valentine, 1997; as cited in Hinrichs, 2003, p. 40)—a new relationship with food that runs broader and deeper than the faceless, placeless, fetishized commodities found in supermarkets, builds loyalty to place, and contributes to the building blocks of a local sustainable food system. The 100 Mile Store promotes food patriotism through the store itself, through its website, and through an email list providing updates about which farmer has just supplied what product for the delectation of customers.

In many ways, the 100 Mile Store can be understood as a part of a sustainable development initiative. Environmentally, it reduces the distance food travels and thus the energy associated with global trade, while supporting ecologically oriented farming. Economically, it supports the local economy by providing a dependable, year-round outlet for local farmers and food producers and encouraging tourists to spend their money locally. And socially, it represents a source of pride for local women, offers an attractive destination for visitors, and provides an educational venue that hosts film nights, speakers and school visits on the subject of local food. The purpose of our project was to understand the development of the 100 Mile Store and why women participate as well as to assess the broader impacts of the store on its members and the community. Moreover, and is made clear below, it offers insights into alignment with, and possibly the implementation of, at least some of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

2.2 Methodology

To carry out our research, we chose a qualitative approach, which uses an inductive thought process, focuses on particular situations or people, and emphasizes words rather than numbers (Maxwell, 1996). Following this approach, we employed in-depth qualitative interviewing, which is not rigidly structured and gives the interview subject some freedom to direct the flow of what can be understood as a ‘guided conversation’ (Babbie, 1998). In 2016, in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 16 women, including the two founding owners and investors in the store. Participants were identified first by inviting the two owners to share our information–recruitment letter through their email list of store members and then through snowball sampling. Potential participants were encouraged to contact the researchers for more information about the project and, if willing to participate, to set up an interview. Semi-structured interviews were designed to encourage a conversation-like discussion and we asked questions including about how and why participants came to be involved with the store, as well as what they considered to be its impact, both personally and more broadly. Fourteen interviews were conducted in person and two were conducted by telephone. Interview length ranged from 23 to 84 minutes, with a mean length of 46 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and verbatim transcriptions were analysed using a constant comparison method as we sought to develop rich insights into participants’ motivations for support as well as perceptions of the store’s impact on them as individuals and their community. The results of preliminary data analysis were sent to participants in an effort to share our analysis and garner further comment or insights. No participant offered additional insights or expressed any concerns about our

findings. In addition, four trips were taken to the community and approximately four hours of unobtrusive observation was undertaken at the 100 Mile Store during which observations were made but there were no interactions in the role as a researcher with those observed (Vogt, 1999). As a result, we were able to get an informal sense of the relationships at play in the store. For example, observations were conducted of conversations between customers and the owners, between the owners and the producers who made deliveries, and between producers and consumers.

Nearly all of the participants were white, middle-class women who were well educated and had lived in or near Creemore for no less than three years. Although two participants had lived in the community their whole lives, most were (or had originally come to the community as) weekenders. Most were close to retirement or retired. All participants have been given pseudonyms for confidentiality.

3.0 Findings: Supporting and Transforming

Analysis of the interview transcripts led to the development of two main thematic categories: (a) supporting the 100 Mile Store and (b) transformations. Below we present a discussion of these themes and relevant sub-themes.

3.1 Supporting the 100 Mile Store

Participants described a range of inter-related motivations for their decision to support the 100 Mile Store, which were linked to their view of the store's mission and role in the community as well as a more personal sense of support for the two women who started it. Our analysis identified three sub-themes: building community, relying on personal connections and reputation, empowering rural women.

3.1.1 Building community. Participants described how the 100 Mile Store plays a role in community development. While communities vary enormously, they generally involve a social network of interacting individuals with common ties, often concentrated into a defined territory (Johnston, 2000). Building community entails enhancing these networks and interactions, which reinforces common ties. For participants in this study, a second motivation for supporting the store was that it helped to build community. Many of the women interviewed remarked on the role the 100 Mile Store—and its owners—played in community events including festivals, education nights, and the farmers' market. There was a sense that the contribution of the store to the community was far broader than what was on the shelves.

In addition, understanding that much of the welfare of the community depends on skiers in the winter and tourists in the summer, it was clear to participants that the store was an attraction. Participants described how Creemore has worked to host festivals and events that attract tourists and even tour buses but that before the 100 Mile Store, only the local brewery was a dependable focal point. Maria, who first invested in the store with her mom when she was 13, outlined how the store remained open all year round and provided an anchor for other businesses to help form a more consistent tourism draw, “we rely on tourism, but it's not a reliable source for local businesses. Even in summer, if it's not a good tourist season [that's a] major issue for a lot of stores”.

Susan noted the support the 100 Mile Store offers to other businesses in the small downtown:

Frankly, I think people who go to the bookstore [also] go to the 100 Mile Store...it speaks quality. It says we are a proud business offering quality goods in the excellent village of Creemore and this is what Creemore is: Creemore is quality.

And Ann noted:

For the town, the store is an attraction for tourism because people like to have something a little different to go to. So it does benefit the town to have that type of store in the town. We are becoming a more touristy area where people are just coming up for the weekend to get out of the city. That kind of store is an attraction.

According to Gina, the store supports the community and the community supports the store:

Creemore is a fabulous place to live. You don't need to go out of town for anything...I hear lots of people talking about it. 'Did you go in?' 'Have you tried that?' Because of the community itself—the community wants them to do well.

Krista described how she makes an effort to shop locally and even avoids going to a nearby community, which has more shopping options, "I won't go and purchase something in Collingwood because I know I can get it here and I'd rather get it here".

Ava noted how the overall appeal of the community, reinforced by the store, has attracted young families:

Over the past few years, I noticed a lot of young couples coming to the area to raise their children in this environment. If you're going to come here, must commute to work or come up with ideas about how to make a living. They see Creemore as the place to do it.

3.1.2 Reinforcing personal connections and reputation. Personal connections and reputation are vital components of community life, and rural communities are no exception. Personal connections form the social networks that characterize all communities and reputation is embedded within these connections. For participants, a third element of their motivation for supporting the store was that while it seemed like a radical and risky idea, it was worth supporting because of personal connections and the owners' reputation in the community. As Margaret noted:

I approached them [to invest]. I would have given [owner] money upfront, without anything attached to it...so when the idea of investors came about, I was on board. She's [owner] a very dynamic individual. Nobody dislikes her. I was a little bit skeptical about the store—I

worried it would only get a one-sided following...but I believed in it—
if she was behind it, I was behind it.

Krista and Alice shared similar views. Krista stated that “I heard it was starting through a friend and I already knew [the owners]. I asked about it...I admired them both as women”. Alice commented that “some people thought it would fold but it never even entered my head because of the personalities running it”.

Elizabeth said, “I looked at the age group [involved] and thought, well, if something is going to happen this is exactly the right age group to do it because they’re full of enthusiasm, bounce, and learning on the job”.

Susan also made a point to talk about the appeal and reputations of the women who started the store. She commented that the “[owner] has a tremendous dollop of business acumen—she’s nobody’s idealistic fool—she’s very savvy in the best possible sense. I have the greatest admiration for her from the business point of view. And [owner] is no slouch”.

3.1.3 Empowering rural women. As an example of a women-only business venture, it is unsurprising that the topic of women and gender power relations arose frequently in our discussions with participants. Indeed, around the world, systems of relations between men and women tend to disadvantage women, both within the family and in public life (International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development, 2009), resulting in a lack of power in both spheres. This is particularly true in rural communities, where tradition and patriarchal structures continue to dominate. For participants in our study, a consistently mentioned motivation for supporting the store was that it empowered rural women. Indeed, their critical thinking about power–gender relations in the community are evident. For instance, Lois noted that the store “feels potent, like a statement”, and Lucy put it this way:

In this community, there’s a lot of dudes who tell us what to do. A lot of mansplaining...I think it [the idea for the store] was very clever...Why is it that when women get together and try to invest and create something, it’s an act, but when men get together, it’s everyday business?

Angela voiced her sense of empowerment in getting involved:

It was definitely an opportunity to do something on my own. I have a husband who has been in the banking world forever and he’s always talking about investing. It is a male world. And here comes this tiny opportunity, it comes right to my front door. I’m in! This was the first opportunity I’d ever had to be part of something that could grow. It was wonderful.

And Krista added:

I looked at my retirement savings and figured out where the \$1000 would come from...I’d like to do that and think about the value added rather than the interest....If we have men who are shareholders, some of them will want to give us a lot of advice, tell us what to do, want to direct us.

As participants made clear, their motivations to support the 100 Mile Store involved a number of aspects: the importance of local food, farmers, and dependable businesses to their community’s health; the significance of women

and women-centred projects; and, relatedly, the reputation of the two women who were behind the store's development, especially as it seemed like a radical alternative. Linked to the broad theme of motivations for support is the notion of transformation and, as we describe next, participants outlined a number of important changes that came because of the store and its mandate.

3.2 Transformations

Transformation involves a process of change that is not merely on the surface, but deeply touches many aspects of life. For example, Cranston (2005) describes how people make meaning of the world through experience and develop habits of mind and frames of reference for understanding the world, much of it uncritically assimilated. She goes on to explain how through the process of daily living, people absorb values, assumptions and beliefs about how things are. Cranston (2005) concludes that when people encounter something unexpected, they either reject the new information or they begin to question their previously held assumptions, which “has the potential to be transformative” (p. 631).

The transformations associated with the 100 Mile Store fall into five inter-related sub-themes: (a) increasing critical awareness, (b) seeing more women leaders, (c) supporting local farmers and socially-oriented businesses, (d) exacerbating community divisions, and (e) engendering broader social change.

3.2.1 Increasing critical awareness. Increasing critical awareness involves adopting a critical perspective and applying it to a growing recognition of the vital issues that affect our life, such as food. Among participants in the study, critical awareness supported, and was supported by, the 100 Mile Store. As Gina stated:

...there's more conversation about where food is coming from. My youngest daughter took up her whole front yard and planted a fruit garden in it. There are more people interested in where their food is coming from and what's on it. We had that big party about the mega-quarry [a rural protest event called Foodstock] and enlightened a lot of people about food sources.

Angela shared thoughts about the rural-urban divide in regards to food literacy:

A lot of people who come up from Toronto, especially the newly arrived, ask really stupid questions, such as where the food came from – ignorance, lack of knowledge, different coloured eggs. The city meets the country – once they've been here for a while they become more accustomed to our ways.

Increasing critical awareness, particularly in the area of food, helps to create the conditions for transformation.

3.2.2 Seeing more women leaders. One of the effects of women's recognized lack of power has been a chronic lack of women in leadership positions. In Creemore, this was point was made clearly by one of the store's owners, who described how, when she first mentioned the idea of setting up the store to a local businessman, he said, “maybe I can talk to your husband and we can work

something out”. She described this event as the ‘tipping point’ for helping her decide to make the venture women-only.

Indeed, male dominance continues to be evident not only in the corporate world, but also in communities, and the previous sections illustrate the extent to which participants were keenly aware of this situation. However, with women’s growing empowerment, this injustice is changing, and participants in the research project clearly recognized this transformation and made an effort to explain how Creemore is changing. While in the community, we learned that one of the store’s owners had recently become President of the town’s BIA (Business Improvement Association), which is, for the first time, comprised entirely of women representatives.

Ava shared a copy of a story about the 100 Mile Store, which was published in 2012 in a regional magazine. She drew attention to the novelty of women leaders in business and more broadly in Creemore as compared to other communities featured in the magazine, “it’s obvious that the people running Creemore are women”. In addition, the linkage between women and food in rural life was an evident connection for participants. The store, for Elizabeth, seemed like an obvious next step. She described it as “a bigger extension of women continuing that commitment of providing good food...[and] all 100 Mile Store investors are women, [that’s] so cool”. Ava’s comments further underlined this point as she too drew attention to a sense that the store has been part of a kind of re-valuing of what used to be considered women’s knowledge and skills in rural life, “there used to be home economics in school and it was considered anti-feminist. There were 4H cooking clubs. But these are survival skills.”

Seeing more women leaders helps to open up new possibilities and to lay the groundwork for transformation.

3.2.3 Supporting local farmers and socially-oriented businesses. In the age of corporate globalization, one of the most interesting changes has been what is termed ‘the local turn’—a growing interest in all things local, including food. This transformation is “often claimed to be a way to increase the value-added component retained by primary producers and to provide healthy, fresh and affordable food to consumers” (Matei, et al., 2017, p. 1). Participants in our study also remarked on this transformation. During our interview with the owners, they described how the store has sparked other social enterprises, including a series of workshops on food preparation, farm tours, and local food-themed events to support a family of Syrian refugees. Alice described the support local suppliers have had:

Local people have brought produce there [the 100 Mile Store] and they will sell it for them. I know an old friend of mine...took in raspberries. They do try to encourage local people who are growing produce and want to sell it, to sell it through the store—a place to sell it.

Notably, a member of the research team was present in the store conducting unobtrusive observations (May 2016) and was witness to the following event. A female customer was making a purchase and chatting with the owners when another woman entered the store carrying a box filled with jars of a potent drink made from ginger. One of the owners motioned to the woman across from her at the counter and said “here—you can meet the person who makes that ginger drink you love so much”. There was a slight pause and the two women (producer and consumer) shook hands. The farmer then took some time to explain how she made the ginger drink and listened, smiling, while the other woman shared how

much she enjoyed it. It was clear that part of the impact of the store is the building of understanding about food as well as relationships. Participants such as Lucy noted how the store owners were working to transform the community in this way, “this community has thrived because of a handful of people who have a vision...[there’s the] satisfaction of knowing you are helping to better a community.”

Supporting local farmers and socially-oriented businesses broadens possibilities and contributes to transformation.

3.2.4 Exacerbating community divisions. Of course, not all transformation is positive, and this can often be seen in rural communities where change is not always welcomed by everyone. The issue of price at the store was raised repeatedly during the interviews and nearly all participants remarked on the nickname ‘The 100 Dollar Store’, which is commonly used by some in the community. A few participants raised the challenges of transformation, especially in regard to issues of class but also newcomers and long-time residents. As Margaret said:

I classify myself as someone who moved in but took hold and worked and made friends with locals and gotten food from local areas [as opposed to] others who are aloof and in some ways extremely arrogant. There is a very definite distinction.

Alice commented:

There’s always a few snide comments. A little bit of divisiveness between the real old timers and anyone liberal or progressive in thinking. One guy told me as I walked to the [100 Mile Store], ‘oh, that’s just for ladies.’

Beth commented that, “not everyone in the village is a weekender. I think a select number of locals use it [the 100 Mile Store]. For other people, it’s far too expensive”.

But some participants reflected an understanding about the need for relatively high prices and asked critical questions about food prices and quality more generally. For instance, Meredith argued:

The only negative I’ve ever heard is that it’s really pricey, and it is. Why are we paying low money for real food? It’s a crime that crap food is so inexpensive—processed and carbohydrate-high food. It’s what people who are impoverished can afford.

For some participants the presence of the store, while broadly beneficial, also reflected tensions around development in the community and a kind of clash between long-term residents and farmers and newcomers who are attracted to a romantic view of rural life. As Angela noted:

Farmers who have lived here all their lives have a pretty different view of how to develop the countryside and the town than those who come

up from the city and come to retire and want peace and quiet and wide-open spaces.

Exacerbating community divisions illustrates the negative possibilities of transformation and provides a lesson for other communities.

3.2.5 Engendering broader social change. Particular transformations can be catalysts for broader change, acting as models or anchors on which people can base future expectations and actions. In this study, participants observed broad change as it was exemplified in the store and the owners' attempts to offer an alternative. In the words of Lois, "[The notion] of community investment feels radical for up here. I bet there was courage involved [with setting up the Store]". Lucy stated that, "In the beginning, I thought they'd be more transformative, but they ended up being a really great business. I remember them coming up with all these great ideas..."

Other participants noted how the presence of the local food store was driving other businesses in town, including the more mainstream traditional grocery store and local restaurants, to offer more organic and locally sourced products. They saw improvement not just in what was available in terms of diversity of options but a growing sense of awareness about the origins of the products they carry and the potential to attract tourists to the downtown.

Alice described how the 100 Mile Store was first received by what was then the owner of the local grocery store, "the other owner flipped out when he found out the 100 Mile Store was opening—he thought it would steal business." But Susan noted that the current owner has become:

...anxious to please the Creemore customers. He's kind of taken to us because we buy our food there—we're pretty frank with our opinions. Whatever the reason, he's tried very hard to improve the variety and the quality. And he's a nice man—he's recognizing that people will shop at his place rather than going to Collingwood if they're looking for better stuff.

The notion of transformation captures what participants shared about change at individual and community levels. Indeed, in a small community where one might expect a continuation of conservative–patriarchal values, the 100 Mile Store and the women who support and own it articulated a change in relationships, power, knowledge, and their community's future. The next section takes up these ideas in light of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and considers the role of the 100 Mile Store in fostering critical thinking more broadly.

4.0 Discussion

Overall, the study shows that participants had clear motivations for supporting the 100 Mile Store and, perhaps more importantly for the purpose of this paper, recognized its transformative impacts after it was established. The implications of this rural case, particularly the pattern of support and transformation, can be viewed more broadly by discussing how it connects to a number of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

The 2030 Sustainable Development Goals are promoted by the United Nations as "a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity" and represent a global attempt to "shift the world onto a sustainable and resilient path" (United Nations, n.d., p. 5). The 17 SDGs address a range of issues, from poverty and education

to water and energy. Given the findings of the present study, can we ascertain whether the 100 Mile Store is contributing to the implementation of any of the SDGs? The case of the 100 Mile Store offers insights into addressing four of these goals: zero hunger (Goal 2), gender equality (Goal 5), sustainable cities and communities (Goal 11) and responsible consumption and production (Goal 12), albeit with some caveats. Next we take up each relevant goal in turn.

4.1 Goal 2—Zero Hunger: End Hunger, Achieve Food Security and Improved Nutrition, and Promote Sustainable Agriculture

As a privately-owned enterprise, the 100 Mile Store must make a profit for its owners if they are going to remain in business. Given the paucity of profits in small food-based enterprises, the owners cannot end hunger or achieve food security in Creemore, nor is it their mandate to do so. Goodman, DuPuis, and Goodman (2014) add nuance to this issue when they note that most alternative food networks are market-based and because of this often-ignored fact, “social justice is the Achilles heel of these networks as the poor and disadvantaged continue to be ill-served” (p. 84). As noted above, participants reflected on what some saw as high prices in the store and expressed concern it was not accessible to all in the community. On the other hand, some participants took the opportunity to consider the broader costs of cheap food and given the range of healthy products at the 100 Mile Store, it does contribute to improved nutrition. In addition, the owners’ unwavering support of natural and organic farms and fair trade clearly promotes sustainable agriculture.

Relatedly, there is a growing body of literature investigating the role of sustainable agriculture and, especially local food in enhancing the appeal of rural communities and the 100 Mile Store can be viewed as an example. Scholars such as Sims (2009), for instance, denote the role of local food in building the authentic experience of place (see also, Sidali, Kastenholz, & Bianchi, 2015). Further, the 100 Mile Store offers support for burgeoning research on food and sustainability that considers restaurants and cafes (see for instance, Moskwa, Higgins-Desbiolles, & Gifford, 2015) as evidence of sustainable and social entrepreneurship. In this way the 100 Mile Store contributes to our understanding of opportunities to implement Goal 2 of the SDGs.

4.2 Goal 5—Gender Equality: Achieve Gender Equality and Empower all Women and Girls

As recognised in the very language of this goal, the role of women and girls in sustainable development is foundational. As a socially-oriented initiative that was organised and funded by women, the 100 Mile Store changed the foundations of doing business in Creemore. Given that rural communities tend to be rather conservative and farming is still imbued with patriarchal attitudes (see, for example, Sachs, 1996), the traditional role of women in such places is that of helpers and supporters, not initiators (Leach, 2012). Opening a business backed only by women sets a precedent and offers an alternative model of (rural) development. The participants in this study recognized this alternative when they offered that one of their motivations was empowering rural women and one of the transformations they noted was seeing more women leaders.

However, since its inception, the store has not become a hub for the ongoing facilitation of women’s equality. Hinrichs (2003) would explain this anomaly in terms of the concept of defensive localism—constructing rigid barriers to protect local spaces while exhibiting reluctance toward difference. Levkoe (2011) picks up Hinrichs’ (2003, p. 37) discussion, adding that the rigid barriers of defensive localism “have the potential to polarise and exclude particular cultural and social

groups by portraying the perception of a homogeneous version of local that excludes the non-local other.” (Levkoe 2011, p. 696) In terms of women and the local food movement and initiatives like the 100 Mile Store, Hinrichs’ (2003) argument means that women who are already marginalized or who become marginalized will be excluded from any benefits associated with increased localism. Nonetheless, the case offers many insights into a remarkable effort to confront gendered marginalization and its lessons for understanding the implementation of Goal 5 should not be dismissed. Despite the shop not becoming a hub for women’s equality, it does contribute to the implementation of Goal 5 by promoting to gender equality in a rural community and empowering the women who became shareholders.

4.3 Goal 11—Sustainable Cities and Communities: Make Cities and Human Settlements Inclusive, Safe, Resilient, and Sustainable

The 100 Mile Store contributes to a thriving local economy: established producers find a dependable year-round market for their products and new producers are encouraged by having a ready-made outlet. Its vibrant economy makes Creemore one of a dwindling number of functional rural communities in Ontario, and the 100 Mile Store adds to its overall functionality. Participants in the study recognized this functionality when they suggested that one of their motivations for supporting the store was building community and one of the transformations they noticed was growing support for farmers and businesses in the broader community.

Goodman et al. (2014) make the observation that local food is “reclaiming rural space and so redistributing flows of value within rural economies” (p. 84). That said, they go on to ask, “who inhabits these reclaimed rural spaces? In what ways are the protagonists in these recaptured spaces contesting, rather than reproducing, ‘embedded’ structures of wealth, property, privilege, and power?” (Goodman et al., 2014, p. 84). While the 100 Mile Store does indeed contribute to the local economy, not everyone benefits equally, particularly those who cannot afford to shop there.

Nonetheless, it is worth considering that, as gender relations are undeniably central to sustainable development, so too are rural areas and we must continue to understand and encourage alternatives to traditional forms of development, particularly those that challenge longstanding power relationships. A recent paper by Anderson (2015) makes a strong case for better appreciating the role of rural areas in the development of sustainable cities and thereby meeting the sustainable development goals:

Cities are likely to meet their food needs most effectively and sustainably through the development of regional clusters comprising the surrounding rural and peri-urban areas, maintained and strengthened to mutual benefits with the urban area and not merely as periphery-core satellites. That is, based on the current challenges to sustainability, promoting further city development without concomitant rural investment is extremely short-sighted. (Anderson, 2015, p. 257)

Perhaps evaluating and even encouraging ‘risky’ enterprises like the 100 Mile Store, if supported and sustained by locals and tourists more equitably, can be part of fostering sustainable food production and supporting growing urban appetites more sustainably and may go some way towards achieving Goal 11 of the SDGs.

4.3 Goal 12—Responsible Consumption and Production: Ensure Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns

Production and consumption are the twin pillars of any food system and ensuring they exhibit sustainable patterns is the aim of a sustainable food system. The mission statement of the 100 Mile Store clearly shows that it supports sustainable production—natural and organic—and provides a route for consumers to access the products of farms that engage in sustainable production (100 Mile Store, 2018). The owners also offer workshops and support community-oriented events to educate community members about sustainable food production and small-scale preparation. Throughout the interviews with participants, it was made clear that being part of the 100 Mile Store has allowed them to both think about, and actively engage in, this relatively small effort to support a sustainable food production. Arguably, the 100 Mile Store concentrates its efforts more on the production side and undertakes a more passive effort to encourage sustainable consumption, for example, its website encourages consumers to “visit the store and support your local growers and producers” (100 Mile Store (2018)). This lack of direct attention to sustainable consumption limits has an impact on the whole production–consumption pattern and as such its relevance to Goal 12 of the SDGs is somewhat partial.

4.4 Critical Thinking, the 100 Mile Store, and the Implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals

Study participants clearly felt being part of the 100 Mile Store, while not without criticism, had changed their way of thinking and encouraged them to re-evaluate what are typically unchallenged ideas regarding power (i.e., gender relations) and production (i.e., food systems). As noted above, achieving the SDGs will require concerted efforts to foster exactly these kinds of changes. Indeed, authors such as McCloskey (2015; see also Scheyvens, Banks, & Hughes, 2016) point out that a key ingredient in moving from the failed U.N. Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to meeting the SDGs will be a focus on building critical thinking (consciousness) and challenging dominant neoliberal economic models. Next, we employ the notion of critical thinking to underscore the value of seeing the 100 Mile Store as an example, however small, of where we might tie all these threads together.

As Koç, Bancercz, & Speakman, (2017, p.6) note, critical thinking involves examining evidence, unearthing values, questioning power, and encouraging social change. As noted above in the discussion of transformation, these elements seem to at least be activated by the 100 Mile Store in Creemore. Further, Brookfield (2005), a leading scholar in conceptualising critical thinking, argues it involves a continuous learning process comprising four aspects. First, it includes the experience of questioning and then replacing or reframing an assumption or assumption cluster, which is accepted without question as representative of dominant common-sense by the majority. Second, critical thinking encompasses the experience of taking a perspective on social and political structures—or personal and collective actions—that is strongly alternative to that held by the majority. Third, it embraces the experience of analyzing commonly held ideas if they perpetuate economic inequity, deny compassion, foster a culture of silence, and prevent adults from realizing a sense of common connectedness. And fourth, critical thinking involves taking informed, democratic action grounded in well-researched assumptions.

It is useful to engage Brookfield’s (2005) framework directly. Indeed, the women who are involved with the 100 Mile Store in Creemore, Ontario, and

who participated in our study, exhibited all four aspects of critical thinking. First, they questioned, and then replaced, their assumption that men ran the village by supporting the empowerment of rural women. They also questioned and replaced their assumption that fresh, local food was not important, and that community investment was not an option. Second, they took a perspective on local business structures that was strongly alternative to the majority view by supporting a business financed and run by women. Third, they analyzed the inequity around women and business in the community. And fourth, they took action and made the financial contributions necessary to jumpstart the 100 Mile Store and then deliberately shopped there to show their ongoing support.

In this way, critical thinking can become a vehicle for the implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, but only if it becomes “a reflexive habit, a stance towards the world in which the deconstruction of ideas and practices for the interests they serve becomes second nature” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 169). Being part of the 100 Mile Store catalyzed critical thinking, which pushed the village a little closer to the realization of some of the SDGs. Clearly, critical thinking needs to become an ongoing reflexive habit among many more people if we are going to fully realize the SDGs.

Investigating one small community in rural Ontario may seem like too small a step to advance us closer to achieving the SDGs, however, the 100 Mile Store, and the critical thinking it has engendered, emphasizes the importance of what Epp (2016) refers to as incremental radicalism:

...small declarations, courageous assertions, or tangible placed stakes in the world...[d]oubtless those declarations are incomplete, incremental, more sure of what they want to avoid than what they can imagine, but still radical in possibility. Incremental radicalism...is grounded in place, communal, adaptive and continuously self-appraising. (p. 359)

Indeed, the potential of this risky rural endeavour to do development differently offers lessons for what can happen as well as cautions us about issues such as class and access to alternatives to the mainstream. Nonetheless, this case of incremental radicalism can contribute to the implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals as the population shifts toward more sustainable ways of life. Like the participants in this study, people who are grounded in place, share communal tendencies, exhibit adaptation, and engage in critical thinking about themselves and the world around them will be the vanguard of the kind of transformative change we will need to realize the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

5.0 Conclusion

As noted at the outset of this paper, an assessment of a small store from a small community should not be construed as inconsequential. As the paper aims to make clear, the radical incrementalism embodied in Creemore’s 100 Mile Store offers outsized insights into the opportunities and challenges inherent in embracing non-traditional business, especially those that support alternative food production systems, engender critical thinking, and upend longstanding social relations. Further research on the broader impact of the 100 Mile Store, particularly its impact on the surrounding farming communities (e.g., in terms of supporting alternative production systems) and even the impact on tourists’ learning about local food production systems, is warranted. It is also worth assessing additional rural activities that can speak to meeting the SDGs by 2030.

As recently noted by the UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed, “The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is the most ambitious, universal, people-centred and planet-sensitive set of goals and targets ever conceived by the United Nations,” (United Nations News, 2018). Thus, examining all cases, big and small, to help meet these goals is essential.

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