

## **Enterprise Innovation and Economic Diversity in Community Supported Agriculture: Sustaining the Agricultural Commons**

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### **Introduction**

Globally, we are confronted with a host of agricultural issues. They include debates about how best to feed an increasingly urbanized global population, how to sustain smallholder and family-based farming in a context in which agriculture is being increasingly corporatized, and how to minimize food loss and food wastage along the entire food supply chain. They also include assessments of the ability of industrial versus agroecological forms of agriculture to nourish the world, of ways to protect the ecosystem services, such as pollination, that agriculture relies on, and of what the impacts of climate change will be on agricultural systems more generally. Perhaps the one characteristic that these debates and assessments share is a tendency to partition the production end of things from the retail and consumption end. There are one set of ideas for ways forward to be applied to producers and another set for retailers and consumers (at least when discussions are about non-subsistence based agriculture). It seems that the food supply chain is even more attenuated especially when pronouncements are made that kids don't know anymore that milk comes from cows (or sheep or goats, or even soy or almonds or rice). What difference would it make if the 'distance' between producers and consumers was shortened? What types of the innovations might emerge if the issues that agricultural producers face were redefined as a shared responsibility across the food supply chain?

This chapter focuses on urban-based enterprises that are building direct links with rural producers and taking seriously the idea that urban consumers have a role to play in stewarding our agricultural environments and securing livelihoods for farmers. When these sorts of concerns are placed at the heart of the enterprise we find that economic innovations follow, and that along with producing benefits for farmers these innovations are also impacting employees and consumers. This results in businesses that are very different from the mainstream model of enterprise--the capitalist firm in which profit-maximization is at the heart.

The enterprises that are the focus of this chapter are two community-supported agriculture initiatives foreground ethical concerns about environments and livelihoods. I argue that these two enterprises provide insights into the ways that community economies take shape. The idea of community economies that I draw on was introduced in Gibson-Graham's *A Postcapitalist Politics* (2006a) and was used to refer to the making of economies in which we recognise and negotiate our

interdependence with human and nonhuman others. In this conception, community is understood as something constructed in the process of negotiating “the quintessentially ethical concern ... of how we are to live together” (p.82); community is not a pre-existing or pre-defined entity or grouping. Interdependence is understood as involving considerations about what is *necessary* for survival; how *surplus* is appropriated and distributed; how surpluses are to be produced and *consumed*; and how *commons* are to be produced and sustained. Far from an idealised image of the world, negotiating these interdependencies and building community economies is understood as involving “struggle, uncertainty, ambivalence, and disappointment” and having to discard “any fantasy that there is a perfect community economy” (2006b, xv). I also draw on the elaboration of community economies developed by Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy in *Take Back the Economy* (2013).

I start by describing the two community supported agriculture initiatives and their commitment to maintaining an agricultural commons. I then present a detailed account of the ways in which this and other ethical commitments shape the market relationships they have built with farmers, and their determinations about what is necessary for survival and how surplus is to be distributed. This discussion highlights the ways in which community economies are being constructed through ongoing negotiations and struggles around the enactment of ethical commitments.

### **Community Supported Agriculture and the Agricultural Commons**

The enterprises Beanstalk Organic Food (based in Newcastle, Australia) and Food Connect Brisbane (based in Brisbane, Australia but with a Sydney ‘branch’) are initiatives which coordinate member-subscribers who pay in advance for weekly boxes of produce and participating farmers who provide produce for the boxes. Beanstalk was established in 2004 and supplies around 60 boxes of organic fruit and vegetables to its members each week. Members drop by Beanstalk’s ‘stall’ (rented premises in a church hall) from 4.30pm on a Tuesday to collect their boxes and pay for next week’s boxes. There is also an opportunity to purchase additional produce, including dried goods, eggs and bread, dairy and meat products, and extra fruit and vegetables. Food Connect Brisbane was also established in 2004 but is a much larger operation that supplies around 1,000 boxes each week. The boxes of pre-paid produce are packed in Food Connect Brisbane’s base and then delivered across the city to collection points, usually the garages of subscribers who are known as ‘city cousins.’ Subscribers pay from 1 month to 12 months in advance for their boxes.

Originally, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) initiatives were based on a model in which a small group of consumers directly connected with an individual farmer, and they paid the farmer in advance for shares of the farmer’s produce from one growing season. However, for larger groups of producers and consumers this original model has been modified to include a third-party (such as Beanstalk or Food Connect) to act as a bridge between producers and consumers. Some argue that these larger initiatives are more precisely described as a hybrid between CSA and a Subscription (or Vegetable) Box Scheme. However, both Beanstalk and Food

Connect identify as CSAs, and in this chapter I follow their lead and also characterise them as CSAs.<sup>1</sup>

Like all CSA initiatives, Beanstalk and Food Connect Brisbane prioritise the interconnection between rural producers and urban consumers, and they aim to make this relationship more transparent. For example, the content of the weekly box varies according to what is in season and the amount of produce in the box varies according to what farmers have been able to produce—even though the price of the box stays the same. This arrangement, in which member-subscribers may lose out if growing conditions are unfavorable, is one way that CSA initiatives are innovating with market relationships in order to acknowledge and deepen the interdependencies between producers and consumers, and rural and urban dwellers. One outcome of this arrangement is that producers are assured of a predictable income. Because the price for their produce is established in advance, they are protected from market fluctuations and the vagaries of the weather. This is an important means of ensuring producers' livelihoods and enabling them to continue producing long-term.<sup>2</sup> As CSA initiatives, Beanstalk and Food Connect Brisbane also prioritise the connection between humans and the planet on which we depend. As we will see shortly, they have developed various economic innovations to support farmers work *with* the land through, for example, the use of organic methods. So both enterprises are developing economic practices that recognize the interdependences between humans (specifically, rural producers and urban consumers) and between humans and the world around (specifically, between the food we consume and the health of our agricultural environments).

In terms of the ethical considerations that are part of the process of building community economies, the focus on the interdependencies between humans and between humans and the environment can be portrayed as a concern with sustaining the agricultural commons. The biophysical agricultural commons (including the soil, water, seeds and insect and microbial life that are essential for sustaining agricultural production) are sustained via economic innovations that support producers to work with the land, particularly via the use of organic rather than industrial agricultural techniques. A knowledge commons about agricultural production is sustained via economic innovations that support producers' livelihoods. When producers are forced out of farming because it is no longer financially viable, knowledge about farming practices, often build up over generations, is lost. Thus strategies such as CSA, which are experimenting with ways of making farming financially viable, are important for maintaining a knowledge commons that humans ultimately depend on for survival.

As elaborated by Gibson-Graham et al (2013) this is an understanding of commons that prioritises the relationships between people and the ways in which people negotiate concerns such as who has responsibility to care for commons, how commons are to be cared for, and who benefits from the commons. In this framing, commons is not dependent on any one form of property. Commons can be created with any form of property--with private property (whether owned by an individual, a

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<sup>1</sup> I also follow the practice within each enterprise of calling the consumers at Beanstalk 'members', and the consumers at Food Connect Brisbane 'subscribers'. When referring to the consumers of both enterprises, I call them 'member-subscribers'.

<sup>2</sup> Here it is worth noting the similarity with the fair trade arrangement of guaranteeing producers a minimum price for their produce, based on what is needed to sustain their livelihoods.

family, a corporation or a collective), with state-owned property or with open-access property. CSA initiatives make explicit the interdependencies between rural producers and urban consumers and highlight how urban consumers have a role to play in maintaining and caring for the agricultural commons and, in turn, benefit from this care. These relationships involve commons that are on privately-owned agricultural land (and the largely privately-held knowledge of farmers), but not exclusively so. The biophysical commons includes a form of open-access 'property' including insects, water and even seeds and soil that move and flow across the landscape.

The commitment to maintaining an agricultural commons shapes not only the general form that CSA initiatives take but also the minutiae of how they operate. CSA initiatives regularly review and adapt their economic operations based on changing circumstances and their ongoing commitment to maintaining the agricultural commons. At the same time, other ethical commitments come into play to also shape their economic operations. Typical of any community economy, these initiatives are constantly negotiating multiple ethical commitments and experimenting with diverse economic practices in order to enact these commitments. In the next section, I examine the detailed operations of Beanstalk and Food Connect Brisbane in order to explore the negotiations and struggles involved in building community economies. This material is based on interviews conducted with key people in each enterprise in the period between 2008 and 2010. The discussion captures changes that took place in this period, but as community economies that are continually revising their practices in light of changing circumstances there have been on-going changes since. For example, as a result of severe floods in the Brisbane region in 2011 some of Food Connect Brisbane's practices that are discussed in this chapter had to be suspended until the enterprise and producers recovered. What follows is thus a snapshot of a particular time.

### **Accounting for Commons, Necessity and Surplus**

We can examine the detailed operations of Beanstalk and Food Connect Brisbane by focusing on what happens to the enterprises' gross revenue. Like all enterprises, Beanstalk and Food Connect earn gross revenue from their commercial operations. In these CSA initiatives, revenue is primarily generated from what member-subscribers pay for the boxes of produce. Beanstalk charges members \$21 for a box of produce (or \$19 for low-income earners). Around two-thirds of each box is pre-packed and then members select from a range of options to pack the final third. Food Connect Brisbane offers a range of six different types and sizes of boxes ranging in price from \$34 to \$55 per box. Like all enterprises, Beanstalk and Food Connect Brisbane allocate their gross revenue in three ways. First they have to pay for the non-labor production inputs. Second, they have to pay for the labor production inputs based on what is determined as being necessary for the workers to survive on. Third, they have to decide what to do with the surplus (i.e. the sum that is left-over after paying for non-labor production inputs and labor production inputs). Each of these allocations is negotiated based on various ethical commitments, including the overarching commitment to maintaining an agricultural commons.

#### *Non-Labor Production Inputs*

The main non-labor production input for Beanstalk and Food Connect Brisbane is produce which primarily comes from local farmers who are either certified as organic producers or are working towards certification. Food Connect Brisbane has a policy of sourcing produce from farms that are within a 5 hour radius of Brisbane. Beanstalk simply tries to source from farms that are as close to Newcastle as possible, but if supplies are low Beanstalk will source from organic producers who sell to the wholesale markets in Sydney (about a 2 hour drive away).

Beanstalk and Food Connect Brisbane have a similar pricing mechanism in that the farmers set the price for their produce and the enterprises pay when the produce is delivered. Robert Pekin, an ex-farmer and the founder and CEO of Food Connect Brisbane, explains the principal:

There was no market for farmers that treated them with dignity. So we have to create a new business model that gives farmers a market and gives them a sense of hope ... We're taking farmers out of the business-as-usual economic paradigm that provides no security around the price. The farmer sets a flat price that we pay when the produce is delivered.

In this arrangement, Beanstalk and Food Connect Brisbane trust farmers to set a fair price taking into account that produce will be accepted with size or shape irregularities and some leaf or hail damage; and that farmers do not need to sort produce and can reuse boxes and packaging. Food Connect Brisbane explicitly asks farmers to consider what they need to sustain the agricultural commons: "We ask our farmers the price that they need to continue farming sustainably, in a way that ensures the health of their land, and their future on the land" (Food Connect Brisbane 2011). Food Connect Brisbane also has a policy of returning as much of their revenue as possible to farmers, and they aim for between 40 and 50 cents in the dollar to be returned to farmers (as compared to an average of 15 to 20 cents in the dollar which is returned to farmers whose produce is sold through conventional retailers). Where the quality of produce seems too low or the price too high, Beanstalk and Food Connect Brisbane will talk with farmers to try to resolve the situation, rather than simply switching to other producers.

The market arrangement that Beanstalk and Food Connect Brisbane have developed is very different from the wholesale fruit and vegetable market. In this market, farmers have to find a wholesaler to take their produce; accept prices which will vary depending on the quality of the produce and the quantity of the produce flowing into the markets; and accept payment sixty to ninety days after delivery. On a visit to Food Connect Brisbane in November 2009, one farmer described how Food Connect was paying him the pre-agreed price of \$25 per box of zucchinis. At the time, this was also the price he was achieving through the wholesale markets,<sup>3</sup> but more zucchinis were about to come onto the market from other farmers and he anticipated the price would drop to around \$10 a box (but he would still receive \$25 a box from Food Connect Brisbane). He also told of another farmer who was selling part of his avocado crop through the wholesale market, but there was a glut and the farmer's avocados could not be sold. Instead of payment for his avocados, the farmer received a bill from his agent for the cost of dumping his avocados. In contrast to this market based purely on

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<sup>3</sup> Some farmers who grow for Food Connect Brisbane sell via multiple sources, including Food Connect, the regional wholesale market and roadside stalls.

the relationship between supply and demand, Beanstalk and Food Connect Brisbane are constructing a market based on an ethical commitment to maintaining an agricultural commons. This includes supporting organic agriculture and thereby the health of the biophysical commons, and helping to make farming a viable long-term prospect and thereby helping to sustain a knowledge commons.

Beanstalk and Food Connect Brisbane have developed additional mechanisms to help sustain an agricultural commons. The enterprises organise days when member-subscribers lend a hand by voluntarily working on the farms to assist farmers, particularly when farmers are affected by adverse weather events such as floods. This means that extra help is available when farm viability is at risk. This mechanism also helps to directly connect farmers and member-subscribers and to constitute an agricultural commons that is cared for by producers *and* consumers. As CSA projects, this direct connection and commitment of producers and consumers to sustaining an agricultural commons is vital. Other mechanisms that help contribute are opportunities for ‘meet and greets’ where farmers meet member-subscribers when they pick up their boxes. Food Connect Brisbane also runs regular tours to some farms, and this has a major impact on farmers and subscribers, as Robert Pekin recounts:

For farmers in Food Connect the real incentive is the contact with the people who eat their food. We run farm tours to our growers. And every time our farmers cannot stop talking. They have never had so many questions about what they do or been so acknowledged. Farmers are almost in tears because people have come out to see what they do and they have hugged them and thanked them. People say, “I love what you’re doing to your land. I love that you’ve got this nature strip over there, and you preserve this wetland area, and that you’ve got this field lying fallow over there, and you’re growing this great produce, and you’re doing it all without chemicals.”

We just had a farm tour two weeks ago and I was talking to the honey grower afterwards and he said “I got all these thank-you cards.” How many farmers get thank you cards from the people who eat their produce?

These sorts of activities help to make the interdependencies between producer and consumer more transparent and provide an opportunity for consumers to recognize their role in helping to sustain an agricultural commons.

### *Labor Production Inputs*

The second component of gross revenue is the labor production input. This is the payment that workers receive for their material wellbeing, so it is an amount that has been determined as necessary for survival (see column 2 in Figures 1 and 2). In Beanstalk and Food Connect Brisbane the workers participate in determining what this amount should be—and as with any ethical economic decision it is a complicated process in which various concerns and commitments have to be weighed up.

Beanstalk is a consumer cooperative and the members are the consumers who purchase their produce through Beanstalk. The survival payments for workers are discussed and decided on at Management Committee meetings (which any member

can attend). These payments take two forms: an hourly rate for the part-time coordinator, and in-kind payments for other workers (called volunteers). The hourly rate for the coordinator is regularly reviewed and discussed with the coordinator to try to ensure that it is a fair payment for the work involved. The arrangement of ‘paying’ all other workers in-kind is a strategy that Beanstalk uses to encourage their members to contribute to the enterprise by volunteering their labor. More generally it also reflects Beanstalk’s ethical commitment to promoting volunteering as an important practice that helps build communities.

**Table 1: The Beanstalk Organic Food Accounts\***

Non-labor production inputs	Necessity (Labor production input)	Surplus
<p>Where possible, produce sourced from local farmers.</p> <p>Price set by farmers.</p> <p>Beanstalk supports farmers and connects them with members through regular ‘working bees’<sup>#</sup> and with farmer and member ‘meet and greets’ when boxes are collected.</p>	<p>Decisions by Management Committee but members can attend meetings.</p> <p><u>One paid stall coordinator</u>, \$20/hr.</p> <p>Other workers paid in-kind: <u>General Volunteers</u>, \$10 box credit for 3 hrs work <u>Management Committee</u>, and <u>Communications and Member Coordinators</u>, \$10 box credit for 3 hrs work <u>Farmer Contact</u>, \$35 credit for 4 -5 hrs work per week. <u>Beancounter</u>, 1 box per week.</p>	<p>Decisions by Management Committee but members can attend meetings.</p> <p>Surplus distributed in the following ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Ongoing operations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Taxes</li> <li>* Accountant</li> <li>* Insurance</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Growing &amp; strengthening <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Upgrading refrigeration, computer, scales</li> <li>* Retained earnings put aside for the future</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Sustainability initiatives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Replacement income for farmers during hardship</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

\* The format of these accounts is adapted from Gibson-Graham et al (2013).

<sup>#</sup> Working bees are when members voluntarily lend a hand to assist farmers with planting, weeding and other tasks. Working bees are usually run on a Saturday or Sunday once every couple of months.

**Table 2: Food Connect Brisbane Accounts**

Non-labor production inputs (55% of revenue)*	Necessity (Labor production input) (30% of revenue)*	Surplus (15% of revenue)*
<p>Produce sourced from farmers within a 5 hour radius of Brisbane.</p> <p>Price set by farmers.</p> <p>Food Connect Brisbane supports farmers and connects them with subscribers through ‘working bees’ during periods of hardship, regular farm tours, and farmer-subscriber ‘meet and greets’ when boxes are collected.</p>	<p>Decision made by workers.</p> <p>Originally 1 wage level for all workers (including the CEO); then 2 wage levels (\$17 &amp; \$19/hr); now considering 3 wage levels for all 32 workers:  <u>Co-workers</u>, \$18/hr  <u>Coordinators</u>, \$20/hr  <u>Responsibles</u>, \$22/hr</p> <p>Note: There is an article in the constitution that the ratio between the highest and lowest wage rate will not exceed 2:1 (i.e. the highest paid worker will never receive more than double the lowest paid worker).</p>	<p>Decisions made by different groups of workers, depending on nature of the decision.</p> <p>Surplus is distributed in the following ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Ongoing operations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Taxes</li> <li>* Accountant</li> <li>* Insurance</li> <li>* Bank fees</li> <li>* Marketing</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Growing &amp; strengthening <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Upgrading truck</li> <li>* Upgrading the packing line</li> <li>* Retained earnings put aside for the future</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Sustainability initiatives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Participatory Farmer Assessment program</li> <li>* Replacement income for farmers during hardship</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

\* These figures are based on how Food Connect Brisbane’s gross revenue was spent in 2010.

However, Beanstalk’s commitment to volunteering gets tested. In 2008, there was a sudden growth in members, largely because Beanstalk moved to new premises adjacent to a popular coffee shop strip. But this interest was not matched by an increase in volunteers. Two of the Management Committee describe the situation in the following terms:

Rhyall Gordon: As we’ve grown, we’ve had a lot of people come in that are just there to take advantage of the cheap food and aren’t volunteering, so it’s that matter of ‘Do we reward the volunteers more? Do we have more paid employees?’, that type of thing. And promoting the whole aspect of community development, which is very important to us.

Kristina Gluschke: Sometimes I think that the challenge is that people don’t want to understand that it’s a community enterprise project. They would rather that it was a business and then they wouldn’t have to contribute anything more than money.

Beanstalk spent some time discussing how best to respond. As Rhyall Gordon suggests, one option that was canvassed was a business-like approach of appointing more paid staff work. However, Beanstalk decided to maintain their commitment to



volunteering and to find ways to make these values more explicit. One option was to charge two-different membership fees so that members who volunteer would pay a lower membership than non-volunteering members, with volunteering being defined as contributing six hours work each quarter. However, it was not necessary to take the step as Beanstalk had to move to premises that were less accessible, with the result that membership dropped off and the need for additional staffing (whether paid or volunteer) became less pressing.

Just as Beanstalk regularly reviews its commitment to volunteerism, it also regularly reviews 'payment' for 'volunteering'. Originally all work was valued the same, with four hours work being equal to one box of produce. However, it was realised that different tasks carried different levels of responsibility. Now the various tasks are valued differently. One set of volunteers are called 'general volunteers' and these are the workers who assist the stall coordinator set-up or clean-up on Tuesday afternoons and evenings when members come for their boxes of produce. These volunteers usually sign-up for a one-month block of work and work for around two hours either at the start or at the end of the Tuesday stall. For every three hours of work this group now receives \$10 credit towards a box. However, not all these volunteers collect their credit; most are happy to simply contribute their time to the cooperative. Other volunteers who also receive \$10 credit for every three hours of work are the members of the Management Committee, and the membership and communication coordinators. The more demanding roles are paid differently. The Farmer Contact usually works Friday evening and weekends so the orders can be finalised with farmers in time for the Tuesday stall. The Farmer Contact is paid \$35 credit each week for around four to five hours work (and the credit is usually taken in the form of a box of produce and some other produce, such as dried goods, bread, eggs). The Beancounter also works around four to five hours each week and they are responsible for taking orders and receiving payments each Tuesday. They are paid one box per week.

Beanstalk has found it extremely difficult to decide on these levels of pay and this is reflected in the variety of payments that different 'volunteer' roles receive. In line with the development of a community economy the pay arrangements are also regularly reviewed. As highlighted in the introduction, building community economies involves "struggle, uncertainty, ambivalence, and disappointment"; there is no perfect community economy (Gibson-Graham, 2006b, xv). Instead there is an ongoing process of ethical economic decision-making in which various concerns have to be 'accounted' for. In Beanstalk's case the concerns range from those about what the enterprise can afford to pay, how pay rates will affect the amount of surplus that's generated and how much produce can be purchased from farmers; to concerns about what's fair for workers, and how to instil the ethical commitment to volunteering in the operations of the enterprise.

Beanstalk's commitment to using primarily in-kind labor also relates to the idea of commons. Beanstalk is helping to constitute a commons for its members in the same way that other groups in other parts of the world are likewise building commons. For example, in the Philippines, the Zanjera commons are based on traditional irrigation schemes. The Zanjera commons serves groups of farmers and land is divided up so that all farmers in a group get equal access to water as it flows down the irrigation canals (Coward 1979; Ostrom 1990). All members are expected to volunteer to help

maintain the canals but farmers who take on extra responsibilities are provided with extra land in return for their efforts. In the same way, Beanstalk is building a commons that all members benefit from, and there is an expectation that all members volunteer their labor in some way to help sustain this commons, whether via the small contribution of partly packing their own box of produce or via a more concerted contribution. Those who contribute more (such as general volunteers, Farmer Contact and Beancounter) are rewarded for their efforts in various ways. Nevertheless, all members benefit from the volunteer labor because it keeps the price of organic produce well below the price of organic produce available through supermarkets (and often below the price of regular supermarket produce). Beanstalk thus offers an alternative to the assumption that our survival needs are best met by a well-paying job and income that provides access to the hallowed malls of consumption. At Beanstalk ‘volunteer’ labor is a means of accessing high-quality organic produce—and as a commons the volunteer labor does not just benefit individuals but all members.

Here it is worth comparing Beanstalk’s experience of building a commons to a much larger consumer cooperative, Park Slope Food Coop in Brooklyn, which has 16,000 members and was founded in 1973. Park Slope requires that members work for 2 hours and 45 minutes every four weeks (or 13 times each year). There are exceptions, for example, for new parents or for bereavement. Members who miss shifts have to ‘make-up’ with two shifts and if these are not done within a four week period members are suspended (an arrangement members voted in favour of at a General Meeting). Park Slope insists on this work requirement as 75 per cent of the work of running the cooperative is done by volunteers and as a result there are savings of between 20 and 40 per cent on all items. But perhaps more importantly, the founding ethical commitment of the cooperative is the importance of people connecting with each other by working together. It is this importance that is placed on cooperative work that shapes the work requirements that Park Slope strictly adheres to.

The challenges of making ethical decisions around labor practices are not unique to initiatives such as Beanstalk (and Park Slope); these challenges are also faced by Food Connect Brisbane. Food Connect Brisbane uses only paid workers, and at the time of writing there were 32 paid workers. Food Connect Brisbane is a not-for-profit company, but it operates more along the lines of a cooperative. Indeed, the not-for-profit company legal structure was selected because it was more flexible and had less onerous reporting requirements than a cooperative legal structure. The only shareholders in the company are the workers, who are offered company shares after three years of employment (and when a worker leaves, the company buys their shares back). Wage levels are decided at meetings of all worker-shareholders. Like Beanstalk, Food Connect Brisbane has experienced growth pressures and this has influenced their decisions over what to pay workers, or to put it slightly differently what is necessary for workers’ survival.

Initially there was only one pay rate for all workers, whether packers or delivery truck drivers, accounts manager or CEO. This was also reflected in a flat structure where all workers participated in all decisions. However, as the number of subscribers grew this model became more and more unwieldy. Food Connect Brisbane started to delegate decision-making and introduced two pay scales (either \$17 or \$19 an hour) to acknowledge the different levels of responsibility. These rates are being reviewed because of another growth pressure. Groups across Australia are starting CSAs

modelled on Food Connect Brisbane, and senior Food Connect Brisbane staff are advising these groups on how to do this. This means that senior staff now have responsibilities not just for what happens at Food Connect Brisbane in Brisbane but for other Food Connects in other cities. At the time of writing, Food Connect Brisbane was considering three pay rates: Co-workers, \$18/hr; Coordinators, \$20/hr; and Responsibles, \$22/hr. The decision over this change in pay involves all workers, and it involves weighing up concerns about what's fair for workers who have different demands, stresses and responsibilities; and what's fair to ensure that all workers receive a payment that enables them to survive well. Food Connect Brisbane addresses this latter concern through the concept of a living wage, and they have spent considerable time discussing what constitutes a living wage in the Brisbane context to make sure that all workers receive a payment that enables them to meet their necessary requirements, which Food Connect Brisbane defines as being able to meet housing costs. There are parallels between how Food Connect Brisbane as a worker-owned company has determined what's necessary for survival and the decisions made by cooperatives around this concern. For example, in the Pioneer Valley of Western Massachusetts Collective Copies is a worker-owned cooperative that was founded in 1982. The worker-owners have determined that the pay difference between the lowest and highest paid workers cannot exceed two to one, with the standard wage being sufficient for homeownership (Cornwell 2011). Indeed, eleven of the thirteen worker-owners are homeowners.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Distributions of Surplus*

The third component of gross revenue is surplus (see column 3 in Tables 1 and 2). Like other businesses, Beanstalk and Food Connect Brisbane distribute surplus to cover ongoing operating expenses, and for growing and strengthening the enterprise. From a community economies perspective what is most interesting is the third type of surplus distribution which is clearly shaped by ethical commitments to sustaining the agricultural commons. For example, when one farmer lost crops because of floods, Beanstalk continued to pay him the amount that he would usually receive from Beanstalk—about \$400 a week—until he got back on his feet. Food Connect Brisbane is working on a similar scheme where they will set aside earnings to support farmers who experience these types of hardships.

Food Connect Brisbane has also used surplus to develop and manage a Participatory Farmer Assessment program. Basically this is a peer accreditation program, where farmers (with several Food Connect Brisbane representatives, including a subscriber) assess each other's farming practices and receive a rating based on their environmental practices, including use of organic farming methods, water use, energy use, encouragement of biodiversity (say by retaining or re-establishing wildlife corridors). The primary aim of the program is to encourage farmers to use more sustainable agricultural practices through a process in which they work with each other and learn from each other, something that is not the usual practice in the horticultural sector. The program is thus seeking to expand and strengthen the knowledge commons on which CSA depends and to shift this knowledge commons from its current private property form (in the sense that each farmer keeps their

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<sup>4</sup> Importantly too, in the US context, Collective Copies worker-owners have full health coverage (including medical, dental, mental and preventative). Partners (same or opposite sex) and children are also fully covered.

knowledge to themselves) to a more collectivised pool of knowledge that farmers can draw on.

By focusing on how these two enterprises are deciding what to do with their gross revenue we can see how they are reworking usual business practices. In terms of their relationship with producers, Beanstalk and Food Connect Brisbane reject the idea that markets have to be based on an instrumental relationship in which the producer tries to extract the highest price for their product, while the purchaser tries for the lowest price. They are creating a market which is fair for both producer and purchaser, and which is based on an overarching ethical commitment to sustaining the agricultural commons on which societies depend. In terms of their relationship with their member-subscribers, Beanstalk and Food Connect Brisbane are inviting them to participate in a form of consumption that exposes just what goes into the production of products that we usually find on the supermarket shelf. Member-subscribers pay in advance in order to underwrite and share the risks of agricultural production. In return, there are opportunities for face-to-face encounters between these financiers and the producers they are supporting. In terms of relationships with their workers, Beanstalk and Food Connect Brisbane transparently and regularly review the basis on which rewards are paid and they do so in a collaborative way with workers.

For all that Beanstalk and Food Connect Brisbane share in terms of their ethical commitments and the resulting economic practices there is also a major point of differentiation between them. Beanstalk is committed to the values of volunteering; whereas Food Connect Brisbane is committed to providing decent paid employment. These different ethical commitments result in different economic practices. Beanstalk runs primarily on 'volunteer' labor which is paid in-kind, and as a result the price of boxes of produce is kept extremely low. Food Connect Brisbane is run as a worker-shareholder operation in which workers participate in decision-making, including decisions about wage levels. Neither of these approaches is better than the other, rather they demonstrate just how much economic diversity and experimentation is possible when ethical commitments come to the fore. This is similar to the finding from another study focusing on the diverse economic practices of CSA initiatives in Western Massachusetts. White (2013) concludes that '[t]he varied approaches to CSA transcend any particular formula or scale of production and distribution and thus CSA collectively results in countless dynamics of solidarity, conflict, vulnerability, resilience, commitment, and engagement' (19).

## **Conclusion**

By foregrounding an ethical commitment to sustaining the agricultural commons and by drawing on diverse economic practices to help realize this commitment, Beanstalk and Food Connect Brisbane are building community economies. As others have highlighted (e.g. Gibson-Graham 2006a & b), this is never a straightforward process, rather challenges are thrown up on an almost daily basis. In some ways this is no different from the daily challenges that face any enterprise; however, in these community economy enterprises decisions are guided principally by ethical commitments. This is not to say that the decision-making process is made easy. In these two examples considerable time and effort is invested in discussions about developing economic practices that will reflect the ethical commitments.

What is notable is how some decisions seem easier to make than others. At least during the time period covered by this study, the decisions about relationships with producers are relatively settled. It is as if the overarching ethical commitment to an ‘other’ with whom there is an interdependent relationship is something easily resolved, whether this other is a human other in the form of the rural producer or a non-human other in the form of an agricultural environment. In particular, there seems to have been relatively little debate within the enterprises of the importance of distributing surplus for initiatives that will help to sustain the agricultural commons. Likewise, there seems to be little contention around the commons-sustaining market arrangement with producers in terms of acquiring and paying for produce. What seem more difficult for the enterprises to settle are the relationships *within* the collective, specifically around labour arrangements.

In Beanstalk there are ongoing discussions about the in-kind payment for ‘volunteers.’ One important dimension to these discussions is to try to find a way to make ‘volunteering’ an attractive option for members and thereby boost volunteer numbers. Here Beanstalk runs up against the challenge of building a community economy in which members are being enrolled to do more than just consume. The most visible forms of economic subjectivity tend to centre on being a paid worker and a consumer. It seems that although Beanstalk has been able to mobilise the familiar consumer identity as the basis for a novel consumption-based relationship with others, it has been more difficult to gain purchase around novel worker identities, specifically the shift from paid to volunteer worker. Certainly there may be practical difficulties in terms of members’ abilities to juggle multiple demands on their time. But the experience of Park Slope Food Cooperative raises the possibility that something deeper may be at play. Park Slope demands that all members work in the cooperative, and it is a demand that is supported by representational strategies and material technologies that range from the language of workslots, shifts and squads to the “Shift Swap” webpage (where members post messages to swap shifts), the Membership Office (which manages missed shifts and the like), the Future Time-Off Program (for members who find it difficult to do a regular shift once every four weeks) and the childcare service (for members who are working or shopping). This swathe of representational strategies and material technologies contributes to a process whereby members learn to inhabit what the cooperative recognises is a complex identity of ‘member-as-worker-as-owner-as-shopper’ (Park Slope Food Cooperative, n.d.) and in so doing start to feel and act as collective economic subjects. The experience of Park Slope, garnered since its inception in 1973, highlights how important it is to develop not just the diverse economic practices but also the economic subjects that community economies call for.

Likewise, Food Connect Brisbane is also building a community economy which is reshaping both economic practices and economic subjects. That workers can only become owners of the company after three years speaks to the time that it takes to shift from worker-as-employee to worker-as-owner. Interestingly, in her study of the Collective Copies cooperative in Western Massachusetts, Cornwell recounts that one worker-owner found that it took three years from joining the cooperative for him to “actually feel like a worker owner” (738). The challenge then for building community economies may be less about drawing on diverse economic practices as the basis for enacting ethical commitments and more about developing the representational

strategies and material technologies that might sustain the shift to new forms of community economy subjects.

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