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To cite this article: Bradley Christensen & Rhonda Phillips (2016): Local food systems and community economic development through the lens of theory, Community Development, DOI: 10.1080/15575330.2016.1214609

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15575330.2016.1214609

Published online: 09 Aug 2016.

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Local food systems and community economic development through the lens of theory

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Abstract

The premise of this article is that community support for local food systems and agriculture enterprises represents a convergence of both community and economic development approaches. By drawing on theory for understanding how local food systems and agriculture enterprises are pursued, there are lessons offering understanding and guidance for actions to support more holistic community economic development (CED) approaches. Using theory as a foundation, we seek to articulate the relationships between local food systems, agriculture enterprises, and CED, providing Hardwick, Vermont, as our case study. We seek to explore four theories: social capital, conflict theory, symbolic interaction, and rational choice. It is our intent to show that theory can provide insight for action and deepen understanding of local food system changes and CED impacts.

Introduction

The growth of the local food movement has been rapid, with new activities, policies, ideas, and debates emerging constantly. It touches the nerve of a basic fundamental need for everyone: food. Society recognizes this basic need, as noted in the 1948 UN Universal Human Rights framework, Article 25: Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing of himself and his family, including food.

Food holds deep meaning for all on many levels: cultural, environmental, social, economic, and even political. Issues of food equity, quality, ethos and meaning, access, and vulnerability are all present in the discourse surrounding food systems. Food is becoming front and center for many policy initiatives, running the gamut from pushes to include it in urban and regional planning policies (Soma & Wakefield, 2011) to rural development efforts to connect local food and tourism (Green & Doughtery, 2008). A local food system incorporates these meanings and purposes of food, as well as its production, processing, distribution, access, and consumption. A local food system is considered “local” based on the flow of food from production to consumption within a defined area (including regional aspects of food sheds incorporating or serving nearby urban areas) (Phillips & Wharton, 2016). Local food systems can help foster more direct and healthier links between those who produce food and those who consume it.
Here, we concern ourselves primarily with local food systems as related to community economic development (CED). Can insight be gleaned to help understand this relationship? This article attempts an exploration of this question, using theory to explore attempts to bridge the gap between local food systems and CED.

Growing changes

The fields of agriculture and economic development have undergone significant changes over the course of the last hundred years. Historically, both fields promoted large-scale export-oriented enterprises to increase farmer income and promote rural and urban development (Blank, 2008; Harold, 2010). This model, typified in the rural geography literature as the agro-industrial model – large-scale modern production and processing of food (Marsden, 2009) – and the Fordist model (mass production) among others (Kenney, Lobao, Curry, & Goe, 1989) is largely a product of agricultural economics, biological science, and the growing influence of large agri-businesses starting in the early 1900s (Kenney et al., 1989; Marsden, 2003). Note that the US system of land grant universities spurred this growth as well with access to research and application through its extension services. With a focus on incorporating exogenous elements into farm management and structure, an agro-industrial approach seeks to enhance agricultural profits via increased economies of scale, intensified production practices, and an explicit market-oriented approach. Questions about long-term sustainability of this style of agriculture began to surface in the 1970s (and continue to emerge) due to many factors, including that decade’s farm crisis (Newby, 1983), the 1974 oil crisis (Kenney et al., 1989), and public perception that this model was not particularly helping small- and mid-sized rural farms and their host communities (Hightower, 1973). One of the main issues facing rural social scientists is that these development approaches rely on external elements that influence the social, economic, and ecological networks of rural areas. These models and approaches tend to ignore the special spatial features, place-based knowledge, and social networks of agricultural communities – the “culture” and “place-based” aspects of agriculture.

There has been increasing importance on theorizing a new rural development paradigm that better incorporates unique features of rural communities (Goodman, 1997; Marsden, 1999; Van der Ploeg et al., 2000). Many scholars have made considerable headway in theorizing a new paradigm, most notably adopting ontological, epistemological, and methodological elements from the political economy tradition (Buttel, 2001). As these scholars laid down this foundation, they increasingly began to take a normative position in their work. This feature can be seen when scholars urged that “it is no longer sufficient to only produce a critique of modernization; rural researchers need to apply their knowledge to the rebuilding of rural life and polity” (Marsden, 1999, p. 505). Subsequent research has focused on understanding and analyzing alternative food initiatives/networks (Allen, FitzSimmons, Goodman, & Warner, 2003), short food supply chains (Renting, Marsden, & Banks, 2003), quality food products (Goodman, 2003), and food and agriculture’s role in sustainability and ecological modernization (Murphy, 2000). These research topics incorporate many concepts from a wide range of social science disciplines. However, there has been less scholarship in understanding and theorizing the micro-level processes by which rural communities adopt, participate in, and create new practices, networks, and initiatives. We believe that the theories
and practices of CED can aid in the understanding of these micro-level processes, especially as related to the special and unique features of rural areas.

**Local food systems and CED**

Some context is needed regarding the relationships between local food systems, community and economic development approaches, and their intersection. Community development serves as the foundation for other types of development and provides relevant theories for our exploration. Community development is defined in myriad ways throughout a variety of disciplines, for example, as “planned efforts to produce assets that increase the capacity of residents to improve their quality of life” (Green & Haines, 2007, p. vii), or as a “place-based approach … concentrating on creating assets” (C. Vidal & Keating, 2004, p. 126). We also consider a definition focusing on both process and outcomes:

A process: developing or increasing the ability to act collectively; and an outcome: taking collective action, and the result of that action for improvement in a community in any or all realms: physical, environmental, cultural, social, political, economic, etc. (Phillips & Pittman, 2015, p. 8)

While cognizant of the skills of individuals, community development is also about social dimensions, with social capital as a major factor facilitating community development and capacity building as an exercise in creating or increasing the stock of capital (Pittman, Pittman, Phillips, & Cangelosi, 2009, p. 81). Embedded within definitions of community development are major concerns or areas of interest. Hustedde (2009) describes these as: (1) relationships; (2) structure; (3) power; (4) shared meaning; (5) communication for change; (6) motivations for decision-making; and (7) integration of these disparate concerns and paradoxes. Many of these areas are related to social capital. There are many forms of capital vital to community development, including natural, cultural, human, political, financial, and built capitals (Emery & Flora, 2006). All of these types are important, yet “without social capital it would be hard to actualize effective community development because it represents the capacity to get things done” (Phillips & Besser, 2013, p. 2). Social capital enables ability to act collectively and take collective action in participatory, democratic ways (Phillips, 2012).

On the other hand, economic development centers on creating wealth and economic outcomes. One way to view the relationship between these two areas is that community development can be thought of as producing assets and capacities, while economic development mobilizes these assets for economic benefits. As noted, traditional or mainstream economic development has focused on economic outcomes, sometimes to the detriment of ecological or social dimensions of community. There has been a shift to a more holistic approach, one that includes more consideration of all dimensions of community wellbeing as a result of increased awareness of ecological needs and the push for sustainable approaches. Other considerations, including impacts on economic self-sufficiency, are a key part of any successful development approach, program, or policy (Phillips, 2012). Anglin (2010, p. 3) provides a definition reflecting this shift:

Community economic development, and its values and practices, are indeed important strategies to help forge a stronger base for addressing key challenges going forward such as (1) development that protects the environment while opening opportunities for the poor to build wealth and opportunity, and (2) assisting in the larger project of strengthening the economic competitiveness of cities and regions.
We agree that a definition of CED is “a merging of aspects of both the fields of community development and economic development, implying practice aimed at community betterment and economic improvement at the local level, preferably encompassing sustainable development approaches” (Phillips & Besser, 2013, p. 2).

We would highlight additional community factors such as accessibility, inclusiveness, equity, and the other dimensions of community development enabling more sustainable and just processes and outcomes. Local food systems in particular are connected to community development in many of these areas, and include economic development aspects as well. Growing consumer awareness of local food systems invites more inclusion and participation (Macias, 2008), which in turn can lead to more equitable processes and outcomes. Bringing these two areas together – local food systems and CED – we can begin to see the potential of fostering a more sustainable system benefitting both consumers and small farmers. Both economic development and community development approaches can incorporate local food enterprises as viable economic development activities enhanced by communities working together to achieve development outcomes and goals (Brasier et al., 2007; Morton & Miller, 2007; Phillips & Wharton, 2016; Taylor & Miller, 2010).

The local food movement provides a natural bridge to CED. It merges with many of the ideas of sustainability, with food production, processing, distribution, and consumption integrated into all dimensions of a place, including economic, environmental, and social (Berman, 2011). There are a variety of forms and activities around the local foods movement, including farmers’ markets, community-supported agriculture, community gardens, and food hubs, just to name a few. Some call it a movement that is spreading quickly beyond the mainstream food markets and helping spur a sustainable network based on local foods (Ikerd, 2011). The connection to the locale is crucial, as the “place” matters greatly when attempting to foster healthy community environments as a desired outcome of community development approaches (Holland & Thompson, 2015). With the growing interest in local food systems, “utilizing a place-based development approach to ensure long-term sustainability of local food systems will be prudent” (Holland & Thompson, 2015, p. 68). It is widely viewed that such a system built around local foods provides a more accessible environment, and one that is knowledge rich, vs. the “one imposed by the productionist paradigm of industrial agriculture in which the origins of food products and the methods of their production are hidden from the consumer” (Gross, 2011, p. 181). Issues and concerns over the conventional food system have prompted exploration of not only issues of food safety, nutritional value, and environmental impacts (Soma & Wakefield, 2011), but also the recognition of the detrimental impacts on small and family farms (Mount, 2011). Local food systems are seen as a way to help faltering small farms, while at the same time addressing concerns of consumers and demand for locally produced products (Brasier et al., 2007).

Analysis approach

Our case is that of Hardwick, Vermont, a town with recent developments in their local foods system that has attracted national attention. For the case, we utilize embedded analysis, described by Yin (2003) as an appropriate technique to use when exploring specific aspects of a case as well as for seeking broader elements such as key issues and common themes. The focus in this instance is seeking better understanding between local food systems and CED, using theory as the lens for exploration. To gather our insights, we conducted two
visits to Hardwick for observations and interviewed a few of the major participants in the town’s economy (one entrepreneur, one “cooperative” model enterprise, and one director of a resource and incubation center for local foods). We also used secondary sources (websites, data provided by the town government, and printed sources such as a book and newspaper articles about Hardwick). We take the viewpoint that theories can serve as guides to action or understanding. This viewpoint is more of an action-oriented one, grounded in key concepts of collective action and social capacity. As Green (2008, p. 50) explains,

If it is to be used in informing practice, theory must help us to interpret and understand the world. Community theory may benefit from directing more attention to the work that people collectively do to shape community life. As one step in this direction, models of community development practice should be revisited to bring in and synthesize theory describing, interpreting, and understanding people’s strategic action.

There are four theories particularly relevant for furthering understanding: social capital, conflict theory, symbolic interaction, and rational choice theory. Each of these theories reflects one or more of these major concerns within community development, such as relationships, structure, power, shared meaning, decision-making, communications, and integration of disparate concerns. Each of the theories can be applied in the context of CED, especially to local food systems and agriculture enterprise development. Social capital theory concerns itself with relationships, while conflict theory addresses issues of power, rational choice theory centers on decision-making, and symbolic interaction is about shared meaning.

The case: Hardwick, Vermont

The town of Hardwick lies in the northeastern region of Vermont, appropriately named the Northeast Kingdom. The town has a population of just over 3000, and a regional population greater than 8000 (Town of Hardwick, 2015). In the late 1800s and into the early 1900s, it was a prosperous granite-mining town but slipped into depression many decades ago with a once vibrant Main Street becoming predominately vacant. Like many rural areas, agriculture has always been a part of the Hardwick economy. After the granite boom and bust, the region saw a large influx of French Canadian dairy farmers who helped lessen the impact of the granite bust and the oncoming depression. In the end, the Hardwick dairy economy fared similar to the rest of Vermont where family dairies continue to go out of business (Parsons, 2010). In general, this boom and bust cycle has been the theme of the Hardwick economy.

Fast-forward to today and it seems that Hardwick is in another boom cycle. While a few food and agricultural businesses have been around for a long time, such as the Buffalo Mountain Co-op (started in 1975), many more enterprises have sprung up in the last 10 years including but not limited to Jasper Hill Farm, Cellars at Jasper Hill, High Mowing Organic Seeds, Claire’s Restaurant and Bar, Pete’s Greens, Vermont Soy Company, The Highfields Center for Composting, and Honey Garden Apiaries. Agripreneurs (agricultural entrepreneurs) and others in the area believe it is possible to create meaningful work in the place they live. Operating with the guiding principle of local economic development based on the stewardship of natural resources, they have created
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a constellation of businesses which are complementary and symbiotic – a diversified vegetable
farm, a compost center, an organic seed company, a small cheesemaking operation, and an
organic tofu business – all enterprises which benefited from co-learning, sharing equipment,
friendly lending – and creative problem solving. (S. Waring, personal communication, April 6,
2015)

Additionally, supporting organizations such as the Vermont Food Venture Center and The
Center for an Agricultural Economy (CAE) have been created. The question to consider for
CED becomes: Is this boom period the same as the previous ones, or does the current focus
on local food systems and agriculture enterprise provide a different foundation for creating
longer term CED outcomes?

Agriculture has always been a part of the Hardwick economy, yet the Hardwick story really
drew national attention when it was featured in a New York Times article titled, “Uniting
around Food to Save an Ailing Town” (Burros, 2008) and in a Gourmet Magazine article pub-
lished the day after titled, “The Town that Food Saved” (Hewitt, 2008). The author of the latter
article would then expand his article into a book of the same title, drawing substantial
attention to Hardwick. These articles provide some fascinating insight for the community
economic developer because they summarize the process and key players of CED initiatives
in the Hardwick area.

Through the lens of theory

In this section, we seek to explore how theory can help foster understanding and perhaps
provide guides for action relative to local food systems and CED. Local food systems and
CED in Hardwick are viewed through the lenses of four theories, as follows.

Social capital theory

As mentioned, there are many forms of capital important for a community. The most fre-
quently mentioned are usually built capital, in the form of buildings, roads, and other infra-
structure and natural capital, in the form of forests, waterways, and other available natural
resources. Again, social capital is a fundamental capital, encapsulating the essential social
relations, trust, network, and norms in a community (Hustedde, 2009). In Hardwick, there is
a type of social capital very evident, that of agripreneurs, or agricultural entrepreneurs. To
the community developer, these types of growth-oriented and often socially missioned (or
at least socially concerned) entrepreneurs are extremely valuable assets for a community.
Not only do these types of individuals provide jobs in the short term, but they also seek to
expand their businesses and strengthen the community housing their families and busi-
nesses (Gruidl & Markley, 2009). Unlike external investors, these individuals are rooted within
an area that supports their businesses and are more likely to be vested in the overall health
of their community.

While this type of growth-oriented agriculture entrepreneur represents a powerful form
of social capital for a community, agripreneurs are but one piece of the larger social capital
picture. Consider the case of Tom Stearns, an agripreneur in Hardwick. In personal commu-
nication with Tom in July 2010, he explained that he did not move to the Hardwick area
because he saw a down-and-out community needing revitalization. He moved there because
it had one of the highest organic farms per capita ratio in the United States. If he was going
to start an organic seed business, he wanted to be in “a like-minded community that cares about the same things.” He started his business as a hobby to help support himself through school, primarily supplying the local markets. As his business grew in size, he started shipping his seeds nationwide and realized that the growth of his company could help the entire community. Not only would he employ more workers, but he would also lease land from nearby farmers, producing seeds, especially suited to the Hardwick area, supplying the community with his seed business byproducts (food!), and advocating for heirloom seed protection. Stearns would not have been able to do this had there not been a social capital network in the Hardwick area that cared about organic farming and provided the supporting environment to grow his business. An important aspect to note is that community members are able to engage and work together to achieve desired outcomes, as well as work through differences. Social capital implies the extent to which members of a community can work together effectively to develop and sustain strong relationships, solve problems, make group decisions, and collaborate effectively to plan, set goals, and get things done (Phillips & Pittman, 2015).

**Conflict theory**

Conflict theory helps explain power relationships in a community. The theory suggests that conflict is both a reality and integral part of social and community life, and that community capacity is central to the inclusion and empowerment of residents (Brennan & Israel, 2008). Similar to social capital in Hardwick, there are two layers of conflict that apply to local food systems and Hardwick that we examine to illustrate our point. The first layer deals with who controls the food supply, especially since the American agricultural sector is an extremely concentrated market. In all commodity food markets except for dairy, the top four firms control between 49 and 95% of the market, enough for economists to label these markets as “highly concentrated” and more prone to anti-trust issues (Blank, 2008). If ever there was a struggle between concentrated corporate interests and one’s ability to exercise back-to-the-land self-reliance, it is in food – the point is that it is difficult to have control over one’s food, given concentrations in the food system.

This first layer of conflict (control over one’s food supply) can be examined with the case of Hardwick producing goods once imported from other communities or regions. We can use this layer of conflict to address points about conflict theory, illustrating relationships between CED and local food systems. These locally oriented import substitutes create a more stable economic base where communities are not as reliant on external firms and market fluctuations (Shuman, 1998). It is unclear whether or not these substitutions can compete with imported goods on price, but they have a clear market advantages in the “romantic and practical resistance to monopolistic economies” (Bellows & Hamm, 2001, p. 273). From our observations, this type of conflict seems very applicable to Vermont towns where there is a strong do-it-yourself mentality. However, the application of conflict theory in this manner might be limited in other communities that are not as fiercely independently minded.

The second layer of conflict theory present in Hardwick is between the community and agripreneurs. Hewitt describes a particularly colorful passage quoting a very independent Vermont back-to-the-lander:
What these guys are doing in Hardwick is creating their own little empire and it’s not going to be anything different from a corporation owning the town. It’s just guys with capital mediating between us and our needs. It’s not an opportunity for us; it’s being imposed on us … we don’t need a bunch of white guys telling us how to adapt. (Hewitt, 2010, p. 91)

Varying opinions can lead to conflict. One might speculate that some of this discomfort emanates from the national media’s portrayal of events there. Hardwick went from a normal rural Vermont town to a “town that food saved” almost overnight. This national spotlight focused the attention on four agripreneurs and did not credit the community’s social capital housing these prominent agripreneurs. It would be a shock for any community to read in the New York Times that they have been “saved by food” and by four entrepreneurs in particular with little credit to the community enabling this development. Undoubtedly, the presence of the national media attention affected the dynamic between the community, the agripreneurs, and the nation.

This type of conflict is not uncommon around development initiatives, and there are many cases where some individuals are opposed to the CED measures being enacted. The real question for the community economic developer is: how can this conflict be converted into something productive? In Hardwick, this question is being pursued through the work of the CAE. Over a decade ago, CAE was formed as a not-for-profit resource hub that would serve to educate, assist, and accelerate growth in those areas of the food system that entrepreneurs could not achieve on their own (Phillips & Waring, 2015). It arose out of the realization that it takes more than a cluster of like-minded businesses to generate CED benefits and that others would need to join. CAE, along with its Vermont Food Venture Center, serves as a food-based enterprise incubator, shared kitchen, and small business development support program. “CAE is serving as a way to connect people together and to resources to foster business and community development in the area,” Sarah Waring, director of CAE, shared with us. As a non-profit organization that provides a neutral resource, CAE is not viewed as threatening.

Symbolic interaction

Another theory that can be used to understand local food systems and CED is symbolic interaction. This theory emphasizes the “symbolic nature of human interaction rather than a mechanical pattern of stimulus and interaction…. the meaning of a situation is not fixed but is constructed by participants as they anticipate the responses of others” (Hustedde, 2009, p. 26). Food in particular is a perfect candidate for symbolic interaction because food means many different things to many different groups of people. A quick look through the academic journals of Gastronomica and Food, Culture & Society reveals a wide set of literature addressing how people and cultures interpret food. In this light, food is an excellent vehicle for CED because it has so many different interpretations and meanings, providing the opportunity to bring together multiple people around CED. Unlike promoting a new mountain bike park or a new art walk, food is something that everybody cares about and everybody needs. There are wide and diverse interpretations of the food system in Hardwick: for the agripreneurs, it has meant opportunity; for the back-to-the-landers it is about independence and self-reliance; for High Fields Compost it is about compost; for the CAE it is about local tradition and a revitalized economy (S. Waring, personal communication, April 6, 2015); for Claire’s Restaurant and Bar’s (2010) it was about “[helping] you celebrate, restart, relax or
savor your day;” and it is anyone’s guess about the many different meanings that food has for the other residents of the Hardwick area. The key for utilizing this shared symbolic interaction is to lessen the barriers and risks associated with developing food based enterprises while still allowing the many different interpretations and interactions to develop on their own. Considering these types of interactions can help guide CED actions.

**Rational choice theory**

A fourth CED theory we employ to help understand the link between local food systems and CED is rational choice theory. This theory is largely concerned with understanding choices and the process used to make them. It is one of the most widely known theories in development and related disciplines. Grounded in utilitarian assessment of consequences, it proposes the following stages for making choices: (1) formulation of goals and objectives; (2) identification and design of major alternatives for reaching goals identified within the given decision-making situation; (3) prediction of major sets of consequences expected to follow upon adoption of each alternative; (4) evaluation of consequences in relation to desired objectives and other important values; (5) decision based on information provided in the preceding steps; (6) implementation of this decision through appropriate institutions; and (7) feedback of actual program results and their assessment in light of the new decision-situation (Friedmann, 1987). Specifically, in the context of community development, “rational choice theory is concerned with finding appropriate rewards and minimizing the risks to individuals who become involved in community initiatives” (Hustedde, 2009, p. 30). With food businesses in both rural and urban areas, there can be quite a bit of risk for developing food and agricultural products and services. Often, there is a lack of knowledge and support to help entrepreneurs create new opportunities as well as aid them in transitioning to higher value-added markets. Rational choice theory provides a “logical” progression of decision-making, which presumably can reduce risk.

One way that this risk has been minimized for agricultural-based communities has been through local business clusters. Most of the CED literature cites Porter’s definition of a cluster as “geographic concentrations of interconnected companies, specialized suppliers, service providers, firms in related industries, and associated institutions (e.g. universities, standards agencies, trade associations) in a particular field that compete but also cooperate” (Porter, 2000, p. 15). The clustering of related agricultural businesses allows them to pool their resources to invest in capital that could not be undertaken by one firm alone. It is similar to formal cooperatives in aspects of sharing or pooling resources, although the ownership models differ (rather than a jointly owned cooperative, clusters are usually comprised of individual enterprises).

An illustrative case in point in the Hardwick area is the Cellars at Jasper Hill. The Cellars started as the basement floor of the Kehler brother’s milking barn. The popularity of their cheese began to skyrocket and the brothers saw an opportunity to offer their services to other Vermont dairies seeking to create aged cheese. After collaborating with local dairies and the large Cabot cooperative, the founders were able to obtain a $500,000 loan from the Vermont Economic Development Authority, a number of rural development grants, equity investors, and financing to create a 22,000 square foot cheese aging facility in Greensboro, Vermont, just outside of Hardwick (Vermont Economic Development Authority [VEDA], 2010). The Cellars at Jasper Hill has enabled small-scale dairies to gain access to the technical
information and knowledge to create high-value aged cheese (we must note that several of these cheeses have received national awards!). The Cellars have also allowed dairies to cooperate, attaining the scale needed to ship cheeses to large urban centers where demand and prices are high. In the past, it was cost prohibitive for small dairies to ship their products to urban markets, however, now with the Cellars as an aggregating force, these small dairies can pool their products to fill a pallet load and more economically ship their products to New York City and Boston (VEDA, 2010).

The Cellars represents a choice made to develop a cluster, in the parlance of CED. Within the business cluster paradigm, there are two types of clusters: export-oriented and locally oriented. Historically, economic development has focused on creating export-oriented markets to stimulate a local economy by bringing in outside money. This strategy was favored because a local orientation was seen as a zero sum game whereby new businesses would only be stimulated at the expense of other local businesses (Taylor & Miller, 2010). However, this premise is being challenged with research showing locally oriented businesses as providing a more stable local economic base and generating higher multiplier effects than export-oriented businesses (Shuman, 1998). Local export-oriented businesses are competing with many other non-local export-oriented businesses. If more favorable conditions for production are found elsewhere, that business may be induced to relocate. The export-oriented model changes, however, when it is local characteristics that are being exported. This is the case with artisan cheeses and other foods that have unique placed-based characteristics, also known as terroir (Trubeck, 2008). While many of the cheeses from the Cellars at Jasper Hill are shipped to non-local markets, many of the other regional agricultural producers supply the Hardwick food system. The food at Claire’s Restaurant and Bar, for example, was almost exclusively sourced from local farms (and the restaurant itself was community owned via shares sold to residents). Also, the Buffalo Mountain Co-op carries many local products.

From this example, we posit that rational choice theory is illustrated with the choices that Hardwick has pursued. While the Cellars is a private enterprise, it has the effect of serving as a community initiative, by “finding appropriate rewards and minimizing risks to individuals who become involved” (Hustedde, 2009, p. 30). Common ground has been found, in this case, to develop specialty products by banding together to produce and distribute. Individual participation in collective action has resulted in positive CED outcomes, via the lens of rational choice theory.

**Conclusion and lessons learned**

There has been a rapid emergence of interest in local food systems and its role in development. Given the need to consider what a local foods system movement implies, we focused on exploring how local food systems and agriculture enterprises are related to CED. We explored how theory can provide insight for action and deepen understanding of local food systems and CED impacts, using social capital, conflict theory, rational choice, and symbolic interaction theories.

Local food and agriculture businesses have created much activity around CED in the town of Hardwick. Food is particularly suited for helping drive CED; not only does it mean something to everyone, it is by necessity an element that each community must address. In some contexts and communities, large amounts of social capital have been created in and around
food – social capital theory can provide some guidance. For some communities this social capital helps support a rich network of agricultural producers, while in other communities it manifests in a vibrant haute cuisine and restaurant network. The question to consider is how and to what extent can this social capital help spur desirable CED, with networks of producers, retailers, consumers, and others?

Given diversity of cultures and contexts, there is inherently conflict between different groups. It is particularly relevant in the context of control over local food supplies, and in some situations may lead to opportunities to produce goods formerly imported. This movement toward import substitution creates a constantly changing local economy whereby entrepreneurs can capitalize on local opportunities to produce economic growth (Taylor & Miller, 2010). At the local level, the key for CED is to help guide this conflict so that it remains constructive, motivates individuals to get involved, and does not alienate community members from each other. It is important to note that conflicts can emerge at the regional scale, not just local versus global production, and CED could help address these conflicts for the common good. Conflict theory holds application in the CED context as seen in the case of Hardwick.

Although different groups interpret food in various ways, food can still provide the platform for those groups to come together and work toward common development goals. It is this undercurrent of symbolic interaction enabling food to be a powerful vehicle for CED in many different types of communities. The approaches illustrated by Hardwick might not be the blueprint for every other city, but it does provide an example of how a food system can be used for CED. Although there are those who do not support Hardwick’s agriculture enterprise development, it has helped revitalize this community.

Rational choice theory illustrates the power of decision-making. It is useful to guide or understand action at the community level in the context of local food systems. Because of its nature as a necessity, there will always be a market for food and a need for the communities producing it. The competitive arena for food is not evenly open to everyone and there are many markets that exhibit monopolistic behaviors. To overcome these barriers, market failures can be dealt with by creating food clusters lowering risks for individuals wanting to enter this sector. Community-oriented collaborations can help entrepreneurs enjoy economies of scale, while maintaining the independence and flexibility of a locally owned small-scale business, as illustrated in the case presented.

The four theories explored provide insights into the situation in Hardwick, illustrating the issues embedded in community development areas of concern. As shown, there is connection between local food systems and CED with a few lessons learned, summarized as:

1. Relationships are of paramount importance to achieving CED. This is illustrated by the importance placed on the role of social capacity and reflected in social capital theory.
2. Conflict reflects power relationships in a community and it is vital to address. An important aspect to consider is if community members can participate together civilly even if they disagree. The ability to work together to resolve differences is also reflective of social capital in a community.
3. Food, including its symbolism, serves a unifying purpose that can be used as a foundation for connecting local food systems to CED.
(4) Decisions made to support appropriate rewards and minimize risks to individuals who become involved with community-wide activities can help spur wider CED outcomes, via “rational” choices.

As seen, theory can help deepen understanding and insight into many of the areas of local food systems, agriculture enterprises, and CED. Conversely, action can shape future theorizing. It can be used to gauge current situations, as well as explore what could be expected to happen in communities willing to connect the bridge between local food systems and CED.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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