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## Public Sector Purchasers as Value Creators in a Resilient Food System: Designing the Public Purse Procurement (3P) Mentorship Program

### ***Abstract***

*The 3P Mentorship Program is a community of practice that convenes institutional food buyers around a shared vision to use the \$750 million purchasing power of the Ontario public sector to foster resilient local food systems. Five design principles emerged from the program, which ran as a pilot in 2014-2015 with a cohort of four institutional mentees: a hospital, university, college, and long term care home, each represented by a manager influencing the institutions' procurement. System mapping and informal interviews revealed that the point of purchase was a high leverage, low friction point of intervention where procurement mechanisms, such as the RFP, make institutions passive consumers of value from the food system. A challenge emerged to design a minimally disruptive intervention that would enable managers to re-claim these mechanisms and to re-imagine their institutions as creators of value, in a position to curate the "reconfiguration of roles and relationships among [the] constellation of actors" for a more resilient food system (Normann and Ramirez, 1993). The pilot generated evidence of the ability of networked institutions to collaborate on a shared vision to increase the social good generated through purchasing, and to play a transformative role in food systems.*

## *Introduction*

The twenty-first century global food system is pushing the limits of its organizing rules. Industry's pursuit of growth, profits, and customer satisfaction has reached near hyperbolic proportions. Food is cheap. It arrives *just-in-time* and it relies on precariously employed migrant labour. Strawberries are abundant in January. The signals of a system in crisis are abundant: the bees are dying, farmers are aging, and consolidation in industry is staggering. This precarious system is sparking global food riots, the commercial extinction of species, and a feverish obsession with inputs, antibiotics, and food safety in an attempt to extend the life of a system straining past its limits. There is little room for error in this system. There is little resilience in the face of external shocks such as shifts in climate or the migration of pests.

Public sector communities of practice are the staging grounds for systemic change, where the failing patterns of production, distribution, and consumption in the global food system can be examined, probed, and reconfigured, to generate greater wealth in the local food systems in which they are embedded. Consciously designed communities of practice of institutional purchasers are a space to discover and begin to understand the current system. This case study of the Public Purse Procurement (3P) Mentorship Program demonstrates how institutions networked through communities of practice can engage in a process of revealing the system and can awaken to their own power within it, able to harness its mechanisms to reconfigure the relationships within it. Networked and empowered through communities of practice, institutions can experiment with their curatorial powers to reorganize the patterns of production and distribution to contribute to the emergence of sustainable local food systems. Indeed, the barriers to undertaking strategic institutional procurement efforts can be overwhelming, particularly in the neoliberal context of global trade agreements, shrinking public sector budgets, the decoupling of food from the provision of care and education, and the challenge of creating a shared vision and measures of success. However, a networked and empowered public sector is well positioned to overcome these challenges.

The assumption of this paper is that the espoused goal of corporate-dominated, global food systems and local food systems alike is to feed the people it serves. This is the common denominator between the two systems. The scale at which this goal operates distinguishes the two systems from one another, as do the theories in use (the set of values and strategies particular to the context), which are deployed to fulfill the goal. Specifically, a more elaborated espoused goal of the global food system might be to feed a hungry planet. Conversely, the goals of sustainable local food systems operationalize at a more localized scale around concerns for accessibility, ownership, dignity, and sustainability within the system. There is an explicit judgment in this paper that the mechanisms through which institutions engage with these systems, particularly the global food system, reinforces structures and patterns of behaviour that prevent the system from fulfilling its espoused goal. The corporate global food system is not feeding the world. Passive institutional procurement perpetuates the legitimacy of this failing system rather than working toward its transformation and regeneration.

In the following sections, the paper introduces the case of the Public Purse Procurement Mentorship Program, a community of practice for public sector food purchasers, designed to leverage the influence of institutions in the food system. The next section maps complexity in the food system, in order to understand the points of leverage within it. The map highlights how the trend of consolidation and centralization in the food system leads to a

trade-off between system resilience and efficiency. The paper explores how institutions' conceptions of value are translated to supply chains through the point of purchase, specifically through the Request for Proposal (RFP) process, to reinforce this trend. Normann and Ramirez' concept of value constellations is used to propose that institutions can use their curatorial powers of procurement to be creators of value for a more resilient food system. The communities of practice model is explored as a strategy to empower institutions within this system, in order to realize the potential of public sector procurement. The paper explores key design considerations for communities of practice and shares five design principles that emerged from the pilot of the Public Purse Procurement Mentorship Program. Finally, the paper concludes with the aspirational, systemic implications of public sector communities of practice on the food system.

### ***Case Background***

The Public Purse Procurement (3P) Mentorship Program emerged as a community of practice to network the efforts of institutional purchasers in Ontario. In 2014-2015, a pilot cohort of four institutions was selected by application, including an Ontario hospital, university, college, and long-term care home, each represented by a manager with influence over procurement, who would participate as mentees. Two mentors, familiar with food systems and procurement, guided the cohort through an emergent, participant-defined learning curriculum. Located across Ontario, the institutions met regularly by phone, email, and in person to discuss progress on their institution-specific goals.

The Public Purse Procurement (3P) community of practice (3P COP) was a response to the traditionally siloed approach institutions took to purchasing, which prevents information from circulating among institutions that purchase using similar mechanisms, from similar supply chains. The networked approach was also a response to the champion flight<sup>1</sup> and turnover in local food efforts that is observable in Ontario, and is anecdotally linked to granting cycles. Sustainable local food roles and efforts in institutions often cease or are scaled back when grants end. The 3P COP therefore set out to build a community of practice among the existing staff of institutions, who were in stable management positions and who could influence procurement. Through an emergent, iterative approach, the model was designed to encourage more self-organizing within institutions, reframing the primary resource available to institutions as the very relationships among themselves as co-participants, rather than as the short-term funding or external expertise available through grants.

The institutional mentees came together around a shared mission to impact the long-term sustainability of the food system. The 3P COP set out to fulfill institution-specific goals and to tackle the structural elements of the system that led to gaps in the mental models of managers,<sup>2</sup> and between their goals and outcomes. The program explored the current culture around food and purchasing, and then examined the mechanisms and paradigms that could lead to a positive transformation in the food procurement culture at these institutions. Fundamentally, the 3P COP was designed around the assumption that social learning is a

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<sup>1</sup> Identifying and funding "champions" has been central in the local food movement in Ontario, but there is an observable pattern that the tenure of these champions often expires with funding.

<sup>2</sup> In a 2013 My Sustainable Canada workshop, health care nutrition managers were asked to evaluate the importance of local food at home and then to evaluate its importance at work; the value at home was markedly higher and pointed to a gap, when probed, related to the control felt over purchasing at home versus at work.

powerful vehicle for catalyzing lasting, sustained efforts for systemic change. It was also built around the hypothesis that different types of traditionally siloed institutions could be relevant, powerful mentors to one another, if networked to identify shared experiences and objectives.

The hypothesis of social learning within networked institutions proved true in the pilot, and the first cohort generated a number of early signs of evidence of the transformative powers of institutions in the food system. Early victories included eliciting new behaviours from distributors, who began to share previously undisclosed information on food origin; challenging corporate policy with contract caterers built on persistent myths related to provincial meat inspection; embedding progressive purchasing measures in a new RFP; and discovering the positional power that networked institutions can have as the customers in the system. The first cohort also achieved an overall 14% increase in baseline purchases of local food across one year, worth \$346, 000. The initial success of the cohort creates the case for further exploring the role that communities of practice can play in advancing the role of institutions in resilient food systems.

## *Mapping a Complex Food System*

Metcalf Foundation President Sandy Houston, wrote in 2010 that, “Food is a fundamental human concern central to our health, economy, and environment, and yet the system we have built around it is complex, rigid, and opaque.” The complexity is inevitable, but the rigidity and opaqueness of the system are not. The global corporate food system sacrifices resilience for efficiency in a myopic pattern of capitalist wealth accumulation that discounts the welfare of the many for the wealth of a few, falling short of the espoused system goal of feeding the people it serves. The system’s ability to allocate food efficiently is poor. Nearly one billion people go hungry every day, according to the World Food Program. In Canada, roughly forty percent of the food produced is wasted, valued in excess of \$27 billion, or roughly 2% of the nation’s GDP (Statistics Canada, 2010; Macdonald, 2009 in Gooch et. al. 2010, 2). The failures of the corporate food system come into focus in the current climate of waste, hunger, and environmental degradation. The system is rigid, opaque, and fragile. The pattern of consolidation and centralization that contributes to its increasing rigidity is discussed in the next section.

## *Consolidation and Centralization in the Food System*

The food system is increasingly centralized and vertically integrated, with fewer decision makers controlling the means of production, processing, and distribution. The system is increasingly rigid, serving the interests of the few, rather than of the many. It is built on limited flows of information that make the system opaque, to the benefit of entities with positional power that control these flows – the corporations that maximize their goals at the expense of espoused system goals.

The trend toward consolidation and centralization in the food system has matured in Canada since the 1950s (Carter-Whitney and Miller 2010, 7), when farm numbers began to decline. The number of farms in Canada has contracted to one quarter of the number there were less than a century ago, from 732,832 in 1941 to 205,730 in 2011 (Statistics Canada 2015). Statistics Canada reported in 2015 that, “The trends of fewer operators, fewer young operators and fewer farms showed no signs of reversing and may indicate more consolidation

and significant turnover in farm assets in the future.” The remaining farmers are bound in an industrial agriculture system so heavily reliant on inputs that the price-cost squeeze has made farming precarious, often unprofitable work. Nettie Wiebe (2008, 162) reveals that,

*“From 1985 to 2010, Canadian farmers, employing world-leading productivity and efficiency [techniques], managed to produce and sell... nearly three-quarters of a trillion dollars in gross revenue [government payments excluded]. But over the same period, farmer’s net farm income (again, government payments excluded) was less than zero, (Wiebe 2008, 162).”*

In the context of this price-cost squeeze, farm secession is a problem. An Okanagan Valley peach farmer, interviewed as part of a 2010 research project on agricultural income stabilization programs in Canada, explained that her peach orchard was reliant on sprays that she would rather not use, but that, “I have no choice if I want to compete,” (Lapalme 2015). She revealed that she would not pass her farm on to her children because it would be “child abuse” to do so, given the precarity of her position in the system as a farmer. If she were to do it over, the farmer indicated that she would diversify what she grew to be less vulnerable to pest, disease, and fluctuations in the market. “Then I would have some quality of life,” she concluded (Lapalme 2015).

Processors have also struggled to remain viable in the face of fierce global competition and a regulatory environment scaled for large, industrial operations. Ontario abattoirs have fought to remain viable in a regulatory climate that systematically prefers federal food safety inspection to provincial. Federal inspection allows meat to be sold across the provinces, rather than only in the province of inspection, and mirrors the national business models of distributors, whose margins are improved by dealing with fewer suppliers who can serve the full market (Carter-Whitney 2008, 24). Major plant closures in the last decade by CanGrow, Heinz, and most recently by Kellogg’s in December 2014, are evidence of eroding and centralizing processing capacity, with operations migrating south of the border toward the larger American market (MaRS Solutions Lab 2014, 1; Carter-Whitney and Miller 2010, 13). In the same year, the US witnessed the merger of manufacturing giants H.J. Heinz Co. and The Kraft Foods Group, which formed Kraft-Heinz, expected to be the world’s fifth largest food company, along with the \$130 billion merger of Dow and Dupont, agribusiness leaders in the sales of chemicals and agricultural materials (Forbes 2015).

The pattern of consolidation continues with the retail and food service distributors in the system. The Canadian Council of Grocery Distributors reported that three major food chains control the flow of seventy-eight percent of the food distributed to consumers through retail channels: Loblaws, Metro, and Sobeys (Carter-Whitney 2008, 7). In food service, a handful of national and trans-national distributors (such as Sysco, Gordon Food Service, and Summit Foods) and contract caterers (such as Compass Foods, Sodexo, and Aramark) largely control the flow of food into restaurants and institutions in Canada.

### ***The Efficiency vs. Resilience Trade-off***

Through consolidation, the controllers of resources are able to optimize their operations for efficiency, but do so at the cost of resilience. Choices are made that lead to a loss of redundancy and diversity in the variety of farms and farmers, the variety of agricultural practices, the seed varieties cultivated, and the infrastructure or technology used.

This loss of variety optimizes short term profits and stability, but compromises the resilience that “arises from a rich structure of many feedback loops that can work in different ways... operating through different mechanisms, at different time scales, and with redundancy,” (Meadows 2008, 76). For example, struck by pests, a monocropped field planted annually with genetically modified corn has few mechanisms to restore its own balance; it is reliant on inputs from agribusiness, just as the Okanagan peach farmer was. Decisions that compromise the food system’s “restorative powers” in a variable environment make it fragile. The global industrial food system has traded resilience for efficiency, and is vulnerable to pests, floods, policy changes, variations in the costs of fuel and inputs, including access to the cheap migrant labour upon which so much of global production, processing, and distribution depends.

### ***Supply and Demand Stakeholders in the Institutional Food System***

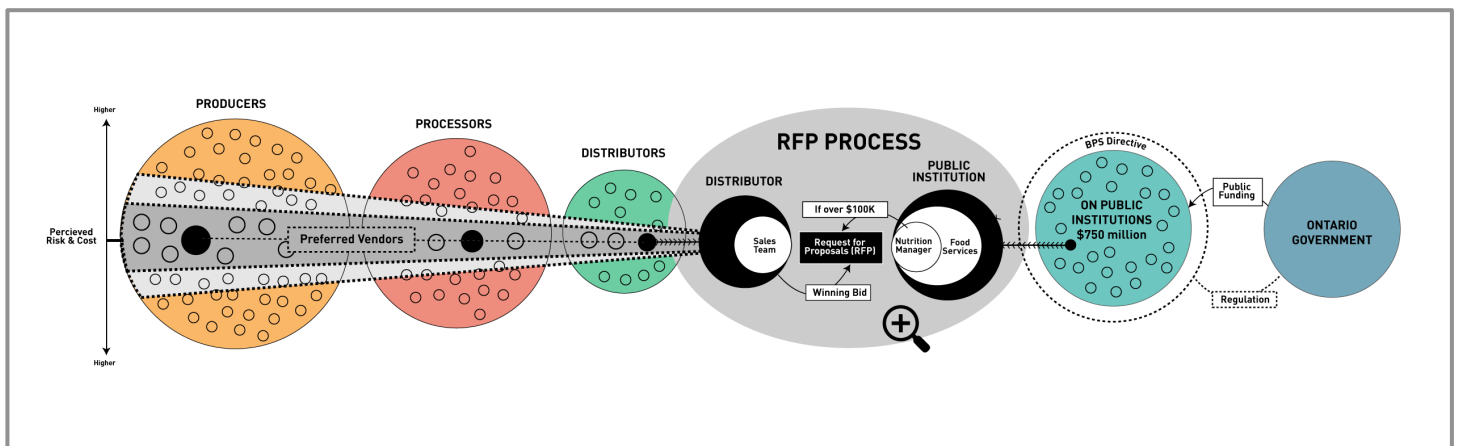
In simplified terms, the institutional food system can be broken into supply and demand subsystems. The demand subsystem, for the sake of this discussion, is the institutional end user: the array of municipalities, universities, schools, hospitals, long term care homes, prisons, and daycares (the MUSH sector), and the populations they serve. These publicly funded institutions are embedded in the provincial regulatory environment that guides public sector procurement. Ontario’s publicly funded institutions are bound by the Broader Public Sector Procurement Directive (BPS Directive), which requires a “fair, open, transparent” Request for Proposal (RFP) procurement process for contracts above a \$100,000 threshold. The sector spends in excess of \$750 million a year on food in Ontario (Lapalme 2015, 2). Institutions purchase an estimated seventy-five percent of the food they consume through the RFP process, either independently contracting with the supply-subsystem, or contracting through group purchasing arrangements by networked institutions.

The supply subsystem includes three broad stakeholders: the producers (the array of farmers and ranchers raising crops and animals); the processors (any individual or entity adding value to a primary good, including abattoirs, manufacturers, aggregators like packing plants or food hubs); and the distributors (wholesalers that deliver and contract caterers, often working with third party brokers). This subsystem draws from many planetary ecosystems, and is influenced by an array of environmental and other external factors, from community groups and public policy, to international trade agreements.

### ***The Positional Power of Distributors***

The distributors in the system have a tremendous amount of positional power. There are few distributors in the system relative to the number of producers and purchasers. They are at a place within the system where information and decision-making pools. Donella Meadows warns that “Missing information is one of the most common causes of system malfunction,” highlighting the importance of observing the informational bottleneck that occurs where the distributors sit in the system (2008,13). Distributors are deeply interconnected (often vertically integrated) with the supply subsystem and their core business is to interpret and fulfill the needs of institutions in the demand subsystem. They know both worlds well and access information from both sides; a privileged position in the system that few other stakeholders can easily access.

Based on the information available to them, distributors make decisions about the producers and processors from which to source. To remain competitive it is in their interest to find efficiencies by streamlining their processes and relationships. They manage costs related to administration, logistics, and risk for each new vendor (producer or processor) from which they source. This incentivizes distributors to find the optimal number of vendors, and to work within this scope of preferred vendors who most efficiently satisfy supply requirements. This incentive to optimize efficiency in supply leads, in some cases, to vertical integration, where one entity buys up the other businesses along the supply chain from which they draw, under one corporation. Sourcing outside of the preferred vendors or outside the vertically integrated brand (for example, a distributor’s in-house brand of diced potatoes) is associated with increased cost and risk. See Figure 1, System Map of Institutional Procurement of Food in Ontario, which illustrates some of the complexity in relationships between stakeholders in the institutional food system, with the supply subsystem on the left of the RFP process, and the demand subsystem to the right.



**Figure 1** System Map of Institutional Procurement of Food in Ontario<sup>3</sup>

In Figure 1, the gray funnel radiating out to the left of the distributors (green) contains a theoretical “line of best fit” to represent the spectrum of preferred vendors (peach, yellow) with whom to work. Radiating out too far from this line is perceived to increase the cost or risk of distributor operations. These vendors span small-scale permaculture growers and artisanal processors to larger fruit packinghouses and provincial abattoirs. Some may have the food safety certifications, liability insurance, and interest to supply institutional channels, but many will not. What these vendors have in common is a perceived threat to the efficiency of distributor operations.

### ***System Suboptimization: the Consequences of Consolidation***

This pursuit of efficiency, manifest as consolidation, leads to the systematic exclusion of smaller or regional (versus large and national) producers and processors and new entrants to the system. It also perpetuates unsustainable agricultural practices and short-sighted

<sup>3</sup> In this simplified model, a one-step RFP process is illustrated, where distributors are contracted then have the latitude to select the vendors from which they source. In a two-step RFP process, institutions first contract manufacturers; distributors are contracted in the second step with the expectation they distribute the winning manufacturers from the first step. The two-step process distributes power in the system, but is less common.



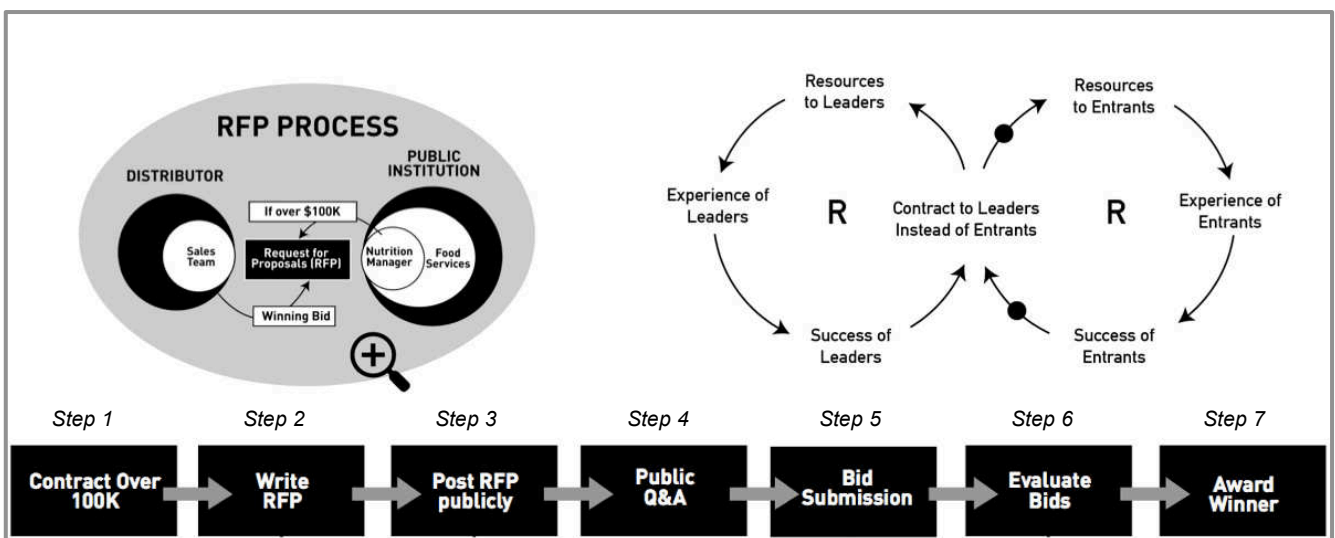
thinking. As discussed, this contributes to the loss of resilience in the system and falls short of meeting the espoused system goal of feeding a hungry planet, but contributes to the overall predictability in profits for the stakeholders with positional power in this system.<sup>4</sup> Donella Meadows calls this “system suboptimization,” where the goal in the supply subsystem to optimize efficiency and maximize profits “dominates at the expense of the total system’s goals,” (2008, 85). She writes that,

*“To be a highly functional system, hierarchy must balance the welfare, freedoms, and responsibilities of the subsystems and total system – there must be enough central control to achieve coordination toward the large-system system goal, and enough autonomy to keep all subsystems flourishing, functioning, and self-organizing.” (85).*

Suboptimization in the supply sub-system is reinforced by values coded into procurement mechanisms in the demand subsystem, communicated at the point of purchase.

### ***Institutional Mechanisms and Paradigms that Reproduce the System***

Through procurement, institutions can either reproduce or disrupt the current system. There are many leverage points within the institutional food system, but the point of purchase stands out as a low friction, low cost, high impact point of intervention. Specifically, the request for proposal (RFP) is the mechanism that codifies the values of buyers. In Ontario, the BPS Directive sets out that “Contracting and purchasing activities must be fair, transparent, and conducted with a view to obtaining the best value for public money,” (BPS 2011, 6). There are many steps to the RFP process, as illustrated in Figure 2, beginning with a contract valued in excess of \$100,000, which triggers the public formal procurement process. At each step of the process there are decisions that institutions can make to optimize the process for efficiency or resilience, observable in the number of bids that are made on any RFP. For example, a decision to actively promote and educate about RFPs to new entrants at the RFP posting stage (step 3) can increase capacity in the value chain to successfully bid on contracts. When a winner is awarded (step 7), institutions can debrief with unsuccessful bidders, though many do not. Ultimately, how institutions define “best value” within the RFP (step 2) guides bid evaluation (step 6) and defines the outcomes of the process.



**Figure 2** The RFP is a tool to disrupt the archetypal “success to the successful” systems behaviour.

Despite the good intentions of the BPS Directive, the mechanism of the RFP often results in suboptimal outcomes for institutions and the value chain alike. The structure and incentives of the RFP do not align with its desired outcome to be fair, open, or transparent. Perversely, they produce the opposite effect, triggering two archetypal system behaviours: *success to the successful* feedback loops in the supply chain, and *eroding goals* among public purchasers.

### ***“Success to the Successful” in the supply chain***

The narrow conception of value described in the previous section are communicated through the RFP and trigger *success to the successful* feedback loops. This archetypal system behaviour rewards past good performance with further resources “with the expectation that performance will continue to improve” (Braun 2002, 10). William Braun explains that this archetype is embedded with the assumption that past winners “have ‘earned’ their increasing share of resources... [but that] current performance may be a better reflection of the initial or starting conditions than they are of true ability for commitments to top performance” (10). Specifically in the case of bidding on institutional RFPs, it is difficult for new entrants to break this cycle and to win bids, as resources and information pool among the winners in the system. This is not necessarily indicative that the past winners have the better product, but that they have the resources and experience to know how to win. In short, the system is biased in favour of those who already know how to play the game. A sales director from a major distribution company illustrates the ease of working with established players, explaining:

*“It is challenging to set up a new vendor. There is a lot of paperwork... The biggest driver for us is customer demand. If we’re going to set up a new vendor, it takes customers to say, ‘I want to start buying this specific product. How do we make that happen?’” (Lapalme 2015, 6).*

This archetypal behaviour was illustrated earlier in the paper, visible through the trend to consolidation in the global food system. Institutional food contract specialist Wendy Smith described this phenomenon as “a natural tendency to go with the incumbent because it makes your life easier,” explaining that “It’s difficult to switch vendors, especially in healthcare because it is a lot of work” (Lapalme 2015, 8). The extra work of contracting a new vendor is associated with addressing the information and capacity gap between established and emerging vendors. Addressing this gap is one of the steps institutions can take to break out of this cycle. Institutions can debrief with unsuccessful RFP bidders (step 7 of Figure 1) to increase their information, and with it, their odds of winning a subsequent bid. A third option to break out of the cycle is for institutions to address the initial conditions that reward the winners, and to “challenge their success loops by ‘unlearning’ what they are already good at,” for example, running an efficient RFP process, “in order to explore new approaches and alternatives” (Braun 2002, 11). Ultimately, the distributor’s remark above highlights the key role institutional demand can play in overcoming the structural bias for past winners, and in overcoming the overall trend to consolidation and loss of diversity in the system.

### ***“Eroding Goals” in the public sector***

The BPS Directive champions the “fair, open, transparent” contracting process as a way to “level the playing field” and create “value for money” (BPS 2011, 6). Institutional food service managers espouse to make public dollars work for the public good. However, the outcomes produced by the RFP process fall short of being fair, open, and transparent, and the

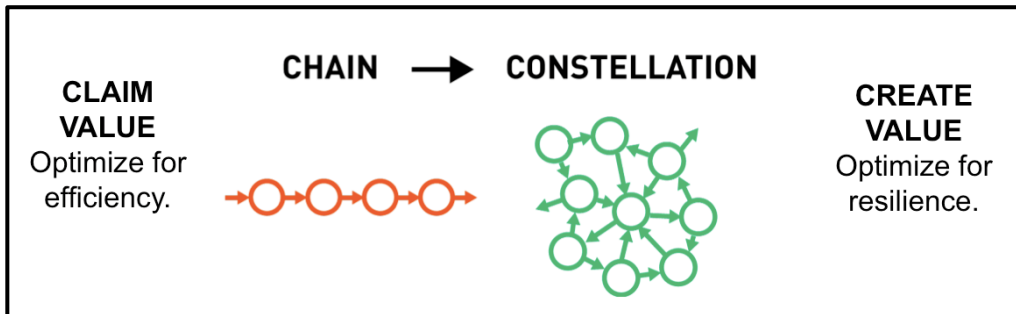
value to the public is hardly maximized when contracts are consistently awarded to the past winners in the corporate global food system. Combined with the ever shrinking budgets of the public sector, public sector purchasing dis-incentivizes participation in RFPs through an often narrow frame of value that emphasizes low cost above other potentially desirable attributes of food, encouraging a race to the bottom for cheap food. Lesser outcomes are accepted, justified by having followed the “fair” process. Institutional managers adjust their mental models, trading espoused theories of making “public dollars work for the public good,” with theories-in-use like “We take the best value we can get with the dollars we have.” After debriefing with an unsuccessful sustainable local food bidder, whose attractive product lost to the incumbent’s, a contract specialist reflected:

*“It has become apparent that the evaluation criteria, the standards for food safety, and a lot of the things that health care has in place, could potentially favour the incumbent... A lot of the practices that we had in running a request for proposal process really favoured the incumbent - things like pack sizes, and things which really don't matter when you're talking about what's on the patient's plate,” (Lapalme 2015, 5).*

This behaviour is emblematic of the eroding goals archetype. William Braun describes the dynamic theory behind the archetype which “states that a gap between a goal and an actual condition can be resolved in two ways: by taking corrective action to achieve the goal, or by lowering the goal. It hypothesizes that when there is a gap between a goal and a condition, the goal is lowered to close the gap,” (2002, 6). This archetype involves a reinforcing dynamic that affects long-term goal setting in the system. Performance expectations drop over time. The way out of this feedback loop, described by Braun, is to “stay focused on vision” (6). For institutions, this means re-evaluating their vision for public spending and translating that into accurate measures of success. For the policy-makers setting the BPS Directive, this involves continuous review of the mandated purchasing mechanisms, and of the incentives to fulfil all aspects of the mandate.

## *Shifting Paradigms: From Claiming to Creating Value*

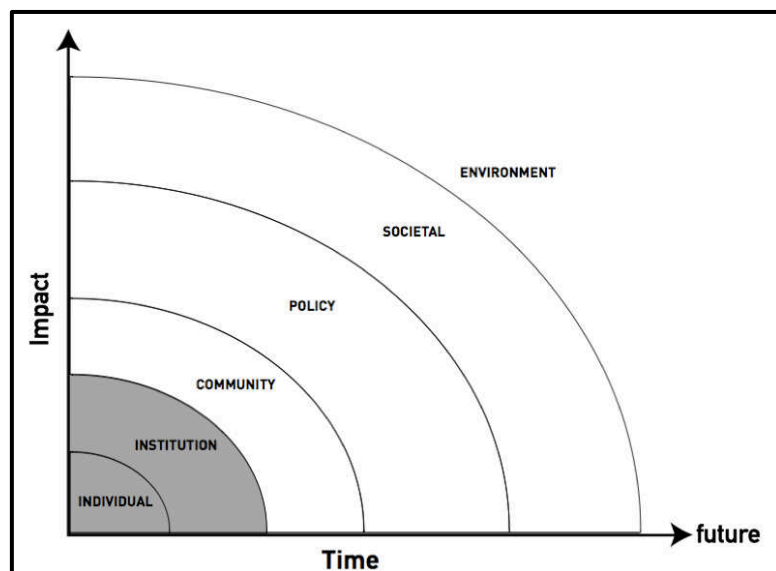
Normann and Ramirez introduce the concept of creating “value constellations,” where actors in a supply chain can focus on the “reconfiguration of roles and relationships among [the] constellation of actors [with the goal] to build a better fit between relationships and knowledge” (1993). Through strategic procurement that leverages the RFP, institutions can be curators in a value constellation that seeks to optimize the value generated for the whole ecosystem. With this objective in mind, value is conceived in such a way that the pattern of extraction across a supply chain consciously transforms into a constellation of stakeholders whose activities increase the total value generated by their interactions (see Figure 3). The mechanisms of the system, for example the RFP, are consciously used to affect the roles and relationships within the food system, to better align structural incentives with desired outcomes. This occurs through what Normann and Ramirez refer to as “The art of continuous design and redesign of complex business systems to connect knowledge and relationships,” (1993). For example, institutions can engage in a process of revising their RFP evaluation criteria to catalyze collaborations in the local supply chain that increase community wealth and that achieve the desired outcomes of procurement.



**Figure 3** Creating Value Constellations. Procurement that optimizes for resilience curates value constellations within the roles and relationships of the food system.

How institutions define value in RFPs affects the outcomes of procurement. In Canada, public sector institutions define value in the context of declining budgets for food services and the perception that food is an ancillary service to care or education. Since the 1990s, food services were increasingly outsourced to save on labour. Cost-effective, ready-to-eat meals are shipped in *just-in-time* and roles in institutional kitchen have gradually been deskilled. Institutions have developed strong competencies to maximize value in terms of present day cost efficiency, within the context of resource scarcity. The dominant purchasing ethic is one that discounts the future and that discounts the impacts of procurement beyond the balance sheet.

Figure 4, an Ecological System of Value, illustrates the time horizon and spheres across which value can be conceived. Value can be conceived in terms of its impacts on an array of levels across the ecosystem, from the individual level to the environmental. For example, value maximized in terms of individual impact might be conceived as it relates to a decision maker's job performance. Value that optimizes for positive societal impacts may be concerned with local jobs and health. Value conceived in terms at the environmental level would include considerations for the flourishing of sustainable local food systems. The farther out the conception of value radiates from the 'here and now,' the more value that is created through purchasing decisions. The highlighted gray area represents a conception of value that maximizes value in the 'here and now.' From this paradigm, the shadow of the future is short and the scope of impact upon which purchasing decisions are made is limited. The conception of value is constrained, purchasing is extractive, and the lowest food budgets are celebrated for their efficiency. The measures of success in institutions where value is framed in terms of immediate return to the institution provide few incentives to conceive of value more broadly.



**Figure 4** Ecological System of Value.

Institutions in a food system where relationships and flows are optimized for efficiency will claim value; the paradigm is extractive. Conversely, institutions in a food system optimized for resilience will have an expansive conception of value that extends to the ecosystem and stakeholders within it; the paradigm is generative. Distributors interpret institutions' conception of value, coded into institutional request for proposal (RFPs), and communicate it to the broader system of food producers and processors. The system map of the previous section illustrated how this narrow conception of value led to the drive for efficiency and the trend of consolidation and centralization in the system.

Globally, from the US to the UK, there are examples of institutions reframing *value* and seizing their reputational and economic capacity to steward positive social outcomes through procurement. Strong examples in the US include the work of Health Care Without Harm and of institutions embracing the Anchor Institution mission, which is “a commitment to consciously apply the long-term, place-based economic power of the institution, in combination with its human and intellectual resources, to better the long-term welfare of the communities in which the institution is anchored” (Serang *et al* 2013, 7). Through a more expansive conception of value, one that aims to leverage the purchasing power of institutions to optimize for resilience, institutions can be value creators in the food system.

Through this section, we have seen how the food system is complex and trending toward increased consolidation under the control of increasingly fewer stakeholders, particularly the distributors, with positional power in the system. Stakeholders in the supply subsystem optimize their operations for efficiency at the expense of system resilience, and fail to fulfill the espoused goal of the food system to feed a hungry planet. Current patterns of institutional procurement are reinforcing this system through an RFP process that leads to *success to the successful* feedback loops. Institutional paradigms at the point of procurement can be extractive (value claiming) or generative (value creating), and affect the outcomes of using mechanisms such as the RFP. Recognizing the *eroding goals* archetype playing out around public procurement is critical to breaking out of these cycles. In the next section, the paper explores the challenge to create a low cost, high impact intervention at the point of purchase that empowers institutions to reframe their roles in the system from bring *value claimers* to *value creators*.

## *Designing for Disruption at the Point of Purchase*

### ***Power and Learning at the Point of Leverage***

The point of purchase in the institutional food system is a low cost, low friction, high impact point of leverage. Multiple mechanisms are controlled by the food service and procurement managers who influence the decisions at this point: they set menus, establish sourcing practices, interpret procurement directives, write RFPs, and determine the evaluation criteria that shapes the roles and relationships in the food system, influencing its structure and behaviours. They set the culture around food in their organizations, by modeling what is possible through purchasing. Affecting any one of these mechanisms begins with affecting the paradigm of these decision-makers around what is possible within their role.

The Public Purse Procurement Community of Practice (3P COP) was designed as an intervention for the food service and procurement managers in public institutions. Efforts targeted at key decision makers at this point have the potential to cascade quickly through the

organization. Engaging a nutrition or procurement manager in a conversation about the source of their food had quickly translated into alternative sourcing choices in precedent projects led by the 3P COP's two mentors. A desire to source more local sustainable food is within the jurisdiction of nutrition and procurement managers, if it is done in a cost neutral manner. Such an initiative resembles the routine task of sourcing, and can be undertaken with little effort, if there is interest. The prompt and support to begin to look at food origins and alternatives can launch an institution into an exploration of the impacts of their purchasing on the food system, and of what is possible through procurement. In short, key influencers at the point of purchase provide a low cost, low friction point of entry from which to influence the institution, and the food system. Subtle shifts in the interpretation of policies or mechanisms at the point of purchase can begin to shift the institutions' internal culture (for example, by generating increased ownership over sourcing practices or increased workplace satisfaction among staff) and affect the impact of the institution on the system.

Efforts to look at the impacts of procurement on the food system were hypothesized to accelerate if they occurred within a community of practice. Institutions like hospitals and universities are traditionally risk-averse, competitive, and siloed. The 3P COP emerged from this observation that sustainable local food efforts remained siloed within the institutions that pursued them, limiting institutions' access to useful information and practices that might accelerate their efforts. The 3P COP was designed around the hypothesis that these institutions could be relevant, powerful mentors to one another, if networked to identify shared experiences and objectives. Together, they might more rapidly produce insights, generate and exchange new knowledge or techniques, and legitimize the efforts of each institution seeking out new practices in a sector that is characteristically risk averse.

The 3P COP was designed on the assumption that social learning is a powerful vehicle for catalyzing lasting, sustained efforts for systemic change. The work of Jeanne Lave and Etienne Wenger on communities of practice was particularly influential in understanding that institutions, both *familiar* with and *new* to the practice of strategic procurement, could benefit from collaborating. Lave and Wenger use the notion of "legitimate peripheral participation" to describe how newcomers to a community of practitioners move from peripheral toward full participation within the community as they master its practice, inevitably changing both themselves, the practice, and the community (2012, 29). Communities of practice are a space of social co-participation where members can develop a practice, exploring its values, norms, and techniques. COPs create a real-world, porous container within which co-learners can teach, share, perform, discuss, practice, test, and reflect their way to new personal and shared understandings about the system. These communities, as observed by Brouwer *et. al.* also have the potential "to create broad systemic change through learning and adoption of effective practices and the development of relationships across the network" (2012, 346).

The vision behind the 3P Mentorship COP was to create a critical mass of systems-oriented, mission-driven purchasers within the public sector, where peers could co-participate in a process of discovery and experimentation that led to a new practice of systems transforming, strategic procurement. The distinguisher that the COP purchasers are "mission-driven" refers to the ability of the mentees to think broadly in terms of the success of the community within the broader system - not just to consider the success of their own facility. In other words, the learning of the 3P COP is not just interested in the individual learning and empowerment of the community members, it is interested in their ability as co-participants to transform the food system.

Working collaboratively, mentees shared RFP wording, connections to new suppliers, and challenged each other's paradigms on what they could each demand as purchasers within the food system. In one memorable moment, one mentee exclaimed to another, "Your distributor does that for you?" to which the second replied, "Of course, I'm the customer. They would do it for you too if you asked." Learning through peers accelerated the rate of adoption of new activities, articulated by another participant who reflected on her time in the 3P COP,

*"I have learned that I am able to get more information a bit more easily than I thought (from suppliers, distributors). It is a little less like pulling teeth than I had thought.... We are way farther along than we'd ever be without this program (we may not have done any of it at all this year)... I think the best support we have for each other (cohort peers) is sharing our progress and how we do things with each other - we can learn and take ideas from each other which helps us all do better. I think that's the main thing," (MSC 2014).*

### **Key Considerations**

Key considerations in the design of the 3P COP related to the identity, motivation, and vision of the managers who might participate in the community of practice. Institutional food service and procurement managers do not naturally identify as risk-takers, but nor do they have to in order to influence the system. Mentees could experiment within their existing roles, regulations, and mechanisms to explore strategies that would enhance business as usual, without jeopardizing their ability to fulfill their current responsibilities.

The motivation of potential participants was a second key consideration in the design of the community of practice. Institutional food service and procurement managers are often motivated by a desire to maximize the social good generated by their work, and were receptive to stacking functions on procurement, for example "investing" in the local food system, so long as it did not compromise the overall food service. Specifically, managers who applied to the 3P COP were motivated by a desire to bridge the gap between their espoused theories about their work (maximizing the public good) with their theories-in-use (doing their best given the constraints). "We think we should be buying more local food, but we don't know how," was a common refrain among applicants. In addition to transforming the food system, the program design had to reflect the immediate needs and motivation of potential participants.

The third major design consideration related to the vision of the program. Given the identity and motivation of participants, who were generally risk averse and community oriented, the vision of systemic transformation of the mentors had to be held patiently, within a time horizon that would allow mentees to feel comfortable participating. This was critical to developing trust in the 3P COP. Ultimately, the desire for food system transformation, or for the outcomes possible through transformation, needed to come from the institutions themselves. The mentors held the goal for participants to feel a high degree of ownership over the community in tension with the systemic change vision for the program. Constantly referencing between the goal and vision enabled mentors and mentees to be accountable to one another, and to allow a natural pace to emerge for the activities of the pilot cohort. Ultimately, the hope was for the 3P COP to become self-organizing.

### ***Five Design Principles***

Considerations of identity, motivation, and vision lead to a central understanding that an engaging and transformational learning experience must be designed for the learner-user. To be effective within the system, the 3P COP had to meet the needs and interests of its participants. Blending insights from design, learning, and systems theory, the following five principles emerged from the 3P COP pilot:

#### ***1 / Disrupt discretely***

Assess the readiness of institutions to embrace the vision for strategic public procurement and invite participants in to the community as they are ready. Initiate efforts with the high leverage, low cost, minimally disruptive intervention at the point of purchase. Align systemic efforts with daily roles and responsibilities of nutrition or procurement managers, reflexively examining the policies, practices, and mechanisms that act to reproduce the system. For example, focus efforts around exploring the measures of value communicated through institutional RFP evaluations. Frame the benefit of these efforts in terms the institution will value, by anchoring the work to the missions of the institutions. Manage the cost and risk of educational efforts and experiments, so that they may be scaled up incrementally, as the institution develops capacity and desire to do so.

#### ***2 / Collaborate across difference to reveal the system***

Donella Meadows writes, “In any system where there are delays, some foresight is needed.” Therefore, build a diverse community of practice that sees the system with many eyes to look historically and outside current paradigms, in order to recognize patterns and anticipate future behaviours of the system. Unite buyers from across silos that purchase with similar missions, values, and processes to learn in community. Start by building trust and an in-group feeling of belonging to encourage social learning and experiments. Encourage the freer flow of information within the community, to counteract the information asymmetry in the system, which privileges the distributors and fails to incentivize purchasers to work together. Identify common objectives and challenges that are faced by purchasers who may not typically interact, but who purchase from similar supply chains. Leverage the collective experience, knowledge, and buying power of the community to influence the mechanisms, relationships, and goals of the system. Mitigate an aversion to risk through collective efforts, by normalizing experiments, and encouraging feedback and discussion of failure. Ultimately, the goal is to encourage systems thinking, and for members of the community to see how their success is bound up in the success of peers.

#### ***3 / Free information (Just ask!)***

Encourage the flow information in order to restore missing feedback loops and cultivate an appreciation of complexity. Ask questions within and outside the group to begin to uncover the system through inquiry. Track purchasing efforts, define and measure key indicators of success, seek out missing feedback loops and delays, and examine the externalized costs of purchasing using an ecological model that considers impacts at various scales. Allow questions to be the guide, and value curiosity above “expertise.” Ask hard questions, and hold them without rushing to answers.



#### ***4 / Challenge assumptions, transcend paradigms***

“Paradigms are the source of systems,” writes Donella Meadows (2008, 164). Therefore, probe the system to reveal its underlying assumptions and paradigms. Share stories. Challenge old biases and reimagine roles and relationships in new configurations in order to reimagine the system. Challenge established policies, practices, and behaviours. This is a process of unlearning old ways of doing and being, and of discovering new ways that align goals with outcomes. Powerful questions include “Why do you do that?” and “Why does that matter?” Draw on diverse members in the community of practice, who offer a chance to see the same system through new eyes. Alice Walker writes that, “The easiest way to lose power is to think you never have it.” Encourage community members to compare how they each relate to various nodes of the system and to discover power they did not know they had. Let go of old ways of seeing the system and strive to interpret the motivation and structure that gives rise to certain behaviours.

#### ***5 / Nurture the desire to learn***

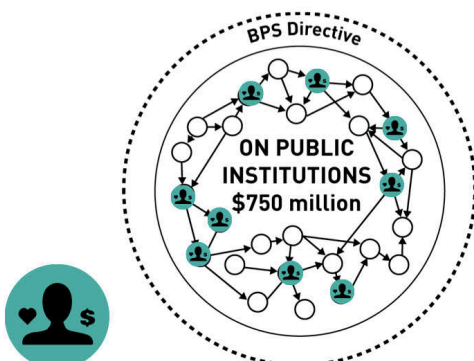
Frame a shared vision for the community of practice, and then allow the needs and curiosity of the community to drive learning. Follow a learning curriculum, rather than a teaching curriculum and empower institutions to set their own goals. Encourage self-organizing within the community of practice. Choose institutions to participate based on readiness at the individual and institutional level. Make participating accessible; full, sustained participation should be the goal. Aim for deep, slow, lasting time on thoughtful metrics that relate to culture shifts. Use a developmental evaluation approach to tracking progress. Celebrate meaningful wins, big and small.

### ***Systemic Implications of the Communities of Practice Model***

There are three primary, desirable systemic implications of using a *communities of practice* model: to create a networked and self-organizing public sector; to expand the conception of value in institutions to expand and diversify the pool of suppliers; and to create more feedback mechanisms between institutions and government, which lead to enabling policy that supports institutional leadership in food systems. These three aspirational, systemic outcomes provide snapshots of a plausible, desirable future if institutions are convened in communities of practice.

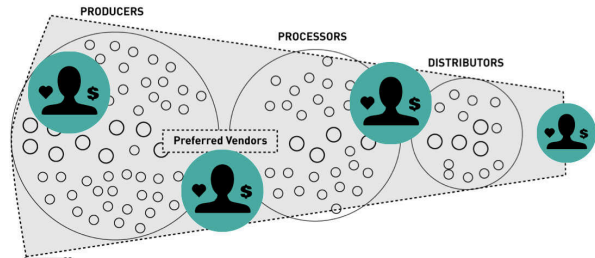
#### ***Networked and Self-Organizing Public Sector***

An ideal future state is that the public sector is networked and self-organizing around shared food systems goals. By breaking out of their silos, institutions from health to education can begin to share information and restore the balance of power that they have allowed to pool in the supply-subsystem, due to a lack of coordination in their own. Working collaboratively with greater access to information, the public sector can also develop greater capacity to interpret how their policies, practices, and mechanisms work to reproduce or to disrupt the system.

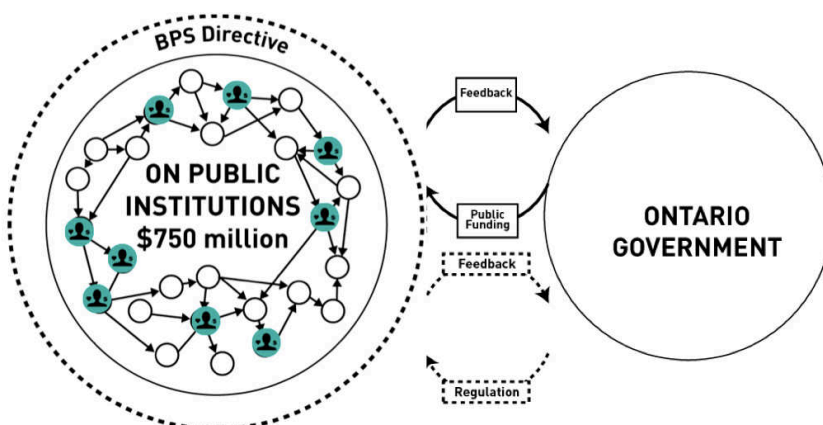


### ***An Expansive Concept of Value and a Broad Range of Suppliers***

A second ideal future state is that the public sector has an expanded concept of value, which broadens the spectrum of producers, processors, and distributors with whom they are willing to work. Institutions view their procurement mechanisms as tools to create different systems outcomes, and use them to curate valuable new configurations of roles and relationships, for example by curating more partnerships and linkages in sustainable local food systems.



### ***Empowered Feedback Mechanisms for Policy Change***



A third ideal future state is that the public sector is empowered through stronger feedback mechanisms with government, able to influence the higher order policy changes that affect the structural incentives of the system. A networked public sector working in concert with government could create better policy

that tackles structural issues in the food system, for example by addressing the measures of best value or the perverse outcomes of the “fair, open, transparent” RFP procurement process that privileges incumbent bidders.

These three ideal future states are interconnected. The corporations that are the biggest winners in the current system have few short-term incentives to work towards any of these desired end states. Therefore, to disrupt the current pattern of consumption and distribution in the food system, some macro level policy change is likely required to overcome the inertia of the current system. Richard Albritton illustrates this probability, writing, “Capitalism’s emphasis on profit means human health, environmental health, and social justice are ignored unless they affect profit or unless laws require that these be considered” (2013, 92). But alone, even macro level policy changes are not likely to be effective without the full participation of an empowered, networked public sector that is able to advance ideas that work for them.

### ***Risks on the Path to a Desired Future***

There is a risk that powerful stakeholder interests in the current system could absorb the potential of public sector institutions working toward increased resilience in the food system. The trend to centralization in the food system manifests its power in its ability to gobble up or appropriate efforts like those for *local food*. Today there are early signals that this is underway. For example, the food industry perpetuates self-serving myths around food safety that create a culture of food *sanification* rather than of *safety* within institutions,

keeping the balance of resources and power in the supply chains of national and global supply chains. The public sector's own mechanisms, such as the public procurement process, codify these behaviours by adopting the industry's measures of safety, rather than looking for themselves.

This risk of short-circuiting the potential of public sector institutions is mitigated by a networked and empowered public sector. Networked institutions are better positioned to advocate to the supply subsystem and to policy-makers through the circulation of information that keeps systemic patterns and behaviours in check. Communities of practice can help shift the balance of power in the food system, to return power from the private sector to the commons.

## ***Conclusion***

Change is cyclical and inevitable. The cracks in this rigid, brittle global food system have been elaborately documented in journals, textbooks, and newspaper articles, with new evidence accumulating daily that the current system is in crisis. Institutional purchasers can embrace this cyclical process of change and play a powerful role in communicating the way forward to more resilient, equitable, nourishing food systems that generate value for stakeholders across value constellations. Indeed, the early successes from the 3P COP provide a proof of concept for sustained investment in the communities of practice model. The mentees in the first cohort, although not yet self organizing, continue their efforts to be more strategic procurers of food, and are vocal about their interest to mentor new institutions as they continue along their own journey.

This paper has explored complexity in the food system and positioned communities of institutional practitioners of strategic procurement as a powerful learning intervention to address the systemic failings of the food system. The problem in this system is with the lack of information circulating within it. The Public Purse Procurement Mentorship Program provides evidence of the ability of an increasingly networked public sector to overcome the information asymmetry in the system, to recognize the limitations of its own mechanisms, to transform the rules of the game, and to influence the goals of the system. Five design principles emerged from the 3P COP to inform subsequent efforts to fulfill the potential of institutional communities of practice.

Since the system is born of the collection of individual paradigms, systemic change necessarily means individual change. The communities of practice model applied to public purchasers offers the possibility for networked peers to participate in a project of social learning and co-participation that overcomes limiting paradigms and reveals the system to enable learners to discover their power. They provide a space to experiment, challenge, and story-tell. They promote the freer flow of information, nurturing learning at the individual level, which can cascade into the institutional level, and work against the powerful feedback loops that protect the current configuration of roles and relationships in the food system.

The policy, regulatory, and funding environment is in flux as it relates to the role of institutions in food systems in Canada. A thoughtful systems change strategy is critical to manage outcomes of procurement efforts. Both government and funders are seeking out the approaches and measures to enable institutions to operationalize their capacity, however no clear way forward has yet been articulated. More documentation of existing efforts in Ontario and across Canada would advance the movement for progressive procurement and help to 'set

free' the experiences and insights that are locked in the institutions of contemporary strategic purchasers. This paper is a contribution to that gap and to the discussion about how to realize the potential of public institutions to push the food system out of rigidity to renewal, using procurement to generate new wealth in communities through the reconfiguration of roles and relationships in the food system

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