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## **ESCAPING THE BONDAGE OF THE DOMINANT AGRIFOOD SYSTEM: COMMUNITY-BASED COOPERATIVE STRATEGIES\***

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### ABSTRACT

The “Missouri School” of critical agrifood studies has provided an effective framework for documenting and understanding the structural dimensions of the global agrifood system and locating important nodes of power. This has directed attention toward the negative impacts of industrialization and corporate concentration on agricultural producers, local communities and economies, and the environment. Using these critical insights, pressure on the dominant agrifood system by civil society organizations has resulted in important changes to production and marketing strategies and related public policies. We broaden this discussion by using social movement and livelihoods theory to explore the position of limited resource and minority producers in the southern United States. This analysis helps us to identify spaces for local responses in community-based cooperatives and other organizations.

The global political-economic system is characterized by further industrialization and expansion of free market relations through corporate firms seeking to harmonize socioeconomic policies, remove social and cultural barriers to trade, and create a global playing field conducive to capital mobility and accumulation (Bonanno 2009; Bonanno and Constance 2001). This type of development in the agrifood sector has been demonstrated by a shift from industrialization and protection of national agricultures supported under the “development project” to intensified industrial penetration, corporate concentration, and free trade promoted as part of the “globalization project” (McMichael 1996, 2008). Since World War II, there has been a reorganization of nationally focused food systems to a system meeting the needs of corporate interests aiming to globally source materials for production and to distribute goods. One strategy that

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illustrates this shift is the creation of “food chain clusters” through horizontal and vertical integration of agribusiness firms solidifying their control literally from the gene to the store shelf (Heffernan, Hendrickson, and Gronski 1999; Hendrickson et al. 2001).

These changes have been challenging for many farm families and communities overall, but it is important to recognize that historic and contemporary structures and processes have negatively affected limited resource and minority farmers in negative ways.<sup>1</sup> The challenges faced by these producers are well documented (e.g., Gilbert, Sharp and Felin 2002; Green 2002; Grim 1995; Jones 1994; Marable 1979; Reynolds 2003; USDA 1997, 1998; Wood and Gilbert 1998). Reviewing an extensive list of documents on the particularly troubling plight of Black farmers, Gilbert et al. (2002) identify the leading causes of farm and land loss as including forced sale of unwilling heir property, limited access to government programs, and racial discrimination from both commercial lenders and government agencies. These challenges are beyond the basic constraints faced by farmers, overall, in trying to produce and sell their goods facing the problems of weather, competition, and ever-changing technology.

Varying analyses of the power of multinational and transnational corporations, the changing role of the state, and opportunities for response and/or resistance by local actors often come from three general positions in the study of agrifood systems: the structuralist perspective, the actor/network perspective, and the critical perspective (see the following sources for illustrations of these perspectives: Arce 1997; Bonanno and Constance 2001; Friedmann 1995; Friedmann and McMichael 1989; Long and Long 1992; McMichael 2008). These perspectives offer a broad conceptual framework for exploring constraints and opportunities in the agrifood system, ranging from the local to global levels.

The “Missouri School” of critical agrifood studies, as characterized in the work of William Heffernan and his many students and colleagues passing through the Department of Rural Sociology at the University of Missouri-Columbia, has

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<sup>1</sup>We use the term “limited resource” as a generic reference to those producers/farmers who tend to have low levels of farm and off-farm income, small-scale landholdings, and little financial capital. The U.S. Department of Agriculture provides an operational definition for these producers, using gross sales, farm assets, and operator household income (Hoppe et al. 2007). Our use of the concept “minority” concerns race/ethnicity. In this case, our study is primarily focused on black/African American producers. We do not imply that all minority producers would be characterized as limited resource. Instead, there are overlapping challenges that they face, and it is clear that a disproportionate number of minority producers also have limited financial resources.

presented in some ways a synthesis of these perspectives, adding a heavy dose of complex organizational analysis and progressive populist sentiment. With a commitment to informing collective action, structures are studied, power relationships analyzed, and reforms critiqued with interest in empowerment and pursuit of social justice. The explicit purpose of research and theorizing is to understand prevailing systems and identify spaces where collective action might take place for the construction of alternatives. In other words, as Bonanno (2009) contends, it is a pragmatic approach to scholarship that seeks to inform substantive democracy.

To complement and augment the Missouri School's critique of the dominant agrifood system, the present article focuses on the structure, roles, successes, and challenges of community-based organizations in their response to the prevailing system. We build from Goldschmidt's (1947) and Heffernan's (1972) work where theorizing is to be grounded in research conducted at the local level. More contemporary examples include Hendrickson's (1997) study of community-based food circle networks and Hendrickson and Heffernan's (2002) call for "opening spaces through relocalization" of the food system. In the present article, however, we draw on the insights from several previous studies, cited extensively below, which are focused on limited resource and minority producers and their cooperative organizations in the American South.<sup>2</sup> Much of the literature on responses to the dominant global agrifood system has largely neglected the experiences of black producers in the south. This is unfortunate, given the history of exploitation of agricultural workers dating from slavery. Their experiences and initiatives to develop alternatives are particularly revealing and informative to a much broader movement. As spaces for collective action in response to the dominant agrifood system are identified, practitioners need insights on what has been and can be done within them.

## LIVELIHOODS AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Social movement and livelihood systems literature may be used in combination with the Missouri School framework to augment our understanding of agrifood systems. Livelihood strategies result from processes of continuous construction of

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<sup>2</sup>It is fitting that this paper concerning application and the future of Heffernan's work address community-based cooperatives in the south. One of the graduate students he worked with early in his career, Carol Prejean Zippert, wrote her master's thesis studying such efforts in Louisiana (Zippert 1969). Carol and her husband John have been major leaders in the community-based cooperative movement, work that continues to the present time.

social, cultural, and political-economic relations within communities and broader social institutions. People interact to meet their needs (Bebbington 1999; De Haan 2000; Hall and Midgely 2004). Threats and opportunities to livelihoods originate partially from political-economic and ecological restructuring. Access to or exclusion from a variety of resources can shape producers' and their communities' capabilities to handle short-term shocks and long-term stresses. This may occur through numerous mechanisms, including attempts to build alternative organizations and institutions (Bebbington 1999; De Haan 2000; De Haan and Zoomers 2005; Green and Kleiner 2009). Global processes and national policies influence which pathways are available and who has access to the assets that enhance people's individual and collective capacities to respond to broad-based social change, such as globalization of the agrifood system (Green and Kleiner 2009). When challenges arise because of limited resources in the face of economic restructuring, people will often organize to make demands on the government apparatus and economic leaders. If they fail to serve people's needs, collective action might also take place through grassroots groups and networks to construct alternative, hopefully more responsive institutions. These processes are evident in the historical development of community-based organizations, including cooperatives, by limited resource and minority producers.

In theorizing the concept of community development work, Bhattacharyya (2004) maintains that it consists of responses to broad-based processes of social change where solidarity and agency have been eroded. People often mobilize and organize at the community level to take action to gain/regain what they value. As part of a social movement, community development may be viewed as "*collective action for solidarity and agency in a particular place that often expands to involve a range of formal and informal groups working between and across places*" (Green 2008: 51, emphasis in original).

Social movements can build from collective action to involve a wide combination of individuals, informal groups, formal organizations, and networks across time and space (Buechler 2000; Green 2008; McAdam 1999). The work of social actors extends beyond specific ends to incorporate broader agendas. Efforts to define and implement the best means to achieve these goals are often contested, both from within and outside the social movement (Green 2008). Buechler (2000) maintains that social action and social movements take place at multiple levels of reality, and there are structures and cultural constraints created, recreated, and transformed by social actors. To more clearly understand dimensions of social movements, Green (2008:53) reviews the literature (especially: Buechler 2000; McAdam 1999;

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McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996) and summarizes three dimensions of collective action and social movements:

- (1) Political-economic constraints and opportunities influencing responses to broad historic processes of social change;
- (2) Mobilization and organization, which focuses on the processes by which leaders can inform and persuade others to commit to a cause and participate in a range of activities, and how the processes through which people interact over time help to develop a deeper understanding of a movement and its goals and the actual work toward realizing those goals through informal and formal mechanisms (i.e., accessing resources, organizational infrastructure, inter-organizational communication); and
- (3) Grievance and collective action frames that evolve out of cultural struggles over meaning and identity, material conditions, and resources.

## COMMUNITY-BASED SOCIAL MOVEMENT RESPONSES TO THE GLOBAL AGRIFOOD SYSTEM

The globalization project is largely directed by political-economic institutions—including corporations, the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and World Trade Organization (WTO)—that are unaccountable to many people who experience the costs of globalization in their everyday lives (McMichael 2008; Stiglitz 2006). McMichael (2008) emphasizes the importance of social movement responses in shaping more humane and sustainable alternative forms of development.

Some agricultural producers and their communities bear the burdens of increased industrialization, corporate concentration, and international competition within the agrifood system (see, for example: Goldschmidt 1947; Heffernan 1972; Kleiner 2004). In the realm of production, many costs are borne by limited resource and minority producers, including African Americans. These producers in the U.S. face similar constraints to development as those confronted by small-scale producers worldwide (Green and Kleiner 2009). They must compete with large, highly capitalized, technologically-intensive farms and corporate consolidation, while there remains a dearth of agriculture and rural development policies and programs with the specific intent of assisting limited resource enterprises. Research shows that while limited resource producers might like to participate more in the traditional commodity programs utilized by many mainstream farmers, they are often even more interested in better access to information, low-interest credit, and

assistance with developing alternative markets (Green 2001, 2002; Kleiner and Green 2008).

There have been various types of responses to globalization that attempt to create alternative structures, processes, and institutions. A few examples are monetary exchange schemes, support for local family businesses, farmers markets, community-supported agriculture (CSA), food circles, food policy councils, and food security efforts (Allen 2004; Hendrickson 1997). These efforts contain some elements of traditional local economic development, but they are often articulated as alternatives to the dominant system. Of course, this is not an entirely new phenomenon. The history of cooperative organizing demonstrates the push and pull between dominant and alternative systems.

Our analysis here focuses on community-based organizations, including cooperatives and related groups, in the southern U.S. developed to address the needs of limited resource and minority producers. We discuss how they have formed, evolved, and continue to function as part of a broad social movement in response to the pressures of the dominant agrifood system. Given that this article is largely conceptual in nature, we draw heavily from numerous existing studies (see for example: Green 2002; Green and Kleiner 2009; Green and Rikoon 2003; Kleiner and Green 2008; Marshall and Godwin 1971; Reynolds 2003; Ulmer 1969) to make our points. We use these studies to briefly sketch out an argument for the relevance of exploring community-based groups' attempts to organize alternatives in the face of the dominant agrifood system. Better understanding their structures, strategies, successes, and challenges in a historical perspective may prove insightful for those of us working on the construction and critical evaluation of alternative socioeconomic arrangements in this global age.

#### THE COMMUNITY-BASED COOPERATIVE SOCIAL MOVEMENT

Community-based cooperative (CBC) efforts are part of contemporary social movement responses to the industrialization and globalization of the agrifood system, yet documented examples of these organizations in U.S. agriculture date back to the 1800s. Small-scale, limited resource and minority agricultural producers organized cooperatives that provided for many social and economic needs of their communities when denied services from government institutions and access to markets controlled by elite large-scale producers and major corporations.

As described by Green (2002; also see Green, Green and Weaver forthcoming), CBCs share similarities with traditional producer and consumer cooperatives with their emphasis on member ownership, democratic control (one person, one vote),

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limited return on investment, and patronage refunds. Many of these organizational characteristics were influenced by those developed through the Rochdale cooperatives formed in England during the 1800s. In fact, the Rochdale principles of cooperative organization permeate much of the institutional field of cooperatives, at least in theory.

A bit different from their larger-scale, commodity specific counterparts in mainstream agriculture, community-based cooperatives are typically focused on specific neighborhoods, towns, or counties, generally have a small membership base (around 30 or fewer families in our studies), and they often express a broad social agenda, amplifying their roots in workers struggles and the Civil Rights Movement. Many of these organizations are legally chartered as cooperatives, while others are nonprofits. Some of them are informal self-help groups. Marshall and Godwin (1971:76) utilize the concept “community development cooperative” to include those organizations run on cooperative principles in the local context but are difficult to classify in particular sectors. In all, they often work for the survival and improved quality of life for farmers, families, and communities traditionally underserved by mainstream private businesses and government agencies.

Under a variety of names, “poor people’s cooperatives” are traced to having originated in the late 1800s, as small farmers and sharecroppers faced competition with their larger-scale counterparts in combination with high costs for inputs, low commodity prices, and the crop lien system (Marshall and Godwin 1971) where producers mortgaged future crops for access to supplies and credit. Furthermore, sharecropping and tenancy arrangements created major power differences between landowners/managers and those who regularly worked the soil. As Fite (1984) argues, these were not simply economic arrangements. They were used as the basis of social control by the elite over both blacks and poor whites. Black producers had to combat these challenges along with the historical legacy of slavery, renewed restrictions on mobility of the post-Reconstruction Jim Crow era, opposition to black-owned businesses and land, and institutions hostile to serving them (Marable 1979).

Early on, many otherwise progressive southern cooperatives only allowed white members. However, the Colored Farmers Alliance and Cooperative Union had black members and sought to address the mutual interests of small farmers, sharecroppers, and hired laborers (Marshall and Godwin 1971). First organized in Arkansas, the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union (STFU) was established in response to laborers and sharecroppers being pushed off the land. Some white planters had responded to the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), a New Deal



policy to limit overproduction and help spur recovery from the Great Depression, by pushing workers off the land as they became idle along with the fields. STFU, cooperative organizers, and some progressive policy makers advocated for rules to provide payment to workers, expand services, and create the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Security Administration in 1937. This agency eventually helped displaced workers by creating resettlement communities and developing cooperative businesses (Marshall and Godwin 1971). Some cooperative organizations started during this time helped set the stage for future mobilization efforts (Green 2002).

With the Civil Rights Movement came another great push toward the development of CBCs, resulting in the so-called "New Poor People's Cooperatives" (Marshall and Godwin 1971; Ulmer 1969). As accomplishments in voting rights were made and public accommodations were achieved, some community organizers proactively turned their attention toward what they viewed to be the next steps in a broader struggle—economic empowerment and justice. With this attention, agricultural and consumer cooperatives were organized across the South. Their focus on empowerment in the social and economic spheres was innovative. These cooperatives often included participants representing rural and urban communities, producers, consumers, churches, and civil rights groups, essentially representing a broad-based and diverse social movement. Pursuing a range of social changes, they were grounded in the historical context of power inequity. As Father A.J. McKnight, a leading figure of the movement, stated (McKnight 1992:32; also quoted in Green 2002:105):

Why the cooperative movement? The essence of slavery deals with two questions—who owns and who controls. These questions are concerned with internal control such as the ownership of your mind, your thinking and your identity as well as primarily control of your livelihood. Black folks will never be free until they own and control. Economics is a very important part of who owns and controls and cooperatives are important because they deal with group ownership of capital.

Cooperatives pooled resources to purchase supplies, combined produce to sell to buyers, and formed credit unions for savings and to supply much needed credit. Several CBCs combined forces to create umbrella cooperative and/or nonprofit organizations to more effectively serve the diverse interests and needs across the southern region. Lead among them was the Federation of Southern Cooperatives

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(now known as the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund), an organization established in 1967 as the outcome of a meeting of twenty-two CBCs and other organizations to address common needs. Through capacity-building and advocacy work, these organizations have achieved long-term sustainability. For example, the Federation operates the Rural Training and Research Center in Alabama, where people can gain agricultural, cooperative, and credit union training. As a state-level affiliate of the Federation, the Mississippi Association of Cooperatives (MAC) was founded in 1972 to focus on assisting limited resource and black farmers, their families, and their communities. MAC has since worked with a variety of other cooperatives in Mississippi that organize and operate farmers markets, grow and sell alternative products, and market specialty products through a diverse array of outlets.

Sharing many similarities with the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund, the Rural Coalition/Coalición Rural emerged in 1978 as a network of nonprofit groups focused on local-level change and CBCs in the US and Mexico. These organizations active in antipoverty, civil rights, and environmental efforts wanted to develop solidarity among people from different regions, ethnic/racial groups, and genders to work with each other (Green 2002; Green and Rikoon 2003). This diversity also included farmworker organizations from across the United States.

The Rural Coalition was involved in debates regarding the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Being active in this discussion has served as a crucial avenue for building relationships between existing member organizations as well as reaching across borders. Through this process, the Rural Coalition has become an active leader in bridging international agrarian, farmworker, cooperative, fair trade, and sustainable agriculture movements. It has articulated a broad-based critique of the globalization project as one that is deeply rooted in a long history of inequity, inequality, and injustice (Green and Kleiner 2009; Green and Rikoon 2003).

Organizations such as the Federation and Rural Coalition profess that they are opposed to the neoliberal agenda of market dominance through the removal of social and political protections and undemocratic decision making processes. They characterize their response as a movement for achieving sustainable livelihoods in a more socially just manner. Their view of “globalization” translates into social action that is communal, interdependent, and consists of grassroots-level power and participation (Green 2002; Green and Rikoon 2003).

Presenting their work at the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of the Rural Coalition, Green and Rikoon (2003) label the overall CBC movement as consisting of a collection of cooperative groups that organized and pushed for political rights, community development, and livelihood security. The groups created alternative markets, utilizing roadside stands, farmers markets, and rural-urban connections. The movement bridged struggles to achieve counter-hegemonic status by addressing the need for reform of the state apparatus and the benefits that it provides to the more powerful in society while simultaneously organizing alternative institutions to mediate structural changes and provide assistance to the disenfranchised.

#### SUCSESSES AND CHALLENGES

Authors have summarized several components of both successes and challenges within the CBC movement across time (Green 2002; Green and Rikoon 2003; Kleiner and Green 2008; Marshall and Godwin 1971; Reynolds 2003; Ulmer 1969). A primary purpose of the CBC movement has been to create self-help organizations for poor, rural, and largely minority communities to mediate the impact of the political and economic forces and achieve more secure livelihoods. These groups have attempted to institutionalize empowerment through working models of alternative institutions in which they could participate in substantive decision making. Because dominant institutions, including those in the market and government (especially the U.S. Department of Agriculture), often fail to meet people's needs, CBCs engage in social movements to construct alternative organizations, networks, and institutions. Their values, rules, and norms include solidarity, cooperation through democratic decision making, and a commitment to communities of place and interest. They do not expressly or radically negate market relationships, but they do seek to re-embed them in broader social and environmental relations that they consider to be fair and morally just.

Over time, CBCs have served important functions at the local level, but to have more influence on broader social change, they had to organize into larger, associations and networks such as MAC, the Federation, and Rural Coalition, among others. These larger groups then served as mediating institutions. Through these networks, individual organizations could more effectively connect their work at the grassroots level to macro-level structures and processes.

Successes go beyond grassroots development efforts to influence national level policies, programs, and procedures. Best known was the role that organized black farmers played in gaining attention to past discrimination and the needs for justice

leading to settlement of the *Pigford v Glickman* (1999) class action case where people claiming past discrimination sued the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Through their mobilization, organizing, and advocacy efforts, as well as their ability to demonstrate field-based successes, CBCs and their larger networking organizations also had significant input in constructing more progressive alternatives. This included involvement in critical commissions to study and make recommendations regarding the plight and future survival of underserved producers, such as the National Commission on Small Farms and the Civil Rights Action Team (USDA 1997, 1998).

Furthermore, although the last several federal farm bills have extended many programs destructive to limited resource and minority producers and rural communities, there were some advances made in the direction of access and equity in government programs. A long list of accomplishments includes: establishment of an Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights in the USDA; development and implementation of uniform procedures for nominating and electing Farm Services Agency Committee members and counting ballots; public reporting of target and actual county-level USDA program participation rates; and establishment of a volunteer minority farm registry. In partnership with numerous other organizations from a broad range of backgrounds (e.g., sustainable agriculture, community food security), they also promoted the establishment and funding of programs that are of great benefit to these farmers such as the: Outreach and Technical Assistance Program for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Program (section 2501 of the 1990 Farm Bill); Community Food Projects Program that focuses attention on linking producers and consumers in local food systems; Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Farmers Market Nutrition Program; and the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program. Additionally, they have pushed for ongoing dialogue between the community-based organizations and the USDA through its Annual Partners Meeting.

Despite the collective strength exhibited by CBCs, traditionally-underserved producers continue to face challenges with establishing alternative marketing and production systems, accessing insurance as a tool for managing risk, and realizing benefits from the typical farm and food policies that often support a few of the largest, highly mechanized, and capital-intensive farms.

Utilizing a participatory/action research approach to identifying and documenting these challenges and possible responses, the Rural Coalition conducted focus groups across the nation, including sites in the southern U.S., to inform the 2002 Farm Bill (Green 2001, 2002). Kleiner and Green (2008) followed

this work in partnership with MAC and Heifer Project International by conducting focus groups with members of community-based organizations in Mississippi and Louisiana. The project participants discussed existing and desired customer bases and market outlets and the opportunities and challenges associated with each. They also explored the meaning of sustainable agriculture and what resources exist and/or are still needed to achieve this approach to production. These studies highlighted common barriers to pursuing alternative markets, such as land insecurity, lack of affordable credit, and limited markets. Many of their participants called for greater collaboration between individual producers and community-based organizations to overcome these challenges. Producers expressed the desire to use more sustainable production techniques, but to establish these techniques, the producers need funding, training, technical assistance, and some assurance that the economic benefits have the real potential to outweigh the risks associated with changing from conventional to sustainable production (Kleiner and Green 2008). Regulations associated with expanding alternative markets also need to be adequately addressed, for many producers have experience with “red tape” as a hindrance to change.

These challenges are problematic, not only for individual producers and their families, but for their organizations as well. In all, there is a contemporary continuation of the struggle highlighted by Marshall and Godwin (1971: 85) in their assessment of the New Poor People’s Cooperative Movement. They wrote that, “Low-income cooperatives have been very fragile organizations mainly because they are made up of small farmers who are having great difficulty maintaining their competitive positions.” If anything, competition in this contemporary global era has deepened CBCs’ economic insecurity.

In addition, loss of farmers overall and the low number of rural youth interested in pursuing agriculture as a livelihood threaten the stability of rural communities and alternative systems. Many CBCs have active youth organizations. However, the ever-changing economy limits their livelihood opportunities in rural areas. Even if youth have the education and skills to be successful at establishing and managing more innovative, alternative production systems, they still need the necessary land, labor, and capital to get started and be profitable over time. Even when they do pursue this trajectory, their options for acquiring supplemental income in rural areas also continue to diminish.

Challenges go beyond the level of individual cooperative organizations to encompass the entire cooperative sector. Primarily, we must acknowledge that throughout the history of CBCs in the southern United States, they have faced

continual pressures on their mere existence. Opposition by conservatives, especially large-scale white landowners and business owners, has been based on the cooperatives' socialistic leanings and support for racial integration (Bethell 1982; Marshall and Godwin 1971). This has led to situations whereby organizations have had to take a defensive stand, deflecting time and effort from their more progressive and proactive interests (Bethell 1982).

Secondly, recognizing that these groups do not exist in a vacuum is important. They mobilize and organize within the context of the dominant agrifood system, thus experiencing competition and pressure to conform. As McMichael (2008) notes, while social movements can shape the development process and existing structures, the dominant development process also shapes social movements. For instance, as with other initiatives that begin expressly as alternatives but are successful and grow in scale, cooperatives that are profitable have the potential to be co-opted by larger more mainstream cooperatives and corporations. In other words, they have the potential to become victims of their own success and lose their role as alternative organizations.

Thirdly, although originally developed as self-help and activist organizations, many of these groups have become highly professionalized and bureaucratic. This has helped to increase their capacity, management, and efficiency in the need to serve many producers, a significant advancement since the 1960s when analysts viewed them as needing much greater management (Marshall and Godwin 1971; Ulmer 1969). Simultaneously, professionalization and bureaucratization have resulted in larger groups and greater dependence on grants and contracts from government agencies and private foundations.

In many ways, CBCs and their networks have followed the path of organizational isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983).<sup>3</sup> As a field of organizational/institutional activity, groups become increasingly homogenized. Arguably, their tendency toward similarity results from the influence of political relations and concerns over legitimacy, responses to an uncertain environment, and professionalization (DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

Many community-based groups and their associations are attempting to fill the gaps in services left by government agencies. This is very important for underserved areas, but it also creates a problematic situation for social movement actors. Community-based groups are crucial for the expansion of services to limited

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<sup>3</sup>The authors thank one of the reviewers for suggesting this connection. For recent use of the isomorphism concept, see Ransom (2007).

resource and minority producers, yet their ability to advocate for structural changes is hampered by having to respond to the needs, whims, and political concerns of funding organizations.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY-BASED COOPERATIVES TO FUTURE RESPONSES

The Missouri School approach to the study of agrifood systems asks us to direct attention toward complex organizations, structural arrangements, and power dynamics, while simultaneously identifying spaces for alternative action. Typically used in the critical study of corporate concentration and the subsequent impact on farmers, families, and rural communities, we have argued for augmenting this approach with livelihood and social movement theories to explore social change initiatives originating at the grassroots level. In other words, we are seeking to assess these real-world efforts of people trying to break the bondage of the dominant agrifood system.

Mere attention to alternatives to the current dominant agrifood system is in no way novel. Several other researchers have done interesting and informative work, including those from within the Missouri School (Hendrickson 1997), as well as those coming from different yet compatible critical frameworks (for example, see: Allen 2004). Studies of farmers markets, community supported agriculture, and fair trade regimes have been enlightening. Our attention to community-based cooperatives, however, does add an important element to the broader understanding of the field of alternative agrifood movements. These organizations, of which we have provided only a cursory overview, have endured over a long time and continue to arise repeatedly. Critical assessment reveals their weaknesses and flaws, yet the adaptability and persistence of this organizational form warrants attention. There is much to be learned.

The CBCs demonstrate the importance of grassroots mobilization and organizing in attempts to develop alternatives. As found in many community development efforts, people who have historically been disempowered, excluded from decision making processes, and underserved by existing institutions can and will often lead at the forefront of a movement. By working to address people's material and experiential needs, these groups have achieved success in providing access to immediate necessities such as credit, supplies, and markets in a manner organized around principles of cooperation and justice. That they have faced numerous challenges and sometimes fail to meet their founders' lofty expectations because of internal problems and external pressures does not discount the fact that

they have served in places and at times when other organizational responses were limited.

Many of these groups have successfully expanded their participation in decision making processes and have increased their legitimacy on these fronts, especially as they further coalesced into federations and coalitions representing a larger and often more diverse constituency. In the American south, limited resource and minority farmers have used community organizing strategies to obtain acceptance by government agencies as legitimate farmers parallel with efforts to organize a variety of self-help cooperative groups and credit unions (Green 2002).

CBCs have mobilized and organized in a variety of ways. Civic groups and churches have often provided a foundation upon which collective action has emerged, such as in the Civil Rights Movement. Heffernan and Missouri School theorists are clearly occupied with organizational structure in studying corporate control of the dominant food system. Similarly, analysts interested in alternatives should be equally concerned with organizational arrangements. As Green (2008) maintains from his review of the broad field of relevant literature, the shape and structure of organizations, and the shape and extent of their networks for leadership, membership, funding, etc., are important to the legitimacy and success of a movement. Numerous substantive organizational forms follow ideal-type structures, such as nonprofits, community development corporations, and cooperatives. Organizations with greater participatory mechanisms may over the long run be more adaptable and effective than rigid hierarchical organizations. Remaining somewhat independent, these diverse organizations can work together on similar issues and bring together compatible constituencies, thus forming solidarity networks. This has been demonstrated by CBCs working together to promote the interest of minority and limited resource farmers through organizations that have withstood the test of time, such as the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund and the Rural Coalition.

Community-based groups have already demonstrated the importance of collective action in constructing alternative institutions given prevailing structures and power dynamics. For instance, limited resource and minority producers engaged with each other to construct markets critical to their survival. How effective these organizations can be as mediators between communities and macro-level society, as their individual producer members attempt to survive the myriad of pressures from a globalizing system, remains to be seen. They clearly intend to try, and they will likely open more space for their own and others' collective action along the way.



Going beyond the achievements realized by CBCs over the past several decades, thinking about the legacy and hope for change they provide is also important, which was our primary motivation in writing this article. This final point leads us to the conclusion offered by Hendrickson and Heffernan (2001:23) in their assessment of community-based alternatives: “The true measure of these alternatives is the inspiration they give to others to think there might actually be an alternative vision of how we can *be* in the food system” (emphasis in the original). For the limited resource and minority producers organizing community-based cooperatives, this entails breaking the bondage of the dominant system to construct something that is better for everyone.

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