

## **Community development, the social economy and FoodShare's Good Food Markets: Background and preliminary findings.**

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Increasingly, aggregate responses to the contemporary urban food crisis are being pursued by alliances forged between citizens, community groups and academics engaged in community-based participatory research. This paper presents background and findings on one such response funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) grant, and supported by a research team comprised of people from Toronto's FoodShare, University of Toronto and York University. This brief paper will detail aspects of the research design, findings and preliminary conclusions.

### **2.0 BACKGROUND ON GFM RESEARCH**

The research team for the GFM program case study was assembled throughout the summer of 2010 and includes staff members from FoodShare and faculty and graduate students from University of Toronto and York University. FoodShare faced the problem of lower-than-expected levels of success with the GFMs, and wanted to understand the causes.

To address this problem, the team worked together to design a two-part research strategy which includes a review of academic and non-academic literature related to programs similar to the GFM and a short, semi-structured survey of various key informant groups. Additionally, a follow-up focus group discussion with market volunteers (leaders) was held to gather more in-depth information on a number of themes. The key informant groups identified include: Market visitors; Competitors; Volunteers (leaders); Volunteers (non-leaders); Community members, and; FoodShare staff/volunteers. A brief definition of each group, and an overview of the questions posed to each follows here.

#### *Market Visitors*

Market visitors are defined as people at the GFM anytime during which a researcher is present. From this group, the researchers are interested in finding out what motivates people to attend the markets, what might enable/encourage them to attend more often, how much they usually spend per visit, and what they might like to see changed about the markets.

#### *Competitors*

Competitors are defined as both independently owned non-franchised and corporately owned franchised vendors who sell fresh fruit and vegetables and are within the general vicinity of the GFM. It is worth noting that the label 'competitor' is used with some caution, because (a) FoodShare is sensitive to the potential that the GFM program might itself be seen as a competitor to smaller fresh food retailers, who likely cannot compete with the price of produce offered at the GFMs and (b) FoodShare strives to understand other produce vendors as partners, rather than competitors. The questions posed to the competitor group seek to tease out some of the complexity of this dynamic by asking questions about how the competitors perceive the GFM

program in their neighbourhood, and whether or not they see any opportunity to work with the GFM program.

#### *Volunteers (Leaders)*

The Volunteers (Leaders) group is defined according to the role the person plays within the GFM. Typically, each market has one person who is the lead liaison with FoodShare, manages the financial side of the market, and generally spends a greater number of hours participating in the organizing tasks of the market than do other volunteers. From this group, the survey seeks to discover a number things, including: what they like about being a lead volunteer, what kinds of supports from FoodShare are most effective, what further supports would they like to see, and how many hours they commit to the market.

#### *Volunteers (Non-leaders)*

The Volunteers (Non-leaders) are defined as all other volunteers at the GFM. Typically, there are a number of Volunteers (Non-leaders) at each market who are responsible for a range of duties including, receiving the produce shipments from FoodShare, setting up the market space, etc. This group is asked questions similar to the Volunteer (Leaders) group, including: how long they have been a volunteer, what they like best about the experience, what challenges they face as a volunteer, what supports they are currently receiving from their market coordinator, and what additional supports they might like to see.

#### *Community Members*

This group is defined as those who live, learn, work or worship within the neighbourhood in which the GFM is located and who are not at the market at the time of questioning. Research partners at FoodShare are interested to find out more about the level of general awareness of the GFM by members of the broader community, and so the Community Members are approached in the streets, parks and other public spaces around the market space. Questions asked of this group include: whether or not they know about the market, whether or not they have ever been to the market, how they found out about the market (if they know of it), and whether or not they plan on attending the market in the future.

#### *FoodShare Employees/Support Staff*

There are three distinct, though not mutually exclusive subset categories of FoodShare employees/support staff: Management/coordinator staff, Distribution staff/volunteers, and Community animators. The Management/coordinator staff are those with leadership positions within the organization and have some aspect of the GFM program as part of their job description. The Distribution staff/volunteers are those who work/volunteer at the warehouse from which the produce is prepared, packaged and shipped. The Community animators are staff members responsible for providing training, support and mentorship to community member organizers within the various communities within which FoodShare provides services. The questions to these three groups generally attempt to solicit feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the GFM program from their perspective within the organization, and what supports might help in reducing the weaknesses while building on the strengths.

### 3.0 RESULTS

Overall, 74 people were interviewed, including 27 market visitors, 18 community members, 17 non-leaders, 8 leaders, 4 competitors, and 2 Food Share program managers. A large majority of competitors were unwilling or unable to participate in the survey generally due to the fact that store managers are not allowed to speak on behalf of their corporate owners in such situations. Follow up work might include re-designing a research strategy better able to engage this demographic.

While only two Food Share managers were interviewed for this project (one responsible for the distribution logistics, ‘distribution manager’, and one responsible for the community development mandate ‘community manager’) their combined experience and expertise for the GFM program justifies an extended consideration of their comments.

Both managers see a number of strengths to the GFM program. First, they both feel that the program does a better job of offering more culturally appropriate and affordable food than do FoodShare’s other programs. They also feel that the program does well at promoting ‘community’, of creating public spaces within which neighbours gather to socialize. The community manager summed this sentiment up well in suggesting that the program addresses issues of both ‘food deserts’ and ‘community space deserts’. She also suggests that the GFMs promote the development of local capacity (through volunteerism, etc.) as well as provide an alternative to the mainstream food system. Importantly, she argues that the GFMs have an under-realized potential to be strong ‘public spaces’ within the community.

Both managers also see a number of key challenges for the GFM program. The first of these has to do with the amount and kind of work individual volunteers must do to maintain each market. Market coordinators (many of whom are volunteers) must commit a significant amount of time to organizing the markets, and must also have a wide array of skill sets—fiscal management and accounting skills, communication and marketing abilities, fundraising savvy, volunteer management skills, among others. In some cases, existing organizations within the various communities ‘host’ the GFMs and provide support and services to help run the markets, taking a significant burden off of any one particular GFM coordinator. However it has been challenging for FoodShare to find organizations willing to provide this support in all GFM communities.

The community manager identified a significant challenge related to this issue. She said that FoodShare staff are, at times, doing too much of the week-to-week organization of individual markets, which creates two interrelated problems. First, this tends to monopolize the time of the FoodShare staff who are meant to be working with other community initiatives within communities, not only the GFM program. Secondly, opportunities to build local capacity for community organizing are lost when FoodShare staff are doing the majority of the market organizing.

Another key challenge both managers see has to do with the logistics of productively using the produce left over after the market. Each market makes weekly produce orders from FoodShare, and the distribution staff at FoodShare delivers these orders. The market coordinator usually pays for the produce upon receiving it from the FoodShare delivery staff. Market volunteers (usually, the market coordinators) are responsible for any unsold produce left over after each market. It seems that, in many cases, this produce is simply given away, creating revenue loss and

generally meaning that many markets operate at a weekly loss. Both managers wonder if there are more productive ways of using this surplus produce, perhaps by turning it into a revenue stream (for example, selling surplus produce to local soup kitchens).

The distribution manager sees an interrelated logistical challenge. FoodShare delivers the weekly produce orders directly to each market, while making a significant effort to be flexible in terms of delivery time and place. This puts considerable pressure on FoodShare resources (both human and financial) as the delivery team must travel across the GTA during various times (often during rush hour) throughout the day. This takes a significant amount of staff time, and increasingly, fuel cost. He also suggests that the level of flexibility FoodShare offers in terms of produce type and amount also puts strain on the distribution staff. FoodShare receives 'full cases' of produce—though they allow markets to order 'half-cases' or 'quarter-cases'. It takes the distribution staff a considerable amount of time to create half and quarter cases, and it would be much easier and time-effective to simply send full cases to markets. At the same time, he understands that the markets very rarely would be able to actually sell an entire case of any given fruit or vegetable.

In order to address these challenges, both managers would like to see more financial support from FoodShare for the GFM program. The distribution manager would also like to see more training and support for the GFM volunteers, especially for issues related to volunteer retention strategies, social enterprise knowledge and management, and strategies for 'place making'. The community manager sees a more fundamental challenge by suggesting that FoodShare has not provided a clear programmatic vision for the GFM program. She suggests that, on the one hand, FoodShare wants to operate the GFM program as a social enterprise—as a means of creating revenue (however meager) for either the individual markets, FoodShare, or both. On the other hand, FoodShare also wants the GFM program to facilitate low-income and marginalized populations to access low-cost and easily accessible produce. She sees a fundamental incompatibility with these two programmatic initiatives, and seems to suggest that FoodShare must choose between either running a revenue-generating (or at least cost recovery) program and a program which provides affordable and accessible produce to marginalized communities.

Two themes emerged from conversations with market visitors--dedication and discernment. Those who attend the markets tend to do so regularly, with 84% of respondents saying that they attend the weekly markets at least 2 times per month. 40% of market visitors attended the market every week. The reasons for attending the markets varied a great deal, though almost half (48%) of the reasons cited can be categorized as concerning quality/freshness and price of the produce on offer. Many respondents suggested that the produce at the GFMs was generally of higher quality and lower price than that available at conventional grocery stores. While the GFMs seem to excel in this respect, they tend to do less well vis-a-vis conventional grocery stores in being able to offer an acceptable range and number of products. Almost 60% of market visitors said that they would spend more money at the GFM if there was a greater number and variety of products.

This signals a key challenge for the GFMs: Many markets do not have the capacity or infrastructure to productively deal with left over produce. Some of the larger markets (generally supported by a high-capacity organization) are able to find ways of using surplus produce within

their other operations (for example, in their cafeterias, kitchen programs, etc.). Many of the smaller markets, however, do not have this option, and end up giving away left over produce to volunteers, staff and the like, meaning that they are losing money on a weekly basis. For this reason, market leaders are hesitant to increase their weekly orders, despite the fact that it may entice visitors to buy more.

The market volunteers, both leaders and non-leaders, can be described as dedicated and determined. The volunteers universally take pride in their role in making the GFM available within their communities and are specifically motivated by the challenge of making healthy and affordable food accessible within their communities. Most non-leaders contribute about 5hrs per week to the market, while most leaders contribute 5-15hrs per week. The tasks vary from market to market, but generally include produce ordering, market set-up and take-down, accounting duties, and outreach and advertising. Some of the larger markets have integrated some specialized tasks, such as accounting and marketing, into their organization's existing accounting and marketing departments. This is a very good way of leveraging existing internal capacities and taking pressure off of market volunteers, however not all of the markets have access to this level of expertise.

Most market volunteers are also motivated to increase the number of people attending the market on a weekly basis. Much of the volunteers' time is spent in various activities meant to increase the number of market visitors. One key way of achieving this is by offering products and services above and beyond the produce provided by Food Share. Some markets provide other products such as breads, baked goods and preserves. Others provide novel experiences for market visitors, including pizza bake ovens, story readings for children, and craft tables. In any event, these kinds of value added products and services are major contributors to the amount of time volunteers (both leaders and non-leaders) spend on the market.

#### 4.0 FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

A number of important considerations follow from the above research. First, it is clear that the GFM program is a key interface through which Food Share connects with the broader public. As such, the volunteers of the GFM program can be considered ambassadors--for the GFM market program, but also for Food Share's broader social mandate. In much the same way, the GFMs themselves can be considered an ambassador program for Food Share. In practical terms, this could mean that the GFM program is used as a means of broader volunteer recruitment, as a venue from which to share information about food issues, or as a way of sharing information about other Food Share programs. Additionally, the GFM program could be re-framed as a permanent weekly meeting place for people looking for affordable and quality produce, but also for those looking to engage more substantively with contemporary food issues.

This foreshadows two final considerations resulting from this research: How can the GFMs *link* and *leverage* within their own host-organizations and with existing community programs, services and infrastructures? As mentioned above, some GFMs have found effective solutions for surplus produce and accounting and marketing needs by leveraging their own internal capacities--in other words, by deeply integrating the GFM into their overall operations. Other markets could follow a similar strategy, though some markets are not hosted by organizations

with these kinds of capacities and skills. In these latter cases, would it make sense to look for those skills, capacities and opportunities in other organizations within the neighbourhood? Do they exist within the neighbourhood? And in turn, are there services, capacities and skills the GFMs can offer to other service providers in the neighborhoods?

More broadly, there are important questions about how Food Share can link and leverage the GFM program toward their broader social change goals. Importantly, many of the market visitors and volunteers understand the very act of attending the markets as an explicitly political act. They understand their various contributions to the GFMs as a means of working towards a more just and sustainable food system. This is no doubt true, but how can this enthusiasm and dedication be further leveraged, both within the GFM communities and beyond, toward other activities designed to alter the contemporary food system? Ultimately, this is the unified goal of the GFM participants, the GFM program, Food Share, and the members of this research project.