

A SWOT Analysis of the Algoma District Anabaptist Community's Evolving Contributions to Local Agriculture



Abstract

The following paper explores the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) associated with the expansion of agriculture in northern Ontario by members of the Anabaptist community. In particular, this paper focuses on interviews conducted by James Newlands in April 2016. Sara Epp and James Newlands hosted a focus group with interview participants in November 2016 to review the findings of the SWOT analysis and have updated this document based on feedback and further discussions with participants. This research is part of a larger project on the expansion of agriculture in northern Ontario, entitled *Mining Local Food in Northern Ontario: Building Opportunities for the Production and Distribution of Local Food in Northern Ontario*. This project has been funded through the OMAFRA – U of G Partnership.

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Introduction

The following paper provides an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats associated with the Mennonite community in Algoma District, specifically in the Bruce Mines area. This analysis is based on a series of interviews that were conducted in April 2016 and a focus group in November 2016. The initial SWOT analysis was presented at the focus group and has been updated based on the feedback from the focus group. This research forms part of a larger project on the expansion of agriculture in northern Ontario conducted by Dr. Wayne Caldwell at the University of Guelph. Further information on the broader study, including current and future research activities are available on the project website (www.enhancinglocalfood.com).

Data Collection

Interview preparations began with contacts in southern Ontario, who provided a map of Algoma District with the names and locations of farmers who had migrated. These initial contacts resulted in thirteen farmers participating in interviews in April 2016. Following these interviews, a draft SWOT analysis was produced and a focus group was arranged in November 2016 to provide these participants an opportunity to comment on the findings of the initial interviews. Seven farmers participated in the focus group and this report reflects their feedback.



Figure 1: Anabaptist farmers arriving for the focus group

Strengths

Lower Cost of Land

In comparison to southern Ontario, the cost of land in the Bruce Mines area is much lower. Interviews with families within the Mennonite community indicated the cost to purchase agricultural land around 2008 was approximately \$700 - \$1,000 per acre. These same families indicated that their former land in southern Ontario could be sold at a much higher price of approximately \$10,000 - \$15,000 per acre. Newer Mennonite families in the Bruce Mines area have indicated that the cost of the agricultural land within the area has risen since 2008 to approximately \$1,500 per acre in 2016.

Abundance of Workable or Cleared Land Unutilized

Although the available farmland in northern Ontario is comprised of much smaller parcels scattered across the landscape, within Algoma District, there is still a considerable amount of farmland readily available for usage. If viewing farmland in northern Ontario from aerial photography, it can be seen as a patchwork of smaller parcels of farmland nestled between the woodlands and bedrock. Although there has been an increase in the farming communities in northern Ontario, there is still a vast amount of fertile land not being used. The underutilization of farmland in northern Ontario leaves plenty of room for the Mennonite communities to expand as their families grow and more members migrate to the north.

Certain Agricultural Products Grow Well

The lack of heat units and a shorter growing season make growing crops, such as corn, more challenging, but not impossible. There are, however, plenty of products the Mennonite community in the Bruce Mines area have been successful at growing. These products include:

- Crops: oats, barley, corn (for silage), hays and grasses, wheat
- Livestock: Cattle, horses, bison, sheep, chickens, goats, pigs
- Produce: cabbage, carrots, potatoes, strawberries, blackberries, raspberries, and more (many types of fruits and vegetables)

Many families have installed greenhouses so they can begin growing their produce early enough to ensure it can be sold at local farmers' markets throughout the summer. The area has become an attraction every summer for locals and tourists alike to stop and purchase fresh, locally grown produce. Many of the families sell their produce to retailers, wholesalers, and independent grocers in the surrounding communities, including Sault Ste. Marie and Sudbury. Some of the produce is sold to retailers as far away as Thunder Bay or even Winnipeg, Manitoba. Multiple interviewees indicated that after years of continuous applications of nutrients to the soils, the area has become fertile to the point where yields per acre of grain crops are comparable to the yields in southern Ontario. In some cases, yields have surpassed those from southern Ontario.

Good Soil Qualities and Longer Summer Days

During the interviews, multiple Mennonite families indicated that the soil quality in the Bruce Mines region is viable to grow a variety of crops similar to those grown in southern Ontario. Some of the original Mennonite families that moved to the Bruce Mines area indicated that agriculture in the area was dying and the soils were not productive; however, after years of work, the soils have gained more nutrients and have returned to being productive.

According to Canada Land Inventory (CLI) classifications, the Mennonite community relocated from Class 1 soils in southern Ontario to a mixture of Class 2, 3, and 4 soils in the Bruce Mines area. With the lower soil classifications, the farmers did not expect the crops to be as productive as they were used to in southern Ontario. They have, however, been impressed with the quality of their crops. In addition to the productivity of the soils, they believe there are other factors, such as fewer insects, and longer summer days, contributing to the overall success of their crops. With the cooler winter climate and general lack of agricultural presence in the area, invasive insects have not been a problem in northern Ontario as compared to southern Ontario. As a result, the application of chemicals to crops to control pests has decreased.

During the winter months, northern Ontario experiences longer nights accompanied by shorter days. In comparison, during the summer months, the sun sets at a much later time than it does in southern Ontario, so days are significantly longer. One farmer stated in the mid-summer months, he could easily work his land until 10 or 11 pm before the sun set for the night. Although the overall growing season can be as much as one month shorter than the growing season in southern Ontario, the longer days in northern Ontario provide a significant advantage to the locals. One farmer in the area stated the additional hours of sunlight during the summer months in northern Ontario add up to having roughly one additional week of sunlight during the growing season. This additional sunlight has significant benefits for the farmers growing crops. The seeds purchased by local farmers are designed to grow and mature within a shorter season and when coupled with the longer days, increased productivity and higher yields were reported by participants.

Assistance Provided by RAIN Program/Scotiabank for Financing

Many programs have been established in the Sault Ste. Marie area to assist new and existing farmers in installing agriculturally related infrastructure and securing financing to develop Good Agricultural Practices for the area farms. The Rural Agri-Innovation Network (RAIN) program was established to build the agricultural system within the District of Algoma. This is done by conducting research relevant to the needs of area farmers, building relationships between the farmers, consumers and related value-added business, and finally, by assisting in developing on-farm infrastructure and knowledge of information for the farmers and businesses.¹ The Bank of Nova Scotia has also established a program to provide farmers in northern Ontario with preferred interest rates to give them an opportunity to receive cheaper financing.

It is important to note that while this analysis outlines the support and assistance opportunities available to all farmers in Algoma District, this report does not suggest that the Mennonite farmers have accepted any financial grants. As a point of clarification during the focus group, participants explained that they do not accept government funding or other financial incentives. While they are respectful of the grants and assistance offered to farmers in northern Ontario, they choose to forgo such funding and find assistance within their community, when necessary.²

Weaknesses

Distances to Suppliers, Grain Mills and Markets

During the interviews with the local farmers, including those with retail establishments, the challenges associated with getting products and animals to the various markets was identified as a major obstacle. With fewer farms in northern Ontario, when compared to southern Ontario, it is not economically or financially sustainable for large amounts of agriculturally related businesses, such as dealerships, co-operatives, or grain mills, to operate in the northern regions.

Importing seeds and feed (especially corn) was identified as a challenge for Mennonite farmers in northern Ontario. While corn is easily grown in southern Ontario, transporting the feed to northern Ontario is uneconomical due to the high costs. Further, corn is also available in Manitoba but the transportation costs to ship it to northern Ontario are high. The farming communities in northern Ontario are not large enough to warrant mass amounts of feed to be sent to the region so the farmers are unable to purchase it at large-scale bulk rates. Participants also noted that the Bruce Mines region does not have an operating grain mill, which creates an obstacle for farmers who would normally get their grain processed before feeding it to their animals.

Lastly, with so few local farmers, it is difficult to operate a year-round auction for livestock. Some of the farmers in the area sell their animals at a local auction in the neighbouring community of Thessalon. This auction, however, is held only three times per year and only one of those sales is devoted specifically to yearling calves. If the farmers do not sell livestock at that auction, they must sell their animals in southern Ontario. The ever fluctuating and unpredictable cost of fuel required to transport the animals, combined with the weight the animals lose in transit are challenges farmers in northern Ontario face as they significantly reduce profit margins.

Limited Local Suppliers, Veterinarians, Truckers, Abattoirs

The limited number of suppliers and other agriculturally related businesses is challenging for the Mennonite community in Bruce Mines as they are only able to travel a short distance for supplies or other services. Having to hire a driver to visit such outlets is another cost added to the expenses of living in northern Ontario. With the recent growth in the Mennonite population, stresses on existing infrastructure, such as at the local abattoir, can be felt throughout the community as it has become increasingly difficult to book an appointment to have livestock processed. Many farmers have stopped using the abattoir as it can be unreliable or the wait is too long. As a result, some families opt to process their animals on their own properties; however, the rigorous laws surrounding the meat packing industry require animals to be processed by a licensed processor. Therefore, these families are only allowed to process their animals for their own personal consumption. While not the only factor, the lack of available abattoirs is consequently a contributing factor to why the Mennonite community sells their animals at auction barns.

Logistics to Markets

The long distances to markets, combined with the limited number of trucks available to transport the animals have created challenges for many of the Mennonite families in the community. Trucks currently only transport animals to southern Ontario once every week (sometimes once every two weeks during the slower months of the year), which means there is a limited window of opportunity to get the animals to market. If the farmer is not ready to send their animals, or if the truck is at maximum capacity before the farmer could get their animals onboard, the farmer is unable to get their animals to the market that week. This can be problematic in some cases, as sale barns usually host specialty auctions on specific dates in the spring and fall. These specialty auctions, such as a vaccinated calf sale, bring in additional buyers who may be willing to pay a higher price for the animals. If a farmer in northern Ontario misses an auction such as that due to the logistics of getting their animals to that sale, they could potentially lose out on significant earnings from the sale of their animals.

Low Levels of Competition

The limited number of suppliers, truckers, and abattoirs in the Bruce Mines region have created low levels of competition amongst the various businesses. Information collected from the interviews suggests that a majority of the suppliers, truckers, and abattoirs in the area charge a premium for their goods and services. These premium prices are further examples of costs that reduce profits the farmers could potentially make. Low levels of competition are a significant challenge impacting many farm-related industries in northern Ontario. For example, there is one equipment dealership servicing the area, one regular truck driver in the area, one seasonal auction house and one local abattoir. Each business sets their own rates and given the lack of competition, farmers have no option but to pay their fees.



Figure 2: A Mennonite farm in Algoma District

Shorter Growing Season and Fewer Heat Units

As indicated in the interviews, there is a shorter growing season in the Bruce Mines area in comparison to areas within southern Ontario. The Mennonite farmers noted that in comparison to southern Ontario, they usually have to wait an extra two weeks in the spring before they can work the land and must be off two weeks earlier in the fall before the land gets too wet. This averages to a growing season reduced by one month. In addition to the shorter growing season, there are fewer heat units in the Bruce Mines area. Combined, these two factors make growing some crops, such as corn, quite challenging. If corn is going to be grown, it will be for silage as it will not likely be mature or dry enough to harvest before winter time. Other crops, such as produce, must be started in greenhouses at the beginning of the season in order to have it ready for a summer harvest time. Installing and maintaining these greenhouses is an additional cost and challenge to the farming community of Bruce Mines.

Lack of Research Relating to Farming in Northern Ontario

Multiple interviewees indicated the majority of agriculturally related research conducted by various universities, government agencies, private organizations, and individual researchers focuses heavily on issues pertaining to agriculture in southern Ontario. The closure of Canadian research facilities in northern Ontario and reduction in research funding for northern Ontario agricultural systems negatively impacts farmers in northern Ontario communities. Farmers indicated that Michigan State University has been conducting research on growing vegetables in climates similar to northern Ontario; however, while this research has been conducted in Ontario, it is focused greatly on assisting American farmers rather than Canadian farmers. As farming populations continue to grow in northern Ontario, it is imperative that these farmers are supported, as agriculture and food systems vary greatly from northern to southern Ontario.

Size of Operations

The current size of the operations within the Mennonite community is problematic as the community does not produce enough food to supply bigger chain retailers. Interestingly, while they tend to operate at a family scale, some of these farm endeavours are large enough that they do require additional labour outside of the farm family. The large retail chains, however, require a continuous supply of produce, and at the present time, the community is not large enough to fill this demand. This creates a tough situation, as the larger retailers can be a guaranteed source of income for these families. It is important to note that the community has grown from only a few families in 2004, to over 30 families in 2016.

At this time, although there are plenty of children in many of these households, the majority of these kids are too young to work in the field and as a result, extra pressure is placed on the elders, parents, and older children. Within the next five years, this situation could change as the children become old enough to work on the farms. Further, the size of the community is expected to continue to grow which could help the area produce enough food to sell to major retailers and provide additional farm labour.



Figure 3: A horse and carriage in a farmer's field

Opportunities

Connections with Mennonite Communities in Southern Ontario

Not only do the Mennonite families in Bruce Mines have a strong sense of community, they also have strong connections with their communities in southern Ontario. Interviews indicated that they frequently write to, and on occasion, visit their families in southern Ontario. These strong connections have allowed the Mennonite communities both in northern and southern Ontario to band together and purchase supplies, such as seeds, in bulk from a single distributor. The supplies are typically shipped to the families in southern Ontario, who then hire a driver to transport the necessary supplies to the families in northern Ontario. This has allowed the Mennonite families to purchase products at a cheaper rate than what they may have cost if bought locally in northern Ontario. With a driver dedicated to serving the needs of and connecting the Mennonite families across the province, many opportunities are possible to transport not only supplies, but perhaps final products from the northern communities for sales in southern areas.



Figure 4: A Mennonite farmer selling a variety of products at the farm gate



Figure 5: Northern Ontario may benefit from climate change, as warmer weather could extend the growing season

Climate Change

Climate change has the potential to be a significant opportunity for farmers in the north. While it is a heavily debated topic, a warmer climate could benefit farmers in the Bruce Mines area.

Longer growing seasons, less harsh winters, and increased heat units would make the region more attractive to farming. While the patchwork style of land cannot be altered, favourable climatic changes could result in an influx of farmers to the region.

Interviews with Mennonite farmers have indicated changes in climate, noting better weather and growing conditions at the present time in comparison to when the first families moved to the area twelve years prior.

Whether these improved conditions are related to climate change or are simply abnormalities in recent years, remains to be seen; however, it is noted that northern agriculture could benefit from climate change.

Promotion of Locally Grown Food

Many northern Ontario communities do not have the opportunity to purchase local food and instead, food is shipped in throughout the year. With the growth of agriculture, and local food system, these communities should soon be able to enjoy the benefits of more locally grown food. The Mennonite farmers in Bruce Mines have capitalized on the idea of growing local food for the surrounding communities by establishing and supporting many farmers' markets in the region. It seems that, across the province, the rates of direct purchase from farmers' markets and roadside stands is increasing. Farmers were aware of these increasing sales, noting that purchases are made by both residents and tourists whose plans are specifically organized around agritourism.



Figure 4: Eggs for sale at the farm gate

Many of the farmers in the region raised animals and grew various crops in southern Ontario and have adapted quickly to growing and selling produce through the summer months. In many cases, produce sales encompass a large portion of overall income for these farmers. To effectively grow the produce, greenhouses have been erected to start the produce earlier, due to the shorter growing season. This local food initiative is environmentally friendly and economically beneficial as it cuts down on emissions and costs associated with transporting the produce. Just as important, having local food available promotes healthier alternatives to processed foods.

The townships surrounding the Mennonite communities have been supportive of their presence and have aided in establishing farmers' markets and other retail outlets so the farmers can sell their produce. With a large number of farmers' markets in the district, promotion of local food has skyrocketed, yet there are still other opportunities to promote local food and produce. The Mennonite families have successfully entered into and captured a niche market of selling locally grown food to the area. Participants indicated that grocers and wholesalers in Sault Ste. Marie regularly purchase produce from the Mennonite community. A daycare facility in Sudbury has also established a farmers' market on site for the Mennonites to sell their produce and the daycare uses only healthy foods for the children at the centre. In the summer, the majority of their produce is purchased from Mennonite and Amish communities between Sudbury and Sault Ste. Marie.

A consistent observation made during the interviews was that the concept of what is "local" varies greatly between northern Ontario farmers and southern Ontario farmers. When asked 'what does local mean to you in northern Ontario?' every farmer had a different answer. Some indicated anything within a twenty-kilometre radius was local, while others indicated local is anywhere between Sault Ste. Marie and Sudbury. One farmer even went as far to suggest anything grown in Ontario could be considered local. Alternately, when asked what local meant when they lived in southern Ontario, a much more consistent answer was given. Typical responses were that local was a distance from Guelph to Elmira or approximately twenty to thirty kilometers.

As can be seen, the term "local" has a much different definition depending on the geographic area. Those living in southern Ontario think of local as a much smaller, more condensed area in comparison to those in northern Ontario. This could be attributed to the fact that there are more places to get "local" food in southern Ontario than in northern Ontario. It should be noted then, that opportunities to expand local food production in northern Ontario are enormous.

Expanded Usage of Greenhouses

Although already in use, there is great potential for more greenhouses on farms in the Bruce Mines area. With produce sales generating a large percentage of yearly income for the farmers, increased usage of greenhouses would allow the farmers to grow more produce. The ultimate result would be increased income for the families. The Mennonite community has already established roots in many farmers' markets, with retailers, wholesalers, and independent grocers regularly purchasing produce. With large population centres, such as Sault Ste. Marie, within a close proximity to the farmers, they can easily promote and sell their produce to other urban areas. As more people become aware of the fresh food available within the region, expanded usage of greenhouses would allow the farmers to increase production and meet the growing demand.

Local Food Auction

As noted in the interviews, the Mennonite farmers have successfully owned and operated a Country Produce Market which acts as a market agent, helping the farmers get their produce to the market. This current produce stand does not purchase the produce from the farmer to sell to the retailer or wholesaler. Instead, the owner of the produce stand has made connections with local buyers to get those buyers to purchase directly from the community. This process allows the farmers to sell in larger volumes than they would otherwise do independently. In this system, the farmer still owns the produce until sold to the retailer or wholesaler and the produce stand takes a percentage of the profit as a transaction or holding fee.

During the interviews, many interviewees involved with the produce market stated that a new produce auction was set to begin in July 2016. The goal of the produce auction was to attract larger wholesalers to bid against each other for the produce. The farmers intend to continue with the current system of the produce market but want to add an auction system to the mix. With a continued reliance on southern Ontario for cheaper food, the Mennonites are hoping that offering larger quantities of produce to wholesales will allow these wholesalers to bid on and potentially purchase their produce locally at competitive rates. Targeted sales to retailers and independent grocers will continue to be made through the existing produce market stand. Multiple interviewees expressed concerns with the auction system, but overall, the farmers remained positive. In the focus group, participants noted that the auction did not perform as well as anticipated but that this was only the first year and they were committed to running it for five years. Of importance, the lack of marketing of the auction, while deliberate so as not to oversell the endeavour, proved to limit participation from larger buyers and sales were low as a result. Many auctions also included spectators who viewed the process but did not purchase any goods. The produce auction will continue in 2017 and the community is optimistic regarding its future.



Figure 7: Algoma produce auction building

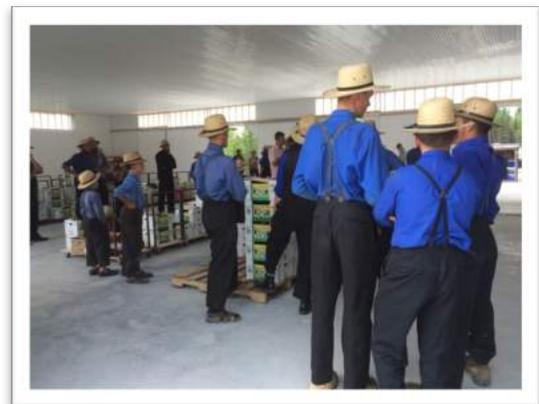


Figure 8: Algoma produce auction



Figure 9: A forested area being cleared for agricultural purposes

“When you’re in northern Ontario, Ontario is local.”³

*Large Quantities of
Pockets of Lightly
Forested/Bush Covered
Land that could be
Cleared*

In addition to the vast amounts of cleared but unutilized farmland, there are many areas that were once cleared and used for farmland but have since been abandoned. Some of these areas have become covered with bushes and young trees. With some work, these areas can be converted back into workable farmland. These are areas that are typically near existing forests or in areas furthest from the homestead.

Growth of Mennonite Community

The first Mennonite families moved to the Bruce Mines area in 2004. At the time, six families moved together from the Wingham and Gorrie area in Huron County, Ontario. Since 2004, additional families have continued to move to the area each year. In 2016, four new families were expected to move from the community in southern Ontario to the Bruce Mines area. In addition to the families moving from southern Ontario, after twelve years of life in northern Ontario, some of the eldest children are beginning to purchase their own farms in the area and begin their own families. In total, the community consists of approximately 35 families. With many communities in rural Ontario facing a decline in population, it is positive to see the Mennonite community in Bruce Mines continuing to grow. With the continued growth and larger tax base, these municipalities may be able to upgrade existing or install new infrastructures for their respective communities.

Family Matters

Many participants noted that their motivation for moving to the north was so that their children could one day own a farm. Given the price of farmland in southern Ontario, opportunities to purchase farms were perceived to be quite limited. Since the initial move in 2004, some of the older children have started their own families and purchased their own farms.



Figure 10: Transportation costs increase during the winter, as some roads are not maintained and accessibility becomes an issue

Threats

Transportation Costs

An outcome of operating a farm at a great distance from markets is the increased transportation costs associated with getting the final product to market. All interviewees indicated that transportation costs are a much higher percentage of their operating costs in comparison to when they operated farms in southern Ontario. As can be expected, other costs, such as land prices, are less expensive in comparison.

Transportation costs, however, are far more variable because of input factors, such as fuel costs. In addition to the costs, the transportation service for livestock and other products is significantly less consistent. There is currently one weekly or biweekly transportation company servicing the area. If anything were to happen that prevented this company from servicing the area, the community would not be able to transport their animals to market.

“If it is not on the truck this week, too bad. You have to wait ‘till next week.”⁴

Lack of Labour Force

Due to the growing size of the Mennonite population and young age of the children, there have been issues with an inability to obtain additional help.

Multiple interviewees indicated that they would benefit from additional workers on their farm or secondary business. Help is also needed for the Produce Country Market and at the various farmers’ markets in the area.

As the community continues to grow in size, it could be expected there would be a greater need for a larger labour force; however, as the children grow older and are able to help around the farm, the lack of a labour force is likely to be less of an issue.

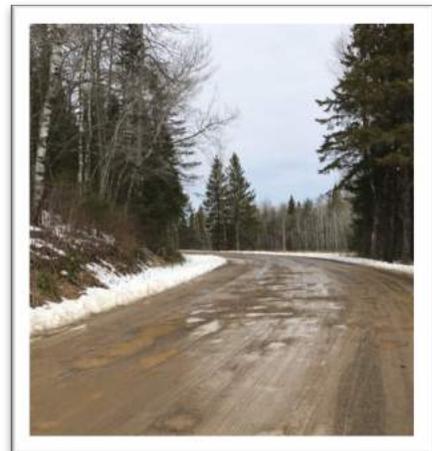


Figure 11: Many roads in Bruce Mines and adjacent towns are unpaved

Speculators Holding Land

With the recent expansion of the farming population in the area, investors have purchased parcels within the area with the intent to own it until land prices inflate enough to make a substantial profit. This can threaten potential expansion for the Mennonite community in the area. Not only will the land be less affordable to new families but as the children of the families currently in the area grow up, they may not be able to afford their own land. It is estimated that land prices in the Bruce Mines area have almost doubled in the past ten to fifteen years since the Mennonite population began moving to the area. With speculators continuing to purchase land, the price per acre is expected to increase.

Additional in-depth discussion during the focus group indicated that although speculators had in the past purchased land (and some continue to do so) with the intent to hold the land for future profit, the Mennonites do not believe the speculation is as profitable as originally thought. Participants noted personal experiences with speculators where the sellers were forced to lower their prices as the land remained on the market for an extended period of time with no interested buyers. Furthermore, while land values have increased over the years, the municipal property tax rates in the surrounding townships are high and continue to increase, thus discouraging potential buyers and slightly reducing demand for land.

Increases in Taxes

With recent growth in the Bruce Mines area, the local school board has built a new school for the children. This new structure has increased the tax burden for all the property owners within the local townships. Even though the Mennonite population chooses to operate their own, self-funded school system, they are still required to pay higher taxes to support the costs associated with the new public school building. This is one example of increases in taxes that the Mennonites in northern Ontario have faced since settling in the area. As more people move to the area, a larger burden will be placed on current infrastructure and significant financial investments will be necessary. As such costs typically get passed onto tax payers, increased property taxes may threaten the viability of farms in the region.



Figure 12: Many buildings within this community are of simple construction without indoor bathrooms, plumbing or electricity

Increases or Changes in Product Regulations

Regulations surrounding the proper handling of dairy or meat products, for example, are continuously being updated by various regulatory agencies. Due to these Mennonite farmers' way of life, notification of new regulations often arises informally through conversation and as such, these new regulations are not always communicated as quickly to these farmers as they are to other farmers. While it is acknowledged that efforts have been made to inform the Mennonite community of changes or updates to regulations, often times the meetings are scheduled at inconvenient times or not enough notice is given. Changes in the delivery of information and notification of such meetings to this community would be beneficial. The current system can create issues for Mennonite farmers if they are unaware of new practices that may affect their operations. For example, one family wants to sell goat milk and cheese to the public; however, they do not know all of the regulations associated with this endeavour, such as how hot the milk must be kept during the pasteurization process. These farmers seek to follow all laws and regulations put forth but limitations associated with the transfer of knowledge hinders their ability to quickly establish a new farm business. Stricter regulations, as well changes to existing policies may also require these farmers to update their equipment, in turn limiting the amount of profit these farmers are able to retain at the end of the year.

Farming in northern Ontario has additional limitations associated with facility inspections by government agencies. As noted by participants, northern Ontario has far fewer inspectors than southern Ontario and these inspectors have to drive much greater distances between locations. Given the limited amount of staff and vast geographic area, booking an inspector to visit a farm in northern Ontario requires greater notification times. In further examining the case of the farmer seeking to produce goat milk and cheese, the cost of an inspector would be solely born by this farmer, as there are no other goat farmers in the area. If other goat farmers existed in the area, the inspector fees would be shared amongst these farmers. Such costs deter farmers from establishing new value-added or on-farm diversification strategies, further limiting the diversity of local food produced and processed in the north.

Many regulations outside of dairy and meat products also exist. With the continuous increases in produce sales, some restaurants in the surrounding communities are becoming interested in the food produced by the Mennonite farmers. Many of these restaurants have decided not to purchase the locally grown produce from these farmers, however, as they need to ensure that the products are traceable. In order to gain purchase orders or contracts with these buyers, the Mennonites would need to obtain 'Good Agricultural Practices' (GAP) certification, which would provide more traceability for the farmers. Interestingly, some of the farmers expressed concerns that if they acquired this certification and large buyers sought their produce, that they might be disappointed by the scale of the farms and produce available. If the farmers are unable to maintain a consistent supply for the buyers or meet their expectations, they fear that they may lose the buyers completely. While GAP certification may be beneficial to the Mennonite community, they should still be focused on filling niche markets within their local food industry as their farming community is currently too small to feed the larger surrounding cities, such as Sault Ste. Marie or Sudbury.

Conclusion

It is evident that the Mennonite communities near Sault Ste. Marie have provided many benefits to the surrounding area. Access to a broader range of crops has significantly expanded locally produced food in the Algoma District. The cultivation of fruits and vegetables within an area typically devoid of such produce, in addition to a variety of livestock, impacts food security and provides a unique economic opportunity to both Anabaptist groups. While expansion opportunities are evident, a number of challenges and threats may impact the future development of these communities. If these threats are mitigated and the challenges overcome, the Anabaptist community will likely expand and food security within this area of northern Ontario can be improved.

Funding Partner

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More information on this project can be found
on the project website:

www.enhancinglocalfood.com



Footnotes

¹ For more information, refer to the Rural Agri-Innovation Network website: <http://rainalgoma.ca>

² The authors of this report appreciate the values associated with the Mennonites way of life – that they are happy to live amongst other community members, but do not wish to rely solely on government grants or other assistance programs to ensure survival. There are many other strengths and opportunities of farming in northern Ontario than just financial assistance. Interviews with members of the Mennonite community indicate they are thankful for the support of the surrounding communities and hope they continue to be seen as an asset to these communities.

³ A farmer's response to what local food means for residents of northern Ontario.

⁴ Participants discussed the challenges associated with a limited number of transportation options for livestock and the consequences of missing the weekly transport. These issues were identified as a major threat to successful agriculture in the north.