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Building the local food movement in Chiapas, Mexico: rationales, benefits, and limitations

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Abstract Alternative food networks (AFNs) have become a common response to the socio-ecological injustices generated by the industrialized food system. Using a political ecology framework, this paper evaluates the emergence of an AFN in Chiapas, Mexico. While the Mexican context presents a particular set of challenges, the case study also reveals the strength the alternative food movement derives from a diverse network of actors committed to building a "community economy" that reasserts the multifunctional values of organic agriculture and local commodity chains. Nonetheless, just as the AFN functions as an important livelihood strategy for otherwise disenfranchised producers it simultaneously encounters similar limitations as those observed in other market-driven approaches to sustainable food governance.

Keywords Organic agriculture · Alternative food networks · Neoliberalism · Sustainability · Participatory guarantee systems

Abbreviations

AFN	Alternative food networks
PC	Participatory certification
PGS	Participatory guarantee systems
TCSC	*Tianguis de Comida Sana y Cercana* (The marketplace of healthy and local food)

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Introduction

Standing in the shade, Doña Mercedes[1] patiently tends to her stand at the farmers' market in downtown San Cristobal, a highland city in Mexico's southernmost state of Chiapas. From a large wooden table she hawks blue and white corn tucked in the husk, a box of ranch eggs, handmade tortillas still warm in the basket. Her meek stature and wrinkled face belie the fierceness of her words: "Poor people like us have to find a way forward; some way not to sell our land." She pauses to count out a dozen tortillas for a customer and then continues, "Zapata's law is over. *Ahora es una política de hambre*—Now it's a politics of hunger. They will leave us *campesinos* with nothing. So now you have to choose, *el precio o la vida*—do you choose the price or do you choose life?"

Doña Mercedes' words allude to manifold political economic challenges facing smallholder, organic farmers in Mexico today. This article reviews the historical origins of these challenges and explores the emergence of an alternative food network (AFN) among organic and artisanal producers like Doña Mercedes to counteract political economic pressures and bolster local food systems. Although the term AFN has been used to describe a diverse range of networks dedicated to challenging different aspects of conventional food systems (Renting et al. 2003), here the term refers specifically to place-based networks promoting local, artisan, and/or organic goods (hereafter "specialty goods").

While AFNs such as farmers' markets have become well-known strategies to re-localize the food system in industrialized countries (Allen et al. 2003; Dubuisson-

[1] To protect the anonymity of study participants, all names in this study are pseudonyms.

Quellier and Lamine 2008; Forssell and Lankoski 2014), more recently similar place-based AFNs have emerged in the "Global South" (Massicotte 2010; Nelson et al. 2010; Freidberg and Goldstein 2011). Since 2005, for example, Doña Mercedes' family has joined forces with over 30 other producer families and a network of consumers and organizers to establish an AFN known as the *Tianguis de Comida Sana y Cercana* (The Marketplace of Healthy and Local Food) (hereafter TCSC). The TCSC is one of over 28 AFNs that have formed throughout Mexico in the last 15 years and is the focus of this study (Schwentesius Rindermann and Cruz 2015). Together, these markets constitute the Mexican Network of Organic Markets (*La Red Mexicana de Tianguis y Mercados Orgánicos*) (hereafter the Mexican Network), a network of independent marketplaces established in 2004 to support local, agro-ecological production and socially responsible consumption, thereby creating a positive defense of otherwise disenfranchised small-scale, organic and artisanal food producers (Nelson et al. 2016).

AFNs have been characterized in the literature as "spaces of possibility" or templates for the "reconfiguration of capitalist society" (Goodman et al. 2012, p. 3) and there is growing evidence of the importance of AFNs to food sovereignty struggles in the Global South (e.g., Lundberg and Moberg 2009; Wittman 2009; Altieri and Toledo 2011). Nonetheless, most AFN literature has focused on initiatives in the Global North (e.g., Renting et al. 2003; Maye et al. 2007; Goodman et al. 2012) and only recently has expanded to include analysis of local AFN initiatives in the Global South (Lundberg and Moberg 2009; Rocha and Lessa 2009; Freidberg and Goldstein 2011; Nelson et al. 2016; Si et al. 2015). This article continues to broaden this scholarship by analyzing the emergence of one AFN in the Mexican context and exploring why more locally focused AFNs are necessary to bolstering food systems in the Global South. Specifically, this study asks: What motivated the emergence of a place-based AFN in the Chiapas Highlands, how has the AFN impacted the experiences, views, and livelihoods of participating producers, and in what ways does this AFN encounter the same opportunities and limitations described in other AFN research?

Through an in-depth case study of the TCSC, this study explores both its innovative strategies and benefits as well as its contradictions and limitations, many of which mirror those found in other market-driven approaches to sustainable food governance (Jarosz 2000; Guthman 2007). AFN scholarship has generated an ongoing debate regarding the extent to which AFN are able to manifest social and environmental change (Maye et al. 2007). While many have applauded their merit (van der Ploeg et al. 2012; Boza Martínez 2013; Bouagnimbeck 2014; Nelson et al. 2016), others have warned of the ways in which they reproduce problematic neoliberal logic by placing the onus for change on local consumer choices and market-based solutions (Guthman 2008; Alkon and Mares 2012). In the interest of practicing critical "reflexive localism" (Goodman et al. 2012), this work tempers enthusiasm for the potential of such AFN endeavors to build "community economies" (Gibson-Graham 2006) with reservations about the ability of such movements to effect food systems change on a larger scale.

Using a livelihoods approach and an agrarian political ecology framework, this study combines attention to the contemporary dimensions of the agrarian question with interest in how livelihood strategies of food producers are shaped by political economic processes and evolving discourses related to food (Robbins 2004; Goodman and Goodman 2007; Tregear 2011). The paper is organized in four main sections. First, I explore the historical factors and motivations contributing to the emergence of place-based AFNs and participatory guarantee systems (PGS) in the Global South. Next, I describe my study site and research methods. I then present my research findings and analysis of the TCSC in Chiapas. Lastly, I bring the case study findings into conversation with debates regarding the potential of AFNs to act as conduits for alternative "community economies" (Gibson-Graham 2006) or as pathways to expanded neoliberal logics and subjectivities (Guthman 2008). I find that while AFN producers enjoy multiple economic and non-economic benefits, there are also shortcomings to the AFN strategy in that protected markets are always an exercise in boundary creation and enforcement. Reflecting on the benefits and challenges associated with building an AFN in Mexico, I argue that AFNs such as the TCSC present ambiguous qualities that can be read both for their liberatory potential as well as for their problematic dependence on market dynamics and "neoliberal" techniques (Guthman 2008).

The need for participatory certifications and locally based AFNs in the Global South

To understand locally based AFNs and participatory certification mechanisms in the Global South, it is first necessary to place their emergence within historical context. Since the 1980s, concerned groups have attempted to counteract the negative impacts of the neoliberalization of agriculture and market-based food governance by creating environmentally and socially responsible certification schemes, the most prominent being "organic" or "fair trade" labels (Buller and Morris 2004). In Mexico, activists and politicians alike have promoted these certification mechanisms as a means by which small-scale producers

can take advantage of new international niche markets (Gomez Tovar et al. 2005). Such labeling mechanisms have proliferated in recent decades to connect specialty, small-scale producers in the Global South to consumers in the Global North and considerable literature has attempted to understand their social and environmental outcomes (Raynolds 2000; Mutersbaugh 2004; González and Nigh 2005; Calo and Wise 2005; Gomez Tovar et al. 2005). While some research suggests they have facilitated important reductions in pesticide use and bolstered social capital (FAO 2011; Rueda and Lambin 2013), others conclude that transnational AFNs produce only marginal success (Chiputwa et al. 2015; Raynolds 2014) if not outright failure (Hatanaka 2010). The sharpest critiques of these initiatives observe that just as organic and fair trade labels attempt to counteract liberalized food markets and the proverbial "race-to-the-bottom" they simultaneously resonate with neoliberal logic by looking to the power of the market to resolve socio-ecological problems (Bartley and Smith 2010; Guthman 2007).

Certified production of organic and fair-trade goods has rapidly expanded in Mexico since the 1980s. Organics now represent 10 % of agricultural gross domestic product (Salinas Cesareo 2010) and Mexico is the third-ranked nation in the world for the greatest number of organic producers (IFOAM 2011). Nonetheless, the access to these niche markets is highly uneven and present substantial entry barriers to small-scale producers (Mutersbaugh 2004; Calo and Wise 2005). Certification requirements increasingly favor large-scale producers, thereby reproducing socio-spatial inequalities that have long plagued Mexico's agricultural history (DeLind 2000; González and Nigh 2005; Gomez Tovar et al. 2005; Hewitt de Alcántara 1976). For example, low-profit, smallholder indigenous and peasant production of coffee and cacao characterize the bulk of the organic sector in southern Mexico (Gómez Cruz et al. 2007). This differs dramatically from northern states, which are dominated by agribusiness models that rely on off-farm inputs, minimal inspections, low-wage labor, and intense capital- and technological-investments (Gomez Tovar et al. 2005).

Extensive research in Mexico has documented the multiple barriers keeping small farmers from entering these specialty markets. These include: expensive annual certification fees; a lack of information; a minimum three-year transition time; variable market prices and demand; greater labor requirements; lack of domestic organic markets; and poor capacity to produce crops as specified by international standards (Raynolds 2000; Mutersbaugh 2004; Renard 2005; Gomez Tovar et al. 2005; González and Nigh 2005; Nelson et al. 2010).

Disillusionment with the barriers to entry to specialty export markets and third party certifications has been a key inspiration for the emergence of AFNs and alternative organic certification mechanisms known as participatory guarantee systems (PGS) (Nelson et al. 2010). Although their structure may vary, PGS are generally based on locally agreed upon certification standards and rely on volunteers to conduct site visits and verify organic production practices. They endeavor to use horizontal relationships, peer review, and reflexive learning processes and are promoted as being more responsive to producer needs, providing low-cost access to organic premiums, and getting "beyond" organic input-substitution models (Boza Martínez 2013; Nelson et al. 2016). PGS have become a critical tool for overcoming the obstacles encountered in other certification systems and is integral to AFNs' ability to generate price premiums for organic micro-producers otherwise disenfranchised by the "corporate food regime" (Nelson et al. 2010, 2016; McMichael 2012). While third party certifications have been important for connecting producers of easily stored goods such as coffee and chocolate to international niche markets (Escalona Aguilar 2009), PGS provide certification options for small, independent producers of perishable crops.

Due to their growing popularity, there are now over 50 PGS initiatives and 49,000 PGS certified producers worldwide (Bouagnimbeck 2014). In Mexico, the Mexican Network played a key role in advocating that PGS be included within Mexico's Organic Law of 2006 as a legal labeling option for organic producers (Interview with Mexican Network organizer, 2 June 2011). As of 2010, the governments of Mexico, Bolivia, Brazil, and Costa Rica have all legalized PGS for domestic organic producers (Nelson et al. 2010). As demonstrated in this case study, PGS have become a key part of building AFNs in the Global South to support small-scale, organic horticulturalists and promote transparency and solidarity in local food systems.

Field site: *El Tianguis de Comida Sana y Cercana*

The AFN examined in this case study is located in the city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas (SCLC) in Chiapas (see Fig. 1). Approximately 31 producer families and over 150 consumers participate in the *Tianguis de Comida Sana y Cercana* (TCSC) (Gutiérrez Pérez et al. 2012). The TCSC functions much like a farmers' market, operating in a courtyard in the city center every Wednesday and Saturday, and at the grounds of the local College of the Southern Border, ECOSUR, on Fridays. It is a hybrid cultural space with mestizo and indigenous family farmers, cooperative vendors, as well as emigrant producers from other regions of Mexico and the world. The TCSC's fare includes over 70 varieties of fresh fruits, meats, and vegetables, and a

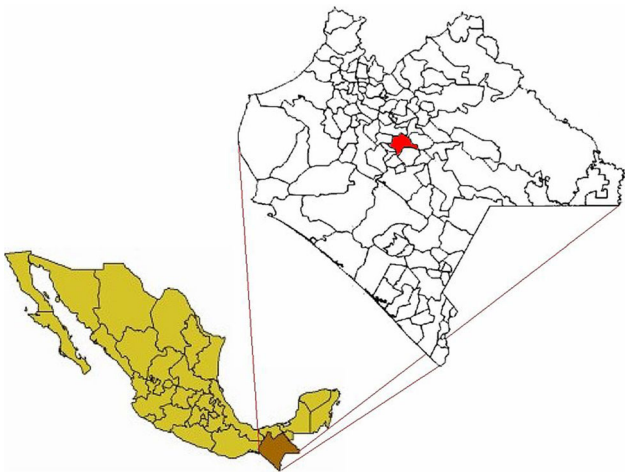

Fig. 1 Study site located in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico

diversity of processed goods such as handmade tortillas and cheeses. While this study focuses primarily on the TCSC producers, it is important to note that TCSC consumers are generally middle or upper class and are highly educated (Gutiérrez Pérez et al. 2012). Nevertheless, interviews and observations in 2015 demonstrate that the consumer base is gradually diversifying to include more working-class and local families.

Research methods

The field research for this study was carried out over 3 months in 2011 and 2 months in 2015,[2] thereby providing a longitudinal view of the TCSC. In 2011, I conducted semi-structured interviews (N = 23), participant observation, and a short survey (N = 28) of all TCSC producers active during the summer season. Interviewees included: three researchers at the Mexican Network's national headquarters; 13 TCSC producers; three members of the former TCSC Support Committee,[3] and four local researchers and government officials. Producers were interviewed based on a stratified sampling of producer categories as defined below (Secor 2010). In addition to the TCSC, I observed other food markets and interviewed vendors in public marketplaces. In 2015, I conducted two site visits, ongoing participant observations as a TCSC consumer, and interviewed seven TCSC producers and three consumers to understand how the organizational structure and functioning of the market has changed, particularly since the dissolution of the TCSC support committee in 2013.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions were analyzed for shared themes and differences across actor groups and individuals (Secor 2010). Reflections from my own field notes and observations in the homes, fields, and marketplaces of each interviewee were used to triangulate analysis. Because the experiences of each TCSC producer relates closely to their background and the kind of products they sell, my analysis separates TCSC producers into four categories: Fresh Producers (N = 8); Traditional Processed Producers (N = 7); Non-Traditional Processed Producers (N = 10); and Collective/Cooperative Producers (N = 3) (see Table 1).

The emergence of an alternative food network in Chiapas, Mexico

The TCSC in San Cristobal is an example of how AFNs emerge to counteract the pressure of the encroaching "corporate food regime" and overcome barriers encountered in the niche organic markets for export (McMichael 2012; Nelson et al. 2016). Much of the impetus for establishing the TCSC was in response to the many changes in food production and retail that have occurred in Chiapas in recent decades, particularly the influx of large supermarkets, imported goods, and produce of questionable origin and sanitation. The idea for the TCSC originated among a group of mothers and consumers concerned about what they observed as troubling tendencies in the globalization of the food system, a loss of food sovereignty, and an overall lack of healthy and organic food options locally (TCSC internal document 2010).

Trade liberalization has not only enabled the large-scale dumping of cheap food in the Global South that outcompetes local, labor-intensive peasant production (Naranjo 2011) but has also produced dramatic shifts in the pace, relationships, and consumer preferences operating in food retail (Schwentesius Rindermann and Gómez Cruz 2002). For example, Wal-Mart is now the largest private employer in Mexico and manages over 20 % of the nation's food retail (Barstow and Bertrab 2012); its big box subsidiaries such as Sam's Club and Bodega Aurrera have become commonplace in even the most isolated parts of Mexico such as the Chiapas Highlands. Free trade agreements and associated increases in foreign direct investment (FDI) since the 1980s have played a key role in the "supermarket revolution" that has reconfigured food procurement and commercialization processes globally (Hatanaka et al. 2005; Reardon et al. 2009; Burch and Lawrence 2009; Cohen 2013). Generally these supermarket chains are

[2] This field research is one component of my longer engagement with Chiapas since 2001, including 5 years of residence and numerous extended visits for research and collaboration.

[3] In 2013, the TCSC's organization and governance was transferred entirely to the market vendors.

Table 1 Basic profile of TCSC producers (2011)

Producer group and nationality	Product sold	Third party certification	Participatory certification status	Land size
Fresh producers ($N = 8$); (7 from Chiapas)	Fresh fruits, vegetables, meat, eggs	No	Organic/ Agro-ecological	Primarily small-scale (1–6 ha), family-based production
Traditional processed producers ($N = 7$) (6 from Chiapas)	Artisanal tortillas, tamales, atole, regional cheeses, salsas	Yes: 2 No: 5	Organic	Primarily family-based production (0 to 25 ha)
Non-traditional processed producers ($N = 10$); (6 from other countries)	Atypical processed foods: aged cheeses, canned fish, cakes and breads	No	Natural (use conventional flour/inputs)	Most live in urban areas without productive land
Collective and cooperative producers ($N = 3$) (all from Chiapas)	Coffee, chocolate, herbal medicine, soap	Yes: 2 No: 1	Organic	NA

based on private quality standards, vertical coordination, and centralized procurement systems that privilege large-scale growers, processors, and distributors (Busch and Bain 2004; Hatanaka et al. 2005; Reardon et al. 2009).

Although the varied topography and microclimates of Chiapas allow for diverse production of fruits, grains, and vegetables, the penetration of transnational food corporations in San Cristobal's "foodscape"[4] has produced a growing disconnect between what is produced in the region and what is consumed. As a result, local producers not only have to compete with transnational economies of scale but must also navigate a series of indirect impacts generated within the increasingly globalized and industrialized foodscape. Based on my observations and interviews, these impacts include cultural shifts in consumer preferences toward a supermarket aesthetic of larger and more uniform produce; increased use of agrochemicals (which not only expands the yields of capitalist producers but also reduces the need to employ fieldworkers); and the replacement of homemade meals with look-alike, processed foods.

Mexico has a rich history of public, open-air meat and produce marketplaces based on local supply chains. However, the quality and origin of products found in these marketplaces have shifted dramatically as agriculture has modernized and become further integrated in international commodity markets. Whereas locally and organically produced goods used to be the norm, today these products are increasingly outnumbered by imported and/or conventionally produced items. Conversations with produce vendors in the open-air markets of San Cristobal attest to these changes. Cristina, a 77-year old woman who has sold in a public market of San Cristobal since she was a girl, described the situation:

> We don't know what we eat anymore. It looks pretty, we cook it up and we eat, but we don't know how it grew…In my opinion, we don't eat anything good. We used to. Maybe like 60 years ago, everything we ate was all natural. There wasn't untreated sewage [and] people didn't use it to irrigate. But you see it's not that way anymore. Now we have to sell in order to eat. [People] plant; they have a lot of land, but what they want is for things to grow fast so they can go right out to sell it. (Interview, 26 July 2011).

To keep pace with the accelerated commerce of Mexico's food industry, farmers use improved seed, agrochemicals, and, as Cristina mentions, even untreated sewage for irrigation. These methods not only hasten production times and reduce the need for manual labor but also produce goods that are generally larger and more uniform in shape. In interviews, organic, subsistence farmers described how consumers often use the differences in appearance of their produce to haggle for lower prices. As one TCSC producer noted, "[We used to sell] in the market in San Cristobal, but we don't use chemicals anymore and the vegetables don't grow very big. It's not the same as using purchased fertilizer. When it's *chiquito* (really small), people don't pay as much in the market" (Interview, Lupita, 28 June 2011). In other words, rather than compelling a price premium, organics often fetch a lower price when compared to their non-organic counterparts, particularly when those producers lack the technical assistance to organically improve the size and yields of their harvests. As a result, small, organic horticulturalists find themselves increasingly marginalized within even the local public markets that have long served as their primary market for surplus production.

Beyond the changing dynamics in local food markets, another important motivation for the emergence of the AFN is a growing realization among consumers and activists that Mexico's domestic market for organics is

[4] I use the term "foodscape" to refer to food production, distribution, and consumption practices operating within and around the city of San Cristobal.

virtually nonexistent. Only 15 % of Mexico's certified organic production is destined for domestic consumption, and, of this amount, only 5 % is sold as organic (Gomez Tovar et al. 2005, p. 462). This is particularly true in Chiapas where—notwithstanding its position as the greatest producer of organics in Mexico—there are no mechanisms in place to protect, let alone expand, local, organic production for local consumption. One member of the TCSC support team (who promotes organic coffee for export) explained how this influenced their decision to form the TCSC in San Cristobal:

> We started to realize that we were doing all of this work with organic producers [in the communities] and then coming home and consuming who knows what from the market. We wanted a place to bring clean food, the extra crops that were being produced but not commercialized, or that went to waste in the field. (Interview, Isabel, 16 June 2011).

For all of these reasons, in 2005 a group of consumers created the TCSC to link local, organic producers to consumers willing to pay slightly more for peer-certified, local, organic and artisan products. In 2006 the group joined the Mexican Network of Organic Marketplaces, and by 2007 the group had generated enough interest to operate as a farmers' market three times a week. Qualified producers were invited to join the network and a core group of consumers formed a voluntary support team to oversee the organizational aspects of the TCSC, including: space rental, vendor applications, market and certification protocols, and educational outreach.

Benefits of participating in the TCSC

Interviews revealed that the TCSC provides a number of economic and non-economic benefits to participating vendors (Table 2). By providing mechanisms for peer-certification, price premiums, and producer trainings, the TCSC has established new ways to acknowledge, support, and value the multiple social and environmental benefits of responsible food production, thereby creating an important countertrend within the local food system. In other words, the TCSC emphasizes the diverse economy or multifunctionality of food beyond its treatment solely as a monetized commodity (Gibson-Graham 2006).

Economic benefits

All producers interviewed described the price premiums they collect through TCSC sales as a key reason for their participation. Although the total income earned from TCSC sales was not possible to calculate due to wide variations in sales week-to-week and producer-to-producer, most producers attested to the importance of TCSC sales in improving their income. As one farmer explained: "It is better for me in the Tianguis because it is one price there and another in the market" (Interview, Carmela, 12 July 2011). Another stated: "Now we are working harder because it is going better for us. I'm producing [and selling] more" (Interview, Lisbeth, 14 July 2011).

Whereas small-scale organic producers often find themselves at a disadvantage in the public markets, participants note this is not the case in the TCSC. There, they take advantage of a new vocabulary—organic, agro-ecological, artisanal—to sell their products at a premium. For many, describing their goods as specialty products is a new experience. As one producer described, "We didn't know that we were organic; we didn't even know what organic was. We just did things as we always did, using the leaves from the trees to compost around them. We didn't know that selling as 'organic' could open up different spaces and markets for sales" (Interview, Diana, 16 July 2011).

Table 2 Benefits of participation in the Tianguis de Comida Sana y Cercana

Economic benefits
Price premium for specialty goods
Less haggling from customers
Network connections to additional buyers (e.g. restaurants, organic stores)
Group savings initiatives (*tandas*) and direct product exchange (*trueque)* generates economic solidarity among producers
Participatory certification process differentiates organic products from conventional items at no cost to producers
Non-economic benefits
Diversified diet through diversification of production and direct exchange (*trueque*) with fellow producers
Vibrant social space and community solidarity (friendships, farmer-to-farmer trainings, information-sharing)
Sense of pride in being recognized as a responsible producer
Predominantly women-led; encourages female participation and self-confidence
TCSC aligns with political beliefs and lifestyle of producers

No longer victims of low-price haggling, the producers noted that the TCSC attracts a different kind of consumer, one who is generally more health-conscious and concerned about environmental stewardship and social justice. As one producer observed, "People go to the Tianguis who know how to feed themselves. They know what they are buying. In the [public] market, all kinds of people go and no one knows the difference, or they don't believe you. The culture is wrong; they look for what is cheapest" (Interview, Alberto, 19 June 2011).

In addition, the TCSC has facilitated partnerships between producers and local businesses selling specialty products. 25 of the 28 TCSC producers surveyed sell their products in other specialty shops and restaurants. Many of these sales have resulted from connections made through the TCSC. For example, an Italian pizzeria makes weekly purchases of TCSC's vegetables and cheeses; various organic stores resell organic produce from the TCSC; and processed producers in the TCSC frequently purchase the ingredients (e.g., vegetables, corn, milk) for their products from other TCSC producers.

Beyond market sales, TCSC producers have also developed innovative solidarity practices. Vendors organize *tandas* to help each other save money to achieve larger scale investments that are often used to improve production. In November of 2015, producers organized a *tanda* that required weekly donations of 200 pesos and which helped producers acquire 6000 pesos in one lump sum. This solidarity is further enriched by the practice of vendor-to-vendor product exchange known as *trueque*. As one vendor explained, "I might only earn 500 pesos on Saturday, but given the amount of goods I take home, I easily double my earnings with 500 pesos of traded goods" (Interview, Ana, 16 June 2011). Ana said the exchange practice not only helps producers get rid of surplus items at the end of the day but also increases the mutual respect and admiration among producers themselves. Producers access goods through *trueque* that may be otherwise inaccessible and are able to personally attest to the quality of their colleagues' products. As Ana observed, "[*Trueque*] has united us."

Both the *tanda* and *trueque* practices have grown between 2011 and 2015. In 2011, only 23 of those surveyed described engaging in fairly regular exchange with other TCSC producers. However, in 2015, nearly everyone participated in *trueque* and on a much greater scale. Even co-op producers now trade items with their TCSC colleagues. One producer reported that *trueque* represents such a valuable addition to her family's economy that she now produces additional quantities specifically for trading at the end of the market day (Interview, Ana, 20 November 2015). By dedicating a third of her production each week to *trueque,* Ana is able to cover her family's weekly consumption of vegetables, tortillas, bread, coffee, and honey, as well as medicines, herbs, soaps, and shampoos.

Another major economic benefit that producers gain from the TCSC is the access to participatory labeling at no cost. In 2011, 14 of 15 fresh producers and traditional processed producers described their products as "organic" yet only two had third party certification.[5] Despite producing organically, TCSC producers explained they had not pursued formal certification due to the high cost, onerous requirements, and the irrelevance of such certifications for their local markets. The TCSC has developed its own PGS based on peer site visits. One producer described it: "Here in the Tianguis we have a system of control among ourselves. Organic certification is a long and costly process; producers here are small-scale and can't invest in certifications like that. But with the controls we have, we can guarantee to our clientele that our products are well made" (Interview, Mario, 22 June 2011).

In 2011, TCSC members collectively determined the best practices for a participatory certification process that would not only verify TCSC products but also result in a peer-certified label that meets the certification requirements of Mexico's Organic Products Law. Many producers expressed looking forward to the more formal certification process. As one TCSC farmer explained: "I think [Participatory Certification] will be good for me. With it we will be able to justify what we are selling. Right now, we can tell people that, but will they believe us?" (Interview, Roberto, 29 June 2011). Some producers mentioned it would be an effective way to maintain honesty among producers while others felt the PGS label would help expand their sales beyond the TCSC. One producer with organic certification from Certimex even anticipated replacing his expensive third party certification with the PGS label: "If I see [the participatory certification] goes well, why keep paying for certification through Certimex?" (Interview, Alberto, 19 June 2011).

Additional interviews and observations in 2015 revealed that the new PGS has evolved slowly and has yet to reach the scale of public recognition producers originally imagined. The TCSC participatory certification commission has solidified the rules and guidelines for fresh produce and all TCSC farmers have been peer-certified as either "agroecological" or "in transition" based on these standards. Nonetheless, the certification protocol for processed goods is still pending and producers are still learning how to move the process forward since the dissolution of the TCSC support team. As one member of the PGS commission observed, "You see, we are involved in long

[5] One is a family that exports organic mango and chocolate to specialty buyers in Mexico City; the other is a member of an organic milk cooperative.

processes here in the Tianguis. This isn't something we can achieve from one day to the next." (Interview, Alma, 31 October 2015).

Non-economic benefits

For most vendors, participation in the TCSC is about more than just economic benefits. As listed in Table 2, non-economic benefits include diversification of diets and production practices, product exchanges between producers, community and solidarity building, and expanding skillsets and self-confidence, particularly among women.

When asked how participation in the TCSC has impacted food production and consumption practices in their own homes, numerous producers described diversifying their crops as well as their household diets. Consumer demands for an ever-greater diversity of products have encouraged producers to experiment with new crops and recipes, thereby expanding the diversity of their own family's diets in the process. As Norma described, "At first we only had things like chard, cilantro, radish, and lettuce. But people started asking for other things and I told my husband to start planting beet, carrot, celery, and broccoli. He planted less of other things and started planting those things people wanted…[we eat everything we grow], everything except garlic. Nobody in my family likes garlic" (Interview, Norma, 12 July 2011). Nine out of 15 fresh and traditional processed producers interviewed mentioned expanding the diversity of products they offer since joining the TCSC. While horticulturalists have diversified production by planting different crop varieties, traditional processed producers have developed new versions of traditional recipes. Maria Carmen, for example, uses vegetable shortening rather than lard in her recipes and offers nearly 50 different flavors of tamales. As mentioned above, vendor diets are also enriched by the generalized practice of *trueque* or product exchange among producers at the end of each market day.

The TCSC is also a vibrant social space in which ideas are exchanged, friendships made, and solidarity practiced. On market days, producers and consumers alike greet each other by name; children share games; problems are confided, advice extended, and exciting news celebrated. Through workshops and field visits, producers teach each other best practices and experiment with new techniques. As one vendor stated, "I do this because I enjoy my *cuates* (buddies). There are great friends here and it's an alternative way of consuming…I like interacting with my companions and the harmony we have" (Interview, Pamela, 15 July 2011).

Repeatedly in interviews TCSC producers indicated the pride they feel to have a space where consumers value their organic and artisanal practices. This is significant given the general context, which one expatriate vendor aptly described: "Government policies devalue farmers; there is a denigration of manual labor in this country. It's not supported and there's no value placed on the nutrition of local, organic production" (Interview, Mary, 14 June 2011). In contrast, the TCSC attracts consumers who support a more just food system. One producer noted, "I have people that regularly buy 5 or 10 kilos from me and it is really nice to sell to them because you feel they really value what we are doing" (Interview, Jesus, 23 July 2011).

The predominance of women as both producers and organizers in the TCSC creates an environment in which the role of women is emphasized and female voices heard. Many women in the TCSC have experience with organizations working towards gender equality and share these experiences with their colleagues, encouraging their *comadres* to express their viewpoints and actively participate in the TCSC. Ana spoke of the importance of women in the TCSC: "[The greatest strength of the Tianguis] is that we are many women and we are warriors (*gente de guerra*). I admire my female companions. They are people who take risks; they are choosing this path among infinite possibilities of what to do to survive and they are choosing to do something that I greatly admire" (Interview, Ana, 16 June 2011).

Indeed, much of the inspiration for the TCSC comes from a shared political agenda and lifestyle vision among its participants for a more socially just and environmentally sound food system. For some it is about economic solidarity and creating alternatives to capitalism:

> [Here in the Tianguis] the money stays in the community. Buying from your neighbors is very different than supporting international regimes. It's like compositing the soil economically speaking. (Interview, Mary, 14 June 2011).

> This is a lifestyle choice and a political position moving towards anti-capitalism. (Interview, Rosalva, 2 July 2011).

For others, it is about protecting food sovereignty and providing different food choices:

> I feel this [globalized food] system makes us believe that we are free, but we aren't. Supposedly we can choose, but choose between what? Between what they give us? So when we go to the supermarket and we see all of that stuff, that's not a choice. In that sense, I think we do add something in the way of food sovereignty, in giving another option so that people can come and decide what to eat. (Interview, Ana, 17 June 2011).

As demonstrated here, the TCSC provides a variety of both economic and non-economic benefits to participating

producers. Certainly there are additional benefits that go beyond the scope of this study, including: environmental benefits of agro-ecological production and local commodity chains (see Reyes Gomez 2010), health benefits of TCSC foods, maintenance of cultural practices linked to traditional food production, options for rural employment and female-led business, and the joy of family-based employment.[6] In sum, the effects of the TCSC go beyond mere economic impacts, reverberating throughout the community and the local food system in a variety of ways. Nonetheless, as with many AFNs, the TCSC faces numerous challenges to which I now turn.

The limitations to and challenges of the TCSC

> At the heart of the spatial terrain of both hegemony and resistance is a combination of logics driven by transnational, regional, national, and local dynamics…Resistance initiatives are themselves embedded in the local experiences of wider capitalist processes. (Morton 2007, p. 466).

The TCSC and other marketplaces in the Mexican Network attempt to challenge industrial food systems trends and create a positive defense for local and healthy production practices. Nonetheless, these initiatives are still embedded in a larger political economic and environmental context, which significantly constrains their ability to effect change. Barriers to the TCSC's success manifest at both the individual/farm level and at the organizational level (Table 3). These challenges merit our attention and confirm the need to temper AFN idealism with "reflexive localism," understanding that AFNs are not conflict-free, but rather are process-based "communities of practice" (Goodman et al. 2012). Indeed, this study's longitudinal view shows that challenges are being resolved, albeit slowly.

Challenges at the individual and farm level

Although economic justice is a stated goal of the TCSC and producers enjoy multiple economic benefits, I found many TCSC producers still struggle with poverty and are unable to support themselves solely through TCSC sales. These challenges are linked to constraints in the larger political economic context. For example, while the TCSC allows producers to charge a modest premium for their specialty goods, vendors cannot stray too far from prices in other markets without losing price-sensitive clientele. Already faced with accusations of being an elite marketplace, TCSC producers must carefully set prices to reflect the value of their work while also remaining sensitive to the buying-power of their consumer base. Unfortunately, there is often a gap between the price consumers are willing and able to pay and the price that adequately reflects the additional labor and care involved in the production of TCSC items.

In most cases, specialty food production practices require substantially more labor than conventionally produced goods. One producer explained, "I am used to the work. It works out, but everything requires manual labor—the manure, the compost, all of it requires manual labor" (Interview, Roberto, 29 June 2011). Another said, "With chemicals things grow a lot faster and it's less work. Organic production takes time" (Interview, Norma, 22 June 2011). In addition, because the TCSC relies on direct producer–consumer relationships, TCSC participants must invest their time not only in production but also in transportation, vending, and organizational responsibilities. For some, this requires regularly working 12-hour days and rarely taking time off.

Such economic challenges affect certain producers disproportionately. Because non-traditional processed producers offer exotic items not easily found in other markets, they do not face the same price constraints as their companions. Fresh producers and traditional processed producers, however, must continually adjust prices according to their conventionally produced counterparts. For example, if cilantro is selling for two pesos a bunch in the public market, TCSC vendors may charge three. Similarly, handmade traditional processed goods at the TCSC must compete with the cheap prices of mass-produced "look alikes" such as Maseca tortillas.

It is therefore unsurprising that participation in the TCSC has not dramatically improved the material livelihoods of most producers and many still rely on off-farm employment to make ends meet. Most TCSC producers of horticultural and traditional processed goods live in austere, concrete block homes with limited amenities. Most have at least one family member employed off-farm as construction workers, field hands, or crafts(wo)men. Those with multiple school-aged children consider the government payments through the *Oportunidades* program[7] an important source of economic support. In addition, rain-based horticulture and meat production are inherently risky. Fresh producers must navigate variable weather and sudden losses from climate extremes or pests, and without crop insurance to cover the losses. As one meat producer described: "There are good days and bad days. You can do

[6] Thirteen of 25 individuals surveyed report family-based production and sales.

[7] *Oportunidades* (now known as *Prospera*) is a conditional cash transfer program that provides cash payments in exchange for regular school attendance, health check-ups, and nutritional support.

Table 3 TCSC challenges

Individual/farm level challenges
Price constraints and poverty—sales are limited by political economic context
Variable sales/limited consumer base
Significant time and labor requirements, particularly for organic/agro-ecological production
Fresh producers are vulnerable to climate extremes and crop loss
Farmers lack sufficient agricultural extension to improve organic production
Organizational challenges in the network
Depends on producers for organization and participatory certification
Some producers lack time/willingness to assume leadership and participate
Continual challenges to securing an affordable market space and room to grow
Lack of effective communication/coordination with Mexican Network and other AFNs
Limited advertising of TCSC market and lack of demand
Many more organic micro-producers in the area cannot access specialty markets like the TCSC. At the same time, there are few incentives for more producers to transition to organic
Consumers' buying-power influences TCSC success and growth

everything for your production and then suddenly lose a bunch of animals" (Interview, Rosalva, 2 July 2011). Another vegetable producer commented on their vulnerability to extreme rainfall: "Right now our biggest problem is the extreme rainfall—it's hurting the broccoli and the lettuce. Last year we didn't have any production from our land because of the [excessive rainfall] and only made it through thanks to [my husband's wage work]" (Interview, Berenice, 14 July 2011).

Although the participatory certification system endeavors to generate farmer-to-farmer learning and provide technical assistance to continually move closer to the agro-ecological ideals outlined in the TCSC protocol, most producers need substantially more assistance than what the TCSC can currently accommodate. The PGS lacks more consumer and volunteer involvement to reach these goals (Interview, Alma, 31 October 2015). While past TCSC workshops have generated noteworthy improvements in farming practices and imparted important techniques for improving soil fertility such as worm composting, site visits to TCSC farms revealed that even greater agricultural extension is needed to further improve farmer yields and productivity.

Organizational challenges of the TCSC

Although the TCSC's horizontal, participatory approach overcomes many barriers to entry for small-scale producers, it simultaneously encounters some of the same contradictions and limitations as those found in other market-based approaches to sustainable food governance. Each organizational challenge listed in Table 3 is discussed below.

From its inception, the TCSC has been deeply reliant upon the volunteer labor of consumers, academics, and activists. Historically, the all-volunteer support team conducted the principal organizational and outreach duties. Nonetheless, in 2013, these responsibilities were fully transferred to the producers themselves, thereby generating a series of new benefits and challenges. Decisions are now made by majority vote in assembly meetings among TCSC producers and each producer is responsible for participating in a sub-committee as well as at least one PGS visit annually.

Interviews in 2015 revealed some producers are more willing than others to assume organizational responsibilities. As a result, producers expressed mixed feelings about the dissolution of the support team. On the one hand, producers commented that since the transition overall producer participation in decisions and organizational duties has improved and assembly decisions now more closely reflect the needs and desires of the producers themselves. One producer explained that the support team was very focused on spreading the ideology and idealism of the TCSC whereas the producers—while committed to the ideology—ultimately prioritize their livelihoods and "survival" (Interview, Ana, 20 Nov 2015). For example, in recent years the producers have made decisions that the support committee historically opposed such as participating in government-supported product expo events and remaining in their current market space despite dramatic rent increases. The choice to remain in their current space is particularly significant given the historic instability of the TCSC location. Between 2007 and 2011, the TCSC changed location six times and, each time, producers suffered a lapse in sales. Now, although most begrudge the

high rent of the current space, all producers interviewed in 2015 acknowledged that their choice to stay means they now have a space that meets all of their needs and provides room to grow.

Producers commented that without the support committee they have struggled to complete all tasks let alone expand the impact of their work. They find that self-enforcing their rules can strain relationships between producers. "We have to police ourselves now…and sometimes, to avoid conflict, we act like we don't see [rule violations]" (Interview, Ana, 20 Nov 2015). Interviews revealed that certain rules were better enforced when the support committee existed and there were more ongoing activities and connections with other food activists and researchers. Some TCSC producers are already overburdened by work and family obligations and therefore limit their participation to the minimum requirements. As a result, producers disclosed that while some sub-committees are active and effective, others might as well not exist.

Discussion

Scholarship on place-based AFNs often falls into dichotomous characterizations that either applaud the defensive localism and autonomy of these initiatives (van der Ploeg et al. 2012; Altieri and Toledo 2011; Boza Martínez 2013; Bouagnimbeck 2014; Nelson et al. 2016) or critique their problematic power relations, reformist proclivities, unknowing reliance on neoliberal logics, and tendency to conflate spatial proximity with social and environmental justice (Slocum 2006; Freidberg and Goldstein 2011; Guthman 2008; Alkon and Mares 2012; Hincrichs 2003). Few authors offer a more balanced view of these movements, acknowledging their potential while also remaining cognizant of their enduring inequalities and limited scope (Goodman et al. 2012; Tregear 2011; Maye et al. 2007). Following this latter group of researchers, this in-depth case study does not fit neatly within a dichotomous characterization but rather presents a complex, hybrid space in which certain qualities can be read as problematically neoliberal (Guthman 2008) just as others can be understood as critical ingredients for the construction of alternative community economies and larger systems change (Sonnino and Blay-Palmer 2016).

The need for *local* AFNs in the Global South

Numerous scholars have observed that there is nothing inherently better about locally based initiatives (Hincrichs 2003; Cleveland et al. 2015). Born and Purcell (2006) remind us that the spatial scale of local AFN is a strategy for the pursuit of specific agendas, the outcomes of which depend on how it is employed. Following Cleveland et al. (2015), an evaluation of the TCSC's goals reveal that spatial localization is key to achieving the network's desired effects. Their place-based initiative is integral to strengthening local direct economies, providing consumers with verified organic products, and improving the economies and agricultural practices of otherwise disenfranchised micro-organic horticulturalists that rely on local markets.

While international niche markets for specialty goods have provided a productive alternative for some small farmers in Mexico (Gomez Tovar et al. 2005), those involved in the TCSC (and the Mexican Network more generally) have brought attention to the historical lack of niche markets and extension services to support small-scale organic horticulturalists and artisanal food producers in Mexico's local markets. Unlike the Global North, most countries in the Global South still have large populations of peasant and indigenous farmers who produce food for local markets (Altieri and Toledo 2011; Freidberg and Goldstein 2011). Nonetheless, as TCSC producers attest, increased competition from the ever-growing influx of cheap imports and supermarket chains has made the use of agrochemicals compulsory for peasant producers and has further marginalized organic horticulturalists in local markets. While there are NGOs that promote agro-ecological production techniques, so far, the TCSC is the only effort in the region that provides a local market for these producers. This study therefore corroborates the clear need for, and demonstrated benefits to, AFNs and niche markets that are specifically local in focus (Cleveland et al. 2015).

The benefit and challenges of PGS

The development of peer certification practices and PGS in the Global South have been integral to overcoming the barriers of entry and frustrations observed in transnational AFNs and third party certification processes (Nelson et al. 2016; Hatanaka 2010; Raynolds 2014; González and Nigh 2005; Escalona Aguilar 2009). Similar to Nelson et al.'s (2016) overall findings in the Mexican Network, the PGS of the TCSC is an important tool that is shaped by producer needs, makes organic premiums available without costly certifications, and helps to establish trust between consumers and producers. Nonetheless, the evidence also indicates that the PGS faces challenges similar to those observed in other studies, including a lack of consumer involvement; insufficient recognition and support from authorities; poor record-keeping; low participation of some producers; and over-reliance on volunteer work (Bouagnimbeck 2014; Nelson et al. 2016; Ortiz 2013; Nelson et al. 2010).

As opposed to the nationally recognized PGS seal developed in Brazil (Zanasi et al. 2009), the PGS process

developed by the TCSC has yet to gain widespread recognition and has not been made accessible to other organic producers unaffiliated with the TCSC. The producer who in 2011 anticipated replacing his third party organic certification with the TCSC's PGS has since abandoned the idea. He noted, "The [third party] certification is expensive but it is what our clients ask for. Participatory certification is just for here in the Tianguis; it is not recognized by our larger network of consumers or in the other cities where we export to" (Interview, Alberto, 24 Oct 2015). Given these enduring challenges, this study confirms that institutional support of PGS (whether by government or NGOs) is indispensable to expanding both the reach of PGS certification and its recognition among consumers (Boza Martínez 2013; Bouagnimbeck 2014; Nelson et al. 2016).

Local community economy or neoliberal governmentality?

Some of the strongest critiques in the literature suggest that AFNs rely problematically on neoliberal techniques to produce food systems change (Guthman 2008; Alkon and Mares 2012). Although there are many definitions of neoliberalism (Ferguson 2010), here I follow Guthman's (2007, 2008) understanding of neoliberalism as the process by which state services are "hollowed out" and the regulation of human and environmental relations is relegated to market mechanisms and the "third sector" (volunteers, private foundations, and private–public partnerships). For example, although market-based certification mechanisms—whether organic, fair trade, or even PGS—intend to promote certain social and environmental protections, they do so by erecting a private property right that is only accessible to certain producers (Guthman 2007). Relatedly, Guthman (2008) contends that AFNs reinforce neoliberal subjectivities by looking to (1) consumer choice; (2) localism; (3) entrepreneurialism; and (4) self-improvement as the key pathways to change, thereby depoliticizing hunger and reducing food activism to the arena of the market.

Admittedly, the TCSC relies on all of the above-mentioned factors to transform the local food system and its members actively struggle with the limits and contradictions of its market-based strategy. For example, although the consumer base continues to grow, demand is still sufficiently limited that the TCSC no longer admits new producers that repeat items already offered by other TCSC vendors. This protocol is not due to a lack of interested and qualifying producers[8] (Calderón-Cisneros and Soto-Pinto 2014), but rather is intended to protect the market advantage of TCSC vendors. While this "market protection" is understandable, it nonetheless points to the ways in which AFNs are ultimately boundary-making projects limited by market fundamentals of supply and demand (Goodman and Goodman 2007). The ability of the TCSC to grow and encompass additional producers is limited due to slow-growing consumer demand, virtually inexistent agricultural extension services to improve organic production, and a lack of organizational capacity to peer certify other producers. In this sense, Guthman (2007) is right in critiquing the limitations of such approaches for producing change on a larger scale. Clearly, overcoming these challenges, as well as the public sanitation and infrastructure problems affecting the safety of local food production, necessarily requires greater involvement of public institutions and political will (Freidberg and Goldstein 2011; van der Ploeg et al. 2012).

While it is important we acknowledge AFNs' problematic reliance on market-based, neoliberal techniques, it is critical we also recognize the ambiguous nature of these "neoliberal" elements and their imbrication with factors that can equally serve to form "community economies" (Gibson-Graham 2006). Numerous authors urge us not to view neoliberalism in monolithic terms but rather evaluate its effects in context, giving due consideration to cases in which "neoliberal" techniques are mobilized to progressive or creative ends (Collier 2012; Ferguson 2010; McCarthy 2005; Perreault and Martin 2005). Indeed, as Edelman (2014) highlights, decentralization and local-scale actions are, ironically, techniques that are considered integral to both conservative neoliberal *and* radical food sovereignty agendas. Hence, by reading the TCSC's economy for diversity rather than essentialized neoliberal practices (Gibson-Graham 2006), we are able to see that "neoliberal" techniques of consumer choice, localism, and entrepreneurialism can also be deployed as innovative components for change. In the TCSC, for example, consumer choice for TCSC products is fundamental to supporting the network's ethics and collective strategy; its local focus is key to valuing a specific sector of otherwise disenfranchised producers; and its entrepreneurialism often manifests as family-based or cooperative endeavors that safeguard, share, and expand culinary traditions and agricultural biodiversity.

[8] Informal interviews in the open-air markets of San Cristobal revealed there are many more organic micro-producers beyond those in the TCSC who could benefit from peer certification and/or participation in an AFN. In a walking survey of one public produce market alone, I counted nearly 80 such vendors. Speaking with some of these "informal" vendors, I found that most sell the surplus from their own subsistence production, most of which is produced without agrochemicals. Some are aware of the TCSC and specifically asked me if I could help them gain admittance to become a TCSC vendor.

Just as some argue that place-based movements offer a direct challenge to neoliberal models of trade and agriculture (Massicotte 2010), others view AFNs more modestly as important efforts to reform markets and re-embed them according to social needs (van der Ploeg et al. 2012). Similar to Polanyi's (1944) observations that the economic system must be embedded within social relations, Gibson-Graham (2006) argue that, because all economic relations are inherently social and founded in daily practices, the economy can be used as a site for transformation and the construction of place-based alternatives. Following Gibson-Graham (2006), we see that financial gains are but one of the benefits TCSC producers enjoy. Hence, just as the overall political economic context imposes challenges, TCSC members are involved in actively responding to those challenges and building a community economy that is: cooperative, based on collective decision-making and responsibility, locally owned, and ethically concerned with generating environmental, social, and health benefits alongside economic well-being.

The many benefits and solidarity actions observed in this case study reflect the ways in which the TCSC is not governed strictly by neoliberal logics. Granted, as found in other studies (Tregear 2011; Reyes Gomez 2010; Escalona Aguilar 2009), the people involved in the TCSC represent a broad spectrum of commitment and rationales for their participation that range from strict self-interest to more radical interest in the TCSC as a space for transformational politics. In addition, although the impact of this particular initiative is admittedly still limited, benefitting a specific group of producers and consumers, it nonetheless continues to grow and inspire other initiatives including a newly founded AFN in the neighboring town of Teopisca.

Conclusion

This paper has evaluated the emergence of an alternative food network in Southern Mexico, explored its impacts on the experiences, perspectives, and livelihoods of participating producers, and reflected on the ways in which it encounters and reproduces some of the same limitations observed in other market-based approaches to food systems change. The Tianguis de Comida Sana y Cercana in Chiapas, Mexico has developed through a combination of increased consumer interest in counteracting dominant food trends and securing access to organic and healthy foods on the one hand, and survivalist interests among small-scale organic and artisanal food producers on the other. The TCSC and the Mexican Network have drawn attention to the plight of organic producers who are increasingly exposed to the intensified competition of cheap imports and industrialized food production yet lack access to certifications, public policies, or niche markets that duly recognize and compensate the additional labor required in their production systems. In sum, the TCSC responds to perceived limitations of state support for sustainable agriculture, the general inaccessibility of organic-for-export markets to certain producers, and the virtual inexistence of markets that value local, specialty products.

As "community economies," the TCSC offers specialty producers a variety of both economic and non-economic benefits (Gibson-Graham 2006). The case study has shown the importance of such AFNs in compelling producers to maintain and further improve organic and family-based farming practices that have long been a tradition in the Chiapas Highlands. The expansion of product varieties, revitalization of producer-to-producer exchanges (*trueque*), alliances with other organizations and businesses, collective organizational structure, and integration of contemporary health concerns and agro-ecological practices in the TCSC all contribute to enriching producer diets, community solidarity, and local food sovereignty. Nonetheless, to the extent that the TCSC relies on market mechanisms to function, it has also unwittingly become a boundary-making project that caters to elite consumers and limits participation to a select group of producers. Hence, while the local focus and participatory certification practices of the TCSC and other Mexican AFNs effectively overcome some of the barriers to entry encountered in the export-oriented organic and fair trade sectors, they simultaneously reproduce some of the same tensions observed in other market-based mechanisms of responsible food governance (Guthman 2007).

Other AFN studies suggest the scope and impact of local-based AFNs can be greatly strengthened by strategic alliances with other social movements and supportive government policy (Cleveland et al. 2015; Sonnino and Blay-Palmer 2016; Bouagnimbeck 2014; Boza Martínez 2013; van der Ploeg et al. 2012; Altieri and Toledo 2011). Provided inter-locking actions emerge at other meso- and macro-scales, place-based strategies such as the AFN presented here can offer "precedents" (Appadurai 2001) and become building blocks for creating larger scale food systems change (Wekerle 2004; Massicotte 2010; van der Ploeg et al. 2012). Certainly the alliances of TCSC producers with other local food initiatives, as well as the multi-scalar policy work and affiliations of the Mexican Network (Schwentesius Rindermann and Cruz 2015) are invaluable to building the "meshworks" (Escobar 2001) necessary for such change. Throughout the Global North and South, AFNs like the TCSC have become part of larger-scale food movements that are now receiving increasing attention and political backing (van der Ploeg et al. 2012; Zanasi et al. 2009; Rocha and Lessa 2009; Wekerle 2004). As the TCSC initiative and the Mexican Network

progress, further research is necessary to analyze whether they are able to follow a similar trajectory, enrolling more actors and informing public policies, purchasing agreements, and multi-scalar networks to transform Mexico's food systems in more substantial ways (Wald and Hill 2016).

Many of the lessons drawn from the *Tianguis de Comida Sana y Cercana* relate broadly to the successes and challenges of other AFN movements throughout the world. Although this paper has exposed important limitations to the AFN approach, these networks nonetheless draw critical attention to the marginalization of organic smallholders and artisan producers and the need to devise new ways to protect such agricultural systems in rural and peri-urban areas. They are a reminder of the multifunctionality of agriculture not only for the production of food, fiber, and fuel but also for the production of rural landscapes, human-environment relationships, rural employment, and local solidarities. With its long history of small-scale, peasant agriculture based on few external inputs and adapted to local conditions, Mexico and other developing countries have a comparative advantage in sustaining the multifunctionality of agriculture. The experiences of AFNs such as that presented herein offer important insights regarding the difficulty of transitioning to a community food economy within the current political economic conjuncture centered on capitalist forms of exchange. Nonetheless, to paraphrase Leyshon et al. (2003), we must not judge the political significance of 'alternative' economic geographies such as the TCSC solely on their prospective economic power but also (and perhaps more importantly) on their ability to suggest a path forward and a proliferation of new possibilities.

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