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Towards a Total Value Tool for Local Food Systems: Measuring Regional Social Value among Small Food Producers in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Local food producers create value that extends beyond food production and economic performance. They contribute to trust between producers and consumers, community wellbeing, and regional identity. However, these forms of social value are often difficult to measure and communicate because traditional evaluation systems mainly focus on financial indicators. This research explores how regional social value created by small food producers in the Netherlands can be identified, measured, and communicated, focusing on three dimensions: trust, community pride, and regional identity. A mixed-method approach combined qualitative and quantitative data collection. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with three local food initiatives: Voedselbos Glanerbeek, De Voedselbos Winkel, and Herenboeren Lingezegen-Grootstal. Quantitative data were collected through an online survey completed by 16 consumers of local food products. Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, while survey responses were analysed using descriptive statistics. The findings show that social value is created through transparency, storytelling, participation, social inclusion, and community engagement, and that consumers strongly associate local food with trust, community contribution, authenticity, and regional identity. Based on these findings, practical indicators were identified and integrated into a proposed Total Value Tool that combines a Financial Module with a Social Value Module, enabling small food producers to communicate their broader impact on communities and regional development alongside traditional financial performance.

Keywords: social value, local food systems, short food supply chains, regional identity

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, interest in local food systems has increased significantly, both in Europe and globally. This growth is driven by changing consumer preferences, where people increasingly value food that is fresh, traceable, and locally produced. According to the European Commission, short food supply chains have expanded steadily since the early 2000s, with many EU countries supporting local producers through policy and regional development programs (Kneafsey et al., 2013). A report by the European Commission shows that more than 15% of farms in the EU are now involved in some form of direct sales, highlighting the growing importance of local food systems (European Commission, 2020). This development shows that local food is no longer a niche market but an important part of modern food systems.

Despite this growth, traditional economic systems still mainly focus on financial indicators such as revenue, cost efficiency, and productivity, rooted in classical and neoclassical economic theories where value is defined through market exchange and consumer willingness to pay (Ritchie-Dunham, 2014). These measurements do not capture

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the broader contributions of small food producers, such as their role in strengthening communities or preserving local culture, creating a gap between what is measured in financial terms and the actual value experienced by society.

To address this limitation, the concept of Ecosynomics offers a broader perspective on value creation, explaining that value is created not only through goods and financial transactions but also through relationships, trust, and collaboration among individuals (Ritchie-Dunham, 2014). Ecosynomics identifies multiple levels of value creation, including material, relational, and developmental levels; while traditional systems focus mainly on material outputs, higher levels of value are created through trust, cooperation, and learning within communities (Ritchie-Dunham, 2014). These relational and developmental dimensions are especially important in local food systems, where producers and consumers often interact directly through farmers' markets, local shops, or community-supported agriculture.

This broader understanding of value is particularly relevant for small food producers, who often contribute to regional identity and cultural heritage. Research shows that around 70% of consumers in Europe associate local food with higher quality and authenticity, and more than 60% believe it strengthens their connection to the region (Eurobarometer, 2021). According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, family farms represent more than 90% of farms worldwide and produce around 80% of global food supply (Lowder et al., 2019), and these farms often rely on local knowledge, cooperation, and shared resources, which strengthens social relationships and community resilience. Studies on the local multiplier effect further show that money spent on local products can generate up to two to three times more economic activity compared to spending in global supply chains (Thilmany McFadden et al., 2016).

However, one of the main challenges is that social value remains difficult to measure. Social value includes intangible elements such as trust, community pride, and a sense of belonging, which are not easily captured using traditional financial metrics; organizations often struggle to measure these aspects because they are qualitative and context-dependent (Nicholls et al., 2012). This limitation means that the full contribution of local food producers is often underestimated in economic evaluations and policy decisions. The concept of shared value supports the use of social indicators to address this challenge, emphasizing that businesses can create both economic and social benefits at the same time (Porter & Kramer, 2011).

This research specifically focuses on regional social values — trust between producers and consumers, community pride, and regional identity — created through local food systems in the Netherlands. By combining the Ecosynomics framework with recent research and empirical data, this study seeks to identify indicators that capture both economic and social contributions, supporting the development of a Total Value Tool that allows small producers to better communicate their overall impact on the community (Ritchie-Dunham, 2014). Main research question: How can regional social values such as trust, community pride, and regional identity be made measurable and communicable for small food producers in the Netherlands? (1)What forms of regional social value do consumers associate with local producers? (2) How do small producers contribute to local identity and wellbeing? (3) What indicators could capture these contributions in a practical way? (4) How can this social value be integrated into a Total Value Tool?

The aim of this research is to explore how regional social value created by small food producers in the Netherlands can be identified, measured, and communicated in a practical way, examining the forms of social value consumers associate with local producers, understanding how producers contribute to local identity and community wellbeing, and identifying practical indicators that support the development of a Total Value Tool integrating social value with economic outcomes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESIS FORMULATION

Social Value

Social value refers to the benefits created through social relationships, community interactions, and collective wellbeing that go beyond purely economic or financial outcomes, including intangible elements such as trust, cooperation, community engagement, cultural identity, and shared experiences (Nicholls et al., 2012). Within the Ecosynomics framework, social value is understood as the value created through the quality of relationships and interactions between individuals and groups; economic systems are not only mechanisms for producing goods and services but also networks of relationships in which trust, respect, and mutual benefit generate positive experiences and additional value (Ritchie-Dunham, 2014). Putnam (2000) introduces the related concept of social capital the networks, norms, and trust that enable individuals to cooperate effectively while Porter and Kramer (2011) argue that organizations can create shared value by generating economic benefits while simultaneously addressing social needs within communities.

Local Food Producers, Regional Identity, and Community Pride

Local food producers are individuals or small enterprises that produce food within a specific geographic region and distribute their products primarily within local markets, typically operating through short food supply chains that allow closer interaction between producers and consumers (Kneafsey et al., 2013). According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, family farms account for more than 90% of farms worldwide and produce approximately 80% of the world's food (Lowder et al., 2019), and these producers frequently maintain traditional agricultural knowledge and strengthen social networks within communities. From an Ecosynomics perspective, direct engagement between producers and consumers creates relational value through dialogue, transparency, and trust (Ritchie-Dunham, 2014).

Regional identity refers to the shared cultural characteristics, traditions, and values that distinguish a particular geographic region and its community; local food networks often generate value through the association between food products and specific places, and consumers may perceive locally produced food as more authentic and trustworthy (Tregear, 2011). Community pride emerges when individuals feel a sense of belonging and positive attachment to their local environment, and initiatives that promote local food systems often strengthen social ties and encourage citizens to participate more actively in community life (Kneafsey et al., 2013).

Measuring Social Value and the Total Value Tool

One of the main challenges in studying social value is translating intangible social contributions into measurable elements, since traditional economic metrics such as income, productivity, or employment do not capture aspects such as trust, belonging, or cultural identity. Nicholls et al. (2012) propose that social value can be assessed using social indicators that measure community engagement, social relationships, and improvements in collective wellbeing, and the concept of Social Return on Investment (SROI) has been developed to measure the broader social and environmental outcomes generated by organizations and initiatives. Within Ecosynomics, value emerges when individuals experience dignity, respect, and shared purpose in their interactions (Ritchie-Dunham, 2014), so indicators of social value may include the strength of relationships between producers and consumers, levels of trust, community participation in local markets, and the preservation of cultural traditions.

A Total Value Tool refers to an analytical framework designed to capture multiple dimensions of value created by an activity or organization, going beyond financial performance to account for non-financial impacts. Ecosynomics provides a useful theoretical basis for such a tool, since economic systems generate value across material, relational, and developmental dimensions simultaneously (Ritchie-Dunham, 2014), while research on social impact measurement emphasizes the importance of combining quantitative and qualitative indicators to evaluate the broader outcomes of economic activities (Nicholls et al., 2012). In the context of small food producers, a Total Value Tool can combine indicators such as production output, local economic circulation, community engagement, and cultural preservation to provide a more comprehensive understanding of regional contribution.

Theoretical Framework: Ecosynomics and SROI

This research is grounded in two complementary theories. Ecosynomics, developed by Ritchie-Dunham (2014), explains that value is created across three main levels: material (tangible outputs such as food products and sales), relational (the quality of relationships between individuals, such as trust between producers and consumers), and developmental (long-term growth, learning, and community wellbeing). This theory is highly relevant because small food producers often operate within close relationships with their communities, creating relational and developmental value that traditional financial reporting does not capture.

The Social Impact Measurement / SROI framework focuses on measuring and communicating the broader social and environmental value created by organizations, identifying stakeholders, understanding the outcomes they experience, and assigning indicators to measure those outcomes (Nicholls et al., 2012). While Ecosynomics explains how social value is created through relationships and community interactions, SROI supports the measurement and communication of these values through practical indicators; the two frameworks therefore complement each other and jointly underpin the development of the Total Value Tool proposed in this research.

RESEARCH METHOODOLOGY

Literature Review Methodology

The research began with a structured literature review to build a theoretical foundation for understanding social value in local food systems. Relevant keywords such as “social value,” “local food systems,” “short supply chains,” “regional identity,” “Ecosynomics,” and “Social Return on Investment (SROI)” were used to search academic databases including Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and SpringerLink. Only peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and institutional reports published after 2009 were selected to ensure reliability and relevance (Snyder, 2019). The selected literature was analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, grouping sources into categories such as trust and relationships (linked to Ecosynomics) and measurement and indicators (linked to SROI) (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Research Design

This research uses a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, because social value is both subjective and measurable: qualitative data helps understand experiences and perspectives, while quantitative data helps measure perceptions and identify patterns (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The qualitative part focuses on local food producers, while the quantitative part focuses on consumers of local

food, allowing the research to capture both the supply side and the demand side of social value.

Population and Sampling

For the qualitative part, three local food producers were selected using purposive sampling: Voedselbos Glanerbeek, De Voedselbos Winkel, and Herenboeren Lingezegen-Grootstal, all of which operate locally, sell directly or through short supply chains, and have interaction with the local community. For the quantitative part, sixteen consumers who purchase or are familiar with local food products were selected using convenience sampling, a sample size suitable for a small-scale study allowing basic statistical analysis.

Data Collection Methods

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with local food producers, each lasting approximately 30–40 minutes, conducted in person or online, and recorded and summarized with permission. Interview questions focused on the role of producers in the local community, their contribution to regional identity, their interaction with consumers, and their understanding of social value. Quantitative data were collected through a structured online questionnaire (Google Forms) using a five-point Likert scale to measure agreement with 20 statements distributed across four thematic dimensions: Trust in Local Producers, Community Contribution, Regional Identity & Authenticity, and Social Value Communication, based on the theoretical framework of Ecosynomics (relational value) and SROI (measurable indicators).

Data Analysis and Operationalization

Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), involving reading the transcripts, identifying themes, grouping similar ideas, and linking themes to theory. Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including mean scores, frequency distributions, and comparisons between variables. To connect theory with data, concepts were operationalized into measurable variables: trust (Ecosynomics) was measured through transparency, reliability, and frequency of interaction; community pride was measured through willingness to support local producers and emotional attachment; and local identity (regional identity) was measured through connection to local traditions and products. Reliability was ensured through a consistent interview structure and standardized survey questions, while validity was ensured by linking questions to theory and using data triangulation across both methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Qualitative Findings: Trust, Community Wellbeing, and Regional Identity

Voedselbos Glanerbeek is a food forest initiative located between Losser and Enschede that combines food production with biodiversity enhancement, environmental education, and community involvement. The interview revealed that trust is developed primarily through transparency and direct interaction: consumers can visit the food forest, observe production practices, and engage directly with producers, which supports the relational dimension of Ecosynomics (Ritchie-Dunham, 2014). A stable volunteer community has emerged around the food forest without active recruitment, with volunteers reporting feelings of hope, enjoyment, and personal fulfilment through participation, and regional identity is reinforced through place attachment most visibly through the initiative's connection to the local Glanerbeek river landscape.

De Voedselbos Winkel, founded in 2023 by Manon, is a local shop that bridges food forest producers and consumers. Here, trust is developed largely through storytelling

and communication rather than direct farm visits: consumers become interested in products after learning about their origin, production methods, and the people behind them. The organisation also contributes to social inclusion by creating participation opportunities for individuals who may experience barriers in the conventional labour market, and regional identity is reinforced through the preservation of traditional craftsmanship such as fermentation, food preservation, grafting, and basket making.

Herenboeren Lingezegen-Grootstal is a cooperative farming initiative near Elst and Nijmegen in which around 300 families collectively own and finance the farm through an initial investment and monthly contributions, in return for a share of the food produced. Because members simultaneously act as consumers, co-owners, and volunteers, trust is developed through participation and shared responsibility rather than conventional producer–consumer exchange, reinforced by consultation on major decisions. Community wellbeing is expressed through examples of members finding social connection and continuity through the cooperative including during personal difficulties such as bereavement or illness while regional identity is expressed through shared values and collective ownership as well as through traditional fruit varieties planted on the farm.

Table 1. Cross-Case Comparison of Social Value Dimensions

Social Value Dimension	Voedselbos Glanerbeek	De Voedselbos Winkel	Herenboeren Lingezegen-Grootstal
Trust	Transparency and direct interaction	Storytelling and communication	Participation and shared ownership
Community Wellbeing	Volunteer engagement and social connection	Social inclusion and accessibility	Social support and community belonging
Regional Identity	Place attachment and local pride	Craftsmanship and cultural practices	Shared values and collective identity

The cross-case analysis shows that trust emerged as the most consistent social value dimension across all three cases, but was not created in the same way; similarly, community wellbeing and regional identity appeared across all interviews but were expressed through different mechanisms. This indicates that regional social value can emerge through multiple pathways while producing similar outcomes in terms of community connection and local engagement.

Proposed Indicators for Measuring Social Value

While none of the interviewed organizations currently use a formal social value measurement system, the qualitative and quantitative findings revealed recurring patterns related to trust, community wellbeing, and regional identity that provide a foundation for practical indicators.

Table 2. Proposed Indicators for Measuring Social Value

Social Value Dimension	Proposed Indicators	Source of Evidence
Trust and Transparency	Farm visits and tours, consumer trust rating, repeat customer percentage, participation in decision-making, frequency of producer–consumer interaction	Interviews and Survey
Community Wellbeing and Engagement	Number of active volunteers, volunteer hours, number of community events, participant satisfaction, number of local	Interviews

Social Value Dimension	Proposed Indicators	Source of Evidence
	partnerships	
Regional Identity and Community Pride	Participation in local markets and events, consumer perception of regional connection, activities related to local culture and traditions, collaborations with schools and community organizations	Interviews and Survey

Quantitative Findings

The online survey was completed by 16 respondents who confirmed purchasing or consuming local food products (100%); the large majority purchase local food weekly (81%). The most common purchase channel was the supermarket (88%), followed by the farmers' market (62%), local shops (44%), and online platforms (38%), indicating that local food purchasing is not confined to a single outlet type. The questionnaire comprised 20 Likert-scale statements (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) across four thematic dimensions.

Table 3. Theme-Level Mean Scores (N = 16)

Theme	Theme Mean (M)	Highest-Scoring Item (M)
Trust in Local Producers	4.14	"I feel more confident buying food when I know where it comes from" (4.50)
Community Contribution	4.16	"I feel proud when local food producers from my region succeed" (4.31)
Regional Identity & Authenticity	4.00	Tradition preservation / authenticity / local identity role (4.06)
Social Value Communication	3.94	"I would like local producers to communicate more about their social impact" (4.19)

Mean scores across all 20 items ranged from 3.69 to 4.50, with no item mean falling below 3.5, reflecting consistently positive consumer perceptions of the social value created by local food producers. Community Contribution was the highest-scoring theme overall (M = 4.16), while Social Value Communication was the lowest (M = 3.94) though the item on wanting producers to communicate more about their social impact scored strongly (M = 4.19, with 81% agreement), indicating a clear consumer appetite for greater transparency despite the theme's comparatively lower overall score.

Integration of Qualitative and Quantitative Findings

The integration of the two data sources reveals consistent patterns: trust, community wellbeing, and regional identity emerged as the core dimensions of social value in both the interviews and the survey. Trust was rated highly by consumers (M = 4.14, anchored by origin transparency at M = 4.50), consistent with the interview finding that trust can be built through multiple pathways transparency and direct interaction, storytelling, or participation and shared ownership. Community wellbeing was the highest-scoring survey dimension (M = 4.16), supported by interview evidence of volunteer engagement, social inclusion, and social support across all three organizations. Regional identity was also confirmed by both sources (M = 4.00), expressed through place

attachment, craftsmanship, and shared values, respectively. An important gap identified through this integration is that although social value communication received the lowest survey score (M = 3.94), none of the interviewed organizations currently use a formal system to measure or communicate social value highlighting a mismatch between the social value being created and the extent to which it is currently made visible.

Proposed Total Value Tool

Based on these findings, a Total Value Tool for Social Value was developed to support small food producers in measuring and communicating their social contributions alongside traditional financial performance. The tool combines two interconnected modules: a Financial Module and a Social Value Module, following an underlying logic in which (1) producers enter their actual performance data, (2) each social indicator is weighted according to how strongly consumers valued that dimension in the survey, and (3) the weighted indicators are converted into a social value score and an indicative euro estimate based on SROI proxy values. The Financial Module covers four cost types (Inputs, Labor, Regenerative Investments, and Logistics) and six revenue streams (direct sales, restaurant/B2B sales, cooperative member contributions, subsidies and grants, educational activities, and other income), from which gross profit, gross margin, and breakeven revenue are calculated.

Table 4. Social Value Module: Categories, Theoretical Basis, and Indicators

Category	Theoretical Basis	What It Measures	Survey Mean (M)
Trust & Transparency	Ecosynomics (relational value)	Farm visits, transparency touchpoints, direct producer–consumer interactions, repeat customer rate, food safety	4.14
Community Contribution	Ecosynomics (developmental value) + SROI	Volunteer participation, community members, events hosted, social inclusion, local employment	4.16
Regional Identity & Authenticity	Ecosynomics (relational value) + SROI	Traditional varieties preserved, cultural activities, regional partnerships, media mentions, consumer origin awareness	4.00
Social Value Communication	SROI (communicating outcomes)	Social impact reports, consumer feedback, product labels, stakeholder reporting, Total Value Tool completion	3.94

Each category contains five indicators, weighted by the mean score from the consumer survey; producers may substitute these benchmark weights with their own consumer research if available. The resulting social value score is expressed on a 0–100 scale per category, while an estimated social value in euros is calculated separately using conservative SROI proxy values (for example, each volunteer is estimated to contribute 40 hours per year at a shadow wage of €15, producing €600 of social value per volunteer; community events are valued at €500 each). A Scenario Planner module further allows producers to test what-if scenarios more collaboration, higher regenerative investment, price optimisation, or a combined best case to see how strategic choices affect both financial and social value outcomes.

An illustrative application of the tool to a scenario broadly inspired by Voedselbos Glanerbeek demonstrates its logic: with an example annual revenue of €111,000 and total costs of €65,500 (gross margin 41%), the estimated social value across the four categories totals approximately €69,254 led by Community Contribution (€41,700, driven by

cooperative members and volunteer activity), followed by Trust & Transparency (€13,504, anchored by repeat customer rate), Regional Identity (€12,200), and Communication (€1,850, the smallest category, consistent with the finding that social value communication remains the least developed dimension in practice). This produces an indicative combined total value of €180,254 and a social value multiplier of 0.62 meaning that for every euro of revenue generated, the producer also creates approximately 62 euro cents of additional estimated social value that does not appear in conventional financial statements. These figures are illustrative rather than precise financial valuations, intended primarily as a communication tool that makes the broader contribution of small food producers visible.

CONCLUSION

This research explored how regional social value created by small food producers in the Netherlands can be made measurable and communicable. Based on the findings from the interviews and consumer survey, regional social value can be made measurable and communicable through practical indicators that reflect the relationships and contributions of local food producers within their communities. Consumers associate local food producers with trust, transparency, support for the local community, regional identity, and authenticity, while producers contribute to local identity and wellbeing through volunteer opportunities, social interaction, education, inclusion, and the preservation of local stories, traditions, and craftsmanship.

Three main findings emerged. First, trust is one of the most important dimensions of social value, generated not only through product quality but through relationships and interactions supporting the Ecosynomics perspective that value is generated through relationships in addition to economic transactions. Second, local food producers contribute to community wellbeing and community pride through participation, volunteering, and social interaction, which consumers recognize and appreciate. Third, regional identity is an important component of social value, strengthened through local products, traditions, stories, and cultural practices, with consumers associating local food with authenticity and regional character.

The proposed Total Value Tool addresses the gap between the social value being created and the extent to which it is currently measured and communicated. By combining financial and social indicators trust, community wellbeing, and regional identity within a single framework, the tool enables producers to communicate a more comprehensive picture of the value they create, supporting more comprehensive reporting and decision-making for local food producers. Although the tool remains conceptual and requires further testing in practice, this research provides an initial framework that recognizes both economic performance and social contribution in local food system reporting.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The main problem identified in this research is that small food producers create significant social value, but this value is often not formally measured or clearly communicated. This creates a gap between the actual value created by small food producers and the value that is visible to consumers, stakeholders, and policymakers, since traditional evaluation methods mainly focus on financial indicators such as sales, revenue, production volume, and costs. The interviews showed that producers are aware of their social role but often lack a practical system to record or measure it, while the survey confirmed that consumers value this contribution and want to see it communicated more clearly.

Local food organizations are encouraged to introduce a simple and practical system for measuring social value, monitoring indicators such as the number of volunteers, volunteer hours, community events, visitor numbers, and local partnerships consistent with the SROI framework's emphasis on identifying and measuring social outcomes through practical indicators (Nicholls et al., 2012). Social value should also be communicated more actively, for example by sharing information about community activities, educational initiatives, and local collaborations through websites, social media, newsletters, and public events, in line with the concept of shared value (Porter & Kramer, 2011). Continued investment in community participation volunteer programs, workshops, and educational activities is also recommended, supported by the concept of social capital (Putnam, 2000), alongside stronger communication of regional identity and local culture, consistent with the Ecosynomics view that value is created through relationships and shared experiences connected to a place and community (Ritchie-Dunham, 2014).

Further development of the tool should include testing with a larger number of local food producers to determine whether the proposed indicators are applicable across different types of local food initiatives. Introducing performance tracking over time would allow producers to compare results across reporting periods and monitor changes in social performance, consistent with the SROI framework's emphasis on measuring outcomes over time (Nicholls et al., 2012). Future versions could also include visual dashboards and reporting features, a stronger integration between financial and social indicators reflecting the Ecosynomics view of material and relational value (Ritchie-Dunham, 2014), and further research into weighting different indicators according to their relative importance to stakeholders.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the research focused on three local food organizations within the Dutch local food sector, and the findings may not fully represent all local food producers in the Netherlands. Second, the survey was completed by sixteen respondents; a larger sample could provide a broader understanding of consumer views. Finally, the proposed Total Value Tool was developed based on the findings of this research and has not yet been tested extensively in practice; future implementation by local food producers could provide additional insights regarding its usability and effectiveness.

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