Building a Sustainable and Inclusive Food System in Canada

A *Science & Policy Exchange* Café

REPORT

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Acknowledgements

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Executive summary

In the quest for a sustainable and inclusive food system, Canada faces intertwined challenges of achieving food security and sustainable development. This report represents a significant step forward, building on a virtual roundtable discussion hosted by Science & Policy Exchange (SPE) in March 2023, with the support of the Canadian Commission for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (CCUNESCO).[1] SPE, a dedicated organization linking science and policy, seeks to empower policymakers for the betterment of society.[2] This report highlights key themes and policy recommendations discussed by experts and stakeholders to improve the food system in Canada. The urgency of this report's mission is accentuated by the global consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as food prices rising due to inflation. Consumers have been dealing with higher-than-normal food prices, underscoring the pressing need for a more stable and equitable food system.

To achieve a sustainable and inclusive food system, the federal government of Canada launched its first-ever food policy in 2019 with six main priorities, including promoting community-led initiatives to improve community capacity and resilience to food-related challenges and increasing connections between different sectors within food systems.[3] However, challenges persist, especially in northern communities where food insecurity rates are disproportionately high, particularly among Indigenous populations.

This report addresses the importance of socio-economic support, the need for consideration of sociocultural identities, the significance of environmentally protective practices, and the requirement for coherent policies at municipal, provincial, and federal levels. By integrating these themes into a cohesive strategy, Canada can create a resilient and equitable food system that ensures the well-being of its population and safeguards its natural resources for future generations.

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[1] The link to the event, including the policy brief in English and French:
https://www.sp-exchange.ca/events/spe-cafe-building-a-sustainable-and-inclusive-food-system-in-canada-5. You can watch the event on SPE's YouTube page: https://youtu.be/1rhPgHFKznM?si=BzxWjsLUnCxbdLNx

[2] More information about SPE: https://www.sp-exchange.ca/.

[3] The Food Policy for Canada
https://agriculture.canada.ca/en/department/initiatives/food-policy/food-policy-canada

Introduction

To build a sustainable and inclusive food system in Canada, we must understand the core concepts of sustainable development and food security. The United Nations defines sustainable development as meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.[4] It is a holistic vision that encompasses not only populations and ecosystems but also concerns such as poverty reduction, gender equality, human rights, education for all, health, human security, and intercultural dialogue.

Food security, as defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), exists when all individuals, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their food preferences and dietary needs for an active and healthy life. Achieving food security is crucial for fostering a healthy, flourishing, and thriving society.[5]

Developing a sustainable and inclusive food system in Canada requires a comprehensive and nuanced approach that goes beyond simply producing more food. It is essential to recognize that food insecurity is not solely a result of inadequate food production but stems from complex social, economic, and environmental factors.

This report builds upon a recent virtual roundtable discussion hosted by SPE in March 2023 with the support of CCUNESCO, featuring Dr. Alison Blay-Palmer (UNESCO Chair on Food Biodiversity and Sustainability Studies, Wilfried Laurier University) and Dr. Monika Korzun (Postdoctoral Fellow in Sustainable Agriculture, Dalhousie University). An overview of the topics covered at the event is provided, categorized by these five questions:

1. What is a sustainable food system?
2. What is the link between the food system and food security?
3. Why do policies need to include community voices?
4. What are some examples of successful community practices?
5. What are the gaps in building a just and inclusive food system in Canada?

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[4] UNESCO and Sustainable Development ([link](#))

[5] The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2002 ([link](#))

Key messages

1. What is a sustainable food system?

- *Environmental Conservation:* A sustainable food system should prioritize ecological practices that preserve biodiversity, regenerate ecosystems, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The industrial food system's substantial contribution to greenhouse gas emissions and biodiversity loss necessitates a paradigm shift. Embracing agroecology, a model for sustainable and regenerative food systems, can revolutionize the way we grow food. Agroecology promotes resilient and biodiverse agricultural practices, even in unconventional places like forests, while caring for soil structures and ecological balance.

- *Sociocultural Identity:* Beyond its role as nourishment, food has a significant socio-cultural dimension. A sustainable food system should honour diverse identities, be gender-sensitive, respect Indigenous knowledge, and support culturally relevant practices. Recognizing the broader significance of food in fostering community well-being can lead to collaborative community development through food systems.

- *Coherent Policy Framework:* To establish a resilient and sustainable food system in Canada, policies must be coherent and articulated across all levels of governance - municipal, provincial, and federal. The current absence of a dedicated "ministry of food" results in disparate efforts from various departments. A cohesive policy framework would align different sectors and promote a unified economic vision for food security and sustainability.

2. What is the link between the food system and food security?

- *Understanding Food Security:* Viewing food security through the lens of the food system allows us to grasp its complexities and challenges. Addressing food insecurity requires more than just increasing food production; it demands addressing underlying issues. Canada has enough food; the real challenges lie in achieving equitable access and ameliorating poverty.

- *Socio-economic Support:* Poverty significantly affects access to healthy food, leading to food insecurity, particularly in low-income communities. A systems approach can enhance community well-being by providing access to nutritious food and empowering vulnerable areas. By addressing socio-economic factors and enhancing community capacity, a sustainable food system can be fostered.

- *Environmental Considerations:* The substantial food waste not only perpetuates food insecurity but also squanders valuable resources and energy. Interventions like closed-loop systems and agroecological practices can minimize waste and enhance sustainability.

To conclude, understanding the interconnectedness of food security and food systems provides a comprehensive approach to addressing food-related challenges and formulating sustainable solutions.

3. Why do policies need to include community voices?

- *Policy Challenges:* Canada's fragmented governance structure lacks a dedicated "ministry of food," leading to siloed policymaking. Policymakers face challenges in aligning various departments toward a cohesive food policy. However, successful examples from other regions, like the European Union (EU), showcase the importance of recognizing and empowering communities in policymaking.
- *The Role of Communities:* Recognizing the importance of community-driven solutions, the EU's approach underscores the pivotal role of communities in bringing about impactful change. Engaging communities in policymaking ensures policies are relevant, effective, and inclusive. Grounding policies in community-based approaches enhances their empowering and transformative potential.

4. What are some of the examples of successful community practices?

- *COVID-19's Impact:* The pandemic exposed vulnerabilities and strengths within the food system. Online platforms like the Open Food Network facilitated direct connections between farmers and consumers, promoting local food access and reducing dependence on traditional supply chains.
- *Global-scale Preparedness:* In cities in Madagascar, multi-actor groups developed strategies for resilient food systems against climate change, disasters, and hazards, anticipating future challenges. These preparedness measures facilitated a better response during the pandemic, demonstrating the significance of community-oriented action.
- *Community-based Organizations:* During the pandemic, non-profits from community-based organizations played a crucial role in emergency food provision, showcasing community resilience. However, the shift also highlighted the tensions between non-profit and governmental roles in food security.

- A promising example: [Santropol Roulant](#) in Montréal serves as a community food hub, providing meals on wheels to the elderly, supporting mental health, and addressing food insecurity through gardening workshops.

"Our Meals-on-Wheels program is at the heart of the organization and is the core around which Santropol Roulant was built back in 1995. It responds to the increasing need for greater food security among the elderly, but also to the shared desire to build a rich and healthy social fabric… It is thanks to delivery of meals to individuals living with a loss of autonomy that young people and elders are given a unique opportunity to meet and build relationships. These relationships strengthen not just our community, but also an entire future generation." [Santropol Roulant website]

5. What are the gaps in building a just and inclusive food system in Canada?

Although Canada's food guide is widely recognized as one of the best in the world, there are still significant gaps that need to be addressed to create a truly inclusive and fair approach. These gaps stem from a lack of representation from all perspectives, including various gender groups, Indigenous viewpoints, and diverse cultures of people of colour. Several challenges hinder the achievement of food security and equitable access to healthy food for all Canadians.

- *Poverty and Inequity:* Poverty and income disparities across different communities persist as major barriers to food security. Communities facing barriers, including Indigenous communities and racialized groups, face disproportionately higher rates of food insecurity. This calls for targeted interventions to address poverty and income inequality to ensure access to nutritious food for all.
- *Food Production System:* Canada's current food production system, which is largely export-focused, has been shaped by public policies that prioritize international trade. The agricultural sector faces pressures to meet export demands, leading to potential shortcomings in addressing domestic food needs. Re-evaluating policy incentives and supporting sustainable local food production can strengthen food security within the country.
- *Corporate Influence:* The growing influence of corporate interests within the food system poses challenges to building an equitable and inclusive food system. Concentration of power in the hands of major corporations can perpetuate inequalities and limit opportunities for community-driven solutions. Ensuring community voices are prioritized over corporate interests is essential for fostering a just and inclusive food system.

Policy recommendations

Building a sustainable and inclusive food system requires comprehensive and targeted policy interventions. Based on the discussions and analyses from experts and stakeholders, the following policy recommendations can help achieve these goals:

- *Establish a dedicated Ministry of Food:* Creating a dedicated Ministry of Food at the federal level would foster comprehensive and integrated food-related policies. This ministry would bring together different departments under a unified vision for food security and sustainability.

- *Prioritize community consultations:* Emphasizing community consultations in policy development ensures that policies address the most meaningful needs and challenges faced by communities. Community input is essential for crafting inclusive and effective policies.

- *Implement a basic guaranteed income:* A basic guaranteed income program can help alleviate poverty and improve access to food, particularly in vulnerable communities. By providing a stable income floor, this policy can significantly reduce food insecurity rates.

- *Culturally sensitive access to food:* Develop systems that allow for culturally sensitive access to food, considering the diverse socio-cultural identities within Canada. Promote traditional food practices and support the preservation of cultural heritage related to food.

- *Research on food sovereignty and agency:* Conduct research to better understand what food sovereignty and agency mean for different populations across Canada. This information will help shape more targeted and inclusive interventions.

- *Consider environmental effects and promote regenerative practices:* Policy efforts should prioritize environmental sustainability by promoting regenerative and biodiverse agricultural practices. Encouraging closed-loop systems can reduce waste and resource consumption.

- *Address fragmented policies:* Advocate for policy coherence across all levels of government. A multidimensional perspective can facilitate synergies and address food-related challenges more effectively.

Conclusion

Building a sustainable and inclusive food system is not merely a task for policymakers; it is a collective responsibility that requires the active engagement of communities, private sector stakeholders, academia, and civil society. By adopting a food systems approach and implementing targeted policy interventions, Canada can overcome the challenges it faces and move towards a more secure and resilient food future. Recognizing that food insecurity is rooted in multifaceted challenges, this report highlights the critical need for comprehensive socio-economic support to ensure access to healthy food for all.

Emphasizing the role of communities in designing and implementing solutions is critical for building a just and inclusive food system that addresses food insecurity at its roots. As discussed by the participants, *'community'* can be defined in various ways, including different geographical scales, local and regional identities, and distinct historical and cultural food systems which can encompass shared interests and concerns. Recognizing and respecting the diverse socio-cultural identities within Canada is crucial for building trust and inclusivity within food communities. Food is intricately connected to community well-being, and understanding its significance beyond mere nourishment can foster collaboration and cohesiveness within food systems.