

# Sustainable Local Food Systems in Europe and the Americas: Lessons for Policy and Practice

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Lost in a Corn Maize? Comparing the EU and Canada on Central Government Engagement in Sustainable Local Food Systems.

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## Key Policy Messages (For Canadian Federal Government Policy in Particular)

Even within the current (neoliberal) political climate, many opportunities exist for moving forward an agenda that supports sustainable local food systems at the federal level in Canada:

- 1) Do no harm. Re-visit policies with scale in mind; develop scale-appropriate regulation; target red-tape that is preventing innovation towards sustainability at the local level.
- 2) Consult with the growing consumer/producer/civil society/academic sector working on integrated solutions for sustainability, health and social justice through food.
- 4) Identify win-win possibilities across departmental mandates (e.g. food, health, environment, trade). For example, Canada Health Act can be a vehicle for disease prevention through encouraging the consumption of local, fresh fruit and vegetables. It is also important to identify the possible alliances that can be achieved across stake-holder groups.
- 5) Pay attention to the integrated “food policy” proposals coming forward from various parties and sectors and identify the shared interests across these diverse groups.
- 6) Learn from the European experience, where efforts to develop integrated food policies are ahead of Canadian efforts in some ways, but also recognize the innovative Canadian entrepreneurial models of governance and community development emerging in this realm.

## Introduction:

Newspaper articles about the environmental impact of the “food miles” on your dinner plate, the obesity epidemic, and the growing use of food banks are signs of interconnected problems in our food systems. One response to these issues is a growing public interest in local food. Questions provoked by this increased attention include, “When is relocalization really a solution and what is reasonably possible in a cold country like Canada?”; “What role does public policy have in stimulating the possible?” Furthermore – notwithstanding the many transatlantic differences in agricultural policy – “What can we learn from European countries like Italy, Sweden, Norway, the UK and the Netherlands, where relocalization has already been on the policy agenda, or has simply been developed in practice, for many decades?”

Sustainable local food systems have the potential to build community resilience in the face of impending environmental challenges and resource constraints (i.e. what Richard Heinberg refers to as “peak everything” – oil, soil, water, fish, etc.). They also have a role in

economic development and diversification, and can further a variety of public health goals. Sustainable local food systems may also require the modification of existing processes and standards that are clearly biased towards export models of production.

In Canada, actions to support this movement are most often seen as provincial issues (e.g. regional food labelling and promotion programs, inter-provincial trade policy) or to be within the purview of municipalities (e.g. land-use zoning, establishing farmers markets). In other cases, they are seen as involving a re-think on the part of industry to capture emerging opportunities (e.g. supermarkets *choose* to buy only federally-inspected meat). It is also clear that civil society organizations already take a leadership role in the reconstruction of local food systems across this country, and much can be learned from their strategies. Many of the presentations today will cover these provincial, municipal, industry and civil society strategies.

But what is the role of central government? In Canada, sustainable agriculture has long been on the federal agenda, but local food is barely on that radar. Still, actions to rebuild local food systems can, and are, being taken by branches of Canada's federal government focused on issues as varied as agriculture, public health, environment, northern affairs, and regional development, as well as bodies with a more specific focus like the National Capital Commission. In some cases, this action takes the form of active federal government support; in other cases it reflects policies designed for other ends that inadvertently support local food security. And in other cases still, the "action" involves the government recognizing when its programs and standards have a negative impact on the potential for sustainable local food systems to develop, and steps are taken to rectify this. Federal government activity in this field might thus include developing scale-appropriate regulations, strengthening country-food based food security in Aboriginal communities, encouraging innovative uses of federal lands, and linking health with complementary goals in a dedicated national "food policy".

Intended as an introduction to today's policy workshop on local sustainable food systems in policy and practice and to raise questions for reflection over the day, this presentation examines some of the ways that the European and Canadian policy experiences are, and are not, comparable. I then give examples of various ways that the Canadian government and some major industry groups in Canada, despite their general orientation towards conventional productivist agricultural practices and exports, also work to support local and sustainable food systems in this country, and thereby provide potential allies, however unlikely, for the largely grassroots and small-business based local food movement. I begin with a discussion around some key terms.

### **Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems?**

Sustainability is widely accepted as triple bottom line thinking: economic, social and environmental variables are ideally given equal weight in principle (though not all put the emphasis in the same way). In agriculture, for example, it can include indicators for soil structure and fertility, crop and livestock diversity, economic viability of farming system (and thus productivity), social justice issues around farm workers, humane treatment of animals. But also: cost of food in relation to income-related food insecurity. Result: guidelines but tensions.

Increasingly, sustainability is also defined in terms of resilience (in relation to climate change, economic crises, etc.) Should we be doing now what we are able to continue to do indefinitely into the future? In a world where the future appears very uncertain, we might think more in terms of the capacity to adapt to changing circumstances.

This is one way to think about the thorny issue of the social vs. economic sustainability of some niche farming and food processing enterprises. They may be charging a high price now, but they are also maintaining the sustainability of small farming for local markets at a time when

this is highly skewed by cheap oil and other resources. Whether they stay producing these high value niche crops in the future will depend on markets, but the resource base is nonetheless sustained/enhanced for food production.

### **Sustainable = Organic?**

We should be careful not to make this assumption. As much as organic practices are definitely part of the mix for sustainable agriculture, they are not likely to provide the whole solution on their own, and there are other approaches to agriculture which manifest some of the same beneficial characteristics (diversification, soil protection, etc.)

Nevertheless, it is unfortunate that while many consumers make a connection between organics and sustainability in agriculture, the federal government in Canada does not. As a result, organic advocates are often not even at the table for discussions over the sustainability of our agriculture in the face of climate change, for example. There is room for more inclusive dialogue here.

### **Local Food Systems = 100-Mile Diet?**

The main focus of discussion today is related to the 2300+ local food initiatives going on in Canada, based in grassroots, farmers markets, small processing businesses, etc. (CCA 2008). However, local food is also big business. For example, the milk distribution system is largely local and involves major processors. You will also hear today about institutional procurement contacts that represent large purchases of local foods.

Let's be clear that what is "local" is relative (to the crop, the region) and not necessarily the solution to all issues, though local foods can be a big part of tackling various social and ecological challenges. On this note, it is important to recognize that Canada and the EU are major exporters (of wheat and many other commodities) and will continue to be in the future. While there are problems with the dumping of Canadian and European foods in some markets in the global South, it is also true that there are many countries that cannot meet their own population's food needs even if they wanted to on the available land base (or from nearby markets). Canada and the EU will have a role in feeding the growing world population, and our focus on the local should not be seen as an attack on reasonable and responsible trade.

On the other hand, there are many ways that we can build the resilience of our food systems by growing the percentage of local foods consumed within our borders. Most food eaten in the world never travels across national borders, so we are part of the mainstream when we advocate for strengthening local and regional food systems in the face of an uncertain but surely challenging future.

### **Local vs Locality Foods**

Today, we are mainly talking about foods consumed near the area where they are produced, but also need to recognize that the European local food discourse (especially from Mediterranean countries) also emphasizes foods associated with specific places and "terroir", often protected in EU law by PDOs/PGIS, and thus not necessarily consumed within the same region (e.g. Parmigiano Reggiano) (see Fonte and Papadopolous 2010). Bringing locality foods onto the radar adds depth to our conversations, though local and locality foods may not mean precisely the same thing from a sustainability perspective (Andrée 2006).

### **Food "Systems"?**

This concept includes inputs, food production, distribution, processing, regulation, consumption (both "alternative" and conventional systems, which we need to recognize are often closely

interrelated in practice). In the UK, food is regulated 150 times from seed to plate (Lange et al. 2009), and the case is probably similar across the wider EU and in Canada.

Regulation/governance takes place at multiple scales: local, regional, subnational, national, supranational (NAFTA, EU) and international (WTO, Codex Alimentarius).

One major issue to have on our radars today includes oligopolies at the input, processing and distribution stages of the food system. It is evident that in all developed countries food systems are becoming increasingly concentrated (UK has major corporate concentration, Canada just a little less so) and the same corporations are also controlling food systems in the global South at an accelerating rate.

This situation leaves both primary producers and consumers vulnerable. Both market liberals and left-leaning critics see problems with corporate concentration in the food system, and it definitely needs to be on our radar as we think through the questions of food system sustainability and resilience.

### **Can the EU and Canadian Experience be Compared? (Some Preliminary Observations)**

#### **No**

- Layers and models of democratic government are very different
- Extent of government intervention in agriculture is very different (EU “green box” subsidies vs. Canada’s supply management and single-desk marketing)
- Progress in certain regions of the EU suggest that policy integration is more advanced than in Canada (e.g. Wales and Scotland’s integrated food/health/environmental policies)
- New EU states: the role of informal economy can be very significant, and this is largely “local”
- The role of the second pillar of CAP in supporting local food systems research and practice

#### **Yes**

- In each jurisdiction, “food” policy is really an amalgam of agricultural policy, trade policy, and food safety rules. There is experimentation with “food policy” but it is not yet fully developed
- Oligopolies in processing and distribution sectors (Nestle, Unilever, ADM/Cargill, etc.)
- Long-term trend towards consumer power within the food system (Beck’s risk society?)
- Increasingly continental food systems rather than national food systems
- General shift from embedded liberalism to neoliberalism – different stages and forms, but common threads
- Trend towards payments for alternative land use services (“multifunctionality”)

Also: Trend of growing interest and demand for sustainable local food sources and policy models to underpin them in both Canada and EU. However: the role of civil society and entrepreneurialism vs. state intervention is one key difference to be explored today.

### **Goals for Today: Identifying Challenges and Possibilities at all Levels of Governance.**

Here, I am drawing on work undertaken by Miranda Cobb, Austin Miller, Emily Norgang and Leanne Moussa in a community-based research course with the People’s Food Policy Project. The focus is thus on federal policy (see Andrée et al. forthcoming).

#### **Recognize Challenges (Examples)**

- 1) The supply management system prevents smaller growers and entrants from supplying local foods.

- 2) Export orientation leads to lack of scale-appropriate regulation. We are losing capacity for local processing (e.g. abattoir regulation in BC)
- 3) Canada's "Product of Canada" (POC) labelling systems don't really allow consumers to distinguish local projects. The old rules (51%) were problematic. The new rules (98%) don't work either.

#### **Pursue Emerging Possibilities (Related Examples)**

- 1) The supply management system in Canada actually maintains a lot of farmers on the land, at reasonable scales of production. Federal conservatives, along with many other mainstream policy actors, continue to support this despite ideological misfit.
- 2) the constitutional division of authorities means that we maintain provincial capacity in slaughter and meat processing (e.g. Ontario) which actually keeps some of them open and allows farmers to supply local markets.
- 3) Meat processing rules in northern communities allow for exceptions to CFIA standards. This demonstrates the possibility of scale-appropriate regulation in Canada. There is also room for more change. (e.g. to sell country food in restaurants in these communities) (Thompson et al. 2011, 13).
- 4) On POC, there are many players who are on the same page on this one. Local food advocates can team up with NFU, CFA, and others to push for reasonable rules.
- 5) There are possibilities for urban agriculture on federal lands (e.g. NCC greenbelt). This is now being negotiated between Just Food and NCC in Blackburn Hamlet.

#### **Some Questions for Today, Drawing on Experiences from Europe, Canada, Cuba, and the United States:**

- 1) Can policies help to "scale up" the local food movement in ways that respect the values and models that allowed it to grow to this point? Can they do more good than harm?
- 2) Can local food meet the demands of holistic policy thinking (social, health, environmental and economic) in a way that the conventional/productivist food system has not been able to achieve?
- 3) What is the role of (international and interprovincial) trade agreements in supporting or undermining efforts to build local food networks?
- 4) What can we learn from the different mixes of state and civil society and industry activity in this realm?
- 5) In theoretical terms, what can we learn from the informal, market-based, solutions that are emerging here to respond to social and ecological problems?
- 6) What do we see as the role of big business in the sustainable local food movement?
- 7) What can we learn from the democratic engagement and problem solving that is taking place in this realm? Should we give up on the state or re-build a responsive public sphere from the bottom up?
- 8) For tomorrow: How might we, as academics and policy-makers, engage with other stakeholders in developing local food systems on the ground in our communities?

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