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Discussion Paper: Local Food Systems and Urban-Rural Linkages

In Canada, it is apparent that growing numbers of consumers want to purchase and support food that has been harvested and produced locally. A 2006 Ipsos-Reid poll found that 56% of Canadians “always” or “usually” check where their fruits and vegetables come from, and 42% buy local food regularly.¹ A public opinion poll conducted by Environics for the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation showed that 72% of central Ontario consumers are willing to pay more for local fruits and vegetables and 70% are willing to pay more for locally raised meat. A whopping 93% of Canadians say farmers markets are important for the community,² while the number of farmers markets in Ontario has increased from 60 in 1991 to 132 in 2007.³ In fact, there are over 60 farmers markets in the Greater Toronto Area alone.⁴ Support for local food is also apparent from the success of books such as *The 100-Mile Diet* and *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, and the expansion of initiatives that support farmers markets, urban farming, and community-supported agriculture (CSA) across the country.

There are many dimensions to the benefits that local food systems can provide. One relates to the social benefits of supporting local food, including connections between rural and urban communities, preserving near-urban prime agricultural land, a better understanding of the origins of food, and increased food security. Rooftop gardens, community gardening, and urban gardening can also foster a closer connection to food and an appreciation for food's freshness and seasonality. Results from a 2006 Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs survey found that 9 in 10 respondents believed that local food is important because it supports the economy and Ontario farmers.⁵ A further 83% of survey respondents said that Ontario produce is fresher than food produced elsewhere. Canadian consumers have also expressed fondness for the vibrancy of farmers markets and an enjoyment of building direct relationships with farmers.⁶ Canadian consumers are also concerned about the contribution of long-distance food travel to climate change and see a local diet as a means to cut carbon emissions. In light of periodic reports of contaminated imported food, as well as Canada's relatively strong food safety and environmental regulation and enforcement, local food may also be safer and may have had a less significant adverse impact on the environment than some imported products. All of these areas of impact - social, economic, health, and environmental - are vital components of sustainable development.

Rising food prices, rising demand for agricultural products, food shortages, and other challenges have led many around the globe to state that we are facing a global food crisis. One part of the solution to this situation may be to develop sustainable local food systems around the world to provide local food security. To ensure the resilience of Canada's food system, policy makers will likely need to find an appropriate balance between local markets and markets dominated by international trade.

Despite growing demand, a number of significant barriers exist that hinder the development of local food systems in Canada. One barrier is access to market. Large retail establishments who supply the majority of food distributed to Canadian consumers generally do not deal with smaller, local farmers because adequate volumes and quality control cannot be ensured. Furthermore, it is often cheaper for large retail outlets to import food from other jurisdictions where labour costs are cheaper and subsidies may be higher. A second barrier is international trade, as deals such as the *Agreement on Agriculture* in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) seek to liberalize trade flows and reduce import barriers. Other challenges include the traceability of food grown or produced in Canada (the “Product of Canada” designation

requires that only 51% of the costs of producing goods – including processing and packaging – need to be incurred in Canada) and policies that have been put into place for reasons of consumer safety (such as restrictions in Ontario on on-farm slaughtering). It is also concerning that demand for local food in Canada is increasing, yet agricultural land has decreased in this country by over 2% since 1990.⁷ Due to this situation, almost 70% of farmers surveyed in 2005 in the greater Golden Horseshoe area did not expect their children to work the farm in the future.⁸

Basis in Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation

While an explicit promotion of local food systems does not exist in either *Agenda 21* or the *Johannesburg Plan of Implementation*, the strategy of building food security as a way to strengthen rural economies is consistent throughout both agreements. A recent study in Michigan found that doubling or tripling the amount of food sold at farmers markets would provide a considerable number of new jobs in the state.⁹ The development of local food systems should be considered one approach for promoting sustainable and resilient agricultural systems in Canada.

Canadian Case Studies

Many initiatives across Canada support the development of local food infrastructure, including farmers markets, partnerships between farmers and retailers in urban areas, and community-supported agriculture.

Local Food Plus (LFP), a Toronto-based non-profit organization, works to certify farmers (mostly from Ontario's Greenbelt) who meet certain social and environmental criteria and links them with local purchasers. LFP's certification scheme is built on five principles: (1) employing sustainable production systems (which reduce pesticides and fertilizers, avoid hormones, antibiotics, and genetic engineering, and conserve soil and water), (2) providing safe and fair working conditions for on-farm labour, (3) providing healthy and humane care for livestock, (4) protecting and enhancing habitat and biodiversity on working farm landscapes, and (5) reducing food-related energy consumption. Certification allows large purchasers access to supply of a guaranteed quality. Thus far, Local Food Plus has certified roughly 70 farmers and distributors, while 29 retailers, restaurants, and institutions in southern Ontario sell certified LFP food.

Initiatives like LFP are but one way of supporting local food systems. Started in the early nineties, the non-profit **Farm Folk/City Folk Society** in Vancouver has been working towards "re-localizing" the food system in BC by supporting community-owned farms that produce food for local consumption, expanding the production of grains in southwestern BC, and educating city dwellers about the benefits of eating locally.

Equiterre is a Quebec based organization that helps to support local food systems through the establishment of community-supported agriculture. Consumers pre-purchase a share of a farmer's harvest to increase the farmers' financial security and food is delivered weekly to consumers across the province. There are 97 participating farms, with an estimated 7,500 contracts involving roughly 20,000 people penned this year.

Just Food in Ottawa provides information about resource-sharing for community gardens in the city, develops a food guide to local farms in the area around Ottawa, and, like Equiterre, provides networking for CSA farms in the Ottawa area.

FoodShare, a Toronto non-profit, was founded in 1985 by then Mayor of Toronto, Art Eggleton, and others seeking to address hunger issues in the city. Over the years, it has taken a broader approach to addressing food insecurity by considering how food is produced, distributed, accessed, and consumed. Today FoodShare focuses on self-help programs such as co-op buying systems, collective kitchens, and community gardens, which strengthen communities and help low-income individuals and at-risk youth gain training and employment. For instance, FoodShare operates a program called the Good Food Box, which packs boxes of mainly local and organic food and delivers them to designated neighbourhood locations at reduced rates. Among these and other

activities, FoodShare advocates for better social assistance, creates jobs and runs job training, educates people on good nutrition, and supports the preservation of farmland.

There is also growing support for local food from various levels of government.

The province of Ontario has pledged to invest \$56 million over the next four years to support local food initiatives, including \$12 million through the **Ontario Market Investment Fund** to promote consumer awareness of the importance of Ontario food and \$4 million to support farmers markets.

Through the **British Columbia Agriculture Plan**, the Ministry of Agriculture and Lands in BC intends to reallocate \$5.6 million over the next three years from existing sources to develop a promotional program to brand BC food, increase extension services provided to farmers, and develop a “food miles” program that educates British Columbians about the distance their food travels.

The **Agri-Food Market Development Program** launched last year by the province of New Brunswick committed \$400,000 to support the consumption of agri-foods produced in the province to help agri-food businesses increase capacity to improve visibility, attract more consumers, increase promotion and advertising, and develop strategic market opportunities.

Earlier this summer the **Buy PEI Initiative** was launched as part of a \$500,000 allocation to support buying PEI foods as well as a regional Buy Atlantic strategy.

Even municipalities such as Prince Edward County in eastern Ontario, which has developed a “**Harvestin’ the County**” program with services such as the production of a locally grown food guide and map and a logo which distinguishes Prince Edward County produce, are supporting local food initiatives.

While these case studies showcase growing support for local food from both the non-governmental and governmental spheres, other case studies address the broader issue of city expansion into farmland.

In 2005 the Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing established the **Ontario Greenbelt** by passing the *Protecting the Greenbelt: Greenbelt Act*. The Greenbelt permanently protects 1.8 million acres of sensitive land, including farmland, from development. In 2008 criteria were passed to evaluate municipal requests to expand the Greenbelt in the interest of growing this protected land.

Between 1974 and 1976 the government of British Columbia established the **Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR)**. This zone of approximately 4.7 hectares makes agriculture a priority use and controls non-agricultural uses.

The concept of a ‘land trust’ or ‘conservation trust’ has been promoted as a way to safeguard agricultural land near cities in perpetuity. Land trusts are essentially organizations that protect ecologically or culturally significant areas that are not currently protected. Often this occurs when an organization purchases the land directly, but it can also occur through legally enforceable “easements” between landowners and a trust that specifies land-use on farm. The **Ontario Farmland Trust (OFT)**, operated out of the University of Guelph, is one such example. Most land trusts in Canada, including the Nature Conservancy and the Manitoba Habitat Heritage Corporation, focus strictly on protecting natural areas. The Ontario Farmland Trust is the only organization in Ontario solely devoted to protecting farmland. According to their website, OFT has so far secured properties in Brant County, Goderich and Wellington.

Initiatives to strengthen local food networks will continue to play a significant role in addressing food security concerns and implementing sustainable development. In light of the unfolding global food crisis, there is a growing need for localized, self-sufficient economies, of which local production of food for local consumption is a vital component. These case studies show how practical steps can and are being taken to implement sustainability, by taking a holistic approach that integrates social, ecological, and economic concerns.

Questions for Discussion

At the *Achieving Resilient Agricultural Systems* workshop, we would like to critically assess the concept of local food and urban-rural linkages and what promise they might have for progressing towards sustainable, resilient agricultural systems in Canada. Please consider and provide your perspectives on any of the following questions. These questions may not be specifically addressed at the workshop; however, prior consideration by participants and input from others will contribute to the discussion of how to advance resilient agricultural systems and sustainable development.

- What programs and policy shifts are needed to support local food systems and stronger urban-rural linkages that will contribute to sustainable development and foster resilience?
- What innovative tools and practices might help to better link local farmers with retailers and consumers?
- How could the development of local food systems further contribute to mitigating climate change?
- How might the promotion of local food systems complement international trade of agricultural commodities and the economic links between countries, and contribute towards resolving concerns raised in the global food crisis?
- What formal and/or non-formal education may be needed to strengthen local food systems?
- How might research and innovation contribute the development of efficient and self-sustaining local food networks?

We also encourage stakeholders to consider and put forward any pertinent case studies, best practices, or relevant information they are familiar with to contribute to an understanding of how local food systems could promote resilient agricultural systems in Canada.

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Endnotes

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