

Rural Food Sovereignty in Canada: Policy Working Paper 2018



Executive Summary

Although rural agricultural communities make significant and unique contributions to Canadian food sovereignty and face numerous distinct challenges, the concept of food sovereignty and its connections with rural communities largely have been underappreciated in government policy. Fortunately, the federal government's development of *A Food Policy for Canada* has the potential to change the status quo and make real steps toward rural food sovereignty. The Rural Policy Learning Commons (RPLC) welcomes the initiative, and seeks to help by offering some policy recommendations in this brief. The recommendations are based on recent work by Food Secure Canada, FLEdGE (Food: Locally Embedded, Globally Engaged), and other government and academic sources, and adheres to a vision of food sovereignty as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture system.”¹

The RPLC's three rural food sovereignty recommendations for policy development are:

1. Policy development and decision-making around food sovereignty require collaborative efforts and transparent processes driven by rural communities with acute insights of their unique contributions and challenges. Northern and remote Indigenous communities should be prioritized.
2. Food sovereignty policy development must be holistic and promote an understanding of food systems.
3. The roles of the state and the market need to adhere to principles and practices of food sovereignty.

¹ This is the definition given by Via Campesina, the international movement of small and middle-scale producers, agricultural workers, rural women, and indigenous communities.

Background

Canada is currently in the process of developing a national food policy that will determine a long-term vision for food-related health, environmental, social, and economic goals, while also identifying short-term actions. A food policy is a means to resolve issues related to the production, processing, distribution and consumption of food (Government of Canada, 2017). *A Food Policy for Canada* will include numerous considerations related to food sustainability, food sovereignty, food security and food safety, such as: land protection, water supply, consumer access, citizen health, climate change and trade policies.²

The relationship between food sustainability, food sovereignty, food security and food safety could be conceived as a nested hierarchy. Food sovereignty encompasses food security, the ability of humans to access and afford healthy foods to maintain well-being, which in turn encompasses food safety, the rigorous mechanisms that protect food from spoilage, contamination and humans from harm (Kevany, 2018). Where food security is concerned with the sufficiency of food supplies and its nutritional content, regardless of the conditions of its production (Edelman et al., 2014), food sovereignty is defined as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define *their own* food and agriculture system” (La Via Campesina, 2018).

Food sovereignty challenges the dominant conceptualization of food chains that control production inputs through commodity production, processing, packaging, transporting, marketing and retailing to consumption (Kauffman, 2004 as cited in Wiebe & Nipf, 2011). Instead, food systems are understood as dynamic webs of people and other elements of living food systems connected and interdependent in a multiplicity of complex ways (Wiebe, Nettie & Wipf, 2011). Shifting to a food sovereignty paradigm necessitates reorienting agricultural production to domestic consumption, safeguarding adequate incomes for food producers and environmental sustainability (Wiebe, Nettie & Wipf, 2011). Food sovereignty addresses distribution questions through its consideration of access to productive resources (Edelman et al., 2014). To be food sovereign necessitates access to land, seeds, resources, markets and policy supports and durable interactions of citizens, governments, markets and nature.

While rural and urban communities all play essential roles in forging food systems that foster health and well-being for the planet and its people, rural communities³ make significant contributions to Canadian food sovereignty and face numerous distinct challenges (Levkoe, 2013). Moreover, within the broader rural category, northern and remote indigenous communities make unique contributions and face the most acute challenges, and are therefore a priority area in food sovereignty policy.

The Rural Policy Learning Commons (RPLC) is a national partnership that works to build rural capacity and strengthen relationships to inform rural research and policy. In this capacity, the RPLC has developed this policy working paper, *Rural Food Sovereignty in Canada*, as a part of one RPLC research project on rural sustainability. A companion piece, *Northern and Remote Indigenous Food Sovereignty in Canada*, has also been developed.⁴

² Please see [Food Secure Canada \(FSC\)](#) for background materials and responses to government draft remarks to date on the policy under development.

³ Several alternative definitions of “rural” are available for policy analysis. One recommended benchmark for understanding Canada’s rural population, is the population living in towns and municipalities outside the commuting zone of larger urban centres (Du Plessis et al., 2001).

⁴ The policy working papers and briefs are part of the RPLC’s research project on rural sustainability and food sovereignty in Canada; however, the views presented are those of the authors and the advisor and may not necessarily represent those of the RPLC.

Rural Communities' Contribution to Canadian Food Sovereignty

Rural communities contribute significantly to food sovereignty in place-based ways that reflect their diverse circumstances. From the Annapolis Valley, to southern Quebec, to the Peach River region of Alberta, rural communities in Canada represent a “great variety of local growing conditions, cultures, [and] political and economic circumstances” (Wiebe, Nettie & Wipf, 2011, p. 5), but agriculture is the social and economic foundation of many of them. These **rural communities produce nutritious and affordable food for Canadians, steward the natural environment upon which sustainable food systems depend, make significant contributions to Canada’s economy** (Canadian Federation of Agriculture (CFA), 2016) **and organize and educate Canadians about local and sustainable food systems.** Rural food sovereignty is the “strongest guarantee of reliable, nutritious food supplies” (Anderson, 2015, p. 262).

Indeed, many food sovereignty strategies, “from local control over markets, to sustainable production of culturally and seasonally appropriate foods are rooted in the current and historical practices of Canada’s agrarian communities” (Wiebe, Nettie & Wipf, 2011, p. 8). Among the most important current and historical practices are cooperative efforts and supporting movements; for example, the National Farmers Union of Canada (NFU) is a voluntary direct-membership, non-partisan organization comprised of thousands of farm families from across Canada committed to achieving agricultural policies which safeguard family farms as the foundation of environmentally sustainable food production (National Farmers Union (NFU), 2018). The numerous local growers associations working on Alternative Food Networks (AFN) to provide pathways for local producers to interact directly with consumers to obtain a greater return-on-investment for their efforts is another example. **Food movements like “slow food, the hundred mile diet, farmers’ markets, community shared agriculture projects, recipe exchanges and food tourism” connect rural and urban communities interested in alternative sources, varieties and cultures of food** (Wiebe, Nettie & Wipf, 2011, p. 9). The resiliency of local food systems and rural regions are improved by these rural-urban connections (Knickel et al., 2018).

Food Sovereignty Issues Faced by Rural Communities

“Globally dominant transnational corporations have made themselves the primary beneficiaries of the vast food wealth produced on Canadian farms” (National Farmers Union (NFU), 2017, p. 2). Export-oriented agricultural policies, such as those reflected in international trade agreements, have eroded food sovereignty in rural Canada. While large, transnational corporations maximize profits through controlling food supply chains, rural communities experience **lower farm incomes, fewer family owned farms, depopulation and higher store-bought food costs** (Wiebe, Nettie & Wipf, 2011). While yields and gross farm revenue increased over the past three decades, farmers’ share of that value has decreased significantly (Qualman, 2011) and farmers are increasingly pressured to enlarge and corporatize. Food manufacturers can tap into a range of options to source cheap inputs on a global scale. With this leverage they can increase competition and lower prices paid for these commodities, and such actions often undermine the livelihoods of smallholder farmers (Scrinis, 2016).

The pressure to increase exports continues to accelerate. For example, the 2017 federal budget’s *Innovation and Skills Plan* aims to increase agri-food exports by 33% by 2025 to \$75 billion annually, yet the “very infrastructure that would be needed to supersize our exports would create roadblocks for the development of more localized food systems” (National Farmers Union (NFU), 2017, pp. 2–3). High volume, low-priced commodities like canola, wheat and soybeans and foods with high costs, like beef and seafood, are exported, while higher value products like wine, baked goods and produce are imported. As a result,

Canada's food system loses diversity, becomes more export dependent, and loses lucrative opportunities to contribute value-added activities (National Farmers Union (NFU), 2017). In addition, the pressure to maximize production under this model creates dependencies on technology and chemicals which degrade the natural environment (Qualman, 2011).

Food sovereignty issues faced by rural communities because of the industrial food system include:

- Rural agricultural communities end up primarily serving the needs of the market before they feed themselves since the market controls the type of crops that are grown and how the land is farmed (Food Secure Canada, 2015).
- Prohibitive land costs and land planning prioritizes commercial, residential and industrial uses that reduce access to land for small-scale agriculture (Food Secure Canada, 2015).
- Local infrastructure and equipment are lacking, making rural communities and smaller growers dependent upon highly centralized infrastructure for food production (e.g., abattoirs, grain storage) (Food Secure Canada, 2015).
- Policies and market forces undermine the ability of smaller local growers to sustainably produce food for local consumers by favouring industrial, large-scale food production businesses (Food Secure Canada, 2015).
- Poverty is higher and food more expensive in rural and remote communities, making it more difficult for residents to afford nutritious store-bought food. Increased distances to stores and a lack of public transportation can exacerbate the effect of poverty on rural communities (Lauzon, 2017).

Northern and remote Indigenous communities face additional challenges that ought to be prioritized in plans for rural food sovereignty. Please see RPLC's *Northern and Remote Indigenous Food Sovereignty in Canada* for specific background and policy recommendations.

Rural Food Sovereignty Policy Landscape

A number of relevant discussion papers and policy atlas graphics were developed in 2017 as a part of a community-academic collaborative project between Food Secure Canada and FLEdGE (Food: Locally Embedded, Globally Engaged) to map and evaluate the existing Canadian policy related to food sovereignty. In this policy brief, attention is focused on key federal level agri-food policy examples to illustrate the rural food sovereignty policy landscape.

There are two types of programs associated with the Agricultural Policy Framework (APF)⁵:

- Business Risk Management (BRM) programs which insure farmers from price volatility, weather, and pest disasters and represented fifty-nine percent of total government spending on agriculture from 2000-2009, averaging \$3.8 billion per year.
- Non-BRM programs like AgriInnovation, AgriCompetitiveness, and AgriMarketing funding programs, and environmental, food safety, food quality, science and innovation, and rural renewal programs (Food Secure Canada, 2017a).

⁵ The APF is the primary agri-food cost-sharing agreement between federal-provincial-territorial governments.

Policy Weaknesses

A brief assessment of several federal programmes alongside the objectives of food sovereignty reveals the following:

- The AgriCompetitiveness funding stream disadvantages smaller scale operators because the regulations to promote farm safety are often inappropriate to smaller farms.
- The AgriInnovation funding stream defines innovation from a technical, industry-driven standpoint by focusing on applied sciences and technologies, biofuels, and genomic research to the neglect of other types of innovations such as social, institutional, financial, or organizational.
- Supporting the development of local food economies does not appear as an express priority of the Minister of Innovation, Science and Economic Development responsible for the work of Canada's six regional development agencies.
- Environmental programming is extremely limited, comprising only 1.89% of the total Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's (AAFC) *Growing Forward* budget in 2011 (Food Secure Canada, 2017a).

Within the existing federal and provincial-territorial policy reviewed by Food Secure Canada and FLEdGE, a number of weaknesses were identified:

- Explicit consideration of food sovereignty and its implications for the market and state is absent from most policy.
- The engagement of civil society in program evaluation and policy change is not sufficiently leveraged. Evaluations were found to be largely top-down, driven by a technocratic approach and urban focus.
- Rural, environmental, agricultural, health, finance and public procurement policies operate in isolation. (Food Secure Canada, 2017a)

These high-level weaknesses result in a lack of clarity of what can and cannot be accomplished with current policy and a lack of awareness of other opportunities and policy levers. Program and funding initiatives tend to be ad hoc, unsustainable, administratively complex and misaligned, but that is not to disregard positive individual policy examples particularly at provincial and regional levels. For example, Newfoundland and Labrador's current upgrades to its procurement policies to reflect factors beyond lowest cost such as health and social value (Newfoundland Labrador, 2018) demonstrate growing consideration of issues of distribution at the provincial policy level.

Policy Opportunities

Canadian initiatives which address these policy weaknesses do so through inclusive, holistic processes (Martorell, 2017a, 2017b). Three types of federal and provincial-territorial policy approaches to strengthening local sustainable food systems were identified by Food Secure Canada/FLEdGE:

1. Promoting local food to consumers by stimulating demand and increasing local food presence and local food literacy.
2. Localizing public procurement by leveraging government procurement practices to strength local and sustainable food economies.

3. Emphasizing sustainable diets and particularly increasing plant-rich lifestyles and reducing meat centric diets (Mason & Lang, 2017; Tallman, 2015).
4. Opening up access to regional markets by diversifying market opportunities for small and mid-sized business and differentiated products (Food Secure Canada, 2017c).

To strengthen local and sustainable food economies, several good practices may need to be combined within a vibrant policy landscape:

- Integrating local food in legislation with set targets, plans, reports, and data collection.
- Establishing linkages between sustainable agriculture, land use planning, and agri-marketing programs. For example: the AgriMarketing program once allocated solely to export development is now available for domestic promotion.
- Re-orienting technical and agricultural extension services towards local market opportunities.
- Supporting the development of municipal or regional food policy councils.
- Providing clear and plain information on food safety and public procurement tailored to different audiences (consumers, public institutions, businesses, and farmers) using applicable methods (checklist, etc.).
- Launching targeted regulatory reviews and consultative mechanisms as well as issuing specific licenses to small-scale abattoirs.
- Developing programs and exemptions for new entrants and niche markets (artisanal, organic, specialty breeds, etc.) (Food Secure Canada, 2017a).

Political conditions and policies being established in other countries for the implementation of food sovereignty provide illustrative encouraging examples of how food sovereignty is approached in other rural contexts (Desmarais, 2017; Knickel et al., 2018; Wittman, 2015). Although as experts in this important field put it: “no single global food sovereignty model can be designed and imposed from elsewhere” (Wiebe, Nettie & Wipf, 2011, p. 5).

Recommendations

The current development of *A Food Policy for Canada* presents an opportunity for the RPLC to make federal policy recommendations related to rural food sovereignty. The following policy recommendations apply the key process principles⁶ and policy priorities⁷ for Canada’s National Food Policy detailed by Food Secure Canada (Food Secure Canada, 2017b) to rural communities.

- 1. Policy development and decision-making around food sovereignty require collaborative efforts and transparent processes driven by rural communities with acute insights of their unique contributions and challenges. Northern and remote Indigenous communities should be prioritized.**

The “democratization of decisions about agricultural policy and market integration”(Wittman, 2015, p. 175) is a condition of food sovereignty. Rural communities are central to democratic food policy decision-making because of their unique contributions and acute challenges. Policies that leverage the potential of rural and remote communities in Canada to be leading decision makers in food sovereignty and drivers of inclusive growth are needed so that issues like farm land protection for food production, processing and distribution,

⁶ Systems-based, Democratic Governance, Nation-to-Nation Relationship, Adaptive Policy for Social Innovation

⁷ The Right to Food and Food Sovereignty, Environment and Climate Resiliency, Healthy and Sustainable Diets, Inclusive and Equitable Growth through Regional Food Systems

support for young farmers and succession planning for family transfer of farms are addressed in ways that respect local circumstances.

Poor policy results from excessive influence of private interests and homogeneous perspectives, therefore, it is essential to promote as much inclusivity and transparency in the policy-making process as possible (Grossman, 2013). The contributions of civil society organizations such as Food Secure Canada, The National Farmers' Association, local food movements and community/university partnerships like the Rural Policy Learning Commons should be valued. Engagement should be geographically inclusive and should follow community protocol and use processes "rooted in rural and remote communities empowered with the capacity to offer their citizens nutritious food" (Food Secure Canada, 2015, p. 4).

It is commendable that *A Food Policy for Canada* development processes have been facilitated through an online survey and through regional engagement sessions and that the draft recommendations and government response have been made public. The inadequacies of rural internet access may limit virtual participation, while the regional engagement sessions have been exclusively in urban environments though the session in Yellowknife at least provides some access to northern communities. However, a bureaucratic consultation process privileges certain voices (Mertens, 2008). More information about how the consultation was designed and facilitated to make space for rural participation may reveal whether diverse perspectives of rural communities were in fact included in the policy consultation. The study *Farm Women and Canadian Agriculture Policy* (Roppel, Martz, Desmarais, & Martz, 2006) was designed to address such shortcomings and may serve as a useful model to strengthen genuinely inclusive, participatory processes.

While no consultation with industry players has been included in the record of contributions for *A Food Policy for Canada*, political influence still needs to be considered at all stages of policy formation. All consultation with agri-food businesses needs to be made public and transparent, so that "excessive influence of private interests is exposed to public scrutiny" (Grossman, 2013, p.184). The record of government consultations, related government processes and investments would reveal how genuine the government actors are in achieving the principles of food sustainability, sovereignty, security and safety.

2. Food sovereignty policy development must be holistic and promote an understanding of food systems.

Inter-scalar and inter-sectoral collaboration are required to develop food policy because food sovereignty encompasses social, cultural, environmental and economic spheres (Trauger, 2014).

It is encouraging that the *A Food Policy For Canada* development process brings together the Ministries of Health, Environment and Social Development (Government of Canada, 2017). *A Food Policy For Canada* can be a place to integrate efforts in preventative public health, social inclusion and environmental sustainability in a whole government approach that draws connections between poverty, health, the environment and food systems (Martorell, 2017b). For example, agroecological initiatives that emphasize more nutritious crop varieties and crop diversification can play an important role in improving environmental sustainability, reduce carbon emissions, and also enhance diet quality (Fanzo, Hunter, Borelli, & Mattei, 2013; Scrinis, 2016).

The Canadian economy is strongly linked to agriculture and food, and food sovereignty depends on diverse rural economies that go well beyond food production, therefore the federal Ministry of Finance should be included in food policy development (National Farmers Union (NFU), 2017). Diverse local food production systems may serve to strengthen local economic development, regional collaboration, as well as improve

the quality of food produced and consumed (Scrinis, 2016). “If food sovereignty is to be more than simply a populist claim for a return to traditional life on the land, then the vision will need to accommodate flourishing rural economies” where growth is inclusive, equitable and environmentally sustainable (Edelman et al., 2014, p. 924). Holistic approaches to policy development can capitalize on the positive relationships between food sovereignty and health, environmental sustainability, rural development

It is also essential to consider the connections between the economy and food sovereignty in order to determine where economic policy supports food sovereignty and where the objectives in one policy area are incompatible with food sovereignty. For example, parallel to the *A Food Policy for Canada* consultations headed up by Health Canada and Agriculture Canada, are additional government processes and reports. The most influential reports are arising from The Advisory Council on Economic Growth or also known as the Barton Commission.⁸ These reports place great emphases on Canadian food exports. The economic investments to implement these recommendations would be in the order of billions of Canadian dollars while the financial investments to implement *A Food Policy for Canada* are likely to be far less, consequently the influence of this policy on actual practice also could be much less than desired. If more is invested in exporting foods (like beef and lobster) than in ensuring all Canadians eat healthily, then these investments will drive outcomes.

3. The roles of the state and the market need to adhere to principles and practices of food sovereignty.

Implementing food sovereignty requires critical consideration of how concepts are defined and what roles are played by the market and the state (Edelman et al., 2014; Trauger, 2014). The central concepts of sovereignty: territory, economy and power (Trauger, 2014, p. 1145) need to be explicitly discussed. Questions need to be addressed like: How can a shared, graduated definition of local/sustainable food based on regional and provincial designation, distance, environmental regulation, and recognized certification bodies be established? What are the limits to things like farm size, firm size and long-distance trade implied in food sovereignty statements? What is deemed culturally appropriate? And most importantly, who defines these meanings and who enforces them? (Edelman et al., 2014).

Greater detail is required if food sovereignty principles are to be successfully implemented. Continuing to ask the hard questions about the role of government and the role of local and global markets, will remain critical as more detailed policy is developed. Policy makers must be willing to re-examine “long-held beliefs and be prepared to work outside their ideological comfort zones to avoid policy disasters caused in large part from commitment to outdated or fundamentally flawed economic ideologies” (Grossman, 2013, p. 176). There are no easy answers to these questions. Answering them will “require careful empirical research and conceptual soul-searching” (Edelman et al., 2014, p. 922), and likely uncomfortable disagreement, but to neglect these foundational questions will hinder real change (Raworth, 2017).

Conclusion

At its heart, food sovereignty policy development is about envisioning and decision-making that foster the right of communities to define their own food and agriculture systems, so that healthy and culturally appropriate food is produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods. Food sovereignty in Canada depends on food policy that is achievable in the present, but which vitally anticipates a more

⁸ Please see <https://www.budget.gc.ca/aceg-ccce/pdf/ideas-into-action-eng.pdf> for details of the update on the implementation of these reports.

emancipatory future (Erik Olin Wright as cited by Kloppenburg, 2014). Rural communities are uniquely positioned to contribute to conversations about the “profound structural changes needed in the capitalist economy and the liberal state for food sovereignty to feasibly exist” (Edelman et al., 2014, p. 927). The Rural Policy Learning Commons (RPLC) supports the development of *A Food Policy for Canada* that genuinely affords needed opportunities to value rural participation in holistic, inclusive and transparent processes which bring together government and communities in openly and critically considering the roles of the state and the market in food sovereignty.

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