

Rural food sovereignty through integrated solutions and policies

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Food sovereignty and its connections with rural communities are complex and may be underappreciated. Rural food sovereignty is the best guarantee of dependable, healthy food supplies for a broader range of Canadians.¹ Rural communities in Canada represent diverse growing environments and cultural, political and economic conditions² and make significant contributions to Canadian food sovereignty yet face numerous challenges that could be aided by government policies.³ As strategies to enhance rural food sovereignty have been shown to generate greater food availability and accessibility, then the adoption of such strategies could be justified as sound policy and practice.

Food sovereignty is understood 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.”⁴ Food sovereignty emphasizes farmers’ access to land, seeds, and water while focusing on local autonomy, local markets, local production-consumption cycles, energy and technological sovereignty, and farmer-to-farmer networks.⁵ While not an exhaustive study, we focus on food sovereignty in rural settings. Policy avenues beneficial to rural and local food systems are identified.⁶⁻¹⁰ The introduction of the first *Food Policy for Canada*, for example, is seen as an important opportunity to strengthen supports that bolster rural food sovereignty and more sustainable and healthy food options. Such transformation of agriculture needs to be guided by ecological change along with changes in the social, political, cultural, and economic arenas that help determine agriculture.⁵

ISSUES

Findings reveal that policy change often is top-down, driven by a technocratic approach and urban focus, and policies may operate in isolation or in opposition.¹¹ Planners are aware that food security and sovereignty issues affect communities differently. Rural areas are facing rising global challenges of climate change, financial crises, food price volatility, and commodity price increases. Yet these pressing environmental, social, and economic concerns frequently are managed by separate government ministries or NGOs.¹²

- Governmental land planning prioritizes commercial, residential and industrial uses¹³ and as such impedes land access for small-scale agriculture and rural communities because market values inflate land costs.
- “Farmer autonomy and control are fast eroding. As farmers lose that control, they lose the ability to make effective long-term plans. And Canadians lose sovereignty over their territory and their food systems.”¹⁴

- Government regulations and policies have led to highly centralized infrastructure for food production (e.g., abattoirs, grain storage), and threaten the ability of smaller growers to sustainably produce and process food for regional consumers by favouring industrial, large-scale food production businesses.¹³
- Without governmental support for or subsidies to the production of sustainable foods, markets control the type of and how crops are grown.¹³
- Government economic policies, including the absence of “a living wage” and rural transportation systems, add to rural social isolation and poverty and less available, accessible and affordable foods.¹⁵
- Every year, roughly one third of all food produced – 1.3bn tonnes – is lost in harvest or storage, or wasted by consumers.¹⁶

RECOMMENDATIONS

A variety of actions by governments, private sector and voluntary actors are recommended to support rural food sovereignty. Governments might help increase support for local food through actions like offering subsidies to producers and placing greater emphases on procurement policies based on local suppliers. Small and mid-sized businesses may become inclined to collaborate around forging regional markets, diversifying market opportunities.^{17,18} Community organizations, like food cooperatives, should be aided in their promotion of local and regional food production and consumption and in facilitating food sovereignty.

Actions to advance food sovereignty might include recognising that food, prosperity and sustainability issues are interconnected and must be tackled together.^{18,19} With the issues in food sovereignty, priority should be given to Indigenous communities as well as rural, northern, remote regions. Governments could ensure policies are developed with rural and indigenous perspectives to enable interconnection and effectiveness of policies. Policy strategies ought to prioritize interventions to mitigate climate change and increase food price availability and decrease commodity price volatility through reducing food waste and increasing plant-rich approaches.²⁰ Policy initiatives are needed to improve harvesting techniques, storage facilities, and innovations in the bio-economy. By averting the loss of food, this would reduce pressures on food production, save on land, water, fertilizer use, and carbon emissions.¹⁶ Protection of land for food production and rural communities needs to be emphasized.²¹ Increasing food sovereignty will require integration of long established examples of successful community-based local agriculture that are more ecological, biodiverse, local, sustainable, and socially just. Such systems have fed much of the world for centuries and continue to feed people in many parts of the planet.⁵ Partnerships across sectors can work together to remediate rural social isolation and increase access to affordable foods. To increase its leadership in food sovereignty, governments may seek to incorporate the perspectives of rural food businesses into policy formation, decision-making as significant drivers of rural well-being. In this context, new policies for food sovereignty would seek to capitalize on the beneficial relationships between food sovereignty and health, environmental sustainability and rural development¹⁹ and the emerging opportunities in sustainable, plant-rich diets.^{22–24}

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