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Canada needs a national food strategy

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What is most disturbing about Canada's food system is not the degraded quality, the impact on health, the devastation of natural resources from industrial fishing and farming, the impoverishment of food producers, the inequitable access that leaves so many Canadians undernourished, or even the safety scares that have us checking for recalls along with prices.

These travesties can be righted, if we act. But we have lost so much control over our food system that our ability to act is diminishing. Indeed, we can hardly imagine that we can act, that food should be a public good, like health care, to serve people foremost. That the public should decide what food Canada produces, how it's produced, and how we share that harvest.

We have largely left those decisions to the market. Consequently, food has been cheapened into a tool for generating massive profits. And an increasingly small group of companies have gained enormous power over Canada's food supply.



SUPPLIED IMAGE

A snapshot: four retailers control more than 70 per cent of grocery sales; two companies control 95 per cent of finished cattle slaughter; two control two-thirds of flour production; globally, just 10 multinationals control two-thirds of proprietary seeds, the basis of food.

Many Canadian farmers, abandoned to compete globally against appalling labour standards, see little future in independent food production here, which is shocking given increasing world hunger. More than a third of our farmers, holding half of all farm assets, are set to retire and most don't want their children to farm. Corporations are most likely to snap up those farms.

But demand for a citizen-led food fix is building.

This past summer, Canadians flocked to political meetings and community talks to discuss our increasingly sick food system and present ideas for a national food policy. Wayne Roberts of Toronto's Food Policy Council said such a policy could be this generation's medicare – a gift of healthy food, and sustainable farming and fishing to future generations.

The People's Food Policy Project held a series of "kitchen table meetings" in rural, fishing, northern and urban communities to gather ideas for a national platform on food sovereignty.

This would mean changing our current export-oriented agriculture to a "feed the family first and trade the rest" policy. It would shift support to local producers and give municipalities and their residents more of a voice in food choices. It would also entail a shift toward ecological food production to protect the natural resources on which future harvests depend. And through fair trade, Canada would extend the same right to other countries to protect their farmers and natural resources.

Finally, it would reposition food as a public good rather than primarily a profit driver, and ensure all citizens affordable access to nutritious food.

Food sovereignty was a key recommendation of the first international assessment of agriculture, the IAASTD report, delivered last year. Of 62 countries participating, 59 signed the agreement. The agriculture policies of the three countries that dissented – Canada, the United States, and Australia – are strongly influenced by multinational food and agribusinesses.

"Our food system is controlled by large and frequently multinational corporations," said Cathleen Kneen, chair of Food Secure Canada. "This is about citizens having a real say in how the system functions. It's food democracy."

Currently, responsibility for food nationally is diced and sliced across ministries, with no coordinated strategy. Agriculture is a minor ministry, oriented to export commodities. Transportation pays for moving it over vast distances. Health picks up the tab for bad food.

Canada needs a national policy on food, say leading thinkers such as Dr. Harriet Friedmann, who contributed to the IAASTD report. She says the policy needs to integrate health, environment and accessibility goals.

In Parliament, the opposition parties have been stirring up ideas for a national food policy. And Canada's major farming organizations have all called for a national strategy for food and farming.

While a national policy is essential, municipalities and cities must drive it, by establishing food councils with responsibility for protecting food sheds. In the inevitable food fight with corporations resisting a local-first strategy, local power wields a particular strength. Roberts, of Toronto's food council, said the city's anti-pesticides legislation passed "rather easily" because the forces opposing it were national players, with little power in the city.

Toronto's Food Policy Council, created in 1992, was just the third in North America. Now there are some 35, many following Toronto's model. Operating under the Department of Public Health, the council has coordinated food action in the city, supporting community food centres, food banks, urban gardening and farmers markets.

The Stop Community Food Centre in Toronto serves as another model. Housed in the historic Wychwood streetcar barns, it runs a community kitchen, food bank, two farmers markets, urban gardens, a 3,000-square-foot greenhouse and teaches new and vulnerable Canadians food self sufficiency – to cook, grow and choose healthy foods.

Its director, Nick Saul, believes there should be a centre in every riding in Canada, adapted to local needs. That might include a farmers' co-op to sell food, an abattoir, processing facilities, a commercial-grade kitchen to incubate new businesses or even community catering of healthy meals for busy families and those in need.

"We don't have a prescription for how another community might wrap its arms around this," said Saul, "but we've developed the core elements." The concept, he says, is about using food to increase health, civic engagement, self-reliance, local economies, social justice and community.

It's about shifting more food into the public domain and returning the value to farmers and fishers and the food itself, where it belongs.

It's food that serves people, exactly the food policy Canada needs.

Margaret Webb is the author of Apples to Oysters: A Food Lover's Tour of Canadian Farms. She has written on food for The Toronto Star, The Globe and Mail, More Magazine and Canadian Geographic. She teaches magazine writing at Ryerson University.