

Diabetes

Dialogue

diabetes.ca/dialogue



How do
we jump the
hurdles
to better management?

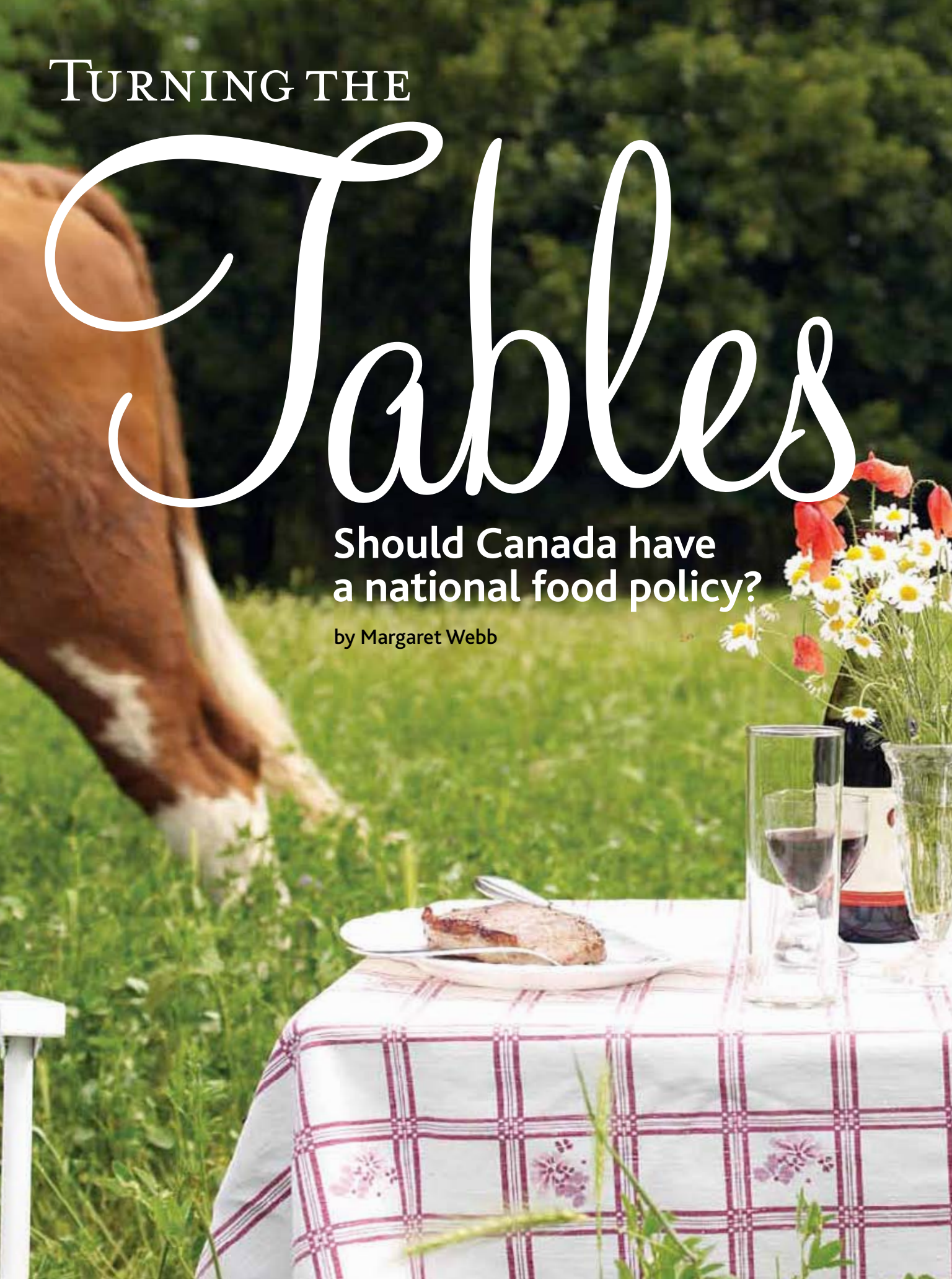
PUBLICATIONS MAIL AGREEMENT NUMBER 40063447, CANADA POST; PLEASE RETURN UNDELIVERABLE ADDRESS
BLOCKS TO: CANADIAN DIABETES ASSOCIATION, 1400-522 UNIVERSITY AVENUE, TORONTO, ON M5G 2R5.

TURNING THE

Tables

Should Canada have
a national food policy?

by Margaret Webb



J RECENTLY SPOKE TO A GROUP OF GRADUATE STUDENTS in Ryerson University's well-respected School of Nutrition, and asked them what food meant to them. After all, they will work in Canada's food system and perhaps shape its future. They responded enthusiastically that food should be a means to good health, enjoyment and prevention of disease, as well as a way to express family and cultural traditions, passion, creativity, even love. They said that Canada's food system should, above all, be healthy, accessible, local, ethical, environmentally sustainable and just, meaning it should be democratically controlled by the people it serves: citizens.



THE PEOPLE'S FOOD POLICY
PROPOSES A PRETTY RADICAL
SHIFT TO A DEMOCRATICALLY
RUN AND UNIVERSALLY
ACCESSIBLE SYSTEM.



IF ONLY these students were setting the table now, because, in Canada's dominant food system, food means none of these things. Our system has such little connection to health that diet-related chronic disease now accounts for two-thirds of direct costs to our healthcare system. It also leaves one in 10 Canadians food-insecure (lacking the resources to access enough nutritious food to maintain a healthy lifestyle), while focusing on exporting our food to foreign markets; allows livestock to be drugged and confined in unhealthy factory farm systems; and has, in the past seven of ten years, returned zero profits to Canadians, forcing them to subsist on government support programs.

As for environmental sustainability, a 2008 United Nations-sponsored global assessment of agriculture found that energy- and chemical-intensive, industrialized agriculture—which Canada overwhelmingly supports—degrades the natural resources on which future harvests depend. Globally, the agriculture and food sector emits between 30 and 57% of total greenhouse gases.

When it comes to food democracy, there's no one at the federal level responsible for food to even hold accountable for this situation. There is no ministry overseeing food policy. Major changes to our food system are never

debated in the House of Commons, but are relegated to a low-profile farm committee or handled, piecemeal and at cross purposes, by bureaucrats in virtually every ministry—with agriculture, industry, transportation and trade supporting the profit-making agendas of the big food companies, while health, environment and social services are left to mop up the damage.

And what do citizens get from a food system we never voted for, a system that views food primarily as a means of maximizing profits rather than supporting our health and wellbeing? Well, we get to pay for our food three times over: first, with \$5 billion in tax dollars each year, largely to subsidize farmers growing ingredients for unhealthy food and for export; second, at the cash register, for often empty calories (which fatten us along with the bottom lines of food companies); and then we pay for the consequences of nutritionally poor food yet again, with very expensive healthcare tax dollars to fix us—hopefully—if we get sick (healthcare spending has hit more than \$180 billion and now eats up nearly half of all provincial budgets).

Two years ago, a coalition of citizens, realizing that Canada's food system was broken on just about every level, created the People's Food Policy Project to come up with solutions for a fix. This coalition of good-food

activists, farmers and fishers, healthcare workers, academics and concerned citizens engaged more than 3,500 Canadians in a series of “kitchen table talks” held in communities across the country. In day-long seminars, town halls and teleconferences, the project animators—all volunteers—asked Canadians what they wanted from their food system, heard stories about how the current system wasn’t serving eaters or farmers, and developed ideas for a fix. From that informative exercise in democratic public engagement, the group then created a blueprint for a healthy, just and environmentally sustainable food system—what could be Canada’s first national food policy—and presented that policy to the federal government after the spring election.

As one of the chief strategists, Cathleen Kneen says, “The project served two purposes: when the federal government gets around to realizing we need a food policy, there will be one for them, and it will be a *people’s* food policy. But it was more urgently a process to get people engaged in thinking about the food system they want.”

Our food system has such little connection to health that diet-related chronic disease now accounts for two-thirds of direct costs to our healthcare system.

Wayne Roberts, the former head of Toronto’s Food Policy Council and a leading thinker and writer on food systems, has written that a comprehensive national food policy would be “a nation-building exercise,” and “regarded as this generation’s gift to the future, much like Canadian Medicare came to be the legacy of the last generation.”



A local group of the People’s Food Policy Project gathers in Kingston for a kitchen table talk.

Compared to the corporate-run food system we have now, the People’s Food Policy proposes a pretty radical shift to a democratically run and universally accessible system. Food policy councils would exist at every level of government, with the greatest control residing locally. Like our healthcare system, the People’s Food Policy would ensure that all Canadians have universal access to healthy food. Establishing a federal poverty prevention and elimination strategy and non-profit community fresh food markets are just two ideas among many for achieving that goal.

A people’s food system would also change the meaning of food, from primarily a commodity or economic driver to being a public good that serves multiple functions: improving health, sustaining environments, strengthening communities, returning a fair wage to food producers and supporting cultural traditions. Other recommendations include taking food out of trade agreements so that Canada can control its own food supply; re-localizing the food system so that communities can protect their food producers and plan local sustainable food sheds; establishing a federally funded “child and food” strategy to provide at least one healthy

Eli Lilly ¼-Page Ad



school meal a day along with food literacy programs; and redirecting farm support payments to promote ecological stewardship and production of healthy foods, such as fruit and vegetables.

Establishing such national food policies are not new, though the People's Food Policy is more comprehensive than most. Brazil, the fourth largest exporter of food in the world, recently addressed the appalling fact that one-third of its citizens did not have enough to eat by creating a national Food Security Policy. It set zero hunger as a target. Britain recently released its Food 2030 national strategy, designed to increase sustainable food production at home and encourage people to eat healthier. Scotland established a National Food and Drink Policy with similar goals. Scandinavian countries established food policies decades ago, with health and local production goals.

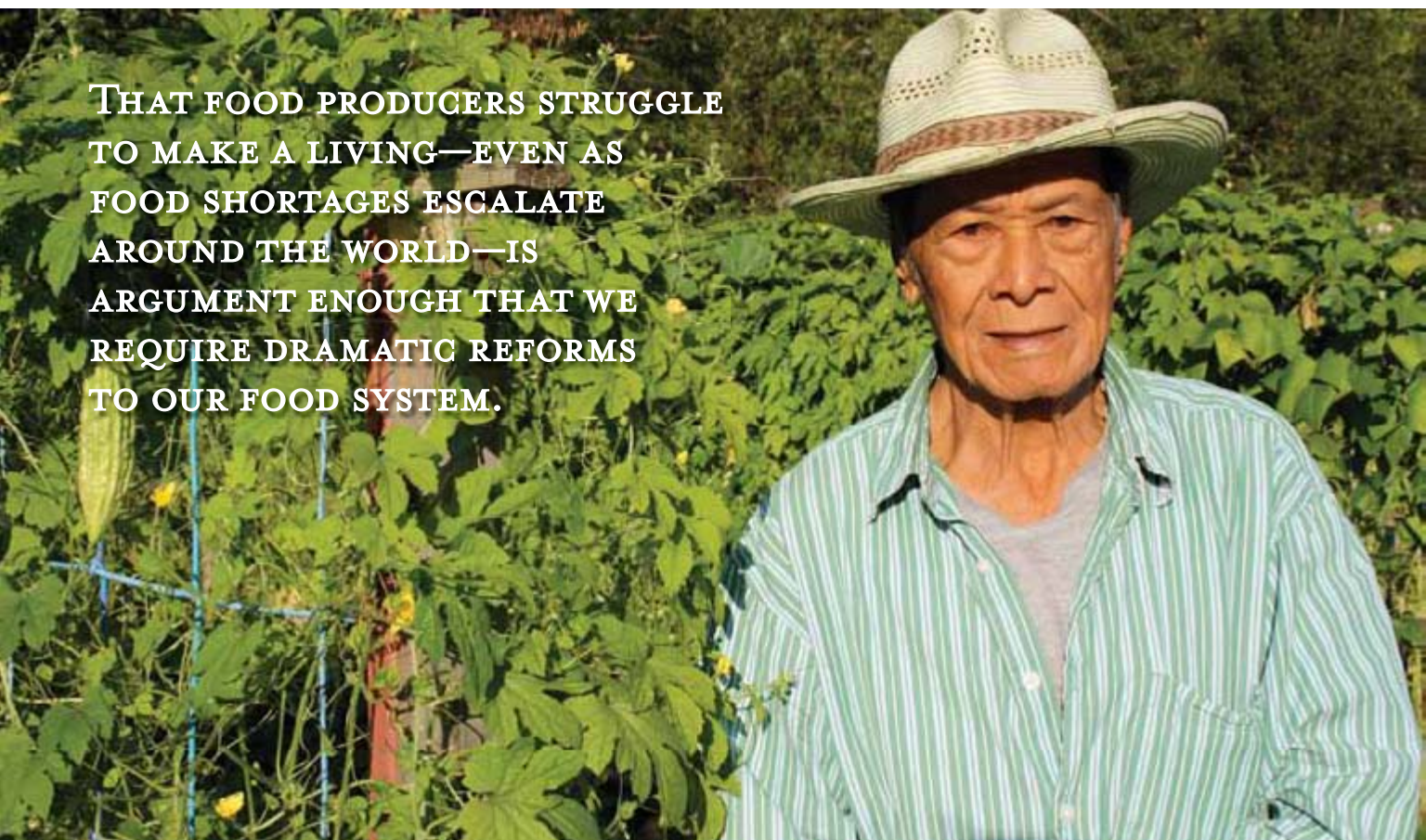
The discouraging fact is that, in Canada, our federal government will likely give the People's Food Policy as much attention as it gave to the 2008 *International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development* (IAASTD), written by

The relative productivity of the industrial food system compared to its negative environmental and social costs is at a tipping point.

400 leading experts from around the world and sponsored by the UN, World Bank, World Health Organization and others. That global assessment of agriculture determined that re-localizing food systems, investing in local agriculture and infrastructure, and supporting sustainable agriculture was the best way to reduce world hunger. Those strategies would also make the world's food system more sustainable and healthier, and help combat climate change. Of the 62 countries contributing to that assessment, 59 supported it—Canada, the United States and Australia did not.

Eli Lilly ¼-Page Ad

THAT FOOD PRODUCERS STRUGGLE TO MAKE A LIVING—EVEN AS FOOD SHORTAGES ESCALATE AROUND THE WORLD—IS ARGUMENT ENOUGH THAT WE REQUIRE DRAMATIC REFORMS TO OUR FOOD SYSTEM.



Why is that? Harriet Friedmann, a world-renowned food policy expert at the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs, says that the governments who do not support the IAASTD are heavily influenced by transnational agri-food and food corporations keen to maximize profits in the global trade of food. "Those three countries have a high commitment to and dependence on exports and massive production of field crops and livestock. Ministries (of food and agriculture) have developed to serve commodity groups. But they will have to shift fundamentally. The relative productivity of the industrial food system compared to its negative environmental and social costs is at a tipping point."

As far as healthcare costs go, pursuing a business-first approach to food no longer makes sense. The Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute (CAPI) marshalled up a strong economic argument for changing Canada's food system to improve the health and wellbeing of Canadians in its 2009 *Building Convergence Report: Toward an Integrated Health and Agri-Food Strategy for Canada*.

That report highlighted the fact that Canada's agriculture and agri-food sector contributes eight percent to GDP, but healthcare costs now eat up approximately 11%. Given that diet-related chronic diseases account for two-thirds of healthcare costs,

it's clear that the current food system does not make enough money to compensate for the damage it causes, and it would make more sense economically—not to mention ethically—to put the food system to work improving the health of Canadians rather than simply boosting economic performance of the food industry.

Promoting and supporting simple changes to diet could save the healthcare system \$6.4 billion in direct and indirect costs.

The economic policies that created our current sugar/fat/and salt-laden food system, which makes junk calories more readily available and cheaper than healthy ones, has contributed to an obesity and diabetes epidemic in virtually every age demographic. In the past three decades, rates of overweight and obesity for 12- to 17-year-olds and 25- to 35-year-olds have doubled. Being overweight increases the likelihood of developing

diabetes by 73%, while being obese raises the likelihood by 400%. Currently, the direct cost to our healthcare system from diabetes is estimated to be nearly \$12 billion per year. Without intervention, the incidence of diabetes and the cost of treatment will explode. CAPI predicts that in just a few years, 70% of provincial budgets could be consumed by healthcare costs alone.

The CAPI report cited modelling scenarios by the Milken Institute in the U.S. to show that reducing risk factors (or, in other words, improving diet and fitness) could slow the rates of diet-related chronic disease (such as diabetes, stroke, heart disease and cancer) from a potential increase of 43% to 17% by 2023. Such a reduction would mean avoiding 40 million cases of chronic disease; reducing the economic impact of disease by 27% (\$1.1 trillion annually in the U.S.); increasing the U.S. GDP by \$905 billion (through productivity gains);

Economic policies have contributed significantly to the obesity epidemic by making high-caloric, nutrient-poor foods relatively cheap and ubiquitous.

and decreasing treatment costs by US\$218 billion per year. Even taking into consideration that Canada is one-tenth the size of the U.S., savings from a health-first food strategy in Canada would be staggering.

In Canada, the CAPI report states that if we made even simple changes to our food system—such as reducing trans fats by 2 grams per person per day (say, cutting or reducing them in oils and salad dressings)—we could reduce cardiovascular deaths by 3 to 9% (1,200 to 7,700 a year), and reap potential healthcare



savings of \$1 billion per year. Promoting and supporting simple changes to diet, such as every Canadian eating the recommended 5 to 10 servings of fruit and vegetables per day, could save the healthcare system \$6.4 billion in direct and indirect costs.

But such recommendations beg the question: how involved do we want governments to be in our food-making decisions? The fact is, they already are heavily involved, but mostly in all the wrong places and in all the wrong ways. In a presentation to a conference on national food policy strategies in Montreal, Diane Finegood, the former scientific director of the Institute of Nutrition, Metabolism & Diabetes at the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, pointed out that economic policies, including farm subsidies, have contributed significantly to the obesity epidemic by making high-caloric, nutrient-poor foods relatively cheap and ubiquitous. “In the U.S., farm policy, which supports a few commodities, like corn and soybeans, and provides little support for the production of fruits and vegetables, has led to large decreases in the cost of soft drinks, fats, oils, sugars and sweets, while driving up the price of fruits and vegetables.” In other words, farm subsidies are actually subsidies to the processed food industry.

Eli Lilly ¼-Page Ad

Canada's corporate-dominated food and agricultural system is not only squeezing nutrition out of food, but also the profits out of farming.

The same thing is happening in Canada as a result of pro-trade and pro-industrial agricultural policies that have little connection to health and environmental sustainability. For instance, soybeans and corn, the cheap ingredients for processed food, fast food and junk food, now grow on half of Ontario's cropland, while the fruit and vegetable industry has withered to almost nothing. Large, industrial factory farms produce 75% of our food, primarily from chemical-intensive monocultures (the cultivation of a single crop) and factory feeding operations that rely heavily on antibiotics—an estimated 70% of all antibiotics in North America are prescribed to farm animals. The CBC recently reported that two-thirds of all chicken in supermarkets were covered in antibiotic-resistant bacteria and suggested that antibiotic use in factory farming could be compromising the effectiveness of antibiotics for treating human illness and leading to antibiotic-resistant superbugs that sicken thousands of Canadians every year. Finegood believes that super-sizing and centralizing food production and processing is also compromising food safety. Food-borne illness affects some 11 million Canadians every year and costs about \$12 billion.

To add to this grim picture, we are losing our farmers. When Canada had a regional and largely sustainable food system 60 years ago, some 20% of Canadians farmed; now, only 1.5% do. Canada's corporate-dominated food and agricultural system is not only squeezing nutrition out of food, but also the profits out of farming. Since 1991, some 62% of young farmers have fled the sector, either unable to make a living or

unwilling to shoulder the enormous financial risks of “going big” to join the industrialized food system. The average age of the farmers who have remained in the game is about 57, with about 30% set to retire within the next decade. Most don't have succession plans because they don't want their children to farm in this current food system. Canada is staring down a farming crisis that is unparalleled in any other sector. Without policy change, Canadians will end up with even more of the industrialized, imported, highly processed food that is making Canadians sick.

That food producers struggle to make a living, not just in Canada but globally, as food shortages escalate around the world, is argument enough that we require dramatic and comprehensive reforms to our food systems, along the lines of what the People's Food Policy is suggesting for Canada and what IAASTD recommends for the world. That change, according to Kneen, can start today, with individuals establishing their own personal food policies in their homes, then “exercising a more robust citizenship” to make sure food policies in schools, workplaces, public institutions and governments support their choices for healthy sustainable food.

Margaret Webb is a freelance writer based in Toronto, Ontario, and is the author of Apples and Oysters: A Food Lover's Tour of Canadian Farms.

For more information or to get more involved:

PEOPLE'S FOOD POLICY is a network of citizens and organizations that is creating Canada's first food sovereignty policy.

www.peoplesfoodpolicy.ca/home

FOOD SECURE CANADA is a Canadian organization that works to unite people and organizations working for food security across Canada and globally.

<http://foodsecurecanada.org>

Eli Lilly ¼-Page Ad