

**Models and Best Practices
for
Building Effective Local Food Systems
in Ontario**

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Introduction

To eat is to participate in a global system, but few of us understand how this system works and our role within it. On the one hand, we have witnessed the rise of a streamlined, vertically-integrated system. On the other hand, alternative food systems have surfaced that emphasize local production, distribution and consumption. The local food movement carries with it the potential to build and foster more sustainable food systems. A local food system minimizes the distance from field to fork, with opportunities to foster long-term local economic resilience, environmental stewardship, quality food access and community and cultural integrity through a food-educated public.

The literature on local food systems underscores the multiple benefits from building a sustainable food chain. First, shortened food chains reduce the distance food travels, thereby potentially decreasing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions associated with certain food products. A report by the Waterloo Region of Public Health examined the relationship between imported food and GHG emissions. It was determined that if all the food grown in the Region of Waterloo were consumed locally, it would be the equivalent of eliminating the GHG emissions from over 16,000 cars every year. Second, local food can improve accessibility and public health. Specific to physical well-being, the Canadian healthcare system is burdened by the results of poor eating habits. It is estimated that 80% of cardiovascular disease, 90% of Type II diabetes and 30% of cancers are linked to poor diet. The consumption of less processed, local food can add to the overall wellness of a community. Third, robust food systems present opportunities for social inclusion; examples include: greater connection between rural and urban populations; the creation of employment opportunities for under-educated and vulnerable groups in society; and inter-cultural associations as culturally-appropriate foods are produced in local markets for new Canadians. Fourth, by shortening supply flows, the local economy retains more money in a region; a study in the United Kingdom found that every dollar spent on a local food box created \$2.59 in value for the local economy, while spin-off from supermarkets generated only \$1.40.

Although it is important to buy more locally, unless the appropriate production and distribution supports are in place the number of farmers will continue to decline, and consumers will continue to have limited access to local food.

This report is a summary of a more lengthy research report, entitled *Local Food: From the Ground Up*. The original report was the collaborative effort of a research team assembled by Dr. Karen Landman at the University of Guelph and Dr. Alison Blay-Palmer at Wilfrid Laurier University. The purpose of this research was to better understand some of the best practices associated with building effective local food systems while increasing an understanding of the barriers that prevent a more robust system from developing, as reported by participants from across the province.

This summary report outlines the objectives of the study and concludes with recommendations based on the findings derived from the interviews. These recommendations aim to better inform those who are working directly and indirectly with local food issues.

Thirty interviews were conducted with key informants across the province. The provincial interviews were divided into two groups: the first focused on Southern, Eastern and Northern Ontario, (Group 1); the second focused on those interviewed within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) (Group 2). This division was deemed necessary because the GTA, and its associated greenbelt, has a different food system dynamic as compared to other parts of Ontario, although there are cross-group interactions. The research interviews took place in the spring of 2009.

Within Group 1, the researchers conducted interviews with 23 people involved in local food across Ontario (Chatham-Kent County, Durham Region, Frontenac County, Halton Region, Hamilton, Kawartha Lakes, Middlesex County, Norfolk County, Ottawa Region, Oxford County, Prince Edward

County, Simcoe County and parts of Northern Ontario). Interviewees were active in food-access facilitation, agricultural coordination, economic development programs, education programs, environmental conservation, farmers' market coordination, marketing, production and tourism.

Group 2 reflects the responses from seven interviews within the GTA. The majority of people interviewed were retailers or distributors of local food in the city. Others interviewed included members of non-profit organizations, a graduate student, an urban producer/farmer, and a local activist.

This report is a synthesis of the responses to the following interview questions:

- What are the goals of a local food system?
- What factors do you feel are most important in determining the effectiveness of a local food system?
- What do you perceive as the most important barriers constraining the development of a local food system in your region?
- In what ways are you personally working to overcome any of these barriers?
- What work would you like to see done by others to overcome these barriers?
- How do you think provincial policy could facilitate the local food movement? What new policies would be helpful? What existing policies would need to be altered?
- Do you know of any specific activities or projects that are particularly effective in terms of building local food systems?

This research reveals that within the local food movement in Ontario, there is no agreed-upon definition of what a local food system is. However, it was clear that there is a common commitment and passion for local food systems.

Goals of a Local Food System

Group 1 Responses:

- Community sustainability
- Environmental sustainability
- Public empowerment
- Sustainable local economies

Economic success was listed by 78% of respondents as an important goal of local food systems in a variety of ways, including: regional economic development; keeping purchasing dollars in the local loop; thriving agricultural sectors; value-added opportunities; economic support of local farmers; economic viability of local farming; regional self-sufficiency; financial well-being of farmers; and strong local economies overall.

Also tied to this desire for sustainable economic practices is a heightened sense of responsibility for environmental stewardship and community sustainability as a whole. The support for community sustainability was mentioned by a number of respondents, highlighting the importance of healthier food for all; support for food needs; consistent access; and a reliable supply that is culturally appropriate. One respondent from Kingston touched on all these themes, expressing that the goals of a local food system:

“... ought to be to promote fairness, stability and long-term sustainability within the food economy for all participants from farmers to eaters.”

When asked to describe what some of the main goals of a local food system should entail, 40% of respondents also included the support and creation of an educated public. One interviewee stated that:

“... if you go to your grocery store and it's harvest time, and you can choose between tomatoes grown locally or from Mexico, our goal is to educate: pick the tomato from Ontario. So to us, education is a must because if we cannot educate consumers we are not going to get any further with local food.”

Group 2 (GTA) Responses:

- Community sustainability
- Environmental sustainability
- Food access
- Public empowerment
- Sustainable economic opportunities
- Tastier, healthier and safer food

Among Group 2, respondents stressed that it is not always easy for average consumers to find local products in stores, and that it can be equally difficult for institutional and wholesale purchasers. Health was also a strong theme, as respondents felt that a shorter shipping distance contributes to food quality. Reasons for this belief were related to shorter shelf-life and unnecessary preservatives, as well as a shorter amount of time between harvest and consumption.

Respondents went on to explain that local food system goals reach deeply into the community. This was perceived to be of great importance, with one interviewee explaining that:

“I come from an environmental perspective, that is my bias, and I don’t even think it is the most important reason. In many cases supporting rural communities or in an urban area supporting community gardening and the social benefits from the system are way more important than the environmental benefits.”

Two other respondents stated that an important goal is being able to ensure that local people have their own needs met, and in the most environmentally-responsible way possible. One respondent did not think it was possible to isolate a single, defining goal, stating that:

“To me, talking about local food systems is powerful because it impacts so many different things. It can be significant for many reasons; I don’t think one is more important than the others.”

Important Factors for Effective Systems

Group 1 Responses:

- Accessibility/availability for both institutional and average consumers
- Affordability and quality
- Consistent food quality and relationships
- Convenience
- High safety standards
- Increased consumer awareness
- Integrated, supportive policy for local, sustainable food
- Profitability for producers and processors
- Transparent and meaningful branding

When asked what particular factors contribute to the overall effectiveness of a local food system, participants overwhelmingly recognized profitability for producers and processors as central. The second most common response was the importance of consumer awareness; this was stated in a variety of ways, including consumer 'buy-in'; general acceptance by the community; understanding 'sticker shock' pricing; an aware public; and understanding the value of local food. One participant explained that:

“People for whatever reason, think because it is Ontario we should pay less for it. That is not necessarily the case in my opinion. You shouldn't pay less for a product that is good. If you look at a product from Mexico, why is it so cheap? Because of labour - they're paying nothing for labour. We have to get in the minds of consumers that they're getting the best product.”

Respondents referred to consistency, reliability, convenience, accessibility and affordability as being central to a successful local food system. One interviewee explained the importance of affordability to the overall system:

“[L]ocal food is more expensive than our current food system; there is a segment of our population who can't afford it. Figuring out that riddle – how do we ensure living salaries for farmers but also make sure it is accessible to those who don't have a lot of disposable income.”

These factors demonstrate the trust and responsibility that producers and consumers have with each other in a localized system. Interviewees also emphasized the the importance of transparency in food safety standards. Policy is seen as an important factor in building local food systems, whether it is in discussion of how to better assist farmers through subsidization programs and research, or operating a localized food system within the world of “cheap-food policy frameworks”. Another issue for producers within the local food movement is the definitional and branding challenges. A concern with a lack of regional recognition was mentioned throughout the interviews.

Group 2 (GTA) Responses:

- Affordability and quality
- Animal welfare
- Communication throughout the system
- Communications to producers
- Connections to producers

- High safety standards
- Increased consumer awareness
- Well-functioning system (environmentally sustainable, efficient, balanced)

When asked what factors contribute to the overall success of a local food system, respondents highlighted a number of features as being important. The most widely-stated were the price and value of the food, the safety of the food, animal welfare and a sound system (environmentally sustainable, efficient, balanced). Many of these elements stem from a greater connection on the purchaser side to where the food comes from. One respondent described the importance of these connections:

“A colleague of mine refers to our current system as ‘bulk anonymous’. There is no connection to the original source of food, or it is all in big pots, so ‘bulk anonymous.’ If we re-establish those connections to the farm then that is a first big step to establishing a network of local food.”

One respondent stressed that accessibility is a good marker of a well-functioning system, saying:

“From my point of view we are looking to balance the needs between consumers and producers - what can work so that the farmers can be sustainable and that low-income people in the city can also have access. So we are looking to bridge those gaps.”

In addition to these points, basic information about the seasonality and availability of local produce was said to be helpful as well, as it would assist consumers in identifying the freshest products possible.

Barriers to Development

Group 1 Responses:

- Flexibility in quota systems to permit small quantity sales
- Inadequate volumes of consistently high-quality production
- Lack of consumer awareness
- Lack of supportive, flexible food and land use policy to promote integrated local sustainable food system
- Need for local processing, transportation and distribution infrastructure
- Need for more abattoirs suited to direct-sell farms
- Not enough farmers
- Seasonality

This question yielded a wide variety of results, with some participants identifying explicit and specific barriers that impede the development of a local food system in their region, while other participants identified barriers on a much broader scale. All responses revealed that, while the current local food movement has resulted in an overall greater appreciation for local food, there are still major struggles that exist for those involved. An example of a very specific and serious barrier for local food is the loss of smaller abattoirs and the challenge that this has created for small-scale meat producers in Ontario:

“Abattoirs – processing animals – it is a really big challenge. Farmers have to travel really long distances to be able to get their meat slaughtered and I know it keeps on coming up all the time.”

Consistently mentioned along with the abattoir issue was the challenge of working within quota systems. As one participant expressed, there is:

“... a lot of frustration that they can't market or advertise or have any print material stating that they have animals if they don't have quota. I have had media who want to put stuff down around Thanksgiving, where you can find a local turkey and no farmers want to say they have it, even though they want to sell it. But it has been frustrating, and around eggs as well. For small-scale agriculture, that is a significant barrier.”

Followed closely by the need for abattoirs and quota issues, distribution was seen as a concern, for both consumers and producers. Other farmers spoke of a lack of farmers in their area, an issue that is supported by the Agricultural Census. One participant explained that:

“... [t]here is not enough supply to meet the demand. If you look at the 2006 census compared to 2001, we lost a fair number of farmers. So that is by far the biggest barrier...”

Issues concerning price were mentioned by a number of participants. Income is only one component of the barriers associated with price. There is also a lack of perceived value or the understanding of price premiums, which is often linked to a lack of consumer awareness and education.

Group 2 (GTA) Responses:

- Inability of small-scale operators to compete with the market concentration of large companies
- Inadequate volumes of consistent high-quality production
- Lack of consumer awareness

- Lack of supportive, flexible food policy to promote local sustainable food systems
- Need for more financial support/funding opportunities for small-scale entrepreneurs
- Need for more logistical and infrastructural support connecting producers/processors to appropriate markets
- Variety

There were varied responses to this question; many had to do with the logistics of the local food system (infrastructure, connection to sources/producers, scale, volume, variety, distribution chains). Other responses included government and policy shortfalls at municipal and provincial levels, as well as incidental concerns such as seasonality, bad habits, loans, and community support. One respondent viewed the current market concentration and the influence of large companies as a principal barrier, but was optimistic about the problem slowly resolving due to public awareness:

“Having a small number of huge companies being responsible for most of the food purchasing decisions has caused the dollar to be the bottom line, and not the quality of the food ... That disconnection is one of the biggest barriers that has happened to local food, but people are speaking out now which is starting to improve the demand for local food.”

Individual demand at a local level was seen by others to be important; any constraint that makes the system harder to participate in for individuals is perceived by some to be a barrier. Respondents suggested that if it is difficult for the purchaser to take part in the system, it might deter them from further involvement. Other specific barriers mentioned include: a lack of support for new farmers; access to land for new farmers; government subsidies for certain crops; and that existing models were designed to favour import and export markets rather local markets. One respondent stated that:

“There are only barriers, everything we have done is based on a global food system, on growing for export and trade ... so we have to go back and change everything. Nothing works right now, not the system for producers, or consumers, not anything.”

Current Efforts of Respondents

Group 1 Responses:

- Advocacy
 - Awareness campaigns
 - Consumer/producer education
 - Market creation and support
 - Promotion
 - Support for local producers
 - Verification standards

Supporting local food through advocacy is seen as valuable work. One respondent stated that:

“... if all we can provide are some mechanisms which allows the farming community to be successful or overcome, every little bit helps. Our efforts which promote local agricultural initiatives try and create a presence for the farming community in an atmosphere that suggests it is a place you want to go, in terms of farmers’ markets. Our role is to try to position opportunities for the agriculture community and then it is their choice.”

Participants saw that understanding the barriers is a crucial component of building local food systems. One respondent explained that:

“... identifying the barrier is the first step and that is largely where Oxford County is right now. We are in the early stages of developing local food systems here. In January 2009 we plan to hold an information session that will be similar to a trade show. We’ll have a hall with producers and chefs, and the chefs will be able to sample local products. Everyone will be able to talk supply and demand and make linkages.”

This demonstrates the importance of communication, networking and collaboration in overcoming barriers, and in sharing best practices with other people in the field. Several respondents are involved with improving distribution systems to help producers. Producers also see distribution as a powerful way to fight barriers commonly associated with small-scale local production. One producer expressed that:

“We won’t sell any meat into the mainstream food distribution; we won’t play their game. We’ve got a lot of pride for what we do and we’re not going to let anyone mess with our brand.”

Group 2 (GTA) Responses:

- Box programs
- Developing access points
- Feedback to certification boards
- Filling distribution gaps
- Organizational support
- Participation in community events
- Personal choices/advocacy
- Procurement planning
- Retail/consumer support
- Urban growing/producing

All of the respondents in this group felt that they were making positive changes within the system. The responses on personal activism are a diverse mix, comprised of organizational support, procurement plans, retail support, feedback to certification boards, box programs, personal choices, research and publication, growing in the urban landscape, and participation in community events. Some respondents had very direct and succinct plans on how to overcome identified barriers, such as:

“My organization is involved in a project called ‘The Local Food Portal’ trying to create an on-line tool that is trying to make it easier for those various parts of the chain to connect and for suppliers and buyers to find producers.”

Another respondent who works with a local non-profit organization has helped to develop access points for low-income families to get fresh, local produce by extending ‘Good Food Markets’ into the communities that would benefit from them. As well as this initiative, the organization has developed a box scheme:

“We were the first people to develop a box program in 1994; we buy food direct from farmers and sell to people in the city at a wholesale price. So, it’s like a co-op. Last year we had four thousand boxes ... we are a non-profit community wholesaler that bridges the gap between the community and the producers.”

Recommended Action From Others

Group 1 Responses:

- Changing public policy
 - Communication between government ministries
 - Government-supported positions that focus on local food
 - Greater representation in government
- Importing/exporting rules
 - Improved labeling
- Investment in the agricultural community
- Regional diversity

The importance of greater community involvement is expressed strongly by respondents in a number of ways. One person illustrated the role that grocery stores can play in supporting local food:

“When I was in Ireland in 1992, I went into a grocery store and saw that they are much more passionate and patriotic about their food. Outside of the store hung a huge sign that said “This week you bought 65% Irish product”. The sign changed every week. But a chain had decided to calculate through sales how much Irish [grown] food people bought. I thought that was pretty powerful.”

There is also an emphasis on promoting agriculture as a viable career choice. A participant from Northumberland County explains the importance of:

“... an engaged communication about opportunities in agriculture because there is more opportunity than there ever has been. In Northumberland County, 60% of our farmers are over 50. Again, agriculture isn’t just about land use; it is about the skill of farming. If you don’t have trained people, you don’t have industry, and then no food security.”

Group 2 (GTA) Responses:

- Better storage and handling
 - Education programs
- Financial support
 - Greater representation in government
 - Improvements to infrastructure
- Media coverage
 - Procurement policies
 - Programs to attract/establish new farmers
- Support for young farmers

The provincial government was perceived by respondents to be creating or reinforcing barriers to local food systems. Greater representation for agriculture as well as good provincial policy were among suggestions on how to make meaningful changes and improvements. Other suggestions included addressing the lack of young people getting into farming; making it easier for new farmers to establish themselves; improvements to infrastructure; better storage and handling facilities; procurement policies; education; financial support; and improved media coverage. Specifically, one respondent was calling for adjustments and updates to the overall systems that the local producers and purchasers have to operate within:

“I think though that sometimes there is too much emphasis on people each doing their own bit. People focus on the ‘do what you can’ approach, but I think there is a need to work on fixing the overall system.”

The government was frequently targeted as a player that could better facilitate a local food system. In general, respondents focused on organization and the complexity of problems:

“There are a lot of ways the system is divided up or the government is organized. So, that is hard because these issues are intertwined and don’t fit our existing boxes very well.”

As well as highly-specific answers that pointed to shortfalls for small farmers within the existing system and policies, one participant explained that:

“I would like to see our supply-managed system for milk and eggs abandoned, so small farmers can also participate ... I’d like to see barriers removed from farmers’ abilities to sell their food directly to consumers, and I’d like to see some kind of financial incentive to both farmers and consumers to improve the system.”

Recommended Provincial Policy Changes

Group 1 Responses:

- Amend current policy/regulation with negative impacts for local food producers
- Improve 'Product of Canada' and 'Product of Ontario' labeling
- Create procurement policies that promote local, sustainable food
- Develop regional as well as provincial branding
- Provide strong government leadership
- Create supportive policy for small-scale operations

While participants had many suggestions for ways in which policy at various levels could become more supportive of local food, respondents tended to focus on several themes such as:

“Product of Canada labeling, that is apparently being changed, would impact local food phenomenally. Right now they are taking South African cauliflower, wrapping it in plastic and saying “Product of Canada”. If this changed it would greatly impact local food systems.”

Others mentioned the existing shortcomings of provincial branding:

“We export products out as ‘Ontario’... the province might want to work on that on both levels. Like: think regionally, act locally.”

Alterations in procurement policies are seen as central to promoting local food systems through government leadership:

“It was crazy that in Guelph it was a big announcement that the Ministry of Agriculture building [cafeteria] started sourcing food locally. They of all people should have been doing that all along. It is just common sense.”

Respondents also mentioned specific policy and regulation that should be reviewed, including:

- The Provincial Policy Statement, on land use
- The Ministry of Environment’s high use watershed designations
- Intensification ratios required in Places to Grow
- Inspection standards for meat (grocery stores cannot carry meat that is not federally inspected, local meat is often provincially inspected)
 - Liquor control for wineries
 - Allowing farmers to raise poultry outdoors
 - Preserving agricultural land through Official Plans

Other respondents spoke more generally, calling for provincial policy that supports local farms and celebrates local food regions, as well as strong support from government leaders. One participant articulated the need for greater communication between the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs and the Federal Department of Agriculture.

Group 2 (GTA) Responses:

- Access to distribution channels
- Institutional procurement policy (hospitals and schools)
- Procurement policy that promotes local, sustainable food

- Subsidies reform
- Support of provincial/regional campaigns (eg., Foodland Ontario, Savour Muskoka)
- Supportive policy for small-scale operations
- Tax reform

A number of respondents felt that procurement policies (government, university, public school, hospital) at all levels of government were the best places to start. Subsidies reform, tax reform and access to channels of distribution were other suggestions. Beyond the province, many felt that the federal government could do more to support regional/provincial campaigns. As well, financial incentives like tax reforms, subsidies for local-market growing, and monetary incentives and rewards for growing sustainably or for land stewardship were suggested. Some of the people interviewed felt that government intervention had the potential for positive unintended benefits to the greater population by impacting public health. One respondent characterized this benefit as a way to save tax dollars in the long run:

“Our government is on the hook for healthcare and general welfare and that is something they have an obligation to stick their nose into regarding food, and they should start legislating around. Research suggests that healthy eating is cheaper in the long run and, if nothing else, that should appeal to them.”

In addition to eating healthier food, many felt that government officials at all levels should be setting a positive example first and foremost within their own institutions through local procurement policies. In addition to these policy suggestions, some smaller and more nuanced changes were suggested at the local level regarding food safety laws and how they affect producers and sellers at the smaller scale.

Current Successful Programs & Activities

Group 1 Responses:

- The Canadian Federation of Independent Grocers
- Evergreen BrickWorks
- Food Secure
- FoodLink Waterloo
- FoodShare
- Halton Fresh Food Box Program
- Heifer International
- Kawartha Cooperative
- Local Food Plus
- Manitoba Food Charter
- The National Farmers' Union (NFU)
 - Northern Ontario Agri-Food Education and Marketing
 - Region of Waterloo Public Health
 - Savour Ottawa
 - The STOP

In addition to these, a number of regions and countries were cited as potentially beneficial models to follow. Among the examples were Prince Edward County, Durham Region, Wisconsin, Maine, Michigan, Portland, Oregon, France, and Europe. Participants also mentioned a number of initiatives such as Buy Local Maps, events that celebrate local food, walking tours, advertisements, internet initiatives, culinary tourism, internships, transition programs for the tobacco industry, regional branding schemes, farm gate guides and community networking events.

Group 2 (GTA) Responses:

- BlogTO
- Center Culinarium
- Edible Toronto Magazine
- Everdale Environmental Learning
- Farm Start
- Local Food Plus
- Not Far From the Tree
- Ontario Culinary Tourism Alliance (OCTA)
- Plant a Row, Grow a Row
- Second Harvest
- St. Lawrence Market
- TasteTO
- Toronto Green Community (TGC)
- Toronto Regional Conservation Authority
- Wychwood Barns

Some respondents were quick to point out that it is not solely organizations that are making a big difference as far as participating or making change when it comes to issues concerning local food. One Toronto retailer stated that:

“For me, as someone in the industry for just over a year, you are open to these things and they pop up and you think ‘damn that’s a good idea’. A lot of hard work is required though and there are a lot of people who do it. Like, there are a lot of bloggers who are

beating this drum, so the movement can come from ordinary people, not just big organizations and NGO's."

Recommendations from this Research

This research reveals opportunities for the development of successful local food systems in Ontario. While it is perhaps not possible to grow all of Ontario's food requirements locally, our research respondents believe there is much more we can do in terms of producing our own food at the local level. Based on the interviews conducted for this research, the provincial government has an opportunity to facilitate:

1. The linking of 'sustainable' with 'local' as sound economic, social and environmental policy in keeping with 'green economy' initiatives. The United Nations Environment Program, in a March 2009 report entitled *Global Green New Deal – Policy Brief*, suggests that sustainable food is a viable 'green economic' initiative as part of what they are calling the 'New Green Deal'. It is possible that provincial infrastructure funding can be used to facilitate this at the local level.
2. A more connected local food system that provides the needed infrastructure for local farmers, processors, distributors, and retailers.
3. Increased institutional procurement of local, sustainable food. This will create a sizeable market that can foster the development of reliable and consistent production of local food in the near future.
4. Access to food for Ontarians that provides farmers with a fair wage and consumers with high quality, affordable food. One avenue may be to work with Health Canada, the Ontario Ministry of Health, and Social Assistance Benefits to develop a food voucher system that is recognized at local farm markets, similar to the system in the United States.
5. Small-scale sensitive regulations and infrastructure that can assist small producers, such as with abattoirs and quota systems. This can be done within the current situation; for example, a provision within the quota system could allow farms to sell up to several hundred of their own chickens from the 'farm gate', making small farms more economically viable, diverse and resilient.
6. Public education to allow consumers to develop as 'ecological consumers'. Foodland Ontario is a marketing program that has been very successful in helping Ontarians recognize Ontario products. A similar campaign on ecological consumption could benefit Ontarians as well.
7. Urban agriculture as a supplement to existing production. Fostering urban agriculture could add to rural and peri-urban food production; respond to the diversity of the multicultural urban market; foster rural-urban linkages; and take advantage of improved microclimate and proximity to market.