

# The People's Food Policy Project: Introducing Food Sovereignty in Canada



People's Food  
Policy Project

Pour une politique  
alimentaire populaire

*By: Cathleen Kneen, August 2012*

## *Summary*

The People's Food Policy Project (2008-2011) mobilized approximately 3,500 people across Canada in a grassroots process to develop a food sovereignty policy for Canada. It was remarkable not only for the number of people involved, but because it effectively introduced the concepts of food sovereignty in a Northern, wealthy country. Critically, it “walked the talk” through a process of participation which reflected food sovereignty principles of respect and inclusion of people, traditional knowledge, and the natural world. As a result, even where the term “food sovereignty” is not used, the essential notion that people can assert control over the decisions which guide their food systems is now widespread across the food movement in Canada. The project has also had a profound effect beyond the food movement, forcing public discussion of food policy in a very hostile political climate.

We hope that by sharing the story of the PFPP and its particular history and context, readers will see similarities and potential for using – not replicating – our experience to further the movement towards food sovereignty in their own locations.

## *Background: The People's Food Commission*

In the late 1970s, in the context of rising food prices, rising hunger, and falling real farm income, a People's Food Commission was launched to ask the real experts – people who grow, harvest, prepare, process, distribute, and eat food – what was wrong with the food system in Canada and how to fix it. The largely volunteer Commission organized public hearings in each region of the country – a total of 75 meetings in all. This was a unique opportunity for people to hear other people's frustrations and share their own ideas and analysis. An understanding of the food system emerged that went beyond concern about food prices, pesticide contamination, and food additives. The increasing power and control of corporations in the food system at the expense of everyone else was neatly summed up in the title of the final report, [The Land of Milk and Money](#).

## *Thirty Years of Industrialization and Hunger*

The analysis and the relationships developed through the Commission formed the base for the development, 30 years later, of what became Food Secure Canada. During that period, the policy of industrialization throughout the food system and a focus on production of commodities for export, including food commodities, expanded and intensified. Likewise, the concerns identified in PFC hearings became more wide-spread. Food banks, which were first set up in 1981 as a short-term solution to the obvious problem of hunger, became an established part of the food

system. The continuing industrialization of agriculture led to a mass exodus from farming, to the point where active farmers now make up less than 1% of the population, and the vast majority of the population are urban dwellers with little connection to, or understanding of the realities of farming or fishing.

### *Individualism*

Growing neo-liberalism in public policy has encouraged a tendency to seek personal, not to say individual, food solutions. For example: while the majority of farmers continue to rely on industrial methods and synthetic inputs, the organic sector has grown substantially: 1.8% of Canadian farms were certified organic in 2012, double the 2001 figure. However, while farmers generally use organic methods as a way to nourish the soil and protect the environment, the market for organic foods has grown because of personal health concerns about the effects of food contamination and manipulation, including chemical additives, pesticides, genetic engineering, and the use of novel ingredients such as high-fructose corn syrup. These have become public health concerns, as research points to the relationships between diet and chronic disease, diabetes, and obesity; however, there has been no public policy to rein in the activities of the giant food “manufacturers”. Similarly, media coverage of local food characterizes the farmer as a food entrepreneur selling to well-off and well-informed consumers, although much of the community-based food work (from back-yard gardens and community gardening to distribution cooperatives) is actually an attempt to build self-reliance among ordinary working people.

When the people involved in these initiatives came together over the past ten years in a variety of organizations around food system issues, they tended to focus on mutual support rather than policy action. The approach was one of “food security” – ensuring access to food for everyone – rather than food sovereignty, which requires that people are able to control the decisions which shape the food system in their own interests and the interests of the larger communities (including the natural world) to which they are connected.

### *From Food Security to Food Sovereignty: Getting Started*

Although [Food Secure Canada](#) was formed specifically to overcome the divisions between the different parts of the growing food movement, it used the language of food security (albeit with a very broad definition). Food Secure Canada insists that food justice requires sustainable livelihoods, that sustainable livelihoods require respect and care for the natural world, and that all of these demand a democratic voice for the people involved. For some members, particularly Indigenous people, Québécois, and those working internationally, this is simply food sovereignty by a different name.

In early 2007, a handful of members of Food Secure Canada attended the Nyéléni Forum for Food Sovereignty in Selingué, Mali. The purpose of this gathering was to deepen and strengthen the movement for food sovereignty beyond its base in the global peasant movement. Already familiar with the concepts of food sovereignty as promoted since 1996 by La Via Campesina, the Canadians were inspired by stories of struggle from people at the bottom of the pyramid of power and their sharp-edged analysis of the food system. The group returned home determined

to find a way to translate food sovereignty into the context of a Northern, wealthy country. We spent several months in consultations (mostly by teleconference) with FSC members in each province, and finally agreed to start where the PFC left off, and create a national conversation about food sovereignty policy. Immediately, there were a number of challenges.

First, we needed money. Food Secure Canada, although strong, was based almost entirely on volunteers, and while this gave us a large pool of activists to draw upon, we needed to be able to pay someone to coordinate the project and to pay for communications and at least some face-to-face meetings to establish trust and working relationships among the volunteers.

Second, food sovereignty was a foreign and difficult notion for most Canadians, and we needed to introduce it to people in a way which would arouse both understanding and enthusiasm.

Third, people's eyes tended to glaze over when the term 'policy' was raised, even people active in the food movement, since successive federal Governments had succeeded in defining democracy as nothing more than periodic elections, with fewer and fewer opportunities for citizens to engage in policy discussions.

Fourth, Canada is a vast country. We had to find ways to use the networks of Food Secure Canada to enable us to do common work without frequent face-to-face contact.

### *Funding*

We were fortunate that we were able to interest Heifer Canada International in a food sovereignty project. We proposed, and they agreed to fund, a pan-Canadian process, with volunteer organizers we called “animators” from the food movement in every province. It would engage people from every sector in developing a policy for food sovereignty, based in and supportive of the needs and perspectives of the whole Canadian people, but particularly food providers and marginalized segments of the population. We also had financial support from several member organizations of FSC to enable us to hire a Coordinator, since (true to its roots in projects located in poor countries) Heifer Canada's policies dictated a salary level for a project Coordinator that could cover only part of a living wage in Canada.

### *Introducing Food Sovereignty*

Our plan was to start by having the Coordinator write briefing notes about the principles of food sovereignty as contained in the “6 Pillars of Food Sovereignty” that emerged from the Nyéléni meetings. Feedback from the Animators quickly transformed this into a series of colourful pamphlets which illustrated each “pillar” with stories of specific struggles and initiatives from across the country – which took a few months instead of a few weeks to produce, because each story (and the aspect of the pillar it emphasized) was subject to a collective process of evaluation and editing. One result was that food sovereignty was explained in terms that people in communities from the most rural to the large cities could identify with. The other was the realization, which was reinforced over and over throughout the project, that food sovereignty is both a goal and a process for achieving that goal.

Canada is home to more than six hundred aboriginal Nations, not including the Inuit or Métis, despite the efforts of church and state to assimilate (or destroy) them. The appalling living conditions on many reserves and the skyrocketing prevalence of chronic disease, substance abuse, and suicide, particularly among youth, have attracted national and even international attention. Indigenous community leaders are working to address these problems by recovering and teaching their traditional foodways and language and by connecting food sovereignty to sovereignty in general. For them, this encompasses the key issues of access to traditional

territories for purposes of harvesting, hunting, and teaching; and protection of land, animals and water from industrial pollution and contamination or outright appropriation by outside entities.

We asked some of these leaders to form an Indigenous Circle which agreed to develop a protocol for engagement with Indigenous people. First, however, they insisted that we needed to add a seventh pillar of food sovereignty: that food is sacred; it is intrinsic to who we are as persons and as peoples. For Indigenous peoples, this derives from the essential relationships between human beings and the natural elements, including all the other creatures. It also means that those who provide food must be seen as central to the food system, it must be shared with everyone, and of course it cannot be commodified.

#### *Starting to Think about Policy*

Our main method of getting grassroots policy proposals was what we called Kitchen Table Talks (KTT). The ideal model was a group of neighbours, or co-workers, gathering in an informal setting to talk. They would start by explaining that 'policy' is simply the guidelines by which decisions are made. For example, everyone has some guidelines as they make decisions about what foods to eat and to serve their families, and where and how to get those foods. This is a "personal food policy". The question for the KTTs, then, was "what gets in the way of your implementing your personal food policy?" and then, "what level of government is responsible for these barriers and what needs to be done to change them?"

In practice, the KTTs were as diverse as the groups involved, ranging from a hotel room in Iqaluit with three Inuit leaders and hunters in discussion with a First Nations environmental scientist from Ontario, to a gathering of more than 100 people in downtown Toronto, convened by a well known urban food organization. Reflecting the bottom-up approach of the whole project, the Coordinator worked together with the Animators to develop tools and methods for participation and to share insights.

#### *Project Animators: Overcoming Distance*

As one might expect, the key to the whole project was the people who devoted immense numbers of volunteer hours to make it happen. In the process of writing the proposal to Heifer, we had contacted and consulted with people with whom we had built relationships and trust through the process of creating Food Secure Canada. They were largely leaders in local or regional food security organizations which themselves reflected the breadth and variety of FSC's own members: local food security initiatives such as community gardens and kitchens, farmers and fishers, food banks and soup kitchens, dietitians and other health professionals, Indigenous

leaders, food policy analysts and activists, academics, urban gardeners, small and medium-sized food businesses. Our first group of Animators came from this network of food action leaders, and it was these relationships of trust and respect that made it possible for the project to overcome the huge challenges posed by Canada's geography, and to develop ways to work together by email and teleconferences with very few opportunities for the leadership group (Animators and Coordinating team) to meet face-to-face.

Although each Animator was supposed to bring at least two or three other people in as Animators, in fact the process was looser, as people heard about the project and started to animate their own KTTs. The project supported these new Animators with monthly teleconferences for all Animators where they discussed their ideas and gave each other support. We also had the Participation Guide along with the Food Sovereignty pamphlets, as well as useful materials for hosting KTTs, such as posters and reporting forms, which are available on-line at <http://peoplesfoodpolicy.ca/tools-and-resources>.

The same process was used to develop the Policy Writing Teams which took the proposals submitted and sorted them into what turned out to be ten Discussion Papers: a call went out through the network, followed up by personal phone calls to get the first people on board. They then each convened a group, mostly from people they knew and sometimes involving people in their own locality, to carry out the work. A lot of conversation ensued between the teams to determine which policy proposal belonged in which paper. Then, as each team developed a draft, it was subjected to a collective editing process in which all the teams were involved: Coordinating Committee (also called Management and referred to as the M-Team), Animators (the A-Team), the Policy Writing Teams, and of course the Project Coordinator.

At this point we decided it was time to engage people beyond our networks in this process. We issued a broad call on the website and through the networks, inviting public participation in giving feedback on the discussion papers, hosting their own KTTs to share food stories, propose more policy ideas, or to generate comments on the papers. Comments could be posted on the website, which was re-designed to allow 'private' working spaces for the Policy Writing, Coordination, and Animator teams; a public face inviting broad engagement and offering information, tools, and resources; and an on-line form for policy proposals and comments. To our delight, this strategy was successful. It created a 'ripple' effect so that with the various team members, people involved with formal and informal KTTs, and people who engaged through the website, we went from a few hundred up to about 3,500 people who were active in the project one way or another, and were able to consider everyone's input in the process of deciding just what policy proposals would be included in the final documents.

We did manage to have two gatherings at which the leaders of the teams were able to spend more time dealing with the work in depth, but most of the editing was accomplished through a “red-light, yellow-light, green-light” check-in where members of the teams assessed the policy papers to determine if, and to what extent, they were ready to advance to the next stage. Each Policy Writing Team used a similar process to come up with their top three policy proposals, which were then vetted by all the teams to come up with the final five top overall priorities named in

the final document.

### *Time, Timing, and Time-lines*

One of the most difficult challenges for us was time. From the beginning, the Indigenous Circle protested that despite our commitment to the holistic principles of food sovereignty, our process was linear: we had time-lines and deadlines (largely imposed by the requirements of the funder). The Indigenous Circle insisted that the process had to take as much time as it needed to clearly hear everyone's voice. This was frustrating, but it also opened a space for others engaged in the project to appreciate, respect, and adopt this approach. Indeed, the learning space between

Indigenous and non-Indigenous people unique to the PFPP was part of what drew some people into the PFPP.

Although we have only begun the work of cross-cultural learning and cultural sensitivity, including awareness of history, this was nevertheless a key factor in the project's success in developing a genuinely respectful and inclusive process and a level of trust that made it possible for us to collectively edit the working documents and the final policy statements.

### *Launching the Policy*

We were working hard to complete the project by July 2011 when a Federal election was called for early May. This was a huge opportunity for us to get food policy on the agenda of all the political parties. We pushed and pulled and drew on all the resources we could muster, and managed to complete a final policy document (including the chapter on Indigenous Food Sovereignty) and launch it on Parliament Hill two weeks before election day. [Resetting the Table: A People's Food Policy for Canada](#) was welcomed by the New Democratic (centre-left) and Liberal (centre) parties, endorsed by the Green Party, and merely acknowledged by the Conservative (right-wing) Party, which proceeded to win the election with a majority. Still, with the New Democratic Party as the Official Opposition, there continues to be substantial interest in the federal-level policy proposals among the opposition, even while the Government remains deeply committed to the industrial, export-oriented commodity production model.

In this situation, much of the current food policy activity, building on the work of People's Food Policy Project and the analysis and ideas in *Resetting the Table*, is happening at the provincial and municipal levels. Food Secure Canada has adopted the priorities identified by the PFP as its program for action for at least the next two years. Recognizing that the current federal Government is not in the least interested in moving towards food sovereignty, we are strengthening our work in other areas: food sovereignty policy in provinces, cities and municipal regions and institutions; building networks and alliances to push for action on our priorities; supporting local food projects, programs and networks as they build food sovereignty locally; and maintaining and developing the spirit that animated the PFPP: respect for differences and openness to new ways of seeking social justice and ecological integrity.