

More Voices at the Table: The Case for a National Food Policy Council for Canada

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The Problems with the Canadian Food System

The problems with the Canadian food system have been extensively documented. Four million Canadians suffer from food insecurity, 1.15 million of them children, and food insecurity in Canada's North is rampant.¹ Vastly transformed eating habits have caused a surge in the rates of non-communicable diseases such as obesity and type 2 diabetes.² The industrialisation of agriculture has led to a distancing between field and plate, a loss of biodiversity, the proliferation of chemical inputs, and increased soil erosion³; worldwide, the food system is responsible for 30 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions.⁴ Canadian farm realised net income has regularly fallen into the negative tens of thousands of dollars, a trend that has pushed farmers off the land, threatening Canada's rural communities.⁵ Many suggest that these problems are symptomatic of increased corporate control of the food system.⁶ These issues are exacerbated by Canadian governments' piecemeal approach to food policy; there is an urgent need to think comprehensively about food-systems problems and to work across sectors and jurisdictions to find solutions.

The Problems with Canadian Food Policy

That Canada currently has no comprehensive national food policy is a significant problem. Food issues are inherently interrelated, yet responsibilities fall under various ministries, such as the Ministries of Agriculture, Health, and Natural Resources. It is also not always clear which level of government should have jurisdiction over food. This disorganization is one of the major reasons for federal inactivity on comprehensive food policy-making.⁷ While the federal government has worked on a comprehensive national food policy, nothing has come to fruition, and few documents have been made public.

In explaining the compartmentalization of food policy, MacRae argues that "Food policy development is a complex issue for policy makers, because ... it is about the intersections between a number of policy systems that are historically divided intellectually, constitutionally, and departmentally".⁸ In order to put in place a national food policy that is as sustainable and equitable as it is efficient and competitive, we need a more systems-oriented approach. With comprehensive policy, we can create a food system that is more equitable for eaters and farmers, that promotes healthy food and lifestyles, and that is gentler on the climate and on biodiversity.

The Importance of Food-Systems Thinking

Despite agriculture's recent productivity, environmental, social, and health externalities associated with the sector have concealed the costs related to this advancement and been relegated to other ministries.⁹ These externalities point to an incompleteness in the Canadian food system and in the way we create food policy: they point to a need for food-systems thinking.

Food-systems thinking reflects "an awareness of how actions by one group in the system affect other groups, as well as affecting the environment, the economy, the fabric of society, and the health of the population, and ultimately consumers".¹⁰ As such, it helps policy-makers think holistically about complex food issues. Addressing food policy issues from a systems perspective is often accomplished "by bringing together diverse experts".¹¹

Many civil society organisations (CSOs) are pointing to the need to build connections in the food system and are calling for a comprehensive approach to addressing food issues in response to siloed thinking. Food Secure Canada's People's Food Policy calls for dialogue and "collective decision-making" that at once crosses sectors, regions, cultures, and jurisdictions and grounds itself in local communities. It argues that "Equitable and just policies must begin from a systems perspective, which reflects on and garners strength and structure from interconnections across the food system."¹² Furthermore, such a perspective must also take into account "the essential reality of our biological and social dependence on food and the resources needed to produce it sustainably."¹³

Potential Solutions

Many prominent food-systems actors are calling for more comprehensive food policy making in Canada. The Canadian Federation of Agriculture (CFA), the Canadian Agri-food Policy Institute (CAPI), the Conference Board of Canada, and Food Secure Canada (FSC) have all worked on National Food Strategies¹⁴ and have had several meetings to identify commonalities.¹⁵ Despite their ideological differences, the goal of all of these strategies is to create comprehensive policy.

2011 marked the first federal election in which all major federal parties included the creation of a national food strategy in their platforms.¹⁶ However, when *Growing Forward 2* was released in 2012, it did not include any mention of such a strategy, an omission noted by opposition parties and civil society organizations.

Many view the creation of a federal Ministry of Food as an ideal solution to the problem of piecemeal food policy making.¹⁷ MacRae identifies the lack of a department of food at any level of government as a food policy challenge, stating that "governments have no obvious institutional place from which to work, and the instruments of multi-departmental policy making are in their infancy."¹⁸ The establishment of a new federal ministry, however, is an enormous and costly undertaking, unlikely

in the current economic climate. While new Ministries are created somewhat regularly, they are expensive and often awkward constructions.¹⁹

Food Policy Councils

There is, however, a less costly and more inclusive approach: a national food policy council. A food policy council (FPC) is a group of stakeholders from across the food system that meets to discuss and act on food issues. As membership generally includes actors from various sectors of the food system (production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste management), FPCs can have a more comprehensive view of food policy issues than could individual members; they engage multiple stakeholders and have a pluralistic view of food issues. As such, most successful FPCs take a systems approach to food policy-making rather than a piecemeal one. They achieve success by allowing multiple food-systems actors to talk about complicated issues, to work together on solutions that take the concerns of various sectors into account, and to find resources through their networks that can push implementation.²⁰

Food policy councils act as umbrella organisations. They encourage more democratic food policy-making and represent the interests of diverse communities.²¹ Engaging in democratic processes is vital to ensuring that our food policy addresses the needs of all Canadians, particularly the most vulnerable and least heard.

Most Canadian FPCs are municipal, though jurisdiction over the food system lies primarily with the provincial/territorial and federal governments. While there is no Ministry of Food at any level of government in Canada, FPCs can undertake some of its functions by helping governments better understand how their policies affect the food system as a whole. They can also bridge public and private food system interests.²² Indeed, FPCs, due to their pluralistic nature, have a capacity to create change and to encourage people to transform their relationships with the food system.

There are currently over 200 FPCs in the United States and Canada.²³ The Toronto Food Policy Council, established in 1990 as a subcommittee of the Toronto Board of Health, was Canada's first and has become one of North America's most successful examples.

Functions

As food policy is made and influenced by numerous government departments and ministries, industry, and civil society, there is a need for stronger coordination. FPCs, which have representation from these various actors, are a possible way to achieve such coordination, to "identify needs and create innovative cross-sectoral solutions."²⁴ FPCs act as facilitators and can respond to the need to mediate between diverging voices and interests.²⁵ Relationship building is an important aspect of FPC work, and it can be instrumental in creating understandings of the interests of various stakeholders who do not often interact.

FPCs also act as policy advisors and advocates. Those with formal ties to government are in a position to identify policy issues that governments may have overlooked and thus "bridge the divisions in public policy making" by connecting the dots between issues and sectors and elucidating to various government departments how seemingly unrelated legislation and other instruments relate to food.²⁶ FPCs also engage in research to inform their policy recommendations.

National Food Policy Councils

There are some national FPCs in existence, though most, such as the National Nutrition Councils in Norway and Finland, seem to focus on nutrition. Brazil's FPC, the National Council for Food and Nutrition Security, covers the entire food system. Australia is in the process of establishing a national FPC,²⁷ which will likely provide the best comparator for Canada.

Why a National Food Policy Council?

As previously discussed, food is a particularly complex and challenging regulatory domain and is best addressed with a pluralist approach. David McInnes, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute, states:

One of the challenges with food is it touches so many different parts of our lives, and people can become so passionate about food, how it's grown, how it's supplied, what's in it, where it comes from, who's part of making it happen, and the challenges all along the way. ... I think the work going on with food strategies and food-systems thinking shows that many people are trying to grapple with this complexity at every level: government, NGOs, businesses. ... So from a food-systems standpoint, I think there's a growing recognition that in order to deal with these problems and create opportunity, there's a need to increasingly connect people across the various parts of the food system and try to create that space to have a dialogue.²⁸

FPCs have an ability to respond to the need to see food policy from a multiple perspectives and to involve more actors in food policy-making. The interviewees for this paper have divergent interests and commonly find themselves on opposite sides of food-systems debates. Nevertheless, there was almost unanimous support for increased collaboration and, though they envisaged it differently, for the creation of a national food policy council. Charles Levkoe, a Doctor of Geography whose research at the University of Toronto has involved mapping out the web of Canadian food civil society organisations, states, "There is no question in my mind that we should have one. It is foundational to what we're doing. It's moving people from thinking, what am I going to buy at the grocery store, to what do we need to do to change this food system at the national level?"²⁹

Moreover, three of the interviewees whose organisations are working on the creation of national food strategies argued for an oversight body for such a strategy: "Absolutely, you need a national food policy council. There's no way to monitor and promote and support a national food strategy if you don't have a national food policy council."³⁰

Criteria for Success

Ability to Engage in Food-Systems Thinking

A successful national FPC should be able to address food-policy issues from a systems perspective. As engaging with policy from a food-systems perspective generally involves bringing together "diverse experts",³¹ membership ought to be as representative as possible of the food system whose issues it seeks to address. Furthermore, it is imperative to "recognise the interdependence across the policy domains, amongst the players."³² Applying a systems approach to food policy-making also involves long-term thinking:

One of the main problems, and I'm talking at both federal and provincial levels, is that a lot of the decisions around government policies and government support and government programs are made quite often in the context of a budget decision as opposed to a long-term approach. We make decisions responding to one crisis or another or responding to budget cuts. Decisions are made looking at the issue of the day rather than looking at a long-term vision. A lot of these issues don't get made with a clear idea of where we want to go.³³

We cannot address the problems in the food system with reactive policies.³⁴

Budget Security

Regardless of its ties to government, a successful national FPC should have secure and sustained funding. The financial sustainability of a FPC can affect its ability to function effectively. Many FPCs spend much of their time fundraising and "face the dilemma of how to finance their own core function at the same time that their wider network of actors and their projects are also precariously financed."³⁵ Research suggests that FPCs with secure funding are most successful.³⁶

Effective Relationships with Government

Formal government ties can provide more secure funding, staff support, legitimacy, and the ear of policy-makers, and more analysis of value to government actors. Indeed, FPCs with no formal relationships to government are less effective than those with direct relationships.³⁷

As food is such a complex issue that is regulated by numerous government ministries and departments, FPCs need to forge strong relationships with various branches of government. An over-reliance on a connection with one ministry could reduce the efficacy of the FPC. Similarly, it should report to both the political and bureaucratic layer as legislation can be broad an enabling and it is often the civil service that develops the details.

Effective reporting to government can only go so far: advisory groups cannot ensure that their advice is taken, especially if it contradicts the government's agenda.³⁸ It is, however, useful for government and for the public to have access to the research and opinions of a diverse and representative group of experts.

Strength of Networks

The importance of relationship-building in the work of FPCs cannot be overstated. FPCs must navigate the interaction between traditional and non-traditional food-system players, and forge alliances between and engagement with "strange bedfellows."³⁹

Traditionally, food-system stakeholders have had some difficulty communicating effectively across sectors.⁴⁰ For this reason, many interviewees stressed the importance of building personal relationships:⁴¹ "It takes people with different voices who don't necessarily get along well to work together."⁴² In discussing this frequent miscommunication, Jean-Charles Levallée, a Senior Research Associate at the Conference Board of Canada's Centre for Food, states that "Collaboration is key to knowing that everyone can still maintain their competitiveness, the viability of the farm to ensuring margins at the retail level. So any strategy and any council need to have broad representation and interests and have all scales of companies. Other sectors will do this, but for food, no."⁴³

Fortunately, some interviewees stated that there is much willingness among traditionally divergent stakeholders to work together and to identify common ground.⁴⁴ The meetings between Food Secure Canada, the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, the Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute, and the Conference Board of Canada were cited as an example.

Proposed Model and Discussion

A national FPC should be established by an Act of Parliament as an arms-length institution. It should report to the Parliament and to the following relevant ministries: Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development; Agriculture and Agri-Food; Employment and Social Development; Environment; Finance; Fisheries and Oceans; Health; Infrastructure, Communities and Intergovernmental Affairs; International Trade; Labour; Natural Resources; and Transport. As there are a great many Ministries responsible for food policy-making, the FPC should report through one, likely the Ministry of Health.

There are several examples of advisory and research bodies being founded as independent councils, such as the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development (more commonly known as Rights and Democracy) and the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy (NRTEE).

As a federally funded institution, it is likely that a FPC with this structure would receive stable funding and staff support. Because its membership would be made up of public and private stakeholders from across the food system, it would also have a strong network. It would likely have some grassroots support from its CSO and producer members, though it might have to engage in public awareness campaigns.

Most importantly, however, being structured as an independent body allows for comprehensive food-systems thinking: as states Cecilia Rocha, Director of the School of Nutrition at Ryerson University, "Because food and nutrition security is intersectoral and multidisciplinary, I think it needs to be a body

that would not be constrained by where it sits. So I feel that an independent body might work better."⁴⁵ Diana Bronson, the Executive Director of Food Secure Canada, cites the International Institute on Sustainable Development (IISD) as an example of a successful independent body with the ability to produce sound research and advice. Furthermore, establishing an independent institution and giving Parliamentary mandate to a FPC to push forward food policy in Canada allows for very effective and direct reporting to government.⁴⁶

Most of the interviewees are supportive of the idea of a national FPC and see formal ties to government as vital to its success. Ron Bonnett, a former dairy farmer and the President of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, in discussing the increasingly active role of the private sector in food policy-making, states that government consultation would give him more faith in its ability to remain an actor: "If the government says I'm elected and I don't care what you say, I think that is doomed to fail. In a case like that, I think moving toward more of a stakeholder-driven model would be a good thing. If a government is elected with the idea that we're going to build in consultation to all of our discussions, then maybe it would be less necessary [for the private sector to take the lead]."⁴⁷

Levallée sees a national FPC as vital, especially after the establishment of a national food strategy. He states that its role should be to bring together sectors that do not historically cooperate to push forward food policy: "A national food policy council has to have a balanced approach, remain neutral, inform, guide anyone who is willing to take part. So the council is supportive, it has capacities to analyse, to research further, to attend meetings and talk to policy makers, farmers, consumers in different ways. It's the same message, but you have to promote it differently. You have to have the ability to reach out to all the different stakeholders and understand them."⁴⁸

Based on his experience with the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, Peter Globensky, the former Chief Executive Officer of the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment and *ad hoc* member of the NRTEE, states that he would recommend this model for a national FPC. He contends that the NRTEE was representative of many environmental sectors and that it succeeded in bridging divides and producing important recommendations and sound policy reports. Despite the fact that its advice often went unheeded by unsympathetic governments, Globensky states, "personally, I thought that they made a really important contribution to government as it related to the environment."⁴⁹

Mandate

Much like the NRTEE, the primary role of a national FPC should be to advise the federal government on national food policy issues. It should do this through a secondary role of producing original research. Lauren Baker, Coordinator of the Toronto Food Policy Council, sees the role of a national FPC as moving "policy through the system. So [with the Toronto Food Policy Council] you do that by working with politicians and with staff, and I could see it being the same at the federal level. You work with all the available mechanisms to push and move policy through the system."⁵⁰ It could also work with supportive governments to ensure that comprehensive policy is properly implemented by working with staff in various ministries and departments to discuss the implementation of FPC

proposals. In addition, a national FPC could provide the government information and analysis of draft documents from stakeholder groups.

The research function of a national FPC would be key. Levallée argues for the "need for solid data. We know less and less, but what we need is more and more."⁵¹ This should work much like at the NRTEE: the topics for research would be decided upon by members, and committees established to carry out the research. These committees would be chaired by FPC members with relevant knowledge and experience, though the research itself would largely be contracted out.

Membership

The Toronto Food Policy Council has 30 members, and, in my experience on the council, this is as many as could feasibly be effective. These members need to represent diverse sectors, geographic regions, and ethnicities while also retaining specific skills, like the ability to think strategically about policy and a deep knowledge of their food-system sector.

There was some disagreement among interviewees about who should be permitted at the table, mostly around the participation of corporations. Bronson, however, thinks corporations must get seats at the table, and not as intermediaries: "I think we need significant food players, and maybe the way to do it is to have people sitting there in their individual capacities. They're not sitting there on behalf of McCain's or Loblaw's. So I think that's a partial solution to that, but you cannot have a useful multistakeholder body and not have the biggest stakeholders at the table." She adds, however, that corporate members must represent "a diversity of corporations, meaning a diversity of sizes and of sectors."⁵² A FPC that did not represent the biggest and most influential food-system sectors would be unlikely to be taken seriously or be given government support, especially considering the increasingly active role of the private sector in food policy-making.

There is also the question of provinces and territories. As food policy is often of provincial or territorial jurisdiction, their representation is a critical issue: "I think all groups have to be more willing, we have to foster a willingness to change, to collaborate, and also jurisdictionally. We're not one nation, we're many provinces who reduce our ability as a country to have a national food strategy because many of the responsibilities under a national food strategy fall on the provinces who then also delegate responsibilities to other lower-level governments, which means then that everybody has to be at the table."⁵³

Baker adds, "You would very quickly address national issues, but when you want to get into the nitty gritty, you would have to work across the provinces."⁵⁴ Bronson states of provincial and territorial representation, "I can't see how they could not be, but right then if you're dealing with thirteen governments, provinces and territories, then you've just weighed it down enormously, so that's a big problem. But I don't see how they cannot be at the table."⁵⁵

There are two potential solutions to this. First, provinces and territories could be *ex officio* members who could attend quarterly meetings and be consulted on matters relevant to them. Second, there is also the potential for a laddered approach. If and when all provinces and territories have

government-linked FPCs, their chairs or presidents could be given membership. And in this case, they would already represent various sectors so could wear two or more hats. In the meantime, provincial and territorial governments could send representatives who bring various skills to the table.

Ideally, membership should be as representative as possible of the food system. Bonnett argues that the "council would be having a balance of representation so that it wasn't seen as driving a very narrow agenda."⁵⁶ If possible, members should come from all five sectors, namely food production, processing, distribution and retail, consumption, and waste management. Finally, membership should include various stakeholders who are often excluded by the policy making process, such as First Nations groups.

As the goal of a FPC is to convene experts from various sectors of the food system to think comprehensively about food policy, the selection of diverse, skilled, and effective members is vital: "success is often determined by the skill with which [FPCs] are facilitated (by chairs and staff), and the level of skill and engagement of the members and the resources they can bring through their initiatives."⁵⁷ There are very particular skills that FPC members should possess. Members should have an in-depth knowledge of their sector of the food system, as well as of the specific issues pertinent to their geographic region. They should understand government structures, how policy is made, and the current policy environment. FPCs must be able to recognise policy windows and take advantage of all opportunities. Furthermore, argues Bronson,

We're overly concerned about representation and not as concerned with competency, and it's easy to hear all those voices, but having them at the table is not enough. So I would rather have the right person who's committed to First Nations issues have that seat. I think you would need domestic and international expertise. We're too tied to global markets to not have an understanding of the role and the situation. I think you definitely need food producers at the table, farmers and fishermen. And you definitely need people with a strong understanding of markets and different levels of regulations. You need independent academic experts who are not funded by any of the various people at the table. ... And you do need a variety of civil society representation. You need economic actors around the table. I think a lot actually depends on the personal credibility of the people around the table. And they need to go out and get advice when they need it.⁵⁸

Finally, in order to appeal to people with extensive food policy experience, "It will need to create a reputation to be able to attract senior, high-level leaders to be able to speak to each other who don't often do such a thing and who can sit at the same table with people who don't necessarily get along well."⁵⁹

Meetings

Considering potential budget constraints and the cost of convening dozens of people from across the country, quarterly meetings are likely the most a national FPC could attempt to meet. Herb

Barbolet, an Associate with the Centre for Sustainable Community Development at Simon Fraser University and one of the founding members of the Vancouver Food Policy Council, stresses the importance of in-person meetings, positing that relationship-building and decision-making are much more difficult to accomplish over the phone.⁶⁰ However, FPC members and committees could meet remotely as often as required.

Another important issue is how decisions are made. Bronson states that "Perhaps the way to ensure there's no cooptation is to never strive for consensus. What government should use such an organisation to do is as a sounding board. It would be the ongoing oversight body where if it was to play an advisory role, they would see drafts of government documents, and they would have an opportunity to input into those documents and fundamentally shift their orientation."⁶¹

The NRTEE did not have one specific rule about consensus but rather had a consensus process, in which "participants work[ed] together to design a process that maximize[d] their ability to resolve their differences. Although they may not [have agreed] with all aspects of the agreement, consensus [was] reached if all participants [were] willing to live with 'the total package.'"⁶² Consensus processes not only help to bridge divergent voices but also create understanding and respect among members.

Funding and Staffing

While there is significant civil society support for the establishment of a Ministry of Food, a national FPC could address the need for comprehensive thinking around food policy at a fraction of the cost. The NRTEE provides a comparable example: its 2011-12 net expenses were \$6,932,957, of which \$1,260,319.27 was spent on contracts for communications, consultation, project management support, translation, computer software and equipment, publishing, website support, and \$292,000 was spent on travel, hospitality, and conferences.⁶³

Were each province and territory to have a FPC, funding could come from both the federal government and the budgets of these FPCs. As this is currently not the case, the FPC would be jointly funded by the various ministries it would report to: Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development; Agriculture and Agri-Food; Employment and Social Development; Environment; Finance; Fisheries and Oceans; Health; Industry; Infrastructure, Communities and Intergovernmental Affairs; International Trade; Natural Resources; and Transport.

In 2011-12, the NRTEE's secretariat was comprised of 31 staff, including a President, administrative and communications staff, research associates, policy advisors, and finance officers (National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, 2012). As the role and scope of a national FPC would be similar to those of the NRTEE, I estimate that its budget would eventually also be similar. However, it is likely that it would start as a smaller organisation and prove its worth.

As a national FPC would report to a dozen ministries rather than one, it is likely that an additional staff member would be needed to coordinate this communication.

Conclusion

The problems with the Canadian food system are sufficiently dire that urgent action is required. The business-as-usual, band-aid approach to food policy-making is increasingly challenging social, environmental, and ecological issues and is no longer a viable option. Bronson argues, "We need to change the conversation, get more players into it. And people are dying to talk about food. That's the good news. People want to talk about it. And they want to talk about it as an economic issue, and an environment issues, as a health issue."⁶⁴

A national FPC does just this. It brings together diverse experts from across the food system to find solutions that take a variety of perspectives into account; it engages Canadians in food policy issues and democratises our food system; and it leads the way toward a healthier, more sustainable, and more economically viable Canadian food system. It is time the Canadian government invest in a more sane and comprehensive approach to food policy: establishing a national FPC as an independent government institution informs and advises policymakers and elected officials on sound food policy decisions and holds them accountable. An arms-length organisation reporting to Parliament and to all ministries responsible for food policy-making through the Ministry of Health is the most effective option: it is a model that has proven by other organisations; would receive stable funding and staff; have a strong network and grassroots support; and, as an independent body, allows for comprehensive food-systems thinking.

Notes

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- ⁶³ National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy. (2012). *National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy Annual Report 2011-2012*. Ottawa.
- ⁶⁴ Diana Bronson, personal communication.