



Sharing the Plate: Directions in Sustainable Food Studies in Canada

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Dialogue

Ann Dale

Thanks everyone for joining us today on a topic we all enjoy--food and sustainable food systems. We all know the importance of food to our health, so I am hoping that we can explore this critical issue as deeply as our different perspectives and experiences bring to the table. I am very sorry that Dr. Newman, who would normally be leading this discussion, is on sick leave, and is unable to participate with us today, but I hope that this is just the beginning of an ongoing conversation.

To start, could I ask each of you to introduce yourself and explain a little about your background?

Lorelei Hanson

Hi, I am Lorelei Hanson. I am professor of environmental studies at Athabasca University and have long had an interest in rural community sustainability. I grew up on a mixed farm that used industrial methods of agriculture and as an adult living in Edmonton am involved with permaculture here and changing the animal control by-law to allow for urban hen keeping in Edmonton. I recently returned from Cuba where I was on an agro-ecological tour of permaculture and organic agricultural initiatives there. I was impressed and inspired by all they are doing with very few resources.

Ann Dale

Welcome Lorelei, I am looking forward to our discussion. Ann

Chris Ling

Hi every one, I am Chris Ling, I am a post-doctoral scholar at Royal Roads University. Other than a general interest in food and food systems I have been involved in research related to urban fringe agriculture and its relationship to multifunctional land use, the role of farmers' markets in urban sustainability and I have also been involved as a volunteer writer in the production of a People's Food Policy for Canada - see <http://peoplesfoodpolicy.ca/>

Jennifer Black

Hello all. My name is Jennifer Black. In January 2010, I joined the Faculty of Land and Food Systems at UBC as an assistant professor in the Food, Nutrition and Health Program.

Before coming to BC I worked in New York City as a community nutritionist and then as a researcher interested in social and neighbourhood-level factors, including how food availability and community resources shape health outcomes and dietary choices.

I have recently begun working with a committee of the Vancouver Food Policy Council who have begun important work developing a working definition and key determinants of food security in Vancouver, a methodology and draft indicators for measuring food security, and a logic model to guide future research and policy efforts. This initiative asks the question, "How food secure is Vancouver in a changing world?", and seeks to answer it in terms of access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food, the structure of the food system and its capacity to support optimal human health and nutrition, and the cultural, economic, social, and environmental needs of individuals and communities.

My main interests now are thinking about how the dietetics community, nutrition researchers and academics can work together to improve understanding (and practice) that moves towards a more sustainable food system (and improved health outcomes for Canadians).

Arthur Churchyard

Hi all, I am a M.Sc. Rural Planning and Development candidate at the University of Guelph.

I've just completed a guide (attached) that outlines the potential for municipal planning to influence regional food systems development in the Greater Golden Horseshoe (the area around Toronto here in Southern Ontario).

My research interests are sustainable food and energy systems, ruralization, community economic development, and planning theory.

Currently, I sit on the President's Task Force for Sustainability, the Guelph-Wellington Food Round Table, and the Energy Conservation Working Group. My background is in biology and I worked in communications for four years prior to my current employment with the Ontario Farmland Trust.

File attachment [Planning Regional Food Systems Final Draft Jan 22.pdf](#) (2.1 MB)

Ellen Desjardins

Hi I am Ellen Desjardins, I am a nutritionist and doctoral candidate in human geography at Wilfrid Laurier University. I grew up in Saskatchewan, went to UBC during the 1970s and worked with Toronto Public Health during the 1980s and 90s. At Waterloo Public Health I was involved with food systems work for a decade and now I hope to do research on the food environment and how people interact with it. I am also involved with rural communities and the local food movement, co-chairing the Waterloo Food Systems Roundtable.

Ann Dale

Welcome, Ellen, Chris, Arthur and Jennifer.

Bill Jeffery

I posted some thoughts on all of the questions at the main page of this e-dialogue.

Here's my wee intro, though I already have met some of you.

This issue is, at best, at the edge of our mandate. But I will share my thoughts, having done food/health policy advocacy for nearly 13 years.

CSPI is an independent health advocacy organization with offices in Ottawa and Washington. CSPI's Ottawa advocacy efforts are supported by more than 120,000 subscribers to the Canadian edition of its Nutrition Action Healthletter. CSPI does not accept industry or government funding and Nutrition Action does not carry advertisements.

Ann Dale

Welcome, Bill, I highly recommend the Nutrition Action Healthletter to everyone.

Let's not wait anymore and move to our first question. What are the critical questions in sustainable food systems in Canada? Let's all jump in.

Jennifer Black

Ellen circulated some excellent thoughts earlier today. Shall we start with some of those?

Ann Dale

Ellen, do you want to include your thoughts now?

Chris Ling

I have attached Ellen's document here

File attachment [RoyalRoadU panel Mar17-2010 sustainable food systems in Canada.doc](#) (41.5 KB)

Ellen Desjardins

Regional and urban planners are major players in creating a more sustainable food system.

Chris Ling

In addition, provincial bodies are important - here in BC Assessment has changed to rules for farmland assessment - supposedly to prevent hobby farmer's from claiming property tax breaks. Consequently a number of farmers that have kept 'unproductive' tree belts and wetland on their property out of production are being told that they are no longer operating farms - causing a huge hike in taxes.

Ellen Desjardins

In Ontario we just had a province-wide conference called Bring Food Home, organized by Sustain Ontario and other groups, and the level of participation by so many diverse groups was absolutely amazing.

It is clear to me that we are on the cusp of major change.

Multiple issues have to be dealt with, so it's hard to single out one.

Lorelei Hanson

I agree with Ellen. There are multiple issues and we each need to find a way to contribute and open up dialogues between agricultural producers and consumers. The issues facing market gardeners close to major urban centres are often considerably different than those facing prairie grain growers - there are different markets, different policies, and different scales/geographies to contend with. There are policies that a national level need to be changed as well as at provincial and regional levels - but what will work for market gardeners in the Golden Horseshoe is not likely a policy that will work in central Alberta. So as researchers, we need to find ways to not only talk about these issues but get involved in them to better understand the complexities.

Arthur Churchyard

Hi all, from a planning perspective, here are some topics of major challenges:

Land use policy (esp. near urban)

Economic diversification and incentives

Accessibility (proximity, timing, cultural factors)

Farming. Marketing and processing knowledge + skills building

Infrastructure
Farm Succession strategies
Institutional Procurement

Ann Dale

Arthur, could you explain what you mean by institutional procurement and what kinds of infrastructure are needed? Thanks.

Arthur Churchyard

Yes, please call me out on any planning jargon.

Institutional procurement=Hospitals, schools, city halls, libraries, universities all buy food at large scales; currently, many local food producers are not integrated with these procurement policies, often because they aren't producing enough. However, creating the policies is often good incentive to get producers started

Infrastructure = Abattoirs, freezing plants, drying plants, other processing facilities; roads (access to market); farmer's markets, farm stands, signage; water supplies, wastewater treatment systems, composting plants, and so on.

Chris Ling

The same could be said of regular grocery stores - that demand a consistency (both in terms of quality and quantity) of supply that is often simply unachievable for smaller producers.

Land use policy is key, I think - but without an increased economic incentive for sustainable farming practices then there will continue to be a decline in small farming around urban areas where frankly it needs to be.

There is also an issue with a declining knowledge base - many people barely know how to grow vegetable in their back yard let alone farm, and what's more do not have the inclination to change this.

Bill Jeffery

Q. What are the critical questions for sustainable food systems in Canada?

A. Identifying what are sustainable food production and distribution practices for the purposes of guiding food labelling, taxation, subsidy policies, government procurement rules, and assisting education (school and public) efforts, and other agricultural policies. Some commodity subsidies and supply-side management systems offer opportunities for building-in sustainability measures.

My impression is that, to have a serious discussion about this issue, and solutions, researchers must speak openly and often about the importance of curbing consumption of red meat (esp. from cattle) to protect the environment. The volume and concentration of beef production in Alberta has made this a politically sensitive subject, but, unlike the tar sands, the debate is rarely conducted in public. e.g., Climate change experts have flagged cattle production as a chief source of GHG emissions. Perhaps the same point could be made about factory farming of hogs and chickens (though the environmental consequences are different and include problems related to antimicrobial resistance).

Likewise, AAFC has an "unsustainably" conflicted mandate (to promote Canadian agricultural production and protect the food supply) which likely forecloses constructive debate on this subject.

Canada is a geographically expansive country with a population concentrated in a small area of our landmass and a diverse food agriculture system and 14 different potential regulators (split fed/prov constitutionality allows for policy innovation). Canada is uniquely situated to understand and innovate (agriculture, transportation, and policies).

You know that a draft of what became the 2007 Canada's Food Guide (The Government of Canada's most widely read publication contained advice to "Buy local, regional, or Canadian foods when available." but the dearth of evidence to support this mean that it did not remain in the document. I suspect that the Food Guide will be revised again in the coming few years.

I am interested in everyone's views on the grassroots People's Food Policy Project.

Q. How can we move the field out of the 'niche' market?

A. By developing and advocating policies that, essentially, are about telling the good news and the bad news (i.e., flagging which products and practices are NOT sustainable) instead of just fine-tuning, e.g., rules regarding what is "organic." Because sustainable does not necessarily equate with organic or local (c.f., organic tomatoes shipped to Canada from Brazil compared to, or conventional or organic beef compared to the corn cows are fed or the beans or chicken alongside it in the Food Guide).

How can we establish a connection between the academy and NGOs working in this sector, and other groups?

Help create and vet sustainability grading algorithms for food sustainability ratings (and non-food products), help do sustainability audits/assessments of existing food regulations and production/distribution practices.

How can we better integrate local food security into the wider sustainability discourse? There must be a basic recognition that the food supply is first a national one (many foods are chiefly produced in certain regions--e.g., potatoes, wheat, beef, pork, milk) with an emphasis in food production in the Toronto area, and international (esp. for exports, and for imports of many fruits, sugar, and most fresh fruits & vegetables during the winter and spring).

I doubt that highly perishable lettuce is locally available for more than a few weeks of the year.

Jennifer Black

Also, who is the current "niche market"?

Are there any good examples of collaborations, programs, funding opportunities, etc. that promote partnerships and move these topics out of the "niche market"?

Ann Dale

Jennifer, that is another excellent research question, I don't know of any, nor any governments that are providing incentives. A new role for modern government would be to scale up successful micro social innovations, particularly in the food sector. A government wide policy of local food purchasing wherever possible would spur a lot of innovation, Chris Ling, do you know if the B.C. government policies and new programs on climate change include any such policies?

Chris Ling

Not that I am aware - BC Climate Change policy is basically two fold - 1 - the carbon tax, and 2 - all institutions must become Carbon Neutral by this year (I think) but as they can use carbon offsets to do that the impact is debatable at least in the short term. I dare say there maybe indirect impacts on food production from this as it will increase the cost of industrial agricultural production methods - but I suspect not by enough to make a significant difference.

Ellen Desjardins

One strategy in Waterloo that is helping to overcome niche markets, I think, is to establish an alternative distribution system which starts with the Elmira Produce Auction. It allows local Mennonite and other farmers to sell directly to retailers and

institutional purchasers which has increased their income and allowed local venues to access local produce more easily. This strategy has flourished and is now split into 2 separate enterprises - one auction and one place where retailers can buy in bulk directly from farmers with set prices.

Ann Dale

Ellen, I think this is a critical strategy for several reasons. By eliminating the middle fat and making the link directly between the farmer and the consumer, there are so many opportunities for education and as Bill was arguing, shifting food preferences to healthier choices. I am amazed at Ottawa's four month local market about the amount of nutritional information passed along and the 'social capital' it generates in terms of community building, albeit, still a very elite market. However, at the end of the day, the market does donate all of its left-over produce to the shelters in town. If we have a permanent year-round market, we would have access to local and seasonal, seasonal is often the most forgotten part of the equation?

Arthur Churchyard

Ann (and all), check out the Ontario Market Investment Fund, here at the Guelph OMAFRA office. George Ferrera is your contact for that. Over 4 years, they are donating millions (I think \$4 million, to be exact) to smaller scale local food initiatives. Foodland Ontario is moving on this now too.

Lorelei Hanson

Jennifer, you used a question while back about niche marketing and who is doing what. That got me thinking about all the research currently going on in this area of food studies across Canada. I know that Lenore has a SSHRC looking at farmer's markets and I also know that many of this year's CURAs awarded this year look at food. Mary Beckie with U of A has a study on farmers markets in BC and Alberta and a survey out know for people doing work in the alternative food sector. Is this perhaps something we might as a group collate some information on - or is someone on this e-dialogue compiling such information about Canada?

Ann Dale

We produced a paper a few years back entitled Direct Marketing in Canada, attached, and we need more collations of what is working, what isn't working. Ann

Jennifer Black

UBC also recently received a SSHRC CURA grant, I believe to begin a large initiative looking at school foods and sustainability issues. It would be great to know who is already having successes in these types of projects and what opportunities and gaps still exist.

It would also be helpful if these led to more training opportunities for graduate students, post-docs, etc. to collaborate with outside partners.

Ellen Desjardins

Alison Bay-Palmer of Wilfrid Laurier University has a grant to do a "report card" on indicators of sustainable food systems in Ontario... she is collecting data from all levels and working on collating this information in usable format.

Arthur Churchyard

Lorelei, in addition to Alison Blay-Palmer, John Devlin and Karen Landman here at the UoGuelph are working with me to present a food research networking hub concept at the CAFS conference in May. I think we can do a great deal of legwork before this, however. My vision would be for a Facebook-style website (have you heard of Buddypress?) where researchers can post profiles, current projects/needs/ideas, and collaborate.

I've had three KTT folks from OMAFRA ask me very pointedly to do this. So I would be surprised if funding didn't come through. But we need a show of initial interest. It could be as simple as starting a Facebook group for now (I know, it's painful for me too).

Ellen Desjardins

At the CAFS (Canadian Association for Food Studies) conference at Concordia in Montreal this year, on Saturday May 29 there will be a session on the CURA food projects.

Bill Jeffery

Currently, about 1%-2% of Canadians are farmers (used to be about 50%).

Can anybody hazard a guess as to how much of Canadians food needs can reasonably be met by urban gardens, etc. The answer is indicative of whether transformation involves a monumental transformation of the economy.

One bit of context: The average Canadian ate 11 KG of chicken in 2006 (70 lbs of chicken meat in a typical household annually).

Chris Ling

Lorelei - how much food demand is met from urban agriculture in Cuba? To what extent do you think this might be replicated in Canada (at least in productivity/land use terms?)

Lorelei Hanson

Currently they have to import about 25% of their food - this is a dramatic shift as before the dissolution of the USSR, they like many other countries imported more in the range of 60-75% of their food. Prior to 1989, most of their agriculture was devoted to exporting major crops like sugar cane and tobacco. These are still important crops, but they have had to diversify their agriculture to feed their population.

Bill Jeffery

I've been to Cuba a couple of times and was left with the impression that the practice of raising chickens in backyards had more to do with people having too little money to buy meat and, as I recall, it was rationed anyway. If so, those incentives don't apply nearly as much or at all in Canada which could relegate that practice to a very small portion of the population.

Lorelei Hanson

Bill, yes people have chickens to supplement their food rations but this is a pretty small portion of the food eaten in Cuba. The national policies are about making Cuba more sustainable in terms of food simply because they do not have enough international currency to buy a lot of food and with one of the most educated populations in the world, they are looking at innovations in land tenure and agricultural techniques to increase their food production. From a nutritional perspective they also are trying to educate their

population about eating more fruits and vegetables and the organopomies are playing a key role here in growing and selling this food to the general population.

Bill Jeffery

There are, of course, lessons to be learned from every country. I like Cuba, but its primary agricultural products are, last time i checked, tobacco and sugar cane. And much of its agricultural practices and policies have been stimulated by desperation, rather than a calculated attempt to improve the environment or the health of the nation. And, while it appears to have achieved some great accomplishments with life expectancy and equity, it is essentially a reasonably well-organized third world country.

Lorelei Hanson

For sure Cuba has largely responded out of desperation but I think it would be wrong to equate Cuba with "Third World" countries like Nicaragua and Mexico. While I am no development expert, I think given its high rates of literacy, education, low infant mortality rates, etc. that it might be better thought of as a second world country - a country that has a lot to demonstrate to other nations about how to deal with peak oil and stay afloat. I am not trying to overly romanticize Cuba, because they have some significant oppression there, but they are doing some very innovative things in terms of agriculture, things that we in Canada could learn some lessons from. Of course, it is a tropical country but with few resources, they have in very short period of time turned made some significant changes in agriculture, one of the most telling that they now only import about 25% of their food.

Arthur Churchyard

For Bill's Q: Ellen can comment on this further, but I believe Waterloo Region found that it would be able to produce almost all of its food locally with only a 10% shift in farmland use (which is currently largely export oriented). No word on how much more labour that require (ie. if the farming population would need to increase - perhaps Lorelei could comment on the labour requirements of permaculture. I hear they're quite low in terms of food volume produced, but high density land-wise).

As mentioned, every region needs a different solution. Some regions will have no solution (unless they really like moose).

This touches on the farm succession problem - how will the 50% of farmers retiring in the next 10 years allocate their lands?

Bill Jeffery

ACCORDING TO TORONTO PUBLIC HEALTH, "The Toronto area contains some of the best agricultural land in the country. On a clear day, over one third of Canada's class one farmland can be seen from the top of the CN Tower." (SEE: <http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2008/hl/bqrd/backgroundfile-13560.pdf>)

I suspect that a bigger proportion of food manufacturing plants is visible from there too.

Chris Ling

And how much of that prime agricultural land is threatened by urban sprawl?

Ellen Desjardins

In response to Bill's point, that Waterloo study about a shift to rural agriculture was done by Rod MacRae and myself - it is now in press at Agriculture and Human Values. We did the math and showed that a 10% shift of land from an exported commodity (like corn or soy) towards produce, legumes and grains could be done feasibly (taking into account soil and climate) and would make a significant difference to meeting the nutritional needs of Waterloo's growing population. Of course it would require more labour, and almost all of our labour is imported, so that is an issue.

Chris Ling

Ultimately this again boils down to the price most people are prepared to pay for food. As a society we are geared to thinking food is and should be extremely cheap. But then agricultural labour has always been migratory and transitory - and before mechanization the reason summer vacations existed was so all the kids were available for the harvest.

Arthur Churchyard

Chris, Ellen and all. Economically, the higher price for local/organic is sorely needed by farmers. I think it can be justified as 'Value added': if we can sell more nutrient dense food, fresher/tastier, that's understood to be more expensive.

As someone concerned about social justice, I should add that I think there is no shame in distributing food credits of some kind as part of EI, in order to help offset the higher

costs of food. Raising minimum wage and gardening skills are also important pieces of the puzzle, but the reality is even wealthy folks buy the cheapest option.

Ann Dale

As you are aware, in order to access the Federal Gas Tax rebate, all communities have to prepare an integrated community sustainability plan (ICSP). I wonder how any communities have included issues such as poverty and food security it seems to me that we often undervalue what is most familiar and important to us. Food is cheaper than most t-shirts. I would like to point out one of my biases here, did you know that Ottawa, our capital city, is one of the few major cities not to have a permanent year round market. And the question of red meat and the power of that sector to avoid change is a major issue. Again, to go back to the niche market, direct buy programs from the producer to the consumer are excellent in terms of changing food preferences, as you get what is available and many provide recipes. How do you scale up, I guess by encouraging and integrating local food purchasing into both the big supermarket chains, and local institutions?

Lorelei Hanson

With respect to "scaling up" the distribution of local food. I know of producers in Alberta that essentially have illegal operations because they cannot afford the costs associated with inspection and/or cannot get a decent quota for the next 50 years that would allow them to make some money in raising their livestock how they do. So they sell and do things illegally.

Further to what Arthur wrote, I would like to suggest that market gardening will always be a very small portion of the overall agricultural production in Canada. So how do we create sustainable food systems that continue to allow for export of major crops, but that better feed our population and that do not screw up the creation of sustainable food systems in other countries?

What are our indicators of sustainability as they relate to food?

Ann Dale

I think we should move to the key questions Lorelei has just introduced? Can consumer demand induce larger supermarket chains to buy local first wherever possible. I think of the Quebec food system which I believe is more sustainable because of socio-political reasons, and because of the strong co-operative movement there.

Chris Ling

I would imagine (and maybe Arthur could back me up) that institutions essentially contract out all their food provision to the lowest cost bidder - so the way to increase their ability to improve their food purchase decisions would be to allow the use of Triple Bottom Line procurement. This would allow public sector institutions to pay a little more provided environmental and social benefits could be demonstrated. Such processes have been successfully used in some circumstances in planning and land use decision making, for example Dockside Green in Victoria.

Arthur Churchyard

Yes Chris, from my experience, the best the University of Guelph and OMAFRA have done is to commit to "local where possible" i.e. where local food is the least expensive and available to fill 6 large freezers, we will buy it.

Often, municipalities are able to commit to 10% above minimum bid in order to allow for higher quality.

Ann Dale

Thanks, Arthur, we should try and do a case study on innovative policies and programs to try and speed the exploitation of alternative models and arrangements. Let's move to our third question, as the second has been indirectly addressed, although they are both related how to scale up from local, niche markets to let's say, a food security something or other, and our third question, how can we establish a better connection between the academy and NGOs?

Arthur Churchyard

At the University of Guelph, we have a research funding partnership with OMAFRA (unique nationally, I think) that funnels a very large sum towards a series of agriculture related research priorities.

Every research proposal within this partnership must include a component for Knowledge and Technology Transfer. So a lesson there would be: make researchers cooperate with industry and NGOs by communicating and integrating their work in order to get their funding.

We are in the first stages of developing a Food Systems Research hub here at Guelph in order to facilitate access of other universities to this funding - so if you are a researcher interested in engaging stakeholders through research, and mobilizing

research results, please get in touch with us!

Broadly, I think researchers (esp. urbanites like me) need to spend time on several farms to see the diversity of practices involved. Talking to farmers is key.

Jennifer Black

That's good to hear. Vancouver's Food Policy Council also has a team trying to gather community input to share data about these issues. They aim to build an online data hub so partners may share data with one another and support all partners' efforts to enhance local food security, but it seems like there remains a big challenge in finding the funding the infrastructure to make sure these types of initiatives can succeed.

Ellen Desjardins

It's already happening... the giant distributor Sysco is embracing Local Flavour Plus as a selling feature. Loblaws has introduced a new sign called "grown close to home" (whatever that means). Many of the people I interviewed for my doctoral research picked their main grocery store by the choice of local or organic foods - I was quite surprised. So grocery stores are going to be pressured by public demand.

Arthur Churchyard

Larger supermarket chains do have a role to play in the short term - campaigns like Hellman's "Buy Canadian" are a good example. I've chatted briefly with Galen Weston at the Couchiching conference and he seemed gung ho about rooftop gardening and ethical purchasing policies, etc.

But the reality is this large chains will not outlast high energy prices. So, while they are currently feeling consumer heat, and are changing slightly (WalMart included), the decentralized food system does not really have a place for Sysco and co.

That's controversial, but from a community economic development perspective, it makes much more sense to increase high quality employment in the agrifood sector. And from a local public healthy agency's perspective, you want to improve nutrition by ensuring freshness and safety, which are not guaranteed by larger supply chains. There's debates about both those last indicators, in that no one can guarantee that local is fresher or safer, but an important point is that if the farmer and the eater are talking to each other, the eater has much more control over the quality of the goods.

Ellen Desjardins

Regarding produce quality: here's the power of the media -- a local businessman wrote to the local newspaper that he found California strawberries of consistent good quality (firm) compared with ones at our local Kitchener market which he found mushy and overripe. Then 2 local farmers wrote to the newspaper and explained that in California they use the banned herbicide methyl bromide because they got an exemption because it is such a key trade commodity. Then someone else's letter got published about the effects of methyl bromide. Then the public waded in - many expressed outrage in the paper that stores were offering berries with a banned pesticide and the sale of local strawberries went up.

Ann Dale

It is also happening here in Ottawa with Metro, again because of the success of the local May to October market here, the smaller chain stores are now selling more local products throughout the year. And farmers are getting smarter, they are selling direct to consumers on line through the winter, making deliveries on the same day throughout the winter, and so forth. What has been a major help in all of this, is that most of the stores here that are 'healthier' are labelling where their food comes from, which makes people think? Who wants a perfect looking strawberry with no taste from Chile? Then again, I would not argue for everything local, there are equity and efficiency effects are there not?

Chris Ling

Apparently a lot of people - including my mother-in-law who bizarrely always complains that her December strawberries taste of nothing - but still buys them all the time anyway

The key question here is how do you define local - and what people perceive of as local? Anecdotal evidence I have suggests that a large number of people bizarrely equate local with provincial or even national leading to people in a grocery store in Victoria to buy potatoes from as far away as PEI over and above ones from Washington State. Now this maybe has other implications of course.

Arthur Churchyard

Chris - I was wondering if we would attempt the definition question.

Might have been a good thing for the intro? In any case, here's my definition:

A local food system is a geographically defined social, environmental and economic cluster that connects food production, processing, distribution, consumption and recycling.

Lorelei Hanson

That's an interesting definition of local - and so if any of those factors have vectors that reach beyond the geographical area, then is it not local? Or is local a continuum?

Is local really what we want to focus on in a food system - for me a sustainable food system is more than a local food system?

Arthur Churchyard

Thanks Lorelei. Local is a continuum. That's why a make the geographic boundaries stretchy. However, local IS the key factor for sustainable. I know food miles are criticized as sustainability indicators - but those criticisms miss the mark. The key problem is energy prices, and loss of nearby farmland.

The economies of scale will vanish for imported products. Climate uncertainty will also influence where we buy our food from - for example, as California runs out of water, Ontario will become more prominent as its own fruit producer (see http://www.pacinst.org/reports/california_agriculture/)

So local is inherent in sustainable. That said, I am a full supporter of focusing the discussion on sustainable local food systems.

Ellen Desjardins

I like Arthur's definition of local. No one is making the case that all our food should be locally produced without any imports. But a key part of a sustainable local food system is there is connection between sectors from farm to fork. The farmers cannot spend a lot of time selling their products to retailers and the public. Local distributors and processors are needed. A major loss to our system are processors which we used to have: canning plants, grain mills, meat processors, etc. We need those back and we need government funding to support that because major re-investment is required. Recently a major fruit canning factory closed in the Niagara region, and many orchards where chopped down. Talk about going backwards in sustainability! Public pressure must be put here to maintain what we have and bring in new storage and processing facilities.

Ann Dale

Arthur, would you include sustainable in your definition? And Chris, have you asked your beloved mother-in-law why? Colleagues, one of the biggest fights I have with our organic stores here and what people ask me all the time, is it better to buy organic rather than local, and again, of course, whatever happened to eating seasonally, Chris, have you asked your beloved mother-in-law how she used to eat when she was young and why she thinks she is deprived now without access to year round strawberries. I remember my doctoral supervisor, Stuart Hill, in a meeting talking about how everyone wanted kiwi fruit in the middle of winter but what about the poor old broccoli? Are there production shifts that would occur if we had a national or regional food security strategy that also factored in energy security?

Arthur Churchyard

Ann - to include 'sustainable', I would just refer to 'sustainable local food systems'.

Chris Ling

I have - and the answer is that she likes strawberries. When I point out that they ALWAYS taste rubbish in the winter and are from California she has no response other than well I only use them in baking and fruit salads during the winter.

She grew up poor and in very rural Ireland and passes of any discussion about organic, local etc with a comment well we didn't worry about that when I was growing up. I respond that that is because there was basically no pesticide or artificial fertilizer used in Ireland in the 1940s and 50s and much more food was local in any event. She also routinely complains about the quality of bacon and potatoes.

Although our colleague Lenore did some research looking at the ecological footprint of goods delivered to restaurants that locally sources their produce, in Alberta somewhere I believe and found that some local produce - mainly local salad vegetables such as lettuce and tomatoes had a higher ecological footprint than imported produce due to the need to use so much energy in the production of those produce in the local climate - as opposed to growing them in California and transporting them. This is where the importance of appropriate food crops and seasonal issue come in.

Ann Dale

Again, a critical question, is it a question of scale? Perhaps we should move to a system that values first of all, nutrition and community economic development, which argues for local wherever possible and in season. Then, we move to global sourcing when that

product is indigenous to that economy? The malnutrition that has resulted from distorting locally grown food systems affects all of us in the long-run? Scale, place, limits and diversity?

Arthur Churchyard

Ann, I think we can say Canadians should be producing maple syrup, hemp, and all other manner of agricultural products that grow well in our region (animal products included). I used to be attracted to the concept of indigenous specialization, but that's actually too limiting (at some point or other, all food crops are non-indigenous). So I'd say local diversity, which you mentioned, is more important, if we are asking the question "what should we grow" ?

Ellen Desjardins

Right, that's why we need standards. Apparently a new label is going to be inaugurated soon by Foodland Ontario - I think with the Organic Council of Ontario -- not sure of the details but I understand it will be a label that ensures the product is certified organic AND grown in Ontario.

Chris Ling

While I accept that I find labelling incredibly useful I wonder what impact it has overall - just make it easier for concerned people to buy the food they want - it does it actually change the food buying habits of the average consumer in a significant way?

Bill Jeffery

It is easy to test this question in a laboratory setting, but hard to get a useful real world example with actually changing the labelling regulations.

However, a vital precursor to consumers making informed consumer choice (and governments making informed procurement decisions, taxation rules, etc., etc., etc.) is having a defensible set of criteria to grade a product's "ecological footprint" then applying those. Sweden recently established such a scheme (though I believe criteria were created by an industry association. One should be developed in Canada.

Arthur Churchyard

I agree Bill, if the budget has money for that (luckily, we may now be able to import much of Sweden's research, given the similar climates).

If funds were limited, I'd want to see a great deal invested in getting the production value chain more organized, and getting more new farmers onto the land. For example, AAFC's Growing Forward program is not adequate for the needs of small, starting farmers.

However, government needs indicators such as "ecological footprint" to maintain their accountability. So I can understand spending on that.

Ann Dale

Bill, what about simply including the embedded energy costs in the labelling, how would we ever calculate the ecological footprint?

Shall we move to our last and final question. Should we and if we should how can better integrate local food security into the wider sustainability discourse? Or perhaps the healthy communities conversation, or simply health and food?

Bill Jeffery

Well, there should be a comprehensive grading scheme to aid consumers in making whatever choice is important. In the absence of a good indicator, consumers will make decisions based on the limited information available and whatever biases or pet theories they have. It will be tricky, but the conversation about how to operationalize the measure must begin somewhere.

Ellen Desjardins

We need more support for journals like Alternatives magazine and others which are readable by everyone and are open to material from academics and non-academics.

Arthur Churchyard

The beauty of working on food issues is that we're talking about daily choices and activities that are relevant to wide audiences. Much of the sustainability debate is

completely out of touch with the daily lives of Canadians of all stripes - but local food is intimate.

That expands to the broader sustainability debate: we need to make it intimate. We need to say, "You are putting this into your mouth", and expand that thinking to "You are putting this on your skin", "Your child is going to mimic that action", "Your partner is doing this for a living".

Additionally, food is a fundamental pleasure - it is a great analogy for the ways in which earth-based living actually tastes and feels good.

Lorelei Hanson

About how to integrate the food work into a wider sustainability discourse: by demonstrating what we are talking about. I've found that by being involved in local initiatives such as permacultural transformations of people's yards, urban hen keeping and the National Farmers Union, I have conversations with people all the time about sustainability and food. There are a growing number of people who are concerned about food and they engage on issues of gardening or soil, and then come around to discussion of sustainability. I think someone mentioned that we are on the cusp here of a trend and so my approach is to get involved in communities and help do the work, educate as I am asked to, and have fun while getting my hands dirty.

And Arthur - I will share the Buddypress stuff with a bunch of folks here in Alberta and ask them to link up - thanks for that and all your good work.

Ann Dale

Arthur, say hello to John for me, a food research networking hub, that connects researchers to farmers, food activists to create a cohesive constituency around local sustainable food systems, would be an excellent start to both increase literacy and integrate food health into the wider conversations?

Lorelei, when I think back when I was in government trying to develop policies for promulgating sustainable development into Canadian society, we missed the boat, we debated linking to health and decided not to take on the medical system at the same time, however, I think, as Arthur has put it so much more eloquently, food is a very powerful and essential part of life. The conversations now happening around food, and the impact of the 100 mile diet, people are starting to really question what it is all about?

Bill Jeffery

I am going to have to sign-off now.

Please let me know if there any next steps with this.

I think it does make a lot of sense to press for specific policy reforms in the federal/provincial agri-food system--perhaps partly through the Peoples Food Policy vehicle--and would be open to exploring ways to help facilitate that if someone else can take the lead. Developing an operational definition of sustainable food that can be defended as a grade from 1-10 or 1-100 and used for the purposes of labelling might be a project worth pursuing if others are interested. It would be interesting to get it, eventually on the Codex agenda.

CSPI is a food policy advocacy outfit with primary interest in health issues--but also the environment--but pretty limited institutional resources.

Ann Dale

Thanks Bill, and everyone for your time and participation in our conversation today. Our dialogue will be archived next week and you will each be sent a copy. I also thank you on behalf of our colleague, Lenore Newman, who brought us together, and who we hope gets well soon. Any final comments, colleagues, before we sign off.

Ellen Desjardins

It has been an interesting leapfrogging discussion which clearly indicates all our passion for this topic!

Thanks for organizing it... I learned a lot.

-ellen

Arthur Churchyard

Great learning more about each of you.

As researchers and advocates, I hope we all get the chance to get our hands dirty more often, as Lorelei mentioned. Farmers are not so bad once you talk to them. And gardening in your front yard is a great way to meet neighbours and discuss some of these issues at the ground level.

It's exciting to see the ways that food research breaks down our ivory tower. All the best.

Lorelei Hanson

I am too am impressed by the level of exchange and look forward to follow up in whatever form that may take. Thanks for organising this Chris, Ann and Lenore. I hope more comes from it.

Chris Ling

Thanks everyone - and good bye.

The conversation will be archived at <http://crcresearch.royalroads.ca/research-tools/e-dialogues/archives> edited for flow and spelling but not for content.

Good to meet you all, and maybe I'll meet some of you in person at the Food Studies conference at Concordia.