Introduction

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Background

In recent years, issues of human and environmental health, and vulnerability of the industrial food system, have prompted numerous alternative food initiatives around the globe and, correspondingly, across Ontario. Such alternatives involve redesigning the food system at the levels of production, distribution, and consumption, and address the issue of sustainability with respect to ecosystems, health and nutrition, the economy, and social justice.

One of the areas of growing activity concerning food has focused on local food. Initiatives such as food hubs (community-based initiatives that address a range of food-related issues) and local food networks (more regional groups of community food projects that may include food hubs) tend to address multiple aspects of food system sustainability. For example, local food initiatives can curb some of the environmental impacts of food production and distribution, contribute to improved health and nutrition, increase food skills and food literacy, support local food producers and local economies, foster social justice, and build community. They have the potential to be transformative at the local level, and can also contribute to changing systems.

Within the Canadian context, a number of signs point to growing momentum for local food initiatives. An important national-level example is the work being done by Food Secure Canada – in particular its spearheading of a national conversation about alternative food policy. That conversation resulted in the 2011 publication of *Resetting the Table: A People's Food Policy for Canada*, which lists "ensuring that food is eaten as close as possible to where it is produced" as the first principle of a democratic and secure food system (see http://foodsecurecanada.org/).

There are also many Ontario-based examples of innovative and exciting efforts to foster the development of local sustainable food systems. In addition to the many initiatives that will be presented in the chapters that follow, it is worth mentioning organizations such as Local Food Plus and FarmStart. Founded in 2005, Local Food Plus certifies sustainable producers and facilitates institutional procurement of local sustainable food. While it began in Ontario, the non-profit organization's success (and support from the Metcalf Foundation, McConnell Foundation and World Wildlife Fund) has allowed it to expand to other parts of the country (see http://www.localfoodplus.ca). Also founded in 2005, FarmStart "aims to encourage and support a new generation of entrepreneurial, ecological farmers." With support from several sources (including the provincial and federal governments, and McConnell, Metcalf and Trillium Foundations) FarmStart has become a leader in training new farmers and facilitating access to land in Ontario (see http://www.farmstart.ca/). These examples (along with those presented in the rest of this

document) represent just a sample of the diverse activities that are helping to build thriving sustainable food systems in Ontario and beyond.

In addition to the increasing number of initiatives dedicated to a sustainable local food agenda, there is also a growing body of literature in Ontario that addresses sustainable food system issues. For example, *Local Food: From the Ground Up* was prepared in 2009 for OMAFRA's Sustainable Rural Communities Initiative. Based on interviews with local food stakeholders from across the province, that report highlighted some key best practices and common barriers with respect to local food system development. It also made some policy recommendations, including a call to: increase the connectivity of infrastructure for local farmers, processors, distributors and retailers; increase institutional procurement of local sustainable food; increase accessibility of high quality, nutritious foods while ensuring a fair wage for farmers; develop regulations and infrastructure to support small- and medium-scale producers; use public education mechanisms to help create "ecological consumers"; and foster the development of urban agriculture (Landman et al., 2009).

One year later, in 2010, the Metcalf Foundation published *Menu 2020: Ten Good Food Ideas for Ontario*, which was similarly based on conversations with Ontario's "food and farm leaders" and designed to provide suggestions for building a better provincial food system. The authors identified ten distinct areas for improvement, many of which overlapped with the findings of the 2009 report. Some specific recommendations from the 2010 document include: making space for new farmers and alternative markets within supply management systems; implementing a school food program and embedding food literacy within curriculum; supporting the creation of community food centres; linking good food with good health; and planning for the future of farming and food (Baker et al., 2010).

Models and Best Practices

Community food initiatives are proliferating across North America. As they grow in numbers and scale many such groups encounter similar if not the same barriers to success and sustainability – and find that the processes of garnering support and resources can also be quite similar across geography. There is a need and desire to learn from one another. Good models and sound practices can provide recipes for success. Some of the most celebrated community food initiatives are now being partially or wholly replicated in other physical and virtual spaces; this is evident in the research findings we present here.

Among the most salient examples of a celebrated model is Toronto's The Stop Community Food Centre. Once a food bank, The Stop's work now includes community kitchens and gardens, peri-natal support, food markets, and many other programs. Widely considered a pioneer in multifaceted community food work, The Stop has been at the forefront of moving away from the charity model of food provision and building a community of food that empowers, educates, and engages (see Scharf et al., 2010). At the time of our data collection, two other Ontario communities – Stratford and Perth – were

already developing community food centres modelled on The Stop (both are included in this report). As we finalize this report, three other centres – another one in Toronto, as well as in Winnipeg, MB and Dartmouth, NS – are being launched, and Community Food Centres Canada network has been established. They all testify to the broad relevance of The Stop's model.

More detailed accounts of the Stop Community Food Centre model as a case study are available at www.cfccanada.ca (see also Scharf et al., 2010; Saul and Curtis, 2013). In this report we have focused on the development of the model as it is being replicated in Stratford and Perth. We wanted to acknowledge the importance of the Toronto Stop Community Food Centre in shaping the trajectory of community food initiatives in Canada. This report offers a wide range of models and best practices, including the practice of The Stop is an example of a trailblazing initiative and the lessons they offer other communities in Ontario and Canada.

Summary of the Research Project

The research presented in this document emerged as part of the momentum described above. It was designed to build on the findings of earlier reports, and help support practical initiatives seeking to create more sustainable local food systems. While the report presents a number of models and best practices based on research across the province, these examples represent a far from exhaustive list of the impressive array of local food activities happening in Ontario. The authors also recognize that each community and region in the province has its own unique set of assets and challenges. As such, this document is not intended to be a prescriptive template, but rather a source of information, insight, and hopefully some inspiration, for people interested in working towards more sustainable food systems in Ontario and beyond.

The Research Group

The research for this report was carried out by five regional teams[1]. These teams were led by researchers deeply connected to the local food movements in their areas of the province, and included postdoctoral fellows and students. The five teams were:

1. Northern Ontario: Connie Nelson, Mirella Stroink, Lee-Ann Chevrette, Ryan Hayhurst
2. Eastern Ontario: Peter Andrée, Patricia Ballamingie, Brynne Sinclair-Waters, Linda Stevens
3. The Golden Horseshoe: Sarah Wakefield, Lisa Ohberg
4. Southwestern Ontario: Karen Landman, Erin Nelson
5. Southern Ontario: Alison Blay-Palmer, Irena Knezevic

Philip Mount, working with Peter Andrée, developed the relational maps compiled in Appendix I. Maps outlining the boundaries of each region were prepared by Ivana Lung,

[1] There was no team specifically dedicated to the Greater Toronto Area. While a number of GTA initiatives do appear in the report, because of the significant attention already being received by successful GTA endeavours (e.g. The Stop Community Food Centre, Evergreen Brickworks, The Big Carrot), this report focuses instead on other parts of the province.

with some initial mapping work done by Robert Sissons. Irena Knezevic, assisted by project co-leads Alison Blay-Palmer and Karen Landman, composed the general overview of the regional chapters and, with support from Erin Nelson, assembled the final report.

Research Methods

The information presented here, and in the chapters that follow, is based on data gathered in the spring and summer of 2011. Each research team scanned and reviewed local food activities happening in their respective regions. A total of more than 350 projects were initially identified across the province and, from that list, 171 were selected for a first round of interviews. Those interviews focused on questions about the history and motivations behind each initiative, its reasons for success, and the barriers it faced. An attempt was made to ensure that a cross-section of initiatives was considered in each region. As such, initial contacts were made with a variety of actors, including Premier's Award for Agri-Food Innovation and Excellence recipients, Public Health officials, local OMAFRA and Economic Development representatives, community leaders, and academics, among others.

After analysing interview results, the research group selected 19 initiatives to be the focus of more detailed case study research[2]. The selected projects represent particularly successful and innovative examples of local food work across a variety of organizational models. Research team members made site visits to each of the case study initiatives and conducted in-depth interviews with one or – in many cases – more representatives in order to gather information.

Other Products and Activities

In addition to this report, the results of the research described above were also compiled into a Community Food Toolkit (http://nourishingontario.ca/community-food-toolkit/) designed to offer step-by-step assistance to people interested in working towards more sustainable local food systems at the community level. The results have also formed the basis of a number of both academic and non-academic publications and presentations, and have informed the development of future research project ideas. For more detailed information on activities related to, and building upon, the work presented in this report, please see http://nourishingontario.ca.

Common Successes

The research helped to confirm that, across Ontario, there is growing momentum around local food. Results from each region suggest that participation in a wide variety of local food activities – from farmers' markets, to community gardens, to local food branding programs, to Community Supported Agriculture – is steadily increasing. In most cases, participants are motivated by multiple factors, including local economic development, social justice, health, the environment, and community building.

[2] In 2013, Toronto's FoodShare was added as a 20th case study. As noted earlier, the GTA was not the focus of initial research; however, because of FoodShare's strong leadership role in Ontario's sustainable food system movement, it was decided that its inclusion in this report was important.

In general, there was a strong recognition of the power of food-based projects to act as building blocks for healthy communities by fostering relationships and connections, strengthening local economies, and inspiring broader community engagement. Many research participants spoke of the role that local food initiatives play in their social lives, and it was abundantly clear that "[f]ood hubs are thus seen to be much more profound than the mere provision of food" (Chapter 1). Indeed, multi-stakeholder co-operation grounded in strong social relationships was commonly identified as one of the most important elements for success, and the research found evidence of creative collaborative efforts of all sorts – from producer co-operatives, to collaborations between community initiatives and local health units, to multi-stakeholder food policy councils or round tables.

Another effective mechanism for building thriving local food systems is raising consumer awareness by increasing the visibility and profile of local food. Projects with that aim were evident in most parts of the province, and included local food maps, local branding campaigns, "buy local" food guides and directories, and promotional activities by food businesses (including restaurant-producer collaborations). In many cases, these kinds of efforts are supported by local economic development offices, and are viewed as an important way to keep money within the local economy.

Beyond the awareness-raising activities described above, broader educational efforts were identified as another key element of many of the successful projects presented in this report. Such efforts include public education about local food and the food system, culinary skills training, future farmer training, and nutrition education. Education was viewed by many research participants as a highly effective way to build rural-urban linkages, increase consumer skill levels with respect to local food preparation and use, and, perhaps most importantly, help change peoples' attitudes about, and relationship to, the food they grow and eat.

In all regions of the province, funding was an important concern and, while finding sufficient resources was a common challenge, there were also many examples of initiatives finding ways to finance their efforts creatively, become financially viable, and in some cases realize profits. For example, several Ontario co-ops have replicated or adapted the Oklahoma Local Food Co-op model (see Chapters 2 and 7) and been able to produce profits. Some initiatives concerned with local food accessibility are combining profitable efforts with a social justice cause by "bundling" projects so that for-profit work (e.g. gourmet food baskets) can support social justice work (e.g. low-cost or no-cost local food boxes). Others manage to harness substantial funds from sources such as the Ontario Market Investment Fund, The Trillium Foundation, and the Metcalf Foundation to launch their projects, and are looking for models to ensure long-term financial viability and sustainability. The following table highlights some of the most commonly cited sources of funding for local food initiatives, while more detailed information is provided in the case studies and project summaries in the following chapters.

Table 1: Common Funding Sources for Local Food Initiatives

CATEGORY	FUNDING SOURCES
Government	Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (especially the Ontario Market Investment Fund), Agriculture Canada, Ministry of Health, Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of the Environment, Healthy Communities Fund, Ministry of Community and Social Services, Rural Secretariat, Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration
Municipal/Regional	Economic Development Corporations, Green Municipalities Funds, Regional Health Units/Health Departments
Education	Universities, Tri-Council funding (if partnered with academics)
Foundations	Trillium, McConnell, Metcalf, Greenbelt, Evergreen, World Wildlife Fund, Imagine Canada, Heart and Stroke, Laidlaw, Carrot Cache, Heifer, Sprott, TD Friends of the Environment
Community	Faith groups, United Way, numerous small and local foundations
Business	BIAs, Campbell, Walmart, Union Gas, Home Depot, Sobeys, Hellmann's

Common Successes

While successes are many, research also identified a number of common challenges that act as constraints on local food activity in Ontario. A lack of steady funding was the most widely-cited challenge. The problem of insufficient resources to cover administrative costs, marketing, infrastructure and capital costs, and other expenses is often compounded by high reliance on volunteers and overworked and/or underpaid staff. While important sources of support, many of the funding streams that are available do not cover core funding, are not sustainable in the longer term, and can be challenging to access – particularly for farm businesses.

Another frequently cited challenge was the policy and regulatory framework that governs food systems in Ontario, which was widely perceived to favour an industrial model of production, while presenting some significant obstacles to smaller-scale locally-based production, processing and distribution initiatives. From procurement policies, to public health regulations, to zoning bylaws, the existing system leaves many small- and even medium-scale producers, processors, and distributors finding it difficult, if not impossible, to compete. Facilitating local processing and distribution through the development of regional infrastructure, increasing institutional procurement practices that

favour local foods, and enacting scale-sensitive regulations are among the possible means to address regulatory and policy challenges.

The high cost of farmland and development pressures on agricultural land are additional barriers to local food system development in some regions, while the loss of the farming population base was seen as a concern across the province. There is some tension between these challenges on the production side of the food system, and the accessibility goals of many local food initiatives, with research results demonstrating that the needs and interests of small-scale producers and low-income consumers can sometimes be at odds. There was some promising evidence of increased co-operation between local food advocates and community groups concerned with food security; however, ensuring fair prices for farmers while simultaneously making local food affordable for low income people is still an issue that requires attention.

A challenge related to accessibility is that, although public awareness of local and sustainable food is growing, paying its full value still runs counter to the deeply embedded culture of cheap food. Recognizing this tension, many research participants discussed how difficult it can be to convince people to pay for local food when lower-priced options are available. Educational efforts that reveal some of the externalized costs of so-called cheap food (and the benefits of alternatives) can help combat this problem; however, even when price is not an issue, distribution-related barriers can make local food less convenient to obtain.

Finally, the research results, and the research process itself, confirmed that increased clarity regarding what terms like “food hub” or “local food network” mean, and how “local” is defined, would be helpful. While a lack of clear definitions in part highlights the exciting diversity that characterizes Ontario’s local food initiatives, it also presents some challenges in terms of communication, particularly across different sectors and stakeholder groups.

Organization of the Report

This introduction provides a broad overview of the research that contributed to this report, and highlight some of the major common successes and challenges that emerged from data across the province. The remainder of the report offers much more specific information and analysis based on region. This regional analysis is important given that Ontario is a large and highly diverse province. The particular challenges, keys to success, or priorities in Northern Ontario, for example, are not necessarily exactly the same as those in more populous parts of the province, or parts of the province that rely less on country foods.

Chapters 1-5 present the results of the regional research teams (Northern Ontario, Eastern Ontario, the Golden Horseshoe, Southwestern Ontario, and Southern Ontario). Each of these chapters begins with a general overview of the region and description of the research participants. That information is followed by analysis of common accomplishments and challenges, and presentation of any other emerging themes. In

some cases, the chapters offer specific recommendations for improvement, including policy recommendations. Each regional chapter concludes with detailed descriptions of best practice case studies. Chapter 6 covers province-wide initiatives, and the final chapter then presents summaries of other notable initiatives from each region. The report concludes with a graphic appendix consisting of case study "maps" demonstrating the resources and relationships that contribute to their success.

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