

The Toronto Food Policy Council

The power of ideas

The persistence of hunger in the midst of plenty. Urban sprawl. Mountains of municipal garbage. The decline of the family farm. Food-based health problems, from the exotic ‘mad cow’ disease to all-too-common heart ailments. Environmental damage from pesticides and pollution from long-distance transportation of food.

Increasingly, communities across Canada are realizing that all these issues are symptoms of deep-rooted problems in our food system. Wayne Roberts, project coordinator for the Toronto Food Policy Council, affirms: “We have a totally dysfunctional food system. The problems are intractable and insoluble when you look at them one at a time.” To find solutions, it is vital to look at the overall food system and address issues in a coordinated way.

The Toronto Food Policy Council is dedicated to doing just that, by partnering with entrepreneurs and community groups to develop policies and programs promoting food security. The Council, with its 21 citizen members, is appointed by the Toronto Board of Health. Its staff of two is employed by Toronto Public Health, but the Council is free to make its own

decisions on food policy issues. It has a modest budget and no authority to pass or enforce laws, but its voice is taken seriously. As its brochure notes: “It’s the power of ideas, inspired individuals and empowered communities that gives us influence.”

Making links

Toronto was an early supporter of the Healthy Cities movement, an initiative of the World Health Organization which encourages cities to support policies that promote health and wellness. A decade ago, the late Dan Leckie and City Councillor Jack Layton championed the idea of a food policy council that would give community groups a voice in policy development around urban food issues. Community groups and supportive city employees convinced City Council that there were problems and health risks associated with the existing food and agriculture system, and that there was a need for a multisectoral approach to food issues.

The Toronto Food Policy Council was created in the fall of 1990 by Toronto City Council. It currently has 21 members, including city councillors and volunteer representatives from

consumer, business, farm, labour, multicultural, anti-hunger advocacy, faith and community development groups. Rod MacRae, former coordinator of the Food Policy Council, notes that: “Since most of the Toronto Food Policy Council’s members volunteer their time or are volunteered by their employers, a small public investment yields large returns in ‘free’ expertise.” The Food Policy Council’s links to the Board of Health “provide immediate access to both the political machinery and the preventive health care knowledge and apparatus of the city.”

Today, an important role of the Food Policy Council is to help community groups concerned with food issues to connect with each other and with relevant public bodies. Together, staff and Food Policy Council members serve as catalysts and brokers. The Council provides a forum for discussing and integrating policy issues that often fall between the cracks of established departments and research specialists. Toronto Food Policy Council staff collect hard-to-find information and make it available to students, researchers and community developers. Staff and Food Policy Council members work to increase public awareness of food policy issues through public lectures and workshops, and advocate for policy changes at the municipal, provincial and federal levels.

Toronto’s partnership between government and the community, supported by government-paid staff, continues to be unusual in Canada. There are other food policy organizations which are similar in outlook, but they generally lack the sustained government resources that support the Toronto Food Policy Council. Most community-based food policy organizations lead a tenuous existence, constantly searching for funding and lacking long-term staff support. The track record of the Toronto Food Policy Council stands as an example of what can be accomplished by a multisector partnership that has resources to support its work.

Hunger and health

The Toronto Food Policy Council has played a leading role in many policy and programming initiatives related to food, hunger and health. Says Rod MacRae: “It has consciously engaged in multiple projects, believing that solutions will emerge from a diverse number of activities in contrast to pursuing a single large initiative. Because the Food Policy Council operates in an arena in which many players – including politicians, civil servants and community people – can decline to participate or can halt a project, this strategy reduces risk by moving many initiatives forward simultaneously and by using a diversity of players.”

Over the past 10 years, the Toronto Food Policy Council has produced a series of 15 discussion papers on various elements of a food systems approach to public health policy. The papers cover a wide variety of topics, including: policy initiatives to reduce the need for food banks; the impacts of free trade agreements on Canadian food security; strategies to integrate the food and health systems in order to address diseases influenced by diet; implications of agricultural policies on food security and health; the economic contribution of the food business; the contribution of current retail structures to food insecurity; improving food information systems for consumers; Recombinant Bovine Growth Hormone (rBGH); urban planning for food security; and urban agriculture. These publications are considered ‘works in progress’ which are released to encourage discussion and policy development. They do not reflect formal policy positions adopted by Toronto Public Health or the Board of Health.

The Food Policy Council also has contributed to a variety of food programming initiatives. It developed a feasibility study of a not-for-profit healthy food delivery system for low-income citizens, and the program was put in



A FoodShare 'Grow Together' garden project for children.

place in 1992 by FoodShare, a nonprofit organization. Today, the Good Food Box program distributes 4,000 boxes of affordable, regionally-sourced fruits and vegetables each month through 200 neighbourhood drop-off points. The Toronto Food Policy Council also has provided fundraising assistance to help community organizations obtain more than \$3.5 million in funding for projects to increase access to affordable, nourishing food. It designed Canada's first food access grants program, which was approved by Toronto City Council in 1995, and administered it from 1996 to 1998. This program directed \$2.4 million to 180 schools and social agencies for food access projects that included improving kitchens in many public and community spaces and supporting community economic development.

Another significant effort of the Food Policy Council involved helping to initiate policy and program cooperation among many players in the food security movement. This coopera-

tion led to the Food 2002 project – an intersectoral dialogue that took place between 1998 and 2000, led by FoodShare, a frequent community partner of the Council. Food 2002 considered what would be required for everyone to have access to affordable, nutritious food by the year 2002, and generated a number of policy recommendations. These recommendations are being taken forward by the Food 2020 project. (The name change recognizes that achieving the social and political consensus needed for change will not happen overnight – and also reflects the need for 'clear vision.')

The Food Policy Council also provided staff and resources to City Council's Food and Hunger Action Committee. This Committee of five City Councillors was formed in December 1999 to study food security in Toronto and recommend ways to reduce hunger, improve the nutritional health of Torontonians and support food-based initiatives that benefit the city's economy, environment and quality of life. The

Committee created a Food Charter which stated that every Toronto resident should have access to an adequate supply of nutritious, affordable and culturally appropriate food, and listed principles and practices that Toronto City Council would follow to promote food security. This Charter recently was adopted by City Council.

The Food and Hunger Action Committee also developed an action plan that includes 38 recommendations for the City. Most of these have low or no costs for the municipal government. The recommendations range from urging other levels of government to adjust policies on shelter allowances and social assistance, to making room for food security initiatives in city-owned buildings, schools and social housing. Other recommendations deal with strengthening community food programs, community gardening, food microprocessing industries, urban agriculture and composting.

There are significant long-term costs to a public health care system when large numbers of people go hungry, are poorly nourished or eat unsafe foods. Recognizing this, the Toronto Food Policy Council and a number of other food security agencies co-authored the Food and Nutrition Strategy of the Ontario Public Health Association and helped form the Greater Toronto Food Policy Commission to bridge City and regional Boards of Health in biotechnology discussions. The Food Policy Council has conducted research and advocacy work on potentially negative health impacts of rBGH.

Environmental issues

In today's industrialized food system, most food is produced a long way from where it is consumed. The separation and distance between producer and consumer contribute to environmental problems – from the pollution associated with long-haul transportation to

In May 2000, Toronto City Council voted unanimously to become a food-secure city that would strive to ensure:

- *the availability of a variety of foods at a reasonable cost*
- *ready access to quality grocery stores, food service operations, or alternative food sources*
- *sufficient personal income to buy adequate foods for each household member each day*
- *the freedom to choose personally- and culturally-acceptable foods*
- *legitimate confidence in the quality of the foods available*
- *easy access to understandable, accurate information about food and nutrition*
- *the assurance of a viable and sustainable food production system.*

Excerpt from *Toronto's Food Charter*, 2001

food-scrap 'waste' that adds to urban garbage woes. Long-term food security implies the need for farmland in or near the city, and the Toronto Food Policy Council has contributed to many planning and consultative processes looking at agricultural land use. It continues to promote the redesign of Toronto's urban infrastructure towards a more sustainable model that would mimic 'closed-loop' energy pathways and cycles of nature.

The Food Policy Council has been involved in a number of initiatives to promote composting of food wastes, on both a small and large scale. It also coordinated a workshop on food transportation and completed a prefeasibility study of neighbourhood 'composting greenhouses' to capture heat, nutrients and carbon dioxide. In *Feeding the City from the Back Forty*,



City Councillors Pam McConnell (chair of the Toronto Food Policy Council and co-chair of the Food and Hunger Action Committee) and Chris Korwin-Kuczynski (co-chair of the Food and Hunger Action Committee) with Toronto's Food Charter.

it spelled out in 23 recommendations how Toronto could produce 25 percent of the fruits and vegetables consumed in the city by 2025.

In other work, the Food Policy Council helped lead the push for a community gardening strategy in Toronto, and it currently co-chairs the Toronto Community Gardening Network. The number of community gardens in Toronto increased from 50 in 1991 to 122 in 2001.

One current effort concerns waste that occurs before food gets to the city. It has been estimated that about one-fifth of fruits and vegetables are not harvested – plowed under because they do not meet cosmetic standards. Some farmers, disturbed by this waste, have been donating their ‘cosmetically challenged’ produce to food banks. The Food Policy Council is one of a number of organizations that have been looking at ways to link more farmers with food programs to find productive uses for good

food that isn't good-looking. It has worked with the Ontario Association of Food Banks on this issue: The Association recently launched the ‘Reclaim Ontario’ program to increase the diversion to food banks of safe but unsalable food products. These goods range all the way from fresh produce to packaged food nearing its expiry dates.

Toronto Parks and Recreation is planning to sponsor a ‘homework club’ where children will do homework after school, have a nutritious free snack provided by the Ontario Association of Food Banks and then use the recreation facilities. With funding from Human Resources Development Canada, street-involved youth will be hired to prepare meals for this program as well as for food bank pantries, shelters and other uses. If they complete a year's work, they will have the option of moving into a job with a major supermarket or receiving a half-year credit for a chef course at Centennial College.



Jennifer Welsh, former citizen chair of the Toronto Food Policy Council, signs Toronto's Food Charter at a celebration on June 14, 2001.

Says Wayne Roberts: “This initiative helps street youth, food bank clients get an upgrade in the nutrient value of food bank food, and waste going to landfill is reduced. The only missing element is payment to farmers: This is on the front burner for the future.”

The Toronto Food Policy Council is constantly looking for such ‘win-win-win’ solutions. “Look for ideas that have at least 10 good things that can be said about them,” says Wayne Roberts, “and at least three major beneficiaries. Once you have that, things just explode.”

Economic development

Food is big business: At least 10 percent of jobs in Toronto are associated with the food sector. The Toronto Food Policy Council has undertaken a number of research and program initia-

tives to promote sustainable development of the sector and encourage employment creation.

Among other projects, the Toronto Food Policy Council has worked with the City of Toronto Economic Development Division on a consolidated approval process for public health regulation of small food processing businesses. The Food Policy Council also collaborated with city staff and community economic development groups on a local economic development strategy for Toronto.

The Food Policy Council’s research on commercial kitchen incubators for the City of Toronto Economic Development Division and FoodShare helped the latter develop an incubator kitchen at its ‘Field to Table’ warehouse in 1997. FoodShare rents this well-equipped, industrial-scale kitchen for a low hourly rate to small food businesses that otherwise would have to

make a prohibitive investment in facilities. As businesses grow, they move on and make space for others to move in.

Ideas and action

Communities across Canada are grappling with many of the same food security issues that the Toronto Food Policy Council seeks to address. Quite naturally, urban hunger is a priority issue for most. But while hunger is the most visible and disturbing problem, lasting solutions require a broader approach to food security. By addressing the environmental, health, community development and economic issues associated with the food system as well as issues of hunger, communities are more likely to have the capacity to build the broad constituencies and political support necessary for change.

More coherent approaches to food security also can realize savings for a municipality. Wayne Roberts says: “I try to pay back my

salary every day” by finding and implementing cost-effective ideas. Identifying cost-effective ideas can help maintain community support – something which is important for an organization that frequently finds itself critiquing municipal policies.

This ‘can do’ attitude – and a willingness to look at counter-intuitive solutions – are important components of the Toronto Food Policy Council’s approach. “We have more food than we have hunger,” says Wayne Roberts. “We have more resources than we have problems. It costs more not to solve the problems than to solve them.” Now *that* is food for thought.

Ann Simpson

Ann Simpson works on the ‘community stories’ series for the Caledon Institute.

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