

Purpose of this note:

The MacEachen Institute for Public Policy and Governance at Dalhousie University hosted a policy roundtable on June 25, 2024, with the goal of providing valuable data and insight for Project Leads Talan İşcan and Kathleen Kevany's research into reorienting food systems to produce more sustainable, healthier diets.

Nineteen participants with expertise in agriculture, health and nutrition, environmental sustainability and food security were invited to speak on food production strategies, environment and equity problems, and to share their lived experiences. Participants engaged in discussions regarding the challenges and potential solutions in sustainable food production.

Facilitator

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Reorienting Agricultural Policies to Support Healthier Diets

Policy Roundtable Briefing Note
July 2024

Selected Observations from the Roundtable Discussion

- ◆ Policies that incentivize sustainable, local farm production could be designed with participation and input from farmers. Due to policies that incentivize corporatization and increased production with decreased costs, farmers have lost the ability to produce at a profit, secure a livelihood, and provide for their own community. More open dialogue and debate are needed to develop more meaningful policy, with farmers, researchers, government, and other stakeholders also at the table.
- ◆ Farmers face many barriers and inequalities in financially supporting their families, maintaining a sustainable and viable farming operation, and finding the time to learn about better agricultural practices.
- ◆ Education on local, sustainable and healthy food procurement by institutions is vital to creating demand for local regenerative agriculture. Many people do not know where their food comes from, but local food procurement policies, education, and interaction with farmers can help address this issue.
- ◆ A basic income in Canada would not only make healthy and fresh food more affordable and accessible for consumers, but would also support farmers secure a decent livelihood as they produce food for others.

This note does not attribute comments to individuals during the discussion but merely summarizes the comments. Participants shared their personal observations and experiences. For further notes about methods, please see the Method section.

Discussion Themes

Policy Design

For generations, farmers built up their farms to support their families and their communities. But now many are bought out by agri-enterprises, which make attractive offers. How does one pass on a family legacy when one becomes an agri-enterprise? Large-scale agri-businesses that ship almost all their produce out of the province will have little or no connection to and interest in nourishing the local food system.

Research shows that governments invest disproportionately in large industrial farming while insufficiently supporting small farmers. Globalization, neo-liberalism, and commodification of food and food systems have undermined the supply of and demand for local and regional food.

Taxing sugar-sweetened beverages may be helpful, and the revenue could be used to subsidize local and healthy foods. We need be more creative in finding ways to make local, sustainable foods more accessible and affordable.

Government institutions should be role models for sourcing local food. Hospitals, universities, schools, correctional facilities, and government cafeterias should serve local food from local farmers.

In grocery stores today, where would you go to find frozen food that was made in Nova Scotia? What about canned food? Farmers have lost the ability to provide for their own community through corporatization and the push to decrease costs. The lack of local infrastructure for making local products accessible and affordable is a tremendous obstacle and a superb opportunity.

Challenges within government can arise from issues being siloed and politically driven. Policies need to consider diversity among farmers. Government policies and programs need producer input because there are many things producers must consider, including climate change, competing with imports, weather, public relations and more.

Some government support for farmers and producers is in response to extreme weather events and disasters and is reactive. There needs to be more proactive and inclusive planning.

Sustainable diets are necessary. Canada's Food Guide is not necessarily applicable to all segments of the population and has colonial roots. Colonization creates a disconnect in Indigenous communities in all segments of life, including traditional food and land and food sovereignty. Efforts are underway with health authorities to ensure that more culturally appropriate, sustainable food, and nutritious offerings are recommended for institutional, household, and consumer consumption.

Income

The reality is that most farmers must work off-farm or have a partner with a 'regular' secure job that provides at least one steady income to maintain their ability to run their farm.

Small producers require and deserve support. More than a livable wage is needed.

Weather and climate change can mean the loss of an entire paycheque. When crops freeze or dry up, that is a huge loss.

Farmers wish they could secure more than a minimum wage. Even having a steady income, like their workers do, could enable greater local food production and business durability.

When thinking about challenges for producers and policies that impact them, there should be subsidies for sustainable practices such as low-interest loans for small and medium-sized farms.

Basic income will help people make healthier decisions. It is hard to talk about food choices when there is rising food insecurity and poverty in Canada.

Nutrition and Health

Foods that are nutrient poor are often the most accessible. Food preparation takes time and not everyone has the time or resources to purchase and prepare nutritious foods.

Misinformation online confuses many people about which foods to eat. They are attracted to high-calorie foods that are made to be very appealing.

The health of Canadians is harmed by the wide availability of less healthy foods and obstacles to securing nutritious and appealing healthy foods.

Nutrition and health specialists are deeply concerned about the decline in food skills and food literacy and the loss of appreciation and respect for food.

Education

If you ask a child in the city where their food comes from, they say ‘the grocery store,’ which shows a major societal disconnect. Education on healthy and sustainable diets should be in the school curriculum. People should receive education on food availability and know where their food comes from. They should learn about sustainable diets and how local, sustainable, and regenerative agricultural works.

There must be a demand for producers to produce healthy food. This is where education comes in. Young people see information on social media about ‘what they should be eating,’ and that information is often not correct.

There needs to be a supportive, Canadian-focused program to develop better food habits. We are not going to create a population that is asking for local foods without education, marketing power, and influence.

There is a lack of trust in our institutions. How will we make sure that people will listen? Who at Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada needs to be involved?

School food programs should work with local farmers. Many Canadians and Nova Scotians have negative experiences with food. How do we cultivate and support positive food experiences for young people? There need to be bridges built between agriculture, schools, and the local economy.

People should be eating food grown in their area. Food education is affected by corporatism because people are disconnected from where their food comes from.

Discussions on education need to consider that education does not always drive health outcomes or behaviour at the population level. Education may deepen inequities because only those with resources and privilege can access education and act on the recommendations.

Well-being of Farmers

Time-poverty also affects farmers. A basic income could counterbalance this by providing public support to ensure an income for farmers. Farmers, while interested in sustainable farming practices, often do not have enough time to learn about regenerative systems.

Farmers' mental health and the frequent financial and personal stresses they face are often neglected in discussions about agriculture.

Research Background

Identifying potential policies and strategies that reorient Canadian food systems to greater sustainability are essential. In Canada, government supports to agriculture are expected to enhance our safe food supply, increase food security and sovereignty, prioritize healthy and nutritious food, activate vibrant rural communities, and foremost deliver durable, sustainable food systems. Sustainable agricultural policies and practices operate within planetary boundaries, sustain biodiversity, and support broad population health and equity.

In 2021, Canadian agricultural producers received \$12.5 billion (about 0.5% of the Canadian GDP or about \$327 per Canadian) including \$8.5 billion coming directly from budgetary support programs to farmers. Numerous farms operate at small margins of profitability or even at economic losses in years with poor yields or low prices. Therefore, agricultural programs offer real financial support to farmers, often stabilizing their incomes, but these funds are not equitably distributed. There is agreement that we need to support our farmers and agriculture, but more analysis or debate is needed on the impacts of current policies and practices.

Human actions have significantly altered 75% of the land-based environment and about 66% of the marine environment largely due to agricultural practices. Yet the health of ecosystems on which humans and all species depend is deteriorating rapidly. Tragically, human systems are eroding the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide (Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, 2019). Globally, agriculture and food systems are generating a third of all GHG emissions, with 80% of this originating from animal agriculture. Animal agriculture is widely seen as a major contributor to deforestation, land degradation, water scarcity and pollution, and biodiversity loss.

Agricultural advances help to feed the world, and this is critical to reducing undernutrition. However, most Canadians do not consume sufficient fruits and vegetables, while they exceed recommended amounts of sugar, meat, processed meat, sodium, and fat. This means Canadians rank high among the world's top consumers of unhealthy foods. Unhealthy diets contribute to the 73% of Canadians who suffer from at least one chronic illness. The average Canadian diet and lifestyle contribute significantly to the burden of disease, mounting healthcare costs and declining access to health services, climate change, and environmental degradation.

This roundtable seeks to investigate how we might move from modern food production that stimulates the consumption of nutrient-poor, excessively energy-dense foods and policies that support industrial animal agriculture to healthy diets and sustainable agricultural production. We ask, what opportunities might there be in repurposing and reorienting agricultural support policies?

Methods for the Roundtable

Project Leads Kathleen Kevany and Talan İşcan are heading this project with the goal of assessing the alignment of Canada's agricultural production to support Canada's Food Guide. Nineteen individuals with expertise in agriculture, health and nutrition, environmental sustainability, and food security from the government, academic, non-profit, and private (food production) sectors were invited and participated in the roundtable. Prior to the event, participants were provided with three documents they were asked to review to help inform their contributions:

- ◆ Background paper: Reorienting our food systems for greater sustainability: potential policies and strategies by Talan İşcan and Kathleen Kevany
- ◆ Report developed by Health Canada: [Canada's dietary guidelines for health professionals and policy makers](#) (Canada's Food Guide)
- ◆ Report of the EAT-Lancet Commission from The Lancet medical journal: [Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT-Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems](#)

The goal of this roundtable was to engage participants in dialogue about how the agricultural support policies could be reoriented to support healthier and more sustainable diets.

The facilitator asked participants to discuss the following questions and they were encouraged to speak freely during the discussion:

- ◆ What are the challenges facing our producers preventing them from aligning with the food guide and producing sustainable, nutritious food?
- ◆ What are the challenges for people accessing this produce?
- ◆ Are there other jurisdictions that are succeeding at this that could be used as examples?
- ◆ We are fundamentally researchers; what information is needed to get your job done that you don't have?