

Food Sovereignty

Background

Canada urgently needs a national food policy. More than two million Canadians are food insecure and over 882,000 turned to food banks each month in 2012, a 31% increase since 2008, when the recession began.¹ Farmers and fishers are going out of business, our natural environment is being pushed to the limit, a quarter of Canadians are overweight or obese, and we are one of very few industrialized countries without either a national food policy or student nutrition program.

Having no national food policy is expensive: we could be saving tax dollars by preventing chronic, diet-related diseases; we could be stimulating local economies by encouraging consumption of local foods; we could be revitalizing rural communities by supporting family farms; we could be protecting and enhancing our environment by promoting ecological food production; we could be developing policies that assist the hundreds of thousands of Canadians who still experience hunger on a regular basis. Yet we are doing none of these things.

The need for change is widely recognized and plans to develop national food policies or strategies are being advanced by many sectors, including all five federal political parties and influential industry groups. The Ontario Federation of Agriculture went so far as to trademark the expression “national food strategy,” while the Conference Board of Canada has brought together a group of corporate investors and government departments to

develop its own food strategy. Both of these initiatives are primarily about the prosperity of the industrial food system — now the biggest, and one of the most concentrated, manufacturing sectors in Canada. Many Canadians believe governments have an obligation to ensure that the essentials of life, particularly food and water, are regulated in the public interest, not controlled by a few corporations “too big to fail.”

The People’s Food Policy² was the first-ever national food policy to be developed through a genuinely public process. Led by the food movement — a diverse network of organizations and individuals working to build a healthy, ecological and just food system — it is rooted in the concept of food sovereignty.³ This internationally recognized approach features several key policy elements, including:

- Ensuring that food is eaten as close as possible to where it is produced (e.g., domestic/regional purchasing policies for institutions and large food retailers).
- Supporting a widespread shift among food providers to ecological production in both urban and rural settings (e.g., organic agriculture, community-managed fisheries, indigenous food systems), as well as the entry of new farmers into agriculture.
- Enacting a strong poverty elimination and prevention program, with measurable targets and timelines, to ensure Canadians can afford healthy food.

- Creating a nationally funded Children and Food strategy that ensures all children at all times have access to the food required for healthy lives (including school meal and/or snack programs that provide healthy, minimally-processed and -packaged foods from nearby farms, school gardens, school cooking, school composting, and food literacy programs).
- Ensuring that the public, especially the most marginalized, are actively involved in decisions that affect the food system.

Current Issues

The AFB focuses on five key issues: 1) a process for food policy development; 2) a national student nutrition program to combat hunger and malnutrition; 3) government procurement (i.e., purchasing power) as a means to improve our food system; 4) identifying key policies to support family farms; and 5) revamping the Nutrition North Canada program to better serve the needs of northern communities.

National Food Policy Process

Despite an election promise to enact a National Food and Farm Strategy, the federal government has failed to include any process towards building such a strategy in its Growing Forward 2 policy framework. Rather, food policy remains *ad hoc* with the departments of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Environment, Agriculture and Agri-food, Health, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, and Fisheries and Oceans, all operating independently, with more regard for export markets than for domestic food needs. Likewise, despite many innova-

tive initiatives at the municipal and provincial levels on student nutrition, urban gardening, emergency food relief, healthy diets, chronic disease prevention, farmers markets, sustainable agriculture, etc., the federal government has largely ignored the increasing preoccupations of Canadians about what we eat — and in some cases are not able to afford to eat.

National Student Nutrition Program

Canada is one of very few developed countries that does not have a national student nutrition program. Dr. David Butler-Jones, Canada's Chief Public Health Officer notes:

When children go to school hungry or poorly nourished, their energy levels, memory, problem-solving skills, creativity, concentration and behaviour are all negatively impacted. Studies have shown that 31% of elementary students and 62% of secondary school students do not eat a nutritious breakfast before school. Almost one quarter of Canadian children in Grade 4 do not eat breakfast daily and, by Grade 8, that number jumps to almost half of all girls. The reasons for this vary — from a lack of available food or nutritious options in predominantly low-income homes, to poor eating choices made by children and/or their caregivers. As a result of being hungry or malnourished at school, these children may not reach their full developmental potential — an outcome that can have a health impact throughout their entire lives.⁴

The benefits of a national student nutrition strategy are immediate — better learning, increased number of high school graduates — and long-term: higher incomes, lower

incidence of chronic diseases, lower health care costs. Networks of farmers, food processors, food distributors, educators, academics, and others across the country are seeking solutions. Only the federal government is missing.

Supporting Local Sustainable Procurement

The benefits of local sustainable food procurement are vast and include reducing environmental impacts, supporting local economies, creating employment, and improving health. For these reasons, support for getting local, healthy, and sustainable food into schools, health care facilities, and other public institutions is growing. In 2011, a national Farm to Cafeteria network emerged to share information, ideas, resources, policies, and best practices. Provincial and municipal governments have begun to support local food procurement. In 2009, Ontario committed \$24 million to “develop the logistics to get more Ontario-grown food into the province’s schools, hospitals, food service companies and other institutions.”⁵ In 2008, the City of Toronto also adopted a policy that aims to have 50% local food in city services. By June 2009, the city reported a 13.4% increase in local food procurement to a total of 33.4%.⁶ Support for local food procurement is also strong in British Columbia where a provincial student snack program has provided fresh B.C. fruits and vegetables to students in more than 14,000 B.C. schools.

The Canadian government, however, continues to negotiate trade agreements likely to restrict the ability of sub-federal governments and public institutions to support local sustainable procurement. Under the Comprehensive Economic Trade Agreement (CETA) being negotiated with the European Union (EU), the EU is seeking access to sub-federal

government procurement, including provincial and municipal governments, crown corporations and the broader public sector. This would remove the ability for these actors to restrict tendering to local companies or to give preference to sustainable or local goods and services.^{7,8} It would represent the loss to governments and public institutions of an important tool for supporting and strengthening local and sustainable food systems.

Family Farms

At the same time that consumers and some governments are beginning to make a sustainable, healthy, and regional food supply a priority, our farming communities are aging, and structural, economic and practical challenges are preventing new and young farmers from getting into agriculture.

With the average age of farm operators now 54,⁹ and 75% of current farmers seeking to sell or transfer their farms in the next 10 years without a successor,¹⁰ agriculture faces difficult succession/intergenerational transfer issues. The imminent retirement of this aging cohort will mean the further disintegration of the social fabric of rural communities and of the long-term stewardship of our farmlands, unless there are young or new farmers to take its place. However, the difficulties in accessing land and capital, lack of appropriate processing and distribution, weather-related risks, and the social disincentives facing those who wish to start a farm enterprise are often overwhelming and discouraging.

Food Security for Northern Communities

In many communities in Northern Canada, prices for goods and services (such as food,

housing and transportation) can be double or triple those in southern Canadian locations. The high cost of living in the North is a result of the distance from suppliers, as well as the extreme climate and isolated geography of most communities, many not accessible by road. When combined with relatively low earned income, this high cost of living often results in widespread hunger as people struggle to adequately feed their families. In 2005, the median after-tax income (15 years and older) in Nunavut was \$20,042 (nearly \$5,000 less than the Canadian average).¹¹ The after-tax income level for the aboriginal population, which makes up a majority of the territory, was even lower at \$16,069.¹² In comparison, the cost to feed a family of four in Nunavut in 2005 ranged from \$17,600 to \$21,100 per year.¹³

In response to the high cost of food in the North, the federal government, through Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC), administers the Nutrition North Canada Program (NNC), a market-based subsidy program “designed to ensure that healthy foods are more accessible and affordable to Canadians living in isolated Northern communities.”¹⁴ The NNC Program, which replaced the Food Mail Program on April 1, 2011, provides community-specific weight-based subsidies directly to retailers on eligible foods transported into communities by air. NNC also includes an education component administered by Health Canada. Community eligibility and NNC subsidy rates are based on past levels of Food Mail use. Many items previously covered under Food Mail are no longer eligible under NNC, including: most non-perishable foods (which can be transported by more cost-effective means), some perishable foods (deemed to be low in nutri-

tional value), and many non-food necessities (e.g., disposable diapers, baby wipes, feminine hygiene products, bathroom tissue, dental care items, non-prescription drugs, hunting and fishing equipment).

Although touted by AANDC as being transparent and successful at lowering the cost of healthy food, Nutrition North Canada fails to fully benefit Northerners for the following reasons:

- NNC does not serve Northerners based on “actual need” or inability to afford food.
- There is no formal process by which new communities can apply to participate in NNC, nor a plan to expand the program or budget.
- NNC cannot guarantee that any savings are passed on by participating retailers to northern consumers.
- NNC’s cumbersome retailer obligations limit competition on which the program’s “market-driven model” relies to reduce food costs.
- As of 2011, the federal government no longer effectively monitors the cost of food in the North, since it relies exclusively on unverified food price data fed to AANDC by a few northern retailers participating in NNC.
- AANDC’s assumption that retailers would use more cost-effective methods (e.g., sealift, barges, winter roads, warehousing) to stock an adequate supply of non-perishable food and necessities has not materialized.
- NNC was implemented without meaningful consultation with residents of isolat-

ed northern communities and consideration of traditional foods.

AFB Actions

National Food Policy Process

The AFB provides a transparent, cross-sectoral, multi-stakeholder process to establish a national food policy. This process brings together civil society, experts, food business interests (including small-scale, local farmers and fishers), various levels of government involved in food policy and all relevant federal departments to examine national priorities for making our food system fairer (reducing hunger, ensuring economically viable farms and fisheries, and ensuring access for Indigenous peoples to their traditional food lands and water), healthier (reducing obesity and other chronic diseases), and more sustainable (reducing the environmental footprint and specifically greenhouse gas emissions associated with industrial food production).

National Student Nutrition Program

The AFB commits to pay 20% of the costs of a national mid-morning snack program delivering healthy, minimally processed and packaged foods from nearby farms to all elementary and secondary students. This program will be phased in over a three-year period, with a first-year allocation of \$200 million and the amount gradually increasing over time, according to local capacity and priorities, and the contributions of other levels of government. The federal contribution will build on existing partnerships at the local level rather than establish a new set of national priorities.¹⁵

To fund this initiative the AFB implements a 5-cent-per-litre tax on sugary soft drinks and energy drinks similar to that advocated by Quebec's Weight Coalition.¹⁶ Canadians consume over 3.5 billion litres of sugar-sweetened beverages per year.¹⁷ The tax should yield approximately \$150 million (roughly the entire first year of a three-year phase-in) while discouraging the consumption of unhealthy beverages that are much more costly in human and financial terms down the line.

Local Sustainable Procurement

The AFB adopts a policy that all federal institutions, offices, and crown corporations (including prisons and military bases) set a goal that 25% of foods served, where suitable, will be local and sustainable. The AFB also supports local and sustainable procurement policies at public institutions at the sub-federal level, including schools and hospitals. This means that no trade agreements or investment protection agreements will be signed if they restrict the ability of governments, crown corporations, or the broader public sector to implement preferences for local and sustainable food procurement.

No genetically modified organisms shall qualify as local and sustainable under these programs and specific policies will favour organic food and fair trade products when imported. The AFB financially supports certification programs related to local and sustainable food so that farmers do not bear those costs alone. Greenhouse gas emissions (e.g., for transportation) will be integrated into the comparative cost analysis of foods sourced locally vs. those shipped from a distance. Funding incentives will be devised to assist farmers to reduce the use of pesticides and to compensate for short-term losses that could

occur from transitioning to a less chemical-ly dependent mode of production.

Family Farms

The AFB launches a *Cultivating Agriculture* program that supports new, established and retiring farmers. The underlying goal of the program is to increase the number of farmers in Canada, reversing a seven-decade trend. The program consists of financial and educational components (Cost: \$650 million/yr.):

- Financial – income support and investment initiatives.
- Educational – training initiatives that cover production and specific business management needs of new and established farmers.

Financial Incentives

The financial component of *Cultivating Agriculture* will provide stability and new potential for farm operations by including:

- Net farm income targets and programs to attain those targets. Net farm income targets will ideally be obtained from the marketplace and cover average costs of sustainable production as well as a reasonable income and return on investment. When the net farm income targets cannot be met due to weather conditions or market failure, a capped aid program that supports appropriate-scale family farms will be available.
- Incentives (e.g., tax reductions or classifications) for sustainable agriculture practices such as those demonstrated through Environmental Farm Plans, or for environmental goods and services provided by farms (e.g., a tax reduction for floodplain

water management or migratory wildlife habitat provision).

- Effective and affordable financing programs for new and young farmers that minimize interest and debt. These will take the form of loan guarantees, “patient capital,” start-up grants and equity financing programs, as well as partial student loan forgiveness for those who remain in the profession for a minimum of five years.

Educational Incentives

The educational component of *Cultivating Agriculture* will foster knowledgeable and resilient farmers by establishing:

- Appropriate and responsive research and extension services focused on practices and technique rather than simple product development. These services will be delivered through farmer organizations and help farmers innovate, become resilient, farm better, and increase environmental goods and services. Farm organizations will set the research priorities and drive field and farm-centred innovations.
- New farmer training and support programs based on a sustainable livelihoods framework that provide business training, mentoring and apprenticeship programs, land-link and transfer programs, production practices, conservation strategies, marketing and market access. Programs tailored for new farmers will also include “farm experience” programs that help new entrants decide if agriculture is the right career for them.
- Extension services across Canada, utilizing a range of traditional and innovative service delivery models. Programs will

promote collaborative initiatives between agricultural organizations, new farmer initiatives, provincial and regional governments, and educational institutions.

Food Security for Northern Communities

The AFB supports food security in northern communities by increasing the funding for Nutrition North Canada to a level that allows all isolated communities to take full advantage of the program, estimated to be \$100 million annually. It also undertakes a review of the program and of the needs of all isolated communities to determine how best to support food security in northern communities.

An interim NNC program expansion will include:

- Additional funds to maintain current subsidy rates for all “full subsidy” communities as well as subsidies for all isolated communities at levels sufficient to bring prices into line with those in “full subsidy” communities, and consistent annual funding for education.
- An enhanced NNC education program with a focus on cooking classes.
- A surface transportation subsidy on healthy food and hunting/fishing supplies, and a warehousing subsidy.

The purpose of the review will be to revamp the NNC program to work for people, not corporations and will include:

- A full, arms-length evaluation of the NNC program
- A needs assessment of all isolated communities that takes the form of direct and transparent consultations with Northerners.

The results of the research undertaken will be combined with an evaluation of the efficacy of the program expansion to determine a nutrition program that truly serves northern communities.

Notes

1 Food Banks Canada. (2012). *Hunger Count 2012*, p. 4. (<http://www.foodbankscanada.ca/getmedia/3b946e67-fbe2-490e-90dc-4a313dfb97e5/HungerCount2012.pdf.aspx>)

2 *Resetting the Table: A People's Food Policy for Canada*. (2011). <http://peoplesfoodpolicy.ca/policy/resetting-table-peoples-food-policy-canada>

3 See, for example, the Declaration of Nyéléni: <http://www.nyeleni.org/spip.php?article290>

4 David Butler-Jones, *The Chief Public Health Officer's Report on the State of Public Health in Canada 2009*, (Ottawa: Public Health Agency of Canada, 2009) at 31.

5 Office of the Premier. *More Ontario-Grown Food in Schools, Hospitals*. April 6, 2009 (<http://news.ontario.ca/opo/en/2009/04/more-ontario-grown-food-in-schools-hospitals.html>)

6 City of Toronto Staff Report. *Local Food Procurement Policy and Implementation Plan – Update*. June 8, 2009. (www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2009/gm/bgrd/backgroundfile-22345.pdf)

7 Sinclair, Scott. *Negotiating from Weakness: Canada-EU Trade Treaty Threatens Canadian Purchasing Policies and Public Services*, Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

8 Shrybman, Steven. *Municipal Procurement Implications of the Proposed Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) between Canada and the European Union*, Vancouver: Centre for Civic Governance.

9 Statistics Canada. *Census of Agriculture 2011* (<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/95-640-x/2012002/00-eng.htm>)

10 James, Lois. *A Canadian Perspective on Intergenerational Farm Transfers and Succession Planning*. Ottawa, August 2007; International Farm Succession Conference. (Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.)

11 Source: Statistics Canada, 2006 Census of Population, Statistics Canada catalogue no. 97-563-XCB2006014 (Nunavut, Code62; Canada, Code01)

12 Statistics Canada. 2007. *Nunavut (Code62)* (table). *Aboriginal Population Profile*. 2006 Census. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 92-594-XWE. Ottawa. Released January 15, 2008.

13 Based on the 2005 weekly cost of the Revised Northern Food Basket in Nunavut communities. Source: <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100035967/1100100035969>

14 Source: <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100035925/1100100035926>

15 See Food Secure Canada submission to Standing Committee on Finance, November 20, 2012 at <http://foodsecurecanada.org/sites/foodsecurecanada.org/files/FinanceCommitteesubmission20nov2012.pdf>

16 <http://www.cqpp.qc.ca/en/priorities/tax-on-soft-and-energy-drinks>

17 Sugar-sweetened beverages in this context are defined as liquids that are sweetened with various forms of sugars (monosaccharides and/or disaccharides) that add calories. These beverages include, but are not limited to fruit-flavoured drinks, soft drinks, sports and energy drinks, and sweetened hot or cold drinks. See Health Canada's Childhood Obesity program: <http://www.healthcanadians.gc.ca/kids-enfants/obesity-obesite/risks-risques-eng.php>