

UN report highlights Canadian, local food security issues: How do we develop national and local food strategies?

Healthy food is the foundation of all communities. Food policy has become a growing area of municipal planning and policymaking in areas such as addressing:

- food production,
- distribution,
- access,
- consumption and waste management, and
- guiding how these systems influence our lives and our neighbourhoods.

This reflects a growing recognition that we are all affected by food decisions. Key to success is local governments' acknowledgement of their role in the development of just and sustainable food systems for their constituents.

In addition to vision statements, principles, and broad action goals pointing towards a coordinated municipal food strategy, food charters express key values and priorities for developing just and sustainable food systems

To create a food charter individuals and organizations from all aspects of the food system must participate, engage and be committed to finding creative solutions to local food challenges. The process to create a just and sustainable food system can create broad health, environmental, educational, economic, social, and cultural benefits for all of society.

Food policies typically focus on:

- land use planning,
- agriculture,
- emergency food distribution,
- food retail access,
- community health,
- waste management,
- environmental management, and
- community economic development.

A healthy community is built by integrating food decisions into these areas of municipal jurisdiction. Some things to consider as you read the results of research conducted by **Olivier De Schutter, Special Rapporteur on the right to food:**

"Canada has long been seen as a land of plenty. Yet today one in ten families with a child under six is unable to meet their daily food needs. These rates of food insecurity are unacceptable, and it is time for Canada to adopt a national right to food strategy." - Olivier De Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food.

Olivier De Schutter concluded his first official visit to Canada as **the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food**, a fact-finding mission and tour across the country conducted on the invitation of the Canadian Government. The Special Rapporteur on the right to food undertook an official visit to Canada, at the invitation of the Government, from 6 to 16 May 2012. The purpose of the mission was to examine the way in which the human right to adequate food is being realized in Canada.

In 11 days, Mr. De Schutter's tour included stops in Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Winnipeg and Edmonton to hear civil society deputations and conduct meetings with municipal, provincial and federal government authorities.

Some Facts to Consider:

- Canada is ranked sixth in the Human Development Index and has average GDP (Gross Domestic Product) per capita of USD 39,070.
- While the recent financial and economic crises have impacted Canada, with rising unemployment rates and a drop in income per capita, Canada has fared relatively well in comparison to its peers.
- However, the gaps between those living in poverty and the middle- and high-income segments of the population are widening, and growing number of people across Canada remain unable to meet their basic food needs.
- In 2007/2008, approximately 7.7 per cent of households in Canada reported experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity.
- Approximately 1.92 million people in Canada, aged 12 or older, lived in food insecure households in 2007/2008 and a staggering 1 in 10 families, 10.8 per cent, with at least one child under the age of six were food insecure during the same period.
- Fifty-five per cent of households in which the main source of income was social assistance are food insecure, the result of a huge discrepancy between social assistances levels and the rising costs of living.

- The failures of social assistance levels to meet the basic needs of households, have resulted in the proliferation of private and charity-based food supplements. In 2011, Food Banks Canada calculated that close to 900,000 Canadians were accessing food banks for assistance each month, slightly over half of whom were receiving social assistance.
- The First Nations Regional Longitudinal Health Survey (RHS 2008/10) indicates that 17.8 per cent of First Nations adults (age 25–39) and 16.1 per cent of First Nations adults (age 40–54) reported being hungry but did not eat due to lack of money for food in 2007/2008.
- Over one in four Canadian adults are obese, as are 8.6 per cent of children between the ages of 6-17.
- Overweight and obesity combined affect 62.1 per cent of the population. Obesity rates have increased significantly since the early 1980s, and it is becoming more severe.
- On-reserve First Nations have particularly high obesity rates, at 36 per cent in 2002-2003: the risk of dying from diabetes and its complications is five times higher among women living in First Nations communities than among Canadian women of the general population.
- The health impacts are considerable. Obesity alone cost the Canadian economy at least CAD 4.6 billion in 2008 in direct (health care) and indirect (lost productivity) costs, when taking into account the eight non-communicable diseases most frequently associated with obesity. Within remote Aboriginal communities, the consequences of high rates of diabetes are particularly disturbing, since specialized services may be inaccessible. (source: a joint report from the Public Health Agency of Canada and the Canadian Institute for Health Information based on 2007-2009 data).

The Legal Framework to Consider:

Canada has been a long time actor in the international human rights arena and has a strong domestic human rights reputation. Yet while Canada's record on civil and political rights has been impressive, the protection of economic and social rights, including the right to food, has been less exemplary. Canada is a party to:

- The International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) ratified on 19 May 1976,
- the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, ratified on 10 December 1981, and
- the Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified on 13 December 1991.

Canada has a duty to respect, protect and fulfil the right to food. Yet, does not currently afford constitutional or legal protection of the right to food domestically. The 1982 Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms protects a number of civil and political rights but has no substantive provisions protecting social and economic rights broadly, and the right to food.

The Policy Implications:

Canada has no national food policy or strategy. While important steps have been taken at the provincial level to address concerns relating to food security, no province has adopted a food strategy. A growing number of provinces are implementing or developing poverty reduction strategies, some of which have been enshrined in legislation, such as 2002 Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion in Quebec and the Poverty Reduction Act 2009 in Ontario. Provinces have taken steps to develop rural economies and encourage the production and consumption of local foods and adopted policies seeking to improve food security and promote healthy diets.

We need a National Food Strategy:

The Special Rapporteur found that Canada is in need of a national right to food strategy. National strategies can play a number of key roles in the promotion and protection of the right to food. National strategies:

1. allow for the improved horizontal and vertical coordination between relevant ministries at the federal level, as well as between the federal government and the provinces and territories.
2. can help identify, at the earliest stage possible, emerging threats to the right to adequate food, through adequate monitoring systems.
3. allow governments to do long-term planning on food issues.
4. can improve accountability, through the setting of targets, ideally associated with measurable indicators

Food Availability: agricultural policies:

Canada's agriculture and agrifood system is a key pillar of the country's economy, accounting for 8.1 per cent of national GDP and employing 2.1 million Canadians, roughly 13 per cent of all employment in the country.

Yet, the Special Rapporteur has heard many concerns about the general direction of agricultural policies such as:

- Since the 1950s, Canada has been moving to large-scale, input-intensive modes of production, leading to increasingly unsustainable farming practices and higher levels of greenhouse gas emissions, soil contamination, and erosion of biodiversity.
- Export-led policies in agriculture have resulted in increased concentration, vertical integration and buyer consolidation in the agri-food sector, leading to a 25 percent decrease in the number of farms between 1988 and 2007.
- Trade liberalization has been detrimental to many of Canada’s agricultural producers, whose net incomes have decreased and whose debt has increased dramatically over the past decades.
- As concentration increased in the farming sector, this sector has become heavily reliant on temporary foreign farm workers: approximately 30,000 migrant farm workers come to work in Canada each year under the federal government's Temporary Foreign Worker Programs.

”A thriving small-scale farming sector is essential to local food systems, and it is indeed these local food systems that food policy councils and localities throughout Canada now seek to strengthen”:

These systems can deliver considerable ecological and health benefits by increasing access to fresh and nutritious foods to children in schools, underserved urban and Northern remote communities as well as residents living in long-term care homes. Reference is given to a number of initiatives that seek to improve food and nutrition security and foster local markets at the municipal and provincial levels in particular through local procurement schemes and “buy local” labelling (such as Local Food Plus, FoodLand Ontario, Manitoba buy local).

However, the ability of all levels of government to use institutional sourcing as a way to encourage the transition towards a more sustainable food system may be restricted by legal requirements of non-discrimination imposed on public procurement. They may also be undermined by the negotiation of free trade agreements.

Canada faces other significant obstacles in transitioning to more sustainable and decentralized food systems.

- current food safety regulations do not meet the unique needs of less industrial, more seasonal, and alternative production methods.
- the government has taken steps to gradually dismantle existing orderly marketing systems. In 2011, the federal government passed Bill C-18 prohibiting the 75-year old Canadian Wheat Board (CWB) from operating as a single-desk selling agency.
- In parallel, the government has revised the governance structure and mandate of the Canadian Grain Commission. The robust grading, inspection and governance system of the Canadian Grain Commission has been undermined as a result.

Food Accessibility: protecting access to adequate food for the poorest:

- Canada has developed a solid social protection system to protect people living in poverty, comprised of measures such as income security,
- education benefits and
- employment support.

However the number of those suffering from hunger and poverty has been growing in recent years, further reinforcing the link between food insecurity and poverty. Poverty affects some 3 million Canadians, of whom more than 600,000 are children. In First Nations families, one in four children live in poverty. As social protection schemes and minimum wages fail to meet people's basic daily needs, an increasing number are turning to food banks in Canada. According to information received, 2011 witnessed high rates of food bank use, with nearly 900,000 people depending on them in one month.

In the view of the Special Rapporteur:

- social assistance levels need to be increased immediately to correspond to the costs of basic necessities; it should be regularly indexed to real living costs;
- and a housing benefit paid outside the social assistance system should be guaranteed, to ensure that the poorest families are not obliged to sacrifice food in order to pay for the non-compressible and non-divisible costs of housing.
- the minimum wage set in legislation should be, at least, a "living wage," that "provides an income allowing workers to support themselves and their families," as required under articles 6 and 7 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.
- Continued support must be given to initiatives that have been taken to address public health and economic challenges at the municipal, provincial and federal levels to support healthy living.
- National and local food strategies should be developed.

Resources:

Draft report: "Northumberland County ...and Food Policy", May, 2012

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/story/2012/05/16/pol-un-canada-food-security.html>

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/health-minister-acknowledges-northern-food-issues-but-maintains-un-criticism/article2441150/>

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