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**Food Secure Canada**  
Healthy - Just - Sustainable



# From Patchwork to Policy Coherence: Principles and Priorities of Canada's National Food Policy

*Discussion Paper*  
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**Food Secure Canada**

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## Executive Summary

It’s no secret that we need a national food policy. However, it’s also clear that not just any old national food policy will do. We need one that is coherent, democratic, integrated and created to benefit all people. This discussion paper is intended as a starting point in figuring out what this might look like and how we can get there. Rather than a specific roadmap or set of policy recommendations, the focus is on big ideas, kick-starting important conversations and highlighting crucial areas of consideration. Our hope is that it provides the foundation for fruitful discussions, consensus-building and problem solving in the months and years to come.

Taking the People’s Food Policy as a founding document, and drawing on Food Secure Canada’s Eat Think Vote Campaign, as well as the federal government’s stated priorities and objectives, Food Secure Canada has identified the following key process principles and policy priorities for Canada’s National Food Policy:

### *Process Principles:*

Systems-based  
Democratic Governance  
Nation-to-Nation Relationships  
Adaptive Policy for Social Innovation

### *Policy Priorities*

The Right to Food and Food Sovereignty  
Environment and Climate Resiliency  
Healthy and Sustainable Diets  
Inclusive and Equitable Growth through Regional Food Systems

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## Introduction

Food is many things to many people. It is a source of nourishment, an expression of identity and culture, a vital economic sector and a critical contributor to the health of our people, our environment and the stewardship of our natural resources. Food is not simply a commodity but a central aspect of our social, cultural, historical and environmental realities.

Unfortunately, our current food system also contains many contradictions and persistent challenges related to production, distribution and consumption that need to be addressed:

- Canada is one of the largest agricultural exporters in the world, yet four million Canadians (including 1.15 million children) experience food insecurity (PROOF: Food Insecurity Policy Research). Rates of food insecurity are twice as high among Indigenous populations, and high levels of hunger prevail in parts of northern Canada.<sup>1</sup>
- Diet-related disease is the leading cause of death in Canada (Global Burden of Disease Study 2010).<sup>2</sup> The consumption of highly processed food full of salt and sugar contributes to chronic diseases (cardiovascular, diabetes, obesity) that threaten to overwhelm our health care system (Moss 2013).
- Food waste is a growing problem, costing Canadians an estimated \$31 billion dollars every year (Gooch and Felfel 2014). In addition to financial costs, food waste has a damaging effect on our environment and carbon footprint.
- With one in eight jobs connected to our food system, Canadian agriculture is vital to our economy, yet farm renewal is a growing concern. Since 1991, we have lost more than a quarter of the farms across Canada, many of them small- to medium-sized farms (Beaulieu, 2015). We support small farmers overseas but encourage bigger, more industrial farms at

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<sup>1</sup> See the findings of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food's Mission to Canada (2012).

<sup>2</sup> See also Community Food Centres Canada's Diet-Related Diseases and Healthy Eating Report.

<sup>3</sup> Ecological refers to practices that improve, maintain and/or protect soil health, water and air quality, nutrient

<sup>2</sup> See also Community Food Centres Canada's Diet-Related Diseases and Healthy Eating Report.

home. We lack the necessary policies and programs to support farm succession, particularly for new farmers coming from non-farming backgrounds, and we need to do more to encourage the shift to sustainable farming practices.

- The global food system (including production, transportation, processing and land-use changes) accounts for nearly half of our greenhouse gas emissions (GRAIN 2011), and 50% of Canadians are “extremely” or “definitely” concerned about the effects of climate change (EnviroNics 2015). Canadian farmers are vulnerable to climate-based volatilities, yet we lack a strong framework to encourage more ecological practices.<sup>3</sup> In addition, our food system is contributing to the depletion of our natural resources and ecosystem services at an alarming rate and threatening the long-term viability of the overall ecosystems upon which our food system depends.
- Strong public trust in Canada’s food system is essential; however, only 30% of Canadians feel Canada’s food system is heading in the right direction. Millennials in particular have a low level of trust, with only 66% expressing confidence in Canada’s food system. As Canadians are increasingly concerned about food safety, the rising cost of food, the humane treatment of farm animals and the sustainability of the food system, they need to see concrete action based on sound evidence and a clear articulation of shared values (Canadian Centre for Food Integrity 2016). Maintaining and strengthening public trust and social licence requires deeper multi-sectoral analysis and engagement than has been provided to date.

With a patchwork of government policies, programmes and strategies, within multiple departments and at various levels of government, the current approach is inadequate. The problem is not necessarily a lack of will or interest: what is missing is an approach that recognizes how these issues are interrelated and how an exclusive focus on one goal can have unanticipated consequences for another. For example, the use of neonics and antibiotics in crop and livestock production may increase agricultural yields but compromises human and environmental health. To comprehensively address these complex issues, we need a national food policy that will take a multi-stakeholder, systems-based approach to managing our food system. We need food policy coherence.

## The moment

*“In particular, I will expect you to work with your colleagues and through established legislative, regulatory, and Cabinet processes to deliver on your top priorities: (...) Develop a food policy that promotes healthy living and safe food by putting more healthy, high-quality food, produced by Canadian ranchers and farmers, on the tables of families across the country.” Rt. Hon. Justin Trudeau, from mandate letter to Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food Hon. Lawrence MacAulay.*

The mandate to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food to lead the development of a national food policy is an important step forward to create the comprehensive, integrated framework our food system needs to be economically vibrant, environmentally sustainable, healthy and socially just.

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<sup>3</sup> Ecological refers to practices that improve, maintain and/or protect soil health, water and air quality, nutrient management, natural pollination, carbon sequestration while limiting greenhouse gas emissions and the use of non-renewable resources.

It will be a challenge as our food system is complex and currently governed by a fragmented policy landscape lacking common principles and priorities to connect jurisdictions and departments. A national food policy needs to embrace this complexity by using a food-system lens. We need to increase collaboration across government jurisdictions and departments as well as across societal sectors, bringing diverse actors together to generate solutions.

We need a national food policy that will bring coherence to the food system by encouraging:

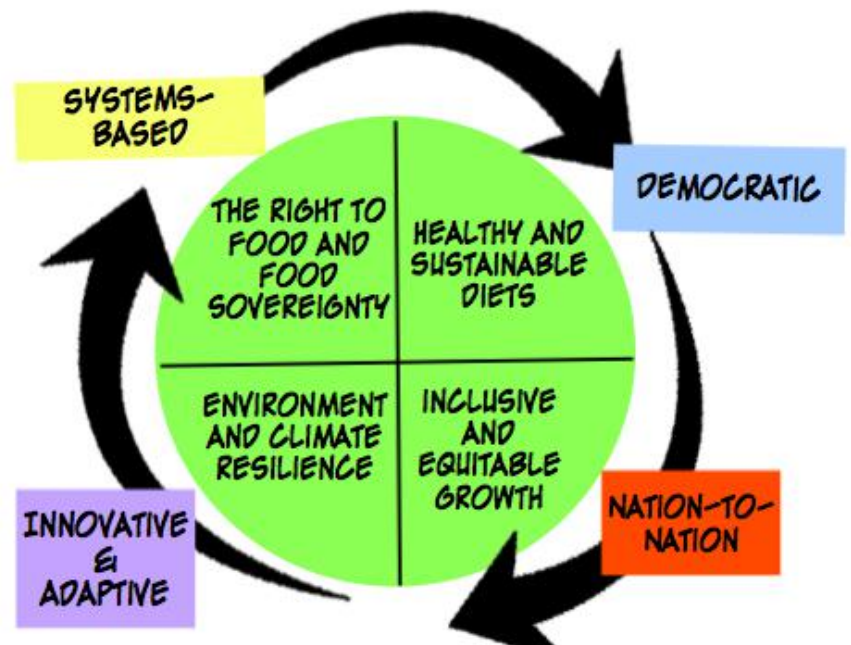
- **Collaboration** of civil society, government and private sector;
- **Coordination** across government departments and jurisdictions;
- **Place-based adaptations** to diverse geographies and contexts;
- Building on **sound evidence and strong principles**; and
- **Innovation** with support for community programs, not simply technology.



## Principles and Priorities of a National Food Policy

Over the coming year, there will be many opportunities for discussion, dialogue and consensus-building among various stakeholders, including government, business and civil society, to elaborate a national food policy. As we begin these conversations, Food Secure Canada has identified key **process principles** and **policy priorities**, drawn from the People's Food Policy Project (2011) and the Eat Think Vote campaign (2015) and presented as they relate to the government's stated priority pillars of health, food security, environment and sustainable growth.

Building a comprehensive and effective national food policy requires a consideration of both **process principles** and **policy priorities**: *What do we want to achieve and how can we get there?* Together they provide a path to building a healthy, just and sustainable food system that contributes to the Canadian economy and societal well-being.



*FSC's vision of process principles and priority outcomes*

## Process Principles

The process of building and implementing a national food policy should be both inclusive and long-term, inclusive of all the components of our food system as well as all of its actors. We also need to be thinking not only of the years ahead, but of the generations to come. Finally, a food policy should also respond to Canada's international commitments, including achieving the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals and upholding the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). To achieve this requires a commitment to **systems-based policy making**, **democratizing governance** and **nation-to-nation relationships**, and **adaptive policy management for social innovation**.

### Systems-based Policy Making

The current government has made a commitment to bringing a new style of leadership, that is innovative, collaborative and inclusive of a multitude of voices. This is precisely the kind of approach needed to build a national food policy. We need to move from an approach that divides health, environment, agriculture and the economy into different domains to a systems approach that links them into a comprehensive and integrated framework. Systems thinking is defined by the World Health Organization as “an approach to problem solving that views ‘problems’ as part of a wider, dynamic system. Through an increased understanding of a system's fundamental characteristics, systems thinking allows us to see with greater precision how systems work” (WHO 2009). It is about seeing the big picture and identifying strategic leverage points for integrated solutions.

Central to this is a recognition of the multifunctionality of food and the food system. The current fragmented nature of our food and agriculture policy works to divide and isolate these food-based issues, many of which have common causes. Food insecurity and hunger, food waste, diet-related disease and corporate consolidation are all symptoms of what is wrong with our food system. We often try to solve societal issues with approaches that address the symptoms rather than the causes of a deeper problem (Tendall et al. 2015). These well-intentioned yet counterproductive solutions do not fully account for the many forces that feed into a problem.

*“At present, the complexity of food systems is driving siloed thinking and action. Creating a transformation in the world's food systems which realizes all four aspirations [Inclusive, Sustainable, Efficient and Nutritious and Health] and drives progress across multiple SDGs will require a holistic approach.” World Economic Forum 2017*

An integrated approach to Canada's food system will connect these issues and bring to light unintended consequences and hidden externalities by focusing on the relationships between priorities and objectives. It will stimulate horizontal collaboration, cultivating an approach to our food system that is greater than the sum of its parts. Rather than trying to fix each problem one by one, this systems approach will look at the relationships among the different parts and coordinate interventions on critical leverage points. For example, a systems perspective would bring an analysis of the social determinants of health to expose the higher levels of chronic disease among low-income groups. This suggests the need for interaction between health policy, income support programs and dietary guidelines.

This systems perspective will lead to a joined-up policy environment that “unites activities across all pertinent domains, scales, actors and jurisdictions” and integrates a diverse array of tools and governance structures (MacRae and Winfield 2016). This is not to say that focused, individual issue-specific initiatives have no place: many of the issues highlighted above do require individual attention. Rather, a systems-based national food policy can improve the effectiveness of these initiatives by outlining a set of core principles and priorities and identifying interdependencies. Shared policy levers can create change on multiple fronts. For example, the [Canadian Poverty Reduction Strategy](#) could include specific targets and mechanisms that would reduce food insecurity in northern Canada, in line with a revamped [Nutrition North](#): just as the next [Agricultural Policy Framework](#) could include funding for local food promotion programs in support of healthy eating as promoted by a revised [Canada’s Food Guide](#). By focusing on the underlying causes and relationships between these different symptoms, the government will be able to more effectively and efficiently develop policy responses that address the full picture in a coherent and consistent manner.

## Democratizing Governance

To realize the goals and objectives of building a sustainable, healthy and just food system, the process of developing and implementing a national food policy needs to enable democratic, transparent, accountable and strategic decision-making. We need mechanisms for diverse stakeholders—civil society, Indigenous peoples, the private sector and other levels of government—to contribute to both the creation of policy and its continued stewardship. Industry and government are comparatively well-resourced to provide input, but it is more challenging for the non-profit sector and traditionally marginalized groups to be heard. It is essential that those actors be financially supported to participate if a government-led engagement process is to be credible.

Key to any process of multi-stakeholder engagement is a commitment to deep and meaningful forms of participation, backed by transparent and accountable mechanisms of implementation. As McKeon argues “such approaches require clear parameters to ensure effective participation by the marginalized and to avoid corporate capture” (2017). Those that bear the brunt of the current challenges of our food system - Indigenous peoples, racialized communities, migrant workers, low-income earners, small-scale farmers and fishers - require support and dedicated space to ensure their voices are heard. McKeon suggests a framing of “participatory multi-actor deliberation” as a way to ensure that questions of power, roles and responsibility are front and centre.

The People’s Food Policy calls for “an inclusive and enabling policy environment requir[ing] institutions and organizing structures that facilitate public participation in shaping policies, norms, values, and rules.” Citizens - whether eaters, producers, workers or food entrepreneurs— want a say in how their food is produced and where it comes from and want to play an active role in bringing about the necessary changes to our food system. In addition, bringing in the voices of different stakeholders to share information, insights and experience can surface innovations and solutions not captured through traditional policy-building mechanisms.

One proposal to ensure inclusive, transparent stewardship is the creation of a National Food Policy Council. A National Food Policy Council would involve a group of stakeholders from across the food system that rarely talk to each other to discuss and act on food issues, enabling democratic, systems-based policy processes and ensuring the inclusion of a diversity of perspectives and experiences in proposing and enacting solutions to chronic food-system problems (McNicoll nd).

## Nation-to-Nation Relationships

Fundamental to any national policy, but particularly to a national food policy is respecting a nation-to-nation process with First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. A Canadian national food policy must acknowledge the history and ongoing legacy of colonialism that often used food as a tool of oppression and marginalization<sup>4</sup> and prioritize reconciliation and decolonization as key guiding principles of our food system. This requires respect for treaty rights and a commitment to building nation-to-nation relationships with First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples in Canada. Indigenous knowledge, ways of knowing and cultural practices must be respected and encouraged, and hunting, fishing and gathering must be acknowledged as key food provisioning activities alongside farming and ranching.

Many indigenous perspectives on food articulate a unique and distinct understanding of food provisioning and its connection to culture, community and the environment. For example, the Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty (2015) speaks of a “complex system of bio-cultural heritage in the forest, fields and waterways” and calls on the federal government to respect Indigenous jurisdiction as a key strategy to address the environmental and social injustices of colonialism that continue to impact Indigenous hunting, fishing, farming and gathering. Indigenous communities are best positioned to articulate the challenges they face and to identify and implement potential solutions. The Canadian government, non-Indigenous civil society and private-sector actors can collaborate with Indigenous-led organizations and initiatives working to address food-related challenges in their communities.<sup>5</sup>

The process of building a national food policy should take inspiration from the First Principles Protocol developed by the Indigenous Circle of the People’s Food Policy (2010), which calls for policy processes to work with Indigenous communities, drawing on their rich experience and expertise, as well as the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015). This may mean developing a separate protocol or framework, or it may mean developing policies within the national food policy that commit to fulfilling the calls to action of the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission and support the development of Indigenous-led food systems.

## Seeding Social Innovation through Adaptive Policy

Canada is a large country with many regions and populations that face different issues. For national food policy to lead to real change in our food system, it cannot take a one-size-fits-all approach. It will have to navigate jurisdictional issues, regional differences, a variety of socio-cultural cleavages and unforeseeable circumstances. This level of complexity must be managed adaptively, which will require flexibility in how the national food policy is implemented and an openness to experimentation and continual learning.

Adaptive policy is an approach to policy-building that is future-oriented and dynamic. Policy-makers are faced with growing environmental, economic and social uncertainties at the domestic and global level. To remain effective in this context, policies need to adapt to a range of unanticipated conditions

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<sup>4</sup> See Daschuk (2013) and Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015).

<sup>5</sup> See for example, the Sustainable Water Governance and Indigenous Law, a research partnership developing an Indigenous-led water monitoring program in the north: <http://www.decolonizingwater.ca/>



and contingencies (Venema and Drexhage 2009). As Walker et al. note, “context is key, in that policies that work in one instance may not work in another” (2001).

As described by Heifetz and Linsky (2002), different kinds of challenges require different kinds of responses. They make a key distinction between technical-based challenges, which can be addressed by existing authorities with current know-how and challenges that require the adoption of new attitudes, values and behaviours. This is an adaptive approach, drawing on “experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community.” Further, Swanson et al. (2009) suggest that adaptive approaches include an integrated and forward-looking analysis, multi-stakeholder deliberation, decentralization of decision-making, promotion of variation and continuous learning.

A key element of this adaptive approach is an openness to social innovation. Our food system is changing and will continue to change in the years and decades to come. As a result, we need to create a space for social innovation within the policy-building process and within the framework itself. Innovation is not just about new technologies or scientific breakthroughs; sometimes the most significant insight comes not from a lab or research facility, but can come from prototypes developed in communities. For example, healthy corner store initiatives are leveraging partnerships with existing local businesses to improve fresh, local food access in low-income communities and have the potential for scaling nationally. Technological and scientific developments have an important role to play in strengthening our food system, but a sustainable, viable, healthy and just food system is one that is open to a wide range of new ideas, approaches and partnerships.

Adaptive food policy will also help to encourage greater overall resiliency of our food system. Tendall et al. (2015) suggest that an emphasis on resiliency creates an “opportunity to eradicate weaknesses and build capacities in the food system while dealing with future uncertainty.” Resiliency and sustainability can be thought of as complimentary, as two complimentary sides of the same coin. Resiliency creates the capacity to weather challenges and uncertainty, and sustainability ensures the long-term prosperity and viability our food system.

## Policy Priorities

In this section we outline key policy priorities that are essential to creating a healthy, just, sustainable food system: *realizing the right to food, healthy and sustainable diets, environment and climate resilience and inclusive and equitable growth through regional economies.*

### Realizing the Right to Food and Working towards Food Sovereignty

*Food is a human right, and Canada has an international legal obligation to respect it.*

First and foremost, Canada’s national food policy needs to be founded in a recognition of the right to food of all residents and communities within Canada. Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights includes “the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living

for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions” and “the fundamental right to freedom from hunger and malnutrition.” The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food elaborates further: “the right to food is the right to have regular, permanent and unrestricted access, either directly or by means of financial purchases, to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and which ensure a physical and mental, individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free of fear.” The right to food includes the key elements of availability, accessibility and adequacy.

This rights-based approach commits to the long-term goal of ending, not merely reducing, hunger and food insecurity. Social and economic rights are not expected to be realized overnight, but we can commit to core minimum standards as a starting point and work towards progressive realisation over time. As one of the largest agricultural producers and wealthiest countries in the world, we have the capacity to ensure domestic access to nutritious food and achieve zero hunger. But beyond realizing the right to food for all Canadians, we should strive towards a process that will lead to the application of the principles of food sovereignty, which has, at its heart, reclaiming public decision-making power in the food system.

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems (La Via Campesina). Food sovereignty is thus an articulation of principles related to how a food system should function and key values that should inform decision-making processes. As the Canadian Council of Academics (2014) notes:

*while food security focuses on the pillars of food access, availability, acceptability, adequacy, and use to ensure that all people at all times have physical, social and economic access to food, food sovereignty is based on the principle that decisions about food systems, including markets, production modes, food cultures, and environments, should be made by those who depend on them.*

A national food policy should take a holistic approach to realizing the right to food that centres food access and availability (issues of food security) within a recognition of the multifunctionality of food and a commitment to creating space for all members of society to contribute to the governance of our food system, thus working towards food sovereignty. In fact, one could argue that, in part, the reason four million Canadians are food insecure and that local food producers have such complex production challenges is precisely that they are not at the policy-making table where their needs could be prioritized. Canada’s national food policy should articulate key goals such as respect for the right to food and a reduction of diet-related disease while simultaneously strengthening civil engagement and democratic participation.

Of particular concern are the levels of food insecurity experienced in Northern Canada and within First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities. The high cost of food in northern and remote communities, as well as diminished access to traditional or country foods for Indigenous communities, has created an alarming situation that must be a top priority. Food insecurity rates in the territories

are well above the national Canadian average:<sup>6</sup> 46.8% in Nunavut and 24.1% in the Northwest Territories (Canadian Community Health Survey 2014). A rights-based approach would recognize that such extreme levels of hunger are violations of international law requiring immediate redress. A food-systems or food-sovereignty approach would highlight the importance of communities being empowered to access and govern traditional land-based foods and wild protein from rivers, lakes and oceans in strengthening food access and availability.

Food insecurity levels are also disproportionately high among immigrant communities (Health Canada, 2010) and low-income communities. This highlights the importance of holistic approaches to combatting food insecurity. For example, research indicates that food insecurity levels are significantly reduced in seniors due to the provision of Old Age Security, a form of basic income (McIntyre et al 2016). It is well established that the single overwhelming cause of food insecurity is income insecurity, and any strategy that attempts to address food insecurity without addressing the primary cause - poverty - is bound to fail to reduce the numbers of food-insecure households in this country.

### *Potential Policy Instruments and Mechanisms*

- Overhaul Nutrition North to improve access and affordability of food while strengthening northern regional food systems, including public support for programmes enhancing access to country and traditional foods.
- Through Canada's Poverty Reduction Strategy, improve social programs (ex. Federal minimum wage, Employment Insurance, pensions, housing, child tax benefits) and work to ensure there is an income floor below which no Canadian will fall, so that everyone can afford adequate, nutritious food.
- Ensure that international trade and investment agreements do not undermine public programs that enhance the respect for human rights, sustainable livelihoods and/or food sovereignty.

### **Healthy and Sustainable Diets**

*To create a coherent national food policy, Canada needs dietary guidelines that integrate nutrition and sustainability.*

“Food sits at the intersection of environmental, nutritional and health concerns, and is both cause and consequence of some of the most pressing challenges we face today” (Food and Climate Research Network). The way Canadians eat affects not only their health but also impacts climate change and the environment. Canadians of all ages do not consume enough fruits and vegetables, and too many of the calories we consume come from highly processed foods.<sup>7</sup> We need to address unhealthy diets to reduce the rapidly growing rates of diet-related disease that threaten to overwhelm our health care system. A 2014 study suggests that 30,000 deaths could be averted or delayed every year if Canadians adhered to dietary guidelines, particularly in regard to the consumption of fruits and vegetables (Belanger et al.).

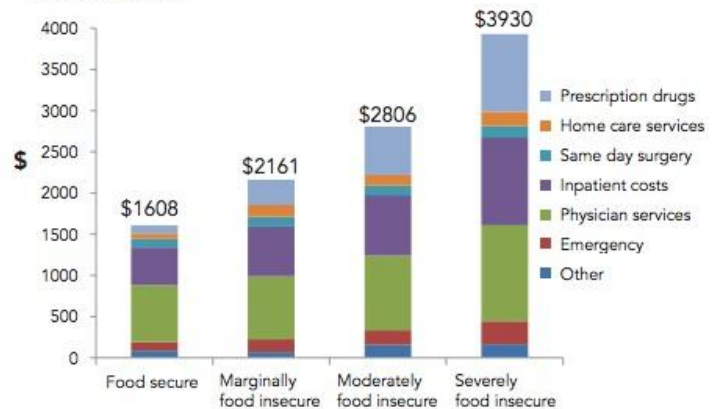
<sup>6</sup> PROOF estimates that in 2012, 12.7% percent of households in Canada experienced some degree of food insecurity. See <http://proof.utoronto.ca/food-insecurity/> for more details.

<sup>7</sup> Minaker and Hammond (2013) found that only 10% of youth consume the recommended number of fruits and vegetables. In addition, 60% of the calories Canadians consume come from ultra-processed food (i.e. packaged salty, oily snacks, confectionary, soft drinks, frozen breakfast foods, packaged pizzas, and instant noodles) (Moubarac et al. 2013).

Due to the increasing costs of many high-quality, nutritious foods, Canadians who experience poverty are more vulnerable to these chronic diet-related health challenges (Ontario Food and Nutrition Strategy Group 2017). Therefore we also need to address the specific challenges food insecure Canadians face in accessing a healthy diet.

Often not accounted for, household food insecurity takes a tremendous toll on the health care system. PROOF researchers have identified in one study in Ontario that health care costs are higher than average for the people living with food insecurity: 23% higher for marginally food-insecure households, 49% higher for moderately food-insecure households and 121% higher for severely food-insecure households (Tarasuk et al. 2015).

Average health care costs incurred over 12 months by Ontario adults (18-64 years of age), by household food insecurity status<sup>7</sup>



It is also urgent to support a next generation of healthier Canadians. Research demonstrates a link between healthy diets in children and proper physical and cognitive development, increased educational outcomes and a reduced risk of chronic disease development in adulthood (Health Canada 2012). Canadian children, however, face significant challenges related to diet: only one third of those between the ages of four and thirteen consume five or more servings of fruits and vegetables, and nearly a quarter of children’s calorie consumption comes from foods not recommended by Canada’s Food Guide (Garriguet 2006). As a result of unhealthy eating behaviours, childhood obesity has tripled in the last three decades (Health Canada 2016), leading the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health to call it an epidemic (Parliament of Canada 2007).

The concept of “sustainable diets” has emerged as a lens through which to explore the various connections between human health and environmental sustainability. A sustainable-diets framework poses the question, “How can shifting diets—the type, combination, and quantity of foods people consume—contribute to a healthier population and a more sustainable food future?” As argued by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), “if we are to address the multiple social, health and environmental challenges caused by, and affecting food systems, global populations need to move towards dietary patterns that are both healthy and also respectful of environmental limits” (2016).

The emerging evidence suggests that we can address both healthy eating and sustainability with the same dietary guidance. Shifting diets to foods that are locally and sustainably produced with an increased consumption of plant-based foods and a reduced consumption of meat and processed foods is good for our health and our planet. In addition to meeting our nutritional needs, healthy food should be understood as coming from food-production systems that sustain our natural resources, advance the well-being of animals, and sustain the overall health of communities and cultures. On the production side, this requires a shift in agricultural and fisheries policy to ensure the availability of sustainable foods and encourage producers to shift to more ecological practices, as well as support for marketing and distribution. This framing also suggests a related shift in public health policy, away from a unique focus on health care interventions that treat disease to preventative approaches to support key indicators of health and well-being, such as food and income security.

Beyond including a sustainability lens, healthy eating policy should move away from a strict focus on nutrients towards a more holistic set of principles and advice. One example to consider is Brazil’s food-based dietary guidelines.<sup>8</sup> Rather than focusing on food groups, Canada’s Food Guide could provide guidelines that speak to food choices and meal preparation, such as eating more whole foods, staying away from processed foods and trying to cook more at home rather than eating out. These guidelines could also be expanded to include a food labelling and media literacy aspect, alongside much-needed restrictions on food marketing to kids. Finally, encouraging public institutions such as schools, hospitals and long-term care facilities to develop local and sustainable institutional food purchasing policies is vital, as it creates necessary healthy and sustainable food options outside of the home, in addition to sending a clear public policy signal about how public dollars on food will be spent to meet health and sustainability objectives.

A sustainable-diets approach will have additional economic and environmental outcomes by encouraging more resilient local food systems and more ecological food-production methods. Through a coordinated approach that promotes healthy eating and sustainability, we can have a healthier population and decrease pressures on our health care system from diet-related disease, while strengthening the sustainability and productivity of Canadian food businesses.

### *Potential Policy Instruments and Mechanisms*

- Integrate concepts of sustainability, levels of food processing, cultural diversity and encourage a more plant-based diet in Canada’s Food Guide, creating a strong policy link between healthy eating and sustainable food production.<sup>9</sup>
- Develop initiatives to increase Canadians’ food literacy while simultaneously implementing restrictions on marketing to kids and improved nutrition labelling.
- Create a national healthy school food program to ensure that all school children have access to healthy, nutritious meals every day. This, and other health promotion programs geared toward children, could be funded by a sugar-sweetened beverage tax.
- Set targets for local, sustainable food and beverage procurement by public institutions such as hospitals, long-term care facilities and schools to ensure the food they serve is fresh, sustainable, locally grown/sourced and promotes healthy eating.

### **Environment and Climate Resilience**

*“...if we are to address our environmental problems, adapt to climate change and create a more food secure, nutrition enhancing food future then the current food system needs to change.” Tara Garnett, Food Climate Research Network.*

A national food policy should be concerned not only with the current food system but also with the food system of future generations. A key element of this is ensuring our food system is built on the principle of sustainable development, which the United Nations defines as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own

<sup>8</sup> See Ministry of Health, Brazil (2014). Dietary Guidelines for the Brazilian Population. <http://www.foodpolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/Brazilian-Dietary-Guidelines-2014.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> See *Eat Healthy Stay Healthy: A Call for Action to Implement a Healthy Food Policy Agenda* (2016) for additional, more specific recommendations on diet and health.

needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). There is a deep and complex relationship between the environment and our food system whereby agriculture affects, and is in turn affected by, our natural environment. They are inherently connected, as the health of our soils, waterways, and air directly impacts our ability to grow and harvest food.

Unfortunately, our current food system, is a leading contributor to climate change, and food prices inadequately reflect environmental costs such as water and air pollution related to food production and distribution. Although Canada does not have good environmental performance data for our food system, globally, 30%-50% of total greenhouse gas emissions are thought to be a product of food systems (European Commission 2006, Vermeulen et al. 2012, GRAIN 2011). In Canada, ten % of greenhouse gas emissions are directly attributed to industrial agriculture practices including the use of nitrogen fertilizers, fossil fuel combustion and synthetic pesticides (Environment and Climate Change Canada 2016). These practices contribute to the acceleration of climate change, leaving producers, and our food system as a whole, in an increasingly vulnerable position.

We are also facing a crisis in our fisheries and coastal communities and pollution of our waterways, forests and soil from development of the oil, mining and forestry industries. Sewage pollution and industrial contaminant spills threaten plant and animal species: a 2010 report documented 2,500 violations of Ontario water pollution laws (Ecojustice 2013, 2010). A federally funded study confirmed that oil sands toxins are finding their way into groundwater and the Athabasca river, concluding that “industry’s role as a decades-long contributor of PAHs [Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons] to oil sands lake ecosystems is now clearly evident” (Kurek et al 2013).

Only a quarter of Canada’s fish stock are considered to be at healthy levels, and the lack of species diversity in Canada’s seafood industry leaves many coastal communities vulnerable to further stock declines (Oceana 2016). Changes to the Fisheries Act in 2012 eroded the scope of habitat protection, despite it being seen as “the single greatest factor responsible for the decline and loss of commercial and noncommercial species on land and in water” (Hutchings and Post 2013).

With an eye towards helping the food, agricultural and fisheries sectors adapt to and mitigate climate change, food policy is an opportunity to innovate and scale up food production approaches that protect and improve the quality of air, soil and water. Industrial agriculture is beginning to shift towards more environmental practices, but there are also other regenerative agricultural models that already exist. They need more support to scale out and accelerate change to effectively address climate change in time. These include organic and agroecological approaches to farming, as well as ensuring policy is inclusive of small-scale, diversified farms.

The federal government has acknowledged the importance of shifting Canadian agriculture to more ecological and climate-resilient practices, with “Environment and Climate Change” identified as one of the key pillars of the next Federal-Provincial Agricultural Policy Framework (The Calgary Statement 2016). This prioritization needs to continue through the national food policy. To do this, we must move away from the current resource-intensive and significantly fossil-fuel-based model of agriculture to one that supports and encourages a range of scales, methods of production and market channels and helps the industry as a whole move towards more ecological production practices. Maintaining and properly managing our marine environment so that it is able to support commercially viable fisheries and aquaculture will also help to mitigate climate change and support food security for coastal communities in particular.

Climate change is a key priority, but it is not the only pressing concern. A narrow focus on climate change adaptation will not be sufficient. We need a paradigm shift that re-orientes our food production policies away from a strict prioritization of industrial scale and growth to embrace a more diverse and ecological approach that will ensure prosperity for farmers, fishers and ranchers, not only in the short-term, but for generations to come (IPES 2016). There are signs that a diversity of producers and consumers are already leading the way. Organic acreage in Canada increased by 70,000 acres between 2014 and 2015, with just nearly 2.5 million acres now under organic production. In addition, between 2012 and 2015, there was a 37% increase in the amount of organic imports, suggesting that increasing domestic processing of organic products is a key opportunity for growth within Canada's food and agriculture sector (COTA 2017).

We need a food system that values natural resources and ecosystem services as its foundation. Much like the application of systems-thinking to food policy, a systems approach to agriculture and fisheries contextualizes them within a broader ecosystem or food environment and highlights the interactions between plants, animals, humans and the environment. Overall, Canada's agri-environmental performance is weak relative to many other OECD countries (Gunton and Calbick 2010). The development of a national food policy is an opportunity for Canada to position its agricultural, fisheries and food sectors as leaders in environmental innovation and sustainability.

A joined-up policy approach is particularly important amidst growing concerns over the threats to biodiversity from increasing corporate concentration within seed and agrochemical industries and the spread of genetically modified organisms (ETC Group 2016). The pursuit of growth and investment needs to be contextualized within a broader conversation on ecosystem health and the ability of all farmers and fishers to thrive (not just large corporate actors). Sustainability and economic growth can be mutually supportive, but this will require a rethink on priorities (eg. valuing both domestic and international markets, implementing the precautionary principle).<sup>10</sup>

### *Potential Policy Instruments and Mechanisms*

- Through the next Agricultural Policy Framework, incentivize and reward best practices in environmental sustainability and climate resiliency.
- Revise Canada's Fisheries Act to better protect fish habitats and support sustainable fisheries in coastal communities.
- Improve the independent assessment and transparency around pesticide approval processes and expand the scope of strategies within the Pesticide Risk Reduction Program (PRRP) and provide additional funding for implementation projects.

### **Inclusive and Equitable Growth through Regional Food Systems**

The recent report from the Advisory Council on Economic Growth (2017) positions the Canadian agriculture and agri-food sector as a key site of growth and innovation for the national economy. Having strong and economically viable agriculture and agri-food sectors is an absolute necessity (as are robust fisheries). This imperative is not exclusive to large businesses and multinational corporations: small-scale farmers, fishers, processors and retailers must also thrive in order for Canada to have a truly sustainable and resilient food system. Through innovative policy that supports

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Clapp 2016

the positive contributions of agriculture and fisheries to health, the environment and food security, we can strengthen public trust and enhance sustainable growth.

A national food policy should encourage a diversity of agricultural practices and scales, not only industrial-scale commodity production for export. This includes expanded support for food production for domestic and local markets as well as small-scale, ecological production systems and investments that defend people's ability to access land and control over productive resources.

Across the country, small rural towns, fishing communities and inner-city neighbourhoods often face the brunt of the global food system's current negative externalities. While overall growth and revenue for the agricultural sectors gives the impression of a stable and robust industry, many smaller farms struggle to stay afloat in the face of rising input costs and stagnant food prices. Farmers are forced to rely on off-farm income and credit to finance their operations: according to Farm Credit Canada, farm debt in Canada will soon reach \$100 billion (Hoffort 2017). In addition, corporate concentration has adverse effects on farmers and other agri-food businesses. Many farm and processing businesses must deal with a small number of very large suppliers for inputs and grocery retailers for sales. If unchecked by policy intervention, this concentration leads to pressures on smaller businesses in the value chain that tends to force them out (See NFU 2015).

While Canada is, and will continue to be, an important player in international agri-food markets, we need a food system that ensures first and foremost that the needs of its population are met. Our agricultural, fisheries and food policy should prioritize eating food as closely as possible to where it was produced, an approach that is sometimes referred to as “feed the family, trade the leftovers.” International trade agreements signed by Canada should protect against unfair subsidies and environmentally damaging practices of other countries that result in cheaper imported food than locally produced in Canada.

In addition to contributing to the food security of Canadians, a preference for local and regional food systems would also have positive economic benefits. A recent study estimated that if Ontario replaced just 10% of its top imported fruits and vegetables with locally grown produce, it would lead to a \$250 million increase in GDP and the creation of 3,400 new full-time jobs. The ensuing reduction in transportation would be an added environmental benefit (Econometric Research Limited et al 2015).

Between 65-85% of Canada's seafood is exported (Govender et al 2016): what would be the impact on maritime communities if some of this was processed in and sold to local and regional markets?

The increasing number of Canadians interested in pursuing a career in food, fisheries and agriculture, whether through urban greenhouse production, aquaculture, farm-to-table restaurants or by taking over the family farm, are breathing new life into communities across Canada. The Canadian government needs to invest in the supports and infrastructure, which local and regional economies need to grow and flourish. This includes mechanisms to ensure a decent living for food producers and workers, infrastructure such as community-owned processing equipment and facilities and scale-appropriate regulatory regimes.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See for example *Food Farms, Fish and Finance* (2015).



Along with supporting local and regional food systems, a national food policy should address inequity in Canada's food system. Seasonal migrant farm workers face numerous troubling violations of their rights due to inadequate protections in existing foreign worker programs and policies. Many First Nations communities lack access to safe drinking water. As noted earlier, food-insecurity levels are higher among Indigenous peoples, as well as recent immigrants (Health Canada 2008) and are strongly correlated to levels of poverty and socio-economic stratification. It is important that we talk not just of growth, but also of equity and justice.

How can we leverage the economic growth of the agri-food sector for social, health and environmental benefits? The concept of food justice is a useful framework for answering this question. Food justice "seeks to ensure that the benefits and risks of where, what and how food is grown, produced, transported, distributed, accessed and eaten are shared fairly. Food justice represents a transformation of the current food system, including, but not limited to, eliminating disparities and inequities" (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010).

A national food policy should strive to create opportunities for all Canadians to be active players in Canada's food system, not only as eaters but as valued workers, producers and entrepreneurs. This includes a consideration of culturally appropriate foods as part of the right to food and an examination of how to address immediate crisis in a way that contributes to a longer-term re-visioning of our food system. How can we use the power of food to build cross-cultural understanding and greater inclusion for those who have been traditionally marginalized?

### *Potential Policy Instruments and Mechanisms*

- In collaboration with the Federal-Provincial-Territorial Ministers of Innovation and Economic Development, review the Federal government's regional economic-development organizations (Ex. FedDev Ontario) to maximize supports for regional food-system revitalization.
- Within the Agricultural Policy Framework, Nutrition North and other economic-development strategies put increased emphasis on the social economy and social financing, including co-operatives and innovative collaborations between community organizations and the private sector. Give priority to initiatives representing and engaging with marginalized populations.<sup>12</sup>

## Concluding Thoughts

We hope this discussion paper will spark conversation on the principles and priorities for developing Canada's national food policy. Rather than providing definitive answers and specific policy recommendations, it is intended to generate tough questions on complex issues as a first step in a broader engagement process of listening, sharing perspectives, surfacing innovation and crafting solutions amongst food system stakeholders.

Canada's food system can be an important driver of positive social change by reducing poverty, improving human health and increasing sustainable economic development that will strengthen rural

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<sup>12</sup> Potential examples to adapt to the Canadian context include the *Health Food Financing Initiative* (HFFI), a cross-departmental program in the U.S. that funds projects increasing the access of affordable healthy foods in low-income communities and communities of colour.

and remote communities, green suburbs and revitalize downtown cores. To ensure that our food system becomes healthier, more equitable and more sustainable, over the next year we need to:

- **Listen** to those on the front lines of our food system—community volunteers and organizations, farmers, fishers, workers, municipalities, entrepreneurs—and bring them into the conversation to surface innovative solutions being implemented across the country.
- **Prioritize** reconciliation with Indigenous communities. Acknowledge the impact of colonialism on Indigenous food sovereignty that has robbed Indigenous communities of their access to traditional land-based foods and fishing and hunting rights.
- **Recognize** the multifunctionality of our food system, as it relates to the environment, the economy, health and community well-being.

A national food policy will not be a panacea for all the food-related problems facing Canadians. But it can provide a strong framework to put us on the right track to health, sustainability, equity and economic growth, and the proper tools to make, and track, meaningful progress. As laid out in the Sustainable Development Goals on Hunger and Food Insecurity: “If done right, agriculture, forestry and fisheries can provide nutritious food for all and generate decent incomes, while supporting people-centred rural development and protecting the environment.”

The present moment offers an incredible opportunity to bring much-needed policy coherence to govern our food system. A national food policy can help to steer us in the direction of a healthier and more sustainable food system in which everyone enjoys the right to food.

Let’s work together to make it a reality.

Visit Food Secure Canada’s [website](#) for updates on how to engage with our work on national food policy and to learn how to become an organizational or individual member.



## Glossary

**Food Security** was defined at the 1996 World Food Summit as “when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet dietary needs for a productive and healthy life.” An important distinction is between household and community food security. The most common definition of household food security is based on the Canadian Community Health Survey, which uses a set of 18 indicators to determine the number of people who are food secure, moderately food insecure and severely food insecure (Roshanafshar and Hawkins 2015). Community food security takes a broader focus and connects food security to a community’s food system, along with issues of environmental sustainability, social justice and health. While household and community level food security are connected and interrelated, each has distinct underlying causes which lead to different set of policy prescriptions and solutions. For example, a basic income is a solution to household food security, while a suitable policy intervention on community food security may look at community gardens or supports for good food markets.

**A Food System** refers to the diverse networks of people, resources, values and interactions involved in the production, processing, distribution and consumption of food. It includes the relationship between food and the environment, health, the economy and the overall well-being of a given community. As outlined by Grubinger et al. (2010), a food system is “an interconnected web of activities, resources and people that extends across all domains involved in providing human nourishment and sustaining health, including production, processing, packaging, distribution, marketing, consumption and disposal of food. The organization of food systems reflects and responds to social, cultural, political, economic, health and environmental conditions and can be identified at multiple scales, from a household kitchen to a city, county, state or nation.”

**The Right to Food**, as defined by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, “is realized when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, has physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement.” The right to food includes the key elements of availability, accessibility and adequacy. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food expands on this, explaining that “the right to food is the right to have regular, permanent and unrestricted access, either directly or by means of financial purchases, to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and which ensure a physical and mental, individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free of fear” (De Schutter 2012).

**Food Sovereignty** is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems (La Via Campesina). There are seven pillars: the first six pillars (Focus on Food for People; Builds Knowledge and Skills; Works with Nature; Values Food Providers; Localizes Food Systems; and Puts Control Locally) were developed at the [International Forum for Food Sovereignty in Nyéléni](#), Mali, in 2007. The seventh pillar (Food is Sacred) was added by members of the Indigenous Circle during the People’s Food Policy process.

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