Thought About Food?

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INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1980s, the institutional response to food insecurity in Canada has been the charitable food bank. Operating with what many would call a "band-aid" approach to a much larger problem, food banks illustrate a reactive response to the much broader issue of food security. Currently, a longer-term, more proactive approach to the larger ills of our food system is bubbling up from the ground, broadening our understanding of food security to include issues like mad cow disease, biodiversity, obesity, and public health. This approach is pushing for a fundamental re-examination of the way we talk about our food and who is included in that conversation. It is based on the notion that people who eat, and who are therefore affected by our food systems, should have a mechanism to participate in shaping the policies that define them.

Public participation in food policy requires a bit of background. The paper begins with a brief introduction to the basics of public participation, the rationale for it, and the different methods used to carry it out. It then examines the scope of participation in policy processes before more specifically looking at the issue of food. Following a brief description on food security and the roots of food policy – or the lack thereof - the paper finally examines the need for public participation in food policy and provides two illustrations from the Canadian experience. What emerges is the realization that the energy to engage citizens in discussions around our food system is not coming primarily from policy makers, but rather from citizens themselves who have organized and initiated processes to influence policy from the ground up.

2. Public Participation: Roots and Rationale

"One measures the health of society by the quality of functions performed by local citizens"
Alexis de Tocqueville

Over the last decade it has become clear that there is a growing risk of "disconnection" between government and citizens. Research tells us that citizens are increasingly concerned that their democratic institutions are out of sync with their values and interests. Moreover, citizens strongly believe that there is a growing gap between their actual and desired level of influence in government decision-making.
Jocelyne Bourgon

The idea of engaging citizens in decision-making processes that affect their lives is as old as the Aereopagos of ancient Greece and the public forum of the Roman republic. Yet headlines in Canada point to a growing "democratic deficit", with politicians, public officials and policy think-tanks suggesting that we need to rediscover opportunities for citizens to engage the issues in a thoughtful and meaningful manner (Wyman 1999). The perceived disconnect between government and citizens signals the importance of re-engaging the public discourse to clarify values, principles and desired outcomes on issues that affect society at large. Our food system, and the policies that guide it, clearly fit the description of this kind of issue. Before examining how participation could affect the policy discourse on food, it is helpful to situate public participation more broadly.

2.1 Why involve the public

Discussions about public participation in political and social sciences build on the underpinnings of an expressed moral belief that, in democratic societies, the individual has the right to be informed, consulted and to be provided the opportunity to express his or her views on those matters that affect them personally (Sewell and Coppock 1977; Stoker 1997). This type of engagement, or participation, is a way of extending the role of the citizen beyond the ballot box. When done well it ensures that multiple perspectives are represented in decision-making processes. In as much as it provides an avenue for the collective expression of public values, social objectives and preferences, participation of the public also adds a layer of analysis that can often be missed by decision-makers and professionals in the public service (Petts 1999).

In addition to the "ends-oriented" rationale where participation contributes to the outcome of a decision, meaningful participation also serves as a tool for the transformative education of citizens. This process-based outcome reminds all parties that participation is something to be valued in and of itself. It provides an opportunity for learning social responsibility and citizenship, pointing to de Tocqueville's measure of the health of a society in general. Understanding this two-fold rationale for participation is one of the fundamentals for creating processes of participation that are truly meaningful and democratic. This principle is further explored in the context of food charters below.

Examples of the importance of participation occur across all levels of government – from the local to the international. At the municipal level, planning documents like Plan Winnipeg 2020 include local empowerment as one of the cities guiding principles, encouraging citizens to participate in shaping the decisions that affect their lives:

Local empowerment requires sharing decision-making processes through citizen engagement, promoting local ownership and control, fostering a strong local economy, and facilitating ongoing participation in local government.
(Principles from Plan Winnipeg 2020)

The plan continues, moving from the rationale for participation to clarifying what forms this participation ought to take:

The City shall commit to citizen engagement in political decision-making processes by: i) facilitating access to information in a responsive, comprehensive, and transparent manner ii) disseminating timely information regarding City programs, services, and initiatives, and fostering better public understanding and awareness of civic functions, responsibilities, priorities, and overall direction; and iii) actively soliciting citizen input into policy formulation, political decision-making, and program development processes through meaningful public consultation. (Plan Winnipeg p 20)

Public participation has also emerged as a major issue at the provincial level in Manitoba, particularly with regard to environmental decision-making. Recognized as a crucial component in Manitoba's Environment Act, mechanisms for involving the public are outlined at the level of regulation with guidelines for meaningful participation in environmental assessments of proposed developments. Manitoba also leads Canada in public participation through mechanisms such as the Clean Environment Commission. This arms-length body of the provincial government serves as a public forum in which a diversity of stakeholders can provide input into decision-making around development projects that will impact environmental health (Lobe 2005).

At the national level, the Public Health Agency of Canada, particularly Population Health, promotes public participation as a tool for developing strategies for Canadians to improve health. They identify a "continuum of activities" for engaging the public, ranging from simple communication to community engagement. They suggest that, in addition to involving those most affected by health issues early in the planning processes to identify solutions, meaningful public participation provides additional "value-added" benefits, which include:

1. Building relationships based on trust, transparency, accountability, openness and honesty

2. Integrating a wider range of public needs, interests and concerns into decision-making.

3. Resolving problems more effectively, through collaborative means.

4 Ensuring that decisions and solutions incorporate perspectives, knowledge and technical expertise that would not otherwise be considered

5. Placing issues and projects within a broader technical, social, cultural or ethical context.

6. Increasing the level of public acceptance and ownership of local level decisions and policies. (www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ph-sp/phdd/collab/collab2.html)

This list provides a useful summary of how public participation benefits decision-makers, citizens and society as a whole, highlighting concepts like trust, public interest, dispute resolution, diversity, values and empowerment. These benefits are not a foregone conclusion, but rather are dependent on the processes and methods used to achieve them.

2.2 The Continuum of Public Participation methods

As alluded to previously in the example from Plan Winnipeg, the actual methods for engaging the public can take a number of forms, often illustrated along a continuum and reflecting the range of power accorded to the public in decision-making processes. Arnstein's Ladder (figure 1) provides a useful illustration of the different degrees of participation, recognizing that both methods and rationale can move from simply informing the public to delegating actual decision-making power to them. Using what is now a classic model for discussing participation, Arnstein argues that the level of empowerment increases as one moves from informing, upwards through consultation, finally reaching the upper levels of delegated power and citizen control.

Citizen Control	Degrees of citizen power
Delegated Power	
Partnership	
Placation	Degrees of tokenism
Consultation	
Informing	
Therapy	Non-participation
Manipulation	

Figure 1 – Arnstein's Ladder of participation (adapted from Arnstein 1969)

INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
Public Participation Goal:	Public Participation Goal:	Public Participation Goal:	Public Participation Goal:	Public Participation Goal:
To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the prefered solution.	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.
Promise to the Public:	Promise to the Public:	Promise to the Public:	Promise to the Public:	Promise to the Public:
We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.
Example Techniques to Consider:	Example Techniques to Consider:	Example Techniques to Consider:	Example Techniques to Consider:	Example Techniques to Consider:
• Fact sheets • Web sites • Open houses	• Public comment • Focus groups • Surveys • Public meetings	• Workshops • Deliberate polling	• Citizen Advisory Committees • Consensus-building • Participatory decision making	• Citizen juries • Ballots • Delegated decisions

Figure 2 - IAP2 Continuum of public participation. www.iap2.org

The International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) has built on Arnstein's Ladder, creating a continuum of tools and goals for participation that match the broader motivations for participation illustrated in her diagram. IAP2s identification of tools (Figure 2) clearly illustrates the range of meanings present in the term "participation" and highlights the movement towards empowerment and increasing impact, depending on the approach chosen to engage the public.

What remains common in this diagram and in Arnstein's Ladder is that the initiator of participation is generally understood to be the government. However, there is increasing energy and thought being given to "citizen-initiated" engagement in which citizens bring forward policy concerns to government in a coordinated manner (Wyman 1999). We will explore two examples of this type of participation towards the end of the paper.

3. Participation in Public Policy

Public policy influences the ways in which society and governments respond to and think about issues that impact the health and well-being of communities. It is essential, therefore, that communities learn to understand the policy-making process. It is also critical that policy makers learn how to work with communities and to tap into the wealth of knowledge, experience and diversity that can help create better public policy. (Dodd and Boyd 2000)

In addition to the actual decision-making processes outlined above, public policy has been identified as a critical area in need of increased participation. Providing the frameworks within which decisions are made and actions are taken, public policy is meant to serve as a guide and to provide direction to decision makers. It typically reflects the value systems and beliefs of the group that created it, which immediately highlights the importance of broad participation to help elucidate those values.

At the international level, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) highlights the importance of engaging the public in policy processes, suggesting that "active participation recognizes the capacity of citizens to discuss and generate policy options independently. It requires governments to share in agenda-setting and to ensure that policy proposals generated jointly will be taken into account in reaching a final decision" (OECD 2001). Clearly, strengthening relations with citizens is a sound investment in better policy-making and a core element of good governance.

In Canada, the public policy process includes a number of stages: issue identification; agenda setting; policy design; implementation; monitoring and; impact assessment (Government of Canada 2002). Meaningful participation in this process requires that the public be involved in identifying the issues and continuing their participation through the monitoring of policy impacts. In the context of Canada, Wyman (1999) argues that "there is a growing recognition on the part of public sector officials that they are going to need new deliberative techniques in order to sustain their legitimacy in the public policy process" (Wyman 1999). Perhaps in response to this growing sense, in 2002, the Government of Canada released " A Code of Good Practice on Policy Dialogue" as part of their larger Voluntary Sector Initiative. It identifies the benefits of the broad expertise, knowledge, experience and ideas gained by involving the voluntary sector and the public more broadly in the policy process (Voluntary Sector Initiative 2002).

At the community level, participation in the policy-making process recognizes that citizens have important knowledge and experience to add to the debate. Dodd and Boyd (2000) argue that linking this experience and knowledge to public policy processes can help communities shift from disintegrating to engaged and empowered; from alienated to responsive and; from unresolved social problems to enhanced capabilities to solve problems across sectors. The

Rural Communities Impacting Policies Project is one example of how community-based capacity building around participation in public policy is actually working. In a series of workbooks and documents, it provides guidance to rural communities on understanding policy development and the challenges and barriers to community participation in policy development (RCIP 2002).

The challenge remains to build the capacity of communities to participate, and for traditional policy makers to recognize and value community experience while developing processes that are both meaningful and inclusive. This type of capacity building work pushes the traditional definitions of participation from government-led to citizen-initiated, and potentially to a place of "mutual engagement" or dialogue (Wyman 1999). If this learning is relevant to the public policy process in general, we will see that it is particularly relevant as we shift the discussion to food and food policy.

4. Food Security, Food Policy and Participation

Few other systems touch people's daily lives in such an intimate way and thereby provide such a strong motivation and opportunity for citizenship… Food, like no other commodity, allows for a political awakening… draws on and helps nurture authentic relationships… has the potential to generate active citizenship… [and] suggests both belonging and participating, at all levels of relationship.
(Welsh and MacRae 1998).

Welsh and MacRae beautifully articulate the potential of food to serve as a connector. Whether around a common table, working together in the garden, or visiting with producers at the local farmers' market, food does in fact provide opportunities for relationship with the land, with neighbors and increasingly even with policy makers. With an understanding of public participation and its potential role in policy making, it is now possible to look more specifically at how all of this relates to food. However, before exploring the rationale and mechanisms for involving the public in food policy discussions, it is important to spend some time reflecting on the nature of food and food policy.

4.1 Food Security

"Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life."
World Food Summit

Agreed to at the World Food Summit in 1996, the preceding definition of food security is now widely accepted and immediately introduces us to the multidimensional nature of food. Food is closely linked to economics and issues of poverty as well as to issues of health and diet. Increasingly, definitions of food security are now emerging that also incorporate environmental sustainability. Hamm and Bellows (2003) define community food security as "a situation in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes self-reliance and social justice". (Hamm and Bellows 2003). This relationship of food to poverty, to health and to our environment sets the background for a discussion of food policy.

With over 800 million people suffering globally from the effects of hunger in a world that produces enough food, the question of food policy and political will could hardly be more pressing. Even developed countries like Canada are not immune to food insecurity. The National Population Health Survey reported that in 1998/99 over 10% of Canadians, or an estimated 3 million people were living in food insecure households. That is to say that they did not have the means to access adequate food for their daily needs. Recent data on food bank usage tells a similar story, indicating that close to 800,00 Canadians – almost 2.5% - used a charitable food

bank in March of 2003 alone (CAFB 2003). Riches suggests that this is symptomatic of a system that is broken, and that the causes of food insecurity in Canada are structural and institutional in nature (Riches et.al 2004). Largely a question of economic access, food insecurity in Canada has not been helped by the deterioration of the social safety nets and remains a major social policy issue.

But hunger and social policy are clearly only part of the larger definition of food security. Increasingly, public health officials are pointing to major challenges and health care costs related to chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, hypertension, stress, cancer, diabetes, obesity, and anemia, all of which are associated with inadequate nutrition. In a document titled Is Food the Next Public Health Challenge, MacRae (1997) points out that "71% of deaths, including more than one-third of cancer deaths, fall into disease categories which have strong associations with diet." In a country that believes health care is a fundamental part of the public good, the relationship between food and health can hardly be ignored.

A third piece of the equation for food security is sustainability and environmental health, a priority highlighted in Canada's Action Plan for Food Security (1998). Food is a concrete link between our social and ecological systems – a link that is made each and every day. Issues like biodiversity, water conservation, genetically modified seeds, soil degradation, climate change, urban land use and energy use are just a few of the issues connecting the food we eat with our surrounding environment. If we are in fact what we eat, the connections between food and environmental health are critical.

4.2 Food Policy

Policy can be defined as a governmental principle, plan or course of action – a blueprint to guide planning of specific actions to attain the desired goals or outcomes. The role of food policy is to guide decision-making from the environmental resource base that provides our foods, to food processing, distribution, transportation, marketing, consumer purchase and ultimately to the consumption of the food as it relates to health and well being (Haughton 1987).

Food bridges a range of policy issues but food policy is rarely looked at, or articulated as a whole. Lang (2004) argues that "it is rare to encounter anyone in government with an overall vision for food policy, let alone the responsibility for delivering it." Canada itself does not currently have a coherent food policy, rather a fragmented body of agricultural, nutrition, social and economic policies at federal and provincial levels – all of which have significant impact on our food system (Riches 2004, MacRae 1999). With many of the food-related policy issues compartmentalized into separate policy spheres, there is a real need for a "joined-up" food policy that would inform the myriad of decisions and actions that occur in the food supply chain. This ranges from production to consumption, and would begin to provide solutions to the hunger, ill health and food-related environmental damage (Lang 2004).

In the absence of explicit government policy, economics and the role of the consumer have become the central drivers of an implicit food policy. This unwritten food policy fails to deal with food system issues such as over and under-consumption (obesity and creation of the food poor), the environment , and public health. MacRae and Welsh (1998) argue that the concept of consumer, and the implicit economic assumptions currently driving the food system, represent a very limited perspective for the making of food policy. The main problem is that economics by itself acknowledges a person's interests and power only in terms of their ability to buy food. Issues of health, nutrition and the environment remain externalized in this process.

The language of citizenship and participation, on the other hand, implies a more complex membership in a society with both rights and responsibilities. Citizens have capacities beyond those of consuming goods and services, reflecting the fact that society is more than simply a marketplace (MacRae and Welsh 1998). With regards to food specifically, the emerging concept of "food democracy" suggests that active participation and political engagement are prerequisites for food policy if solutions to the impacts of the dominant food system are to be achieved. Food democracy rests on the belief that every citizen has a contribution to make in the solution of our common problems. (Lang 2004, Hassanein 2003).

With no coherent approach to food policy beyond the market-driven commodification of food, the terrain remains highly contested with underlying battles of interest, knowledge and ultimately belief. Given this, it is helpful to pull back to common ground and determine what is generally agreed upon, at least by nation states. Perhaps the most widely recognized, if not the most clearly defined, underpinning for food policy is that of the human right to adequate food, articulated in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1966 International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights. Both internationally binding agreements were signed by Canada and the right to food is recognized as a leading priority in Canada's Action Plan for Food Security 1998.

However widely accepted, the definition of, and actions required to fulfill, the right to food remain hotly contested ground for many of the same reasons already mentioned. When world leaders gathered at the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome at the 1996 World Food Summit, it was agreed that the right to food was a useful starting point for food policy and should be explored and defined more carefully. As a result, an intergovernmental working group was formed to further unpack what this right might mean and to create a set of voluntary guidelines for countries interested in implementing the right to food. Following a highly politicized discussion that lasted for well over two years, eighteen guidelines were adopted by all members of the UN at the FAO Committee on Food Security Meetings in November 2004. While all of the guidelines represent a further elaboration of the right to food, the first guideline is particularly instructive for the discussion on participation in food policy. It states:

States should promote democracy, the rule of law, sustainable development and good governance, and promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms in order to empower individuals and civil society to make demands of their governments. (FAO 2004).

This first principle points back to participation and to empowerment of those whom the food system affects. Hearkening back to the IAP2 diagram, Arnstein's ladder and the broad rationale for democratic engagement of citizens, defining what the right to food means at the community level is one way to ensure that food policy represents the outcome of informed democratic debate. This is essential, not only for the interests of the poor and vulnerable, but also for our collective interest in ecological and societal well being on the whole (Riches 1999).

4.3 Engaging the Public in Food Policy

The best hope for finding workable solutions to conflicts about the character and direction of the agro-food system is through the active participation of the citizenry and political engagement to work out our differences. (Hassanein 2003)

Unfortunately, food policy discussions that impact our food system do not always include the individuals and organizations engaged in the day-to-day work at the community level where much of the diverse experience and knowledge resides. This is not to say however,

that the importance of community voices is not understood. In 1996, world leaders gathered at the FAO for the World Food Summit to address the increasingly dire state of world food security. Among many of the other pronouncements made on the failings of the "business as usual" approach to achieving real food security, world leaders recognized the important role that individuals and organizations working at the community level play in creating solutions. One of their commitments was to engage the public more broadly in discussions around food security:

'We will ensure an enabling political, social and economic environment designed to create the best conditions for the eradication of poverty and for durable peace, based on full and equal participation of women and men, which is most conducive to achieving sustainable food security for all.'
(FAO 1996)

In Canada, the official work around food security is housed under Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's Food Security Bureau. One of Canada's commitments to follow-up from the World Food Summit was to engage the public more effectively. The creation of an "enabling environment" is included as a major heading in our Action Plan for Food Security and states that "Civil society plays an important role in social, political and economic reform, through public education, advocacy and participation in public policy formulation" (AAFC 1998).

Following up this commitment are two specific actions. The first is to undertake a major increase in efforts to educate Canadians about food security issues and to support initiatives geared toward enhanced involvement of citizens in achieving food security. The second action is to encourage dialogue on food security issues that will translate to policy reflection and change, based on public education, sound research and open and participatory governance, in order to engage all sectors of the population and ensure that the needs and priorities of all are represented (AAFC 1998).

While government initiated action has been slow to appear, voices from the community have begun to bubble upwards into the policy process. The final section of this paper will provide two examples of community-led initiatives in Canada that are working to put a citizen voice in food policy discussions.

4.4 Mechanisms for Engaging the Public in Food Policy

There are a number of ways in which the public engage in food policy in Canada. This section will provide two examples from the Canadian experience that illustrate some of that diversity. The story of the Toronto food charter and of the Kamloops Food Policy Council illustrate their relevance and importance as tools for engaging the public in policy dialogue around food. Perhaps most importantly, the stories reveal that, regardless of the outcomes, the process of creating a food charter or food policy council becomes one of community capacity building where local values are collectively articulated for the purpose of improved community food security.

Food Policy Councils – The Kamloops Experience

Food Policy Councils first emerged in Knoxville, Tennessee in 1987. Since then, more than 10 councils have appeared at the municipal and state level in the United States and four in Canada – in Kamloops, BC, Vancouver, BC, Ottawa, ON and Toronto ON. Comprised of stakeholders from various segments of the local food system, Sarah Borron (2003) suggests that food policy councils have generally emerged from the growing community food security movement which links anti-hunger, nutrition, sustainable agriculture and other groups in collective efforts on food system issues. Councils serve as a forum for innovative collaboration between citizens and government officials. Their primary goal is to examine the operation of local food systems and to provide feedback, ideas and recommendations to improve programs and related policies.

The Kamloops Food Policy Council was formed in October 1995 following a Food Day Forum hosted by the regional health unit. The council currently includes representation from community gardens and kitchens; food banks; seniors organizations; City of Kamloops officials; Social Planning Council; Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries; Ministry for Children and Families; Thompson Health Region; Kamloops Indian Band; Kamloops Farmers' Market; Shuswap-Thompson Organic Producers Association; the United Church; Kamloops Home Support; and the University College of the Cariboo Department of Social and Environmental Studies (Kalina 2001).

Laura Kalina, one of the driving forces behind community food security efforts in Kamloops outlines the purpose of the council as:

• Providing a forum for members and affiliated organizations to network, collaborate, and participate in community food security work

• Promoting interaction on food security issues by increasing communication between community groups, city, regional and provincial governments and organizations

• Providing direct community programs and initiatives for better access to food and Kamloops through strategies such as community kitchens and gardens

• Providing public education about hunger and food security

• Advocating for public policies that will improve food access and the health of Kamloops residents

The council's work on policy has focused on the implementation of a food and nutrition policy in the Thompson Health Region, utilizing the diversity of actors at the table. In 2000, as a result of much coordinated work by the Council and its many participants, the Health Region adopted four elements for their Food and Nutrition Policy, laying the groundwork for discussions around implementation. The four elements are:

1. Safe and nutritious food is available within the region for all residents

2. Access to the safe and nutritious food is not limited by economic status, location or other factors beyond a resident's control

3. There is a local and regional agriculture and food production system which supplies wholesome food to the region's residents on a sustainable basis

4. All residents have the information and skills to achieve nutritional well-being. (Kalina 2001)

This kind of progress towards food policy, built from the community up, is an excellent example of the kind of benefits that come from public participation in food policy discussions. Wekerle (2004) characterizes food policy councils as policy from the ground up, "which contrasts with the routinized public meetings and public participation initiated by planning departments or city staff."

Food Charters – The TorontoExperience

Another tool being used by several communities in Canada to foster public participation in food policy discussions is the food charter. Simply stated, a food charter is a community created and community-owned document. As an outcome, it is a one-page statement on what the community believes about food and their food system. As a process, it is a way for the many different voices in the community to come together to have a policy-based conversation about food. Charters have emerged as citizen-based vehicles that serve to make declarations like those of the World Food Summit and Canada's Action Plan real at the community level.

The 2001 Toronto Food Charter was the first in Canada, built on a long history of community organizing around food security and the increased interest in public health and food that emerged in the late 1980s. Understanding the genesis of the food charter requires looking back more than a decade.

Created through the Toronto Food Policy Council, the 1992 Declaration on Food and Nutrition is seen as the predecessor to the current Toronto Food Charter. It was initially hoped that the creation of this declaration would convince the city to provide more dollars for community-based food security projects. Proponents also argued that there would not be a coherent approach to food security work in the city unless they had a policy statement on which they could hang all of the diverse food security programs and activities.

Rod MacRae, who worked on the initial declaration, indicated that the Toronto Food Policy Council leveraged close to 7 million dollars in funding during the 1990s for community-based food security work, constantly using the 1992 declaration. He said "having a policy document was a big help in legitimizing our work. The declaration was an avenue into the city policy machinery and created a kind of fermentation process where the ideas of food security began to percolate through policy discussions." (personal communication 2005)

Hurdles that were encountered along the way included the need to continually answer the question of why the city would be involved in food or agriculture issues. Questions like "Isn't that someone else's responsibility?" or "Why is government involved anyway?" were common. Constructing key arguments on why food should be a public policy discussion became an important task. MacRae indicated that "the public health angle was critical for making this argument. In a country that fundamentally believes in public health care, this was, and is an important entry point for a discussion around food and food policy" (personal communication 2005).

In response to the community energy around food security work in the Toronto area, a Food and Hunger Action Committee (FHAC) was created by the city in 1999. It took a collaborative approach, bringing together city councilors, city staff, staff from community-based agencies and coalitions, food program participants, volunteers, clergy and interested members of the public. One of three recommendations from their Phase One report was that a food charter be developed for the City of Toronto. It was also recommended that the charter be accompanied by the creation of a Food and Hunger Action Plan to be created by the FHAC.

A Community Reference Group to the FHAC served as the primary vehicle for the 2001 food charter. The creation of this reference group included a broad call for participation to numerous networks in the city - a significant discussion on who should be in attendance ensued. Janice Etter, one of the key organizers, argued that there were two important criteria in creating this group. The first was that the reference group should represent the geographic diversity across greater Metropolitan Toronto. The second important criteria was that organizers must be aware of sectoral diversity.

A mix of sizes and types of organizations and programs was important (personal communication 2005).

In addition to their work on the charter, the community reference group organized a series of tours of existing food security projects in the Toronto area. This served as a real eye opener for local politicians and community members alike. It fostered a sense of learning and relationship that set the background for the food charter conversation. The actual charter was created through a number of meetings of the community reference group. It was a collaborative process, led by city staff from the Toronto Food Policy Council and beyond. These staff collected notes from the discussions held by the reference group and drafted them into the early pieces of a food charter. Subsequent meetings then worked to refine a one-page statement.

The Toronto Food Charter opens with a preamble covering the human right to food, culture, nutrition, health, economy and diversity. It then moves to specific actions that the Toronto City Council will take. These actions range from sponsoring nutrition programs that promote healthy growth to adopting food purchasing policies that serves as a model of health, social and environmental responsibility. The one page charter was further supported by a piece of research on food security titled "Ten reasons why Toronto supports food security". It is in this initial interpretation of the charter where some of the real detail emerges.

Based in part on the increased awareness created by the Toronto Food Charter, in 2002 the Food and Hunger Action Plan managed to get a one-time grant from the province for almost 800 thousand dollars for community food security programs. This money was held and administered by the Department of Community and Neighborhood Services, but the FHAC and the community reference group had input into what the funding would be designated for. It was an amazing initiative that included everything from conducting surveys to hiring project staff to buying fridges and stoves for community kitchens.

As an outcome of this funding, the FHAC held a public event at city hall called "Making the Food Charter Work" at which all those who had received money were invited to come and share the stories of their work. "For every dollar that went into community-based programming, there was a ten-fold return" said Janice Etter. She argues that the provincial money enhanced local organizational capacities, helped to leverage additional monies and provided a large increase in volunteer opportunities in the community (personal communication 2005). The Toronto experience clearly shows that the charter was one piece of a much broader effort to engage the community in the larger food policy conversation.

Community-initiated energy around food charters has continued to grow across Canada at the municipal, provincial and national levels. Building on the energy in Toronto, municipal governments in the cities of Saskatoon and Prince Albert ratified food charters in 2002 and 2003 respectively. In 2004, the city of Sudbury completed a food charter and diverse groups are currently working on provincial food charters for Saskatchewan and Manitoba. The energy from two national civil society food security conferences is moving towards the creation of a national food charter to articulate a collective vision for food security and a sustainable food system. Kossick (2004) suggests that food charters "put back to the community a form of intentional citizenry where individuals and groups articulate positions and strategies on those critical issues that affect them very directly."

5. Conclusions

Public participation is about democratic debate – it is about citizenship. The emerging concept of food democracy reminds us that active participation and political engagement – broadly defined – are prerequisites, if solutions to the ecological, economic, and social justice consequences of the dominant food system are to be achieved.

The specific lessons that emerge for linking this idea of participation to our food system are the following:

• The rationale for participation can vary from simply informing the public to empowering them

• Meaningful participation helps to elucidate values toinform policy

• Traditional definitions of participation tend to be top-down, or government-led

•The benefits of meaningful participation are related both to the outcomes and to the process.

• Participation is a transformative experience and is valuable in and of itself.

•Food security is by definition interdisciplinary and includes social, economic, health and environmental issues

•Food crosses a number of policy spheres, yet we lack a coherent food policy

• We are all connected to, and a part of the food system.

• Communities bring a wealth of knowledge and diverse perspectives to the policy table

• Participation in food policy has tended to occur at the initiative of the community food security movement.

The challenge remains to build the capacity of communities to participate in policy and for policy makers to recognize and value community experience while developing processes that are both meaningful and inclusive.

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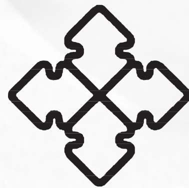

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