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Envisioning a Post-Pandemic Agriculture and Food System

A sustainable and just food system for Canada as proposed by the National Farmers Union mitigate and prevent multiple cascading crises and provide the foundation of a good life.

The COVID 19 pandemic is showing us where our current food and agriculture system is vulnerable, as well as who it serves and who it exploits. How the food system is structured profoundly affects our society. At minimum, we need a food system that provides adequate daily nutrition for our whole population. At its best, it will play an integral role in shaping and delivering a good life for all members of our society.

According to recent public opinion surveys, Canadians want to know where their food comes from and how it was produced; they want to support Canadian farmers, buy local when they can, and are uncomfortable with highly concentrated ownership. Our massive emergency response to safeguard health and stability during this pandemic shows we can also harness societal recovery efforts to start building a food system consciously designed according to our needs and values. **As we look forward to the end of COVID 19 restrictions, let's not return to pre-pandemic normal, but envision the food system we want and prepare to make it a reality.**

What the pandemic reveals

The first wave of COVID 19 showed that Canada's food production and processing depends on low-paid, vulnerable workers – often migrant workers, recent immigrants and women -- who not only do very difficult jobs, but also risk their own and their families' health in the process. When Canadians went into lock-down, many stocked up on food and switched to larger, less-frequent grocery shopping trips. The rapid shift to home cooking required immediate adjustment in food processing to minimize waste and prevent shortages. Producers in the supply managed sectors were able to share the burden, and have managed the pandemic's challenges more effectively than the highly export-oriented cattle and hog sectors. When the Cargill beef packing plant shut down, the price of cattle dropped sharply due to the backlog in processing and the lack of smaller abattoir, processing, storage, and distribution capacity. Hog farmers were forced to euthanize piglets when American hog finishers became overloaded due to plant shut downs from illness outbreaks there. Corn producers face low prices as a demand for ethanol fell alongside the reduction in fuel used for travelling. The impacts on other grain farmers is still unknown, but they could be seriously affected if railway transportation or ports suffer COVID-19 outbreaks. A common factor in all cases is that our current food system has little resilience. **The highly efficient, just-in-time approach has all but eliminated the food system's shock absorbers.**

Yet, Canadians also stocked up on local food from direct-marketers, subscribed to Community Shared Agriculture operations, and convinced health authorities to allow farmers markets to continue operating. While higher demand is welcome, many direct-marketing farmers are stretched to their limits adopting new online marketing tools, finding enough skilled workers and adapting to new public health

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measures. These responses show that both rural and urban Canadians value local food and are concerned about the pandemic's impact on farmers, consumers and food security. **Where our food system has managed best – local food and supply managed sectors – democratic control and community power has maintained some cushion to soften the blows of uncertainty.**

Post-pandemic essentials

The sustainability, security, and stability of our food supply; democratic decision-making, and fair incomes for both food providers and consumers must be at the centre of our post-pandemic food system. We also know that as a society, we all must confront the climate crisis – by reducing our emissions and becoming better prepared to manage climate chaos. The food system requires a strong foundation, so farmers must have security of land tenure, seed sovereignty, control of animal breeding stock and effective market power within the economy. Farmers also need to pass knowledge from generation to generation within farm families and to new farmers from non-farm backgrounds to support a vibrant ethos of agriculture that will nourish the larger community culturally as well as physically.

Our post-pandemic food system will stand upon the three pillars of sustainability: ecological health, social justice and economic viability. Using climate-friendly, low-emission production, it will deliver a healthy and secure food supply to Canadians and provide sustainable livelihoods to a larger, younger and more diverse population of farmers while engaging in fair international trade relationships. Our food system will broaden rural prosperity by embodying gender equity, anti-racism and decolonization. Farmers and farm workers will earn equitable incomes, realizing the full value of their products as Canada leaves behind its cheap food policy and reduces socio-economic inequality so that all can afford high quality, balanced diets. Measures to reduce farm debt will support affordable land tenure, creating conditions for long-term stewardship practises that protect biodiversity and help buffer the impacts of the climate crisis. A strategy of on-farm diversification and geographically dispersed food processing, storage and distribution will improve resilience, whether future disruptions are from the next pandemic, climate change or other crises. A shift toward producing more of the foods needed for a balanced diet will reduce the impacts of conditions outside of Canadian jurisdiction where commodities are exposed to export market vagaries and currency fluctuations. Our new food system will also help prevent future pandemics by reducing pressure to extend global food production frontiers into natural areas where new zoonotic (animal-to-human transmitted) diseases can emerge.

Principles, elements and mechanisms

Our new food system will require a network of formal and informal institutions based on food sovereignty and agroecology.

Food sovereignty, the powerful concept developed by *La Via Campesina* in the mid-1990s, is about empowering farmers and eaters to define their own systems to produce healthy and culturally appropriate food for people through ecologically sound and sustainable methods. Food sovereignty focuses on food for people; it values food providers, localises food systems and puts control locally. It builds knowledge and skills and works with nature. Food sovereignty is created and maintained by empowered food producers and providers and the communities who rely on the food.



Agroecology encompasses both how food is produced and how producers relate to their local ecological and social contexts. Agroecological production is often represented by circles -- cycling materials within the ecosystem; care and nurturing of the commons; and reciprocal connections among community members – in contrast to extractive agriculture, which is represented by one-way arrows -- from raw materials through consumption to waste; and exploitive relationships that move property, wealth and power into the hands of ever fewer and larger corporations. Agroecology provides a framework for climate friendly agriculture, by minimizing purchased inputs of GHG-emitting fossil-fuel intensive products and processes. Agriculture must do its part to repay the carbon debt, but it does not have the capacity to mop up after other industries – all must do their part.

Our post-pandemic food system also needs a regulatory system based on the precautionary principle to safeguard the air, water, biodiversity, and lands that are our heritage and our legacy. These regulations will have teeth to protect farmers and consumers against hazards, balance power in the marketplace, and ensure decision-makers are not insulated from the impacts of their actions.

Democratically controlled institutions will be at the heart of the new food system. Supply management; single desk marketing; producer, consumer, worker and multi-stakeholder co-operatives; land trusts; public research institutions; and community food hubs, farmers markets and CSAs are examples of institutions that can be expanded, improved, re-vamped, re-built and developed to ensure an ongoing balance of ecological health, social justice and economic viability is maintained.

Debts and power relations

For at least 35 years, Canada has reduced the size and scope of government through austerity measures and enhanced the power of multinational corporations through international trade deals. The COVID 19 pandemic and the failure to contain it can be understood as outcomes of these policies. **Globalization and austerity have created a massive debt by allowing the powerful to offload costs onto vulnerable people, rural and remote communities, ecosystems, the atmosphere, oceans and future generations.**

Building our post-pandemic food system requires rebalancing this policy-induced societal debt through large and sustained public investment. Already, governments at all levels are providing emergency funds to prevent the mass contagion and the collapse of our health system and to assist those struggling due to the economic impact of these public health measures. Further public investment will be required to integrate resilience into our food system to ensure we have the capacity to withstand the next crisis.

It will require public investment to develop institutions that ensure farmers receive a fair price for what they produce as a rule, instead of relying on market dynamics that keep farm prices at the bare minimum. Farm debt, now approaching \$115 billion, is increasing exponentially and largely driven by high input costs and land prices inflated by investor speculation. It will require public funds to reduce farm debt in an equitable fashion and ensure intergenerational land transfer occurs with dignity for both retiring and new farmers. Figuring out how to farm successfully with low inputs will require public research, another important use of public money to build a sustainable food system. **Investments in resilience and stability will pay dividends in by reducing the need for emergency payments as our food system becomes less precarious.**



Canada also has a debt to Indigenous people on whose land our country has been built. Our post-pandemic food system must honour the Treaties, traditional territories and inherent Indigenous rights. Indigenous food sovereignty is part of our food system; indigenous food lands and food ways will have priority over other potential activities and uses.

Internationally, the regime of interlocking trade agreements – CUSMA, the CPTPP, CETA and myriad bilateral agreements – constrain Canada’s public policy space, hampering our democratic capacity to deal with the real issues that concern voters. These agreements have increased corporate influence over agriculture and food. However, corporations’ legal duty is to maximize profits for shareholders, which is not a workable value system for managing recovery from COVID 19, addressing climate change, or dealing with future crises that may occur. To build our post-pandemic food system, **Canada will need to revamp our international trading relations to promote the fair trade of agricultural products without impinging on democratic governance.** These new trade agreements will impel a virtuous circle that enhances equity, diversity, and resilience among trading partners.

Big lessons from a microscopic teacher

The global pandemic has not only revealed our food system’s vulnerability, it has truly demonstrated that we are connected: a virus so tiny its size is measured in nanometres has travelled around the world on a network of human relationships in a matter of months, taking lives and wreaking destruction -- but also activating world-wide, community-based cooperation and caring. We have shown Canadians can act together to keep COVID-19 from causing massive, uncontrolled deaths. Likewise, we can rebuild our agriculture and food system to support healthy nutrition for people, sustainable family farms, intact ecosystems and a liveable climate for future generations.

