

# Transformative Food Politics: Sharing Our Experience, Building Our Networks



Summer/Fall 2011 Issue 2

## Propagating the Food Movement

This newsletter provides periodic updates about  
the Transformative Food Politics and Regional Networks research



*Illustration by Claudia Dávila*

Rhizomes are horizontal, underground plant stems with the ability to create complex root systems. They can expand relentlessly

underground, often lying dormant for years, and reemerge as healthy plants in different locations when the internal and external conditions are right. Each new plant created is connected to the parent but exists as its own independent, flourishing entity. Asparagus, ginger, and Jerusalem artichokes all propagate using rhizomes.

The rhizome can serve as a metaphor for the Canadian food movement – a decentralized network of diverse, self-organizing, inter-connected initiatives with no identifiable beginning or end.

Over the past decade, food-related initiatives have proliferated in response to growing concerns about the corporate, industrial food system. These initiatives address issues ranging from more equitable food access and healthy food consumption to agroecological production and citizen engagement. Although they have diverse goals, their combined activities challenge the existing food system while seeking to build economically viable and environmentally sustainable alternatives. The individuals and organizations that constitute this movement are becoming increasingly organized, but unlike traditional social movements there is not one set of common objectives,



*The Ecology Action Centre  
Halifax, Nova Scotia*

nor a single, linear path toward them.

Regional networks have emerged in almost every province and territory over the last decade with an explicit mandate to transform the food system by supporting the work of local initiatives and fostering collaboration. The British Columbia Food Systems Network, Food Secure Saskatchewan, Food Matters Manitoba, Sustain Ontario, the Nova Scotia Food Security Network and Yukon Food are just a few examples of province- and territory-wide, cross-sectoral alliances that act as intermediaries between initiatives, creating spaces for dialogue and interaction among actors.

At a national level, the recently launched People's Food Policy (PFP) brought together many of the ideas and efforts of individuals, community groups, governments and businesses in the first-ever citizen-led food policy. The PFP is based on hundreds of kitchen table talks held across the country between 2010 and 2011, which were synthesized into 10 discussion papers addressing a wide range of topics including agriculture, health, the environment, fisheries, Indigenous food systems, science and technology, and international food policy. These discussion papers, along with the overarching document "Resetting the Table: A People's Food Policy for Canada," constitute the most comprehensive national food policy currently being advanced in Canada.

### ***Rhizomatic Food Networks***

In the fall of 2010, researchers at the University of Toronto in collaboration with provincial-level networks conducted a survey of over 200 organizations working on food-related issues in



*East hill Community Garden, Vernon, BC*

British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, and Nova Scotia. The study, which aimed to gather information about the relationships between network actors, confirmed a number of assumptions about the food movement.

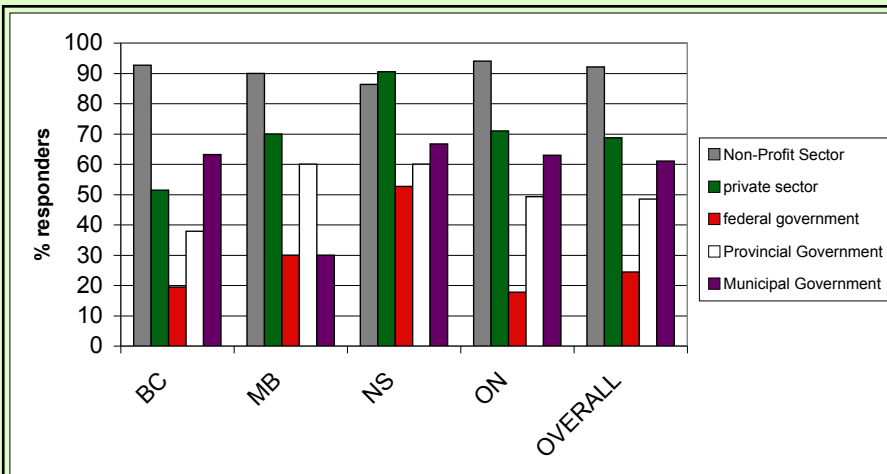
Survey respondents were involved in extremely diverse types of work including community development, agriculture, food literacy,

food sovereignty, research, civic engagement, policy, Indigenous rights and climate change. The study found that organizations develop relationships with each other in multiple ways such as through overlapping membership, funding partnerships, sharing resources, formal and informal knowledge exchange, joint projects and working together within the same geographic regions. In this way, networked organizations mimic natural systems by taking advantage of the ways that people move fluidly in and out of organizations, leaving behind ideas and established projects, and bringing their experiences, knowledge and personal connections with them.

Organizations were also found to frequently build cross-sectoral partnerships with other non-profits, businesses, and with governments at all levels (see graph on the next page). Further, contrary to typical social movements, which tend to be led by a



*Green Roof at the Seaport Market  
Halifax, Nova Scotia*



**Network Relations are Multi-Sectoral:** In general, organizations have regular contact with the non-profit, private, and governmental sectors.

relationships. It also helps to recognize and privilege new forms of social empowerment on the margins of capitalist society. This highlights the importance of a diversity of strategies and tactics where incremental projects that take us in the right direction are as important as large-scale public events and protest.

The food movement is, and always will be, a work in progress. It has and will continue to run into rifts and challenges, but like a rhizome, it has the power to extend its reach,

few actors occupying fairly central positions in the network, the study found that the networks constituted by food initiatives are quite decentralized with few actors holding substantial power.

Within the food movement, collaboration is happening in non-traditional ways across issues and groups. Drawing on the rhizome metaphor to reflect on the work of transforming the food system provides a different way to think about engaging with resistance. The rhizome concept suggests that the relationships between organizations are constantly shifting and transforming knowledge, experience and social

forge growth in new territories, and make connections that may not be visible but are vital and life-supporting.

Building on this metaphor through reflecting on, and encouraging the many differences within the Canadian food movement along with fostering tactical collaboration at the local, regional and global levels holds a powerful strategic potential to radically transform the food system.



*Youth Food Justice Project,  
Manitoba Alternative Food  
Research Alliance (MAFRA)  
Winnipeg, Manitoba*



*Heart & Soil Gardens  
Eat Local Coop, Sudbury, Ontario*

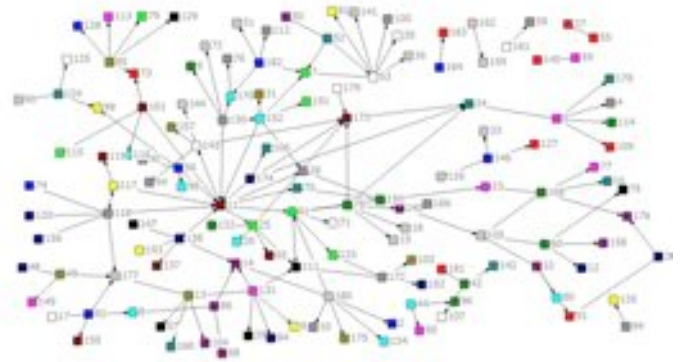
*(The text of this article was written by Charles Z Levkoe and was originally printed in Briarpatch Magazine, September/October 2011).*



# Social Network Analysis

A survey of food initiatives in BC asked organizations to identify 6 provincial groups that they are involved with most frequently and that they believe are valuable in helping address food issues. A computer program called UCINET was used to illustrate and analyze each organization (represented by the coloured dots) and the relationships between them (the black lines)(see BC's picture to the right). Data from this Social Network Analysis is currently being used to help understand the structure of each of the 4 provincial networks along with the position and relationships of organizations within the network. This illustration shows that there is very low centrality in the BC network. This means that it is a decentralized network with few actors holding substantial power.

A Social Network Analysis: Organizational Relationships within the BC Community Food Security Network



## Transformative Food Politics Workshop British Columbia



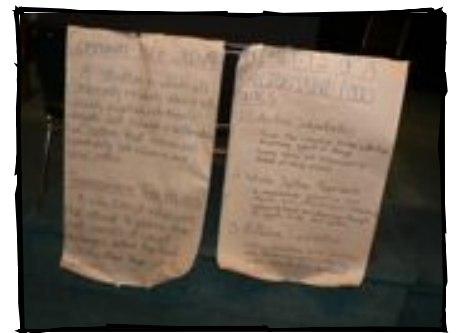
On July 8, 2011, a popular education workshop was held as part of the BC Food Systems Network Gathering in 100 Mile House. The workshop consisted of

interactive discussions about community food security efforts in British Columbia. These reflections and ideas, presented on the next pages, will be part of sharing collective knowledge and experience within and across regions in order to support our work and to explore concepts of a transformative food politics.

Working in small groups, participants created a picture of how Community Food Security (CFS)

affects our communities using a *What's Happening Chart*: First, participants discussed things that make it more difficult to establish CFS in our communities; and second, participants discussed ways we are working to increase CFS (see pages following).

Ideas were posted on the chart in 5 areas that impact us: social justice, ecological sustainability, community health, democracy, and “other”; as well as looking at 3 different levels where people are affected: Local/ Provincial, National, and Global.



# BC What's Happening Chart Summary:

## What Decreases Community Food Security

### Global

Social Justice	Ecological Sustainability	Community Health	Democracy	Other
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• debt</li> <li>• war</li> <li>• lack of food education</li> <li>• unethical business</li> <li>• colonization</li> <li>• unequal labour laws</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• climate change</li> <li>• lack of nature for grazing and wild crafting</li> <li>• natural disasters</li> <li>• agribusiness</li> <li>• biofuel</li> <li>• commoditization</li> <li>• export agriculture</li> <li>• lack of support/ infrastructure to small producers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• subsidizing cheap food</li> <li>• oversimplifying 'diet' messages</li> <li>• medical system</li> <li>• poverty (determinants of health)</li> <li>• lack of flexibility in working together</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• subsidizing cheap food</li> <li>• global trade regimes</li> <li>• land privatization</li> <li>• gate keepers</li> <li>• oligopoly (e.g. Monsanto)</li> <li>• corporate control of distribution chains (market power)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• trade</li> <li>• disconnect with growing food</li> <li>• loss of traditional knowledge</li> <li>• advertising</li> </ul>



### National

Social Justice	Ecological Sustainability	Community Health	Democracy	Other
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• cost of land for farming</li> <li>• agribusiness</li> <li>• no food policy</li> <li>• lack of food education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• complicated funding structures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• socio-culture structures (time)</li> <li>• lack of food policy</li> <li>• lack of access to food</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• subsidies for industrial crops</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lack of experience</li> <li>• loss of knowledge and skills (i.e. people don't know how to garden and cook)</li> </ul>


### Local/Provincial

Social Justice	Ecological Sustainability	Community Health	Democracy	Other
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lack of food education</li> <li>• individuality</li> <li>• lack of food policy</li> <li>• poverty</li> <li>• access to (affordable) food</li> <li>• insufficient low income assistance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• elimination of local abattoirs</li> <li>• decrease in fish stocks</li> <li>• costs of (farm) production</li> <li>• pesticides</li> <li>• lack of education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• climate change</li> <li>• advertising</li> <li>• loss of food skills (i.e. growing, cooking, nutrition)</li> <li>• inequitable and inadequate food distribution</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• over-regulation</li> <li>• public health policy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• access to road systems (transportation)</li> </ul>




# BC What's Happening Chart Summary: What Increases Community Food Security



## Global

Social Justice	Ecological Sustainability	Community Health	Democracy	Other
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• food justice movement</li> <li>• eco-feminism</li> <li>• education</li> <li>• fair trade</li> </ul> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• micro-lending</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• World Health Organization</li> <li>• shift in global consciousness</li> <li>• internet (i.e. information dissemination)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• economic development</li> <li>• alternative distribution</li> <li>• access to communication technology</li> <li>• empowered people</li> <li>• non-GMO actions (i.e. petitions, rallies)</li> <li>• advocacy against oligopolies</li> <li>• boycotts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• educating consumers on the market value of healthy foods</li> </ul>

## National

Social Justice	Ecological Sustainability	Community Health	Democracy	Other
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• permaculture networks</li> <li>• eco-certifications and product labeling</li> <li>• bridging the gap between youth, elders and culture</li> <li>• food reclamation (reducing food waste)</li> <li>• value of food (as central to spiritual/cultural relationships)</li> <li>• subsidized food programs (i.e. farmer's market nutrition)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• fair wages</li> <li>• fair work conditions</li> <li>• restorative agriculture (closed system)</li> <li>• permaculture</li> <li>• food recovery</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• less individualized focus (more community)</li> <li>• new federal food policies (i.e. Peoples' Food Policy)</li> <li>• increased rural/remote community self reliance</li> <li>• community and organization partnerships (i.e. health, funding, government)</li> <li>• funding institutions partnering to increase project development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• increased education (i.e. identifying where your food comes from)</li> <li>• health as part of all politics</li> <li>• truth in labeling</li> <li>• food policy networking</li> <li>• health equity lens on policies/programs</li> </ul> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• increased food knowledge and skills</li> </ul>

## Local/Provincial

Social Justice	Ecological Sustainability	Community Health	Democracy	Other
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>including garden space in Official Community Plan for multi family housing</li> <li>sliding scale pricing</li> <li>coupon programs</li> <li>knowledge sharing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>farmers' markets</li> <li>building root cellars</li> <li>seed saving</li> <li>community gardens</li> <li>food boxes (delivery) to rural communities</li> <li>education</li> <li>municipal pesticide bans</li> <li>advertising</li> <li>Community Shared Agriculture projects</li> <li>marketing opportunities for small farms</li> <li>bees</li> <li>farmer cooperatives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>gleaning</li> <li>education about gardening, cooking, preserving education (x2)</li> <li>community gardens</li> <li>gleaning</li> <li>gathering</li> <li>seasonality</li> <li>local processing and storage</li> <li>celebration and enjoyment (together)</li> <li>social cohesion and community strength</li> <li>farmers' markets</li> <li>alternative health options</li> <li>'know thy farmer'</li> <li>capacity development (i.e. city kitchens)</li> <li>local food production bylaws (i.e. chickens, goats, backyard gardens)</li> <li>right to urban agriculture</li> <li>provincial food policy</li> <li>question your food</li> <li>eat food grown locally</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>band subsidized community food (i.e. fish)</li> <li>keeping community members engaged (everyone is an expert)</li> <li>local food education programs (i.e. seed saving, community kitchens, salve making, healthy school program)</li> <li>interrupt industrial institutional buying</li> <li>mentors</li> </ul>
				

## Next Steps:

The workshop and the survey described in this newsletter are part of a larger study about regional food networks and a transformative food politics in Canada. The study involves interviews with specific organizations, workshops, observation of local initiatives and meetings with a number of people in British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario and Nova Scotia. The research provides an opportunity to share our knowledge and experiences. As more information from other regions becomes available, this newsletter will provide a space for this sharing to take place.

## Please Send Us Your Thoughts and Ideas!

You are welcome to use any part of this newsletter for your own work, but if you do, please let us know where and how you are using it. If you do not want to receive future newsletters or know someone else who does want to receive them, please let us know. If you would like to receive past issues, have any questions or comments about this newsletter, the broader research or anything else, feel free to contact us at the Department of Geography and Program in Planning, University of Toronto: Charles Z Levkoe ([charles.levkoe@utoronto.ca](mailto:charles.levkoe@utoronto.ca)); or Sarah Wakefield ([sarah.wakefield@utoronto.ca](mailto:sarah.wakefield@utoronto.ca), 416-978-3653).



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