

Transformative Food Politics: Sharing Our Experience, Building Our Networks



Winter 2011/2012 Issue 3

Building Strong and Effective Networks

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



*The following are edited excerpts
from a panel discussion held on
Friday October 28, 2011 at the
Bring Food Home Conference in
Peterborough Ontario
(www.bringfoodhome.com).*

Linda Davies (foodnetontario.ca): The importance of networks is the connections made by people sharing ideas, common interests, and common goals. The power of networks is the power of the people involved and the ability of those people to work together and make things happen.

FoodNet Ontario was established by organizations that came together to build a network (The Ontario Public Health Food Working Group, FoodShare Toronto, Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition and the London Community Resource Centre). FoodNet's purpose is to provide a vehicle for community food security initiatives to house ideas and share them with other people throughout the province.

Ravenna Nuaimy-Barker (sustainontario.com): Sustain Ontario originated from an identified need to bring groups transforming food systems together to share ideas and work on policy and advocacy. Sustain creates a place for people to come together, have conversations, and connect

with one another. That place can be physical but also virtual. Our work is about policy as well as practice.

How do we effectively move things forward? First, by creating opportunities to connect to each other - not just together in a room but actually working together. The strongest connections come from working side-by-side. It's about building trust over time and also understanding that we have a common vision. As a network, Sustain Ontario does not work on consensus. We are made up of different groups with different missions, but we are all forwarding a sustainable food system in some way, shape or form. That allows us to move forward without getting stuck. It allows us to build trust and relationships over time.

Cathleen Kneen (foodsecurecanada.org): Networks are created by spiders and we are all spiders creating networks. First, you grab onto something and swing out into the unknown on a thread until you find something else that you can grab onto. You connect with it and then climb back up to where you started and do it again. Then you move across to those two nodes and connect them. You keep repeating this process until there is a whole web. And there are two things that are really important here: One is that the filament, the silk that the spider spins, comes out of her gut; the other is that it is stronger than steel. The strength of the network is the strength of the links we have built today and yesterday and last week and next month; all of which, together, create that wonderful and beautiful mosaic that is our food movement.

In 1999, a group of people came together to provide an analysis and a critique of Canada's Action Plan for Food Security, which was Canada's commitment in relation to the World Food Summit. The group came together from across the country and from different sectors and went through the document piece by piece. It was clear that Canada had not lived up to its commitments. We also realized we had to keep meeting. Over the years, we had many meetings and came up with the basic principle that you could not have food security without justice and you could not have justice without sustainability and sustainable livelihoods for the people working in the system. The radical thing was getting food banks, dietitians, farmers, fishers, indigenous people and more all in one room. We agreed on three interlocking commitments: zero hunger; healthy and safe food; and, a sustainable food production and distribution system. This is Food Secure Canada. We are not a network, but an organization that networks. The network is the base, the veins and the arteries that make this organization work.

Amanda Sheedy (peoplesfoodpolicy.ca): Networks are liquid-like and obscure in the way that water slips through your fingers. There is a lot of strength in that, but it also means we need to understand the nature of what holds those networks together in order to maintain them so they serve us in the long run. The core function of a network is to share information. But the potential is to collectivize that power to affect the change we are all busy doing. Pooling our power for change is the real potential of networks that is not always actualized.

The peoples' Food Policy Project originated with a group from Food Secure Canada that went to the Nyéléni conference in Mali where peasants from around the world defined food sovereignty. Inspired, they brought home the idea of developing a Peoples' Food Policy for Canada. Over the last years, we have held over 250 kitchen table talks that have pulled together people into a conversation about the obstacles in trying to create a food system that we all want and the policy solutions that will facilitate and support achieving that vision. We built the Peoples' Food Policy on a network of networks.

The peoples' Food Policy defined a goal in very simple terms: to develop a national food sovereignty policy for Canada. That goal was fundamental. But the project also had an engaged grassroots process that allowed us to reach out to people and to keep generating and collecting ideas. There is a real balance that needs to be struck between defining goals (and there are many) and a process that enables the network to move and shift while

reaching out to touch the power structures. We need to find a balance between an organized and institutionalized structure and a respect for that organic, beautiful nature of the food movement that fills our bellies with the energy to do what we do.

Charles Levkoe (University of Toronto): The idea of a complex ecological system offers a useful way to think about our food networks. Think of a forest ecosystem: all the organisms do their own thing without any centralized control. But, they are all interdependent on each other. As each entity figures out how to survive, it in turn contributes to the survival of others. Thus, we can think of a complex ecological system as a dynamic set of relationships that occur both inside and outside the network. Behaviour is unpredictable and emergent, evolving and adaptable. The system is characterized by the self-organization of autonomous, heterogeneous actors through bottom-up processes that involves simple interactions resulting in complex outcomes. Like ecological systems, our food networks can be considered complex.

This has some direct implications for the ways we build our networks. First, we need to recognize,

acknowledge and foster diversity. We come from different places, and with different histories, experiences, approaches, goals, and visions and we need to find ways to work together despite not always reaching consensus.

Second, we need to resist

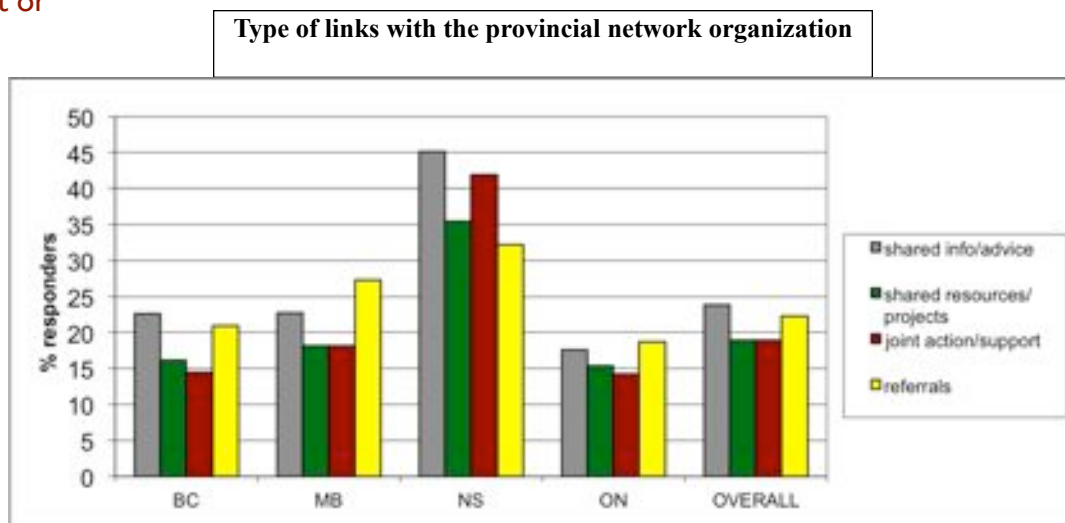
inclinations to centralize and control the network.

Networks don't form by themselves but require weavers with the ability to recognizing where experience exists and how to shift configurations of collaboration accordingly. Third, individuals and organizations are grounded in particular experiences, cultures, situated knowledge and perspectives. This means we must continually engage in (re)creation and negotiation of identity and meaning. Fourth, provincial network organizations have an important role to play in the network. They can act as a bridge by supporting strategic organizing and coalition building and by creating opportunities for collaboration. Fifth, food is not a panacea for society's ills. Food is a powerful connector and can act as a lens to understand the challenges and possible solutions. We need to connect our networks to other networks outside the food movement and confront power on all levels. Sixth, we need to find ways to balance organic, emergent, democratic network processes with finding common issues and campaigns we can work on together. This also speaks to the tensions between embracing complexity and the need to build strong foundations and institutions to scale-up our initiatives.



The Transformative Food Politics Survey

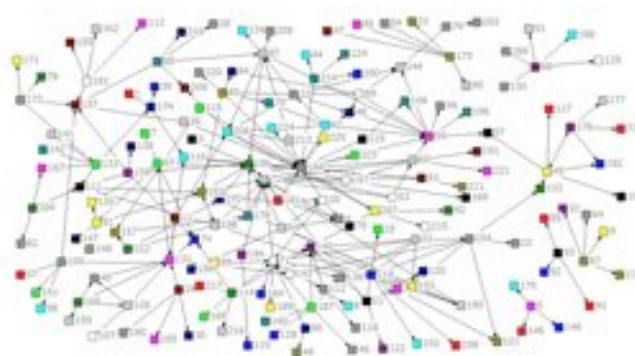
In the fall of 2010, a social network survey was completed by over 200 organizations working on food-related initiatives in British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario and Nova Scotia. One of the questions asked respondents to describe the type of links to the provincial network organization (i.e. BC Food Systems Network, Food Matters Manitoba, Sustain Ontario, the Nova Scotia Food Security Network) (see graph below). From the responses, organizations identified a wide range of collaborative efforts including shared info or advice (e.g. regular calls, working groups, meetings or emails), formally shared resources/projects (e.g. joint funding or applications, joint projects, shared equipment or personnel, shared facilities), joint action or support (e.g. providing letters of support, cross promotion of resources or campaigns, acting together informally), and referrals received or given (e.g. suggestions that their/your members, clients or the public contact or work with the other organization).



Social Network Analysis

A survey of food initiatives in Ontario asked organizations to identify 6 groups in the province 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 ON's picture to the right). Data from this Social Network Analysis is currently being used to help understand the structure of provincial networks in BC, MB, ON and NS along with the position and relationships of organizations within the network. An initial conclusion from this illustration is that there is very low centrality in the Ontario network. This means that it is a decentralized network with few actors holding substantial power.

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



Transformative Food Politics Workshop at Bring Food Home in Ontario



On October 27, 2011, a popular education workshop was held as part of the Bring Food Home Conference in Peterborough Ontario. The workshop consisted of interactive discussions about community food security efforts in Ontario. These reflections and ideas, presented on the next pages, are part of an effort to share our collective knowledge and experience. The purpose is to encourage and facilitate communication 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.



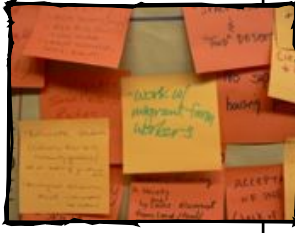
Ontario - What's Happening Chart Summary: What Decreases Community Food Security

Global

Social Justice	Ecological Sustainability	Community Health	Democracy	Other
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> poverty (income distribution) (x4) land speculation economies linked to resources export orientation free trade food deserts lack of knowledge and skills access to land food as commodity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> limited natural resources (x2) climate change (x2) bio-piracy agri-business agenda subsidizes industry externalization of true costs food as commodity agriculture in trade agreements research and production on world crops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> lack of food literacy (how to shop, cook, grow) (x4) separation between food and health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> trade agreements (x2) lack of investment in “real” food corporate concentration (i.e. land aggregation, oligopoly, profit motive, speculation) treating “symptoms” commodity crop pricing broken supply management markets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> expectation that food should be cheap commodification of seeds, water, food climate change aging expertise and skills (transfer of knowledge to next generation) lack of information




National

Social Justice	Ecological Sustainability	Community Health	Democracy	Other
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> inadequate labour laws (x3) poverty (income disparities) (x2) lack of food knowledge and skills (x2) uneven access to food programs food banks (x2) lack of respect for parents as educators acceptance of inequality (apathy, political will) lack of supportive housing policy disconnect between eaters and farmers inadequate social assistance rates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> inadequate labour laws (x3) regulations (x2) reduced biodiversity lack of training pressures on farmers, lack of access to farmland hidden cost of food production 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> public transit (rural) lack of information industry driven nutrition regulations food deserts inequalities easy access to low quality food hidden cost of food profit driven food system remote communities lack of student nutrition policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> lack of access to people in power (x2) limited food policy work (x2) lack of unified voice of food movement government purchasing policy broken supply management poverty stigma no right to a healthy standard of living misinformation and manipulation in ads lack of rigor in regulatory systems food as commodity lack of government priority for food low food expenditure corporate oligopoly “vote with your fork” reproduces inequality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> unclear who is responsible big box grocery cultural conditioning to tasteless products loss of food traditions loss of appreciation true value of food has been lost 



Local/Provincial

Social Justice	Ecological Sustainability	Community Health	Democracy	Other
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> poverty (access) (x3) food deserts (x3) housing (x2) lack of knowledge and skills affordable childcare food quality and price divide inadequate social assistance and income security no ongoing funding for CFS programs lack of voice for hungry people few good jobs lack of transportation public education inter-ministerial policies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> lack of farmland protection (x2) reliance on interns for labour limited access to water limited local infrastructure (i.e. cold storage, value added, processing) ignored economic benefits of local farming limited connection to food producers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> education system flawed (x3) lack of support for CFS programs (x3) over abundance of pre-processed food cultural norms viable food markets lack of student nutrition policy disconnection between people access to food in emergency (3-days) lack of local processing availability of culturally appropriate foods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> no inter-ministerial collaboration (x3) access to land (x2) limited food security policy work (x3) community development that excludes certain groups disabling policy environment (x2) lack of political will lack of public awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> lack of local food distribution 

Ontario - 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"> learning from the Global South and social movements fair trade slow food movement (benefits to small scale producers, farmers food skills) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CSAs Science on our side International agreements (i.e. organic standards) Seed saving projects Linking small-scale farmers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> improved availability intersections of food/health/environment cooperatives (food and others) food skills education food boxes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> fair trade agreements campaigns to deal with root causes work to remove agriculture from trade agreements financial resources focused on local food re-zoning permits work to establish enabling policy for farmers multi-stakeholder coops political activism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> values (cooperation, honesty, integrity, inclusiveness) policy push-back on agribusiness media attention food as a unifying theme (get food right you get a lot of things right and can have a positive and hopeful message)



National

Social Justice	Ecological Sustainability	Community Health	Democracy	Other
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> education (x2) housing policy/strategy food policy/strategy fair trade growth in public awareness/interest subsidies for basic food items pay farmers for ecological goods and services (i.e. ALUS) work with migrant farm workers more places to buy local 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> decentralized distribution foundations support for food alternatives public awareness multifunctionality pay farmers for ecological goods and services policy work tax incentives for farmers to donate climate change realities market creating demand for ecological practices farm organizations raising voice at the political level cooperatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> student nutrition program work gleaning food as a priority in planning procurement policies education and training food charters programs that improve access for marginalized communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> government-level support (x3) development of food policies (i.e. Peoples' Food Policy) (x2) collaborative movements funding for start up political activism farmland preservation institutional purchasing policies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> academic-community collaborations investment in infrastructure (i.e. mobile abattoirs) creative land access (i.e. rent/lease, borrow, land trusts) food issues very prominent in media



Local/Provincial

Social Justice	Ecological Sustainability	Community Health	Democracy	Other
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> increased cooperation and collaboration (x3) food policy councils (x2) re-inventing food banks (x2) fair trade (x2) economic injustice housing policy/strategy food charters food strategy sense of local ownership of issues incentive/supports for new farmers fun and celebration social enterprise market vouchers shortening distance (field to taste) Good Food Box urban hunting tax breaks for small farmers universal programming community-based research advocacy groups Transition Towns Food as “lightning rod” for folks with diverse backgrounds and interests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> markets for distribution and processing (x6) farmer-to-farmer training (x4) urban agriculture (x3) official plan/policies around protection of agricultural land (x2) farmland matching programs (x2) local food hubs resurgence in small and mixed farms small space initiatives land trusts incubator farms mapping of local food venues and locations pay farmers for ecological goods and services farm visits youth interested in food production seed saving Ontario Farm Fresh Marketing Associations SPIN Farming Landshare Information availability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> urban agriculture (x11) community kitchens (x7) education (including food skills and literacy) (x6) reducing number of food deserts (land use planning, good Food Markets) (x3) celebrations (x3) food hubs (x3) communication between emergency food hubs (x2) redistribution programs (x2) focus on built environment public education on farming community composting network building and promotion food re-skilling healthy eating programs CSAs buying clubs food co-ops Good Food Box Farmers’ Markets government regulations meal programs institutional procurement urban chickens 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> food policy councils (x5) food charters (x4) engaged politicians (x2) funding for start up small scale farming cooperatives collaborative movements policy statements for official plans alternatives to cash economy food embedded in planning political activism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> sustainability coordinators in schools (include food) train the trainer sessions (food skills) strong, diverse partnerships across sectors urban agriculture (fits into all categories depending on the purpose, methods, focus) quotas for processed foods overcoming inertia – get out and just do it increased capacity of social networks community currencies and barter desire for local foods developing local infrastructure (preserve and store) regaining knowledge of local and seasonal foods



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. Other venues for sharing research results will include The American Association of Geographers Annual Meeting (February 24-28, 2012) and the Seventh Annual General Meeting of the Canadian Association of Food Studies (May 26-28, 2012).

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); or Sarah Wakefield (sarah.wakefield@utoronto.ca, 416-978-3653).



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