

Resilient Food Systems: Policy collaborations now for health and security in the future.

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Themes from Canada's 2021 Throne Speech focused on the cost of living, health care, and the environment. These themes are connected by a system overlooked in the Throne Speech, Canada's food system. Food is essential to our health, and its production has impacts on the environment. The recent food affordability crises and its effects on Canadians' access to healthy foods highlights the dysfunctional state of Canada's food system. This paper proposes next steps for government collaboration to avert future food crises by aligning Canada's Food Policy and Canada's Competition Bureau (2023) recommendations and using Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck's (2011) comparative analytical framework to complement this process. Aligning policies supports a comprehensive approach to address the systemic challenges within Canada's food system and to protect Canadians from future volatile market situations.

The Canadian government defines a food system as *“interconnected and ... integral to the well-being of communities, including northern and Indigenous communities, public health, environmental sustainability, and the strength of the economy”* (AAFC, 2019 p.3). Canada's food policy recognizes the interconnections between health, social, environment and economic factors of the food system and encourages collaboration across sectors of government (Food Secure Canada, 2023; AAFC, 2019). The federal government's vision for the future of food in Canada states *“All people in Canada are able to access a sufficient amount of safe, nutritious, and culturally diverse food. Canada's food system is resilient and innovative, sustains our environment and support our economy.”* (AAFC, 2019 p. 5). However, given the recent food affordability crisis in Canada, this vision has yet to come to fruition.

Evaluations of Canada's food crises highlighted various contributing factors. Canada's Food Price Report (2023) forecast for overall food price increases in 2022 was exceeded by five percent, reaching a 10.3 percent price increase. In the same year, Canada's three largest grocers collectively earned more than \$3.6 billion in profits (Competition Bureau Canada, 2023). This

trend began prior to supply chain issues and inflation rates, as Canada's largest grocers' gross margins have increased over the last five years (Competition Bureau Canada, 2023). One important factor to food prices is industry concentration rates. Canada has one of the most concentrated food systems in the industrialized world (York University, 2023). When concentration rates surpass levels that generate proficient business practices it causes negative social and economic effects (York University, 2023). Since 2019, the National Farmers Union Canada has focused on concentration rates in all parts of the food system to steer attention towards the food system structure (Clapp, 2022). Their focus highlights how patterns of mergers have surged and were highest in 2021, leading to a smaller number of agri-firms controlling food supply (Clapp, 2022). When concentration happens in the food system, food corporations have 'market power,' giving them uncontested power to decide the price to pay suppliers and the prices that consumers pay.

The food affordability crises and the dysfunctional concentration rates in Canada's food system are an opportunity for government to build a more effective and efficient food system. Transforming Canada's food system towards a robust model reflects Canada's recent Speech from the Throne focus on building a resilient economy to ensure a healthier future for 'our kids.' Building a resilient food system can address the issue of 6.9 million people, including 1.8 million children, in Canada who experience food insecurity due to financial constraints (PROOF, 2023). Food insecurity is strongly correlated with health outcomes and have negative implications for Canada's public health system (Tarasuk, Li, & Farfard St-Germain, 2022) Therefore, reforming Canada's food system will have wide reaching effects.

The call to reforming Canada's food system echoes Canada's *Competition Bureau Retail Grocery Market Study Report* (2023). As per the Competition Bureau's recommendation (2023) Canada needs a "*Grocery Innovation Strategy*" aimed at supporting the emergence of new types of grocery businesses and expanding consumer choice. However, the report neglects alternative

avenues to achieve this. To build a resilient food system the focus must be on developing local food systems. Policies aimed at transforming Canada's food system at the local level reflects commitments made by various federal departments. In March of 2022, Minister of Agriculture and Agri-food, Minister of Northern Affairs, Minister for Prairies Economic Development Canada, and Minister for the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency announced \$20 million dollars allocated toward the Local Food Infrastructure Fund to create long-term food security solutions (AAFC, 2023). The next step for Canada's federal government is to extend across department collaborations to different levels of government to recognize the importance of local governance of food systems. Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck's (2011) analytical framework can help guide these steps.

Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck (2011) introduce a comparative analytical framework based on four food models. Their framework provides an overview of the spectrum of four food system models as it relates to corporate food regimes and food movements. Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck (2011) describe food systems by discourse, model, key actors, and its approach to food crises. The framework they provide can be used as an evaluation tool by government to assess local food systems and guide policy reforms aimed at enhancing Canadians food security. Their framework illustrates the effectiveness of local food system models.

Transfer of food production power and governance to local communities builds local capacity to address food insecurity and diversifies local food markets (Desmarais, 2017). One way to accomplish this is to bring producers closer to consumers. This has been done across the nation in the form of 'Farmers Markets.' Collaboration between governments can build on this successful food system model and bring food production into urban centres year-round using indoor farming technologies. One example of this type of food system is in Naujaat, Nunavut where indoor farm greenhouses are established and can withstand harsh cold temperatures and seven feet of snow

(Whitehouse, 2018). Produce grown from these greenhouses are sold at local farmers markets and food banks for less than the cost at local grocers (Whitehouse, 2018). The broad policy framework at the federal level requires active collaboration with provincial and municipal governments to implement this type of food system model in urban centres across Canada.

One aspect to developing alternative food system models is to reform property policies. As per the recommendations made in the Competition Bureau's (2023) report, policies must focus on property controls to accommodate a shift in Canada's food system structure. The policies around property controls govern how real estate is used by competing grocers which can be a barrier for new grocers to open, causing food deserts in communities (Competition Bureau Canada, 2023). Property control policies aimed at re-zoning areas in urban centres to accommodate indoor food production and establish farmer markets is an essential step to meeting Canada's Food Policy vision of a resilient and integrated food system.

Another focus for policy is to interconnect food systems with local social programs. Policies that foster relationships between indoor urban food production and local food programs would benefit the well-being of communities. For instance, policies that secure a certain percentage of food produced be distributed to food programs within local school districts, food banks, and local nursing homes would better protect vulnerable populations from food affordability crises. These policies would serve as wrap-around support to Canada's National School Food Policy. Federal funding associated with this alternative food model would alleviate strains of the pay-what-you-can program model suggested in the National School Food Policy Engagement Report (EDSC, 2023).

In summary, policy reforms regarding property control and zoning are an essential step towards building resilient local food systems. The collaborations between all levels of

governments together with local food organizations to develop indoor farms and year-round farmers markets will meet numerous priorities set by Canada's government. Supporting the infrastructure for locally governed indoor urban farms is a feasible approach to diversify local food markets, address food insecurity, and build on existing frameworks. The funds provided by federal and provincial collaborations to supplement start-up costs and sponsor food distributed to local social programs would establish these alternative food systems year-round and address the negative effects of Canada's food affordability crisis.

Canada's recent experience of the food affordability crises is a valuable lesson and requires government strategic action to remedy and prevent food crises in the future. A food system developed and governed locally for residents with the support of all levels of government is an avenue to meet the Competition Bureau's (2023) recommendations, support Canada's National School Food Policy, and reflect Canada's Food Policy's vision for the future of food in Canada. This paper has illustrated that all the essential elements are in place to transform Canada's food system but what is required is the integration of these elements to strategize and provide real tangible results. Creating locally governed indoor urban farming units is a feasible approach to begin transforming Canada's food system. The collaboration of this magnitude answers the declaration made in the 2021 Throne Speech "*to build a healthier today and tomorrow*" and "*deliver real results on what Canadians need*" (p. 10).

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