

for HUNGER- proof CITIES

Sustainable Urban
Food Systems



Edited by Mustafa Koc, Rod MacRae,
Luc J.A. Mougeot, and Jennifer Welsh

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Published by the

International Development Research Centre
PO Box 8500, Ottawa, ON, Canada K1G 3H9

in association with the

Centre for Studies in Food Security, Ryerson Polytechnic University
Toronto, ON, Canada M5B 2K3

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Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Main entry under title :

For hunger-proof cities : sustainable urban food systems

Includes bibliographical references.

"Most of the papers in this volume were presented at the International Conference on Sustainable Urban Food Systems, ... at Ryerson Polytechnic University, Toronto..." — p.4.

ISBN 0-88936-882-1

1. Food supply — Congresses.
2. Food supply — Developing countries — Congresses.
3. Nutrition policy — Congresses.
4. Sustainable agriculture — Congresses.
5. Urban health — Congresses.

I. Koc, Mustafa, 1955-

II. International Development Research Centre (Canada)

HD9000.9A1H86 1999

641.3

C99-980227-5

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IDRC Books endeavours to produce environmentally friendly publications. All paper used is recycled as well as recyclable. All inks and coatings are vegetable-based products.



Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
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Introduction: Food Security Is a Global Concern — <i>Mustafa Koc, Rod MacRae, Luc J.A. Mougeot, and Jennifer Welsh</i>	1
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Part 1. The Concept of Urban Food Security

For Self-reliant Cities: Urban Food Production in a Globalizing South — <i>Luc J.A. Mougeot</i>	11
Urban Food Security in Sub-Saharan Africa — <i>Daniel Maxwell</i>	26
Combining Social Justice and Sustainability for Food Security — <i>Elaine M. Power</i>	30

Part 2. Local Food Systems

Promoting Sustainable Local Food Systems in the United States — <i>Kenneth A. Dahlberg</i>	41
Community Agriculture Initiatives in the Metropolitan Borough of Sandwell, United Kingdom — <i>Laura Davis, John Middleton, and Sue Simpson</i>	46
Developing an Integrated, Sustainable Urban Food System: The Case of New Jersey, United States — <i>Michael W. Hamm and Monique Baron</i>	54
Public Policy and the Transition to Locally Based Food Networks — <i>Ellie Perkins</i>	60

Part 3. Urban and Community Agriculture

Urban Agriculture in the Seasonal Tropics: The Case of Lusaka, Zambia — <i>A.W. Drescher</i>	67
The Contribution of Urban Agriculture to Gardeners, Their Households, and Surrounding Communities: The Case of Havana, Cuba — <i>Angela Moskow</i>	77
Agriculture in the Metropolitan Park of Havana, Cuba — <i>Harahi Gamez Rodriguez</i>	84
People at the Centre of Urban Livestock Projects — <i>Alison Meares</i>	90
Measuring the Sustainability of Urban Agriculture — <i>Rachel A. Nugent</i>	95

Part 4. Accessibility and Urban Food Distribution

Food Banks as Antihunger Organizations — <i>Winston Husbands</i>	103
Bottlenecks in the Informal Food-transportation Network of Harare, Zimbabwe — <i>Shona L. Leybourne and Miriam Grant</i>	110
From Staple Store to Supermarket: The Case of TANSAS in Izmir, Turkey — <i>Mustafa Koc and Hulya Koc</i>	115
A Nonprofit System for Fresh-produce Distribution: The Case of Toronto, Canada — <i>Kathryn Scharf</i>	122

Part 5. Ecological and Health Concerns

Urban Food, Health, and the Environment: The Case of Upper Silesia, Poland
— *Anne C. Bellows*. 131

Reuse of Waste for Food Production in Asian Cities: Health and Economic Perspectives
— *Christine Furedy, Virginia Maclaren, and Joseph Whitney* 136

How Meat-centred Eating Patterns Affect Food Security and the Environment
— *Stephen Leckie*. 145

Farming the Built Environment — *Elizabeth Graham* 150

Part 6. Engendering the Food System

Gender and Sustainable Food Systems: A Feminist Critique — *Penny Van Esterik* 157

Women Workers in the NAFTA Food Chain — *Deborah Barndt* 162

Canadian Rural Women Reconstructing Agriculture — *Karen L. Krug*. 167

Part 7. The Politics of Food and Food Policy

Contemporary Food and Farm Policy in the United States — *Patricia Allen* 177

Policy Failure in the Canadian Food System — *Rod MacRae*. 182

Urban Agriculture as Food-access Policy — *Desmond Jolly*. 195

Part 8. Toward Food Democracy

Reaffirming the Right to Food in Canada: The Role of Community-based Food Security
— *Graham Riches*. 203

Youth, Urban Governance, and Sustainable Food Systems: The Cases of Hamilton
and Victoria, Canada — *Zita Botelho* 208

Food Policy for the 21st Century: Can It Be Both Radical and Reasonable? — *Tim Lang* 216

Appendix 1. Abstracts. 225

Appendix 2. Contributing Authors 235

Appendix 3. Acronyms and Abbreviations. 238



Promoting Sustainable Local Food Systems in the United States

Kenneth A. Dahlberg

Introduction

This discussion paper draws on experience with the Local Food Systems Project (LFSP), a three-year project funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and administered by the Minnesota Food Association of Minneapolis, Minnesota.¹

The LFSP chose six sites to receive technical assistance for developing or strengthening food-policy structures (policy councils, task forces, networks, etc.) within a larger framework of encouraging community and economic development.² Two technical-assistance workshops were held, in May 1995 and June 1996. The LFSP also developed resource materials to support these and other local efforts (MFA 1997). In 1998, we hope to publish the lessons learned from the project.

Although only one effort among many, the LFSP combined several important elements. First, it assumed a broad food-systems view.³ Second, its general theoretical approach embraced political economy, community development, and structural issues (Dahlberg 1996). Third, the project team had had a variety of practical experience. We are convinced that the LFSP's focus — on planning, organizing, and policy development — would be central to the long-term success of both local food systems and community food-security work.

Local food systems in strategic perspective

A variety of groups seeking alternative approaches to food insecurity have shown an increasing and enthusiastic interest in local food-systems work. This approach is even gaining some recognition among more traditional groups (for example, conventional

¹ The project team included Kate Clancy, founding member of the Onondaga Food System Council (New York), who is now with the Wallace Institute for Alternative Agriculture; Kenneth Dahlberg, LFSP Director and a professor of political science at Western Michigan University; Jan O'Donnell, Executive Director of the Minnesota Food Association; and Robert Wilson, a chief architect of the Knoxville, Tennessee, Food Policy Council.

² The six sites were Los Angeles, CA; Berkshire County, MA; a nine-county planning region around Rochester, NY; Pittsburgh, PA; Austin, TX; and Moyers, WV.

³ Basically, this means analyzing the interrelationships between levels of food system — household, neighbourhood, municipal, regional, etc. — in terms of their economic, social, health, power, access, equity, and symbolic dimensions, as well as in terms of food cycles: production (agriculture, farmland preservation, farmers' markets, household and community gardens, and small livestock), processing, distribution (transportation, warehousing), access (physical and economic barriers to food, availability of food stores, cafes, street food, and feeding programs), food use (health, nutrition, cooking, food preservation, food safety, and food handling), food recycling (gleaning, food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens), and the waste stream (composting, garbage fed to animals, etc.).

agricultural groups; antihunger groups; and people in various academic disciplines). This raises the question whether these new local-food groups are becoming a movement. Although some (Gottlieb and Fisher 1996) think this (on the basis of the reform agendas of the groups involved), the project team has concluded (on the basis of the modest social and political support such groups enjoy) that they are not yet a movement.

This suggests that the many groups interested in food issues and food policy need to find common goals and harmonize their approaches. It is difficult to know how to develop and orchestrate a larger community effort, given the demands of modern organizational life. Yet, without a joint effort to build the theoretical, organizational, and political foundations of food-systems work, we risk being either co-opted by more traditional sectors or marginalized. The following is a broad outline of the requirements for such a larger cooperative effort.

Developing a vision

At the local level, it would be useful to conduct a visioning exercise among potential stakeholders to explore and clarify values and goals (see Hancock 1993) while getting them to think in systems terms about their local food system and its sustainability. It would also be useful to bring together representatives of the groups active in food-systems work around the country for similar visioning and goal-setting workshops. Any such workshop should be based on a federated, bottom-up vision that gives priority to local goals and needs as long as they are consistent with the requirements of sustainability at other levels.

Longer term theoretical needs

The general theoretical and empirical work on the structure and political economy of food systems should be expanded. Relatively little work done in this area has focused primarily on national and international issues, and the research would benefit from a multilevel analysis of local and regional issues. When the project team sought to do this, it learned of the great need for a practical theory. Such a theory would be aimed at helping local food-security practitioners to better understand their communities and the food needs of their communities and develop appropriate policies and programs to deal with them. Practical theories and concepts to guide organization and planning would also complement the many existing how-to manuals.

Key areas for a practical theory would be profiling, planning, organizing, and evaluation. Our resource guide (MFA 1997) provided readings and guidelines on the first three of these topics. The fourth, evaluation, was a most valuable tool for us. We used formative evaluation throughout to try to assess our progress and further objectives. In developing the final evaluation form for our six sites, we structured it to encourage the community workers to do some formative evaluation as they reviewed their progress and future goals.

At this stage, we especially realized how much we needed a practical framework or matrix to describe the key contextual parameters and organizational variables for the sites. It is hoped the following lists of these parameters and variables will benefit other groups and communities working on food planning and policy.

Key contextual parameters

1. *Scale* — One needs to find and show the area covered, plus its total population. These affect the prospects for intervention (distances to be traveled to meetings, numbers and types of people or organizations that need to be involved, etc.).
2. *Landscape patterns* — Any work with an urban–rural spectrum soon suggests that landscape patterns tell us very little about the patterns of people and land use important to local food systems. We need more useful descriptors and typologies.
3. *Population patterns* — These varied considerably between communities. Among the LFSP sites, Los Angeles and Pittsburgh were very concentrated; Austin was fairly concentrated; the Berkshires and West Virginia were very dispersed, and the New York site was dispersed but had one major population concentration. The question to ask in connection with this parameter is what types of organizing approach these variations suggest.
4. *Socioeconomic patterns* — These include the role and importance of the general economic structure of the community (whether it is diverse and to what degree it is autonomous), agriculture, various food enterprises, and social structures (patterns of race, class, poverty, etc.).
5. *Food organization patterns* — One needs to examine such patterns in both food-system and other food-related organizations in the community. One also needs to assess the linkages among them.

Key organizational variables

1. *Leadership* — It is helpful to work with more than one recognized community leader when dealing with food issues. When several leaders come from different sectors (public, private, nonprofit), they need to be aware of each other's orientations and work styles. Ideally, leaders can work together over a long enough time to develop collaborative leadership, where tasks can be rotated or delegated with relative ease.
2. *Work styles of groups* — These can be seen across three somewhat-overlapping spectrums. One of these goes from an emphasis on ad hoc responses to one on strategic planning; another shows the relative emphasis given to specific projects versus developing a process to pursue change; finally, the last ranges from a project emphasis to a policy or policy-development emphasis. Experience suggests that the more community workers pursue planning, process, and policy, the more effective they will be.
3. *Staff funding* — All observers agree that it is crucial to have funding for full- or part-time staff exclusively devoted to food-systems work. Without this, staff time tends to be consumed in dealing with other, more immediate issues of employment.
4. *Administrative approaches* — The administrative approaches of key staff (and their location) are important. In some cases, key staff are also key leaders. In others, they may be different people. Administrative questions include the degree of centralization and the types of delegation preferred. Relations between leaders and staff are of obvious importance.

Various combinations of these contextual parameters and organizational variables yield different results. With a set of matrices or a typology illustrating these, local communities would be in a much better position to identify their key issues, challenges, and opportunities.

The need for capacity-building

The need for capacity-building for the food-systems community emerges out of the generally increasing interest in food systems, sparked in part by the United States Department of Agriculture's *Community Food Security Act*. Six crucial elements are discussed below. The overarching challenge, however, is to find enough financial and organizational support to carry out this capacity-building.

- *Networking* — Few nonprofits have the resources to daily track the range of activities relevant to their interests. A web page dealing with food-systems issues would be most useful (keeping in mind that less affluent groups don't have web access), along with support for key people to attend regional, state, or national meetings.
- *Technical assistance* — Whereas a web page might offer some technical assistance, a national or a set of regional hotlines would be useful to answer questions on local food systems and policy. One model for this is ATTRA (Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas). A more modest approach would be to develop directories or databases listing the experts on various topics.
- *Leadership training* — Leadership training should be recognized as both a key next step and part of longer term capacity-building, including systems thinking and practical skills in planning, organization, and policy development.
- *Ongoing strategic evaluation* — One or more groups should monitor the many current programs and experiments to develop summary descriptions. These should be regularly analyzed for lessons learned. Both the summaries and the lessons learned should be disseminated in print or electronic forms or both. This would require not only financial support but also a group of analysts with both theoretical and practical knowledge.
- *Research on a practical theory* — Nonprofits in diverse regions could do such research, but they would need staff and more general organizational support. Regional centres would be in a good position to seek interns and graduate-student assistants from area academic institutions.
- *Longer term research on food systems* — The two most likely locations for longer term theoretical and empirical research are academic institutions and think tanks. They each have a great deal to offer if a critical mass of knowledge can be established and the problems of disciplinary specialization (academia) and shorter term policy focus (think tanks) can be avoided.

Conclusions

Meeting the larger challenge of finding financial support for capacity-building ultimately requires the diverse groups involved in food-systems work to establish a community of interest. Separately and jointly they need to consciously think about how to strengthen the capacities of the community, particularly in terms of building common organizational infrastructures and capacity-building programs. Only as a community, with a strategic vision and new organizations and common programs, will we make progress toward more equitable, sustainable, and democratic food systems.

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