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Guest Editorial

Special Issue on building an integrated Food Policy for Canada: An open letter to the Canadian food policy community

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Dear Food Policy Community,

We write to you as the guest co-editors of this special issue of *Canadian Food Studies*, “Building an integrated Food Policy for Canada”, on the eve of the federal government’s much anticipated development of a Food Policy for Canada. As food systems scholars, practitioners and engaged citizens, we have followed these developments closely over the past decade with hopes that an integrated policy approach at the federal level may finally begin to address the concerns of those most impacted by the challenges of our current food system: those struggling with food insecurity and poverty, low waged food workers, small and mid-scale farmers and fishers, and Indigenous people, to name only a few.

The effects of climate change, neoliberalization, corporate consolidation, declining access to healthy food and country food, and the overall lack of democratic accountability of the food system have left many to conclude that we are at a critical juncture for how food is produced, harvested, distributed, and consumed in Canada. While a Food Policy for Canada is only a first step towards achieving a more healthy, just and sustainable food system, it is an important one. We recognize that the upcoming policy will be just the beginning; many pressing questions remain about how the policy will be implemented and what mechanisms will be used to ensure its realization. There will be many perspectives and tensions within these discussions going forward. This special issue is intended to be a contribution to the crucial work ahead.

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Many civil society actors, including members of the Canadian Association of Food Studies (CAFS), the academic association which hosts the *Canadian Food Studies* journal, have been following the development of this initiative closely since 2015 when the Minister of Agriculture was instructed “to develop a national food policy that promotes healthy living and safe food by putting more healthy, high quality food, produced by Canadian ranchers and farmers, on the tables of families”.¹ Later in May 2017, CAFS was honoured to host Minister Macaulay’s official announcement of the consultation process at the annual CAFS conference. Many CAFS members also participated in a number of community-based roundtable discussions, submitted recommendations, and served as delegates to the Ottawa Food Summit held in June 2017.

Our interests in the development of Canada’s national food policy, as editors of this special issue, come from a recognition of the need for better coordination of existing food-related policies and programs distributed among different federal departments and agencies, as well as other jurisdictions. Existing policies tend to work in isolation from one another and some in contradiction, leading to even more complex challenges. We were very happy to see the Government of Canada’s commitment to develop a Food Policy for Canada that “will set a long-term vision for the health, environmental, social, and economic goals related to food, while identifying actions we can take in the short-term”.²

A national food policy is not a new concept. Work towards a Food Policy for Canada emerged from decades of work by civil society actors, social movements, governments and businesses. While there has not been agreement on all aspects of what a national food policy should look like, there is consensus that the dominant food system is not working for many Canadians. This was expressed clearly by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food when he visited Canada in 2012. While praising the many achievements, Olivier De Schutter noted a host of challenges, including inadequate social assistance levels; health and chronic disease stemming from poor diets; the unacceptable conditions of Northern and Indigenous communities; and fragmented, short-sighted policy interventions. Echoing the call of many civil society organizations, De Schutter emphasized the need for a comprehensive national food strategy, rooted in the right to food, that would take an integrated and democratic approach to governing Canada’s food systems.³ It also seems like more than just coincidence that the Food Policy for Canada consultations were launched exactly ten years after the initiation of the Peoples Food Policy’s project and the subsequent report, *Resetting the Table: A People’s Food Policy for Canada*.⁴ Over the past decade, the call for a national food policy has been echoed by groups such as the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, the Canadian Agri-food Policy Institute and the Conference Board of Canada.

This special issue grew out of a collaboration between three organizations that are part of Canada’s growing food movements including: CAFS, an academic and community-based

¹ <https://pm.gc.ca/eng/minister-agriculture-and-agri-food-mandate-letter>

² <https://www.canada.ca/en/campaign/food-policy.html>

³ <http://www.srfood.org/en/official-reports>

⁴ <https://foodsecurecanada.org/people-food-policy>

research association that promotes critical, interdisciplinary scholarship in the broad area of food systems; Food Secure Canada (FSC), a pan-Canadian alliance of organizations and individuals working together to advance food security and food sovereignty; and Community First: Impacts of Community Engagement (CFICE), an action-based collaborative research project that studies how community and campus players work together to positively impact their communities. Together, individuals and organizations associated with these networks and research projects sought to create a more open, collaborative and transformative food policy space that brings truly innovative ideas to the fore. As active participants in these organizations and networks, we sought to expand the food policy conversation in Canada in various ways, including through the production of this special issue.

The contributions to this special issue include original research articles, perspectives and commentaries that represent a wide range of ideas, critical reflections and proposals from scholars, practitioners and activists with extensive experience in the broad field of food studies. While some of the authors have been involved in this work for decades, others bring fresh perspectives to this complex debate. In the various contributions, you will find a range of proposals and recommendations for ways Canada's national food policy might evolve. While some of these ideas are actionable immediately, others provide a longer-term vision for processes of democratic engagement. Nonetheless, all of them are made earnestly and should be taken seriously. For instance:

- Andrée, Coulas and Bellamie reflect on two earlier national food policy efforts A Food Strategy for Canada (1977) and Canada's Action Plan for Food Security (1998) along with experiences from national food strategies developed in seven other countries. Drawing on key lessons, they recommend establishing a multi-sectoral and inter-governmental National Food Policy Council to guide the Food Policy for Canada.
- Dachner and Tarasuk argue that eliminating household food insecurity must be viewed as a prerequisite to the promotion of healthy living and safe food in Canada. Drawing on extensive data to demonstrate that household food insecurity is linked to social and economic factors, they call for the integration of policy actions, and for the establishment of performance targets and ongoing monitoring mechanisms.
- Elliot and Cardwell note that food allergies are a growing public health epidemic but under-addressed at all levels of government. They suggest that a national food policy must consider, for example, the expansion of school-based policies, the introduction of standardized restaurant training programs and the provision of stock epi-pens.
- Rotz and Kepkiewicz ask if it is even possible for a national food policy to form the foundation for sustainable and equitable food systems in Canada given the current settler-colonialist government structure. They offer several suggestions regarding how settlers might begin to rethink investments in the Canadian state and ways forward that might include repatriating land and transforming private property structures, supporting Indigenous food provisioners, and building knowledge and support for non-extractive relationships.

- Seed and Rocha explore the possibilities of advancing sustainability principles within Canadian national dietary guidelines by drawing on experiences from four other countries. Their proposals include building cross-sector collaborations and alliances—including civil society participation—to support governments who may feel constrained to act and to counter-balance food industry influence, developing “win-win” messages to satisfy agendas of various sectors, and building on current political opportunities in Canada.
- Levkoe and Blay-Palmer analyze the development of Food Counts: A Pan-Canadian Sustainable Food Systems Report Card as an effort to bring together existing measures of social, environmental, and economic well-being to examine food systems from a food sovereignty perspective. They argue that while report cards and indicators can make visible numerous food systems' elements, they can also obscure diverse experiences, reinforcing unsustainable practices and policies.
- Weiler addresses the lack of dignity and justice for workers hired through Canada’s temporary farm labour migration program. She argues that Canada’s national food policy presents an opportunity to demonstrate global leadership on collective human rights for cross-border workers.
- Qualman, Akram-Lodhi, Desmarais, and Srinivasan provide an evidence-based analysis of the structural factors and forces driving Canada's agricultural sector with a focus on the growing crisis of generational farm renewal. They suggest that a national food policy built upon social, economic, and environmental sustainability can bring greater emphasis on sustainable and low-input agriculture, local food, organic production, agro-ecology, and food sovereignty.
- Soma takes on a national food waste agenda and argues that there needs to be a shift in the governing paradigm from a food recovery hierarchy to a regenerative closed loop food system.
- Nelson, Levkoe, and Kakegamic highlight some of the shifts and challenges facing food provisioning in Northwestern Ontario, to emphasize the importance of contextual, place-based food policy.
- Hernandez, Engler-Stringer, Kirk, Wittman, and McNicoll draw on an international review of different school food policies and approaches, to argue for the creation of a national school food program that is universal, health-promoting, comprehensive, education-integrated, sustainable, and contextualized as part of a Food Policy for Canada.
- Bacon, Vandelac and Petrie raise the issue of the increasing use of glyphosate-based herbicides and their impacts in Canada. They argue for the necessity to take into account a series of major issues within Canada’s food and agriculture policy and for a more independent evidenced-based approach to pesticide approvals as a key component of an integrated national food policy.
- Berger Richardson and Lambek argue that the development of a national food policy for Canada offers an opportunity to harmonize law and policymaking, and clarify the key

roles that all levels of government play in the development and governance of food systems. However, this will require identifying sites of conflict and overlap, but also spaces for collaboration, coordination, and innovation.

- Smythe focuses on market access, standards, regulatory harmonization and procurement to argue that a national food policy must include real efforts to link up and develop coherent, whole of government food policy that includes the impact of trade and investment agreements.
- Laforge, Fenton, Lavallée-Picard, and McLachlan address the shifting demographics of farmers and the impact of agricultural and food policies on the decision-making and behaviours of new farmers. Drawing from a national survey and a review of existing literature they present four key recommendations: 1) Protect agricultural land and ensure accessibility for new farmers; 2) Ensure training and education are available and accessible; 3) Ensure financial resources are accessible to diverse farmers; and, 4) Support shared infrastructure and scale-appropriate regulation.
- Martorell and Abergel explore lessons from Quebec’s approach to implementing agriculture and rural policies. They suggest that federal institutions could follow suit by integrating key operating principles that include the precautionary principle (a requirement of scientific certainty to mitigate risk), multifunctionality (support for both economic and noneconomic outcomes of agriculture), and subsidiarity (appropriately scaled policy and interventions).

Notwithstanding the growing scholarship and civil society efforts weighing in on the complexities and possibilities of a Food Policy for Canada, we believe this conversation is only beginning. There is much to be envisioned, negotiated and debated and we hope the ideas of the contributors to this special issue will be part of those discussions.

In closing, we would like to express our gratitude for the tireless efforts and supports from Ellen Desjardins and the *Canadian Food Studies* editorial team, input from Diana Bronson and members of CFICE and the Food: Locally Embedded, Globally Engaged (FLEdGE) research partnerships, as well as funding from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Sincerely,



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