



Field Report

Critical food guidance in action: The history of the Toronto Food Policy Council

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Abstract

This field report links food and city policies by tracing the history of the Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC). We bring the insider perspective of Canadian food policy practitioners and staff leads of the TFPC—one of the first food policy councils in a major city when it was established in 1990, and an example of critical food guidance in action. We present six insights about food as a tool of critical food guidance, gleaned from our experience at the TFPC. We argue that: 1) Food is at the centre of the planetary crisis; 2) Cities are where the planetary crisis is coming home to roost; 3) Food is multifunctional and can solve many city problems; 4) Civic engagement is essential, and food policy councils are a pivotal tool; 5) Solutions must be place-based, and food is a place-maker; and 6) Action must be people-centred.

Keywords: Toronto Food Policy Council; food-city nexus; people-centred food policy; civic engagement; multifunctionality; critical food guidance

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Introduction

Many projects can be described as a voyage, not a destination, and the Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC) is among them. We may never know the destination, or if we will get there, but we see a path worth taking. This field report highlights the experience of two Canadian food policy practitioners and staff leads of the TFPC¹—one of the first food policy councils in a major city when it was established in 1990—and an example of not only successful food planning and policy in motion (Blay-Palmer, 2009), but also of the food-city nexus and critical food guidance in action.

The history of the TFPC, and the insights with respect to future food planning and policy based on our experience, resonate with critical food guidance. In their invitation to the Special Issue, the guest editors introduced the concept of critical food guidance and described it in terms of going beyond healthy eating to embrace broader issues associated with environmental, social, and economic sustainability. This matched the concerns of the TFPC from its origins in addressing food insecurity to its focus on civic engagement, place and people-centred action. Aiming to combine healthy eating patterns with efforts toward more sustainable food systems, the guest editors encouraged submissions that linked the food we eat with the sustainability of the world around us. In particular, they asked prospective authors to submit working examples of critical food guidance, such as food policy councils. Providing a history of the TFPC seemed like a perfect choice: the TFPC recognized early the unsustainability of the industrial food system, its policy reports highlighted links between food and the sustainability of the city, it supported nascent food movements, and it showcased community food assets.

In 2007, new pathways linking food and city policies—the food-city nexus—opened up. That year, for the first time in history, city populations outnumbered rural (North Carolina State University, 2007). This emboldened the new urban majority to see cities as the bedrock for momentous opportunities and challenges. The same year was also a turning point for local food. “Locavore” was named word of the year, a sign that rising urban interest in food was creating brash new choices—beyond the stale debates between health food and junk food, or herbivore versus carnivore (Oxford University Press, 2007). Local food led people in cities to renew relationships with their nearby countryside and food producers. Local and sustainable were also being paired in a new debate (The Metcalf Foundation, 2008). Food presented gateways to different ways of living, not just different ways of eating. This was suggested by three key books of 2007: Alisa Smith and J.B. MacKinnon’s (2007) *The 100-Mile Diet*, Barbara Kingsolver’s (2007) *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, and Alice Waters’ (2007) *Delicious Revolution*. Not that lifestyle choices defined the range of interests and issues. The *Guardian*, circulated daily to a worldwide influential readership, featured many stories about food waste, school meals and the environment (Cairns, 2007). The year ended with a global food crisis in the fall, when demand

¹ See TFPC (2022). Wayne Roberts staffed the TFPC from 2000-2010. Lori Stahlbrand was the staff lead from 2017-2019.

for grain as feedstock for ethanol fuel sent grain prices soaring. Would the poor starve while the rich used once-affordable food staples to fill the gas tanks of their luxury cars? Riots were predicted for the new year in dozens of cities as speculators drove up food prices again (Watts, 2007). True, most food was produced in countryside and coastline villages, but the riots showed that the future of food would be contested in cities.

This was confirmed in 2015, when Milan officials, in partnership with the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization and others, issued the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, and called on other cities to join them (Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, 2015). The brief statement (Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, 2015) warned that the planetary crisis of unsustainable environments would surely affect “the task of feeding cities” (p.1) The rapid rise of urban populations, the Pact said, “necessitates re-examination of the ways in which cities are provisioned with food and water” (p.1) because food and water will be central to a wide range of city issues, including “poverty, health and social protection, hygiene and sanitation, land use planning, transport and commerce, energy, education, and disaster preparedness” (p.1). The statement advised that “most interventions will have an impact on multiple dimensions (economic, social, health and environment) of sustainable development” (p.3). Leaders of more than 200 cities, home for 350 million people, have since signed the Milan Pact (Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, 2015). The food-city nexus had moved to centre stage.

In this field report, we look at the history of the TFPC, drawing on its thirty-year involvement with public health, citizen engagement, multiculturalism, food insecurity, food waste, urban agriculture, green infrastructure, social enterprises, and community partnerships. We begin by discussing the origins of the TFPC and the context for its emergence. We then discuss the TPFC and its focus on the multifunctionality of food, civic engagement, place and people-centred action, and community-based food assets. We conclude with some ruminations about future food planning and policy, informed by our experience with the TFPC, and link the TFPC to critical food guidance.

The origins of the Toronto Food Policy Council

Food policy councils are made up of representatives and stakeholders from—ideally—all five sectors of the food system (production, consumption, processing, distribution, and waste recycling) (Harper et al., 2009). Support for and interest in these organizations has grown significantly since the creation of the first food policy council in the early 1980s (Schiff, 2008). Acting as both forums for food issues and platforms for coordinated action, food policy councils “identify and propose innovative solutions to improve local or state food systems, spurring local economic development and making food systems more environmentally sustainable and socially just” (Harper et al., 2009, p. 2). This reflects the work of the TFPC.

Created as a vehicle for food citizenship (Welsh & MacRae, 1998), the TFPC is a pioneer in urban food policy. Blay-Palmer (2009) describes it as a positive force for social change

because it can activate the kind of transformations that result in a more just city. In spite of challenges, she explains how the TFPC “moves food issues onto a suite of agendas, making food considerations more visible and relevant to policy makers, businesses, citizens/eaters, chefs, farmers, food processors, and activists, among others” (Blay-Palmer, 2009, pp. 402-403). For Blay-Palmer, the TFPC offers an example of cutting-edge food policy innovation in action.

This innovation was clear from the beginning of the TFPC. In the mid-1980s after the first food banks had opened, Mayor Art Eggleton was appalled that Toronto should sink to this indignity, and convinced City Council to fund the startup of FoodShare, later the largest local food-security organization in North America, to find alternatives to food banks. When that effort failed to stem the tide of poverty and dependence on food charity, Jack Layton, a radical and inventive city counsellor and Board of Health Chair, together with his Executive Assistant Dan Leckie, proposed that Toronto set up a food policy council, in part inspired by local activists and the London Food Commission. Along with the mayor, they tapped into the city consensus: food banks were an emergency measure, part of an emergency food system, and the long-term response had to be based on comprehensive government policy.

The TFPC was launched as a sub-committee of the Toronto Board of Health in 1990, with policy as the operative word. But the TFPC’s assignment to do supportive food policy stood in stark contrast to the neoliberal/austerity turn focussed on privatization, deregulation, and liberalization (see Harvey, 2006). Despite the best efforts of the TFPC and many other organizations, no sustained effort to roll back poverty levels, which lead to food bank use, has ever been implemented across North America. Indeed, Torontonians made 1.45 million visits to food banks in 2020 (Daily Bread Food Bank & North York Harvest, 2019).

This is not to say that progress has not been made in understanding the issues and obstacles to food security. Rod MacRae, the founding staff lead for the TFPC, wrote several seminal policy papers adopted by the TFPC during his nine-year tenure (TFPC, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 1999). In 1992, he and the TFPC prepared a Toronto Declaration on Food and Nutrition, which was adopted by the Board of Health (Toronto Board of Health, 1992). It declared that healthy food choices should be promoted for all Torontonians, that all Toronto residents should be able to access them, and that local farmers should be supported to grow healthy food for local markets as a way of ending Ontario’s trade deficit in food. In effect, the declaration redefines the food bank problem as a public health challenge. Since the 1980s, the visionary conviction of Toronto Public Health has been repeatedly well-stated: public health policy and resources need to focus “upstream”, where health problems are caused and determined, and not fixate “downstream”, where the results depend on expensive and ineffective cures to preventable diseases.

MacRae and TFPC members also made the compelling link in their series of policy briefs cited above that the industrial food system was responsible for a deadly combination of three main factors: the inability to provide healthy food to people on low income, the inability to prevent the rise of chronic diseases flowing from unhealthy foods, and the inability to limit the environmental damage done by pesticides and intensive production methods in agriculture. As

MacRae outlined it, the food system is dominated by large corporations, which sell food products that earn them a profit, with no necessary commitment to good health, local employment, or environmentally responsible production methods. In other words, there is no understanding of food as a public good. This is quite exceptional, even in a capitalist economy, where non-food industrial sectors include public goods as well as private profits. Transportation includes public roads and public transit. Health includes public health and public hospitals. Water and energy include public utilities. Shelter includes public housing. Culture includes public broadcasting. There's no such public infrastructure associated with the food sector. This was the nub of the TFPC's food system analysis in its first decade.

The Toronto Food Policy Council and the multifunctionality of food

While the first decade of the TFPC brought the food-health connection into the foreground, the second and third decades moved toward a deeper understanding of the food-city nexus and food's centrality in addressing a full range of issues related to people, place, and planet that belong on a local government agenda. Traditionally, local city governments often focus on issues such as parks, transportation, and policing. In contrast, a food mandate can encourage cities to take major initiatives on behalf of people, places, and the planetary environment. "Think globally, act locally" comes of age.

In 1998, the Ontario government ordered Toronto and five adjoining suburban city governments to amalgamate into one common metropolitan city (Chidley & Hawaleshka, 2013). All six governments had vigorously opposed amalgamation but recognized that they had no constitutional choice but to follow orders. Amalgamation had unexpected positive consequences for the TFPC. Overnight, it doubled the number of people and issues it could speak for, making it a metropolitan and not simply a city body. Within months of being hired at the TFPC, Wayne Roberts (co-author of this chapter) was assigned to co-lead the Food and Hunger Action Committee (FAHAC) for the newly amalgamated city (City of Toronto, 2000, 2001a, 2003). Roberts also had an opportunity to write a comprehensive critique of the new city's draft Official Plan and ensure that food was included (TFPC, 2001). Over a four-year period, amalgamation offered TFPC staff and members a crash course on the food-city nexus.

As befitting the opportunity to start fresh with a new policy in an area that few local governments had formal policy on—namely, food and hunger—FAHAC invited community leaders active in confronting food insecurity to join its steering committee. That allowed Kathryn Scharf, on staff with FoodShare, as well as citizen-chair of the TFPC, to play a leading role in both the TFPC and FAHAC. The staff leads of the FAHAC process came from two city divisions, public health and social development.

Following unanimous adoption of the FAHAC report *The Growing Season* by Toronto City Council, TFPC staff turned attention to the City's Official Plan (City of Toronto, 2019). The TFPC's report on Toronto's Official Plan, *The Way to a City's Heart is Through its Stomach*,

was widely circulated among planners and planning students across North America. Planners were beginning to awaken to food as a city planning issue (Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 2000). For the first time, food received multiple mentions in the Official Plan. The TFPC report anticipated the Milan Pact’s call for cities to identify food as having strategic importance for city wellbeing and brought to the fore for the first time the need for cities to act on food issues. The FAHAC report presented to City Council highlighted the multifunctional nature of food and its ability to help solve a wide range of problems in the city. Multifunctionality fulfills two functions: it positions food policy councils as “solutionaries,” people who contribute solutions, not problems, to policy discussions; and it also raises the profile of new, creative, and affordable solutions to problem areas known to be hard to solve.

The Toronto Food Charter, submitted alongside the FAHAC Report, was unanimously approved by Toronto City Council in 2001 (City of Toronto, 2001b). It implicitly and explicitly acknowledges the food-city nexus and the multifunctionality of food. While the Charter itself features a list of things a city should do about food, the appendix to the Charter outlines ten ways that food programs enhance city wellbeing—perhaps the first such listing in a formal government document. The Toronto Food Charter is the guiding document of the TFPC. It sets the tone for community-based critical food guidance, by providing the principles that all TFPC members commit to work towards. The Charter identifies the public interest that governs all members, over and above the interests of any stakeholder group.

The next breakthrough in the TFPC’s strategic appreciation of foods’ role in cities came almost ten years later. The Medical Officer of Health, Dr. David McKeown, and his assistant Barbara Emanuel asked TFPC staff to help develop a Toronto Food Strategy. In 2010, the team produced its report, *Cultivating Food Connections: Toward a Healthy and Sustainable Food System for Toronto* (Toronto Public Health, 2010). The consultation process engaged a far reaching group of City division heads, community leaders, academics, and citizen groups. The resulting report was one of the first city-wide food strategies anywhere, explicitly designed to encompass the entire city, not just one division, such as health or community development. It was also one of the first documents to explicitly identify food as a lever for addressing non-food problems.

The concept of leverage came to the attention of TFPC staff during a tour of low-income housing projects with community gardens. A manager responsible for cleaning up litter noticed that wherever people in housing projects thought nearby land was part of their community, they cared for it, and wherever they felt unwelcome, they let it degrade. She became a champion of neighborhood food projects as a way to reduce littering (Roberts, 2014). Leveraging food can also influence traffic jams, a much-cursed problem in the city, widely said to cost billions of dollars annually in lost time and opportunities (Star Editorial Board, 2018). Almost one quarter of trucks on the road are carrying food, according to a U.S. Department of Agriculture study (USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, 2011). Reducing traffic also means reducing air pollution—now regarded as one of the world’s top killers (Le Page, 2019). The concept of leverage offered a blueprint to all city divisions to help them identify ways of using food

programs to reduce divisional costs, increase divisional revenues, or improve divisional services.

The Toronto Food Policy Council and its focus on civic engagement, place, and people-centred action

By its third decade, the TFPC settled into an unspoken understanding that the combination of neoliberalism and austerity had shut down any opportunities to make significant advances in the fields of social, economic, and public health policies. As early as 2001, a TFPC publication on city planning (Roberts, 2001) took note of Saskia Sassen's masterful analysis of post-industrial, post-Fordist world cities, where a new economic elite set its eyes on global markets, rather than domestic markets that depended on well-paid workers who could afford to buy the many goods they produced (Sassen, 1991). There was to be no overarching policy to achieve food security akin to Canada's much loved publicly funded universal healthcare. Nor would substantial but more piecemeal policy initiatives be considered to reduce food insecurity. Toronto's drift into such a fate was sealed by the successful mayoralty campaign of a far-right politician, Rob Ford, in 2010.

But as often happens, one door closes and another opens. The TFPC became a pivotal space for an emerging food movement. This nascent open-ended movement was based in civil society organizations and young food enthusiasts who were inspired by local and sustainable food, Italy's Slow Food movement, and the ideas behind food security and food sovereignty. Their positive, imaginative, and joyful visions and energies offered a glimpse into the possibilities of an alternative understanding of food policy. In practice, the TFPC continued to play a brokerage role, linking citizen experts and City policy staff with each other. But the TFPC also provided a platform that convened civil society leaders who could manage and steer emerging issues and relationships.

GrowTO: An Urban Agriculture Action Plan for Toronto (City of Toronto, 2012) is an example of how policy has played out in the food-city nexus. Developed by the TFPC with staff lead Lauren Baker, it was unanimously adopted by Toronto City Council in 2012. Both the process and the content of the report illustrate the dawning of a new policy era. Talented community and academic leaders pitched in. One participant, Dr. Joe Nasr, had co-authored the UN's first publication on the topic (Smit et al., 1996). Baker herself was a pioneering rooftop grower and social entrepreneur during the 1990s (Roberts et al., 1999). The GrowTO Action Plan highlights the many ways individuals and community groups can take leadership and agency. Initiatives will happen in home backyards, apartment roofs, boulevards, schools, parks and hospitals, the report predicted. It was ground zero for urban agriculture as a partnership between public policy and citizen action.

It is not a surprise that urban agriculture has become one of the most active areas of food-related community-based activity. Gardening brings multifunctionality down to earth. It is

inherently place-based, making use of the unique features of city neighbourhoods. For example, in Toronto, lands located in flood plains are being made available for urban farms in the heart of the city.

Urban agriculture also lends itself to multiple partnerships, often with neighborhood groups. TFPC meetings, held monthly at City Hall, have become a space where residents interested in urban agriculture can meet and plan. The TFPC's Urban Agriculture Working Group is perhaps its most active. Community-based leaders, with the support of the TFPC, advocated for Toronto's Mayor to declare an annual Urban Agriculture Day in 2017 in early September (TFPC, 2017). The TFPC, with support from staff lead, Lori Stahlbrand (co-author of this chapter), participated actively in what has evolved into Urban Agriculture Week, organizing tours of urban agriculture projects, and devoting its September meeting to the theme of growing food in the city.

This action-oriented approach, which focussed on projects and programs in partnership with community organizations, extended to the Toronto Food Strategy Unit, which was formed within Toronto Public Health in 2011. The manager, Barbara Emanuel, put an emphasis on "action learning" —a process involving "a small group working on real problems, taking action and learning as individuals, as a team, and as an organization...to develop creative, flexible and effective responses to pressing problems" (World Institute for Action Learning, n.d.). The most celebrated program launched by the Toronto Food Strategy Unit is Community Food Works. The program was developed in 2014 to give Toronto residents on a low income the skills and education they need to find work in the food industry. The program includes Food Handler Certification, as well as nutrition education and social networking opportunities. Community Food Works for Newcomers opened the program to recent immigrants and refugees. In 2017, Community Food Works for Newcomers won the top Milan Pact Award (Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, 2017).

The Toronto Food Policy Council and community-based food assets

The TFPC's next project reveals how a food policy council can enable and catalyze urban communities. As the TFPC's staff lead in 2017, Lori Stahlbrand was tasked with reworking the Food By Ward (FXW) project identifying community-based food assets across the city (TFPC, n.d.). The TFPC launched the interactive FXW map on its website in 2018. It was designed to showcase the range of community food assets across the city. Literally and figuratively, it put food's value to community development on the map. FXW was also designed to inspire and support self-identified food champions to advocate for food policies and programs with their City Councillors. The project aimed to grow the City's appetite for using food assets to solve city problems, and to make it easier and more transparent for City staff and community-based agencies to develop food assets strategically. FXW also enhanced community capacity through a

toolkit providing information on how to contact a City Councillor, organize a meeting, speak to the media, and so on.

The Food By Ward map has been accessed many thousands of times since its June 2018 launch. Community partners report that they regularly use it to help clients access services such as food banks, school-meal programs, community gardens, and farmers markets. It has also become an advocacy tool within city government to ensure that food is included in all major policies and strategies, including Toronto’s Poverty Reduction Strategy and Climate Change Action Plan (City of Toronto, 2017, 2018). FXW is in keeping with the overarching philosophy of the TFPC that food is a lever to link civic health and public policy. FXW can help decision makers problem solve and give both community food advocates and municipal staff a better understanding of the role of neighbourhood food environments and infrastructure in the creation of a healthy, equitable, and sustainable city.

Mapping community-based assets helps identify and assess the current condition of a community, facilitates communication among stakeholders, foregrounds problems, and contributes to the design of solutions. The FXW project helps food advocates overcome a major challenge—the lack of visuals convincing cities that food is a lever that can be used to solve multiple city problems. Planners typically use maps for internal purposes. FXW was the first initiative in Canada to use asset mapping to look both inward and outward from city offices. It helps put food on the city agenda by engaging city staff and politicians, and by providing them with a useful tool for understanding the role of food in cities. It also engages citizens and provides a forum for citizen participation.

The FXW initiative shows what can be done by one staff person with skilled and enthusiastic community backing. Literally thousands of volunteer hours from TFPC and Toronto Youth Food Policy Council members and many others went into developing this initiative—from collecting data and connecting with food champions to producing advocacy tools and organizing workshops and the public launch. It testifies to citizen commitment to build a healthy, just, and sustainable food system for the city. After the initial launch, there was a great deal of discussion about how to keep the data current and how to stimulate further engagement. The online interactive map was only made possible because of many more volunteer hours updating the resources listed on the map, as well as data sharing agreements with partners. The FXW initiative showcases community capacity building. It engages people and gives them something to show for their efforts, using simple tools to measure progress, and to support continuous improvement. It is the culmination of thirty years of the food-city nexus, which has spurred us to consider the concept of critical food guidance.

Future food planning and policy

Our years of experience at the TFPC have been transformative and they have inspired us to put forward some insights with respect to future food planning and policy.

Food is at the centre of the planetary crisis

“Food is implicated in the most important health, environmental, economic, social and political challenges of our time” (Hawkes & Parsons, 2019, p.1). For example, the food system produces almost one-third of all greenhouse gases (Vermeulen et al., 2012). It is heavily reliant on fossil fuels in the form of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, as well as fuel for machinery and long-distance transportation. It plays a role in loss of biodiversity and the destruction of habitat to make way for monoculture crops. Agriculture is the largest polluter of fresh water (Molden, 2013). More than 30 percent of the food produced is wasted (Gustavsson et al., 2011). By 2050, plastic waste in our oceans, much of it food packaging, will outweigh all the animal life in the sea (World Economic Forum & Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2016). There is also massive social displacement and food insecurity accompanying the climate crisis. The United Nations estimates that only eleven years remain in which to prevent irreversible damage from climate change (United Nations, 2019). For these reasons, we need to heed the warning of Rees (2019) and acknowledge that food is at centre of the planetary crisis.

Cities are where the planetary crisis is coming home to roost

Cities are already confronting the first signs of the planetary crisis. Roads, sewage systems, electrical grids and other city infrastructure can't take the pounding of today's unpredictable weather. Unprecedented heatwaves are creating public health emergencies. Rapidly increasing urban populations mean traffic jams are getting worse, as is air pollution. Displacement and rural depopulation contribute to a lack of jobs and affordable housing (Roberts, 2016; United Nations Habitat III, 2016). The resulting economic polarization is creating larger inequities, social unrest, and political polarization. At the same time, cities are coming into their own as a global force to be reckoned with. As they take a larger role in international climate leadership, cities will increasingly champion food as an indispensable tool to prevent social and environmental calamities.

Food is multifunctional and can solve many city problems

Multifunctionality was first associated with agriculture, referring to the fact that agriculture can produce ecosystem services and social benefits, as well as food and fibre (Renting et al., 2009). But thinking of food more broadly as multifunctional is a bedrock of critical food guidance. There are two reasons for this, one is that multifunctionality opens food to the economies of scope, not the economies of scale. “Scale economies” mean that food producers are on a treadmill of producing more to keep their prices down so they can sell cheaply. “Scope economies” are multifaceted, which means, for example, that part of the value of a green roof comes from harboring endangered pollinators, from keeping rain on the roof to be soaked up by

plants rather than rushing down a flooded street, from cooling the city air with evaporation, and so on. Producing food becomes just one of many benefits of the green roof. Second, multifunctionality means food can be a lever for addressing multiple non-food problems of cities that no other sector of the economy can match (Toronto Public Health, 2010). For example, a community garden stores carbon and rainwater, makes use of compost from food waste, helps feed several families, supports physical and mental health, provides a safe outlet for youthful energy, builds skills, increases food literacy, and creates opportunities for social inclusion and newcomer integration. Food is key to the “wealth of relations” or social-capital formation on which cities depend for cohesion and sociability, especially as the world faces greater social displacement in the form of immigrants and refugees than ever before (Wooster, 2019). Food’s multifunctionality means that a key question to be answered is “What can food do for cities?”

Civic engagement is essential, and food policy councils are a pivotal tool

City bureaucracies, organized in silos, are not well designed to take advantage of the multifunctionality of food. Yet cities need solutions for the complex interrelated problems they are facing such as developing resilience in the face of shocks and stressors caused by the planetary crisis. Food policy councils are a form of deliberative democracy, providing a tool for tapping into citizen expertise from civil society and business, as well as from community-based grassroots organizations and engaged citizens (Reybrouck, 2016). As it becomes more difficult to develop and fund government policy, community-based solutions in the form of pilots, programs and partnerships will become more important, and provide proof of concept for risk-averse cities fearful of major policy initiatives. Food policy councils enable government of, for, and by the people by treating food as a “whole-of-government”, “whole-of-society” multifunctional issue (Dubé et al., 2014).

Solutions must be place-based, and food is a place-maker

Every city is different, with diverse strengths and weaknesses. The geography of a city—whether river or seaside, at high or low elevation, temperate or tropical, sprawling or compact—will play a role in determining how it will be affected by the planetary crisis. Place is one of the prominent issues that fell off the agenda when food’s contributions were narrowly defined around supply chains and nutrients. It’s what led William Rees, originator of the concept of the ecological footprint, to argue that “the most food secure populations by the second half of the twenty-first century will be those populations that have deliberately chosen and planned to relocalize as much of their own food systems as possible” (Rees, 2019, p. 6).

Action must be people-centred

People-centred food policy—as distinct from supply chain-centred policy or nutrient-centred food policy—is well suited to cities. If cities are to claim and chart their own course on food initiatives, they need a unique and unifying concept that relates specifically to local and city government needs, mandates, jurisdictions, and capacities. People-centred food policy fits that bill. Cities and food specialists are beginning to recognize that cities need food because of what food uniquely does for people in cities. People-centred food policy and programs deal with the people side of food. They address how food brings people together in good times and in crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, how it shapes popular culture, how it supports peoples’ exploration of different cultures, how it addresses loneliness, how it speaks to mental health and wellbeing, how it gives people a sense of belonging, how it can help at-risk youth and how it can be used by cities to engage citizens in supporting complete streets, green roofs and walls, urban agriculture, urban forestry, thriving restaurant districts, agro and culinary tourism, horticultural therapy, and ultimately the best shot at food security in a world facing climate chaos.

Conclusion

The Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC) has been operating at the interface of food and city policy for over thirty years. Formed in 1990, near the beginning of food becoming a civic issue, it remains at the forefront of articulating the new landscape for the food-city nexus.

The insights reflected here with respect to future food planning and policy that we developed as a result of our experience at the TFPC reinforce the links between the history of the TFPC and critical food guidance. In their invitation to the Special Issue, the guest editors expressed the need for recommendations that could help to mitigate food-related problems and enhance collective action for holistic change. Our insights pinpoint food as being at the centre of the planetary crisis and recommend civic engagement and people-centred action, with food policy councils as a form of deliberative democracy.

In our admittedly biased opinion, the TFPC’s relative success is due to many factors. First and foremost, the TFPC started early, before all levels of government had received the neoliberal memo. Second, the TFPC was nested in a high-profile and progressive public health department. Indeed, Toronto Public Health’s innovative approach had already inspired the World Health Organization’s Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (WHO, 1986). Toronto Public Health wisely accorded the TFPC and the TFPC’s staff lead freedom of speech and action—as befits an advisory body. Thanks to that combination of high profile and autonomy, the TFPC has always been able to recruit from “the best and the brightest” of Toronto food advocates and thought leaders. The TFPC also chose to strictly identify itself and all its members as serving the public interest in food policy, as laid out in the Toronto Food Charter. This means that the TFPC does not identify as a stakeholder body struggling to find common ground among food banks, supermarkets, racialized minorities, academics, food processors, and others—a central issue with which many other food policy councils have grappled. Because of its commitment to the public

interest, the TFPC has been able to work through consensus, and to show leadership and gain public and media credibility on major issues of public concern, such as food security.

The TFPC has benefitted from many strong leaders, and has engaged a host of knowledgeable, committed council members from a variety of walks of life. Having permanent city staff assigned to the TFPC has meant that these highly skilled and busy food people could bring their expertise to the TFPC, knowing that there would be some capacity to make their investment of time worthwhile. The work of all these people and our insider perspective regarding the TFPC has given us insight on which to base suggestions for critical food guidance.

Ironically, as this field report was being written, proposed deep cuts from the Ontario government to Toronto Public Health have threatened the TFPC's very existence. More recently, the pressures on Toronto Public Health to cope with the ongoing COVID pandemic have put broader food issues on the back burner, and risk closing off an opportunity for ongoing input from citizen experts and grassroots leaders, just as the importance of the food-city nexus is being globally acknowledged. Whatever the future brings, the TFPC has provided a model for food planning and policy that embodies critical food guidance and the food-city nexus in action.

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