



Original Research Article

Introspecting food movements in Canada: Unpacking tensions towards justice and sustainability

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Abstract

Over the past decades there has been a notable growth in community-based food systems projects and successes. Despite these advancements, food insecurity, precarious food work, ecological degradation, and corporate conglomeration in the food sector all continue to increase, compounded by the ongoing impacts of white supremacy, patriarchy, and settler colonialism. Recognizing these growing inequities, critical scholars have noted that too many food systems initiatives are overly concerned with influencing individual behaviours and a focus on narrow objectives. Furthermore, many approaches tend to overlook ways that food systems are embedded within political and economic structures that constrain their goals of social and environmental justice. These multiple challenges suggest that food movements are at a crossroads. This paper reflects on this pivotal moment through an analysis of key food movement actors' perspectives on the progress and promises as well as emerging tensions for food movements in Canada. Through a series of interviews with individuals prominent in food movement spaces, we explore key perspectives on the state of food movements and possibilities for future directions. Our findings paint a complex and nuanced portrait of what food movements have accomplished, tease out internal tensions, and identify questions facing their future prospects. The perspectives presented through our findings offer a path to transcend the critiques that position short-term strategic gains in opposition to longer-term systemic change. We suggest that food movements can overcome these challenges by embracing a more radical and expansive vision of social and environmental justice that is deeply embedded within food systems while also looking beyond them.

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Introduction

Food movements in Canada¹ have much to celebrate. Over the past decades there has been a notable growth in community-based food systems projects (Elton, 2010; Knezevic et al., 2017), food policy groups (Schiff, 2008; Harper et al., 2009), food systems activism (Miller, 2008; Wittman et al., 2011), farmers' markets, community gardens (Baker, 2004; Beckie et al., 2012), and the creation of the first national food policy for Canada (Levkoe & Wilson, 2019). Despite these advancements, food insecurity (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020), precarious food work (Sachs et al., 2014; Weiler et al., 2016), ecological degradation (Qualman, 2019), and corporate conglomeration in the food sector (Fuchs & Clapp, 2009; Howard, 2016) all continue to increase, compounded by the ongoing impacts of white supremacy, patriarchy, and settler colonialism. Recognizing these inequities, critical scholars have noted that too many food systems initiatives are overly concerned with influencing individual behaviours and focus on narrow objectives (Guthman, 2008a; Levkoe, 2011; Sbicca, 2018). Furthermore, many approaches tend to overlook ways that food systems are embedded within political and economic structures that constrain their goals of social and environmental justice (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011). These multiple challenges suggest that food movements are at a crossroads, with food movement actors facing important decisions about how to move forward. While many of these questions are not new, there is a growing recognition both within and outside food movements of the pressing need to address them more explicitly (see for example, Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Bohunicky et al., 2021; Elliot et al., 2021).

This themed issue addresses several of these challenges, suggesting that there are different, and at times competing logics at play within different food movements (Rosol et al., 2022, this issue). The stated objectives of this special issue are to better understand these differing approaches, the spaces in which they work, and to explore collaborative possibilities within, between, and beyond food movements. Rather than offer a pragmatic assessment of specific activities or initiatives, this paper contributes a broader reflection on this current moment

¹ In this paper, we frame our discussion through the concept of 'Canadian food movements'. We acknowledge that this is a practical and problematic category. Since the arrival of Europeans to what was known by First Nations, Inuit and Metis people as Turtle Island, colonialism has had devastating impacts on Indigenous Peoples and their traditional foodways. The violence of capitalism and settler colonialism that has permeated social and ecological relations has been devastating to all life on this planet. We recognize the assumption that food movements hold national identities or are part of solidifying the continued existence of colonial jurisdictions risks replicating settler-colonial logics. In this paper we focus on the geographical area commonly known as Canada as a way to speak to the collective efforts of food system actors to navigate, shift, and circumvent the various ways in which the state has sought to structure and influence food systems - including committing genocide against Indigenous Peoples and using food systems as a tool of settler colonial expansion.

within food movements through an analysis of key actors' perspectives on the progress and promises, as well as emerging tensions for food movements in Canada. As part of the evaluation of a multi-year collaborative research project that explored community-academic partnerships within food movements, we conducted a series of interviews with prominent individuals in food movement spaces. The interviews aimed to explore key perspectives on the state of food movements in Canada and possibilities for future directions. From this research, we heard reflections of both optimism and uncertainty. Interviewees placed much emphasis on the rapid growth and successes of food movements, yet they also highlighted an undercurrent of concerns and questions related to the overall impact of their efforts and whether they are having the right conversations, using the right tools, and focussing on the right targets. Moreover, what was described as “right” differs among movement actors. In this paper we present two prominent tensions that emerged from the interviews: balancing breadth and depth, and nurturing consensus alongside difference. Second, we suggest two proposals for moving beyond them: an analysis based in both “good food” and “good politics” and looking outside traditional food movement actors and issues.

The interviews suggest a present moment characterized as one where food movements are building bridges and connecting silos, yet at the same time, they are still fragmented, diverse, and disparate. Putting these perspectives of food movement actors into conversation with the challenges facing food systems (and society more broadly), our findings paint a complex and nuanced portrait of what food movements in Canada have accomplished, tease out internal tensions that exist within and among diverse food movements, and identify questions facing their future prospects.

Our decision to focus on the perspectives of food movement actors was in part an effort to build on critiques in the literature, but also to complicate them. Critiques fault food movements for prioritizing short-term strategic gains over longer-term systemic change; yet the perspectives presented through our findings indicate that food movement actors are actively working to transcend them. This is not to suggest that food movement actors have it all figured out; far from it. Through our analysis we suggest that many of the challenges facing food movements might be overcome by embracing more radical and expansive visions of social and environmental justice. This requires critical and collective self-reflection alongside proactive efforts to listen to, learn from, and build strategic alliances with a much broader range of actors and organizations than are traditionally seen within food movements.

A movement of movements

Efforts to create more just and sustainable food systems have been taken up within the literature in a variety of ways. However, much of the literature describes the ways that civil society groups have responded to particular issues facing food systems (e.g., food insecurity, farming practices, exploitation of food workers) and strategies, campaigns, or activities within food movements

(e.g., food policy councils, alternative distribution schemes, school food programs). There is far less analysis that explicitly examines food movements and their strategic approaches to collaboration and action. The lack of analysis poses challenges to understanding the impact and trajectory of food movements, as well as the underlying values and visions of food system transformation that underpin food movements actors' work.

We describe food movements as a collection of formal and informal organizations and individuals actively seeking to ensure food systems are more just and sustainable. They are made up of a range of actors attempting to influence elements from across the food chain (from production, harvesting, and distribution to consumption and waste management) along with the socio-political and ecological relationships that constrain and enable them. In this way, food movements are not a cohesive group with a common goal. Using the term food movements, with an emphasis on their plurality and becoming, is aspirational, recognizing their potential to be strengthened and expanded.

Food movements cannot be understood within a set of fixed boundaries, but rather should be conceived as a fluid and emergent network of relationships and collaborations among individuals and organizations (Levkoe & Wakefield, 2014). Membership as an “insider” within food movements is both a process of self-identification and recognition of legitimacy. Further, it is common for groups of actors to build relationships as part of different, and sometimes overlapping networks, each with a varying set of priorities and political orientations. The wide diversity of food systems, along with the high concentration of formal civil society actors (e.g., non-profit, and charitable organizations), the involvement of food producers and harvesters, small businesses (e.g., co-ops), academics, and para-state actors (e.g., public health workers, nutritionists, policy analysts) further complicate the nature of food movements in Canada.

Indeed, food movements have been described as a “movement of movements,” referring to the wide diversity of individuals, coalitions, organizations, and institutions from different sectors, scales and orientations that come together through networks (Constance et al., 2014; Levkoe 2014). Following from this, we suggest that food movement actors should be distinguished from other food systems actors by their deliberate efforts to challenge the logics of the dominant food system to bring about collective change based on a different set of values and priorities. For instance, our conceptualization does not include businesses that provide a particular food service or product that may be deemed “alternative,” unless they are also involved in related social change efforts (Rosol, 2020).

While there are likely more differences than similarities within food movements, they tend to coalesce around a shared critique of the dominant industrial food system along with the social and environmental implications for people and the planet (Alkon & Guthman, 2017; Desmarais, 2019). Most recently, food movements have increased attention to inter-sectoral issues such as labour (Gray, 2013; Myers & Sbicca, 2015), environmental sustainability (Dale, 2020; Qualman, 2019), race and equity (Reese, 2019; White, 2017), and policy and governance (Desmarais et al., 2017; Andrée et al., 2019). Many actors have used multi-scalar approaches to address issues in a more strategic way. For example, many Indigenous food sovereignty

advocates have worked with international agreements such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP),² settler legal systems, regional Treaties, and traditional ecological knowledge to pursue food sovereignty,³ and self-determination (Lowitt et al., 2019; Settee & Shukla, 2020).

Scholars exploring the evolution of food movements have made valuable contributions to theory and practice by developing commentary on their activities (DeLind, 2011; DuPuis & Goodman, 2005; Guthman, 2008b) and heuristic descriptions of their political orientations (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011). Food movements have also been discussed in relation to their framing discourses that express core common goals and objectives (Schiff & Levkoe, 2014). Food justice is a prominent food movement frame that challenges the ways that the dominant food system has been built on foundations of capitalism, white supremacy, and settler colonialism by proposing a collective vision of justice (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Sbicca, 2018). Food sovereignty is another popular food movement frame that emerged from La Via Campesina's articulation of a collective response to the domination of neoliberalism and an alternative vision for grassroots control of food systems (Patel, 2009). These two frames differ significantly from ideas of food security and food charity by focussing their efforts on the problems and solutions underlying food systems that go well beyond food.

However, each of the divergent frames that guide diverse food movements also face questions about their focus and approaches. Scholars have outlined broader critiques of food movements for their penchant for highlighting alternatives to dominant food system activities rather than directly confronting fundamental sources of oppression and exploitation within the dominant food system (Alkon & Guthman, 2017; Myers & Sbicca, 2015). This has raised questions as to precisely what kinds of food futures are being imagined and enacted through food movement discourses and activities. For instance, the promotion and focus on the creation of alternatives to the dominant food system has encouraged individualizing and, at times, seemingly depoliticized approaches (Guthman, 2008b). Despite the ever-growing popularity of alternative food practices, individual and market-focussed solutions are ill-equipped to address deep structural and systemic problems with food systems. Scholars have questioned whether they represent a substantive departure from conventional food systems, and to what degree their creation leads to broader food system transformation (Busa & Garder, 2015; DeLind, 2011; Rosol & Barbosa Jr., 2021). As many critical scholars have noted, the path towards more just and sustainable food systems must be rooted in collaborative efforts that address underlying structures of inequity (Holt-Giménez, 2017; Levkoe, 2011).

² More information can be found via the United Nations website:

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>

³ Food sovereignty is defined by La Via Campesina's as "the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems" (Nyéléni Declaration, 2007). For more information see: <https://viacampesina.org/en/what-are-we-fighting-for/food-sovereignty-and-trade/>

Considering these critiques, scholars and practitioners have lamented the lack of a more confrontational orientation among food movements. According to Alkon and Guthman (2017), the creation of alternatives has become the “dominant mode of food politics” (p. 17) neglecting other avenues of action, particularly those that seek to directly contest existing structures of power within the dominant food system. The focus on alternatives has shifted the politics of food movements and distanced them from broader struggles related to class, race, gender, settler colonialism and power (Bohunicky et al., 2021). Myers and Sbicca (2015) observe, the focus on alternatives “foregrounds a prefigurative politics of flight, exodus or counter power” which leads to “succession from rather than direct confrontation with the conventional agri-food system” (p. 17). Similarly, Holt-Giménez (2017) argues that food movements lack a strong political economy analysis which more explicitly targets capitalism and power in food systems. Of note, while there are actors and organizations engaging in these critical issues, many have not felt included among food movements (Kepkiewicz et al., 2015).

These shifts towards individual and depoliticized food systems activities have resulted in narrowing the horizon of food movements’ possibilities and distracting from underlying issues of injustice and oppression within food systems. In response, critics have called for the cultivation of a more collective and critical food politics within food movement activities and visions of food system transformation (Hammelman et al., 2020; Sibbica, 2018). Alkon and Guthman (2017) urge food movement actors to respond to these critiques by becoming “more politicized, strategic, and confrontational” rather than focussing solely on the celebration and promotion of alternatives (p. 15). Holt-Giménez (2017) suggests there is great potential in bridging efforts that focus on practical, localized interventions, and those that call for broader structural, systemic transformation. It is within the context of these critiques and radical calls to action that we sought to better understand the perspectives and reflections of food movement actors themselves.

Methods

The research presented in this paper draws on a series of interviews with individuals active in food movement spaces across Canada. Participants were initially selected from a pool of respondents who completed a national survey sent through the Food Secure Canada⁴ (FSC) listserv of approximately 10,000 individual and organizational subscribers. The survey was open for responses between December 2017 and January 2018, inviting responses from organizations that self-identify as food movements actors. From the seventy-nine survey respondents, a purposive sampling approach was used to select twenty-six interview participants. All interview respondents had been active in food movements over the past five years, and were decision makers (e.g., directors or managers) within their respective organizations or held prominent

⁴Food Secure Canada is pan-Canadian organization seeking to build more just and sustainable food systems. They are a membership-based organization, with both organizational and individual members. See foodsecurecanada.org

positions within food movement spaces (e.g., event speakers, conference participants, online activity). We also sought to maximize geographic and sectoral diversity (see Table 1). Of the twenty-six participants, eleven were active in academia, eleven in non-profit organizations, one in public health, and three in other community-based research areas. In addition, all but three participants identified as women, three identified as racialized, and all participants had been active in food movements for at least a decade.

Table 1: Interview Participants

Interview participant	Primary Sector	Region	Interview participant	Primary Sector	Region
1	Academic/Farmer/Non-Profit	Ontario	14	Non-Profit	National
2	Non-Profit	BC	15	Public Health	Ontario
3	Research/Regional Non-Profit	Yukon	16	Academic/University	Ontario
4	Non-Profit	Alberta	17	Academic/University	Ontario
5	Academic/University	Alberta	18	Non-Profit	National
6	Academic/University	Ontario	19	Academic/University	Ontario
7	Academic/University	Saskatchewan	20	Academic/University	Ontario
8	Academic/University	Ontario	21	Non-Profit	National
9	Non-Profit	National	22	Academic/University	Ontario
10	Academic/University	British Columbia	23	Non-Profit	Newfoundland
11	Non-Profit	Manitoba	24	Non-Profit	National
12	Policy Analysis/Consultant	British Columbia	25	Non-Profit	Nova Scotia
13	Academic/University	Ontario	26	Non-Profit	Ontario

We conducted this research as two white settler activist-scholars with a history of active participation in diverse food movements. Far from objective bystanders, we are committed to research that actively advances food system transformation. For us, food system transformation

entails a dismantling of oppressive systems, structures and discourses that perpetuate deep inequalities and harm, particularly capitalism, colonialism and racism, and a reimagining of our relationships with food and each other grounded in food sovereignty.

The data collection was initially conducted as part of a larger project through Community First: Impacts of Community Engagement (CFICE), a multi-year project exploring ways to build more effective and equitable collaborations between community and academia. While the survey and interviews covered a broad array of topics, in this paper we focus on data relevant to understanding the current and future context of food movements. The interview schedule was developed by the authors based on current debates in the literature. Interviews were conducted by a graduate research assistant between April and October 2018.

The interview data was analyzed using a thematic coding technique (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Our approach to the data analysis was predominantly open-ended and substantive. The themes were compared with observations from the literature to identify points of alignment and divergence. Care was taken to identify both dominant and dissenting perspectives among respondents. The authors' own experiences and observations within food movements were also used to generate additional insights from the data in subsequent rounds of analysis.

Learning from prominent tensions

Our analysis identified many strengths of food movements in Canada, but what we found most interesting were the areas of tension and discord. In this section, we present two prominent tensions: 1) balancing breadth and depth; and 2) nurturing consensus alongside difference.

The majority of interview participants spoke positively about the trajectory of food movements. However, the ways that participants contextualized this positivity provided valuable insights into how they perceived and understood impacts and accomplishments. Their reflections also pointed to a range of challenges for food movements, limiting their impact and long-term sustainability. In many cases, we found that both the strengths and weaknesses identified by participants had common points of origin. In other words, many of the factors that make food movements vibrant and strong, also created challenges and limited their impact. We describe these contradictory tendencies as tensions that permeate the ways that accomplishments and challenges were named and discussed by participants. For instance, respondents believed food movements had succeeded in building broad public support and widespread awareness of the importance of food as a social, political, and economic issue. Some respondents questioned to what degree this support and awareness had led to tangible impacts; while others wondered whether their growth and popular support had shifted the dominant values of the movements. Several respondents also referred to efforts being made to build relationships across different sectors and issue areas—one respondent referred to this as “silo spanning” (Participant #22). While this silo spanning was framed by some as an accomplishment, several interviewees also

mentioned an ongoing disconnect between movements, suggesting that the diversity of issues and actors within food movements is also a challenge that can impede progress.

Balancing breadth and depth

The first prominent tension that emerged from the interviews speaks to the opportunities and complications that come with a growing, maturing movement. Specifically, respondents wrestled with the ability to maintain a balance between breadth and depth in seeking to move from awareness to impact and in making choices between strategic and idealist orientations.

From awareness to impact

Many interview respondents spoke of an increase in public awareness and understanding of issues affecting food systems. At the same time, several respondents questioned the depth of this understanding, and whether certain issues had received widespread attention without a deeper appreciation for the food system as a whole and the underlying structural challenges shaping that system. In particular, framings of local food and knowing about where and under what conditions your food comes from were frequently identified as gaining in popularity.

Participant #15 suggests that the issues driving the growing interest in food were more individually oriented, such as food safety, personal health, and questions like, “where can I go to find safe food for me and my family?” rather than systemic social and environmental justice themes. While Participant #7 was more optimistic about the depth of public understanding of food systems issues, they acknowledged, “That doesn’t necessarily mean that that thinking gets translated into action.” Participant #26 spoke of significant growth and success in terms of food literacy among the public, and in building local food enterprises and community projects. Despite this growing awareness and on-the-ground work, they felt that systemic change remained elusive, but that the food movement was “poised” to see change on that level.

Greater policy-level impact was frequently named as an important goal of movements, yet respondents had very different assessments of their degree of success. Participant #9 suggested, “food issues are much more on the public and policy agenda,” and Participant #23 noted, “an increase in political interest” across political jurisdictions. Participant #16 expressed a similar sentiment, noting “a huge growing interest around local food” in the past fifteen years, but questioned to what degree this had been translated into political engagement. Participant #18 gave a similar assessment, noting that while there is awareness at the consumer level, the task is to leverage that awareness to political change. Participant #3 described the present moment as “a critical point”, where the federal government is finally interested in advancing policy in relation to food, and Participant #4 was disappointed to see the lack of government attention to food systems, given how much the movement had grown and developed. Further, Participant #8 believed policy makers were showing greater interest, but the impacts had yet to materialize.

Respondents also differed on the strategies to achieve this impact. Some suggested a primarily bottom-up approach, while others advocated for an approach that would see food movements working in greater collaboration with government. Participant #25 suggested the best path forward was a collaborative approach, one that would focus on “relationship building, understanding opportunities, trying to create a working partnership...as opposed to...external demand.” Participant #12 advocated for a greater focus on grassroots engagement within food movements, rather than prioritizing government relationships: “the lesson that I learned was that policy should be thought about from the ground up rather than from the government down.” These comments demonstrate the ways that respondents struggled with how to prioritize different kinds of actions. Increased public awareness is seen as a major achievement, yet it does not necessarily indicate deep understanding of systemic issues, nor does it translate automatically into political change. The translation of growing public awareness into tangible political impact is not straight forward, and food movement actors continue to hold different views on how to negotiate these tensions.

Acting strategically

A second form of this tension emerged through participant’s discussion of shifting movement discourse and orientation. Alongside, and perhaps the result of growing interest and awareness in food systems issues, some respondents noted that food movements were becoming more professionalized with a greater focus on formalized organizational actors, while others noted a shift in the dominant discourse towards a more reformist and self-described strategic orientation. In looking back at its evolution, Participant #24 saw significant change in the nature of food movements, asserting that today, we are “not very grassroots...we are a fairly professional movement.” Participant #1 made a related comment, that the dominant actors within food movements were institutions and organizations, going so far as to suggest, “you need to be in an organization or an institution in order to be involved.” Participant #22 noted an increase in academic programs and certifications related to food systems, meaning that those involved increasingly have formal credentials and training. It was subsequently noted that this may inadvertently further marginalize certain voices or perspectives that draw on lived experience.

Several respondents also made note of a shift in tone within prominent food movement organizations. In particular, some noticed a shift away from a food sovereignty discourse towards more mainstream approaches. Participant #6 saw this as a shift from the language of sovereignty to the language of rights: “Food sovereignty back in 2012 was a big part of the conversation and now, I don’t think I have heard it mentioned other than for Indigenous food sovereignty really in the discussions around the national food policy. And there’s strategic reasons for that.” Here, the suggestion is that food movements have made a strategic decision to frame demands within the right to food, which accepts state authority over grassroots decision making power. This could be because of the greater role played by policy advocacy in movements’ theories of change and a desire to appear as more legitimate to the governments

they seek to influence, or an emphasis on achieving short-term goals while working towards deeper transformation (See Kneen, 2009; Tung et al., 2022, this issue, for a more in-depth discussion of the right to food framing).

Movement professionalization is not unique to food movements (for example, see Markowitz & Tice, 2002). Countless other social movements have gone through a process of consolidation where organizations take on greater roles and responsibilities. However, the way in which professionalization manifests and the consequences of maturation, looks different based on the contexts. Food movements exhibit characteristics common to maturing movements, yet at the same time, many of the organizations within food movements struggle to sustain themselves. Participant #23 reflected that the growing interest in food issues has created an increasingly “crowded sector”, forcing organizations to clarify their roles, skills, and capacities. They framed the key challenge their organization was facing as “figuring out, how do we best build upon and benefit from this growth in interest, engagement, and action from diverse players without losing our voice and power and agency.” Participant #9 made a similar observation, pointing to a “kind of competition” that emerges, as organizations with overlapping mandates compete for funding and resources. While most participants saw growth in very positive terms (as noted in the preceding subsection), there remains tensions between growth and sustainability.

These comments on the increased professionalization of food movements also connect to the increasing focus on policy, which requires particular skills and capabilities. In a synthesis of social movement literature, Taylor and Van Dyke (2004) identify a correlation between professionalization and institutionalization and more conventional or mainstream tactics, particularly lobbying and policy advocacy work. Participant #26 noted that participating in policy “requires a fairly high level of skill... I feel like we are short on that level of participation and resource to participate, but also on the skill of facilitation to do that work in our movement at the regional, provincial and at national levels.” Participant #26 highlights a specific manifestation of this tension—wanting to prioritize policy engagement yet lacking the resources that build an inclusive and participatory approach to this work.

Growth is crucial, and yet it brings challenges and complications. Respondents expressed a desire to see greater policy engagement yet also wanted to retain the grassroots, community-based quality that is characteristic of powerful social movements. Most food movement actors see increased public awareness as a major achievement yet there is not a clear understanding of how this should be accomplished or whether this leads to significant political impact. This is all in the context of movements that have seen many successes, yet at the same time, many food movement actors continue to struggle to achieve long-term organizational sustainability.

Nurturing consensus alongside difference

The second prominent tension highlights the desire to cultivate both consensus and diversity among food movements. Respondents noted the benefit and necessity of diversity and difference

to a thriving movement. At the same time, respondents lamented the lack of shared values and priorities. Some even positioned diversity and difference as a challenge that can weaken movements and their ability to achieve their objectives.

Many respondents suggested that a primary goal of food movements should be to develop the capacity to unify different voices. Participant #16 described food movements as “rich and diverse and multifaceted.” Participant #8 identified the diversity within food movements as an asset because of the opportunity to connect different issues and actors. Even if people come to the movement from very different places, they “still see themselves as a part of the food movement and still see themselves as working towards similar goals.” From this perspective, the plurality of voices within food movements is not an impediment but instead, a potential strength. Participant #20 brought a similar perspective suggesting, “food attracts a wide range of people from different starting points and brings them together. So, it is also conducive to building allies and doing solidarity work and building community.” Participant #11 didn’t see as much convergence taking place but still conceptualized the diversity within the movement as a positive attribute. They reflected that within food movements there are “different communities of interest” each working on their own issues, in ways that may overlap, but without necessarily converging into one single objective: “I think what’s happening is a recognition that those issues don’t necessarily always culminate in some concerted policy direction or program interventions and that sometimes not all—we can’t address all birds with the same style.”

While diversity and difference were framed as beneficial by most participants, they were also identified as potential challenges and weaknesses, leading to a more fragmented movement. Participant #1 framed this as an unresolved dichotomy: “It’s always felt to me like there’s been this bifurcation of interest in social justice parts of food, versus interest in ecological parts of food. And their ability to bring those onto one page, that’s just been a huge problem and a huge frustration that we seem to separate those two things.” Participant #10 suggested that successful movements required a clearly articulated shared goal, something they identified food movements as lacking: “There’s no kind of moral consensus in the food movement because if we go for the ‘let’s make food more affordable’ pathway, then that often can negatively affect farm incomes. And if farmers say, ‘well I want to earn a living wage from my highly priced produce’, which you know they should, then urban poor say, ‘well you’re excluding me from the ability to access the healthy food’.... The food movement doesn’t really know what it wants and some of the things that it wants are contradictory.”

For Participant #10, the problem was not just in identifying common core principles, but in moving from broad values to concrete actions: “You have principles that, I think you could probably say that in Canada many organizations subscribe to the food sovereignty principles.... So, then the question becomes, what’s next?... Principles are one thing, but then the target of action is the next thing.”

Similarly, Participant #6 suggested that “there’s less of a normative framework that’s guiding the food movement.” They didn’t necessarily see the lack of homogeneity within food movements as a negative thing, but something that posed a challenge for these movements.

Participant #25 echoed this point but felt that this diversity could also pose a problem: “We have multiple food movements, and they don’t always align...people don’t think about food movements the way they might think about workers or civil rights movements.”

For Participant #17, having different perspectives and priorities is to be expected given the complexity of food systems, yet it still frustrating: “The food system is very complex, and we all have different priorities and concerns. Bringing people together and trying to establish a hegemonic alternative to the current practices and policies would require a little bit of patience, a little bit of energy and commitment, dedication, and sometimes we need to learn how to deal with our frustrations, because sometimes it is one step forward, two steps backwards, but we have to understand that, and we should not get discouraged.”

Others framed this as a challenge in knowing how to balance different perspectives and approaches within food movements; for instance, striking the right balance between a critical perspective and a collaborative orientation. Participant #12 also noted that food sovereignty previously played a more prominent role in framing the vision of food system transformation articulated by dominant actors: “FSC’s policy platform was designed around food sovereignty, which is an extremely important concept because it calls the essential nature of food as something more than a commodity. And of course, that’s an anti-capitalist position. FSC lately, is having a bit of difficulty knowing how to hold that.”

They noted this challenge particularly in relation to efforts to work more collaboratively with industry or corporate food actors, and the difficulty in maintaining a strong civil society perspective, or what they label an “activist edge” against much more powerful actors.

Some participants saw signs that movements were finding ways to hold space for both diversity and consensus. Participant #6 described the present moment as “a moment where people who have traditionally worked in silos are starting to see their work as connected.” They specifically named food and labour⁵ as being more connected over the past five years, as well as sustainable agriculture and poverty, and rural and urban perspectives. However, they felt there was still much more work to be done to fully address these divisions. Participant #24 believed that some of these tensions, specifically between anti-poverty and food insecurity advocates hadn’t disappeared, but there was greater understanding and respect that had been built. Even though challenges exist, there is a better understanding of the complexities and how to be cognizant of those remaining tensions.

As the above reflections illustrate, participants saw difference and diversity in complex terms, presenting the heterogeneous nature of food movements not as decidedly good or bad, but as something that brought both benefits and complications. As Participant #13 noted, food movements’ “strengths are in their diversity and its weakness is its diversity.” One way forward is shifting the perception of diversity and difference, along the lines of the reflections shared by Participants #13 and #26, and building strategies that effectively mobilize these differences in

⁵ See Klassen et al., 2022, this issue, for an in-depth discussion of growing connections between food and labour and what possibilities this might hold.

pursuit of shared goals, as opposed to seeing diversity as something that must be solved or overcome. Consensus need not be synonymous with homogeneity. Finding the right balance was perhaps best articulated by Participant #26, who conceptualized the challenge as being able to “move together across diversity.”

The evolution of food movements is forcing actors to grapple with an increasingly complex landscape. On the one hand food movements have grown and expanded, but there is a concern about what is lost in pursuit of that growth and increased impact, and whether the diverse manifestations of the movement can be maintained within this emerging model.

Ways forward: reconciling theories of change

At the heart of the two prominent tensions discussed above are questions about strategies and orientations to social change. This might also be described as differences in theories of change. The concept of a theory of change is used by both scholars and practitioners to refer to the process through which individuals or organizations believe social change occurs—this might include the mechanisms, strategies, and tactics, as well as an ultimate vision. In this final section, we consider what can be learned from participants’ insights to help address these challenges and strengthen the theories of change utilized by food movements. From the prominent tensions we identify two possible directions forward—moving beyond “good food vs. good politics” and looking outside of food systems.

These insights parallel discussions in the literature about the tactics, strategies, and overall political orientations of food movements (Alkon & Guthman, 2017; Myers & Sbicca, 2015; Holt-Giménez, 2017; Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011). While these debates have been primarily focussed on the United States, we can observe somewhat similar dynamics unfolding within Canadian food movements in respect to how actors conceptualize paths of social change but also to how they engage with government and the broader public. Interview respondents were aware of the critiques of food movements and there were clear indications that they were consciously grappling with their implications and seeking productive ways forward.

Rather than positioning orientations as a binary between creating alternatives or adopting a contentious politics against the state (as previously described in the literature), most of our respondents took a more nuanced approach to what a theory of change might entail. The comments emphasizing the need to transcend a dichotomous approach also suggest an evolution in these conversations—a recognition of the need for structural change and empowerment, grassroots movement building, and policy advocacy. Figuring out how to reconcile differences, while maintaining core values within a shared vision of food system transformation may help chart a path forward that embraces a diversity of social change strategies and the orientations needed to get there. In most cases this will not necessarily require achieving commonality but instead holding contradictions with greater care and consideration with sharper analytic tools.

Good food vs. good politics

A point of disagreement among respondents was the scale of change sought (e.g., individual vs. collective) and the kind of analysis of the dominant food system that might inform that change. This was perhaps best articulated by Participant #10 as a kind of antagonism between “good food versus good politics;” reflecting that “I don’t think food is political in this country yet.” For example, they suggested that responding to issues of food access with community gardens or efforts to encourage growing one’s own food “isn’t looking at the structural concerns around food in Canada.” Here community gardens and growing one’s own food are examples of what they see as “good food.” They lamented the lack of emphasis on policies to achieve land reform, or commitment to anti-oppression that they had seen in food movements in other places, examples of “good politics.” This sentiment was echoed by interview Participant #26, who noted a lack of politicization within Canadian food movements. Several participants saw this as a tension between different framings or orientations—a consumer/individual-level focus and a political/policy-focussed engagement. Participant #24 explained, “a lot of people still approach [movement work] in a very personal or family-oriented way, like a consumer approach where they are trying to do things that are the best for individual health or maybe to community, but they are not really engaged in a political way.” Participant #24 later summarized, “I don’t think food is political in this country yet.”

Participant #12 observed that European food movements had a much stronger political analysis, which was not consistently present in the Canadian context: “Some of our European partners are relentless in the strength of their political analysis... I’m not interested in the food movement if it doesn’t have that.” Participant #1 suggested that engagement with social and economic justice was uneven across food movement organizations, with some showing a greater commitment than others. Participant #6 attributed part of this challenge to the long history within Canada of addressing food security through “charity-based models” and “alternative grassroots community initiatives” as opposed to more directly targeting underlying structural issues and the state. They suggested that the challenge was not necessarily the movements themselves (e.g., actors and organizations) but in how they are engaging the broader public to shift the narrative: “I think it’s a challenge for the movement because rights-based approaches or food sovereignty haven’t captured the wider imagination as people still think of food insecurity in those terms.”

Participant #10 believed there was a tendency within food movements to avoid the political arena altogether:

I talked to a lot of young people, primarily urban, who say no, we should not be spending our time on politics. Politics are stupid. Politics are useless. We just need to plant the community garden together and we need to have a potluck. And we need to develop a relationship with our friends and our neighbours and that will protect us. And that’s a very privileged [perspective]. Those people tend to come from quite privileged

backgrounds and other groups that might be advocating for affordable housing or Aboriginal rights to the title.... There's no connections between those groups and so, there's no political weight behind these demands. There's no common political demand for a specific public policy that would support sustainable food systems coming out of the food movement in Canada.

These reflections point to a tension between consumerist/individualistic approaches and more politicized orientations, however, we look to Holt-Giménez and Shattuck's (2011) to recognize that individual actions are an essential part of social and environmental justice and can also be political and deeply radical in their goals. The salient critique here is the need for our actions (whether individual or collective) to be informed by a deeper analysis of the systems and structures that shape food provisioning. Put differently, for food system transformation to occur, good food must be informed by good politics. Good food without good politics will likely only tinker at the edges of the dominant food system or create alternatives for a select few, at best. A strong theory of change must include both good food and good politics—a deeper engagement with structural issues facing food systems while maintaining a sense of possibility and experimentation that make participation in social change efforts relevant and tangible.

Looking beyond food systems

Several respondents suggested that a major challenge to articulating a strong critical analysis of food systems is that there is a tendency to be overly inward looking rather than making connections to broader social and economic issues. For instance, Interview Participant #10 argued that some of the most pressing issues facing food systems are not conceptualized as food movement issues:

One of the biggest threats to food sovereignty in British Columbia, we would argue are the pipelines. The pipelines are opening up areas of traditional food land to pollution, deforestation, and degradation. Threatening marine food security with vastly increasing the potential of oil spills.... But that isn't being presented as a food movement issue. [It is] being presented as an Indigenous issue and an environmental issue. I think individuals in the food movement have absolutely gotten behind that struggle, but there's no one saying 'hey this is an issue that the vast food movement needs to be in solidarity around.'

Similarly, Participant #6 spoke of this challenge in relation to the kinds of solutions proposed to food system problems: "I think one of the challenges we have in Canada is that, at least on questions of food security, the answers are not necessarily in food. And that's a challenge that we

face because we're all interested in food and the way in which food connects people. Those are all important things that we want to work on but they're not always the only solution.”

Participant #17 lamented what they saw as the limitation of sector-specific approaches, as opposed to food movement actors collaborating with other groups and organizations to build broad-based social and environmental justice movements: “We tend to focus [with]in our networks. Sometimes there are advantages of people crossing territories. So, in our networks we may have people who are also working in improvements or changes in the health sector, there are also activists who are working for better housing and better education, and other social justice movements, environmentalists, and people who are working for better libraries, better healthcare. I think we need to collaborate and learn from each other. This kind of collaboration will eventually lead to stronger political movements instead of sector-based social justice approaches.”

Respondents articulated the potential benefits of extending analysis and relationships beyond what is generally understood as part of food systems and who are food system actors. This is one way to strive for that deeper political impact and understanding that respondents spoke to earlier, while also connecting food to structural issues of social and environmental justice that are also common across various social and environmental struggles.

Following the 2018 FSC biannual assembly,⁶ there was a call from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) in attendance for a greater emphasis on addressing structural racism and settler colonialism within the food system and food movements (see Elliott & Liao, 2019). Attendees also called for bottom-up approaches to policy advocacy that were driven by grassroots communities and rooted in the experiences and leadership of those most marginalized by the dominant food system. In November 2020, FSC held a virtual assembly featuring primarily BIPOC speakers from across Canada sharing their knowledge and experiences in sessions focussing on Black and Indigenous food sovereignty, anti-racist school food programming, allyship in labour rights, and connecting local and global food movements. This shift in focus is an encouraging sign and signals a willingness on behalf of food movement organizations to embrace a more radical and expansive theory of change by centering a more critical and systemic analysis of the food system, and by inviting collaboration and solidarity with other social and environmental justice movements.

Conclusion

In this paper we have presented an introspection of food movements in Canada focussing on how prominent food movement actors understand and frame the current state of movements they are actively involved with by capturing some of the key tensions that have emerged amidst

⁶ A gathering that brings together hundreds of individuals and organizations involved in food movements (see Elliott & Liao, 2019).

significant growth and success. Food movements are increasing in scale and influence and despite being on the precipice of greater impact, a long and difficult journey lies ahead. Concerns include the limits of increased public awareness, the difficulties in translation of awareness, and support into political impact, and building consensus while nurturing diversity and difference.

Naming and unpacking these tensions help to better understand the complex realities facing food movements today. Exploring these tensions underscores some of the opportunities and limitations of food movements and provides direction about collective transformation towards more just and sustainable food systems. Further, considering what participants identified (or did not) through the interviews provides a window into the potential aspirations and barriers facing food movements. Our analysis raises important questions about how a social movement might balance difference and consensus as well as short-term impact and long-term sustainability.

By focussing on these tensions facing food movements, we hope to contribute to the ongoing reflections, debates, and activities among food movement actors and organizations. We see the reflections and proposals offered by actors in this paper as possible openings to address current limitations and cultivate an expanded vision and more nuanced conceptualization of food systems transformation. For instance, instead of framing food systems activities as a binary of “good food” or “good politics,” mutual learning and engagement between the material and the conceptual is an essential space for prefiguration and experimentation. Similarly, the lack of a normative consensus speaks to the diverse perspectives and sectors involved in food movements. Instead of attempting to develop a single point of agreement that risks stifling difference, movements might identify core values and points of affinity that link different experiences, issues, and foci together.

Overall, food movements would benefit from a more critical and holistic analysis of food systems, an approach that integrates different issues and experiences rather than trading one for the other; and one that attends to questions of labour, capital, human-non-human relations, etc., within food systems. Further, there is much that food movement actors can learn from the approaches of other movements engaged in struggles for social and environmental justice, to develop a deeper appreciation for tactics, strategies, and theories of change from outside traditional food movement actors. This is not a question centering one’s gaze inside or outside food movements, but a question of expanding the analysis to broaden the scope of possibility for food system transformation. Some evidence of this was noted by respondents, and several recent examples illustrate promising possibilities⁷ but overall, the connections and relationships between food movements and other social justice movements remain underdeveloped.

Centering a stronger critique of structures and relationships of power within and surrounding food movements could make visible points of connection and solidarity with other

⁷ For example, FoodShare Toronto has established collaborations with both Justicia for Migrant Workers and Foodsters United, drawing powerful connections between poverty, food security and labour rights. See FoodShare 2021 and Hayes 2021. Also, Farmers for Climate Solutions is a new national alliance led by a diversity of farmer and food systems organizations that aim to address the climate crisis (see <https://farmersforclimatesolutions.ca>).

movements, including, for example, migrant justice, fat activism, Indigenous sovereignty, climate justice, global justice, and prison abolitionism. This is particularly important for individuals and organizations expressing alienation from food movements despite working on food systems issues. There is much that food movements can learn from and share with other movements. Thus, our call for introspection and greater reflection is not merely a call inward but rather a call to reach outwards, beyond the particularities of what is often considered to be part of the food system, to other movements that share a related critiques and visions for change. It is also a call to listen to those within food movements that are actively seeking to cultivate these relationships and deeper critiques. In this paper we spoke to individuals who were most prominent in food movement spaces; however, we recognize there are other actors within food movements already engaged in this work but who lack the same prominence, power, and visibility as our sample. We also recognize our own privileged positionality shapes the ways in which we are able to participate in food movements and navigate food movement research. Future research could directly target actors on the margins to assess their perspectives about the current and future state of food movements. In addition, ongoing research introspecting food movements would provide valuable insights on how these tensions shift over time.

While there are no simple solutions, we argue that food movements can overcome current tensions by embracing a theory of change that prioritizes “good food” and “good politics,” and that builds solidarity and relationships of mutual learning with other movements. This would expand the scope of possibilities beyond a binary approach and encourage food movements to make tangible gains while still focussing on problems at the foundations of food systems (e.g., capitalism and private property, white supremacy, settler colonialism, patriarchy).

This is not to insinuate that the path ahead is straightforward. The divergent perspectives and priorities shared by participants in this study illustrate several significant points of contention, each representative of distinct theories and approaches to social change. Food movements and the people and organizations that make up the “network of networks” are being pulled in multiple different directions and are facing significant pressures to both consolidate and expand, step-up and step-back, build consensus, and embrace diversity. Interviewees demonstrated a strong sense of self-reflexivity and critical awareness of the opportunities and tensions facing food movements. Despite the desire for greater collaboration and an expanded theory of change, the path forward remains elusive.

Rather than trying to perpetuate a false vision of a united food movement, we argue that food movements acknowledge, and even embrace these differences, recognizing that many strategies and tactics can complement one another within a common theory of change, working in collaboration rather than as adversaries. This also demands a commitment to embracing a more radical and expansive vision of social change that goes well beyond food and food systems. Doing so will open new possibilities for developing long-term vision and strategies that build alliances and solidarities essential for social and environmental justice.

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