



Perspective

Transitioning to a public-minded food system: The role of public food infrastructure

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Abstract

A vision for a more sustainable, just, and health-promoting food system can come from scholars, activist organizations, and communities alike. However, widespread inequities that result from the endless pursuit of profit remind us that ensuring all people are fed is not treated as an issue of public interest in Canada. In this piece, I detail how issues of food access can begin to be addressed by embedding public interest in supportive physical infrastructure and policy, putting forth the notion of *public food infrastructure*. To illustrate this concept and its applicability, this paper draws on two examples: the Scarb'TO Mrkt Bucks initiative, a civil society group creating a system of subsidized vouchers

for wider access to farmers' markets at the community level, and the Coalition for Healthy School Food, a network of organizations advocating for federal investment in a universal cost-shared healthy school food program. Common to both examples is an acknowledgement of the central role that food infrastructure plays in both supporting and sustaining their initiatives, as well as an assertion of the value of food in the public realm. Building and strengthening public food infrastructure is thus a pathway to widespread food access and a means with which to conceive of food as a public good—both central to the wider transition to a healthier, more just food system.

Keywords: Local food systems; food access; social infrastructure; school food; farmers' markets

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Résumé

Les visions d'un système alimentaire plus durable, juste et favorable à la santé peuvent émaner autant des chercheurs et chercheuses que des activistes et des communautés. Cependant, devant les nombreuses iniquités qui résultent de la poursuite infinie du profit, il apparaît que nourrir tout le monde n'est pas considéré comme un enjeu d'intérêt public au Canada. Dans cet article, je présente comment l'on peut commencer à prendre en charge les problèmes d'accès à la nourriture en mettant l'intérêt public au cœur des infrastructures physiques et des politiques; je mets ainsi en avant la notion d'*infrastructure alimentaire publique*. Pour illustrer ce concept et ses applications, cet article s'appuie sur deux exemples : le projet ScarbTO Mrkt Bucks, un groupe de la société civile qui met sur pied un système de bons d'achat subventionnés pour offrir un

plus vaste accès aux marchés fermiers à l'échelle de la communauté, et la Coalition pour une saine alimentation scolaire, un réseau d'organisations qui promeut les investissements fédéraux dans un programme scolaire universel d'alimentation saine à financement partagé. Dans ces deux exemples, on retrouve une reconnaissance du rôle central que jouent les infrastructures alimentaires dans le soutien et la pérennité de ces projets, ainsi qu'une affirmation de la valeur de l'alimentation dans le domaine public. Construire des infrastructures alimentaires publiques et les renforcer s'avère donc à la fois un moyen d'élargir l'accès aux aliments et de concevoir la nourriture comme un bien public – deux éléments cruciaux dans la grande transition vers un système alimentaire plus sain et plus juste.

Introduction

In Canada, and globally, inequities built into the very fabric of the food system through socially constructed intersections of racism, patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism exacerbate unequal health outcomes (Anderson et al., 2019; McInnes, 2019). Widespread inequities that result from the endless pursuit of profit remind us that food rarely lies within the public sphere, it instead operates almost entirely within the private realm. The only antidote is a vision for a more sustainable, just, and health-promoting food system co-produced by scholars, activist organizations, and communities (Anderson et al., 2019; Dale & Sharma, 2021; Fan et al., 2021; Levkoe & Sheedy, 2019; MacRae, 2011; Valgenti, 2021). The question is, how do we build infrastructure to support “public-minded” food systems in light of neoliberal capitalism? Creating infrastructure

and implementing policies that allow for a more public-minded alternative are faced by significant opposition, including from neoliberal ideologies shaping policy and vested interests that centre greed as having the power to shift consumer behaviour towards healthier, more accessible outcomes (Feeding City, 2020, September 16; Friedmann, 2007; Maharaj, 2020).

In this piece, I detail how issues of access that plague the food system can begin to be addressed by embedding public interest in supportive physical infrastructure and policy. I begin with a discussion of public interests as they related to food, insisting that food should be governed as a public good. Then, I define food infrastructure in this context, arguing for its transformational potential. To illustrate the role public food infrastructure could and does play, I draw from two

examples, first ScarbTO Mrkt Bucks, an initiative¹ created by a civil society group building a system of subsidized vouchers for more equitable access to farmers' markets at the municipal level (Feeding City, 2020, October 20), and second the Coalition for Healthy School Food², a network of over 220 organizations advocating for federal investment in a universal cost-

shared healthy school food program (Coalition for Healthy School Food, 2018).³ Creating pathways to food in public settings, I argue, is central to the wider, global transition to a healthier, more just food system.

Defining the “public” in a “public-minded food system”

The current push towards privatization and private service delivery and the general disinvestment in social safety and security nets are direct consequences of the power imbalances present in our economic and political systems, shaping what we see in society today (Baker et al., 2020; Holt-Giménez, 2019). When it comes to the inaccessibility of healthy foods, or of food altogether, it becomes essential to recognize the roles these dynamics play. In 2021, 15.9% of Canadian households experienced food insecurity within the previous year,

pointing to the implications of a lack of widespread food access (Tarasuk et al., 2022). The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the inherent vulnerability of Canada's food system, challenging food access in its disruptions to processing, production, distribution, and consumption (Lowitt et al., 2022). How issues of the public good are framed, and by whom, meaningfully intersects with food access. Scholars have directly and indirectly raised questions about public good as it relates to food in their discussions of food access,

¹ At the time of writing, the ScarbTO Mrkt Bucks initiative has implemented its project as an initial prototype. The founding partners, including Marina Queirolo, Jennifer Forde, Suman Roy, and Maria Londono, trialled the project in select farmers' markets in the summer of 2022. In the summer of 2023, Toronto will be hosting the [International Public Markets Conference \(IPMC\)](#), where the Mrkt Bucks Program and the concept of a “market city” will be revisited at an international scale. Further information on the initiative, its founders, and the important gaps in food access being addressed are discussed in Feeding City (2020, October 28, 2021, 2022) The initiative is also discussed on the Market City TO website (<https://marketcityto.org/>).

² More information on the ongoing work and research of the Coalition for Healthy School Food can be found on their website (<https://www.healthyschoolfood.ca/>). The research used to develop this case study represents a small fraction of the growing body of knowledge and experience of those involved in the Coalition. Further analysis of the Coalition for Healthy School Food can be found in publications by Field & Webb (2022), Feeding City (2020, September 16), Goodridge (2020), and Stutz & Gagliardi (2020).

³ The interviews and data gathering process informing this piece is covered by the Research Ethics Board (REB) number 38578, under the project, “Feeding Cities and Resilient Urban Communities” led by Principal Investigator (PI) Dr. Jayeeta (Jo) Sharma. Interviews with Marina Queirolo were conducted over Zoom on December 2, 2021, December 8, 2021, and January 21, 2022. Email correspondence with Marina Queirolo also built upon discussions found here. Additionally, webinars organized by Feeding City and attended by Suman Roy, Marina Queirolo, Jennifer Forde, and Debbie Field are referenced to highlight these stakeholders' unique perspectives and interests. It is important to acknowledge the ways in which the key stakeholders of both case studies contributed to this process of knowledge co-creation, particularly outside the context of formal, scholarly publications.

positioning health and equity considerations as important lenses with which to make sense of public interest.

Klassen and Murphy (2020) distinguish “access to food [as]...an important marker of how well a society distributes its wealth, reflects the state of political accountability, economic redistribution, and a society’s level of commitment to uphold the right to food” (p. 1). Similarly, food equity moves beyond the constraints of current economic interests and means of production, which shape food insecurity discourse, in attempts to create meaningful structural-level changes to reduce persistent inequities in food access due to poverty, health outcomes, decent work, and overall wellbeing (Sage, 2014).

Taking how the right to food is upheld as an example helps to illustrate that food rarely exists within the public domain, with the notable exception of food in publicly operated special care homes, hospitals, and other such settings. Despite Canada being a signatory to several national and international agreements insisting that food is a basic right (Rideout et al., 2007), food is not governed as a universally, publicly accessible good. Instead, it is overwhelmingly treated as a commodity at the whims of the market (Koberinski et al., 2022). However, with systems of public food provisioning,

like those already observable in lunch programs in public schools, we are reminded that institutional-level support could be possible (Gaddis & Jeon, 2020). Yet, as McInnes (2019) shows, these very programs have been consistently underfunded and undervalued, relying instead on community initiatives and individual organizers. Issues of food access and inequity remain deeply individual responsibilities, yet are still framed as threats to public health and state security.

To challenge this tendency, embedding public interest into how food is governed is crucial. Drawing on civil commons literature, Sumner (2011) proposes that this may be achieved by asserting that the food system is “a public system in public hands for the public good” (p. 69). In Canada, we can draw parallels from how we make sense of health as being in the public domain. Health framings often leverage significant action when it comes to policy, observable in the responses to the Covid-19 pandemic (Shanks et al., 2020). While increasing food access has undeniable positive health impacts, protecting food access for the public good merits support on its own (Sumner, 2011). Thus, for the purposes of this paper’s argument, protecting food access and ensuring that all people are fed lie directly in the public interest, with public good as integral to the food system.

The role of food infrastructure

Food infrastructure is often thought of as built structures directly producing, processing, or delivering foods (Donofrio, 2007). However, food infrastructure can exist at the community level as a diversity of physical structures, as well as networks of people and knowledge. As presented by Pilcher (2016), the current dynamics of how food is valued, distributed, produced, and consumed are products of a winding history of

physical food infrastructure. Physical food infrastructure as we know it today, whether it be supermarket chains or cold food distribution systems, is a legacy of public and private investments in the food sector, as well as of shifting welfare policies (Marsden et al., 2018; Pilcher, 2016). The way infrastructure is reflective of these historical dynamics and capable of perpetuating histories of discrimination and corporate

control has been a central consideration for urban geographers and is increasingly relevant for urban and regional planners (Pilcher, 2016). Infrastructure that uplifts communities requires an acknowledgement of its own power and its capacity to contribute to legacies of inequality (Clark et al., 2021; Friedmann, 2007). Therefore, intentional infrastructure planning is crucial.

The assertion that food exists in the public interest is then critical to food infrastructure planning. It is through the creation of infrastructure and adaptation of existing structures that change can be appropriately embedded and realized. Whether taken on at the community level or embedded in public policy, food infrastructure presents transformational potential for food systems (Marsden et al., 2018).

Examples: Examining public food infrastructure at different scales

For the purposes of this article, I will draw from two community-grounded initiatives, whose different scales and approaches to increasing food access help illustrate what is meant by public food infrastructure and its transformative potential. Details about each initiative draw from semi-structured interviews with their stakeholders, as well as secondary public sources, including published reports, presentations, and websites.

First, the Scarb TO Mrkt Bucks initiative is a program operating at municipal and community levels, where the scale of impact and change is first and foremost targeting community needs. The program creates food infrastructure through a farmers' market currency program while also strengthening existing farmers' market infrastructure in the Scarborough region in Toronto. It looks to build social and knowledge structures, ensuring that physical farmers' market infrastructure is protected and promoted by its operators and the community it serves. The program ultimately looks to scale this neighbourhood-level pilot across the city with a standardized currency program.

Second, the Coalition for Healthy School Food, a longstanding advocacy group, is working to create infrastructural change at the federal level, where changes to infrastructure are protected by and

embedded in policy. Its efforts are aimed at strengthening existing school food infrastructure, such as cafeterias and school kitchens, as well as allowing for further development of physical and social structures. These initiatives' differences demonstrate the wide applicability of the public food infrastructure concept, while simultaneously providing insight into the challenges each faces at their different levels of establishment.

The ScarbTO Mrkt Bucks Initiative

The ScarbTO Mrkt Bucks initiative provides a local manifestation of public food infrastructure through its work to make farmers' markets more affordable and inclusive spaces, especially where these may be limited or inaccessible. The initiative consists of a voucher program to connect residents facing food insecurity with neighbourhood farmers' markets in Scarborough in the Greater Toronto Area. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the vulnerabilities, inequities, and racism embedded in the city's food system, which fails to provide equitable access to fresh food and limits economic opportunities. Frustrated by years of disinvestment in Toronto's east end, the ScarbTO Mrkt Bucks partners and collaborators decided to develop a

program that connects residents to farmers' markets and builds publicly accessible food infrastructure.

Equity issues can compromise farmers' markets' ability to address food access (Caron-Roy et al., 2021; Klassen & Murphy, 2020; Queirolo, 2019). The high cost associated with organic produce or fruits and vegetables grown by small, family-owned farms is a barrier to low-income families. Additionally, farmers' markets' dependence on community volunteers, private sponsorships, and donations can make them more difficult to organize and sustain in low-income communities (Sadler, 2016; Sage et al., 2013). The voucher program model proposed by the ScarbTO Mrkt Bucks initiative draws from broader North American experiences implementing similar programming at individual markets (as in British Columbia), as well as through municipal partnerships (observed in the United States). While sustained economic support for low-income households is at the centre of mitigating access and equity issues relating to food insecurity, voucher programs look to address the immediate needs of different communities, recognizing just how dire the consequences of food inequity can be (Bowling et al., 2016; Oberholtzer et al., 2012; Winch, 2008).

This initiative positions farmers' markets as immediate, locally grounded solutions to food insecurity in low-income neighbourhoods. By targeting one of the main barriers to farmers' markets' access—its cost—the ScarbTO Mrkt Bucks initiative helps position market infrastructure as a viable option for moving food into the public sphere. While this initiative has struggled to find sustained financial support, the potential it demonstrates can be drawn upon by municipal policymakers looking to create vibrant, healthy communities (Markow et al., 2016). Creating infrastructure from the ground up will require support to show results beyond how it is received by the

community it serves. However, as examples from British Columbia make clear, a government-backed farmers' market voucher program can create a positive feedback loop by strengthening market infrastructure and increasing food access—moving food closer to the public sphere (Caron-Roy et al., 2021).

The Coalition for Healthy School Food

The Coalition for Healthy School Food is a Canadian network of non-profit organizations from each province and territory that is made up of community-based school food practitioners, national health volunteers and staff, Indigenous leaders, and philanthropic organizations in the realms of health and education (Coalition for Healthy School Food, 2016). The Coalition was formed in response to the lack of a universal, Canada-wide school food program in the country, highlighting how Canada is the only OECD country without national food programming (Hernandez et al., 2018). While the Coalition and its members recognize the work of individual and community organizers in filling this gap and creating small-scale, local initiatives, its members call for federal investment in this program to protect children's and youths' health across the country (Food Secure Canada, n.d.). In its call for public investment, the Coalition looks to bring appropriate value to healthy food within the public realm, emphasizing how food insecurity and malnutrition continue to threaten public health. The Coalition for Healthy School Food's efforts underscore the potential for a Canadian public food program's promotion of health and public food infrastructure. The Coalition has created a network of knowledge and practice to transition towards a specific, common vision for a universal, healthy school food program.

With federal support and recognition coming as an important first step in the movement towards increased

food access through universal school food programs, inter-agency cooperation and wider recognition of access to healthy food as public interest are crucial to addressing these wider issues (Hernandez et al., 2018; Ruetz & McKenna, 2021). The creation of a cost-shared, universal school food program is a mission grounded in increasing food access, but it also presents an opportunity to change the discourse around how food is valued in Canada (Coalition for Healthy School Food, 2016). International examples of comprehensive school food programs presented by the Coalition for

Healthy School Food, including programs in Brazil and Japan, demonstrate the potential and impact of such programs in increasing food literacy, strengthening local food economies, and promoting food sovereignty through urban agriculture (Engler-Stringer et al., 2021; Hernandez et al., 2018; Ruetz & Fraser, 2019). Creating greater demand for healthy food, in school settings and beyond, can serve as a positive feedback loop to support local food production and contribute to food system change (Everitt et al., 2020). However, this must be supported by food infrastructure.

Envisioning a public-minded food system

With studies of the Canadian food environment indicating a lack of commitment to and prioritization of healthy food, it is not surprising to see how efforts to build food infrastructure overwhelmingly remain at the community level (Levkoe & Sheedy, 2019; McInnes, 2019). However, community-grounded initiatives, including those described above, hold transformational potential, particularly in their ability to foster social infrastructure and networks of knowledge sharing. As scholars have echoed in the literature, mechanisms of this kind are required to move food into the public interest, ultimately achieving embeddedness in policy and physical infrastructure (Friedmann, 2007; Galli et al., 2020; Marsden et al., 2018).

A health lens represents an important means to drive action towards building a food system that actively engages with issues of public good and public interest. Concerns for population- and community-level health have been instrumental in shaping the “food security” agenda and bringing issues of food inequity into the public sphere (Dimitri et al., 2015). Additionally, the Canadian government has shown increased interest and commitment to building healthier communities in

recent years (Government of Canada, 2021). Nevertheless, the food and health nexus could benefit from greater institutional support.

So far, community organizers have acknowledged these gaps and the common needs that their communities face around accessing plentiful, diverse, and nutritious foods. Community initiatives often connect local experiences with systemic and structural sources of inequity, leading to more comprehensive means of change (Feeding City, 2021; Pitter, 2021). Food inequities represent a dire need to reverse the current paradigm that places the marketplace’s needs above the population’s needs (Domingo et al., 2021; Mendly-Zambo & Raphael, 2019). Proponents of transformative social policy, like Schrecker and Bamba (2015), require states to be “more willing to challenge the values of the unfettered marketplace in order to increase and equalize opportunities for everyone to lead a healthy life” (p. 120). Public services that protect people’s livelihoods must be both embedded in policy and physical infrastructure and supported by strong networks of social connection and knowledge sharing.

It is with this consideration in mind that the notion of *public* food infrastructure is crucial to ensure a balance between private and public interests. Asserting food issues as lying within the public interest allows for the democratization of food, empowering individuals and communities to access diverse food options and make informed decisions about food that impact their health (Feeding City, 2021; MacRae, 2011; Marsden et al., 2018). Institutional and political support are

necessary to create steady streams of funding for physical infrastructure, as well as a socio-political valuation of food as a tenant of public interest. Transformation of these systems towards more supportive means of building healthy communities must be prioritized at all levels of government. The protection of public interests and assertion of food as a public good are therefore central to the creation of healthy public food infrastructure.

Conclusion

Transitioning to a public-minded food system does not come without obstacles and competing public and private interests. The examples discussed here highlight the experiences of those trying to build publicly-minded infrastructure and programming that can achieve more equitable access to food. The Scarb TO Mrkt Bucks initiative, even in its founding stages, outlines several of the obstacles faced by community members in their efforts to address systemic food injustices at the local level. The Coalition for Healthy School Food illustrates the time and support required to build a network of advocacy that puts communities and public interests first. Common between both initiatives is an acknowledgement of the central role that infrastructure plays in both supporting and sustaining them, as well as in asserting the value of food in the public realm.

To garner support and meaningfully contribute to the transformation of the food system, public interest

must be embedded in supportive, physical infrastructure as well as in policy (Blay-Palmer et al., 2020; Feeding City, 2021; Marsden et al., 2018). To build a food system with more public infrastructure, there must be movement towards protecting and upholding public interests. Infrastructure presents an important pathway for change in its ability to provide longstanding and sustained service delivery (Friedmann, 2007; Pilcher, 2016). By acknowledging the nexus of food and health and its relevance to policymakers and the public, designing and transforming food systems can be done intentionally, ultimately creating healthier spaces and protecting social networks. Harnessing the transformative power of communities will play a key role in creating a healthy public-minded food system, as reflected in healthy food infrastructure and embedded in healthy public policy.

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