

Lessons from Covid-19 for food system resilience

Durham Food Policy Council, summer 2020

As the COVID-19 pandemic wears on, necessary food safety precautions and social distancing measures are disrupting Canada's system of food production and distribution. As some processing or distribution facilities are forced to close or decrease their capacity, the high concentration of our food system results in significant bottlenecks, and producers are having to dispose of large amounts of food. Labour shortages aggravate this problem and also threaten producers' ability to make a full harvest. Meanwhile, a crisis in food security reveals the need for more food production at the local scale. At this time, we are reflecting on how pursuing the objectives of the Durham Region Food Charter¹ can help us through this crisis and make us more resilient to disruptive events in the future.

Canada's agricultural policy has long favoured large-scale, export-oriented production, resulting in a steady decrease in the number of smaller farms and food processors². This concentration of food production- and the resulting long distances between farms, processing centres, and retailers- has exacerbated the delays and shortages, and resulting price increases, caused by the pandemic.

Meat processing provides a stark example: most of Canada's meat production is controlled by only four corporations (Cargill, JBS, Maple Leaf and Olymel), with less than 5% of meat in the country being processed by smaller enterprises³. Now, outbreaks at two meat-packing plants have resulted in backlogs of meat to be processed⁴. Beyond the health implications for workers and their families, this means lost revenue for ranchers, a shortage in supply and an increase in the price of beef for consumers. The federal government is now offering financial assistance to meat producers and processors, but the National Farmers Union (NFU) points out that a fuller response could reduce the need for such measures in the future, urging the government to support the rebuilding of smaller abattoirs in all provinces, and develop regulations tailored to these smaller facilities so that they can compete with larger ones.⁵

To decrease concentration across our entire food system, governments should promote the development of local food systems, as stated in the Food Charter. This means giving priority treatment to small producers in ongoing farm loan and risk management programs, as well as emergency funding during times like these. It also means mandating and funding regional and municipal governments to create smaller-scale processing and distribution infrastructure. Another priority set out in the Food Charter is the establishment of institutional, industrial and

¹ [Durham Region Food Charter](#)

² [National Farmers Union, Policy Brief: A Food Policy for Canada](#)

³ [Spring Magazine, Covid or Capitalism: What's causing the food crisis?](#)

⁴ [Financial Post, Three meat-packing plants turn out 85% of Canada's beef](#)

⁵ [National Farmers Union, Media Release: COVID emergency funds for agriculture can help build a more robust future food system](#)

commercial local food procurement policies. Governments and public bodies such as universities can bolster local food production by acting as high volume, consistent buyers⁶.

Another source of vulnerability in Canada's food system is our heavy reliance on migrant workers and other vulnerable populations for their labour. Participants in the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP), who are not permitted to live year-round in Canada, are being held up in their home countries by travel restrictions, and need to remain isolated for 14 days after arriving in Canada⁷. As well, many workers in food production and processing work- and in some cases, live- in very cramped conditions. We have seen the danger of this in the outbreaks at meat processing plants and at a greenhouse in Ontario⁸. Unfortunately, the structure of SAWP discourages workers from reporting unsafe conditions, as they fear being reprimanded and returned to their home countries⁹. This is wrong from a human rights perspective, and as we see now, can also put our food supply at risk. Lost production due to insufficient workforce is another financial cost the federal government is now partially covering for food producers¹⁰.

One bright spot during this crisis has been seeing the response of Durham's existing local food producers and retailers, many of whom have stepped up to help customers, and each other, participate in the local food market through online stores and contactless delivery. Here and elsewhere, many small producers report that they are seeing more demand for their products and even hiring more staff¹¹. Hopefully, these efforts will advance the Food Charter objective of creating an educated consumer base that understands and supports the local agricultural sector.

Community gardeners, for their part, organized to develop guidelines for gardening safely during the pandemic and convinced the provincial government to deem gardens an essential service¹². For some consumers, this will soften the blow of the price increases caused by hold-ups in more concentrated food supply chains. It will also be a big help to our local food banks, who are unfortunately also seeing a surge in demand for their services due to the economic downturn.

What this shows is the potential for our local food economy to act as a key economic driver and safety net. That the federal government's response to the pandemic includes millions of dollars in emergency funding for food banks shows that charity has become an "essential" part of

⁶ [Canadian Food Studies, *Introduction to the special issue of food procurement*, by Jennifer Sumner and Lori Stahlbrand](#)

⁷ [CBC News, Food security experts warn of supply shortages, higher prices due to global pandemic](#)

⁸ [Simcoe Reformer: Three dozen migrant workers at Chatham greenhouse have COVID-19](#)

⁹ [New York Times: Foreign farmworkers in Canada fear deportation if they complain](#)

¹⁰ [Prime Minister's Office, Support for Canada's Food System](#)

¹¹ [Durham Region News, Farmers react to coronavirus](#) ; [Toronto Life, What it's like to run a grocery delivery service in the middle of a pandemic](#) ; [National Observer, Small farms tackle COVID-19 and Canada's food system](#)

¹² [Durham Integrated Growers](#)

Canada's strategy for food security¹³. While we are not opposed to this funding, as food banks are indeed doing critical work, reliance on food banks is not a long-term solution to hunger. As we've discussed elsewhere, the solution largely lies in income support- but fostering local food production can play an important role as well. More community gardening would mean more access to healthy food, often in exchange for volunteer labour. Community gardens can also teach people how to grow food in their own homes. By providing food that does not need to be purchased, gardening can reduce poverty-driven hunger. More local food production and retailing, meanwhile, means more jobs that can enable people to afford a healthy diet. Of course, this requires enough support to allow small food businesses to pay living wages.

Having more people involved in food production, either as volunteers, home gardeners, or workers, would also feed back into resilience. While some have proposed that currently unemployed Canadians can help fill the labour shortages at farms¹⁴, and while this will certainly happen to a degree¹⁵, the fact is that the Canadian population at large has lost contact with food production. From the 1930s when it sat at 1 in 3 Canadians, the number of people working in agriculture has declined to 1.8% of the population- about 1 in 56¹⁶. Many newly recruited farm workers will therefore lack the skills and knowledge that the workers they are replacing had, meaning harvests will be slower and less efficient this year¹⁷. A more robust, distributed local food system, where more of us come into contact with our food supply chain, would mean a greater reserve of food production expertise and labour to fall back on in a crisis. Of course, another great risk-reducer would be expanding pathways to permanent residence and citizenship for migrant workers, so that they and their expertise could remain in Canada year-round.

For all of these reasons, Canada's economic recovery must include an injection of public funds into local food systems. Regional and municipal governments, along with local public institutions like schools and libraries, are well-positioned to foster food sovereignty through land use planning decisions, local economic development policy, and community programs- but they cannot do so adequately using only the shoestring budgets they currently operate on. If higher level governments are unwilling to fund robust policy for food system resilience, they are likely to end up paying billions more in emergency relief funds as this crisis continues, and future crises arise.

¹³ [CBC News, Food security experts warn of supply shortages, higher prices due to global pandemic](#)

¹⁴ [Toronto Sun, Forget grants, get students to do farm work: MP](#)

¹⁵ [Help Canada Grow](#)

¹⁶ [Statistics Canada, Agriculture](#)

¹⁷ [Financial Post, Why we can't send unemployed Canadians to work on labour-strapped farms](#)