



Pandemic reflections from Toronto

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Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the Toronto city-region are broadly similar to those crossing my screen hourly from North America and the world. What may be unique is the depth and breadth of the community of food practice centered on the Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC) since 1991. It has been the pivot of what would otherwise be separate initiatives related to sustainability and justice, to promoting local food and the infrastructure to support it, to linking city and countryside, to making emergency food part of deeper politics of empowerment, equity and justice. It has linked municipal government with civil society. This deep and wide foundation turned a political emergency a few months before COVID-19 into a threshold shift in municipal government, and a basis for responding to the pandemic.

Toronto City Council in October 2019 passed a resolution astounding food activists. It mandated all municipal programs to pass through a “food lens”. This idea was introduced in 2010, when the Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC) and the Toronto Board of Health approved the Toronto Food Strategy, which in turn built on two decades of work by TFPC staff and members across municipal departments. That work was to shift from “asks” to food-centered “solutions” based on deep knowledge of the problems faced by each siloed municipal department—from shared use of parks to low income food market access to waste management. The “food lens” became City policy during a political crisis that elevated the TFPC at just the moment when its existence was threatened. The Conservative Party elected to govern Ontario in 2018 went on a “shock doctrine” rampage against Toronto, gerrymandering wards in the middle of the 2019 municipal election, and announcing drastic cuts to Public Health, in turn leading to departures by key officials.

Just at the time when despondency overcame Toronto Public Health, wide and deep civil society networks centred on TFPC, mobilized to press City Council to elevate food policy and secure TFPC.

This food lens mandate was in place when the pandemic struck. No one knew what it would mean in practice. While permanent replacement positions were advertised, two young Public Health staff with no experience in food policy were seconded to TFPC and the Food Strategy. Then the pandemic led to immediate suspension of all pending hires, and all public health personnel were assigned to COVID-19. What transpired was near to miraculous: the temporary staff turned out to be brilliant listeners, fast learners (alike from civil society, friendly City Councillors and Public Health officials), and excellent administrators; a languishing TFPC mobilized itself quickly. The last meeting before isolation was well attended by food activists as well as TFPC members, and energetically committed to saving two institutions threatened by the ban on all activities not on an “essential services” list. Leaders in urban agriculture and farmers markets worked quickly with willing officials in both Municipal and Provincial government (the latter reversed course as it rose to the pandemic occasion) to devise ways to include gardens and markets with food retail and agriculture as essential services, and to devise detailed protocols to do so safely. (Other initiatives included greatly expanded food distribution through public libraries and community centres, and elevating respect for food system (along with health care) workers).

A second response concerns food justice. FoodShare, one of the oldest and largest food security organizations, has long devoted itself to social and racial justice. One accomplishment is Black Creek Community Farm (BCCF), based on sustained work by farm trainers to convince Toronto Conservation Authority that *sustainable* farming *protects* the watershed. BCCF is on the edge of Toronto, across a busy road from a large, high density, racialized, low income community. FoodShare and TFPC leaders were among those who shepherded a transition to community governance, not an easy process. Meanwhile, FoodShare helped create the

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Colour of Justice network, and after a long search, convinced a brilliant Black native Torontonian to return from Vancouver as successor to the difficult-to-replace Founder. Food-Share and BCCF have grown and deepened their growing, training, and food box programs, now receiving emergency funds from governments and donors to address the expanding needs in the pandemic. The City of Toronto will for the first time (and in contrast to other levels of government), collect data on racial differences in hunger exacerbated by COVID-19 (CBC 2020). This converges with a leap in self-organization by indigenous people publicizing hunger and other dangerous conditions on Reserves and in cities.

Finally, TFPC and others have created conditions for social enterprises to create new ways to connect local, sustainable farmers with urban consumers. Links among hunger, food system, and farming were early brought into Toronto Public Health in 1991 by hiring a soil scientist and leader of the organic farming movement to coordinate urban civil society in TFPC; ten years later, he moved to academia, where his many environmental studies students have enlivened the community of food practice. Deep in these networks are the founders of Local Food Plus (Friedmann 2007) which elevated public procurement to support regional sustainable food and left a legacy of self-purchasing where ten years earlier a handful of transnational corporations had monopolized food services; they are now, respectively, creator of a food systems stream in a leading culinary college, and the first Green Party member of the Ontario Parliament. Environmental activists led to a large Greenbelt protecting Toronto's watershed, which later promoted local food; small and ecological farmer organizations, local food boxes dating back decades, and much more, have all edged towards a regional food system healthy for people and landscapes. Still small, it now seems far more possible than it did only a few months ago.

As COVID-19 reveals vulnerabilities of just-in-time supermarket supply chains, and of reliance on temporary migrant labor in agriculture—both crossing a suddenly unpredictable border—what are the possibilities for rapid food system change? Might surging demand for local food scale out to more farmers, scale up into governing institutions, and scale deep into food cultures (Moore et al. 2015)? Coming at least a month before planting, in the context of newly unpredictable borders, timely demand for local food could signal regional farmers to respond to a new situation in 2020: to shift from monocultures to mixed crops and artisanal foods; from chemical-intensive practices to knowledge-based work with plants, animals, soils, waters, and forests; and away from “redundant trade”—e.g., carrots exported from the highly productive Holland Marsh near Toronto, while supermarket logistics favor importing carrots? Might

that open a trajectory leading to more supply, lower prices and easier access to overloaded websites? Meanwhile, might complementary conversations in rapidly shifting Canadian politics converge with food system changes? For example, universal liveable income could allow good farming; pandemic has focused attention on appalling conditions of temporary migrant workers on farms and food manufacturing—does closure of a huge meatpacking plant in Alberta because of COVID among workers open space for renewing local abattoirs?

Previously unimaginable collaboration across parties and policy silos, such as health, social assistance and agriculture, and better listening by government to civil society and across levels of government, could shift the system to a better future. However, official rhetoric insists the economy will “bounce back,” presumably to a deeply flawed past (Roberts 2020). No matter what, it seems likely that food and farming will be more central to all of it.

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