

Building the Ecological Food System

From hunger to health, ecosystems, & communities

BY DEBBIE FIELD

In a world of plenty, in which we have the capacity to grow more than enough food to feed everyone, how can hunger still be a problem? Why do 1.1 billion people around the world go to sleep hungry each night? Why do 10% of Canadians have to worry about food at some time during the month, going without meals in order to pay bills, particularly rent, while close to 5% use food banks? Why are emergency measures and food banks not an adequate response to hunger?

For over 20 years, FoodShare Toronto has been wrestling with these questions. In the beginning our responses were narrowly focussed on co-ordinating charitable food donations for people on low income. Over the years, as our understanding of the food crisis deepened, a vast and diverse network of initiatives has grown up. FoodShare's community kitchens, nutrition programs, gardens, composting, urban agriculture, job training programs, and farmers markets now touch the lives of tens of thousands of people in the metropolitan region, connecting the dots between hunger, health, and local, small-scale farming.

It is a model of how effective responses to the dilemmas of the Canadian food system can be stimulated, incubated, managed, and co-ordinated by local people. Yet it is still a model, heavily dependent on the donations of money, time, and energy from citizens, backed up by a core of staff and workers, many of them underpaid for the work they do. The transition to a food system that can supply nutritious food, affordably and reliably, to residents of Toronto and beyond requires more – especially from our provincial and federal governments.

Cultivating Community

FoodShare Toronto was formed in 1985 by then Mayor of the City of Toronto, Art Eggleton. A group of religious and community leaders approached his office because they were deeply concerned by increasing hunger and food bank use in Toronto. The City provided them with a small grant to accomplish two specific tasks. First, it was to establish the Hunger Hotline, a phone service to inform people about which of the many emergency food programs in the city would best meet their needs. It would also inform grocers and bakeries about charitable

agencies that could distribute donated food. Second, the group was to research the causes of increased hunger and food bank use and to provide City Council with recommendations for action.

That research laid the primary responsibility for hunger at the doorstep of government because of its inattention to the social safety net. Working with the provincial Social Assistance Review Commission in 1988, FoodShare's Executive Director Richard Yampolsky would stress the need for adequate welfare and minimum wage rates so that people could afford to pay for food, after paying the high costs of rent.

FoodShare is a singularly “flat” organization – more like a movement, really, than an organization. It has infrastructure & capacity that can enable residents to turn ideas into pilot projects, & pilot projects into long-term initiatives.

But Canadian social policy kept moving in the opposite direction, reducing social assistance and funding for affordable housing and childcare programs. So in 1989, when still more cuts to the social safety net were on the way, FoodShare took the next step on its journey. It looked South, to Latin America, Asia, and Africa, where government support to disadvantaged citizens is marginal or non-existent. Low-income neighbourhoods in those countries instead organize their own radical self-help programs. By means of community kitchens, community gardens, farmers markets, school meal programs, and co-operative bulk buying clubs, people improve their immediate circumstances while building community solidarity and political cohesion.

Learning from these examples, FoodShare hired community outreach workers to develop a menu of options through which to activate groups and neighbourhoods around food issues. The menu has grown to include:

- *community kitchens* in which people enjoy preparing good, healthy food, trying new recipes, socializing, and going home with more food than they could make at home.

- *community gardens* where residents together raise money, secure a plot (in neighbourhoods, schoolyards, on apartment grounds or rooftops), and carry out its preparation, cultivation, and harvest.
- *fairs, festivals, and forums* that celebrate food and cuisine in all their diversity, and explore its politics.
- *manuals, training sessions, newsletters, and networks* to support the efforts of citizens to pick up these options and run with them.
- *small businesses*. FoodShare's Urban Agriculture Project now maintains a rooftop greenhouse and garden, a beehive, and a composting system. Our 560 square meter Sunshine Garden employs clients of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in growing organic vegetables, sprouts and herbs for sale at a local farmers market, to FoodShare's Good Food Box (see below), and directly to consumers.

This grassroots organizing has decreased hunger and increased food access. Participants do save some money when they shop, cook, or grow food together. The biggest benefits, though, have come from reduced social isolation and the participants' greater knowledge of food, self-confidence, and enjoyment as they became involved in civil society outside the marketplace.

Universality in School Nutrition

In the late 1980s teachers in Toronto had begun noticing kids coming to school hungry. Jack Layton, then a city councillor (now leader of the New Democratic Party), wrote a proposal for a free hot lunch program for low-income children. But would this answer the need?

Unlike most of the industrialized North and many countries in the South, Canada never implemented a national student nutrition policy. Provincial responsibility for education and federal responsibility for health made such co-operation very difficult. Canadians acknowledge the benefits of a universal health care system and municipally supported free libraries. But our social policy theorists have not understood that the same logic applies to universal student nutrition programs.

For a variety of reasons, FoodShare research revealed, children often do not eat properly during their school day. Their parents may lack the money to feed them properly; they may lack the time to do so, on account of their work schedules; pressure from peers and advertisers to eat junk food may be the reason; or there may be outright eating disorders like anorexia at play. Income transfer will not address all the hunger and malnutrition many students experience during the school

“Real Food is ... more than what you put in your mouth. It’s about health at a fundamental level: health that stems from quality food, low in cholesterol & high in complex carbohydrates to be sure, but also health that comes from simpler lifestyles & richer relationships that let food keep body & soul together. It’s an innovative approach to buying, cooking & savouring food, an approach that can be the basis for a new life ethic..... Real Food is the link between your food & four key elements: health, joy, justice & nature.”

Wayne Roberts, Roderick John MacRae,
& Lori Stahlbrand¹

¹*Real Food for a Change: Bringing Nature, Health, Joy and Justice to the Table* (Random House, 1999), p. 1. (right) Jerk Chicken with rice and peas, prepared by Field To Table Catering. Photo courtesy of Laura Berman, GreenFuse Images.

day. On the other hand, free food just for low-income children could be stigmatizing and counter-productive. (It certainly was for me as a child.)

We had to broaden our catchment and define a social program that was not geared solely to low-income people through income transfer. In 1992, FoodShare became one of several members of the Coalition for Student Nutrition that convinced the city's Board of Health and Board of Education to support community-based student nutrition programs in Toronto.

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Community-based student nutrition programs, organized on a school-by-school basis, include parents, teachers, community members and students designing programs that meet specific cultural needs and have positive benefits in terms of social cohesion, and developing community solidarity. FoodShare works with partners in Public Health and the Boards of Education to provide interested schools and Parent Teacher

Associations with assistance in organizing programs customized to their particular needs.

Currently, 400 school programs operating in over 350 schools and community sites feed a healthy breakfast, lunch, or snack to 75,000 students across Greater Toronto daily. They are also taught about the importance of affordable local food. Our goal is to make sure that high school curricula include a nutrition and cooking course so no one graduates without knowing how to feed themselves.

Typing in the Farmer

In 1991, the first North American Food Policy Council was formed as a part of the Toronto Public Health Department. After a meeting of food system representatives convened by the Council, a farmer and an anti-poverty activist got to talking about how much surplus food there was in Ontario when so many of Toronto's low-income people wanted fresh produce.

This exchange was the basis for FoodShare's launch of Field to Table in 1992. Mary Lou Morgan and Ursula Lipski, its designers, sought to shorten the distance between the *field* (regional Ontario farmers who had excess capacity) and the *table* (urban city dwellers, especially those who find nutritious produce difficult to find or afford). If farmers could sell their produce directly in Toronto's low-income neighbourhoods, Morgan and Lipski projected that prices would be lower, while quality and access improved.

Originally, a Field to Table truck donated by the Canadian Auto Workers drove direct from farms into isolated low-income



neighbourhoods, selling seasonal, local produce at wholesale prices. That was unworkable. Very few farmers operated the mixed farms that could supply 15-20 different items for each box. Nor were we able to keep driving around the countryside collecting the produce. By the winter of 1994, the idea had evolved into the Good Food Box: a fresh fruit and vegetable buying club that provided quality produce to people at wholesale prices. A staff person (and subsequently a professional buyer) made the purchases at the Ontario Food Terminal, the huge marketplace where every wholesaler, large retailer, restaurant, and supermarket buys its food.

The Good Food Box, too, used a community development model. A neighbourhood volunteer collected \$15 from ten of her neighbours each week. The following week, brimming boxes of the highest quality produce would be delivered to her building for distribution to each of the buying club members. From the first, it was a universal program. There was no means testing. While we focussed outreach on low-income communities, we encouraged participation from anyone who would pick their food up at a neighbourhood stop. So, in addition to getting people better fed, the project would help build neighbourhood and community cohesion.

Since then, the program has blossomed. There are currently over 200 neighbourhood drop-off points at which 4,000 boxes are distributed monthly. Participants can choose between six boxes, costing \$12-\$32, including a fruit basket and a "Reach for 5" basket, that contains prepared, chopped fruit and vegetables for seniors. (The cost of the basic box went to \$17 in 2000.) A newsletter in each box supplies information about nutrition, economical food preparation, and any "unusual" box contents selected to encourage local or seasonal eating.

Volume has enabled us to revisit direct relationships with farmers. As a niche buyer, we may take things off their hands that large buyers don't want. We'll buy a lot of squash in the fall, when that's all that's left over. We'll buy those unusual varieties of apple, of which there aren't large enough quantities to sell to the supermarkets. Our organic food boxes (large and small) create a market for farmers making the transition from conventional to organic agriculture.

Two more recent programs create enterprises that embody the same values of healthy food and healthy community that are the basis of the Good Food Box. The Toronto Kitchen Incubator is a certified commercial kitchen on FoodShare premises at which small-scale enterprises prepare foods to the tastes of specific markets. Hearth to Home, for example, creates vegan meals which are then delivered to subscribers within the Toronto, North York, and Etobicoke areas. Field to Table Catering provides seasonal foods for local community organizations, events and private functions. It also serves as training and employment opportunity for graduates of Focus on Food, one of a number of FoodShare programs at which participants learn

nutrition and cooking skills.² In a city as culturally diverse as Toronto, FoodShare's kitchen can commercialize undervalued food knowledge (that of women, for example), enabling people to prepare distinctive foods in sufficient quantity to satisfy a market niche.

From Community Practice to Public Policy

This range of activity makes FoodShare a very large organization, in one sense. We have upwards of 800 volunteers. For governance purposes, FoodShare has 100 voting members, but counts as Friends 10,000 individual donors and another 8,000 homes that are on our community mailing list, order a Good Food Box, or attend a community garden, community cooking, baby or student nutrition workshop or training session. The hub of our activity is the Field to Table Warehouse, a 12,000 square meter building in an old industrial part of town.

FoodShare cannot bring about a transition to a local, sustainable food system all by itself. What FoodShare can do is incubate individuals & ideas & projects, model their integration, & offer a living demonstration of how such a food system might look & operate.

But FoodShare has only 22 full-time staff. For all our repertoire of initiatives and interests, FoodShare is a singularly "flat" organization – more like a movement, really, than an organization. We maintain an unusually open, flexible nature that welcomes new ideas. We also have the infrastructure and capacity that can enable residents to turn these ideas into pilot projects, and pilot projects into long-term initiatives. FoodShare has never sought to control Torontonians responses to food issues, but to stimulate and support their responses to it. FoodShare is one very important part of the *community of food practice* that has grown up in Toronto in the last 20 years.

Yet FoodShare receives little or no core funding. The Good Food Boxes don't, and never have been able to cover all costs. The

² Like other FoodShare programs, Focus on Food has been particularly successful with low-income people and youth. This is due partly to the appeal of food, but also to flexible and trusting management practices and an inclusive atmosphere.


(left) Volunteers prepare Good Food Boxes. Photocredit: FoodShare Toronto.

greatest part of the revenue from the sale of boxes (\$1.1 million, or roughly one third of FoodShare's \$3.5 million annual budget) goes straight to the farmer. Similarly, the Kitchen Incubator and Field to Table Catering do not fully pay for themselves.

Costs of transport, staff, and infrastructure are covered primarily through grants and donations from individual donors (close to one quarter of the budget) and family foundations. Little is contributed by federal or provincial government programs, and still less by the corporate sector.³

The marginal role of the public and corporate sectors in FoodShare's work subjects the organization to an annual cycle of fundraising that nonprofits everywhere know only too well. On the other hand, our independence of these sectors enables FoodShare to "speak to power" with great clarity and energy.

Since 2000 FoodShare has been involved in an exciting process of grassroots consultation and organizing that has articulated a vision of an equitable food system: what it would take for everyone – not just in Toronto, but across Ontario and Canada – to have access to affordable, healthy food. This vision is summarized in *Food 2002/2020*, a double-barrelled set of recommendations – 28 for grassroots action and 28 for public policy-makers. These recommendations specify the action citizens, the private sector, and government must take at every step in the food chain – the way food is grown, how it is distributed and sold, the way it is purchased, cooked, and shared – if we truly believe food is vital to the health of individuals and communities. Access to good, healthy food is a basic human right. To guarantee that right, we must think and act systemically.

FoodShare cannot bring about a transition to a local, sustainable food system all by itself. Government policies and practices must recognize and buttress the groundswell of people who are acting on their determination to put food first at all levels of society. What FoodShare can do is incubate these individuals and ideas and projects, model their integration, always changing and learning from the the people and communities we work with, offering a living demonstration of how a local, sustainable food system might look and operate, and form one part of the broader movement to make it a reality. 

DEBBIE FIELD has been the Executive Director of FoodShare since 1992. For more information about FoodShare, visit www.foodshare.ca. (Click on "Food Policy" for the text of the "Food 2002/2020 Process to Build Food Security.") You can reach Debbie at debbie@foodshare.net or 416-392-1628.

³ Note that the nutrition programs are not administered by FoodShare but by the Toronto Partners for Student Nutrition, a partnership of boards of education, the Department of Public Health, and community agencies. In 2004-05, \$2.5 million in municipal funding and over \$1 million in provincial funding assisted the Partners with the nutrition programs. Focus on Food is subsidized by a federal job-training grant.



myCommunity

Neighbours Indeed

Canada-wide, myCommunity is searching for self motivated people with a heart for their community to coordinate programs that build community spirit and loyalty. Service clubs are invited to apply for coordinating and administering as well as a means of raising funds for their other community projects.

The Program Coordinator organizes the participation of businesses, municipal government and churches that benefit from increased community relations by means of the natural word of mouth generated by the program.

The program recognizes local residents who celebrate a birth, a wedding, an anniversary or have made a move into the community.

Contact: programs@mycommunitycsscanada.com

www.mycommunitycsscanada.com

