



Saskatchewan



Notes

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Building a Citizen's Good Food Policy

— *by Don Kossick*

There is an exciting movement taking place in our country to build a strategy for good food policy, to mobilize action at the local and regional levels, and to influence public policy. Called food charters they are becoming the vehicle for citizens and communities to engage their public institutions and develop a common approach for good food practices in communities.

Daily, we are seeing an increasing concern about food and where it comes from. Consumers are asking serious questions about how the food is produced, processed, and distributed. Some of this concern has emerged out of major food crises of the last decade including mad cow disease in Europe and the energy blackout in eastern Canada last year that stopped access to food stores. More recently, we have witnessed the impact of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in Western Canada, the alarming figures about the rates of obesity in North American society, and the deteriorating health of children as they over consume pop and processed food. There is increasing realization that the production and consumption of food contributes to global warming.

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Food Share Toronto reports lamb chops flown in from New Zealand travel almost 200 times further than Ontario lamb to get to Toronto stores, producing over 1000 times more CO2 in the process.

All this has created a change in consciousness and practice on the part of consumers—more and more individuals and communities seek out alternative means of finding safe, wholesome food supplies, and learn more about how food is produced and distributed. We are seeing the manifestations of this across Canada with the rapid emergence of, and support for, local and regional farmers markets, good food boxes, collective kitchens, community gardens, field to table festivals, urban agriculture initiatives, nutritious meals for children and youth, and promotion of fairly traded products such as coffee. Urban-rural linkages are in formation that have farm produce being delivered directly to consumers, and community-to-community links are developing internationally as with the urban garden movement in Cuba.

In short, an alternative to the global industrial food system is growing. Rather than the industrial system dominated by transnational companies who control the price and type of

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product from the farm gate to the consumer plate an alternative is emerging. This peoples' food system—accountable, locally and regionally based, and environmentally sustainable—has been defined as building food security, food democracy, and food sovereignty. These key issues of security, democracy, and sovereignty together underscore a dividing line between a human-centred and community responsive food system versus the globalized and corporate industrial food system.

Major issues arise as communities come together in building these alternatives. Can government promote, support, defend, and expand these growing initiatives for building food security? Can civil society create good food policy that will serve as an umbrella—supported by public institutions—for the good food work being done? Can policies be created that have institutions and communities working jointly on activities that support a common food security, incorporating key elements of food democracy and food sovereignty?

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Furthermore, can we move from expressions of the importance of the right to food and food security to concrete actions and solutions at the regional and local levels? The Government of Canada has declared that it is committed to important world-wide declarations such as the *United Nations Covenant on Social, Economic, and Cultural Rights* which calls for the right of everyone to adequate food, shelter, and employment. The Canadian government has endorsed a *Canada Food Security Action Plan* that declares “the fundamental

right of everyone to be free from hunger” and “food security exists when all people at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”. There is little evidence that these declarations are manifested in Canadian communities across Canada, especially when we see the continual rising use of food banks.

Food charters have emerged as citizen-based vehicles to make these declarations for good food policy real at the community level. The first food charter in Canada was adopted by the Toronto City Council after extensive work by the Toronto Food Policy Council and Food Share in Toronto. It became the template that guided groups in Saskatchewan in developing their own food charters. The second food charter in Canada was adopted in principle by the City of Saskatoon in the Fall of 2002, followed by the City of Prince Albert, also in principle, in the Spring, 2003.

The exercise for building the elements of these charters was as important as the final charter documents themselves. Community and regional groups defined what they saw as the key issues for achieving food security. These groups represented all parts of the food chain from production to consumption.

In Saskatoon, children's nutrition program organizers, organic farmers, food bank people, good food box organizers, public health representatives, farmers market vendors, and international NGO development workers concerned about fair trade all came together to design a food charter. They collectively analysed the working of the food system, developed a vision of what a responsive food system would look like, and designed steps to enact it based on security, democracy, and sovereignty. In Prince Albert, two community forums were held by a working group that brought together all parts of the community. These processes in both Saskatoon and Prince Albert each took about six months, but were critical in developing local food charters. There was a prior deep history to draw on where groups had done analysis of key food issues and the food system. The processes of building food charters were exercises in civil society engagement.

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For example, the Saskatoon Food Charter is an embracing document looking at food security and food democracy from production to consumption. It also links the impact of food on the health and nutrition, the culture of food, and the globalization of its production. It is a clear policy document in that it lays out steps for food security. *Food Security and Production* underlines the need for food to be produced in a manner that is environmentally sustainable and socially just. It highlights the need to build urban-rural linkages that would bring economic security to farm people and good food to urban consumers. *Food Security and Justice* speaks to the fact that food is more than a commodity and that every citizen has the right to access nutritious food without social or economic barriers. *Food Security and Health* describes how good food contributes to the physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional well-being of people, and healthy food determines the overall health of the community. *Food Security and Culture* talks of how food brings people together in the celebration of family and community thus strengthening links between diverse cultures, and rural and urban communities. Food is a social good that supports and sustains our communities and us. *Food Security and Globalization* asks that governments recognize the right of all people to adequate, nutritious, and safe food at home and internationally. Furthermore, regional and national governments must guarantee the right of communities and individuals to food security through supporting viable, sustainable agriculture and equitable income distribution.

Food charters also lay out steps that civic bodies and institutions can follow to implement good food policy goals. Gerald Regnitter, a member of the Prince Albert Food Charter working group, in describing the charter development there states,

the Charter encourages a civic culture that encourages a greater degree of self sufficiency. Recognizing that highly centralized food retail services have created severe access problems for many, the community proposes solutions. Support for breast-feeding mothers, for seniors and for children is encouraged. Since many citizens lack food growing and food preparation skills, and that food storage is a problem for even more, the Charter encourages new initiatives to address these concerns. Public transportation policies are seen as critical elements to meeting food access concerns. Local individual and cooperative food production efforts with the support of civic government is supported as are new cooperative ventures between urban and surrounding rural residents and between urban and rural municipal authorities. The Charter encourages all public facilities and public organizations to use food policies that will be a model for good nutrition practices to all citizens. (2003, p. 3)

Regnitter (2003) further states, “the creative vision of the community has been articulated in a Food Charter, and this vision is already forging new cooperative alliances within the community to improve the food security of all citizens” (p. 4). This process of making alliances for

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good food policy involved the Prince Albert Food Charter working group obtaining support for the charter from local school divisions, teacher and health groups, and the City Race Relations and Social Issues Committee, before the final adoption in principle by the Prince Albert City Council.

Carrying forth a food charter to its actual implementation is the critical next step. Groups who have organized to see food charters adopted are now working to see actions and activities carried out at the local and regional levels that meet the goals of the charters. In Saskatoon, the Saskatoon Food Coalition, which formed around the development of the Saskatoon Food Charter, sees a clear role for community-based groups to monitor

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the progress of the Charter, and make it work in the community. For the Saskatoon group, this has involved working with civic government on moving forward charter initiatives such as support for community gardens, urban orchards, and the use of the charter in discussions on food related issues in economic and social development. Organizing work is underway with large public institutions such as the Saskatoon Health Authority and school boards to use the Charter as an effective tool to show the relevance and inter-connectedness of good food policy and good health and education. Within the scope of the Food Charter, members of the Saskatoon Food Coalition, such as the Child Hunger Education Program (CHEP), are researching the potential of a community good food store in the core area of Saskatoon, supporting the campaign for a secure place for the Saskatoon Farmers Market, and continuing public education on food issues. In Toronto, Food Share and the Toronto Food Policy Council maintain the links between civic and community structures in implementing the Food Charter, and developing good food policy. Plans are underway in Prince Albert to review the progress of the charter, and to continue meetings with city administration officials regarding the possible further implementation of elements of the Charter.

In conclusion, the development of food charters is an example of threads that civil society can weave to bring governance back into a space where officials see working with communities and citizens just as important as serving other interests. It puts back to the community a form of “intentional citizenry” where individuals and groups articulate positions and strategies on those critical issues that affect them very directly. They then organize those deliberations into logical frameworks that can be adopted and worked within public governance.

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Regnitter, G. (2003). A food charter for Prince Albert: A model for positive political and social evolution. Unpublished manuscript.

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