10. FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IN THE GOLDEN HORSeshoe REGION OF ONTARIO

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Southern Ontario is a highly urban region of ten million people. Just under 40 percent live in the dominant city, Toronto, while most of the rest live in and around smaller cities and towns which together constitute an almost continuous urbanized region stretching along Lake Ontario between Niagara Falls and Oshawa. In a dramatic reversal of immigration history, in which newcomers came mostly to farm, the arrival of the present generation of immigrants coincided with the development of global markets in food and agriculture. Immigrants have had little incentive or opportunity to connect with an older generation of European-origin farmers, while those farmers have often preferred to take advantage of opportunities to sell their land to companies building houses and shopping malls (or to reorient to export markets), rather than connect with the diverse, young, cosmopolitan newcomers.

Food sovereignty is a movement led by those who grow food, raise animals and capture fish in ways that are very different from those utilized in the industrial and trade-based system. It is a movement of peasants and farmers that arose in response to trade agreements that favour the takeover by transnational corporate supply chains of farming systems that are embedded in particular social, cultural and ecological contexts. Furthermore, by most accounts, food sovereignty is an increasingly important issue in the North as well as the South (FAASTD 2009).

What, then, does food sovereignty mean for a largely urban region? How can a politics created by small farmers linked across North and South find a home in an urbanized region like the Golden Horseshoe region of Ontario? These questions are really about the relations between countryside and city, and between farmers and urban dwellers. As such, their answers are relevant across the North and much of the South.

In a highly urbanized region in which specialized industrial farms predominate, the paths towards food sovereignty are complex. For one thing, sustainable, mixed farming faces multiple obstacles: conversion of farmland to other uses, low farm incomes relative to many urban occupations and a mismatch between the types of crops appropriate to near-urban and urban
agriculture (fresh vegetables, fruits, eggs, meat, etc.) and the single crop or livestock farms (mainly dairy, soy and maize) inherited from a time when these were located farther from cities. Despite excellent work by the National Farmers Union (NFU) in Ontario and organizations I describe below, the interests of industrial farmers, with little interest in food sovereignty goals, dominate in provincial policies. Second, many non-farmers support food sovereignty, but many of the people working towards a just and sustainable food system have little contact with farming or farmers. The good news is that city people and agro-ecological farmers, both actual and hopeful, have much in common.

A conference on food sovereignty was held in Toronto in 2009 to launch a conversation across food sectors, including farmers, urban growers, social enterprises, academics and justice and sustainability activists. The discussion was sparked by speakers from the National Farmers Union of Canada, Food Secure Canada (FSC), FoodShare, the Toronto Food Strategy (TFS), Sustain Ontario, the People’s Food Policy Project (PFPP) and FoodNet Ontario; it was sponsored by FoodShare, FoodNet, Heifer International and the FoodShed Project, as a framework for understanding Southern Ontario as an ecological, social and political context. The event generated over two hundred ideas that were summarized by a FoodShare staff writer into six categories:

1) Increase and focus support on localized food systems
2) Support farmers
3) Maintain, develop and redevelop food infrastructure
4) Educate people about food
5) Advance social inclusion
6) Create coordinated and enabling policy. (FoodShare 2009: 16)

This set of themes is reasonably comprehensive as a first step in a conversation between urban and rural interests about a just and sustainable food system. It points to some significant gaps — why do people need to be educated about food, and what do they need to know? How can social inclusion of people who cannot afford enough food of any kind be reconciled with support for farmers who need decent prices? The Toronto conference was also a first step at bridging the great gap that has arisen between town and farm, partly because of trade, but also because of changes in demography and culture. It is clear that the success of food sovereignty depends on overcoming the division between urban and rural lands and activities (Roberts 2008; Steel 2009a).

What is at stake in the region is, in part, a lost coherence as an agri-food region. Re-establishing this coherence requires a discussion of how to “scale up,” or how to employ what Roberts (2008) calls the “fusion” way of doing food. According to Roberts, a “scaling up” of food system change involves “joining up” vibrant initiatives so that food sovereignty can shift from the margins to the centre of economy, policy and society. This use of the term, “scaling up,” is becoming common, but should be distinguished from the “growth imperative” imposed on corporate farms and other food businesses; the food sovereignty idea of scaling up involves a networked agri-food economy composed of small private and social enterprises embedded in the natural, social and cultural features of a region (Day-Farnsworth et al. 2009; Nasr et al. 2010; Friedmann 2007). The idea of scaling up networks, rather than enterprises, is increasingly important to social innovation (Wheatley and Frieze 2006). While still in its infancy, some work has begun in the application of this idea to food sovereignty (usually without using the term “scaling up”) in rural and urban parts of the region.

Historical Context

Historically, the economic and cultural connections between town and farm in southern Ontario were not only denser but also more fluid than today. As the wheat frontier moved west in the late 1800s (Fowke 1957), farms specialized in other products such as dairy, fruits, vegetables and livestock, while processing industries such as cheese factories multiplied to serve local markets (Menzies 1994). At the same time, there was a great deal of food production in the city of Toronto — even cows were kept for milk (Cohen 1988). Certainly the cultures of city and farm, however different they may have seemed at the time, were deeply connected culturally and demographically.

As food and agriculture became industrialized, however, many gaps began to appear: between genders, as dairy moved from women’s work on the farm to men’s work in factories, and between growers, artisans and eaters (Cohen 1988). As cities grew and farmers diminished in numbers and were located farther from the city, the groundwork was laid for prices to become the main connection between growers and eaters (Kneen 1989). Production of “cheap food,” still the bane of farmers today, began with settlers, who were forced to exploit soils to export crops to Britain, and intensified during the deeper industrialization of farming in the past fifty years. However, for labour-intensive products such as fruits and vegetables and pasture-fed livestock, the push to “get big or get out” came from imports. These imports were increasingly organized directly by supermarkets, as they took control of the food system in the 1980s and especially the 1990s.

A capsule history of the dilemmas of food sovereignty in the region around Toronto, therefore, goes like this. Toronto was built on farmland which is the best in Canada and among the most fertile in North America. In the 1960s, specialized livestock farmers in Ontario (e.g., hogs, dairy) created marketing boards which succeeded in limiting vertical integration
by processors (McMurchy 1990). However, while farmers continue to this
day to produce milk and other supply-managed products for Ontario mar-
tkets, their farms became larger in size and fewer in number. A shift in field
crops towards corn and soybeans for livestock feed eliminated much of the
diversity of crops and livestock needed by urban eaters. During the period
1945–1980, Canada shared with governments all over the world a focus on
basic agricultural commodities, designed to assure enough calories and
proteins to populations, as well as to stabilize increasingly specialized farm
sectors (Friedmann 1993).

Until the 1990s, international trade in fresh fruits and vegetables was
very limited. As was the case in most of the world’s cities, in 1950, the fruits
and vegetables sold in Toronto and other Ontario cities still came from sur-
rounding orchards and fields. Small farmers delivered their crops either to
a network of shops, facilitated by the (still) publicly owned Ontario Food
Terminal (which handles imports as well as local produce), or to a network
of processors — the large tomato canneries and other vegetable operations
southwest of the metropolis and a web of abattoirs serving local livestock
farmers. Many growers formed marketing boards; today the newest agricul-
tural entrants, greenhouses, continue to do so (OMAFRA 2005).

Meanwhile, increasing urbanization in Southern Ontario created an
almost continual urbanized region called the “Golden Horseshoe.” While
the city of Toronto contains 2.6 million people, an additional 7.4 million
live in rapidly growing suburbs, smaller cities and towns, from Oshawa in
the east to Niagara Falls in the southwest. If regional agricultural markets
for fresh produce and livestock had been able to grow in tandem with cities
and towns, farmers might have found a vibrant regional market (Winne
2008). Farming might have had a chance to stay connected to urban con-
sumers and be renewed, both economically and culturally, as consumer
tastes changed and as new people with farming skills arrived in the region.
Indeed, agriculture did grow in tandem with cities for decades, until cars
made it possible for cities to sprawl and trucks made it easy to move food
long distances for trade. The same roads that, together with cheap fossil fuel,
made it seem more efficient to move fresh fruits and vegetables long distances
to urban markets, also competed with farmland, as did housing estates and
shopping centres designed around automobile use. Consequently, the very
rich farmland, stretching from Niagara to the southwest and to the Holland
Marsh to the northeast and beyond, came under increasing pressure for
conversion to other uses. Growers were squeezed out of regional markets as
cities expanded: by 1986 Ontario orchard acreage had already fallen by 30
percent from its level in 1941 (Gayler 1994: 284). Total farm area in Ontario,
which had been 22.8 million acres in 1931, decreased to 13.3 million acres
in 2006 (Statistics Canada 2006c). The rest is in danger of being paved over
if present market rule continues — though there are some recent signs that
this may not happen.

As retail and processing industries became centralized, regional food
industries and traders were marginalized. In contrast to supply-managed
sectors, notably dairy, where farms consolidated but still supplied regional
markets, vegetable, fruit and small livestock operations suffered. When can-
neries, jam operations and other processing industries closed, for instance,
Niagara orchards and market gardens lost their most stable buyers. At the
same time, supermarket supply chains spread across the continent and even
the world. The result has been that the Golden Horseshoe is left with a “miss-
ing infrastructure” for a regional food system (Baker et al. 2010) — one which
applies disproportionately to fruit and vegetable processing (Carter-Whitney
and Miller 2010: 12–13).

The other route for farmers was to shift from diverse crops for a growing
regional population to specialized exports. The Holland Marsh, located at
the northern edge of Toronto, is one of the most fertile regions in North America.
It is still very productive farmland with 135 farmers producing more than
$50 million worth of vegetables on ten thousand acres (Reinhart 2009). More
than half of the produce from the Holland Marsh is exported. Farmers have
concentrated on a small number of crops, especially carrots and onions, to
achieve economies of scale suited to exports. Strangely, these same crops are
also imported for local consumption, mainly through supermarket supply
chains (Reinhart 2009).

Given the combined constraints of the consolidation of local agriculture
to a reduced variety of crops, oriented to export, the increased trade and
import of fruits and vegetables, and increased urbanization, the renewal of
farming as part of a regional food system presents an enormous challenge.
Both land and labour are difficult to find and protect in an integrated way
(Roberts 2008). Although the Golden Horseshoe contains about a quarter of
Canada’s population and has, according to the official Canada Land Inventory
(Ontario Farmland Trust 2010), more than half of Canada’s best farmland,
both this farmland and the farmers who have based their livelihoods on it
are under great pressure from powerful urban interests to convert to urban
uses. Not only do farmers disagree about whether to preserve or sell remain-
ing farmland, but they are also faced with a huge problem of generational
renewal. Many farmers’ children have moved into other occupations, and
those who do wish to inherit often intend to farm differently from their par-
ents — moving towards sustainable, intensive crops and specialty livestock,
often on smaller farms than the acres for corn and soybeans that are typical
of the older generation.

Ontario farmers understandably respond to loss of markets and specula-
tive land prices by sometimes wanting to cash out. They are aging — of all
Ontario farm operators counted by the Census of Agriculture in 2001, 37 percent were 55 years or older; of these, 16.9 percent were 65 or over and another 20.6 percent expected to turn 65 by 2011 (Statistics Canada 2003). Farmers who have worked for very little income during their lifetimes are tempted to sell farmland, where they can, to agents of urban sprawl to finance their retirement.

The challenge of turning this around is compounded by a deep cultural gap. In the past two decades, a vast social and cultural gap has grown up between young multicultural cities and aging farmers who are mainly of European descent. The whole region, not only Toronto, is the site of an intersection of transnational diasporas (Cohen 1997). Cities have become "global" in a new way as a large stream of immigrants retain active cultural ties to groups in other countries (Sassen 2002). For instance, South Asian communities in Canada are actively engaged with those in the U.K., Trinidad, South Africa, India, Pakistan and many other countries. Not only are half of Metropolitan Toronto’s population of 5.5 million born outside of Canada, but an equal number of new Canadians live in surrounding municipalities (Toronto 2010; Statistics Canada 2006b). The last census shows that some of the fastest growing municipalities, such as Markham, have as many as two-thirds of their populations listed as visible minorities (Statistics Canada 2006a). Because these immigrants mostly arrived in a time of increasing world food trade, they found it easy to import traditional prepared foods and ingredients, as well as fresh ones, that suited their traditional and cultural preferences. This contrasts sharply with prior waves of immigration in which many new Canadians became farmers, while urban dwellers, both old and new, prepared and ate the crops and livestock grown mostly by surrounding farmers.

Emerging Potentials for Food Sovereignty

Renewal of food and farming depends on bringing people of all kinds — eaters, growers and everyone in between — into new and increasingly conscious relationships with each other and with land. Those relationships must first provide the conditions in which people can protect agricultural land and think creatively about all the ways and places they can grow food. Second, they must find a new policy hinge for understanding how to link growing food and eating — for example, a focus on health policy can reconnect land and food that have been disconnected from another by the market as it has worked so far. Third, they must build on the potential of agri-food for green economic renewal. Fourth, they must use public education to promote food literacy and skills. Finally, a regional infrastructure to (re)connect growers and eaters after many years of disconnection must reach across the divide that has developed between rural and urban cultures. Fortunately, all of these changes are taking place. If these factors can be connected by conscious practices and policies, food sovereignty becomes imaginable.

Renewing Agriculture: The Greenbelt, Urban Agriculture, Rewarding Sustainable Farms

The government of Ontario introduced a pioneering policy for environmental protection in 2005. The Greenbelt, the largest in the world, is 1.8 million acres of provincially protected land covering a good portion of the Golden Horseshoe. It encompasses diverse natural landscapes and watersheds, hundreds of towns and villages and over seven thousand farms, mostly family or sole proprietors, which account for over 50 percent of the land (for more details see <greenbelt.ca/about-the-ontario-greenbelt>). This comprises some of Canada’s most valuable agricultural land, and its farms produce fresh fruits and vegetables, dairy, beef, pork and poultry products, sheep and lambs, wine, mushrooms, maple syrup, flowers and plants. It includes the historically fertile Niagara region, now shifting from soft fruits to vineyards and greenhouses, and the Holland Marsh (Friends of the Greenbelt 2010). But there are many unprotected areas, like the borders of the Greenbelt, that are the focus of intense speculation and put pressure on the Greenbelt itself.

The Greenbelt, which must be renewed as a protected area in 2015, offers an opportunity for supporting farming and connections with consumers through reconstruction of infrastructure to create a regional food system based on sustainable small farms. However, the Greenbelt faces two major limits that need to be addressed. First, the Greenbelt legislation did not consider or include farmers in its creation. Thus, there was little legislation supporting farmers in the Greenbelt. For example, it did not include changes to policies, such as taxation (that currently discourages value-added on-farm food processing), to better support farmers within the Greenbelt. Moreover, it did not address the problem encountered by many who wish to enter farming of accessing good farmland, especially near the markets of the Golden Horseshoe. Consequently, there is now considerable opposition from an alliance of “developers” and farmers who wish to realize speculative gains from selling farmland. Second, the Greenbelt itself is full of unprotected “holes” as many areas surrounding the smaller and most rapidly growing municipalities of the Golden Horseshoe reserved land in their outskirts, including farmland, for future urban expansion. These “holes” are called the “white belt.” The perimeters of these holes, together with the external boundaries of the Greenbelt, have led to serious speculative pressure at the many edges of the Greenbelt.

Urban and peri-urban agriculture are also growing. Yet urban-rural divisions have left a policy legacy that inhibits urban and peri-urban food production and sales. Creative civil society initiatives are pointing the way
towards identifying regulatory barriers and seeking ways to resolve problems specific to crops and livestock in cities (Nasr et al. 2010). New links across jurisdictions have been created by two pioneering partnerships between the City of Toronto and the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA): the Toronto Urban Farm at Black Creek Pioneer Village, near to one of the most marginal urban neighbourhoods in the Jane-Finch area; and the FarmStart McVean New Farmers Project which helps new Canadians experiment with adapting crops to the region, located in a conservation area near Toronto in the City of Brampton. For example, one East Indian farmer at McVean Farm proudly described to me the two varieties of coriander, named after his children, which he has bred to suit both local conditions and his taste. Nearby plots on conservation authority land included new crops from Thailand, Ghana and other countries. Crossing jurisdictions also includes work by the Ontario Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs (OMAA 2003), which is helping farmers who have difficulty finding or affording land to farm.

Another initiative is the proposal by two visionary councillors from the Town of Markham for the creation of a “foodbelt.” This proposal, which complemented Markham’s “smart growth” policies for transportation, density and energy, envisioned a municipal limit to further encroachment on farmland in the “white belt” surrounding the town and a request to the Province of Ontario to include this land in the Greenbelt. It lost by one vote, but citizen engagement and public awareness rose through the efforts of these councillors, along with several food, farm and environmental organizations, both local and national (Suzuki Foundation 2010), as well as a coalition of academic experts. The conversation has shifted, and urban expansion onto farmland is no longer presumed to be “natural” (Robb 2010; Suzuki Foundation 2010; Gomu 2010).

From the rural side, a farmer-led movement called Alternative Land Use Services (ALUS) is advocating payment for environmental services. Existing farm policies strongly encourage single crops called “commodities,” in contrast to high-value crops more amenable to mixed and sustainable farming systems. Commodities are at the heart of the farm income crisis and of the political dilemma between good prices for farmers versus affordability for (low income) consumers. At current prices, many farmers either use methods that damage soil and water and emit greenhouse gases, or they engage in environmental practices at their own expense, at times even paying to introduce “environmental farm programs.” If farmers could multiply their income streams by getting paid for ecological management including carbon sequestration (as a payment for a service, much as teachers or nurses are paid, rather than participating in a “carbon market”), they would not have to recover all their costs through the prices of their crops. This could create a shift of public resources away from single products to site-specific, experimental, knowledge-intensive farming. For example, Bryan Gilvesy, the leading advocate in Ontario, took a great economic risk when he shifted from tobacco to an agro-ecological way of farming that combines pasture-fed beef with wildlife habitat, native pollinators, carbon sequestration, natural insect control (bluebirds) and much more, all based on the reintroduction of native perennial grasses (www.yuranch.com). Payment for environmental services could help jumpstart entrepreneurial initiatives, such as one being undertaken by members of the Holland Marsh Growers’ Association (HMGa) who are experimenting with new crops such as baby bok choy and red carrots, in demand by Chinese and East Indian communities, respectively (Reinhart 2009).

Other services deserving payment include training apprentices, whether farmers’ own children or other young farmers. At present, young farmers are being trained by a network of sustainable farms called the Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training (CRAFT <www.craftontario.ca>), and by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Everdale Environmental Learning Centre (<www.everdale.org>) and FarmStart <www.farmstart.ca>. FarmStart also runs a program called “Farmlink” which “brings together new farmers who are looking for land or mentorship with farm owners who have land available or expertise to share” <farmstart.ca/programs/farmlink/>. Farmers are not paid for this public service, and NGOs are always scrambling for donors.

The TFS notes that Toronto “has already begun to strengthen the regional foodshed through the adoption of a local food procurement policy”; it envisions expanding public procurement by schools and social services (Toronto Public Health 2010: 29). Beyond this, it advocates partnership with many civil society organizations, quasi-public agencies, like the Ontario Food Terminal, and provincial government agencies to “build links between local farmers and Toronto’s diverse markets” and “develop a regional food strategy that addresses the needs of farmers and Toronto residents” (Toronto Public Health 2010: 29). Other TFS priorities include “food friendly neighbourhoods;” “eliminating hunger;” “empowering residents with food skills and information;” and “urg[ing] Federal and Provincial Governments to establish health-focused food policies” (Toronto Public Health 2010: 23–26). The Toronto Food Strategy can make such connections by linking many apparently separate problems, from diet-related health costs to municipal climate change strategies.

An Emerging Metric: Health
The Toronto Food Strategy represents a new level in envisioning multi-scale and cross-sector collaborations to change the food system. It is the culmina-
tion of patient work inside city government and with community groups, inside and increasingly outside of Toronto. TFS represents a breakthrough in public policy, democratic consultation and social awareness. It began with a process of community consultations, based on a draft report in Spring 2010 that represented discussions between city and community partners about existing and future food initiatives. These conversations revealed themes including “affordability of healthy food, lack of access to quality food stores, the specific needs of newcomers adjusting to a new food system... concern about the lack of basic food skills and the unhealthy diets of children and youth, and the poor quality of food available through food banks... [as well as an expectation for] governments to play a role in facilitating solutions” (Toronto Public Health 2010: 4, 18). The discussions led to a revised document called Cultivating Food Connections which was presented by the Medical Officer of Health to the Toronto Board of Health. Subsequently, it was approved as official policy in June 2010. Cultivating Food Connections is at once visionary and provisional. It is the most recent document in a long-term project:

[to] build a vision and inspire action toward a health-focused food system. A strategy is more than just a report or set of recommendations. It is the ongoing process of identifying, building and strengthening positive connections — between local government and residents, among City Divisions, within the community, and with the countryside. (Toronto Public Health 2010: 4)

This means that Cultivating Food Connections is the most recent step in “embedding food system initiatives in City Government.” Making food a priority is not about creating one more thing for busy officials to do but “about being proactive and using food activities as a way to enhance efforts to meet Toronto’s ongoing goals.” The strategy recommends that city agencies work in “active partnership with residents, community organizations and businesses” (Toronto Public Health 2010: 19) to enable the deep changes in thinking and practice consistent with the goals of the food sovereignty movement.

The move toward a health-focused food system brings together human health, social justice and ecosystem health as priorities for public policy; its principles are “resilience, equity and sustainability” (Toronto Public Health 2010: 13). Public policy can affect incentives towards healthy food choices, availability of fresh foods in low-income neighbourhoods and access to good foods by vulnerable populations such as seniors and those with physical limitations. Public health policy starts with food, which can be a “strategic vehicle for meeting city goals” (Toronto Public Health 2010: 13). Instead of being divided into separate government departments, food solutions become synergetic ways to solve multiple problems, from waste management to depressed neighbourhoods to children’s school performance.

A health-focused food system includes recognizing and supporting farmers as environmental managers and producers of quality foods that can reach consumers quickly. Healthy soils, water, and air, fewer carbon emissions and more carbon sequestration though sustainable techniques are all dependent on strong networks linking farmers to consumers: “a sustainable food system is also economically and socially viable over the long term, especially for local farmers” (Toronto Public Health 2010: 14). Building on the innovations of the Toronto Food Policy Council, which, from its foundation in the early 1990s, brought farm representatives into a City body and which pioneered in helping to create the Greater Toronto Area Agriculture Action Committee (GTA AAC) composed of farm and planning organizations throughout the region, Cultivating Food Connections sees an integrated food system as key to building a creative economy, not only in Toronto (Donald 2009), but also in the region as a whole.

Food Security: Economic Renewal and Jobs in a Creative Food Sector

Importantly, an integrated food system must include great sensitivity to the many changing cultures in the neighbourhoods of Toronto. One of the key recommendations of Cultivating Food Connections is to identify neighbourhood food access problems and solutions. These can build on existing initiatives, such as the Toronto Urban Aboriginal Framework (UAF), in which Toronto Public Health has collaborated with community organizations to develop special programs, such as the Peer Nutrition Program (PNP) for the Aboriginal community. These solutions include integrating initiatives in Toronto Community Housing, and from community gardens, bake ovens and community kitchens to fresh food markets — many organized by nonprofit organizations such as FoodShare Toronto, the Stop Community Food Centre and other smaller initiatives.

Social enterprises like these are joined by entrepreneurs committed to values of equity, diversity, or sustainability, as well as their own livelihoods. Arvinda’s <arvindas.com> is a small business that is creating new links between farmers, cooks and cultural cuisines. Arvinda’s Healthy Gourmet Indian Cooking School was started in 1993 by retired civil servant Arvinda Chauhan; she soon realized that time-pressed cooks needed some prepared foods, which she innovated. Then in 2005, her daughter Preena, while pursuing an advanced degree in environmental studies, got a government start-up grant to create a spice mix business. This has now expanded into a range of activities, including culinary tours of “little India” in Toronto and longer ones of big India, too. Preena has used her knowledge of business and environment to encourage Golden Horseshoe farmers to supply the ingredients needed for her products and for Arvinda’s classes; she has also relied on her sense of social justice to find or create fair trade for those products which must be
imported. Her brother Paresh left his early career in software development to join what is a new type of family business and social enterprise.

The link between economic vitality and culture is thus key. Public and non-profit initiatives support diverse artisanal businesses to produce, distribute, sell and serve food, hoping to capture a greater share of the $7 billion spent on food annually in the city. These are knowledge- and skill-intensive jobs, as are those of sustainable farmers and of the people who link them directly to customers and to a resilient ecosystem. The Food Strategy proposes to support these projects through a not-for-profit Food Business Incubator, funded in part by Toronto’s agency for Economic Development and Culture. Next steps are planned, involving work with Business Improvement Associations and the Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC), the Ontario Culinary Tourism Alliance (OCTA) and other partners to support culturally diverse, healthy and sustainable food. All of these initiatives have a green focus: they fit under one of the priorities of the TPS — “Make Food a Centerpiece of Toronto’s New Green Economy.” Regional food cultures are reviving in tandem with cultural renewal of agri-food in the region — and with new social justice movements.

Other initiatives are aiming to “scale up” and “join up” towards a tipping point. One is the astonishingly successful non-profit certifying organization for local sustainable foods called Local Food Plus <localfoodplus.ca> that, in just a short time, has built on institutional purchases to draw retail into support for local sustainable farmers and food artisans. For example, Local Food Plus was instrumental in the University of Toronto’s decision to incorporate an increasing percentage of local and sustainably produced food in its food service contracts, beginning in 2006 (Friedmann 2007). It is now helping organizations to start up or build onto existing initiatives in other provinces across Canada. Chefs who have given long-standing support to local farmers have joined initiatives that combine equity with quality food: these range from Slow Food <slowfood.to> to the Ontario Culinary Tourism Alliance <ontarioculinary.com> to the welter of farmer markets with ever-expanding educational, economic and community roles. Older farmers’ markets have long served as complex community hubs. The Evergreen Brickworks <ebw.evergreen.ca> is the newest example of this, connecting market initiatives with school gardens and potentially with an urban farm.

Finally, FoodShare is the oldest and most established of the non-profit food security organizations in Toronto <foodshare.ca>. FoodShare has over twenty years of experience in innovation in Toronto food systems. It began with the Hunger Hotline, which it still runs, to direct callers to food banks in their areas. It pioneered the Good Food Box, which delivers approximately five thousand boxes a month of fresh fruits and vegetables, sourced locally as much as possible, to groups of households. The Good Food Box is itself a community builder — people from all walks of life help to pack the boxes, which are delivered to neighbourhood or workplace hubs. It is a pioneer in social marketing — creating a universal program in which everyone wants to participate while targeting low income communities for drop-off locations. Debbie Fields, Director of FoodShare, says that “this is a dignified program because everyone pays for the box and is therefore a ‘customer’ rather than a ‘client.’” Contributions cover the full cost of the food and some of the delivery, while staff costs and infrastructure such as trucks and warehouse space are supported by grants from the government, foundations and individuals. The Good Food Box has been copied and adapted widely. For example, it has created niche boxes for pregnant women, for organics (which tend to be more expensive) and for cultural cuisines.

FoodShare incubates and partners with many food organizations, as innovators take their experiences and experiments into new social ventures. A central partner, headed by Anan Lololi, is the Afri-Can Food Basket, whose mission statement states: “The Afri-Can FoodBasket is a non-profit community food security (CFS) movement that is committed to meeting the nutrition, health and employment needs of members of the African Canadian community, in particular, those who are economically and socially vulnerable” <www.africanfoodbasket.com>. The Afri-Can Food Basket encourages sustainable agriculture, local food access, youth development and food justice, all with festivals, music, cooking, markets and fun.

FoodShare has innovated practices such as training young people in cooking, catering and gardening — including beekeeping, composting, rooftop gardens, sprouts and more. It has pioneered a kitchen incubator used mainly by young entrepreneurs from immigrant communities to experiment with commercializing their culinary products. FoodShare is an inspiring social enterprise, combining non-profit with entrepreneurial activities, including income generation through its excellent catering service (which also provides training), its sale of seedlings and more. It has been a leading partner in student nutrition programs in public schools, trying to fill the gap shamefully left by federal and provincial governments that have no universal student meal program. FoodShare hosted and cosponsored its first food sovereignty conference in Ontario in fall 2009.

A New Coalition: Public Schools to Revive Food Knowledge and Communities

In 2010 FoodShare is moving many of its projects to a new level and focus by launching a comprehensive advocacy campaign called Recipe for Change <foodshare.ca/school-recipeforchange.htm>. The campaign aims to make food literacy and food practice required in the curriculum of public schools in Ontario from Junior Kindergarten to Grade Twelve. Building on a recent poll in which 85 percent of Canadians supported healthy food and snacks as
a universal school program, FoodShare is gathering allies among government officials, farmers, teachers, health organizations, food movements, students and the general public to work in coalition to make food literacy — including practical skills from compost to cooking — part of a school curriculum: this program will help young people understand the food system and empower them to make healthy food choices. The campaign is shifting public focus from fear of “obesity” and other dysfunctions of the food system to a focus on knowledge, experience and community, based on healthy foodways. FoodShare director Debbie Field envisions the spread of food literacy programs throughout the schools, in the same way that computer literacy — and computers themselves — were introduced only fifteen years ago, starting with one model school that led the way.

At FoodShare’s 2010 Annual General Meeting, a panel devoted to Recipe for Change reflected new links between farm and city. The panelists included a member of the Toronto District School Board, who reported on model school gardening and cooking programs in the city, such as the “foodprint” garden at James S. Bell public school. In this program, students do complex composting, using kitchen scraps and vermicompost, and cook their produce, as well as learn everything from carbon saving to writing haiku verses, all based on “respect, responsibility, and teamwork.” Other panelists included a farmer and a chef. The Holland Marsh farmer is proud of the red carrots he grows, which are much in demand by East Indian cooks. He sees himself as both traditional, like his grandfather who began the farm and had to learn how to grow crops for the region, and innovative in the way that he uses direct marketing to cut costs and to allow both profit for himself and good prices for his customers. He interprets current, popular attitudes towards food as based on fear — a fear that comes from separation, distance and ignorance of food. He supports Recipe for Change as a means to help people understand the whole food system and to “learn to cook again.” He sees government research into new crops, though still small in scale, as indicative of a positive change in policy. At the other end of the food system chain, a local chef who has worked both in expensive restaurants and at the non-profit The Stop Community Food Centre has become a leading public educator and advocate, recently leading a culturally diverse group of chefs to present a deputation in favour of the Toronto Food Strategy to the Toronto Board of Health.

In addition to smaller innovations, including salad bars and gardens, the Recipe for Change initiative envisions a Good Food Café in every school, and institution of a curriculum in which all students are taught to cook, garden and compost throughout all the subject areas. This entails (re)introducing kitchens and changing curriculum, big challenges that nonetheless promise to attract allies. Programs for children, as well as health and synergistic solutions for multiple social and economic problems, link Recipe for Change to the Toronto Food Strategy and to regional initiatives that work to transform the food system of the Golden Horseshoe and beyond.

Rebuilding Infrastructure for a Regional Food System: Sustain Ontario and Menu 2020

The most recent initiative bringing food system change to a regional level is the report called Menu 2020: Ten Good Food Ideas for Ontario (Baker, Campsie and Rabinowicz 2010). It is the pinnacle of a remarkable multi-year collaborative process that reflects the best thinking about what to do about the food system right now in Ontario. When it was first released, a 2008 Metcalf report “Food Connects Us All” (Campsie 2008) made a splash in the food movement because it highlighted a call for considerable change, including the following recommendations:

1) "Wide-Ranging Policy Reform": in farm support, labelling, extension services to farmers, research that is appropriate for small-scale and sustainable farming, safety regulations fostering centralization of processing industries, payment for environmental services, and farmland conservation, as well as food access for people with low incomes, education about food and health, support for community food programs and school food, planning for urban agriculture and community gardens, planning for healthy street food vending and public procurement.

2) "Remaking the Middle" of the food system which has become dangerously undone by oligopolistic food retailers. The report noted that “78 percent of the retail market is captured by just three large companies: Loblaw, Sobeys, and A&P/Dominion” (Campsie 2008: 31). Profits flow to outside shareholders rather than circulating within local economic networks. In particular, processors such as mills, abattoirs and canneries have largely disappeared, making it more difficult for small farmers to find markets.

3) "Building Self-Sufficiency," including support for moving food banks into community food security organizations that help people to grow food, cook, learn nutrition and work together, as well as access emergency food. Urban agriculture figured importantly, as well as community and school gardens.

4) "Bridging Divides": overcoming the social and cultural gap between farm folk and city folk. This includes Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and farmers’ markets, as well as dealing with frictions at the edges of farms and cities and the deep divide over “cheap food," which angers farmers, and "expensive
Growing a Sustainable Food System

I wrote some years ago that a sustainable food system would allow people to grow what is good for the earth, eat what is good to grow and design social and political institutions to make the first two of these possible (Friedmann 2003). The present food system does the reverse: farmers grow what dominant corporate buyers demand, eaters buy what is offered by the same corporate actors, and ecosystems and health suffer, as do social and political systems, both urban and rural. Food sovereignty has the enormous task of reversing these trends. In the Golden Horseshoe, farmers and farmland are disappearing, but the Greenbelt and many initiatives are working to renew farmers and save farmland. Eaters are unequal and unhealthy at younger ages and in increasing numbers. These conditions present a great challenge for change: the initiatives are aimed at creating those much-needed changes.

Most importantly, the gap between food growers, preservers, cooks, traders and eaters has grown very large in recent decades. An enormous gulf has arisen between farmers and changing urban populations in the three decades of globalization that have inspired the challenge of food sovereignty. In Ontario, where once most immigrants were farmers and most urbanites had close connections to rural life, today's global diasporas, global food markets and concentration of supermarket power have driven a great cultural and social wedge between the two (Winson 1992; Kneen 1989; Burch and Lawrence 2007). Thus, as a farmer-focused movement, food sovereignty faces special challenges in a large, urban, multicultural region such as the Golden Horseshoe. On one side, farmers have lost touch with the complex array of urban eaters; the most entrepreneurial among them are changing their crop mixes to reflect new tastes among culturally diverse, health-conscious consumers, while others remain locked in low-price "commodities" for the industrial food system. On the urban side, Carolyn Steel (2009a) reminds us that the present urban ignorance about where food comes from, and, by extension, about the natural basis of cities and the people who eat there, is almost unprecedented in human experience. Echoing Baker and her colleagues in Menu 2020, but speaking more philosophically, Steel goes on to say:

The first thing we need to do is to stop seeing cities as inert objects and recognize them as organic entities, inextricably bound to the natural ecosystem…. What we urgently need is an alternative to utopia: a model that aims not at perfection but at something partial and attainable. My proposal is sitopia, from the ancient Greek words sitos (food) and topos (place). Sitopia, in essence, is a way of recognizing the central role that food plays in our lives and of harnessing its potential to shape the world in a better way. The good news is that sitopia already exists. Wherever food is valued and celebrated,
from ordinary family dinners and food co-ops to international movements such as Slow Food and Transition Towns, there is growing recognition that, far from waning as an issue, food is set to become our greatest global challenge. The trick is to scale up such recognition to the point where it affects not just our daily habits, but our socio-economic structures, cross-cultural understanding, and value systems — our very conception of what it means to dwell on Earth. Food is the great connector. If we can learn to share it as a conceptual tool, we can use it to shape a better common future. (Steel 2009b)

The initiatives I have described here point in this direction — food sovereignty has become a framework shared by many who work toward such radical change. I outlined the specific challenges faced by cities and urban regions in achieving food sovereignty: I have also described how recent projects are re-linking cities, food and farmers in a totally new context in Southern Ontario. The links among these initiatives and the trust that is incipient in the new networks suggest that a community of food practice have come into being (Friedmann 2007). If Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze (2006) are correct, and I believe they are, then “suddenly and surprisingly a new system emerges at a greater level of scale...[which] possesses qualities and capacities that were unknown.” We seem to be getting closer to this moment of great change.

Notes
1. Farm workers are also included in the category, “people of the land.” This is often contradictory, as farmers, even small farmers, are often employers. It is especially problematic in Toronto farms and greenhouses, which employ temporary migrant workers under conditions unacceptable to citizens and immigrants (Sharma 2006). I won’t deal with this issue in this chapter, but it is crucial to address for food sovereignty.
2. See Kloppenburg et al. (1996) and Peters et al. (2009) for discussions of foodsheds.
3. Vertical integration involves a firm owning and/or controlling several aspects of the supply chain; for example, production of inputs, growing food, processing, marketing and distribution.
4. The following websites provide more information: <trca.on.ca/understand/near-urban-agriculture/toronto-urban-farm.dot> and <trca.on.ca/understand/near-urban-agriculture/farmstart-mcvean-new-farmers-project.dot>.

References
Burch, David, and Geoffrey Lawrence (eds.). 2007. Supermarkets and Agri-Food


