SUMMARY: NEXT STEPS ON FOOD POLICY DEVELOPMENT

"We have to think about food differently."
A comment from a participant in the MISC conference,
"What are we eating? Qu'est-ce qu'on mange?"

ABSTRACT

On the surface, the Canadian food and agriculture system looks robust, but "What are we eating? Qu'est-ce qu'on mange?" laid bare the dissatisfactions and anxieties that now permeate the system. Many obstacles stand in the way of a food policy that promotes the individual and collective health of Canadians and these obstacles will require a number of different strategies to overcome them. How can one best move forward on a topic that involves multiple actors, many disciplines, and multiple orders of government? A novel process was proposed. It consisted of asking 15-20 people to draft a detailed national food policy and then circulating that proposal to secure input from all relevant stakeholders.

RÉSUMÉ

Le système d'alimentation et d'agriculture canadien paraît superficiellement robuste. Cependant, «What are we eating? Qu'est-ce qu'on mange?» a révélé les insatisfactions et les anxiétés qui imprègnent le système. Plusieurs obstacles empêchent la création d'une politique alimentaire faisant la promotion de la santé individuelle et publique des Canadiens. Ces obstacles exigeront différentes stratégies pour les surmonter. Comment est-il possible d'aller de l'avant sur une question impliquant différents acteurs, plusieurs disciplines ainsi que plusieurs paliers de gouvernement? Un nouveau processus fut proposé–celui demander à 15-20 personnes d'élaborer une politique alimentaire nationale détaillée qui serait ensuite circulée pour assurer la contribution de toutes les parties prenantes pertinentes.

ROD MACRAE, Policy Consultant
GRACE SKOGSTAD, University of Toronto
NATHALIE COOKE, Associate Dean, Faculty of Arts, McGill University

Introduction

On the surface, the Canadian food and agriculture system looks robust, but "What are we eating? Qu'est-ce qu'on mange?" laid bare the dissatisfactions and anxieties that now permeate the system. The conference presenters, including those whose texts appear in this issue, addressed many of the subjects that currently confound our ability to take action to improve food, nutrition and agricultural policy. Participants were confronted with the tremendous complexity of a system of diverse actors and such a long and embedded history. Many questions were posed and few were truly answered, but there were some general areas of agreement, including some where new thinking is taking root.

Supply, but what of demand?

Governments have traditionally intervened on the supply side of the food policy equation. Their intervention has produced many benefits, though many challenges remain. The demand side (what and how much people eat, why they eat as they do, how food tastes are shaped, and what it costs to eat well) has received, for a variety of reasons, decidedly less attention from policy makers. In fact, in some ways a focus on supply has historically compromised demand and health (see Ostry this issue). The significant costs for individuals and society of policy makers' failing to

intervene on the demand side are now becoming more apparent.

Food, health, taste and culture

Food and health are closely intertwined and a food policy that contributes to the health of Canadians is one that promotes a secure and sustainable supply of safe and nutritious food at affordable prices, with adequate returns for farmers and food businesses. Although such goals are commonly stated by food system actors and governments,[1] clearly, some of the components of such a food policy – food security, food affordability, nutritious supply, low incidence of food-related diseases, farm financial health – are not being fully met. Although most Canadian consumers currently have access to a supply of safe and nutritious food at affordable prices, this is less likely to be the case for those who are poor, live in remote areas, and are Aboriginal. However, conference presenters and delegates reiterated that even with nutritious food within reach of the vast majority of Canadians, individually and collectively, Canadians often make food choices that do not contribute to and often undermine their health, both immediately and in the longer term. Rising levels of obesity are the clearest evidence of Canadians' failure to make healthy food choices, and diet is a significant risk factor in many cancers, in heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, and low birthweight births.

And what of taste and culture? As Beauchemin points out in this issue, much has been lost and some things have been (re)gained. Many conference stories highlighted how important food is to our social and community fabric, and this reality is often lost in the policy discourse about changing the food system.

Multiple actors with influence

Conference participants (and the articles in this issue) identified at least six different sets of actors whose behaviour is implicated in addressing our current dilemmas: i) the food production, distribution and retail sector – from field to plate ii) governments who regulate the food supply system and whose public policies have an impact on the security, safety, nutritional quality and affordability of food; iii) consumers whose individual and collective food choices affect their personal health and the structure and financial viability of the entire food system; iv) educators, including health care professionals, who can inform and educate consumers on their food choices; v) marketing/advertising agencies who shape consumer food preferences; and vi) the popular media (see Renaud et al. this issue). Each of these actors variously contributes to and/or frustrates the realization of food policy goals. As several authors in this issue highlight, these actors are not necessarily able or willing to identify their contributions to the challenges faced.

Consumer behaviour, individual freedoms and our collective needs

A foremost question of the conference was the following: in the presence of an ample supply of safe, nutritious and affordable food, how can consumers be induced to make choices that contribute to their health? What is the role of consumer education and strategies to modify behaviour? How much responsibility does the food industry have to regulate itself to better achieve health goals? Do governments need to become more involved in regulating the food supply system – not just to ensure that food is safe but also that it is nutritious and widely accessible and affordable? Is there a need to regulate the media/advertising firms, and so on? These questions, as Hedley points out, get to the very heart of Canada's conception of liberal democracy, because such interventions might infringe on current perceptions of individual freedom. But in the face of health problems that threaten not only an individual's health, but also health care budgets and our collective economic productivity, a common implicit question in the conference discussions was: is it time to rethink our notion of individual freedom and entertain more aggressive interventions that favour our collective interests? As Riches proposes, is the implementation of "food rights" central to moving forward on a collective approach?

Moving forward in a complex environment

The conference made clear, first, that there are a number of obstacles standing in the way of a food policy that promotes the individual and collective health of Canadians; and second, that these disparate obstacles likely require a number of different strategies to overcome them. How can one best move forward on a topic with multiple actors, many disciplines, and numerous orders of government? First, there is a clear need to better understand how the various food policy goals are interrelated; to know, for example, how one goal cannot be realized without simultaneous action on the

other. For example, if consumers are making poor food choices because they are poorly informed, then programs providing information and offering strategies to encourage behavioural change may be the most effective way to solve the problem. But if consumers are making poor food choices because they are poor and have limited access to affordable, nourishing food, then an educational policy is unlikely to be effective in the absence of a better labour market, improved social welfare, and / or a guaranteed annual income or food income supplements. One conference session addressed the main tradeoffs commonly associated with food policy development[2] and largely concluded that there are ways through them, though the path is somewhat treacherous.

Second, once the problem of a food policy is better understood, there is a need to build a consensus around the appropriate role of governments in achieving a food policy. Does it involve a larger government regulatory role, with governments interfering directly with the food industry's right to advertise foods and consumers' choices? Governments commonly believe that such a role can not be thrust upon them in the absence of a broad societal consensus that it is appropriate. But who, then, shall provide leadership on these complex matters? Who will animate that consensus-building process? Do governments actually want such a consensus to emerge, given their historic difficulties in working across departments on complex files? And this is a complex file, as Sally Rutherford identified in the final conference plenary, with 27 priority domains discussed by conference participants. As Carolyn Bennett explained, there is no "Ministry of Food," precisely because its mandate would consume numerous others – including the Ministries of Northern Affairs, Energy, Environment, and Heritage. Are we all tired of previous efforts to move forward in this area and don't actually know what will work? And what of the role of community-based efforts, one area in which there have been significant, though often small-scale, advances? The spirit of the conference indicated that change must be accelerated at both the policy and community levels.

Next steps

To close the event, the participants tackled the question of next steps. Although many found it tempting to consider limited strategies addressing discrete problems in the food system, the dominant sentiment favoured a more integrated and comprehensive approach to food policy development. As Hedley and Ostry stress in their articles this issue, some of our current problems can be seen as products of a historically limited approach to policy development in the food sector.

A more holistic approach, however, would require a demanding process. Some participants had been part of difficult efforts in the 1970s to create a national food policy. A few are currently involved in the federal/provincial National Food Policy Framework, the most recent attempt to move forward on these themes. Many had participated in numerous consultations on smaller, but related, topics that had ended in disappointment. Several thought we must attempt, once again, a long and thorough consultation with as many sectors as possible to seek a national consensus.

But, as one participant stated, an inclusive process would require a facility the size of Toronto's SkyDome. Given a strong desire expressed to move on to implementation, one that permits short term actions while the longer term plan is unfolding, would there be a different way of working? Could we put 15-20 people around a table to draft a detailed national food policy and then circulate and modify it in way that included input from all relevant stakeholders?

Variations on this approach have been used by commodity organizations and sectors to develop national-level strategic plans. For this purpose, a small group that covers a wide (but not complete) range of sectors and expertise would be funded to draft a national food policy that attempts to balance all the interests and potential tradeoffs. Their task would also include setting out the strategic interventions needed to move the policy forward. To make the effort substantial, they would have to highlight the changes to existing programmes, policies and regulations that would advance a comprehensive food policy. Then they would circulate their draft widely, actively solicit feedback, and revise. This might require numerous rounds, perhaps even a dozen drafts, until it appeared a consensus was emerging. Ultimately, if sufficient numbers of organizations and institutions were prepared to endorse it at the end, it would have life.

The task, then, is not just to think differently about food, but perhaps also to think differently about food policy development. During the final session, one participant laid a modest sum of money on the table to start the development process. Who will take up the challenge?

Endnotes

[1] See, for example, policy statements from Agriculture and Agrifood Canada.

[2] The session addressed the following 5 topics:

Can we improve nutritional health at an affordable price?

Can we produce sufficient food and protect the environment at the same time?

Can we improve domestic economic development opportunities in the food system without breaking international trade rules?

Can we better support farmers financially and keep prices reasonable for low-income consumers?

Can fish and seafood remain an important part of the diet without depleting the resource?