

**Enhancing Viability of the Agri-food Sector through  
Local Food and Governance Systems**

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## **Executive Summary**

Heightened public awareness about the current state of our global food system and the consequences of industrialized agriculture has been a driving force for change in how we, as a society, perceive and obtain food. Globalization of the food system has detrimental environmental, social, and ethical consequences and has created barriers to sustainable food production. This global industrialized food system creates concerns around food supply, environmental sustainability, community health, and economic vitality for the citizens and governments in Canada. In response, cities and communities are beginning a movement to participate in a collaborative effort to augment the development of a regional food system that enhances the viability of the agriculture and agri-food sector.

A model for this movement is a concept called municipally enabled and supported agriculture (MESA). The goal of MESA is to integrate agri-food systems into communities and cities to enable food policy change at the municipal and regional government levels. This paper is an exploration of the role local food systems can play in enhancing viability in the agriculture and agri-food system sectors through changes in local government policy. It is recognized that a balance between the global and local food systems needs to be achieved. By assessing a complement between these two opposing food systems models, new revenue streams and a window into new prospects for adding value across the supply chain will emerge.

## Introduction

My family immigrated to Canada from Italy in 1970. As a first-generation Canadian born and raised in Winnipeg, I never truly understood what they left behind. I would hear stories about the ocean, the land, and the historic cities they left, but most of all I would hear about the food. Memories of the taste, scent, and culture were still fresh in their minds. This provoked the continual search for fresh food, grown and prepared just the way it was back home. This led them to grow lush vegetable gardens, plant fruit trees, harvest mushrooms, and pay visits to farms in the search of fresh, locally raised meat. Many Italians started small businesses, restaurants, and specialty grocery stores, with a focus on high-quality, homemade, and affordable food. Additionally, a small number of families realized the economic opportunity presented by the demand in Canada for imported products from Italy such as olive oil, cured meats, cheeses, preserves, and wine. This could be described as the marriage between the local and global food system. This is not a new concept. Robert Wright's book *A Short History of Progress* (2005) describes how food has been transported from other countries, and continents, since before the time of the Roman Empire. Among Wright's themes was how a civilization becomes reliant on global imports rather than on local agricultural production capabilities, which was a contributing factor in the fall of the Empire. In our current times, food is convenient, mass-produced, pre-packaged, packed full of ingredients we cannot pronounce, and shipped thousands of kilometres. The way we eat, and the way we obtain food, has impacted our health and our culture. Our communities and cities have suffered for the same reasons. What we can learn from the recent and distant past is that promoting a regionally focused food system will have environmental and social benefits, but will also contribute to economic vitality.

## Food Systems and Economic Vitality

Through an understanding of the challenges we face with our current food system we can begin to shift towards a new model. Food systems are comprised of dynamic, interconnected elements, which include production, processing, distribution, sales, marketing, and disposal of all the processes involved in maintaining our food supply (Kimbrell, 2002). The current “conventional” food system is comprised of multiple complex interconnected processes that cover large geographic areas and are often global in scale (Patel, 2008). This results in increased vulnerabilities in our food system in terms of food security (supply) and food sovereignty (control), and creates a compromise in the ability of communities, including cities, to achieve food self-reliance.

The state of the current global food system has significant implications for the environmental, economic, and social well-being of cities, communities, and citizens (Norberg-Hodge, Merrifield and Gorelick, 2002; Pollan, 2006). Standard agricultural practices cause environmental degradation and natural resource depletion (Department of Environment Foods and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), 2010; Kloppenburg, Hendrickson and Stevenson, 1996). The way the global food system currently operates contributes to the destruction of rural agricultural communities and economies, declining human health as a result of poor-quality food and insufficient quantity of food, and a detached cultural relationship to food and agricultural land (Peters, Bills, Wilkins, and Fick, 2008; Pollan, 2006). The way our dominant food system currently operates cannot be maintained in a way that can meet current and future global food requirements (Kimbrell, 2002).

Creating an economically viable food system includes the promotion of business opportunities and job creation. Farmers’ livelihoods rely on generating revenue through sales of their food products. In a viable food system this would be achieved through business opportunities such as community-supported agriculture, farmers’ markets and other means of direct sales, all of which are mechanisms that create direct connections between farmers and communities (Feenstra, 2002; Pollan, 2006). Job creation in a community can occur in all components of a food system including production, distribution, transportation, processing, and packaging. Small-scale, human-intensive agriculture maintains and creates jobs within a community, contributing to local economic vitality (Feenstra, 2002; Mullinix *et al.*, 2008). Supporting and enhancing

small-scale family farms where food is grown and raised in accordance with sustainable agricultural practices will contribute to the economic well-being of a region (Kimbrell, 2002).

### **Municipally Enabled and Supported Agriculture (MESA)**

A paradigm shift in food systems policy is required to better position the agri-food sector in the Canadian and international economies. Currently, there are two competing agricultural paradigms relating to food systems: conventional industrial agribusiness and local-scale, human-intensive agri-food systems (Mullinix *et al.*, 2008). There is a need for a more prominent role for local-scale food systems and increased support from municipal and regional governments on issues involving food. If food systems are to be embedded into a regional or municipal context, then the governance systems need to shift in support of that change. Municipal and regional governments need to take the lead in enhancing food systems rather than following governments at the federal and provincial levels (Mullinix *et al.*, 2010). Food and agriculture policies that promote food production, processing, transportation, and consumption at the local level need to be implemented (Feenstra, 2002). According to Mullinix *et al.* (2008), to achieve sustainability a shift to local-scale food systems and an enhanced role in food policy and regulation from local and regional governments need to occur. This concept is called municipally enabled and supported agriculture (MESA).

The intent of MESA is to integrate agri-food systems into communities at the regional level with a focus on economic, environmental, and social sustainability, while simultaneously engaging policy change within the local and regional governance systems (Mullinix *et al.*, 2008; FAO, 2010). Mullinix *et al.* (2008) states, "MESA can assist local governments to enhance an agri-food system that will have direct and positive impacts on local and regional economies, protect and preserve farmland against unfettered urban development, and promote sustainable food consumption." Since governments at the municipal level are "closest to the citizens present within their boundaries," they present an important connection between food policy, food systems, and communities (Mullinix *et al.*, 2008). The foundation of MESA is a community-supported and collaborative approach among governments, community groups, and key stakeholders to create usable

“tools” and strategic planning to encourage food security and sovereignty (Mullinix *et al.*, 2008). The MESA focus is on “living laboratories” that act as models, specifically taking a bioregional perspective, to inform the effects of a regionalized food system (Mullinix *et al.*). The ultimate driver of MESA is the “integration of sustainable agri-food systems into local communities” and determining the ways local governments can participate in the enhancement of agri-food policies that contribute to the economy (Mullinix *et al.*, 2008).

One of the objectives of the MESA model is to “enable municipalities to become leaders in bioregional food system planning, development, and governance” (Mullinix *et al.*, 2008). A bioregional food system considers the unique physical characteristics of place that are environmental, climatic, and geographical, and recognizes the distinct differences in character, history, democracy, and culture in an area (Szymanski and Sutherland, 2006; Patal, 2008). This can be described as a food system that is diverse, productive, adaptable, and attempts to integrate environmental, economic, and social health into a particular place (Feenstra, 2002). A bioregional food system works within the context of a local or regional governance structure to change food purchasing practices, governance structure and land tenure legislation, and to promote incentives and collaboration (Mullinix *et al.*, 2008).

## **MESA in Action**

The following outlines a case study where the MESA concept is being put into action. The Sea to Sky Bioregion is defined as being comprised of the environmentally, historically, and culturally distinct communities of Squamish, Whistler, Pemberton and Lillooet. A number of barriers to achieving sustainability in the production, distribution, processing, and consumption of food currently exist in this area as agriculture is limited in scope, the vast majority of food is imported from long distances, productive farmland is threatened by commercial and residential development, and the high cost of fresh food has resulted in diminishing population health (Whistler2020 Food Task Force, personal communication, June 23, 2010). Governments and citizens in these communities have recognized the potential negative consequences of being entirely dependent on the global food system and, as such, they wish to determine and outline appropriate and feasible

strategies to achieve a heightened degree of regional food self-sufficiency, security (supply), and sovereignty (control). In collaboration with other jurisdictions and regional stakeholders, the intent is to expand and strengthen regional food production as a means to curtail the loss of agricultural lands, enhance the regional economy and community, diversify opportunities for agriculturalists, and reduce reliance on imported food.

By taking a bioregional approach, the goal of maximizing the potential for regional food self-reliance through food security, sovereignty, and contributing to the regional economy can be furthered. Taking a bioregional approach involves an investigation of food self-reliance, community input and collaboration, and capacity building. This approach requires the initial steps of determining the geographical boundaries based on the unique characteristics of place that are environmental, climatic, and geographical and establishing a baseline production capacity in the Bioregion as compared to per capita consumption to determine food self-reliance. Regional and local government partners in this project include the Squamish-Lillooet Regional District and the municipality of Whistler, respectively. Through applying a bioregional approach, a food system management plan outlining specific action items will be prepared with input from the local and regional governments. These action items will require the participation of local and regional governments through food policy changes.

## **Conclusion**

Our current reliance on the global food system has consequences for Canadian society in terms of economic viability and there is a need to enhance local-scale food systems. As recent and past history show, a balance between the global and local food systems is required to achieve food security, sovereignty, and economic vitality. It must be recognized that limitations exist in the ability of a regional food system to provide complete food self-reliance to a community. The intent is to determine what can be produced through a regional food system and what needs to be supplemented by the global food system. Assessing a complement between the global and local food systems will lead to increased economic sustainability.

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