



AGM & Symposium 2021

Food System Dialogues: What We Heard Summary

November 2021

About the Food Sustainability Dialogues Session

The Ontario Food Collaborative held its Annual General Meeting and Symposium virtually on November 18, 2021. The Symposium included a session on Food Sustainability Dialogues which gave participants the opportunity to engage with others and think out-of-the-box to problem solve. Participants were divided into breakout groups and led by a moderator. The purpose of the session was for participants to get a sense of ways that they and OFC could support movement in the areas of:

1. Food literacy in schools
2. Food access
3. Food waste

Please see Appendix I for the detailed scenarios presented to each breakout group.

Summary of Breakout Group Discussions

The following is a summary of the feedback that was shared by participants during the breakout groups.

Breakout 1 – Food Literacy in Schools

What roles can community and municipal partners play in supporting food literacy programs in schools?

Participants noted that education, awareness and experiential learning (i.e. cooking classes, gardens, etc.) are ways in which community and municipal partners can support food literacy programs in schools. Participants also identified the need for a champion within schools to drive programming. Many also pointed to the need to partner with private sector to gain access to resources not available to schools.

Specific comments included:

- **Increase access to experiential learning** – connecting schools with community gardens or cooking classes. Afterschool programs and school field trips are also an opportunity to explore.
- **Increase awareness of food literacy** – municipal and community partners can do outreach through school presentations and programming. Could also offer resources designed for schools.
- **Integrate food literacy into food waste reduction educational resources** – some municipalities (City of Hamilton) have begun to do incorporate food literacy into their materials and as part of their waste education centres.
- **Champions are an essential** component to successful school programs, but create the risk of failure if the champion leaves.

- **Policy and funding are essential** to ensuring the long-term success and sustainability of programs. It also provides the foundation for broader implementation to different schools and school boards.
- **Collaboration** between community groups, schools, governments, and the private sector that typically work in silos can support food literacy through identification of common goals and new opportunities. This includes resource sharing such as kitchens, garden tools, etc.
- **Consideration of existing and differing structures among provinces** - these structures allow for the development and implementation of varying programs.
- **Collaboration between municipal waste and/or health and planning departments** – to provide input into school development plans using a food literacy lens (i.e. rooms for cooking, spaces for gardens)

How can we leverage school-based food literacy programs to provide food education and outreach community (e.g. student food leaders providing community cooking classes, tie into OFC programs)?

Participants provided suggestions on how schools could be leveraged to provide food education and outreach to communities.

Suggestions included:

- **Utilizing schools as an avenue for reaching the whole family.** Presents the opportunity to engage with youth for ideas as well as intergenerational perspectives.
- **Connections and partnerships** between private and/or public groups can provide access to resources that would otherwise be unattainable by school (shared spaces, community kitchens, convening conversations, community hubs, broader food systems support).
- **Research** to gather evidence in support of the connection between food literacy and waste reduction. This can include waste audits and related food literacy programming.
- **Engaging with different levels of government** can open more opportunities for collaboration.
- **School Board Policy** so that schools have the resources and direction to support food literacy programs.

Breakout 2 – Food Access

Beyond funding, what other supports can local government provide to community-based action on food security issues?

Participants noted that large urban municipalities such as those in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area do not have zoned agricultural land and suggested municipalities consider implementing urban agriculture by-laws or amending zoning by-laws to promote growing and sharing of backyard agricultural goods and improve access to locally grown produce.

Other suggestions included:

- **Creation of an App** that would improve access by connecting residents to locally grown products.

- **Development of Community Sharing Programs** in neighbourhoods that face challenges to food access. Example, City of Toronto's urban harvest program which is volunteer run and provides collection and redistribution of surplus local produce to local food banks.
- **Planning for food access** such as food scaping in boulevards and community gardens so fruit and other produce is available for free to anyone on public property.
- **Be inclusive when developing food access programs** everyone must have a seat at the table to properly address food access and security this includes looking beyond traditional stakeholders such as Public Health.
- **Emergency Food Programs** emerged during Covid 19 and these need to be continued beyond the pandemic, while not a solution it does serve as an opportunity to provide food to those who have no access.

Breakout 3 – Food Waste

If the Provincial government moves forward with the implementation of a food and organic waste disposal ban, what key challenges, actions and policies should different sectors, both private and public, consider?

Participants felt that educating the public should be top of mind if the provincial government moves forward with its food and organic waste disposal ban. This is an opportunity for the government to raise awareness and properly educate the residential, multi-residential and Institutional, Commercial, and Institutional sectors on food waste reduction. Many noted that education of stakeholders needs to happen well in advance of the disposal ban coming into place, in particular for the multi-residential sector.

Other suggestions included:

- **Requiring community gardens** for new developments, especially for new multi-residential developments.
- **Amending the Building Code** to require multi-residential building to have space for and utilize green bins or perhaps eliminating chutes all together to encourage further diversion.
- **Competition can spur change** (i.e. competition between MR buildings or businesses to divert the most).

What can government bodies and other organizations do to encourage a move beyond organics recovery (e.g. composting) towards a circular food economy?

Participants encourage the wide spread use of food waste exchanges where food surpluses go to other uses before being turned into animal feed. Examples included sending baked good to breweries. Participants noted that a key barrier to exchanges is the lack of regulation and standardization which may deter participation. Legislation, education and advocacy around food exchanges is needed to reduce barriers and for the public to feel comfortable participating.

Other comments included:

- **Circularity has costs** and may be cost prohibitive for some.
- **Circular procurement as a requirement of doing business.**
- **Mentoring program** which would offer access to expertise which would make reducing food waste, food exchanges etc. more attractive to small businesses/charities etc. They need technical support.
- **Research circular approaches** and government can leverage academia and fund research. Food waste and recovery is perfect area for research. For example, University of Guelph has a 3 year project researching using soluble and insoluble fibres (i.e. mustard seed casings in food products (i.e. pudding).
- **Education** of proper food preservation techniques.
- **Advocacy** so that small organizations implementing circular initiatives can scale up.
- As charity and working with Upcycle Kitchen, a huge part of grant was that it included a mentor that taught them how to use spent grain for pizza dough etc.

Appendix I – Breakout Group Scenarios

Breakout 1 – Food Literacy in Schools

Bill 216: Food Literacy for Students Act proposes amendments to the Education Act that would require school boards to offer experiential food literacy education and healthy eating for Ontario students in every grade, from grade 1 through grade 12. The courses of study would need to ensure that students are given opportunities to grow food, prepare food and learn about local food.

In some communities, programs that provide this type of hands-on food literacy education are already being offered through partnerships between schools, farmers, government agencies and non-profit organizations. From schoolyard gardens and farmer-led workshops to farm to cafeteria programs, the models and activities differ for each school and community. What can OFC members do to support school boards in developing food literacy programming?

Breakout 2 – Food Access

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, food security has become an increasingly urgent concern. Many barriers to the regular access to safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food have been amplified during this crisis. In response, organizations and governments may be exploring different ways to increase food security. This investment in food security programming and planning has the potential to support not only an emergency response to food insecurity, but also long-term community food security. Local governments considering investing time, money and resources into food security plans and programming need to identify the challenges or barriers they aim to undertake and select approaches that will effectively address those challenges.

Imagine you are a member of a local government looking to support food security programs in a community where transportation is known to be a key barrier to many residents' ability to access healthy food, due to high transportation costs, limited transit options and long travel times to grocery stores. These challenges have been exacerbated by the pandemic through business and transit restrictions as well as impacts on household income. Beyond funding, what other supports can local government provide to community-based action on food security issues?

Breakout 3 – Food Waste

Over 60% of Ontario’s food waste is sent to landfills. The Province has previously discussed banning food waste from disposal, including both landfills and incinerators, to increase diversion of this material and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Much of this material is expected to end up in Green Bin programs and composting facilities. While this could have positive environmental impacts including reducing methane gas emissions from landfills, it is unclear if a disposal ban will promote the reduction and prevention of food waste.

If the Provincial government moves forward with this, what key challenges, actions and policies should different sectors, both private and public, consider? What can government bodies and other organizations do to encourage a move beyond organics recovery (e.g. composting) towards a circular food economy?