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Setting the table to beat the 'good food gap'

By Ann Hui

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Uniting all the stakeholders in food policy, says a new study, would make us all healthier and happier

Government policies across the country dealing with all aspects of food - from production to consumption - are uncoordinated and lack oversight, one expert says, leading to a broken food system in Canada.

In her paper, *Menu 2020: Ten Good Food Ideas for Ontario*, Lauren Baker, an advocate for healthy food and sustainable agriculture, argues that a number of groups affecting or affected by food policy are presently left out of the discussion. And many that are included, she said, often don't communicate with one another. The report is one of five food policy papers released Tuesday by the Metcalf Foundation, which funds research in all areas of community and social services.

The Baker paper argues that a "good food gap" exists between struggling farmers, and consumers who want healthy food. Ms. Baker said the reason for this gap is a lack of oversight and co-ordination in the creation of food policy. Some of the groups not currently at the table during discussions, she said, may not even realize they should be. Environmental groups, social services and economic-development groups are just some of the other organizations who have a stake in food policy.

"Previously, we've looked at issues separately," Ms. Baker said. "I'm proposing that we can't find a solution to anything unless we bring the other issues together."

Ms. Baker's ideas are focused on Ontario, though she said provinces across the country are facing similar issues.

Rod MacRae, the author of another Metcalf paper, would like to see a national food policy that includes all the different groups from all levels of government - everyone from city planning officers to Health Canada - working together.

But some farmers have doubts. Rhonda Driediger, owner of Driediger Farms in Langley, B.C., said the last thing farmers need are more policies. "If you're in agriculture, you're automatically looking for better ways of farming," she said. "It happens naturally."

Ms. Driediger also questioned the paper's emphasis on local, saying that the export-oriented B.C. blueberry industry produces about 80 million berries a year. "We only have so many people in B.C.," she said. "Are you asking them to eat them all?"

But Ms. Baker said her ideas are not meant to add regulation, but rather to facilitate more discussion. She also said that though her paper emphasizes local, she's more interested in having a balance between local and export, rather than the present focus on export.

Lauren Baker's 10 ideas for addressing the "good food gap:"

Idea 1

Support local producers

The gap: Farmers are having a hard time making a living. Competition from cheap imports is just one problem they face. They're also receiving a smaller share for each retail dollar from large grocers, and struggling with a lack of support from governments, especially when it comes to transitioning to sustainable practices.

Baker's solution: Governments could provide support to local farmers by ensuring they get a floor price for their products, and receive incentives for using sustainable practices. Policies could also be created to ensure as strong a focus on local markets as on export markets.

Idea 2

New and alternative farmers

The gap: The number of farmers is on the decline, and new farmers are finding it difficult to establish themselves. Meanwhile, non-conventional growers, such as organic farmers, have an even harder time finding space for themselves among large-scale farms.

Baker's solution: Policy makers, supply-management organizations and new producers need to begin a discussion to find ways to simultaneously encourage innovation in the field, while keeping existing supply-management systems for producers who need them.

Idea 3

Environmental stewards

The gap: Farmers are some of the largest landholders across the country, with their land providing habitat for countless species, and space for biodiversity to thrive. Yet they're rarely seen or treated as environmental stewards.

Baker's solution: Recognize the value of the ecological services farmers provide and, in some cases, find ways to pay them for these services.

Idea 4

Plant urban Ontario

The gap: Urban agriculture could develop to the point where cities grow at least a portion of their own fresh food. Yet, current farming policies continue to place emphasis on rural areas. Urban farmers also face challenges finding space for packaging and processing.

Baker's solution: Local governments could support urban growers by providing space on both city-owned and institutional land, and make changes to zoning bylaws as needed.

Idea 5

Food lessons

The gap: Poverty and the lack of a universal student nutritional policy in Canada mean that diabetes and obesity are on the rise among children.

Baker's solution: Create integrated school food policies in each province to replace the current hodge-podge of municipal, provincial and federal agencies who oversee school programs. Schools could also be required to buy from local farmers and suppliers, and develop curriculum to teach children about healthy food choices.

Idea 6

Community food centres

The gap: Healthy food, like that offered at farmer's markets, is currently available only for those who can afford it. Meanwhile, many larger supermarkets or grocery stores choose not to move into low-income areas, creating "food deserts." Absence of city planning officials from food-related discussions often exacerbate this, resulting, for example, in lack of public transportation to places where healthy food is available.

Baker's solution: Use public and private funding to create community food centres in these "deserts" where healthy cooked meals are served, food can be delivered on an emergency basis and cooking and gardening skills are taught.

Idea 7

Regional food clusters

The gap: Local food processing facilities are shutting down, meaning farmers are losing potential income from wasted products, while consumers are unable to find the local products they want.

Baker's solution: Create regionally based food clusters consisting of networks of producers and alliances of small and medium-sized processors. These clusters could work together to ensure all local needs are met.

Idea 8

Buying local

The gap: Many governments already have local procurement policies in place for public institutions like schools and hospitals, requiring them to buy local whenever possible. But for some, this policy does not yet include food.

Other governments who do have these policies in place often have an unclear definition of what constitutes as local or sustainable.

Baker's solution: Governments could further develop food labeling policies to clarify local and sustainable for consumers and producers.

Idea 9

Good food equals good health

The gap: Food is often thought of in terms of productivity or efficiency, rather than in relation to good health. As a result, people in the food industry may not work together as closely as they should with policy makers and other parties involved.

Baker's solution: Government ministries could work together with health-promotion partners to create an integrated approach to connecting good food with good health.

Idea 10

Food and land use

The gap: Land-use policies are often inconsistent with farmers' needs. For example, farmers who are looking at diversification, or wanting to build a storage facility on their property, may not be able to due to zoning issues.

Baker's solution: Educate planners about the implications of their land-use policies, and include people from urban,

rural and farming communities in land-use discussions.

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