



Y2K was a dry run: Reflections on COVID-19 and food
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In the late 1990's, I spent the better part of 2 years educating people about how to grow, make, and preserve food in their own homes. It was part of a pro-active measure taken by my then employer, the Kootenay Country Store Cooperative in Nelson BC, to respond constructively to the concern that many were feeling about the possible havoc that Y2K might wreak. Then, as now, people were concerned about the security of their food supply—though less so about toilet paper. If no fuel was available to run the trucks that bring so much of our food, how could we best protect and prepare ourselves locally?

Twenty years on, this novel coronavirus outbreak has made it blatantly apparent that our world is connected and very, very small. As each day passes, it is hard to avoid the news about the dramatic increase of cases in country after country. We are seeing unprecedented closures of borders and commerce in the attempt to contain the spread. And around the globe, people are being told to practice “social distancing” in order to insulate themselves from possible exposure to the virus. The virus is globetrotting while our lives are narrowing into the confines of our homes, if we are lucky enough to have one.

What this coronavirus has made blatantly clear is that relying on long supply chains for the essentials of our lives makes us very vulnerable. In almost thirty years of talking and educating about food systems, my best attempt to make this tangible in the past was to reference highway closures due to avalanches. The fragility of long supply chains is now all too obvious as hospitals struggle to acquire enough masks, never mind ventilators.

It is impossible to know what next week will bring for this pandemic, nor how this will all play out here and around the world. But I hope that this prompts more to embrace the value of local food systems. There is no inherent moral superiority to local food. However, as the breakdown of global supply chains demonstrates, having the source close at hand provides greater security of access. And when it comes to food, which every one of us needs daily, it seems wise to ensure that the basics are covered locally.

Most of us rely on commerce or the marketplace to source food. There are those, however, who rely on their own skills and work to obtain at least a portion of their food. To augment food security for Indigenous people, wherever they may be able to practice traditional ways, we must ensure that they have access to the places and

waterways from which they can source their foods and medicines. For those who raise and grow food in their backyards or fields, we must ensure that local bylaws encourage and enable such practices. And for those of us who rely on commerce to obtain food in exchange for money, we must rebuild our local food systems.

We are being told that there is no shortage of food.¹ Nevertheless, no matter how large the distribution centres of Canada's large grocery chains, they are still finite relative to our ongoing need to eat. Of the commodities California produces, it exports almost 40% of the USA total, shipping \$3.3B in fresh fruits and vegetables to Canada in 2017.² California is currently one of the hardest hit states in the USA by COVID-19. It is also a state with an agricultural sector that relies heavily on foreign workers to tend the crop and collect the harvest. Add to that the pressures of climate change and the long-documented decline of fresh water supplies in California, and it becomes pretty clear that relying on California in the long term for our fresh produce is unwise.

There are things that we can do in our homes and communities in the short term, but the work of rebuilding local food systems and supplies is a long-term project. In my lifetime, I have watched the loss of infrastructure for local food systems—from flash freezers and cold storage to canneries, from abattoirs to veterinarians; they have all disappeared from the landscape with few exceptions. This has not been by accident. It is the outcome of public policy going back to a 1969 Federal Task Force report that recommended that “1/2 to 2/3 of Canadian farmers be moved out of agriculture”.³ Public policy derived from that Task Force's findings promoted “efficiency” and export markets over the survival of family farms and fishers across the country, which has achieved its sad goal with the massive reduction of farmers and fishers in the past six decades.

The Federal Task Force of the late 1960s proposed that “success can only be had by having fewer units. That is the only way to have family farms capable of a decent income to have fewer of them.”⁴ COVID-19 has compellingly demonstrated that relying on “fewer units”, often far away, leaves our communities highly vulnerable when it comes to the basic necessities of life.

Which is all to say that there is great wisdom in rebuilding local food systems, but it will necessitate changes in policy at all levels of government. It will also require an increase

¹ <https://globalnews.ca/news/6672070/coronavirus-grocery-stores-canada/>

² https://aic.ucdavis.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/2017_CDFA_Tables.xlsx

³ Darrin Qualman and Fred Tait, 2004. The Farm Crisis: Bigger farms and the myths of ‘competition’ and ‘efficiency’, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, page 6.

⁴ Canadian Agriculture in the Seventies, Queens Printer, Ottawa, 1969, page 34.

in local market options for producers, something resembling domestic fair trade so that farmers and fishers receive fair compensation for their vital skills, work and investments, and a real and sustained increase in the number of people willing to enter these vital trades for our collective good.

Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, most Canadians spent less than 10% of their disposable income on food—even less if you remove food consumed out of the home at restaurants and cafes. To do our part in rebuilding local food systems, we must privilege food in our budgets.

When we let our values and priorities determine the direction and character of local programs and policies, we strengthen our communities and local food systems and ensure that people do not go to bed hungry.

There is much to be done to rebuild our household and communal food security and move towards food sovereignty—where local eaters have more control over the food supply. We need to recognize the true cost of producing food here in Canada, where we have protections for wages, environmental standards, food safety expectations and rules, not to mention a northern hemisphere climate. These all contribute to higher costs of production. We need to reflect on our core dietary needs and consider adjusting our food wants to better align with what can be grown or raised in our home foodshed. And we need to consider our relationship to the land, to the water and to the Indigenous people who were here long before we were.

As so many have said in response to the global pandemic, it is through our collective efforts and mutual caring that we survive and thrive. This is just as true for the work needed to rebuild our local food supplies and increase the resiliency of our communities.

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