

**RURAL-URBAN LINKAGES FOR LOCAL FOOD IN THE CITY OF
GUELPH/COUNTY OF WELLINGTON LANDSCAPE**

Dr. Karen Landman
klandman@uoguelph.ca

Dr. Ricardo Ramirez
rramirez@uoguelph.ca

Joaquin Navas
jnavas@uoguelph.ca

Patrick Carroll
pcarroll@uoguelph.ca

Dr. Charlotte McCallum*
cmccal01@uoguelph.ca

Erin Nelson
enelson@uoguelph.ca

School of Environmental Design and Rural Development, University of Guelph

***Department of Geography, University of Guelph**

The organic agriculture movement has long been considered the primary way in which the industrial food system could be challenged and sustainable alternatives could be built. However, although organic agriculture remains important, over the past several years there has been a growing focus on how local food networks can also help contribute to ecological, social and economic sustainability. The research presented here is based on a study of opportunities and barriers to a local food system in Guelph and Wellington County. Findings suggest that key factors for strengthening local food systems include the facilitation of face-to-face contact in order to build relationships within and across stakeholder groups; the presence of a convener or coordinator whose legitimacy is recognized by all stakeholders; and the creation of a supportive policy framework using input from local actors. Barriers currently inhibiting the growth of an effective local food system in the area include deficient communication networks; the tendency for consumers to favour cheap and convenient foods; an insufficient and inconsistent supply of local food; logistical problems in the development of efficient distribution systems; and, perhaps most importantly, a lack of local, provincial, and national policies designed to help foster the social and economic viability of a local food business model. Opportunities to overcome these barriers exist within the network of research participant.

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Introduction

The changing nature of the food market is partly represented by a growing demand for locally-grown and fresh-to-table agricultural products (Fuller and McCallum, 2004). A local food system does not aim for the production of everything eaten within a particular food-shed. Rather, the effort is placed on using existing resources within a community to better advantage, and on identifying the gaps and barriers that have limited a well-functioning food system.

Increasing food miles, the decline of the family farm, the economic difficulties in farming generally, and the awareness of and demand for quality food have contributed to a growing grassroots effort at developing local food networks (Landman et al., 2006). The local food movement is concerned with issues of environmental, social and economic sustainability, as well as with ethical concerns surrounding the food we eat. Local food research is place-based by its nature and has contributed to informed actions that provide opportunities for increased health; the conservation and building of regional identity based on production; a sense of place and community pride in place; and increased choices for agricultural production and consumption (Knowd et al., 2006).

The local food movement in the Guelph-Wellington landscape has been, until now, fragmented, citizen-driven and ad hoc. The bulk of the dispersed initiatives are on the demand side, with little coordination with the supply side; ironically, as a result the emerging innovations are not yet locally owned. During this research we identified noteworthy organizational efforts that address some marketing and coordination bottlenecks. This project engaged citizens, producers and institutions in enhancing these opportunities, thereby making a contribution in moving forward to take advantage of these opportunities. This research also engaged University of Guelph graduate students in a team-based, action-oriented research that enhanced their education and that made a positive contribution to the greater community. It is hoped that this research will make a meaningful contribution to policy and programs that support local food initiatives.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we present the research background and objectives. Second, we describe the multi-stakeholder engagement the policy analysis component of the research and. Third, we present our findings and, lastly, we provide conclusions and recommendations.

The goal of this place-based research was to engage citizens, producers and institutions in identifying community-wide constraints and opportunities for local food production and consumption. The research had three components:

1. A series of workshops to bring together citizens, producers, government representatives, planners and institutional consumers in order to identify barriers and opportunities to foster a local food system in the City of Guelph and County of Wellington landscape;
2. A policy analysis to understand the planning and regulatory constraints and opportunities to local food at three levels: local-institutional, municipal and provincial; and
3. A spatial analysis based on the data gathered at the workshops and on the policy analysis.

Methodology

The multi-stakeholder process consisted of two workshops followed by individual, semi-structured interviews with selected participants and a focus group session. The research team began by preparing a preliminary list of what could be considered primary stakeholder groups within a local food network in the City of Guelph and Wellington County. This list included producers, institutional consumers, marketers, community outreach organizations and government agencies. These stakeholder groups were further broken down into subgroups. We did not conduct engage ‘average consumers’: that was perceived to be valuable but beyond the resources and timeline of our project.

Within the context of this research, “primary stakeholder” referred to individuals or organizations that met at least two of the following conditions:

1. The person/organization should be involved in the decisions around local food;
2. The person/organization has influence in the community to positively or negatively affect local food; and
3. The person/organization can directly benefit from a local food network.

Primary stakeholders were identified, selected and invited to the workshops according to the following criteria:

- The person or organization belongs to one of the primary stakeholder groups;
- The person or organization may have an interest or direct impact in the development of a local food network; and
- The person or organization operates in the City of Guelph or Wellington County.

The researchers used participatory analysis techniques in both workshops. The outcomes of the workshops and the individual interviews were:

- A list of stakeholder groups and subgroups that need to be included in a local food network in the City of Guelph-Wellington County;
- A set of criteria for stakeholder inclusion;
- A list of contributions from the different stakeholder groups;
- A list of barriers; and
- A list of prioritized opportunities.

First Workshop

The first workshop took place on October 25, 2007 in Guelph. The goal of the workshop was to identify barriers and ways in which key stakeholders can contribute to developing a local food network in Guelph-Wellington County. Out of fifty-six invitees, thirty-nine people attended the workshop, representing the following stakeholder groups: farmers, institutional consumers, community outreach and local food promoters, and government institutions and research bodies. At the beginning of the workshop, participants were presented with an overview of the project and the invitation criteria, on which they were asked to comment. The remainder of the workshop consisted of group discussions on various topics.

During the initial round of group discussions, participants were asked to sit at a table with people from the same stakeholder group. There were a total of eight tables:

1. Farmers
2. Government
3. Institutional Consumers (University of Guelph - Hospitality Services)
4. Local Food Promoters and Community Outreach Organizations
5. Marketers
6. Restaurants
7. University of Guelph
8. Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Health Unit

First, each stakeholder table was asked to write a statement describing an ideal Guelph-Wellington County local food network in one year's time. The descriptions provided by each stakeholder group were posted on the wall and shared with all participants.

Second, each stakeholder group was asked to reflect on ways in which they could contribute to help build the proposed ideal local food network. Each idea was written on an individual card. At the end of the discussion, the facilitators collected the cards, did a preliminary categorization by common themes, and provided preliminary feedback to the participants. After the workshop, the ideas were analyzed and classified into more refined themes.

Third, participants were asked to think of the essential barriers that need to be overcome in order to achieve the ideal local food network. Each idea was written on an individual card that was colour-coded according to each stakeholder group. At the end of the discussion, the facilitators collected the cards, did a preliminary categorization by common themes, and provided preliminary feedback to the participants. After the workshop, the ideas were analyzed and classified into more refined themes.

For the subsequent group discussions, participants were asked to sit at a table that had as many representatives of different stakeholder groups as possible. There were five tables. Participants were initially asked to suggest people/organizations that should be invited to attend a second workshop, and to provide their names and contact information. Facilitators collected the cards and used them to organize the second workshop.

Finally, users were asked to discuss whether the supermarkets should be invited to the second workshop or not. Each table was to discuss the issue and to cast a Yes/No vote with a justification. The majority of the participants agreed that the smaller supermarkets should be part of the multi-stakeholder process. More detailed results of these discussions are presented.

Second Workshop

The second workshop took place on November 29, 2007. The goal of the workshop was to identify the most important and urgent opportunities for the development of a local food network in the City of Guelph-County of Wellington. Seventy-five people representing primary stakeholder groups were invited to participate. Mainly due to poor weather conditions resulting in unexpected road closures, only 16 people attended the workshop.

Prior to the workshop, all the barrier and contribution cards that had been produced during the first workshop were classified by themes and posted on the wall, as well as the “ideal local food network” vision statements from the stakeholder groups.

For the benefit of those who were new to the process, the facilitators started the workshop by presenting an overview of the project, as well as the invitation criteria. The remainder of the workshop consisted of group discussions. For the first group activity, participants were invited to review the products of the first workshop and to discuss within their stakeholder groups. There was representation from following groups:

1. Farmers
2. Government
3. Institutional Consumers (University of Guelph - Hospitality Services)
4. Local Food Promoters and Community Outreach Organizations
5. Marketers

This exercise provided new participants with an opportunity to become familiar with what had been done in the first workshop. For those who had been part of the first workshop, this exercise allowed for a review of the results. Participants were encouraged to add any barriers and/or contributions that they thought had been missed in the first workshop.

For the second group activity, participants were asked to sit at a table with people from different stakeholder groups and to compare the contributions and barriers displayed on the wall in order to find opportunities that could be matched with the barriers. For example, in the first workshop "Lack of funding" had been identified as a barrier for one group and "Offer funding" had been identified as a contribution from another group, which together pointed to a solution. Each table was asked to suggest the three most important opportunities for a local food network in Guelph/Wellington County. The facilitators reviewed all the opportunities and grouped them by themes.

For the third and final group activity, each participating organization or individual was given three dot stickers and was asked to vote for the opportunity or opportunities that they thought needed the most attention in terms of urgency, feasibility and relevance. They were asked to think of the opportunity/opportunities on which a hypothetical local food network should focus during its first year of operation. Each organization or individual had the choice of putting the three dots against only one theme or to distribute them in any way they wished.

Individual Interviews

After the workshops, ten individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected participants. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions; the goal was to generate reflection about the experience of participating in the workshops. Participants were mainly asked to reflect on how the workshops helped them develop relationships, skills or perspectives that could help them improve future performance. The selection of the interviewees was based on two criteria: 1) the interviewees represented different stakeholder groups and 2) the interviewees had preferably attended both workshops.

Policy Research

The policy research began with a listing of all barriers/challenges and contributions. The barriers/challenges were then synthesized into core barriers and challenges, which were then matched to the existing contributions offered by participants. The analysis then proceeded to compare the barriers, contributions and visions across stakeholder groups as well as across general policy realms, yielding what barriers existed; which were most pressing; which affected each of the stakeholder groups; and which were being addressed by participants and which were not. These findings were then considered in more detail and the findings of the second workshop as well as the findings of the follow-up interviews were used to identify opportunities for addressing the barriers and challenges. Finally, suggestions that reflected the opportunities, priorities and challenges submitted by participants and yet remained within the scope of OMAFRA were developed.

Research Outcomes

Participants suggested three key fronts on which they can work:

- i) Improve the existing networks and communication among producers, retailers, consumers and policymakers;
- ii) Promote new values in the marketplace to generate a shift from the “cheap food” attitude towards one that values quality and sustainability focusing on raising awareness, educating the community, and setting good example as consumers;
- iii) Develop a business model that can make local food viable for everyone by improving the distribution channels and logistics; by implementing better marketing strategies; by diversifying and creating more on-farm value added opportunities; and by carrying out more research.

Other proposed contributions were: enhancing current regulation, ensuring food safety, offering and demanding high-quality products, improving supply, building consumer trust, offering training and skill development programs and support, offering financial support, and promoting local food through tourism.

The five main barriers identified by participants were:

- i) Deficient communication and information-sharing networks;
- ii) Current shopping values of the marketplace in favour of cheap rather than high-quality food;
- iii) Economic viability when competing against large-scale operations due to high start-up costs, high operation costs, low return on investment and scale-insensitive regulations;
- iv) Availability of local food during the off-season and even during the growing season due to insufficient quantity; and
- v) Deficient logistics in terms of distribution and facilities.

Other barriers were the lack of adequate marketing strategies (i.e. lack of certification mechanisms to build consumer trust, lack of adequate labeling and branding); inconsistent product quality; food safety concerns; lack of funding; inadequate or scale-insensitive

policies; poor accessibility to local food; unidentified leadership to lead a local food initiative; and the possibility that local food could be just a fad.

Opportunities for Developing a Local Food Network in the City of Guelph-Wellington County

Based on the suggested contributions and barriers, participants identified and prioritized four main opportunity areas for working towards the development of a local food network in the City of Guelph-Wellington County within the first-year period of a hypothetical local food coordinator's mandate:

- i) Coordinating and linking efforts;
- ii) Distribution and adoption of co-op models;
- iii) Education and awareness;
- iv) Policy and marketing.

How and what did Participants Learn as a Result of Attending the Workshops?

The workshops helped participants learn mainly in two ways: by interacting with other stakeholders in the general discussions of the workshops, and by connecting personally with some of those stakeholders. What did they learn?

By interacting with other stakeholders in the general discussions, participants built a better understanding about the complexity of local food networks. The group discussions raised awareness about the fact that there are many different perspectives and interests around local food, and that bringing these together requires a significant amount of work. The group discussions also allowed participants to identify additional stakeholders that had not been identified by the research team, such as seed companies, individual consumers, local churches, urban producers, large-scale producers and neighbouring regions. Participants also realized that the creation of a local food network is a complex multi-stakeholder process that requires time to develop. Such complexity became evident by the fact that participants felt it was much more difficult to communicate across stakeholder groups than within groups. Participants also witnessed increased understanding amongst stakeholders that resulted from having met face-to-face.

By connecting personally with other stakeholders, participants were able to start new social relationships or to strengthen existing ones. Most interviewees valued the face-to-face contact with other participants because it allowed them to connect in a meaningful way other than telephone or e-mail communication. These connections helped most of the interviewees find new business opportunities, establish new working relationships or partnerships to carry out community events, and become more confident about approaching people outside of their own stakeholder group.

The following were the most relevant learning that helped interviewees acquire a better understanding around local food networks:

- A local food network has many stakeholders beyond just producers and consumers.

- There are many people/organizations working in isolation on local food initiatives in the City of Guelph and Wellington County. These people/organizations could be working together.
- Sharing ideas and perspectives with other people helps identify new business opportunities. However, bringing these ideas and perspectives together to materialize the opportunities requires major linking and coordination efforts.
- Unless there is an evident financial benefit through a business model leading to a personal financial benefit, people will not actively become involved in local food.
- Despite the significant amount of work that is required in order to develop a local food network in the City of Guelph and Wellington County, there is, at the time of this research, no clearly-identified leadership.
- Political boundaries do not necessarily represent local food boundaries. The City of Guelph –Wellington County local food-shed already has strong ties with neighbouring counties, in particular with the Waterloo Region, into the south end of Grey County and Dufferin County.

This collective learning experience has created a certain degree of social cohesion among some individuals representing stakeholder groups from the City of Guelph and County of Wellington, which can be valuable for carrying out collective initiatives in the near future.

Focus Group

This event was held on March 26, 2008. Four important organizations were present: the representatives from the Buy Local-Buy Fresh Map (Guelph), Foodlink Waterloo Region, the Ontario Natural Food Cooperative, and the Elmira Produce Auction. Together, these organizations already respond to several of the opportunities identified in this research project, namely information coordination, education, and market linkages. Also present were some local producers. They all agreed to continue with the momentum created by this project. This led to a “Local Food Forum” on May 5, 2008 where each of these organizations shared their achievements and plans with a wider public. We concluded that, in addition to fulfilling our research objectives, we were able to link with existing innovation and to enhance networking in the Guelph-Wellington and Waterloo area.

Policy Analysis

Some local food initiatives are thriving in the Guelph-Wellington landscape. However, if all local foods are supplied only through direct contact between farmer and consumer, local food production will continue to be a marginal agricultural activity. To move beyond this model, improved infrastructure for distribution must be created. The infrastructural challenges facing our research participants could be addressed through effective organizational rural-urban links. Current programs, such as the Ontario Strategic Infrastructure Financing Authority and the Canada-Ontario Municipal Rural Infrastructure Fund offer assistance to municipalities for roads, bridges, waterworks and the like. Such programs could be expanded to include local food infrastructure. Current scale-insensitive regulation, such as that for meat processing, is seen to be a crippling effect on viable local processing. Creative alternatives to large-scale abattoirs would greatly assist rebuilding the middle processing requirements.

Communication networks are limited, and represent another infrastructure opportunity that could be addressed in a public or public/private partnership approach. Linking producers to consumers, particularly large-scale consumers such as institutions, is being done on an ad hoc basis, resulting in frustration and inefficiency for both producers and consumers. It is recommended that communication not be entirely reliant on the web, as not all producers are currently making use of the web (e.g. Mennonites who supply the Elmira Produce Auction).

Currently, there are some viable business models, whether private enterprises or co-operatives, at work in this landscape; these have developed as a result of individual and collective action at the grassroots level. Documentation of these and other, successful models could assist further expansion of local food production and consumption across the province. The Ontario Rural Plan identifies “strong people, strong economy” as one of three priorities. The identification of effective local food networks could aid communities in building on their own local efforts. Strong local economies are resilient economies, and local food systems can add to that resiliency. The awareness and engagement of local municipal staff as to the economic development potential of local food systems must also be elevated.

Finally, the education and awareness of the average consumer is often a barrier. In spite of the Foodland Ontario advertising, and the source labeling of foods in large supermarkets, our participants stated that the average urbanite is largely unaware of what local food really means, and how local food production is connected to the long-term viability of the near-urban landscape and rural communities. The recent change to Product of Canada labeling legislation is a move in the right direction, but much more needs to be done to help the consumer understand the implications of purchasing choices. Another useful approach could be the development of agricultural/food curricula in primary and secondary education.

Spatial Analysis

Stakeholders made it clear that the local food network operating within the City of Guelph- County of Wellington landscape was not confined to these political boundaries. For example, producers in the north of the County were linked to consumers in Grey and Dufferin Counties. Producers in the west of Wellington County are linked to consumers in the Region of Waterloo. Consumers will also move across these political boundaries in search of the products they need. While it was felt that municipal governments can play a key role in fostering local food systems, it is imperative that there is communication amongst municipal staff across municipal boundaries. As well, there are opportunities to conserve smaller parcels of arable land suited to agricultural production in the urban and near urban landscape. Traditional, industrial agricultural activity requires larger land tracts, but the intensive, small-scale production that much of local food represents can be achieved on smaller parcels and in greater proximity to urban land-uses.

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. Local food networks are complex social organizations. Identifying the primary stakeholders and engaging them in dialogue is important not only to obtain information, but also to generate a collective learning process that can help develop relationships among

participants. The primary stakeholders identified for Wellington County and the City of Guelph were farmers, consumers (institutions and individuals), marketers (including supermarkets), community outreach organizations, the transport industry, and Government institutions (including research bodies).

2. Enhancing a local food network depends on having a convener who is seen to be legitimate in the eyes of most stakeholders. The process by which such a convener emerges may take time.

3. In the particular case of this research, the combination of workshops, individual interviews and focus group helped create enough interest among participants to organize a local food forum in Guelph that may play an important role in the formation of a future local food network. The face-to-face interaction was considered valuable by most of the participants in creating a more personal connection with others. Face-to-face contact has been identified as a key element in the conceptualization of local food in urban and peri-urban areas in other studies (Selfa and Qazi, 2005).

4. The main barriers for the continuing development of a local food network in Wellington County and the City of Guelph are deficient communication networks, the prevalent shopping in favour of cheap food, the lack of viable business models, the availability of local food and the logistics around distribution. These barriers are similar to those identified in other Canadian regions (Wormsbecker, 2007).

5. The main opportunities for the development of a local food system in the City of Guelph-County of Wellington are on education and awareness, distribution and adoption of co-op models; coordinating and linking efforts; and policy and marketing. Some of these opportunities are also similar to those identified in other Canadian regions (Wormsbecker, 2007).

6. All work related to the pursuit of the identified opportunities should be supported by an adequate policy framework that can contribute to a more viable business model, both from the economic and social perspective.

7. In the case of this study, it was found that local food systems do not necessarily coincide with political boundaries. Collaborative work among different regions seems to be important for the development and strengthening of these networks.

8. It is strongly recommended that the development of policies and programs that respond to the needs of local food networks involve the local stakeholders in an interactive policy-making approach, in order to avoid unintended consequences.

9. More research is needed to better understand how local food networks develop and how policy can support the creation of such networks.

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