Canadian Mile Diet

Mika Imai, Trent University

This essay proposes a number of policy suggestions to improve the organization of Canada’s food system. Currently most developed countries, Canada included, are pursuing liberal trade policies to satisfy domestic demand. The international community has responded by critiquing this globalized orientation for its social and environmental ramifications. In this essay a literature review was used to uncover current discussions on this issue and present Canadian policy. Based upon this analysis, this essay then draws the conclusion that Canadian governments need to implement policies which promote local farming, strengthen inter-provincial trade and re-direct farm subsidies towards small scale farmers.

Introduction

It is increasingly recognized that the local production and distribution of food can contribute to a more sustainable agricultural system, both environmentally and socially. Nevertheless, a number of Canadian policies fail to prioritize or support localization and instead promote international trade. This is reflective of a neo-liberal alignment which argues that liberalized trade is the most effective means of market distribution. Canada’s participation in seven international trade agreements is indicative of this position. The impact of such policies is demonstrated in the vegetable market; eight of Canada’s ten major vegetable exports are mirrored in the list of imports (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2009a). However, despite this orientation towards free trade, Canada continues to provide agricultural subsidies categorizing the subsidies as ‘non-trade distorting’ support. Canada defends this contradiction of neo-liberal ideology on the basis that subsidies are critical to the industrialization and consolidation of farm production and thus international competitiveness.
Unlike many global South countries, Canada is in a privileged position because it can be selective in choosing which aspects of a liberal economic system it will adhere to. For instance, the Minister of Agriculture, the Right Honourable Gerry Ritz, appears to consider certain protectionist regulations necessary (Ritz, 2009). Supply management in the dairy industry is one such policy, with the objective of balancing supply and demand to prevent surpluses (Canadian Dairy Commission, 2006). This is achieved by applying quotas on Canadian production and tariffs on imported dairy (CDC, 2006). Likewise, the Canadian Wheat Board (CWB) represents a protectionist policy which sets a domestic and international price for wheat and durum by operating as a single desk seller (CDC, 2006). The intention of the CWB is both to provide farmers a better price and to even-out the disparities between crops and locations (Schmitz & Furtan, 1999). While this can be beneficial to Canadian farmers, the Canadian Wheat Board has been criticized by the United States and the World Trade Organization (WTO) for encouraging surplus production and dumping grain on world markets (Schmitz & Furtan, 1999).

In this way, both international trade agreements and domestic support become instrumental in globalizing Canada’s food system. This essay will attempt to uncover the consequences of organizing production in this manner and will then introduce policy suggestions for a more comprehensive Canadian system which acknowledges the intersectional nature of global commodity chains.

Impact

Subsidizing large-holder farms can sustain inefficient production and create food surpluses and thus has a direct impact in Canada and abroad (Akram-Lodhi, 2008b). When food is dumped on international markets it undermines local production through the introduction of generic substitutes at lower prices (Akram-Lodhi, 2008b). The prevalence of American corn in Mexican markets reflects this reality. With the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), highly-subsidized American corn
has flooded Mexican markets and jeopardized the economic viability of local producers (Patel, 2007). As a result, there has been a shift in demand away from traditional corn tortillas and towards the cheaper, imported substitutes (Patel, 2007). Canada is involved in similar practices abroad, particularly with regards to wheat (Akram-Lodhi, 2008b).

There are also a number of environmental ramifications of the current system. Indeed, there is a correlation between international markets, industrial farming, and environmental degradation. Industrial agricultural production has a tendency towards monocropping and the heavy usage of pesticides and herbicides to maintain high levels of productivity (Weis, 2007; Shiva, 2001; Patel, 2007). Such capital-intensive farming has significant consequences on biodiversity and is highly dependent upon hydrocarbons (Weis, 2007; Shiva, 2001; Patel 2007). In addition, with global distribution, food is now travelling unprecedented distances. In fact, it is estimated that for every one calorie of food, four calories of hydrocarbon energy and 2,400 km of travel are required (Sierra Club & David Suzuki Foundation). This is reflected within Canada’s transportation sector which produces one quarter of total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, a contributor to global warming and respiratory illnesses (Sierra Club). Perhaps what is most disturbing is that both of these consequences disproportionally affect poor and minority groups in both the global North and South (Diez, 2008).

Locality also has a distinct impact on the socio-economic sustainability of Canadian farming communities. As a result, even though distribution to the United States may sometimes involve fewer food miles, it supports the corporate consolidation of agriculture. This is an issue not only because Transnational Corporations (TNCs) are more difficult to regulate, but also because they are less likely to re-invest profits within the same Canadian branch (Akram-Lodhi, 2008b; Patel, 2007). For TNCs, a community is more typically seen as a source of labour and a site for production. On the other hand, small scale farming tends to effectively support the community by dispersing profits locally and evenly (Akram-Lodhi, 2008b). Interestingly, one study has also found that customers engage in ten times as many conversations in farmers’
markets than in supermarkets (Sierra Club).

**Calls for Change**

Various individuals and organizations in both Canada and the global South are responding to the changing food system, as consumers find themselves victim to fictitious standardization in the supermarket and farmers are transformed from producers into waged labourers. Arguably, the loudest voice has come from La Via Campesina, a Brazilian peasant movement which now has millions of members from fifty-six different countries. La Via Campesina advocates for food sovereignty as a more comprehensive counterpart to food security. The food sovereignty platform encompasses more than simply access to food, but also the processes involved in production (Akram-Lodhi, 2008a). La Via Campesina identifies a number of criteria for achieving sustainable production, such as a focus on subsistence, and not on export-dependent agriculture. Furthermore, La Via Campesina argues that countries should adopt a national food policy which protects farmers from international dumping and low-price imports.

The local movement in Canada operates on a smaller scale and has a more narrow scope. Although localization is gaining popularity, it has been depoliticized by a tendency towards market-oriented solutions rather than policy lobbying. Indeed, with the proliferation of ‘green’ product lines such as Loblaws’ ‘Organics’, it appears consumers are increasingly becoming responsible for ensuring environmentally friendly manufacturing. Nevertheless, two Canadian organizations in particular, Inter Pares and the Sierra Club, are pursuing an advocacy role in encouraging the government to adopt policies which integrate locally-sourced production. Inter Pares actively promotes a conception of food policy similar to La Via Campesina (Inter Pares, 2008). In addition, on the political scene, Liberal Member of Parliament, the Right Honourable Dr. Caroline Bennett has been promoting ‘a more comprehensive food policy’ and suggests that this is instrumental to improving Canada’s health sector (Bennett, 2008).

Food issues are quickly coming to the forefront of academic discussion
as well. Vandana Shiva, an Ecofeminist from India, has taken a strong stance on this issue. Shiva argues persuasively that the negative connotations associated with subsistence are merely a Western creation and the entire food system should be structurally re-ordered in this direction (Shiva, 2001). In line with this argument, Shiva notes that agri-businesses undermine local production and destroy sustainable livelihoods (Shiva, 2001). The views of Shiva are in sharp contrast to the position of the WTO which proposes that food shortages can be alleviated through an exchange of food based on comparative advantage (Akram-Lodhi, 2008c; World Trade Organization ab). The tenets of the WTO hold that by increasing the capital-intensity of farming and then trading the excess on world markets, we can ensure food security for a growing population (Akram-Lodhi, 2008c; WTOab).

**Proposed Solutions**

Food has rightly been called the ‘intimate commodity’ because each person shares a unique relationship to food, relying on it as the very source of life. In this way, it is understandable that the organization of food systems has instigated such a heated passionate response from international communities. Although concerns are quickly identified, the recommendation of viable solutions is a more difficult task. In Canada, governments have taken the back seat by allowing the market to devise solutions to environmental degradation. However, consumer demand alone cannot confront the challenge of global warming. Across all jurisdictions, the Canadian government must take a firm position in implementing legislation that will force the market in a more sustainable direction.

**Municipal Level**

At the municipal level, there needs to be more active support for local farmers. This can be achieved through the promotion of farmers’ markets and the showcasing of local products through food events. Each municipal district should create a policy to initiate such a program and support it with consistent funding. This will be pivotal to the creation of a stronger connection between consumer and producer, and generate a greater awareness of
commodity chains. Unlike many European countries where food is central to social relations, arguably, food is not valued in Canadian culture to the same degree. By developing a more intimate connection to food production, people will likely become more concerned with ensuring that production and distribution systems are healthy and sustainable. In major cities, this approach holds significant promise because the market will support a larger number of farmers willing to sell products in alternative urban centres to consumers who are willing to step outside the sterile environment of a supermarket. If the government boosts demand for local products, it will also place pressure on supermarkets to create a more easily identified local product section. In addition, it will likely spawn other environmental initiatives, such as urban gardening. Starting from the grassroots is pivotal to ensuring that local movements across the country can be sustained in the long-term.

**Provincial Level**

Changing policy at the provincial level may be more difficult. Governments need to actively pursue cooperative trade networks to reduce interprovincial barriers. In 1983, the Western Grain Transportation Act (WGTA) was introduced as an attempt to reduce the financial obstacles to trade by subsidizing railway companies to transport grain from Western Canada (Schmitz & Furtan, 1999). This was considered necessary because railway companies were prioritizing more profitable non-grain products (Schmitz & Furtan, 1999). The Act was dissolved in 1995, but the barriers to interprovincial trade persist with transportation continuing to be a significant drain on farmers. In recognizing this, the Agreement on Internal Trade (AIT) was signed in 1994 as an action-oriented policy document between provinces (Industry Canada, 2009). The basic tenets of the AIT are: reciprocal non-discrimination; right of entry and exit; no obstacles; legitimate objectives; reconciliation and transparency (Industry Canada, 2009). Theoretically, these policies should discourage and prevent unnecessary barriers to trade across provincial borders. However, the implementation of the AIT remains slow due to weak enforcement (Canadian Chamber of Commerce, 2004). As a result, licensing requirements, multiple regulations, and migration barriers, amongst other factors, continue to place
financial barriers on small businesses (CCC, 2004). These barriers restrict inter-
Canadian trade and are adverse to localization. Renewed attention must be
given to the AIT as well as to further research into the promotion of regional
specialization, such as the ‘Buy Ontario’ advertisements.

**National Level**

National policy changes will be necessary to ensure a long-term and
country-wide dedication to localization. An initial assessment would suggest
that this will be a difficult task because, as a member of the WTO, Canada
is legally required to liberalize trade. However, there are in fact a number
of routes that Canada can pursue. For one, Canada can continue to support
supply management at the WTO as a means to protect domestic industries.
But more comprehensively, Canada needs to create a national strategy for
reforming the distribution of subsidies towards small-hold farmers. This is
because Canada is actually able to enact changes that are fairly structural in
nature for the government currently allocates less than the maximum level of
permissible subsidies according to the WTO Aggregate Measure of Support of
the Agreement on Agriculture1. In fact, in 2000 Canada distributed only $848
million of the allowed $4.3 billion (Holden, 2005). As a result, the government
could increase certain subsidies that are particularly beneficial to smaller
farms, such as the provision of infrastructural and development support.

Nevertheless, reforms alone will not provide a sufficient re-organization
towards local production. Ironically, Canada should actually look south,
to the historically conservative United States of America, to find tips on
agrarian modifications. Newly elected president Barack Obama is proposing
some surprisingly progressive reforms to the 2008 US Farm Bill, such as a
prohibition on subsidies to farmers with gross sales greater than $500,000
(Obama & Biden, 2008). Reid Cherlin, a spokesperson for the White House
explains the proposition: “Family farmers are critical both to America’s rural
communities as well as America’s economy, and that’s why the president’s
budget promotes efforts that strengthen small- and medium-sized farms — not

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1. The Agreement on Agriculture was incorporated into WTO policy during the
Uruguay round in 1995. The Aggregate Measures of Support dictate the level of domestic
support for agriculture permissible for all WTO members (WTOc)
large agribusinesses” (Obama & Biden, 2008). The Rural Leadership Report put forth by Barack Obama and Joe Biden during the election campaign also includes initiatives such as the ‘Small Business and Microenterprise Initiative’ that will provide support (e.g. training and technical assistance) to small and medium farmers and a tax credit on the investment of small owner-operated businesses (Obama & Biden, 2008). These initiatives suggest that Obama is attempting to reduce the concentration of agri-businesses through a modified Farm Bill.

In contrast, Canada’s 2003 Agricultural Policy Framework (APF) is lacking the visionary direction of Obama’s reforms. There is little to no discussion of the possible shifting to subsidies to smaller farmers (AAFC, 2009b). In addition, any consideration of the environment is primarily in the context of on-farm practices, rather than facilitating the structural changes needed for localization (AAFC, 2009c). The APF continues to stress ‘export capacity building’ and ‘the exploration of new economic opportunities that encourage additional environmental action’ (AAFC, 2009b). While the policy name was changed to ‘Growing Forward’ in 2009, the mandate has not altered. Clearly, market-led solutions are on the agenda rather than sweeping transformations to agricultural assistance. Canadian policy needs to assume a position similar to that of the United States, with a cap on subsidies to extremely profitable farms, as well as a shifting of subsidies that support specific government objectives, such as localization and environmental sustainability.

In addition, reforms to Canada’s food system will have to involve a consideration of its impact on the global South. Currently, Canadian production affects international trade both as a consumer and a subsidized exporter. Canadian policy has significant implications abroad. A reduction in Canadian importation could have a devastating impact on the livelihood of millions of people in the global South, particularly because their economies have been structurally re-organized towards exportation (Millet & Toussaint, 2004). In recognizing this, Canada must re-direct importation towards products that cannot be produced domestically and ensure that future aid is not used to create export markets. Canada could continue to employ the WTO theory
of comparative advantage, but adopt a more comprehensive conception of production externalities when determining what should be produced domestically and what must be imported. In line with these modifications, Canada must also act more equitably in WTO discussions and acknowledge the legitimacy of voices in the global South as they call for a slower integration into the market. Because Canadian localization will be a relatively gradual process, if it is also coupled with international aid, the short-term ramifications should be small and the long-term impact beneficial for both Canada and its trading partners.

**Implementation**

The policy changes recommended in this essay are structural and multi-pronged. As a result, implementation will be a difficult task and will require significant leadership from all the political parties in the Canadian Parliament. Unfortunately, the current political system favours short-term and tangible projects. However, perhaps unlike any other industry, promoting local food has the potential to draw widespread support from across Canada. People increasingly want fresh, natural food that supports vibrant communities and dedicated farmers. In fact, due to falsified media portrayals, this is often what people think they are purchasing in supermarkets. As a result, with the exposure of this illusion, there is the possibility for considerable mobilization at the community level.

In any event, it is time for the government to re-claim a regulatory position in society. State initiatives are necessary because price remains a significant barrier to the consumer demand of sustainable products. Governments need to assume a firmer role in promoting sustainable production and therefore remove the onus on consumers to be solely responsible for creating socially responsible systems. Government policy needs to create minimum standards so that shopping is not the choice between an expensive ethical product and a cheap exploitative one. All products should reach a certain standard of social responsibility and be available at various price ranges.

In implementing these policies, the government must be held accountable
by its constituents and non-governmental organizations to ensure that the money of lobbyists does not impede or dilute policy. For, although Canadians are the primary benefactors of this policy, not all stakeholders will be equally affected. Agri-businesses will likely suffer in the short-term from the reduction in subsidies. Thus, in the United States, agri-business has become the primary voice of dissent to Obama’s proposed policy changes. Agri-business is lobbying the U.S. Senate, arguing that it is an integral source of economic revenue for the country and that a decrease in subsidies could significantly hinder its viability (Morton, 2009). A similar reaction is likely to come from business interests in the Canadian agricultural sector. And while in academia, it can be easy to envision corporate agricultural as predatory, one must also recognize that agribusiness employs a vast number of Canadians. Thus, just as people have desperately clung to the auto industry, any collapse in agri-business due to the withdrawal of subsidies, could be an extremely contentious issue.

In order to build public support for change, it will be important to reveal the flaw in this line of reasoning. For, it is debateable whether or not agri-business contributes to higher levels of employment. In comparing capital-intensive farming to family farms, one could argue that the former simply requires more government money, and fewer labourers. In addition, it is improbable that these corporations will actually go bankrupt if subsidies are reduced. It is true that adjustments will be required that may decrease their productivity, but if they alter their distribution systems appropriately, this may not result in a negative outcome. For instance, large farms could re-direct supply to Canadian markets which would also have become cheaper due to the removal of interprovincial trade barriers. Canadians should also recognize that there is the added benefit that a reduction in subsidies can limit over-production and food dumping on international markets. This is an extremely positive change for global South countries, and Canadians might support such policy changes as a form of foreign aid to be considered as a component in an increased level of foreign aid to 0.7% of the GDP.
Conclusion

Overall, localizing Canada’s food system will be a time-consuming and complex task that will certainly adapt and evolve as it is slowly implemented. The Canadian government will need to play an integral role in spearheading a response to these global challenges. However, the average Canadian could also benefit from a more thorough understanding of food policy and the manner in which it intimately impacts all of society. Clearly, free market policies have been unsuccessful in solving the issues of climate change and global inequality. This essay has sought to argue that localization can make an important contribution in addressing these concerns.

Works Cited


Akram-Lodhi, H. (2008c). Trade treaties, the WTO and global food politics. IDST 221. Trent University, November 12.


