

From public participation to social movements: engaging citizens in policy development in Canada

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Amanda Sheedy loves good food, good conversation and any process that deepens our democratic culture. Currently, she coordinates the People's Food Policy Project of Food Secure Canada, which aims to unite the voices of Canadians to develop the People's Food Policy, a national policy platform based in the principles of food sovereignty that will provide the framework for a just and sustainable food system in Canada. She brings to this work a decade of experience in participatory democracy, community development and food activism as well as degrees in Environmental Health Science, Community Economic Development and Health Promotion (pending). She wrote a *Handbook on Citizen Engagement: Beyond Consultation*, published by the Canadian Policy Research Networks in 2008.

Thank you very much for that introduction. So it's nice to start off, speaking to a big room of people like this with a giggle. I'd like to acknowledge the Indigenous people whose land we are meeting on, and especially to thank Gordon and Leanne, because they allowed me to escape from this. This is my front yard, the day before I left, after we got another foot of snow, that we had to dig ourselves out from under. Just a quick little story. I was once travelling in India and I met up with some Aussies of course, and a couple of Kiwis, and we're having dinner and we're chatting away and there's a couple of other Canadians there, and the Kiwi turned to us at one point, she said, "Do you realise you've been talking about the weather for half an hour?" We love to talk about the weather. So if you want to make small talk with a Canadian, you know what to do.

So I'm the National Coordinator of the People's Food Policy Project, and I consider myself to be quite lucky to be in this role. I get to coordinate a Pan-Canadian network of very engaged citizens and organisations, and we're working to create a food sovereignty policy for Canada. We've got about a hundred participants, very high quality volunteers, such as yourselves, that are organised into about 15 teams, including an Indigenous circle; a group of animators, who are in the face of the project. We've got ten policy rating teams, a communications team, and of course, my management team that is my main support. I'm the only staff person, so for those of you who think that this is not do-able in a small teeny, tiny budget of \$70,000 a year, it is.

We have engaged just about 3,500 citizens in a national conversation about the future of food and food policy, over the last couple of years. I think the most interesting thing about what we've done is that we've actually managed to weave together, we hope, the very nascent food movement that has existed really at a grassroots level in Canada until now, and given us all a national voice, which is very important right now.

So before I get into what we have done, I just want to quickly give you a little framework for how we think about the work that we're doing. That includes a really interesting international movement that's based on food sovereignty, health promotion of course, and citizen engagement, as is the topic of today's panel. So this is a very familiar definition for most of you, but I just want to draw your attention to the highlighted parts here, about enabling people to increase control over their health.

When I started studying health promotion—this is what really attracted me to the field—but I have to say that it's very under-developed in the world of health promotion, from what I've seen. That notion of control often—as I think a lot of you will attest to—is thought of, in terms of the individual's control, and I think what we're talking about here today is: what is our collective control over our determinants of health in our communities?

I'm sure a lot of you have heard of food security. This is the predominant discourse that's used when we talk about food. But just to give it a little bit of a contrast, the origins are quite different. Food security was defined by the FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization] and by nation states, whereas food sovereignty was a term that was developed by—and has its origins in a landless peasant movement in Brazil called, "La Via Campesina." They identify as the root of the problem—and I think this, again gets out this question of

control—the lack of power or control of marginalised people, and food producers, in particular, to define their food system. You will see that this is quite different to the root that is identified by food security, which really sees the root of the problem as being inadequate access to food, and then we get all kinds of—which is not to say that that is not the case—that is absolutely a huge problem—but in my opinion, it's not the root of the problem; [it is] one of the symptoms.

So just a little bit more there. Food sovereignty, as an idea, was really developed at an amazing—I wish I'd been there, but I was home having babies—at an international movement gathering in West Africa, in Mali, where they gathered together food leaders from around the world to talk about this notion of food sovereignty, and they came up with six pillars. You will notice the bottom one, we added, through the course of our project in Canada, to really reflect our Indigenous people's view and world view, which is that food is sacred and let us not forget that. So food for people, as far as I'm concerned, encapsulates what we talk about, when we say food security. So it's about access, but also about making sure that we don't use agricultural land to build buildings or grow fuel, which is an increasing problem in the world food supply.

“Values food producers.” I think you're all experiencing a crisis in this right now, here in Australia, from what I understand, where the milk producers are really getting squeezed out by the food retailers. From what I can see, this is because of a complete lack of involvement of your government to protect their interests from industry, and without farmers we will have no food. Let's not forget that—right; we need to value them.

“Localises the food system,” and I think I need to explain that one. “Let's control locally.” This is obviously, the heart of the notion for me, and I think it's quite context-specific. In the global south, for example, in Mali, for peasants there, it means getting the IMF and the World Bank out of their governing structures and allowing their nation state to really define their food system.

In Canada this has a bit of a different flavour. This, to me, has a lot more to do with community control and bringing the decision-making power down to a much more grassroots level.

“Works with nature.” I love this way of framing the environmental question, because it puts us in a collaborative position with nature, rather than as one of acting upon nature.

“Builds knowledge and skills.” I think you're probably all very aware of the fact that a lot of our youth are growing up, not knowing how to cook; let alone how to grow a garden; let alone how to put food away for the dry season, in your case; for the winter, in my case, and that this is a really important part of a food system.

So I don't need to get into citizen engagement definition, because Desley has just done a wonderful job of explaining that to you. The thing that I like to point out to people, that is just this idea of a two-way communication we have, and I think Desley's presentation did a good job of distinguishing between those two things. So let's just back up a little bit—I just want to give you a few pieces of the Canadian context. As Desley mentioned to you, we have an amazing array of citizen engagement initiatives going on in Canada that I'm quite proud of, and I think maybe the root of this is that we had a commission back in 2001/2002 that you may have heard of, called the Romano Commission. This was the most extensive consultation process with Canadians, and when I say “consultation,” it's really a citizen engagement initiative. I'm proud to say that one of my mentors was the lead on carrying out these consultations, and the report, as you can see, “Building on values. The future of health care in Canada,” it clearly—just in the title even—clearly balances this evidence-based with value driven information, and that's really at the core of this report, and I think probably cleared the way for a lot of people and organisations to really dive into this notion of citizen engagement. It gave value to citizen engagement, and as you can see here, this is just the tip of the iceberg, in terms of the process that the Romano Commission utilised.

So other quick examples. Again, as Desley mentioned, there are numerous cases. I was interested to see that a lot of them I didn't even know of, but I've chosen some of the more federal level examples in Canada. The Canadian Institute for Health Research, who would have thought—right, has just developed a framework to engage citizens in setting health research priorities. Fantastic. They're just getting going. In Canada, too—and I'm glad to hear that the (inaudible 0:09:11) presidency has moved to Canada, because we really need some help because there has been legislation that has made it mandatory for the government to consult with indigenous peoples for any policy or program that's affecting their people. Now, this has caused a huge

scramble and there's a real lack of skills to really respond to this legislation right now, and a couple of really other interesting examples that you can look into, if you're interested.

Let me just give you a quick snapshot of the food system in Canada. It's very similar to yours here, as the MC pointed out already. So Canada's bread basket has expanded, at least in the world context lately. We're the second largest exporter of wheat and we supply about 80 per cent of the world's canola—GM canola, by the way—and we've managed to quadruple our exports in the last 20 years. We also have an ageing farm population, with the average age being about 52 years old, and surprisingly, our farmers are going broke; if it wasn't for the subsidies, they'd all be in a hole, on average, about \$20,000 a year, and a lot of them survive, thanks to (inaudible 0:10:23) works. So you can just imagine the strain and stress that they're under. And we're also losing family farmers. You can see, just in Quebec, which is one of our provinces we've lost 60,000 farms—it's almost hard to wrap your mind around—in the last 40 years.

In the context of this expanding global presence in the food market, we have a really serious hunger problem in Canada, or food insecurity, if you want to call it that. Food insecurity affects one in eight Canadians, and of course it's worse in our indigenous communities, up in the north, where it affects one in three people. In March 2008 alone, we had close to 900,000 visit a food bank. This, to me, is just appalling and embarrassing, especially in the context of exporting so much food onto the global market, and this, to me, is really the crux of the sovereignty question, where I think it just makes sense to look after your own, before you export. I don't think there's anything—and this gets into the question of values, I think, where we really do need to have people weighing in on this ridiculous situation.

And of course, as many of you will be very aware as health practitioners, obesity is now responsible for lowering the new generation's life expectancy below that of its parents; the first time in history that this has happened. There's an epidemic. There's a crisis, and we need a really concerted approach to deal with this, if we're going to have any impact on it. And of course, in Canada, you may know, we have—had, I should say—one of the world's richest fisheries, until we managed to completely deplete it in the nineties. I've heard stories of people, my age, who remember being able to go down to the ocean with a bucket and just stick a bucket into the ocean and pull out some cod. That's how plentiful the ocean was. And because of our greed and our lack of management of this fishery, we managed to completely deplete it, and it's not looking like it's going to come back; it has completely changed the eco system.

So, we need a food policy, and I think you do, too. Right now, food is governed by about five federal departments, three federal agencies, not to mention the plethora of other departments and agencies at the provincial or state level, as well as the municipal level. Food is a very complex issue and we are not going to solve these problems without a really concerted, coordinated effort to resolve those problems.

So, really quickly, I just wanted to give you a sense of our food movement in Canada, because from what I have learned since I've been here for a very short time, we're a bit ahead of the game on the food movement. We've got an amazingly rich local food movement that I understand you call the "slow food movement" here. We have got extensive ecological agriculture and especially community supported agriculture. This is Fred (inaudible 0:13:51), who is my CSA farmer back home. I pay him \$500 at the beginning of the growing season, and every week I get a basket of fresh foods and vegetables back from him. That means that, when he needs the money at the beginning of the season, he has the money, so that he can do everything that he needs to do. Fred is one of those family farmers who is, unfortunately, on the verge of bankruptcy, because the government doesn't recognise him as a farmer, because he has a small plot of land and doesn't export.

Urban agriculture and community gardens are also just exploding in Canada right now, as I hear they are here, as well. This is a community garden just around the corner from me. In Montreal, where I'm from, the city actually manages this. So as a resident of the city, you can rent a small plot of land for \$10 at growing season, and provide yourself with all kinds of fruits and vegetables. We have an emerging movement around these community food centres. These are former food banks that have now made themselves into a much more dynamic space, where people coming in who are hungry, get the food that they need, but they also get plugged into the community garden program, the anti-poverty advocacy group and so on; a really amazing model to have a look at, if you're interested.

And we also have farmer mentorship programs popping up all over the place, because it's becoming increasingly hard for young farmers who want to get on the land, to get on the land. It's expensive. The

equipment is outrageous. We have a quota system in Canada that makes it very prohibitive to young farmers, so there are all kinds of people working to overcome those barriers. Toronto Food Policy Council; I don't think you have food policy councils here yet. These are really amazing institutions that are rooted in municipal public health departments, and they bring together the local food businesses, the community organisations, along with government, to have conversations about food policy and programs; what a concept—right, and they're also open to citizens, like myself. If I want to go down to the meeting, I am most welcome and I can participate as a citizen. And of course, Food Security Canada, which is the organisation that birthed the project that I'm currently working on, is a national network, a very loose national network ; it's still in its infancy; is trying to bring together these various pieces into a coherent voice, as I mentioned earlier, at the national level.

So what have we managed to do with the People's Food Policy Project? In Phase 1, when I was hired, there was already about 25 animators in place. These are people who are really working at the community level, including farmers, community health workers and so on, who were really distributed around Canada and were leaders in their own communities. In the first phase, they hosted 101 kitchen table talks, with about 900 people, and these are really the tip of the iceberg, as in Desley's presentation. These are people who are already really involved in the food movement, and we asked them, "What are the barriers that you're facing in your work? So you're running a community garden. What is preventing you, ie. what government regulation is preventing you from doing your job and from attaining your vision of the food system that you want?" From that process we received 264 policy submissions, and then we built up around that, ten policy rating teams, and this brought on board a lot of academics and intellectuals who really translated these popular ideas into policy documents, which is not an easy feat, as you can imagine.

Here is a list of our policy papers, which are available on our website. They're in—that's a draft form that was up there, and I will explain that a little bit further on, and we're just in the process of revising these. So as you can see, just from the titles, we have addressed the food system—right; it's huge, and I think it has told all of us just how vast our mission is.

In the second phase of our project we said, "You know, 900 people is good, but you know what, everybody is affected by the food system. We're all stakeholders in the food system." This was our banner that we used on our website, just to bring that message home. Of course you eat—right, so you should have a say in the food system.

So we broadened our invitation to host these kitchen table talks to a broad—it was just a broad call. If you want to host a kitchen table talk, then please do. I got an incredible response from the health sector. This really, I think, again reflects the desire on the part of health workers to engage people in these conversations. The website was really a key tool. As I mentioned, I'm the only staff person and I'm constantly thinking of how can we reach as many people as possible with as little resources as we have, and part of that was developing the website as a key communications tool, and we developed all kinds of brochures and pamphlets and guidebooks and workshop outlines and so on, and all of our reporting was done online. One of the challenges is, we're trying to collect information from this kind of broad engagement process.

We also offered teleconference training. These were free 1800 lines that people could call in and get some advice on how to hold their kitchen table talk. And then, as part of that decision-making process, we at Food Security Canada's Assembly in November, just this past November, asked our workshop participants to help us prioritise. Sorry—I forgot to mention that at those kitchen table talks, so this fall, we actually made the first public draft of our papers available to people. So again, coming back to what Desley said, we brought what people had contributed to. We then showed them and said, "Did we get it right? Does this reflect what you are telling us you wanted in your food system?" and so that's what they commented on. And then—so at this conference then, we said, "Okay, what are our priorities? What are our opportunities? How are we going to move this forward without taking on the massive food system in its entirety?"

So we're just into Phase 3. As I mentioned, our policy discussion papers are currently being revised and reviewed, as I speak. I think there's a meeting going on today that I'm going to be missing out on, or in the middle of the night or something. We're going to be launching the People's Food Policy. Those priorities are being summarised into an over-arching document that we're going to call the People's Food Policy. It's going to draw on those ten other discussion papers. It's going to highlight those priorities that came out of that conference I mentioned.

We're really focusing now on building relationships with the government—that's 5—okay—with the government, both at the federal level and also at the provincial level. And not surprisingly, I think, all of a sudden there is this buzz going on in all kinds of organisations in Canada, including the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, a number of our political parties, and they are also developing their vision of a food policy or strategy for Canada, and so we need to be at the table with them and that's what we're focusing on right now. And we have gotten such positive response back from people, about these kitchen table talks; they want more. So we're trying to figure out how we can do that in a way that isn't just conversation for the sake of conversation, but it is actually going to continue to feed into our process and into our vision.

So what have we accomplished? I think we have really democratised or have started to democratise the food movement, where we've managed to shift a lot of the actions that you hear about, as "buy local"—right. But we're not just consumers—right, we're citizens and citizens deserve to have a say in the political structures that they live under, and let's not forget that the government is supposed to be representatives of us—right. So I think we've really enthused people with hope. I can't tell you how many times, especially real people. Because our process was so open to anybody participating, they really, deeply appreciated that they were being heard, because I think often times, real people don't feel like they're being heard. I think [that] has permeated through the movement with this notion of sense of hope, and our question is, "How to maintain that?"

We have created a collaborative space for rural and urban people. I think often times, the way food issues get framed is that they pit the consumer—okay, the citizen, the eater, I like to call them—against the farmer, and it doesn't need to be that way—right; we need to see ourselves as partners and not fighting over the dollar value of food. We have woven the local food movement together, as I said, into a Pan-Canadian fabric that's hopefully going to have a strong federal voice, and that part of our questioning right now is, "How do we maintain a united federal voice, while at the same time continue to engage this grassroots?" And I think the proof will be in the pudding in what happens in the next couple of years, as Canada moves towards a federal food policy. I think we've claimed a legitimate space because of our process, in the development of a national food policy. So the idea is that Canada—that we keep saying, "Canada needs a food policy, but citizens need to be a part of it"—right, and as I said, we're just starting. So keep your eyes posted and hopefully we will have lots more to tell the next time we see each other.

So just in conclusion again, just to sort of echo some of what Desley has already said, is citizens bring values to decisions about policy and program development, and I think it's especially important in a room full of medical practitioners. We hear a lot about evidence-based decision making. Humans don't make decisions only based on evidence, and when we say that, when we claim that we do make evidence-based decisions, without thinking about values, we hide the values, and this is where, I think, there's real value in using citizen engagement, because it brings to light the values that are in our current regulatory system, as well as in the vision that we have of a better future.

Food sovereignty, I believe, is more closely aligned with the health promotion notion, than is, potentially, food security—and I don't want to undermine anybody who is working on it—I think really, it's a piece of a larger puzzle that is food sovereignty. But I think if you really want to get at the question of community control, you will find that food sovereignty is a much more interesting framework to work with. And really, like Desley, I would just encourage you to check out citizen engagement methodologies. I came to know citizen engagement after years of working with the notion of participatory democracy and participatory decision making, and when I found citizen engagement I just felt like I'd found my community, and not only that, but there were these well developed tools and resources to help me do what I do even better.

So with that, I'd just like to again thank the NRHC for having me. I hope that I have managed to inspire some of you to support the emerging food movement that's here in Australia, and that desperately needs your support, because you are going to get a food policy and by the looks of it, citizens are not in a place yet nor the health sector are really at the table yet with industry, to help shape that. So I really encourage you as health promoters to get on board this question of food; it's at a really crucial moment. And of course, I'd like to again thank Gordon and Leanne for investing so much time and resources in getting me over here. I really appreciate it.