Assessing the Impact of the Eastern Ontario Local Food Conference (EOLFC)

Based on a literature review, scan of key documents, and interviews with organizers and experts, this report provides recommendations on how to track medium-term impacts of the Eastern Ontario Local Food Conference (EOLFC) on participants, their businesses, and their organizations.

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Canada



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Introduction

The Eastern Ontario Local Food Conference (EOLFC) "aims to build relationships and support local food in Eastern Ontario" (EOLFC 2016, p.1). In the summer of 2016, EOLFC organizers undertook a survey of attendees from the first five conferences (2011-2015) to evaluate the conference's impact.

While the survey was being carried out, Katie Nolan from OMAFRA and Peter Andrée from Carleton University began a conversation about how to effectively evaluate a range of impacts of a conference like the EOLFC. Prof. Andrée proposed to lead a short study on how to improve the EOLFC's impact evaluation. This report is the result of that study.

Methodology

This report is based on a literature review, a scan of key conference documents, and targeted interviews with ten individuals (see appendix A) who have been involved in EOLFC organization or who are experts in the field of local food and agriculture. Interviews were undertaken in the winter of 2017 by Omar Elsharkawy using the instrument found in appendix B. The interview instrument was informed by the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (discussed below). All interviews were transcribed and coded, first by Mr. Elsharkawy, and then again later by Prof. Andrée. Themes were identified from the interviews (entitled 'General Findings', below). Rather than start from scratch to define a new post-conference survey instrument, these findings were used to develop recommendations for adjustments to the 2106 EOLFC Impact Analysis Survey. The main focus of this report is on post-conference evaluation (from 6 months to a year after an EOLFC event) though we also present some suggestions for short-term evaluation used by EOLFC organizers in Appendix C, since suggestions on these topics arose in interviews.

Many of the interviewees for this research are affiliated with the FLEdGE (Food; Locally Embedded and Globally Engaged) research project based out of the Centre for Sustainable Food Systems at Wilfred Laurier University. FLEdGE (funded through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada) paid for the costs of this study alongside the I-cureus research fund at Carleton University and OMAFRA.

This study is preliminary. The recommendations included in this report are simply meant to move the conversation forward among EOLFC organizers about conference evaluation. More indepth research meant to inform conference evaluation would have to involve interviews with conference attendees to understand the goals they have for the EOLFC, and how EOLFC participation has informed their work on local food in Eastern Ontario.

Before moving on to our findings and recommendations, this report begins with a brief analysis of what the research team learned from the 2016 impact analysis survey.

Review of 2016 EOLFC Impact Analysis Survey and Responses

In the summer of 2016, the EOLFC Impact Analysis Survey was sent electronically to past participants of all five conferences (approx. 150). A total of 47 respondents answered the survey. Almost all (46) had attended the 2015 EOLFC in Belleville. There were fewer than 17 responses from individuals who had attended all previous conferences (2011-2014) combined. As a result, the bulk of the data collected (e.g. on job creation or new investments) reflect choices made by participants in the eight months since the most recent conference.

83% of respondents to Question 2 (Q2) believed that they, their businesses, or their organizations, benefited from attending (83%). When asked how they benefited (Q3), this group focused on: increased awareness of local food initiatives in Eastern Ontario (83%), provided new contacts (76%), provided useful information (61%) and facilitated local economic development efforts (39%).

In response to Q4, 21% explicitly stated that they have expanded or started new investment initiatives as a result of attending the conference. Of these, only 3 participants (6%) provided a dollar value for those investments. 6 others (13%) provided some general insights into the types of investments they made in research, delivering workshops, etc.

In Q5, respondents were asked if they retained or created new jobs as a result of applying information acquired from attending the conference. 34% said they had created or retained some form of employment, though such numbers should be read with caution. It would be difficult for conference organizers to know the direct correlation between the EOLFC and job created or retained without getting more details. However, this particular question (#5) had no box for additional details to be added and it is unclear whether follow-up interviews were undertaken with these respondents.

15% of respondents to Q6 said that participation in the EOLFC had facilitated a successful funding application, and they shared some details on this (though 45% felt the question not

applicable to them). 92% of respondents to Q7 believed the conference provided a successful networking opportunity, but only 8 individuals (17%) added some specificity to their answers.

Q8 asked respondents if they had a specific testimonial or success story to share from the EOLFC. 8 (17%) said yes, and 9 (19%) shared their stories in just a few sentences. Further, 43% of respondents said they were open to being called to share further details related to their survey responses. When asked for additional comments, only 4 respondents (9%) gave additional constructive comments, most related to future conference planning.

General conclusions about the 2016 survey and responses:

- Good response rate of about 30% of conference attendees from first 5 years.
- In general, benefits of the EOLFC to participants are clear, but specificities are not easily revealed through the questions asked and answers provided.
- Responses on jobs and investment are probably not a good indicator of actual impact of the EOLFC in these areas. Respondents were not encouraged to add additional details.
- Targeted questions (e.g. on funding applications) are only applicable to some segments
 of respondents, and might be best to include as sub-questions of more general
 questions.
- Testimonials and success stories are valuable for demonstrating impact, but few came forward through this survey tool, though a large proportion of respondents welcomed a follow-up call. (For confidentiality reasons, the researchers on this study did not have access to the results of those calls, though we expect the information gleaned from them was very useful to organizers.)
- Open-ended questions asking for general comments are important, but produce limited responses.

Theoretical Framework:

We drew on two theoretical frames to help us plan our study, inform our analysis and organize our recommendations: Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA) and the Kirkpatrick Model of training evaluation.

With its origins in international development studies, SLA focuses on the full set of capacities, assets and activities that individuals require to survive and thrive. It sees farmers and other food system participant as drawing on a variety of capacities and assets (defined in terms of specific forms of capital: Human, Physical, Social, Natural and Cultural) to thrive. A food producer's livelihood, for example, is sustainable when the producer can maintain or enhance their capabilities and assets, as well as cope with and recover from stress and shocks, while not undermining the natural resource base/environment they rely upon (Scoones 1998). For this

research, SLA provides a conceptual framework for a more comprehensive evaluation of impact of the EOLFC on individual participants, their businesses and their organizations. It was primarily used to inform the interview tool (found in Appendix B).

On the suggestion of one of our interviewees, Phil Groff of Sustain Ontario, we looked towards the Kirkpatrick model of training evaluation to help organize our results. The Kirkpatrick Model measures impact on participants in terms of Reaction (immediate), Learning (short-term), Behaviour and Results (medium-long term). The Kirkpatrick Model can be combined with basic marketing theory (which evaluates impact in terms of Reach, Resonance, and Reaction) to define six stages for evaluating impact of an event like the EOLFC: Reach, Resonance, Reaction, Learning, Behaviour, and Results. In this report, we focus on Learning, Behaviour Change and Results (the purpose of the post-conference evaluation tool), but we have some advice on earlier stage evaluations (Reach, Resonance and Reaction) in Appendix C.

General findings:

Eight general observations arose from our analysis:

1) Evaluation must be tied to goals. In the case of EOLFC, the breadth of goals that participants associate with the conference suggests the need for a broader, more open-ended evaluation instrument.

According to EOLFC documents, the core goals of the conference are (EOLFC 2015):

- To provide a forum for practitioners in the local food sector to establish a regional community of practice;
- To provide specific, timely, technical content that addressed the current needs of the sector in Eastern Ontario.

Organizers are aware, however, that the event serves other goals as well. "The conference has grown into the region's premier annual local food event and has become a key forum for REDB East Regional staff to:" Engage with its client base; generate new business leads; build awareness of REDB resources and tools for economic growth; connect clients with resources and information; and work towards the Premier's challenge of doubling the local food industry's annual growth rate and creating 120,000 jobs by the year 2020. (EOLFC 2015).

In various ways, all interviewees identified these (primarily economically-framed) goals as important to the EOLFC, but we also heard that many participants in the local food sector are

¹ The Kirkpatrick Model http://www.kirkpatrickpartners.com/Our-Philosophy/The-Kirkpatrick-Model

engaged to achieve more than economic outcomes. The theme for the 2016 EOLFC, for example, was resilience. It featured presentations on a diverse array of topics including climate change adaptation and municipal food policy efforts. It is clear that local food sector is also about social and environmental sustainability outcomes for many engaged in it. Participants coming to the EOLFC for these purposes sometimes see their priorities reflected in the conference agenda, but not always.

Theresa Schumilas made a comment that sums up what we heard on this front: "Either the Ministry isn't really clear about what they're trying to accomplish or they are clear but they're misnaming it. Maybe their only intention is to increase jobs in the food and farmscape in Ontario. Then they've announced a conference that has to do with local food and sustainability. That is a big disconnect because they mean different things... My experience is that [OMAFRA] tend of to focus on a very small set of economic indicators like job creation... If they're trying to get a broader group to attend the events, then they need to think about broader evaluation."

Recommendation 1: Develop a strong consensus around the full breadth of conference goals with key stakeholder groups, and then evaluate the EOLFC's impact against that full set of goals.

2) A more open-ended approach should yield a more complete picture of impact.

We heard from interviewees about the value of more open-ended approaches to impact evaluation. The quantitative measures used in 2016 (e.g. job creation, investment) yielded limited useful quantitative data in the survey responses, and few details on data were gathered to help connect the cause (the EOLFC) to the result (investments made or jobs created). An evaluation instrument is needed that identifies various potential indicators of success and which allows participants to frame those successes in their own terms. Follow-up interviews can then be undertaken with survey respondents to get more details on the economic implications for their livelihoods, businesses, or organizations of specific choices made.

Recommendation 2: Adopt a more open-ended, qualitative, approach to the evaluation of impact to reflect the diverse needs and interests of conference participants.

3) Economic impact is about more than job creation and investment.

Several interviewees felt that the questions on the survey instrument about job creation and investments were appropriate. We agree that these are impacts that organizers should try to understand and report on. However, these questions are also a narrow interpretation of

economic impact. One interviewee suggested the question: "Has the conference inspired you to adopt new ways of producing and packaging a product?" Such a development could be framed as an 'investment', but respondents might not think of it that way. Then there is the important dimension of building new business relationships or collaborations. The current tool asks about the EOLFC as a networking opportunity, but does not focus on the establishment of new working relationships (except for the question about successful funding applications).

Adding to the complications of measuring economic impacts, Theresa Schumilas noted that "there are regional markets, direct consumer markets, markets that focus on trade, social economy, and food sharing. There are markets that are non-monetary... "[This is] about whether or not the men and women who run farms in Ontario are able to make a living as they define making a living. To them, it might be more, or less money [income]." Schumilas suggested that participants could be asked to define economic impacts on their own terms: "Simply asking people about their livelihood and how they're satisfied with it is a great indicator."

Recommendation 3: Adopt a more inclusive approach to asking about the economic impact of the EOLFC on participant's activities. Follow-up interviews can pull out the details in terms of how individuals understand their own needs, successes and progress. These interviews can also elicit details on 'jobs created' given the importance of this indicator of success for OMAFRA.

4) Changes to human capital include learning outcomes.

Sustainable livelihood theory talks about changes to 'human capital' as an asset (rather than simply 'jobs'). This difference in framing encourages us to also think about the internal changes taking place within the people working in the local food sector, and especially the learning that takes place. Heather Candler asked: "How do you measure the increased ability (over time) of someone to tackle take their next steps?"

Recommendation 4: Include questions designed to reveal what participants have learned as part of the EOLFC's community of practice.

5) Changes to the environment should be accounted for in an evaluation of EOLFC impact:

Currently, the EOLFC impact evaluation instrument asks no questions about changes to natural capital as a result of decisions taken by EOLFC participants (e.g. to change cropping patterns, input use, etc.), yet these types of changes can make a difference to the resilience of livelihoods and of economies and their ability to face future challenges (whether environmental or economic). Interviewees suggested a variety of ways of capturing these impacts.

Heather Candler suggested "One of the things a conference like this can do is reinforce a commitment to green values. To measure that, I don't know if it gets more sophisticated than simply asking the question: Has this event reinforced your commitment to environmental values and green goals within your activity?"

Other interviewees suggested questions like: Have farmers [switched to using] crops that have less impact on the environment (Alison Blay-Palmer)? Are there environmental benefits (or drawbacks) as a result of on-farm diversification? Have input [fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation] regimes changed (Louise Livingstone)? Have new production practices been adopted that reduce carbon emissions and impact soils? Any changes to climate change resiliency? (Rich Pirog)

Deducing whether specific on-farm and food production practice changes have positive or negative environmental impacts is complex, but a starting point might be to ask a general question about the environmental impacts participants expect through changes to their practices informed by participation in the EOLFC. In future, these questions could be developed with consultation with the branches of OMAFRA (and other EOLFC stakeholders) that deal more directly with the environmental side of food production and distribution in Ontario.

Recommendation 5: Add a general question about anticipated changes to natural capital/environment informed by participation in EOLFC.

6) Social impacts are important, and could be followed more carefully.

The strongest common thread through the interviews was the need to examine the social/network (social capital) impacts of the EOLFC more carefully. All interviewees agreed that building networks (whether strengthening existing partnerships, developing new ones, or simply growing one's network of individuals to reach out to for questions) is a core outcome of the event, and that networking has multiple benefits. Heather Candler noted: "Collaboration, encouragement, innovation, recharging with like-minded people is important. Often people working with local food suffer from burnout. But how to measure these things is tough." And network development doesn't just bring social benefits. It is often the precursor to economic outcomes, through adaptation of ideas from one context to another. Charles Levkoe, an expert in local food networks across Canada, pointed out that "networks are about unstructured social space for people to share ideas and be inspired... Success comes through adaptation rather than replication."

Phil Mount's interview focused almost exclusively on the idea of expanded networks: "Expanding networks (Direct post-conference contact) would be high on my radar for

measurements of success... How many times have you met in person or exchanged emails? These things aren't predictable beforehand and even when people are making those contacts, but it's the kind of thing that develops over time, maybe over years, into other connections. [For example], when you're thinking of expanding, or having a workshop, or need to talk to experts in the field, then you'd think of people you met at the local food conference and then you'd reach out to those. These are the kinds of impacts that are difficult to capture with economic measurement. They're important for social networking measurement."

How do you track network development? Phil Groff proposed a question related to social capital in this way: "Did you make any new connections that you stayed in contact with?" A deeper approach, which Charles Levkoe employed in his own doctoral research, would involve the development of a network map for the local food community in Eastern Ontario and to see how it changes over time. This approach would require participants to help organizers answer the question "Who is connecting with who?" (Levkoe)

Recommendation 6: The evaluation tool could more explicitly ask about the anticipated impacts of specific connections made through the EOLFC.

7) Measuring changes in food as a form of cultural capital

Food and culture are closely entwined, so a local food conference can impact cultural capital in positive ways. Heather Candler noted: "My thought is that food is who we are and a value that's really integral to our identity. Food is one of those issues that are so important to everybody that it risks becoming important to nobody... Because it's such a universally accepted premise that food is important, it sometimes doesn't foster champions. I think that, for me, EOLFC would [help with] understanding the cultural impacts that [Food] has on our values, identity."

Recommendation 7: Respondents should be asked about how their perceptions of local food and local food initiatives have changed through participation in the EOLFC.

8) Inclusion of diversity.

Charles Levkoe pointed out that "sharing and understanding diversity and difference is a key benefit of a networking event." If this is the case, diversity should be deliberately included as a goal in event planning. What happens when it is not? Rich Pirog asked: "Did the conversation around the conference make you think about equity at all?... Is it a white narrative around a successful food system? Are there various stories and perspectives present?"

This point relates to the first recommendation about the importance of matching the event to anticipated outcomes and impacts. If the goal is to develop a diverse community of practice (as stated in the first goal of the conference), the full diversity of local food practitioners must be clearly reflected in invited speakers and in the content delivered through the conference.

Recommendation 8: Assuming EOLFC is designed to further a broad set of goals related to local food, ensure that invited speakers reflect the full breadth of participants that organizers want to see attend (economically, socially, and culturally).

Proposed revised evaluation tool (1-5 years after):

- 1. When did you attend the Eastern Ontario Local Food Conference (EOLFC)? Please check * all that apply.
- -Kemptville, 2011: Scaling Up Our Local Food System
- -Kemptville, 2012: Collaborating for Success
- -Kingston, 2013: Innovation Driving Local Food
- -Kingston, 2014: Niche to Mainstream
- -Belleville, 2015: Creativity + Collaboration = Action
- Belleville, 2016:
- 2. Has the EOLFC benefitted you/your business'/your organization's local food work?
- -Yes
- -No
- 2b. If no, what could the EOLFC do in future that would benefit your business or organization? (same as question 3e below, to try to get an answer)
- 3. If yes, how has the conference played a role? Please check all that apply, providing details where asked:
- Increased awareness of local food initiatives in Eastern Ontario
 - If checked, pop-up: 3a) How has your <u>perspective</u> on local food and local food initiatives changed as a result of participation in the EOLFC?
- Provided contacts that benefit my business or organization
 - If checked, pop-up: 3b) Please describe how your business or organization has benefitted, or may expect to benefit, from one or more <u>contacts</u> you made at EOLFC.
- Facilitated business/organizational investment, job creation, development or growth
 - If checked, pop-up: 3c) What <u>changes</u> in your business or organization did participation in EOLFC lead to?
- Provided information and insights useful to my business/organization (for example, on food safety, regulations, value chain development, marketing, institutional procurement, collaboration, urban agriculture, etc.)

If checked, pop-up: 3d) What did you <u>learn</u> at the EOLFC that made a difference?

- Led to positive environmental benefits as a result of how our business or organization works (e.g. crop diversification, changes in the use of energy or hazardous inputs, increased carbon storage, reduced food miles, etc.).

If checked, pop up: 3e) What <u>changes to your business or organization's environmental impact</u> would you attribute to your participation in the EOLFC?

- The conference has not benefitted my business or organization

If checked, pop-up: 3e) What could the EOLFC do in future that would benefit your business or organization?

- 4) Are there other ways that the EOLFC has benefitted you, your business or your organization? Please describe:
- 5) The EOLFC seeks to provide a forum for a diverse cross-section of practitioners in the local food sector in Eastern Ontario. Are there any groups that you would like to see better represented at future events?
- 6) May we contact you for further details? If yes, please fill in the boxes below (same as 2016 boxes)
- 7) Do you have any additional comments for conference organizers?

References:

EOLFC (Eastern Ontario Local Food Conference). 2016. EOLFC Impact Analysis Survey.

Scoones, I. (1998). Sustainable rural livelihoods: A framework for analysis. Brighton, U.K.: Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex.

Appendix A: Interviewees

Alison Blay-Palmer, CIGI Chair in Sustainable Food Systems, Associate Professor. Balsillie School of International Affairs. Waterloo, Ontario. https://www.balsillieschool.ca/people/alison-blay-palmer

Heather Candler, Agriculture and Rural Economic Development Advisor. Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

Phil Groff, Director, Sustain Ontario https://sustainontario.com/team_member/philip-groff

Charles Levkoe, Canada Research Chair in Sustainable Food Systems, Assistant Professor. Lakehead University. Thunder Bay, Ontario. https://www.lakeheadu.ca/users/L/clevkoe

Louise Livingstone, Harvest Hastings. http://www.harvesthastings.ca/user/1

Phil Mount, Associate Director. Just Food. Ottawa. http://justfood.ca/about/who-we-are/

Katie Nolan, Agriculture and Rural Economic Development Advisor, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

Rich Pirog, Director. Centre for Regional Food Systems. Michigan State University. http://foodsystems.msu.edu/people/pirog

Jennifer Rushlow, Tourism Coordinator, City of Quinte West.

Theresa Schumilas, Postdoctoral Fellow at Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems. University of Waterloo. https://uwaterloo.ca/ecological-agriculture-in-china/about/people/theresa-schumilas

Appendix B: Interview Questions employed in this research

- 1. What role do you and/or your organization play in the Eastern Ontario food system?
- 2. If you were organizing a networking event, what types of community impacts would you hope to achieve?
- 3. For an event like the Eastern Ontario Local Food Conference, organized jointly by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food and local partners from throughout the region, how would you evaluate success in relation to the following types of impacts (Only answer for criteria that are important to you):
 - a. Economic
 - b. Social
 - c. Environmental
 - d. Cultural
 - e. Other (please describe)
 - f. Intersectional (all together)
- 4. What is your advice to conference organizers on how to <u>measure</u> the impact of the EOLF conference one or two years after it has taken place?

If there is time,

- 5. Looking at the current evaluation tool (share current survey instrument), what are your comments on it?
- 6. Are there evaluation tools you have used that you would like to share with us?
- 7. Any other comments that you would like to share with us?
- 8. Any suggestions of other people who we should interview?

Appendix C: Short term EOLFC evaluation recommendations:

Reach/Resonance: (note: in addition to what is already tracked, e.g. hotel rooms booked, meals served):

- What communities are represented in the EOLFC's constituency? How were those communities represented by your conference attendees or impacted by the activities your conference undertook? E.g Francophone events and/or are they being contacted? First Nations, Inuit, Métis groups: Are they involved and in what way? (Phil Groff)
- Diversity of attendees is an important goal in itself. Are the right people (within orgs) being asked to come, and are they coming? (Charles Levkoe)
- An indicator of 'reach' that also speaks to behaviour change/impact: "I think the number
 of local speakers who come to the conference who share their experience would be a
 measure of success. It's all very well getting people from outside coming to talk, if we
 were doing more things in Eastern Ontario then that would be a measure of success."
 (Louise Livingstone)
- How many (post-conference) hits on reports, web videos, etc.?

Reaction: (measured on day of through satisfaction surveys. These are in addition to the surveys already currently conducted by organizers at end of day):

- What were your reasons for attending? (open-ended or options with 'other' box)
- Did the sessions accommodate participant's personal learning styles?
- Did you find the conference representative of you and your group / organization?
- "Did you find a resource, network, tool that's important to you to....", I would ask the questions related to the targets. (Theresa Schumilas)
- Have you made or renewed any connections as a result of today's conference?
- Would you come again? Why or why not?

Appendix D: EOLFC Impact Evaluation Survey (2016)

2016 EOLFC Impact Analysis Survey



The Eastern Ontario Local Food Conference (EOLFC) aims to build relationships and support local food in Eastern Ontario.

Your valuable input is requested to help usdetermine how the previous conference(s) have impacted our supporters over the long term.

All responses will be taken into consideration to enhance future experiences at the EOLFC. However, the information gathered will be held confidential and only aggregate information will be reported.

The survey will take less than 10 minutes to complete and will be open until July 7th, 2016.

Thank you for your time and participation.

	Kemptville, 2011: Scaling Up Our Local Food System
	Kemptville, 2012: Collaborating for Success
	Kingston, 2013: Innovation Driving Local Food
	Kingston, 2014: Niche to Mainstream
	Believille, 2015: Creativity + Collaboration = Action
* 2. H	las the EOLFC benefitted you/your business'/your organization's local food work? Yes
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