

ADOPTING A FOOD SYSTEMS APPROACH A CASE STUDY OF JUST FOOD, OTTAWA

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Just Food



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

KEY QUESTION

What is the meaning and value of a *food systems approach* for communities in Eastern Ontario, as well as the opportunities and challenges that accompany this approach, using Just Food, Ottawa as a case study?

BACKGROUND

In recent decades, there has been a growing interest in food issues and, increasingly, awareness of the concept of the food system amongst academics, governmental representatives, civil society organizations and the public. However, there remains a lack of clarity around the meaning of a food systems approach amongst food system actors themselves.

Just Food, community partner in this project, identified this dilemma. Just Food is a non-profit organization that aims to work towards vibrant, just and sustainable food and farming systems in the Ottawa region. The project adopted a community-based research methodology to document an organizational history of Just Food and its food systems approach. The history was primarily based on interviews and a focus group with staff and board members of Just Food.

MAIN FINDINGS

I. ANALYTICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

- According to the International Panel of Experts on Food Systems (iPES-Food), a *food system* includes the “web of actors, processes, and interactions involved in growing, processing, distributing, consuming and disposing of foods, from the provision of inputs and farming training, to product packaging and marketing, to waste recycling.” The food system concept provides a lens through which to view food-related issues and allows us to see the dynamic and interconnected nature of the food system. A food systems approach, then, is one that applies this “food systems lens” or “food systems thinking” in efforts to explore questions about (and address issues in) the food system, as well as propose strategies for change.
- However, through the review and analysis of the food systems literature, it became apparent that there is a lack of clarity in the meaning of a food systems approach because a variety of actors invoke the language of a food systems approach in different ways and to different ends.

- Our analysis suggests one way of enhancing clarity in the food systems literature: we can distinguish between the more mainstream food systems approach and what we call a critical food systems approach. The approaches differ on the extent to which they challenge the currently dominant food system or the level of change they call for.
 - A critical food systems approach aims to bring about significant, long-term structural change in the food system. It retains a normative element as scholars, organizations and activists adopting this approach call for advancing more socially just, equitable, democratic and sustainable food systems. These are the core principles/goals of a critical food systems approach.
 - The literature also identifies mechanisms for food systems change. There is an emphasis on the role of municipal governments in fostering sustainable food systems (e.g. urban policy and planning agendas, municipal food policy councils).
- Although Just Food does not define its food systems approach as a critical food systems approach, it is argued that Just Food's approach can be categorized as such.

II. CASE STUDY CONTRIBUTIONS

- Just Food is a unique actor in the Ottawa region food system. While other actors may understand their work in relation to a food system, Just Food is the only organization whose core mission and mandate is to foster more just and sustainable food and farming systems in the Ottawa region.
- Just Food enacts a food systems approach by both (a) adopting a food systems lens (or food systems thinking) in its understanding issues in the food system; and (b) working on the level of the local/city region food system. That latter involves both (i) engaging in activities and offering programs across aspects of the food system, with a focus on production and access (e.g. urban agriculture, community gardening, farmer training, facilitating local distribution and direct buying); and (ii) acting as a hub or coordinating body of food systems work in Ottawa (e.g. the Community Food Hub; facilitative role in the Ottawa School Food Network and the Poverty and Hunger Network). Just Food's work at the local/city region food system level and its coordination role are also what makes Just Food unique in the Ottawa
- Just Food demonstrates a critical food system approach through initiatives that advance sustainability, social justice and equity, food access and participatory democratic governance (i.e. the core principles of the approach).
- Challenges associated with a food systems approach include:
 - Reliance (typically) on project-based funding; lack of core organizational funding
 - Additional challenges related to funding: difficulty scaling up initiatives, reliance on volunteers, limited capacity to train volunteers
 - Communicating a food systems approach and long-term goals — structural goals can be difficult to grasp; funders often look for short-term measurable outcomes
 - Difficulty of working in a silo-ed policy environment
- Strengths of a food system approach include:
 - Holistic understanding of the food system and its problems
 - Ability to identify and fill in gaps in the food system (e.g. Community Food Hub)

- Cross-jurisdictional policy development/advocacy (e.g. provincial food and farming policy advocacy at provincial level through Sustain Ontario)
- Engagement in partnerships and collaborative projects
- Strong public and political interest in food and food systems contributes to positive reception to and increased demand for food system initiatives

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

- Despite this project's initial contribution to clarifying the meaning and value of a food systems approach, further analysis is warranted to address the confusion in reading the food systems literature. For example, why is food systems language used by different actors to different ends? How can we further enhance clarity? Are there other ways to categorize different iterations of a food systems approach?
- This project identified some of the opportunities and challenges associated with a food systems approach. Additional research could explore why these opportunities and challenges arise (e.g. by drawing from theories of neoliberalism).