

ECOPOLITICS PODCAST EPISODE 4.13: Collective Action for Sustainability

Learning from Food Movement Elders

Additional Pedagogical Resources

Summary: *In this episode, host **Peter Andrée** and co-host **Kaleigh McIntosh** explore how collective action and governance can drive sustainability transitions, using food systems as a central lens. Drawing on interviews with food movement elders, **Dr. Harriet Friedmann** and **Dr. Rod MacRae**, the episode examines how change emerges through the interaction of community organizing, institutional strategy, and policy advocacy. The discussion highlights the fragmented nature of food governance in Canada, the importance of participatory and inclusive policymaking, and the role of institutions like the Toronto Food Policy Council in bridging civil society and government. Drawing on the experience of Rod and Harriet, we see how sustainable change depends not only on structures and policies but on people, those who build relationships, recognize opportunities, and mobilize collective action across differences.*

Key Takeaways:

- **Food systems are a powerful lens for sustainability.** They are the “hole in the donut” that connect environmental, social, economic, and political systems, making them a key site for transformation.
- **Canada lacks a coherent food governance structure**, yet diverse initiatives emerge across local, provincial, and national levels.
- Including civil society in policymaking helps “enliven bureaucracy” and ensures policies reflect diverse needs and knowledge. **Participatory governance matters!**
- **Collective action and institutional strategy are key to impact.** Grassroots organizing is most effective when connected to policy processes and decision-making structures.
- **Allies and unlikely partnerships are essential.** Progress often requires working with people who hold different perspectives but share overlapping interests.
- **Change happens at multiple levels.** Mid-level bureaucrats, community leaders, and organizers play crucial roles in advancing policy innovation.
- **Effective advocacy requires policy literacy** — understanding how institutions work, where decisions are made, and how to intervene strategically.
- Even when formal structures like the Toronto Food Policy Council weaken or no longer exist, **ideas and practices persist through networks and individuals.**

Key Terms & Concepts

- **Food Systems:** The interconnected processes and actors involved in producing, processing, distributing, and consuming food, including environmental, social, and political dimensions.

- Crippa, M., Solazzo, E., Guizzardi, D. *et al.* Food systems are responsible for a third of global anthropogenic GHG emissions. *Nat Food* 2, 198–209 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43016-021-00225-9>
- Dudley, N., & Alexander, S. (2017). Agriculture and biodiversity: a review. *Biodiversity*, 18(2–3), 45–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14888386.2017.1351892>
- **Food Systems Governance:** The structures and processes that shape how food systems operate, including policies, institutions, and social movements.
 - Bhunnoo, Riaz & Poppy, Guy. (2020). A national approach for transformation of the UK food system. *Nature Food*. 1. 6-8. 10.1038/s43016-019-0019-8.
 - Clark, J. K., Lowitt, K., Levkoe, C. Z., & Andrée, P. (2021). The power to convene: making sense of the power of food movement organizations in governance processes in the Global North. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 38(1), 175-191. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-020-10146-1>
- **Participatory Governance:** Decision-making processes that actively include civil society, community groups, and diverse stakeholders.
 - Huttunen, S., Turunen, A., & Kaljonen, M. (2022). Participation for just governance of food-system transition. *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, 18(1), 500–514. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2022.2088187>
 - Levkoe, C. Z., & Sheedy, A. (2019). A people-centred approach to food policy making: Lessons from Canada’s People’s Food Policy project. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, 14(3), 318–338. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19320248.2017.1407724>

Discussion Questions:

- Canada has a fragmented food governance system. Based on the discussion in this episode, what are the advantages and challenges of fragmented governance systems for food governance? For sustainability?
- Dr. Harriet Friedmann describes participatory governance as necessary to “enliven bureaucracy.” What might this look like in practice?
 - Why is it important to include civil society in formal policymaking structures?
- How can advocates for food and sustainability issues think about balancing community organizing with policy advocacy?
- What role do you see mid-level actors (rather than top leaders) playing in driving change?
- In what ways can food systems serve as an entry point for broader social and environmental change?

Spotlight Stories:

The Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC)



Established in the 1990s as a citizen advisory body within the Toronto Board of Health. It brought together activists, academics, policymakers, and community leaders to collaboratively shape food policy from inside municipal government.

The TFPC's unique positioning was its ability to bridge civil society and formal institutions. It worked within government structures while maintaining strong ties to grassroots movements.

The TFPC also operated as a networking and knowledge hub, connecting actors across sectors like public health, urban planning, social services, and community organizations.

- Stahlbrand, L., Roberts, W (2022). Critical food guidance in action: The history of the Toronto Food Policy Council. *Canadian Food Studies*, 9 (1), 69-86. <https://doi.org/10.15353/cfs-rcea.v9i1.505>
- Blay-Palmer, A. (2009). The Canadian Pioneer: The Genesis of Urban Food Policy in Toronto. *International Planning Studies*, 14(4), 401–416. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563471003642837>

Recombinant Bovine Growth Hormone (rBGH) Debate

rBGH was a genetically engineered drug designed to increase milk production in dairy cows. In the 1990s, its potential approval in Canada sparked widespread concern among farmers, scientists, and civil society groups.

The Toronto Food Policy Council played a catalytic role by initiating research, raising awareness, and convening discussions around the issue. The issue gained momentum beyond the control of any single organization, illustrating how collective action can take on a “life of its own.”

- Andrée, P. (2011). Civil society and the political economy of GMO failures in Canada: a neo-Gramscian analysis. *Environmental Politics*, 20(2), 173–191. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2011.551023>
- Mills, Lisa N. (2002). *Science and Social Context: The Regulations of Recombinant Bovine Growth Hormone in North America*. McGill-Queen's University Press. <https://www.mqup.ca/Books/S/Science-and-Social-Context2>

A Food Policy for Canada

The eventual creation of the Food Policy for Canada (2019), along with a National Food Policy Advisory Council, marked an important step toward more integrated governance. While the policy itself has limitations, its development demonstrates how sustained advocacy, strategic partnerships, and policy literacy can translate ideas into formal institutional change.

As highlighted in the episode, successful advocacy for the national food policy involved not only grassroots organizations but also major agricultural groups and private sector

actors. This reflects a key lesson from Rod MacRae's work: policy change often depends on assembling coalitions that can operate across sectors and scales.

- MacRae, R. (2011). A Joined-Up Food Policy for Canada. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, 6(4), 424–457.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19320248.2011.627297>
- Andrée, Peter; Ballamingie, Patricia; Bancercz, Margaret; Bilyea, Ted; Bronson, Diana; Buckingham, Don; et al. (2023) (originally published 2017). The Case for A National Food Policy Council. *Toronto Metropolitan University*. Report.
<https://doi.org/10.32920/24084801.v1>
- Andrée, P. P. Ballamingie and M. Coulas. 'Integrative governance for ecological public health: An analysis of 'Food Policy for Canada' (2015-2019)'. *Canadian Journal of Food Studies* <https://doi.org/10.15353/cfs-rcea.v8i2.450>

Learn More About our Guests and Co-Host:

Dr Harriet Friedmann: I am a food system analyst, writer and lecturer. Since retiring from the University of Toronto in 2012, I freely pollinate the worlds of academia, policy, and activism across scales of organization. I first entered the unnamed realm that became “agro-food systems” in the 1970s by studying the historical emergence of a world wheat market. I was also lucky to be connected with the early emergence of the pioneering Toronto Food Policy Council and its eventual embrace of city-regional food systems. These connections happily converged with two emergent phenomena: the interdisciplinary intellectual field of food studies. My main passions now are seed biodiversity, city food regions, commons, resilience theory, and exploring with others the present possibilities for food system transformations in a world-ecological context—what might be called emergent modes of foodgetting.

Select articles, books, projects:

- Harriet Friedmann speaks about [Biodiversity and Food](#) in this episode of To Save the World.
- Friedmann, H. (2017). [Remaking “traditions”: How we eat, what we eat and the changing political economy of food](#) in Julier, A., Counihan, C., Van Esterik, P., *Food and Culture*. Routledge.

Dr. Rod MacRae is a food policy analyst with over 35 years of experience examining the transition to a sustainable, health-promoting food system in Canada. Following doctoral studies at McGill University, he co-ordinated the Toronto Food Policy Council for 10 years, then worked for 10 years as a consultant to governments, businesses and NGOs on projects to advance sustainable food systems in Canada. Before his retirement, Rod was an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change at York



University, where his research focused on developing a national food policy for Canada and the coherent, comprehensive programs required to support it.

Select articles, books, projects:

- A discussion with Rod MacRae about “[The "Missing Middle" in the Canadian Food System](#)” as part of the SSFPA's National Meeting in November 2023.
- MacRae, R., Cuddeford, V., Young, S. B., & Matsubuchi-Shaw, M. (2013). The Food System and Climate Change: An Exploration of Emerging Strategies to Reduce GHG Emissions in Canada. *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems*, 37(8), 933–963. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21683565.2013.774302>

Kaleigh McIntosh is a PhD candidate in Geography and Environmental Studies at Carleton University, where her research focuses on how collaboration between different groups shapes long-term resilience in complex socioecological systems. My current work looks at the Wolastoq Valley in New Brunswick, where I study how relationships among diverse stakeholders influence watershed governance and resilience efforts over time. Before this, I completed a BA in Political Science at Carleton and a Master’s in Development Studies at York University. My MA research took me to South Tarawa, Kiribati, where I explored community-based climate adaptation and how local organizations contribute to broader climate and disaster risk reduction efforts. Across my work, I’m particularly interested in questions of inclusion—who gets to participate in climate adaptation and governance, who doesn’t, and what that means for social and environmental justice in complex systems.

Select articles, books, projects:

- McIntosh, K. and Jesmer, A. (July 2024). [Tren Maya & Pluriversality w/ Laura Primeau](#). In *Probably About Politics*.
- Ecopolitica Podcast [Episode 4.6: Becoming an Ecopolitical Researcher](#).

Resources in the Episode:

Urban Agriculture

- [The GrowTO: Urban Agriculture Action Plan for Toronto](#) was proposed in 2012 offered six priorities for moving forward with support for urban agriculture.
- Find here a report that Rod MacRae contributed to on [Scaling Up Urban Agriculture in Toronto: Building the Infrastructure](#) in 2010.
- Toronto and Region Conservation Authority cites agriculture as an important pillar of the work they do. Learn more about the relationship between their work and the spaces for people and organizations [to grow and harvest fresh food](#).

Coalition for Healthy School Food

- [The Coalition for Healthy School Food](#) is the largest school food network in Canada focused on collaborative efforts to advocate for a universal, permanent, cost-shared National School Food Program.
- Harriet Friedmann cited the important work of Debbie Field as the Executive Director of FoodShare Toronto and now as Coordinator of the Coalition for Healthy School Food. Learn more about [Debbie's work](#) and her perspective on the [movement for a school food program in Canada](#).