

# Investigating the Role of Food Charters in the Canadian Food Justice Movement: A Case Study of Waterloo, Ontario

Michelle E. Metzger<sup>1</sup>, Janice Aurini<sup>2</sup>  
*memetzge@uwaterloo.ca*

1 Centre for Knowledge Integration, University of Waterloo, 200 University Avenue West, Waterloo, Ontario Canada N2L 3G1

2 Sociology and Legal Studies, University of Waterloo, 200 University Avenue West, Waterloo, Ontario Canada N2L 3G1

**Abstract** - Food security is one of the major development concerns of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Increasing awareness of the need for sustainable and healthy food options has sparked a grassroots movement of food system reform. One tool used by this movement is a food charter: a non-binding policy which articulates a particular community's values concerning the production, processing, consumption, and disposal of their food. In this paper, I consider the role of municipal level governance in shaping this grassroots reform towards a more sustainable future for the food system. Using the Waterloo Region Food Charter as a case study, I interviewed four individuals who were significantly involved in the process of drafting this charter, and who have background experience with food charters or with Waterloo's regional food policy. My investigation was further informed by my own participation in the food charter working group. Over the course of 5 months, I attended meetings of this working group. The interviews suggest that food charters play multiple roles in the food justice movement: providing a unified vision; promoting awareness of food issues; enabling further activities of the food justice movement; enabling further policy developments and political support for food justice initiatives; and promoting broader systemic changes to the food system. These results represent the potential for the Waterloo food charter to influence the local food justice movement. Realizing these changes in practice will involve continued community mobilization and measurable impacts will require investment of further resources to develop strategic implementation plans.

## I. Introduction

Over the past fifteen years in Canada, many municipalities have chosen to draft and endorse food charters. These non-binding policy documents are usually drafted by citizen groups to represent the values and priorities of that community with respect to food. These documents are significant as they articulate an approach to food systems that is significantly different than the dominant food system approach of the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The changing perspectives and values of Canadian communities have come to be known as the food justice movement<sup>1</sup> and policy has been recognized as a key resource in initiating meaningful change.<sup>2</sup>

The food justice movement is grounded in a collective, fundamental desire to realize the United Nations Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights which grants that all people have the right to be free from hunger.<sup>3</sup> Early efforts to reach this goal depended on a system based on the

productionist paradigm; that producing more food would surely solve the world's hunger crisis.<sup>4</sup> The food movement emerged from a mass paradigm shift, in which society began to recognize the chronic lack of sustainability in the productionist model.<sup>5</sup> The food justice movement is comprised of grassroots action through a diversity of Alternative Food Initiatives. In many Canadian communities, food charters have been present in this movement incorporating the emergence of a new ecologically integrated paradigm<sup>6</sup> into municipal policy.

While food charters are cited as being impactful to the movement,<sup>7, 8</sup> it is unclear from the literature the particular role that food charters play and how these goals might be realized. This paper provides insight into the role of food charters in an emerging food justice movement in Canada by performing a case study on the Waterloo Region Food Charter, developed by a working group of the Waterloo Region Food Systems Roundtable, and endorsed by

Waterloo Regional Council in April, 2013.

## II. Methods

The primary research question in this study is: what role does a food charter play within the food justice movement? I also hoped to discover: the role of regional government more generally with respect to this food movement; whether a food charter is an appropriate policy response and what added value the charter brings to the community; and what might be unique about the role of a food charter in the case study of Waterloo.

In order to answer these questions, I performed a qualitative study involving four interviews. I selected my interview participants based on their high level of familiarity with the development of the food charter in Waterloo, and in most cases significant experience with the landscape of local food politics in Waterloo Region preceding the food charter. To preserve the anonymity of the participants, I have referred to them by a significant characteristic to their food charter involvement: a researcher, a volunteer, a public health planner, and a regional councillor.

My investigation was further informed by my own participation in the food charter working group, attending meetings regularly over the course of 5 months. During this time I was involved in a public consultation phase in which a survey was conducted to collect feedback concerning a draft version of the charter. This feedback was carefully considered in producing the final document. Then the group sought endorsements from the community, and from the Region of Waterloo. While my attendance at food charter working group meetings was not formally contributing to my research, my participation informed my research and interview questions.

## III. Results

The interviews suggest that food charters play multiple roles in the food justice movement. In this analysis I highlight five key themes.

**Vision:** Food charters serve to articulate a common vision for the food movement in a particular area. For some of the first charters such as Sudbury's, articulating a vision was the first step to spark the initial development of food activism in the area (Volunteer). However, in Waterloo's charter the vision serves a slightly different function. Since a

wide variety of alternative food initiatives are already well established in Waterloo, articulating a vision involved identifying common interests among these various stakeholders and presenting these interests in such a way that the disparate actors could identify with the document. There is evidence within the interviews and from supporting survey data that the vision presented in the Waterloo food charter is indeed generally accepted across the community; however, the food charter working group stopped short of collaborating with groups such as corporate retailers. The researcher suggested that it might be important for future developments to extend the inclusivity of the charter to find common ground among all food system stakeholders.

**Awareness:** The interviews suggest that one of the most important outcomes of the charter would be an improved awareness of food issues, and increased occurrences of community members engaging in dialogue about these issues. Extending awareness may take the form of new people entering the conversation for the first time or previously engaged food movement activists discussing food in a new way. The public health planner noted that the food charter is valuable because "it can provide a means for a conversation with more people about food issues... so we want to bring that conversation to people who don't have food on their radar." To realize this goal, the working group intends to develop a toolkit to help the community engage with the charter. For those that do have food on their radar, the food charter can enable current actors to recognize the multifaceted connections and interdependencies between their actions and a broader movement.

**Action:** The charter also has the potential to mobilize further action and inspire change in the nature and impact of community involvement and alternative food initiatives. There are several challenges in understanding the impact of the charter in this area. For example, defining what is meant by community engagement in a movement that is by definition comprised of a diverse set of actors and initiatives is extremely difficult. Furthermore, in an active community such as Waterloo, where localized efforts to progress the food justice movement exist already, identifying and measuring the impact of a non-binding policy

document is a challenge. Some measurable ways to utilize the charter might include using the quality of a shared vision discussed above to improve connectivity between various food justice actors, thereby enabling new collaborative partnerships across the region. An even more involved and tangible approach would be to adopt a food strategy as cities such as the cities of Vancouver and Toronto have done following their food charters. A food strategy would require particularly significant time and energy to develop and implement (public health planner), but might represent the most successful outcome of the food charter (volunteer).

**Policy:** The interviews indicated that a primary function of the charter is an accountability tool to remind regional council of the values held by the community and leverage further policy supporting the sustainability of the local food system. The advantage of a non-binding policy is that the food charter was more readily accepted by politicians (volunteer). However, to see tangible changes the responsibility lies with the community to use the charter as supporting documentation to initiate the changes they wish to see (councillor). While the charter may lack the weight of other types of policy documents, the participants were optimistic that any number of groups could “use [the charter] as a tool to promote what they’re doing, and... hold council accountable” (Researcher). A food charter is seen as one step in a process of reforming food policy, not the end policy objective.

**Systems:** The interviews suggest that new charters such as Waterloo’s have evolved with the food justice movement to extend their vision beyond the UN covenant of a universal right to food and also promote broader systemic changes to the food system as a whole. For example, the Waterloo food charter defines an approach to supporting ecological health that is more comprehensive relative to previous charters. The charter also promotes a broader definition of economic prosperity for the community, including the need for a living wage for farmers and consumers alike. Finally, the charter reaches out to different levels of government, proposing collaboration across jurisdictions to ensure a comprehensive food strategy that meets the needs of all food system actors across the country.

#### IV. Summary and Conclusions

This case study of the Waterloo Region food charter has revealed multiple roles for food charters in the broader food justice movement. In this paper, I have focused on five key roles: vision, awareness, action, policy, and systems.

One distinct challenge in realizing the goals of the food charter is in tracking and measuring the charter’s particular impact in the food justice movement. In part this is a chronic challenge in policy research; however, tracking change is also difficult in this case since the food justice movement is an established agent of change in the community already. It will be difficult to track which changes are a result of the charter.

In light of this challenge, I argue that the symbolic role of articulating a unified vision is valuable at any stage in the development of the food justice movement, as it can connect disparate actors regardless of their previous level of engagement. I also suggest that if the community does use the charter to promote policy change, this can be documented. Finally the development of a food strategy would be the most comprehensive and tangible method of ensuring the realization of the food charter goals in progressing the agenda of the local food justice movements, however further resources and organizational support are needed.

For other communities that are pursuing a food charter, I would highlight the importance of engaging all stakeholders throughout the process. Furthermore, plan for long term success by understanding the role of the charter in your community and securing key resources and partners for realizing the goals of the charter into the future.

#### V. References

1. Wekerle, G. R. (2004). Food Justice Movements. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*. 23: 378-386.
2. Mendes, W. (2007). Negotiating a Place for 'Sustainability' Policies in Municipal Planning and Governance. *Space and Polity*. 11(1), 95-119.
3. United Nations (1976). Covenant on Social, Economic, and Cultural Rights. Treaty Series. Vol 993, p.3.
4. Lang, T and Heasman, M. (2004). *Food Wars*. New York: Earthscan.
5. Wekerle, G. R. (2004). Food Justice Movements. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*. 23: 378-386.
6. Lang, T and Heasman, M. (2004). *Food Wars*. New York: Earthscan.
7. Raphael, D. (2004). Toronto Charter outlines future health policy. *Health Promotion International*. 19(2). 269-273
8. Macrae, R. (2011). A Joined-Up Food Policy for Canada. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*. 6, 424-457.