



GEOG 346 – Dr. Don Alexander

The Stamp of Local Approval

A case study of Local Food Plus

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Introduction

This case study will present the local food movement as an answer to the rising issue of food security in Canada and highlight one progressive new organization working for towards this goal. *Local Food Plus (LFP)* is a charitable non-profit organization based in Toronto, Ontario who proclaim themselves to be “Canada’s premier solutions provider for local sustainable procurement” (Local Food Plus). This case study will briefly outline the organization’s history, strategies, and successes, and then look to assess the efficacy of their approach. This case study will also speak to the opportunity for municipalities and institutions, partnered with *LFP*, to take a lead role in the local food movement.

The Issue

Food Security is an increasingly rising concern in many communities around the world today. What does it mean to be food secure? At the World Food Summit in 1996, food security was defined as “...all people at all times hav[ing] access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life” (World Health Organization). There have been various initiatives to promote and ensure food security worldwide, currently the most notable has been the local food movement, which encourages consumers to buy their food from local growers and producers. The terms “local” and “sustainable” as defined by *Local Food Plus* will be addressed in subsequent sections but first they will be briefly contextualised within a broader global perspective.

Local in a subjective term that can apply to a large area, such as a country, or a rather small area, such as a municipality. Regardless of the boundaries applied, the aims of the local food movement are relatively consistent. The local food movement encourages greater recirculation of

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moneys within the local economy, aims to reduce the carbon emissions required to transport food long distances, promotes more environmentally conscious farming practices, closes the association gap between producers and consumers, and most often results in healthier, higher quality products. One definition of the local food movement describes it as “a collaborative effort to build more locally based, self-reliant food economies—one in which sustainable food production, processing, distribution, and consumption [are] integrated to enhance the economic, environmental, and local health of a particular place.”

The term sustainable has become an quite the buzzword of late encompassing an extensive and increasingly diluted meaning. For the purposes of this case study the definition of a sustainable food system given, by Food Secure Canada, a Canadian non-governmental organization, will be recognized. A sustainable food system insists that:

Food is...produced, harvested (including fishing and other wild food harvest), processed, distributed and consumed in a manner which maintains and enhances the quality of land, air and water for future generations, and in which people are able to earn a living wage in a safe and healthy working environment by harvesting, growing, producing, processing, handling, retailing and serving food.

(Food Secure Canada)

The Globe and Mail featuring *LFP* in 2011 presented data which painted a general picture of the greenhouse gas reduction and economic benefits of switching to local food.

“If 10000 Toronto families shifted \$10 of their weekly food purchase to local for a year,

it would equate to taking 908 cars off the road for a year” and would shift \$5.2 million away from imports and into local economies (Leeder)¹.

Case Study Background

Local Food Plus was launched by founder Lori Stahlbrand in 2006 in response to the growing local food movement in Toronto. Stahlbrand holds a masters degree in Environmental Studies and has been a passionate advocate for sustainable food system for some time working with organizations such as World Wildlife Fund and the Toronto Food Policy Council (Friedman). She originally planned to do her doctoral thesis on the subject of sustainable food systems but decided that rather than writing about it, she wanted to go out and do something about it (Biggs). Initially *Local Food Plus* consisted of home-based staff and a UPS mailbox. By 2009 they had a six desk office and 11 employees.

Strategies and Approaches

The main focus of *Local Food Plus* is their certification process. *LFP* has created their own certification label: Certified Local Sustainable. *LFP* defines the term local on the provincial scale. Therefore food that is grown in Ontario is deemed as local when sold within Ontario. With regards to sustainability, they take a thorough and impressively holistic approach. According to their website, they offer certification to farmers and processors who work to:



¹ Based on the comparison between food produced within 200 miles versus from California or Florida. Complete calculation details are presented in the Globe and Mail article.

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1. Employ...production systems that reduce or eliminate synthetic pesticides and fertilizers; avoid the use of hormones, antibiotics, and genetic engineering; and conserve soil and water.
2. Provide safe and fair working conditions for on-farm labour.
3. Provide healthy and humane care for livestock.
4. Protect and enhance wildlife habitat and biodiversity on working farm landscapes.
5. Reduce on-farm energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions.

(Local Food Plus, *Certify*)

The first step has been to getting farmers and producers certified. The next has been to find a market for their products. This is the second largest focus of *LFP*, to create partnerships with retailers, restaurants/caterers, institutions and distributors. Once signed on with *LFP*, these partners pledge to purchase a percentage of their food from *Certified Local Sustainable* providers. The program is set up with realistic goals of starting small and slowly increasing the percentage of local food procured over time.

To date *Local Food Plus* has certified over 100 farmers and processors. They started in Ontario and have recently branched out to include partners in British Columbia, Manitoba, Quebec and parts of Atlantic Canada. They have also acquired several institutional partners, most notably the University of Toronto and the Town of Markham which will both be discussed in the following *Achievements* section.

Since *LFP* is the first organization of its kind in Canada, the staff have had to learn almost everything from scratch and they have much from the experiential learning process. This has made them a broadly knowledgeable in the field of local food procurement (though they are quick to dismiss the title of expert). Nevertheless, they are now offering local sustainable consulting to businesses and institutions.

Achievements to date

The first major partnership secured was with the University of Toronto (UofT), which truly help launch the *LFP* name. Together, *LFP* and University administrators worked for a year to change the institution's purchasing strategy to reflect a greater emphasis on supporting sustainable practices (Friedman). With some guidance provided by *LFP*, Aramark, a national services manager, secured the UofT food service contract in May 2006. Their bid included the guarantee that 10% of the food served in select campus cafeterias was *Certified Local Sustainable*. The percentage at University of Toronto has since grown to 25%. McGill University became the most recent institutional partner in May 2011.

In June 2008, the Town of Markham, located just north of Toronto, announced their partnership, and the first such by a municipality, with *Local Food Plus*. The town agreed to use a minimum of 10% *Certified Local Sustainable* products for all food and catering services within their facilities, with that number increasing by 5% each year (Town of Markham).

LFP has received various awards since its inception including the Tides Canada Foundation's Top 10 Innovative Non-Profits award, Canadian Environment Award, and the Green Toronto Award. The most recent was the Toronto Community Foundation's Vital Idea Award in 2010. The Vital Ideas program provides grants to organizations "that have a solid track record of

success making Toronto a better place to live, work, learn and grow” (Toronto Community Foundation).

Critical Assessment

The *Certified Local Sustainable* label provided by *Local Food Plus* is truly the first of its kind, encouraging an impressively high standard of production in many areas. This could prove a welcome service from those interested in creating a more sustainable food system. Even within the local food community there are concerns that local is not enough and that it neglects any other important facets of a sustainable food system. Is it more important to buy locally grown food covered in pesticides or organic food from 1000 miles away? Being a non-government organization has allowed the staff at *LFP* to write their own certification criteria to the standard they feel reflects real improvements in all aspects of social, environmental and economic regeneration of local communities. Therefore, the *Certified Local Sustainable* assures that the consumer is supporting those farmers and producers whom are truly working to create a more sustainable food system.

The future success of *Local Food Plus* will greatly depend on whether they are able to create larger market for small-scale producers and in turn increase their income viability. In many areas of Canada small-scale producers are being out competed by large industrial producers. Small-scale farmers often struggle to make a fair income therefore the added cost of certification could act to discriminate against those that can't afford it. Further research would need to be done to assess the direct benefits of certification to small-scale farmers. Measures would need to be put in place to avoid this situation, otherwise *LFP* runs the risk of promoting an unbalanced market based on one's ability to invest in certification.

Though *LFP*'s program is new and innovative, the idea customer driven labelling is not. Unfortunately, the recent proliferation of eco-labeling and other certification mechanisms for sustainable products have become so numerous that they run the risk of overwhelming the consumer and subsequently creating a state of sustainability apathy. To be certain, the *Certified Local Sustainable* label will find some following but also runs the risk of being discarded as yet another greenwashing mechanism. Continued exposure and good on-the-ground support and implementation will be key to helping in stand out against the rest.

This is where the increased benefits of targeting institutions such as universities becomes apparent. Not only are universities large purchasers, but they also provide great opportunity to engage with and inform an open and eager community of young people. By proudly displaying and promoting the *LFP* logo on campuses it encourages discussion and action amongst the student population. Institutions in turn are able to benefit from the marketing and recognition received for their progressive stance on sustainability.

“Local Food Plus has identified an exciting opportunity for universities to play a leadership role in building local sustainable food systems. It offers both the institution and its students a way to give back to the community.”

Anne Macdonald, Director of Ancillary Services, University of Toronto

Institutional food procurement has become very systematized, with efficient and widely accepted guidelines and procedures. As with many of these systems it can be hard to convince any deviation from the business-as-usual model. *LFP* can help to make this transition to local food much easier by doing the legwork of identifying suppliers and creating valuable working relationships. Their ability to provide successful working examples such as University of

Toronto will be key. *Local Food Plus* may represent what VIU Geography professor Don Alexander calls a “transitional” rather than “radical” prescription for change (class discussion, March 29, 2012). It promotes incremental changes over time which does not represent drastic change but may prove palatable enough to be implemented by institution long entrenched in the old system.

Conclusions

Food security is an ever-growing concern for many and the local food movement seems to incorporate many of the most important facets that can help to achieve this goal. *Local Food Plus*, with its focus on building partnerships between local farmers and local purchasers while promoting high environmental and employment standards, is well positioned to play a key role in this movement.

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