

## Scaling up: Bringing public institutions and food service corporations into the project for a local, sustainable food system in Ontario\*

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**Abstract.** This paper reports on a relationship between the University of Toronto and a non-profit, non-governmental (“third party”) certifying organization called Local Flavour Plus (LFP). The University as of August 2006 requires its corporate caterers to use local and sustainable farm products for a small but increasing portion of meals for most of its 60,000 students. LFP is the certifying body, whose officers and consultants have strong relations of trust with sustainable farmers. It redefines standards and verification to create ladders for farmers, Aramark and Chartwells (the corporations that won the bid), and the University, to continuously raise standards of sustainability. After years of frustrated efforts, other Ontario institutions are expressing interest, opening the possibility that a virtuous circle could lead to rapid growth in local, sustainable supply chains. The paper examines the specificities of the LFP approach and of the Toronto and Canadian context. Individuals in LFP acquired crucial skills, insights, experience, resources, and relationships of trust over 20 years within the Toronto “community of food practice,” located in a supportive municipal, NGO and social movement context.

**Key words:** Certification systems, Community of practice, Ecolabels, Food citizenship, Food service corporations, FoodShare, Institutional purchases, Local Flavour Plus, Local food systems, Short supply chains, Social justice, Sustainable food systems, University of Toronto, Values-based markets

**Abbreviations:** FS – FoodShare; DF – Debbie Field; IPM – Integrated Pest Management; ISO – International Standards Organization; LFP – Local Flavour Plus; LS – Lori Stahlbrand; MS – Michael Schreiner; PC – President’s Choice™ (brand of Loblaw’s Supermarket); RM – Rod MacRae; TFPC – Toronto Food Policy Council; UofT – University of Toronto; UK – United Kingdom; US – United States; USDA – United States Department of Agriculture; WWF – World Wildlife Fund

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### Introduction

Food politics are moving quickly. Food is increasingly understood as a sector with great potential for regional economic development, if only supply chains linking farmers to customers can include local processors and merchants. Public debates increasingly link sustainability to proximity (Pollan, 2006). As long distance trade

breaks the link between organic and sustainable agriculture (Guthman, 2004), and as “food miles” implicate agriculture more deeply with climate change and fossil fuels (Millstone and Lang, 2004: 66–67), localization is becoming explicitly central to understanding sustainable food systems (Pretty and Hine, 2001). At the same time, the divide between “conventional, long,” and “alternative, short” supply chains is clearly too stark, and paths towards regional food economies must traverse wider, perhaps global networks (Morgan et al., 2006; Maye and Ilberry, 2006).

This paper describes what could be a breakthrough in longstanding attempts to “scale up” local supply chains in Toronto, Canada. Toronto is notable for both a vibrant network of small businesses in food production and

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retailing, and a vital community of food activists, municipal and non-governmental organizations (Donald and Blay-Palmer, 2006; Hassanein, 2003; MacRae and Toronto Food Policy Council, 1999). The two come together in an understanding, based on two decades of practice and reflection, within a large network of individuals and organizations, that food security and sustainability are intrinsically linked through a project to (re)build local food supply chains (Marsden and Murdoch, 2006).

However, for fifteen years attempts by community organizations to get supermarkets to source local farm products, and by municipal food officials to convince public institutions to buy local farm products, all met with failure. In contrast to parts of Europe where deeply rooted food cultures offer some scope to shift the retail sector towards local supply chains (Fonte, 2006), Canada can be called a “placeless foodscape” (Morgan et al., 2006: 196). In such a context, “creative public procurement could be the most important single factor in fashioning food localization” (Ibid.).

Creative public procurement is suddenly beginning in Toronto, in ways no one, least of all the key players, anticipated. The University of Toronto (UofT) in May 2006 announced that Aramark and Chartwells Corporations had won competitive bids as of August 1 to provide food services to most of the 60,000 students on its three campuses. The contract specifies that a portion of the food provided must be local and sustainable as verified by a new organization called Local Flavour Plus (LFP). The two officers of this newly incorporated nonprofit organization, Lori Stahlbrand and Mike Schreiner, supported by the consultant writing their standards, Rod MacRae, worked with sympathetic administrators in the University for a year to alter the institution’s purchasing strategy towards social and ecological responsibility. This paper reports on the model they invented, based on interviews with some of those involved. It concludes with a brief reflection on the vibrant “community of food practice” (Waddell, 2005: 136–37) in Toronto, which originated over a quarter of a century ago, and links social responsibility and other issues to sustainability. This community, and its public and nongovernmental institutions, provides the context for these individuals to implement a promising new model.

### **The Toronto context: A unique configuration in North America**

In Toronto, sustainability is less starkly contrasted to social justice than in the U.S. (Wekerle, 2004). It was not always so. Until recently, tension between the food bank community and food security organizations in Toronto

echoed the debate between Allen and Guthman (2006) and Kloppenburg and Hassanein (2006) over farm-to-school initiatives in the U.S. That debate centres on the effects of attempts to promote local supply chains on the universal social justice aims of school lunch programs. (Allen et al., 2003; Allen and Guthman, 2006; Kloppenburg and Hassanein, 2006). It is framed by the specific U.S. history of national, publicly provided school lunches – which in turn draws on its unique history of agricultural surplus disposal (Poppendieck, 1986).

By contrast, there is no national student nutrition program in Canada, a fact that often surprises Americans. As a result, the U.S. debate never touched student nutrition projects in Toronto. Efforts to achieve a national school food program in Canada came only in the 1990s, and were spearheaded by FoodShare, the largest and oldest community food security organization in the city. FoodShare’s delivery of fresh and (when possible) local produce to schools thus differs crucially from U.S. farm to school programs. Efforts to create a universal school lunch program in the late 20th and early 21st centuries have been intrinsically shaped by issues centred on cultural and social diversity, food quality, health, loss of farmers and farmland, and sustainable, local food systems.

The larger goals and strategies of Toronto food policy officials and activists are also specific to the Toronto and Canadian context. While planners in the United States have recently recognized food as a distinct focus, most food politics in the US are concerned with availability of retail stores, especially supermarkets, to low income neighborhoods (Pothukuchi, 2005). This is also a problem in Toronto, but to a lesser degree. One reason may be Canada’s somewhat more generous and inclusive social assistance. Two other reasons are more important. First, in contrast to starkly racialized class divisions in the U.S. (which are not absent in Toronto), diverse immigrant communities have sustained a web of small specialty shops, often in low-income neighborhoods (Donald and Blay-Palmer, 2006). Second, successful community organizations actively link accessibility and sustainability, particularly in low-income neighborhoods. In particular, The Stop Community Food Centre, located in an area of closed industries, adopts

“a unique perspective [that] brings together a number of approaches in the field of food security, melding respectful emergency food delivery with community development, social justice and environmental sustainability...[through] community kitchens and dining, urban agriculture, a food bank, drop-ins, civic engagement and pre- and postnatal nutrition and support. All the The Stop’s efforts are based on the belief that food is a basic human right.”<sup>1</sup>

The overriding goal of Toronto food politics in recent years, foodbanks notwithstanding, is to link long-term food security and sustainable agriculture to the (re)building of local supply chains.<sup>2</sup> The Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC) lends institutional support and network coordination not only to food security projects, but also to local farmers. Unusually, farmers are represented on a municipal council. Through extending its efforts beyond its institutional home in the Greater Toronto Department of Public Health, the TFPC has for over a decade and a half brought agriculture into municipal politics. At a well attended World Food Day event on October 4, 2006, a proclamation by Mayor David Miller recognized agriculture as a key to the future of the 7th largest city in North America: the city “supports urban agriculture within city boundaries, as well as the preservation of farmland in the surrounding regions.” It quotes Toronto’s Food Charter of 2001 on “the right to healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food,” and names the newly created Greater Toronto Agricultural Area Action Committee (headed by the outspoken former head of an activist farm organization) as key to the city’s commitment to achieve it. It ends with the proclamation “to celebrate the contribution of agriculturalists to food security.”<sup>3</sup> On the community organization side, others have followed FoodShare’s lead not only to foster connections “From Field to Table,” but also to find creative ways to combine service to low-income clients with encouragement for sustainable practices by local farmers.

This context has allowed community and government organizations to converge on a focus linking social justice and sustainability via local supply chains. For instance, the Government of the Province of Ontario in 2005 created a Greenbelt, among other goals, to protect 1.8 million acres surrounding Toronto from further encroachment on farmland.<sup>4</sup> One specific feature of the Greenbelt to promote local farming is the first certification of farmers’ markets to ensure that participants are farmers and products are locally grown.<sup>5</sup> This sort of initiative to protect local farmers sets the stage for a search to find ways to increase their access to the nearly 6 million eaters in Toronto.

### **Why public institutions?**

Local community food organizations believe they have reached the limits of scale in both supply and delivery. The pioneering Toronto nonprofit, FoodShare, after twenty years of success distributing “good food boxes,” expects to peak at 4000 families (see Johnston and Baker, 2005). The box schemes expand by assisting other communities across Canada.<sup>6</sup> FoodShare’s community

kitchens, gardens, composting, urban agriculture, job training programs, and farmers markets touch the lives of tens of thousands of people. Through innovative approaches, such as the student nutrition program, FoodShare models public funding for local diversity. Yet “community economic development” of this kind, according to FoodShare director Debbie Field, cannot solve social problems.<sup>7</sup> Nor can it support a transition to a local, sustainable food system.

Retail has reached limits, unless new conditions force a change in future. On one side, small organic businesses specializing in local products face competition from industrial organic imports. The organics delivery business most committed to building local networks, founded by LFP officer Mike Schreiner, recovered from the crisis of supermarket entry but finds it challenging to compete with the prices charged by corporate retailers who don’t share a similar commitment to local sustainable food. Led by the chain Loblaw’s and its President’s Choice (PC) Organics™ Line, Canadian supermarkets are integrating organic imports into their conventional, long-distance supply chains (Guthman, 2004; Pollan, 2006). While the new Canadian organic standards are higher, they are not expected to affect USDA certified imports. While legitimizing organics to a wider range of consumers, supermarkets break the link between sustainable and local implicit in the original organics social movement.<sup>8</sup> “Food miles” (Lang and Heasman, 2004: 233–40) show no sign of diminishing through existing market practices. On the other side, supermarkets have not been receptive to attempts by nonprofit organizations to place local, sustainable crops, such as the frustrated efforts of World Wildlife Fund Canada (with Stahlbrand and MacRae part of that team) to place sustainably grown Ontario apples in Toronto supermarkets (despite supplies large enough to export to England).<sup>9</sup>

Nor can the TFPC, part of municipal government, do better than nonprofit and commercial efforts to “scale up” sustainable local food systems. The TFPC is widely recognized in North America as a creative organization, which has successfully leveraged public health and other municipal infrastructures (such as publicly owned warehouse for FoodShare) into support for an elaborate web of food-related social and economic projects. Its founding Coordinator, Rod MacRae, recognized the potential of public institutional purchases to scale up the market for local and organic food over ten years ago. Yet access to sympathetic elected Councillors on the Council and to fellow city employees did not encourage the slightest hope at the time.<sup>10</sup> The strategy of institutional buying was ahead of its time in the 1990s. Even as the strategy has made a sudden breakthrough via a nonprofit organization, according to the present coordinator, Wayne Roberts, it is still blocked to the TFPC.<sup>11</sup>

### Building ladders: a collaborative approach

Local Flavour Plus took shape while its founding individuals worked with UofT officials to rewrite the University's food services contract. LFP created a collaborative and flexible model of standards and verification that gives ladders to farmers and corporations to scale up local supply chains for sustainably grown products.

LFP seeks to make it easy to enter into collaborative relationships to scale up local sustainable supply chains. The process began in February 2005, when Stahlbrand, founder of LFP (as it eventually came to be called), was co-teaching a senior seminar in food security with her partner Wayne Roberts (Coordinator of the TFPC) as part of the equity studies program at New College, a residential and teaching unit of the UofT. Their practicum included a class survey among New College students, which showed that they were willing to pay somewhat higher costs for local, sustainable food, and research into University procurement in North America, which mainly relied on Food Alliance's ecolabel. She mentioned the results to the Principal, David Clandfield.

Stahlbrand says, "...the thing he was most interested in was that this wasn't an all or nothing proposition. You could start with just one product, and you could slowly expand as the market could bear it and as farmers became certified." The continuous improvement approach gives the University of Toronto (UofT) a ladder. Clandfield called meetings and organized presentations where, he says, "Lori wowed them." It led to extended collaboration between Stahlbrand and UofT administrators to write sustainability requirements into the specification for bids for a food services contract to replace the one expiring in July 2006. They designed a contract requiring increasing percentages of LFP products each year, and offering incentives to exceed targets. It provides a ladder for giant food services corporation to climb over the years of the contract. Contractors Aramark (which won the larger bid), Chartwells (the smaller) and Sodexo began learning as they prepared bids, asking LFP for guidance.

#### *Ladders for farmers; proximity, collaboration, flexibility*

Three innovations are key to evolution of the LFP approach: local supply chains – proximity – as a pivot of sustainability; collaborative relations to help individual farmers and the whole sector improve; and flexible verification to help farmers solve problems that arise in meeting standards.

Proximity is an LFP ladder for *both* organic and conventional farmers. Although difficult to specify, especially in sparsely settled regions of Canada, Stahlbrand's commitment to sustainability led her to insist on local criteria. LFP brought in Rod MacRae to write stan-

dards. MacRae had worked with Stahlbrand at WWF and on a popular book with her and Roberts (Roberts et al., 1999); had long experience in both organics standards and government (including nine years coordinating the TFPC); a doctorate in sustainable agriculture policy, and a commitment to local food systems. LFP works with and against the arbitrary nature of "local." It begins with political jurisdictions. LFP certifies within the province of Ontario, allowing exceptions for borders with other provinces but not (for legal reasons) with the U.S., despite the fact that the national border cuts across natural regions and waterways. Most important, local refers to the whole supply chain. LFP reverses conventional incentives, and encourages regional links (Local Flavour Plus, 2006).

By making available a greatly expanded market, LFP hopes to balance the scales in favor of *local* ecological farmers. The Canadian organics movement has succeeded in getting higher government standards than the US National Organic Program. This makes it even more difficult for Ontario farmers to compete with industrial organic imports. Stahlbrand had first looked to U.S. Food Alliance, "rather than reinventing the wheel...and having to write standards ourselves." Stahlbrand (2003) But Food Alliance "didn't deal with energy and there wasn't anything overtly local." As a result, frozen blueberries and raspberries, which are grown and frozen in Ontario, are also imported from a Food Alliance certified 4000 acre operation in Oregon.<sup>12</sup> When the Food Alliance connection broke down, Stahlbrand realized "we can make these standards anything we want to make them because we are starting from scratch!" (LS). As LFP standards evolved, they aimed to turn proximity from a liability into an advantage.

At the same time, ecological farmers stand to benefit from the high standards they have maintained. LFP's environmental production standard automatically recognizes organic and other environmental production systems. However, farmers will have to meet new requirements for biodiversity, labor, animal welfare, and energy use, as well as proximity. Energy standards are a notable innovation. Even more notable are labor standards, whose absence in the US, according to Guthman (2004), was a fatal flaw that facilitated industrial take-over of organics in California. Organic farmers will have access to the same collaborative relationships and flexible verification practices as conventional farmers to improve with LFP.

To meet the proximity standard, organic farmers in the Toronto area can benefit from existing local organic supply chains. LFP Director of Marketing Mike Schreiner brings a loyal network of organic farmers and processors created over a decade through his organic home delivery business, which emphasized local as much as possible. He calls it a "values-based" business. His goal was always political, to build sustainable economies.

Beginning with a Community Supported Agriculture project using a local currency, he helped organic farmers overcome what he saw as quality barriers to market entry. Paradoxically, what was grown without chemicals and with attention to ecosystem integrity was not handled properly, so that it would “die the next morning in your refrigerator.” Organic farmers often came from non-farm backgrounds. “There was a lot of historical knowledge about how to handle foods that wasn’t there.” Schreiner had grown up on a farm in Kansas, where his grandmother had milled wheat into flour, which she still does in retirement. He also learned by working in grocery stores. By helping them to market their products, Schreiner got past the attitude he encountered – “well, it’s grown without chemicals, so therefore, eat it!” He taught organic farmers better post-harvest handling techniques. As these local organic supply chains hit limits relative to “mainstream corporate organics,” LFP offers them a food services corporate ladder (MS).

LFP’s flexible certification addresses another barrier of the organics movement. Organic certification is an all or nothing proposition. The clear boundary between organic and conventional is intentionally reinforced by rigorous requirements for transition to organic. It encourages division, even hostility, between organics and those committed to the conventional food system. Organic farmers understandably consider themselves burdened by market and government practices favoring conventional farmers, an attitude noted by both MacRae and Schreiner as a barrier to growth. Conventional farmers and government ministries of agriculture understandably take organics to be a rejection of all they do. LFP standards are instead based on a continuous improvement model, with support for farmers to move in the right direction in place of penalties if they fail to meet specific rules.

LFP’s innovative point system is designed to help farmers move in the direction of sustainability in all of its categories. A base of mandatory conditions must be met in each category to be verified, but once verified, bonuses reward improvement in each category. Out of a total of 1,200 points, farmers must meet 75%, which LFP understands to “represent significant progress in the transition to more sustainable practices” (Local Flavour Plus, 2006: 1). Thus, while it is mandatory for a supply chain to be within Ontario (a very large territory), the LFP local standard awards a 50 point bonus to farmers and processors within 200 km of final consumers. Some small producers are already planning to divert from US to domestic sales (RM).

LFP introduces collaborative practices designed to improve the sector as a whole. In order to minimize administration for those already participating in certification programs, LFP “piggybacks” on existing high standards, such as organic and the animal welfare standards of the British Columbia Society for the Prevention

of Cruelty to Animals (RM). All farmers are facing a proliferation of governmental, corporate, commodity sector, and third party norms and “performance standards.” The “Introduction” to LFP farm standards states, “In the spirit of continuous improvement, standards are strengthened annually, based on input from growers and other experts” (LFP, 2006: 1).

Building on his experience with Integrated Pest Management (IPM) systems with World Wildlife Fund Canada, MacRae devised standards and verification procedures to assist farmers in meeting production protocols. He recalls an IPM instance when a redlisted (banned) chemical for potatoes had to be temporarily reclassified on the yellow list (permitted with specific conditions) because the local pesticide vendor would not carry the listed yellow substitute. LFP standards are thus designed to work consciously with the “tension...between differentiating from the [conventional] norm and having...a sufficient pool of people who can meet [the higher standard] so that you guarantee supply... in the short term.” The aim is the highest possible standard. The means is to “shift...provisions to make them more rigorous over time but at a speed that allows producers...to evolve with the protocol.”(RM)

#### *Ladders for transnational food services corporations: local auditing*

Corporate buyers demand protocols, but don’t always know which to use, especially across regions. Much has changed in the decade since MacRae first tried to convince municipal institutions and hospitals to purchase food according to social and sustainable criteria. At that time, he was a government insider, a public servant in the City’s Department of Public Health. Yet in retrospect MacRae thinks the obstacles were mainly to do with undeveloped corporate supply chains, at least with respect to local farmers and processors. Ten years ago what we now call *traceability* – a practice adapted by corporations from the organic movement – was just beginning in many commodities. MacRae was told by municipal and hospital purchasers at the time that local buying was not consistent with specific protocols of vendors concerning food safety and quality. He retrospectively understands these statements to reflect an early stage in restructuring of corporate supply chains (see Marsden et al., 2000). Over the decade, it has become clear that massive investment in electronic tracking systems paradoxically makes it possible for corporations to monitor *local* supply chains. Still, they need incentives and assistance to do so.

Aramark, the larger UofT supplier, follows demand. The corporate website<sup>13</sup> insists on this. Its “guidance” refers only to health: Avian flu (“...not a food-borne illness.”); Food Allergies (“Upon request, we share with

customers all ingredients that go into our final product.”); and Nutrition: “Just4U™ recipes are developed for superior taste and analyzed by dieticians for nutritional content based on several criteria, including Low Fat, Heart Healthy, Carb Counter, Cal Smart, Vegetarian and Vegan;” and “ARAMARK’s ‘Fresh and Healthy’ educational and promotional campaign directs consumers to the healthier items available...” “Its school contracts “provid[e] nutritious, healthy food to the children we serve at more than 440 school districts around the country,” including “nutritional meals and educational programs for...the K12 market,” and “[i]n 2004, the ARAMARK Charitable Fund...awarded a grant to the American Diabetes Association Research Foundation to fund research into childhood obesity.”

The corporation introduces new issues in response to its perception of consumer wishes: “ARAMARK is dedicated to providing its customers with a broad portfolio of coffee options...including coffees certified as Organic, Shade Grown and Fair Trade...”; however, the word *sustainable* does not appear, nor as the coffee example suggests, does any reference to distance. There is one reference to *local*: “ARAMARK’s mission is to understand consumer preferences...In spite of the challenges, in circumstances where there is strong demand, ARAMARK works with local providers to ensure they meet our top-rate safety and quality standards in bringing cage-free eggs to consumers.” Even for this one ingredient, it is not clear whether Aramark’s offer leads or follows the UofT contract. This suggests a highly selective translation of environmental and health demands of social movements into consumer preferences, showing no real attention to the agricultural end of the supply chain, what I have described as an emergent “corporate-environmental food regime” (Friedmann, 2005). So big institutional customers can lead in a new way.

*Ladders for Public Institutions: extending the “No Sweat” experience*

For its part, UofT during the same period had acquired experience in responsible purchasing. As a publicly funded university, UofT had suffered serious cutbacks during years of deficit politics, and responded to a per-capita government funding formula by increasing enrollments and tuition (though still very low by US standards). Students in recent years, however, despite increased tuition bills, had demanded that the University take social conditions into account in its corporate purchases.

The UofT finally complied. It purchases apparel according to social criteria advocated by the “no sweat” campaign of the Maquila Solidarity Network – a policy recently adopted as well by the municipality of Toronto for firefighters, police, transit workers and paramedic

uniforms (*Annex Gleaner*, 2006: 2). This shift in purchasing to include criteria other than price set the stage for students interested in local, sustainable food from UofT catering corporations. They didn’t need to demonstrate. With help from teacher Stahlbrand, a small group of students in New College (one of the undergraduate residential colleges) researched models for UofT to consider. Then New College Principal Clandfield took the initiative, and introduced Stahlbrand to his colleagues responsible for purchasing in the wider UofT, where she introduced the students’ findings. They enthusiastically embraced the idea. MacRae says of Stahlbrand, “She has tapped into...[a] vein I have never seen before. I have never seen a project that has received so little opposition.” The UofT is proud to announce its new policy (Munk Centre for International Studies, 2006), and other educational institutions are expressing interest.

**Enabling cooperation: values-based facilitation of market relationships**

LFP has invented a promising way to assist a large public institution, two transnational food service corporations, and regional farmers to navigate a foggy climate of proliferating regulations and protocols. A proliferation of norms, protocols, and “performance standards” has made government agencies, which once monopolized regulation, into one among many types of “certifiers.” Government institutions built in the 1970s or earlier, even while requiring extensive records to be kept, have great difficulty adapting to differentiated supply chains. The Ontario Milk Marketing Board, for instance, reluctantly responded to pressure to allow a separate organic stream a few years ago, but other than that, according to Stahlbrand, “it’s all or nothing.”

LFP, like other “third party certifiers,” does some work from which governments have withdrawn. The Canadian government, through its recent Agricultural Policy Framework, disperses some responsibilities it used to perform. For some protocols a government agency may inspect as before. For others, in one example, it gives grants to commodity groups to develop and enforce food safety performance standards in field crops (RM). Government, commodity producer organizations, and third party certifiers, including – and perhaps especially – nonprofit organizations, approach regulation from different angles (Bingen and Busch, 2006: 247–249).

Nonprofit status prohibits political activity and commerce, but allows LFP to provide “marketing support” to farmers who can’t pay for marketing sustainable products that should bring a premium price. It uses the money it raises from foundations “to educate people about sustainable agriculture and provide markets, not

for individual farmers but for sustainable farming.” Of course, nonprofit status is necessary to win foundation grants, which provide the income that cannot be generated through charging for services. Finally, the relationship is more comfortable between organizations, such as the UofT and LFP, when both are both nonprofits (LS).

LFP intends to at least partly shift the highly unequal balance of market power. MacRae says, first, that marketing associations and links to “progressive buyers” are among several shifts by growers wanting to be “connected to something” rather than atomized and dependent on corporations. Second, as an alternative to standard corporate protocols, LFP does not necessarily accept most International Standards Organization (ISO) protocols, which are oriented to large operations and framed universally. Generic standards of the ISO type are applicable without reference to the local conditions, and inappropriate to small operations, e.g., having a company officer responsible for environmental management. LFP protocols are more flexible and conducive to adaptation to diverse sites, an approach more favourable to the small scale and specific cropping systems of sustainable agriculture. According to MacRae, ISO might require “a plan for minimizing soil erosion, whereas our [protocol] would be you have to have a four-course rotation.”

While the future will tell how well this works, and what unanticipated challenges will confront the experiment, LFP hopes that Aramark’s purchases to prepare meals for tens of thousands of students will reorient supply chains towards local and sustainable. LFP does not negotiate contracts, including quantities and prices. MacRae: “we can’t guarantee anything for anybody.” Nonetheless, some small growers are “scaling up” in anticipation of LFP-certified sales, based on the trust they bear to MacRae, Schreiner, and the consultant who is training inspectors for LFP. Garry Lean was approached because of his 25 years’ experience as an organics inspector, his flexibility (“we weren’t sure he’d want to since it’s not all organic”), and relations with farmers: “When you say to a farmer, Garry is our director of inspection, they say, ok, I’m comfortable with this.” (RM)

MacRae envisions that “once suppliers are LFP verified, many of them [will sell]...to multiple customers.” He hopes that food service companies will encourage existing suppliers to meet LFP standards, and LFP will no longer have to create new relationships. Echoing his colleague Mike Schreiner, the values-based entrepreneur who outlived the PC Organics™ crisis, and reflecting on the failure of Lori Stahlbrand’s efforts for WWF to place IPM apples in supermarkets, Rod MacRae hopes that “this may be the way to retail in the end.” Whether or not it reaches the retail sector, one of the lessons collectively learned by LFP is how to use the legal framework of nonprofit organizations to enable relationships between small farmers and institutional buyers.

### **The Toronto context: a vibrant community of (food) practice**

What is intriguing about the UofT contract is an experimental configuration centered on a nonprofit organization which works toward enabling a constructive market linkage between local small farmers and large transnational corporations. A public institutional purchaser is specifying local. By rewarding improvements, the contract encourages a large transnational corporation to use its advanced tracking techniques to enable small quantities to enter via local supply chains. These tracking technologies are not sufficient for either the incentive or the practical knowledge of how to implement local sourcing. This is provided by LFP. Its web of relationships allows for a bridge between policy and activist orientations, and between place-based and industrial conventions (Goodman, 2003:1–2).

Whatever the degree of success turns out to be, the design is creative. It is worth inquiring into the basis of this social creativity, which both draws upon and facilitates “food citizenship” across not-for-profit (including municipal government) *and* market spaces (DeLind, 2002:223). Stahlbrand, Schreiner, and MacRae are three of the many creative individuals in a Toronto community of food practice that goes back more than two decades. Like the others quoted in this article – Field, Roberts, Parvinian and even Clandfield (who sponsored a student food bank and offered a course in food security) – and hundreds not mentioned – the three acquired crucial technical skills, organizational insights, negotiating experience, institutional resources, and personal relationships of trust over 20 years within the Toronto context. All three credit their experiences and relationships to what can be understood as a *community of practice* of Toronto food politics.<sup>14</sup>

Unlike most uses of the phrase (Waddell, 2005: 136–37), I understand the Toronto community of food practice to include more than networks among individuals, and more than their skillful access to institutional resources. It also includes the specific functions of a municipal government body, the Toronto Food Policy Council, and a vibrant network of nongovernmental food security organizations, especially the largest, FoodShare. These organizations have provided strategic resources, as well as opportunities to experiment and learn from others’ experiments, to the diverse individuals who move through them, usually leaving behind new projects and ideas. These institutions are unique in linking a wide range of top-down and bottom-up initiatives that emerge and evolve within and across a range of “sectors” – public, voluntary (NGO), and market.

Schreiner and Stahlbrand met at the Toronto Food Policy Council, on the day in early 2005 when Coordinator Roberts invited both to address the Council. Each had

turned to the Council for help in scaling up markets in sustainable agriculture in Ontario, but from different sectors – private business and NGO. Schreiner was ready to move on from the organic distribution business, as he turned over management to a new partner. His business had started with a grant from the City of Toronto administered by the TFPC, which allowed him to buy a refrigerated truck, and with low cost warehouse space at FoodShare. Stahlbrand was looking for support for an Ontario ecolabel, at the time envisioned as Food Alliance Canada, which grew out of her work with WWF Canada. She had already begun to work under FoodShare's welcoming umbrella, which allowed her to apply for grants under their charitable status. These small grants kept her going for a few months at a time. Both Schreiner and Stahlbrand had worked independently for years to arrive at convergent understandings. The embracing community of practice, via TFPC, allowed them to collaborate quickly.

That these two food innovators had worked on marketing sustainable food in the Toronto area for many years without meeting testifies to the breadth of the community. Roberts says that "Toronto has incredible bridging capital." Roberts acted as a bridge between market and social movement organization experiences by connecting Stahlbrand and Schreiner. But this was not a social introduction. They met as a result of requesting help from a public agency and its director, and in the course of addressing the Food Policy Council to solicit advice and support. TFPC is an institutional pivot for the food community of practice.

At the same time, community webs are intricate. MacRae was Coordinator of TFPC before Roberts, and the two had co-authored a popular book on sustainable food with Stahlbrand. Although she and Roberts are personal partners, Stahlbrand met MacRae independently. Each was consulting (on different projects) for WWF Canada. Stahlbrand's fascination with ecolabels and contacts with Food Alliance came from the WWF project, as did her ability to move beyond FA's limitations. She then took her quest, as do many food innovators, to FoodShare, where Debbie Field gave her support and practical help to explore and experiment. Like the Toronto Food Policy Council, this enduring and shape-shifting NGO is a pivot of the community of practice.

As former Co-Chair of TFPC and a food researcher at the University of Toronto, I am part of this community of food practice, and played a small role in the unfolding story. A government research grant at UofT, which included FoodShare as a "community partner," financed a small seminar at which Stahlbrand first introduced the concept of an Ontario ecolabel in December 2004. The event attracted an unusually mixed audience for the University or any venue: policy officials and staff from Toronto and Ontario governments, farmers, food and environmental activists, and NGOs.

No one guessed at the time that the ecolabel idea was only a step towards a very different approach to "value-based labeling" (Barham, 2002),<sup>15</sup> which would culminate a year and a half later in the UofT-Aramark contract, and in the creation of LFP, both works in progress. Out of the Toronto community of food practice has come a new way of certifying, of making standards for sustainability, and of sourcing institutional food, which offers a promising way to increase the scale of farm products moving through local supply chains. An aspect unusual in North America (Shreck et al., 2006) is to make labor standards one of the criteria of sustainability. The Toronto Food Policy Council and FoodShare were originally initiatives of municipal government to address hunger and food security. While the mandate was grandiose, the effects were, and are, unpredictably fruitful. These two organizations, one governmental and one not, have helped to sustain the often uneasy link between social justice and sustainability. The elements of "real food" for the Toronto community include justice as well as health, nature, and joy (Roberts et al., 1999) – a creative tension since the early days of the community of food practice.

## Notes

1. <http://www.thestop.org/>
2. The Good Food Box, which is the flagship program of Foodshare, has since its founding cultivated local suppliers of fresh produce. Its founder, Mary-Lou Morgan, was a pioneer in local food coops in the 1970s. As the Big Carrot, still formally a cooperative, shifted to a larger, more upscale store, Morgan joined FoodShare to express her value-based entrepreneurial skills. She built the Good Food Box on her local farm and food networks and carried into FoodShare the original link implicit in food coops of the 1970s between fresh, healthy, socially just, sustainable foods as the basis for healthy and just communities.
3. [www.toronto.ca](http://www.toronto.ca) – proclamation\_worldfoodday2006.pdf
4. <http://www.greenbelt.ca/reports/Grading%20the%20GreenbeltFINAL.pdf>. Accessed 6/12/2006.
5. <http://ourgreenbelt.ca/>. Accessed 6/12/2006.
6. Interview with Good Food Box Marketing Team Manager Zahra Parvinian, May 4, 2006.
7. Interview with FoodShare Director Debbie Field, May 11, 2006. Indicated as (DF).
8. Interview with Mike Schreiner, May 8, 2006. Indicated as (MS).
9. Interview with Lori Stahlbrand, May 3, 2006. Indicated as (LS).
10. Interview with Rod MacRae, May 2, 2006. Indicated as (RM).
11. Wayne Roberts, May 19, 2006, personal communication.



12. [www.stahlbush.com/history.php](http://www.stahlbush.com/history.php)
13. [www.aramark.ca](http://www.aramark.ca), linked to [www.aramark.com](http://www.aramark.com). Accessed 6/12/2006.
14. This might be the political complement to the structural understanding of “far-reaching possibilities for creative forms of production and work...in the great metropolitan regions of the new global order (Scott, 2006: 14), which may well emerge by sector, including the food sector (Donald and Blay-Palmer, 2006).
15. Now the Munk Centre for International Studies (2006) is glad to rediscover its part in what evolved, over two years, in a completely different part of a very large university.

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