

Preface

Nourishing Communities: From Fractured Food Systems to Transformative Pathways is the product of more than a decade of collaborative work by a network of scholars, community-based partners and practitioners interested in constructing more sustainable and just food systems. Established in 2007, the Nourishing Communities research network aimed to foster direct connections between university- and community-based actors, and to draw on tools rooted in both theory and practice to support food system transformation. Our early work was based primarily in the province of Ontario, Canada, where we explored a wide range of sustainable food systems initiatives in an effort to better understand their successes, innovations and challenges and make their experiences more accessible to a wider audience. Drawing on the varied backgrounds and areas of expertise of the network's first members, we adopted an interdisciplinary approach and collaborated closely with regionally anchored community organizations, businesses and government personnel representing the interrelated actors that comprise a food system.

As our work evolved, so too did these relationships and connections with community partners from different sectors, creating a number of opportunities. For example, we began to more explicitly incorporate *participatory action research* into our activities, collaborating in action-oriented projects with a food justice organization in eastern Ontario, a participatory research network with close ties to First Nations communities in northern Ontario, and a municipal government and food system roundtable in the south-western part of the province. Beyond those specific in-depth efforts, we also began to turn more directly to our growing network of partners to inform our data collection and analysis and to more fundamentally shape our work by identifying their most pressing research needs. We established a system of multi-actor regional advisory committees that, through regular meetings and ongoing communication, could identify areas of investigation crucial to understanding key challenges and promising trajectories for the development of sustainable and resilient place-based community food systems. Drawing heavily on the ideas and expertise shared by these advisors, our work in Ontario has explored a

number of specific themes related to local sustainable food systems, including tensions between food affordability and producer livelihoods; connections between food and housing security; access to land for new farmers; creative food distribution models that serve both small farm and limited access communities; and innovative food initiative financing strategies such as crowdfunding.

While this research helped us to better understand the ongoing transformations in Ontario's diverse food systems, it was clear that our work would be far richer if it could be expanded in scope to allow for trans-local learning beyond the boundaries of one Canadian province. Building upon the solid structural foundation of community-university partnership that had been developed through our efforts in Ontario, we began to extend the network by turning to colleagues in other parts of Canada, as well as the USA, Europe, Africa and Latin America, fostering more active relationships of collaboration with them and, by extension, their networks of community partners. As a result of this process, the Nourishing Communities research network has evolved to become a continuously growing global network of scholars and practitioners deeply concerned about food system transformation.

Housed in Waterloo, Ontario, at Wilfrid Laurier University's Centre for Sustainable Food Systems, our collaborative research and action projects continue to be shaped by advisory committees that, now regional, national and international in scope, ensure our connection to a wide range of grass-roots, place-based food initiatives. Simultaneously, these activities create opportunities for dialogue at a global scale regarding the imagination and construction of more sustainable food systems. As we have grown from a regionally focused to a global community of practice, the Nourishing Communities research network has remained committed to the spirit of multi-actor engagement and interdisciplinarity—as well as to the participatory, action-oriented approach grounded in community-identified priorities—that informed our initial work. In all of our work, we actively seek to cultivate and maintain relationships with community partners that are based on an exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity that brings mutual benefit to all those involved.

While the chapters in this collection could not possibly cover the full scope of collaborative projects associated with our network, this collection of chapters represents many of the key learnings of the Nourishing Communities work to date and highlights some of the commonalities and divergences of the sustainable food system research and practice engaged in by our group. Our research partnership has grown from a handful of actors in 2007 to now include nearly one hundred organizations, from universities and research centres to small community-based organizations. As we have worked to weave together the diversity of initiatives and experiences represented by Nourishing Communities, we are gradually fine-tuning our understandings of some of the key concepts used in our work. Far from offering

any definitive conclusions, *Nourishing Communities* aims to provide a general foundation for the interrogation of sustainability and transformation of food systems, with a recognition that specific conceptualizations and uses of these concepts are contested and context specific—as pathways to food systems transformation.

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