

## Report

# Northern Ontario Food Distribution Workshop

Hosted by Greenbelt Fund

Oct. 4, 2017

Thunder Bay, Ontario



Submitted by Amanda Sheedy, MetaLab, Nov. 14, 2017

## Introduction

Food distribution in Northern Ontario presents a conundrum for food businesses as well as advocates of food security and food sovereignty. The region is greater than the size of France, with only 780,000 people inhabiting the vast territory, translating into scant transportation infrastructure. Thirty-six communities, with a population of approximately 15,000, are considered remote, relying on ice roads, ships or airplanes to leave their communities or bring in supplies, including food. The high cost of food in small and remote communities (over twice as much in some communities<sup>1</sup>), due in part to the high cost of distribution, presents an obstacle to food security. Furthermore, Northern Ontario's food and agriculture sectors are growing, and yet distribution channels for the most part do not allow for this food to be consumed within the region, or to viably access markets in Southern Ontario. Proponents of local food, food security and food sovereignty have all pointed to food distribution as a focal point in need of some creative and collaborative solutions.

On Oct. 4, 2017, 33 people from across Northern and Southern Ontario gathered to discuss some of the obstacles to improving food distribution in Northern Ontario and the possibility of building a collaborative initiative to address these obstacles. Individuals from food distribution and transportation businesses, non-profit organizations, governments, funders, First Nations communities as well as academics were present, providing a rich diversity of knowledge and perspective. While the majority of people were from the Thunder Bay region, people from across Northern Ontario were present. During the course of the meeting participants contributed to a high level analysis of the food distribution system, an analysis of the common problems faced by numerous stakeholders and finally developed draft collective plans for the coming year.

See Appendix A for a list of attendees.

See Appendix B for the workshop agenda.

The objectives of the meeting were:

- To pool knowledge and resources necessary to develop a collaborative food distribution strategic plan
- To identify and agree on key challenges to be addressed by the initiative
- To identify key elements of a shared work plan for the coming year
- To network and build connections between those working on food distribution in Northern Ontario

Overall the objectives were met.

The following report captures the key conversations and structures the proposed action plans into a format to be further developed. Finally, recommendations for next steps are proposed.

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<sup>1</sup> Food Secure Canada, 2016. Paying for Nutrition: A Report on Food Costing in the North. Accessed Nov. 10, 2017 at: [https://foodsecurecanada.org/sites/foodsecurecanada.org/files/201609\\_paying\\_for\\_nutrition\\_fsc\\_report\\_final\\_wt\\_erratum.pdf](https://foodsecurecanada.org/sites/foodsecurecanada.org/files/201609_paying_for_nutrition_fsc_report_final_wt_erratum.pdf)

## Key Conversations

The following summarizes key conversations but is not a comprehensive summary of what was discussed.

### **Need for greater understanding, sharing and collaboration in Northern Ontario**

At several points in the workshop, participants referred to a gap in knowledge or understanding about the food system ecosystem in Northern Ontario. A mapping exercise was carried out during which participants identified food system actors, connections and power centres as well as analysed opportunities for advancement of the work. Gaps in knowledge and knowledge transfer were identified regarding social systems' programs and services, existing infrastructure, best practices in the North and the availability of data to better understand the system. False assumptions were dispelled, namely that there are indeed many players in logistics and transportation despite the fact that people believe the contrary.

There was a clear gap identified regarding knowledge of existing collaboration as well as the capacity to collaborate. Some pointed to the lack of sharing that is manifesting in some communities. While the mapping exercise was taking place, it was noted that not enough was known about who is collaborating with whom. More specifically, one person noted that there is a lack of collaboration among groups to aggregate orders. In some cases, it was noted, this has to do with a lack of human resource capacity to support collaboration. Lack of infrastructure, specifically community owned infrastructure, was also pointed to as an impediment to community collaboration.

### **Leadership and Funding**

There was a general recognition of this workshop as an opportunity to foster greater collaboration, having already generated some momentum in a prior preliminary stakeholder meeting hosted by the Greenbelt Fund on July 6. There was some light discussion about collective impact as a framework for collaboration that carries with it some potential funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation. The response to the collective impact framework was mixed, but curiosity about what it could offer emerged. The conversation, however, surfaced two important questions: who will lead this initiative, and how will this support collaboration rather than competition for scarce resources?

Participants expressed the desire to have this initiative lead by an organization in the North, and yet recognizing the track record and capacity of Greenbelt to support this work. Thanks were extended for the work of Greenbelt Fund to initiate this work. OMAFRA (Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs) was named as an organization that could lead this work, but this was quickly dispelled, saying that this work is broader than OMAFRA's mandate and should not be lead by a government. Rather, it was agreed, governments should play a support role as a member of the steering committee. Overall it was agreed that governments, including OMAFRA and FedNor, were important to have at the table but not leading the work.

Another question emerged regarding funding. Some in the room expressed that they intended to apply for Trillium collective impact funding for their own work and wondered what this would mean and if it should be combined with the emerging plans. It was recognized that this type of competition for scarce resources could work to the detriment of

collaboration, while acknowledging that collective impact has the potential to minimize duplication and increase collaboration if it is structured to support a common goal carried out by diverse players. What is required is the commitment to a common goal and a structure to support relationship building for collaboration. Then, participants believe, the funding will follow this collaborative intention.

### **Opportunities**

Opportunities identified over the course of the meeting, including those reported by Local Food and Farm Coops' recent report on food distribution:

- Redistribution of vegetables
- Export of timber forest products or non-timber products (ie: birch syrup, mushrooms, etc.)
- Meat processing
- Desire for fresh produce
- The capacity of data to support growth
- Funding sources were identified (Trillium Foundation, FedNor, NAN)

### **Potential solutions**

During the iceberg exercise, an analysis was conducted on some of the key challenges in food distribution. Solutions were identified that had the potential to address these challenges, including:

- *Growing and processing:* A number of solutions were identified that people would like to pursue that would support local / regional food system development, including: development of shared capital (such as a 'food starter' that could house and incubate many food businesses); creation of a common Northern food brand and / or marketing coop; providing support for social enterprise development, including coops; creation of alternative market access channels, such as online ordering, to increase competition; and development of mobile processing units.
- *Infrastructure:* There is a great need for more infrastructure to enable food transportation, transformation and storage. Infrastructure to enable cross-docking and / or a food hub was named as a specific infrastructure need, as well as training and hiring of logistics coordinators at Far North regional airports to pick up goods at distribution end-points to be distributed within the communities (although infrastructure needs are more extensive than that).
- *Education and Community Capacity Development:* Numerous times the idea of education and sharing success stories or best practices emerged as a need and potential solution to building community capacity. Farm finance training and workshops was also named as a need. Participants also recognized the need to build capacity for collaboration.
- *Advocacy and policy change:* The retail monopoly in many remote communities was named as a problem whose solution lies to some degree in advocacy for policy change (to Nutrition North Canada program, amongst others).

Short-term activities that could be accomplished by the group in the next year were identified:

- an aggregation project in Thunder Bay to coordinate and thereby increase bulk-purchasing power to the benefit of local producers, and
- asset mapping of the food ecosystem in Northern Ontario.

## **Values / principles**

The following captures some of the values and principles that were named throughout the meeting that might inform this initiative. It should be noted that there was no specific conversation about values and principles, and that this should be addressed at a later meeting.

- By the North for the North
- Holistic, food system thinking
- Collaborative, cooperative, sharing
- Centre / include marginalized people in the process
- Trust, honesty, transparency
- Decolonization of the table and relations
- Asset based – build on what already exists
- Simplify the system – shorten the distribution chain

## **Proposed Plan**

The following structures the result of the meeting in order to advance planning and fundraising to support the work. The following overall goal and objectives were presented to participants and no amendments were proposed.

### **Goal for year 1**

A plan will be developed to addressing food distribution challenges in Northern Ontario in order to increase access (consumer and market) to local and Ontario food, through stakeholder engagement, research and collaboration.

### **Objectives**

- Increase knowledge sharing, collaboration and coordination between organizations and sectors involved with food distribution in Northern Ontario
- Create a strategic plan and action plans that builds on what already exists, reduces redundancy and addresses gaps drawing on the collective impact framework
- Develop governance infrastructure and terms of reference to support the initiative, including identify steering committee members (including funders) and a backbone organization to coordinate the strategy.

### **Key Activities – Year 1**

The following activities were proposed by a subset of participants who were tasked with proposing what could be done to advance the goal.

#### **1. Hold regional and / or thematic engagement sessions to solicit diverse input to strategy and action plans.**

Northern Ontario has diverse regions, populations, capacity and needs. As such, it will be important to hold engagement sessions that seek out this diversity in order to inform the development of the strategy. Through this engagement, we will seek to broaden the voices contributing to the initiative.

## **2. Conduct research to better understand gaps and asset**

In order to better understand where we are starting from, the group agreed that an asset and network analysis would be a helpful first step to be carried out in year 1. It may very well yield the need for further in-depth research on specific topics.

## **3. Support learning and capacity building**

There is a strong need to learn about new and emerging initiatives that are working well in Northern contexts, including in Northern Ontario. Sharing of research and reports will also enable learning. Capacity building in year one will focus on the development of collaboration skills and tools to carry this work forward past year 1.

## **4. Build the steering committee and define roles and governance**

Ensure that the steering committee includes a diversity of stakeholders and that all regions are represented. Identify 1-2 organizations to act as backbone organization. A terms-of-reference will be developed that defines governance for the initiative, including roles and responsibilities.

## **5. Support and enable short-term collaborative initiatives**

Short-term pilot projects will be embarked on in the next year as a way of building trust and collaborative capacity in Northern Ontario. A short-term initiative to aggregate purchase orders in Thunder Bay was sparked during the course of the meeting (see below).

## **6. Ensure effective communications**

Communications within the steering committee as well as with the broader Northern Ontario community will be essential to the success of the initiative.

### **Thunder Bay Local Food Aggregation Pilot**

A sub-group of participants discussed a new collaborative project to support the evolution of the local food system in and around Thunder Bay. The pilot will create a conversation between buyers (particularly institutional buyers) and farmers, so that buyers can express their needs to farmers, farmers can then plan to fill this need and in so doing increase their business. The first step identified by the group was to bring together buyers from the city to discuss possibly aggregating their orders.

### **Remaining questions**

The following captures some of the questions that emerged from the meeting that will require discussion and decisions by the steering committee at some point in the next year:

- What is the scope of the initiative?
  - Is it focused only on food distribution, or the food system / food security more broadly?
  - Is it focused only on local / Ontario food or all food?
  - A general consensus emerged that participants would like the scope to encompass all of Northern Ontario, although this should be discussed again to confirm.
- How do we expand the table to be inclusive of Northern Ontario's diversity? (and yet remain nimble enough to get the work done)
- Who should lead the initiative?
- How do we build capacity for collaboration?
- How do we proceed to obtain funding for this initiative in such a way as to support collaboration, not competition?

**Next steps:**

- Amanda Sheedy will write and circulate a draft report for discussion (November)
- Sam Cheuk will convene the steering committee by teleconference to review and finalize the report, including plans for the coming year and deciding on an interim backbone organization (November)
- Fundraising is required to carry out the plan for the coming year. Applications to FedNor, Trillium Foundation and NAN will be prepared and submitted by the interim backbone organization. (TBD – dependent on backbone identified and grant deadlines)
- A communications mechanism will be established. (TBD by the steering committee)
- Dan Munshaw will convene buyers at the City of Thunder Bay to explore aggregation of purchase orders to support local food producers. (before end of February)



## Appendix A

### List of participants

Anna Meer	Regional Food Distribution Association of Northwestern Ontario (RFDA)
Annet Maurer	Thunder Bay Country Market
Arik Theijsmeijer	FedNor
Barb Alves	Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA)
Bill Darby	Rainy River District Regional Abattoir
Brendan Carlin	Regional Food Distribution Association of Northwestern Ontario (RFDA)
Bruce Sakakeep	Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug First Nation (KI)
Carolynne Crawley	FoodShare
Catherine Schwartz Mendez	Thunder Bay District Health
Charles Levkoe	Lakehead University
Dalton MacFarlane	Missinabie Cree First Nations
Dan Munshaw	City of Thunder Bay
Dan Tukendorf	Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association (OFVGA)
Emily Paterson	Sioux Lookout First Nations Health Authority
Emmett Ferguson	Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN)
Erin Beagle	Roots to Harvest
Franco Naccarato	Greenbelt Fund
Gail Winter	Independent First Nations Alliance (IFNA)
Jason Perrier	Loudon's
Jay Monture	Moosecree First Nations
Joseph Leblanc	Social Planning Council of Sudbury
Kendal Donahue	Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA)
Kevin Belluz	Belluz Farm/Superior Season
Luis Alves	Superior Foods
Michaela Bohunicky	Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN)
Peggy Baillie	Local Food and Farming Coops
Peggy Brekveld	Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA)
Rachel Globensky	Thunder Bay District Health
Sam Cheuk	Greenbelt Fund
Shawn Farquhar	Farquhar's Dairy
Stephanie Vanthof	Northern Ontario Food Innovation Alliance (NOFIA)
Vicki Blanchard	Sioux Lookout Distribution Hub
Wayne VanderWees	Freight Managers Inc.
Amanda Sheedy (facilitator)	MetaLab



**Appendix B**  
**Agenda**  
**Northern Food Distribution Initiative**  
**Oct. 4, 2017**  
**Thunder Bay, ON**

This meeting will gather diverse stakeholders in the Northern Ontario food system to begin the work of generating a strategic plan and action plan to improve distribution of and access to local and Ontario produced food in Northern Ontario by the fall 2018.

<b>Time</b>	<b>Item</b>
8:30 – 9:00	Arrive, settle (breakfast served on site beginning at 8:30)
9:00 – 9:45	Welcome and introductions
9:45 – 10:30	Getting to know you - Asset mapping Part I <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mapping who is here from Ontario's food distribution system</li></ul>
10:30 – 10:45	Break
10:45 – 11:15	Presentation and discussion <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- The vision and hopes for the coming year</li><li>- What is collective impact?</li></ul>
11:45 – 12:30	Getting to know the food distribution system – Asset mapping Part II
12:30 – 1:30	Lunch – served on site
1:30 – 1:40	Presentation: New Report by LFFC
1:40 – 3:00	Discussion: Identifying key problems, their roots and our common priorities for this work
3:00 – 3:15	Break
3:15 – 4:45	Discussion: What can we do together in the next 12-18 months?
4:45 – 5:00	Wrap up and next steps