



This brief is connected to the [sustainable food systems policy brief](#) one of a series produced by the [Building Back Better Post-COVID-19 Task Force](#), a group of experts affiliated to the [Canadian Commission for UNESCO](#) and its UNESCO Chairs Network. Their goal is to bring together sustainable economic recovery ideas to make our communities stronger in a post-COVID-19 world. The series highlights how responding to the COVID-19 crisis through adaptive and strategic infrastructure investments can preserve critical ecosystems, increase the use of green infrastructure, and protect regional resources and distribution systems. These infrastructures can meet basic human needs and improve human health, while fostering long-term community resilience, well-being and sustainable employment. The suggestions offered in this series support Canada's commitments to the UN Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and position the country as a world leader in developing new economies based on environmental sustainability.

THE NEED FOR A STRONG REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEM

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed vulnerabilities and inequities in Canada's highly concentrated, globalized food system. From panic-buying in grocery stores, to declarations of food workers as essential service providers, our society is waking up to its dependence on the infrastructure and people that make up our food system – and the need to build strong regional food systems.

Canada maintains [one of the most concentrated food supply chains](#) in the industrialized world. For example, five companies hold 80% of the [grocery retail market](#) and four companies [control over 60% of global seed and pesticide sales](#), Canadian sales included. Moreover, just three federally-registered processing plants account for between [85 - 95%](#) of Canada's beef processing capacity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed weaknesses in this supply chain model. For example, [some of Canada's largest COVID-19 outbreaks](#) occurred within slaughter and processing facilities. Given that [two plants account for 70% of Canadian federally-inspected beef processing](#) capacity, the temporary closures and changes to operating capacity had impacts across the beef supply chain, and farmers were forced to either pay for [extended animal care costs](#) or [euthanize livestock](#).

Farmers are key to the food system, but too often do not have access to the kind of support they urgently need. The rapidly changing environment for farming (including the impact of climate change and working within the food supply chain) means that training and transition for farmers is critical. Access to land is also a major concern.

In light of existing and future challenges in our food system, there is an immediate need to move towards regionally focused food production and distribution infrastructure. The considerations below build on the [sustainable food systems policy brief](#) and focus on three areas: regionally-scaled infrastructure, farmer training and transition programs, and land access for farmers. The considerations centre on increasing equity and inclusion, identifying barriers and

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opportunities, and encouraging regionally informed policy.

FARMER TRAINING AND TRANSITION PROGRAMS

Helping new farmers find the training and resources they need to adapt to the Canadian landscape and agroecological practices could aid in the development and implementation of sustainable farming practices and support the regional food production model. Accessible, place-specific training programs with a focus on sustainable growing practices help to equip new farmers for success. In addition, supporting the infrastructure needed to sustain farmer-to-farmer cooperation and mentorship, regional or [local seed sharing systems \(such as seed libraries\)](#) can be vital to combating climate change, preserving seed varieties, and bolstering biodiversity.

Project	Description
N.L. Young Farmers' Forum Pilot Program	Investment expands existing programs that compensate farmer-to-farmer knowledge sharing opportunities, including on-farm demonstrations and mentorship programs. Supports Farmers' for Climate Solutions' recent recovery plan , by modeling potential future investment opportunities.
Growing in the Margins, Sundance Harvest	Run as a free, 12-week educational program for marginalized (BIPOC, LGBTQ+, disabled, low-income) youth in Toronto, Ontario to teach beginner skills in (urban) farming. Promotes urban food sovereignty, youth engagement, and skills development for youth interested in growing food within and for their communities.
The Institute for Sustainable Food Systems and the Incubator	Operates two farmer training programs at the Tsawwassen First Nation Farm School and Richmond Farm School to prepare the next generation of agroecological farmers and help graduates access affordable land to start their farm

Farm Schools Program	businesses. Training new farmers through programming and promoting Indigenous practices
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CONSIDERATIONS:

1. Racialized individuals are more likely to be farm workers than farm owners or operators. Training accessibility should be evaluated specifically for the inclusion of Black, Indigenous, and people of colour. This can also support the development of new Canadians with farming backgrounds as future leaders.
2. Consideration of policies and investments that bolster farmer-led research is critical, [particularly when bridged with academic support](#). A shift towards place-based policy could accelerate solutions to key challenges like biodiversity loss and soil health. A successful example is the Ecological Farmers' Association of Ontario's [award-winning farmer-led research program](#).
3. Transition programming should be directly tied to training/mentorship opportunities, and knowledge-sharing networks to ensure farmers are supported by trusted advisors with place-specific knowledge. These programs should be regionally informed and have stable and sustainable resources.

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LAND ACCESS FOR FARMERS

Ensuring that farmers have secure land tenure, either through ownership or long-term leases, is critical to the vitality of Canada’s agricultural sector. Access to land remains a barrier for many interested in farming – land prices have skyrocketed while the average farm size continues to grow. Finding a way to uphold land preservation and environmental protection while providing increased access to smaller plots of land could help new farmers.

Small, diversified farms can [increase economic resilience](#), particularly in light of climate change, and can foster [greater farmscape biodiversity](#). Working together to support frameworks that encourage farmers to partner with private and public landowners to grow while working towards permanent land ownership can help bridge new farmers into food systems.

Project	Description
Toronto and Region Conservation Authority's Sustainable Local Food Partnerships	Blends food production with conservation by providing long-term tenure agreements to community farms on agricultural conservation land, such as Black Creek Community Farm . Partnering with conservation authorities demonstrates how increasing sustainable food production with adequate social and economic support frameworks can promote community food security and conservation.
Salt Spring Island Farmland Trust	Promotes vibrant local economies and food systems via access to community farms. Land trusts permanently protect agricultural and natural lands and provide a flexible model for access.
Strathcona County's Agricultural Master Plan	Explores and identifies possible integration of agriculture into urban planning and design processes, this Plan looks at issues from urban livestock and

	farm management to edible landscapes.
Just Food Ottawa's Start-Up Farm Program	Pairs training with land access to provide new farmers with a low-risk environment to develop skills and test business ideas. Addresses local farmer concerns, increases access to place-based knowledge, advances the transition toward sustainable growing practices, and builds greater enterprise and sector resilience.

CONSIDERATIONS:

1. There is a need to review access to land for new and young farmers. This includes understanding [historical barriers to and displacement from land for Black, Indigenous, and other people of colour](#).
2. Investment in improved access to creative growing spaces could help to integrate agriculture into urban landscapes and support the efforts of growing organizations that operate on a justice-centred framework. To ensure all citizens benefit while prioritizing those who are most vulnerable, urban agriculture developments should be neighborhood-led and focus on the needs and vision of marginalized people.
3. While programs that join training with land access are an effective short-term tool, they do not address the broader need for access to secure, long-term land tenure and therefore need to be paired with long-term solutions.

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REGIONALLY SCALED INFRASTRUCTURE

Throughout the pandemic, farmers across Canada have been keeping communities fed by adapting and connecting to consumers in new ways. [Community supported agriculture \(CSA\) programs](#), food co-operatives, farmers markets, local food retailers, and [online platforms](#) are all working to respond to demand. However, all too often, consumer preferences for local food are not met by supply chains that have become increasingly concentrated. Moreover, despite being a crucial element of food supply chains, regionalized post-production facilities in Canada, ranging from packing plants to food-preparation facilities, have been gutted. For example, over the last 10 years, Eastern Ontario has lost close to [35% of its small-scale slaughter capacity](#) due to factors such as rising costs, regulatory burden, labour shortages, and high transportation costs.

From processing to distribution, the entirety of our regional food infrastructure needs to work in concert to support a robust food system. Both [the European Think Tank Group](#) and [the Food and Agriculture Organization](#) point to the need for food distribution to be embedded within urban and regional planning in order to [make it easier for distributors and foodservice companies to work with multiple, small suppliers](#). To build more resilient food systems, the planning for local food processing and distribution should be connected to official plans, food storage needs, and transit planning. In addition to supporting smaller, nimble processing facilities and mobile food distribution, investing in regionalized or local food hubs can also provide spaces for innovation, networking, and cooperation among new entrepreneurs.

Project Title	Description
The Station Food Hub	Provides space for communities to gather and certified kitchen space to enable small-scale processors to create safe processed foods in accordance with food safety guidelines. Investment into food hubs should consider both the initial development and

	reoccurring costs to support sustainable community spaces.
The Open Food Network	Connects eaters and growers directly online through an innovative and transparent online portal. In addition, the Open Food Network provides responsive and direct purchasing while building an online presence for local food systems.
Smaller abattoirs and skilled training	The National Farmers Union of Ontario suggests a network of smaller abattoirs and butchers that would be more responsive to local demand, while also being more resilient and adaptable. Building skills training, nimble regulations, and infrastructure would help address the national shortage of skilled butchers and support new opportunities to bridge the gap in need for thousands of skilled butchers across Ontario and Canada .

CONSIDERATIONS:

1. Innovative new or enhanced relationships between eaters and growers have helped address the needs of communities in the face of great uncertainty. Continuing to build these arrangements will enhance direct access to healthy foods, provide support to local growers, and shift supply chains;
2. Directing investment funding towards regionalized facilities that promote enhanced worker safety and service a wider variety of livestock for local eaters could create a more resilient food environment. There is an ongoing need for reviewing inspection guidelines and regulations to enable smaller-scale processing. There is also a need to support isolated or remote communities in accessing safe, timely processing services and spaces.

SUMMARY

The [Metcalf Food Solutions](#) work shows how considerations should be taken in concert with

enabling regulation that support “scale-appropriate, sustainable enterprises,” creating a holistic policy landscape. We can build back better from the ground up. Resilient, equitable, and diverse food systems are central to building back better for our ecosystems and our communities. By consciously investing in a stronger, more resilient systems we can help Canadians reconnect to their food and access critical nutrition, all while supporting a more environmentally responsive approach to growing the good food farmers produce across Canada.

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