



▶ WE KNOW WE HAVE A PROBLEM, BUT WHAT EXACTLY IS IT? A CALL FOR DATA COLLECTION ON THE CANADIAN FOOD SYSTEM IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

The following blog post was originally published by the Canadian Science Policy Centre. <https://sciencepolicy.ca/news/we-know-we-have-problem-what-exactly-it-call-data-collection-canadian-food-system-response>

The global pandemic has a disastrous effect on all aspects of our society—and our food system is no exception. On the surface, the food supply seems to be more-or-less stable, but it has caused considerable distress to many of us during this lockdown period.

We are left to wonder whether what we see reflects some fundamental feature of our food system that needs work. And, if so, what should we do about it?

In the supermarket, everything seems normal and some products even become cheaper in the fruits and vegetables section. But the Canadian potato industry recently declared a major crisis due to the shut down of dining establishments. Is this just because our entire industry is dependent on people eating French fries at restaurants?

Rationing measures apply for meat products in some stores, but farmers are now sharing heart-wrenching stories about having to euthanize their animals at the farm due to loss in demand. Is this at root caused by reduced capacity in highly concentrated slaughtering facilities—which are now hotbeds of coronavirus? The working conditions of these facilities are now under scrutiny. Is meat consumption now an act of both animal and human cruelty? Should we all stop eating meat?

In major supermarket chains, flour and yeast are hard to find. Robin Hood even had to change their packaging to meet the surge in demand. Is it just because all Canadians are now stress baking at home?

The shelves for pasta and related products stay barren. Is it only because Canadians are stocking up shelf-staple food? Walk to another aisle and all is well in the canned beans, vegetable, and seafood section. How do we explain this?

These days, more and more people talk about the importance of “supporting

local”—including farmers and small food businesses. People talk about shortening the food chain as the way of our future. Is it really just “scale of production” and “globalization” that got us to where we are right now?

Some people think we need to break our dependence on purchased food. Interest in vegetable gardening is at an all time high as news media, such as the *Global and Mail*, are encouraging people to plant “victory gardens” to combat COVID-19. Will this help the country stay food secure? Could this be a remedy for our remote and vulnerable populations?

Even a simple question like “How are Canadians doing and responding?” elicit mixed responses. Some claim that they are eating better during this quarantine because not being able to dine out forces them to be more creative at home. On the other hand, others are deeply concerned about people who rely on school lunches and soup kitchens for daily nutrition.

It is very easy to say, “We have a problem”. However, we know very little about what the problem is, let alone the extent and the significance of the problem. What we are seeing these days are anecdotal observations and opinions, each carries some truth but does not represent the whole story. Personal beliefs, prior experience, and linear thinking very much dominate existing discussions on our country’s food system.

Evidence-based policy making is all the rage in the pandemic response, but we continue to make decisions based on impressions anchored in fanciful stories. In the absence of real-time data, experts and policy scholars are making all sorts of recommendations, from asking people to just be patient and let things stabilize to urging people to buy local or go 100% self-sufficient. Look deeper and one will notice that none of these recommendations has any real basis in evidence.

With COVID-19, we now know how incomplete, low quality data can really hurt the nation’s health. This too will affect how decisions are made within our food

system. By now, it is apparent that what regular consumers are seeing is not what other stakeholders are experiencing. The knowledge gap makes it very difficult for the government to navigate the system—let alone pinpointing the issues that warrant intervention.

Statistics Canada is actively gathering data to illustrate COVID-19’s impact on the economy and the society. The pandemic has triggered many Canadians to take actions that contribute to a greater good. Unprecedented time has created an unprecedented opportunity to collect useful data on how the nation’s food system is functioning under stress.

It is time to move beyond the “we have a problem and here is this one solution to solve it” tactic and get working to really understand what is driving what we are seeing. We have the means but so far have not organized to use them. Recent digitalization within the agri-food sector has already fulfilled some of our data requirements as we are now generating accurate price and inventory turnover data. More is needed.

To this end, we strongly urge Statistics Canada to roll out a nation-wide survey to examine Canadian’s food consumption behavior and how it changes in face of a pandemic. We also urge policy research

“Recent digitalization within the agri-food sector has already fulfilled some of our data requirements as we are now generating accurate price and inventory turnover data. More is needed.”



MAKING WAVES



JOHNSON SHOYAMA
Centre for the Study of
Science and Innovation Policy
UREGINA ▼ USASK

institutes across the country to actively share information and put together data resources for future research and policy making. Coordination between private and public sectors within the food chain could provide vital evidence that will help reveal the deep roots of what we see at the store and give us a better chance to address the causes rather than simply respond to the symptoms.



PETER W.B. PHILLIPS, Distinguished Professor, Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy; and Researcher, Centre for the Study of Science and Innovation Policy

Dr. Phillips earned his Ph.D. at the LSE and practiced for 13 years as a professional economist in industry and government. At the University of Saskatchewan, he was the Van Vliet Research Professor, created and held an NSERC-SSHRC Chair in Managing Technological Change in Agriculture, was director of the virtual College of Biotechnology, and was founding director of the JSGS. He has had appointments at the LSE, OECD, European University Institute in Florence, University of Edinburgh and University of Western Australia. He was a founding member of the Canadian Biotechnology Advisory Committee and was on the boards of Canadian Agri-food Policy Institute, Pharamlytics and Ag-West Bio Inc. He has held over 15 peer-reviewed grants worth more than \$250 million and is author/editor of 15 books, and over 60 journal articles and 55 book chapters.



CRYSTAL CHAN, Master of Public Policy student, Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, University of Saskatchewan

Crystal Chan was born and raised in metropolitan cities. She completed a Master of Science degree on cancer genetics at Queen's University before life took her to Saskatoon, where she held several positions that involve developing and directing large-scale research and development projects. Crystal decided to return to school to study public policy in the hope to bridge the gap between city dwellers and farmers, and between technology and society. Her research focuses on the impact of digital technology on trust, relationship dynamics, and industry governance.