Eco-Just Food Network (EJFN)

Canada Healthy Communities Initiative Project Proposal

Overall Goals

The Eco-Just Food Network is an urban/rural collaboration connecting and enabling vulnerable communities, farmers and food providers to improve food security through food sovereignty. Safe, clean, culturally appropriate food is key to maintaining the health and resilience of our communities and local ecology. The ultimate goal of this pilot project is to begin to knit together a local food system to create resilience in the face of ongoing crises. This requires building a reliable network of partners and community spaces among farms, food providers, subject matter experts, and community groups; recruiting and coordinating teams of motivated workers and learners; and bridging the knowledge, training, social and physical gaps between rural farmers and the city communities. This is a large goal with many moving parts. Coordinating these activities in a logical way requires the formation of a broad interconnected network such as the Eco Just Food Network.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the equity seeking communities across Canada have been disproportionately impacted by high rates of morbidity and mortality from COVID-19, as well as by the associated economic and social fallout of the pandemic (Ali et al., 2020; Chowkwanyun and Reed, 2020; Greenaway et al., 2020); Yancy, 2020). In particular, equitable access to fresh, healthy food has been decreasing due to increasing prices, loss of income, supply chain failures, and restrictions in accessing grocery stores. Providing training and community-building activities and bringing fresh food to these communities *in a COVID-19 safe manner* is an important step towards fighting the effects of the pandemic and establishing stronger resilience during future emergencies.

An important component of this kind of resilience is the development of safe community spaces to access fresh, healthy local food, and the provision of a safe environment during the collection and provision of healthy food from local farms, which fits the mandate of the Safe and Vibrant Spaces category of the Healthy Communities Initiative.

Eco Just Food Network, a collaboration between St. James Town Community Cooperative, Global Medic, National Farmers Union Local 305, and other partners, is currently undertaking a project to connect rural farms and urban communities and create a network of resilient and local sources of fresh healthy food in the region and build community knowledge and skills in agriculture. This project has three main objectives, as described below:

Project objectives

1) Creating a welcoming, accessible, and community-run space for food processing, storage, and distribution.

St. James Town is a high density, low-income neighbourhood in downtown Toronto, with an estimated 20,000 residents within less than 1 kilometre, one of the lowest median household incomes, a high proportion of new immigrant population, and high rate of un- or under-employment (City of Toronto, TOCore Neighbourhood Population Profiles, 2016). There is a recognized lack of parks and public space in

the neighbourhood for meeting and socializing (D'Souza and Kowalchuk, 2020; Alberga, 2020; Brockbank, 2020). The residents of St. James Town are also living with low food security and fragile food resilience.

Currently, the St. James Town Community Cooperative (SJTCC) runs three successful and important food security programs: 1) the Bulk Food Buying Club, a self-funded program which provides discounted, organic food staples to the community, supplied in part by EJFN farmers; 2) the Emergency Food Program started by a grant from the Red Cross, which distributes healthy food boxes to the community, in which food is sourced from EJFN farmers where possible;and 3) the OASIS Food Hub, which is a planned community hub, food processing and distribution centre, and eco-agricultural community support system to provide food and climate resilience in the local neighbourhood. Without dedicated, public space to run these programs, the SJTCC has been using their members' homes and the Wellesley Community Centre.

To remedy this, the SJTCC is working with the City of Toronto and in negotiations with Toronto Community Housing (TCHC) to purchase a customized shipping container, to be placed on TCHC land, to house the OASIS Food Hub. With the addition of such a container, the Food Hub would include refrigerated storage, a processing kitchen, and an open area for community cooperation and socializing to facilitate food distribution and be accessible to the community. While this basic infrastructure is necessary to support the food distribution work, it does not provide the equipment needed to ensure that food brought in to support the community can be processed, cleaned, stored, packaged, and distributed effectively, and does not reflect the additional capacity required to run these programs during COVID-19.

We are requesting funds to support the purchasing of this equipment and the supplies to make this community space an effective distribution hub for food, and a community hub for COVID-19 safe community building. This includes commercial preservation equipment such as a dehydrator, as well as kitchen equipment for cleaning food and the packaging required for COVID-19 safe distribution of food to the community. We are also including outdoor furniture to turn the Food Hub into a community meeting space, an urgent need for the community.



Rendering of the shipping container OASIS Food Hub

2) Creating safe working conditions for community members to grow and collect surplus food at local farms.

Due to COVID-19, many members of equity-seeking, low-income, and newcomer populations have been disproportionately affected in finding employment, affording training, and building community relationships. To combat this, the EJFN has been developing functional and reciprocal relationships between the community and local farms. It can access surplus food at the farms for the community to be processed, stored, and distributed to the community members via the SJTCC's OASIS Food Hub. The goal is to provide people in food insecure communities the opportunity to partner with struggling local farms to 1) join the EJFN Food Corps to work under-utilized farmland to grow food for the their communities, 2) harvest local farm crops that otherwise remain unharvested for financial reasons (gather surplus food), and 3) collect crops that are healthy but unsuitable for sale through regular channels due to their appearance.

The need for employment, community, and fresh food has been highlighted and expanded during COVID-19. Thus, a component of this project is providing the opportunity to continue and expand these important trips while taking into account COVID-19 safety precautions. These crucial farm trips provide the community with food skills and healthy and fresh food and are targeted to equity seeking groups and new Canadians, but are open to the general public.

The activity encompasses recruitment and training of community members and providing COVID-safe and sanitary transportation and working conditions at the sites through a mobile on-site support vehicle. To provide safe transportation to and from farms and training sites, vans and/or buses will be rented and safe social distancing protocols will be followed within the vehicles. Should COVID-19 protocols change, we will adapt transportation strategies accordingly.

Food insecurity is an emergency. Training and sending groups of Food Corps workers to combat this emergency must be done with the safety of these groups in mind. Our partner, Global Medic, will be supplying much of the infrastructure needed to support these groups at the partner farms without creating unsafe conditions due to COVID-19. This would be supplying tents and other mobile infrastructure for the project, where the workers can stay for the duration of the job.

It is not possible to run these Food Corps trips in a COVID-19 safe way if we were to use the facilities (if any) available at the farm. For this reason, we are requesting support for this through funds in the Healthy Communities Initiative in the form of portable composting toilets, mobile potable water supply and purification, a mobile kitchen for basic on-site cleaning of crops and meal preparation, and other COVID-19 safety measures, such as masks, sanitizer, etc.

3) Upgrading of the community garden.

In order to provide even more local food to the community, this project will involve the upgrading of the local community garden with an irrigation system and a dome greenhouse. This effort will build community and provide another way that fresh food can be brought to support the community. This will also enable organized gardening activities that can be led by volunteers in the community to encourage community growth.

Outcomes

- COVID-19 safety in Food Corps farm trips that provide agricultural training and experience to groups of food insecure community members and youth involved in Conscious Minds Cooperative (CMC), a co-op run for and by youth to promote climate-resilient education and adaptation.
- Improved resilience in food insecure neighbourhoods through food reserve creation and network with local food production farms
- Increased community built around community-run initiatives to provide fresh, healthy food in the community
- Improved output and usage of community garden, as well as new activities to be planned

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Partners

The project leadership will be made up of members from the community and all of the supporting organizations, including the SJTC, Global Medic, Conscious Minds Cooperative (CMC), Fish Tree Farm, Mount Wolfe Farm, Riverdale Farm and Forest, the National Farmers Union Local 305, Black Creek Community Farm, Afri-Can FoodBasket, and Dr. Bryan Dale of the University of Toronto.

Community Partners:

St. James Town Community Cooperative

The St James Town Community Co-op aims to enable community projects and social enterprises that benefit the residents of St James Town and improve the quality of life in the community. The primary focus is food security and resilience to climate change. The Co-op is currently running a bulk food buying club, an emergency food relief project and developing the OASIS Food Hub with support from the City of Toronto. The SJTC has recently secured a $200,000 community investment grant being trusteed by FoodShare.

Eco Just Food Network

In the spring of 2020, 73 organizations working in the food sector came together for the Ontario Urban Rural Emergency Food Forum Series. The overarching goal of the forum series was to facilitate a strategic, collaborative, and collective approach to adapting our local food system to the twin crises of climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. Out of this work, The Eco Just Food Network was born. The Eco Just Food Network (EJFN) aims to connect and enable vulnerable communities, farmers and food providers to achieve food security through food sovereignty. EJFN will train and mobilize youth and community members to form skilled Food Corps that will assist ecological farmers, small scale food processors (e.g., community kitchens) and vulnerable communities to grow, harvest, proces, store and access healthy food. Food providers will get the skilled labour they need to grow, harvest, process and distribute healthy food. Food Corps members will develop valuable skills, be duly compensated, have access to fair shares of the food being produced and help distribute healthy food to communities most at risk and low-waged essential workers.

The EJFN is being developed and organized by rural and urban eco-farmers, food providers, youth leaders, and trainers from organizations such as the National Farmers Union Local 305, Local Farm and Food Co-op, Conscious Minds Co-op, Food Share, Afri-Can FoodBasket, and the OASIS Food Hub project of the SJTCC.

Conscious Minds Co-op

Led by youth, Conscious Minds Cooperative (CMC) is an intergenerational cooperative stepping into regenerative living, and the possibility of a better world. With a focus on climate-resilience education and adaptation, Conscious Minds creates spaces for its members to activate their unique gifts to learn and better care for themselves, others, and the world we all inhabit. CMC has been a partner in the OASIS food hub project since 2017 contributing participatory learning and design facilitation, and assisting with digital platform and online interaction tech support and development for community engagement and the urban rural emergency food forum. In summer of 2020, CMC youth helped found the Eco Just Food Network and continue to participate in its mission.

GlobalMedic

The David McAntony Gibson Foundation, which operates as GlobalMedic, is a registered Canadian charity that has provided life-saving disaster relief and humanitarian aid since 2002. GlobalMedic is committed to delivering the right aid to the right people at the right time. Founded by a first responder, staffed by professional humanitarians, and backed by a team of emergency workers and skilled volunteers, GlobalMedic has been able to respond to 229 disasters in 76 countries including Canada. The organization has provided emergency support such as food, water purification/hygiene, shelter, and medical services to over 3.6 million people in need.

National Farmers Union (NFU) Local 305

The NFU local 305 has NFU members in the Toronto-York-Peel regions. They are a group of passionate farmers and eaters who have come together to advocate for local farms and food in rural, urban and suburban settings. Since the Local is located in the Toronto area, they are in close proximity to Queen's Park and many advocacy groups who share our interest in securing a local and sustainable food system in Canada.

Dr. Bryan Dale

Food equity researcher from University of Toronto Culinaria Research Centre, Project Manager of the 'Feeding the City' COVID-19 food challenges study. Dr. Dale is also an associate member of the NFU Local 305.

Partner farms:

Fish Tree Farm

Training and growing

A growing independent local farm that is currently expanding its planting space and is looking for distribution channels to food insecure communities. Fish Tree Farm is located near Bolton, Ontario, and uses and demonstrates responsible ecological farming methods and infrastructure. They are a member of EJFN and supply food to the SJTC's Bulk Food Buying Club and the Emergency Food Program.

Mount Wolfe Farm

Apprenticeship growing site

Established in 2016, Mount Wolfe Farm is a family-owned and woman-operated non-certified organic diversified vegetable farm located 15 minutes north of Bolton, Ontario. Mount Wolfe Farm runs a year-round CSA program, raises pastured meat chickens and free-range laying hens, attends a farmers market in Toronto, offers rural skills workshops, and forages & grows materials for the sustainable floral community of the GTA. In addition to growing food, viable ecological livelihoods, a robust local food system, circular economy, and facilitating meaningful relationships to the land are at the core of why they farm. They are members of the EFAO (Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario) the NFU local 305, the EJFN (Eco Just Food Network), the Local Food and Farms Coop association, WWOOF (Worldwide Workers On Organic Farms), ORSN (Ontario Rural Skills Network) and ORIAS (Oak Ridges Institute for Applied Sustainability).

Riverdale Farm and Forest

Training and growing site

Susan and Owen Goltz farm and live on 60-acres in the heart of the Village of Inglewood, Ontario, Canada. For the past 12 years, Owen has developed a natural farming system that focuses on nature's three pillars -- re-growth, repair and replace -- to grow the nutrition needed for their table and local community. As an early advocate of the soil health movement, the farm has played an important role in farmer-to-farmer learning, as well as engaging their community to the importance of eating real food. Owen is the previous president of NFU local 305, and on the steering committee of EJFN.

Black Creek Community Farm

Farm work urban training site

BCCF's Mission is to serve and enrich their community through a thriving farm, healthy food, hands-on training and learning experiences. To inspire the next generation by providing leadership in food justice, and supporting diverse natural and social ecosystems. BCCF is an urban agricultural centre that engages, educates, and empowers diverse communities, through sustainable food. BCCF offers a range of community programming for people of all ages. All programs have food security as a central element, with food literacy and food skills as key components. Their unique site welcomes thousands of children annually for experiential outdoor education as part of our camp and farm school programs. Their youth internship program now has dozens of graduates who have gone on to successfully pursue employment and higher education. BCCF uses land that is held by the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority.

Afri-Can FoodBasket

Will conduct the farm work training at BCCF

Afri-Can FoodBasket, an EJFN member, provides a comprehensive blend of urban agriculture training and technical support for community projects, assisting low-income communities to access food through growing their own. Afri-Can FoodBasket's mission is to provide leadership in urban agriculture, and foster collaboration to advance food justice, health, and social enterprise in the African Canadian Community. Their integrated programs leverage one another as a means to create a holistic solution to address youth unemployment, youth leadership, and cross generational/cross cultural collaboration.