Building a culturally integrated food strategy: A case study of the
Collingwood Neighborhood House

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Executive Summary

Conclusion

In order for our diverse communities to be more culturally sustainable, aside from having food infrastructure that support our food system and provide food-related green jobs, we must work together to acknowledge that non-indigenous ethnic food can be part of a healthy food system. In this project, my research question explores “to what degree does Vancouver’s Greenest City 2020 local food strategy reflect cultural diversity, and how does it incorporate East Asians’ food practices” with a case study approach on the Collingwood Neighborhood House. According to the interview results, it seems that the city does try to incorporate cultural diversity into the food strategy to some extent, such as through widening their dialogue and public outreach. But, it is evident that more work needs to be done to fully address the food practices of our diverse community. However, aside from providing food infrastructure (land, people, buildings, and food-related green jobs) to support a sustainable urban food system, the city plays a more supportive role in this incorporation of cultural diversity. In fact it is up to us, members of the city, to make the prominent changes in our community because without reverting our thinking of what local food means and the acknowledgement of “how local food does not displace cultural food,” it becomes hard to fully address the needs of our culturally diverse communities (Anonymous expert).

From both the literature and interviews, it is clear that there is no single definition of what local food means because the term varies between people and through time. However, this can be misleading when incorporating the term cultural food into the dialogue because without a consistent definition of what local food means, people can have different perspectives on whether the term cultural food should be included. Therefore, I have suggested some recommendations that will hopefully create more awareness and acknowledgement about the relationship between cultural food and local food in order for our diverse communities to be more culturally sustainable.

Recommendations For RangiChangi Roots

- RangiChangi Roots needs to be a leader that brings awareness and educates the public about the meaning of local food.
- RangiChangi Roots needs to educate farmers that there could be a market for growing local, non-indigenous ethnic food.
• RangiChangi Roots needs to work with other organizations to increase the opportunity for different ethnic groups to share their food ideas and knowledge. This then can promote opportunities for open dialogue and create educational opportunities for different organizations to learn from each other.

• RangiChangi Roots needs to work with the City in order to fully address the needs and resolve the food issues in our diverse communities.

• RangiChangi Roots needs to educate and work with the Food Banks in order to provide donated food that are more culturally appropriate, nutritionally valuable, and practical to prepare.

Recommendations For the City of Vancouver

• The City needs to communicate the message to the public that eating local does not displace cultural food.

• The City needs to ensure that the food strategy will incorporate dialogues that are translated into languages that are non-english

Introduction

My research goal for this project is to use culturally sensitive lenses to critically evaluate Vancouver’s Greenest City 2020 ‘local food’ strategy. In other words, I will explore to what extent does Vancouver’s ‘local food’ goals take cultural diversity into consideration. Under the extreme pressure of globalization and urbanization, cities in the world are competing against each other towards the goal of being ranked as global cities. Vancouver is not an exception where it tries to sell an image of being the most livable city in the world and a city that is green. However, with Vancouver being among one of the most ethnically diverse communities it becomes crucial that we question how feasible Vancouver’s local food strategy is in regards to meeting the food practices of our diverse communities.

Vancouver’s Greenest City 2020 ‘local food’ is one of the ten ‘green’ goals of the Vancouver Greenest City 2020 Action Plan by which the city works towards becoming the greenest city by 2020. The vision of this action plan is “together [as one] we will create a more livable, healthy and economically resilient city, and a better life for [our] future generations” (City of Vancouver a). An important reason why Vancouver is working towards becoming the greenest city is because of the acknowledgement that Vancouver residents have an ecological footprint three
times larger than the Earth can sustain (City of Vancouver a). Nevertheless, it is important to note that Vancouver’s ‘local food’ is a specific topic and that there are other initiatives that are taking into consideration.

RangiChangi Roots, my community partner, is a grassroots nonprofit organization that has the vision of many cultures under one climate where diverse communities work together for a fair and healthy planet (RangiChangi Roots). Their mission is to bridge the gap between the green movement and cultural communities because to them the “transformative change needed to solve the climate crisis will not happen unless everyone is involved” (RangiChangi Roots). In addition, RangiChangi Roots have been looking into whether people are willing to give up their favorite ethnic dishes to be more sustainable and whether it is viable to substitute local, organic food for ethnic dishes. While the RangiChangi Roots unveils the different food stories on one hand, together we both hope to create more awareness about how cultural diversity can be incorporated into the local food movement. Thus I would argue that in order to be more culturally sustainable for our diverse communities, aside from having food infrastructure that support our food system and provide food-related green jobs, we must work together to acknowledge that non-indigenous ethnic food can be part of a healthy food system.

**Statement of Research Question**

I will be exploring “to what degree does Vancouver’s Greenest City 2020 local food strategy reflect cultural diversity, and how does it incorporate East Asians’ food practices” with a case study approach on the Collingwood Neighborhood House (CNH). In other words, I will be analyzing in a broader context of how Vancouver’s strategy addresses the food practices of the CNH’s community members. I will use CNH as an example to show the feasibility of Vancouver’s strategy and how the city plans to incorporate East Asian food practices. I chose to do a case study approach on the CNH because they are one of the few organizations that are known for their multicultural integration. They provide a multitude of programs and services. For example the Renfrew Collingwood Food Security Institute does not only provide the educational knowledge and tools for growing food, but it is also about cultural sharing, relationship building, and more importantly, how to build a sustainable and healthy food system together as a community (Collingwood Neighborhood House). By focusing my research on the neighborhood house, I will gain a greater understanding on how appropriate Vancouver’s
strategy is for diverse communities such as the Collingwood neighborhood. Also, I will examine whether incorporating East Asian food practices conflicts with Vancouver’s notion of sustainability.

**Why food matters?**

Food is an important part of our everyday lives because similar to water and air, food is essential for our survival. Food systems such as the way we grow, process, transport, and consume food have been central to the sustainability of communities for millennia (City of Vancouver a). However, the current food production processes that are utilized to feed Vancouver’s 600,000 residents accounts for almost half of the city’s ecological footprint (City of Vancouver b). In fact, food represents one of the largest sources of our greenhouse gas emissions. Therefore the size of our ecological footprint must be reduced in order to have a stronger local food system. For example, we need to cut down the use of fossil fuels, protect our food-producing lands and related biodiversity (City of Vancouver a). It becomes evident that the importance of food cannot be ignored and for Vancouver to become the greenest city, a sustainable food system should be a main priority for the well being of all Vancouverites. In fact, the main goal of the ‘local food’ strategy is for Vancouver to become a global leader in urban food systems and their target is to increase city wide and neighborhood food assets by a minimum of fifty percent over 2010 levels (City of Vancouver a). As shown below in Table 1.1, Vancouver currently has a total of 3,337 food assets and the city would like to achieve a total of 5,143 food assets by 2020. In other words, it is a total of 54.1% increase of food assets from now to 2020. Although it is important that we reduce the impact of our ecological footprint to become a more livable, healthy and economically resilient city for our current and future generations, it is nevertheless crucial that we question how cultural diversity is incorporated into this notion of sustainability in Vancouver.
Table 1.1 (source from http://talkgreenvancouver.ca/goals/local-food)
supply chains. Furthermore, there is recognition for a more integrated food strategy that includes a “whole-of-society” systems approach where it not only looks at the engagement between different levels of governments, but also with consumers and other stakeholders (Dube et al.). More accessibility to supermarkets to reduce food insecurity is another important recognition because some inner city neighborhoods may have lower vehicle ownership rates and higher percentages of elderly residents (Smoyer-Tomic et al. 319).

Multiculturalism

In Asia, there has been increasing evidence that Asian diets have been westernized, where people are moving away from tradition diets, such as staples towards livestock and dairy products, and vegetables and fruits (Pingali 283). The author argues that this is mainly due to the transformation of food supply systems from traditional food supply chain towards a more diversified and commercialized production system (Pingali 283). But with the rapid spread of global supermarket chains and fast food restaurants has also reinforced these dietary changes (Pingali 283). On the other hand, the length of residence also affect dietary patterns of Chinese immigrants who live in Canada, where the longer the length of residence the more likely that they increase their consumption of convenience food and fruit and vegetables (Rosenmöller et al.). However, there is also discussion on how greening multicultural strategies were seen as problematic because when environmental organizations try to incorporate multicultural perspectives into their programs they did not address and examine all aspects of exclusion (Jafri 248). Similarly, there is recognition of the complexity of multicultural planning where in order to proceed to more successful multicultural planning, planners must guarantee tangible results that can be seen in communities and that acknowledge and respect cultural diversity (Uyesugi 319).

Local food

There are different definitions of local food, where the term local is a relative concept that is produced by both consumers and producers and the value of the term changes in relation to how it is used (Blake et al. 410). At the same time, there are barriers for purchasing local foods, such as for socio-economic groups in UK, price and inconvenient lifestyles were identified as important barriers to purchase local foods (Chamber et al. 210). These socio-economic groups do recognize the benefit of buying local food, but with these barriers it becomes hard for them to purchase local food as part of their busy everyday lives (Chamber et al. 211). On the other hand, there is recognition of the complexity of how home is seen as the site of consumption and how
eating can be seen as a process of identity formation where different consumption practices can determine the identity of children, a parent or the whole household (Valentine 500).

**Method**

As previously discussed, I have focused my literature on three main themes: food security, multicultural, and local food. However, simply looking into what has been stated in the literature is not sufficient to fully grasp how Vancouver’s local food strategy takes cultural diversity into consideration. Therefore, I have conducted three 30 minute semi-structured interviews with James O’Neil, a Social Planner and a leading member working in the Food Policy Council from the City of Vancouver; Stephanie Lim, a Collingwood Neighborhood House staff working for the Renfrew Collingwood Food Security Institute; and an anonymous expert. I will then use the information gathered from the interviews to compare with the literature and analyze them in a broader context on how Vancouver’s strategy addresses the food practices of our diverse communities.

**Interview Results**

Before discussing my interview results, I would like to clarify that although my research question specifically explores how the food strategy incorporates East Asian food practices, there were no specifications towards how their food practices should be incorporated. Instead, my recommendations and conclusion will be directed towards how the food strategy addresses the food practices of our diverse communities in a broader sense. In addition, I was originally hoping to include perspectives from the CNH’s community members about the food strategy and food issues in general, so I can compare the interview results from experts and CNH staff with the CNH’s community members. Unfortunately, I was unable to get any interviews from the community members. This then could be part of my research limitation where there is a lack of perspectives of the food strategy, food security, and the importance of local food from the general public. Nevertheless, from my three interviews I still received valuable results that will be an important contribution towards to what extent cultural diversity is incorporated into Vancouver’s ‘local food’ strategy.

As mentioned in my executive summary, there is no single definition of what local food means and the term varies between people and through time. Therefore, in order to ensure that
cultural diversity is incorporated into the ‘local food’ strategy the dialogues need to be widened. For example, there is a need to include nonprofit organizations, different levels of governments, immigration agencies, and other general public that are part of the community into the dialogue (Anonymous expert). More importantly, it is crucial that the right questions are asked and that people who make up the huge part of the population are incorporated into the dialogue (Anonymous expert). However, for communities that are harder to reach to be incorporated into the dialogue, such as the more vulnerable population, provide funding for food programs that is specific to each neighborhood is another part of how cultural diversity is incorporated into the food strategy (Anonymous expert). An important emphasis is that the city needs to communicate the message of how “cultural diversity and local food can exist together” because “eating local food does not displace cultural food” (Anonymous expert). Therefore, it is important that we look at the bigger picture because we have a culturally diverse population that has culturally diverse needs. The city can incorporate culturally diverse diets by increasing food production of non-indigenous ethnic food, such as bak choy and tat sai to be grown in our local climate (Anonymous expert). For food preparation, we can “substitute local varieties into a cultural dish” (Anonymous expert).

Aside from communicating the message of how local food does not displace cultural food, the importance of messaging in general was another crucial emphasis that was constantly brought up. For example, we need to be careful with the language we use and need to be careful when explaining what local food means (Lim). In other words, there is a need to ensure that people are included in the dialogue and that the message sent out is relevant to them (Lim). An example is translating documents that are available for people that speak different languages, so information would be accessible for them because “if it is a food strategy for the city, there needs to be a way to translate the message to their language” (Lim). Creating greater awareness and education about what local food means is also an important emphasis because many people support the idea of local food, but to them local food might only mean food that are locally grown (Lim). Therefore, it is crucial that we educate people about the different meanings of local food. For example, local food can mean how people interact with food and how people purchase local food (Anonymous expert). The public “needs to look at the bigger picture where imported food can be part of a healthy food system” (Anonymous expert).
As important as educating the public about what local food means, it is also necessary that we educate our local farmers that there could be a market for growing non-indigenous ethnic food because we have a culturally diverse population with culturally diverse needs (O’Neil). In other words, there is a potential demand for more ethnic food, but the problem is risk taking. Farmers need to take into consideration about the risk involved in growing ethnic food because the soil might not be fit to grow it (O’Neil). In addition, the food industry is market driven and the “municipal government has no jurisdiction to determine what people should grow”, so without a large enough market to grow non-indigenous ethnic food it can become a barrier to motivate people to grow more cultural food (O’Neil). Nevertheless, there is a lot of potential in Vancouver to be more resilient because Vancouverites are extremely literate on being environmental friendly and making the city a better place (O’Neil). Therefore, “if neighborhoods and communities come together” and if we learn more about how to incorporate the needs of our diverse communities, such as allowing opportunities for different ethnic groups to share their ideas and knowledge, then “resiliency of food will happen on a neighborhood level” (O’Neil).

Another part of incorporating cultural diversity into the food strategy is to include an anti-poverty strategy because the city is not an affordable place for many people to live (Lim). Our society does not provide people equal access to things such as food, transit, housing, and childcare services are often overly expensive (Lim). Having that said, the city needs to incorporate many considerations into the food strategy and the complexity of poverty itself (Lim). Therefore, the city is unsure how to incorporate an anti-poverty strategy into the ‘local food’ goals (Lim). The challenge for food banks was an intriguing issue that was pointed out where most of the donated food is usually “not culturally appropriate, nutritionally valuable and practical to prepare” (Lim). Kraft dinner was the example given where when one cooks Kraft dinners it is essential that butter and milk is added, but the problem is for “people who live in the Collingwood neighborhood that are from Asia a lot of them are lactose intolerant” (Lim). Also, for individuals that are dependent on obtaining food from food banks they might not have the resources to buy butter and milk. It is often that people who receive the donated food do not know what to do with them because “many immigrants may not be familiar with Canadian ingredients or familiar with using the oven” (Lim).

Recommendations (Full Version)
Having to state what has been found in the literature and interviews, the four main recommendations for my community partner, RangiChangi Roots are: Taking the initiative to work with the city, working with other organizations, providing awareness and education about what local food means, and working with Food Banks.

*Be proactive and work with the city*

According to RangiChangi Roots, they are already working with the city by giving feedback on the greenest city initiatives. However, this would not be enough to fully address and resolve the food issues in our diverse communities. Therefore, RangiChangi Roots needs to continue to work with the city to suggest important insights on how to reduce food issues in our diverse communities because it is at the community and neighborhood level where problems, such as a lack of food accessibility and food security happen on a daily basis. This is demonstrated in Chamber et al.’s article where price and inconvenient lifestyles are identified as important barriers to purchase local food. The city needs the help from our communities and neighborhoods to search for the barriers that the public is facing in order to provide more practical and effective solutions to resolve food insecurity.

*Collaboration with other organizations*

It is important to acknowledge the work that RangiChangi Roots have done with numerous organizations, such as Shark Truth, David Suzuki Foundation, Evergreen, World In A Garden, etc. However, in order to promote more awareness about how cultural diversity can be incorporated into the local food movement there needs to be more collaboration with other organizations, such as the Collingwood Neighborhood House, New Westminster Community Gardening Society, Mount Pleasant Neighborhood House, and Kitsilano Neighborhood House. These organizations have community events and programs that include community garden and kitchen, where people come together to celebrate food and learn how to grow food. The notion of collaboration with other organizations is not solely crucial of having the opportunity for different organizations to learn from each other. More importantly, it is providing the opportunity for different ethnic groups to share their food ideas and knowledge together to increase our food resiliency level. This does not just allow people to voice their opinions on the value and needs of their food practices, but it also respects cultural diversity, which is important in the implementation for a successful multicultural planning. In other words, it is important in the context of how cultural diversity should be incorporated into Vancouver’s local food strategy.
Create awareness and education about local food

From the literature, we understand that climate change and imported food affect food security and in order to have a sustainable urban food system it is important that we reduce our ecological footprint. At the same time, we observe evidence that there is increasing westernization of Asian diets both in Asia and in Canada; however, with Vancouver being such a culturally rich city, to simply reduce imported food or non-indigenous ethnic food is impractical and unrealistic. Instead, what we need is to have “fewer miles”, where we have “shorter distance miles that food travels to reduce our carbon footprint” (Anonymous expert). But also “friendly miles”, where we “make sure that our food system supports a culturally diverse population” (Anonymous expert). As shown in the interview results, increasing food production by growing cultural food that suit our local climate and food preparation of substituting local varieties into a cultural dish are feasible examples of how to increase more friendly miles. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, there is not a single definition of local food and with this reason alone, it should be clear that it is necessary to provide awareness and education about what local food means in order to incorporate cultural diversity into the dialogue. It is important that the public acknowledges that local food does not displace cultural food and imported food can be part of a healthy food system because without this understanding it can become a barrier to fully address the food practices of our diverse communities. Therefore, RangiChangi Roots can play an important leadership role in providing this awareness and education by promoting food events that celebrate food, and learning workshops that educate people about the meaning and value of local food. Both the food events and workshops can be done through community kitchen and gardening where people can have fun and be educated at the same time. Collaboration with other organizations to promote food events and learning workshops would also be important to increase awareness about the relationship between cultural food and local food. Nevertheless, if the awareness is successfully distributed in the city then it might intrigue local farmers about the potential market for growing non-indigenous ethnic food, which then would facilitate our food system to become healthier and more culturally sustainable.

Collaboration with Food Banks

As shown in the interview results, food donated to the Food Banks are typically culturally inappropriate, impractical to prepare and nutritionally invaluable. Therefore, RangiChangi Roots can play an important leadership role in educating Food Banks and creating more awareness for
donated food to be more culturally appropriate, nutritionally valuable and practical to prepare. For instance, RangiChangi Roots can work with the Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society to discuss strategies on how to obtain donated food that would meet the needs of the different ethnic groups. This then can be incorporated into the programs of the Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society to create awareness for incorporating more culturally appropriate food. While the ‘local food’ strategy provide long term goals for our food system to become sustainable, Food Banks can provide short term support to reduce food insecurity, especially for more vulnerable populations. In other words, if food banks are able to provide donated food that somewhat addresses people’s food practices, then at least they will be able to obtain food that are more nutritious and culturally appropriate.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

From the literature review, it is evident that there is an increase westernization of Asian diets, where Chinese immigrants and people from Asia are consuming more fruits and vegetables. However, there is still lack of research on Asian consumption patterns other than fruits and vegetables. There is recognition of the importance of different cultures and norms in developing an integrated food strategy, but there is insufficient research on the relationship of how different cultural values affect food choices and health. In addition, with restricted time I was only able to obtain perspectives from experts and CNH staff about to what extent cultural diversity is incorporated into the ‘local food’ strategy. However, for future research it is crucial to incorporate a more in-depth examination of local farmers’ attitudes towards growing non-indigenous ethnic food and how much of the food in the local markets are produced from local farmers. At the same time, future research should look into the barriers that the public is facing to purchase local food in a local context. This would give a better understanding of how the city should improve or accommodate in order for our food system to be culturally sustainable in the long run. In addition, future research should explore if large markets, such as T&T and Yaohan take food security into consideration when deciding what food should be imported. Although I have argued that there are cultural food that can be grown locally, I was unable to provide a list of cultural food that can be grown locally. Therefore, for future research there is a need to do an in-depth examination of the types of non-indigenous ethnic food that can be grown in our local climate.
**Discussion**

There is evidence that cultural diversity is incorporated in the food strategy to some extent and that the city does take initiatives to work with culturally diverse organizations such as the Collingwood Neighborhood House. But for the strategy to be feasible it is crucial that the language and message used in the strategy is related to food practices of our diverse communities. In other words, without the acknowledgement that cultural food can be incorporated into the local food dialogue it would become a barrier for cultural diversity to be incorporated because people need to feel included in order to successfully and fully address the food practices of our diverse communities.

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Anonymous expert. Telephone interview. 27 February. 2012.


Lim, Stephanie. Personal interview. 9 March. 2012.


