

## **PRACTICE SUMMARY**

### *Sustainable Food Systems that Promote Healthy Diets: A proposed Roadmap for Dietetic Practice*

---

#### **Background**

At a global level, leaders in the dietetic profession are discussing ways in which the profession could use its expertise in human health, food systems, food policy, food service, production and marketing, to support actions that address global issues facing societies (e.g. climate change, malnutrition in all its forms, social inequities, etc.). In 2015, the Board of Directors of Dietitians of Canada (DC) set a strategic direction to: “*raise the profile of Dietitians as a key partner in intersectoral dialogue on innovations that support a sustainable food system and promote healthy diets...*” And this meant “*...beginning with member-led action that would result in a common understanding of what dietitians mean by food system sustainability, followed by development of tools that members can use to inform actions and advocacy.*” This direction led DC to collaborate on research that began to fulfill these needs, and to initiate a Sustainable Food Systems Leadership Team to begin to support DC in advocacy and action.

This PRACTICE SUMMARY is based on outcomes of a collaborative research project<sup>1</sup> with Dietitians of Canada (DC), Acadia University, and Blekinge Institute of Technology. It is written in the voice of the authors, Liesel Carlsson (Acadia University) and Edith Callaghan (Blekinge Institute of Technology). Liesel is a co-chair of the [DC Sustainable Food Systems Leadership Team](#), initiated in 2016.

---

<sup>1</sup> The research project was conducted through dialogue with over 50 dietitians, using the Delphi Inquiry process, with four rounds between January – June 2017. The first three Delphi rounds were facilitated via online survey and follow-up summaries; the 4th round was conducted in a face-to-face workshop on June 7, just before DC’s National Conference in St. John’s, NL, and a ‘pre-workshop’ webinar on May 23 for participants who could not attend the workshop.

## Starting the Dialogue

The objectives of this collaborative research project were to:

1. spark dialogue about sustainable food systems in Canada through co-creating a vision
2. identify barriers and supports for sustainable food systems in the current Canadian context
3. identify and prioritize actions that will bring us toward our collective vision
4. identify indicators relevant to the nutrition professional, and necessary to measure progress toward the vision, i.e., how will we know we are on track?

The **full research report**, entitled [\*Sustainable Food Systems that Promote Healthy Diets: A proposed Roadmap for Dietitians of Canada\*](#), includes a discussion of *all* the above objectives. The outcome of this project can be viewed as both guidance and advice for individual practitioners, as well as an attempt to set a course for the profession in tackling sustainability.

This **PRACTICE SUMMARY** describes how the participating DC members envisioned sustainable food systems in Canada, and focusses on actions that could be taken by individual practitioners (Objectives 1 & 3 only).

The participating DC members stressed the importance of reflexivity in our profession's approach to sustainability. Important first steps in leading progress toward sustainable food systems include:

- reflecting on our own assumptions,
- sharing our views and values about population and environmental health, and
- seeking to understand any resistance to changes we believe are needed to support more sustainable food systems.

"We still need to have broader conversations about the meaning of health. It is important to moving forward on issues such as sustainability."  
–participant in Pre-conference Workshop, June 2017

## A Vision for Sustainable Food Systems that Promote Healthy Diets

The purpose of human food systems is to provide nutritious, safe, and high-quality food and water that supports human health and welfare. But just any old food system won't do. We have a vision. **This vision represents the voices of DC members who volunteered to participate in this preliminary work, and is intended to be an inspirational articulation of the goal – sustainable food systems that promote healthy diets.**

### ***A Vision for Sustainable Food Systems that Promote Healthy Diets in Canada***

- as articulated through research with members of Dietitians of Canada

*Sustainable Food Systems in Canada steward and enhance ecosystems, and respect the needs of other species in those ecosystems. They prioritize biodiversity, fertile soils, clean water, and clean air by using resources at a rate they can sustain, within and outside national borders, and through responsible use of materials and energy along the entire the supply chain. They strive to be “closed loop” in terms of materials and energy flows – in a cycle of replacing what is taken from the ecosystem.*

*Sustainable Food Systems are sovereign and self-sufficient while supporting other nations’ food sovereignty. A collaborative network of food system actors (producers, processors, retailers, consumers, etc.) shares decision-making power, resources and returns in an equitable manner. The network supports viable, intergenerational livelihoods, and genuine consumer choice.*

*Sustainable Food Systems support food literacy. The systems are transparent (e.g., food labelling, industry activities, etc.), traceable and trustworthy. Canadians have the capacity to produce, access and prepare food, and also to reflect and act on the socio-ecological implications of their food choices.*

*Sustainable Food Systems support equitable and just access to food for all Canadians in a manner that is empowering, inclusive, dignifying and respectful. Healthful foods are affordable and available for all Canadians, including marginalized populations and remote communities, in particular Indigenous and Northern communities.*

*Sustainable Food Systems support a healthy relationship with food, such that Canadians value food, its origin and quality, and express identity and culture through foods.*

*All of these core values are reflected in institutional settings (schools, workplaces) and Canadian food policy. The governance of sustainable Canadian food systems involves multiple stakeholders in a reflexive process that honours traditional and expert knowledge, to continually support dynamic change in our system. Governance applies a precautionary principle to decision making at all levels, in order to achieve the above vision.*

*Responsibility in the system, including the ecosystems on which it depends, is also shared by stakeholders, and this responsibility is enforced. The above is captured in a comprehensive Canadian Food Policy.*

*Within this vision, Canadian dietitians take an active role in food system advocacy, education and governance, as both leaders and collaborators, and are guided by current evidence on food in a sustainable society.*

## What can dietitians do, today and tomorrow?

*Dietitians can take action now to move toward our vision.* Some actions we are already doing, some we can do right away, some others will take time. All have potential for high impact within Canada’s food systems, where dietitians already have influence. The following are actions that we as dietitians can take in our individual practices<sup>2</sup>.

***For dietitians new to the topic of sustainable food systems or looking to refresh, here are some “low hanging fruit” - what we can do now, using existing resources and networks:***

### REFLECT AND EDUCATE YOURSELF

- Educate yourself about the relationship between food systems and the social and ecological environment
- Take part in continuing education opportunities for dietitians around sustainable food systems
- Begin to feel confident about what sustainable food systems means to you, as an individual and as a dietitian
- Reflect on your own assumptions about how other sectors understand sustainability and health
- Seek to understand the worldviews most resistant to change
- Educate yourself about how to step into advocacy and the policy development process

### COMMUNICATE

- Get involved in mass and social media: increase the evidence-based messaging about food sustainability and health
- Contribute to our reputation as a legitimate source of food and nutrition information
- Share your tools, resources and research with your colleagues

### EDUCATE OTHERS

- Support food skill development and food literacy programming
- Help develop key messages around sustainable food systems for public programming
- Advocate for the inclusion of sustainable food systems curriculum in schools

---

<sup>2</sup> In addition, the participating dietitians in this research dialogue also had ideas for *organizational actions and priorities* – read more in the full report, “**Sustainable Food Systems that Promote Healthy Diets: A proposed Roadmap for Dietitians of Canada**” – available at <https://www.bth.se/eng/food-commons/>

***For dietitians ready to take a deeper dive into sustainable food systems, these medium to long term actions will likely involve several steps and take longer to accomplish:***

### **ADVOCATE**

- Participate in government consultations. Contribute your voice to DC to inform the professional responses to these consultations.
- Advocate for shaping and regulating the food environment such that health, social, ecological and economic outcomes carry equal weight in decision making.
- In your communications, include clear messages about food systems sustainability and the need for regulation.
- Advocate for policies which systematically dismantle inequities, e.g., basic Income guarantee.
- Advocate for structures (policy, incentives, etc.) which *also* support small to medium scale players in the food system. There is need for diversity of scale (local, regional, global) in food systems.
- Advocate to revise the food inspection requirements if these are barriers in some institutions – so that culture, meaning and sustainability are honoured (without compromising food safety).
- Advocate for the inclusion of sustainable food systems as a core dietetic competency.
- Advocate for, or directly collaborate in, land use planning in urban and rural settings. The role of the built environment is not only to address issues of food access, but also to secure the availability of *sustainable* foods.

### **INSTITUTIONALIZE**

- Use a principled approach to sustainability in your practice or organization (see Appendix A & B): identify structural barriers to social sustainability (including but not limited to health); identify root causes of ecological damage (pollution, waste, resource use) and examine/implement appropriate actions.
- Create a sustainable standards policy for use within your work and related organizations.

### **COLLABORATE**

- Make allies in other professions and sectors (e.g., agriculture, environment, medicine, etc.).
- Identify key partners: other organizations, in Canada and beyond, working for sustainable food systems; other disciplines and sectors such as agriculture, food science, etc.

## Key Resources

If sustainability in food systems is a new topic for you, the Sustainable Food Systems Leadership Team has gathered a list of key reports and research to help you get started with the above actions - check out DC's website [here](#) to find a current list of key resources. This list of resources will be updated periodically, so check back to see what's new.

See also:

[Practice-based Evidence in Nutrition](#) (PEN®)

DC's [Learning on Demand](#)

## Next Steps

Key outcomes of this project, through collective dialogue, included a member-informed vision of success for sustainable food systems in Canada that articulates key themes of importance to dietitians, and the identification of key leverage points for action. Together, these outcomes provide a roadmap that captures the collective knowledge and values of participating DC members. In summarizing this work, the intention was to stimulate dialogue among dietitians, to encourage dietitians to contribute to and promote food system sustainability.

The sustainability of our food systems is critical to the everyday work of dietitians. The outcomes of this research project told us that SFS is a topic that many dietitians care about. The depth and scope of the responses demonstrated that many of us have already been thinking and learning about sustainability for a long time. As a Leadership Team, we hope to spark more dialogue at a professional level, provide a forum to bring disparate conversations and thoughts together, to help DC members share and learn from one another, and to be a conduit for more resources in the future.

### **Acknowledgements**

*The authors extend sincere gratitude to the participating members from Dietitians of Canada who put into this project countless collective hours, and to Pat Vanderkooy and Marsha Sharp, Dietitians of Canada staff, who have consistently stressed the importance of food system sustainability in our profession, and poured energy into making it a priority. We are grateful to the other members of the 2017 Dietitians of Canada Sustainable Food Systems Leadership Team for their support: Jennifer Brady, Pamela Fergusson, Eric Ng, Laurie-Anne Patenaude, Nazima Qureshi. Roxane Wagner, Fiona Yeudall. Acadia University and VINNOVA (Swedish Governmental Agency for Innovation Systems) are also gratefully acknowledged for financial support.*