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Our Food Future: A regional food circularity case study from Canada

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Abstract

In response to the socio-economic and environmental limitations of contemporary food systems, a multistakeholder group of community changemakers came together to create Our Food Future, an ambitious effort that aimed to develop a regional circular food system in the Guelph-Wellington region of Ontario, Canada. This study involved interviews with individuals (N = 35) who contributed to the development and/or implementation of Our Food Future's programming and projects in order to identify lessons learned from this municipally led circular economy initiative. In this article, we argue that the proponents of Our Food Future worked to leverage circular economy and municipal innovation discourses and practices to catalyze a sustainability transformation based in the local food system. Perceived enablers to success include the centrality of relationships and partnerships to the project design, collaborations across traditional city/county divides, the diversity of thought embodied by the workstream model, the focus on food as a locally relevant issue, and the municipal scale of intervention into policy and practice. We also observed that the municipal governance model operationalized in the project was itself an innovation. Our analysis indicates that Our Food Future represented systemic and enabling approaches to sustainability transformations, and that structural transformation will require ongoing efforts to fundamentally change the socio-ecological context of contemporary food systems. This study functions

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Kate Parizeau was a community-engaged researcher who participated in some of the initiatives described in this article.

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as an early case study of regional food circularity initiatives, with the goal of enabling the project's lessons to be applied to other locales in Canada and abroad.

Keywords
circular economy, food, food waste, municipal innovation, sustainability transformations, Smart Cities

Introduction and Conceptual Framework

Food systems around the world are riddled with inefficiencies and inequities that result in enormous quantities of wasted food and the perpetuation of food insecurity (Parizeau & von Massow, 2022). Municipalities are increasingly positioned as the appropriate scale of intervention in food systems issues, and circular economies are becoming a prominent framing for such interventions (e.g., see Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 2022). The present study investigates Our Food Future, an initiative led by a multistakeholder group of community changemakers that aimed to develop a regional circular food system in Guelph-Wellington, Ontario, Canada. The initiative was primarily funded through a CA$10 million grant awarded by Infrastructure Canada's inaugural Smart Cities Challenge in 2019. This federal grant competition encouraged communities to improve the lives of Canadians using data and connected technology (Government of Canada, 2019). This funding served as a catalyst for future grants and in-kind funding. In total, Our Food Future leveraged CA$23,545,257 in new funding throughout its duration from multiple sources (City of Guelph & Wellington County, 2023a).

Employing a triple bottom line approach to simultaneously achieve social, environmental, and economic outcomes, Our Food Future's "50x50x50" objectives included: (1) a 50% increase to affordable and nutritious food access, (2) the creation of 50 new circular businesses and/or collaborations, and (3) a 50% increase in circular economy revenue achieved through food waste reduction (City of Guelph & Wellington County, 2019a). To achieve these objectives, a multistakeholder group of community changemakers, led by the City of Guelph and Wellington County, collaborated to develop and implement regional programming and food-based initiatives. Their efforts were organized into workstreams focused on each of the 50x50x50 objectives: Affordable, Nutritious Foods workstream; Waste as a Resource workstream; and Circular Businesses and Collaborations workstream. A Smart Cities Office was established in each of the City of Guelph and Wellington County to provide central municipal project oversight. More than 1,000 stakeholders from municipal and provincial governments, postsecondary institutions, nonprofit organizations, social enterprises, and local businesses contributed to Our Food Future from its conception in 2018 to its conclusion in 2023 (City of Guelph & Wellington County, 2023a).

The aim of this research article is to identify the lessons that can be learned from Our Food Future's work to build a circular food economy in Guelph-Wellington through a series of interviews with key actors in this initiative. The research questions explored in this study include:

(1) What did the project accomplish, and what factors led to the successes and challenges experienced across Our Food Future's diverse initiatives?
(2) How did the "circular economy" framing of the project shape the goals and outcomes of Our Food Future?
(3) What can be learned from the municipal governance model chosen for the project?
(4) How did Our Food Future contribute to sustainability transformations in Guelph-Wellington?

Our Food Future is situated within the topical intersections of circular economies, municipal innovation and institutionalization, and sustainability transformations. As such, literature from each of these fields informed the study design. In this article, we argue that the proponents of Our Food Future worked to leverage circular economy and municipal innovation discourses to catalyze a sustainability transformation based in the local food system. Following is an overview of the conceptual framework that guided this research project.

Conceptual Framework: Circular Economies

The circular economy is often positioned against the 'linear economy' that currently dominates global production and consumption processes with its unsustainable 'take-make-waste' approach. 'Circular economy' definitions are plentiful in academic and grey literature (Kirchherr et al., 2017). These descriptions have been criticized for being deliberately vague, deeply normative, unachievable, and impractical (Corvellec et al., 2022; Friant et al., 2020; Gregson et al., 2015; Kirchherr & van Santen, 2019). Kirchherr et al. (2017)—who completed an analysis of 114 circular economy definitions—describe circular economy as a construct "developed through a multi-stakeholder discourse" (p. 224) and offer the following definition:

> A circular economy describes an economic system that is based on business models which replace the 'end-of-life' concept with reducing, alternatively reusing, recycling and recovering materials in production/distribution and consumption processes, thus operating at the micro level (products, companies, consumers), meso level (eco-industrial parks) and macro level (city, region, nation and beyond), with the aim to accomplish sustainable development, which implies environmental quality, economic prosperity and social equity, to the benefit of current and future generations. (pp. 224–225)

Despite the environmental potential for waste reduction through a circular economy, the environmental and social implications resulting from circular models in practice remain questionable. Considering waste to be a resource may lead to its commodification (Greer et al., 2021), which works against the waste hierarchy and directly competes with waste reduction efforts. The possible and problematic shift toward commodifying waste is noticeable within circular economy discourses. Of the '4 Rs' (i.e., reduce, reuse, recycle, recover), 'recycle' appears most often in circular economy definitions, with some scholars subverting the concept by suggesting that circular economies are merely models for recycling (Kirchherr et al., 2017). Determining the environmental benefits of circular economies are also muddied by the application (or lack thereof) of the laws of thermodynamics (Friant et al., 2020), the possibility of increasing bio-accumulative toxicants in our biological systems (Isenhour et al., 2021), and a failure to recognize that the indefinite circulation of many materials is currently not possible (Friant et al., 2020). Similarly, circular economies generally neglect social considerations (Corvellec et al., 2022; Friant et al., 2020; Kirchherr et al., 2017), and as such, it has been challenging to identify which societal benefits circular approaches may offer. Some recent efforts to implement circular economy models have responded to these critiques at the design stages.

Our Food Future thus presents an interesting case study, given its explicit focus on addressing social equity concerns through a circular economy framework. As described below, this initiative grappled with the critiques of circular economy models throughout its operations, resulting in the emergence of a place-based definition for the term that proponents worked to operationalize: "Circular economies—which minimize waste by recycling and reusing resources instead of throwing them away—have the potential to address environmental challenges and decrease social inequities while creating business opportunities" (Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 2022. p. 4). We analyze this definition further below.

Municipal Innovation and Institutionalization

Innovation can be understood as a gradual or long-term transformative process that disrupts existing procedures to enhance institutional practices (Robinson & Biggar, 2022). In Canada, there have recently been increased efforts to innovate at the municipal level of governance (P. A. Johnson et al., 2020). Innovation in the public sector can be described as "intentional effort to design, realize, and diffuse new public policies, services, organizations, and procedures that disrupt established practices and conventional thinking" (Sørensen & Torfing, 2016, p. 828). Municipalities are increasingly attempting to innovate under the umbrella of the 'smart city' concept. A smart city refers to a municipality that uses technologies to optimize the delivery of public services, advance sustainability, and improve the well-being and quality of life of

residents (Zwick & Spicer, 2024). While technology is often centered within smart city narratives, many academics and practitioners agree that smart city initiatives must extend beyond digital infrastructure to also incorporate social innovation and participatory governance models (Spicer et al., 2023; Zwick & Spicer, 2024). Smart city projects have been criticized for being profit-driven and dominated by corporate, rather than public, interests (Goodman et al., 2020). For example, several multinational companies, like Uber and Airbnb, have used vendor-driven smart city models to deploy technologies at the city-scale around the globe. However, it appears that there may be a potential rise in government-centered smart city efforts that prioritize the public good over profit maximization (Robinson & Biggar, 2022).

Institutionalizing innovation involves "a transformational process that shifts innovations out of the experimental phase … by diffusing innovations among a wider array of adopters and integrating them into emerging or existing regimes. This process enhances the legitimacy, coherence, and stability of the innovations through the diverse interactions and actions of various actors" (St-Laurent et al., 2025, "Conceptual Background," para. 3). The institutionalization of innovation may therefore be a key component to long-term, sustained transformations in our communities. Yet, achieving such institutionalization is not without challenges. There is limited knowledge on how to operationalize municipal innovation (Robinson & Biggar, 2022; Zwick & Spicer, 2024). Institutionalization efforts in Canada can be complicated by governance mismatches, such as the division of authority (e.g., data privacy) and the perception of responsibility (e.g., waste management) between federal, provincial, and municipal governments (Spicer & Zwick, 2021). Institutional silos can also impede municipal innovation. With its focus on government-led approaches, Infrastructure Canada's Smart Cities Challenge provided an opportunity to further our understanding of institutionalizing innovations at the municipal level. The municipal innovation focus of Our Food Future's primary funding source therefore influenced our choice of analytical frameworks.

Sustainability Transformations

'Sustainability transformations' can be defined as fundamental, long-term, and multidimensional shifts in socio-technical-ecological systems that reshape structural, functional, relational, and cognitive components to enhance well-being, promote environmental protection, and support sustainable production and consumption (Daedlow et al., 2016; Markard et al., 2012; Patterson et al., 2017). Within the context of this study, Our Food Future aimed to transform Guelph-Wellington's food systems. Food system transformations involve fundamental 'farm to fork' changes within and between the structure, systems, and functions of a given food system. The concept of 'sustainability transformations' first emerged in 1990's sustainability literature (Markard et al., 2012) and became further popularized through the United Nations' launch of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. Three approaches to sustainability transformations elaborated by Scoones et al. (2020)—structural, systemic, and enabling—have gained recent recognition. Structural approaches involve the fundamental rethinking of entire social systems by changing core political, economic, and societal foundations. Systemic approaches target and aim to change individual system features, such as institutions, technologies, and stakeholders. Enabling approaches build social capacities and agency that empower individuals and communities to take meaningful action on their own. Coupled with these approaches, Scoones et al. (2020) outline three principles to consider when facilitating transformative change: (1) engage with diverse knowledges to create hybrid—rather than homogenous—knowledge systems, (2) explore a plurality of pathways toward sustainability, and (3) recognize the deeply influential role of politics in transformation.

Transformations are rarely straightforward, often contested, and do not occur in a "political or cultural vacuum" (Hebinck et al., 2018, p. 2). Rather, transformations are inherently political and have the potential to be deeply influential within policy and governance (Blythe et al., 2018; Hebinck et al., 2018; Patterson et al., 2017; Scoones et al., 2020). It is critical to recognize the role of political systems and processes in sustainability transformations as they inevitably lead to shifts in power

and changes to who and what experiences benefits and drawbacks (Blythe et al., 2018; Hebinck et al., 2018). Failure to critically consider power dynamics and the role of politics within transformations can have considerable implications. For example, Blythe et al. (2018) argue that "by shifting the burden of response to global environmental change from those who have caused it to those who are most effected, transformation discourse may serve to disempower and further marginalise vulnerable groups" (p. 1212). Our Food Future presents a case study for strengthening our understandings of how these theoretical considerations manifest in practice, due to its local governance model which aimed to induce sustainability transformations while maintaining a commitment to social equity considerations.

Applied Research Methods

This study involved interviewing individuals who contributed to the development and/or implementation of Our Food Future's programming and initiatives. A review of publicly accessible project resources[1] was undertaken to inform the study design, research questions, and interview guide. Interviewees included 35 former Our Food Future staff members and collaborators. Most participants (n = 24) had been involved with Our Food Future since its inception and prior to it being awarded CA$10 million through Infrastructure Canada's Smart Cities Challenge in 2019 (Government of Canada, 2019). Eighteen participants contributed to Our Food Future as municipal or provincial government employees, 13 contributed from nonprofit organizations or social enterprises, and four contributed from postsecondary institutions. Of the 35 interviewees, 12 participants primarily worked within the Affordable, Nutritious Foods workstream; 10 mainly contributed to the Waste as a Resource workstream; and six were mostly involved with the Circular Businesses and Collaborations workstream. Of the remaining participants, four were members of the overarching leadership team who contributed to Our Food Future more broadly and three provided guidance and shared their expertise through adjacent roles.

Participants were recruited through email, LinkedIn messaging, and snowball sampling (Henry, 2009). Participants were sent a letter of information and, if they were interested in participating, a one-hour virtual interview was scheduled. An interview guide was emailed to participants prior to their interview. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by author Everitt between November 2024 and January 2025 via Microsoft Teams. Because Our Food Future concluded in December 2023, the results of this study may be limited by recall bias. Verbal consent was obtained from all participants at the beginning of each interview. During the interviews, video, audio, and Microsoft Teams–generated transcriptions were recorded. Transcriptions were manually revised and verified for accuracy.

The two authors collaboratively coded the interview transcripts in NVivo using a thematic coding approach. Themes identified for the preliminary codebook were based on the research questions, interview guide, and field notes written by Everitt. As per Richards & Hemphill (2018), the preliminary codebook was independently pilot-tested by each author against three uncoded transcripts. The authors then met to discuss and revise the codebook where appropriate. The authors wrote analytic memos (Saldaña, 2013) and continued to meet regularly over a period of six weeks to share coded excerpts, discuss emergent themes, and resolve disagreements through compromise. A structured member checking approach (McKim, 2023) was followed to establish validity and gather feedback from participants. All participants (N = 35) were given the opportunity to choose their own identifiers for this research and to review a draft of this article, including a preliminary review of the direct quotations that we anticipated using in the study results.

Parizeau is a community-engaged researcher who participated in the development and operation of Our Food Future between 2018 and 2023. She was invited by Our Food Future leadership to participate in the Waste as a Resource workstream, attend meetings of the Program Delivery Team and the Community Steering Table, and provide feed-

[1] Available at https://foodfuture.ca

back on policy and programming associated with the project. She also led research assessing the outcomes of initiatives associated with Our Food Future. Parizeau's participation in Our Food Future influenced the research questions and design of this study, and provided a first-hand perspective on the operations of the project. This model of community-engaged scholarship has been described as collaborative public-sector innovation and is considered appropriate for municipal policy research because of shared commitments to community-informed solutions, the development of mutually meaningful goals, and shared aspirations for more equitable societies (Levac & Chan, 2025). Community-engaged researchers must navigate multiple dimensions of their insider-outsider identities with respect to their research communities, and reflexivity is a key strategy for ethical engagement in this type of research (L. R. Johnson, 2017). Parizeau practiced self-reflexivity at all stages of the research project through a series of field notes, where she considering her intentions and interests in participating in Our Food Future as well as her assumptions and beliefs about the project. This research study is the result of multiple initial conversations with proponents of Our Food Future, who encouraged the research team to document the process of forming this initiative. As a result, the research design of this project was collaboratively conceived with the aim of building reciprocal research relationships with community (L. R. Johnson, 2017).

Results and Discussion

In the following sections, we describe the accomplishments of Our Food Future, report on its impacts and the factors enabling its success, analyze the municipal leadership model deployed in this initiative, and describe the challenges and lessons learned by project participants. We close the discussion with an analysis of the discursive shifts and transformations associated with building Our Food Future.

Our Food Future Accomplishments

Between 2020 and 2023, it was estimated that Our Food Future led to the creation of 287 circular jobs; funding for 93 community food projects; increased access to affordable nutritious foods for 20,572 individuals; the diversion, upcycling, or recycling of 84,860 tonnes of food waste; 320 acres of land piloting regenerative agricultural practices; and the prevention of 168,788 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions (City of Guelph & Wellington County, 2023a). We highlight some of the projects commonly discussed by interviewees below. Additional information about the many other innovative projects housed under this initiative can be found online.[2]

To further progress toward achieving a 50% increase in affordable and nutritious food access (one of the 50x50x50 goals), Our Food Future partnered with the Guelph Community Health Centre and other stakeholders to implement a variety of food security initiatives. A social enterprise leader (P31) described the community impacts of these initiatives:

> I would say the biggest change was on the ground. We distributed a lot of food and worked with a lot of people who are experiencing food insecurity, and those people had a lot of say in how that happened and had a real voice in that. And so, there was a lot more people getting good food and more people being involved and being asked to be involved.

This approach resonates with Varney and Soma's (2024) identification of the need to develop an equity-oriented approach to prioritizing dignified food access within circular food economies. Some initiatives may rely on a short-sighted approach of redirecting wasted food to food insecure individuals in a nontransformative practice that cannot address the root issues of income insecurity and inequality (Soma, 2024). Our Food Future proponents actively worked to provide food security with dignity through the Affordable, Nutritious Foods workstream initiatives. One example of these initiatives is 'groceries from the SEED,[3] the first sliding-scale online grocery store in Canada (City of Guelph & Wellington County, 2023a). In its first year of the project, the SEED

[2] https://foodfuture.ca

[3] https://www.theseedguelph.ca

made over 10,000 grocery deliveries, of which 80% were made to households experiencing food insecurity, saving pay-what-you-choose customers over CA$500,000 (Wellington Dufferin-Guelph Public Health, 2022). Groceries from the SEED continued to operate beyond the conclusion of Our Food Future, contributing to increased food access in the Guelph-Wellington region.

Working toward the creation of 50 new circular businesses and/or collaborations (another of the of the 50x50x50 goals), the Smart Cities Office at the City of Guelph initiated the Circular Opportunity Innovation Launchpad (COIL) in 2021. COIL provided for-profit businesses and nonprofit organizations with access to knowledge, tools, resources, and supports to embed circularity into their principles and practices (City of Guelph & Wellington County, 2023a). A leader in the Smart Cities Office (P11) described how COIL mobilized circular economy knowledge within the corporate world:

> In the business and the startup space, we worked with tons and tons of startups who had not necessarily heard of 'circular economy.' They may have been doing some things in that space, but the framing, the thinking, the linking it to climate, all that stuff I think was really valuable.

One example of a COIL success story is Friendlier,[4] a reusable container company that received support from COIL during its incubation phase. It is now the fastest growing business of its kind in Canada (City of Guelph & Wellington County, 2023b). Throughout COIL's time under the Our Food Future banner, the launchpad supported over 160 organizations across 42 cities in southern Ontario—expanding Our Food Future's reach outside the Guelph-Wellington region (City of Guelph & Wellington County, 2023a). With support from COIL, over 80 new products and services were developed and a total of CA$1,075,000 in corporate funding was leveraged to advance circular innovations (City of Guelph & Wellington County, 2023a). Following the conclusion of Our Food Future, COIL is now housed within the Circular Innovation Council,[5] a nonprofit organization that aims to advance the circular economy in communities across Canada.

Toward the goal of achieving a 50% increase in circular economy revenue through food waste reduction efforts (one of the of the 50x50x50 goals), Our Food Future partnered with the Circular Innovation Council to pilot a food recovery and rescue business model for industrial, commercial, and institutional (IC&I) sectors in the Guelph-Wellington region. In the first year of the pilot project, 53 participating businesses recovered and donated the equivalent of 39,447 meals (valued at CA$131,803.76) and diverted 230,637 kilograms (508,468 lbs.) of food and organic waste from landfill (Alexander et al., 2023). Environmentally, this resulted in the mitigation of approximately 2,542 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions (Alexander et al., 2023). Following the conclusion of Our Food Future and building on the project's success in the Guelph-Wellington region, Circular Innovation Council expanded the pilot in 2024 to the Town of Westlock and Strathcona County in Alberta, as well as the Waterloo Region in Ontario.

Impacts of Our Food Future and Factors Enabling Success

In discussing the overarching impacts of Our Food Future, a circular economy manager at a municipality (P21) said:

> It showed the art of the possible, and I think that even though the Smart Cities Office [at the City of Guelph] has shuttered its doors, I still think the spirit of Our Food Future lives on, and it wasn't just a flash in the pan. It really spurred a lot of creativity and inspiration and work that now continues on.

Participants identified multiple factors that enabled success and contributed to Our Food Future's positive impacts. Many participants perceived value in the new and enhanced relationships created as a result of the initiative's highly collaborative approach. An academic at a local university

[4] https://www.friendlier.com

[5] https://www.circularinnovation.ca

(P34) reflected on the unprecedented community collaboration that took place: "I've been in Guelph for almost 15 years, and it was the first, arguably the only, time that there's been serious collaboration between members of civil society and the City and the university all trying to articulate a common vision." Some participants, such as a leader in the charitable healthcare sector (P12), recognized that inclusion and diversity contributed to the project's successes: "Having so many people at the table, it was a bit of a double-edged sword, but it worked well because we had lots of diversity of thought and opportunities that presented themselves." This finding aligns with Scoones et al.'s (2020) transformative change principles that encourage serious consideration and appreciation for diverse knowledges.

Our Food Future's focus on food systems as focal points for transformation likely enabled success as well. A manager at a community-based organization (P6) described the impact of the project's focus on food:

> I think food is something that people understand. People have different relationships with food, but we also understand that food does more than just nourish bodies. It's a place. It's something that people connect over. It's something that people have moments of joy over. … I think another resource may not have garnered the level of excitement and attention because it just doesn't impact people in so many varied ways.

The involvement of the City of Guelph and Wellington County in this highly collaborative model was also described as an enabler of success, as some participants recognized the role municipalities have (or should have) in food system transformations. For example:

> We do see municipalities at the forefront of addressing climate, addressing affordability, and circular economy approaches are so supportive of some of those challenges, but they can't be undertaken in silos and so that ability to work cross-functionally was meaningful. (P29, Circular project manager)

We argue that the achievements of Our Food Future position this initiative as an example of a community-based circular food system. Alonso Martínez et al. (2025) articulate a vision for community-based circular food systems:

> … which can be defined as local and regional food systems that reduce waste and regenerate eco-systems through practices grounded in participation, equity, and the local context. … Their emphasis extends beyond material flows to encompass relational dynamics, participatory governance, and holistic well-being. (p. 2)

The inclusion of equity-oriented goals and the participatory ethos of the project were closely connected to the multistakeholder collaborative model at the heart of the project's design. The local and regional scale of the food system was considered to be both meaningful to participants as well as appropriately matched to the governance context where relevant policy decisions could be taken (Spicer & Zwick, 2021).

Municipal Institutionalization and Innovation

The municipal leadership model developed for Our Food Future positioned municipal staff at the hub of a burgeoning circular food system network. A Smart Cities Office was established at each of the City of Guelph and Wellington County to provide central, municipal project oversight. While housed within municipalities, one participant described the City of Guelph's office as being "slightly removed from the City, but still within the confines of the municipal machine" (P10, Project coordinator at a municipality).

In alignment with Our Food Future's overarching sustainability objectives, programs and their corresponding stakeholders were grouped into three thematic workstreams: (1) Affordable, Nutritious Foods; (2) Circular Businesses and Collaborations; and (3) Waste as a Resource (City of Guelph & Wellington County, 2019b). Smart Cities Office staff also worked on a fourth theme of Systems Change, which provided logistical support, project management, and policy guidance to the project. Municipal staff from both the County and the City participated in all workstreams, and were

joined by relevant representatives from community organizations, local businesses and business accelerator programs, postsecondary institutions, public health, and others according to the workstream mandates. A circular economy leader (P5) described their experience with these workstreams as follows: "My experience was that that [format] was great because it became the way that the project was more led by community leaders and the participants in the workstreams than it was by the centre."

While the workstream format enabled shared leadership of Our Food Future's projects and goals, the core of the municipal governance structure provided operational stability and the perception of legitimacy in some spheres. Municipal employees assigned to the project supported the innovation work of community organizations and businesses by disbursing funding, supporting communications, and coordinating actors across sectors. Drawing on the definition of institutionalization as the embedding and diffusion of innovations by building their legitimacy, coherence, and stability (St-Laurent et al., 2025), municipal actors were positioned as important prospective agents for institutionalizing the innovations associated with Our Food Future. For example, interviewees commented on the need for municipal policy change to support Our Food Future's transformational work:

> The City's in charge of a lot of things that matter to us every day, and how cool if they also thought thinking about food and food access is a piece of it. I think that's why I find that more exciting than maybe if a university took it up or a not-for-profit, because I think the impact for policy change is just higher. (P13, Faculty member at the local university)

Interviewees noted that there can be strong capacity for effecting transformative change at the municipal scale when it is resourced appropriately. The municipal sphere was repeatedly discussed as an appropriate scale for sustainability governance and interventions:

> I think from the municipal perspective … we are the ones typically that are closest to the need, especially in this area of food and waste. We're the ones that are most attuned into what people are needing and are looking for. (P19, Supervisor in waste management)

> There's been a lot of discussion about how cities can drive circular economy, more so than even provincial or federal governments. Or they have their own unique role to play, and I just think that this project really demonstrated that cities do have a role to play. (P10, Project coordinator at a municipality)

The municipal scale can therefore be the appropriate scale for community-centred sustainability transformations. However, municipal governments in Canada tend to be chronically underfunded and stretched thin with increasing service responsibilities. A number of interviewees noted that the development of Our Food Future created a space for municipal innovation in a context where municipalities often cannot afford to experiment. One interviewee commented on the distinctiveness of the municipal governance approach undertaken through Our Food Future:

> Not only did this project exceed expectations, but this experience also presented significant learning opportunities, including the role a municipality can play as a community convener and mobilizer, diverging from the usual operations of a municipality. (P2, Manager at a municipality)

The municipal governance model associated with the Our Food Future project positioned city and county representatives as the 'hub' that connected 'spoke' projects located across the community. This format of municipal leadership can be understood as a form of innovation, in that it represented a purposeful attempt to "disrupt established practices and conventional thinking" (Sørensen & Torfing, 2016, p. 828) about how to catalyze sustainability transformations at the municipal scale. However, the meaningful institutionalization of this model of governance and other workstream outcomes has proven challenging in the winddown of the project.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Interviewees described a number of challenges that they experienced through the design and implementation stages of Our Food Future. While some of these issues presented barriers to success, many of the challenges identified were also framed as opportunities. For example, multiple interviewees alluded to the ambitious scale and complexity of Our Food Future as a source of operational challenges, while some also named this ambition as a factor that contributed to the diverse successes associated with the project. Relatedly, the time and effort required to build the partnerships at the heart of this ambitious project were described by interviewees as both a challenge, and a prerequisite for success:

> And I think that what I always tell people about having been through this project is that you really can only move at the speed of trust. You can't do it without partnerships and partnerships work on trust and that takes time. (P1, Member of the project's leadership team)

The COVID-19 pandemic was described as very disruptive to the project, especially given the planned involvement of public health staff in the Affordable, Nutritious Foods workstream. Our Food Future was designed to support local food businesses that were subsequently severely impacted by COVID-19 closures and regulations. However, interviewees also framed the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to rethink some of the premises of Our Food Future and to reprioritize the social equity goals of the project in the local context of intersecting inequalities that had been exacerbated by the pandemic (Pin et al., 2021). The project's short-term pivot to creating a Grow Back Better plan to guide community and business initiatives in the wake of the pandemic led to Our Food Future being named a top recovery project by Future of Good (a federally funded news aggregator focused on amplifying community impact; City of Guelph & Wellington County, 2023a).

Some interviewees also spoke to the challenges of working across urban and rural divides, acknowledging historic disconnects and tensions between the City of Guelph and Wellington County. They noted that project responsibilities and resources were not always evenly distributed between the city and the county, and that the application of circularity appeared to prioritize urban rather than rural spaces. Spicer et al. (2021) discuss the urban focus in most smart cities research, noting that a major limitation to creating smart rural communities is a lack of internet access. Even though this barrier was also mentioned by Our Food Future participants, some interviewees also noted that Our Food Future served to create a more effective working relationship between the city and the county through close collaboration on a number of initiatives.

Some respondents raised challenges around financial issues (including the prioritization of funding for chosen aspects of the project), silos between the work completed by different workstreams, competing project goals, and interpersonal frictions. Many of these issues are common in large-scale, multistakeholder projects. Interviewees also mentioned technical difficulties, including the challenge of measuring progress. Despite the achievements of Our Food Future, some participants perceived a lack of awareness of the project and its outcomes among the public.

Interviewees also mentioned tensions between the approaches preferred by different stakeholders in the project. For example, a contrast was drawn between some proponents' entrepreneurial 'move fast and break things' worldview versus nonprofit organizations' approach of slow, relational advocacy to effect structural change. Some interviewees' commitment to effecting structural changes in the food system informed how they interpreted the final outcomes of the Our Food Future initiative:

> Whether or not there's any lasting effect on the social inequality side of things, I think would be pretty debatable. In fact, things are worse now than they were when the project started. But again, I think that goes to show the scale of the issue is greater than a municipality alone can tackle. I think it's more provincial and federal level funding and attention that needs to happen. (P4, Manager at a nonprofit organization)

> There needs to be a home for food in all levels of government and until there is, this will be hard. (P26, Community connector within a nonprofit)

These quotations speak to the intractability of some of the issues that the Our Food Future initiative set out to address, including food insecurity and food access. Other researchers have commented on the difficulties of addressing trenchant social inequalities through circular economy interventions (Corvellec et al., 2022; Friant et al., 2020; Kirchherr et al., 2017). Notably, Varney and Soma (2024) argue for "systemic solutions that address the root causes of food insecurity and food waste to ensure the implementation of a circular food system that promotes equity and prosperity for current and future generations" (p. 16).

In addition to the intractability of some of the issues at the core of the Our Food Future initiative (such as food insecurity and widespread food waste generation), the goal of institutionalizing sustainability transformations proved somewhat elusive. With the end of the federal funding for the project, Our Food Future and the City of Guelph's Smart Cities Office shut down at the end of 2023. Some of the workstream activities had been successfully mainstreamed into municipal operations by this point. For example, the City of Guelph's Solid Waste Master Plan update and Wellington County's introduction of organic waste diversion services represent the long-term institutionalization of sustainability practices and policies that had been developed through Our Food Future (City of Guelph & Wellington County, 2023a). The Smart Cities Office in Wellington County has continued to operate beyond the end of the federal funding for the project, and the manager in that office has maintained the legacy of Our Food Future's aims on a reduced budget. However, other initiatives ended abruptly, to the dismay of some interviewees. While many respondents were disappointed by the lack of continuity for Our Food Future's initiatives, some noted that this outcome is status quo in sectors that rely on noncontinuous funding sources:

> One major lesson learned is—and this is a problem with many government-led initiatives—there's no forethought around legacy and continuation of initiatives that have been launched. Often times they're one-offs and I suspect the government's just hoping, somehow miraculously, someone will figure out how to continue the work. But more often than not, additional funding of large scale is hard to come by, and therefore these really fruitful initiatives get launched, executed, grow, then all of a sudden they shut down at their peak when they're starting to make a benefit. (P3, Academic researcher)

The deep desire for continuity of the Our Food Future initiatives could be interpreted as a commentary on the value of the network that was formed and the unrealized potential that many participants perceived in these collaborations. Such sentiments also speak to the need for legacy planning in order to ensure the sustainability of ambitious projects like Our Food Future.

An Analysis of the Discursive Shifts and Transformations Associated with Building Our Food Future

Our Food Future aimed to transform not just the social and material flows of food in Guelph-Wellington, but also the discursive framing of these dynamics through "articulat[ing] a shared vision of a regional circular food system" (City of Guelph & Wellington County, 2023a, p. 2). Interviewees noted that 'circular economy' became a more legible concept over the tenure of the project, especially in conversations with local decision-makers:

> I think a significant accomplishment was getting elected officials talking circular economy languages both at the City and the County. You had City councillors, County councillors who know a lot more about the circular economy than they did before Our Food Future. And so I think that's an achievement in itself, because [elected officials] are important stakeholders as we look to move to a more circular society. (P27, Manager at a local municipality)

> I think part of the legacy was the way that people across sectors started to work together and also started to think about circularity just as an important concept within the regular day-to-day work that they were participating in or doing. (P5, Circular economy leader)

Despite its increased use in municipal governance and organizational contexts, some respondents noted that it was not clear whether the term 'circular economy' had gained increased resonance with the public over time. Interviewees also noted that different definitions of circular economy had been invoked in different contexts throughout the project to speak to diverse priorities across the workstreams.

Respondents had disparate perspectives on the transformational impacts of Our Food Future. Many pointed to the successes of individual initiatives as transformational, particularly mentioning the expansion or development of specific organizations and businesses that were enabled through Our Food Future funding and mentorship. Others spoke to the ongoing relationships and cross-sectoral partnerships fostered through Our Food Future, which they believed would change the status quo for collaborations in Guelph-Wellington. These types of changes typify what Scoones et al. (2020) describe as systemic approaches (e.g., changing institutions, technologies, and stakeholders) and enabling approaches (e.g., empowering individuals and communities) to sustainability transformations. Structural approaches that fundamentally transform social systems remain more elusive, according to some interviewees:

> But unfortunately, it's going to fade from our collective conscience, I think. That's not Our Food Future specific. I've been working in this world for a long time. That is unfortunately the way it is with these types of initiatives unless they are heavily resourced for a really long time to do the slow, methodical, strategic work to spread the impact, to get it into people's minds and brains, and that sometimes is about changing curriculum in school so the next generation is thinking about these things differently. (P6, Manager at a community-based organization)

Structural transformation is an ambitious expectation for a project of this scope and scale. As Alonso Martínez et al. (2025) observe, community-based circular food system initiatives:

> are often resource-constrained and highly localized, which can make them vulnerable to systemic shocks and very much reliant on community buy-in for long-term viability. This can result in organizational challenges to scale impact, secure long-term financing, and navigate regulatory constraints (p. 2).

The challenges faced by Our Food Future, including the closure of one of its municipal offices and program discontinuations, are therefore consistent with the experiences of other community-based circular food systems. An interviewee recommended that the vision of a circular food economy for Guelph-Wellington should be understood as:

> a generational goal. Something that … takes a lot of time to implement. … It's really a fundamental changing and re-ordering of not only the economy, but society in a lot of ways. (P27, Manager at a local municipality)

True transformation is a long-term project that must be pluralistic and differentiated to challenge the root causes of unsustainable practices and systems (Blythe et al., 2018). Shifts of this magnitude can be supported by community-based circular food systems initiatives like Our Food Future, but such projects cannot be expected to effect a structural sustainability transformation on their own. They require institutionalization across multiple sectors and multiple scales of governance in order to lead to long-term sustainability transformations.

Conclusions

Our Food Future experienced many successes, including fostering the development of multiple new or expanded businesses and nonprofit interventions seeking to disrupt traditional food system dynamics, as well as policy changes to support local waste reduction and diversion. Many of these initiatives focused on triple bottom line goals and were supported through multistakeholder collaborations

across different sectors. By the end of its tenure, the final project was stated to have met or exceeded its 50x50x50 goals of (1) a 50% increase to affordable and nutritious food access, (2) the creation of 50 new circular businesses and/or collaborations, and (3) a 50% increase in circular economy revenue achieved through food waste reduction (City of Guelph & Wellington County, 2023a).

Success factors identified by interviewees included the centrality of relationships and partnerships to the project design, collaborations across traditional city/county divides, the diversity of thought embodied by the workstream model, the focus on food as a locally relevant issue, and the municipal scale of intervention into policy and practice. Ultimately, it was the capacity of the project proponents to successfully fundraise for the project that enabled subsequent accomplishments. The discursive framing of a circular food economy for Guelph-Wellington as both a smart city initiative and an opportunity to locally effect socio-environmental transformations were central to these fundraising efforts.

The challenges discussed by respondents included project logistics, workstream silos, concerns about the continuity of the initiatives, urban-rural divides, COVID-19 interruptions, and interpersonal issues. Factors influencing these challenges included the ambition and complexity of the project goals, the scale of the project and its many participants, and the transient and disjointed nature of funding for municipal innovation in Canada. Another major constraining factor was the trenchant nature of the root issues that Our Food Future sought to address through the creation of a circular food economy. In particular, food insecurity (which is caused primarily by income insecurity; Idzerda et al., 2024) and food waste are deep, structural, systemic challenges that are embedded across multiple scales and sectors of the food system in Canada. Addressing such issues is truly a generational project.

We observed that the municipal governance model operationalized in the project was itself an innovation. The long-term institutionalization of the achievements of Our Food Future was partial, although the progress that was made in embedding the practices and discourses developed through this project was likely a result of the municipal governance model that brought diverse stakeholders together in a series of topically organized workstreams. The focus on food was perceived to be appropriately matched to the municipal scale, although interviewees also noted that institutionalization of policy changes to the food system would also require buy-in from the provincial and federal scales in Canada. We therefore advise that future attempts to build circular food systems in Canada will require buy-in and support from all levels of government to ensure their sustainability and their meaningful institutionalization. We also recommend that extended public and private funding for such initiatives would enable the goal of structurally transforming the food system. In the absence of long-term funding, we recommend that planning and resources should be dedicated to the end-stages of time-limited investments in local circular economies to enable legacy planning and the continuity of programming, where possible.

In this article, we have argued that the proponents of Our Food Future worked to leverage circular economy and municipal innovation discourses to catalyze a sustainability transformation based in the local food system. Over the course of the project, Our Food Future's multistakeholder discourse led to the creation of a locally relevant and socially oriented definition of the term: "Circular economies—which minimize waste by recycling and reusing resources instead of throwing them away—have the potential to address environmental challenges and decrease social inequities while creating business opportunities" (Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 2022, p. 4). This definition rationalizes the approach to transformation undertaken throughout the project, while also recognizing the intractability of some of the underlying social and environmental issues that such interventions seek to address. This definition does not speak to structural change, but rather to practice-oriented interventions that can be effected at a municipal scale. The discursive framing of a 'circular economy' for Guelph-Wellington shaped the workstream model of the project as well as the articulation of the 50x50x50 goals of the project, and so was central to its conceptualization and

operations. The successful funding and traction provided by this focus has launched Guelph-Wellington onto the world stage, receiving recognition from the Ellen McArthur Foundation, the World Economic Forum, and the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact.[6]

In summary, this article provides an overview and analysis of a community-based circular food system innovation (Alonso Martínez et al., 2025) in the Guelph-Wellington region of Canada. While many circular economy studies are situated within manufacturing sectors (Kirchherr & van Santen, 2019), this article explores a multifaceted circular economy initiative spanning agriculture, retail, hospitality, residential, waste management, and manufacturing sectors. In alignment with Kirchherr & van Santen's (2019) observation that there is a lack of empirical work on circular economy, this article also strengthens our understanding of how circularity functions in the 'real world' and provides concrete evidence to complement an existing body of literature focused on theoretical advances and conceptual work. We posit that Our Food Future represents an example of how community-based circular food systems can represent systemic and enabling approaches to sustainability transformations, and that the successes of this type of multistakeholder collaborative initiative can provide inspiration to move toward deeper structural changes.

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