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The contribution of food initiatives to food systems transformations: Insights from the region of Guelph-Wellington, Canada

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Abstract

Food systems transformations require place-based efforts that connect diverse community actors, align shared goals, and support practical pathways toward more equitable, sustainable, and resilient futures. This paper examines how food initiatives in Guelph-Wellington, Canada, contribute to regional food systems transformations. Drawing on publicly available online material from 40 food-related initiatives, we analyze stated visions, targets, actions, and relationships to understand how initiatives portray their impacts and contributions to transformative change. We found that food initiatives developed shared visions centered around circular and local food economies, connected communities, and equitable food access. These visions were accompanied by specific targets that influence actions and facilitate partnerships. This study contributes insights surrounding regional food systems transformations by showing how community food initiatives can collectively strengthen transformative pathways.

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food systems transformations, regional food system, place-based initiatives, visions, targets, actions, amplification, descriptive social network, Guelph-Wellington

Introduction

There is an urgent need for food systems transformations on a global scale (Gordon et al., 2017; Oliver et al., 2018). Food systems are a primary driver of global environmental change, contributing to approximately one third of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions (Crippa et al., 2021), ninety percent of tropical deforestation (Pendrill et al., 2022), and the majority of biodiversity loss (Leclère et al., 2020). Concurrently, food systems are a primary victim of global environmental change, vitiated by processes such as land/soil degradation and changing weather patterns (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2023). As long as global food systems are controlled by a handful of corporations prioritizing cheap, processed foods, issues such as excessive land and resource use will persist (Clapp, 2021; Oliver et al., 2018). Thus, as multiple, interconnected crises coalesce to exacerbate such complex issues, it is critical that modern global food systems rapidly and drastically transform to become more equitable, sustainable, and resilient.

Food systems transformation can be understood as the fundamental restructuring of the interactions and feedback loops in food-related systems at various scales to ensure equitable and sustainable food systems (Juri et al., 2024). These systems refer to food chains (from production to processing to distribution to consumption to disposal) and their connections to ecology, food security, and farmer livelihoods (Ericksen, 2008; Fanzo et al., 2024). Radically reshaping structurally unjust, unsustainable food systems can and should promote health, equity, sustainability, and resilience in all social, economic and ecological spheres (Gordon et al., 2017; Springmann et al., 2018).

Many scholars argue that to adequately address and achieve such ambitions, efforts must be focused on transforming regional or city-regional food systems (i.e., local or place-based) to influence national or global scales/systems (Blay-Palmer et al., 2018; Palmer et al., 2017; Sonnino & Milbourne, 2022; Sellberg et al., 2020). Regional relations constitute unique, place-specific, multidirectional 'flows' of economic, social, cultural, and environmental resources and activities (i.e., the movement of people, exchange of goods and services, environmental resources, waste and pollution, knowledge, and social norms, values, and lifestyles; Davoudi, 2008). The regional scale can evoke a more nuanced understanding of space and place in practice and policy (Davoudi, 2008), which national and global scales struggle to capture.

In considering such resource and activity flows, Palmer et al. (2017) argue that regional food systems exist at an ideal scale to promote alternative food systems that support sustainable and just pathways. Such food systems prioritize localized food networks and circular food economies, which are both critical for transforming food systems toward equity, sustainability, and resilience (Lever & Sonnino, 2022; Palmer et al., 2017; Sonnino & Milbourne, 2022). Consequently, *localized* and *circular* regional food systems can improve local producer livelihoods and food and nutrition security; combat waste; and enhance environmental quality by prioritizing place-based solutions (Blay-Palmer et al., 2018; Palmer et al., 2017; Sellberg et al., 2020; Sonnino & Milbourne, 2022). Feenstra (1997) describes alternative food systems as:

> … more environmentally sound, more economically viable for a larger percentage of community members, and more socially, culturally, and spiritually healthful. … They encourage more direct and authentic connections between all parties in the food system, particularly between farmers and those who enjoy the fruits of their labour—consumers or eaters. … They attempt to recognize, respect, and more adequately compensate the laborers we often take for granted. … They tend to be place-based, drawing on the unique attributes of a particular bioregion and its population to define and support themselves. (p. 100)

There are various ideas and theories surrounding how transformations toward such an alternative food system can unfold. Systemic or structural approaches tend to focus on top-down drivers of transformative change, while enabling approaches

focus on bottom-up dynamics that enable individuals, communities, and other small-scale actors to act (Scoones et al., 2020).

The Seeds of Good Anthropocenes[1] (SOGA) approach theorizes about bottom-up change by investigating how small-scale initiatives work to drive transformation (Bennett et al., 2016). This approach aims to identify existing positive and inspirational initiatives and explore the futures they envision. It also investigates how these initiatives empower themselves and others to think and act in ways that help bring these futures into being (Pereira et al., 2019). Small-scale initiatives with the potential for transformative change are called "seeds" in this approach and are defined as

> initiatives (that is, a way of doing, an institution, a technology, a business, a project, or an organization) that exist in some form and that someone identifies as having the potential to contribute to a Good Anthropocene [a positive future], but that are not currently dominant. (Pereira et al., 2018, p. 332)

In this study, we move beyond the focus on singular seeds to understand the broader role of community and organizational food initiatives in regional food systems transformation. As the term 'seed' can be confusing in a food-systems context, we use 'food initiatives' as the main term in this paper and reserve using 'seeds' to refer to direct engagement with SOGA literature. The objective of this research is to understand how food-related initiatives in Guelph-Wellington contribute to regional food systems transformations through the articulation of visions, targets, actions, relations, and amplification processes.

Community-based and alternative food initiatives should not be treated as inherently transformative. As Kelmenson (2023) argues, sustainable food systems may still reproduce poor job quality or labor inequities if wages, security, working conditions, and care responsibilities are not explicitly addressed. Since this research is based on publicly available online material, where food initiatives emphasize successes and underreport downfalls, we are unable to know whether such poor conditions exist. Thus, this paper treats these food initiatives as important but partial contributors to regional food systems transformation, rather than inherently transformative actors.

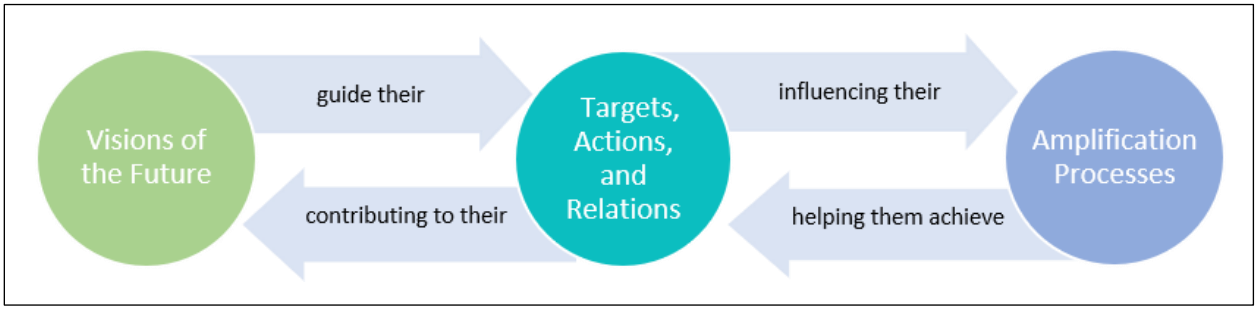
Conceptual Framework: Linking Visions and Amplification Processes

For this study, we iteratively constructed and investigated a conceptual framework linking visions to amplification processes to assess transformation dynamics (Figure 1). In the following three subsections, we review the meaning and significance of each category: 'visions,' 'targets, actions, and relations,' and 'amplification processes' for understanding transformative change.

Visioning

Moore et al. (2014) argue that a key phase in any transformative process is envisioning alternative futures. Although the concept of a 'vision' is heterogeneous in the literature, in alignment with McPhearson et al. (2016), we define it as *an alternative or desirable future state.* Visions are broad, long-term, and inspiring, and they serves as guides, pro-

Figure 1. Feedback Loop of How Visions of the Future Can Be Met to Foster Transformation



[1] https://goodanthropocenes.net/

viding direction and purpose and unearthing the barriers and opportunities for change (McPhearson et al., 2016; Moore et al., 2014; Sellberg et al., 2020). The framing of working toward *positive* visions—opposed to combating dystopian visions—is identified as a stronger predictor of continual motivated action, practical innovation strategies, and long-term investment in a cause (McPhearson et al., 2016).

To understand this, 'visioning,' then, is the process of crafting positive and inspirational ideas about the future, *ideally* in a participatory manner (Pereira et al., 2019; Wiek & Iwaniec, 2014). The participatory nature of visioning to construct common visions and coalitions is particularly important, as aligned visions of the future can empower stakeholders to co-develop realistic pathways and plans and assess progress (McPhearson et al., 2016; Van der Helm, 2009). Aligning visions can also help build capacity, drive momentum, and develop accountability (Van der Helm, 2009; Wiek & Iwaniec, 2014). This is illustrated in a study on the institutionalization of urban agriculture in a Montreal borough that was facilitated through building a common vision among diverse actors (St-Laurent et al., 2025). In short, the literature shows that to achieve regional food systems transformation, diverse food initiatives benefit from aligning their individual visions to collective, regionally oriented visions that frame their targets and actions.

Targets, Actions, and Relations

The operationalization of positive visions begins with identifying and working toward specific targets (Wiek & Binder, 2005). When visions are broad, targets are narrower and more specific, defining what is approachable and actionable. Perhaps counterintuitively, aligning stakeholder targets is less critical than aligning visions (Farla et al., 2012). Ensuring collective visions may require actors to prioritize different targets (Farla et al., 2012). For example, if a region collectively envisions a circular food economy, some food initiatives might target food redistribution, others food waste, and others sourcing. Diversified targets can ensure certain puzzle pieces are not missing from the whole puzzle.

Similarly, a variety of action approaches (i.e., what they are working on, such as capacity-building, networking, a project, advocacy, etc.) can help food initiatives support one another and realize their goals. Essentially, different actors often benefit from tackling their visions from different angles: occupying different roles, employing different strategies, and utilizing different resources (Farla et al., 2012). For example, initiatives within a region that focus on individual projects might fail on the front of cohesion and collaboration without the efforts of initiatives aiming to build networks and collaborations. Conversely, if network-based food initiatives were to dominate a region, the practical efforts that project-based initiatives offer would be inadequate. For this reason, it is important that initiative 'action areas' in a region are diverse, multitudinal, and complementary.

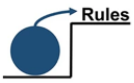
Finally, and most crucially, strong initiative partnerships are a fundamental feature of transformation because they shape the social networks through which information, resources, support, and influence move (Gianelli et al., 2025; Lam et al., 2020a). Fostering relationships can facilitate the spread of information and knowledge, promote engagement, stimulate innovation, and help build resilience (Lam et al., 2020a, 2022; Pereira et al., 2019; Sellberg et al., 2020). Examining initiative partnerships through a descriptive social network analysis, therefore, provides insight into the prominent actors, common partners, and degree of connectedness supporting food systems transformation. To gain a more holistic understanding of the transformation dynamics and processes that Guelph-Wellington food initiatives employ, we investigate food and food-chain-related targets, action areas, and initiative partnerships between one another and other prominent regional actors.

Amplification Processes

To understand how individual food initiatives contribute to regional food systems transformations, it is important to examine the processes through which they strengthen, extend, and deepen their impact. (Lam et al., 2020b). Food systems literature often discusses these processes in terms of scaling, including how local initiatives grow, spread to new contexts, and influence institutions. However, scaling should not be understood as merely increasing

the size or influence of an initiative. Lam et al.'s (2020b, 2022) amplification framework offers a more nuanced assessment of how initiatives increase their transformative potential through different pathways. Thus, rather than scaling, in this study we use this framework to evaluate transformation dynamics through the process of 'amplification' — the ability to increase impact (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Typology of Amplification Processes and Actions

AMPLIFICATION PROCESSES & ACTIONS			
Categories	**Processes**	**Analytical questions**	**Actions defined** (* actions inductively generated during the data analysis; ** *actions not found in the data*)
Amplifying within an initiative	***Stabilizing*** 	Does the initiative try to have longer impact?	• Building an organizational structure • Getting new partners • Getting new members • Optimizing resources • Looking for financial resources • Making members to stay longer • Adapting to the system dynamics*
	Speeding up 	Does the initiative try to have faster impact?	• Securing access to financial resources • *Increasing number of people involved* • *Optimizing processes and efficiency* • *Developing a work routine* • *Setting clear goals and deadlines* • Developing ready solutions or products* • Providing mentoring/consulting*
Amplifying out an initiative	***Growing*** 	Does the initiative increase its impact range (in a similar context)?	• Reaching more people • Covering larger areas • Diversifying portfolio • Covering larger share of market
	Replicating 	Does the initiative replicate the existing initiative (in a dissimilar context)?	• Opening other local groups, entities, franchise in other locations
	Transferring 	Has the initiative been transferred to create a similar initiative (in a similar context)?	• Another independent initiative emerges with similar profile
	Spreading 	Has the initiative spread principles or approaches to create a new initiative (in a dissimilar context)?	• Spreading principles/approaches to create a new initiative
Amplifying beyond an initiative	***Scaling up*** 	Does the initiative impact higher institutional levels?	• *Influencing rules and laws* • *Influencing policy* • Influencing dominant norms, customs, traditions, practices • Advocating/lobbying • Connecting across scales and engaging with key individuals
	Scaling deep 	Does the initiative impact values or mind-sets?	• Increasing awareness • *Fostering critical thinking* • Creating a community of like-minded people (networking) • Reconnecting people to nature • Empowering people in risk of social exclusion • Integrating different kinds of knowledge

Note. We focus attention on categories, analytical questions, and specific actions applied by initiatives. The processes column is not relevant to this study. Reprinted from Lam et al. (2022) under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Lam et al. (2020b) define three broad categories of amplification processes and actions that facilitate transformation (Figure 2):

- *amplifying within* means the initiative has done something to extend its lifetime or speed up the way it creates impact;
- *amplifying out* means the initiative has extended its impact to other places; and
- *amplifying beyond* means the initiative has encouraged change of rules, laws, or values, or inspired people to live in different ways.

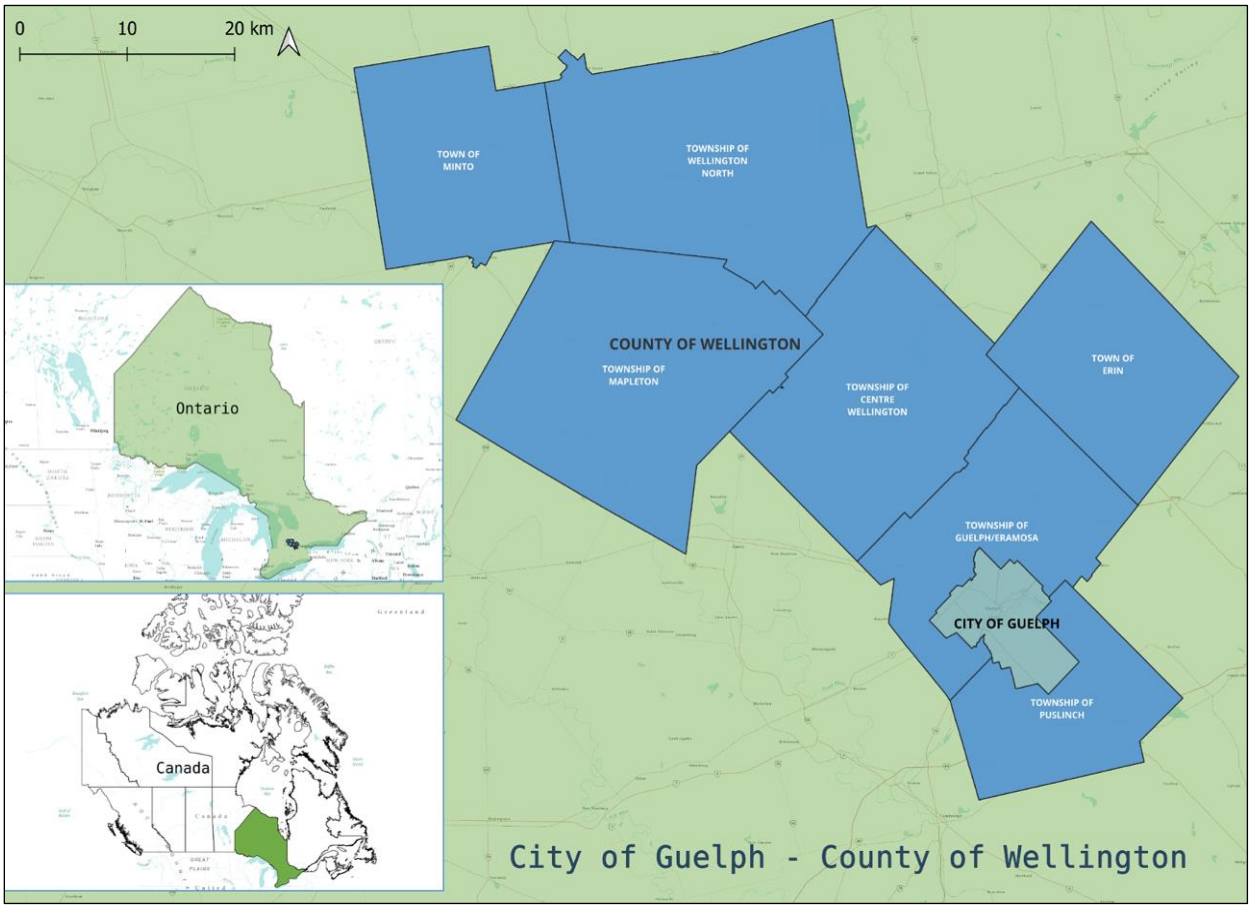
Amplification categories are determined by assessing the processes and actions of each initiative (see Figure 2), such as securing partnerships or funding (amplifying within), opening another location or expanding programming (amplifying out), or advocating or lobbying for policy change (amplifying beyond). In this way, amplification helps capture multiple forms of scaling, which are represented by the categories and processes columns in figure 2.

Case Study: Guelph-Wellington

We selected the region of Guelph-Wellington, in Southern Ontario, Canada (see Figure 3) to explore food initiatives and assess transformation dynamics. Guelph-Wellington is situated on the traditional and ancestral territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and the Attawandaron (Neutral Confederacy) peoples, whose relationships with these lands extend back thousands of years (City of Guelph, n.d.). The city of Guelph, a

Figure 3. Map of Guelph-Wellington

The city of Guelph is surrounded by seven towns and townships that make up the county of Wellington in Ontario, Canada.



Map created by Hope Jesmer, February 2026.

midsized city by population (roughly 160,000 as of 2025), is located roughly 70 km (43 miles) west of downtown Toronto (City of Guelph, n.d.). Wellington County, known for its agricultural sector, consists of seven towns and townships and encapsulates the City of Guelph (This Is Wellington County, n.d.).

This region is well recognized for its work to combat food-related issues and its broadly supported food-related projects (Nelson et al., 2013; Raftis, 2023), making it an appropriate context for this study. For example, a government initiative called Our Food Future[2] had an ambitious goal to make Guelph-Wellington Canada's first local, circular food economy by 2025. To make this goal a reality, various community actors worked independently and collectively to address food-related issues and contribute to this mission. In just three years (2020–2023), this initiative diverted nearly 84,860 tons of food from the landfill, helped increase access for 20,500 people to healthy and affordable food, helped 310 businesses adopt more circular practices and innovation strategies, and prevented 168,788 tons of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (equivalent of driving 37,560 gas-fueled cars for a year; City of Guelph, 2023). With these results, Our Food Future was on track to not only meet but *exceed* its 2025 goals (Raftis, 2023). The initiative has been recognized and celebrated by national and international organizations, such as Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (Raftis, 2023; City of Guelph, 2023).

Based on the reputation and achievements of Guelph-Wellington, we propose the following research question: How do food-related initiatives in Guelph-Wellington contribute to regional food systems transformations? To answer this question, we identified and analyzed publicly available online data on 40 food initiatives with an active presence in Guelph-Wellington. We assessed their visions of a positive future, food- and food chain-related targets, action areas, and stated relations to other food initiatives. We used this information to assess how initiatives amplify their impacts and to produce a social network visualization to showcase the matrix of Guelph-Wellington food initiatives. The discussion then considers what these findings suggest about the role of connected, community-based initiatives in advancing regional food systems transformation, while also reflecting on institutionalization, practitioner and policy positions, and the need for future research. In essence, this research investigates a feedback loop describing how the food initiatives of Guelph-Wellington utilize their collective visions of a more positive future to shape their targets, actions, and relations; amplify their impacts; and, ultimately, encourage food system transformations that align with their visions (Figure 1).

Methods

In this project, we identified food initiatives operating in the Guelph-Wellington region during the fall of 2023 and noted their publicly stated visions, targets, actions, and relations. Websites and social media posts are important repositories to understand how organizations want to be represented and perceived. The analysis of websites has been used to understand sustainability visions and policies as discussing associated commitments and actions (Hasim et al., 2018; Zuo et al., 2012). However, we acknowledge that the information curated on web-based platforms is promotional and incomplete (Hasim et al., 2018), and may fail to disclose tensions that may exist, actual practices on how food initiatives operate, or important partnerships. Additionally, failures such as poor job quality and labor inequities are not captured through public-facing data (Kelmenson, 2023). Interpreting amplification processes exclusively from online information likely led to incomplete information regarding how food initiatives extend their impact. This online information does offer insights into the visions and approaches that these initiatives seek to promote publicly.

Selection of Food Initiatives

The first step in selecting food-related initiatives in Guelph-Wellington was to determine what would be considered a food initiative. To fit our inclusion criteria, the initiative had to:

[2] https://www.wellington.ca/business-development/environment-agriculture/circular-economy/our-food-future-project-legacy-page

- be located in the Guelph-Wellington region,
- be doing work for Guelph-Wellington,
- be centered around food and/or food systems, and
- be operating at the time of the data collection (i.e., November 2023).

Various methods were employed to identify and locate Guelph-Wellington food initiatives, such as: (1) An internet website search, using combinations of the key words 'food,' 'food systems,' 'environment,' 'Guelph,' 'Wellington County,' 'project,' 'initiative,' which was conducted in October–November 2023; (2) Knowledge from students (obtained from a survey administered to a University of Guelph geography class with 150 students in fall 2023); (3) Identification through social media outlets (Facebook and Instagram). Using these methods, 60 food initiatives were identified and logged in a spreadsheet (Supplement A).

Data Collection

Websites, reports, articles, and/or social media pages were scanned for each food initiative to ensure the initiative fit our criteria. Twenty food initiatives were removed from the list because they were not food-centered (e.g., may have a food-related side project, but were focused on another social/environmental cause, such as Guelph CHC), were more nationally or internationally orientated (e.g., Bee City Canada), not presently operating (e.g., The Elevator Project), or information was limited online during this time (e.g., Food Material Flow Analysis; Supplement A). Survivorship bias (which refers to including initiatives that persist and excluding those that have disappeared) likely generated incomplete ideas surrounding the extent of overall initiative involvement and support in Guelph-Wellington.

40 food initiatives fit our criteria. Each initiative was then further analyzed using information available online, including relevant websites or social media pages. Data were collected using a coding form developed by Karina Benessaiah, a member of the SOGA project. Information gathered from online sources was used to answer 30 questions about each initiative (Supplement B). These questions were organized into three thematic sections, described below.

The first section asked for identifying information such as each initiative's name, location, and website URL. The second section assessed the features, focuses, and partnerships of the initiative. Information recorded include the food initiative's vision of a positive future, directly quoted from the online source; the 'initiative type,' or who runs the project (e.g., government, civil society and nongovernmental organization (NGO), academic and research institution, for-profit businesses, cooperative or social enterprise, or grassroots organization); the food chain focus (e.g., ecosystem functioning, production, distribution, consumption, broader institutional environment, waste, all, or other); and the specific target of the initiative (e.g., innovative farming, local food, ecosystems and biodiversity, gastronomy, sourcing, food waste, protein shift, food redistribution, food insecurity, or others). Additionally, we recorded the initiative's action area, which were conceptualized as capacity building (e.g., provides resources, services, expertise, etc., to help other initiatives to succeed), advocacy-based (focuses on raising awareness and education), project-based (e.g., focuses on practical projects and experimentations on the ground), network-based (e.g., connects initiatives together), funding-based (e.g., help other initiatives financially), a new product or technology, or all of the above. Finally, we recorded any explicitly stated partnerships (e.g., other initiatives that *help* this initiative or are *helped by* this initiative) and their initiative type (who operates the initiative, such as an NGO or government) (Supplement B).

The third section involved the transformation dynamics of each initiative. Although 10 transformation-related questions were answered (see Supplement B), amplification categorization (within, out, or beyond) and amplification evidence (example or criteria used to categorize amplification process) were of most relevance to this research and were analyzed. The amplification frameworks produced by Lam et al. (2020b, 2022) were used to guide coding and structure the data into three amplification categories (Figure 2). This framework was used because it integrates insights on amplification processes from different streams of transformation research (Lam et al., 2020b). We used

the information found on websites, reports, articles, and media regarding the initiative's actions, achievements and relations to answer the analytical questions and apply the actions defined, presented in the amplification framework (Figure 2). The coding was both semantic (e.g., looking for new members) and latent (e.g., setting clear goals and deadlines; Braun & Clarke, 2006). One or more amplification categories were selected, and specific examples explaining the selection were provided for each category.

Data Analysis and Visualization

The data was analyzed and visualised integrating a thematic analysis of visions to a descriptive social network of the food system in the Guelph region.

Thematic Analysis for Visions of the Future and Amplification Evidence

The qualitative data obtained from websites and social media pages were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis according to a six-step framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). 'Visions of the future' was directly quoted in one to three sentences and 'amplification evidence' was stated in one to three sentences. To thematically code, the first author initially read through all recorded material for 40 food initiatives to become familiar with the data. On the second review, initial codes were generated. From these key codes (e.g., circular food economy, community relationships, finding partnerships, etc.), we searched for and reviewed themes. We defined and named the common themes and recorded any outliers.

Descriptive Social Network

We use the term "descriptive social network" to refer to a visual mapping of publicly stated relationships among Guelph-Wellington food initiatives and other regional actors. (Figure 6). Unlike a full social network analysis, this approach does not calculate network-level or node-level metrics but instead illustrates network size and visible patterns of centrality and connection within the regional food system. For this project, individual initiatives were connected if they publicly stated that they *helped* or were *helped by* another initiative. This help could, for example, include financial support, practical and project support, or advocacy and awareness support. The intention with this sociogram is to illustrate the network of food initiatives in Guelph-Wellington that initiatives themselves publicly acknowledge.

Results

The results of this research are organized around four dimensions of food initiatives' contributions to regional food systems transformations. First, we present the dominant visions of a positive future, identified through thematic analysis. Second, we summarize the main characteristics of the initiatives, including initiative type, action area, food chain targets, and specific food-related targets. Third, we examine patterns of partnerships and connection through a descriptive social network of food initiatives and other regional actors. Finally, we analyze how initiatives amplify their impact within, out, and beyond, and consider what these amplification pathways and evidence imply about food systems transformation dynamics in Guelph-Wellington.

Guelph-Wellington's Visions of a Positive Future

Three dominant themes emerged regarding the futures the food initiatives envision. These categories are not mutually exclusive. Eight (20%) initiatives envision circular and/or local food economies (reduction in food waste are included); nine (23%) initiatives envision a more resilient and/or more connected community; and 13 (33%) initiatives envision a future where everyone has access to nutritious, affordable, and/or culturally relevant food (Figure 4).

Two out of 40 (5%) initiatives did not have a vision statement. Four statements (10%) were too vague or broad to be categorized (e.g., "improve the economic, environmental and social sustainability of food systems"). Other nondominant visions included aspects of Indigenous self-determination (n = 2; 5%), ecosystem health (n = 2; 5%), resilient agricultural systems (n = 1; 3%), farmer rights (n = 1; 3%), and mindset or behavior change (n = 1; 3%). Multiple food initiatives incorporated more than one of these visions in their online statement.

Main Features of Guelph-Wellington Food Initiatives

Online information revealed a variety of foci and features across food-related initiatives. The initiative type, action area, food chain targets, and specific targets are important features that inform amplification categorization and evidence.

In regard to *initiative type* (who operates the initiative), 20 (50%) initiatives were led by civil society organizations or NGOs, seven (17.5%) by the local government, seven (17.5%) by businesses, six (15%) by cooperatives or social enterprises, five (12.5%) by academic or research groups, five by (12.5%) by grassroots organizations, and two (5%) by other groups (Figure 5).

The *action areas* (what they do) of these initiatives were predominately project-based (n = 21; 52.5%), followed by advocacy or education-based (n = 15; 37.5%), capacity-building (n = 10; 25%), networking (n = 9; 22.5%), funding (n = 3; 7.5%), a new product/technology (n = 3; 7.5%), or all of the above (n = 3; 7.5%) (Figure 5).

Regarding *food chain targets*, initiatives tended to focus on food production (n = 17; 42.5%), consumption (n = 15; 37.5%), distribution (n = 13; 32.5%), food waste (n = 12; 30%), underlying ecosystem functioning (n = 7;17.5%), broader institutional environment (n = 3; 7.5%), all of the above (n = 6; 15%), or other/none of the above (n = 7; 17.5%; Figure 5).

Finally, *specific targets* of each initiative include reducing food insecurity (n = 24; 60%), promoting local food (n = 19; 47.5%), facilitating food redistribution/circularity (n = 16; 40%), reducing food waste (n = 14; 35%), sourcing (n = 9; 22.5%), strengthening ecosystems and biodiversity (n = 8; 20%), gastronomy (n = 5;12.5%), innovative farming (n = 3; 7.5%), protein shift (n = 2; 5%), and other targets such as farmer welfare (n = 1; 2.5), Indigenous foods and medicines (n = 1; 2.5), food longevity (n = 1; 2.5), and food tourism (n = 1; 2.5; Figure 5).

Figure 4. Three Dominant Visions of the Future for Guelph-Wellington Food Initiatives

The cogs are proportional to the number of mentions.

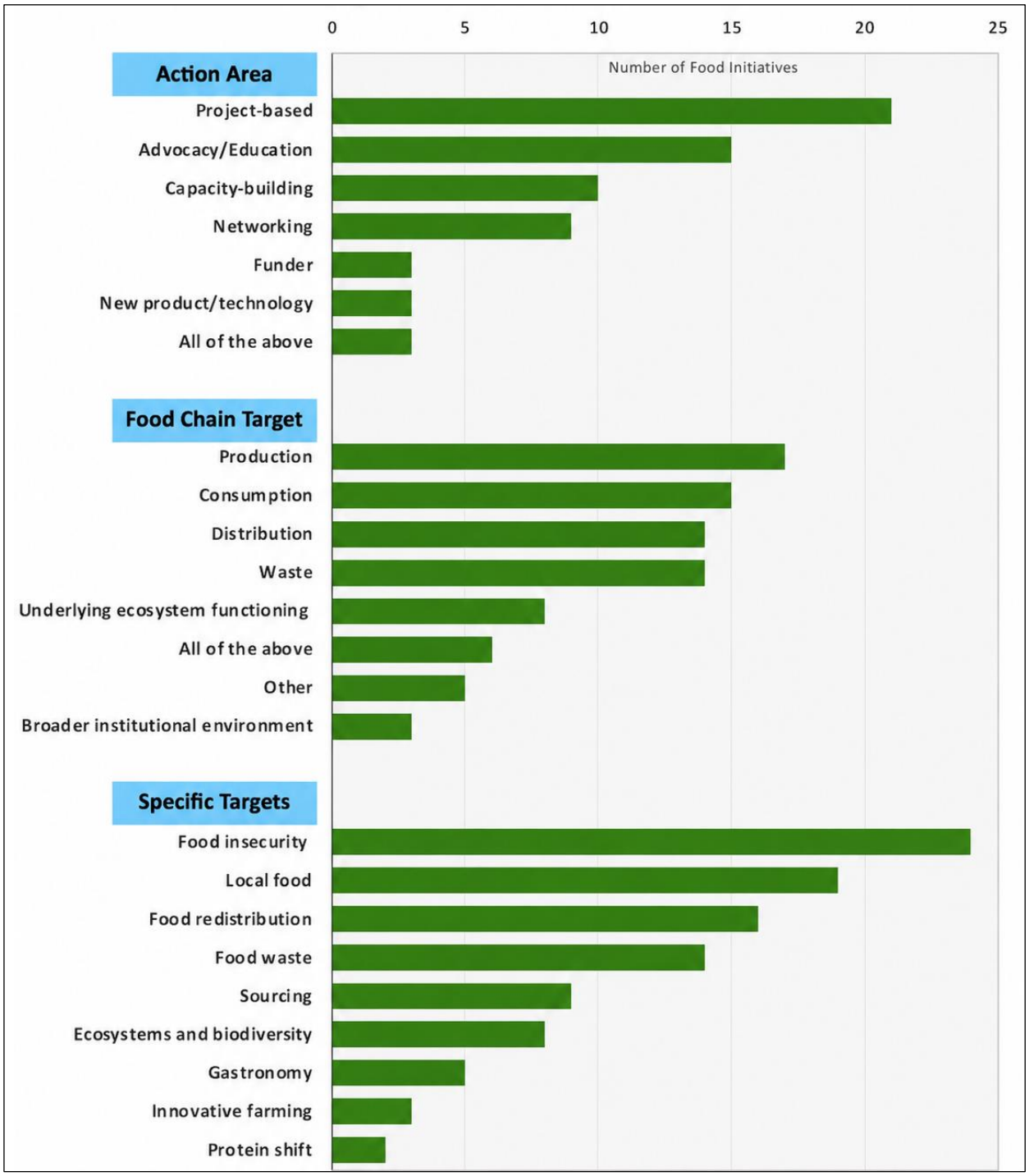


Guelph-Wellington Network

Figure 6 depicts a descriptive social network of the 40 food initiatives studied for this research, along with five additional regional actors identified as important partners or institutional supports too broad or large to fit our food initiative inclusion criteria. These five additional institutional supports were the city of Guelph, Wellington County, other businesses (e.g., grocery stores, restaurants), other NGOs, and the University of Guelph. They were included to better represent the broader partnership landscape in which Guelph-Wellington food initiatives operate. "Other businesses" and "other NGOs" include larger organizations and enterprises, such as grocery superstores, chain restaurants, or national and international NGOs.

Data on initiative partner types (see Supplement C) suggest that initiatives are most often partnered with NGOs or civil society organizations (n = 24; 60%), businesses (e.g., grocery stores and restaurants; n = 20; 50%), and/or local government actors, including the City of Guelph and Wellington County (n = 18; 45%). Every food initiative

Figure 5. Main Targets and Action Areas of Guelph-Wellington Food Initiatives
This figure highlights the diverse strategies and complementary positions food initiatives take in regional food systems transformation. The diversity of targets and action areas suggest that amplification is not pursued through a single pathway or mechanism, but through practical and complementary efforts that mainly address access, circularity, and localizon.



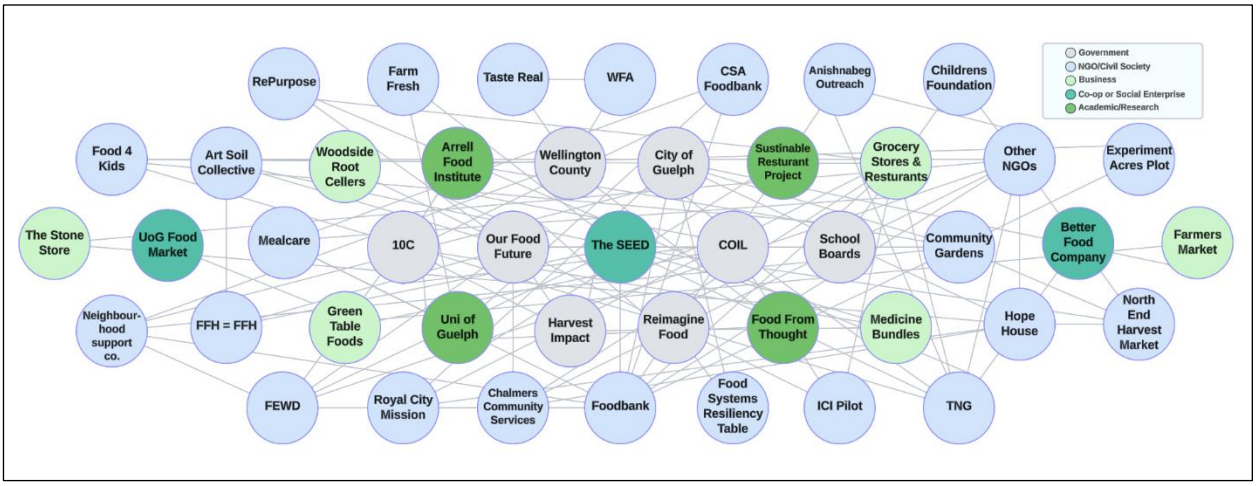
had a minimum of two publicly stated connections to other initiatives or regional actors in Guelph-Wellington. The food initiatives with the highest number of publicly stated partners include Our Food Future[3] (19), The SEED[4] (18), Community/Pollinator Gardens[5] (12) and the Guelph Food Bank[6] (10). These initiatives appear to play especially visible roles in the regional food system by, for example, coordinating partnerships, supporting other initiatives, or redistributing resources. For this reason, these initiatives and additional actors or institutions were strategically placed central in the network due to their significant presence to the region (Figure 6). Although this descriptive social network provides hints into size, density, and centrality, it does not paint a full picture of food systems actors' true numbers, significance, and connectedness in Guelph-Wellington. Due to survivorship bias and the limitations of using publicly available online information, we suggest that this underinformed network simply and modestly showcases the inspirational initiatives and actors connecting in the region.

Amplification Categorization and Action Evidence

Food initiatives' actions and targets were categorized into one or more of Lam and colleagues' (2020b, 2022) three broad amplification categories based on publicly available web content (Figure 7). These categories are not mutually exclusive; several initiatives showed evidence for more than one amplification pathway.

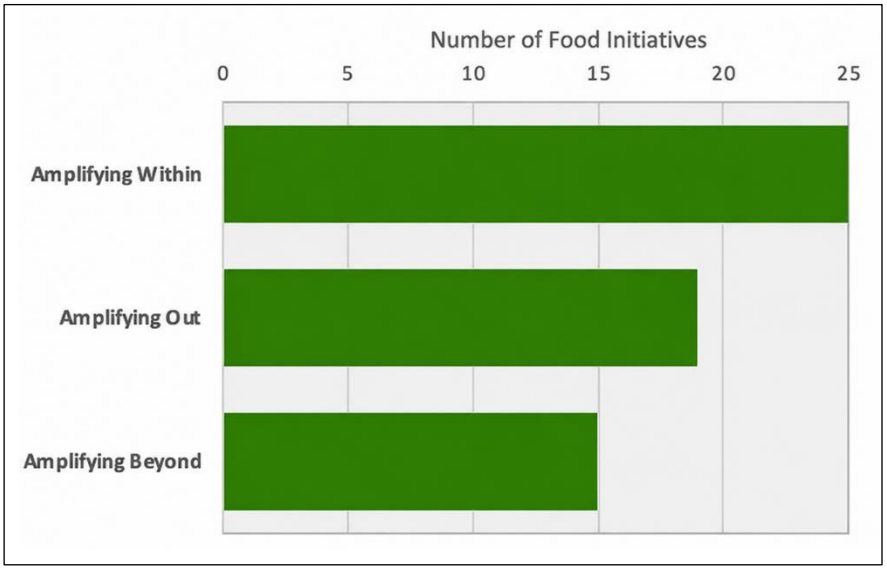
Amplifying within (i.e., the initiative has extended its lifetime or sped up the way it creates impact) was the most frequent amplification strategy (n = 25; 62.5%). This includes efforts to gain partnerships and/or members (n = 15); optimizing processes and efficiency (n = 10); and looking for or securing financial resources through donations, grants, loans, or other forms of support (n = 8). The prevalence of amplifying within suggests that many Guelph-Wellington food initiatives are pri-

Figure 6. Network of Food Initiatives and Other Important Actors in Guelph-Wellington
The network includes 45 nodes: the 40 food initiatives included in the study and five broad regional actor categories that appeared frequently in partnership data: City of Guelph, Wellington County, Grocery Stores and Restaurants, Other NGOs, and the University of Guelph. Connections are drawn between initiatives and institutions when one publicly states that it helps or is helped by another initiative or institution. Initiatives are colour coded sorted by who runs the initiative: the City of Guelph or Wellington County (government), government, NGOs/civil society, businesses, cooperatives/social enterprises, or an academic/research institution.



[3] https://www.wellington.ca/business-development/environment-agriculture/circular-economy/our-food-future-project-legacy-page
[4] https://theseedguelph.ca/
[5] https://guelph.ca/living/recreation/parks/community-and-pollinator-gardens/
[6] https://www.guelphfoodbank.ca/

Figure 7. Amplification Categorization
Summary of how initiatives implement actions pertaining to the three broad amplification categories developed by Lam et al. (2022).



marily focused on sustaining and strengthening their existing work. Before initiatives can spread to new places or influence broader systems, they must first build the capacity, stability, and relationships needed to persist.

Amplifying out (i.e., the initiative has extended its impact to other places) was the second most frequent strategy (n = 19; 47.5%). This included initiatives that extended their reach to more people, households, businesses, and communities beyond their initial geographical region (n = 6); covering a larger share of the market (n = 4); and opening a new group, program, or entity in another location (n = 4). Some initiatives also appear to inspire models or practices beyond Guelph-Wellington; for example, The SEED's sliding-scale grocery model informed a similar approach for an initiative in British Columbia. This suggests that initiatives are more likely to amplify out when their work can be adapted, replicated, or extended.

Amplifying beyond (i.e., the initiative has inspired rules, laws, policies and/or values) was the least frequent strategy identified (n = 15; 37.5%). Evidence of amplifying beyond included connecting community members (n = 8), influencing cultural norms through knowledge mobilization (n = 6), advocating for policy change (n = 4), and encouraging changes in consumer behaviors or public awareness (n = 4). This lower frequency may reflect the difficulty of documenting system-level influence through public-facing online materials. Amplifying beyond can also be slower, less visible, and harder to attribute to individual initiatives.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that food system transformation in Guelph-Wellington is supported by a layered set of amplification pathways. Amplifying within and out suggests that the visible transformation work in Guelph-Wellington is currently grounded in practical efforts such as sustaining, building, and expanding. Amplifying beyond suggests that deeper work may depend on whether these initiatives can translate this practical work into longer-term influence. Thus, amplification processes are strongest when pursued collaboratively.

Discussion

In this study, we identified three dominant visions of the future for Guelph-Wellington, which highlighted important targets and actions of food-related initiatives, observed the connectedness between these initiatives, and summarized the main ways they amplify their impact. The following sections highlight how initiative visions, targets, actions, relations, and local government interventions can facilitate amplification and contribute to transformative change. We conclude by highlighting practice, policy, and research recommendations.

How Focused Visions and Targets Contribute to Operationalization

Clear and focused visions for the future provide a sense of direction and purpose (Pereira et al., 2019; Sellberg et al., 2020; Villasante et al., 2024). Inspiring visions serve as a guide, helping food initiatives set specific targets and make decisions that align

with their long-term aspirations (McPhearson et al., 2016; Sellberg et al., 2020). A study about transformative change assessment examined 391 case studies aiming to foster transformative change and found that cases that included visions were associated with more positive ecological, economic, and social outcomes (Villasante et al., 2024).

In the case of the Guelph-Wellington region, we found that food initiatives held and supported shared visions that, in turn, lead to several aligned dominant targets: reducing food insecurity, promoting local food, facilitating food redistribution, and reducing food waste. Thus, these shared visions lead to a community working toward similar goals. Shared visions can (1) promote collaboration, (2) increase the efficiency and effectiveness of initiatives, (3) support a more coordinated use of available resources, and (4) help the initiatives become more resilient to challenges. Having similar visions of the future and complementary food-related targets can facilitate these processes by fostering a shared understanding of the steps needed to achieve these common objectives.

Importance of Connectedness in Facilitating Transformation

The identified food initiatives in Guelph-Wellington are highly interconnected (Figure 6). The 40 food initiatives and five broad institutional categories were minimally partnered with two other initiatives and institutions. Prominent actors, such as Our Food Future and The SEED, were connected to nearly half the food initiatives collectively studied. Connectedness and relationality are key themes in transformation research (Lam et al., 2020a). As mentioned earlier, ample, strong connections can facilitate the spread of information and knowledge, promote engagement, stimulate innovation, and help build resilience (Lam et al., 2022; Pereira et al., 2019; Sellberg et al., 2020).

In Guelph-Wellington, food initiatives can advance partnership formation through their 'action area.' For example, initiatives that are capacity-building, advocacy- or education-based, or networkers help foster connections in the community. In Guelph-Wellington, initiatives are predominantly project-based, meaning they have a project on the ground (e.g., a soup kitchen, community fridge, or food bank). These projects are often aided by other food initiatives that are, for instance, capacity-building, networkers, education-based, or funders, which help build connections while providing the practical solutions that project-based initiatives strive toward. This diversity in action areas is key to ensuring all initiatives are supported in one way or another.

The importance of finding and securing partnerships was frequently noted on initiatives' websites, which informed their dominant amplification actions. Most popularly, food initiatives tended to *amplify within* by "securing new partners and members," *amplify out* by "extending their reach (to more people and businesses)," and amplify within by "connecting community members" (refer to Figure 2). Nurturing partnerships and garnering support can help individual food initiatives achieve their goals and foster a positive feedback loop for other initiatives to achieve their goals. This feedback loop could propel *system-level* transformations, helping the initiatives collectively work toward their visions of the future (Figure 1).

The Role of Local Governments and Institutionalization

Our Food Future achieved its five-year goals in merely three years by working to connect and institutionalize food-related initiatives with other influential actors in the region. St-Laurent et al. (2025) found that government-supported interventions significantly bolster transformation. Change efforts that blend bottom-up approaches focusing on practical change (food initiatives) with top-down approaches focusing on structural change (local government) are proven to be more robust, efficient, and effective (Elzen et al., 2012; Fudge et al., 2016). These governing bodies also have greater understanding and sensitivity to local, social, cultural, and economic regional contexts, helping to tackle relevant challenges and support place-based solutions (St-Laurent et al., 2025).

When interventions are designed in collaboration with a diverse community of change-makers, actor and resource synergizing occurs, which can support initiative flourishing (St-Laurent et al., 2025). In the case of Guelph-Wellington, Our Food Future served as a key capacity-builder, fun-

der, and networker initiative (Everitt and Parizeau 2026), helping initiatives connect and institutionalize (i.e., diffuse and embed their innovations into emerging or existing regimes; Pereira et al., 2018; Wamsler et al., 2014). The institutionalization of initiatives is particularly important, as this process enhances the stability, coherence, and legitimacy of food initiatives by embedding these into norms, policies, and institutional structures (St-Laurent et al., 2025). Institutionalization thus is critical for aligning goals and amplifying actions to fit within broader systems and structures and is often facilitated when local governments act as supporters and agents of change. Without the support of Our Food Future and other local government initiatives (e.g., COIL, Harvest Impact, Reimagine Food), movement toward a food systems transformation may not have unfolded as efficiently or effectively in Guelph-Wellington.

Practice, Policy, and Research Recommendations

The findings suggest that regional food system transformation depends not on individual initiatives, but the relationships and supports that allow them to amplify their impact. Practitioners and policymakers should therefore treat partnership-building as central transformation work by strengthening cross-sector collaboration among NGOs, businesses, local governments, schools, and community organizations. This finding aligns with Everitt and Parizeau's (2026) case study of Our Food Future, which identified such collaboration as a key enabler of regional food circularity, localization, and security. As the Our Food Future case demonstrates, local government initiatives can play an important role in enabling food system transformation by enhancing funding, capacity-building, and network support. Thus, policymakers should prioritize occupying these action areas so that practitioners can focus on practical efforts and relationship-building.

Future research could build on this study by using interviews or surveys to better understand the less visible dimensions of food initiatives such as additional partnerships, amplification strategies, capacity, adverse conditions, and challenges. Additionally, a more in-depth social network analysis to uncover metrics such as density, degree centrality, and betweenness centrality could help future researchers understand which actors occupy more central or bridging roles and where gaps exist in the regional network. Longitudinal research would also be useful to examine how food initiative networks change over time, especially after major funding, capacity-building, and networking programs end.

Overall, these findings suggest that regional food system transformation depends on more than the existence and quantity of food initiatives. It requires strong practical efforts, policy support, and research that critically examines both the strengths and limitations of community-based food initiatives. In Guelph-Wellington, food initiatives offer important pathways for transformation, but their long-term contribution will depend on whether they are supported to sustain their work, expand their reach, and influence structural change.

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the transformative potential of food initiatives in Guelph-Wellington, Canada. Food initiatives in this region drive positive changes by working toward food systems that are circular, local, highly connected, and focused on ensuring food security and access. The amplification framework by Lam and colleagues (2022) and this research provides insights into how these food initiatives amplify their impact. The most frequently observed strategy for amplifying within, amplifying out, and amplifying beyond all emphasized the importance of building partnerships for individual and collective food initiative success. The interconnected nature and support given to one another facilitates the exchange of knowledge and resources, builds individual capacities, and promotes collaboration, helping such food initiatives work toward their individual targets and collective vision of the future. These processes, which simultaneously promote institutionalization through enhanced support, can be facilitated by government initiatives and/or other capacity-builder, funder and networker initiatives such as Our Food Future.

Overall, Guelph-Wellington initiatives contribute to regional food system transformations by

working as a connected community to help each other amplify their impacts and work toward their collective visions. To achieve global food systems transformations toward equity, sustainability, and resilience, policymakers should work toward promoting the autonomy of place-based food systems, such as regional food systems. Regions can amplify their impact at national and global scales similar to the way food initiatives amplify their impact within, out, and beyond. Guelph-Wellington is a particularly inspirational case to help other regions understand the processes, dynamics, and actors involved in fostering place-based food systems transformations.



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Supplementary Material

Supplement A — Master List of Included and Excluded Initiatives

Supplement B — Google Forms Coding

Supplement C — Google Forms Responses