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Taking Youth Engagement To The Next Generation: Lessons From Best Youth Engagement Practices Toward Food Sustainability

Daniel Hoang
Ryerson University

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TAKING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT TO THE NEXT GENERATION:

Lessons from Best Youth Engagement Practices toward
Food Sustainability

By

Daniel Hoang

Bachelor of Arts Honours, York University (2010)

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presented to Ryerson University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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in
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TAKING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT TO THE NEXT GENERATION:

Lessons from Best Youth Engagement Practices toward Food Sustainability

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Master of Planning
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ABSTRACT

Food is one of life's most basic necessities. Yet the problems of our food system are becoming increasingly worse: global food security is in jeopardy, health related diseases are epidemic, and generations are increasingly disconnected from their food. The youth population, in particular, is largely missing from the food engagement and decision-making process. Yet it is this group that will inherit the problems of the food system, and constitute the next generation of eaters, policy-makers, and planners. This paper aims to fill this gap by examining ways to improve youth engagement in food sustainability by making it more widespread, meaningful and effective. Using a scan and analysis of best practice research, this paper offers recommendations – including cases, tools, principles and techniques – for stakeholders (such as NGOs, local governments and municipal planners) to improve their youth engagement strategies in food sustainability.

Key words: youth engagement; food sustainability; best practices

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Above all, I would like to thank my parents and my sisters. To my mom and dad: Thank you for your unconditional love and support. To my older sisters, Annie and Helen: You are my rocks.

FOREWORD

"The joys of the table belong equally to all ages, conditions, countries and times; they mix with all other pleasures, and remain the last to console us for their loss."

- Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

Like love, dance, math and music, food is a universal language. It has the power to crosscut boundaries, cultures, religion, and races. **It has the power to unite us.**

However, although we all enjoy the wonders of eating and drinking, we do not all experience food the same way. Unfortunately, there are billions of people around the world who are struggling to access food, afford food, or find the nutritious and healthy foods that our bodies require.

Food, as something that is so pure, fundamental and intimate to humans, is being threatened by the problems that plague the food system – including environmental degradation, health concerns, and the centralization of global food supply. We, as humans, are becoming increasingly disconnected from our food source.

It is these two main challenges of the food system that guided me to my research topic. Where they meet is at the intersection of food sustainability and youth (the current and future leaders of tomorrow, who are, paradoxically, becoming increasingly disconnected from food). It is here that this paper emerges.

When we had to choose Major Research Paper topics for the Ryerson Master of Planning program, I knew I wanted to do food. And my experiences, both personally and academically, have taught me that planners can do more than just plan neighbourhoods, or develop parcels of land. The world is our oyster – we have the potential to change the world around us, and we have a responsibility and obligation to improve the quality of people's lives, and to make this world a more liveable place. With this said, my MRP represents my passion for food and food justice, and my hope that I am able to contribute to making a difference.

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"The way to a city's heart is through its stomach" – Wayne Roberts

1.0 Introduction

Urban planning, as a profession, lays claim to being a comprehensive, future-oriented and public-driven profession that strives to enhance the livability of our cities, and the quality of our lives. When we think about terms like "livability" and "the quality of our lives", there is nothing that impacts these more than the fundamental, most basic necessities of life – the trifecta of life's essentials: food, water and shelter. Planners have been involved in efforts to improve water through municipal infrastructure projects such as sewage, waste and resource management, and they have planned our water systems and networks. They have also been heavily involved in shelter, developing our human settlements, providing housing and planning neighborhoods and communities. But when it comes to food, urban planners have been less focused on this third life essential. For centuries, the profession has primarily been concerned with the planning of community systems such as housing, transportation, road networks, and zoning and land use, while the food system has been notably absent in most planning practice, research and education (Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 2000).

The good news, however, is that things are starting to change. In the last decade, food systems and food sustainability have become a more central concern for planners in urban municipalities. And, due in large part to global and local pressures from the realities of food production, food sustainability has begun to emerge as part of a planner's scope of practice. In fact, in February 2001, the City of Toronto became the first Canadian municipality to develop a comprehensive, multi-

sectoral food security plan, which identified the municipality's role in the local food economy (Wekerle, 2002). This set the stage for the creation of a Toronto Food Charter (approved in 2001) and additions to the city's 2002 Official Plan that acknowledged and supported the role of urban agriculture and sustainable food practices. Thus, there is no doubt that positive change has occurred, obstacles are being overcome, and important strides are being made in the area of food sustainability and urban planning in Toronto.

The City of Toronto's progress is one step toward more robust efforts to improve the food system, food sustainability and security, and to address food related issues in the city. We must, however, not view these achievements as final successes. After all, a planner's practice involves a continuous process of constant evaluation and reflection. Forester's (1999) *Deliberative Practitioner* shows us that it is through collective deliberation, learning, critique and critical reflection that the process of community change and transformation occurs. The reality is that significant progress still needs to be made to improve the food system and the planner's relationship and role within this. There are still improvements that must be made in order to ensure the long-term sustainability of food and food security within Toronto.

From a planning perspective, the search for local solutions to food sustainability have principally taken the form of strategies related to land use – such as community gardens, green roofs, urban agriculture and greenbelts, and there

have been more innovative and ‘unconventional’ ideas, like vertical farming and growing food in hydro corridors. These proposed solutions contribute to the access and security of food, and they enrich our understanding of the food system and its many issues. But these ‘physical’ land use solutions are just one part of the food sustainability picture. Planning must set its sights beyond land use practice because a just food system not only ensures access to healthy food for all, but it also provides access to information about food – how to grow it, prepare it, how we can play a role in it – and the importance of giving power to the collective and individual choices we make about food.

Physical land use solutions are important, but so too are the community-based and engaged citizenship pieces around this. This is not to say that one is more important than the other, but rather, that they are both key pieces to the future of urban food sustainability. Importantly, sustainable development can be understood as both a product and a process. As Robinson (2009) reiterates, we can think of sustainability as two separate, yet connected “generations”. The first-generation views sustainability as “an additive approach whereby sustainability is expressed as the sum of social, economic and environmental factors in decision-making, and sustainability is the end-state or goal” (pg. 162). This approach views sustainability as a *product*. The second-generation approach emphasizes “the process of working toward sustainability with a focus on decision-making and stakeholder engagement” (pg.162). Public engagement in food sustainability represents this second approach to sustainability, which views it as a *process*. This process-oriented approach is important because it emphasizes the importance of decision-making, and the need

to transform governance to adequately allow for new forms of decision-making to occur in order to create sustainable change (Robinson, 2009).

This process-oriented approach in food sustainability planning, however, is largely missing in current planning efforts to advance food related sustainable development. The reality is that there is a gap in the research that exists around the engagement of individuals in food planning, particularly that of the youth population. While there has been more discourse and effort around food planning matters recently, little research has been conducted around engaging/situating the youth population within these discussions (Dale, 2010).

1.1 Research Question

Youth as one cohort of our population represents an important and key group in the development and improvement of the current food planning system. Yet, with the current lack of attention paid to this youth group, a large gap exists around understanding the best practices for mobilizing and engaging this group in food sustainability practices. Consequently, the central question that will be examined and explored in this research paper is:

How do you make youth engagement in food sustainability planning more widespread, meaningful and effective?

This question, therefore, is threefold. Making youth engagement more widespread is important for the purposes of scale. It refers to creating more opportunities for

youth to become engaged, increasing the numbers of engaged youth, and ultimately doing so to build the capacity and propensity for positive change to occur. As the old saying goes, “there is strength in numbers”. The term ‘meaningful’ can be understood as possessing useful qualities, being significant and important to those involved, and above all, serving a *real* purpose. As Jennings et al. (2008) echo, for meaningful engagement to occur, “youth need to engage in activities relevant to their own lives, ones that excite and challenge them and count as real.” And Kim et al. (1998) stress the notion that engagement activities need to promote the underlying competence and intrinsic motivations of youth, so that they can test and master their own interests, develop skills and gain confidence. The essence of meaningful engagement is captured nicely by Checkoway & Gutierrez (2006) who write:

“Youth participation is about real influence of young people in institutions and decisions, not about their presence as human subjects or service recipients. Although participation studies often assess activities in terms of their scope – such as their number, frequency, and duration – quality is their most significant measure. Just because a number of young people attend a number of meetings and speak a number of times, is no measure of their effect. Quality participation shows some effect on outcomes, including its effect on community change” (pg. 2).

This brings us to the third aspect of this paper’s research question: efficacy.

‘Effective’ engagement can be understood in its ability to create positive change, make improvements upon the current food system, and ultimately, create successful results

1.2 Audience

This paper has research and practice-oriented aspirations. Not only will it address the research question: *How do you make youth engagement in food sustainability more widespread, meaningful and effective?* But it is intended to also provide a tool that can be used by the multiple participants and organizations in food systems planning to improve their own youth engagement strategies. This range includes (but is not limited to) NGOs, communities, food organizations, municipalities, charities and other relevant stakeholders with vested interests in improving food sustainability through an engaged and active youth population.

1.3 What is a Food System?

A food system, as the name suggests, is an interconnected network that involves the processes, practices and places that covers all aspects of food. It is usually characterized by statements such as “from field to table” or “from land to mouth” to involve all of the processes and activities that occur between point A; when food is grown or produced in its most raw form, to point B; when it is on our plates. As such, a ‘food system’ is a highly integrated web that “includes everything from farm input suppliers to retail outlets, from farmers to consumers” (Kneen, 1993:11). A food system, therefore, is the complex set of activities whose purpose is to provide food for sustenance and nutrients for maintaining our health and livelihood to humans, for consumption.

A food system generally has six stages or components. They are (City of Vancouver, 2009):

- 1) Food Production - the farming and gardening practices that produce the raw food products, such as the fruit and vegetables, grains, meat and dairy products, that form the basis of our diet.
- 2) Food Processing - transforming the food from its raw state, into something that is eaten. This can be as simple as peeling a cucumber, or as complicated as slaughtering cows, grounding their meat, adding preservatives and flavouring, slicing them into neat patties, and packaging them into boxes of hamburgers.
- 3) Food Distribution –this involves the different distribution channels and venues that move food (in its many forms) throughout the system. Moving seeds to a farm, or a bag of carrots to the grocery store is an example of this.
- 4) Food Access – refers to people’s ability to obtain food from sellers, and the action of buying food from grocery stores, markets, restaurants, etc.
- 5) Food Consumption – when the food is eaten
- 6) Waste Management – dealing with the material remains of food after consumption, through disposal, composting and recycling.

These 6 stages describe the general components of a food system, however, it is important to note that there are multiple food systems that exist (nested spatial hierarchies). A food system can exist globally and involve world markets,

international trade and corporate food production. This type of food system is the current overarching and dominant system of food production that reflects the globalized nature of today's food. But other systems may be more localized, such as community food systems, which involve local or regional agriculture, community farms and local food production and distribution. These localized systems are often more sustainable, environmentally friendly, and fostering of ethical imperatives.

1.4 The State of the Current Food System

The perils of the overarching food system are not new, per se, nor are they relatively unknown facts of reality. The issues of the food system have been widely highlighted in the media – look, for example, to recent award winning documentaries such as *The Future of Food* (2004), *Our Daily Bread* (2005) and *Food Inc.* (2008), bestselling books like *The 100-Mile Diet* (2007) and *In Defense of Food* (2008), and Emmy Award winning television programs like *Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution*. Prevalent issues such as soaring obesity rates, unhealthy eating habits, lack of food knowledge, environmental degradation and unsustainable farming practices are just some of the issues explored in these mediums. Additionally, government campaigns have been launched to provide food education and healthier food to the public and in schools, and there has been a recent “going green” movement and a very visible organic food revolution.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) recently released a study (2010) which assessed the impacts of the global food system. The landmark study produced by the International Panel on Sustainable Resource Management, a

body set up to provide independent and scientifically driven advice to the UN, highlights “the inefficiency of our food production system”, its “far reaching environmental impacts” and its “unsustainable production, consumption and material usage” (UNEP, 2010). According to the study, 38% of the world's total land area is used for agriculture, yet it is responsible for over 70% of global freshwater consumption. The global agricultural system and food consumption are "two of the most important drivers of environmental pressures, especially habitat change, climate change, fish depletion, water use and toxic emissions" (UNEP, 2010). Industrial farming practices, especially of livestock and meat production, were flagged in the study as the most unsustainable food practices. 50% of the world's crops are used to feed animals, rather than people, and the majority of meat for global consumption is produced through factory farming operations (UNEP, 2010). These operations require intensive resource consumption, they significantly contribute to greenhouse gas emissions, require the destruction of rain forests, the use of pesticides and agrochemicals, and the destruction of biodiversity through using monoculture of single adopted breeds in livestock and agricultural production, resulting in loss resiliency in the agricultural system (UNEP, 2010). These are just some of the unsustainable outcomes of the global food system highlighted in the report, which merely scratch the surface of unsustainable food practices. There are also considerable ethical, health and labour issues that result from the current practices of the global food system.

What it is important to make note of here, though, is that this paper acknowledges and understands that global food systems of agricultural and farming

practices are things that have to occur. Resources ultimately have to be used, food must be produced, and food must meet the demands of our growing world. Simply put, we as humans must eat to stay alive, and so long as we are on this earth, farming and food production are not only inevitable, but necessary as well. The intentions of highlighting the unsustainable agricultural and farming practices of the global food system in this paper is not to advocate that everybody should stop eating meat, adopt a vegan lifestyle, or only eat organically. To do so would ignore the cultural preferences/norms of societies around the world, and the class relations that complicate and diversify our relationships with food. After all, food is a universal language, but it is experienced differently by all – we cannot assume that the world is equal and that everyone has the same financial means and access to food, nor is it realistic to say that one’s cultural mores should be adopted by others. Rather, the intention of highlighting the unsustainable practices of the global food system is to illustrate that **things can be done better**. There is room in the food picture for more sustainable, environmental and socially conscious practices.

The overarching food system is highly energy and capital-intensive, globally integrated, and increasingly economically consolidated. Unfortunately, it has resulted in environmental degradation, health epidemics, and community residents who do not have access to an adequate, nutritious food supply. It has also led to the disintegration of the social and spiritual fabric – critical connections – that are part of a community’s food system. People have become disconnected from the sources of their sustenance – the land, the people who grow and harvest their food, and from the taste and quality of the food itself. With the lack of food knowledge, many

consumers are passive recipients in this rather homogenous global food system of nutrient distribution. For these and the other reasons mentioned in this section, the long-term sustainability of the current food system is in question.

2.0 Methodology

To address the research question of this paper: *How do you make youth engagement in food sustainability more widespread, meaningful and effective?* a specific methodology has been selected. The following section explains the rationale for this methodology, how it will be used and understood for the purposes of this paper, and its limitations.

One of the best ways of gaining knowledge, expertise or skills is to learn from the experiences of others. Their experiences, successes, failures, trials and tribulations, can teach us valuable lessons that contribute to our understanding and improvement of how to do things better. The applied purpose of this paper is to make youth engagement in food sustainability more widespread, meaningful and effective. To accomplish this task, the method being used is a review of secondary literature focusing on best practices. This approach involves identifying, communicating and facilitating the transfer of practices that seem to work successfully somewhere else, to your own organization or for your own purposes (Vesely, 2011). Identifying these lessons is known as “best practice research”.

Following a scan for best practices, the information gathered will be analyzed, disseminated, and presented as “lessons” that communities and organizations can learn from in order to improve the engagement of youth within the food system. Naturally, this set of practices and principles will then form the basis for recommendations for these interest groups moving forward. Best practice research (BPR) has been selected as the method for this paper because “the primary goal of BPR is the selective observation of a set of exemplars across different

contexts in order to derive more generalizable principles and theories of management" (Vesely, 2011:99). This falls in line with the intended objectives of this paper, and enables a rigorous means through which this paper's research question can be effectively explored and addressed.

To conduct "best practice research" and identify the potential best practices that will inform this paper, criteria must be established to distinguish what it is that actually constitutes a 'best practice' example. The use of best practice research is usually found in public and private organizations and businesses, and it is often used and understood in the 'business sense' for the purposes of management, corporate operations, business procedures and the development of policies. Many definitions of 'best practices' that exist, therefore, reflect this business-like, corporate perspective. For example, the Encyclopedia of Management (2009) defines it as: "in a general sense, the term best practice refers to the most efficient way of doing something. The fastest method that uses the least resources (including labor and parts) to create the highest quality output is the "best practice". Best practices are therefore largely based upon making the operations of a business more efficient, cheaper, or less-labour intensive.

For the purposes of this paper, however, the intention is not to understand youth engagement and food sustainability in this light. It is not about cutting organizational costs or using less labour resources, per se, but rather, about improving the overall impact of youth engagement in food. That is, the scope, meaningfulness and efficacy of the process. The objectives and subject matter of this paper therefore calls for a different definition of best practice – one that is better

suiting to the intentions of this study. A more fitting definition, provided by the UN-Habitat (n.d.) is: “best Practices are actions that have made a lasting contribution to improving the quality of life and the sustainability of cities and communities.”

Building on this definition, the criteria for which best practices have been selected to inform this paper are as follows:

Firstly, several interrelated terms are used in literature to refer to best practices, including "good practice" and "smart practices" (Vesely, 2011). The use of the word 'best' can be controversial due to the contextual and relative nature of the term. As such, this paper uses 'best practices' synonymously with 'good practice' and 'smart practice'. The choice to use the term 'best practices' is for the sake of consistency both within this paper, and with the broader literature that exists. Thus, a selected 'best' practice may not necessarily be the 'best' in its most literal sense, but it has generated some type of useful function that can generate learning (i.e. it can be 'good').

Secondly, this paper is situated within the larger framework of sustainability. Sustainability can be understood as both a product and a process (as discussed previously). Thus, the best practices selected must demonstrate a successful product (in the end) and/or a process of getting youth engaged in food. The product and/or process is determined to be successful when it has proven to create positive change or the intended desire outcome of the practitioner, in real world practice.

Finally, this paper is about learning new things, and gaining new insights and knowledge around how to better engage youth in food sustainability. As such,

innovation and new ideas are highly valued as a criterion in this paper's selection of best practices. For, pushing youth engagement further requires progressive approaches, practices and perspectives. A best practice is determined to be new and innovative when it is a 'pioneer' – it is unique, the first and only of its kind existing, or it responds to a specific current emerging issue in the food system.

In sum, the following constitutes the criteria for which best practices are defined/included in this paper:

- It is a 'best', 'good' or 'smart' practice, where value can be derived for the purposes of this paper
- It is an exemplary product or process, proven to be successful in the real world
- It is a new/innovative idea

Limitations

One of the limitations of the method being employed in this paper is that best practice research is used as the sole methodology. When considering that this paper explores meaningful youth engagement, it makes sense that interviews or surveys be used as a method, to actually talk to those involved in the project and gather the extent of 'meaningfulness' experienced by these first-hand participants. This limitation is acknowledged. However, the demands of administering interviews with organizers and youth from around the world go beyond the scope of this paper. Thus, interviews are a logical next step to this study – to garner more detail and gain

a deeper understanding of the best practices highlighted in this paper. As such, the meaningfulness of best practices will largely be assessed by the author of this paper: a male, ethnic minority, graduate urban planning student in Canada's largest urban region, who is part of the youth population himself.

With this, there can be the potential for personal bias. My background as a researcher can influence the best practice selection process, by choosing cases that appeal to my preferences/suit my interests. This can be both positive – as an ethnic minority, for example, the inclusion of diversity is a factor that is important to me. However, other factors may be overlooked, such as a female's experience with the food system. To control for these potential biases, the methodology is applied through the lens of broad youth appeal. That is, that these practices are chosen because they aim to benefit all youth. I do not seek to improve youth engagement for my purposes, or to solely better engage myself as a youth in food sustainability practices. But rather, my hope as a researcher is to improve youth engagement in food sustainability at large, and contribute to the development of food youth engagement for the purposes of more economically, socially and environmental sustainable cities. At the crux of this lens is the concept of equity, and fairness for all.

3.0 Understanding the Youth

3.1 Who Are Youth?

In the process of discussing youth, it is important to acknowledge that not one set definition exists, and that ‘youth’ is a fluid term. Like most social terms, there are multiple perspectives on how to best define it. The concept of ‘youth’ has been viewed historically in a number of different ways, including as a state of mind, a legal age, a developmental stage, or a cultural phenomenon. The Toronto Youth Food Policy Council, for example, defines ‘youth’ as those under the age of 30. The Toronto Youth Cabinet defines it as 13-24, and the United Nations defines it as those between the ages of 15-24. For the purposes of this study, the term ‘youth’ will refer to people between the ages of 15 to 30. This choice is intended to capture the diversity of perspectives and backgrounds of young people – teenagers in high school, those in university, recent graduates, and those who are old enough to vote and sit on boards and committees. This broad definition of ‘youth’ reflects the dynamic, energetic and forceful nature of this group. It is important to understand though, that although these young people are categorized under the term ‘youth’, they are by no means a unitary or homogenous group. They come from different cultures, educational backgrounds, classes, and experiences. Understanding the diversity of this group is key to understanding how to make their engagement in food planning more meaningful and effective.

The youth do by nature, however, also share commonalities. They are in essence a group that exists in transition. Whether it be from high school to

university, living on their own for the first time, or starting their careers, they are at the cusp of adulthood and attaining the necessary supports, skills or developmental abilities moving forward is crucial. In an article written by Dr. Wendy Wills entitled *“Food and Eating Practices During the Transition from Secondary School to New Social Contexts”*, a study of young people studying at a college in South East England was conducted to explore the role of new spaces and places and their impact on youth people’s eating habits, routines and knowledge of food. The results of her study found that the transient nature of youth between different and new social contexts resulted in the re-negotiation of food and eating practices. The practices learned at the parental home during the early part of a young person’s life still served as a significant pillar of everyday food practices in new social contexts. However, being in new social contexts also resulted in more experimental behaviours, exploration, trial and personal discovery which all come with “an increase in personal agency, thereby creating more individualised routes and tributaries on the way to ‘adult living” (Wills, 2005:98). Thus, Dr. Wills asserts that the youth period of one’s life is a crucial time for developing and learning new life-long food skills. It is the time when young people question who they are, and go through a period of trying out different behaviours to see what ‘fits’ in terms of their established and also evolving values. This study shows that food and eating practices are not ordinary, mundane events in young people’s lives, but rather, an important part of dealing with the transition to new social contexts.

This transitional period in one's life has also created a demographic that is largely disconnected from the overarching food system. Thus, the youth group can also be defined as one that is increasingly distanced from civic engagement, community and the full potential of their autonomy in local matters. As Zeldin et. al (2006) echo, "youth have gradually lost access to many of society's roles and social networks....youths' dominant roles have become limited to those of student, style setter, and consumer (pg. 3).

A recent study published by San Diego State University on March 5, 2012 found that the Millennial Generation (those born between the years 1982 to 2000, thus aged 12 to 30) are more civically and politically disengaged than Generation X and the baby boomers before them, when they were the same age (in the study Gen X was defined as being born between 1962 and 1981 and baby boomers were born 1946 to 1961.). Three psychologists at San Diego State University analyzed two databases of 9 million U.S. high school seniors or students entering college, dating back to the 1960s. The students were asked about life goals, concern for others and civic involvement. Some of the results of this study were that 45 per cent of boomer students said being wealthy was very important to them – a number that rose to 70 per cent for Gen X and 75 per cent for Millennials. And on a question about staying up to date with politics, the numbers fell from 50 per cent for boomers, to 39 per cent for Gen X and 35 per cent for Millennials (Twenge et al., 2012). The greatest declines that were revealed in this study, however, were in the area of civic engagement and community. Millennials reported thinking about social problems less, having less interest in government, making less effort to conserve energy, and

being less interested in taking “green” actions to protect the environment (Twenge et al., 2012). Millennials were also less likely than Boomers and Gen-X to participate in the political process through voting, writing to a public official, participating in demonstrations or boycotts, or giving money to a political cause. The decline in wanting to take action to help the environment was also particularly steep – three times as many Millennials than boomers said they made no personal effort at all to help the environment. With these results, the researchers conclude that the trend among the Millennial Generation, the current youth of our population, is towards more extrinsic values, such as materialism, fame and image, and less towards intrinsic values, such as group affiliation, community and political engagement (Twenge et al., 2012).

It is important to note a few important points here. Firstly, this study is not an attack nor criticism of the Millennials. The researchers acknowledge that social behaviours and values are largely reflective of the dominant culture, and that this is exhibited in young people the strongest. As they themselves write, “generational differences are cultural differences: As cultures change, their youngest members are socialized with new and different values. Children growing up in the 1950s were exposed to a fundamentally different culture than children growing up in the 1990s, for example. Thus birth cohorts— commonly referred to as generations—are shaped by the larger sociocultural environment of different time periods (Twenge et al., 2012:1).

Secondly, this study is American and was conducted among American youth. Thus, the question needs to be asked of whether these trends and results can be

applied to Canadian Millennials as well. The answer to this, simply, is yes. For starters, it can be argued that despite some differences, Canadian and American culture is very similar in many ways. We share the same North American culture, and we get the same movies, television programs, music, websites, and public figures and role models that dominate our media and social world. These, undoubtedly, are some of the greatest influences on the youth of today. And as Twenge et al. highlight, youth values and behaviours are reflective of this pervasive culture.

Furthermore, similar research, although less extensive in scale, has been conducted in the Canadian context, and the results are generally the same. In 2010 for example, Paul Howe released his book entitled *Citizens Adrift: The Democratic Disengagement of Youth Canadians*, which highlights the civic, political and community disengagement of today's youth population in Canada, in areas such as voter turnout, apathy, participation and volunteerism (Howe, 2010). The Canadian government has also taken notice of the lack of youth engagement, particularly in political matters. They have launched campaigns targeted at getting youth involved, volunteering, or voting in elections. Several governmental studies also highlight the trend of disengagement among today's youth. An example is the federal government's Policy Research Initiative, which conducted a study in 2005 entitled *Social Capital in Action: Thematic Policy Studies* examining youth civic engagement in Canada. The results from this study found that "young Canadians today are less engaged than their parents and grandparents at a similar life stage" (Canadian Policy Research Initiative, 2005:82). And this has transpired in areas such as voting,

membership in political parties, political knowledge, political interest, volunteering and generalized trust among Canadian youth. Thus, these reports echo the results of the comprehensive study conducted by Twenge et al., revealing the same underlying point: That today's youth are largely disengaged from community, political and civic life.

The next question that must be asked, then, is to what extent have these trends influence or manifest in the area of food engagement? Firstly, it must be made clear that the areas of youth disengagement mentioned above, such as voting, political interest, and political knowledge are all areas that ultimately impact food. Although these connections may not be seen as immediate or directly related to food at first glance, food is highly politicized and should not be understood as something separate from community or politics. Who a young person votes for, for example, may influence who is elected, and different leaders and political parties have very different ideas and values about food sustainability. Their vote, therefore, may determine the decisions that are made about food, and the policies that are implemented by who is elected – all things that influence the future of food sustainability. Thus, although areas such as political knowledge and political interest may seem very general, they ultimately have implications for the real world. Youth disengagement in these areas, therefore, has very concrete impacts on food.

Furthermore, studies about youth and their relationship with the food system show that the general trend of disengagement permeates to the realm of food as well. In 2011, a survey conducted by Farmers Feed Cities, a not-for-profit organization based in Guelph, Ontario, revealed that only 41 percent of the 18-34

age group claimed to be aware of where their food comes from (much lower than older cohorts) (Baynton, 2011). This is a staggering amount. It means that almost 60% of the youth demographic has no idea of the origin and source of their food – the things that they put into their bodies and consume, every single day. The survey also highlighted that overall the youth age group is more unattached to the farm than previous generations. Undoubtedly, these results illustrate the disconnect and disengagement among the youth population in the food system.

3.2 Why Focus on Youth?

The youth are disconnected from the food system in many ways such as the knowledge of where food comes from, and the health and environmental impacts of their food choices (Wolynsky, 2010). This disconnect is one that is concerning and deserves much attention. According to Statistics Canada research from 2006, 33 percent of youth in Ontario are overweight, and the rates of obesity among this group have nearly tripled since 25 years ago (Wolynsky, 2010). In addition to the staggering statistics mentioned the previous section, over 50 percent of youth in Canada do not know the Canada Food Guide (Wolynsky, 2010). Perhaps most jarring, however, is the fact that the young people of today, for the first time in more than a century, are more likely to live shorter lives than their parents. This is due in large part to obesity and chronic disease caused by their food consumption habits and lack of food knowledge (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2011). It goes without saying that food is inherently connected to our individual health and well-being. The

alarming rate of these health statistics among the youth population reveal that, clearly, the inadequacies of the food system need to be addressed, and approaches must be taken to deal with these issues. Engaging youth in our food system by situating them squarely within these solutions and decision-making processes, provides a means to achieve this.

Beyond just these important health concerns, youth engagement is also necessary. For, public participation pieces and ethics of inclusivity are rooted in planning documents and codes of practices. The Canadian Institute of Planners, for example, has a strict professional code of practice that forms the basis of planning practice for all of its members. In Ontario, these codes are enforceable through the disciplinary provisions of the OPPI By-law 1-86 (OPPI, 2009). One of the codes of practice state:

“Members have a primary responsibility to define and serve the

interests of the public. This requires the use of theories and techniques of planning that inform a structure debate, facilitate communication, and foster understanding. Accordingly, a Member shall:

1.1 practice in a manner that respects the diversity, needs, values and aspirations of the public and encourages discussion on these matters;

1.4 identify and promote opportunities for meaningful participation in the planning process to all interested parties.”

These codified public participation practices are quite broad, however, and the engagement of the public in planning matters is viewed as a high-level and macroscopic practice. The extent to which these broad-based participation pieces have actually permeated the food system in a meaningful and effective way for youth, though, is questionable. When dealing with a specific demographic group (youth) with unique characteristics, needs and experiences, participation and public engagement has to be more than just a broad-based practice. It has to be precise, it has to be meaningful, and it requires specific strategies in order to successfully mobilize and engage this group of people.

Focusing on the youth is also valuable. Engaging them in decision-making and the planning of food systems is not something that should be done because it is considered the right thing to do, or because the codes of practice say we should. To do so would perpetuate the tokenistic public participation and consultation processes that often occur in the urban planners' attempts to engage the public in planning affairs. Rather, the youth should be engaged because their influence is important, and because what they have to offer is of value, usefulness and worth. The youth group encompasses a demographic that possesses dynamism, audaciousness, a daring spirit, and they can provide fresh and creative ideas and perspectives to the table.

Creating meaningful and effective engagement with the youth demographic is one that is mutually beneficial. Advocates and researchers of youth point to the developmental benefits of youth involvement in decision-making and public

engagement. Youth participation has been linked to greater organizational sustainability and effectiveness and, on a macro level, national democratic, social and economic development (O'Donoghue et. al, 2003). Furthermore, including youth in decision-making processes and the planning of our food system is one that creates equity – a major component of sustainable development. The Brundtland Commission, which played a prominent part in popularizing the notion of sustainable development defined the term as: "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations, 1987). This definition, which has since been adopted globally and endorsed by the United Nations, embodies the notion of equity at its core. In essence, equity implies the need for fairness and the entitlement of everybody to the same quality, treatment, access and distributive gains. Currently, the lack of engagement and attention given to youth within the food system does not reflect this fundamental principle. Furthermore, the idea behind not reducing the ability of future generations to meet their needs embodies the notion of intergenerational equity. This ethical principle is central to sustainable development, and implies that we inherit the Earth's resources from previous generations and have an obligation to pass it on in reasonable condition to future generations. This includes current youth and children, as well as those in future generations.

Engaging youth in food is also important because Ontario's farmers are aging. The mean age of farm operators in Ontario was 53 in 2006, three years older than a decade earlier (Secombe, 2007). From 1996 to 2006, young farm operators in

Ontario declined by 49%. By 2006, only 9% (7,070) were under 35 years of age (Seccombe, 2007). And, while the 1996 cohort aged, new entrants were not taking their place. The children of Ontario's farmers are evidently looking elsewhere for their career choices. While retaining their inheritance rights, most decline to take over the management of the family farm as their parents approach retirement. This has to do with many factors, including the disconnect of young people from the food system and the decline in net incomes of small-scale farming as an occupation. The question then, is where the next generation of Ontario's farmers will come from? If the present trend persists, retaining new generations of farmers will become a major issue, and we will soon lose the capacity to grow most of the food we eat in Ontario.

The youth demographic also constitutes the next generation of eaters, policy-makers and politicians. The youth have a unique concern for food security and sustainable integrity, as they will inherit the systemic problems of environmental degradation and food insecurity. But this also means that finding the solutions to these problems will lie in their hands as well. For the purposes of the planning practice, therefore, the youth must be better understood and integrated in order to ensure that food sustainability issues can be better addressed as we move forward. Investing in youth, therefore, means investing in the future.

4.0 Reviewing Best Practice and Research

4.1 Assessing Youth Food Engagement Programs in Ontario

The City of Sudbury, following studies within the last six years that show that the youth of Northern Ontario and Greater Sudbury are unhealthier and less food-knowledgeable than the rest of Ontario's youth, undertook a review of youth-based food sustainability programs in Ontario (Wolynsky, 2010). In partnership with The Foodshed Project, they aimed to see how these programs could potentially be adapted to Sudbury's youth population. The result was one of the first comprehensive reports that reviewed the extent of Ontario youth engagement programs in food sustainability entitled "*Youth Engagement in Food Sustainability: A Review of Programs offered in Ontario*" (2010). In the report's assessment of youth-based food programs, the report lists organizations (such as Green Venture, Just Food, The STOP, Roots to Harvest, etc.) and the types of programs and initiatives that they offer. These include such things as community gardens, community kitchens, community workshops, school field trips and school salad bars. The results of the study found that there are many attempts being made by organizations throughout Ontario to address the disconnect between youth and the food system. These attempts include hands-on programs, gardening and cooking programs, and internships among others.

This report is an important preliminary piece that has been undertaken, and it sets the foundation for more rigorous research around this topic. What could be built upon is the report's lack of criticism of the youth-based programs offered by the organizations. One organization may offer a wide array of programs and youth

initiatives, but does this necessarily mean that these programs are meaningful to youth? And to what extent are they effective in accomplishing positive results? Is a salad bar, for example, really a meaningful and effective way of engaging youth in food sustainability? Thus, my paper is intended to take this preliminary work to the next step – to explore way in which meaningful and effective youth engagement can occur in food sustainability.

4.2 Food Democracy

The term “food democracy” was developed by Tim Lang, a professor at the City University in London, in the mid-1990s as a response to the increasing corporate control and lack of consumer participation in the food system (Fisher, 2010). Food democracy is based on the principle that citizens can and should be actively participating in shaping the food system, rather than remaining passive spectators on the sidelines. In other words, food democracy is about citizens having the power to determine food policies and practices locally, regionally, nationally and globally. Food democracy asserts that it is a right and responsibility of citizens to participate in decisions concerning their food system. These beliefs challenge the corporate structure and allow for bottom-up control of the food system, transforming individuals from “passive consumers into active, educated citizens” (Fisher, 2010). The goal of food democracy is to ensure all citizens have access to affordable, healthy and culturally appropriate foods. Food democracy, therefore, emphasizes social justice in the food system, and food is viewed as central to the democratic process.

This concept of food democracy places citizens in the midst of the discussions and planning decisions made about food. As such, this notion serves as a valuable framework and theoretical basis in which to understand this paper moving forward. Food democracy is more than just an ideology, it is ultimately about decentralizing power and giving groups a real voice in shaping the food system. Thus, it has practical utility with respect to collective action and the mobilization and participation of public interest groups in food sustainability.

Neva Hassanein (2003) makes a very compelling case for the use of food democracy to better understand citizen engagement in food sustainability. When the term “sustainability” first emerged in public discourse, it was a concept that was contested and there were many ways in which it was defined. Although the term has eluded a consensus on its definition, “sustainability” is popularly regarded as encompassing social, economic and environmental imperatives, in addition to some component of equity (as discussed previously). Allen et. al (1991) provide a common definition of sustainability: “one that equitably balances concerns for environmental soundness, economic viability, and social justice among all sectors of society “ (p.37). Definitions like these are useful because they embrace the range of interests that should be included in any vision for sustainability. But it is difficult to apply this, or any definition, as a practical guide for action. What does it really mean *in practice* to equitably balance concerns for environmental soundness, economic viability and social justice among all sectors of society? How should each dimension be evaluated in relation to the others? For example, how should society weigh the protection of water quality from agricultural runoff against the possibility that

additional regulation of farming practices might make it even more difficult for small agricultural producers to operate in an economically viable manner? And perhaps most importantly, who gets to decide where the “equitable balance” lies? Definitions of sustainability, therefore, cannot fully anticipate responses to these kinds of questions because at their core, these matters are about conflicts over values.

This is where food democracy steps in. Hassanein (2003) writes:

“Because the conflict is about values, sustainability must be socially and politically defined. Furthermore, solutions to the ecological, social, and economic problems associated with the excesses of industrialized, corporate dominated, and globalized agriculture cannot all be prescribed in advance. Natural and social systems are neither static nor predictable. Because decision-making is usually shrouded in uncertainty, society must assume and plan for the reality that the agro-food system is temporally and geographically variable, that we cannot have complete knowledge in advance of the consequences of the choices that are made, and that notions of what is sustainable will evolve over time. Selecting sustainable solutions from various options means making choices that affect everyone, and in that context, conflict is inevitable. Politics is the arena in which we deal with disagreements over values. Such conflict is not something to shy away from; conflict leads to change... Change means movement. Movement means friction. Only in the frictionless vacuum of a nonexistent abstract world can movement or change occur without that abrasive friction of conflict. The best hope for finding workable solutions to conflicts about the character and direction of the agro-food system is through the active participation of the citizenry (in the broad, denizen sense of the word) and political engagement to work out our differences” (pg. 79).

Thus, if solutions to problems in the food system depend in a very fundamental way on participation, the concept of food democracy serves as a constructive method for political practice, because participation is a key feature of democracy. To speak of the pressure to democratize the food system is to recognize that there are spaces of resistance and creativity in which people themselves attempt to govern and shape

their relationships with food and agriculture (Hassanein, 2003). And so, the practical utility of food democracy, in its call for participation, provides the means through which we can begin to solve the complex nature of food sustainability.

4.3 The Youth-Service Model vs. The Youth Engagement Model

Traditionally, attempts at engaging youth have been based on the youth-service model (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006). This model views the youth population as passive and/or helpless ‘clients’ in need of some type of outside intervention. Thus, the youth is seen as a group with problems that need to be fixed, and as dependents that need to be taken care of. This view is consistent with the images of ‘youth as problems’ that often permeates popular media, professional practice and even social science. For example, the youth is often portrayed as perpetrators of crime, drug users, school dropouts, sexually promiscuous, vandals, inarticulate, irresponsible, and apathetic. With these images in mind, it is not surprising that adults primarily think of young people as societal problems, rather than as agents of real change in our communities (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006). This view, by nature, is reflected in the policies and engagement strategies that exist around dealing with the youth population. In these attempts, youth are treated solely as the recipients of initiatives, rather than as actors in influencing the initiatives themselves. The traditional youth-service model can therefore be understood as working *for* youth.

An important first step towards creating more meaningful and effective engagement for youth in food sustainability is to adopt a new perception, or attitude,

towards working with the youth population and of the youth population in general. We must move beyond the traditional model, towards one of meaningful and effective youth engagement. Instead of viewing youth as ‘problems’ this alternative model views young people as competent citizens and community assets, with a right to actively participate in the decisions that affect their communities and their future. Rather than adults solving youth issues from the top down, the process of engagement becomes one that is mutually inclusive – accepting and respecting the perspectives of the diverse youth group, and working with them to create change from the bottom up. The engagement model can be understood as working *with* youth. The following chart (adapted from Rempel, 2011) contrasts the two different approaches to dealing with youth engagement:

Traditional Youth-Service Model	Youth Engagement Model
Preventing and responding to problems	Nurturing youth assets and positive development
Young people as passive citizens, in need of outside intervention	Young people as active community members with the wisdom, skills and expertise to contribute to solutions
Short-term one-off projects, programs, and services	An ongoing process of empowerment, capacity building and action
Professionals as experts who ‘work for’ young people, their families and communities	Professionals as facilitators and professionals who ‘work with’ youth

Table 1: The Traditional Youth-Service Model vs. The Youth Engagement Model

To bridge the gap between this distinction of broad youth engagement strategies to those specific to food, research indicates that the traditional model of youth servicing also occurs within the realm of food. One of the problems of the food

system that is most evident in youth is the rise in unhealthy eating practices, obesity rates, diabetes and other health related issues. In many reports that highlight these conditions, they often adopt the youth service model in their depiction of the youth population. For example, they speak of the poor choices of young people, lack of physical activity (sedentary lifestyles) and junk food binging. And as a result, solutions to address these problems involve adult intervention – such as stepping in to give youth healthier options. But while it may be true that greater forces/players need to be involved in solving these health issues and a degree of outside intervention is needed, little is actually said about working *with* the youth themselves, to create change. The youth are largely viewed as victims of their lack of food knowledge and unhealthy eating practices, rather than as agents of change.

Furthermore, opportunities to work with youth to create this change are simply not as prevalent as they should be. As citizens of the state, youth often find the institutional framework for public participation, communication, and decision-making inadequate, unwelcoming and unsatisfying (Botelho, 1999). The truth is that opportunities for youth in Canada to become engaged in food can be hard to come by, or the opportunities that do exist remain largely unknown among the youth population.

4.4 Fertile Ground: Creating the Spaces for Engagement to Occur

Gail Feenstra is a food systems analyst for the University of California's Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education Program. During her many years of experience at this position, she has come across thousands of food system projects;

funding them, developing them, and watching them grow, or in some cases, fail. But these observations led her to an important point of exploration: *what does it take to create and sustain a successful, sustainable food system project?* In her study entitled *“Creating space for sustainable food systems: Lessons from the field”* she aims to answer this question, through an analysis of food programs in California and in-depth interviews with key food system practitioners. Her results found that people had to “create space” for the germination of these projects in their communities, and protect space for their continuation. There are four types of spaces that must be carved out, for the sustained success of community food initiatives (Feenstra, 2002):

Social space

From their inception, the successful food systems projects identified by Feenstra encouraged communities to create new social spaces. This could include actual physical places, like new farmers’ markets or community gardens, where rich social interactions took place. But more often, it meant the multiple opportunities these projects created for diverse people in communities to come together to talk, listen to each other’s concerns and views, plan together, problem-solve, question, learn, and get to know and trust one another in the context of a common purpose or vision. This, as Feenstra (2002) describes, “is where democratic theory and practice come together, and regular citizens and residents have the opportunity to participate in their food systems in new ways”. This occurs in the context of such mediums as food policy councils, grassroots organizations devoted to improving community food security, and farm-to-school committees.

Political space

Closely related to social space is political space. Every community food systems project that Feenstra assessed spoke of their involvement in policymaking at some level – from the school district or local institution of higher education, to city, county, or state government. This kind of space almost needs to be carved. Carving out political spaces allows for the project to do things like craft a local school food policy, add a local food component to the city's or county's General Plan, or put ballot measures on a local ballot to preserve open space and farmland (Feenstra, 2002). One important element of creating political spaces is that it can help food system pilot projects or models institutionalize their efforts within a community. This stabilizes the activities and allows them to mature in place. To convince policymakers, there are two things that Feenstra (2002) found to be most convincing. First, are compelling narratives (stories) and second, is solid data that show the impacts of a new initiative. So, both qualitative and quantitative information is needed to carve the political spaces that allow food projects to sustain and flourish.

Intellectual Space

Intellectual space includes several related elements: articulating the vision of a sustainable food system and then conceptualizing a community food system initiative within the local context. It also involves reflecting on progress and future plans with local residents. Successful projects all included at least one person who had a clear vision and could share the “big picture” with the rest. The other part of

intellectual space has to do with reflection and evaluation.

Economic Space

Most of the projects that Feenstra worked with included some connection with the local economy – whether it was an attempt to find ways to recirculate local financial capital within a region, examine employment opportunities for youth, or look at sharing land costs and stewardship. Furthermore, all of the projects also relied on external funding, which was absolutely necessary to really allow them to get off the ground. Once a project has started and been in existence for a while, the next challenge is keeping it going – the maintenance phase. There seems to be a vulnerable time between start-up and stability, between initiation and institutionalization, in which the project needs particular nurturing. Continued funding is very helpful at this stage of project development.

Gail Feenstra's findings about the types of spaces that need to be created to ensure that food projects are successful does not speak specifically about youth, but it has been included in this paper for one very important reason. In order to improve youth engagement, there must be a starting point – an ultimate place in which youth engagement can emerge, develop or simply exist. Moreover, this paper is not just about improving existing youth engagement initiatives, but fostering the creation of new ones as well. This is an important part of making youth engagement more widespread. Establishing localized food projects, with the aim of achieving social-justice and environmental goals, is an important strategy for developing

sustainable urban food systems. As individuals and groups throughout the world try to develop such food systems, it is useful to understand what makes these efforts successful. Feenstra's analysis provides this insight.

4.5 Setting the Stage

The preceding literature review is intended to set the stage for the next section of this paper: The Best Practices and Recommendations. It has attempted to do so through covering the following areas, which naturally segue into the forthcoming sections:

Firstly, it provided an overview of a comprehensive report conducted by the City of Sudbury, which reviewed the extent of youth engagement programs in food sustainability in Ontario. This foundational report highlighted the fact that there is a variety of youth programs being offered in Ontario, but ultimately, the extent to which they can actually be viewed as meaningful and/or effective still remains undefined. Thus, it sets the groundwork for more research to be conducted, and for this foundational piece to be pushed further. This section therefore provides the background knowledge of: (1) *the types of youth engagement programs that exist in Ontario, and how they can be improved.*

Knowing this, food democracy was discussed next, as a practical framework in which to understand the context of this paper. Importantly, it also provides a rational approach to address the complex and conflictual nature of sustainability issues, specifically that of food. Food democracy asserts that it is ultimately through civic participation and democratic decision-making these issues can be adequately

and justly addressed. This section therefore provides: (2) *the constructive method to be used to address the issues of youth engagement in food sustainability.*

The third section discusses the traditional youth servicing model, in contrast to the youth engagement model. The latter calls for a new attitude and approach to dealing with the youth segment of the population. Rather than address youth as problematic and in need of outside intervention, the youth engagement model works with youth and treats them as competent citizens and community assets, with a right to actively participate in the decisions that affect their communities and their future. As such, this section highlights: (3) *The important shift from the youth servicing model to the youth engagement model that must occur as a first step, to ensure that youth engagement in food sustainability is meaningful and effective.*

With this, Gail Feenstra then provides us with an overview of the types of spaces that must be created to allow for the sustained success of food projects. After all, to improve youth engagement, there must be a foundation in which the process of meaningfully and effectively engaging youth can emerge, flourish and exist. Consequently, this section was included to provide a valuable understanding of what it takes when communities start food projects/programs to become successful. This section provides: (4) *what it takes to create and sustain a successful, sustainable food system project.*

In sum, the literature section sets the stage for the next section of this paper through addressing the following flow of notions:

- (1) *Firstly, the types of youth engagement programs in Ontario are identified, as well as how they can be improved*
- (2) *The concept of food democracy is then introduced to as the way to address these improvements*
- (3) *Next, the youth engagement model is explained. This model helps to achieve food democracy by making youth part of the decision-making and participatory process. This is the approach that must be adopted by adults, policy-makers and organizers in order to make youth engagement in food more meaningful and effective.*
- (4) *Once the youth engagement model is adopted as both an approach and mindset, certain “spaces” must be created to ensure that these youth food projects/programs germinate, come sustain themselves, and are ultimately successful.*

What is next then, is how to bring the youth into the picture. And, how their involvement within this picture can be improved by making their engagement more widespread, meaningful and effective. This is (5) what the best practices and recommendations will teach us.

5.0 Best Practices

The methodology used in this paper is a scan of best practice research. The process of scanning for ‘best practices’ is guided by the criteria established for defining what it is that constitutes a ‘best practice’ example, as outlined in the methodology section of this paper. This criterion was created to define ‘best practices’ in a way that suits the needs and objectives of this paper. To reiterate, a ‘best practice’ is:

- A ‘best’, ‘good’ or ‘smart’ practice, where value can be derived for the purposes of this paper
- An exemplary product or process, proven to be successful in the real world
- It is a new/innovative idea

Using this methodology, the scan for best practices yielded two general types of practices, which can be distinctly categorized as: Cases and Principles/Tools.

5.1 Cases

The Food Project, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

The Food Project is a youth food engagement success story that has been nationally recognized in the United States as a best practice. There are many valuable lessons that can be derived from this case. The Food Project (TFP) began in Lincoln, Massachusetts in 1991, with Ward Cheney, who wanted to bring together people of diverse backgrounds – particularly youth – to grow and distribute food to Boston’s hungry and, in the process, “practice care for land and community”

(Tolman & Pittman, 2001). His goal was to balance values and beliefs (such as care, reverence and usefulness) with important resources (land, people of diverse backgrounds) and needed products (innovative education, food for others and ourselves, and an active, responsible, informed citizenry). To make his vision come to life, he hired two interns: Pat Gray, a veteran of local politics and Greg Gale, a then Harvard Divinity Student who had worked with teens. When the project began, Gale and Gray began recruiting young people from inner city neighbourhoods and surrounding suburbs. The goal of the Food Project's program was to employ these youth on farms in Lincoln and Roxbury (Boston suburbs) during the summer period to grow food and learn about farming and agricultural practices. The youth were offered training and attended regular workshops to discuss community building, urban improvement, sustainable agriculture, and a wide variety of other related topics. Youth participants are grouped into crews of 10 Crew Workers and are led by a Crew Leader. The Crew Leader is usually slightly older, around college age, and usually has had prior experience in the Food Project (Tolman & Pittman, 2001). Each crew also has an Assistant Crew Leader who helps lead the crew and is typically a returning Crew Worker. Each site has a Site Supervisor that oversees the function of the farm and manages the Crew Leaders. There are also several Growers who are knowledgeable in aspects of agriculture and organic farming and who advise and help maintain the lots.

The crops that are planted and harvested by these youth are donated to food banks and homeless shelters, and what remains is sold in Farmer's Markets and Community supported agriculture networks. As the project became larger, it

attracted more media attention and funding, and the youth-led crews began to reclaim land on abandoned lots throughout Boston, such as a half-acre former auto dumpsite, and underutilized plots throughout the downtown core (Tolman & Pittman, 2001). The Food Project, at its core, is also about bridging community and race. This was its starting place: youths and adults of diverse backgrounds working side by side, moving from suburb to city and back. Because of this, the project was placed among former President Clinton's list of a hundred "promising practices" recognized by his Initiative on Race (Tolman & Pittman, 2001).

In 1998, the Kellogg Foundation recognized the project's positive community impacts and provided the TFP with a five-year \$615,000 grant (Tolman & Pittman, 2001). It has since exploded with new programs and possibilities, along with more than doubling its conservation acreage. In 2001, the organization had a budget of \$1.7 million, and it grew more than 150,000 pounds of organic produce each year (50 kinds of vegetables alone), with more than half going to food pantries and shelters (Tolman & Pittman, 2001). The Food Project has blossomed from a small pilot project ten years ago to a nationally recognized program. Year round, young people and adult partners join The Food Project's quest to create a sustainable metropolitan food system, to bridge communities traditionally divided by race, class and physical distance, and to address critical environmental and social issues.

Lessons Learned:

One best practice that can be learned from The Food Project is its approach to dealing with diversity, and the sensitive issues of race and class difference.

Bridging the divide between these socioeconomic factors was a core value and goal of the Food Project. As previously mentioned in this paper, although the ‘youth’ is categorized under this singular term, they are by no means a homogenous group. Class and race can play a role among a young person’s ability to access food, their food security, and the ability to partake in local food matters. For example, Canadian reports reveal that food insecurity is largely racialized – the population that is most affected by food insecurity in Canada are immigrants, Aboriginals and people of colour (SRCHC, 2008). Food, however, should never be a privilege for certain groups, but rather, a basic human right for all.

In understanding the complexity and diverse backgrounds of youth, The Food Project actively and purposely targeted and sought youth from a variety of neighbourhoods and communities around the Boston area. This includes the lower income inner neighbourhoods of Dorchester, and the affluent suburbs of Lincoln, Massachusetts. This bridged the social divides between youth – along the lines of the urban-suburban divide, class, race, and age as adults and youth worked together, side-by-side, as they find common ground through meaningful community building, food sustainability and agricultural education and training. Addressing diversity/difference need not be divisive. Instead, working together and sharing experiences “creates a space for solidarity across lines of difference—a space in which identities do not dissolve, but instead change” (Jakobsen, 1998). Moreover, the active targeting of specific youth groups (low income, new immigrants, etc.), as seen in the case of The Food Project, enables organizers to bring some of the most disenfranchised, disconnected and marginalized youth into the engagement process.

This provides these youth with an opportunity to become involved in the food system, in ways/opportunities that they may not have been given the chance to do otherwise.

Another exemplary practice that can be learned from this case is the ‘train the trainer’ approach. The program is structured so that participants are grouped into crews of 10 crew workers. This group is then lead by a Crew Leader. The Crew Leader is usually slightly older, around college age, and usually has had prior experience in the Food Project. Each crew also has an Assistant Crew Leader who helps lead the crew and is typically a returning crew worker. This structure means that there is different expertise to acquire, and different positions that youth can become involved as. Youth participants who begin as crew workers can return in following terms/years in new roles. This phasing technique means that members stay active within the groups and its functions for over a long period of time, rather than just a short one-time term. It also means that new youth are being coached and guided by other youth members – this keeps the organization youth driven and creates leadership and mentoring experiences for youth leaders.

Finally, the Food Project demonstrates how the efforts of a sustainable food organization can be made meaningful and effective through connecting with the broader community/city rather than keeping the operations and efforts of the organization internal. The food grown and produced by the youth in various reclaimed gardens/land around the Boston area is donated to food banks, homeless shelters, and low cost farmer’s markets. In 2001, for example, more than 73,000 pounds of locally produced, organic fruits and vegetables were harvested in the

summer – with the majority distributed to the city’s poor through food banks and shelters (Tolman & Pittman, 2001). The evidence of impact on the community, therefore, is broad and deep. For youth, this is very important. Having goals and tangible results means that the youth can see the outcome of their own efforts. Seeing the thousands of pounds of produce being harvested and the food going to help those who desperately need it, for example, means that a youth can tangibly see that his/her efforts, time and commitment was put to good use. There is perhaps nothing more frustrating for a youth who wants to be involved to feel like their efforts were futile and do not amount to any results/benefit/use.

This broader connection/benefit to the wider city also gives visibility to the efforts of the organization. Connecting with the city means that public attention can be gained, awareness is raised, and importantly, it shows to others that the youth can and do make a difference within the community. This is crucial to changing perceptions around youth, and raising education and awareness for the values of the organization (sustainable food, youth engagement, etc.). This is not to say that individual contributions towards food sustainability that go unnoticed are not important or valued, but public attention is important for the status of the organization. If you look at the case of The Food Project, it was this public attention that made this small pilot program 20 years ago blossom into a nationally recognized program.

GrowFood.org: A food system for the 21st century, USA & Global

In 2001, a 20 year old named Ethan Schaffer founded GrowFood.org, a nonprofit organization that aims to connect young people with organic farmers, urban gardeners, green builders, renewable energy experts, policy crafters, and organizations that practice sustainable farming (WorldChanging Team, 2009). The premise behind this idea was simple –opportunities for youth exist and there are employers, farmers and those in agricultural businesses out there who are looking for the assistance and skills of young people. Similarly, there are youth that are itching to become involved and gain knowledge of the agricultural/farming sector. However, these youth do not necessarily know where to turn to or how to find these opportunities that exist. Thus, there is a missed connection that exists here, and the demand/interest of youth is not being captured and capitalized on.

To address these missed opportunities, Ethan Schaffer created GrowFood.org which is a website that gathers a list of sustainable projects and organizations from around the world, and displays these opportunities, job postings, internships, volunteer opportunities and cultural/knowledge sharing experiences for youth. It functions like a matchmaking site, connecting youth with opportunities to become engaged in sustainable food practices. As the website states, “the mission of GrowFood.org is to train a new generation of sustainable farmers and to reconnect people with farms” (GrowFood.org, 2012). Since its inception in 2001, the site has grown to become an online hub within the youth food community – the site currently has more than 25,000 registered members alone from all 50 states (GrowFood.org, 2012), and the site serves the global youth community as well. 21

Latin American countries now use the site to find organic farms and urban gardens to work and learn on, and to build coalitions, pool resources, and launch new sustainable enterprises (WorldChanging Team, 2009). There are opportunities in Africa, Asia, Europe and Australia.

For his efforts in creating this new and innovative way of connecting youth to sustainable farming practices, Schaffer was the recipient of the 2002 Brower Youth Award. This annual award is presented by the Earth Island Institute to youth under the age of 23 who have contributed to the progression of environmental and social justice.

Lessons Learned:

Ethan Schaffer's GrowFood.org provides an exemplary best practice for how to improve the engagement of youth. What this case does exceptionally well is increase the scope of youth engagement in food sustainability (i.e. making it more widespread). By providing opportunities to youth through the use of the Internet, websites and social media platforms, it provides the potential to reach a whole new generation and 'market' of youth. After all, many studies have shown that Canadian youth spend a large proportion of their time on the internet (IAB, 2009) and that this mode of media now has more 'reach' within the youth demographic than television, radio and magazines (IAB, 2009). In fact, in 2009, 98% of those between the ages of 16 and 24 went online (CBC News, 2010) a rate significantly higher compared to older Canadians.

By creating an online, one-stop hub for youth, GrowFood.org has managed to capitalize on this online trend, and have filled a large gap within the domain of youth food engagement. It is innovative because it is the first example of its kind to exist – that is, there are no other global youth engagement online hubs that list and match make users to sustainable food opportunities. They have made finding opportunities to get engaged and involved with sustainable food easy and convenient for youth. This has created a whole new way of reaching thousands of eager youth, and has created an avenue that significantly and directly increases the capacity for change globally.

The Ghana Institute of Horticulturalists (GhIH) Project

In the West African nation of Ghana, the youth (aged 15 to 35), who comprise of the main active working force, constitutes more than 30% of the total Ghanaian population (Abubakari et al., 2012). As Ghana becomes more industrialized and developed, the agricultural opportunities in the country are diminishing, as hundreds of acres of land are being bought/owned by large-scale companies and businesses (Abubakari et al., 2012). As a result, the rural youth either have to contend with the existing opportunities in subsistence production or migrate to urban centres in search of alternative employment opportunities (Abubakari et al., 2012). The problem, however, is that much of this youth is largely under-equipped for these other employment opportunities, and for changing employment in the food sector as well. They lack the education, training and skills needed to partake in these industrialized agribusinesses, and it is the small percentage of youth with degrees,

certificates and diplomas who are attaining jobs within these agribusinesses (Abubakari et al., 2012). As such, there is a decline in the youth human resource base required by Ghana's food sector, where it has been difficult to keep up with its increasingly industrialized and rapidly changing pace.

To address this gap, the Ghana Institute of Horticulturalists developed a youth-specific program to better prepare generations of youth for the changing food sector, while also focusing on sustainable and local agriculture. It not only aimed to provide training for youth to become employed in large-scale industrial farming practices, but it also focused on improving relationships to local food and community-based forms of agriculture. The goal of this program was to ultimately build capacity to increase the potential of youth for employment in the agrifood sector.

The project began by partnering with Post-Secondary institutions offering horticultural studies, and horticultural and agricultural professional networks and institutes within Ghana. Next, they targeted youth in the Upper West Region of Ghana. The project is largely an exchange program, where knowledge and practical skills are shared between the rural youth of Ghana and professionals studying/working within the field of sustainable agriculture. The students enrolled in a post-secondary institution studying horticultural studies for example, would apply their education/acquired skills in farms in the Upper West Region of Africa (whether it be community farms, or a young person's family farm) (Abubakari et al., 2012). This creates a two-way benefit. The students (who are youth themselves) are able to apply their knowledge and skills in the real world. This can include using

new planting strategies, trying new plant resistance techniques, or testing farming technologies. In this process, the rural youth participants are able to acquire practical skills and learn new, more modernized farming practices and techniques.

A study exploring the impact/result of this project found that availability of fresh vegetables increased from 5 months to 9 months in project communities (Abubakari et al., 2012). At least 53% of the farmers reported increases in purchasing power as a result of increasing productivity and income. More youth farmers have recognized vegetable production as a critical livelihood support system, and the rural-urban migration was reported to have substantially decreased (11% decrease in 2006 and 20% decrease in 2010) over the five years of the project, and appears to be evidence of the higher income generated by the training and new skills acquired by young rural farmers (Abubakari et al., 2012).

The GhIH Project also partnered with professional networks, affiliations and institutes in the field. The purpose of this was to forge a connection between the rural youth partaking in the project, and employment opportunities. This was a main goal of the GhIH project. Agricultural businesses and employers, through the program and its partnership with the Ghana Horticultural Institute, actively sought youth participants from the program in filling employment positions (Abubakari, et al., 2012). Additionally, these networks provided training courses, professional and communication exchanges, and opportunities to attend sustainable food conferences.

Lessons Learned:

The first major lesson that can be learned for the GhiH project is its establishment of partnerships with other key institutions/organizations. In establishing these connections, the project was able to leverage more resources, expertise and training opportunities for youth participants. This enabled a creative opportunity to connect post-secondary youth studying horticulture with rural youth, allowing them to apply practical knowledge of sustainable farming while teaching new skills to others (two-way benefit).

Another important lesson from the GhiH project is its intention and ability to bridge the program into real careers in the sustainable food sector for young people. This forges a connection to a life path in food sustainability, transitioning a youth's engagement in a food program/organization, into a career in the sustainable food industry. This has great implications for improving youth engagement, its meaningfulness and efficacy. After all, how can youth be more engaged in food sustainability than having a career in the field? This places them squarely in the food sustainability picture, and consequently, gives them the most ability engage with our food system and create the change that they wish to see.

5.2 Tools & Principles

Youth Food Councils

Using a scan for best practice research, one new and favoured response to encouraging youth engagement at a local level is setting up youth food councils and youth food policy councils. A food policy council (FPC) is “a way to address the food system as a whole, often bringing the weight of local, county or state government behind grassroots initiatives. FPCs work across sectors, engaging with government policy and programs, grassroots/non-profit projects, local business and food workers. Instead of many advocates working on the isolated symptoms of a failing food system, FPCs attempt to establish platforms for coordinated action at the local level” (Harper et al., 2009:2). A youth policy council is one in which the committee and board members are comprised of youth, as a means to involve youth perspectives and incorporate their voices in food issues/debates. An example of this is Toronto’s Youth Food Policy Council.

Youth Food Policy Councils demonstrate an exemplary process of bringing youth into the engagement picture, by directly situating youth within the decision-making process regarding matters that relate to food and food sustainability. In the example of Toronto’s YFPC, they reserve the rights to two permanent youth seats on the broader Toronto Food Policy Council (Toronto Youth Food Policy Council, 2011).

In an article by Hugh Matthews (2001) he evaluates the efficacy of such councils. In his assessment, which involved interviews, surveys and examining

council structures, he finds that there are many valuable benefits that councils provide. These include developing a sense of self-worth for youth, the acquisition of new skills, and a better understanding of local issues (Matthews, 2001).

Furthermore, councils provided youth with an opportunity to have focused discussions - for and by young people - on issues that have direct bearing on their day-to-day lives (Matthews, 2001). These benefits, however, become hindered and dampened without a clear and strong sense of purpose. "There is a danger that adult-dominated organization, like a local authority, may turn to a youth council as a political sop or as a means of fulfilling another performance indicator, without sufficiently thinking through roles and responsibilities" (Matthews, 2001:309).

Youth councils therefore need to be set up and operating with meaningful youth engagement at its core. That is, "young people require structures and methods that are appropriate to them and which are sufficiently responsive to provide a sense of control and ownership" (Matthews, 2001:316).

In failing to do this, youth councils can result in disempowerment, tokenism, and meaningless 'engagement' that fails to consider, acknowledge, and reflect the views, opinions and needs of the youth involved. Thus, youth food councils and policy councils are a great way of to directly engage youth and provide them with a process and forum to create and influence change towards greater food sustainability. But to ultimately ensure their efficacy, it must enable and accept the *real* influence of young people, not just their mere presence.

Youth-Adult Partnerships

Another identified best tool/principle for engaging youth in food is youth-adult partnerships. These are “when young people and adults become engaged together in their communities; they are relationships between youth and adults where there is mutuality in teaching, learning, and action” (Zeldin et al., 2001). In the pathways to creating meaningful and effective youth engagement, this can rarely be achieved with youth working entirely alone. There needs to be adults involved in the process, to work with youth. Adults provide ongoing guidance, support and expertise. In fact, research indicates that youth want and expect certain types of support (Camino & Zledin, 2002). These include coaching, dialoging, and connections to institutional resources and community leaders. Many skills are best learned by youth from consistent and direct contact with adults. Leadership, for example, is not a skill, per se. It is rather a complex set of skills, behaviors, actions, and attitudes. And this is best developed through apprenticeship and experiential-type learning processes, which necessitate close partnership between novices and older hands (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). Furthermore, youth–adult partnerships are critical to the efficacy of youth engagement because they have the potential to engage a full range of human capital (adults in different/important roles, from different sectors, with different resources and access to networks). The youth-adult partnership tool is especially important for the purposes and perpetuation of intergenerational equity.

The Equal Distribution of Power

To enable real influence by young people, the equal (or fair) distribution of power is necessary. Youth participation can be plagued and perverted by the imbalance of responsibility and decision-making power within organizations. For example, adults may frequently attempt to steer the agenda and process towards their own interests (Matthews, 2001). Or, there may be a high adult to youth ratio, which can result in the diminishment of the youth voice, and the subjugation/isolation of the disproportionate youth at the table. There is a common myth that youth participation means that adults must relinquish their responsibilities/powers (O'Donoghue et al., 2002). However, this is simply not the case. Youth participation is about sharing power, evolving roles, and undertaking new tasks (as guides, role models and mentors for example), not surrendering them.

This principle has major implications for the concept of food democracy. After all, food democracy is about fairness and the decentralization of power. And it is about making food discussions and decision-making more representative of all. The re-distribution of equal power among youth, therefore, provides a mechanism towards achieving this.

Time and Space to Develop Youth

Having youth who are eager and wanting to be engaged in food sustainability does not necessarily mean that they are prepared/equipped to do so. This is not to say that youth are not capable of participating and taking on important responsibilities. But, just as adults need support and training, authentic youth

engagement requires that people be given the time and space to develop the skills they need to participate effectively (O'Donoghue, 2002). This does not mean that youth need to learn now and participate later, but rather that they have ongoing training and support during the participation process. For example, a youth initiative may require an evaluation of the program, but research methods, data analysis and collection may not be skills that youth readily possess. Thus, they need to ultimately be trained, and learning opportunities have to be made available to youth, in order for them to develop the necessary skills to become effective members.

The preceding best practices, tools and principles have been identified using the criteria and methodology developed for this paper. They are all examples of a best/good/smart practice in food engagement, as identified by literature and the objectives of this paper. They all have valuable lessons that can be extracted and applied, to answer the research question of: *how do you make youth engagement in food sustainability more widespread, meaningful and effective?* They are exemplary products (such as an online hub) or processes (such as recruiting diverse youth) that have been proven to be successful in the real world. Finally, they are also new and innovative ideas, in that they are unique (The Food Project), the only of its kind (GrowFood.org), address current needs/changing food patterns (GHIH Project), or are recently emerging as a response to food system issues (Youth Food Policy Councils). Based on the selection of these best practices, recommendations have been developed.

6.0 Recommendations

Based on best practice research, and the analysis of cases and principles/tools for engaging youth in food sustainability, the following recommendations have been derived:

1) Youth are diverse. They come from various backgrounds, classes, races, and they experience food and access to food differently. To address these diverse perspectives, stakeholders who are trying to engage youth in food sustainability (such as NGOs, local governments, businesses and municipal planners) should **target specific groups**. As The Food Project demonstrates, actively going into neighbourhoods and communities to recruit diverse representation helps to bridge the gaps and social differences that divide the youth population. Targeting specific groups is especially valuable to engage those who are traditionally marginalized/disconnected from the food system. In actively targeting these youth populations, you are able to involve some of the most unheard youth voices in the food engagement process. And remember, dealing with difference need not be divisive. The Food Project shows that diverse groups, working side by side, helps to create new perceptions, identities and enriched learning experiences.

For Organizations, Communities and Urban Planners:

- Specifically target the youth groups that you wish to engage – such as immigrants, youth from low-income families, rural youth, etc.

- Do not be afraid to actively recruit youth by going into certain neighbourhoods, and targeting communities within the city, For example, seek out youth participants in high schools located within a priority neighbourhood.
- Bring marginalized/disenfranchised youth groups into the picture. You have an opportunity here to make their silent voices heard.
- For organizations and communities, ensure that there is a diverse representation of youth working together, side-by-side in your projects/programs/board and committees.
- For urban planners, make sure that there are diverse youth participants that are partaking in the public participation and consultation processes.

Consider using interactive and engaging ways to present information to youth and to gather their input at these meetings. For example, have a youth member of the community, who is engaged in the food planning issue at hand, give a presentation at the meetings, or have them share their experiences.

2) Make the engagement/interactions with youth specific to their

preferences*. It is much easier to get youth involved if the methods to do so capitalize on the trends and patterns of youth behavior. An example of this is using the internet and social media to connect youth, as the GrowFood.org case effectively illustrates. Taking youth engagement online helps to reach a broader youth base, as it is where this demographic is spending most of their time. Using these new

platforms now will help to keep youth engaged in the future, as they age. A study finds that Canadians carry their media habits with them as they age. High levels of Internet usage exhibited by 18- to 24-year-olds today, therefore, will become high levels of usage for the entire 25- to 34-year-old age group eight years from now (IAB, 2009).

For Organizations and Communities:

- Make use of the Internet as a resource – create a website for your initiative, advertise online, and make connections to/on popular youth websites.
- Use Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other new and emerging social media platforms to engage youth
- Capitalize on youth use trends and popular means of youth communication. For example, smart phones and mobile applications are very popular among youth. Consider creating an app for your food initiative or organization. This is an easy way to keep youth connected, to send them notifications, and to keep them up-to-date with the initiative/organization.
- For urban planners, expand how public meetings and consultations are made known to the public beyond just traditional means – use social media, make YouTube videos, and create Facebook events.
- For youth who may be unable to physically attend public meetings, find online ways to engage them – interactive surveys, for example, can easily be administered online. And Twitter is becoming an increasingly popular way to

reach broad audiences by tweeting questions and issues, and immediately receiving the public's responses (reply tweets).

* It is recognized that digital techniques such as social media and mobile apps can privilege specific groups within the youth population – mainly those who have the economic means to possess and access computers and smart phones, and those who have internet access readily available to them. Additionally, Graddol (2001) notes that the online world is overwhelmingly dominated by the English language. As such, social media engagement strategies privilege English-speaking users who are conversant in the English language. These issues speak to the need to bring diverse, less privileged youth into the engagement process. As recommendation #1 emphasizes: actively target diverse and specific youth groups, especially those are traditionally marginalized/disconnected from the food system.

3) Create an online youth hub that connects young users to local sustainable farming opportunities for a neighbourhood, city or a region. In Toronto, for example, there are many youth food organizations and programs within the city. But many youth are not aware of these opportunities. Creating an online hub/community where these opportunities are listed in a similar fashion to GrowFood.org, can easily be created to suit localized contexts and needs.

For Cities/Communities and Organizations:

- Consider creating an online one-stop shop similar to GrowFood.org for eager and/or unaware youth who want to get involved. The City of Toronto, for example, can create a hub that lists all the sustainable food organizations within the city and their youth opportunities, farms that are looking for youth assistance, internships in Toronto, etc.

For Urban Planners:

- Urban planners can make use of these online hubs by posting youth career and volunteer opportunities in food sustainability available within their workplaces
- Planners can also post upcoming food planning events, conferences, workshops and speakers' series on this online community to get youth to attend
- Utilize this online resource to match community space with access in areas of need.

4) Utilize a 'train the trainer' approach. Have youth who have experience in a food organization or its projects/programs come back to train new participants. This helps keep the initiative youth-driven and led. It also provides the development of mentoring and leadership skills.

For Organizations, Communities and those running youth engagement initiatives:

- **Consider creating multiple roles for youth.** This allows youth members to become involved in different ways, rather than just a 'youth' member.
- This also allows for phasing, where youth can move between different roles and responsibilities. This keeps a youth engaged food sustainability programs/organizations for longer periods of time.

5) Make the connection to a life path in food sustainability for youth. Strive to bridge youth engagement opportunities in the organizations, to long-term careers and jobs within the sustainable food/farming industry.

For Organizations and Communities: This can be achieved through partnering with agricultural networks, businesses and professional institutes (as the GhIH Project illustrates) where careers and opportunities for youth to stay involved in food sustainability beyond the activities of organizations, are readily available.

For Employers, Farmers, Professional Food Institutes and Sustainable Food

Businesses: Provide resources and opportunities to youth in sustainable food organizations and initiatives. Look to these organizations to recruit young employees and to fill available positions within your businesses. You as a potential employer have the ability to capitalize on eager, engaged and interested youth – who would value and appreciate the opportunity to work in a field that they feel passionately about.

6) Setting up Youth Food Councils can serve as an effective and meaningful way of engaging youth in the sustainable food decision-making process.

For Government Bodies, Advisory Committees and Sustainable Food Businesses:

This is an ideal tool to get youth directly involved in their operations, and to include the youth voice in big decisions that impact the sustainability of food, such as policy making, by-laws and food standards. However, to be effective and meaningful for youth, it must have structures and methods in place that ensure sufficient responsiveness to their concerns, and that their voices are adequately heard. For example, structure the council so that youth have voting power, veto rights, establish quorums, or give leadership and senior positions to youth.

For All Stakeholders Involved in Youth Engagement:

- **7) Connect with the broader community/city.** This helps to raise the profile of your organization/youth engagement and create public awareness of your values and youth efforts. This exposure can result in more youth participants, and attention from officials (as with the case of The Food Project). With this often comes more funding, organizational growth, partnership opportunities and mass appeal/promotion.
- **8) Create partnerships and collaborations with relevant institutions and professional networks.** This leverages more resources, expertise and opportunities for youth. In addition, it creates the potential for creative engagement strategies and learning opportunities.

- **9) Have goals and tangible outcomes to strive for.** This allows youth to see the results of their efforts. To be meaningful, youth participants must have a sense that their involvement in actually creating a difference, and benefitting others as well as themselves. These goals can be to produce a certain weight of produce yearly, or to donate a certain amount of boxes of food to shelters. These can be accomplished by having metrics/measures of progress/success with youth-specific focus.
- **10) Create Youth-Adult partnerships.** Youth need adult support and expertise, and it should be a mutually beneficial experience for both groups. Working with adults also gives youth more human capital and capacity to generate positive change.
- **10) Ensure that power is shared equally among youth and adults.** See youth as equal partners in engagement and decision-making processes.
- **11) Anticipate and dedicate time for the maturation of youth skills.** Young people need to be given the time and space to develop the skills they need to participate effectively, just like adults do. Provide ongoing training, education and support during the participation process.
- **12) Educate planners more about youth.** This demographic deserves more attention and awareness about the role that they can play in the planning process, how planners can benefit from engaging with youth, and the potential that the youth possess to create positive community change (in the area of food, and more broadly). Use different planning forums to teach planners about youth, such as conferences, workshops, speaker sessions and

symposiums. Similarly, planning schools should include more focus on the youth (and their engagement) in their education, curriculum and classes to instill these lessons in the new generations of up and coming planners.

7.0 Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to utilize a best practice review to address the issue of youth engagement in food sustainability. Although the planning profession has begun to pay more attention to food issues, little research has been conducted around engaging/situating the youth population within these discussions. The youth represents a key group in the development and improvement of the current food planning system. Yet, with the current lack of attention paid to this segment of the population, a large gap exists around understanding the best practices for mobilizing and engaging youth in food sustainability practices. Consequently, this paper aimed to address the central question of: *how to make youth engagement in food sustainability more widespread, meaningful and effective?*

Through the exploration of this question, this paper found that the youth are disengaged from food in many ways. They are unaware of where it comes from, the practices of farming and agriculture, and the health and environmental impacts of their food choices. But this does not define the youth population. The youth possess an incredible untapped capacity and propensity to influence the food system and drive positive change in their communities. But unleashing this potential takes the thoughtful and attentive efforts on the part of those involved – organizations, NGOs, communities, local governments, businesses and planners. Strategies and approaches to engagement must be youth-specific, capitalize on their behaviours, and reflect their needs, desires and unique perspectives. The diversity of the youth population is a key piece to this puzzle. Youth diversity should not only be

acknowledged, but also adequately addressed – for it is in capturing the full spectrum of the youth voice that they are heard loudest. The solutions to problems in the food system depend in a very fundamental way on participation, since participation is a key feature of democracy. And democracy, in the end, is about the decentralization of power and allowing all groups to influence and shape the issues that affect their lives. Creating meaningful and effective youth engagement in food is therefore ultimately about giving youth the power, opportunities and tools to create change.

This paper therefore provides an early first start at looking at issues of food sustainability and security through the lens of youth and youth engagement. The City of Sudbury conducted one of the only early examples that attempted to review the extent of youth engagement programs in Ontario. My paper builds upon this foundational piece and attempts to fill a gap within research by not only reviewing youth engagement in food, but the actual scope, meaningfulness and efficacy of this youth engagement.

This exploration is important and timely. We are living in a world where the implications of our problematic food system are becoming progressively worse. Global food security is in jeopardy, generations are increasingly disconnected from their food, health related diseases are epidemic and the quality and longevity of our lives are suffering. Squarely placing youth within this context is crucial and necessary. They constitute the next generation of eaters, policy-makers and adult inhabitants of this earth. They have a unique and vested interest in food, as they will inherit the systemic problems of the food system. The development and

improvement of these food concerns will ultimately, one day lie in their hands. And so, it is up to us today – now – to improve the ways in which we engage this group, and mobilize them as effective, active, and well-equipped agents of change.

Planners, and the urban planning profession at large, must shift their practices to reflect these objectives. As a profession that is directly responsible for the shaping of our physical and natural worlds, it holds an opportunity and obligation to improve food sustainability by better engaging with youth. By adopting the recommendations and central themes provided in this paper, a platform is provided to begin to make these improvements. The engagement of youth in food sustainability is complex, complicated, multi-faceted and at times, conflictual. However, good planning is about pushing the envelope. It is new ways of doing practice and these spaces of resistance and creativity that carve out new opportunities and avenues for change.

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