

Food Charters in Canadian Cities: a key milestone for building Food Strategies, Food Policies and Food Plans

Vancouver Green Rooftop, visit with Food Charter partners

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The case study¹ has been put together by the Dhaka Food System project, with support by the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and in association with the Bangladesh Institute of Planners. The case studies provide relevant international references to stakeholders, to inform how to best integrate food system considerations into urban planning.

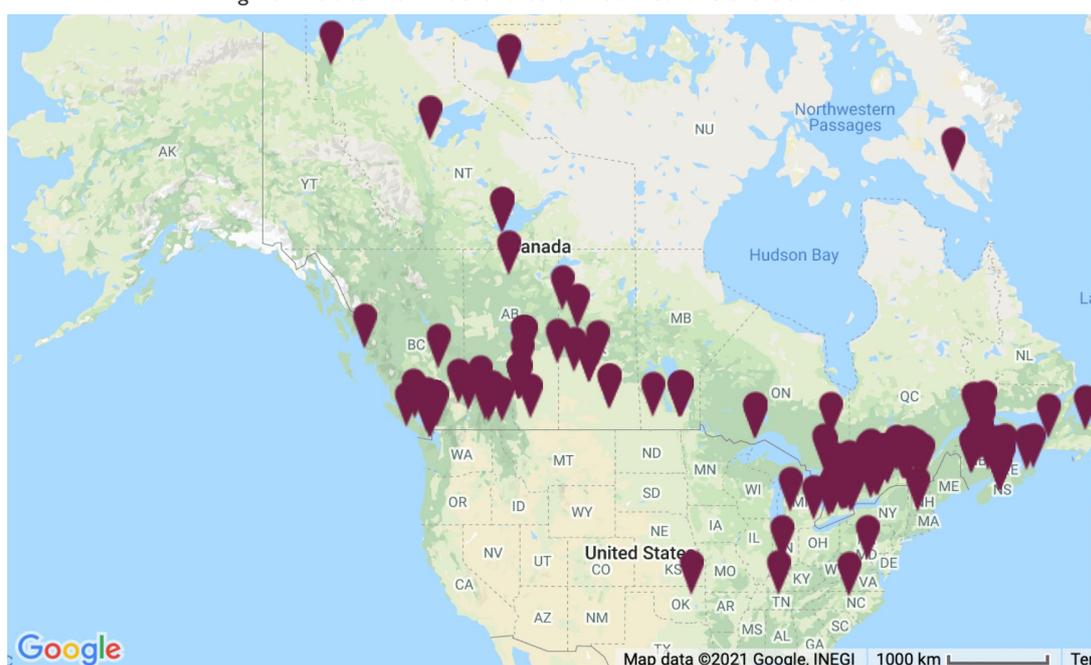
Introduction: what is this case about?

Even though Canada and Bangladesh are quite different countries, City Food Charters (CFC) are addressing in Canadian cities, challenges shared by many of their Bangladeshi sisters. In many cases, it addresses the health problems of people because of a poor diet, meaning high rates of heart disease, diabetes, cancer or obesity. CFC is a first answer as well to unsustainable food systems. As one of the cities states: "Hamilton has lost both farmland and farmers who produce our food. Hamilton lacks processing facilities for local food, relies heavily on imported food, and depends on a limited fossil fuel supply". A third justification, is the lack of access to healthy food because of low income, high food cost.

Food Charters, that will be described here emerged in Canada in the 2000s, along with a huge attention given to food and urban agriculture (see top picture, Figure 7 & 8) with beacons such as Toronto, home of the first Food Charter, adopted in 2001 and Vancouver (2007). Since then, more than 60 cities across Canada have adopted Food Charters (See figure 1) and most of them are connected to a national network of Community Food Centres (<https://goodfoodorganizations.ca>)

Interestingly Food Charters in North America refers to quite different spatial and political/administrative scales: seat of district, district, county, cities, Municipal Region, Metropolitan region, or Federal State (Michigan or Minnesota for instance). It indicates that over the last 20 years, food related issues are in practice and are being addressed at multiple levels, an important possible source of inspiration for Bangladesh.

Figure 1. Cities with Food Charters in Canada and the USA. 2021



¹ This case study draws primarily from author's previous works and research on of food charters, as well as field visits and exchanges with local actors. See in particular; Cabannes Y. and Marocchino, C. (eds.). 2018. Integrating Food into Urban Planning. UCL Press: London; FAO: Rome (Chapter 1) <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ucl-press/browse-books/integrating-food-into-urban-planning> and Cabannes, Y., (2012) Pro-poor legal and institutional aspects of Urban and Peri-Urban agriculture. FAO Legislative Study Series Number 108, FAO Legal Office (Food and Agriculture Organisation), Rome, <http://www.fao.org/legal/en/>

As a consequence, this case is rooted on four illustrative cities of different scales and nature: three are located in or close to Greater Toronto: Simcoe County (307,000, 2016); the Regional Municipality of York, also called York Region (1.1 million inh, 2016) and Hamilton city (683,000, 2016). The fourth case is a reference city when speaking of food policies and planning, Vancouver, the eighth largest city in Canada and part of Metro Vancouver, the third largest metropolitan area in Canada, with a population of about 2.6 million in 2020.

1. Highlights on City Charters in some Canadian cities

What is a City Food Charter?

Definitions slightly vary from one place to the other, but in a nutshell a Food Charter brings a “vision of values, principles and priorities” as underlined by Hamilton, Ontario. Visions and principles are highlighted as well by Simcoe County stating that a City Charter outlines, in one or two pages, the vision and the principles about the food that a county, a city or a region consider most important. . . Rather than a policy document, a charter is a guide for making decisions intended to improve the local food system for all residents”. Once adopted by the City Council, and /or by the municipal department in charge of food related issues (health in particular in Canada) it will help to frame food planning interventions

Content wise, the multiple existing charters (see **figure 2**) will detail their vision in relation to food, for instance “Hamilton’s Food Charter envisions a healthy, sustainable and just food system. It seeks to guide municipal policies and community action”. This vision is normally followed by envisioned Food Strategic Principles that are the pillars upon which the local Food system will be built, such as:

- Healthy, Sustainable and Just Food System and Education as a key (Hamilton)
- Health and Well Being; Economic Opportunities; Environmental sustainability; Equity and social Justice; Education and skills (York Region)

Just as important as the definition of the Strategic Principles that are collectively valued, the commitment to “How” they are going to be attained is key (see Hamilton municipality and York Region Charters here). It states the will. For example, in Hamilton A Just Food System (third of the 3 principles) will:

- Provide opportunities for all residents to acquire safe, nutritious, and personally acceptable food
- Give a voice to people marginalized by the present food system
- Reflect the real cost of food production
- Support a living wage economy to allow everyone to buy food

In addition to a detailed set of guiding principles, a Food Charter can be an educational and raising awareness tool about food, introducing key concepts and definitions, answering questions such as: why do we need a food charter? What is a food charter? What is a food system, or what is sustainable development? It usually introduces briefly as well who has been involved in conversations and development of the Food Charter.

Figure 2. Hamilton Food Charter leaflet

The leaflet is titled "Food for All: A Food Charter for Hamilton". It is divided into several sections:

- Why do we need a Food Charter?**
 - Our health depends on the food we eat. Many people in Hamilton suffer from ill health because of a poor diet. Rates of heart disease, diabetes, cancer and obesity are too high in our City.
 - Our current food system is not sustainable. In recent years, Hamilton has lost both farmland and farmers who produce our food. Hamilton lacks processing facilities for local food, relies heavily on imported food, and depends on a limited fossil fuel supply.
 - The Food Charter will raise awareness about farm income, fair food prices and low paying jobs in the food industry.
 - Some members of our community cannot access healthy food because of low income, high cost, or lack of food skills.
- Let's talk about food**
 - This food charter is a statement of values and principles to guide food policy. People from a wide range of community interests and organizations met and discussed their concerns and desires around food and agriculture policy in order to come up with this common vision and set of principles. The vision and principles form the basis of Hamilton's own unique, local, community food charter. It is a public document to guide municipal decision making and community action.
- Definitions**
 - A **charter** is a vision of values, principles, and priorities.
 - The term "**food system**" refers to all of the processes which are part of providing food to people. It includes the growing, harvesting, transporting, processing, marketing, selling, consuming, and disposing of food.
 - The most commonly used definition of **sustainable development** comes from the Brundtland Commission of the United Nations: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."
- This Charter was developed by:** the Community Food Security Stakeholder Committee – an advisory committee to the Board of Health in Hamilton.
- For more information visit:** hamiltonfoodcharter.wordpress.com
- Please send comments to:** hamiltonfoodcharter@gmail.com

The leaflet features several images: a woman looking at a tablet, a man in a field, a woman and child with vegetables, a farmer with a tractor, and various fresh produce like tomatoes and blueberries. The Hamilton logo is in the bottom left and right corners, with the date "January 2014" in the bottom right.

Who are the actors promoting Food Charters?

Food Charters usually result from a process involving different food related actors: citizens groups, multi-stakeholder groups, urban agriculture champions, with some differences from one place to the other:

- In Hamilton, the Charter was developed by a Community Food Security Stakeholder Committee with an advisory role to the municipal Board of Health with membership from a wide range of stakeholders on the food system.
- In Simcoe County, as illustrated in **figure 3**, multiple organizations provided guidance: various local governments, community health centre, food partners alliance, County of Simcoe, local university, farmers associations, etc.
- In Vancouver, the Charter was developed by a municipally affiliated citizen group, the Vancouver Food Policy Council, with extensive experience organizing at the community level. The Charter was also used by the Food Policy Council as a tool for community engagement and consultation for over a year before it was presented to Vancouver City Council for approval. In this way, the inclusive, consultation-based process of formulating the Food Charter was just as important as the final product, the Food Charter itself.

Figure 3. Early partners for the development of The Food Charter. Simcoe County, Canada.



Source: Simcoe County Food and Agriculture charter, dec.2012

2. Highlights on Food Charters relevant aspects for Dhaka context

From City Food Charter to Food Strategy

A food charter is an important tool for food systems planning and especially for formulating food Strategies. A key moment is the collective and multi-actor envisioning of the city, ideally through consensus building. A vision will then help in defining basic principles to guide the formulation of a proper food plan. In Hamilton for instance, “the Food Strategy Principles are derived from the Charter and are strongly supported by the community engagement results” (see **figure 4**).

Figure 4. Hamilton Food strategy is built on the Guiding principles of the Food Charter

Food Strategy Principles

The Food Strategy's principles are derived from the Food Charter and are strongly supported by the community engagement results. The Food Strategy principles envision a healthy, sustainable, and just food system as the following:

A Healthy Food System will

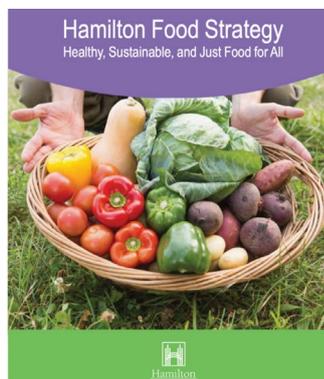
- Enable the overall health and well-being of Hamiltonians
- Lower the risk of chronic diseases
- Reduce the risk of food-borne illness
- Allow for nutritious and personally acceptable foods in all places where food is available, such as home, workplace, school, retail settings, community centres, and entertainment complexes

A Sustainable Food System will

- Ensure the economic viability of the Hamilton food sector for producers, processors, distributors, and retailers
- Preserve and protect Hamilton farmland, watersheds, and the species diversity of animal, plant, and seed stock
- Allow for the development of urban agriculture
- Use processes that sustain or enhance the natural environment in both rural and urban settings at every stage of the food system
- Lessen the impact of variations in food supply
- Celebrate food that is grown locally

A Just Food System will

- Provide opportunities for all residents to acquire safe, nutritious, and personally acceptable food
- Give a voice to people marginalized by the present food system
- Reflect the real cost of food production
- Support a living wage economy to allow everyone to buy food



In Vancouver, in the own words of a key professional staff involved in the process: “Vancouver’s Food Charter is used regularly in the city’s policy work to justify new policies and developments related to urban agriculture and Food security. This is highly impressive for a document spearheaded by a citizen group”².

² Dr Wendy Mendes, interview, October 2010

A Food Charter is conducive to stronger multi-stakeholder's Food City Councils

Food Charters are conducive to quite innovative Food Governance models, that were not existing before: The York Region Food Council was born out of the York Region Food Charter, and is housed within the York Region Food Network. The Council is made up of representatives from York Region and the municipalities that make up the Region, Public Health, York University, Seneca, the farming community, and more (see [York website](#)). In other cases, such as Vancouver, the Food Policy Council, essentially composed of citizens (and not of a multi-stakeholder nature), gained legitimacy and advocacy capacity, once the Food Charter was approved.

4. Time line and key dates: a consultation and evolutionary process

The Food For All, A Food Charter for Hamilton is the result of a consultation held during about two years, from November 2011 to December 2013, complemented with a review of some existing charters, to get a base for identifying key messages. However, as in other Canadian cities, and as happened in Accra, Ghana MPAP (see case 1 of this series), participants are proposing at the same time, actions that could be taken to improve the existing food system.

Another crucial point, is that once the draft of the charter is ready, another consultation period might start, over the web, inviting more partners to engage, to post comments and ideas. In other words, a Food Charter is not only a crucial statement, but at the same time, it provokes a snowball effect, gathering more partners and ideas. In Hamilton as a result of this process, the Charter was updated, and debated in 2014 within the Board of Health for approval (see minutes of debates, City of Hamilton, August 14, 2014)

Figure 5, Hamilton Food Charter, on among various tools, allows to observe that some planning measures took place in parallel with the Food Charter formulation (zoning by law for farmer markets and urban agriculture for instance). The Charter (approved 2014) was followed by various crucial actions (nobody is hungry fund, same year; and the creation of a Food Advisory Committee at municipal level in 2016).

Figure 5. The food Charter. One among various Planning and Policies tools. Hamilton

Examples of Current Hamilton System-wide Resources & Tools

- Hamilton Community Garden Policy, 2010
- Zoning By-law amendments, 2014, 2015 (Urban Agriculture and Farmers' Markets)
- Food for All, A Food Charter for Hamilton, 2014 ←
- City Enrichment Funds, Nobody is Hungry/without Shelter, 2014
- City Enrichment Fund, Environment and Agriculture streams, 2015
- Small Business Enterprise Centre
- Food Advisory Committee, 2016
- Hamilton Community Garden Network



Source: Hamilton Food Strategy 2016

5. Key messages

Bring people together

The development of Food Charters should bring people together of all different interests, ages, and origins, who might be involved in a diverse range of topics from urban agriculture, markets, or food waste. These actors and food champions can discuss their visions of the city they want as food is concerned. The process leads to a high level of ownership of the charter by multiple actors.

Adopt an integrated approach to policy and planning

A City Food Charter constitutes a crucial starting point for formulating local integrated [or multi-sectorial] Food Strategies, policies and planning

Build food system governance

Envisioning a food charter is conducive to set up a collaborative governance body such as a strong City Food Council, that will be presented in a future case from this series.

6. To deepen your knowledge on City Food Charters

City of Hamilton. 2014. 'Food for All. A Food Charter for Hamilton'. <https://hamiltonfoodcharter.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/food-for-all-2014.pdf>

City of Vancouver. 2007. 'Vancouver Food Charter'. http://vancouver.ca/files/cov/Van_Food_Charter.pdf

Simcoe County. 2012. 'Food and Agriculture Charter'. https://fpa.simcoe.ca/Shared%20Documents/PDF_Charter_Printable.pdf

Video

York Region, Ontario Food Charter <https://yrfn.ca/food-policy/york-region-food-charter/>

Vancouver Food Policy and actions <https://vancouver.ca/people-programs/food-policy.aspx>

7. FAO/BIP Case study series

Case 1. Multi-stakeholder Policy formulation and Action Planning, MPAP Learning from Accra, Ghana, January 2021 / Cabannes Y / FAO / BIP: Dhaka

Case 2. Bangkok City Farm Program: promoting urban agriculture through networks, January 2021 / Cabannes Y / FAO / BIP: Dhaka

Case 3. Food Charters in Canadian Cities: a key milestone for building Food Strategies, Food Policies and Food Plans, January 2021 / Cabannes Y / FAO / BIP: Dhaka

Case 4. Quito 20 years' experience in building an urban centred Agro Food System, January 2021 / Cabannes Y / FAO / BIP: Dhaka

8. Credits

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Figure 6. Community Garden, Vancouver, Canada

Date	Food Policy
July 8, 2003	City Council Just & Sustainable Food System Motion
December 9, 2003	Vancouver Food Action Plan (adopted)
March 11, 2004	Vancouver Food Action Plan (expenditures approved)
July 14, 2004	Vancouver Food Policy Council
Dec 2004-Oct 2005	Vancouver Food System Assessment
September 19, 2005	Community Gardens Policy
February 27, 2006	Hobby Beekeeping Guidelines
May 30, 2006	2,010 Garden Plots by 2010 Initiative
January 2007	Vancouver Food Charter
2008	Urban Agriculture Steering Committee
January 20, 2009	Urban Agriculture Design Guidelines for the Private Realm
June 10, 2010	Keeping of Chickens Guidelines
2010	Food scraps collection program
2009-2010	Greenest City Grants in support of urban agriculture
2011	Grant to support urban farming forum
2009-2012	Grants to support Neighbourhood Food Networks
2012	Greenest City Action Plan
January 2013	Vancouver Food Strategy
May 16, 2013	Rezoning Policy for Sustainable Large Developments Amendment
July 2013	Vancouver Park Board Local Food Action Plan
April 2014	Pollinator Project

Figure 7. Community Garden, Vancouver, Canada



Figure 8. Roof top gardening on top of Conference Centre. Montréal, Canada

