

A Taste of the Future

Creating a local, organic, community-supported food system in Québec

BY FRÉDÉRIC PARÉ

Équiterre's Ecological Agriculture Program enables Québécois to connect with the benefits offered by more ecologically and socially sustainable practices in agriculture and food. By supporting local and organic foods emanating from small, solidarity-based farm marketing channels, the program encourages the population to become more responsible citizens. In addition to the co-ordination of a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) project, Équiterre assists the development of new initiatives, like organic daycares and collective kitchens. What's more, Équiterre works directly with decision-makers to ensure that environmental and social issues related to the food system are taken into account in the policy-making process.

Fundamental to this vision is sustainable development. What is it? Firstly, it is a matter of development in response to people's essential needs, among which drinking and eating must surely be the most basic. These are the ends of sustainable development. It is also development that treats capital or the economy as a means to achieve these needs, not as an end in itself. Finally, sustainable development is conditional on one factor – the environment.

In order to fulfill and display this vision of the food system, Équiterre intervenes through initiatives (opportunities for citizens to take tangible action), through education (communications

projects), through research (to make projects credible and innovative), and through advocacy (reports, press releases, and meetings).

Community Supported Agriculture

Ten Years Underway

The CSA network allows Québec organic producers to pre-sell their harvest directly to citizens wishing to act in solidarity with the farming community. Launched in 1995 with the Cadet-Roussel farm, it today links 104 partners – 67 fruit and vegetable farms, 15 meat producers, and 22 associates (who offer supplemental organic items such as honey, cheese, oils, and berries to participating farms) – with 8,600 families, feeding approximately 25,000 people.

To Every Corner of Québec

Now active in 14 of Québec's 16 regions, it's a lively network, due in great part to the contributions of three dynamic regional councils. Outaouais region had their season opener on April 2, 2005 in Hull, in collaboration with the Regional Environmental Council. In central Québec – the Mauricie – it was Équiterre volunteers who distributed the lists of participating farms to the interested consumers. As for the citizens of the Gaspésie/Îles-de-la-Madeleine region, they learned about CSA in the summer of 2005 through a television program on the local station produced by the regional chapter of the Union of Farm Producers.

Équiterre's Role

Équiterre's role is to promote the CSA model to the general public and to the farm producers. A list of the farms is updated annually and widely distributed (15,000 copies). Press releases also help to strengthen communications. Likewise, Équiterre promotes the model to farmers by attending a range of agricultural fairs and trade shows for organic producers as well as farmers in general. Finally, Équiterre supports the producers in the network by offering training, mentoring, farm visits, and by performing various analytical studies of the economy (e.g., keeping a close eye on retail prices and production costs).

Happy Farmers

In collaboration with the Federation of Agricultural Management Unions of Québec, Équiterre has conducted a study of the financial viability of CSA farms. It revealed that for the most part, participating farms experienced a small surplus per basket. In financial, educational, environmental and social terms, the CSA formula appears to be more relevant now than ever.

Financing Équiterre's CSA Work

In the years 1995-2000 part of the network's finances came from consumers and farmers (about 30%) and private foundations such as The J.W. McConnell



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Harvesting fall carrots at the Cadet-Roussel organic farm near St-Grégoire, QC. The farm supplies about 300 families with food baskets weekly. Photocredit: Vincenzo D'Alto.

Family Foundation, the EJLB Foundation, or George Cedric Metcalf Charitable Foundation contributed the rest.

Thereafter, with the increase in the number of farmers and consumers, a financing strategy aiming for larger financial autonomy was drafted, discussed, and adopted. It is important to point out that everyone was involved in this decision: the farmers, the consumers, the staff, and Équiterre's board of directors. The consumers' share went from \$5 (voluntary) to \$10 (obligatory)

longer use it to finance the regular activities of the network. The fees to the consumers and to the farmers were therefore modified once again.

From year to year, the costs of CSA activities run at approximately \$140,000. We receive \$120,000 from the families (8,000 families @ \$15) and \$20,000 from the farmers (70 of 100 farms on the promotions list @ \$285 on average). These revenues cover 2.3 full-time equivalent positions, traveling and promotional fees, printing costs for the list and diverse materials, and training

recognize the importance of Équiterre's work in CSA.

The government has begun an extensive public consultation on the future of agriculture in Québec. Équiterre intends to make itself heard so that government, consumers, and producers recognize policies and practices that favour and sustain ecological farming and small, solidarity-based farm marketing channels. We truly believe that CSA contributes to ensuring sustainable agriculture for future generations and to the food security of Québécois.

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and the farmers' share remained essentially untouched.

After this decision, the financial autonomy of Équiterre's CSA project reached 65%. The remainder of the funds came from the Support Program for Developing Organic Agriculture, a subsidy program of Québec's Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. The problem with this program is that it requires recipients to carry out new projects; Équiterre's work in CSA (recruiting and creating links between citizens and farmers) was not eligible for funding. It was thus necessary to create "micro projects" relating to CSA in order to round off the CSA project budget. So for example we created flyers to explain CSA and Équiterre's work to farmers and undertook two studies on CSA production costs.

Due to the difficulties with this program, it was finally decided to no

for the producers. We have significantly upgraded our services to producers over the last three years. These include training, on-site visits, mentoring and coaching programs for new participants, communication bulletins to partners, web recipes, a new CSA logo, and canvas bags for participating consumers. We no longer apply to the Support Program for Developing Organic Agriculture for additional funds as it forces us to increase our workload through new projects.

Équiterre considers the government's support inadequate. It's important to create programs that do not exclude the sort of routine and structural tasks as Équiterre does for CSA. In summary, if the government was as serious as it claims to be about the farmer's share of the food consumer's dollar, about reducing greenhouse gases, and about reducing the number of vehicles on the road, then it would fully and fairly

Growing Initiatives

Organic Collective Kitchens

New this year, the organic collective kitchens are part of the project "Citizens – to Your Health!" from the Québec Collective Kitchens Association. The aim of this nutrition and educational project, managed by Équiterre, is to create 20 new producer-consumer partnerships by 2007.

This year, five collective kitchens involving about 30 women have shopped at local organic farms. They cooked with in-season products and significantly increased their consumption of fruits and vegetables. In sharing the "fruits of their experience," these women contributed in turn to the expansion of the project. All asserted that they would love to do it again next year.

This project helps people realize that organic and local foods are accessible to all, and not luxury items as the population generally assumes. It is indeed more difficult for organic and local foods to make a breakthrough in a population segment that is used to food that is given to them or bought very cheaply. Still, the initiative demonstrates that even a food system based on ecology and solidarity can respond to the issue of economic accessibility.

The collective kitchens get their food supplies from the CSA farms in the same way as a household does, that is, by placing formal orders rather than receiving "surprises." The groups receive their farm vegetables weekly from July to November and sometimes until March, in the case of farms offering winter baskets, like root vegetables and squashes.

Organic Daycares

This project aims to facilitate the supply of organic and local foods to daycare centres and to make children and their adults aware of the different facets of farming and their links to health and the environment.

As a pilot project in 2002, four farms from the CSA network and five daycares were linked. Now in 2006 there are 44 daycares, three family daycare services, and 19 farms. This project is operating in eight regions of Québec and gives over 3,000 young children access to local, organic fruits and vegetables during the summer and fall seasons.

At one and the same time, this project thus creates between people and farm a bond of food and a bond of education. Visits to local farms have been organized and educational kits given to the daycare workers. The kit, called "Something's Moving in my Eco-Garden," has a multitude of educational tools such as puppets, puzzles, a small terrarium, storybooks, and a board game. Finally, a workshop for the parents has been designed and delivered in order to give them information on the links between agriculture and the environment, health, and the economy.

Important Issues

Coalition for the Protection of Farmland

Less than 2% of the land of Québec is arable. Équiterre has joined the Coalition for the Protection of Farmland in order to instill the importance of acting quickly to protect this land from, among other things, multi-lane highway projects in the greater Montréal area. According to our calculations, if we could protect and apply the CSA model to the 2,000 hectares of land slated for extending Highway 25, we could feed 38,500 families 52 weeks a year with local, organic, solidarity vegetable baskets.

Nourrir Montréal

In a time when more and more Montréalers are resorting to food banks and we are witnessing the emergence of

a 2-tiered food system, action to assure food security becomes a priority. This is why for the past year or more Équiterre has played a very active role in the creation of "Nourrir Montréal" (Feed Montréal), a roundtable of local stakeholders formed November 29, 2005 to ensure that quality food is available to everyone. In addition to emphasizing that all citizens should have enough income to feed themselves, Équiterre strives within this body to focus analysis and action on the food system itself as a source of food insecurity.

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Coalition for Supply Management

Équiterre has also recently joined a large coalition of organizations and various public personalities in order to ensure that the Québec and Canadian regulations on supply management are protected during the current World Trade Organization negotiations. Supply management actually allows the "removal" of certain farm and food products from normal market activity by fixing a price for the producers and for the consumers and by restricting the market in their area. Although the mechanism has its faults, it remains very relevant in a time of globalization.


"L'achat local, toujours en tête!"

The Campaign "L'achat local, toujours en tête!" ("Buy Local – It's Tops!") invites consumers to make more room in their grocery shopping carts for local foods. Équiterre defines this campaign in the following way

"Why Buy Local? There are many advantages to buying locally and regionally:

- By reducing food kilometers it decreases the quantity of greenhouse gases.
- It contributes to the social and economical viability of rural and sub-urban communities.
- It supports the family farm in all regions of Québec.
- It ensures our food independence and security."

The last ten years have witnessed an increase in the number of consumers

and farmers supporting an ecological approach to farming. Even though this approach is still marginal relative to agricultural production as a whole, the record to date is very encouraging. As the population becomes more and more aware of the need to reduce greenhouse gases and the importance of sustaining viable local communities, we are optimistic about the future – even though there is so much yet to do. 

FRÉDÉRIC PARÉ is an agronomist and holds a Masters in the management and development of co-operatives. He has been working in the food and agriculture sectors for 20 years at the helm of various farming co-operatives, in the organization of organic product certification, and, over the last six years, in Équiterre's Agriculture and Food Program (www.equiterre.qc.ca/agriculture). Frédéric represents Équiterre in national organizations active in rural, farm, or food issues and contributes regularly at conferences on these subjects.