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Rooted in Place: The Role of Farmers' Markets in Building Sustainable Food Systems in Canada

Justin Cantafio

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Scholar profile

Image 1: Justin Cantafio attending the 2nd Annual General Assembly of the World Farmers' Markets Coalition in Rome in June 2024

Justin Cantafio is a relocalization advocate and changemaker residing in Punamu'kwati'jk, also known as Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq.

A food systems thinker, storyteller, and farmers' market champion, Justin is passionate about all things local. His professional interests also include food hubs, cooperatives, and institutional procurement. His work intersects multiple organizations and scales, from the international to the hyper-local.

At the time of this report's writing, Justin serves as the Executive Director of Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia, a non-profit cooperative of over 40 farmer's markets. He is the Co-founder and President of Canadian Farmers' Markets, Canada's national farmers' market association, and a founding member of the World Farmers Markets Coalition. Justin is a founder and Director of the Halifax Regional Food Hub Co-operative and a founder and Director of the Atlantic Food Action Coalition. Justin is an advisor for and for the Centre for Local Prosperity, a charitable organisation specializing in relocalization, which he previously chaired until October 2024.

Justin has lived and worked on multiple organic farms across Canada. He was a fishmonger and sustainable seafood advocate for several years, specialising in seafood traceability and literally selling seafood by the seashore while building a sustainable seafood value chain in Atlantic

Canada. Justin has also worked extensively in the realm of institutional procurement, helping bring local food into schools, universities, and hospitals.

When he's not crafting up ideas to re-localize our economy and promote local businesses, you might find Justin running in the woods, reading by his wood stove with his dog, cooking up hearty meals with friends, or relaxing in his off-grid cabin on Atlantic Canada's Bay of Fundy, home of the world's largest tides.

Acknowledgements

My Nuffield Scholarship journey was a life-changing experience. The transformative opportunity and privilege to travel the world had me away from home for a significant portion of 2023 and 2024, and I wouldn't have been able to do so without the support of my partner, friends, and family, as well as the support and flexibility of my staff and directors at Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia.

I'd like to thank the wonderful team at Nuffield Canada and my primary funder, the Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture, without whom this journey wouldn't be possible. I'd also like to thank the other funders who helped to make my dream a reality: the Dalhousie University Faculty of Agriculture, Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia, Friends of Agriculture Nova Scotia, and TapRoot Farms.

My thanks go towards the incredible humans I met along my travels throughout Mexico, France, Spain, Portugal, Malta, Italy, Turkey, and Canada. More often than not, I arrived in these places with little to no plan, yet was welcomed with open arms and warm hearts. The journey became the destination, and the sights, learnings, friendships, and experiences I was so fortunate to experience will forever shape me.

I'd like to offer my sincere gratitude to the people who inspire me, including the folks at Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia, Canadian Farmers' Markets, and the World Farmers Markets Coalition, as well as my fellow Nuffield scholars new and old from around the world.

Lastly, I'd like to extend my deep admiration, appreciation, and reverence for the countless peasants, smallholders, and local food systems champions across Canada and the world, who are tirelessly working to build a just, equitable, and human-scale food system. This includes the farmers, food producers, and farmers' market vendors who work tirelessly towards alternative food systems. We owe the world to you.

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My Nuffield Scholarship was sponsored by the Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture, with support from Dalhousie University's Faculty of Agriculture, Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia, Friends of Agriculture Nova Scotia, and TapRoot Farms.

Executive summary

Canada's food system faces growing challenges, including rising food insecurity, declining farm viability, corporate consolidation, and climate change. The need for resilient, community-based solutions has never been greater. Farmers' markets offer a powerful alternative—providing a localized, human-scale approach that strengthens food sovereignty, revitalizes local economies, and enhances adaptability to global disruptions.

This report draws on findings from across Canada, Mexico, France, Spain, Portugal, Malta, Italy, and Turkey to explore how farmers' markets address systemic food challenges. These human-scale markets are embedded in their communities. They foster social connection and trust while reconnecting consumers with the people who grow, raise, and make their food. They generate local revenue, create jobs, and incubate small businesses. They offer direct-to-consumer sales that support small- and medium-scale farmers—many of whom use agroecological methods that regenerate land and build resilience. Critically, they can also promote food equity and social justice by improving access to fresh, affordable food in underserved communities and providing opportunities for marginalized and systemically-excluded farmers and food producers.

Farmers' markets play a key role in strengthening food security. They offer culturally relevant, locally grown foods that help counter food deserts and rising grocery prices. Their short supply chains reduce dependency on fragile global distribution networks, making them more adaptable to economic and environmental shocks. They are also community anchors—places for education, gathering, and cultural exchange.

To unlock the full potential of farmers' markets in Canada, governments must enact policies that shift the food system away from corporate dominance and toward localized, community-driven solutions. Strong legislative action is needed to support small-scale producers, ensure fair competition, and integrate local food systems into broader agricultural and economic frameworks. Investment in local food infrastructure is essential, alongside dedicated funding for farmers' market organizations and vendor support programs. Expanding public procurement and establishing food hubs will provide vendors with more stable, diverse sales opportunities. Proven programs like nutrition coupons and buy-local campaigns should be scaled with long-term government funding to enhance food security and support small- and medium-scale producers. Agroecology must be prioritized through targeted incentives and market development that align with food sovereignty and environmental resilience. Finally, farmers' markets must be leveraged to advance food equity and social justice. Investments in anti-racist training, equitable vendor support, and community-centred market management will help ensure these spaces remain accessible and representative of diverse communities.

This report advocates for a food system rooted in social justice, food sovereignty, and community leadership. Canada can build a more equitable, sustainable, and resilient food future that prioritizes farmers, communities, and ecological well-being over corporate profit. While farmers' markets are not a silver bullet, they are a critical foundation for a food future that is just, resilient, and truly rooted in the places and people it serves.

Disclaimer

This report has been prepared in good faith but is not intended to be a scientific study or an academic paper. It is a collection of my current thoughts and findings on discussions, research and visits undertaken during my Nuffield Farming Scholarship.

It illustrates my thought process and my quest for improvements to my knowledge base. It is not a manual with step-by-step instructions to implement procedures.

Neither The Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust, nor my sponsor, nor any other sponsoring body guarantees or warrants the accuracy, reliability, completeness or currency of the information in this publication or its usefulness in achieving any purpose.

Readers are responsible for assessing the relevance and accuracy of the content of this publication.

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Glossary

Agroecology
A sustainable farming framework emphasizing biodiversity, ecological balance, and community resilience. It integrates cultural, social, and environmental elements into agricultural practices.

Alternative food systems
Local food systems that prioritize short supply chains and community participation over globalized industrial food systems.

Corporate concentration
The dominance by a small number of large firms in a specific market or industry, reducing competition and often increasing prices or limiting choices for consumers.

Corporate food system
A large-scale, industrialized food system controlled by multinational corporations, prioritizing global supply chains and shareholder profit over local agricultural practices.

Decolonization
The restoration of food sovereignty, revitalization of traditional practices and foodways, and promotion of equitable, community-led food access.

Direct marketing
A sales approach in which producers sell goods directly to consumers without intermediaries.

Embeddedness
The integration of economic activities within social, cultural, and environmental contexts, emphasizing relationships, community values, and sustainability over purely market-based transactions.

Farmers' market
A type of public market where consumers connect directly with farmers and producers through direct, face-to-face exchange.

Farmers' market nutrition coupon program
Programs providing alternative currency to low-income households for purchasing fresh, local foods at farmers' markets.

Foodways
The cultural, social, and economic practices surrounding food production, preparation, consumption, and traditions, reflecting a community's identity, history, and values.

Food deserts
Areas with limited access to affordable, nutritious food, often affecting low-income communities due to a lack of nearby grocery stores or fresh food options.

Food hub
A centrally managed business or nonprofit that aggregates, stores, processes, and distributes food—often from small or mid-sized farms—to connect regional producers with larger buyers, including institutions and restaurants.

Food security
The state in which all individuals have consistent physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, culturally appropriate, and nutritious food.

Food sovereignty
The right of people to define their own food systems, focusing on local production, cultural relevance, equitable access to resources, and prioritizing the needs of local communities over global markets.

Globalization
The process by which economies, cultures, and societies become interconnected through trade, technology, and communication, often prioritizing large-scale industrial systems over localized economies.

Local economic multiplier effect
Economic benefits generated when money spent locally recirculates within the community, increasing overall regional prosperity.

Marginalized communities
Groups that face systemic barriers to economic, social, and political inclusion, often experiencing inequities in access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making.

Neoliberalism (economic policy)
A political-economic philosophy emphasizing deregulation, privatization, free markets, and reduced government intervention, often associated with the consolidation of corporate power and reductions in public services.

Public market
A community space for buying and selling goods, often emphasizing local and fresh products. Farmers' markets are a specific subset of public markets.

Relocalization
The process of shifting economic systems towards localized production and consumption to build community resilience and reduce dependence on global supply chains.

Resilience
The ability of systems, communities, or individuals to adapt to and recover from disruptions, maintaining functionality under stress, such as climate change or economic crises.

Scale-appropriate infrastructure
Facilities, equipment, and systems designed to meet the specific needs of small- to medium-scale farms, enabling regional food processing, distribution, and marketing without requiring industrial scale operations.

Short food supply chains
Systems minimizing intermediaries between producers and consumers, enhancing transparency and fairness in the food economy.

Small- to medium-scale farms
Also sometimes referred to as mixed production farms, market gardens, family farms, or smallholders, these farms typically operate on smaller land holdings and focus on diverse, often locally-marketed crops or livestock. They contrast with commodity producers, who manage larger farms (often over 1,000 acres) specializing in high-volume, single-crop production for national or international markets.

Social justice in food systems
An approach that ensures equity and fairness in food access, production, and distribution, emphasizing the inclusion of marginalized communities in decision-making processes.

Sustainable food systems
Food systems that provide food security and nutrition in a way that maintains ecological balance, promotes social equity, and supports economic viability.

Third places
Informal public gathering spaces—like farmers' markets—where people from different backgrounds interact, build community ties, and foster social cohesion beyond home and work.

1.0 Preamble

"But it was an illusion, an industrial arrogance, a future that didn't work: a dystopia. Only now are we slowly awaking from this comfortable coma to realize that we are a long way from the fields that feed us and from knowing enough to make good choices. What we do know in our hearts—even the most optimistic of us—is that finding our way back will take time and faith, and radical structural changes in our relationship with food and farming."

- James Rebanks, *Pastoral Song* (2020)

"Radical hope is the most powerful weapon we have. It's time we use it."

- Kristen R. Ghodsee, *Everyday Utopia* (2023)

I've been drawn to farmers' markets since my childhood. The sights, sounds, and smells sparked a passionate curiosity that has only deepened over time, and I've remained inspired by farmers, fishers, and other "country folk" since I can remember. I studied local food systems during my undergraduate degree, and I lived and worked on ten small-scale organic farms across Canada as the foundation of my master's. I spent several years as a fishmonger, and helped to sell local food products to restaurants, institutions, and at farmers' markets. And since 2018, I've had the great honour and privilege of being at the helm of a provincial farmers' market cooperative, co-founding a national farmers' market sector association, and being one of the founding members of a Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) funded international farmers' market association.

The reader will inevitably catch my bias towards small- to medium-scale production and community-based (and decidedly non-corporate) local food systems. I'd like to stress that I have respect and admiration for farmers and food producers of all scales. However, I have no problem owning the lens through which I've written this report, guided by my values and my steadfast belief in the power of relocalization.

While I believe that farmers' markets are the ultimate manifestation of the principles of relocalization, they can't be the sole solution to the polycrisis facing Canada's food system. Other forms of local food systems must also be supported, with an emphasis on building food sovereignty and food justice, and actively decolonizing and dismantling the racism inherent in our nation's food system. An ecosystem of local food system components will include farmers and food producers at multiple scales, as well as farmers' markets, public markets, co-operatives, nonprofits, independent grocers, restaurants, food service, food hubs, farm gate sales, institutional procurement, processors, and distributors. And critically, Indigenous, Black, and other systematically excluded communities must be centred in this approach if we truly wish to establish food security and food sovereignty in Canada.

I'd also like to stress that I don't wish to be a contrarian. This report is not written out of cynicism but out of conviction. I'm a kind, caring, and community-minded individual. However, if there is a negative tone at the start of my report, it's because after travelling to countries across the world and speaking to hundreds of inspiring individuals, I found the same root cause eroding the ability of local farmers to feed their communities, and the same roadblocks preventing the very solutions that I spend much of my report highlighting.

I remain optimistic, and the reader will note that the conclusions I come to in my report remain optimistic in nature. I believe in the power of humans and communities to do good. I believe in the power of local food systems. In my opinion, you can't create sustainable food systems by incrementally changing a system that isn't equitable, just, or human-centred to begin with. We need another way forward. One that is human-scale. One that values farmers, food producers, consumers, and communities, rather than corporations. One that recognizes that food sovereignty is the foundation of food security and regional prosperity.

Farmers' markets are not the only answer, but they are a critical part of the solution. I hope this report inspires you to see them as such.

2.0 Introduction

I applied for a Nuffield Canada Scholarship to deepen my understanding of—and advocate for—the social and economic benefits of the farmers' market model. I sought to take a global lens to explore the power of the farmers' market model to build sustainable and resilient local food systems in Canada. I also highlighted the mounting pressures on Canada's food system—supply chain disruptions, farm income crises, climate change, and food price inflation—and the belief that farmers' markets help mitigate these challenges. I aimed to demonstrate that increased support for farmers' markets can offer small- and medium-scale producers more sales opportunities while strengthening regional food systems.

To explore these issues, I traveled to farmers' markets in Canada, Mexico, France, Spain, Portugal, Malta, Italy, and Turkey, engaging with local food cultures and meeting inspiring food systems champions[1]. Some of the stories I gathered appear here as anecdotes and case studies, while others inform broader themes that shaped my understanding of how farmers' markets strengthen local food sovereignty and community resilience. This report is grounded in these experiences and informed by academic literature, professional reports, and my ongoing work in farmers' market organizations at the provincial, national, and international levels.

This report highlights farmers' markets as critical local food infrastructure with broad impacts on communities, economies, and food sovereignty. It offers insights for policymakers, planners, and other stakeholders to support small- to medium-scale producers and strengthen regional food systems. By focusing on the farmers' market model as a practical application of relocalization, the report shows how local, sustainable food systems in Canada can build food sovereignty and address the shortcomings of the globalized industrial model.

[1] During my scholarship I also had the pleasure of attending the 2023 Nuffield Contemporary Scholars Conference in Vancouver, and being a speaker at the 11th International Public Market Conference in Toronto in 2023, the 2024 BC Farmers' Markets Conference, and both the first and second General Assembly of the World Farmers Markets Coalition in Rome (2023 and 2024). I was also a Canadian delegate to Slow Food Terra Madre in Torino in 2024.

3.0 Challenges facing Canada's current food system

Experts agree that changes are needed to address both existing and emerging challenges in global food systems. The UN Food Systems Summit, for example, was convened in 2021 to spur immediate action toward meeting the UN Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. In his closing remarks UN Secretary-General António Guterres stated that "business as usual is not good enough", that we need a "systems approach to food… that embraces the complexity of our world to deliver the transitions we need", and that "the value of food must also be understood as far more than a mere commodity" (United Nations, 2021).

In the 1940s, Canada—like many countries—rapidly shifted its policies from local to globalized food systems, leading to consolidation, commodification, and industrialization (Dale, 2021). Neoliberal policies further accelerated international trade and free trade agreements, especially from the 1970s through the 1990s. Today, most agricultural policies in Canada favour large-scale, export-focused operations (Dale, 2021). As a result, Canada's food system faces rising food insecurity, reduced resilience and adaptability, declining numbers of Canadian farmers and farm profitability, and increasing corporate concentration and control.

3.1 Food insecurity

Hunger and malnutrition persist despite the globalization of the food system (Carlile et al., 2021). In his final report to the Human Rights Council, Olivier De Schutter (2014), the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, concluded that "measured against the requirement that they should contribute to the realization of the right to food, the food systems we have inherited from the twentieth century have failed."

In 2023, between 713 and 757 million people were undernourished globally, accounting for 8.9% to 9.4% of the world's population (FAO, 2024). That same year, approximately 2.33 billion people—28.9% of the global population—experienced food insecurity (FAO, 2024). Canada is not immune: in 2022, 22.9% of Canadians faced food insecurity, with even higher rates among vulnerable populations (Statistics Canada, 2024). In Nova Scotia, the rate reached 28.9%, rising to 37.5% in racialized households (Statistics Canada, 2024). These figures underscore the urgency of addressing systemic failures in the food system and the need for localized, resilient solutions.

3.2 Eroding resilience

Resilience is "the capacity of a system to withstand, recover and adapt from disruptions while maintaining essential functions" and "is crucial for ensuring sustained access to safe and nutritious food for communities" (Stephens & Gerhardt, 2024). Yet Canada's food system has followed global trends of increasing industrialization, corporatization, centralization, and corporate concentration (Laforge et al., 2021; Weinkauf & Everitt, 2023), and in so doing, it has

become less localized, less adaptable, and more vulnerable to disruptions (Carrara et al., 2022). These weaknesses have been exposed by recent shocks: tariffs and trade wars, COVID-19, geopolitical instability from Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine, and the accelerating climate crisis (IPES-Food, 2024).

Ongoing structural adjustments have made Canada's food system more vulnerable. It now relies on fragile supply chains and just-in-time delivery models (IPES-Food, 2024). Meanwhile, corporate control continues to grow, reducing competition, raising risks, and eroding local and sustainable food systems (National Farmers Union, 2022).

3.3 Loss of farms and self-sufficiency

In 2022, Via Campesina, a global peasant movement representing over 200 million members in 81 countries, released its *Manifesto for Agricultural Transition to Address Systemic Climate Crises*. In it, they state, "Small and medium-scale peasant farming is now proven to be more resilient than most industrialized models, yet small and medium-scale farmers are subjected to political, social and economic conditions in which they simply cannot survive." (Via Campesina, 2022). As Hannay (2025) notes, this global pattern is mirrored in Canada, where under a neoliberal policy landscape and a corporatized food system, local food systems remain underfunded, and many Canadian farmers—especially small-scale operators—can no longer stay afloat.

From 2000 to 2019, Canadian farm debt more than doubled, and continues to surge (Qualman, 2019). As of 2022, it hit a record high of $138.9 billion (Wichers, 2024). As farms adopt more conventional, industrial models, their reliance on agribusiness corporations deepens. Corporate control of inputs such as agrichemicals, fuel, machinery, technology, and credit now capture up to 95% of Canadian farmers' farm revenues, leaving the average Canadian farmer with only 5%[2] (Qualman, 2019).

Farmland ownership is shifting. Agricultural land prices in Canada are rising far faster than agricultural market prices, driven in part by investment corporations speculating on farmland (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2024). This financialization of land has made it especially difficult for new farmers to enter the sector. I witnessed a similar trend in the Luberon region of Southern France, where rising land prices have made it nearly impossible for new farmers to get started.

In Canada, the financialization of farmland has also led to predatory rental arrangements that undermine farmers' economic stability (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2024). I observed a similar dynamic in rural Oaxaca, Mexico, among smallholder farmers managing traditional communal landholdings called *ejidos*. In many cases, large agribusinesses exploit rental agreements by offering rates too low to sustain farmers—deepening economic inequality in rural communities (Jimenez Martinez, 2018). During my time in Oaxaca and Jalisco, I saw how

[2] Qualman's findings are based on Statistics Canada data from 1985 to 2018.

these arrangements have accelerated the shift from subsistence farming—once the cornerstone of local food security—toward export-oriented agribusiness, further eroding food sovereignty.

Farms wishing to stay afloat in Canada's current agriculture policy landscape may be tempted to further automate their production while increasingly relying on the precarity of low-waged migrant workers (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2024). Farms are getting larger, but fewer in number. From 2001 to 2021, the total number of Canadian farms dropped by 23%—from 246,923 to under 190,000[3] (Hannay, 2025).

Nowhere is this trend more evident than in my home province of Nova Scotia. According to the latest Census of Agriculture, the province lost 21.2% of its farms between 2016 and 2021—more than a fifth in just five years (Province of Nova Scotia, 2022). During the same period, nearly three-quarters of a million acres of farmland were lost—a 21.4% decline. Additionally, from 2017 to 2022, Nova Scotia's farms, on average, operated at a financial deficit (Province of Nova Scotia, 2022).

These challenges are not unique to Canada. In Malta—a small island nation I visited as a case study in agricultural self-sufficiency—I heard of similar struggles from farmers, market managers, and restaurateurs. Malta now imports 80% of its food supply (Soler, 2023), while domestic food production has declined. Between 2006 and 2023, fruit and vegetable output fell by 28.3% (Malta National Statistics Office, 2025), the farm labour force shrank by 26.7% (Alden, 2023), and agricultural land declined by 6.2% (Malta Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Animal Rights, 2023).

Under Canada's current agricultural policy framework—like in many other nations—the country will continue to experience a net loss of farmers, an aging farming population, and a shrinking number of farms (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2024). These trends directly affect Canada's food self-sufficiency. Farm Credit Canada (2024) reports that between 2000 and 2015, the country's ability to meet its own food needs dropped from 80% to 70%. Today, Canada imports approximately 80% of its fruit and 60% of its vegetables (The Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute, 2023), even though many of these crops could be grown locally.

3.4 Corporate control and concentration in the grocery industry

The Government of Canada's Competition Bureau (2023) noted that "Canada's grocery industry is concentrated" and that corporate control is deepening—contributing to rising food prices for Canadian consumers. Supermarket chains posted record profits in 2023, even as profits plateaued in the food manufacturing sector (Stanford, 2023). The Competition Bureau (2023) also noted

[3] In 2021, Statistics Canada changed its definition of "census farm" from "an agricultural operation which produced at least one agriculture product intended for sale" to a unit that produces agricultural products and reports revenues or expenses for tax purposes. As a result, this figure may be slightly different in some instances. The number of farms had dropped to 193,492 by 2016 (21.6% less than in 2001), even before the new definition was adopted.

that a major contributing factor in rising grocery prices is that “Canada’s largest grocers [are] increasing the amount they make on food sales”.

As food production and retail in Canada becomes more corporatized, market power continues to consolidate. A U.S. Department of Agriculture (2021) report describes Canada’s grocery market as “largely consolidated,” while the Government of Canada’s Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food found that just five companies control 80% of the sector (Blois, 2023). This concentration limits competition, weakens regional food infrastructure, and reduces consumer choice.

Amid these challenges, farmers’ markets are gaining recognition as resilient alternatives to corporate food retail. Morales (2021) argues that “the problems grocery stores have with supply chains, labor, insurance, and other constraints of [the] contemporary neoliberal economy are addressed in farmers’ markets through local sourcing, short supply chains, and self-contained labor forces.” Informal and community-based markets demonstrate greater adaptability in serving lower-income communities, often providing access to fresh food in ways corporate supply chains cannot (HealthBridge, 2022).

Recognizing the need for change, the Competition Bureau of Canada recommends supporting “the emergence of new types of grocery businesses” (Canada Competition Bureau, 2023). Farmers’ markets fit this definition. They serve as vital local food infrastructure, diversifying the retail landscape, enhancing food security, and strengthening local economies (Stephens & Gerhardt, 2024).

4.0 The farmers' market model and local food systems

Public markets have served as marketplaces and gathering spaces for as long as humans have engaged in barter and trade. Like agriculture, farmers' markets developed independently across multiple cultures. *Tianguis*, or open-air markets, have existed since pre-Hispanic times in what is now Mexico City (Linares & Bye, 2016), while records of public markets in Europe and the Middle East date back millennia, functioning as commercial and social hubs (Basil, 2012).

Today, public markets are understood as "complex interactions of actors from public, private and nonprofit sectors" (Carrara et al., 2022). In Canada, farmers' markets are the most familiar form of public market, serving as direct points of connection between consumers and local producers. They vary in size, season, and infrastructure, animating spaces from rural villages to urban centres. Whether held in parking lots, parks, town squares, churches, community centres, or dedicated buildings, farmers' markets create dynamic social and economic spaces that bridge rural and urban communities.

Farmers' markets have been shown to improve individual and public health, connect people with information and nutritious food, promote ecological education and social connections, and provide opportunities for newcomers (Morales, 2021). These markets have long served as the social and economic lifeblood of villages, towns, and cities around the world. They are economic engines, small business incubators, job creators, and vibrant community hubs offering access to healthy, local food. As embedded local food systems, farmers' markets reflect our human desire to gather around food and trade on a community level. And unlike the "placeless foodscapes" of supermarkets typical of globalized food systems, farmers' markets are deeply rooted in place—reconnecting people to food, farming, seasonality, and community (World Farmers Markets Coalition, 2021).

A growing awareness of environmental and health issues, economic instability, and declining regional food access has fueled the resurgence of the farmers' market movement. More consumers recognize the importance of supporting local economies and sustainable food systems (Food Secure Canada, 2024). As food insecurity rises, food sovereignty declines, small farms go out of business, farmland becomes financialized, the effects of climate change intensify, and grocery chains post record profits, issues of food justice have finally come to the fore. In response, farmers' markets are being increasingly viewed as strategic, community-rooted solutions.

Image 2: A placard at a farmers' stall at the Annapolis Royal Farmers & Traders Market in Nova Scotia (photo by Justin Cantafio)

4.1 Canada's growing farmers' market movement

Modeled after European public markets, farmers' markets have existed in Canada since long before confederation (Sanderson et al., 2005). The Halifax Seaport Farmers' Market is the longest continuously active farmers' market in North America, dating back to 1750, while Kitchener's has operated since the early 19th century (Basil, 2012). Government support and policy helped spread farmers' markets across the country from the late 18th to mid-20th century (Basil, 2012). Despite this long history, their prominence has fluctuated as cities grew and industrial food systems expanded.

After the First World War, farmers' markets declined due to suburbanization, shifting policies, the industrialization of farming, and the rise of supermarkets (Basil, 2012). These shifts drove the consolidation of grocery retail—marginalizing small- to medium-scale producers, reducing access to fresh local food, and disconnecting communities from culinary traditions (Metz & Scherer, 2021).

Since the 1970s, however, a "contemporary renaissance" has been underway, pushing back against the forces of globalization and neoliberalism that accelerated through the 1990s (Morales, 2021). Canada's farmers' market sector has grown significantly in recent years. In 2009, there were 508 farmers' markets across the country; by 2025, that number had grown to over 700[4], with an estimated annual growth rate between 5% and 7% (Ubertino & Mundler, 2019). Provincial farmers' market associations are active in Nova Scotia, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta, and British Columbia. This growth led to the formation of Canadian Farmers' Markets in 2020—a national coalition that meets monthly to share resources, exchange best practices, and engage in national advocacy.

Canadian Farmers' Markets is a founding organization of the World Farmers Markets Coalition, a FAO-funded nonprofit based in Rome. Recognizing the need for a unified global effort, The coalition first convened in July 2021, where founding members[5] engaged with UN Deputy Secretary General Amina J. Mohammed. Today, it operates as a registered nonprofit with members from every continent, offering an online academy, annual gatherings, and global initiatives to position farmers' markets as essential players in sustainable food systems. This international collaboration reflects a growing global recognition of farmers' markets as vital forces for sustainable and equitable food production worldwide.

4.2 Relocalization, local food systems, and food sovereignty

Relocalization has long been advocated as a way to strengthen food sovereignty by empowering farmers and producers through resilient, community-driven local food systems (Frankova & Johanisova, 2012). It refers to the process through which communities reestablish regionalized, self-sufficient, and human-scale economies that are naturally resilient, adaptable, and accountable. Examples include farmers' markets, institutional procurement of local food, community-supported agriculture (CSAs), local currency initiatives, urban gardening and agriculture, community land trusts, and community-based credit unions (Frankova & Johanisova, 2012).

Also known as "alternative food networks" (Matacena & Corvo, 2019) or "territorial markets" (IPES-Food, 2024[6]), local food systems refer to short-circuit food production, distribution, and marketing systems that are rooted in a region's environment, culinary traditions, people, and

[4] There are presently 43 farmers' markets in the Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia cooperative, 39 listed by Tourism New Brunswick, 143 in l'Association des marchés publics du Québec, 180 in Farmers Markets Ontario, 32 in Direct Farm Manitoba, 95 in the Alberta Association of Farmers' Markets, and 142 in the British Columbia Association of Farmers' Markets. However, not all farmers' markets are members of a provincial farmers' market association, so this figure is a significant underestimate of the total number of active farmers' markets in Canada.

[5] Founding members of the World Farmers Markets Coalition included members from Denmark, Georgia, Ghana, Italy, Norway, and the U.S. I had the honour and privilege of being amongst this group during our founding meeting.

[6] During my Nuffield Scholarship studies in March 2023, I was invited to participate in one of three regional virtual gatherings hosted by the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food), an international think tank and panel of experts providing guidance on sustainable food systems. These gatherings brought together 100 territorial market actors from 21 countries across the world, and these conversations served as the foundation for a pivotal report by IPES-Food published in July 2024 entitled *Food From Somewhere: Building Food Security and Resilience through Territorial Markets*.

institutions (World Farmers Markets Coalition, 2021). These systems are often participatory and community-led, and include farmers' markets, direct sales, food hubs, and regional processing infrastructure—resulting in shorter, more embedded supply chains. While colonialism promoted export-oriented agriculture, local food systems remained dominant in Canada until recent decades (Laforge et al., 2021). However, as corporate-controlled supply chains expanded, they displaced many localized networks—despite being less adaptive and responsive to community needs (IPES-Food, 2024).

Food sovereignty is a concept born out of *La Via Campesina*, a global peasant movement that includes two Canadian member organizations. It asserts the right of communities to control how their food is produced, distributed, and consumed—encompassing food systems, food cultures, and production methods (Sampson et al., 2021; Colson-Fearon & Versey, 2022; Bernstein, 2014). Food sovereignty frames hunger and food insecurity through a systemic lens. It also opposes corporate control of food systems and calls for a "shift towards local, community-owned and operated food networks" (Colson-Fearon & Versey, 2022).

Food sovereignty is supported by grassroots organizations and communities around the world and has been enshrined in national policy in several countries as a way to ensure domestic food needs are met (Carlile et al., 2021; Sampson et al., 2021). As momentum behind the movement grows, its principles continue to shape global conversations around sustainable and just food systems.

4.3 Agroecology

Agroecology is a holistic framework that integrates cultural relationships, scale-appropriate technology, and sustainable livelihoods within the food system (Laforge et al., 2021). It prioritizes working in harmony with natural processes, emphasizing biodiversity, soil health, intercropping, and water quality while minimizing chemical inputs (Wittman, 2011; De Schutter, 2014). These principles make agroecology a key strategy for building resilient and ecologically sound food systems.

Agroecology is central to preserving genetic diversity in food systems. This is critical given that, of the 7,000 plant species gathered and domesticated by peasant farmers, the industrial food chain relies on 16 crop species for 86% of global food production, while 75% of crop diversity within this narrow list of species has become extinct (Mooney et al., 2021). This dramatic reduction in biodiversity threatens the resilience of food systems and underscores the need for a shift toward more diversified, agroecological production methods.

In his final report to the UN Human Rights Council, Olivier De Schutter (2014) emphasized the need to transition to agroecology to "improve the resilience and sustainability of food systems." Similarly, Edwin Escoto of Groundswell International frames agroecology as a shift away from conventional industrial agriculture toward "ecological, localized agriculture" that centres producers and supports both communities and ecosystems (FAO, 2020). Escoto notes that

agroecology has been shown to increase yields, strengthen resilience, enhance biodiversity, and improve nutrition (FAO, 2020).

Beyond ecological benefits, agroecological methods are more cost-effective and resilient than conventional approaches (De Schutter, 2014). Studies show that diverse agricultural production leads to greater dietary diversity, which in turn improves public health outcomes (DeClerck et al., 2011). Recognizing these advantages, policymakers and researchers now view agroecology as a core pillar of food security and sustainability (López-García & Carrascosa-García, 2024).

Because of its ecological, economic, and social benefits, academic institutions and international agencies—including the UN—have called for policies that expand agroecological production. Farmers' markets have been identified as key mechanisms for supporting agroecological farmers and strengthening local food networks (FAO, 2019). As the movement for sustainable food systems gains momentum, agroecology remains at the forefront of efforts to build resilient, equitable, and biodiverse agriculture.

5.0 How farmers' markets can address food system challenges

Farmers' markets are embedded in the social, economic, and cultural fabric of their communities. Unlike the corporate food system, which operates at a distance, farmers' markets exist at a human-scale, fostering direct relationships between producers and consumers. This embeddedness positions them to address major challenges in Canada's food system, from food insecurity and economic fragility to the erosion of regional food sovereignty.

The following themes draw from my Nuffield travels, professional experience, and relevant literature. They explore how farmers' markets strengthen social cohesion, support small-scale farmers, build economic resilience, and provide increased access to fresh, affordable food. As place-based institutions rooted in community, farmers' markets serve as cornerstones for a food system that prioritizes people, connection, and long-term sustainability.

5.1 Farmers' markets nurture community, social cohesion, and trust

Farmers' markets are human-scale and embedded in their communities, generating broad positive impacts. They connect farmers, producers, and consumers—not only facilitating direct transactions but also linking people to their foodways and culinary traditions (Turkkan, 2022). As Morales (2021) notes, farmers' markets "weave together many activities and processes, producing social integration…, ecological awareness and caring, and economic inclusivity." This reinforces their role in building and maintaining community ties. Warsaw et al. (2021) similarly state that farmers' markets "build, support, and link urban and rural communities by fostering economic opportunities, creating public space, and vitalizing neighborhoods."

Case study: Embeddedness in Paris

A striking example of embeddedness occurred during my Nuffield travels in Paris. I took public transit into the downtown core for the first time, and upon exiting the subway station, I was immediately thrust into a bustling public market that animated the subway entrance and surrounding area. The effect was total immersion in local food systems—making foodways part of daily life for Parisians.

This emphasis on local food in urban planning is intentional. Parisian residents continue to prefer markets and independent retailers over supermarkets (Mairie de Paris, 2018). The municipal government has introduced a range of policies to support farmers' markets and local food systems, guided by its *Paris Strategy for Sustainable Food*, adopted in 2018. These initiatives aim to eliminate food insecurity by 2030 and expand opportunities for local farmers, including establishing new organic markets (Mairie de Paris, 2018).

Image 3: An example of embeddedness in Paris, whereby a farmers' market surrounds the entrance and exit to local public transportation.

Another feature of embeddedness is that it allows farmers' markets to be third places, serving as "public gathering places for people from different ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic communities" and as "neighbourhoods' original civic centers" (Project for Public Spaces, 2020). As public spaces, farmers' markets have been demonstrated to increase social engagement and bridge socio-cultural, economic, and political divides (Project for Public Spaces, 2003). Their built-in connections and accountability "strengthen a sense of community and encourage mutual support between local producers and residents" (Food Secure Canada, 2024).

Farmers' markets make a meaningful contribution to community well-being. In Nova Scotia, 93% of participants in the Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program reported feeling more connected to their community, and 77% made at least one new friend or social contact through the program (Flourish Community Development Co-operative, 2024). This example underscores how these markets do more than facilitate economic exchange—they create meaningful human connections.

By embedding people directly into food systems, farmers' markets enhance social cohesion and reinforce trust in local food networks (Warsaw et al., 2021). This is particularly significant in Canada, where public trust in conventional food systems is waning (Braun et al., 2019). The transparency and direct engagement facilitated by farmers' markets help counter this trend, cultivating trust in food systems.

Image 4: Consumers and a farmers' market vendor in Akyaka, Muğla Province, Turkey (photo by Justin Cantafio)

Farmers' markets also serve as educational spaces that encourage more conscious consumer habits (Project for Public Spaces, 2003). They offer opportunities for people to reconnect with food systems and rethink their relationships with food, increasing both environmental and social awareness (Food Secure Canada, 2024; Turner & Hope, 2014). Additionally, farmers' markets function as urban-rural linkages, facilitating the exchange of goods, knowledge, and services between rural producers and urban consumers (Carrara et al., 2022). They promote seasonal eating, which often leads to continued local purchasing beyond the market itself (Rasmussen et

al., 2006). Research shows that exposure to farmers' markets can influence consumer preferences and build lasting support for local food economies (Carson et al., 2015).

Farmers' market vendors act as "food emissaries"—producers who are seen as leaders in local food production and educators connecting with chefs, restaurants, and schools (Warsaw et al., 2021). The reciprocity between producers and consumers allows producers to gain insights into new and emerging demands for products, including opportunities to grow culturally relevant crops and varieties (Warsaw et al., 2021).

Ultimately, farmers' markets are more than places of commerce—they are dynamic social institutions that nurture trust, community, and shared cultural identity. By fostering meaningful connections, encouraging education, and bridging urban-rural divides, farmers' markets strengthen social cohesion and play a pivotal role in shaping resilient, community-driven food systems.

5.2 Farmers' markets promote food sovereignty

For food systems to be sustainable, they must honour cultural acceptability—ensuring that every community's foodways are reflected and valued (House et al., 2023). Because farmers' markets are human-scale, community-led, and flexible, they are well positioned to meet the needs of local consumers while preserving culinary traditions and regional identities (Food Secure Canada, 2024). In this way, they become powerful instruments for promoting food sovereignty.

Case study: Mazatec food sovereignty in Cerro Quemado, Oaxaca

I experienced an impactful example of this in the Mazatec village of Cerro Quemado, in the mountainous cloud forests of Sierra Mazateca, northern Oaxaca. In both Canada and Mexico, neoliberal economic and agricultural policies have been directly linked to the ongoing legacy of colonialism, impacting Indigenous culinary traditions, practices, foodways, and sovereignty (Laforge et al., 2021). Indigenous peoples and peasants "safeguard landscapes and nurture neglected and underutilized species" (Mooney et al., 2021), and I had the honour and privilege of witnessing this first hand.

Traveling north from Oaxaca city, first through desert landscape, followed by rolling agricultural landscapes dominated by large scale commodity production, then into mountains of cloud forests intermixed with pockets of smallholders still practicing traditional Mazatec mixed agriculture. These *milpas*—fields of corn, beans, squash, chilis, and other crops—are surrounded by agroforestry: cacao, bananas, coffee, fruits, *tepejilote* (unripe palm), and medicinal plants.

This is the type of agriculture that surrounds the village of Cerro Quemado. Noting the encroachment of predatory land rental agreements that bind local farmers to monocropping in the area, I asked a resident farmer of the village why he continues to farm the traditional way. His answer was, "for us, our agriculture is an act of ongoing resistance to colonialism". The Mazatec peoples of this region are still firmly embedded in their traditional foodways, and their farmers' market, which takes place in the middle of town, serves as an educational space, economic hub, and gathering place for the community. While attending the market, local school children gave a presentation on the history of agroforestry and cacao

production in their region, and vendors sold locally grown products that would not be commercially viable on a commodity market. Surrounded by the homogenizing pressures of corporatism, the farmers' market is actively preserving and promoting food sovereignty in Cerro Quemado.

Images 5 & 6: Local schoolchildren presenting on the agroecological farming traditions of their region at a Mazatec-led farmers' market in Cerro Quemado, Oaxaca, Mexico (photos by Justin Cantafio)

Case study: Seed saving in Jalisco

Another striking example came from the Feria de Productores farmers' market in Guadalajara, where I met Paye, an agroecological farmer and seed saver. What I found most impactful was his commitment to continuing to grow varieties of corn that had little to no value on the commodity market. Varieties that had been adapted over centuries not only to local environmental conditions, but also to culinary traditions. The many varieties of corn Paye preserves and grows are used for making nixtamalized corn masa, which is corn that is soaked and cooked with ash or lime, then used to make tortillas. Paye also grows corn specifically for making beverages such as *tejuino*, a Jalisco specialty beverage made from fermented corn, water, and *piloncillo* (unrefined cane sugar).

Facing shrinking commercial opportunities for his traditional corn varieties and products, Paye has found a way to continue making a living while preserving culinary traditions through selling at the farmers' market. Seeing the variety of ancient varieties of seeds laid out before me during a visit to his farm, which he preserves in recycled jars and coffee tins, I was reminded of the tenuousness and fragility of maintaining this genetic diversity, the basis of his region's cuisine. While genetic variety and culinary traditions continue to succumb to the homogenizing pressures of globalization, Paye has found a way to keep his piece of living history alive through the farmers' market.


Images 7 & 8: Paye, an agroecological farmer, seed saver, and farmers' market vendor from Jalisco, Mexico (photos by Victor Flores & Justin Cantafio)

In Eastern Turkey's ancient market cities—Adana, Tarsus, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, and Mardin—I witnessed how bazaars act as cultural and economic lifelines, preserving culinary traditions and supporting local producers. These cities sit along the old Silk Road, a trade route active for over 1,500 years. In Adana, for example, the iconic Adana kebab traces its present form to the 19th-century Kazancilar Bazaar (Obućina, 2022). It's now protected under a Controlled Designation of Origin and enjoyed across Turkey. Local food systems and farmers' markets have ensured that the kebab remains both authentic and accessible—anchored in place, yet shared far beyond it. Other regionally protected products, like *şalgam* (fermented turnip juice), have similarly endured.

Traditional foods and dishes persist throughout Eastern Turkey, where bazaars and farmers' markets serve as repositories for ingredients and culinary knowledge. They offer a compelling example of how embedded, place-based food networks can counter global homogenization while nurturing food sovereignty, culinary innovation, and diversity.

Image 9: Adana kebab being prepared at a festival in Adana, Turkey (photo by Justin Cantafio)

5.3 Farmers' markets fight food insecurity

Farmers' markets are recognized as resilient mechanisms for addressing food insecurity (He & Morales, 2022). They not only meet immediate needs for fresh, affordable food but also tackle systemic causes of hunger by supporting wage fairness, affordability, food access, and community-level resilience (HealthBridge, 2022; Warsaw et al., 2021). They address both the symptoms of food insecurity and contribute to long-term food sovereignty.

In many regions, foods sold in public markets are as affordable—or more so—than those in supermarkets. A meta-analysis of 25 studies found that "prices for fresh produce in markets are competitive with local retailers," and can even be more affordable, especially during peak season (Warsaw et al., 2021). The Africa Policy Research Institute noted that local markets that cater to small-scale, agroecological producers often offer lower prices than the very supermarkets displacing them (Mugambe, 2022). Gómez and Ricketts (2013) of the FAO found that in the Global South, supermarket prices for produce and livestock are often higher than those in traditional markets.

Beyond affordability, farmers' markets also help buffer against inflation. While global food prices rose by 15% in 2022 (IPES-Food, 2024), localized food systems showed greater resilience.

Inflation rates were higher in corporately owned grocery stores than in Canadian farmers' markets (Stephens et al., 2025).

Farmers' markets contribute to food security by offering affordable food, supporting local producer livelihoods, increasing food access, and demonstrating resilience to shocks (IPES-Food, 2024). They can be established in diverse communities—including areas with limited access to healthy food such as food deserts—and have proven especially effective in places facing higher rates of diet-related illness. As community-level interventions, they offer fresh, nutritious, and accessible food, with particularly strong outcomes in underserved areas (Project for Public Spaces, 2020; Brace et al., 2020).

The impact of farmers' markets is amplified when paired with food assistance programs. Initiatives like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in the U.S. and Canadian nutrition coupon programs[7] boost fruit and vegetable consumption and improve health outcomes (Johnson et al., 2020). Provincial nutrition coupon programs in Canada have set a global standard for increasing access to healthy, locally produced foods. An independent study of the BC Farmers' Market Nutrition Coupon Program found that these initiatives provide vital financial support, enhance nutrition knowledge and food skills, and reduce short-term household food insecurity (Caron-Roy et al., 2021; Aktary et al., 2024).

Nova Scotia's Nourishing Communities program exemplifies the benefits of unrestricted nutrition coupon models, empowering participants with full choice. About 80% of redeemed coupons go toward food, and nearly a third on fresh fruits and vegetables. 91% of participants report healthier eating habits, 78% anticipate long-term dietary changes, 92% feel more capable of meeting non-food needs, and 95% rate the program as highly beneficial (Flourish Community Development Co-operative, 2024).

Collectively, these findings show that farmers' markets are not only essential for immediate food security but also serve as platforms for building long-term food sovereignty. By maintaining competitive pricing, buffering against inflation, and expanding access through assistance programs, they offer a powerful response to food insecurity—and help pave the way for healthier, more resilient communities.

5.4 Farmers' markets build resilience and adaptability into food systems

With their adaptable, "close-to-home supply chains" (IPES-Food, 2024), farmers' markets are well positioned as local food infrastructure to strengthen Canada's food system. Their resilience is vital in the face of climate change, geopolitical instability, and trade wars. As the Government of Canada (2023) states, "strengthening local food economies helps Canada to build resilience… reducing dependency on longer-supply chains in case of disruptions". The Guelph Statement—

[7] In Canada, there are successful provincial farmers' market nutrition coupon programs in British Columbia (since 2007), Nova Scotia (since 2019), Manitoba (since 2020), and Quebec (since 2024).

Canada's agri-food vision to 2028—also identifies resilience as a top priority (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2021).

Food system resilience came into sharp focus on April 21, 2020, when the governments of Canada, Brazil, Egypt, and Italy issued a joint statement on the vulnerabilities exposed by COVID-19. The statement stressed that "local, regional, and global food security will depend more than ever on strengthening the resilience of food systems to withstand multiple shocks," while ensuring small-scale producers can "sell their products for a fair price in a safe environment" (Government of Canada, 2020). This underscores the essential role of localized food networks like farmers' markets in maintaining food access and economic stability during crises.

A powerful example of resilience occurred in Adana, an ancient city in Eastern Turkey, located less than 200 km from the epicentre of the February 2023 earthquake near Gaziantep. The Adana Slow Food Earth Market, unable to use its covered infrastructure due to damage, quickly relocated outdoors under the shade of large trees. When I visited in spring 2024, the market remained vibrant, with vendors selling locally grown and produced foods. Its ability to continue operating despite losing its physical home reflects the flexibility of the farmers' market model—ensuring access to traditional foods and sustaining livelihoods during crises.

Farmers' markets are closely tied to the communities they serve, fostering trust and accountability. This connection enables them to reflect and draw from the cultural and social richness of their surroundings. As IPES-Food (2024) notes, "their cultural rootedness means that these markets benefit from—sometimes hidden—forms of governance that allow them to function well." Farmers' markets and their communities operate in symbiosis, working for mutual benefit. Their adaptability also enables them to be set up quickly in diverse environments, helping to mitigate both acute and chronic food insecurity (Brown, 2002).

During my travels, a consistent theme was the adaptability and resilience of farmers' markets, especially during crises. This was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when corporate supply chains broke down. Farmers' markets provided a stable alternative, ensuring access to fresh food while sustaining livelihoods (Carrara et al., 2022; Morales, 2021). In Guadalajara, I spoke with the manager of the Feria De Productores farmers' market, who described how the market played a vital role during the pandemic. It continued serving local residents with fresh food and supported its 60 vendors—all from Jalisco state—despite widespread disruption. Its ability to stay open underscores the indispensable role of farmers' markets in food system resilience.

By reinforcing local economies, responding quickly to crises, and ensuring food security through community-driven approaches, farmers' markets are a cornerstone of resilient food systems. Their ability to adapt across diverse socio-economic and environmental contexts highlights their lasting value—locally and globally.

5.5 Farmers' markets and local food systems are economic engines

Farmers' markets serve as powerful economic engines, connecting urban and rural communities by channeling urban spending into local economies (Project for Public Spaces, 2020). They offer low-cost, low-risk opportunities for farmers and entrepreneurs to develop their products—acting as incubators for ventures that may later grow into brick-and-mortar businesses or broader retail operations (Project for Public Spaces, 2020; Bragg, 2010).

In 2023, the Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia (FMNS) cooperative's 44 markets generated $43.36 million—about $985,000 per market—while the BC Association of Farmers' Markets reported $1.64 million per market across 142 markets (Flourish Community Development Co-operative, 2023; BCAFM, 2023). FMNS markets perform on par with BC's, generating roughly $40.58 per person annually versus $41.52 in BC. Applying an average of $41.05 per person to Canada's population (39.8 million as of August 24, 2024, per Worldometer) suggests a national economic impact of approximately $1.63 billion per year.

Beyond revenue, farmers' markets are key job creators and economic catalysts. Farms that sell locally generate 13 jobs per $1 million in revenue, compared to just 3 jobs for farms selling into longer supply chains (Low & Vogel, 2011). As anchor institutions, farmers' markets boost vendor sales and stimulate regional development—driving foot traffic, attracting tourists, and supporting small business growth (Warsaw et al., 2021; World Farmers Markets Coalition, 2021; Econsult Corporation, 2007).

Farmers' markets strengthen local economies by reducing reliance on imports—a process known as import replacement. By supporting local production and consumption, they lower food miles, reduce emissions, and generate higher economic returns through the local multiplier effect (Warsaw et al., 2021). This multiplier has been measured between 2 and 4, meaning dollars spent locally generate more economic activity than those spent on imports (Centre for Local Prosperity, 2021).

This is especially relevant in Canada, where 80% of fruit and 60% of vegetables are imported (The Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute, 2023). Retail context also matters: independent U.S. retailers recirculate 52.9% of revenue locally, versus 13.6% for chain stores. Farmers' markets, selling mostly local goods, likely exceed even those figures (Civic Economics, n.d.).

Collectively, these findings show that farmers' markets are more than sales venues—they are catalysts for local economic growth. By generating revenue and jobs, boosting regional multiplier effects, and enabling import replacement, they help build resilient communities and a more sustainable food system.

Case study: The value of seafood embeddedness in Asturias, Spain

When I visited Asturias, in northern Spain, I was struck by its similarities to Nova Scotia—both share comparable populations, maritime climates, and resource-based economies. But one difference stood out: Asturias had an abundance of affordable, locally available seafood and sparkling cider. As a former fishmonger, I was curious about what made seafood so prevalent and accessible. Locals explained that the region supports a thriving inshore fishery in the Bay of Biscay, backed by scale-appropriate seafood processing infrastructure. In contrast, corporatization and consolidation in Nova Scotia have restricted access for owner-operators and reduced local seafood availability (Ecology Action Centre, 2014).

Asturias is an example of the power of embedded local food systems. The abundance of seafood products in farmers' markets, restaurants, grocers, and through direct sales ensures that Asturians consume plenty of seafood, benefiting the local economy, and local consumption encourages the continuation of the inshore fishery and localized seafood processing infrastructure. Based on my travels, Asturians eat a lot of seafood. Some reports estimate that Asturians eat about a kilogram of seafood per person per week—over 50 kilograms per year (Eating Asturias, 2024).

A Nova Scotia-funded report found that internal seafood consumption contributes 21% of the industry's output—about $545 million—driven by restaurant sales, local demand, and tourism (Pisces Consulting Limited, 2022). Using this figure, if Nova Scotians (who eat just 2.2 kg of seafood per person per year) ate like Asturians (52 kg), then over $12 billion could be generated for the provincial economy.

Asturias demonstrates how embedded food systems—such as farmers' markets—and regional food processing infrastructure work together to sustain strong local markets and drive economic growth. The availability of locally processed seafood supports widespread regional consumption, reinforcing demand for inshore fisheries and local processing capacity. This keeps more economic value in the region, benefiting fishers, processors, and small businesses. With stronger local food infrastructure and policies that promote regional consumption, Nova Scotia could strengthen its inshore fishery, expand market opportunities, and unlock significant economic potential.


Images 10 & 11: Seafood vendors at markets in Asturias, Spain (photos by Justin Cantafio)

5.6 Farmers' markets support farmers and sustainable agriculture

Farmers' markets support more sustainable livelihoods for regional farmers and food producers (Carrara et al., 2022). Short food supply chains allow farmers to become price setters rather than price takers, helping them retain income that would otherwise go to intermediaries (Sanderson et al., 2005). With fewer steps between production and consumption, farmers' markets generate higher profits for producers while keeping prices affordable for consumers (Mount, 2012; Akunuri, 2024). One Government of Alberta study found that producers earn 40% to 80% more by selling directly at farmers' markets rather than through brokers (Lencucha et al., 1998). Farmers' markets also help stabilize pricing, ensuring more predictable revenues for producers (World Farmers Markets Coalition, 2021).

Small- to medium-scale diversified farms are estimated to provide roughly 70% of the world's food (Laforge et al., 2021). Yet in Canada, agriculture has become increasingly conventionalized and consolidated—often at the expense of smaller farms using sustainable practices such as agroecology. These are often the very farmers who sell at farmers' markets. Direct marketing channels enable farmers employing agroecological farming methods to stay afloat.

Case study: The chinampas of Xochimilco, Mexico

One of the most striking examples I encountered was among the pre-Hispanic *chinampas* of Xochimilco in Mexico City. Xochimilco, meaning "flower field" in Nahuatl, is rooted in Indigenous culture and agricultural innovation. Once part of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan, the region remains home to a thriving Indigenous-led form of agroecology. These floating farms, managed by Xochimilca farmers known as *chinamperas*, are among the most productive systems in the world (Yeung, 2024).

This ancient and innovative farming method consists of elevated, narrow platforms and islands of earth surrounded by canals, creating a productive and sustainable agricultural system. Chinampas are built on shallow lake beds using earth layered atop reeds and grasses, bordered by Mexican willow (*ahuejotes*) for erosion control. The constant influx of nutrient-rich sediment from surrounding canals allows for multiple harvests per year, making chinampas one of the most productive agricultural systems ever developed (Merlín-Uribe et al., 2013). This millennia-old practice continues today thanks to direct marketing pathways like farmers' markets.

The "Chinampera Label" was developed to distinguish products grown by Indigenous Xochimilca farmers. Farmers' markets such as *El Mercado de las Cosas Verdes "Tianquiskilitl"* ("the market for all green things") play an active role in preserving these agroecological methods (Agroecology Now, n.d.). It is precisely thanks to direct marketing methods, including farmers' markets, that these highly productive, traditional agroecological methods are able to continue today.

Images 12 & 13: A view of a typical chinampas canal, with ahuejotes trees, whose root systems serve as a binding agent to hold earth and prevent erosion. A Xochimilca farmer pouring nutrient-rich mud to form nursery beds (Images taken by Justin Cantafio)

Case study: Les marchés paysans du Luberon

In the Languedoc-Roussillon region of Southern France, agriculture has become dominated by large, commodity-focused farms (FAO, 2019). From conversations with local farmers, it's clear that at the small- to medium-scale is increasingly difficult—and land prices are soaring. Meanwhile many tourism-oriented "farmers' markets" in the region often lack actual farmers. Recognizing the threat this posed to local farmers and food sovereignty, the Parc naturel régional du Luberon launched a program to create farmers' markets that directly support smallholders.

The Parc naturel régional du Luberon is one of 58 regional natural parks in France. Residents and municipalities voluntarily form these parks, and the parks are mobilized to advance economic and social development alongside protection, education, and planning. With funding support fromUNESCO, the Parc naturel régional du Luberon launched its *Marché Paysan* program. There are now eight marchés paysans, or "peasant markets", throughout the region, all of which occur on grounds granted to the market organizers on behalf of the Parc naturel régional du Luberon (2023). Vendors who sell at these markets are from the region and grow or produce the products they sell.

Images 14 & 15: A "marché paysan" in Apt, Southern France, and two produce farmers and farmers' market vendors who benefit from the program.

Farmers' markets play a vital role in sustaining small- to medium-scale farmers and preserving agroecological practices by offering direct sales, fair pricing, and market stability. Whether in Mexico City's *chinampas* or the *marchés paysans* of Luberon, these markets uphold traditional foodways while helping farmers retain more value for their products. By reducing intermediaries and fostering direct connections between producers and consumers, farmers' markets support livelihoods and safeguard cultural and ecological knowledge in an increasingly consolidated food system.

5.7 Farmers' markets can be leveraged for food equity and social justice

Farmers' markets are increasingly recognized as sites of social justice (He & Morales, 2022). They support this work through multiple levers—including economic revitalization and improved food access in underserved and historically excluded communities (Larsen & Gilliland, 2009)—and by laying the groundwork for greater food sovereignty and equity through community-led food systems (Kerstetter et al., 2023; Food Secure Canada, 2024).

As flexible, community-led initiatives, farmers' markets are uniquely positioned to build food equity in communities[8]. One example is the Deeply Rooted Black & Indigenous Farmers' Market in Toronto:

> Farmers' markets can play a vital role not only in supporting small-scale producers, but also in promoting social and racial equity within our communities. We see this very clearly in the Deeply Rooted farmers' market, which, by providing a platform for Black and Indigenous communities to sell products that reflect their cultural heritage, works to combat the systemic structures that have historically limited Black and Indigenous access to traditional distribution channels. By recognizing and challenging the deep disparities

[8] While there are tremendous opportunities to leverage farmers' markets and local food systems to build food equity and social justice, there is much work to be done. This is noted in section 6.6 below.

> and inequalities in land ownership and market access in Canada, Deeply Rooted has successfully advanced food sovereignty in the country and circulated money within Black and Indigenous communities – demonstrating the potential of public markets as incredible levers for social change and food justice. (Food Secure Canada, 2024)

Across Canada, programs have successfully leveraged farmers' markets as small business incubators. In British Columbia, the Hatch & Hype program, launched in 2021 by the BC Association of Farmers' Markets, helps entrepreneurs test and grow market-ready businesses. Inspired by this model—and seeking to address systemic barriers faced by newcomers and racialized entrepreneurs—Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia launched the Taking Root program in 2024. In partnership with organizations that support underrepresented entrepreneurs, the program offers low-barrier opportunities for aspiring vendors. Participants receive a free market table in their region of choice, a business coach, a vendor mentor, and a dedicated fund to purchase equipment, signage, or tools needed to launch their businesses.

Initiatives like the Taking Root Program and the BIPOC New Farmer Initiative at Toronto's Sorauren Farmers' Market demonstrate how markets can advance equity and inclusion. By offering subsidized vendor spaces, equipment, and mentorship tailored to the needs of underrepresented farmers, these programs lower barriers to entry and help diverse growers succeed. In turn, they enrich markets with culturally significant foods and foster a more representative, just local food system (Sorauren Farmers' Market, n.d.).

As community-embedded food systems, farmers' markets can also play a role in advocacy and social justice. During my Nuffield travels, I visited the Feria de Productores farmers' market in Guadalajara, where organizers have used their strong social media presence and community connections to amplify campaigns like *Sin Maíz No Hay País* ("Without corn, there is no country"). This anti-neoliberal movement, led primarily by peasant farmers, defends culturally appropriate corn varieties and Indigenous seed sovereignty. The market has helped connect urban residents to these agrarian struggles—broadening support and deepening public engagement.

Farmers' markets are more than spaces for commerce—they are platforms for social justice, economic inclusion, and food sovereignty. Whether through initiatives like the Deeply Rooted Market in Toronto, the *Taking Root* Program in Nova Scotia, or advocacy efforts in Guadalajara, farmers' markets challenge systemic barriers by centring historically excluded communities and amplifying grassroots movements. By lowering entry barriers, supporting diverse food producers, and leveraging their influence for broader social change, they show their potential not just as economic drivers—but as catalysts for equity and justice.

6.0 Recommendations to unlock the benefits of farmers' markets and local food systems in Canada

Despite the global food system's persistent challenges, governments have significantly underinvested in proven alternatives like localized food systems (UN-Habitat, 2022). Targeted policies and investments are essential to build and strengthen local food systems—including farmers' markets—and unlock their full potential across Canada.

To strengthen local food systems, the Government of Canada must directly address corporate control in the grocery industry. This includes bolstering funding for farmers' markets, introducing stricter antitrust policies, and challenging practices that obstruct the growth of community-led food systems (IPES-Food, 2024). Canada's highly concentrated food system (York University, n.d.) demands urgent reform. Dismantling corporate concentration will create the space for farmers' markets to thrive and expand their positive impacts.

My recommendations focus heavily on policymakers, not because I undervalue grassroots efforts[9], but because they are operating *despite* significant systemic barriers. Most farmers' markets and local producers in Canada receive minimal policy support, and operate within systems that remain colonial, systemically racist, and neoliberal (Lowitt et al., 2023). The success of the local food movement is a testament to the hard work and resilience of its organizers, farmers, and producers. Grassroots initiatives will continue to lead, but they must be supported through intentional investments in network-building, storytelling, and shared resources. Governments must also increase support for research and documentation of local food system contributions.

Governments at all levels have a crucial role to play in building local and sustainable food systems across Canada. The following categories offer immediate and long-term opportunities—primarily from a policy and investment perspective—to support that goal. These recommendations are grounded in my Nuffield Scholarship travels, my review of relevant literature, and my ongoing work in the farmers' market sector.

6.1 Enact policies and legislation at multiple government levels

Canada's agricultural policies were not always shaped by neoliberalism. Until the post-war era, "Canadian agriculture was recognized through state supports and safety nets," and "agrarian movements created large farmer-run marketing organizations and cooperatives" (Beingessner & Fletcher, 2019). A reorientation toward policies that support local food systems is entirely possible.

Canada's *Food Policy for Canada*, launched in 2019 as the country's first national food policy, is nearly 3,000 words long—but mentions the word *"local"* only once (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2020). Policies are only as meaningful as the actions that follow. Window dressing will

[9] These include grassroots movements, mutual aid circles, and other community led and solidarity driven initiatives.

not address the worsening food and farming crisis. Effective policy must account for complexity—embedding connections between climate, equity, and food security. Prioritizing agroecology and food sovereignty would require a multidisciplinary, cross-departmental, and participatory approach.

Farmers' markets and their vendors need national and regional policies that are scale-appropriate and supportive of local food systems (Godette et al., 2015). As Olivier De Schutter (2014) writes, "the transition to agrifood policies that support the realization of the right to food requires major political efforts to restructure support around agroecological, labour-intensive, poverty-reducing forms of agriculture."

Municipal governments play a key role by investing in programs and infrastructure and enacting supportive policies. With mandates over planning, regulation, and infrastructure (Carrara et al., 2022), they are well-positioned to meet community needs. By orienting their policies to be supportive of farmers' markets as essential infrastructure—and expanding their mandates to include local food system development—municipalities can close gaps in financing, infrastructure, and access.

Case study: The "Market Cities" concept and the example of Barcelona

The Market Cities Initiative, established in late 2019 by Project for Public Spaces, HealthBridge Foundation of Canada, and Slow Food International, offers valuable guiding principles for municipalities seeking to strengthen their local food systems through public markets and farmers' markets. The initiative aims to "expand understanding of the impact that public markets bring to the communities they serve and to promote supportive policies and investments in market infrastructure and management capacity to achieve that impact" (Project for Public Spaces, 2020).

To this end, the initiative proposes seven key principles for a "Market City": a city with a diverse market system; one that organizes collaborative partnerships; measures market value and function; prioritizes local, healthy food distribution; invests in facilities and management; supports diverse vendors; and recognizes markets as public spaces that welcome all and preserve cultural heritage (Project for Public Spaces, 2020). The term "Market City" emphasizes the recognition of public markets' unique benefits and the development of supportive systems and policies that enhance their financial health and community impact (Project for Public Spaces, 2020). These principles offer a robust framework for communities of any size to build thriving, community-oriented market systems.

During my Nuffield travels, I visited Barcelona, a prime example of a "Market City." Barcelona boasts 43 permanent public food markets, strategically placed to ensure every one of its 73 neighborhoods has access to fresh, local food (Project for Public Spaces, 2014). The city itself is the primary funder, having invested the equivalent of nearly $143 million CAD in physical and digital market infrastructure from 2020-2023. This investment has yielded results, with 66% of Barcelona residents reporting regular shopping at these food markets (IPES-Food, 2024).

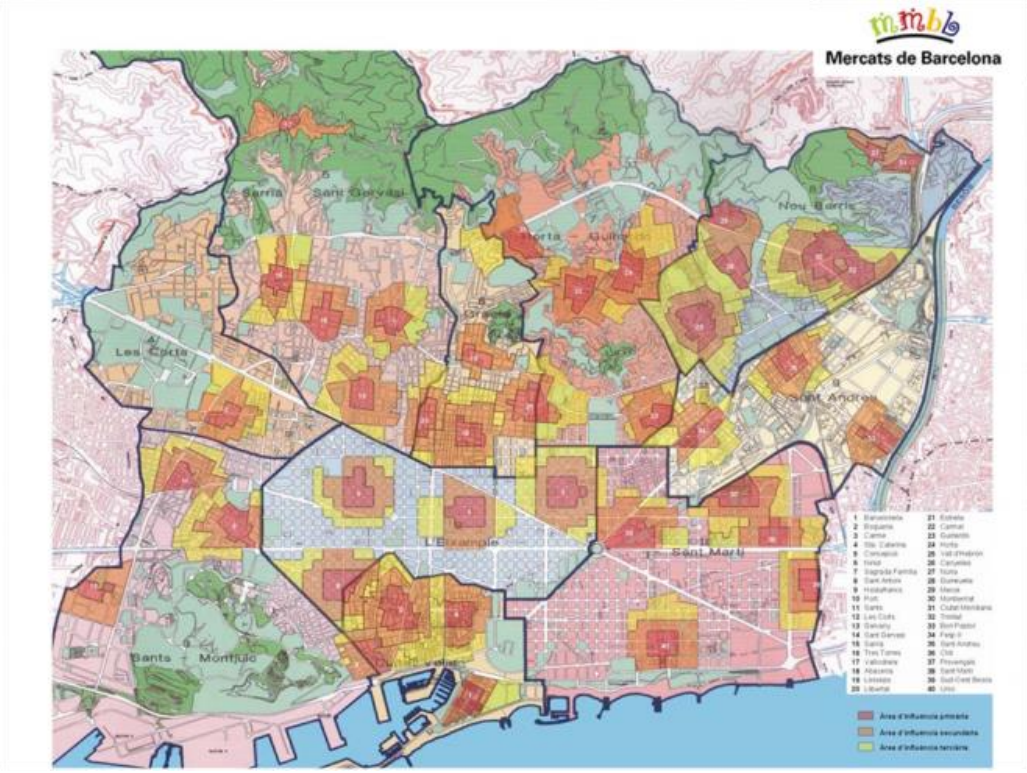

Image 16: Prevalence and catchment area of public food markets in Barcelona (Project for Public Spaces, 2014)

Another municipal-level policy example is the *Milan Urban Food Policy Pact*, which now includes more than 280 cities worldwide—including my hometown of Halifax[10]. The pact encourages municipalities to strengthen urban and peri-urban food production, protect land for smallholders, and adopt regional food planning strategies. One of its 44 indicators is to increase the proportion of local producers selling into city-based public markets (FAO, 2021).

Policy shifts at all levels of government, from national strategies to municipal actions, are essential to creating an enabling environment where farmers' markets and local food systems can flourish. This multi-level approach ensures a cohesive and impactful strategy for addressing the complex challenges facing Canada's food system and paving the way for a more sustainable and resilient future.

6.2 Invest in markets, local food infrastructure, and human resources

In his final report to the UN Human Rights Council, Olivier De Schutter (2014) recommended that governments address food insecurity and poverty by "providing strong support to small-scale

[10] During my Nuffield studies, I had the pleasure of visiting several cities that have signed the pact, including Barcelona, Guadalajara, Istanbul, Mexico City, Montpellier (France), Montreal, Muratpaşa (Turkey), Palermo, Paris, Rome, Toronto, Turin, and Vancouver.

food producers" and "develop[ing] local markets and local food processing facilities." He emphasized that "local food systems can be rebuilt through appropriate investments in infrastructure, packaging and processing facilities, and distribution channels, and by allowing smallholders to organize themselves in ways that yield economies." Similarly, the FAO (2019) identified public infrastructure for farmers' markets as a core recommendation to support agroecological production.

Several financial mechanisms can support the creation and growth of local food systems—including farmers' markets—such as subsidies, low or zero-interest loans, land banks, credits, grants, and preferential insurance rates (IPES-Food, 2024). These mechanisms must be equitable, prioritizing "well-planned preferential credit, policies, and programs to women, Indigenous Peoples, racialized groups, youth, and other marginalized peoples" (IPES-Food, 2024).

Case study: Malta's national investments in strengthening local food systems

The Government of Malta has developed a National Food Policy modeled on the EU's Farm to Fork Strategy (Refalo, 2023), launched in 2020 to support more sustainable food systems through shorter supply chains (European Commission, 2020). Malta's Common Agricultural Policy Strategic Plan, approved in 2023, allocates €166 million to support a "smart, sustainable, competitive, resilient and diversified agricultural sector," including €16.4 million to stabilize incomes for smallholders—90% of whom farm fewer than two hectares (European Commission, 2024).

As part of its strategy to meet the EU's 2030 target of 25% organic production, Malta launched an Action Plan for Organic Food in 2023, aiming to increase organic acreage sevenfold. It also seeks to connect farmers and processors directly with consumers, strengthen short supply chains, and grow local food consumption—supporting jobs, small processors, and the resilience of the value chain (Malta Ministry for Agriculture, Fisheries and Animal Rights, 2023).

To achieve this, the Maltese government is investing in public events, marketing campaigns, and farmers' markets—including the Ta' Qali Farmers' Market, which I visited in 2023. The 2025 national budget includes a new €10 million investment in the market over two years (bil-Malti, 2024).

Image 17: Three generations of shoppers interacting with a vendor at the Ta' Qali Farmers' Market, Malta (Image taken by Justin Cantafio)

Despite the benefits of shorter supply chains and agroecological models, access to capital and infrastructure remains a major barrier for local food systems. A lack of regional, scale-appropriate aggregation, storage, processing, and distribution infrastructure limits their expansion (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2024).

Canada's *Local Food Infrastructure Fund* is a commendable step, but its $50 million allocation is oversubscribed and falls short of demand. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (2024) recommends an annual investment of $210 million to support multi-year projects for networks of small and medium-sized enterprises.

A FAO-funded study of Toronto's "Great Golden Horseshoe" region—home to 25% of Canadians—identified food insecurity, food access, and the lack of mid-scale infrastructure as urgent challenges (RUAF Foundation, 2019). It recommended policies and investment to support farmers' markets, food hubs, and regional processing to address these gaps.

Access to physical infrastructure is also key to maximizing the economic and social value of farmers' markets. Funding for seasonal extensions like awnings, semi-permanent structures, year-round facilities, and commercial kitchen space can significantly boost market impact. My travels revealed numerous examples of effective, state-sponsored infrastructure—from permanent buildings to simple, elegant stalls. These investments are essential to unlocking the full potential of local food systems.

Image 18: An example of simple yet effective state-funded farmers' market infrastructure in Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca, Mexico (photo by Justin Cantafio)

Farmers' markets are proven community-level interventions that support human health—especially in underserved areas (Freedman et al., 2012). In the early 20th century, U.S. governments at all levels funded the creation of public markets to address unemployment and food insecurity (Morales, 2000). Today, municipal governments should do the same—integrating farmers' markets into their planning objectives, particularly where food access is limited (Feldman & Wolnik, 2019).

Reallocating existing funds from conventional agricultural subsidies to local food systems, as suggested by IPES-Food (2024), could effectively and holistically address food systems challenges. A significant challenge, however, is the prevalence of part-time or volunteer management positions at farmers' markets. As Project for Public Spaces (2020) points out, this undermines the ability of operators to build institutional knowledge and strategic approaches.

While legislation and policies are essential, a thriving farmers' market sector requires a complex system of "civil society, the managers, NGOs, vendors, producers, distributors and others engaged

in market systems" (Carrara et al., 2022). Recognizing the economic and social benefits these markets provide, investing in their management and human resources is crucial.

Canada's national and provincial governments should support professional farmers' market organizations, including provincial associations and the national association, Canadian Farmers' Markets. These non-profits, while helping to deliver on government mandates, often lack core funding for staffing and operations. Investing in their human resources would professionalize the sector, strengthen outreach and programming, and build advocacy capacity—expanding the reach and impact of farmers' markets across the country.

6.3 Support farmers' market vendors through diversified sales channels

Farmers' markets are vibrant hubs of local food infrastructure, supporting thousands of farmers and producers while catalyzing the development of complementary systems. As anchor institutions, they facilitate direct sales and help seed new ventures—such as food hubs—that strengthen regional food economies. For example, the Halifax Regional Food Hub, a non-profit multi-stakeholder cooperative co-founded by Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia (FMNS), illustrates how farmers' markets can spark additional local sales opportunities and networks.

FMNS supports its member markets by helping local farmers and producers succeed across multiple sales channels. Recognizing that farmers' markets are rarely the sole outlet for vendors, FMNS advocates for diversified sales opportunities. Expanding into additional segments helps stabilize pricing and strengthen livelihoods—creating a win-win for both producers and consumers.

Public procurement represents a powerful opportunity for growth. In 2016, institutional food service sales in Canada were estimated at $8.5 billion (Canadian Food Studies, 2019). Redirecting even a portion of this spending toward local food systems would create substantial impact. By leveraging the networks of small and medium-scale producers already active at farmers' markets, government policies and investments could support this shift. One study found that a 10% increase in local procurement by Atlantic Canadian institutions could generate 43,000 new jobs, $2.6 billion in wages, and a $4.7 billion boost to GDP (Centre for Local Prosperity, 2018).

These examples highlight the role of farmers' markets as foundational pillars for broader food infrastructure. By harnessing their community-embedded nature to support food hubs and unlock public procurement opportunities, we can expand income streams for producers and strengthen local economies. In doing so, we move closer to a more resilient, equitable, and thriving food system.

6.4 Invest in proven programming

Successful programs have shown clear impacts—governments at all levels now have an opportunity to collaborate and scale those successes. For example, the strong performance of

provincial farmers' market nutrition coupon programs prompted Canadian Farmers' Markets to launch a petition and campaign in October 2023 urging the federal government to create a national fund to expand these initiatives. Such a fund would improve food security by increasing access to local, nutritious food for vulnerable households—while also supporting farmers, community-based markets, and rural economies (Canadian Farmers' Markets, 2023).

Expanded funding for nutrition and vendor development programs would also unlock farmers' markets' potential as small business incubators. This support could grow initiatives like British Columbia's Hatch & Hype program and Nova Scotia's Taking Root program, while helping other provinces establish programs of their own.

Farmers' markets serve as vital platforms for connecting producers and consumers, strengthening rural–urban linkages, building public trust in agriculture, and educating communities about local food systems. They are powerful tools for policymakers looking to amplify these benefits.

A practical example is the Nova Scotia Loyal School Voucher Program, launched in 2024 to encourage regional food consumption. Every student in public schools, Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey schools, or registered homeschools receives a $10 voucher, redeemable at vendors within the FMNS cooperative (Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia, n.d.).

By investing in proven programs—like nutrition coupon schemes and buy-local initiatives—governments can extend the reach of farmers' markets, strengthen regional food systems, and create more reliable income streams for small and medium-scale producers. This collaborative approach reinforces the economic foundation of our communities while advancing a more resilient and equitable food system.

Case study: Campagna Amica, Italy

During my Nuffield scholarship travels, I explored Italy's dynamic farmers' market scene in culinary hubs like Rome, Sicily, and Naples. Many of these markets operate under Campagna Amica (literally "friendly countryside"), a foundation dedicated to preserving, promoting, and supporting Italian agriculture. The bright yellow tent canopies and distinctive aprons worn by vendors made these markets instantly recognizable. With their bright yellow tents and vendor aprons, Campagna Amica markets are instantly recognizable. Founded in 2008 by Coldiretti—Europe's largest farmers' union—the initiative champions small farms by protecting food heritage, ensuring quality and fair prices, and strengthening direct producer–consumer connections.

Today, Campagna Amica is the world's largest direct marketing network under a single brand. It includes 1,198 member markets—65 of which are housed in permanent structures—and supports roughly 120,000 market days each year. The network represents over 15,000 farms, primarily small- to medium-scale family operations with an average of 2.4 employees per farm. In total, it generates more than €4 billion in annual economic activity, and nearly one-third of Italians report shopping at Campagna Amica markets (World Farmers Markets Coalition, 2023).

Campagna Amica shows how structured, locally focused initiatives can transform food systems by supporting farmers, preserving cultural traditions, and creating strong economic returns. Its model offers

valuable lessons for leveraging local food infrastructure to build resilient, community-driven food networks—and inspiration for scaling similar success in Canada.

Image 19: Farmers and vendors selling at a Campagna Amica farmers' market in Sicily (photo by Justin Cantafio)

6.5 Centre agroecology for food systems change

Agroecology is widely recognized by experts and organizations like the FAO as essential to solving the complex challenges in our food system. Yet, as Laforge et al. (2021) observe, its anti-capitalist, decolonial, and feminist foundations are often dismissed as too radical for mainstream acceptance in Canada. But incremental reforms have failed to meet the moment—and likely never will. Canada must reconcile this growing divide between expert consensus and policymaker inaction.

Faris Ahmed's (2022) report for the Agroecology Policy Research Initiative—supported by UNESCO and the Government of Canada—reveals that agroecology remains in its infancy in Canada. It is practiced primarily on small- to medium-scale farms—often family-run or smallholder operations—that face steep economic challenges under current policies (Qualman, 2019). This reality highlights the urgent need for policies that support and sustain agroecological farming in Canada.

To increase agroecological production, governments must invest in policies and programs that support its non-industrial, small-scale nature. This includes building and improving market mechanisms designed for scale-appropriate distribution and sales. Because most farmers' market vendors already follow agroecological principles, increased investment in farmers' markets and local food systems would create the economic conditions needed to scale up agroecology across

Canada.

6.6 Leverage farmers' markets for food equity, food sovereignty, and social justice

Farmers' markets are vital community assets that support food justice by increasing access to fresh food, offering incentives for low-income shoppers, and strengthening social ties (Miller & Malacarne, 2023). Yet they are not a standalone solution to food insecurity. Government investment and policy at municipal, provincial, and federal levels are needed to fund new markets in underserved neighbourhoods and connect them with public transit—measures that can dramatically increase access and impact (Freedman et al., 2016).

While farmers' markets can foster food sovereignty and social justice, this potential is compromised when market consumers and leadership aren't reflective of the communities they serve (Warsaw et al., 2021). Without intentional efforts, these spaces risk perpetuating "middle-class whiteness" (Pilgeram, 2016). To drive meaningful change, an overarching administrative framework—with dedicated funds to support in-depth, regionally appropriate anti-racist and anti-classist training—is crucial (Metz & Scherer, 2022). Free resources, such as the Farmers Market Coalition's *Anti-Racist Farmers Market Toolkit*, are valuable but must be complemented by targeted financial support.

Farmers' markets are built on trust, reciprocity, and community—naturally generating social capital that can be leveraged for the public good (World Farmers Markets Coalition, 2021). But when markets are not embedded in and accountable to their communities, this social capital can be misdirected—sometimes drawing predominantly white, affluent residents and inadvertently contributing to gentrification (McClintock, 2018). A session at the 11th International Public Markets Conference in Toronto, *Is Your Market a Gentrifier or Generator?*, underscored how this disconnect can alienate the very communities these markets aim to serve (Project for Public Spaces, 2023).

While many farmers' markets and sector organizations across Canada are making meaningful progress, much work remains. Market operators, governments, and community groups must work together to centre social justice and food sovereignty—ensuring inclusive leadership, intentional outreach, and ongoing engagement by and with underrepresented communities (Alkon, 2008).

Market managers, vendors, and consumers must also recognize that these spaces operate on the territories of Indigenous peoples within a food system that remains systematically colonial and racist (Lowitt et al., 2023). Any effort to decolonize and relocalize food systems—and build true food sovereignty—must be participatory and co-designed with small and medium-scale farmers, food producers, agricultural workers, migrants, Indigenous peoples, and others who have been or continue to be strategically devalued in decision making processes (De Schutter, 2014).

Together, these approaches highlight the critical role of farmers' markets not only as hubs for fresh food access and community building, but also as catalysts for a more equitable and resilient

food system. By pairing structural policy support with inclusive, community-led practices, we can advance food justice by transforming local food systems from the ground up.

7.0 Conclusion

Throughout my Nuffield journey, I traveled to many countries to explore the transformative potential of farmers' markets and local food systems in Canada. What I found reaffirmed my belief that farmers' markets are not just places of commerce—they are dynamic, community-driven institutions with the power to build food sovereignty, support agroecology, strengthen regional economies, and foster resilience in the face of crises. More than that, they are critical infrastructure, offering a counterbalance to the corporate concentration that has increasingly defined Canada's food landscape.

My travels took me from Indigenous-led markets in Mexico to the vibrant stalls of Spain and Italy, from the Slow Food markets and historic bazaars of Eastern Turkey to the peasant markets of the Luberon in Southern France, and beyond. Across these diverse contexts, a common truth emerged: embedded, human-scale food systems provide a foundation for strong, just, and adaptable communities. I witnessed firsthand how farmers' markets serve as cultural and economic anchors—preserving foodways, incubating small businesses, and offering equitable access to fresh, healthy food.

Yet despite their growing recognition and success, Canada's farmers' markets remain under-supported and undervalued in economic and agricultural policy. If we are serious about strengthening food sovereignty, we must invest in the infrastructure, human resources, and legislative frameworks that allow local food systems to thrive. This means addressing corporate concentration, creating funding mechanisms for small- and medium-scale farmers, and ensuring farmers' markets are accessible to all—particularly those facing systemic barriers to food access and economic participation.

Farmers' markets are not a silver bullet—but they are an essential part of the solution. They offer a roadmap to a food system that is more localized, just, and resilient—one that prioritizes people and communities over profit. My hope is that this report serves not only as an argument, but as a call to action: that policymakers, funders, and community leaders recognize the power of farmers' markets and work together to support their growth and impact.

The path forward is clear, and it is one rooted in place, people, and possibility.

7.1 Summary of recommendations

- **Enact policies and legislation at multiple government levels**
  Canada's food system requires bold policy shifts to move away from corporate dominance and toward community-led, localized solutions. Governments at all levels must enact legislation that supports small and medium-scale producers, ensures fair competition, and integrates local food systems into broader agricultural, economic, and climate resilience strategies.

- **Invest in markets, local food infrastructure, and human resources**
  Sustainable local food systems need dedicated investment—not only in physical infrastructure like aggregation, storage, and processing facilities, but also in the human capacity that keeps markets running. Core funding for farmers' market organizations, vendor development programs, and regional planning support will strengthen operations, increase market access, and deliver lasting community benefits.

- **Support farmers' market vendors through diversified sales channels**
  Farmers' markets play a critical role in strengthening regional food economies, but vendors need multiple sales avenues to remain viable. Expanding public procurement initiatives and building complementary infrastructure like food hubs will help vendors reach new markets, stabilize incomes, and reduce the risks of relying on a single point of sale.

- **Invest in proven programming**
  Programs like farmers' market nutrition coupon initiatives and buy-local campaigns have demonstrated measurable success. Scaling up these proven models with long-term government support will improve food security, strengthen local economies, and build trust in regional food systems.

- **Centre agroecology for food systems change**
  Agroecological farming offers a path toward greater sustainability, but it remains under-supported in Canada. Policies must be reoriented to favour agroecological practices through targeted financial incentives, infrastructure investments, and market development that align with the principles of food sovereignty and environmental resilience, while removing structural barriers that currently limit the scale and reach of non-industrial food producers.

- **Leverage farmers' markets for food equity, food sovereignty, and social justice**
  Farmers' markets are powerful tools for addressing systemic inequities in the food system, but their potential is only fully realized when they are intentionally inclusive. Investments in anti-racist training, equitable vendor support, and community-centred market management will ensure that these spaces remain accessible and representative of diverse communities.

By embracing these recommendations, Canada can harness the transformative power of farmers' markets—not only to counteract the vulnerabilities of our current food system, but to build a future rooted in sustainability, justice, and community. This is more than an economic imperative; it is a call to restore trust in our food, reinvigorate our communities, and reclaim a food system that truly serves the needs of its people.

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