



Sustainable Food Systems in Canada: Building a vision for IISD

October 2021

What This Project Was About

IISD recently undertook an exercise to examine how and whether we could better engage on sustainable food systems in Canada. The goal was to:

- Engage with food and agriculture social movements and civil society organizations in Canada
- Start to identify potential ways for where and how IISD can support sustainable food systems research and policy in Canada

We wanted to know:

- How could IISD express its interest in working in this space?
- Where would IISD be best placed to help inform policy discussions on sustainable food systems, either federally or provincially?
- Who would we need to engage with now and in the future if we wish to expand our work in this space?



To answer these questions, staff members from each of IISD’s program areas came together as a team to discuss and brainstorm. We undertook the following activities:



A **survey** of IISD staff and associates who have previously or are currently working on food systems-related projects either in Canada or internationally.



Semi-structured interviews with leading organizations and experts working on sustainable food systems in Canada.



A **research scan** and literature review of several major sustainability challenges faced by and being caused by current food systems in Canada to identify areas where we might be best placed to contribute.



In-person and virtual workshops to discuss results and chart out possibilities as a team.



What We Heard From Staff



IISD’s work on food and agriculture over the last several years has been primarily focused on developing countries. IISD is well placed to draw from its international experience (for example, from the [Ceres2030](#) project and work by IISD’s [Agriculture, Trade & Investment team](#)) to help shine a spotlight on domestic food and agriculture issues.



Work on sustainable food systems presents a unique opportunity for more collaboration and synergies among IISD programs to link science to policy-making. It is a natural fit to leverage existing expertise from our Resilience; Energy; Tracking Progress; Water; and Economic, Law and Policy teams.



COVID-19 has brought to light some systemic issues and gaps in the Canadian food system that need to be addressed. Staff from across programs are interested in thinking about how to enhance these gaps and increase attention on social and equity issues in food systems.

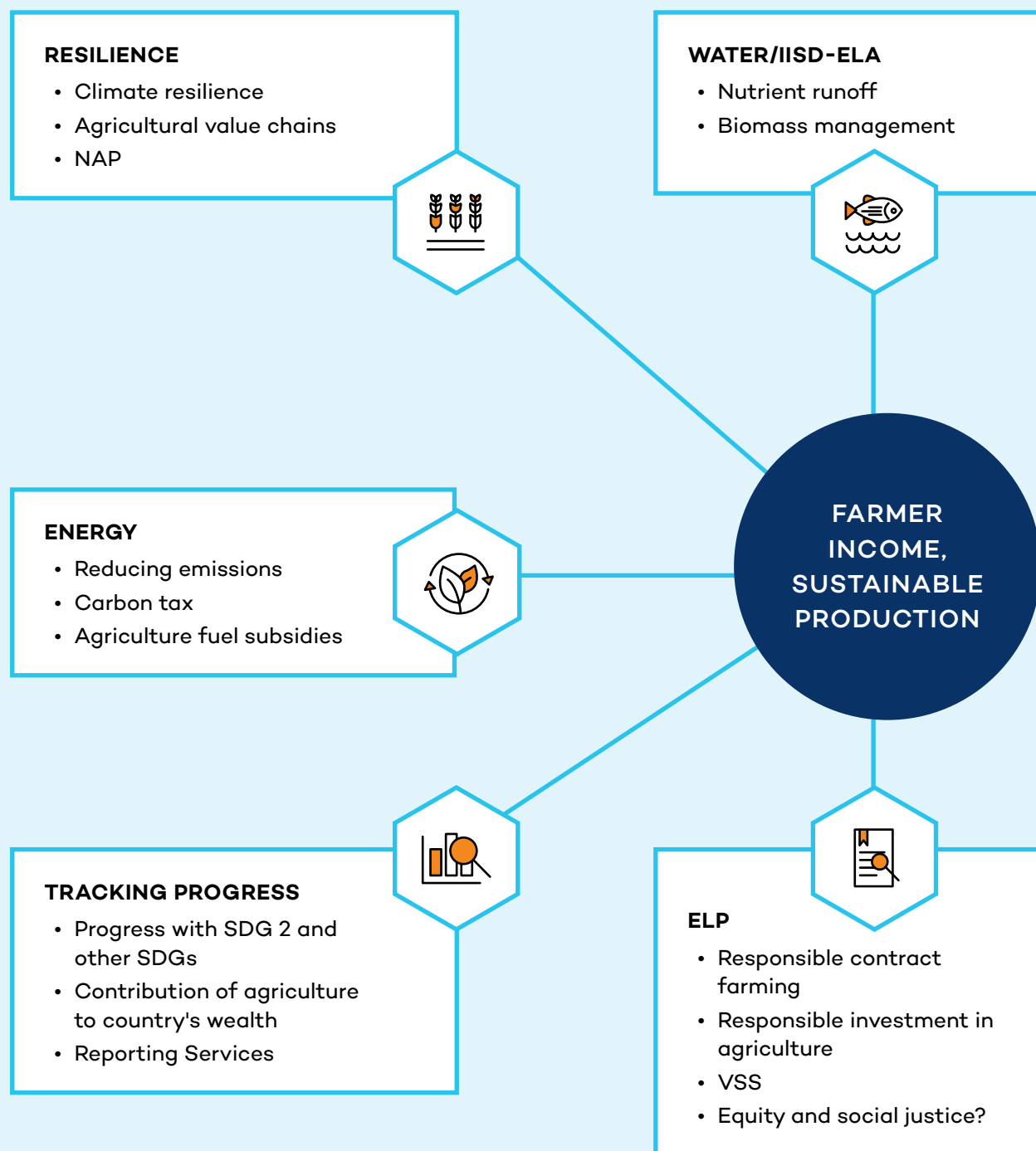


Our new project work in Canada, including recent work on green recovery (such as the [Task Force for Resilient Recovery](#) and our [Green Strings report](#)) and on climate action in agriculture (with [Farmers for Climate Solutions](#)), has allowed IISD to be a useful voice in recovery-focused policy spaces. These projects provide potential opportunities to scale up related food and agriculture work.

Internationally, IISD programs already work on sustainable food systems in a range of approaches, such as food security, food policy, farmer income, and sustainable production (see Figure 1 on the following page).



Figure 1. IISD program work on farmer income and sustainable production





What We Heard From our Stakeholder Interviews

Our team conducted 17 interviews with key stakeholders across Canada's food system, including representatives from federal and provincial governments, academia and research, and civil society and advocacy organizations. The interviews reveal a potential research agenda for IISD on sustainable food systems transformation in Canada and highlight that IISD could play a convening role that brings other stakeholders together.

Some of the key insights we heard:

- Respondents had questions about the sustainability and resilience of Canada's food supply chains, including on how to address the urgent need for climate action in the Canadian food and agriculture sector. Questions were also raised about food access, equity, and justice concerns (e.g., consumers, migrant workers, farm incomes).
- Respondents identified a need for a “systems approach” to address different dimensions of sustainability and a more comprehensive multi-sectoral approach to food policy, rather than working in siloes.
- We heard various existing challenges to effective, sustainable food systems policy, including a lack of broad consensus and a clear path forward for food policy in Canada, a lack of incentives for sufficient climate action in agriculture, and issues between municipal, provincial, and federal jurisdictions.



Respondents highlighted potential opportunities for IISD to:

- Play a convening role and support multistakeholder dialogues to build a shared vision and consensus on sustainable food systems in Canada.
- Support inclusive policy discussions and highlight sustainability, equity, and justice issues across the food system.
- Engage with emerging sustainability and green recovery policy conversations and opportunities for food systems transformation by playing a research role to provide evidence-based policy recommendations.

Five Examples of Research Themes

We found from our project activities and interviews that despite the valiant efforts of many policy advocates and researchers, some sustainable food systems issues and themes lack the attention they deserve in research and policy in Canada. Below are five examples. One recurring and overarching finding from our research was a need for an equitable and holistic approach to food systems research and policy development, encompassing healthy people, animals, and ecosystems.



Trade and sustainability tensions: How do we balance self-reliance and exports, including the export goals in the Barton Report and increased yields, with sustainability and equity? IISD has unique expertise on trade that could be leveraged for conversations in Canada.



Labour and market issues: This includes issues such as barriers to farming for marginalized groups, trends in producer income, labour shortages and foreign worker issues, market concentration in Canadian and global food systems, and more.



Access, agency, and food security: Organizations such as Food Secure Canada are at the forefront of research and advocacy in this area. IISD can help improve holistic thinking about food production systems and equity and make the connection to overall ecosystem health and people's well-being (for example, sustainable diets).



Climate risks and impacts in food production: Climate change will affect the entire food system, from crop production, contaminants, and food safety to the disruption of food supply chains (including transport), impacting exports and trade and more. There is already some momentum on climate change action in agriculture, but there is a need to expand this work.



Agricultural land use, water use, and biodiversity: Many organizations already work on these issues, but IISD is well placed to support other stakeholders by connecting the dots between social, economic, and environmental components. This includes, for example, helping to determine how sustainable or regenerative agriculture can put money in farmers' pockets.

Overall Findings

The results of our project activities point to two fundamental areas where IISD could contribute policy-focused research to advance sustainable food systems in Canada:

- Understanding how international and domestic objectives are integrated.
- Using a “three-pronged” approach for food policy—integrating the social pillar of agriculture and food into current economic and environmental approaches

We landed on **five priority areas** of research and policy work that IISD could pursue in the short term. Overall, our project findings suggest that having broad research that applies across sectors and regions is helpful because so much existing research and projects often work in isolation and are incremental in this space.



FIVE AREAS FOR POTENTIAL WORK ON SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS



1. Advise on a “game plan” for effective emissions reductions in Canadian agriculture and food systems and/or Canadian food and dietary choices.



2. Evidence-based policy solutions to incent sustainable agricultural practices, such as analyzing the potential of regenerative agriculture or conducting risk management-related research.



3. Tracking key data on sustainable food systems and supporting food systems literacy, since better data means a better-informed debate, developing important baselines, and bringing new perspectives to the table.



4. Evaluating fiscal barriers and opportunities to support resiliency in agriculture, for example, conducting research on farm income, applying the lens of “just transition” to agriculture, or identifying the “business case” for a sustainable transition.



5. Working through a “food systems” lens and promoting holistic and equitable food policy development as part of Canada’s sustainable development pathway. This is a “how” as well as a “what”: first, by applying an equity lens across our food-related work, and second, by convening and participating in multistakeholder and rights-holder dialogues with other organizations.

Conclusion

IISD has strong potential to accelerate and increase our impact on sustainable food systems in Canada. We can leverage our existing expertise in international trade and investment, agricultural transformation, energy and climate, subsidies, Experimental Lakes Area science, water policy, resilience and adaptation, and much more. More importantly, we can leverage what IISD staff are interested in and excited about, including mainstreaming equity, into our work internally and with external partners, stakeholders, and rights-holders. We hope this project can inform and inspire future discussions and action, particularly opportunities for collaboration with others!