

PROGRAM BRIEF

**Common Ground Canada Network:
 Building relationships for just and sustainable
 agriculture and food systems transitions**



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Introduction


The Common Ground Canada Network¹ (CGCN) is a national partnership of social science and humanities (SSH) researchers, community organizations, Indigenous leaders, farmers, policymakers, and civil society groups working together to transform Canada’s agriculture and food systems in pursuit of a sustainable, net-zero future. CGCN recognizes that climate change is not just a technical problem requiring the expertise of natural scientists and engineering; it is also a problem of *relationships* between people and the land, between rural and urban communities, between Canada and the world, and between people within/and food systems. An initial team of 49 academics at 13 institu-

tions and 22 nonprofit/nongovernmental organizations responded to a joint opportunity from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) to form a Social Science Research Network on Sustainable Agriculture in a Net-Zero Economy, and Common Ground, with its focus on relations and relationships, was the winning proposal.

Background and Rationale

CGCN members recognize that agriculture and food systems are central to the climate crisis, with food systems contributing up to one-third of all greenhouse gas emissions. At the same time, food systems are deeply vulnerable to climate change impacts such as floods, droughts, and storms. Addressing the complex intersections of food and climate is not simply a technological challenge of crop and technique optimization or digital agriculture. Food is inherently social, involving people in every stage—including how it is produced, pro-

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cessed, distributed, consumed, and disposed of, and who is involved at every step. Because of this, shifting agriculture and food systems toward sustainability requires a deeper understanding of history, values, and human relationships. Accordingly, CGCN brings the strengths of the SSH together with food system actors to examine not just *how* we reduce emissions, but also *who* benefits, *who* bears the costs, and how we ensure a fair and inclusive transition.

The CGCN's Goals

The CGCN's overall goal is to make SSH knowledge and expertise accessible, practical, and genuinely useful for the people and organizations leading Canada's transition to more sustainable agriculture and food systems. To do this, the network is pursuing four objectives:

1. Coordinate and formalize a community of SSH expertise on sustainable agriculture and food systems.
2. Forge connections among researchers, Indigenous and settler communities, organizations, governments, and industry to share knowledge and foster collaboration.
3. Develop holistic sustainability goals that go beyond carbon reduction to encompass equity, justice, reconciliation, and right relations.
4. Direct resources strategically to the areas where they can have significant impact.

Common Ground's Pillars

To guide its work, CGCN is organized around four pillars of social relations:

1. **People and Land**—Exploring issues such as land ownership, Indigenous sovereignty, conservation, fisheries, and how humans relate to the land and water that sustains us.
2. **Rural and Urban Communities**—Studying and strengthening the interdependence of rural producers and urban consumers;

understanding what rural communities need to be like to support sustainable food production for all; urban food production.

3. **Canada and the World**—Investigating how Canada's food systems are connected globally through trade, migration, and shared environmental responsibilities.
4. **People in and around Food Systems**—Addressing, for example, equity, labor, and access to healthy, culturally appropriate food.

These pillars are designed to connect communities and areas that might otherwise be siloed, whether by geography or by discipline. CGCN recognizes the overlaps across pillars as opportunities for collaboration rather than complications. All pillars are underpinned by three core assumptions: first, that agriculture is one component of larger *food systems* that encompass the social, political, economic, and environmental contexts of, and the processes, institutions, and regulations that shape, food production, distribution, consumption, and disposal. Second, as we undertake this work on the ancestral territories of many Indigenous peoples, on lands that were stolen and along coasts that remain sites of competing rights claims, we assert that there is *no way* to build a research network about food systems and agriculture without actually creating “common ground” between settlers and Indigenous peoples and the many other histories and worldviews that shape our approaches. Third, we bring attention to the interrelated issues of justice, ethics, livelihoods, reconciliation, social inequality, marginalization, social impacts and other aspects of the just transition in our food systems work.

Partnership Approach

The CGCN is grounded in the belief that no single sector, discipline, or community can transform food systems alone.

Impactful change requires partnership involving diverse backgrounds and areas of expertise. Since launching, CGCN has grown to include approximately 200 researchers from over 20 uni-

versities, engaging with over 70 community networks, 122 academic networks, and 60 community organizations. Furthermore, upon receiving funding, CGCN partnered with the Food Communities Network, a coast-to-coast-to-coast network of over 400 community actors who are actively working to improve food systems in Canada.

Activities

Within each pillar, researchers and community partners are working on small initiatives they have collaboratively designed to move work ahead or fill a gap in their subject area. Some have focused on taking existing projects “the last mile,” while others have started new pilot research. For example, members of the Rural pillar are working on a pilot survey of food hubs across Canada, and members of the Land pillar are supporting the development of a national database of land tenure models. In addition to these pillar-based projects, an Indigenous Circles team is developing a series of events to engage and support Indigenous communities who are working toward sustainable food systems goals. In order to support these various initiatives and meet its objective of formalizing and coordinating its community of expertise, CGCN created an online database of SSH food systems experts in Canada. Built using survey data, the network retains information on areas of expertise, community partnerships, and active projects. The database will remain open for new additions and is available to all members to search for potential collaborators, speakers, etc. We are building a parallel database of community-level actors (e.g. NGOs, municipal initiatives, grassroots groups, advocacy organizations and more), which will also be accessible to all members. Most recently, working with civil servants at AAFC, the CGCN launched an informal discussion series that aims to foster knowledge exchange about scholarly and policy priorities between researchers and government

staff. The CGCN is planning a hybrid food systems conference at Lakehead University (Orillia) in 2026, which will involve Common Ground and several other networks. Across all initiatives, CGCN is working toward greater inclusivity and diversity. For instance, by investing in simultaneous French-English interpretation for Common Ground events and ensuring most funded activities will benefit a community partner. Future plans for Common Ground include launching an Evaluation Team focused on the development or refinement of sustainable food systems indicators, and sending a delegation of CG members to the EU to learn from food systems experts, as well as forge connections and explore possible collaborations there.

Training and Mentorship

Over the next five years, the network aims to train at least 56 student research assistants and three postdoctoral fellows. These trainees will gain hands-on experience in research, policy engagement, knowledge mobilization, and partnership building.

Conclusion

CGCN foregrounds social relations because so many food systems sustainability solutions “hit a wall” in the form of a misalignment within the system they intend to change—an evidence-based health intervention might bump up against an entrenched inequity that must be resolved for the intervention to work; a recommendation to change a food safety regulation might run into jurisdictional misalignments. The CGCN believes that expanding knowledge about social relations across its pillars along with a holistic view of agriculture, food systems, and diverse modes of food procurement will train researchers and policymakers to anticipate relational barriers and opportunities, and work collaboratively to address them. 