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DEMONSTRATING THE VALUE OF REGIONAL AGRICULTURAL SUPPORT

***Tools From a Year-Long Evaluation Engagement With
Agri-Food Organizations From Across BC***

Part of the Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District's System Change project
Expanding the Influence of Regional Agricultural Support

van^{co}uver
foundation



ALBERNI-CLAYOQUOT
REGIONAL DISTRICT

WHY THIS FOCUS ON EVALUATION?

This evaluation exercise aimed to illustrate *why and how* Regional Agricultural Support organizations (RAS) are an important link and structural component of BC's agricultural support system. We wanted to clearly demonstrate the important role that RAS play in expanding local food harvests and markets, thereby expanding their opportunities for core funding and governmental support.

RAS help to support Provincial mandates at a regional level. We hope this evaluation project helps them to be better recognized for their contributions.

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The ACRD's food system work is grounded on the traditional territories of the Hupacasath, Tseshah, Hesquiaht, Ahousaht, Tla-o-qui-aht, Yuułu?iŋ'at̓h, Toquaht, Huu-ay-aht, Ditidaht, and Uchucklesaht First Nations, and extends across what is now commonly known as the Province of BC. We offer gratitude for our uninvited presence here and the Indigenous stewardship of these lands over time immemorial.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

As part of its 3 year System Change project, *Expanding the Influence of Regional Agricultural Support*, the Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District (ACRD) convened a 'Core-8' group of RAS from across the Province in order to share knowledge, build relationships, and explore development of a common voice. A key focus area for year one was on developing and sharing simple tools for evaluation and measurement of impact.

For the purpose of this project, Regional Agriculture Support (RAS) is defined as: Any organization that: (1) Seeks to provide general supports for agriculture from within a specific and defined area in BC, and; (b) Leads and determines priorities, management, and structure from within its specific region

PARTNERS AND COLLABORATORS

A primary partner in this Evaluation component was Capital Region Food and Agriculture Initiative Roundtable (CRFAIR). Other members of the Core-8 RAS group include: District A Farmers' Institute (DAFI), Kamloops Food Policy Council (KFPC), Kootenay-Boundary Farm Advisors (KBFA), Lillooet Agriculture and Food Society (LAFS), Nanaimo Food Share (NFS), Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako (RDBN), and North Okanagan Land to Table Network (NOL2T).

"The ACRD's System Change project sets out to test a regional model for food system and agricultural support. Strong regional structures will influence Provincial frameworks and ensure accommodation of the unique contextual realities of BC's various geographical regions and producer populations.

By bridging and supporting local organizations, building a BC-wide network of other regionally-driven organizations, and engaging in targeted education and resource development, we will support change in the way producers, Indigenous stakeholders, and communities are supported within Province-wise agricultural frameworks, ensuring efficacy, long-term sectoral growth, and diverse cultural relevancy."

- ACRD System Change public statement



WHY REGIONAL AGRICULTURAL SUPPORT MATTERS - A SUMMARY FOR FUNDERS

RAS have achieved significant successes through their work but have limited influence where opportunities for local food system growth conflict with Provincial regulations or complex barriers such as a changing climate and expensive local infrastructure. Overcoming these barriers requires a high-level, organized, and collaborative approach, one that explicitly includes these voices from on-the-ground.

Community-based, on-the-ground support also helps producers, Indigenous communities, and other local food system actors with their day-to-day needs and priorities in a way that is geographically tailored, in real-time, and culturally appropriate. This mentorship, knowledge-sharing, and hands-on involvement comes from a standpoint with an evolving and intimate understanding of a particular community's unique needs.

SYSTEMIC STRUCTURAL GAPS

The Province has structures in place for supporting food systems and agriculture, and both Ministry of Health (MoH) and Ministry of Agriculture and Food (MAF) are active players. However, it is challenging for Provincial ministries to effectively engage individuals within communities across BC. The Ministry of Health does offer funding organizational support to regional food security organizations, but these organizations do not always have strong producer ties or an intimate understanding of agricultural issues.

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The Federal government has programs to fund Provinces, based in part on the priorities and needs of the Province. Both the Federal and Provincial governments have various agri-programs, including for Indigenous communities and for larger agricultural industry stakeholders, but there are gaps in communicating the opportunities to local community members and in supporting applications and program participation. Support is also often lacking for extension services and for small or community-scale food production initiatives. RAS activities help to fill these gaps.

CORE PLAYERS IN A COMPLEX FOOD SYSTEM

RAS are key members in many regional committees, and frequently collaborate with others to develop and secure funding for new food system or agri-food projects. They're front-line workers, in terms of connecting and developing relationship with producers, other food harvesters, and the local public.

With the exception of the RDBN's programs, however, all Core-8 RAS struggle to secure core funding. They rely heavily on time-bound, project-based grants and consistently face existential stressors. This lack of funding stability can result in short-term fire fighting and energy expenditures just to survive. Core funding, in contrast, allows RAS to adapt and respond to important emerging issues, in real-time. It's also essential for developing community relationships, communications, and knowledge-sharing, activities which are indispensable at the local level and are not typically supported in project-based funding.

BRIDGING, NETWORKS, AND COLLABORATION

RAS across the Province have long been doing community-based food system work in isolation, without formal connections to other (external) initiatives. Increases to RAS capacity allows for deeper engagement in supportive province-wide networks, reducing redundancy within the whole, increasing organizational effectiveness, and supporting development of a common voice to better influence those in greater positions of power.

Within a region, an agri-food network, consisting of local governments, regional organizations, and local food harvesters allows each to learn from each other, scale up programming, and collaborate for greater community impact.

Finally, formal structures and roles are required for bridging between regions and the Province, so that Provincial programs are relevant and appropriate to the needs of communities across BC. These channels for upstream feedback support efficacy, long-term sectoral growth, and diverse cultural relevancy.



HOW DOES RAS IMPACT COMMUNITIES?

THEMES AND COMMONALITIES IN RAS GOALS AND ACTIVITIES

While every RAS is unique, the following are part of most programs to some extent:

- ▶ They build and maintain strong connections to the local agri-food community through events, newsletters, and social media;
- ▶ They share information with producers from higher levels of government;
- ▶ They actively engage local agri-food actors to understand local perspectives about needs and challenges, then share that information upstream where opportunities exist;
- ▶ They host workshops, forums for discussion, and other opportunities for learning;
- ▶ They bridge health and agriculture interests at the community level;
- ▶ They acknowledge Indigenous food sovereignty as integral to a healthy food system;
- ▶ They initiate and manage programs that support sectoral growth when opportunity and needs coincide;
- ▶ They engage with diverse community stakeholders, often working in collaboration with others to achieve desired outcomes.

A BRIEF SKETCH OF THE CORE 8'S VARIOUS PROGRAMS¹

North Okanagan Land to Table Network (NOT2T)

NOL2T started in 2015 as an informal group of food system and farming advocates. Their three primary priorities are: economic prosperity (local food economy), environmental sustainability, and increasing access to healthy local food. They convene annual forums and community events, maintain and develop networks via communications and info-sharing channels, and carry out priority-based projects in collaboration with others in the community. Some key projects from 2021:

- ▶ An Eat/Think/Vote campaign engaged Federal election candidates on the topics of food sovereignty, food insecurity, resilient local food systems, and more. 42 participants were present, and they shared food system perspectives that they wanted candidates to address. The event prompted candidates from different political parties to subsequently reach out to one another and further discuss what they heard.
- ▶ Partnership with Okanagan Indian band (OKIB), who had lost significant food stores due to flooding and fires. NOL2T helped to recreate trade routes to get halibut from the coast, supported members to hunt, and organized a Meat Drive. Through the Drive, \$8000 of meat was purchased from local farmers who were worried about feed shortages and needed to reduce their stock after drought, fires, and flooding, but who couldn't sell animals because of road closures. The meat was then distributed to OKIB.

"The connections, validations and hope inspired through collaboration and commonality. Emphasizing the very high value of collaboration opportunities with First Nations people." - Annual Forum Participant, on what was most memorable from the event²

Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako (RDBN)

RDBN is the only Core 8 RAS which is fully funded and staffed by the regional district. It is also the only one which does not report challenges with securing core program funding. They have 2 part-time Coordinators, one for each of the Eastern and Western regions.

¹ For more information on members of the Core 8 RAS, please see page 10 of the [ACRD's 2020 System Change Report](#):

² From Bridging Gaps, Exploring Local Food Access in the North Okanagan https://landtotablenetwork.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Forum-Report_Bridging-Gaps.pdf

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- ▶ The RDBN website includes a comprehensive resources for the sector, including a *Connecting Consumers' to Producers Online Directory*, which includes info and benefits about various local products, a regional producer directory, farmers' market and retail sources listings, and resources and tips for food preservation;
- ▶ They offer annual grant funding of up to \$1100 per municipality or electoral area to support agricultural events, which can be used to purchase local food or for the venue, promotion, or music, etc;
- ▶ They maintain the *Growing Opportunities* monthly e-newsletter and podcast series;
- ▶ They support various industry needs, including via lobby and education efforts for topics such as vet shortages, meat processing, invasive species, youth in agriculture, infrastructure assets, and climate change.

Kootenay Boundary Farm Advisors Program (KBFA)

KBFA is the most specialized of the Core-8. Their focus is explicitly centred on providing extension services to producers, offering technical (pests, soils, weed, water), educational (workshops, field days), and coordination (business planning, research support, farm planning) services. They are funded by, and provide services for, the Regional Districts of Kootenay Boundary, Central Kootenay, and East Kootenay, and the Columbia Basin Trust.

- ▶ KBFA created and implemented a comprehensive evaluation tool to measure their impacts and reach.
- ▶ In one year, they made 60+ farm visits, gave advice to producers on 440 different issues, fostered producer connections to 142 other experts, and organized 20 events and field days.
- ▶ They offered numerous online workshops and programs throughout the pandemic, which were well received and attended by producers.

Capital Region Food and Agriculture Initiative Roundtable (CRFAIR)

CRFAIR is the backbone organization for the Good Food Network and convener of many other regional coalitions. *"The Good Food Network is a regional system of organizations, communities, non-profits, grassroots initiatives, teachers, researchers, health promoters, students, food processors, local government, planners, fishers and farmers working*

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towards a shared vision for a healthy, sustainable and more equitable food system in the Capital Region”³. The shared-impact goals that drive its work are Food Access, Food Literacy and the Local Food Economy. CRFAIR also undertakes other projects that are consistent with their own vision, mission, and values, including:

- ▶ Tailoring the Province’s New Entrant Strategy to their own region, then sharing it with local governments and a farmer focus group in order to bring a regionalized context to decision makers;
- ▶ Farmer 2 Farmer, Good Food Gathering, Flavour Trails, and other educational and networking events;
- ▶ Advocacy in areas such as Farm Land Trusts; Food Literacy, Justice, and Belonging; and Indigenous Food Sovereignty

“We are thrilled at the leadership your organization continues to show in moving our region towards food sovereignty and a sustainable food system. The tangible outcomes achieved so far, and the coordination of the many stakeholders, is excellent work.” —

Sandra Richardson, CEO, Victoria Foundation⁴

Kamloops Food Policy Council (KFPC)

The goals of the Kamloops Food Policy Council are to cultivate meaningful partnerships, influence policy, implement community-based food programs, and provide community education to support food literacy. Their food system vision is of one which is regenerative, sovereign, and just. KFPC maintains a network of over 550 members and 100 organizations. Since 2020, they have leveraged \$1.14M for economic recovery through the food sector. Current and recent projects include:

- ▶ An assessment of the Kamloops Food System, as defined by KFPC and their core program goals (see pg. 14 for their measurement methodology);
- ▶ A community fruit gleaning project and Butler Urban Farm;
- ▶ The Stir Food Hub;
- ▶ Policy advocacy around land trusts and federal tax implications and otherwise;
- ▶ Contributing to the creation of the Kamloops Food and Urban Agriculture Plan, the Kamloops Agriculture Area Plan, and a Kamloops Farm Hub Feasibility study;

³ [Good Food Network 2021/22 Progress Report](#)

⁴ <http://www.crfair.ca/our-plan-1>

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- ▶ Managing a community seed library; and
- ▶ Hosting community events and educational workshops, as well as a bi-monthly networking meeting.

"We are just over three years into the implementation of the Food and Urban Agriculture Plan which was the result of substantial community consultation and was supported by the KFPC. There is a strong connection in the plan to the work of the KFPC to help carry out the community actions. This is a reflection of City Council's belief in the strong leadership, knowledge and experience that the KFPC and its members bring to the community food action initiatives. The City has enjoyed a strong and productive working relationship with the KFPC for many years, and it cannot be overstated how important the KFPC has been when discussing food action programs that have fostered the development of numerous local initiatives that have become sustainable and thriving food security initiatives." - Ben Chobater, Community Development Coordinator, City of Kamloops

District A Farmers' Institutes (DAFI)

The District A Farmers' Institute was established around the 1920s. It is the only Core-8 member which has no paid staff support, but the one which has the strongest connections to - and is in fact wholly led by - primary agricultural producers. Farmers' Institutes in BC have a significant advantage and opportunity where it comes to communicating with the BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food: by law, under the province's Farmers and Women's Institute Act, they are entitled to meet directly with the Ministry on an annual basis. They are also a critical avenue for sharing and receiving information with the producer community, such as updates about; outbreaks like Avian Influenza; grant and program opportunities; Provincial regulations such as Premises ID and groundwater licensing; emergency management for agriculture and other educational events; and otherwise. They participate, usually without honoraria, on the Coastal Invasive Species Board of Directors, Climate Action Initiative advisory groups, and various municipal and regional government advisory committees. Despite their lack of funding and volunteer-led coordination, DAFI and their member Farmer Institutes across Vancouver Island, Gulf Islands, and the Sunshine Coast, have undertaken significant policy advocacy activities over the past few years, regarding topics such as:

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- ▶ Changes to the Meat Inspection Regulations that allow an avenue for on-farm slaughter across BC;
- ▶ Legislating changes governing ALR lands, specifically Bills 52 and 15;
- ▶ Rising cost of farm insurance;
- ▶ Unannounced SPCA farm inspections;
- ▶ Invasive species management and livestock predation.

Nanaimo Foodshare (NFS)

Nanaimo Foodshare is one of several Food Security Hubs on Vancouver Island receiving funding from Island Health. NFS values include: Local access (food sovereignty in the region); Empowerment (hand-ups not hand-outs); Resilience (supporting sustainable access to food); Inclusivity (ensuring accessible and equitable access to food and food knowledge); and Collaboration (working together to fill gaps and serve the region). They manage numerous programs including:

- ▶ Food Access programs, including Good Food Box programs for Seniors
- ▶ Agricultural training and employment programs focusing on young people and people with diverse abilities;
- ▶ Food skill-building programs to teach nutrition, food preservation, gardening, and cooking to youth, school children, and neurodiverse adults
- ▶ Facilitation of a newly established Nanaimo Food Policy Council (funded by City of Nanaimo)
- ▶ Urban Farms in partnership with Growing Opportunities Farm Coop, Growing Opportunities Farm Project, and Five Acre Farm;
- ▶ A fruit gleaning project, school food and gardens, and community events such as Seedy Sunday.

"I am continually impressed with Nanaimo Foodshare and how they provide community leadership in so many ways. From their advocacy around food security issues and work on urban farms, to their programs supporting employment for those with disabilities, to their efforts to reduce their own organization's environmental impact, they dig deep to address societal concerns in meaningful ways." - Tyler Brown, Councillor, City of Nanaimo⁵

⁵ <https://nanaimofoodshare.ca>

Lillooet Agriculture and Food Society (LAFS)

LAFS was convened 2016 by the Squamish-Lillooet Regional District's (SLRD) Area B, District of Lillooet, & St'át'imc Agricultural Plan Working Group. LAFS work includes: collaborating on research, education and awareness initiatives that foster responsible growth of the agriculture and food system in the region; opening up new opportunities and markets for local products and services; and identifying effective ways to get healthy, delicious fresh local food to the world. Specific projects include:

- ▶ Market Access and Growth Strategy;
- ▶ Agri-Tourism Strategy;
- ▶ Lillooet Grown branding and marketing strategy;
- ▶ Abbatoir Feasibility Study;
- ▶ Farmer Directory;
- ▶ Farmer and public outreach and events;
- ▶ BCAFM Nutrition Coupon Program;
- ▶ Food Skills workshops, education and outreach; and
- ▶ Agricultural Infrastructure Project.

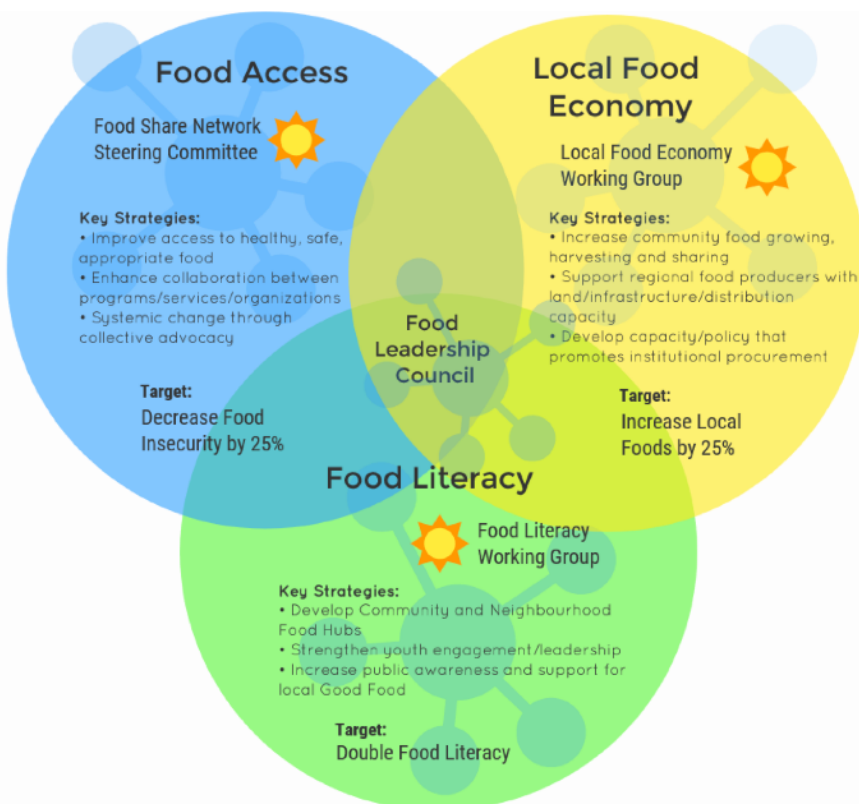


MODELS FOR EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

Following are various examples of how agri-food organizations are measuring impact and conducting evaluation. These models could be applied to new RAS evaluation projects.

1) IMPACT AREAS - ACCESS, LITERACY, & LOCAL FOOD ECONOMY

CRFAIR's Good Food Network uses these three impact areas to evaluate their program and activities, though others could be substituted if deemed more relevant to an organization. Simple evaluation via an Impact model could use the questions - What are your intended outcomes/impacts, and are you moving towards or away from them?



In practice, to work towards specific impacts ambitious targets must be set. Ambition is important, as real change often involves breaking through numerous substantial barriers.

Once targets are established, strategies are set to reach them, then indicators for measurement⁶ are determined and baselines established. Indicators are ideally very specific, but more subjective or qualitative indicators can be used as well.

⁶ For examples of specific Indicators, see page 19 of the [Good Food Primer](#)

2) INDICATOR SELECTION - IS IT RELEVANT, IMPORTANT, & USEFUL?

In 2019, Island Health used these three questions to help determine which indicators would be used to measure progress towards their food security goals.

The number of potential indicators available can be overwhelming, and this framework can be used to 'grade' each. For example, a potential indicator is graded on each question - relevance, importance, and usefulness - and given a score between 1-5. Then, the three scores are totalled, and the indicator is assigned a final grade out of a possible 15. The highest-graded indicators are chosen for use.

<i>Question</i>	<i>Reflections for Analysis...</i>
Is it Relevant?	Does it have a clear relationship to current organizational priorities and strategic plans?
Is it Important?	Is it important to the population you work with, to funders, or to other system actors?
Is it Useful?	Does it have practical applications in your day-to-day work? Does it help identify meaningful and actionable opportunities for improving upon (and/or celebrating) your policies and programs?

Table adapted from: Food Security Indicator Area Prioritization, a presentation by Jesse Veenstra, 2019

3) FROM SEED TO FRUIT - WHERE ARE WE AT?

Kamloops Food Policy Council commissioned the 2021 Assessment of Kamloops Food System to better understand to what extent they were achieving their vision and goals for a food system that is regenerative, sovereign and just. A report was prepared by Emily Pletsch and Robyn McLean that used a seed-to-fruit metric to measure progress towards 7 components of their food system vision. A seed represented little to no development towards that component, and fruit represented an area that is very strong and where gaps are well-managed.

Their framework is simple, colourful, and easy to understand. A simple glance can provide direction and an intuitive understanding, yet it is also a starting point to looking more deeply into any of the components.

Food System Vision	Current Status
A resilient food system: healthy land and water	 Sprout
Indigenous food sovereignty: decolonizing relations and the restoration of ecological food systems	 Seed
Alleviation of poverty: equitable access to healthy, culturally appropriate food	 Sprout
Our network: celebrating people as gifts and the cultivation of connections	 Flower
Local economic vitality: support for regional food providers	 Sprout
Food literacy: intergenerational knowledge transfer and sharing best practices and research	 Plant
Food Commons: the revitalization of local food assets and the sharing economy	 Seed
 Seed-Little to no development; lots of potential  Sprout-Area is beginning to develop  Plant-Moderate development  Flower- Area is strong; some gaps remain  Fruit- Area is very strong; gaps are well managed	

From: Assessment of Kamloops Food System, 2020

SPECIFIC TOOLS FOR RAS EVALUATION

Through the course of this project, several tools have been developed which RAS or other organizations are welcome to use or adapt to their needs. These include a Survey Template, a Framework for Survey Development, a RAS Evaluation Framework, and a monthly evaluation tool that to support tracking of metrics.

1) SURVEY TEMPLATE

This template was originally designed to be customized then distributed by each Core-8 RAS, within their own regions, with results collated both regionally and BC-wide by the ACRD. It was intended to aide the argument that RAS provides critical and useful supports to BC producers, processors, and food harvesters.

Various challenges, including general 'survey fatigue' and the varied internal communication priorities and timelines of Core-8 members, led to a change of plan. Instead, the Template itself is being made available to any organization who wishes to adapt and use it for their own purposes. These might include: evaluating how they are doing as a regional organization supporting agriculture; learning how to better support producers; understanding producer needs; understanding organizational impacts and potential areas for improvement; getting feedback from program clients; or otherwise.

Because it was intended for use for the Core-8 RAS and this evaluation project, its questions are related to the RAS Evaluation Framework, described in number three below. However, questions can be amended as desired. The Google Survey host is free to use, but limited in formatting options. The same template could be used with a paid hosting site, offering better options for fonts, style, question formatting, and collation of responses.

[The survey template can be found online here.](#) Please do not edit the original, but feel free to duplicate or download, then use as desired.



2) SURVEY DEVELOPMENT TOOL

Much was learned while developing the survey above. In the interest of sharing knowledge, a Survey Development Tool was also developed. This framework can help guide development of a custom survey and offers tips or a checklist for important components to include. The tool can be completed collaboratively with partners. There is space to document specific roles and timelines as well.

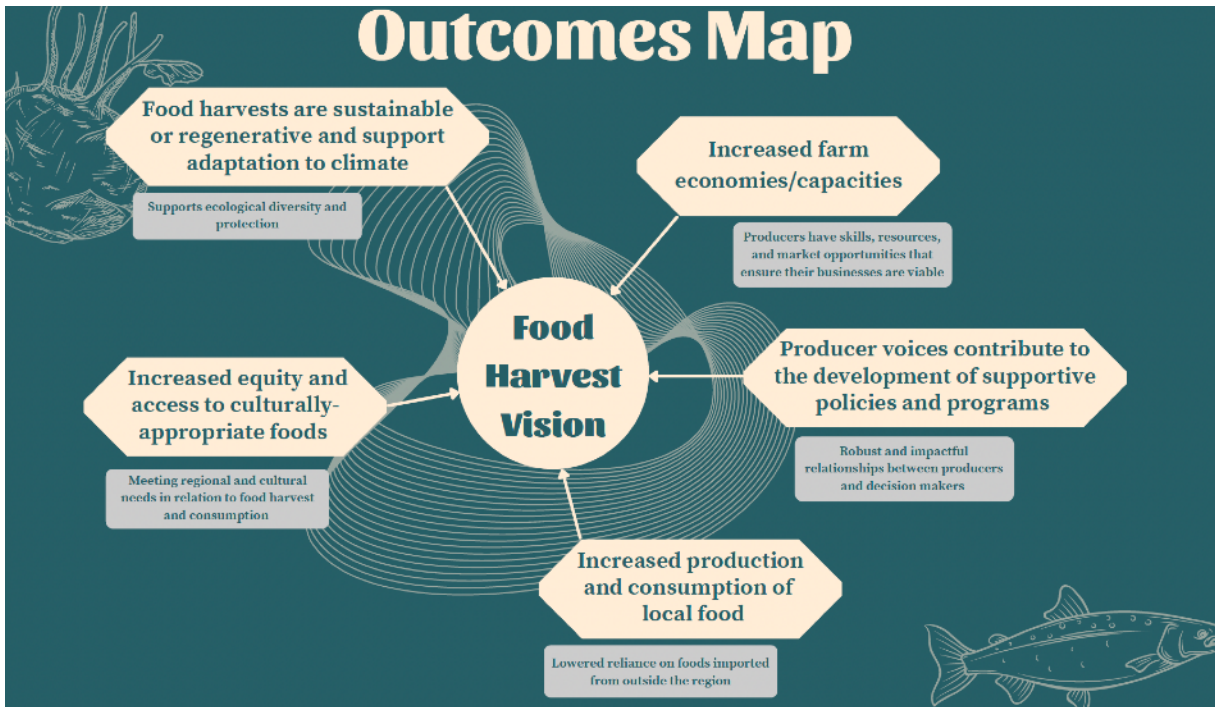
[Find the Survey Development Tool here.](#) As with the survey, please feel free to duplicate or download, but do not alter the original.

3) EVALUATION FRAMEWORK FOR RAS

The first activity of this evaluation project was to develop a framework for RAS evaluation, based on feedback of the Core-8 RAS and others. The aim was to create a simple picture of common RAS goals, separated by theme, and examples of related indicators and measurement tools. The framework was used as the base to develop the Survey Template and Monthly Evaluation Tool. The 5 outcome goals decided on were:

1. Increased farm economies/capacities,
 - ▶ *Producers have the skills, resources, and market opportunities necessary to ensure their businesses are viable;*
2. Food harvests are sustainable or regenerative and support adaptation to climate change,
 - ▶ *Supports ecological diversity and protection;*
3. Increased equity and access to culturally-appropriate foods,
 - ▶ *Meeting regional and cultural needs in relation to food harvest and consumption;*
4. Increased production and consumption of local food,
 - ▶ *Lowered reliance on food imported from outside the region;*
5. Producer voices contribute to the development of supportive policies and programs,
 - ▶ *Robust and impactful relationships between producers and decision-makers.*

Note that each RAS has differing priorities, based on local need and context, and each gives their own unique weight to these general themes within their programs. [The full framework, including definitions, indicators, and ideas for measurement can be found online here.](#)



4) MONTHLY EVALUATION TOOL FOR RAS

Setting up programs for evaluation and tracking of measurements can be costly, time-consuming, and difficult. This monthly evaluation tool was generated as a quick and easy way to help RAS to begin identifying and tracking useful metrics. It is intended to be used as part of general administrative routines, even daily for example, along with timesheets or routine activity logging.

The data on these monthly sheets can be collated on an annual basis, and will provide at least some degree of useful quantitative and qualitative measures. [See the tool online here.](#)



A VISION FOR THE FUTURE...

RAS are well-recognized for their contributions to thriving agriculture and food systems, both within their geographical regions and at the Provincial and Federal levels. Secure funding streams allow organizations to seamlessly carry out day-to-day operations as well as time-bound, project-based activities.

Guidelines and tools for RAS development and growth are widely available, and education and training programs are available to assist both start-ups and established programs develop skills in food system support. RAS are key collaborators in a network that brings diverse, multi-level, multi-sector, and multi-perspective stakeholders together to identify and create workable solutions for shared food and agricultural system goals.

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We offer gratitude and appreciation for the time and contributions of the many organizations and individuals who participated in this evaluation exercise, through online forums and otherwise, including: BC Agricultural Climate Adaptation Research Network; BC Cooperative Association; BC Food Web; BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food; BC Ministry of Health; Capital Regional District; Capital Region Food and Agriculture Initiative Roundtable; Comox Valley Regional District; District A Farmers' Institute; District of Saanich; Investment Agriculture Foundation of BC; Institute of Sustainable Food Systems; Kamloops Food Policy Council; Kootenay-Boundary Farm Advisors; Lillooet Agriculture and Food Society; Nanaimo Food Share; North Okanagan Land to Table Network; Nuuchahnulth Tribal Council; Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako; Regional District of East-Kootenay; Regional District of Nanaimo; Richmond Sharing Farm; Uchucklesaht Tribe Government; University of British Columbia; Young Agrarians; various organizations, governments, and staff from within the ACRD; and other individual producers and stakeholders.

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BC Agricultural Climate Adaptation
Research Network