

MA MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

COMMUNITY FOOD ASSESSMENTS: COMBINING COMMUNITY ACTION  
AND POLICY FOR A MORE JUST AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEM

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## Introduction

Globally, there is a stark contrast between the overnourished, those who consume too much food and are overweight and obese, and the undernourished, those who cannot obtain enough food for themselves and their families. This paradox is not one of production, but one of distribution, of “want amid plenty” (Poppendieck 1999). It is particularly notable in affluent countries like Canada, where food seems readily available and the standard of living is high. Not only is hunger a serious problem in Canada, but the problem can be obscured by the high quality of life that most Canadians enjoy. According to foodjustice.net, “whether they are economic, social and cultural rights, or civil and political rights, all human rights are indivisible. The right to food, a basic human right, ...is largely affected by the violation of other rights” (foodjustice.net). Hunger in Canada is a matter of public health, and of inequality, but most importantly, it is a matter of social justice.

For that matter, hunger is not the only aspect of the food system that is socially unjust. Aside from problems of access, there is also a concern over lack of control over food resources. “Control over the most basic needs of the people has been surrendered to an increasing degree to transnational companies” (Starr, 2000). The public has no voice in the decisions or priorities of these companies except as consumers. This is not only a public concern, however, but has also been expressed by small farmers, who cannot compete with larger-scale, centralized, corporate farms. This raises the related concern of not having control over where food comes from. “Food in the U.S. travels an average of 1,300 miles from the farm to the market shelf, and for most states almost 90 percent of the food supply is from non-local sources” (Allen, 1999). This is another instance of an

advancement that serves the needs of corporations, but not necessarily the needs of the public. By centralizing their resources, corporations save money. However, this alienates people from their food and the practices associated with its production, and in many cases, can lower the quality of food and have negative impacts on the environment. The food system is currently characterized by three dominant problems: food and income, which is manifested in hunger; food and health, which is manifested in a host of diet-related illnesses; and food and agriculture, which is visible in unsustainable production systems (Field 2007). I will argue that in order to resolve any of these concerns, we need to conceive as all of them as a system and seek to resolve them as a whole.

This paper is concerned with the conception of a solution to food insecurity in Canada. I will begin by reviewing the two dominant approaches to food security, the antipoverty approach and the sustainable food systems approach. I will argue that in order to establish a food secure Canada, community action to increase food access and address concerns about production, distribution and consumption needs to happen in conjunction with policy action that seeks to reduce inequality and to promote a more just and sustainable food system.

To examine this premise, I will discuss two Canadian Community Food Assessments, which will provide insight into how the food system is playing out in two communities, and what is being done to create a more balanced food system for local residents. I will also provide a discussion of the assessments' recommendations and how they see change coming about in the food system. What needs to happen in order to create food security in Canada? And with who and where are these changes to take place?

## **Key debates: Anti-Poverty vs. Sustainable Food System approach**

In response to the problem of hunger in Canada, two approaches have been promoted: the anti-poverty or anti-hunger approach, which seeks to guarantee access to the food market by ensuring adequate incomes and social assistance; and the sustainable food system, or community food security approach, which seeks to improve access to healthy and local food by addressing the fundamental problems in the food system through a combination of community and broader efforts.

### **The Antipoverty Approach to Food Security**

The antipoverty approach is based on the assumption that hunger is a result of poor people's lack of money to buy food (Power 1999: 31). The inability to purchase enough food for one's family is manifested in the growing numbers of people who rely on emergency and charitable food sources, which have emerged as a response to the failure of Canada's social safety net. As Power states, the Canadian social security system was based on "a recognition that the structural forces responsible for poverty require macroeconomic state intervention. The social security system was designed to give Canadians income security, thus alleviating poverty and hunger" (Power 1999: 30). Cuts to this system have resulted in an increase of poverty levels all over Canada, and a number of social problems, such as hunger and homelessness.

This approach sees food insecurity as inseparable from the failure of social policies, which have resulted in high rates of unemployment, minimum wages well below the poverty line, and high housing costs (Power 1999: 31). "The antipoverty approach to food security rejects the destruction of the welfare state and the neoconservative values of

individualism, competition, and inequality and proposes instead to restore values such as equality, fellowship, democracy, and humanitarianism to the foundation of social policy” (Power 1999: 31). Antipoverty activists assume that equality in Canada will mean an end to hunger, and that policies should work to eradicate poverty in order to create an environment in which food security is possible. This goal is echoed by Health Canada’s population health approach, which seeks to reduce health inequities through social justice. It is “an approach the health that aims to improve the health of the entire population and to reduce health inequities among population groups... An underlying assumption of a population health approach is that reductions in health inequities require reductions in material and social inequities” (Dietitians of Canada 2005: 2).

A related approach is the anti-hunger approach, a shorter-term approach that is focused on individual or household food security. It seeks to reduce societal costs, improve individual health, and increase social equity through emergency food and federal food programs (like those in the U.S., which subsidize farmers to allocate food to the poor) (Winne et al. in Bellows and Hamm 2002: 37).

While anti-poverty activists emphasize the importance of social policy and programs to promote equality, they do not consider why these programs are necessary in the first place. It is argued that capitalism is by nature an unjust system, which leads to the question of whether it is possible for social policy to put an end to inequality if it continues to endorse a system that is based on the profiting of a few at the expense of many.

## **The Sustainable Food Systems Approach to Food Security**

While the antipoverty approach is focused on marketplace access to food, the systems approach takes a broader focus, on all of the activities in the food system, including production, distribution, preparation, preservation, consumption, recycling and disposal of waste, and support systems (Power 1999: 32). It acknowledges the different parts of the food system as being interrelated and dependent on one another. So, while it addresses the problem of hunger, it is also meaningful to people of different classes and areas of concerns, as it takes account of all the major problems in all areas of the food system, such as:

“the marginalization of small-scale primary producers and processors; loss of rural ways of life; horizontal and vertical integration, consolidation, and monopolization in the food industry and agriculture; manipulation of food and its packaging to increase profit; and alienation of food consumers from food producers and from the food that they eat, including “deskilling,” or the loss of people’s abilities to grow and prepare food” (Goodman and Redclift and Winson, in Power 1999, 31-32).

Just as globalization has brought the unprecedented entrenchment of capitalist relations and has alienated consumers in general, commodification and corporate control over the food supply are primary concerns of this approach.

The approach defines community food security as, “all persons obtaining at all times a culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through local non-emergency sources” and seeks to ensure this through community-based, hunger-prevention activities, which focus on both immediate and long-term needs (Allen 1999: 119). Some of these activities include, “community food planning, direct marketing, community gardening and urban food production, strengthening food assistance, farmland protection, food retail strategies, community and economic development” (Allen 1999: 120). They often seek to create alternatives to traditional, market food access, through different distribution

arrangements, and seek to empower community members through self-provisioning activities, which are seen as more dignified than relying on donations and leftovers.

Allen discusses the potential of initiatives that empower community members by involving them in a community approach to food security. While self-provisioning promotes a more active role for consumers in the production of their own food, it also allows for politicization through determination of their communities' own priorities. This can foster a sense of civic engagement and enhance the sense of community and public space in places where they may be lacking. "Until individuals perceive it as immediate and personal—salient—such a circumstance will rarely inspire conscious protest" (Goldberg in Allen 1999: 120). These initiatives provide community members with the opportunity to connect the personal with the political. And, since these projects are motivated and run by community members, they speak to the concern that community food actions represent the wants of middle-class activists, instead of the needs of low-income people (Power 2006).

While Allen recognizes the potential benefits of community action, she is concerned about romanticizing the concept of local action. By emphasizing strategies at the regional level, Allen feels that localism can subordinate material and cultural difference, which could result in replication of the differences that create food insecurity in the first place. Further to that, while food insecurity problems are felt at the local level, they are not necessarily caused at that level (Allen 1999: 121). In other words, while grassroots actions are important, they are not enough to solve food insecurity, which needs to be addressed at higher levels by political economic structures. Allen says,



“achieving food security requires *both* a process of developing self-reliant food systems and a political effort to achieve justice and equity” (Allen 1999: 127, my emphasis).

### **Combined Approach**

Perhaps the two approaches are not mutually exclusive. In order to recognize the potential for empowerment and action at the community level, but also the need to acknowledge systemic factors and elicit broader change, I will now discuss the possibility for a combination of the two approaches. “Given the diversity of local circumstances, activist strategies like anti-hunger and community food security (CFS) movements seem less polarized opposites than complementary and simultaneously operating responses to community-based food needs” (Bellows and Hamm 2002: 41). While community development activities are making gains in improving access to healthy, local, and culturally-appropriate foods in low income communities, many experts argue that if change is only promoted at the local level, governments will be allowed to shirk responsibilities for their citizens and existing class divisions will be exacerbated.

For example, Power and Allen both suggest the danger of developing a two-tiered food system, in which those who can afford to participate in the market system will do so, while those who cannot will be forced to rely on urban agriculture and other self-provisioning activities (Allen 1999: 126, Power 1999: 34). Allen also notes that while some CFS initiatives promote self-reliance, they do not consider that most poor people are already overwhelmed with the existing labour demands in their own jobs and households, and are not able or willing to take on the extra work that would be required of producing and preparing one’s own food (Allen 1999: 125). Since the responsibility for food provision tends to remain in the hands of women, this would not only result in

increasing burdens on the poor, but particularly for poor women. Bellows and Hamm suggest that taking a local-based approach could result in a “patchwork” of failed and successful initiatives, which do not inform those of other communities (Bellows and Hamm 2002: 36).

To avoid increasing the burden on the poor, and to allow communities to learn from one another’s successes and mistakes, food security activities at the community level need to be combined with higher level changes, particularly in the creation of policies that allow people to obtain a sufficient amount of food for their families. “There will always be people who need food assistance as long as there is underemployment, unemployment, poverty-level wages, and inadequate pensions and access to food is based on ability to pay” (Allen 1999: 126). Community food security does not eliminate the need for social policy to reduce poverty and inequality. The lack of an adequate social safety net in both the U.S. and in Canada means that people will experience food emergencies whether alternative methods of provision are available or not. The establishment of adequate food programs could mean that these people do not need to turn to emergency measures, such as food banks and the charity of friends and family, to be fed.

In combining antipoverty and food systems efforts, there is a need to acknowledge the different levels and terms at which food security action needs to take place. Dietitians of Canada (DoC) recommends conceptualizing changes in three stages: initial food systems change, food systems in transition, and food systems redesign for sustainability (Dietitians of Canada 2007: 5). In the first stage, immediate problems are addressed by temporary solutions, such as food banks. In stage two, strategies seek to “build capacity

through greater involvement from those experiencing food insecurity and by strengthening current food systems” (Dietitians of Canada 2007: 5). The final stage involves broader strategies that require a long-term commitment from actors of the entire food system (Dietitians of Canada 2007: 5). In the long term, community food security efforts should move beyond the realm of the community to provincial, federal and even international policies. These efforts might include reducing socio-economic disparities, and to develop food policies at provincial and national levels that encompass environmental, health, agricultural, and other interests. It is important to consider that, even just in the realm of policy, this would involve collaboration from multiple actors. For example, food security at the federal level could involve ministries of Agriculture and Agri-Food; Environment; Fisheries and Oceans; International Trade; Health; Labour and at the provincial level, ministries of Education; Health Promotion; Transportation; Environment; Economic Development and Trade; and Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

## **Food Policy**

Lang also argues for food policies that seek to improve access and public health by taking a broad view of factors such as historical, cultural, ideological, and geographical. He points out what a shameful and strange situation it is that millions of people have trouble feeding themselves and their families despite living in prosperous countries. “We cannot understand why [people are experiencing food poverty in rich countries], let alone argue for policies which may prevent it, if we only focus on the poor or on nutrition. The lesson of studying food policy is that we need a socio-political context too” (Lang 1998: 18-19). Yes, the poor are malnourished, and also tend to have

higher rates of obesity and other diet-related illness. But we cannot pretend that this has nothing to do with the diseases and eating problems of the middle and upper classes, or the systematic destruction of the land, or the “speeding up” of the Western lifestyle and the resultant neglect of food preparation and enjoyment.

One factor that has played a strong role in the establishment or lack of existing policies is ideology, particularly that of neoliberalism. Neoliberal policies are based on the assumption that the unfettered market is the best reflection of the public’s will, and have resulted in “the privatization of public services, reduced expenditures and social services, and the downsizing and downloading of social programs [in Canada]” (Dietitians of Canada 2005: 3). DoC argues that specific changes to social programs in Canada in the 1990s (see Dietitians of Canada 2005: 4) have resulted in high levels of poverty in Canada, which have particularly affected the food security of children, single mothers, and aboriginal peoples (Dietitians of Canada 2005: 4). Rather than being driven by the public interest, it is often argued that policies are made to be conducive to commercial interests. Lang says, “the retreat from food governance has been an ideological exercise. Is public policy best subsumed by commercialism?” (Lang 1998: 21).

Existing policies in Canada around food issues are reflective of this way of thinking. MacRae notes the lack of a coherent food policy in Canada. Instead, policies and ways of operating tend to be set by commercial interests. “Powerful food-system players have excessive influence over policy. In fact, federal and provincial departments of agriculture in Canada are widely viewed as captives of farm and food-industry interests” (MacRae 1999: 187). And, since political interests tend to be represented

according to commodity or industry, there has been little effort to develop policies that consider food in any systemic way (MacRae 1999: 183).

The result of this policy approach is a host of health problems among citizens, and an agricultural system that is not sustainable. MacRae says that federal policies that are skewed towards producing for the global market result in the externalization of environmental costs (MacRae 1999: 186). And, the logic of market activities leaves the decisions around constructing a healthy diet up to the individual. Poor nutrition information requirements and the convenience and availability of unhealthy food have made for a myriad of health problems and diet-related illnesses. “[Individual responsibility for healthy food decisions] might make sense if we each paid our own health-care bills, but because we all pay for each other’s health care through the tax system, it makes sense to encourage some collective responsibility for diets” (MacRae 1999: 185). Instead of treating citizens as consumers and farms as factories for commodities, MacRae suggests taking collective action to create a food system that is focused on feeding people and ensures public and environmental health, which could be facilitated by food policy.

So what should food policy look like? MacRae suggests that “a comprehensive food policy would create a food system in which

- Everyone has enough food (quality and quantity) to be healthy;
- Food production, processing, and consumption are suited to the environmental, economic, technological, and cultural needs, potentials, and limits of the various regions of Canada;
- The food system is seen as providing an essential service, food supply and quality are dependable, and they are not threatened by social, political, economic, or environmental changes;
- Food is safe for those who produce, work with, and eat it, and it’s safe for the environment;

- Resources (energy, water, soil, genetic resources, forests, fish, wildlife) are used efficiently (in an ecological sense) and without waste;
- The resources of the food system are distributed in a way that ensures that those who perform the most essential tasks have a decent income (in particular, people in rural communities have enough work and income to maintain or improve their life and to care for the rural environment);
- The system is flexible enough to allow people to improve and adapt it to changing conditions;
- Everyone who wants to be involved in determining how the food system works has a chance to participate;
- Opportunities are available in the food system for creative and fulfilling work and social interaction; and
- Our food system allows other countries to develop food systems that express similar values” (MacRae 1999: 187-188).

In order to facilitate equal access to nutritious food that is produced in a safe and responsible way, we need policies that are directly concerned with food production, distribution, and consumption and do not just regard it as an economic issue. While MacRae’s vision of what a food policy needs to do does a good job of broadening the lens to include all parts of the cycle, and includes environmental and other issues that need to be taken into account, I think it also needs to be more explicit about addressing some of the current problems of equity in the current system. In the second point, he mentions respecting the “cultural needs” of Canadian regions, but I’m not sure this is explicit enough in protecting cultural groups who may work in food production or be food consumers, such as immigrants. And, the fourth and last points could be interpreted in a way that promotes fair labour practices and trade along the commodity chain, but this goal could be stated more plainly to prevent cultural, racial, and gender exploitation. So, along with MacRae’s recommendations for what a food policy in Canada should strive to accomplish, I think ensuring fair labour practices across the food chain needs to be ensured by policy as well.

## Universality

The breadth of changes that need to come about in the food system suggest that food security is not solely a concern for low-income people. Industrial food production and existing policies act as barriers to access to nutritious or sustainably-produced foods for everyone. For this reason, any food policy put in place should seek to facilitate *universal* access to healthy and well-produced foods. An example of the potential benefits of policies that promote universal access is the public library system, which facilitates literacy for all by making reading materials publicly available in a socially acceptable manner. This access is ensured by policy and no amount of social action could replace the free library system in the promotion of universal literacy (Field 2007). In this way, policy that promotes universal access does not only make it easier for people of all income levels to attain goods, but also removes the stigma that can be attached to targeted programs.

Power says, “food programs aimed at the poor tend to reinforce the individualistic ideology of neoconservative policies in that they suggest that the victim is to blame, rather than blaming socioeconomic policies that leave the poor without resources” (Power 1999: 34). These programs separate people ideologically according to income, and do not necessarily provide the poor with the same standard of service as others. “Programs for the poor quickly become poor programs” and are often the first to be cut in times of recession. Since universal programs are used by people of middle and upper income levels, the people whose voices are more readily heard by governments, they are more likely to maintain a higher level of service, or hear about it if they don’t (Roberts 2007). Power argues that “people in the dominant middle and upper classes set the standards for what is desirable in our society” and that “most poor people... want to be

full participants in society, including its consumerism” (Power 2006). While I agree that food policy should strive to create an equal society in which people have the right and ability to choose what and how they and their families consume, I also feel there is a need to address the dominant culture and promote better ways of producing, distributing and consuming food for everyone. While food security is essentially about ensuring a material right, it is also about ensuring social justice, which Power sees as fundamental to democracy. The only way to create a democratic food system is to ensure access to all, regardless of income or social class.

## **Some Examples**

### **U.S. Food Stamps**

The problems with targeted programs are illustrated by the case of food stamps in the US. This program seeks to find a solution to hunger that is mutually beneficial to citizens as well as farmers by subsidizing consumers to purchase produce directly from producers. By requiring that food stamps be used to purchase live foods, such as fruits and vegetables, this program also subsidizes the consumption of healthy foods, unlike subsidies for commodity crops, which often end up in cheap, processed foods that are high in fats and carbohydrates (Roberts 2007). And, since food stamps can only be spent on food, the program evades the assumption that subsidy money will be spent where it is not intended. However, since the program is not universal, the use of food stamps can carry a social stigma, which, Roberts points out, can further entrench class and racial differences. In some states, applicants are required to be fingerprinted in order to receive food stamps (Roberts 2007). Since this program also regards hunger in isolation from



other social problems to which it is inextricably linked, it fails to address the causes of hunger and can never be seen as anything but a short-term solution.

## **Brazil**

Brazil is a noteworthy example of innovative food policy for its emphasis on reduction of poverty as well as food and nutrition security, and for its promotion of participatory and local democracy. After a tremendous cross-class campaign pushing for political change, the Lula government created a position for a Minister of Food Security, and enacted a Zero Hunger (Fome Zero) initiative. This initiative is directed at improving food access; strengthening family agriculture; income generation; and partnership promotion and civil society mobilization. The Bolsa Familia program raises family income through cash transfers to poor families and mothers, but participation in the program is conditional on their children's education and health so families must ensure children attend school and that the money is used to ensure children receive adequate nutrition. There is a universal school meals program, which is the main meal of the day for over 50% of children in the poorest regions. The family agriculture program provides credit, crop insurance, and technical assistance to small, family farms. This is enhanced with a procurement program in which the government purchases crops and milk directly from small farmers for use in its programs (Rocha 2006). So, with the acknowledgement of both income inequality as well as food access, Brazilian policy has helped to reduce poverty for citizens and farmers while ensuring people get fed.

Sacalao ("big bag") markets in Brazil are another example of a healthy food initiative that was facilitated by policy. Situated in low-income neighbourhoods, these markets allow participants to fill up a big bag of blemished or damaged produce and pay

for it by weight at a discount. The markets only sell live foods (fruits, vegetables and beans), and are located in high-traffic areas that would normally be venues for convenience foods (Field 2007). This program is not a result of directly subsidizing either consumers or producers, but of the government determining the terms of trade. This arrangement benefits farmers by giving them a venue to distribute produce that could not otherwise be sold, and low-income people by providing a venue for foods which they might not otherwise be able to afford. This is an example of an innovative policy that is more efficient in reducing hunger and economic stability for farmers than would be subsidizing both parties.

## **Cuba**

The Cuban government has also set up policies to ensure better access to food by its citizens. In response to the disintegration of the Soviet Union, upon which Cuba relied for oil and trade, Cuba was forced to transform the agricultural system in order to feed its people. The new system makes use of both urban and rural agriculture as well as agroecological technology instead of chemicals, as none could be brought in. The food crisis required a redistribution of land for agriculture that would feed the Cuban people (as opposed to production for export), and that fair prices be paid to farmers, who could otherwise sell their goods on the black market (Rosset 1994: 211-212).

Normally, in a crisis like this, the state would be forced to turn to food aid or other emergency measures, but instead, Cuba has found a solution in local and sustainable production. This illustrates not only how vulnerable and intertwined food systems can be with other forces over which the state has no control, but also the importance of policy that recognizes food as a separate concern. Even in the first world,

with a food system so dependent on transport, we have no policy to ensure we would be fed if there were a crisis and borders closed. By addressing food production directly, the Cuban system not only ensures that people are fed, but also addresses other problems, such as quality of urban life, employment and the disalienation of labour (Rosset 1999).

## **Malawi**

Contrary to the Cuban case is that of Malawi, which responded to critical food shortages by subsidizing fertilizer, seeds and tools for Malawian farmers. While Cuba sought to produce more food by rethinking where and how food is grown, the Malawian government helped created a food surplus by subsidizing inputs to low-income farmers. An article in the *Globe and Mail* (Nolen 2007) applauds the policy for its ability to bring third world surplus into the global economy (as Malawi's maize surplus was traded to neighbouring countries for cash), while ignoring the long-term effects of using chemical fertilizers, or of creating a dependence of farmers on the fertilizer subsidy. The framing of third world farming in a Western development model also undermines the potential for a locally-based, self-reliant economy, which is a common symptom of neoliberal policies. Subsidizing farmers to purchase fertilizer is parallel to the income transfer method of improving food security in that it addresses one isolated aspect of the food system without conceiving of problems as interconnected pieces of a whole system. Policies that do not consider the externalities of food production, distribution and consumption will always fail to meet the needs of the people.

## **Community Food Assessments**

### **Elements and Outcomes of a Community Food Assessment**

The Community Food Security Coalition (herein referred to as “the Coalition”) in the US has compiled a document on community food assessments (CFA) as a resource to communities that wish to undertake an assessment. It sees community food assessments as “a tool for groups to highlight and take action on the many connections between their communities and the food system. These assessments enable groups to systematically explore a wide range of food-related issues, and to build momentum and support for positive changes in their communities” (Pothukuchi et al. 2002: 11).

In order to establish such a broad understanding, CFAs do not just examine food issues, but combine elements of a variety of other assessment areas, such as social work (needs assessments), public health (nutrition assessments), and environmental studies (environmental assessments) (Pothukuchi et al. 2002: 11). So, a key element of an assessment is how food is connected to the community, and what are the implications for quality of life, food security, social justice, and other community values (Pothukuchi et al. 2002: 12)? A CFA is not merely an assessment, however, but also seeks to inform practical action, be it at the policy, industry, civil society, or community level (Pothukuchi et al. 2002: 12). While food security projects tend to be focused on problems in the food system and their practical implications, a CFA seeks to address both needs and assets. The Coalition sees this approach as being more sustainable as it will result in the building on existing resources (Pothukuchi et al. 2002: 13). And, just as the systems approach to food security seeks to facilitate an understanding of food issues from a broad

perspective, a CFA involves participation from a broad spectrum of actors. This includes collaboration from community members (Pothukuchi et al. 2002: 14).

While many communities already have food security activists working to promote change, the Coalition recommends doing an assessment in order to create a more specific awareness of local food security issues, and to develop the most appropriate strategies to address these issues. These could include program development, policy advocacy, and visibility (Pothukuchi et al. 2002: 16). This approach is also advocated for its potential to develop networks, promote community participation, and develop capacity for participants (Pothukuchi et al. 2002: 18).

### **What does a Community Food Assessment Do?**

Allen says that a community assessment is important for giving community members a better understanding of the food system. “Community food assessments of the food and agriculture system provide an opportunity for people to understand the forces that constrain or enable their access to resources in the food and agriculture system. Democratic participation is merely formal without this type of understanding” (Allen 1999: 120). However, food assessments do more than just inform people. Ideally, they are also part of community action to increase food security. “The value of a [Community Food Assessment] lies in building a database to influence public policy and form well-targeted CFS programs” (Bellows and Hamm 2002: 39). In order for the community to respond to problems of food security, it needs to take stock of these problems and the success or problems with solutions that are already in place. These reports also have potential to influence change at higher levels. “CFS assessments can be used by community based organizations (CBOs) to strengthen their efforts to make local and state

governments more aware, involved, and accountable to CFS welfare” (Bellows and Hamm 2002: 40). So, while an assessment is a tool for local food information and action, it should also be an important mechanism for eliciting broader social change.

## **Case Study: *Vancouver Food System Assessment***

### **Problems in the Food System**

The Vancouver report begins by putting forward the definition of Community Food Security, which it will continue to refer to throughout: “a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice” (Barbolet et al. 2005: 13). The report claims that by this definition, we are all food insecure, as urban food systems are reliant on external sources, which could collapse in the event of a catastrophe.

The natural solution to this problem would be to reduce reliance on imported foods by encouraging local production, processing and consumption. However, there are other, more powerful interests that prevent communities from relocating the food system, such as corporate control over the food supply; regulatory structures governing agricultural production, processing and export; and the lack of policies, programs and regulatory tools to facilitate regional self-reliance (Barbolet et al. 2005: 14-15).

While these structural forces can act as barriers to the establishment of regional food systems, they also have a major effect on household food security in Vancouver. The assessment connects this reality with changes in government policies related to income, such as “the restructuring of employment insurance, restrictions on eligibility for social assistance, the decline in benefits in most provinces and the clawback of the national Child Benefit Supplement” (Barbolet et al. 2005: 14). While the report acknowledges income as the major factor affecting food security, other barriers to access, such as the availability of culturally appropriate foods, are also mentioned in this section.

This demonstrates that while the report is predominantly focused on the material realities of Vancouver citizens, it is able to identify some of the larger causes and forces influencing local food security.

So, while food security refers to the situation of one community, the assessment takes the national or global factors that affect it into account. The assessment conceives of Vancouver's reliance on imported food as both a vulnerability and an opportunity to create a more self-reliant system. After its discussion of the systems in place that would prevent a more localized system, it goes on to suggest examples of community groups that are working to facilitate links between local producers and cities (Barbolet et al. 2005: 14). It is interesting to note that while the problems that are identified are seen as caused at the global or national level, many of the proposed solutions take place at the local level.

### **Existing Programs and Services**

The next section of the report is an assessment of food security in Vancouver. It takes account of the people that are at high risk of food insecurity, and the services that are in place to attempt to assist them. Interestingly, while specific populations (such as single women and Aboriginals) are identified as at-risk, the recommendations of the report don't deal with specific populations or the inequalities that cause their food insecurity. The first program that is discussed is the charitable food sector, which was originally conceived as a temporary or emergency response to hunger, but has increasingly become an important component of the food system (Barbolet et al. 2005: 22). A major concern associated with this method of food provision is quality, particularly since most providers rely on donations of food. Many food bank patrons have



health problems or other special needs that require special diets, which cannot be accommodated by the limited amount and quality of food they receive. Others don't have access to storage and cooking facilities and are therefore unable to prepare the foods they receive (Barbolet et al. 2005: 22-23). There is also a distribution problem of charitable food resources, as they tend to be concentrated in one extremely poor neighbourhood, while poverty exists in other areas of Vancouver as well (Barbolet et al. 2005: 23). The cost and availability of transportation were also barriers to access. The report found that some patrons were unable or didn't feel safe to stand in line to access food, or did not feel comfortable accepting charity (Barbolet et al. 2005: 23-24).

A more long-term approach to food security issues is that of community food resources, such as community kitchens, community gardens, farmers' markets, and Good Food Box programs (Barbolet et al. 2005: 24). However, since these programs require participants to invest more time and money than charitable programs and don't usually run on a daily basis, they may not be accessible to all low-income people (Barbolet et al. 2005: 24-25).

"A community kitchen makes cooking and food preparation equipment available to groups who meet regularly to cook meals... Participants... are encouraged to be involved in menu selection, shopping, food preparation and cooking" (Barbolet et al. 2005: 24-25). So, community kitchens can provide better quality of food, and some even seek to address specific health problems (Barbolet et al. 2005: 25). This method can also be seen as empowering to participants, as they are involved in their own food provision, rather than relying on handouts, and can help promote a sense of community by bringing people together in the kitchen and around the table.

The Good Food Box is a box of (local, where possible) produce that participants order in advance and pick up from a neighbourhood depot. Since customers don't have to pay supermarket fees and the service is run by volunteers, the food in the box is significantly cheaper than it would be to purchase it from a supermarket (Barbolet et al. 2005: 25). While the concept of the program appears to promote equality through dignified access to quality food, the report found that middle-income people felt limited by the selection and were disinclined to participate in this scheme (Barbolet et al. 2005: 25).

Like the Good Food Box, farmers' markets provide consumers with the opportunity to support the local economy by buying from the producer. The assessment found, however, that Vancouver is poorly served by farmers' markets, due to zoning and other regulation problems, and a lack of interest in participating from farmers, as they would need to diversify their crops and have the option of participating in other markets in the region (Barbolet et al. 2005: 26). Further to that, the study found that the cost of food might be a barrier to low-income people and that of the four markets in Vancouver, none of them was located in a low-income neighbourhood (Barbolet et al. 2005: 26).

Conversely, there are 20 Community Gardens in Vancouver, with some in middle- to low-income areas (Barbolet et al. 2005: 26). Interestingly, while some low-income, working participants reported gardening to save on food costs, the study found middle-income participants less interested in gardening as they were too busy and did not feel the amount of food produced would be worth the effort (Barbolet et al. 2005: 26-27).

Finally, the report discusses the retail food sector. While distribution of grocery stores is often a problem in low-income areas, this does not appear to be the case in

Vancouver. “Unlike other cities, where the concentration of grocery stores declines with neighbourhood income levels, lower-income areas in Vancouver tend to have higher numbers and densities of stores” (Barbolet et al. 2005: 27). However, having a grocery store nearby does not guarantee access, and participants were concerned about food quality, cost, and cultural acceptability (Barbolet et al. 2005: 27). While there is a high density of food stores in the lowest-income neighbourhood, many of these stores are convenience stores, with little selection of healthy food (Barbolet et al. 2005: 28). This left most participants to depend on public transportation, which they found to be costly and inconvenient to use, particularly while carrying groceries and with children (Barbolet et al. 2005: 28). And, while the study found food prices to be lower in some neighbourhoods, low-income residents have difficulty affording food, regardless of where they reside. Since other costs, such as housing, are inelastic, participants were sometimes forced to go without eating, or purchase less nutritious food to save money (Barbolet et al. 2005: 28).

## **Solutions and Recommendations**

In response to problems of access and unsustainable distribution, the Vancouver assessment recommends the development of a food-related social economy. “A social enterprise is a specific business that produces goods and services for the market economy, but manages its operations and directs its surpluses in pursuit of social and environmental goals” (Barbolet et al. 2005: 30). An economy that is organized according to these goals, it argues, could stimulate the local economy, provide better quality food to charitable food recipients, and could create livelihoods and reduce the dependence on charity to feed people at risk of food insecurity (Barbolet et al. 2005: 30). Some of the

strategies for establishing a social economy lie within the community, such as the establishment of a food and social economy congress of existing social enterprises and alternative food organizations to create a strategy to relocalize food production, processing, and distribution and create opportunities for those at risk of hunger. However, many of the recommendations in this part refer to policy, or at least would require funding from governments. For example, it recommends promoting local food partnerships with institutions, such as hospitals and schools. Another recommendation is to enhance training opportunities in food-related businesses, which also makes reference to policy: "Governments should be encouraged to implement policies that allow trainees to receive on-the-job training without being disqualified from receiving social assistance or employment insurance benefits" (Barbolet et al. 2005: 40).

In terms of the charitable food sector, the report recommends establishing a voluntary code of practices that ensure the respect of participants and the safety of food. This would be monitored by a board of food providers and consumers (Barbolet et al. 2005: 41). It also recommends broadening the mandate of food providers to include capacity-building activities for clients, and the development of hybrid charitable/social enterprise models, such as The Stop Community Food Centre in Toronto, which, rather than seeing charitable food as opposed to community activities like capacity-building and self-provision, responds to food security needs on both short- and long-term bases (Barbolet et al. 2005: 41). Here again, while the activities for this sector and for the community sector are mainly located at the local level, many of these could not be achieved without government programming or funding. For example, the report recommends education campaigns around buying local, subsidies for low-income people

to use farmers' markets, and increasing the number of community gardens (which would require an amendment to zoning bylaws) (Barbolet et al. 2005: 41-42).

The report suggests action on the part of the city to facilitate better access for at-risk populations to retail outlets. However, most of the recommendations, such as Good Neighbour Programs that offer healthier foods in low-income areas, and free store shuttles and food delivery, would require co-operation and innovation on the part of industry (Barbolet et al. 2005: 42). It also recommends marketing food resources in Chinatown to surrounding neighbourhoods despite the fact that the previous section of the assessment noted that certain populations were made to feel uncomfortable in Chinatown shops (Barbolet et al. 2005: 28,42).

Finally, there is a section of recommendations specifically for the City and the Food Policy Council. These are focused predominantly on ethical food procurement; but also recommend incorporating urban agriculture into new developments and amending city by-laws to allow the keeping of livestock in the city and to promote the distribution of local food in urban areas.

Since the publishing of this report in 2005, Vancouver has adopted a Vancouver Food Charter, which emphasizes five principles: community economic development; ecological health; social justice; collaboration and participation from all levels of government, businesses and NGO's; and promotion of the importance of food in bringing people together in celebration (City of Vancouver 2007). The food policy council has also advocated for increasing the number of community gardens and hobby beekeeping operations in the city, and is promoting a program where community gardeners donate extra food to food banks (City of Vancouver 2007).

## ***Case Study: Community Food Assessment for Thunder Bay: A Closer Look at our Food System***

### **Problems in the Food System**

The focus of the Thunder Bay assessment is poor nutrition and its relation to the health of the population. It notes the impact of nutritional inadequacy of pregnant women on their babies; the physical, mental, and psychosocial outcomes for undernourished children; productivity problems among malnourished adults; the link between nutrition and chronic diseases, and their higher incidence among people living in poverty; and the North American paradox of hunger and obesity, which are both prevalent among food insecure people (McGibbon 2004: 5-6). Both reports note higher incidences of food insecurity among those who rely on social assistance (Barbolet et al. 2005: 19, McGibbon 2004: 8).

A major concern noted by participants in this study is the cost of food, as food prices in the Thunder Bay area tend to be significantly higher than elsewhere and this is especially a problem in the winter months. Participants also note employment difficulties and a lack of good jobs in the region. Some note that they lack the utensils, storage space and facilities to prepare food, and some have limited budgeting and cooking skills (McGibbon 2004: 9-10). The lack of transportation to and from grocery stores is mentioned, as is the distance to the store. First Nations People who have moved into town cite the lack of access to food from hunting and fishing and the increased cost of living off the reserve (McGibbon 2004: 10).

Apart from individual problems of access, Thunder Bay is particularly vulnerable to transportation and other problems, since the majority of its food comes from

warehouses in Winnipeg or Toronto. When a local food warehouse closed a few years before the report, food prices increased (McGibbon 2004: 11). Within the city, the assessment notes problems of access to grocery stores in low-income neighbourhoods, despite them being well-distributed throughout the rest of the city (McGibbon 2004: 18). Charitable and community food resources tended to be concentrated in low-income neighbourhoods, which could be partly a result of the lack of mainstream food access in these areas.

The Thunder Bay assessment also considers problems in the food system from the perspective of local farmers. The main challenges that they identified were: a short growing season; high production costs; poor infrastructure (causing difficulty in getting parts); difficulty getting products to the market; lack of access to specialists; the cost of rainfall and crop insurance; rules and regulations (such as nutrient management); kids leaving the farm for other jobs; funding cuts to farm organizations; lack of a federally-inspected abattoir (which would allow farmers to sell meat to grocers) or a chicken-processing facility; and a decline in the number of farms (McGibbon 2004: 23). Farmers felt that very few citizens were aware or concerned about local farming and the challenges they faced. There is only one farmers' market in Thunder Bay. A survey found that the majority of market patrons are 50 years and older (McGibbon 2004: 25). The problems experienced by farmers in distributing their goods suggests that accessing local produce is not just a problem for people of low incomes, but for everyone.

Participants in this study noted that "food is no longer a human right, it's a commodity and the feeling was that food was at present not a political or a societal priority" (McGibbon 2004: 27). While this study mainly discusses food access in terms of

poverty, there was a concern that people in general are just unaware of where their food comes from (McGibbon 2004: 27).

### **Existing Programs and Services**

The assessment sees a Registered Dietician (RD) as vital in increasing public food knowledge and skills. However, RDs are difficult for the general public to access as they tend to work with specific populations (McGibbon 2004: 13). Thunder Bay also has Community Food Advisors, who provide nutrition and food safety education, including workshops on shopping skills; healthy eating; budgeting; and cooking. The Meals on Wheels program delivers meals to people unable to cook due to chronic illness, physical disability or lack of facilities (McGibbon 2004: 13). Both of these programs are run by volunteers. While these programs are an asset to the community, the assessment notes that the prevalence of food programs run by volunteers makes them “vulnerable to volunteer life changes as well as funding” (McGibbon 2004: 18).

There are school meal or snack programs running in 35% of schools in Thunder Bay, varying from daily to once per week (McGibbon 2004: 15). However, lack of volunteers and funding mean that not all schools that need a program have one.

The charitable food sector in Thunder Bay distributes food hampers, milk coupons, food vouchers and hot meals. Since food banks are reliant on donated food, they tend to distribute mostly processed food rather than fresh produce or dairy products. Also, some participants found food bank criteria and hours of operation to be a barrier, and some single people were excluded by food programs, such as Christmas hampers, that were set up to serve families (McGibbon 2004: 17-18). There is a problem for some participants to access food banks because of transportation, while some families choose



not to use them as they would rather not rely on charity to feed their families. Since it does not promote self-reliance or improve conditions, the assessment says that the charitable model does not promote human dignity (McGibbon 2004: 15). However, some participants noted that they appreciated the social setting in which hot meals were served, while others noted the respect they got from food bank staff and volunteers was important (McGibbon 2004: 17).

The assessment reports that there are 20 community kitchens in Thunder Bay that seek to improve participants' cooking skills and knowledge of healthy eating, provide food for participants' families, and create a social environment and sense of community (McGibbon 2004: 16). More training or a better-established network of kitchen leaders might help the kitchens programs run more smoothly. The main concern for community gardens in Thunder Bay is a distribution problem, as they tend to be concentrated in the north (McGibbon 2004: 16). So, we can see an alternative method of food distribution with similar problems to mainstream methods. The study does not make it clear who is using these gardens (in terms of class, gender, and race, for example) and whether they are benefiting those who are at risk of food insecurity. Thunder Bay also has a gleaning project, where individuals and families can go to farms after they have been harvested and gather the remaining food (McGibbon 2004: 16). This project operates through the donations of local farmers. Participants were happy with the food they were able to access, but also enjoy the experience of going to the farm and picking the food (McGibbon 2004: 16). Participants in initiatives such as these appreciate the opportunities to learn and participate in getting their food, as they are often too embarrassed to access a food bank (McGibbon 2004: 17). They appreciate the chance to

share their skills, eat together and build self-esteem in this environment, however the study suggests that these programs may not supply as much food as is required (McGibbon 2004: 18, 27).

On an ideological level, there is concern that many people in the community do not even know that food security is a problem in Thunder Bay. While there are some strategies to deal with food insecurity, participants feel that existing solutions are “piecemeal and band-aid solutions that [do] not address the real problems” (McGibbon 2004: 17-18). “Respondents felt that there was not a value-based commitment regarding people’s right to food and that perhaps a food policy council might help to incorporate that into the planning process and community as a whole” (McGibbon 2004: 18). So, this report acknowledges the need for a more systemic and organized way of dealing with food issues in Thunder Bay.

## **Solutions and Recommendations**

The report identifies several areas for improvement at the community level, although many of these suggestions lie well beyond the realm of local community action, as there can also be community action aimed at broader policy and structural change. The first of these areas is money, and a number of suggestions are made to improve existing programs, such as making social assistance cheques biweekly instead of monthly, and the creation of new solutions, such as the institution of a food supplement, similar to the housing supplement (McGibbon 2004: 19). Both of these solutions require federal policy change. The second area of concern is with food banks. Participants would like to see more fresh foods and infant formula available, and also note that “cultural issues” need to be addressed, although there is no explanation of what these issues are (I assume it is a

concern about a lack of culturally-appropriate foods available in food banks), or how they should be dealt with. The report suggests a central organization to take care of food distribution (McGibbon 2004: 19). As transportation is a major concern that participants mention often, the report suggests working with industry and the community to provide some sort of free or co-operative transportation to grocery stores (McGibbon 2004: 19). The report also suggests that the city planning department consider planning food outlets near to where people live. And since price is a serious concern, the assessment suggests creating partnerships with stores to offer coupons and sales to accommodate low-income people (McGibbon 2004: 19). For both of these initiatives, it is unclear how they will be carried out and how they will ensure cooperation from industry partners. What incentives do profit-run enterprises have to meet the needs of low-income people? Finally, the report identifies reclaimed food, from farmers, stores and hunters, as an area for improvement, as Thunder Bay does not have a mechanism for re-appropriating wasted food (McGibbon 2004: 19).

The Thunder Bay assessment considers a healthy food system to involve collaboration from various interests. In the Recommendations section at the end of the report, it recommends community education and the enhancement of existing initiatives, such as community gardens (McGibbon 2004: 28). Some of its suggestions at the community level are to educate consumers on the availability of local foods and to promote existing farmers markets (McGibbon 2004: 28). The report also mentions working with retail outlets to encourage local food availability and acknowledges the important role that the food industry provides in creating employment (McGibbon 2004: 28). Community-based food programs are also noted as a potential space for creating

employment, particularly for individuals at risk of food insecurity. In terms of transportation, the assessment proposes solutions that would involve both the community and industry to provide shuttles, or perhaps ride co-ops.

The only mention of attempts to make policy changes is to “work together to change policies to ensure that Social Assistance and minimum wage are adequate to support health and well-being,” and it does not discuss how it will go about advocating for these changes (McGibbon 2004: 28). However, while it is not explicitly stated, some of the recommendations in the report are directed at policy, particularly at the federal level. For example, it seeks to increase the number of child nutrition programs so that eventually they are universal. I think it is assumed that the expansion of these programs would happen through community action (and this one is listed under the heading “Community Response”), but the mandate to make nutrition programs universal lies with the provincial (health) and federal (education) governments. The recommendation to “work towards public policies and experts to help make breastfeeding more acceptable and possible” mentions policy, but interestingly, it does not note the cultural taboos faced by breastfeeding mothers, which is a much broader issue than one of policy (McGibbon 2004: 28). The assessment notes the problem of only having access to a provincially-inspected abattoir, as retailers tend to prefer meats from a federally-inspected facility (McGibbon 2004: 28). This demonstrates the role that various levels of policy play in the production and distribution of food.

## **Analysis and Questions**

### **Comparative Analysis of Vancouver and Thunder Bay Assessments**

In comparing the two assessments, it is important to consider the contexts of both locations and how this affects food security for each region. British Columbia is often lauded as the only place in Canada where the “100-Mile Diet” is possible, due to its mild climate and long growing season. Vancouver is also located on the ocean, giving it ready access to a wealth of global goods, including imported food. And, since Vancouver is an urban centre, it is more multicultural than other places in Canada and therefore, should have better access to more culturally diverse foods. In contrast, Thunder Bay is a fairly geographically isolated city, and its distance from other cities results in some major difficulties of food access. As noted in the assessment, this has meant for a reliance on transportation of food and farm inputs from other places as well as high food prices. On the other hand, Thunder Bay farmers note that they have more direct access to local consumers. The difficulties of an isolated city are exacerbated by the short growing season in Thunder Bay. It is also worth noting the high Aboriginal population in the Thunder Bay region, as Aboriginals tend to experience poorer health and more diet-related diseases and food access concerns than other Canadians (Govender et al. 2006: 42, Barbolet et al. 2005: 20). Vancouver also has its share of people at severe risk of food insecurity, such as injection drug users (IDUs), homeless youth and very recent immigrants (Barbolet et al. 2005: 20).

The circumstances of both places could explain their approaches to food security to some extent. The generally favourable position of Vancouver suggests a reason for the emphasis on the particular groups and area that have the most problems accessing food.

Also, British Columbia's potential as a food-producing region explains the emphasis on relocation. And, perhaps Vancouver's urban environment would be a more hospitable environment for social enterprises, which could account for the attention devoted to developing a food-related social economy. The Thunder Bay assessment deals with more immediate concerns, such as health and poverty, which could be attributed to its necessary reliance on other places to provide food. This might also account for its suggestions to include the food industry in its solutions, as it might have more of a need for the power and connections that food businesses could provide. The aboriginal population in this area could also account for this report's mention of hunting, which is not discussed in other CFAs.

Another aspect of the assessments that needs to be taken into consideration is who is carrying them out and why. The Vancouver assessment is carried out by the City of Vancouver's Department of Social Planning, the SFU Centre for Sustainable Community Development, and the Environmental Youth Alliance. The broad range of collaborators emerges from both policymakers at the municipal level and civil society, with interests in community development, food and food policy, and sustainability; and from sectors such as NGO, social enterprise, and educational institutions. Generally, I found the scope of this report to be broader than that of Thunder Bay, which could be explained by the partners that were involved in creating this assessment. The assessment begins with a broad view of the global food system and then moves to a focused view of the Vancouver system in relation to it.

The assessment is concerned with the fact that there is food insecurity despite a “diverse and vigorous economy and close proximity to rich and productive food producing lands and waters” (5). The goals of the assessment are:

“1) to develop an assessment of food security in Vancouver by examining the availability, accessibility, and acceptability of food provided through the charitable, community and retail food sectors; 2) to explore how the food system in Vancouver might be transformed through proactive community economic development and promotion of policies that build food system sustainability for all residents; 3) to provide information and recommendations to inform and support the work of the Vancouver Food Policy Council and other agencies engaged in food-related work in the City” (Barbolet et al. 2005: 5).

It is worth noting that the report explicitly aims to elicit policy changes at the local level, and does not mention the potential for higher-level actions until the recommendations section. This is consistent with some of the discussions within the report, such as on page 14-15, where the assessment mentions problems in the food system as diverse as NAFTA and the increasing reliance on American markets, climate change, rising oil prices, loss of agricultural land and urban development, bio-terrorism, changes in government policies. In response to these concerns, the report notes “projects in many cities [that] demonstrate creative approaches to local distribution of locally produced food” (Barbolet et al. 2005: 15). In response to a multitude of global problems, the assessment promotes local solutions.

The Thunder Bay Assessment is carried out by the Thunder Bay Food Action Network, which is part of the Thunder Bay District Health Unit. The focus on health problems in the community is evident in the profiles of the community, although recommendations are not made from a solely health perspective. The report also puts emphasis on societal problems, such as the loss of understanding of where food comes from and how it is produced, and the loss of food preparation skills. This could also be

attributed to the sample population, as interviewers spoke with social workers that deal with food insecure people. The objectives of this assessment are:

“1) To communicate the CFA findings to all stakeholders; 2) to identify key community food resources by developing an inventory; 3) to act as a catalyst for positive impact in the local food system; 4) to encourage community residents to participate actively in the local food system” (McGibbon 2004: 4).

Here again, the explicit goals are focused on community action, although “positive impact” could come from outside the community as well, although it is unclear whether this is a goal of the assessment. In both reports, however, recommendations are focused at multiple sectors, actors, and levels of government even though these interests were not always represented by the groups carrying out the assessments or the assessments themselves.

## **Major Themes and Lessons**

Evidently, in both communities there are serious problems of access, such as transportation; planning; availability and quality of food; and the amount of time and effort required of participants; with all of the existing food resources, whether they are in the charitable, community, or retail sector. In fact, some of these concerns, such as distribution of resources, apply across sectors.

As discussed above, the Vancouver assessment expresses concern for the dominant practice of trucking our food in from afar, even when it can be produced locally. While I believe that this practice should be opposed on principle, when placed alongside one another, the assessments give a tangible picture of the vulnerability a delocalized food system creates. As discussed in the Thunder Bay assessment section, this community is in a particularly weak position geographically, as it is fairly isolated



and at a long distance from other communities and food warehouses. Considering the potential gravity of this situation, I don't feel that it has been emphasized enough in the Thunder Bay assessment. Relocalization is one of the most important, and most difficult responses that needs to be addressed by food policy as it would go against the status quo and would be difficult to implement. In this case, community programs, such as those that seek to develop local capacities for production and distribution, could work alongside higher level policies, such as those to develop infrastructure. For example, community-oriented "buy local" campaigns could coincide with policies to shift local farmers from production for export to producing for local markets.

Farmers' markets are seen as areas of concern in both regions, although for different reasons. In Thunder Bay, there is a lack of knowledge about markets and local food, while in Vancouver, lack of access to farmers' markets is a problem for people of all income levels. There are only four markets in Vancouver, despite a high demand for more. A major reason for this problem is that farmers are not interested in participating in city markets. A growing number of farmers' markets in surrounding areas, as well as lower sales volumes, and the need to diversify crops, means that farmers might do better to sell their produce wholesale, or at another regional market (Barbolet et al. 2005: 26). So, what can make farmers' markets more appealing to farmers, and therefore, more available to city residents? As noted above, MacRae (1999) sees the potential for policy to facilitate better production *and* consumption. What would happen, for example, if farms were encouraged to produce fruits and vegetables for people to eat, rather than producing commodities to be traded internationally? Or, what if there were a way to subsidize consumers to invest in locally-produced foods, as in the Good Food Box

program in Toronto, thereby increasing public health, food access, and increasing incomes for farmers, similar to a health card or other programs that promote universal public health? Both of these ideas would address the problems in each community, and the latter would address concerns about income and food access, as well as broader issues in the food system.

Another concern that comes up in discussions of both community kitchens and community gardens is that people find these programs to be too much work for the amount of food or gains they receive. In the Thunder Bay assessment, social workers also note a lack of cooking skills among participants, which can prevent them from using some community food resources. This speaks to two important concerns: the need to address cultural shifts that have transformed how our culture relates to food; and the need to account for the realities of self-provisioning activities. The shift away from cooking and other food preparation activities is not discussed at length in either assessment, but I think it needs to be mentioned how dominant Western culture has devalued these activities and generally relates to food in a very different way than cultures of the past and how this has coincided with women's pursuing careers outside of the home. In a more general sense, this is also addressed in the Thunder Bay assessment and the gleaning project. Not only have many people lost the skills to prepare food, but there has also been a loss of understanding of where food comes from and how it is produced. It is important to take account of this shift as more than nostalgia for the past, but also to consider the real impact that this can have on individual food security. If people are unable to properly prepare the food they receive from donations or other programs, they are not making the most of these limited resources. This concern is addressed to some

extent by community food programs, such as community kitchens, but universal public food education about how food is grown and how to prepare it, as suggested in the Thunder Bay and Richmond Assessments, could make even greater gains in this area. There is also a need to address the broader cultural issue of women and their relation to food, as they are most often the ones doing this work.

While participants note the important practical and social aspects of these community food programs, Allen and Power (1999, 1999) raise an important concern about self-provisioning activities, such as gardening. Some participants in both studies noted that self-provisioning activities increase the burdens on the individual, many of whom are already overworked. This is a particular concern for women, as domestic labour still tends to fall predominantly on their shoulders. While community food action is invaluable in increasing access to resources and food for some people, it is important to recognize the potential danger of promoting this approach in isolation from other social justice activities. If income and class inequalities aren't seriously addressed on a broad scale, low-income people may be forced to grow and produce their own food, when they might be those facing the greatest barriers, such as income, time, and physical capability, to these production methods.

Both assessments recommend a more organized or practical way of managing charitable food resources. While emergency food programs always purport to end hunger and "put themselves out of business," they are still relied upon as an important source of food for increasing numbers of people. The quality of the food and conditions under which the food is often presented is a serious cause for concern that needs to be addressed in a more systematic way. However, it is important not to conceive of these programs as

sustainable or acceptable measures of acquiring food. They merely reflect how, as noted above by Allen (1999), there will always need to be emergency food as long as there is a failure by the state to provide adequate income and social supports, and as long as the global market-driven food system dominates agricultural production. So, while a centralized organization and set of practices can be established for food banks at the local level, it needs to happen in conjunction with multi-level policy efforts to reduce poverty and increase food security.

In the recommendation sections of both reports, we can see efforts to facilitate collaboration between different sectors, such as community, government, and the food industry. It is interesting that these groups are seeking to create partnerships with industrial interests when these are often considered to be the “enemy,” or the cause of some food security problems. These initiatives recognize the power that exists in the hands of food companies, and seek to put this power to work for the benefit of the community. They also indirectly recognize the prevailing ideological and cultural forces behind food corporations’ dominance and ways of operating. Involving them in community food security actions seeks to make them more accountable to their communities’ needs, rather than just their own financial interests.

The suggestion to form partnerships with the food industry begs the question of who plays what role in a local food system, and intrinsically, who can have an effect on the food security of local citizens. Perhaps this is one area where the two assessments are limited, in that they did not include the perspectives of local food businesses and, in the case of Vancouver, food producers in the assessment.

Conversely, the *Collaborative Food System Assessment* that was done in 2005 in San Francisco (Jones et al. 2005) represents a more encompassing definition of food system actors. As in the other assessments, this report begins with a synthesis of quantitative secondary data about local access issues. The report also contains data from a round table event at which a variety of stakeholders in the community food system discussed the assessment findings, and established priorities. What is most interesting about this method is the broad base of actors that was involved in these discussions.

- “The recruitment strategy aimed to identify and invite a decision-maker, a provider or producer, and a recipient or customer for each indicator or subject area... [Participants were recruited from the following sectors:] (1) food assistance (government and charitable food assistance programs), (2) urban agriculture (urban farmers and community gardens), (3) direct marketing (farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture), (4) health (nursing, nutrition, medicine), and (5) restaurants, retail and commercial recycling” (Jones et al. 2005: 61).

This assessment is not just comprehensive in its recruitment, but also in the discussions participants were asked to participate in. Participants were asked to identify current trends in the local food system, and were asked to discuss the following questions: “What have you done to respond to these trends? What have you not done that you would like to do? What do you need (e.g. resources, alliances) to accomplish this?” (Jones et al. 2005: 64). So, while the other assessments have identified specific problems and seek the help of businesses in resolving them, this discussion gives both community members and food producers and distributors voices in a dialogue and encourages them to consider their own places in the global food system. The outcomes of this study suggest that this method is effective in garnering collaboration from community members, industrial interests, and policy members in order to effect change.

The principle of collaboration among various actors in the food system is also present in the Vancouver assessment's emphasis on the social economy. The social economy method can reduce organizations' dependence on government funding, donations and volunteers, and instead move to "interdependence with local consumers, farmers and processors" (Barbolet et al. 2005: 30). The assessment also sees this approach as having the potential to assist in rebuilding the local food system.

Social enterprises represent an attempt to shift vulnerable people from charitable or emergency food to self-reliant economic activity. This can appear to be problematic, particularly from the anti-poverty perspective, which emphasizes the often dire circumstances of people on low incomes and social assistance. However, since social enterprises also incorporate capacity-building activities for people with barriers to conventional employment, they seek to decrease reliance on emergency food. It is important that in putting social enterprises in place, they do not replace emergency food systems for those who need them. A potential solution to this problem is to create hybrid charitable and social economy approaches. Developing a social economy may also address the concerns discussed above about self-provisioning activities as they could serve to make more "normal" channels of food distribution accessible to people who might otherwise not be able to afford them. However, Allen critiques CFS strategies that see food security as being resolved through market activities.

"While anti-hunger programs have been necessary precisely because the market has failed to ensure food security, community security activists see the market as essential for achieving food security... [USDA Community Food Projects do not] address the federal-level policies that significantly shape food security in local communities. While the projects are directed toward meeting the food needs of low-income people, they do so with the assumption that this can be achieved through local, market-based initiatives" (Allen 1999: 123).

Again, while community action is extremely important, it is no replacement for broader changes, such as federal policies that can address the fundamental issues of class, inequality and distribution.

## **Critiques and Questions**

One area that I find confusing in the Vancouver study is when it discusses the distribution of grocery stores in the city. It claims that unlike other cities, which tend to experience the “food desert” phenomenon, in which grocery stores tend to be concentrated in middle and high income neighbourhoods, in Vancouver, there is a reasonable number of retail food outlets in the Downtown East Side (DTES). The report goes on to say that “many stores in the DTES are convenience stores, with large selections of junk food and little fresh produce” (Barbolet et al. 2005: 28). I feel that it should have been more explicitly differentiated that if the only foods available are what Winson refers to as “pseudo foods, ...edible products that are typically high in sugar and/or fat, and other than the calories they provide they are low in other nutrients such as proteins, minerals, and vitamins,” then an area should still be considered a food desert, even if these foods are readily available (Winson 2004: 302). However, Winson also has another explanation for the lack of differentiation in the report. Spatial colonization, he says, accounts for the way profit determines an item’s place and prominence in a grocery store. Profitability also explains why grocery stores are increasingly becoming outlets for pseudo foods, and could mean that access to fruits and vegetables in the DTES is difficult, whether retail outlets are convenience or grocery stores. I raise this concern not merely to critique the report, but also because of its broader relevance to the poverty vs. food system debate. Availability of nutritious food is but one of many problems with

food access that is not directly caused by income. The multitude of problems that lie outside the realm of income provide evidence for the importance of a systems approach.

This was another area of concern for me with both assessments. While I think the recommendations from both assessments reflect their understanding of the connection between local food security issues and both community and policy action, I still feel there is a lack of attention to some of the less tangible elements that impact a local food system. There is mention of the political, but I feel that a more integrated analysis of ideological, cultural, historical, and social contexts would facilitate a better understanding of barriers to community food security, and how these factors could be addressed by federal policy. This could be in part due to the “community” nature of these food assessments. Do these assessments seek to be practical and only try to change what they see as changeable? I don’t feel this is enough of an explanation, particularly since, as Allen says, a community assessment should motivate democratic participation.

In terms of specific policies, the *Richmond Food System Assessment: Environmental Scan & Action Plan* (Govender et al. 2006) contains a table that connects policies and papers at the organizational, municipal, provincial, and federal levels that affect the local food system. This reflects not only an understanding of the connection between policy and community food security, but of the different levels of institutional power that play a role in this complex system. However, while it does a good job of placing the food system in a broader context, it only evaluates existing policies, rather than advocating new policies, or pointing out areas that are not currently addressed by governments. Conversely, FoodShare’s *Food 2002: Phase 2 Multisectoral Policy Recommendations* makes policy recommendations under the themes of food and income;



food and health; food access, hunger and the food industry; food and agriculture; food and consumers' rights; food and community-based food programs; food, cooking and commensality; and food and student nutrition (Field and Mendiratta 2002: 2). This report not only identifies key areas for policy development, but also identifies actions for policies to take within these areas. While this document is not a Community Food Assessment, it does emerge from a community food security organization and it represents the interests of community members in a way that I feel would be beneficial for groups undertaking assessments. As I have discussed, an understanding of community food security problems is incomplete without an attempt to change the policies and systems that affect and create these problems.

Policy advocacy is not only represented by local food security organizations, however. It is also a fundamental goal of national food security coalitions, such as Food Secure Canada (FSC), which works to eliminate hunger, create a sustainable food system, and ensure access to healthy and safe food for Canadians (Author unknown n.d.). An example of a food security initiative at the national level is FSC's People's Food Policy Project (PFPP). "The project's ultimate goal is a suite of policies, generated by the people working on food issues across the country, which will together provide a just and sustainable food system—food sovereignty—in the face of the imminent breakdown of the current globalized system" (Kneen 2008). With this project, FSC seeks to address the gap between local food security projects and food policy, which it sees as dominated not by the people but by governments and industry. This gap also needs to be addressed by groups wishing to undertake community food assessments, which, as I have discussed, do not always connect local problems with larger systems.

In contrast, the San Francisco assessment paints a clearer picture of some of the broader, systemic issues at work. In the introduction of this report, it lists food production, food distribution, food consumption, and food recycling as components affecting the food system (Jones et al. 2005: 1-2). This is in contrast with the two case studies I have brought forward, which mainly discuss the existing programs that are set up to meet the needs of people at risk of food insecurity, and neither of which include waste and recycling in the scope of their assessment. The San Francisco report also acknowledges the circumstances and conditions affecting the way we understand and interact with the food system: a cultural system, a political system, a natural system, and an economic system (Jones et al. 2005: 3). So, for example, people of different cultural backgrounds may have different values about food and the way it is consumed and prepared; and there are social and political relations that affect how people relate to eating, such as the value placed on work, which, in Western society, has a tendency to take time away from other activities. These indicate that there are larger forces that are not always visible, but that affect how individuals and communities access their food. As a result of this broader lens, this assessment also comes up with consequences of food system activities that are beyond the scope of the other assessments. For example, urban agriculture is noted not just for food production and the positive experience of gardening, but for neighbourhood beautification and the creation of sustainable urban environments (Jones et al. 2005: 5).

The Richmond assessment (Govender et al. 2006) also discusses the elements of a food systems approach before evaluating the local food system. It uses the Food System Consortium model for food systems, which considers factors such as natural

resource/environmental ecosystems; research/education systems; technology systems; political systems; social/cultural systems; and economic systems (Govender et al. 2006:

15). It identifies the components of a food system as;

- “a. the production of plants and animals for food and related products;
  - b. the processing of plants and animals into food products for human consumption;
  - c. the transportation, storing, and marketing of food products to consumers;
  - d. the studying of the nutritional and health aspects of the foods humans consume;
  - e. the waste products subsystem from the production and consumption of food; and
  - f. the educational aspects that relate to all of these components in order to have safe food in sufficient quantities for a healthy life”
- (Govender et al. 2006: 15).

From this range of activities, the Richmond report identifies six themes upon which the assessment is based: health and nutrition; food production; food access and distribution; transportation; emergency planning and risk management; waste management (Govender et al. 2006: 16). Despite the vulnerabilities that are built into our current reliance on imported food, this is the only one of all the assessments I have discussed that assesses the system’s emergency preparedness. It is mentioned in the Vancouver assessment, and is currently being researched as a follow-up to the report (Author unknown n.d.). This method represents a more complete and integrated picture of a local food system and the activities and actors involved. While some of the activities that are discussed in the two case studies fall under these themes, a more explicit acknowledgement of the food system serves to paint a more complete picture of the problems and strengths of a local food system and the required actions for community food security.

A more comprehensive definition of the range of activities and systems also has the potential to include perspectives that may have been lost in the case studies I have discussed. However, even the San Francisco and Richmond assessments, while using a clearer definition of the food system do not acknowledge issues of equity. For example, the San Francisco report does not discuss labour concerns, even though it has sections for production, where it promotes activities that facilitate a better understanding of where food comes from with no mention of the system's dependence on migrant labour; and distribution, where retail food stores are only considered from a consumers' perspective and that of employees is left aside. The Richmond assessment, also, is based on the goal that "in Richmond, people are making healthy choices supported by a sustainable, affordable and equitable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and cultural inclusion" (Govender et al. 2006: 9). However, despite promoting a more equitable food system, the production section is focused on viability of local production and preservation of agricultural resources, and again, food outlets are discussed from a consumer access perspective, without a discussion of the people who work in these sectors.

Gender issues, also, are not explicitly discussed in any of the assessments, despite the Thunder Bay and Vancouver reports' mention of community members' resistance to participate in community programs that demanded too much of their time or effort, and the fact that single women are considered a group at-risk of food insecurity (Barbolet et al. 2005: 27, 20, McGibbon 2004: 16). I would consider women's unpaid labour to fall within the lens a systems

analysis, which should take account of cultural factors of food provision, such as how domestic labour is still predominantly carried out by women, often to the exclusion of their own nourishment; or the shift of food preparation from the home into the market upon women's entry into the labour force, to the detriment of people's health; or how women account for most of the low-level and low-paying jobs in the food system; or how lower class women are now paid low wages to perform some of the reproductive labour that used to be the unpaid jobs of mothers and wives (Allen and Sachs 2007). Even the creation of alternative food production and distribution systems tends to be dominated by women, who often do so in a volunteer capacity (Barndt 1999).

### **Questions about Community Food Assessments**

I have raised questions about the two case studies and some other examples, and I would also like to raise some questions about community food assessment. As part of a community's response to local concerns of food insecurity, a CFA is an important tool for taking stock of existing concerns and assets, and motivating future action. Even in communities with seemingly ideal circumstances for food access and production, there are many barriers to food security beyond people's ability to afford enough food. The CFSC promotes this method for its emphasis on progressive planning, increased collaboration from various actors, community responsiveness and ownership, and multi-sectoral strategies (Pothukuchi et al. 2002: 6). For these reasons, an assessment can be a very useful tool, but are there ways to make sure that an assessment is as useful as it can be?

Most of the assessments I've discussed in some way respond to some of the particularities of the region, such as a high cost of food in Thunder Bay, or a high-concentration of food poverty in Vancouver's DTES neighbourhoods. Because solutions to local food security issues will often involve actors from outside the community, I feel that as much detail as can be provided here should be. While it is important to give information about the specific conditions of the region, it is important to also place it within a larger context, as the Vancouver assessment's "Vancouver's Food System in Context" section does when it places local conditions in relation to the global food system. However, I feel that this discussion is incomplete if the larger system is merely equated with the global food system and its practices. As I have discussed above, the assessments that view the community as a small yet interrelated part of a larger system, which it defines comprehensively in relation to economic, ecological, cultural, and political systems, are the assessments which are best able to understand the causes and solutions for local conditions.

As I have discussed, some communities acknowledge the systemic forces that can affect a local food system, but this is an area where I saw potential for local food security groups is in communication among groups across the country. Do communities necessarily communicate with one another when undergoing a food assessment? Is there an overlap of efforts? What resources could communities share with one another to make food security efforts such as these more beneficial?

"[Community food security] efforts are necessarily diverse; they represent local solutions to local manifestations of larger problems. However, they often share common goals, such as making nutritious food more accessible, revitalizing and empowering communities, and supporting local and sustainable food production and distribution" (Pothukuchi et al. 2002: 3).

This issue emerged for me in reviewing the Vancouver and Richmond assessments, as they are two neighbouring communities. The Richmond study was done one year after the Vancouver one. I can't tell from the assessments whether there was any collaboration or resource sharing between the groups. The creation of partnerships between communities could result in more comprehensive assessments, as it could motivate a broader understanding of the issues that affect regions and communities, and it could also result in better practices being created through resource- and knowledge-sharing. For example, while one community alone may not be enough of a market to motivate farmers to shift to growing for local consumption over exports, a commitment from multiple communities to create these markets may make this shift seem more viable to a farmer.

Since the function of a CFA is both assessment and action, it is important that the outcomes of the assessment are communicated with the community and beyond to promote change. With the San Francisco assessment, this is built into the research process, as all participants in the roundtable discussion were given opportunities to review the first part of the assessment before discussing it and planning future actions and further research. Every assessment needs to include a mechanism for promoting and measuring action on the assessment's findings. Without ensuring that the findings are communicated and paired with action and plans to revisit and revise the goals, an assessment will not be able to meet its goals.

One way of ensuring that assessments motivate action in the community and beyond is to invite participation from a variety of actors. The CFSC found that communities doing assessments in the U.S. had included organizations such as foundations; government agencies; universities, institutes and education centres; non-

profit organizations; businesses; and coalitions (Pothukuchi et al. 2002: 14). What actors have a stake in community food security that can be brought to the table? If representatives from government are invited to participate, this may motivate policy change, but policy change should also be a question that is addressed in planning an assessment. What policies, and at what levels, have an impact on food security in the community? This includes existing and potential policies. If new policies are needed, what can be done to make policy change happen? I have discussed FoodShare's policy document as an example, but I think it is an important example also because it not only envisions changes in local food action and policy, but also advocates for higher-level policies.

Of course, inviting actors from different sectors (e.g. food industry and community food security activists), while creating a potentially more complete picture of the food system, also creates a more likely environment for conflict, as groups will represent different interests. It could also be argued that some groups already have enough power over the food system and that it would be counter-productive to invite their participation in grassroots community assessment. For this reason, some food security activists advocate for operating outside of the state and the market and instead putting control over the food supply in the hands of the public. It is worth considering the possibilities of approaching food security from this perspective. Groups undertaking assessments should consider what they envision for the community, the region, and the nation's food system. What is possible and how can this happen?



## **Conclusions and Questions for Future Study**

The problems with food insecurity as illustrated in Vancouver and Thunder Bay's community food assessments demonstrate the need for community and political action in Canada. This begins with a re-imagining of social policy to eradicate poverty, as people will never be able to provide for themselves without adequate income and social assistance. However, while an increase in income would better allow people with low incomes to provide for themselves and their families, it does not address other problems of access, such as locations of supermarkets and availability of public transit; the decline of farming and sustainable food production; distancing from the sources of our food and industrial food production.

In response to some of these barriers to food access and sustainable production, the assessments provide examples of some of the existing food security efforts that are happening in Canadian communities. These programs have made great gains towards food security in some communities. But, however innovative, community food security strategies that evoke change at the local level do not always take issue with the broader systems and problems that cause food insecurity and are therefore not enough. In conjunction with these efforts, policymakers need to acknowledge the major flaws in our current foodways. Public policy has become less of a reflection of the public will and more of an exercise in satisfying corporations, whose control over the food supply is enhanced by their power and influence over public institutions.

As public policy becomes increasingly concomitant with corporate power, the power of the people has come to be equated with consumer power. The emphasis on consumer culture and individualism has translated to mean that the individual is regarded

as the most important agent of change, which is often purported to happen through our decisions as consumers (this not only minimizes individual political capabilities, but also excludes the poor, who may not be able to exercise their will through market participation, or whose choices may be limited to price). Rather than focusing on actions only at the micro level, a more just food system will only arise from an acknowledgement of people's power as more than consumers, but as active members of communities, regions, and nations. The functions of the state that have been transferred to civil society need to be reinstated to the public domain and the state needs to become more accountable to its people. Governments and policies need not just acknowledge problems with food security in Canada, but need to effect changes that will prevent them.

But how will this happen? I have illustrated how there are a number of spaces, actors and voices that need to be connected in a network of strategies for food security. In contrast with individual changes, social movements can represent a collaboration of voices that seek to elicit broader social change, whether they focus on environmental, health, economic, political, or cultural aspects. The efforts to increase food security at the community level form an important part of this approach.

Community Food Assessments are not just a communicative tool, but also emerge from potential spaces of collaboration and advocacy. They not only serve to educate on potential changes that need to come about, but also build organizations and connect people in order to develop community programs, strategies and practices. Some questions that have arisen from this study include: How can CFAs motivate change at broader levels, in both their processes and outcomes? How can a greater understanding of the deeper structural issues that affect national food security be developed? Food security

initiatives that deal with problems in the community need to be coupled with long-term efforts that envision a food secure future in Canada and that push for structural change.

Do national coalitions and food justice organizations have the potential to create a national food security movement? Can these advocacy efforts connect community concerns with national food security by bridging the gap between on-the-ground problems with some of their less tangible causes at higher levels? What is needed to effect social change and create a more just and sustainable food system in Canada?

The great gains that are made in food security by communities have raised another question for me about spaces of change. While I have emphasized throughout this paper the important role that policy plays in ensuring food security for citizens, some grassroots activists question the merits of this approach. If the people have lost control over their public institutions, why not use the effort that would otherwise be used to fight for a foothold in these institutions to fight for a more just food system? If the state has come to be controlled by corporations, it is worth considering the merit of approaches that circumvent corporations and governments altogether and just seek to create strategies for more food secure communities on the ground. And, further to that, if the problems of the current food system come as a result of corporate control and ineffective policies, then potential can be seen in approaches that re-imagine our foodways and incorporate methods that promote equality and sustainability.

Community efforts as tools for public engagement and participation also speak to the realities of modern-day politics. While I have discussed the potential for making use of existing power structures, such as governments and corporations, to improve on existing practices, I have not acknowledged an important barrier to this approach, which

is public disengagement from political structures. An important strength of community level action is that it serves to empower, disalienate, and “make the political personal” by involving people in real actions that will change the food system. In the course of this study, I have come to recognize the importance of community action in creating real and tangible spaces of change for the food system. In this way, community food assessment should be regarded not just for the potential results, such as policy change and program development, that it can create, but as an important process of acknowledging local food security issues and building a community and strategies to deal with them.

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