

# FOOD SECURE CANADA SÉCURITÉ ALIMENTAIRE CANADA

Where agriculture, environment, health, food and justice intersect  
Le pont entre l'agriculture, l'environnement, la santé, les aliments et la justice

## DISCUSSION PAPER 3 Access to Food in Urban Communities

**Food Secure Canada** is a national membership-based organization committed to fighting against hunger and to building a healthy, fair, and ecological food system. Our vision is encapsulated in *Resetting the Table: A People's Food Policy for Canada*.

### FOOD SECURE CANADA DISCUSSION PAPERS

The People's Food Policy is based on ten detailed discussion papers. These discussion papers were generated through 350 Kitchen Table Talks, hundreds of policy submissions, dozens of tele-conferences, online discussions, and three national conferences. Over 3500 people participated in their development. These papers cover a breadth of issues and include detailed policy recommendations for rebuilding Canada's broken food system. Unlike *Resetting the Table*, they are not consensus documents and not every member of Food Secure Canada has signed on to every recommendation in them. Rather, they are living documents, intended to inform debate, stimulate discussion and build greater understanding of our food system and how it should be—and must be—fixed.

- 1) Indigenous Food Sovereignty
- 2) Food Sovereignty in Rural and Remote Communities
- 3) Access to Food in Urban Communities
- 4) Agriculture, Infrastructure and Livelihoods
- 5) Sustainable Fisheries and Livelihoods for Fishers
- 6) Environment and Agriculture
- 7) Science and Technology for Food and Agriculture
- 8) International Food Policy
- 9) Healthy and Safe Food for All
- 10) Food Democracy and Governance



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# Access to Food in Urban Communities

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this discussion paper is to highlight the barriers to food sovereignty for urban residents and provide policy solutions to those barriers. We focus on three action areas: 1) economic barriers to healthy food and reliance on charitable providers for low-income populations; 2) limitations to urban food production; 3) the inability for many population groups to connect with local food sources and information.

### Recommendations:

- Improve programs (minimum wage, EI, pensions, income support) so that all Canadians can afford adequate nutritional food. Alternatively institute a system of vouchers for wholesome food to give every Canadian. Ensure that there are no “food deserts” in cities and suburbs, forcing people to travel extraordinary distances to find food.
- Institute programs to legitimize agricultural use of urban land. Fund school food programs.
- Institute “buy local” food procurement policies within municipalities, regions, provinces, territories, and federal institutions.
- Institute a purchasing policy for all federal-level institutions and contracts that gives preference to local food whenever available. Provide funding for food coordinators in all urban communities.

## INTRODUCTION

Running through these discussion papers is the rejection of the assumption that food can be treated simply as a commodity. This means that we are opening a discussion to imagine non-market ways of distributing food. This attempt to re-imagine the world beyond markets will no doubt affect our understanding of other realities besides food.

Cities are tightly tied to market activity. Cities first emerged as hubs (sea and river ports) through which commodities were transported. As industrialization emerged, they grew

around mills and factories. People moved to cities to participate in the innovation, excitement and prosperity that were emerging.

In terms of policy, cities are the neglected stepchildren of the provincial and federal governments. While some large cities – Vancouver and Toronto come to mind – have had the foresight to establish Food Policy Councils, they are all caught in the same straitjacket of raising revenue through property taxes and fees for services. They are subject to provincial review when making decisions about land use. Federal policies are more sensitive to the demands of extractive industries than to the needs of city dwellers. But when people are hungry, sick, or on the street, it is the city's problem.

Though the focus of these discussion papers is on federal policy, we will make mention of some changes that will have to come from municipal authorities. As Discussion Paper #10 makes clear, the first step in any change will be ongoing discussions among citizens, and in that light we bring forward the problems and possibilities at the municipal level.

There are problems implicit in the nature of cities that have clearly emerged. One is that markets engender inequality: while some are rewarded for their innovations, others are left behind. Another problem is that the land on which cities are built is no longer thought of as land, the source of our food. It is only space: the space on which buildings and roads are built. Some of this space is reserved for social and health uses, such as parks. However, in general, because cities generate most of their revenue from property tax, the tendency is to use the space as “productively” as possible. So, unless some authority intervenes, to use the land as a source of food becomes economically unfeasible.

Yet all people need access to healthy food. Addressing issues of food access in urban areas means targeting the root causes and acknowledging the different demographic groups that are most affected. People in cities mainly obtain their food by purchasing it; however, those who do not have sufficient funds to do this may either not eat, or not be able to eat enough healthy food. Though not confined entirely to cities, poverty and the inability to purchase and prepare healthy food is a serious issue that policy makers continually face, and any discussion of food sovereignty must recognize and target these contributing factors.

Healthy food, like public health care and education, should not only be for those who can afford it. There are certain population groups that should be especially considered when creating policy to enhance food security in urban areas, including Aboriginal populations, people of minority groups, the elderly, and single mothers.<sup>1</sup> Ensuring that all people, regardless of income, have enough healthy food to eat will ensure a healthier, more productive society with a higher quality of life than is presently the case. The *food as a commodity* concept fundamentally hinders the level of food sovereignty by privileging those of higher socio-economic status and punishing those of lower socio-economic status. This is inherently problematic and must change.

The discussion of policies to improve food access for populations in urban communities is organized around four key issues in this paper:

1. Economic barriers to food access for urban populations;
2. Limited opportunities for urban agriculture;
3. Inability of many population groups to connect with local food sources and information;
4. Lack of educational programs to enable people to improve food access and diet in conjunction with programs that address the structural barriers to accessing healthy food.

## **ACTION AREA #1: IMPROVING ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD FOR LOW-INCOME URBAN COMMUNITIES**

### **Current Situation**

One in ten urban residents experience limited or inadequate food access due to financial constraints.<sup>ii</sup> Low-income urban residents rely heavily on food banks and other charitable feeding agencies for food. These agencies are unable to keep up with demand, serving only a fraction of those who are struggling with food insecurity. Furthermore, charitable programs are often unable to provide sufficient nutritious food to meet their client's needs. For these reasons, low-income urban residents should have the financial means to purchase nutritional, culturally-appropriate food in a dignified manner through job creation, wage supports, and transfer payments. They should also be granted access to affordable housing with adequate food storage and preparation facilities, an important component of food sovereignty. Because the experience of asking for food is undignified and shames those who are hungry, we suggest an alternative to the predominant response to hunger and food insecurity by proposing an urban foodscape that is equitable and accessible to all, is dignified and empowering, and promotes high nutritional standards.

### **Policy Proposals**

- 1.a.- Support the systematic review and recalibration of both federal and provincial/territorial income assistance programs, which provide social support for

individuals and families, to ensure that all Canadians can afford to purchase healthy, nutritious food that meets cultural choices. As part of this:

- Implement a federal poverty prevention and reduction strategy, with measurable targets and timelines, in consultation with municipal and provincial governments, business, the non-profit sector, and individual Canadians, and include an effective affordable housing strategy (see Discussion Paper 9).
- Maintain planned levels of federal transfers, including the Canadian Social Transfer, to provincial, territorial, and First Nations governments.
- Support the creation of a living wage with which low-income workers can afford to purchase healthy food.
- Continue to work to make the Employment Insurance (EI) system more inclusive and more effective as an income support program for workers, including unemployed, part-time and self-employed workers.

1.b. - As an alternative – or in addition - to the more general income security measures cited above, we think there should be a discussion of the benefits of a program of food vouchers. These would be distributed to every adult each month, redeemable at grocery stores or farmer's markets for locally-produced, unprocessed foods such as vegetables, fruits, meats, cheeses, beans, and grains. The vouchers could be taxed back on a graduated sliding scale from those with higher incomes.

This discussion would also need to explore whether such a program should be under Health Canada, Agro-Food Canada, or some other department.

1.c.- **Poverty, Food and Housing:** For the urban poor, access to food and to housing are closely related. First, because Canada is the only country with cold winters not to subsidize housing for a broad range of low-income citizens, poor Canadians must spend so much on housing that they cannot afford adequate nutritional food. Secondly, the housing they can afford often lacks appropriate storage and cooking facilities.

We propose that CMHC once again offer subsidies for low-income housing that provides adequate cooking and food storage facilities.

1.d. - **Geographical Access to Food:** With little food produced in urban areas, residents are often dependent on supermarkets for the majority of their food purchases. Because the overall policy framework in Canada is that resources should be distributed by the market, many Canadian urban communities –especially low-income communities - are disproportionately underserved by grocery stores.<sup>iii</sup>

Large retail supermarkets sometimes abandon low income areas for more desirable locations in response to changing market forces and trends in economic development (such as expanding suburbs). This situation creates a food desert: an area where there is little or no access to affordable and healthy food.<sup>iv</sup> Those without access to transportation are forced to obtain food elsewhere, often at convenience stores with limited food choices, poor quality products, and higher prices. The inability for these residents to obtain a nutrient-rich diet may have detrimental effects on their health and well-being, particularly for vulnerable populations (e.g.: pregnant women, children, the elderly, those with chronic illness).<sup>v</sup>

An important element for broad geographic access is the development of food-related social enterprises in low-income neighborhoods. The development of food-related social enterprises, such as affordable cafes and market gardens, could create livelihoods for low-income residents who are currently outside the labour market, thus improving their food access and potentially reducing the need for food charities to feed people at risk.<sup>vi</sup>

We propose that the Federal government, in concert with provincial and municipal governments, develop support programs to ensure that all Canadians have affordable access to wholesome food.

We also encourage charitable food providers to adopt a community economic development model that address the root causes of food insecurity while also meeting immediate needs of the people they serve.

## **ACTION AREA #2: IMPROVING ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE, HEALTHY FOOD THROUGH URBAN AGRICULTURE**

### **Current Situation**

Urban dwellers regularly rely on a food supply that is transported significant distances to reach retail outlets within city limits. The option to decrease travel distance by supplementing an imported diet with a home-grown food supply is often not available in cities due to lack of knowledge about small-scale food production (gardening), lack of owned land on which to grow food, or a lack of public space to grow food. In terms of Food Security, when individuals have the knowledge, land, and ability to grow their own food, they are able to rely less heavily on outside sources. Furthermore, issues of affordability of

and access to fresh vegetables and fruit prevent many urban dwellers from maintaining a healthy diet due to the often high cost of those foods. Growing food in cities could significantly increase the availability and affordability of fresh food in urban areas and increase Food Security for the population. This is already happening elsewhere: in Quito (Ecuador), Hanoi (Vietnam), and Havana (Cuba) as much as 35 percent of city land is under cultivation.<sup>vii</sup>

Public city land can be used efficiently to grow food and raise livestock for communities and individuals as a means to help curb the unavailability and inaccessibility of healthy and fresh food for impoverished urban populations, and to provide more local food for all residents. Strain on charitable organizations that provide food, such as food banks and community-run kitchens, can be reduced by enabling more food production and processing by individuals within city limits. Furthermore, gardening and small-scale agriculture, and individual and community connection to the source of food, enhances individual control over food choices and helps to create a more educated and food-secure population.

### **Policy Proposals**

2.a.- Incorporate urban agriculture into the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Agri-Foods and grant urban farms the same legitimacy as small-scale rural farms, recognizing the importance and potential of urban agriculture as a valuable supplement to rural agricultural production. This ministry will be responsible for broadening the responsibilities for appropriate programs and supports to urban farmers; research on small-scale food production; education on household food production; implementing programs to assist with accessing land in urban areas; and promoting urban agriculture similar to Victory Garden promotions.

2.b. Support a cross-Canada School Food program to include student meal programs, school gardens, and food and agriculture literacy programs that ensure students leave schools able to grow and prepare healthy food (see Discussion Papers # 6 and # 9).

2.c. Mandate that a percentage of federal land within city limits is used to allow for gardens, orchards, growing walls, green roofs, etc.

2.d. Support regionally-based research and extension centres to provide regionally-appropriate information on seeds and breeds to both households and farming communities that meets interests and diverse food choices within those communities (see Discussion Paper # 2).

2.e. Use urban gardens/farms as educational models by establishing, protecting, and caring for these gardens/farms. This would include, but is not limited to,



creating, using, and redirecting necessary or possible infrastructure such as greenhouses near waste-heat sources, reclaimed marijuana grow-op technologies, etc.

2.f. Award points to immigrants with food production skills as one way to increase food access to culturally appropriate foods increasingly demanded in urban centres (see Discussion Paper # 4).

2.g. Remove HST on all gardening supply purchases (tools, seeds, etc.).

### **ACTION AREA #3: IMPROVING CONNECTIONS TO LOCAL AND HEALTHY FOOD FOR INDIVIDUALS LIVING IN URBAN COMMUNITIES**

#### **Current Situation**

With little food produced in urban areas, residents are often dependent on supermarkets for the majority of their food purchases. The produce in these stores typically comes from farms located in climates with longer growing seasons. Local farms are rarely able to compete with large international farms due to cost, quantity, and reliability issues. This situation leaves our farmers out of grocery stores, decreasing the availability of locally produced food for urban residents.

However, the support and development of local food systems (farmer's markets, Community Supported Agriculture programmes) is essential for achieving food sovereignty. Buying local food supports local farms, creates jobs, and promotes local economic growth. It increases consumer knowledge about food production and helps reclaim decision-making power for food providers and consumers. Local food systems reduce the environmental impact associated with 'food miles' and resist dependency on large corporations. Increasing the availability of locally produced food is important in all urban communities, particularly in areas without access to healthy food (such as food deserts).

There is also the need to develop food-related social enterprises in general, especially in low-income neighborhoods. Development of food-related social enterprises, such as affordable cafes and market gardens, could create livelihoods for low-income residents who are currently outside the labour market, improving their food access and potentially reducing the need for food charity to feed people at risk.<sup>viii</sup>

Integrating local food purchasing policies into federal food contracts has the potential for dramatically increasing markets for locally grown food. Federal institutions can also serve as sites for farmer's markets, community gardens, or community-supported agriculture programs. This has the potential to benefit both employees and surrounding neighborhoods.

Food coordinators are essential for the movement towards food sovereignty. They are individuals working in our communities to encourage Canadians to reclaim decision-making power in our food system.

However, regardless of what the food options are, accessing food can be a challenge. Those without access to transportation are forced to obtain food elsewhere, often at convenience stores with limited food choices, poor quality products, and higher prices. The inability for these residents to obtain a nutrient rich diet may have detrimental effects on their health and well-being, particularly for vulnerable populations (pregnant women, children, the elderly, those with chronic illness).<sup>ix</sup>

### **Policy Proposals**

3.a. - Develop a substantial Food Fund to be administered through the Federation of Canadian Municipalities to ensure support for regionally appropriate urban food production programs and solutions (farmer's markets, community gardens, local food distribution, support for food enterprises, food educators, etc.) (See Discussion Paper # 9).

3.b. - Prioritize "buy local" procurement policies within municipalities, regions, provinces, territories and federal level institutions such as schools, hospitals, long-term care facilities, day-cares, government facilities, and so on. Reject the CETA and other similar trade agreements and consistently implement "buy local" food purchasing policies as a key strategy in economic development, health, and agricultural renewal strategies.

3.c. - Initiate a purchasing policy for all federal-level institutions and federal contracts to mandate preference for local food whenever available (see Discussion Paper # 4).

3.d. - Encourage the development of local food programs such as farmers' markets and community gardens in and around federal institutional buildings.

3.e. - Provide funding for food coordinators in all urban communities.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Health Canada. Canadian Community Health Survey, Cycle 2.2, Nutrition (2004) - Income-Related Household Food Security in Canada, and Supplementary Data Tables. Ottawa, ON: Office of Nutrition Policy and Promotion, Health Products and Food Branch, Health Canada; 2007. Report No.: 4696.

<sup>ii</sup> Kirkpatrick, S. and Tarasuk, V. "Food insecurity is associated with nutrient inadequacies among Canadian adults and adolescents," *Journal of Nutrition*, 138, 2008, p. 604-612.

<sup>iii</sup> Bertrand, L., Therien, F., and Cloutier, M.-S. "Measuring and mapping disparities in access to fresh fruits and vegetables in Montreal," *Can. J. Public Health*, 99, 2008, p. 6-11

<sup>iv</sup> Larsen, K. and Gilliland, J. "Mapping the evolution of 'food deserts' in a Canadian city: Supermarket accessibility in London, Ontario, 1961–2005," *International Journal of Health Geographics* 7, 2008. Available online at [www.ij-healthgeographics.com/content/7/1/16](http://www.ij-healthgeographics.com/content/7/1/16)

<sup>v</sup> Smoyer-Tomic, K., Spence, J., Raine, K.D., Amrhein, C., Cameron, N., Yassenovskiy, V., Cutumisu, N., Hemphill, E., and Healy, J. "The association between neighborhood socioeconomic status and exposure to supermarkets and fast food outlets," *Health & Place*, 14, 2008, p. 740-754.

<sup>vi</sup> FORC (2005) Vancouver Food System Assessment. Accessed online: [http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/socialplanning/initiatives/foodpolicy/tools/pdf/FORC\\_final.pdf](http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/socialplanning/initiatives/foodpolicy/tools/pdf/FORC_final.pdf) on 15 juin 2011.

<sup>vii</sup> See ETC group: [www.etcgroup.org/en/node/4921](http://www.etcgroup.org/en/node/4921)

<sup>viii</sup> FORC. Op. cit.

<sup>ix</sup> Smoyer-Tomic, K. Op. cit.



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Food Secure Canada is based on three interlocking commitments:

**Zero Hunger:** All people at all times must be able to acquire, in a dignified manner, adequate quantity and quality of culturally and personally acceptable food. This is essential to the health of our population, and requires cooperation among many different sectors, including housing, social policy, transportation, agriculture, education, and community, cultural, voluntary and charitable groups, and businesses.

**A Sustainable Food System:** Food in Canada must be produced, harvested (including fishing and other wild food harvest), processed, distributed and consumed in a manner which maintains and enhances the quality of land, air and water for future generations, and in which people are able to earn a living wage in a safe and healthy working environment by harvesting, growing, producing, processing, handling, retailing and serving food.

**Healthy and Safe Food:** Safe and nourishing foods must be readily at hand (and less nourishing ones restricted); food (including wild foods) must not be contaminated with pathogens or industrial chemicals; and no novel food can be allowed to enter the environment or food chain without rigorous independent testing and the existence of an on-going tracking and surveillance system, to ensure its safety for human consumption.