A National Environmental Scan of Strategies for Influencing Policy to Build Food Security: Highlights Report

Prepared by: Nova Scotia Nutrition Council /Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre Food Security Research Projects

AHPRC
Atlantic **Health Promotion** Research Centre

The Nova Scotia Nutrition Council

Introduction & Purpose

This report highlights findings from a national environmental scan which examined past and current strategies used to influence policy related to food security. It is recognized that policies at multiple levels influence root causes of food insecurity and therefore a scan to examine the strategy of using policy to influence the issue is important. The scan was conducted by the Nova Scotia Nutrition Council/Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre Food Security Projects under the guidance of a National Advisory Committee, representing organizations across Canada concerned about food security. Although not inclusive of all initiatives in Canada, this report begins to paint the landscape of **strategies** used by community, government, and professional groups to influence policy at various levels to build food security.
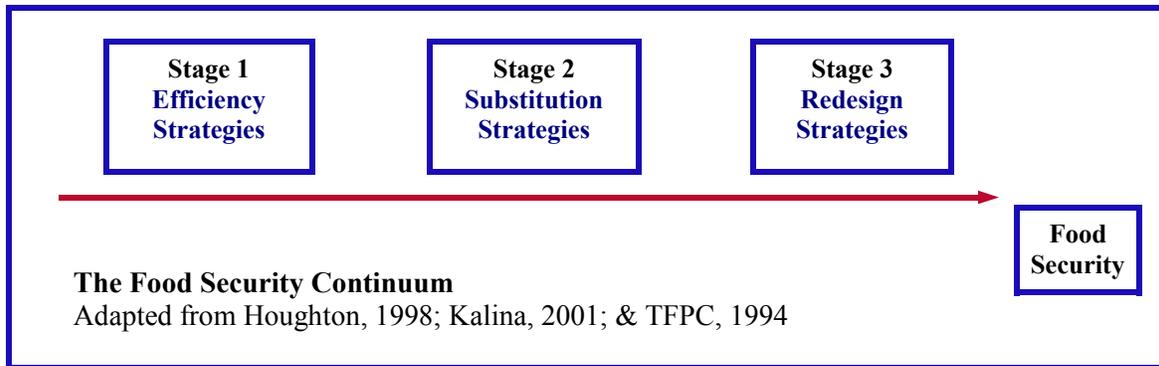
Food insecurity is the limited or uncertain access to, or availability of safe, nutritionally adequate, culturally or personally acceptable foods, or the limited ability to acquire such foods in a socially acceptable manner (Davis, Katamay, et al., 1991; McIntyre, 2003; Smilek & Bidgood, 2001). Alternatively, food security is defined as a" situation in which all people at all times can acquire safe, nutritionally adequate, and personally acceptable foods that are accessible in a manner that maintains human dignity" (Canadian Dietetic Association, 1991, p.139). Food security also exists when people are able to earn a living wage by growing, producing, processing, handling, retailing and serving food, as well as when the quality of the land, air and water are maintained and enhanced for future generations (BC Food Systems network, 2001). Also part of food security is that food is celebrated as central to community and cultural integrity (BC Food Systems network, 2001).

Two key approaches have been used to understand and address food insecurity: an antipoverty approach, which views poverty as the underlying issue that needs to be addressed; and a sustainable food systems approach, which views issues within the current system of food production, processing, and retailing as the root problems (Power, 1999). Regardless of the approach, many efforts have been and continue to be made across Canada to address the mounting problem of food insecurity. These strategies have been organized along a continuum referred to as the Food Security Continuum (TFPC, 1994; Houghton, 1998; Kalina, 2001). The Food Security Continuum is comprised of three main stages: efficiency or short-term relief strategies; substitution or capacity building strategies; and redesign strategies. Despite the differences between the anti-poverty and sustainable food systems approaches there seems to be some consensus that in order to build food security there must be movement along the continuum toward redesign strategies that have the power to affect fundamental changes to how food is produced, distributed and consumed.

Actions that fall within the efficiency stage of the continuum offer temporary solutions to food insecurity. These strategies are commonly referred to as "Band-Aid" solutions because while they do offer short-term support, they do little to address the root causes of food insecurity or affect the problems in the long term. At this time, food banks, as an "efficiency strategy", are the most common response to food insecurity in Canada (Riches, 1997).

Stage 1 Efficiency Strategies	Stage 2 Substitution Strategies	Stage 3 Redesign Strategies

Food Security

The Food Security Continuum
Adapted from Houghton, 1998; Kalina, 2001; & TFPC, 1994

Substitution strategies attempt to replace or act as a substitute for short-term strategies (TFPC, 1994). Such strategies may be more costly than short-term relief strategies n terms of labour and time, and may require more overall commitment from those involved (Kalina, 2001). However, substitution strategies also often attempt to build capacity among those individuals who are experiencing food insecurity to improve their situation through skill development, increased access to resources, increased awareness, and community mobilization. An example of such initiatives would be community kitchens, which have been used to successfully build knowledge and skill around food preparation and nutrition, as well as to develop support networks and community action among participants (Crawford & Kalina, 1997).

Redesign strategies aim to affect policies that will result in long-term changes to address the root causes of food insecurity (TFPC, 1994). Actions at this level are more costly and require a large amount of commitment from representatives of the entire food, health, social, and economic sectors as well as hose who may be marginalized by these systems (Kalina, 2001). Redesign strategies may be directed toward various levels of policy, including personal, organizational, or public policy. Many experts have argued that public policy is in need of considerable change in order to build food security (MacRae, 1999; McIntyre, 2003; Riches, 1986; 1997). Public policies are those implemented by governments to address a certain public issue or problem, and can have a positive or negative impact on people and communities.

According to the food security continuum redesign strategies are the most effective means of building food security because they recognize and focus on policy change to affect the underlying social, political and economic structures that perpetuate food insecurity (Houghton, 1998; Kalina, 2001; TFPC, 1994). Changes in public policy are considered the most effective and direct route to ensuring that Canadian households and communities can be more food secure (TFPC, 1994). Building capacities among individuals, communities, and systems may be an important step toward this end.

Capacity building within communities affected by social policy issues is increasingly being viewed as a powerful strategy for bridging the gap between communities and public policy, and enabling a greater degree of participation in the policy process, particularly among communities typically excluded from such participation (Devon Dodd & Boyd, 2000; Restrepo, 2000). Traditionally public policy has been developed from a top-down approach, however the current social and political climate has moved toward an increasingly bottom-up approach to policy development that involves the participation and input of stakeholders and communities (Devon Dodd & Boyd, 2000).

Community capacity refers to a community's ability to identify, mobilize and address social and health issues that impact on the lived experiences, and is often viewed as both a means and end to building healthier communities (Devon Dodd & Boyd, 2000). Strengthened community capacity is considered an investment in long-term success as it may increase the potential of the community to address not only a current problem, but others that may be identified in the future (Hawe et al., 1997).

Environmental Scan Methods
What did we do?

The national environmental scan began in December 2001 with a literature review, followed by the compilation of a database of over 300 initiatives involved in food security related work. A food security initiative questionnaire was developed and widely distributed to obtain detailed information on tools and strategies used by initiatives to influence policy related to building food security. The questionnaire was also used to as a screening technique to gather information about each initiative's relevance to food security and activities pertaining to policy change. 123 questionnaires were completed and returned. The questionnaires were coded and analyzed using statistical software to generate descriptive statistics regarding the respondents and the activities of their initiatives. Based on the screening technique, 26 key informants were selected for interviewing. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The interview data were qualitatively analyzed using content analysis.

A broad range of respondents participated, including coordinators, health professionals, administrators, advocates (particularly around the issue of poverty), consultants, volunteers/community members, and researchers. Respondents were identified by the contact for the initiative as the person most knowledgeable about their policy-related work.

Strategies & Insights
What did we find?

A number of strategies and insights for influencing policy to build food security emerged from the key informant interviews. Collaborating with other groups and individuals involved in the same issue was seen as a key strategy that could result in a louder message and could allow for resources and efforts to be pooled rather than inefficiently duplicated. Community development and capacity building also appeared to be essential strategies for raising awareness and building skills for specific communities, the general public and themselves to become involved in and support the efforts to build food security through policy. Several of the key informants discussed the importance of framing food security as a health issue, as a way to both increase support for the issue and to make a necessary connection between health and social environments. Most of the informants indicated that lobbying and advocacy were essential to influencing policy, as well as garnering public support. A final strategy used by key informants was to conduct research and collect information. This strategy appeared essential to ensuring that clear and accurate messages could be developed and shared, and that policy decisions and changes were evidence-based. In the following sections each of the strategies will elaborated on in more detail.

KEY STRATEGY 1: Collaboration
"There is really a lot of committed and dedicated people out there with some wonderful ideas"

Working in partnership with other initiatives and creating opportunities for collaboration through the establishment of networks and coalitions was reported as a strategy used for strengthening efforts to influence policy. Collaboration appeared to be an effective way to pool resources and efforts, share ideas, and learn from others. Working collaboratively could also help to ensure that efforts were not being duplicated, and could avoid situations where initiatives working on similar issues might "tread on each others' toes" by competing for the same funding source.

KEY STRATEGY 2: Community Development and Capacity Building

"Participants are given the chance to make choices and get involved"
Many of the informants discussed the importance of "empowering the community" by "working together" or "with" communities affected by food insecurity. Building individual level skills was not necessarily the main objective, rather programs and skill building were seen as a way to bring individuals together and strengthen the community as a whole. Many informants discussed the use of participatory approaches within their initiative to provide opportunities for and encourage active involvement. Efforts were taken to facilitate participation and involvement, recognizing that there may be significant barriers for some individuals to become involved. Informants discussed the need to create a safe and comfortable environment, and to provide support for participation such as childcare, transportation and food.

"We developed a lot… There were skills that we did not have that we had when this was over"
Many informants also discussed their own need to develop capacity within their organization in the realm of policy. This entailed building an understanding of what health public policy is and how to be involved in influencing public policy.

"People learning from each other."
Educating the public about food security and insecurity was also an objective of community development and capacity building efforts. Some informants discussed the importance of having the general public not only aware of the issues, but to develop "strong support and momentum" to see change happen. Some appeared to feel that policy change, particularly at the level of public policy, cannot occur unless the public is aware of the issues and supports a direction of change toward policies that build food security.

KEY STRATEGY 3: Food Security as a Health Priority

"Where healthier choices are easier choices"
Several of the informants discussed the importance of considering food insecurity ultimately as a health issue. Direct changes within health departments were seen as a necessary means of addressing food insecurity. Reorienting health services to focus on health promotion and disease prevention appeared to be the main focus. Building healthy public policy appeared to be seen as an essential element of also building food security. In this way, highlighting the connection between good health and well-being and food security seemed to be a priority. In addition to raising awareness of the health implications and connections, a need was identified to connect different departments within governments to create intersectoral partnerships as a step towards the development of healthier public policies.

KEY STRATEGY 4: Advocacy and Lobbying

"Viewing ourselves as social advocates"
Advocacy and lobbying occurred all levels and were directed at individuals, organizations, and governments. Advocacy tools most commonly used included meetings with policy makers, letter-writing campaigns, and using the media. Some advocacy appeared to be used internally by government departments to gain the attention and support of their key divisions, government officials, or policy makers. More commonly advocacy was an external activity targeted at other initiatives or governments.

KEY STRATEGY 5: Research and Collecting Information

"Putting it together"
To ensure clear and accurate messages many of the informants discussed the need to conduct research and/or collect information from other reliable sources in order to base key messages presented to others, and policy decisions on sound evidence. In keeping with the emphasis on community development and capacity building, some of the informants indicated that participatory research approaches were used to involve different stakeholders. Research activities included literature reviews, needs assessments and asset mapping, surveys and questionnaires, interviews, and food costing studies to monitor the cost of food.

Key Challenges

Several key challenges were identified that those attempting to influence policy to build food security need to think about in the process of attempting to influence policy:

## *"It can be a bit of a hodgepodge"*
The complexity of concept of food security appears to present a significant challenge to those working to address the problems. Many informants indicated the "hodgepodge" of issues related to food insecurity present a challenge to working together and developing strong and unified messages.

"What's your point of view?"
Informants reported challenges to building buy-in and support outside of an initiative, as well as among partners within the initiative. This was particularly the case for building support for broader changes focused on re-design strategies rather than more typical "band-aid" solutions like food banks. Within initiatives it was often difficult to create sustained or involved support, such that most of the work was left up to only a few key players.

"Burn-out"
Achieving a balance between the time and effort required for doing policy work with available resources was seen as key challenge. Informants repeatedly referred to the enormous volume of work and the high-profile, fast paced nature of the work. Resources were often not adequate to support their needs and this often led to "burn out".
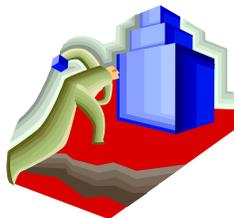
Tips and Suggestions for Influencing Policy

✓ Celebrate the small things - it can be a long and arduous process to influence policy.

> *"It is like the drip of water and it is going to eventually create a hole in the rock."*

✓ Think big but stay focused - there are so many issues to be dealt with.

> *"You can't be all things to all people... keep the same message... be aware of what your focus is."*

✓ Know the political process – know how government works.
✓ Meet with policy makers – don't be afraid of politicians.

> *"The process, the structure and how government works, that is really important."*

✓ Hit the media - it can be prime driving force for shaping public opinion and political agendas, but seek assistance from others who have experience with media and be sure to communicate clear and accurate information.
✓ Build public support - there needs to be pressure from outside the political system too.

> *"The Minister, at the end of the day, needs to know that the work is supported on the outside."*

✓ Identify a champion – someone either within the political system, or someone outside of it who can work the system and move the issue.

> *"In the end that is what clinched the deal for us, was that one councillor became very excited about what we were doing and really moved for us."*

✓ Develop clear and palatable messages - avoid an adversarial approach that blames or attacks certain stakeholders.
✓ Take action - be timely and specific, let your audience know what they can do to address the issues, develop action steps, and follow through on your efforts.

> *"If you're going to be an activist, you have to act."*

Conclusions

This research has revealed some commonly used and effective strategies for influencing policy to build food security, along with some tips for success and challenges to think about in the process of attempting to influence policy. The findings suggest that developing food policy councils (FPCs) may be an effective way to incorporate the strategies presented here, and to address some of the challenges. FPCs have been created to address food security issues holistically, rather than disjointedly through various municipal level departments. They are usually made up of voluntary members representing a diversity stakeholders. Diversity creates an opportunity for more creative solutions, and research has shown that FPCs with more narrow membership and focus are not as successful as broader and more divers councils (Borron, 2003). FPCs have been successful in building awareness of food security, and momentum for action at various levels of government and within the general public (Community Food Security Coalition, 2002). Many councils are community-based and work to involve communities in meaningful ways in order to build capacity and food security (Community Food Security Coalition, 2002). Finally, they have been effectively used to bridge the diversity of issues related to food security and the often-dichotomized anti-poverty and sustainable food systems approaches (Borron, 2003; Community Food Security Coalition, 2002). Unfortunately, FPCs often still face challenges related to limited resources, but many are moving toward having staff support (Borron, 2003).

The research also suggests that social inclusion is a fundamental component of food security, and that food security cannot be built without consideration for and inclusion of those impacted by food insecurity. Social inclusion aims to remove the barriers and risks that may prevent meaningful inclusion and participation in decision-making, developing social policy, employment, and cultural and social activities (Raphael, 2002; Wotherspoon, 2002). Social inclusion is about social justice, equity, valued recognition, human development and capacity building, and is particularly important to the development of healthy social policy (Wotherspoon, 2002). Many of the initiatives involved in this research emphasized social inclusion through community development, capacity building, and participatory research. It is important to note that while it is important to engage and include communities in building food security, it is equally important to consider the potential to overburden communities or assume that they must be involved. Facilitating empowered communities and developing capacities is no substitute for supporting communities through healthy public policy. That is, moving toward policy change and redesign strategies should remain the ultimate goal of food security efforts; building community capacity is an important process to move toward this end.

Recommendations

In addition to continued development and support for food policy councils and the use of a social inclusion framework for addressing food security, further work is also needed to build on this National Environmental Scan:

1. Build upon the database of initiatives compiled for this research to gain a bigger picture of the initiatives across Canada, including details of their programs and efforts.
2. Evaluate the actual success of policies that have been developed or adapted to build food security.
3. Conduct analyses of the political, economic, social, and health implications of different policy options for addressing food security.
4. Develop a stronger network of food security initiatives across the country to build on national and provincial efforts and solutions.
5. Explore the feasibility of National and/or Provincial Food Policy Council and determine the assets and needs for the development of such an initiative.
6. Explore strategies for bringing food security advocates from differing perspectives (i.e. antipoverty and sustainable food systems) by gathering information on success stories, learnings through lack of success, and examples from other issues involving multi-disciplinary topics.

References

BC Food Systems Network (2001). *Food security*. Retrieved February 20,2003 from www.fooddemocracy.org/security.html

Borron, S.M. (2003). *Food policy councils: Practice and possibility*. Hunger-Free Community Report. Eugene, Oregon, USA: Congressional Hunger Center.

Canadian Dietetic Association (The) (1991). Hunger and food security in Canada: The official position paper of The Canadian Dietetic Association. *Journal of the Canadian Dietetic Assocation,* 52(3), p. 139.

Community Food Security Coalition (2002). *Weaving the food web: Communty food security in California*. Retrieved online August 27, 2003 from www.foodsecurity.org.

Crawford S.M. & Kalina, L. (1997). Building food security through health promotion: Community Kitchens. *Journal of the Canadian Dietetic Association*, 58(4), 197-201.

Davis, B., Katamay, S., Desjardins, E., Sterken, E., & Patillo, M. (1991). Nutrition and food security: A role for The Canadian Dietetic Association. *Journal of the Canadian Dietetic Assocation,* 52(3), pp. 141-145.

Devon Dodd, J. & Hébert Boyd, M. (2000). Capacity building: Linking community experience to public policy. Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada: Health Canada: Population and Public Health Branch Atlantic Regional Office.

Hawe, P., Noort, M., King, L., & Jordens, C. (1997). Multiplying health gains: The critical role of capacity building within health promotion Programs. Health Policy, 39(1), pp. 29-42.

Houghton, J. (1998). The dietitian's role in British Columbia's food security movement. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Dietitians of Canada: Members in Action Newsletter.

Kalina, L. (2001) Building Food Security in Canada. 2nd Ed. Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada: Kamloops FoodShare.

MacRae, R. (1999). Policy failure in the Canadian food system. In M. Koc, R. MacRae, L. J. A. Mougeot, & J. Welsh (Eds.) *For Hunger Proof Cities* (pp. 182-193). Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: International Development Research Centre.

McIntyre, L. (2003). Food security: More than a determinant of health. *Policy Options,* 2003(Mar.), pp. 46-51.

Power, E. M. (1999) Combining social justice and sustainability for food security. In M. Koc, R. MacRae, L. J. A. Mougeot, & J. Welsh. (Eds.) *For Hunger Proof Cities* (pp. 30-37). Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: International Development Research Centre.

Raphael, D. (2002). *Social Justice is good for our hearts: Why societal factors – not lifestyles – are major causes of heart disease in Canada and elsewhere*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: CJS Foundation for Research and Education.

Restrepo, H. (2000) Increasing Community capacity and empowering communities for promoting health. Draft Technical Report. Fifth Global Conference on Health Promotion, Mexico City.

Riches, G. (1986). *Food banks and the welfare crisis*. Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: The Canadian Council on Social Development.

Riches, G. (1997). Hunger in Canada: Abandoning the right to food. In G. Riches *First World Hunger: Food Security and Welfare Politics* (pp. 46-77). New York: St. Martin's Press Inc.

Smilek, S., Bidgood, B., Parent, M. & Thompson, J. (2001). *When the fridge is bare*. Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Food Bank of Waterloo Region. Retrieved April 14, 2002 from www.foodbankwloo.org/fridgebook.html.

Toronto Food Policy Council (1994). *Reducing urban hunger in Ontario: Policy responses to support the transition from charity to local food security (Discussion Paper #1)*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Author.

Wotherspoon, T. (2002). *The dynamics of social inclusion: Public education and Aboriginal People in Canada*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Laidlaw Foundation