

May 25, 2022

## Open Letter to Ontario Political Candidates: Building a Food Secure Ontario

Dear Ontario Political Party Candidate,

As a united collective of organizations working closely with people experiencing food insecurity, we call for policies that challenge structural barriers to food security and foster the sustainable development of a food-secure Ontario.

Food insecurity is the inability to access food as a result of financial constraints and inadequate funds to purchase food. Household food insecurity is the “inability to acquire or consume an adequate diet quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so.”<sup>1</sup> It is a serious problem in Canada that negatively impacts physical, mental, and social health while putting strain on our healthcare system.<sup>2</sup>

Researchers at the University of Toronto’s PROOF found that food insecurity impacts over 60% of households dependent on social assistance income. However, food insecurity also affects a significant number of the workforce, with 65% of food-insecure households relying on wage or salary incomes.<sup>3</sup>

When someone is experiencing food insecurity, they are likely struggling with other basic needs as well, for example: inadequate or insecure housing, lack of money for necessities such as prescription medications, dental care, telephone, transportation, clothing, and struggling with depression, anxiety, and social isolation.<sup>4</sup>

### **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the urgent need to address food insecurity in Ontario. Addressing food insecurity is critical to a successful and equitable recovery - economically, environmentally, and socially. Fostering communities where Ontarians have access to sufficient, healthy, and culturally appropriate foods requires urgent collaborative action. Differences in food insecurity in Canada’s provinces demonstrate the potential impact that provincial policymakers can have on food security in their communities. Coordination between the public, private and not-for-profit sectors is needed to develop policies that increase food security in Ontario while supporting the progress and strength of our province

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<sup>1</sup> Government of Canada. (2020). [Household food insecurity in Canada: Overview](#).

<sup>2</sup> Tarasuk, V. & Mitchell, A. (2020). [Household food insecurity in Canada, 2017-2018](#). Toronto: PROOF.

<sup>3</sup> Tarasuk, V. & Mitchell, A. (2020). [Household food insecurity in Canada, 2017-2018](#). Toronto: PROOF.

<sup>4</sup> McNicoll, S, & Curtis, A. (2021). [Beyond hunger: the hidden impacts of food insecurity in Canada](#). *Community Food Centres Canada*.

and demonstrating a commitment to the nationally and globally recognized Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>56</sup>

Household food insecurity is experienced in greater proportion and more severely by Ontarians who are Black, Indigenous,<sup>7</sup> and marginalized by other social and structural inequalities like being disabled<sup>8</sup> and being LGBTQ2S+<sup>9</sup>. Our community members that experience food insecurity at these intersections face structural barriers that limit their potential to contribute to the prosperity of our province fully. Local campus surveys have highlighted these intersections and experiences for post-secondary students in Ontario<sup>10</sup>. We must center the voices of the communities and people who are disproportionately impacted to make Food Justice a priority.

Food Justice is a key priority as it “seeks to ensure that the benefits and risks of where, what and how food is grown, produced, transported, distributed, accessed and eaten are shared fairly. Food justice represents a transformation of the current food system, including but not limited to eliminating disparities and inequities”.<sup>11</sup>

When Food Justice is centered in our approach to poverty reduction, agriculture and environmental protection, and food access, food security<sup>12</sup> for all becomes attainable. There must be stable availability, access and utilization of food to make food security possible.<sup>13</sup> Addressing food insecurity and justice-related issues benefits all Ontarians, our economy and the environment.

The recovery from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the power of collective action when our communities come together to triumph over challenges. We advocate for food security for all Ontarians and implore you to take action on the following three categories of policy recommendations that are both practical and impactful:

- 1. Household Food Insecurity**
- 2. Agriculture and Environmental Justice**

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<sup>5</sup> Because food and agriculture is tied into so many facets of well-being, society, and environment, it is tied to many of the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#). Creating a more food secure Ontario contributes to the no poverty, zero hunger, and good health and well-being goals, and touches on many other goals.

<sup>6</sup> Environment and Climate Change Canada. [Achieving a sustainable future: Draft federal sustainable development strategy 2022 to 2026](#). Gatineau: Government of Canada.

<sup>7</sup> Tarasuk, V. & Mitchell, A. (2020). [Household food insecurity in Canada, 2017-2018](#). Toronto: PROOF.

<sup>8</sup> Schwartz, N., Buliung, R., & Wilson, K. (2021). [Experiences of food access among disabled adults in Toronto, Canada](#). Disability & Society.

<sup>9</sup> Appiah, A., Brennan, K., Halpenny, C., Pakula, B., & Waite, S. (2021, August). [Building the evidence base about economic, health, and social inequities faced by LGBTQ2S+ individuals in Canada](#). Ottawa: Social Research and Demonstration Corporation.

<sup>10</sup> Meal Exchange. (2021). [National Student Food Insecurity Report](#).

<sup>11</sup> Gottlieb, R. and Joshi, A. (2010). Food Justice. MIT Press, Cambridge.

<sup>12</sup> “Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” - Food and Agricultural Organization, 1996

<sup>13</sup> Food & Agriculture Organization. (2008). [An introduction to the basic concepts of food security](#). Rome: EC - FAO Food Security Programme.

### 3. Anti-Oppression, Anti-Racism and Indigenous Food Sovereignty

#### Household Food Insecurity

Household food insecurity is directly tied to financial and affordable housing security. Economically insecure households experience more severe food insecurity and at higher rates than economically secure households. Lack of affordable housing is also associated with food insecurity.

Food insecurity is much more prevalent among households who rent rather than own their dwelling with 61% of food-insecure households in Canada renting their accommodations.<sup>14</sup> Lack of affordable housing is a significant concern for the 46% of Ontarians who spend over the affordable threshold of 30% of their income on rent and even more dire for the lowest income group who spend 73% of their income on rent.<sup>15</sup> With over 70% of their income spent on rent it is clear how little low-income Ontarians have left for basic necessities like healthy, quality food. An astounding 59% of Ontarians who rely on social assistance programs experience food insecurity and more severely which points to the impact that policy intervention can have in our communities.<sup>16</sup>

Policies that improve the economic security of Ontarians has been demonstrated to reduce their experiences of food insecurity. For example, a \$1 raise in minimum wage or a \$1000 increase in annual welfare income were each associated with 5% lower odds of severe food insecurity, while a one-percentage-point increase in the income tax rate for the lowest-income households was associated with 9% higher odds of food insecurity.<sup>17</sup> This confirms that policy interventions aimed at supporting the economic security of Ontarians simultaneously supports food security.

While charitable services, such as food banks, provide temporary relief for a fraction of food insecure households, they fail to address the causes of food insecurity. Policy interventions are the only way to target the root causes that will reduce and eliminate food insecurity. When we invest in the economic stability of our community members, we support the food security and economy of the province.

#### **What the provincial government can do:**

- Create Affordable Housing:
  - Strengthen rental laws and rent control to better support renters who make up 61% of food-insecure households in Canada.
  - Expand the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit.
  - Invest in the creation and repair of social and low-income housing.
- Improve Social Assistance and Income Supports:
  - Reconfigure Ontario Disability Support Program and Ontario Works to reflect the cost of living and bridge the deficit between assistance and a living wage.

<sup>14</sup> Tarasuk, V. & Mitchell, A. (2020). [Household food insecurity in Canada, 2017-2018](#). Toronto: PROOF.

<sup>15</sup> [Canadian Rental Housing Index](#).

<sup>16</sup> Tarasuk, V. & Mitchell, A. (2020). [Household food insecurity in Canada, 2017-2018](#). Toronto: PROOF.

<sup>17</sup> PROOF. (2021, May). [Provincial policy levers to reduce household food insecurity](#). Toronto: PROOF.

- Reduce or eliminate penalties for earned income while on income support.
- Improve access to these supports by simplifying the application process and requirements.
- Improve Employment Policies:
  - Invest in the creation and protection of better jobs with living wages, security, and paid sick days.<sup>18</sup>
  - Develop and protect labour laws that benefit Ontario workers.
  - Increase minimum wage to a livable wage.
  - Expand the Low-Income Individuals and Families (LIFT) Tax Credit and dismantle earned-income penalties from government support programs

## **Agriculture and Environmental Justice**

Food security issues are directly connected with agriculture and environmental justice. The agriculture sector plays a key role in providing sustenance, jobs and revenue for our province and beyond. Ontario as a wealthy province has the capacity to both import and grow its own food, however policies moving forwards must recognize impending environmental and social justice concerns. The province's policies regarding topics such as land preservation and climate change affect the food system and all Ontarians. The agrifood economy is land and weather dependent, where drastic climate impact can change what we see and pay for at the grocery store.

Increasing Ontario's food security is an investment in Ontario agriculture and environmental sustainability. Ontario is currently losing 175 acres, or 5 family farms, of farmland to urban development every day.<sup>19</sup> Once this land has been repurposed for urban developments it can never return to viable farmland and with just 5% of the land in Ontario with the capacity to produce food, it is critical that policy thoughtfully regulates urban sprawl.<sup>20</sup> The viable farmland that Ontario does possess is some of the best and most well preserved in the world and protecting these spaces should be a priority.

Land preservation promotes future growth of local food to feed our communities, building food security for Ontarians and fostering prosperity of the provincial economy. Investing in local food production secures the province's position as a leader in agricultural production in Canada. Policies that establish land preservation and environmental protections ensure longevity of a sustainable food system and natural resources in Ontario for generations to come. Policy needs to reflect the unique experiences of Black, Indigenous and otherwise marginalized Ontarians experiencing food insecurity.

Climate change is a scientific reality that has become overly politicized and requires a multifaceted approach to mitigate. A provincial focus on reduction in greenhouse gas emissions does not adequately address climate change as a global issue. Leadership in Ontario must rethink its urban planning in relation to the environment as the effects of its planning now will be felt by future Ontarians. Climate change is the ultimate culmination of the effects of

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<sup>18</sup> Feed Ontario. (2021). [A future without hunger](#). Policy Recommendations for Hunger Relief.

<sup>19</sup> Ontario Federation of Agriculture. (2022). [Home grown: protecting Ontario's farmland](#).

<sup>20</sup> Ontario Federation of Agriculture. (2022). [Home grown: protecting Ontario's farmland](#).

poor environmental policies internationally and Ontario has an opportunity to be a leader in developing new and educated environmental policy.

### **What the provincial government can do:**

- **Farmland Protection and Limit Urban Sprawl:**
  - Ontario Federation of Agriculture: Protecting Ontario's Farmland<sup>21</sup>: With over 30,000 signatures OFA's petition to protect farmland is becoming one of the largest movements in Ontario and supporting such policies in your platform will resonate with voters.
  - Cease the increasing use of MZO's (Minister's Zoning Orders) that bypass processes intended to protect farmland.
  - Create affordable housing without jeopardizing farmland through urban intensification.
  - Fund research for environmental practices in agriculture (ie. cover crops, cultural foods, programs for farmers).
  
- **Support and Invest in Ontario's Agricultural Workers:**
  - Raise awareness and promote careers in the agriculture and agri-food sector.
  - Invest in training and educational programs to support the meat and poultry sector's retention and growth in processing capacity.
  - Create stronger legal protections and improved access to supports for migrant farm workers.
  - Improve existing support for small farmers.
  
- **Build Community Relationships with Land, Agriculture, and Food:**
  - Remove barriers for community members to access public land for local food production purposes.
  - Incentive programs for businesses to source local foods.
  - Invest in natural gas, transportation, broadband, health care and schools to make rural Ontario attractive to farm, live, and do business.

### **Anti-Oppression, Anti-Racism and Indigenous Food Sovereignty**

Anti-oppressive policies need to reflect the unique experiences of Black, Indigenous and otherwise marginalized Ontarians experiencing food insecurity. An intersectional perspective is required to address systemic oppression, such as racism in the Canadian food system. This is a concern that must be tackled at all levels of governments which is where the Anti-Racism Directorate<sup>22</sup> can lend a role on the provincial level.

Food insecurity intersects with other structural disadvantages and is experienced in higher proportion by racialized and marginalized individuals. "The highest rates of food insecurity were found among Canadian households where the respondent identified as Indigenous or Black, at 28.2%, and 28.9% respectively."<sup>23</sup> Addressing anti-Black racism in the

<sup>21</sup> Ontario Federation of Agriculture.(2022). [Protecting Ontario's Farmland](#).

<sup>22</sup> Government of Ontario. (2022). [Anti-Racism Directorate](#).

<sup>23</sup> Tarasuk, V. & Mitchell, A. (2020). [Household food insecurity in Canada, 2017-2018](#). Toronto: PROOF.

food system and following up on action to address the problem of food insecurity experienced by many Black Torontonians is what the City of Toronto did by introducing Canada's First (and hopefully not last) Black Food Sovereignty Plan<sup>24</sup>. The Ontario Government has an opportunity to reinvigorate the archived the Food Security Strategy<sup>25</sup> with anti-racism principles to strengthen the reach across the province that are proposed for the city of Toronto so more individuals can benefit.

Anti-oppression in the food system can not be achieved if growers and migrant workers are not treated with dignity and compensated fairly. Ontario employs many migrant workers who grow our food in farms and serve it in restaurants. Due to their temporary work authorization permits, they are "excluded from many basic provisions of Ontario's Occupational Health and Safety Act and Employment Standards Act, as well as denied the right to collectively bargain<sup>26</sup>." For a just food system the agriculture sector requires political will from the provincial government to address inequity and oppression.

Making food a part of reconciliation involves a multistep approach for settlers to support food sovereignty alongside Indigenous communities. Centering the voices of Indigenous communities is an important step to involve the community in making decisions made around land access, rights, and working towards policies informed by recommendations layed out in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action<sup>27</sup>. In the Eat Think Vote campaign by Food Secure Canada the Indignious Food Sovereignty section emphasizes "the issue of food access, traditional or country foods and Indigenous foods all rely on the ability of Indigenous communities to have access to land". In order "to repair and reconnect the relationship of Indigenous people to the food that was altered in the colonial process means empowering and giving Indigenous people the space to return to the land and water where their food comes from."<sup>28</sup>

The most marginalized groups' voices, experiences and expertise must guide policy design and implementation to deconstruct the barriers to a fair and just food system.

### **What the provincial government can do:**

- Advancing Anti-oppression in labour force and land access:
  - Provide land access and usage for Indigenous, Black and People of Colour communities.
  - Remove barriers for women entering and re-entering the workforce.
- Involving equity-deserving communities in policy decisions:
  - Engage community benefit organizations and agreements.
  - Increase consultation with community organizations and members.

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<sup>24</sup> City of Toronto. (2021, October). [City Council approves first Black Food Sovereignty Plan](#).

<sup>25</sup> Government of Ontario. (2021, August). Archived - Building Ontario's First Food Security Strategy. [Discussion Paper](#).

<sup>26</sup> [Open Letter](#) – National Day of Mourning: No More Deaths or Injury at Work. (2021, April).

<sup>27</sup> [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action \(2015\)](#)

<sup>28</sup> Food Secure Canada. (n.d.). Eat Think Vote. [Indignious Food Sovereignty](#).

- Implement and bolster initiatives and programs designed to support racialized workers.
  - Improve protections for immigrant workers and access to culturally relevant support programs.
- Support recommendations made and informed by communities, such as the First Nations Food, Nutrition and Environment Study<sup>29</sup> Recommendations as follows:
    1. Prioritizing the protection of the environment – First Nations lands, waters and territories
      - a. Improve measures that protect local ecosystems, mitigate against the negative impacts of pollution and climate change, and prevent further environmental damage.
      - b. Promote the consumption of traditional foods.
      - c. Reduce the levels of contaminants in natural and built environments through enhanced research, education, regulation, and communication.
    2. Build Capacity to eliminate barriers to proper nutrition and to reduce food insecurity.
      - a. Incorporate a holistic approach to food and nutrition that involves addressing social issues and socioeconomic factors such as poverty, unemployment and education that contribute to food insecurity.
      - b. Support communities to increase reliance on traditional food systems and build resilience against threats to food security/sovereignty, including extreme climate events/disasters (e.g. flood, drought, wildfire) and pandemics (COVID-19).
    3. Create a joint task force or committee to plan how to implement/operationalize these recommendations.

Food security is a critical issue for this election as the people of Ontario are feeling the social, economic, and environmental impacts of the last few years. The provincial government holds great power to influence food security issues including household food insecurity, agriculture & land use, and climate change. We are hopeful that once elected, MPPs and the Government of Ontario will take these recommendations and use them to move towards a more food secure Ontario. We look forward to working with you and other political representatives on issues relating to food security.

Sincerely,

Greater Ontario Food Collective




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<sup>29</sup> University of Ottawa, Université de Montréal, & Assembly of First Nations. (2021, October). [First Nations food, nutrition and environment study](#).

**Greater Ontario Food Collective Member Endorsements**

Middlesex London Food Policy Council

Niagara Food Security Network

Peel Food Action Council

Simcoe County Food Council

York Region Food Council

**Additional Endorsements**

ALUS Middlesex

Canadian Black Registered Dietitians Association

Good Food Impact (formerly Good Food Project)

Growing Chefs! Ontario

Guelph-Wellington Food System Resiliency Table

Hamilton Community Food Center

Meal Exchange

National Farmers Union - Ontario

Niagara Chapter Native Women Inc.

Niagara Community Garden Network

Niagara Poverty Reduction Network

Ontario Food Collaborative

Peel Poverty Reduction Council

Peterborough Food Action Network

PROOF Food Insecurity Policy Research, University of Toronto

Roots to Harvest

The Local Community Food Centre

The Mississauga Food Bank

The York Region Youth Food Committee