

**Food Sovereignty on the Menu:
Exploring the Opportunities of Locally-Sourced School Food Programs**

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Abstract

Locally-sourced school nutrition programs offer opportunities for the development of food sovereignty and the realization of the right to food in Canada. School food and public procurement programs can strengthen local food systems, reduce food insecurity, increase food literacy, support environmentally sustainable farming practices, and improve the incomes of small-scale farmers. Analyzing research from the academic and grey literatures, this paper reviews the failure of the Canadian government to realize the right to food, examines and contrasts the concepts of food security and food sovereignty, considers the role of civil society organizations, and assesses the opportunities and barriers of school food programs that source ingredients locally. The potential benefits and pitfalls of relying on government for funding and administering programs are also considered. Across Canada, non-governmental organizations and charities have been filling in the gaps in the country's social safety net by providing food for the vulnerable, including through the funding, administration, and operation of school nutrition programs. Although the paper argues in favour of a nationally-mandated and funded program, consideration of the local context is important, and accordingly the paper contains a brief discussion of the response to food insecurity in Winnipeg schools. In conclusion, I argue that a national, locally-sourced universal school lunch program, designed with the engagement and input of grassroots and community organizations, would be an important step towards food sovereignty, and should be a priority for the Canadian government.

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1. Introduction

Governments should be exploring opportunities to advance the right to food by supporting initiatives that build food sovereignty, such as locally-sourced school food programs. Universal school meal programs create opportunities for food literacy education and for the realization of the right to food. Targeted public procurement programs offer a viable way to support small-scale producers by purchasing locally-produced ingredients for large and stable institutional buyers like schools. Together, these programs have the potential to reduce food insecurity, improve educational outcomes, strengthen local food systems, increase the incomes of small-scale farmers, and contribute to the environmental sustainability of the food system.

The forces of globalization and neoliberal capitalism have transformed the global economy, fostering even greater inequity and leaving many unable to afford basic necessities like food. Canada is no exception in this unequal distribution of wealth. Although ranked as one of the wealthiest nations in the world, Canada is home to shocking levels of child poverty and hunger (Statistics Canada, 2020), and ranks very poorly on efforts to combat poverty and food insecurity (Brazier, 2017). Swept up in the neoliberal march to smaller government, Canada has continued to thin the social safety net that once provided some protection to the most vulnerable residents. In doing so, Canada has forsaken its duty to ensure the realization of basic human rights, including the right to food.

In failing to fulfil the right to food, Canada is neglecting both its moral duty and its legal obligations as this right is enshrined in multiple human rights instruments to which Canada is signatory (Salmon, 2015). While other less developed countries around the world have created national school meal programs to address child hunger, the Canadian government has deferred this responsibility to food charities and civil society organizations, which are unequal in their funding, capacity and distribution across the country. In relying on charitable organizations to feed the hungry, Canada is shirking its duty to fulfil the right to food, while reinforcing the false impression that food is not a basic universal human right.

Meanwhile, other nations, such as Japan, Sweden and Finland, have moved beyond school nutrition models that focus exclusively on the provision of sufficient food to meet immediate needs, and have incorporated integrative pedagogical models that educate students about food and food systems (Oostindjer et al, 2017; Parker & Koeppel, 2020). In Brazil, school meals are viewed as opportunities to build sustainable food systems, and have been incorporated

into a broader policy framework and legislation that support the principles of food sovereignty (Kleine & Brightwell, 2015). Food sovereignty, a concept brought to the world's attention by the international alliance La Via Campesina (LVC) (Desmarais, 2015), is a vision embraced by peasants, smallholders, academics and human rights activists, and defined by LVC as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food, produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agricultural systems” (quoted in Patel 2009, 666).

The development of a national school food program that focuses public procurement policies on the strengthening of local food systems and the support of small-scale farmers is a step toward food sovereignty. This model addresses the human right to food not only through the provision of healthy food to children, but also through the increased reliability of farmer income, since globally, small-scale farmers are often food-insecure themselves (Gallegos, 2011; Ramanujam et al, 2015). School food programs have been identified as ideal for the delivery of nutrients, and importantly, they represent an opportunity to develop food literacy and to educate children about the food system, the environment, and the role of individual consumer choices in developing a just and sustainable system (Powell & Wittman, 2018).

Locally-sourced school food programs are a valuable initiative in their capacity to support farmers; a group that has been disproportionately and adversely affected by neoliberal globalization. Olivier de Schutter (2012), former Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, notes the negative impacts that neoliberal trade policies have had on Canadian farmers; particularly the decline in net income, dramatic growth in debt, and the narrowing margins that have pressured many producers into expanding operations in order to maintain their income. Agricultural policies, driven by multilateral organizations such as the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the International Monetary Fund, reinforce adherence to the classical, traditional economic model, which favours large-scale, industrial, export-driven producers (Gallegos, 2011). Given the urgency with which the world must confront climate change, and the significant environmental damage done by industrial agriculture, it is vital that the government support the small-scale producers who have taken the lead on agroecology and other sustainable farming practices. Public procurement programs that favour small sustainable farms are one way of providing support, while generating many other benefits.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of complex, global food supply chains and has underlined the need for systemic change (Clapp & Moseley, 2020). Supply interruptions have served to heighten the sense of urgency among alternative food system activists, and have raised awareness among ordinary Canadians about the precarious nature of the just-in-time global food distribution system (Hobbs, 2020). The Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the need to build resilience into the food system, as evidenced by an unprecedented surge in home gardening (Mullins et al, 2021) and interest in purchasing local food (Goddard, 2021). This swell of interest and enthusiasm for local food production and consumption has created opportunities to escalate efforts to build food sovereignty in Manitoba by strengthening the connections that have been forged in the local food community and exploring opportunities for collaboration.

This major research paper considers the opportunities that locally-sourced school nutrition programs could offer for the development of food sovereignty and the realization of the right to food in Canada. I begin with a brief description of methodology, after which I offer an overview of Canada's record on the right to food. Here, I consider the history and problematic nature of the concept of food security, particularly as it compares to the vision of food sovereignty, and then examine the implications of the proliferation of charitable approaches to hunger. The next section explores how school food programs and public procurement policies can contribute to food security, food literacy, and the development of food sovereignty, thus supporting local farmers and strengthening local food systems. Following this, I discuss the benefits and pitfalls of relying on government to fund and deliver school food programs. The next to final section of the paper grounds the theoretical and practical dimensions of implementing the human right to food in Canada by considering the local context of Winnipeg. I conclude by highlighting topics for future study and a brief description of my own related forthcoming research.

2. Methodology

To further my exploration of the right to food and food sovereignty, I pursued a practicum with three different organizations, each dealing with a complementary dimension of the right to food.

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) is a policy think tank that has previously advocated for a universal school meal program, and which focuses on policy to meaningfully address inequity across Canada. With this organization, I initiated research to explore the feasibility of a locally-sourced school lunch program in Winnipeg. I focused my research primarily by critically reading the academic and grey literatures on programs operating in wealthy, developed nations, and took a particular interest in some of the programs that have been studied in Canada. This research goes beyond the practicum and will involve exploring the opportunities and barriers of establishing a school lunch program in Winnipeg that would source food from local producers and would be funded on a pay-what-you-can basis – a model which has been adopted in programs in several Canadian provinces.

Secondly, I worked with the Fireweed Food Co-op, a producer cooperative that acts as a hub for retail and institutional buyers to purchase locally-produced foods. My practicum work with this organization centered primarily on identifying funding opportunities, but it also offered me an opportunity to gain valuable insights into the challenges facing small-scale producers in Manitoba, and the opportunities that a public procurement policy and school food program could offer.

Finally, I worked with the Winnipeg Food Council to create maps illustrating the various organizations working to improve access to food and the right to food in the city. One of these maps created a visual and interactive web-based representation of potential allies, resisters, and funders in the community that might influence the successful launch of a locally-sourced Manitoba school lunch program. The dynamic nature of this map, coupled with the large amount of data it contains, made it impossible to include as an appendix. This process revealed to me the fundamentally inequitable funding and distribution of charitable organizations and programs, reinforcing my belief in the need for a nationally-mandated and funded universal school lunch program.

For the purpose of this research paper, I have drawn on the research I performed while engaged in this practicum and coursework, and further explored the questions related to the right to food in Canada, the legal and moral obligations of the federal government, the difficulty and moral quandary of food charity, the benefits of school food programs, and the opportunities for food sovereignty that may be achieved through public procurement policies and the involvement of grassroots and civil society organizations in the development of national programs.

3. The Right to Food in Canada: An Empty Promise

The human right to food is enshrined in many international instruments, and is included as part of the right to an adequate standard of living in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (Lambek & Claeys, 2014). Although the human right to food was first enshrined in the UDHR in 1948, it wasn't until 1966 that it was added to a legally-binding document, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (Mekouar, 2014; De Schutter, 2012). Signatories to the ICESCR commit to legal obligations to progressively realize the right to food (Elver, 2016; Mekouar, 2014).

The General Comment 12 (article 11), added to the ICESCR in 1999, provides interpretation of the right to food, which includes the economic and physical accessibility to food that is adequate in quantity, quality, health, and cultural appropriateness (CESCR, 1999). General Comment 12 also makes explicit the obligation on the state to proactively engage in facilitating people's access to food, and to provide it directly when individuals or groups are unable to enjoy their right to adequate food for reasons beyond their control (CESCR, 1999).

Socioeconomic rights are generally believed to require positive state action and are often perceived as more aspirational than civil and political rights, which are considered more achievable because their realization requires only that the state refrain from interference (Raponi, 2017). This belief can be attributed to the difficulty in enforcing positive rights, and the substantial resources that governments may have to commit to their fulfilment (Raponi, 2017). However, Raponi (2017) points out that the full realization of the right to food would require fewer resources than some other rights that are protected such as the right to property and security; she illustrates that to fulfil or protect some civil and political rights, such as the right to physical security, the state provides both action and resources in the form of law enforcement, courts, and prisons (p.105).

Due to its nature as a positive obligation, advancing the right to food requires substantive government action and resources (Track, 2015). For the human rights framework to be effective in advancing the right to food, citizens need to embrace the notion of food as a human right, and hold their governments accountable (Narula, 2015). Lambek (2015) echoes this belief that citizens need to advocate for changes that support the right to food, pointing out that

implementation rates are weak without widespread public support, “as governments are unlikely to adopt or protect legal rights that do not underpin the demands of the electorate” (p.70).

As a nation that has been heralded for its leadership in the adoption and protection of human rights, Canada has shown a remarkable negligence in its obligations to fulfil the right to food. As a signatory to at least two legally binding treaties – the ICESCR and the Convention on the Rights of the Child – that enshrine the right to food, the government has a legal responsibility to work towards the progressive realization of this basic right (de Schutter, 2012; Track, 2015). In spite of these commitments, the absence of legal enforcement has meant that apart from political embarrassment, there is little consequence for failing in the duties to respect, protect and fulfil this right in Canada (McKay-Panos, 2012, p11). Apart from the commitments that Canada has made internationally, there are at least two legal avenues to enforce the right to food based on the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Rideout et al, 2007; de Schutter, 2012). Notwithstanding the theoretical justiciability of the ICESCR, and the interpretations of the Charter that suggest a legal standing for the right to food, there has yet been no domestic legal precedent for its enforcement in the Canadian court system (Rideout et al, 2007; McKay-Panos, 2012; Lambek, 2015).

Canada’s failure on the right to food is evidenced by the country’s growing rate of food poverty (Rideout et al, 2007; de Schutter, 2012). In 2017-18, 8.8% of Canadian households reported moderate or severe food insecurity, and for the most vulnerable demographics, that percentage is much higher: 16.3% of male lone-parent families, and a staggering 25.1% of female lone-parent families experienced moderate to severe food insecurity (Statistics Canada, 2020). In the UNICEF Report Card on Sustainable Development Goals, Canada ranked 37 out of 41 developed countries on food security and ending hunger, well below the performance of less wealthy countries such as Latvia, Estonia and Hungary (Brazier, 2017, p.16). Contributing to the problems of hunger and poverty is a significant decline in social safety net spending in Canada over the past few decades, which has resulted in benefit programs being underfunded and inadequate, leaving vulnerable Canadians even more likely to suffer food insecurity (Rideout et al, 2007).

In spite of the evidence that Canada is failing in its duty to fulfil the right to food, there has yet to be meaningful movement towards the development of a human rights framework on the right to food in Canada. There is some hope for progress as the government did announce its

intention of creating a Food Policy for Canada in 2018 and committed \$134 million in the 2019 budget towards its realization (Agriculture and Agri-food Canada [AAFC], 2019). A national food policy is certainly a welcome step, as the failure to integrate food policy across health, agriculture, environmental and social policy has been identified as a missed opportunity to address issues such as inequality and sustainability; and it has been to the detriment of those suffering most from food poverty (Rideout et al, 2007).

3.1. Food Security: A Market-Based Response to Hunger?

The official government terminology used to describe hunger, malnutrition, and food poverty in Canada is generally ‘food insecurity’ (Statistics Canada, 2020). The concept of ‘food security’, which originated in the 1970s with the World Food Conference, reinforces the idea perpetuated by neoliberal free market principles, that food poverty can and should be addressed through market mechanisms. This conceptualization of food security can be traced to the World Food Conference in 1974 (Elver, 2016; Borras & Mohammed, 2020). This understanding of hunger and food poverty posited that the issue could be resolved through a coordinated effort to regulate supply and demand, thereby overlooking the many other structural factors determining access to adequate food (Borras & Mohammed, 2020). Borras and Mohammed (2020) explain that in the 1980s, the World Bank and FAO added the notion of “economic access” to the discussion, suggesting that in order to improve purchasing power of households, further liberalization of global trade would be required to improve food security gains:

The World Bank’s definition is fundamentally framed within the basic neoclassical economics assumption that food is just a commodity like any other goods that are produced, sold, and bought in a market economy. It implies that the law of supply and demand primarily determines access to food, and commodities’ price equilibrium or fluctuations dictate hunger, food insecurity, and malnutrition. (p.302)

The 1986 World Bank Report did more than just redefine the problem; it relieved governments of responsibility for alleviating the problem, placing it instead on “individual ability to purchase food through neoliberal, corporatized food systems” (Jarosz, 2014, p.171-2).

This market-based framing of hunger and food poverty fails to acknowledge the underlying structural inequalities that necessarily impact a person’s access to food (Borras & Mohammed, 2020). Furthermore, the approach ignores the fundamentally unequitable

distribution that is characteristic of the current global food system, where even in countries of relative wealth and abundance, people go hungry. Elver (2016) argues that a focus on growth and consumption will lead to further environmental damage, and that instead of approaching the problem as one that can be regulated through the markets alone, a human rights approach is necessary to address the inequities that underlie hunger and malnutrition. Further criticisms of the food security concept point out that it “fails to address the issue of social control and autonomy” (Patel, 2009), and neglects to consider producers (Pimbert, 2009).

3.2 Beyond the Right to Food – Food Sovereignty

The food sovereignty movement emerged in opposition to the neoliberal industrial model of food and agriculture systems, and is founded on the principles of participatory democracy, social justice, self-determination, and equitable access to resources (Claeys & Lambek, 2014; Elver, 2016; Pimbert, 2009). The idea that hunger is caused not by an inadequate food supply, but instead by the very structure of the food system (Claeys & Lambek, 2014), underpins the Via Campesina’s assertion that food sovereignty is a prerequisite to food security (Patel, 2009).

One of the defining characteristics of food sovereignty is that it escapes simplistic definition (Patel, 2009). It has been criticized for this reason; inconsistencies and confusion can arise in the lengthy and evolving definitions issued by Via Campesina (Patel, 2009). However, the extensive and inclusive definitions reflect the diversity of this transnational movement, allied around common concerns. Desmarais and Wittman (2014) point out that although food sovereignty struggles will necessarily look different in Canada, where industrial, commercial agriculture is overwhelmingly dominant and farmers represent a very small proportion of the general population, the issues driving the movement are similar:

(...) collapsing rural communities as a result of the ongoing farm income crisis leading to rural exodus, an aging farming population and a decline in public services; farmers’ loss of power in the marketplace and in policy development, accompanied by the corporatization of agriculture, and growing concerns from both consumers and producers about human and animal health and welfare, and the environmental, social and economic sustainability of industrial agriculture (p.1157-8).

One of the failings of the food security concept is that it often relies on cheap imported food to provide nourishment at the expense of the livelihoods of local farmers (Pimbert, 2009).

Food sovereignty demands that food is produced according to the needs of local communities rather than for global export (Elver, 2016), and prioritizes the rights of local, small-scale farmers, who are seen as key to food security in local communities (Ramanujam et al, 2015). In fact, the food sovereignty approach “emphasizes small-scale farmers as the main actors in a food and agricultural system”, giving them freedom to produce foods that reflect their own knowledge, experience and local conditions (Seminar et al, 2017, p.34).

3.3 Food for the Hungry: Charity or Entitlement?

Notwithstanding the criticisms of food security and its view of food as a commodity rather than as a basic human right, there exists a real and pressing need to address the hunger that is experienced by so many in Canada. As the publicly-funded social safety net has eroded, the responsibility for food provision to the hungry has fallen to charitable and civil society organizations. As Rideout et al, (2007) point out, the institutionalization of food charity in Canada is a sign of the government’s failure on the right to food, and the non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations have in fact “become part of the problem because the proliferation of charitable ‘solutions’ has shifted the policy debate from one of rights to one of benevolence” (p.570). As a result of this shift, food banks and non-governmental organizations that provide food as charity are inadvertently providing cover for the governments that have neglected their legal and moral duty to fulfil the right to food by shifting the focus away from the legal entitlement to food (Rideout et al, 2007; Silvasti & Riches, 2014). Laura Track (2015) echoes this assertion in her analysis of children’s legal right to food in British Columbia:

Conceiving of food as a right (...) acknowledges that hunger and food insecurity are not simply a manifestation of an involuntary lack of food, but are a result of what Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen calls “entitlement failure” — a breakdown in the political and legal systems that should support people to meet their basic needs. (p.58)

In fact, the proliferation of charitable organizations has had the effect of depoliticizing the issue by deflecting attention and public discussion from the failings of government to meet its responsibilities (Silvasti & Riches, 2014; Riches, 2011). Riches (2011) traces the rise and expansion of food banks to the ascendancy of the neoliberalism that brought cuts to publicly-funded social programs and cast food insecurity as a case for community charity, rather than as a

government responsibility. He (2018) argues that to properly address food poverty, public policies “must be grounded in human rights expressing a common humanity, that is respect for human worth and dignity” (p.119). In the meantime, the effect of food charity such as food banks and other programs is to create a false sense that hunger is being addressed (Riches, 2011). He also highlights the role that the media plays in reinforcing the idea that addressing food security is a charitable responsibility by pointing out that Canada’s public broadcaster does a high-profile fundraising drive for food banks at Christmas and Thanksgiving every year, which feeds into the narrative that it is an act of community altruism to feed the hungry rather than a government obligation to fulfil the right to food.

The current focus on charitable approaches to feeding the hungry distracts not only from the failure of government to perform its moral and legal duties, but also from the structural causes of hunger (Pollard & Booth, 2019). The reliance on food charity persists despite that a more effective approach to alleviating hunger is to address the underlying causes of food insecurity through social policy changes that would raise income levels (Taraschuk, 2020; Silvasti & Riches, 2014). To illustrate this point, Riches (2018) highlights the example of Brazil, a country that enshrined the right to food in its national constitution, and where food security is being pursued through integrated policy and the Zero Hunger strategy (see Box 1).

Wealthy nations that rely on food charities to address chronic food insecurity fail to treat those suffering from food poverty with respect and dignity (Riches, 2018). Indeed, the response from food banks and food charities has moved into a realm that affords the hungry even less dignity: the diversion of food waste. Professor Elizabeth Dowler of Warwick called it ‘leftover food for leftover people’ (quoted in Caraher & Furey, 2018, p.34), and as these scholars point out, “this is the social hunger/appetite aspect of providing already disadvantaged groups with nutritionally poor, financially reduced and culturally cheap, socially inappropriate and devalued food” (p.34). Riches (2018) points out that the enormous amounts of waste produced by the current corporate food system is evidence of gross inefficiency in the system, and rather than positing charitable food delivery as a solution to this problem, fundamental changes to the system itself are required.

In addition to the savings in waste disposal fees, and the polished ‘socially responsible’ brand, the corporations that engage in this so-called charitable giving are offered tax breaks and incentives for their ‘generosity’ (Riches, 2018; Silvasti & Riches, 2014, p.284). Taraschuk et al

(2020) argue that governments across Canada encourage the expansion of food charity and particularly corporate donations of unsold goods through tax credits and legislation, such as the Box 1 – Brazil’s Zero Hunger Program

Brazil’s Rights-Based Approach to Building Food Sovereignty

As part of a national framework for food security, in 2003, the Brazilian government introduced a program called *Fome Zero* (Zero Hunger) that took a multi-pronged approach to ensuring the right to food (Wittman, 2015). Among other measures aimed at improving access to food among the country’s poor, the government instituted public procurement policies that linked challenges of small-scale farmers to the needs of urban consumers (Wittman, 2015). The public procurement program aimed to improve food security while providing family farms with access to stable markets and reliable incomes (Wittman, 2015).

Subsequently, in 2009, the government promulgated an education law directly connecting the support of family farms to a universal school lunch program (Wittman, 2015); the legislation stipulated that a healthy meal, including safe, cultural, traditional, and nutritious components, be served to students at lunch, and that a minimum of 30% of ingredients be procured through family farms (Kleine & Brightwell, 2015). The program also allowed for a premium of up to 30% to be paid for organically-grown ingredients (Kleine & Brightwell, 2015).

In their research on *Fome Zero*, which focused particularly on the innovations that connect public nutrition programs to local small-scale producers, Wittman & Blesh (2017) conclude that notwithstanding some of the challenges, it is a model that holds promise for food sovereignty, with producers experiencing many positive outcomes:

Participants in this study highlighted the role of the programme in enabling a transition to crop diversification and other agro-ecological production practices, in risk reduction and improvement in farm financial planning, and in increased access to markets, leading to more reliable incomes, while contributing to food security at the household and community levels. (p.100)

“Good Samaritan Laws” that absolve corporate donors of liability for the health and safety of donated food. In fact, Silvasti and Riches (2014) count Canada among the forerunners in the “corporatization of food aid” (p.283).

There is a great irony in recognizing the charitable efforts of massive food-based corporations in channeling food waste to food banks as “corporate social responsibility”, when it is the practices of these very corporate entities that generate food waste, undercompensate family farmers, and keep food prices unaffordable for a large part of the population (Riches, 2018, p.772). Ultimately, framing food waste diversion to charitable food agencies as a solution to

household food insecurity fails to address the underlying socio-economic issues and distribution problems in both food waste and food insecurity (Pollard & Booth, 2019).

Additionally, it is important to note that food charity is not effective in reaching all of the hungry who require support. Whereas public policy measures such as child benefits have measurable effects on levels of household food insecurity, even the relatively successful community food programs have a limited reach, which effectively restricts their impact on overall rates of food security (Loopstra, 2018). Apart from the limited resources that make it impossible for food banks to meet demand (Silvasti & Riches, 2014), there are many food insecure households and individuals who simply will not use food banks. Food banks are not used by a majority of the food insecure, and tend to be used only as a last resort; in other words, they do not alleviate hunger for the majority of households experiencing food insecurity (Loopstra & Taraschuk, 2012). Even when experiencing severe food insecurity, only one third of Canadian households with children will seek help at foodbanks (Silvasti & Riches, 2014, p.293-4). In brief, food banks and food charity are inadequate. Approaching food from a human rights perspective changes the focus from feeding the hungry to ensuring that they are able to feed themselves with dignity (Riches, 2018).

4. School Food Programs: Opportunities and Barriers

In his Mission to Canada Report in 2012, the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food recommended, among other things, that Canada should “create a nationally funded children and food strategy (including school-feeding, food literacy and school garden programmes) to ensure that all children, at all times, have access to healthy and nutritious food” (de Schutter, 2012, p.20). Indeed, Canada is the only country among G7 nations, and one of the only members of the OECD to not have a national school nutrition program in place (Hernandez et al, 2018). Instead, the Canadian government’s approach is that feeding children is the responsibility of the parents, and thus it has opted to provide family supplements in lieu of a nation-wide school meal program (Carbone et al, 2018). Notwithstanding the government’s recent pledge to work toward a national food policy (AAFC, 2019), the reality on the ground is mostly a patchwork of informal approaches to addressing student food insecurity (Parker & Koepfel, 2020). In the absence of a national program, charitable and non-governmental food provision programs such as Breakfast

Club of Canada emerged as a way to address child food insecurity, in parallel to the increasing reliance on food charity in response to food insecurity (Parker & Koepfel, 2020; Riches, 2018).

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that school food programs result in reduced levels of household food insecurity (Petralias et al, 2016; Ralston et al, 2017; Dalma et al, 2019; Fletcher & Frisvold, 2017). In their study on the effect of school breakfast programs on food insecurity in the U.S., Fletcher and Frisvold (2017) point out that there is a benefit for household food security even for those students who might otherwise have been provided a meal at home; more resources are made available to the household if the child is consuming a meal provided at school. In this case, the authors go on to suggest that the school breakfast program acts as a resource transfer to households. The provision of school meals has also been associated with improved school attendance, behaviour, academic performance, and attitude (Hernandez et al, 2018), as well as increased consumption of healthy foods and improved dietary behaviours in students (Colley et al, 2019).

There are, however, significant challenges in the creation and administration of school nutrition programs. Limited resources and a lack of reliable funding is a common barrier to school nutrition programs (Everitt et al; Colley et al, 2019; Wyonch and Sullivan, 2019). There is also a stigma associated with food insecurity and reliance on food charity that reinforces the importance of a universal meal program (Parker & Koepfel, 2020; Hernandez et al, 2018). However, a universal meal program would require not only funding support from the federal government, but also cooperation from the provincial governments. Whereas other countries offer government-funded and mandated national school lunch programs, Canada's provincial governments have the jurisdiction over education and health, with the federal government's role restricted to the provision of funding transfers to those areas (Hernandez et al, 2018). Indeed, as Powell and Wittman (2018) point out, in spite of the work of civil society and grassroots organizations who have been advocating for a national school food program to address child poverty and hunger in Canada since the 1990s, finding a constitutional path for a national program has been historically challenging due to conflicts over the level of government responsible.

4.1 The Aim of School Food Programs: Subject for Debate

The call for universality in school nutrition programs is not without its opponents. Wyonch and Sullivan (2019), who adhere to the belief that “the fundamental goal of school nutrition programs is to feed hungry children” (p.1) argue that there is insufficient statistically significant evidence that nutrition programs result in benefits to students in attendance or academic performance. Specifically, they suggest that the clear evidence points only to the benefits of such programs for disadvantaged students (Wyonch & Sullivan, 2019). The authors suggest that programs that are insufficiently, unreliably funded, and facing myriad challenges, should not be scaled to address the need for universality to counteract stigma, but rather that schools known to be populated by at-risk, low-income students should be targeted for universal meal programs (Wyonch and Sullivan, 2019).

In contrast, Oostindjer et al (2017) assert that school nutrition programs in most developed countries have moved into three phases that they outline as having evolved over time: the first phase was designed to alleviate hunger, the second to improve nutrition, and the third to integrate multi-component programs that included education about health and sustainability in dietary choices. In other words, while the intent of school meal programs has historically been the alleviation of hunger, Oostindjer et al (2017) assert that school meals represent an opportunity to address the health and sustainability of food choices and food systems. They suggest the integration of food as an educational tool in schools to help students form healthy and sustainable eating habits from an early age, as well as an understanding of the food system (Oostindjer et al, 2017).

Indeed, there has also been a growing recognition of the educational potential of school nutrition programs to improve food literacy and dietary behaviours. Emerging evidence suggests that programs that integrate multiple components, such as food literacy, healthy choices, and ties to curriculum provide valuable benefits (Hernandez et al, 2018). These authors even postulate that incorporating more food skills and food literacy into a school meal program could contribute to a greater balance in food housework, which is currently a burden disproportionately shouldered by women (Hernandez et al, 2018).

In “The case for a Canadian national school food program”, written by Hernandez et al (2018), the authors make six recommendations. Echoing other researchers and advocates, they call for free or subsidized meals to be provided universally to all students. Importantly, they recommend that when the cost is shared, the program be administered so as to make it

impossible to know which students pay full-price and which receive a subsidy. The second and third recommendations focus on the nutritional value and cultural appropriateness of the meals provided. The fourth is the connection to local community and producers, drawing on local resources to foster community and economic development while the fifth draws again on Oostindjer et al's (2017) phase three of school nutrition programs, and emphasizes the need for an integrative, multi-component approach to school meals. Finally, Hernandez et al emphasize the importance of sustainability in funding support: "Provisions for on-going funding, staffing, and training must be part of a national program" (2018, p.220). They conclude that Canada should implement a national school food program that is informed by the successes and challenges of the various programs across the country, and the best research on the topic from Canada and abroad.

4.2 Public Procurement Programs - Supporting the Right to Food and Sustainability

Former Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier de Schutter (2014) observes that almost all wealthy countries and more than half of the low and middle income countries have a school food program, and asserts that these programs are an opportunity for public procurement policies to advance the right to food. He demonstrates that OECD countries spend an average of 12% of their GDP on procurement, and asserts that "institutional purchasing can contribute to the progressive realization of the human right to adequate food," (De Schutter, 2014, p.3). His 2014 Briefing Note entitled "the Power of Procurement", goes on to outline five principles to achieving the right to food through public procurement programs. First, is the adoption of targeted procurement policies that facilitate the process and include small-scale producers to advance the right to food. Second, he argues that it is important to ensure that the workers throughout the supply chain are fairly remunerated so as to guarantee the right to food not only for the recipients of the targeted programs, but for all of those involved – including those working to supply the food. He asserts that this policy will ensure a greater likelihood of multiplier effects and improved livelihoods associated with the public procurement programs. Third, de Schutter suggests that insisting on improved nutrition and diversity of foods served in school food programs is another important component of achieving the right to adequate food. Fourth, including a focus on environmental sustainability criteria and local procurement can also advance the right to food by ensuring the availability of resources to future generations. Finally,

ensuring the democratic participation of a wide range of actors within the community will assist in the development of democratic food choices and the empowerment of local actors.

The Brazilian National School Feeding Law, implemented in 2009 as part of the country's Fome Zero strategy (see Box 1), offers insights into the opportunities of a public procurement program. While Wittman and Blesh (2017) identified both benefits and barriers in the Brazilian program, they concluded that overall it is a model with potential to contribute to food sovereignty and the right to food. Likewise, Powell and Wittman (2018) found opportunities for the development of food sovereignty in their assessment of the farm-to-school programs in British Columbia:

Farm to school programs have the potential to contribute to goals of food sovereignty by taking the critical step of connecting primarily consumer-focused concerns around healthy eating and food skills to the need for structural changes in the food system as a whole, including by supporting local farmers through mediated markets, improving the quality of food available to school children, and establishing social infrastructure towards broader food literacy and public engagement in food systems. (p.202)

The benefits identified by Wittman and Blesh (2017) and Powell and Wittman (2018) have been affirmed by other researchers studying public procurement programs. These include an increase in stable, reliable and predictable farm income (Nehring et al, 2017; Lehnerd et al, 2018; de Schutter, 2014), an increase in the variety and health of foods being ordered and consumed (Soares et al, 2017; Gaddis & Copplen, 2018; de Schutter, 2014), increased food security (Nehring et al, 2017; Oostindjer et al, 2017), strengthened community connections (Everitt et al; Lehnerd et al, 2018), and increased sustainability in the food system (Everitt et al; Gaddis & Copplen, 2018; Oostindjer et al, 2017).

Another central tenet of food sovereignty supported by public procurement programs is agroecology, which de Schutter (2012) describes as “the application of the science of ecology to agricultural systems” (p.1), although the contemporary meaning has come to encompass a broader understanding of the concept. Elver (2016) describes it as “a marriage between science, traditional agriculture, and social movements” (p.40), but it is Wibbleman et al (2013) who expand on the systems approach of agroecology by pointing out that notwithstanding its foundations in science, “a key concept in contemporary agroecology is that agricultural systems cannot be studied independently of the human communities that depend on them”, and that as a

result, “the primary concepts of agroecology and agroecological management practices resonate with arguments for food security, food sovereignty and sustainable rural development” (p.3).

Public procurement programs can be designed to support small-scale producers who adopt agroecology and incorporate environmental sustainability in their practices (de Schutter, 2012; Wittman & Blesh, 2017). In fact, Nicholls and Altieri (2018) identify public procurement programs as the most effective policy to promote agroecology, describing institutional or public procurement as “an effective strategy to promote the progressive realization of the right to adequate food through opening up new marketing channels for smallholder produce” (p.1188). The growing global concerns with climate change and environmental sustainability support the need to transition to agroecology, and the need for governments to support these practices with policies and funding (Challinor et al, 2017; Vermeulen et al, 2012). Beyond the moral duty to protect the environment for future generations, Article 11 of the ICESCR accommodates and recognizes a legal duty in the form of a “‘sustainability imperative’: the inviolable truth that sustainability is a pre-requisite for long-term food security and, thereby, also a pre-requisite for the genuine realization of the human right to adequate food” (Salmon, 2015, p.153).

4.3 Lessons For Canada

It is important to note that local institutional procurement programs are not without barriers, and research on locally-sourced school food programs has revealed some of the most common issues. Even the most heralded Brazilian procurement policy discussed earlier is not without its challenges: some of the family farms from which schools purchase are in fact large-scale family agribusinesses (Kleine & Brightwell, 2015); small-scale producers’ inadequate capacity or the difficulty in matching supply and demand is a frequently-cited problem (Kleine & Brightwell, 2015; Wittman & Blesh, 2017); insufficient infrastructure is also identified as a major barrier, in terms of roads and transportation, as well as food storage capacity (Wittman & Blesh, 2017); and complex regulatory and bureaucratic requirements are obstacles for many producers (Nehring et al, 2017; Wittman & Blesh, 2017). Research from other countries echo many of these concerns, including the inadequacy of existing infrastructure (Powell & Wittman, 2018), small-scale producers’ inability to meet demand (Lehnerd et al, 2018), and regulatory barriers (Nehring et al, 2017). Others observed difficulties with programs targeting small-scale producers include the reality that there is no globally or commonly accepted definition of a

smallholder or family farmer, and the relatively greater risk for institutions procuring food directly from farmer organizations or cooperatives rather than using a private or corporate intermediary (Nehring et al, 2017).

It is important, particularly in light of the Canadian government's recent commitment to explore a national school food program as part of the Food Policy for Canada (AAFC, 2019), to carefully consider the framework and sourcing of school nutrition programs. The Brazilian example, where school meals are a constitutionally-protected, universal right, offers a view of how a rights-based approach to school food might look (Kleine & Brightwell, 2015). One of the striking features of the public procurement policies in Brazil is that it is perceived as an expression of collective choice, in contrast to the discussions about "ethical consumption" that tend to focus on the choices of individual consumers (Kleine & Brightwell, 2015). The development in Brazil of a public food system is underpinned by a human rights approach that takes a broad, holistic view of the food system:

It explicitly weaves together educational, cultural, social and economic objectives such as increasing consumption of healthy, safe and appropriate food that respects traditional diets and contributes to improved performance of students; ensuring universal school attendance; fostering involvement of national, regional and municipal authorities in food provision; providing incentives for the purchasing of food from family farmers, rural enterprises and traditional native communities; and enhancing the food and nutritional security of all school children, including the most vulnerable (Brazilian Government, 2009) (Kleine & Brightwell, 2015, p.136).

When formulating the Food Policy for Canada, as the current Liberal government has promised to do, this holistic, cohesive approach that recognizes human rights and is an expression of food sovereignty would serve as a valuable model.

It is vital that the development of a national school food program be informed by the successes and setbacks of existing programs in Canada as well, including logistical challenges, such as the lack of crucial infrastructure, which Hernandez et al (2018) identify as one of the greatest obstacles to local procurement policies in school nutrition programs. It is also vital that social, economic, and environmental costs and benefits be considered when assessing the value of locally-sourced school food programs, in contrast to the more common focus on the cost of the food, and the goal of securing the cheapest possible product (de Schutter, 2014).

5. How to Ensure State Accountability?

While there are many legal and moral reasons to suggest that governments must assume responsibility for fulfilling the right to food, and that national school food programs must therefore be fully funded and administered by the federal government, there are some valid reasons to give pause. Allison Blay-Palmer (2016) presents a compelling argument in favour of empowering civil society organizations (CSOs) to effect change in order to counter-balance the power of the state and to hold state actors to account. Drawing on the idea that states themselves are necessarily the arbiters of human rights claims, and cannot be relied on to act without self-interest in their approach to human rights (Narula, 2015), Allison Blay-Palmer (2016) suggests that empowering “effectively-networked” civil society organizations to address the fulfilment of the right to food by enabling them to participate in framing and constructing the right to food discourse, may effectively advance the development of sustainable food systems, strengthen advocacy for the vulnerable, and hold the State to account (p.2). Furthermore, she (2016) argues that given the propensity of state actors and elites to benefit from the very policies that deny and violate rights, it is vital to afford greater capacity to grassroots organizations to balance the power of the state and effect transformation: “CSOs need to have the capacity to claim power and inhabit spaces across multiple scales so they can monitor and support human rights, help shape public rights-based discourse, and ensure that the right to food for children is a social expectation and not negotiable.” (p11)

The food sovereignty movement is replete with examples of grassroots organizations working to strengthen local food systems and influence national policy (Wittman & Blesh, 2017). This idea is further reflected in the Brazilian public procurement policy that came about as a result of work by civil service organizations and social movements lobbying for sustainable rural development and food sovereignty (Kleine & Brightwell, 2015). Desmarais and Wittman (2014), in writing about the origins, growth and nature of the food sovereignty movement in Canada observe that the diverse actors involved in the food sovereignty movement have a common goal: reclaiming “a public voice in shaping the food system” (p.1169). Desmarais and Wittman (2014) go on to describe alliances formed in Canada between farmers, foodies and First Nations around food sovereignty issues:

There are also examples of alliances based on food sovereignty concerns between diverse groups self-identifying as farmers, foodies and First Nations, which offer prospects for

future solidarity-building. How that power is claimed is diverse, and occurs at different locations and scales, through: demands to address the structural causes of unjust and environmentally damaging agri-food and trade policies at local, provincial, national and international policy levels; the ability to make more sustainable choices as individual consumers within both local and globalized food systems, and struggles for decolonization and self-determination by Indigenous peoples. (p.1169)

Following the Nyeleni International Forum for Food Sovereignty in 2007 that was attended by a number of Canadian organizations who were members of Food Secure Canada, these groups came together to build the People's Food Policy Project (PFPP) (Desmarais & Wittman, 2014). The PFPP was a two year participatory process that culminated in the publication of a document that outlined policy demands including a focus on local food production and consumption, the need to support producers to transition to more sustainable production practices, the creation of a federal poverty elimination strategy to improve the ability of Canadians to afford healthy foods, ensuring that all Canadians have a voice in decision-making around the food system, and “[c]reating a nationally funded Children and Food strategy (including school meal programs, school gardens, and food literacy programs) to ensure that all children at all times have access to the food required for healthy lives” (Desmarais & Wittman, 2014, p.1168).

Perhaps more than any other, the food sovereignty movement, led by the international organization La Via Campesina, has shown itself capable of holding states to account, and countering neoliberalism. This international alliance of grassroots movement was instrumental in the creation and adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) (Claeys & Edelman, 2020), which enshrines the rights of farmers to an adequate standard of living, a decent income, and to a healthy, and clean environment (UN General Assembly, 2019). The process of UNDROP was also groundbreaking, as it affirms “that grassroots activists can successfully insert their notions of rights into international law” (Claeys & Edelman 2019, p.9). The strength of the Vía Campesina is its broad alliances that are propelling a global movement advocating for rights that are deeply connected to the right to food and the structure of the food system (Lambek, 2015). Borras and Mohammed (2020) state that “unlike the food security and food insecurity paradigms, food sovereignty exposes, critiques, resists, confronts, and attempts to change the dominant corporate-led global capitalist mode of food production, processing, marketing, distribution, and

consumption” (p.308). The adoption of UNDROP underlines the strength that grassroots alliances can bring to bear on advocating for the protection of human rights, and the capacity they have to hold governments to account.

Blay-Palmer (2016) argues that advocacy work is particularly vital given that the governing body meant to be ensuring the right to food may, in fact, prevent its realization through a narrow focus and adherence to neoliberal free market ideology. She suggests that collective, collaborative action on the part of non-governmental organization networks may act to successfully counter balance the dominant neoliberal approach of states as it pertains to the right to food, both politically through advocacy, and materially through programs: “[G]iven the shifting terrain for federal governments it is critical to ensure power resides at multiple levels, so that human rights obligations are consistently realized and do not ebb and flow with changes in governments.” (Blay-Palmer, 2016, p12-13).

Reliable, consistent funding has been identified as a significant challenge for school nutrition programs (Everitt et al; Colley et al, 2019; Wyonch & Sullivan, 2019), and it is under constant threat by governments that adhere to neoliberal economic models. Blay-Palmer (2016) also suggests that in contrast to government funding, which is subject to the ideology of the governing party at the time, non-governmental organizations offer a potentially more resilient funding model: “[O]rganizations that balance their resources between public sources, philanthropic, and individual donations, as well as money earned from their own programs, may offer more resilient long-term answers for food system viability and the carving out of more secure, powerful spaces.”(p.9)

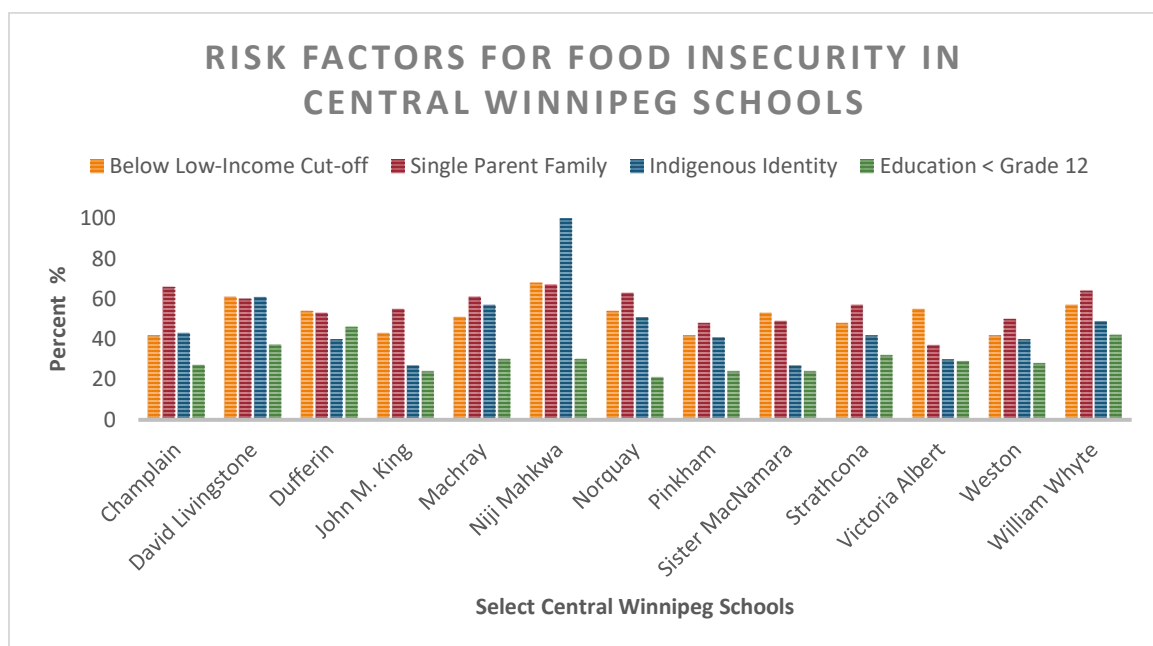
School food programs in Canada have shown resilience under duress, demonstrating a capacity for nimble responses to ever-changing circumstances during the Covid-19 pandemic. Noyes and Lyle (2021) note the extraordinary adaptability in the response of school nutrition programs in Ontario to the abrupt school closures made necessary by the Covid-19 pandemic. These scholars also observe that despite being chronically underresourced, the organizations providing school nutrition programs were able to transition to different models of delivery in very little time because of the strength of their relationships and partnerships in the communities that they serve. Nonetheless, Noyes and Lyle (2021) argue in favour of a nationally-funded school nutrition program to create more equitable, stable, and cohesive programming.

6. The Response to Food Insecurity in Winnipeg Schools

In Winnipeg, there was a similarly adaptive response to the Covid pandemic as described above. For example, the Winnipeg School Division (WSD), the largest division in the city, gathered donations from community partners, and diverted school food funding to the creation of hampers that were assembled and distributed to vulnerable families by volunteers (CBC, 2020).

According to the Canadian Community Health Survey (2018), Manitoba has the second highest rate of food insecurity among Canadian provinces, with approximately 1 in 5 children living in food insecure households (Taraschuk, 2020). Central Winnipeg neighbourhoods are home to many families that fit at least one of the food insecurity risk categories, including: low-income households, single-parent families, Indigenous households, and households where the highest level of education attained is lower than grade 12 (Statistics Canada, 2012; Statistics Canada, 2018.) This fact is illustrated by the Demographic Report published by the WSD, which administers the schools in this core area of the city (Winnipeg School Division, 2020). This annual report details the demographics of the neighbourhood and the social demographic make-up of the students at each of the WSD schools. Figure 1 reflects data drawn from the annual report and illustrates the high proportion of students that fall into the high risk categories for food insecurity in select central Winnipeg schools.

Figure 1 – Food security risk factors in select schools in central Winnipeg School Division



Source: (Data compiled from the Winnipeg School Division, 2020)

One of the key community partners for the Winnipeg School Division is the Council for Child Nutrition of Manitoba that provides most of the funding for school food and nutrition programs in Manitoba. This not-for-profit relies on funding from the province, as well as from private individuals and corporate donors, but has also been forced in recent years to rely increasingly on fundraising initiatives to try to compensate for a dwindling contribution from the government of Manitoba (Child Nutrition Council of Manitoba, 2019). When pressed by Wab Kinew, the leader of the opposition, to initiate a universal breakfast program in schools, Manitoba Premier Brian Pallister replied by stating that “If children are going to school hungry, then parents aren’t fulfilling their responsibilities”, and suggesting that it is not the responsibility of government to feed students (Winnipeg Free Press, 2020). In the meantime, schools in Winnipeg, including those select schools identified in the Winnipeg School Division chart (fig.1), are forced to rely on a patchwork of charitable donations and grants in order to try to fill the gaps.

7. Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has raised awareness among Canadians that global food supply chains are vulnerable to disruption, and has increased interest in supporting local food chains as a result (Hobbs, 2020). With so many families experiencing food insecurity, there is an important and timely opportunity to explore the potential for public procurement programs, like the Brazilian Fome Zero model, that could support small-scale, local producers, while simultaneously providing nourishment to children in schools.

The case for a national school lunch program is clear, and it appears that the Canadian government is prepared to take some initial steps toward its realization. It is vital that in formulating a national plan, the government invite the participation of organizations that have been deeply committed to the right to food and food sovereignty in Canada. Grassroots organizations and civil society organizations should be involved in the planning, development, and administration of initiatives that address the right to food, as these groups have been actively working to advocate for and fulfil the right to food, and are uniquely positioned to contribute and to hold governments to account.

The development of public procurement policies for a national school lunch program would represent an important step towards food sovereignty in Canada by strengthening local

food systems, creating opportunities for small-scale producers to access a reliable market, improving the livelihoods of smallholders, and supporting agroecological practices. As Olivier de Schutter (2014) has pointed out, costs associated with public procurement programs designed to advance the right to food should be treated as investments rather than expenses, particularly given the potential for multiplier effects in social, economic, and environmental terms. When planning for a national school lunch program, governments must consider the opportunities of public procurement policies for community economic development and the long-term sustainability of food production and local food systems.

To fund universal school meal programs, a novel approach is being taken by some organizations, including the provincial government of Prince Edward Island. Universal school lunches are offered to students on a pay-what-you-can basis, with a confidential process, so as to protect the identity of those students who pay nothing or receive a subsidized meal. These programs are provided with government funding, but strive to operate on a cost-recovery basis. This assures that all students are able to access the school meals with dignity. As part of my practicum, I prepared a collaborative research proposal to conduct a feasibility study of establishing a locally-sourced, pay-what-you-can school lunch program in Winnipeg. The proposal was successful and is being funded by the Manitoba Research Alliance. The research includes interviews with administrators of pay-what-you-can lunch programs in other Canadian provinces (Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, and British Columbia), collaboration with a community partner (Fireweed Food Co-op) to conduct a survey of local food producers to determine local capacity, developing a sample school lunch menu and budget using local ingredients from a local caterer (Diversity Food Services) that operates as a social enterprise in Winnipeg, and collaboration with an Indigenous PhD candidate based at the University of Manitoba who will examine the opportunities and barriers to integrating locally-sourced Indigenous foods into the school lunch program.

Moving forward, research is required in several areas to inform policy decisions regarding school food programs and public procurement. Large-scale asset inventories in schools are needed to explore whether the existing infrastructure is sufficient for food storage, on-site preparation, and safe food handling. More data is required on the logistical needs and challenges facing local producers in accessing markets as this is an issue that will impact the viability of public procurement programs, and the potential strength of local food systems. More

data is also needed on the number of small-scale and sustainable farms in Canada, and their capacity to supply large institutional buyers. In his advocacy for public procurement programs, de Schutter (2014) pointed to a UK study that showed a 3 to 1 return on local procurement for school food. Canadian data on this topic is sorely needed; a research study should be undertaken to fully explore the social return on investment that locally-sourced school food programs would offer in communities across Canada.

Access to adequate, healthy food is a basic human right. The Government of Canada has committed to advancing that right by pledging the creation of a national school lunch program, and should consider exploring the use of targeted public procurement programs to source ingredients for school meals. Across the country, countless non-governmental organizations have been committed to providing nutritious snacks and meals to schoolchildren, with some having forged connections with local farmers to strengthen their community food system. It is vital that the valuable insights and experiences gained by these local experts be considered in the design and delivery of future programs. A national, locally-sourced universal school lunch program, designed with the engagement and input of grassroots and community organizations, would be an important step towards food sovereignty, and should be a priority for the Canadian government.

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