



**Division of Community
Engagement and Food Systems**

Strengthening Food Systems and Dignified Food Access in Northern BC

Report

i. About This Report

This project is co-led and administered by the Public Health Association of BC and Food Banks BC and is funded by the BC Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction.



Public Health Association of BC

The Public Health Association of BC (PHABC) is a non-profit charity organization that provides public health leadership to promote health, well-being, and social equity for all British Columbians. PHABC fulfills their mission through advocacy, collaboration and engagement activities, education, and research throughout the spectrum of public health practice including prevention, promotion, protection, and policy.



Food Banks BC

Food Banks BC (FBBC) is the provincial association of food banks for British Columbia and a member of the Food Banks Canada. Our membership comprises of 107 food banks throughout BC. FBBC supports member and non-member hunger relief agencies through the provision of funding, food, education and training resources, and networking opportunities. Through research and advocacy, we serve as a voice for food banks and the people they support, as we collectively work toward a hunger free British Columbia.



Province of BC

Reducing food insecurity is a key priority for the Government of British Columbia. With food costs at their highest levels in over 40 years, people are struggling to afford healthy, nutritious food for themselves and their families. Since 2019, the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction has invested over \$66 million in grants to organizations supporting food security initiatives in communities throughout BC. This includes funding to Food Banks BC to develop a greater understanding of the unique food security challenges faced by northern communities in BC.

These investments are helping communities by informing and supporting ongoing efforts to strengthen and enhance BC's food access system. The BC government is committed to continued work in collaboration with others from the farm field, to school classrooms to local food hubs, to kitchen tables in order to make sure that everyone has access to nutritious, affordable and culturally preferable food and to support a co-ordinated provincial approach to improve food security in BC.

ii. Acknowledgements

PHABC and FBBC would like to acknowledge that we are provincial organizations, and our work supports communities and nations throughout BC and Turtle Island. PHABC's main office resides on the territories of the *lək'wəŋən* (Lekwungen) People, now known as the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations. Food Banks BC main office resides on the territories of the Salish Peoples, including the *q̓íçəy̓* (Katzie), *q̓ʷa:ŋə́n* (Kwantlen), and Semiahma (Semiahmoo) land-based Nations.

PHABC and FBBC would like to acknowledge the project team for their dedication to this report and the hundreds of organizations that provide food access across BC. Thank you to Rebekah Erickson, Richard Han and Aaren Topley for the project design, management, community engagement, analysis, and writing of this report; to Laurel Burton and Raihan Hassen for analysis, report review and project support; Elsie Wiebe for community engagement and compiling secondary data; Selenna Ho and Lisa Ngo, for the communications and design; and Shannon Turner, Dan Huang-Taylor and Nick Johnson for their continued guidance and support throughout this process.

Our project team would like to thank all the organizations across northern BC that work hard to provide food to communities throughout the region. You are essential workers to our province. We would like to give a special thank you to the respondents that took the time to complete the survey, attend the roundtables, and participate in the interviews; the insights and experiences you shared with us made this project possible. We hope this report reflects what you have shared.

Finally, PHABC and FBBC would like to thank our funders and supporters at the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction.

“...what food security looks like is resilience in food systems, and all people having equitable access [to food], having agency, having it be socially just, and having not only Indigenous food sovereignty, but food sovereignty in all systems.”



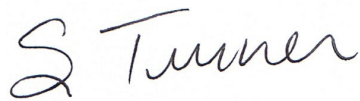
– Roundtable Participant Quote

iii. Foreward

This report comes at a critical time for British Columbians. The demand for hunger relief support through the charitable system is at an all-time high, with more people accessing food banks in 2023 than at any point in their 40-year history in the province. While more and more families and individuals struggle to access sufficient quantities of nutritious, culturally appropriate food, the charities and programs providing support are experiencing significant strain under the unsustainable increase in demand. While these challenging times are impacting all communities in BC, the need seen in the north of the province, particularly in rural and remote communities, is felt even more acutely.

Evidence reviews, dialogue and an assets-based approach were used to gain a thorough understanding of the context and potential in this public health challenge. This approach has enabled us to discern themes related to infrastructure, geography, resources, and systems. The analysis by our teams and participants led to the generation of important insights represented in this summary of our findings. We appreciate the opportunity to inform policy and the careful manner our funders are deploying to fully understand the challenges and potential solutions to this significant issue. This inquiry would not have been viable without the willing participation of northern food service organizations, advocates, and clients. We are most grateful to them.

We wish to acknowledge the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction for their commitment to understanding the complex challenges facing individuals and communities in northern BC regarding food insecurity. We further wish to acknowledge the provincial government for its commitment to reducing food insecurity and increasing dignified access to food for British Columbians experiencing hunger.



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iv. Executive Summary

Introduction

Access to nutritious, safe, and culturally appropriate food is essential for the well-being and dignity of every individual. Over the past several years, food insecurity in British Columbia has risen, exacerbated by global events like the COVID-19 pandemic, climate emergencies, and the rising cost of living. Consequently, BC food bank visits increased by 57% from 2019 to 2023, a figure that is even higher in rural communities at 101% (Food Banks Canada, 2023). Northern BC in particular faces distinct challenges and barriers to reliable and sustainable food access, driven by its small population, vast geography, and limited infrastructure. As a result, food banks in the region have experienced a disproportionately high demand for services.

Recognizing the need for a northern-specific response to address the inequitable access to food in the region, Food Banks BC (FBBC) and the Public Health Association of BC (PHABC) initiated the Strengthening Food Systems and Dignified Food Access in Northern BC project in 2022. Funded by the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, this project aims to explore the opportunities, strengths, barriers, and challenges related to food access in northern BC. This knowledge can inform and support efforts to enhance food system resilience across the region.

Project Design

A collaborative inquiry and asset-based community development approach was used to engage northern communities and amplify the voices of those directly involved in food access work. The project team used mixed methods to gather information about the barriers and opportunities to food access in northern BC, with data collection and analysis taking place from August 2022–July 2023. This involved:

- Reviewing literature, an environmental scan from the Food Access Across BC project, and grant records (United Way Food Infrastructure Grant, 2021–2023 and Northern Health Rural Remote and Indigenous Food Action Grant, 2022–2023).
- Visiting 17 FBBC member food bank sites and administering online surveys to staff.
- Hosting roundtable discussions in the northwest, northeast, northern interior regions of BC with a total of 44 participants representing local food access organizations (non FBBC-members).
- Interviewing nine key informants representing six organizations engaged in regional food security efforts across northern BC. The informants spanned diverse sectors, including health, funders, distribution and retail, food recovery, and Indigenous food sovereignty.

Literature Review

A review of the literature provided insights into the food access landscape of northern BC, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change on food security, and the concept of dignified food access. Northern BC, covering 70% of the province's land, has the highest rates of food insecurity in the province, partially due to higher food costs and lower-than-average incomes. Climate change exacerbates food insecurity through extreme weather that impacts agriculture, disrupts supply chains, and leads to increased food costs. Indigenous communities are disproportionately affected, as climate change can disrupt traditional food practices like hunting and gathering and deplete populations of key protein sources. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated food insecurity due to supply chain disruptions, unemployment, inflation, and rising costs of living, with northern and rural communities being particularly affected.

While food banks provide essential emergency hunger relief to Canadians, they do not address the root causes of food insecurity, and many people refrain from using them due to stigma. Research suggests dignity can be enhanced in the food space through positive social interactions, addressing social hierarchies and inequities, accessible and flexible programming, promoting choice and autonomy, and honouring cultural food traditions. Additionally, multifaceted approaches are needed to address the structural inequities underpinning food insecurity, including better wages, social security, affordable housing, promoting land-based work that prioritizes sovereignty, and addressing climate change, systemic racism, and the impacts of colonization on food access. Most importantly, solutions to create more resilient food systems must be community-driven and guided by a holistic understanding of the diverse factors that impact food access.

Community Engagement: What We Heard

Food access work in northern BC is extensive. Our review identified 179 organizations and First Nations engaged in this work across the region, including 76 in the northern interior, 68 in the northwest, and 35 in the northeast.

Workforce challenges limit the capacity of food access organizations. Many depend on volunteers since they lack funds to pay staff or compete with natural resource industry wages, leading to high rates of burnout. Most volunteers are seniors since organizations have difficulty recruiting younger volunteers, which threatens succession planning.

Northern communities often have access to fewer funding opportunities than other regions of BC. Roundtable participants noted that long, complicated grant applications create barriers, highlighting a need for more flexible, simple processes, and multi-year or core funding for program sustainability. They also expressed a desire for improved coordination amongst food access organizations to avoid duplication of efforts, collaborate and share resources.

Concerns were raised about the impacts of climate change and deforestation on the food supply, including shorter growing seasons, extreme weather events, displaced wildlife, and changes in animal migration patterns, which leave communities unable to hunt the animals they traditionally hunt. Rural and remote northern communities are particularly vulnerable to climate emergencies since many rely on a single road for access, which, if blocked, can cut off their food supply. Participants called for better road infrastructure and food storage facilities to mitigate these risks.

Several other transportation challenges were highlighted, including a shortage of truck drivers, inefficient distribution channels, and rising gas prices which make transporting food to northern BC more expensive and drive-up food prices. These issues particularly impact rural and remote areas where residents must travel long distances to access food. Additionally, other rising living expenses such as housing further strain budgets available for food.

Indigenous food sovereignty is crucial for strengthening food access in northern BC yet faces several barriers. Food safety regulations, though necessary for protecting health, were seen as rigid and unsupportive of traditional food practices. Some participants experienced barriers to obtaining licences and approvals, noting a need for flexible processes to preserve culturally safe food practices and more accessible pathways to compliance. Additionally, key informants emphasized the need for land back policies to provide Nations greater access to farmland and waterways, and Indigenous-led training to restore traditional knowledge and practices.

Participants stressed the need to develop local food systems for greater resilience and food sovereignty. Increasing locally grown and produced food was seen as a vital for reducing dependence on imports and large retailers. However, several challenges were noted, including limited access to certified abattoirs and butchers, with waitlists up to 1-2 years. Moreover, there is a shortage of farmers, driven by low wages and high costs of farmland. Nevertheless, many farmers donate to local food banks. To establish a more sustainable and mutually beneficial arrangement, one food bank proposed developing contracts with farmers, ensuring a guaranteed market and a consistent supply of fresh food.

Additionally, significant infrastructure needs exist in northern BC, with many communities lacking adequate facilities and equipment for food storage, processing, preservation and distribution. Participants expressed a desire for more food hubs to be established with equipment and infrastructure that can be shared amongst organizations.

Many northern BC food banks receive donated food from local grocery stores. While these donations are appreciated, staff are sometimes burdened with sorting through the food to determine what is suitable for human consumption and disposing of the rest. Food recovery organizations such as Loop or Second Harvest can help to address this issue. They offer to sort the donations, ensuring quality food reaches food banks and any remaining excess food is redirected to farms.

Key informants emphasized the importance of dignified food access. While not unique to the north, some food access programs impose rigid restrictions, limit choice and agency, and require disclosure of private information, undermining participants' dignity. Participants highlighted self-determination, adequate resources for purchasing food, and inclusive decision-making as key factors that help to preserve dignity.

Conclusion

Our consultations underscore the complex nature of food access in northern BC. Despite unique challenges, northern communities demonstrate resilience, strong social networks, and a commitment to local food systems. Cross-sector collaboration and centring northern voices in planning and decision-making will facilitate effective solutions to address barriers, leverage community strengths, and advance opportunities to improve food access and create more resilient food systems across northern BC.

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vi. Definitions

Capacity building – The terms “capacity” and “capacity building” were frequently used by the communities who participated in this project. Capacity building collectively describes the process of strengthening skills, abilities, policies, and resources so that organizations and communities may not just sustain themselves in the long-term, but thrive (United Nations, n.d.). In this project, capacity building was mentioned in the contexts of administrative and human resources (i.e., staffing and information management/information technology), infrastructure, funding, and social networks.

Decolonization – Decolonization is a process that seeks to replace Western-focused interpretations of history with Indigenous perspectives (Indigenous Corporate Training, 2023). It aims to centre Indigenous worldviews, knowledge, culture, and tradition. To be successful, decolonization requires non-Indigenous people to take responsibility for learning, acknowledging, and recognizing Canada’s colonial past and its historical and current impact on Indigenous Peoples. Western-focused institutions, governments, organizations and people must recognize these historical and present harms done to Indigenous communities and work to centre, create space for, and support Indigenous peoples in reclaiming what was taken from them (Indigenous Corporate Training, 2023).

Dignity – Dignity is the idea that, inherently, all humans have equal worth and value (Cultures of Dignity, 2023). Dignity is non-negotiable, it is not earned and it cannot be lost. While all people are born deserving of, and possessing the right to dignity, acting in ways that honour others’ dignity takes work and intention. Perceptions of what constitutes human dignity can vary among individuals and across cultures.

Dignified food access – Dignified food access can be defined in a number of different ways, and likely differs depending on individual perspective and lived experience. This report frames dignified food access as the process of ensuring that food programming protects and promotes the inherent worth and value of all humans, and that all individuals and communities have agency, choice, and self-determination in accessing food.

Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (EDI) – The Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion (2023) describes EDI as an essential lens and part of engaging with others. Central to EDI is that all people must be able to participate in all systems, institutions, and organizations, including those related to food work. Equity asserts that all people are celebrated for their diverse needs and that all people can equally participate and engage to the same extent. Diversity focuses on individual uniqueness including qualities, characteristics and other dimensions of the person and it describes the mix of people present in any group. Race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, socio-economic status, physical abilities, and other perspectives are part of diversity. Inclusion is the process of creating a culture that embraces, accepts, and values diversity. It is an intentional way to equitably meet the needs of all people (Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion, 2023).

Food access – Food access is the uncompromised physical access to adequate, acceptable food (BCCDC, 2022). It is impacted by geography, climate and climate-related events, transportation, infrastructure, and physical mobility (BCCDC, 2022). Uncompromised access to food is a basic human right and should be attainable irrespective of socio-economic status, geographical location, cultural preferences, and other factors.

Food access organizations – Food access organizations are community service organizations that provide food provisions through programs such as good food boxes, food hampers, meal programs, community kitchens, or other programs designed to feed people (PHABC, 2021). Some food access organizations focus only on food provision, while some offer food in addition to other types of programming.

Food system resilience – Enhancing food system resilience involves improving long-term sustainability while also building capacities for adapting to, mitigating, and reducing vulnerabilities to the climate crisis and other factors that threaten food security. A resilient food system is capable of providing a diverse, stable, sufficient, and accessible food supply in the face of adverse socioecological conditions.

Natural resource industry – The natural resource industry uses aspects of nature to produce goods and services. In Canada, the natural resource industry includes energy sources like oil, natural gas, wind, fossil and alternative fuels, forests and forestry, mineral exploration and mining (Government of Canada, 2023). Much of northern BC's economy, and BC's economy more broadly, focuses on activities related to the natural resource industry (Business Council of British Columbia, 2020).

Rural and remote – Rural and remote communities consist of small towns, villages, and other populated areas that have a low population density, spread out over large areas. They can include agricultural lands and undeveloped lands, and are often geographically isolated and can include residents who are reliant on natural resources for livelihoods. Remote areas in particular have limited social and physical infrastructure (Vodden & Cunsolo, 2021). Often, rural and remote communities have strong social networks, high levels of community involvement, and extensive local and/or Indigenous knowledge. Rural and remote communities are an integral part of Canadian society and the economy.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background



Access to nutritious, safe, and culturally appropriate food is essential for the physical, mental, social well-being and dignity of every individual.

The BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) defines food security as existing when all people have access to food that is affordable, culturally preferable, nutritious and safe, within a sustainable and resilient food system. It means that all people have agency to participate in, and influence food systems, that they are socially just, and honour Indigenous and community food sovereignty (BCCDC, 2022).

Within the broad framework of food security, access to food is a key pillar. According to the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (2023), access to adequate food is a human right. Uncompromised access to food should be attainable irrespective of socio-economic status, geographical location, cultural preferences, and other factors. Across British Columbia and Canada, food access continues to be threatened by significant global events like the COVID-19 pandemic, climate emergencies and the unsustainable cost of living (Drolet, 2012; Berry & Schnitter, 2019; Zavaleta-Cortijo et al., 2020; Li et al., 2023). Food producers and distributors alike are searching for ways to recover from and withstand future shocks and disturbances to the food system. Additionally, structural barriers like systemic racism and colonization persist throughout BC, which cause inequitable barriers to food access.

In 2021, the Public Health Association of BC (PHABC) released the [Food Access Across British Columbia](#) report, a foundational document that characterized the state of food access programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the report, food access organizations throughout the province saw a substantial increase in clients using their services during the pandemic. Similar findings were also documented in Food Banks Canada's 2023 Hunger Count survey, which found visits to BC's food banks increased by 57% from 2019 to 2023. In BC's rural communities, these numbers were even more stark, with visits increasing by 101% over the same period (Food Banks Canada, 2023). While the pandemic brought to light pre-existing social disparities and vulnerabilities within the food system, these issues were already present in many regions of BC, including in the north. In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, the increasing number of climate emergencies like wildfires, droughts, and floods continue to exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities in food systems throughout BC. In an effort to increase food access and availability, local and regional food access organizations have developed new programs and expanded existing ones to meet the heightened demand.

The northern region of BC is a unique part of the province that faces distinct challenges and barriers to reliable and sustainable food access. An area the size of France, northern BC has a vast geography, including three sub-regions: northern interior (NI), northwest (NW), and northeast (NE), with distinct landscapes and climates (Northern Health 2023; Government of BC 2023). Within these regions there are

many diverse urban, rural, remote, and Indigenous communities with strong social networks. While factors like vast geography and a small population make northern BC a diverse and beautiful place to live, they also give rise to barriers and challenges related to reliable and sustainable food access. Some of these barriers include: limited infrastructure for food processing, storage, and distribution; extreme climate events; and a vast geography with restricted transportation and road access in certain areas. For example, in 2021, transportation pathways linking the southern and northern regions of BC were disrupted due to flooding throughout the province, leaving many northern communities temporarily cut off from food distribution (Barker, 2021).

This Project was borne out of Food Banks BC's desire to address the inequitable access to food and disproportionately high demand seen across their network of food banks in northern BC. Additionally, the findings from PHABC's Food Access Across BC report recognized the need for a northern-specific response to address the unique food access challenges in the region. In 2022, in response to the report's recommendation to: "develop a specific strategy to support rural, remote and Indigenous communities", PHABC



and Food Banks BC (FBBC) established a partnership to initiate the Project. Funded by the BC Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, the primary goal of this project is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities, strengths, barriers, and challenges related to food access in northern BC communities, as this critical knowledge can help to inform and support efforts to enhance food system resilience across the region.

A resilient food system ensures sufficient, appropriate and accessible food for all in the face of any unforeseen disturbance (Tendall et al., 2015). The concept of resilience provides a useful framework for examining the broader food system to understand the determinants of food availability, an underlying condition of food access (Doherty et al., 2019). Enhancing food system resilience involves improving long-term sustainability while also adapting to, mitigating, and reducing vulnerabilities to the climate crisis and other factors that threaten food access (Rotz & Fraser, 2015). This project adopts a resilience lens to identify barriers and pathways for building capacities to enhance food system resilience in northern BC. Our use of the word "resilient" reflects a food system capable of providing a diverse, stable, sufficient, and accessible food supply for northern BC communities in the face adverse socioecological conditions.

This report presents the outcomes of the *Strengthening Food Systems and Dignified Food Access in Northern BC* project, including the project design and methods used to gather information, a literature review on the context of food access in northern BC, key findings from engagements with northern communities, and the implications of these findings for strengthening food access across northern BC.

1.2 Project Design

This project used a collaborative inquiry and asset-based community development approach. Food system researchers, food justice movements, and other stakeholders have called for amplifying the voices of people on the ground and involving them in the process of both identifying challenges to food security and appropriate interventions (Schipanski et al., 2016; Anderson & Leach, 2019; Schwarz, Vanni, & Miller, 2021). Further, evidence of the limitations and harmful implications of solely focusing on deficits within a community have resulted in calls for recognizing, building, and leveraging the strengths of communities as a process of community empowerment and self-determination (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003 and 2005; Clark et al., 2021). This project answered these calls by collaborating with and collecting insights from people on the ground who are directly engaged in food access work. It also sought to identify assets across northern BC that are relevant to food access, including resources, networks and partnerships, food knowledge and skills, and more. This project used a collaborative inquiry and asset-based community development approach to align with and inform a “just transition” toward a more sustainable, equitable, and resilient food system (Anderson, Chappell, & Pimbert, 2019; Huttunen, Turunen, & Kaljonen, 2022).

To comprehensively examine the strengths, challenges, gaps and opportunities related to food access in northern BC, the project team used a mixed-methods approach, including secondary data analysis and qualitative and quantitative methods. More specifically, the project team conducted a literature review, analyzed grant records and an environmental scan, visited food bank sites, conducted semi-structured interviews, administered surveys, and hosted regional roundtable discussions. For a complete list of the questions asked during these engagements, please refer to Appendix 1. The stakeholder groups targeted through these engagements included FBBC food bank members, local food access organizations,

Indigenous communities, and key informants working across the region to address food security (e.g., health authority representatives, funders, food distributors, etc.). See Appendix 2 for a list of the stakeholders engaged throughout the project. The data collection and analysis took place between August 2022–July 2023. These activities are further described below.



1.2.1 Literature Review

A literature review was conducted to gain a baseline understanding of the food access landscape across northern BC. Databases used included Google, Google Scholar, and the University of British Columbia (UBC) online library. A combination of search terms were used to identify relevant academic and grey literature, including “northern BC, British Columbia, rural and/or remote, COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, global warming, food access, food banks, food security, and food insecurity”. Literature was screened for relevance and reviewed to meet general inclusion criteria. Only literature from Canada or British Columbia, published in the last 20 years was used. Relevant literature was categorized into the following topics: dignified food access, the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and food banks in BC.

1.2.2 Secondary Data Analysis

Various sources of secondary data were analyzed and used to inform the subsequent community engagement phase of the investigation. This analysis included data from the 2021 [Food Access Across BC survey](#) and environmental scan, as well as grant application records for the United Way Food Infrastructure Grant (years 2021–2022 and 2022–2023) and the Northern Health Rural Remote and Indigenous Food Action Grant (2022–2023). For further details on these data sources, see Appendix 3. This secondary data was used to identify and map community organizations and First Nations actively involved in food access initiatives throughout the region. Additionally, the analysis provided insights into current funding priorities and ongoing food access initiatives within the region. This information guided the questions asked during the community engagement phase of the project and the selection of stakeholders that were invited to participate.



New Life Assembly Family Assistance Program Food Bank in Tumbler Ridge, B.C.

1.2.3 Food Bank Site Visits

A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 FBBC food bank members, each representing a distinct northern community. Questions focused on understanding the operations, programming, infrastructure and needs of each food bank. Out of the 17 interviews, 14 were conducted through in-person site visits, which also included guided tours of the respective organization's facilities. The remaining three were conducted virtually over Zoom.

During the interviews, the project team took notes and captured photographs. For virtual interviews, participants submitted photos of their food bank facilities over email. After each interview, the project team debriefed to discuss and document the successes, challenges, commonalities, and differences among the food banks. Notes derived from the interviews were later coded and thematically analyzed.

1.2.4 Food Bank Survey

Based on the themes that emerged from the site visits, the FBBC member food banks were sent an anonymous follow-up survey to gather additional details about topics such as food procurement and delivery methods, partnerships, infrastructure needs, and challenges mentioned in the initial interviews. The survey was conducted using the Hosted in Canada online survey platform. Out of the 17 food banks that received the survey, 14 completed it. To ensure participant confidentiality, any identifiable information was removed from the dataset. The survey data was cleaned, coded, and analyzed using Microsoft Excel.

1.2.5 Roundtable Discussions

Three regional roundtable discussions brought together representatives from local organizations actively involved in food access work (i.e., non-Food Banks BC members). These roundtables were hosted in the northwest, northeast and northern interior regions of northern BC, each in collaboration with a local partner food access organization that assisted in the outreach, design, and facilitation of the meeting. A total of 44 participants joined these discussions: 18 at the northern interior roundtable, 20 at the northwest roundtable, and 6 at the northeast roundtable. Two were conducted virtually on Zoom, while the third followed a hybrid format that included both an in-person group and a virtual group, with the latter being broadcast in the room.

In preparation for the roundtables, participants completed a brief survey to provide insights into their organization's operations and partnerships. During the roundtable, facilitators led participants through activities aimed at mapping food systems partnerships in the region and identifying the assets and requests of organizations – specifically, what they offer and what they need. Afterwards, participants were divided into smaller breakout groups and asked a series of questions about the strengths, challenges, gaps and opportunities pertaining to food access in the region. The discussions were recorded and transcribed. After the roundtables, facilitators debriefed to discuss and document highlights that stood out from the engagement. Transcripts from the roundtables were subsequently coded and thematically analyzed.

1.2.6 Key Informant Interviews

A series of virtual semi-structured interviews were conducted over Zoom with nine key informants representing six organizations engaged in regional food security efforts across northern BC. The key informants represented a diverse range of sectors, including health, funders, distribution and retail, food recovery, and Indigenous food sovereignty. The interview questions focused on gaining insights into how each organization contributes to food security in the region, the obstacles they encounter and potential areas for enhanced support, and their perspectives on the cross-regional strengths, challenges, and opportunities pertaining to dignified food access. The interviews were recorded for subsequent transcription, coding, and thematic analysis.

1.2.7 Data Analysis and Verification

The project team worked collaboratively to analyze the information gathered through each of the data collection methods, identifying key themes and patterns that emerged within the data. To verify the findings, the team hosted three virtual participant feedback sessions over Zoom and shared the draft report with key informants to review and provide feedback. The key findings from the project are presented in the following sections of this report.



2. Literature Review

The following section presents the findings from our literature review, which provides an overview of the current food access landscape in northern BC.

Specifically, this section delves into the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change on food systems, the historical backdrop of food banks in Canada and British Columbia, and the concept and importance of dignified food access.

2.1 Describing the northern BC context

Northern BC is a large and diverse region that makes up 70% of BC's land mass. It spans 600,000 square kilometres from Quesnel, north to the Yukon border, west to Haida Gwaii, and east to the Alberta border. The region is home to about 300,000 people, including 55 First Nations (See Figure 1). In 2017–2018, 16.6% of people across northern BC were living with household food insecurity, the highest rate across the province (BCCDC, 2023). High food costs and lower than average incomes contribute to this high rate (Dachner et al., 2016; McKee et al., 2022). According to the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC), a nutritious food basket for a family of four living in northern BC costed \$1,300 per month in 2022. The most expensive nutritious food basket in BC was in the northwest, costing \$1,571 per month (BCCDC, 2023). Additionally, social, political, and environmental events have placed significant pressure on food access initiatives in northern BC and throughout the province. The high prevalence of food insecurity in northern BC calls for robust,

multi-sectoral, and equitable policies and programs that centre human rights and dignity, while facilitating access to affordable, nutritious, safe, and culturally appropriate foods (Provincial Health Services Authority, 2016; BCCDC, 2022; BCCDC, 2023).

2.2 Climate change and food access

Climate change increases vulnerability to food insecurity due to increased food costs, supply disruptions, and challenges associated with growing and producing food (Drolet, 2012; Berry & Schnitter 2019). These factors can reduce the availability of safe, culturally appropriate, and nutritious foods. Disruptions to the food chain negatively impact access, availability, and affordability of quality foods. This is especially true in northern BC where food transportation costs are high, and transportation routes are limited. Increasing temperatures and extreme weather can lead to long-term disruptions in the availability of food (Ostry et al., 2011). Similarly, unpredictable weather patterns, high rainfall, floods, snow, wildfires, shorter winters, and hotter summers impact local agriculture and access to imported foods (Berry & Schnitter, 2019; Ostry et al., 2011; Alderhill Planning INC, 2022).

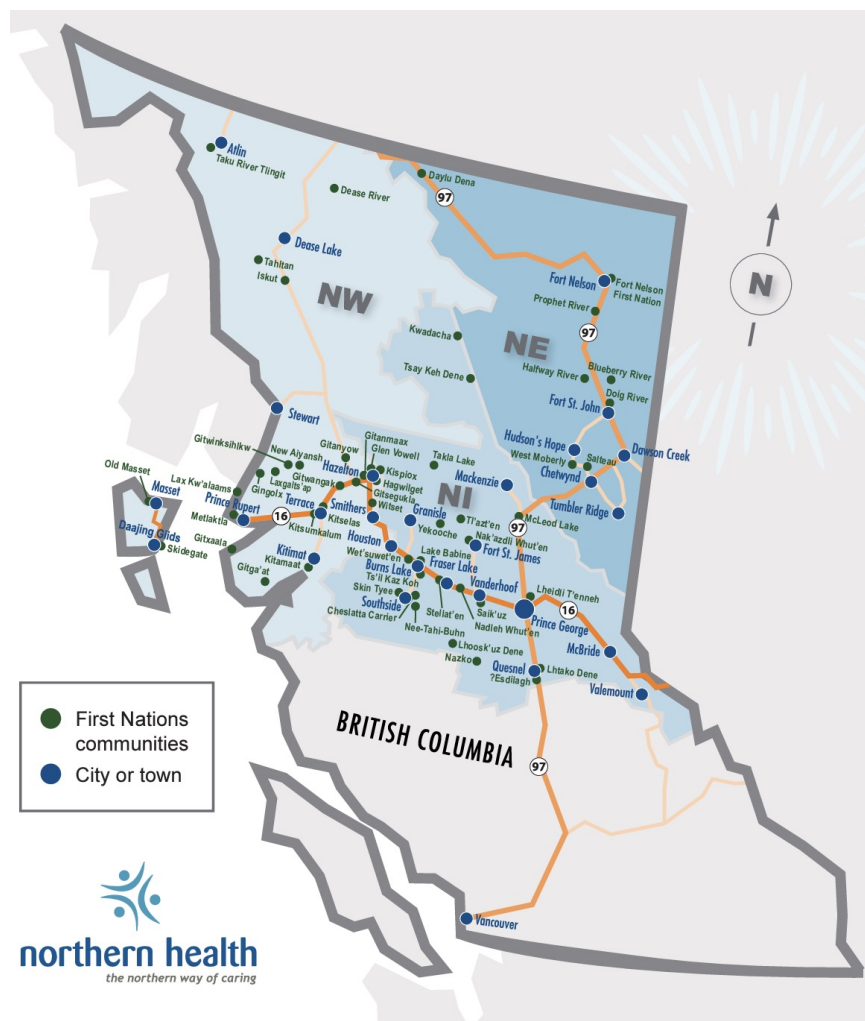


Figure 1: Map of Northern BC (Northern Health, 2023)

Climate change has significant implications for Indigenous food sovereignty (Alderhill Planning INC, 2022). Indigenous communities make up a high proportion of the population in northern BC and are disproportionately affected by climate change. Climate change disrupts the ability to engage in traditional and cultural food practices like hunting, gathering, storage, and distribution safely and sustainably (Berry & Schnitter 2019). Changes in climate lead to unpredictable changes in the food web and further disrupts traditional food knowledge. For example, populations of moose, elk, and other traditional protein sources are decreasing because of reduced food sources that these animals rely upon. This is partly due to industries like mining, which change the natural landscape and cause animals and their food sources to be pushed out to make room for resource industry activities (Alderhill Planning INC, 2022).

The influx of industries that extract natural resources from the environment can also adversely impact the yield of local agriculture. Rural communities in northern BC are particularly vulnerable to climate change due to the geographic features of the region, their isolated location, and the increased resources needed to connect with neighbouring areas. Northern communities that are most susceptible to climate change are subsequently more susceptible to socio-economic challenges related to the disruptions caused by climate change, including higher food costs resulting from food system disruptions (Ostrey et al., 2011). Consequently, as the climate continues to change in northern BC, food insecurity intensifies with it.

2.3 The COVID-19 pandemic and food access

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted existing gaps in food systems across Canada. COVID-19 exacerbated other food system vulnerabilities in northern BC including the already high cost of food, disruptions in supply chains, and the worsening effects of climate change. In order to prevent the spread of the deadly virus, and in advance of the development of the vaccine, widespread system disruptions were experienced. Some of these had a disproportionate impact on already vulnerable groups. Emergency funds for food security were identified and allocated, however, the challenge of reaching those in need was amplified by pandemic conditions. The percentage of households in BC experiencing food insecurity increased from the pre-pandemic rate of 12.4% in 2018 to 14.9% in 2021 and further rose to 16.2% in 2022 (Tarasuk & Mitchell 2020; Tarasuk et al., 2022). This rise in food insecurity is primarily due to the increased cost of living, increased rates of unemployment, and reduced wages (Lowitt et al., 2022; Kotyk & Hurst 2021; Li et al., 2023). During the pandemic, higher rates of food insecurity were seen amongst households who applied for the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), and in northern and rural communities (Lowitt et al., 2022). In fact, the BC COVID-19 SPEAK survey administered in 2021 found that the prevalence of people who reported concern for food security was highest in northern BC (15.5%) and within rural (11.7%) and remote (16.9%) communities across BC (BCCDC, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic, compounded with climate change, placed added pressure on food systems. Pandemic restrictions led to significant disruptions in the supply of food, which has been felt most significantly in communities that rely on food to be transported into their region. These supply shortages further strain already low-resourced grocery stores and other food distribution sites (Zavaleta-Cortijo et al., 2020). Food program use increased during the pandemic (PHABC, 2021) and this trend has continued ever since. In 2023, Canadian food bank usage increased by 32% compared to 2022 and a

staggering 79% compared to 2019 (Food Banks Canada, 2023). During the pandemic, food access organizations were forced to adapt their operations to comply with public health restrictions that led to limited operational hours and increased delivery services, while navigating higher rates of unemployment and higher demand (PHABC, 2021; Vantage Point, 2020). The economic fallout of the pandemic continues to impact food security due to inflation and high costs related to food purchasing and distribution. These disruptions were compounded when the Fraser Valley experienced record rainfall in 2021, which led to catastrophic flooding. Already impacted supply chains were further disrupted when key highways collapsed due to the floods, leaving many communities in northern BC cut off from a secure food supply (Baker 2021; Evans 2021; Hui 2021; Kotyk & Mangione 2021; Larsen, 2021).



2.4 Food Banks in BC

Structural factors like inadequate income, systemic oppression, and the historic and ongoing impacts of colonization create more barriers to accessing food among marginalized groups (Richmond & Ross 2009; Tarasuk et al., 2022; Mendlly-Zabdo et al., 2023). Initiatives aimed at increasing access to food range from those intended to address the root causes of food insecurity, to actions that provide short-term access to food but fail to address

the underlying causes. Food banks, which fall into the latter category, focus on an emergency hunger relief model and are currently the most common tool used across Canada to increase access to food (Riches, 2018; Mendly-Zabdo et al., 2023).

Food banks have been part of the Canadian food landscape for the past four decades. Originating in the United States, food banks have since spread to Canada and many other Western nations, including Australia, the UK, and other European countries (Tarasuk et al., 2020). Canada's welfare system began to erode in the 1980s in response to increasing inflation, insecure labour markets, and a decrease in government revenue (Tarasuk & Davis, 1996).



Salvation Army Food Bank in Prince Rupert B.C.

As a result, government-funded social security systems became increasingly inadequate, and community-based initiatives began to emerge, which were designed to provide short-term support to low-income and other marginalized groups (Tarasuk & Davis, 1996; McKen & Porter 2003). Government programs supported citizens through income-based programs like social assistance, while community-based initiatives predominantly offered resources and services to help people and communities cope with

issues like poverty and food insecurity (Tarasuk & Davis, 1996). During the 1980s recession, hunger rates rose and food banks appeared in Canada as a temporary solution for struggling households (Tarasuk et al., 2020). More than 40 years later, food banks have become institutionalized in Canada and normalized as a response to food insecurity, despite their inability to effectively address the underlying socio-economic factors that put households at risk.



Food banks are in many communities throughout British Columbia. Food Banks BC (FBBC) is a provincial organization encompassing over 100 food bank members spread throughout the province (Food Banks BC, 2023). The organization offers valuable support to its members including access to financial assistance, food, and training opportunities aimed at enhancing their service capabilities. To become a member, food banks can submit applications, provided that they meet the requirements listed on the FBBC website (Food Banks BC, 2023). However, in order to maintain data integrity and mitigate against donor and client overlap, there is a limit to the number of members that may join with association within a geographic region. Consequently, there are many other food access organizations throughout the province that are not a part of the FBBC network. A map of the Food Banks BC members can be found on the Food Banks BC website (Figure 2).

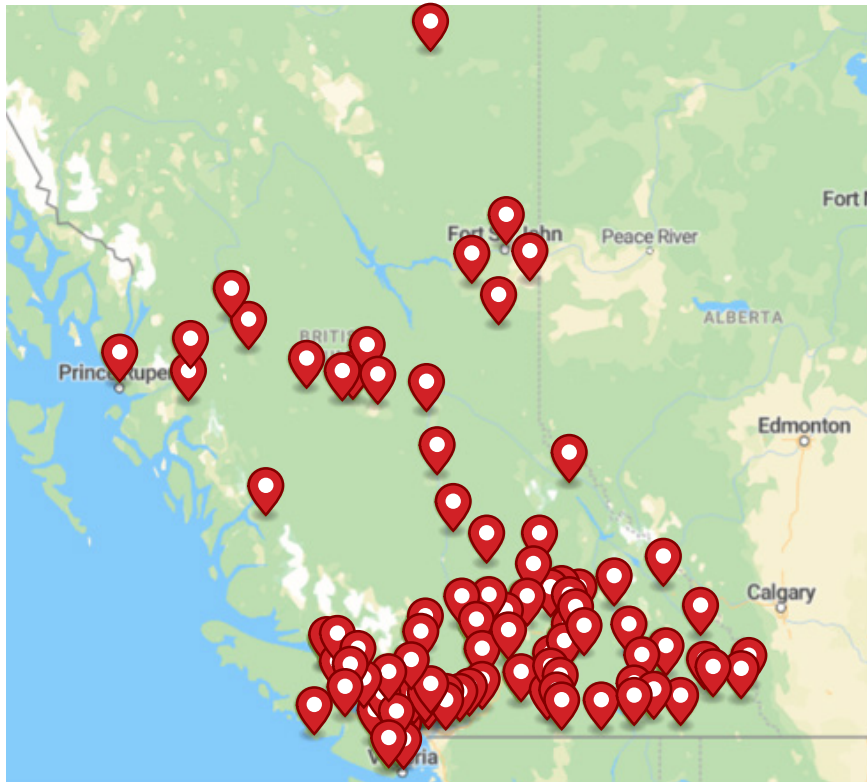


Figure 2: Distribution of food banks supported by Food Banks BC.

Although food banks are an important resource that can enable some individuals to temporarily increase their access to food, they do not address the root causes of food insecurity. Food banking is often framed as a food security initiative, which can overshadow the call for public policy responses that more effectively address structural inequity and the inequitable distribution of resources that creates barriers to food access (Mendly-Zabdo et al, 2023). Moreover, evidence shows that only a small proportion of food insecure people access food banks (Riches 2008, Tarasuk et al.,

2020). Although food bank usage increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was still a significant gap between food bank usage and household food insecurity (BCCDC, 2023). A nationally representative survey showed that only 7.4% of food insecure households reported receiving charitable food donations in the last month (BCCDC, 2023). For many, food banks are often a tool of last resort and are used most frequently by households in the most dire financial situations (Tarasuk, Fafard St Germain, Loopstra, 2020). Many households will delay bill payments or borrow money from family or friends before accessing food banks, or attend community programs that offer meals or food as part of wrap-around services. One reason that food banks are a last resort for many households is the stigma associated with accessing them (Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2012; Riches, 2018; Mendly-Zabdo et al., 2023).

While charitable and emergency food programs are the dominant approaches to addressing food insecurity in BC and across Canada, the evidence is clear that these programs do not effectively address the root causes of household food insecurity (BCCDC, 2023). Food access advocates and researchers suggest that food banks be framed as a means for temporary hunger relief and that multifaceted approaches prioritizing social security, like income, affordable housing, and better wages be used as one way to address the structural roots of food insecurity (Tarasuk et al., 2020; Regehr & Pasma n.d.; Werner & Lim 2016; Riches, 2018). While improving social security is vital, the experience of food insecurity is multifaceted. Income-based solutions are one part of a necessary systems redesign, which also requires, but is not limited to, addressing climate change, promoting land-based food work that prioritizes sovereignty, creating stronger social networks around food, and addressing systemic racism and the impacts of colonization on access to food, and within the food system more generally (Morrison, 2008; BCCDC, 2008; Dhunna & Tarasuk 2021).

2.5 Dignified food access

Food researchers, programmers, and policymakers suggest that dignity must be central to all food access policies and programs. Consistent and reliable access to nutritious food is central to leading a dignified life (Community Food Centres Canada, 2017; SRO Collective 2019; Roots to Harvest, 2021; Herrington & Mix, 2021). While there are many ways to think about dignified food access, the ability to choose what, when, and where food comes from, is essential (Harrington & Mix, 2021). Dignified food access assures that individuals can access the foods they want in unstigmatized places and in unstigmatized ways (Roots to Harvest, 2021).

Social researchers that focus on food systems argue that dignity is socially constructed and relies on how we compare ourselves to others in society. In a society that prioritizes income and class, the commodification of food creates a social divide between people who can access food freely and on their own terms, and those who cannot (Herrington & Mix, 2021). This structural hierarchy creates a system where those with unreliable access to food are perceived to exist within a lower social class than those with more privilege and better access (Herrington & Mix, 2021). When people who cannot afford food are treated differently than those who can and are forced to rely on others and charity for food, access becomes stigmatized and dignity is lost. Dignity can be preserved when everyone has access to high-quality food in ways that promote autonomy (Collins, Power, & Little, 2014; Herrington & Mix 2021; Roots to Harvest, 2019).

Herrington and Mix (2021) suggest three pathways for enhancing dignity in the food space: relational, individual, and institutional. The relational pathway focuses on fostering dignity through positive interactions and social connections within food programs, which can promote a sense of community and belonging. The individual pathway refers to how social



Kitimat Food Bank Society in Kitimat B.C.

hierarchies, which stem from social inequity, influence access to food. Individuals with higher social status are less food insecure, whereas those with lower social status face a higher risk of food insecurity due to limited resources and socio-economic opportunities. To promote dignity, social inequities must be addressed. Lastly, the institutional pathway relates to how the processes and practices of organizations, agencies, and government programs can affect an individual's sense of dignity. This includes aspects like the physical space and layout of food programs, accessible and flexible schedules, promoting choice in the shopping experience, and honouring cultural food traditions (Harrington & Mix, 2021). Together the relational, individual, and institutional pathways can facilitate independence and autonomy, and honour the dignity of food program participants (Roots to Harvest, 2021; Harrington & Mix 2021; Smith-Carrier et al., 2017; Collins et al., 2014; PHABC, 2021).

Several food access organizations in BC have embraced the concept of dignity as a core element of their mission and vision. For example, the Food Stash Foundation in Vancouver outlines eight components of dignified food access that they strive towards, including providing a safe and inclusive environment for participants, advocating to address the root causes of food insecurity, and building intentional relationships with community members and other service providers (Food Stash Foundation, 2021). Another notable food access organization in BC, Kiwassa Neighbourhood house, hosted a series of sessions with food justice advocates to discuss creating a dignified food system in the region following an increased demand for emergency food access during COVID-19 (Kiwassa Neighbourhood House, 2021). The group concluded that multi-year core funding, agency for community members, and cultural safety training were key to achieving dignified food access.

2.6 Conclusion

In summary, prior research indicates that northern BC faces significant challenges to food access, exacerbated by factors such as climate change, rising inflation, and disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, food access organizations play a crucial role addressing immediate needs in northern BC, but it is imperative that these food programs are delivered in a dignified manner. Moreover, while charity models can provide temporary hunger relief, they do not address the systemic issues at the root of food insecurity. To strengthen and create more resilient and sustainable food systems, it is essential to generate a holistic understanding of the diverse factors impacting food access, promote cross-sector collaboration and leverage community-led solutions for improving dignified access to food.

Recognizing the need for a holistic and community-driven approach, the Project engaged communities across northern BC to explore the strengths, barriers and opportunities related to food access across the region. The key findings from these engagements are presented in the following section.

3. Findings from Community Engagement



This section summarizes insights from the roundtable discussions with local food access organizations, site visits and surveys to FBBC member food banks, and key informant interviews.

These insights are organized into major themes identified during the analysis, which are further broken down into several sub-themes. The key themes include collaboration, funding, infrastructure, grocery store and food costs, transportation, labour, Indigenous food sovereignty, local food producers, dignified food access, and natural environment and climate change.

Who is Doing Food Access Work in Northern BC?

A total of 179 food access operations in northern BC were identified using the Food Access Across BC report's environmental scan and the grant application records from the Rural Remote and Indigenous Food Action grant and Food Infrastructure grant. Within northern BC, the interior region had the highest number of food access operations ($n = 76$), followed by the northwest ($n = 68$), and then the northeast ($n = 35$). Of these 172 operations, 127 (73.8%) were non-profit organizations, 7 (4.1%) were networks (i.e., made up of several members), and 45 (26.2%) were First Nations. However, this list is not comprehensive; it only consists of operations that list their food programs online or those that applied for the two grants. There are likely more organizations and First Nations communities engaged in food access work in northern BC that are not captured in this estimate.



Stuart Lake Outreach Group Society Food Bank in Fort St. James, B.C.



Touring the greenhouse at The Link in Burns Lake, B.C.



Salvation Army Food Bank in Prince Rupert B.C.

3.1 Collaboration

3.1.1 Partnerships

The importance of strong partnerships emerged as a theme related to collaboration. Several key informant interview participants felt that since their work is farther removed from larger urban centres, communities in northern BC must advocate to be heard by the rest of the province. Roundtable and site visit participants discussed relying on partnerships with food producers, grocery stores, the natural resource industry and other food access organizations. These types of partnerships allowed for them to provide more and better-quality food, depending on the partner and what was available. Organizations created partnerships to share infrastructure like fridge space or vehicles for food delivery. In the northeast, for example, some organizations partner with local farmers to coordinate food donations.

Government was also seen as a key partner. Roundtable participants were interested in receiving funding and social support services from the government as well as policy changes to effectively run their programs and meet the needs of their community. In particular, they expressed a desire for policies that would slow the effects of climate change and support Indigenous food sovereignty, particularly by addressing regulatory barriers that hinder communities from engaging in cultural food practices. Additionally, they wanted more social support to aid community members who were struggling with poverty, mobility and transportation barriers, and health issues. These themes are further elaborated on in the sections below.

We do rely on our government policies and the funding and support and all that. Otherwise, we're a bunch of nonprofits flailing, trying to pull it all together with literally no resources, lack of volunteers, and those are all the common themes that we're starting to hear.



– Roundtable Participant



Group discussion at a food security meeting in Prince George, B.C. in October 2023

In a pre-event survey, roundtable participants shared additional information about the types of partners they collaborated with. These were divided into seven categories: grocery stores, agricultural partners, government agencies, food access organizations, Indigenous communities, industry partners (e.g., oil, lumber, mining, etc.), and others (e.g., local businesses, schools, etc.). The percentage distribution of partnerships among each category is presented in Table 1. Across all three regions, participants frequently reported having partnerships with other food

access organizations in their areas, government institutions, and local organizations such as schools and local businesses. Having industry partners was less common. When comparing the regional roundtables, partnerships with Indigenous communities were more frequently reported by organizations in the northwest region, whereas agricultural partners were more common in the northeast. However, due to the small sample size of participants at each roundtable, these findings cannot be generalized and require further exploration to truly understand nuances of partnerships in each region.

Partnership Category	Regional Roundtable		
	Northern Interior	Northwest	Northeast
 Food access organizations	19%	16%	17%
 Government agencies	19%	17%	14%
 Other organizations (schools, local businesses)	18%	19%	21%
 Indigenous communities	12%	17%	7%
 Grocery stores	14%	12%	14%
 Agriculture partners	11%	11%	17%
 Industry partners (e.g., oil, mining, lumber, etc.)	17%	8%	10%

Table 1: Percentage distribution of partnerships among various partner categories, as reported by food access organizations participating in each regional roundtable. Data from pre-roundtable survey.

3.1.2 Coordination

Networking that allowed for better regional coordination was seen as an opportunity to improve food access. During the key informant interviews, several participants talked about how creating a food security network led by food champions, (i.e., those leading food work directly in community) would present members an opportunity to share and exchange valuable knowledge and experience.

Larger provincial and cross-regional organizations play a key role in advocating for, and lending support to, local non-profits doing food access work. Key informants spoke of a variety of regional networks that could exist, which would present important opportunities for advocacy and social change. They felt that collaborating with other organizations via a regional network would be valuable since they could offer additional support to smaller non-profits through resource sharing (e.g., financial, supplies, advice, etc.), advocacy, and enhanced coordination.

The one thing that we can still do that brings value to a lot of organizations is to advocate. It's to show up at tables, talk with people like yourself, on their behalf because this is not something that they have the time, capacity, or they may not have the skill [to do]... we fill in the gap that they can't fill themselves. So, it's funding, supplies, advocacy, advice, it's direction on providing support to their clients when they can't provide it for themselves because they don't know the answer.



– Key Informant Interview Participant

Many roundtable participants expressed a desire for improved coordination between organizations and better communication regarding available resources. They believed that a better understanding of what other food programs were doing would not only help to reduce redundancies in their work, but also highlight opportunities for collaboration. Additionally, there was a sentiment that, while resources do exist, they are often piecemeal and are not effectively promoted. Many community members are either unaware that resources exist or do not know how to access them. Participants felt that it was challenging to facilitate networking opportunities because they were already strained for time, funding, and resources. While they knew that working collaboratively with other organizations would strengthen their work, they were unable to add any more tasks to their already full workload. This left many roundtable participants feeling like they were working in isolation. Several participants specifically expressed a desire for a paid coordinator role. Developing regional food access plans or strategies demands a significant level of coordination, yet current efforts towards this often rely on volunteers or staff with already overstretched workloads. This is an unsustainable approach that can result in burnout.

It's not coordinated. Let me make that clear. We're doing the best we can with what we have.



– Roundtable Participant

3.2 Funding

3.2.1 Core and Multi-Year Funding

The vast majority of organizations at the roundtables cited a lack of adequate funding as a core challenge that threatened the efficacy and sustainability of their work. They explained that granting programs have been key to supporting the food work happening across the region, however,

many are short-term and only fund specific programs. This created limitations, threatened program sustainability, and subjected staff to time consuming and onerous re-application processes. In the key informant interviews, consistent and reliable core funding and multi-year funding were mentioned as essential for supporting project sustainability.

“Core funding would be incredible. You just count on it. And then a second would be multi-year funding. And then I guess any type of funding specific to self-determined food access would also be exceptional at this point.”



– Key Informant Interview Participant

One key informant explained that donations to non-profits, including organizations that fund food programs, have waned in recent years, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic downturn. The pandemic upended many things, not least of which was the stability of core funding upon which non-profits heavily rely.



St. Marks Food Bank in Dawson Creek, B.C.

“One of the challenges coming out of the pandemic certainly has been the change that has occurred in fundraising revenues for most non-profits, it went down, and it has not recovered. Our Major Donor Network is large corporations, and maybe their workplaces, and their philosophy, or perhaps their workforce changed quite a bit over the last number of years. And we’re really just now seeing what the effect of that is ... we don’t have quite as much money to give as we used to.”



– Key Informant Interview Participant

3.2.2 Funding Flexibility

Throughout the key informant interviews, a number of participants spoke about the challenges associated with current funding models. Funding streams often have rigid processes and criteria shaped by funders’ perspectives and interests, which can lead to restrictive language or rules around what can and cannot be funded as part of food work. Key informants spoke about the need to work with key funders to shift to more flexible funding models as a critical step towards supporting culturally safe funding. If the granting process looks to be prohibitive, communities will avoid applying for grants. Additionally, since many organizations offer a range of support services beyond just food, participants saw a need for funding to be broad and support holistic models, rather than being rigid and inflexible – only allowing for pre-determined or food-specific activities. One key informant explained that they had trouble accessing funding because their models were not just food-specific but provided holistic community programming.

“We struggle to get funding from [the] health [sector], like First Nations Health or others because we feed everybody, we give living allowances, we do transportation, mental health, peer support, harm reduction, naloxone training. We do it all, but no one seems to want to [give] funding in terms of understanding the holistic model.”



– Key Informant Interview Participant

Another key informant spoke to the barriers associated with the fact that granting program criteria do not always meet the needs of the communities with respect to traditional food practices. When asked what would help to create more flexible and accessible funding models, one interview participant framed this as shifting away from dominant Western-based food paradigms and towards community self-determination.



“... How do we give control back to community leaders and community knowledge holders to self-determine the food system and food structure that works best for them, while providing a supportive environment for whatever direction that takes?”



– Key Informant Interview Participant

3.2.3 Funding Inequity

Along with funding flexibility, another issue highlighted was funding inequity. Grants that support Indigenous food sovereignty require a distinct and focused approach. Working to build trust across communities, organizations, and provincial partners will require a closer look at how granting programs promote inclusivity. A key informant expressed concern that Indigenous organizations only received a fraction of funding compared to what non-Indigenous organizations in the same region received. While several funding

“People don’t want to fund Indigenous farmers to farm... we have some [non-Indigenous] counterparts in the area who receive ... five-year contracts for millions of dollars to do stuff. And we’re like 90% Indigenous staff and we’re lucky if we can get, you know, six months to a year operating. So, we’re seeing those are barriers... non-Indigenous [organizations] are still able to access stuff that we’re not.”



– Key Informant Interview Participant

programs for Indigenous food security programming exist in BC, this concern highlights the need for further exploration of the limitations and barriers to accessing this funding.

Since this interview was conducted, [infrastructure funds](#) have been allocated to further support Indigenous-led agriculture and food sovereignty efforts.

3.2.4 Infrastructure and Operational Funding

Roundtable participants from all three regions spoke about the varied sources of funding used to run their programs. Food access organizations source funding from grants, government funding, crowd-sourced donations, and internal revenue. Securing sufficient and sustainable funding was a key challenge the participants experienced, which directly impacted their program activities.

Funding was needed for start-up costs, ongoing program costs, and operational costs. However, roundtable participants expressed that it was challenging to source funding for operational costs including staff time and overhead costs, all of which are integral to running their programming. Participants also expressed a need for capital costs including infrastructure like processing equipment, vehicles for food pick up and delivery, and for rent or purchasing a building.

“One of the biggest challenges that we face as a non-profit is funding. It’s really easy to get grants for programs and for that sort of thing. But operational costs are not covered.”



– Roundtable Participant

Infrastructure needs were also explored in the survey with FBBC food bank members. Amongst the food banks surveyed, when asked what infrastructure they needed or needed more of, preservation equipment (e.g., canning, vacuum sealing, dehydrator, etc.) was the most commonly reported, followed by physical floor space, storage, and refrigerated vehicles (See Figure 3).



Salvation Army Food Bank in Fort St. John, B.C.



New Life Assembly Family Assistance Program Food Bank in Tumbler Ridge, B.C.

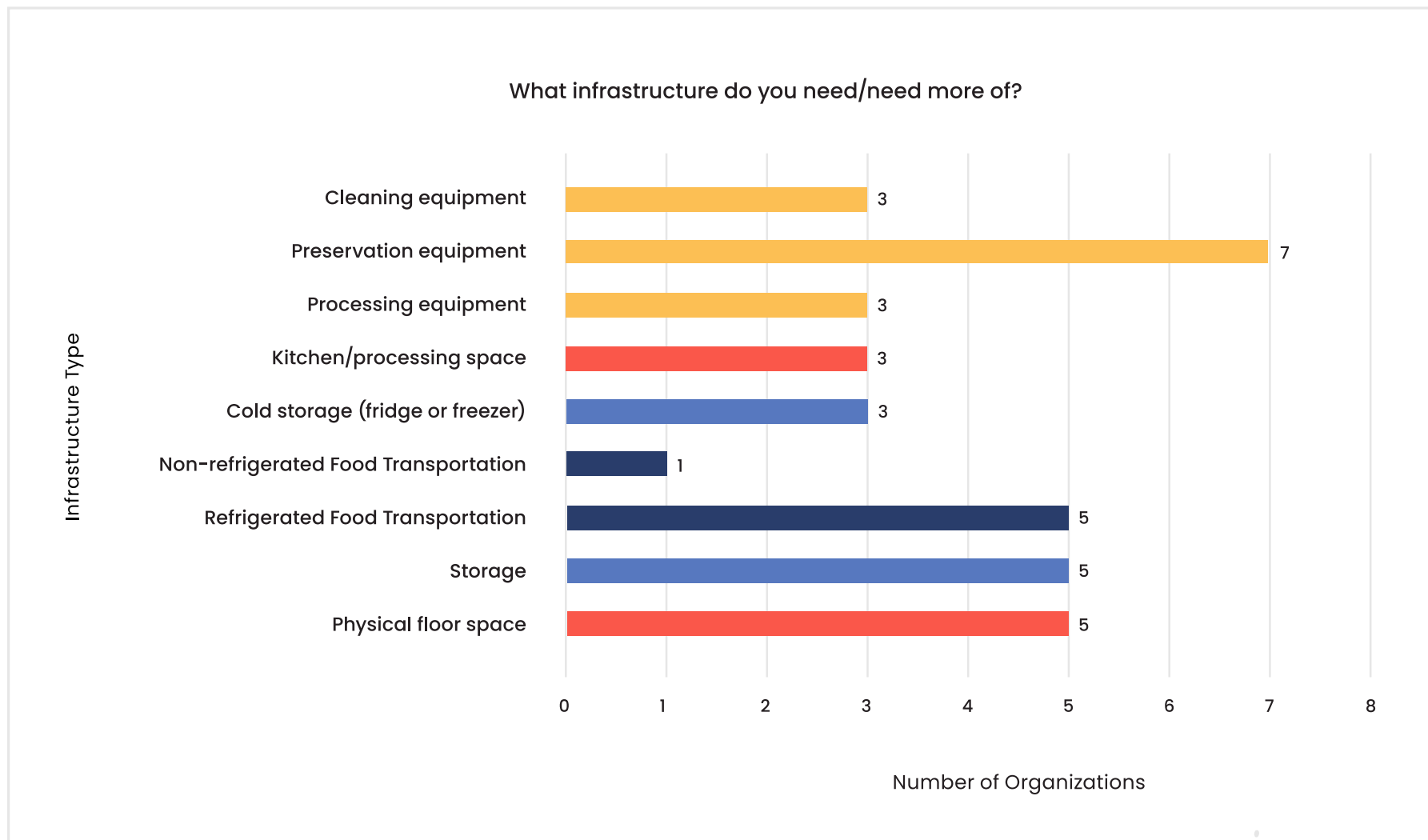


Figure 3: Response to survey question: "What Infrastructure do you need or need more of?" Data collected from the food banks survey.

Many of the food banks also experienced challenges securing operational funding, with a significant proportion (36%) reporting that they had trouble paying for overhead costs (see Figure 4).

“We have been blessed with community funding, but without donations, we would struggle.”



– Survey Participant

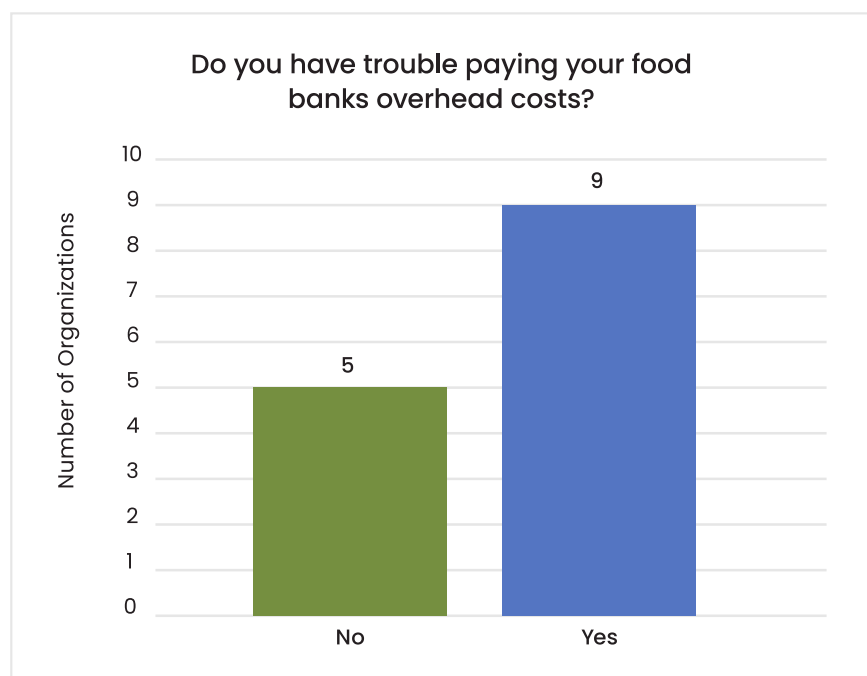
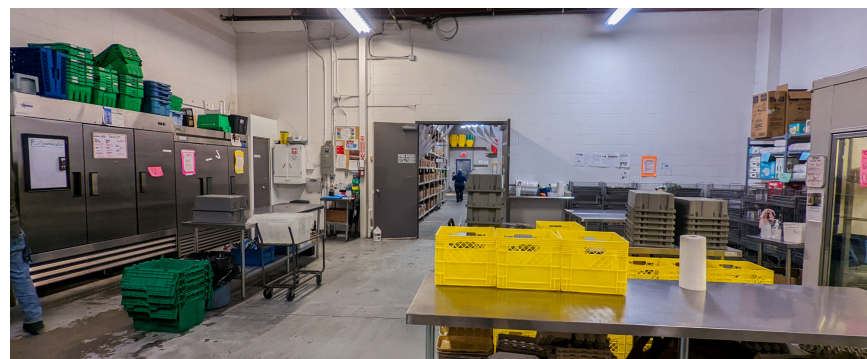


Figure 4: Response to the survey question “Do you have trouble paying your food bank overhead costs?” Data collected from the food banks survey.

3.3 Infrastructure

3.3.1 Warehousing and Storage

Inadequate infrastructure was mentioned several times as a barrier to food access across northern BC. Due to its large geographic size and small population, there are no centralized food warehouses in northern BC. Warehouses and central storage facilities are typically placed in larger communities outside of the region, like Edmonton or Vancouver, since these centralized hubs are more efficient and cost-effective for businesses. The lack of food storage facilities in northern BC makes the region vulnerable to supply chain disruptions, such as those caused by climate emergencies and pandemics, since large quantities of food are unable to be stored.



Salvation Army Food Bank in Prince George, B.C.

One of the struggles in [rural and remote] stores is that we don't always have a ton of space there, we don't always have the ability to store a huge amount of product at those stores. That's because it's not economical to build those stores that way sometimes, or there's no access to land or whatever it might be. It would be really nice to have some way to help those stores have bigger places to store things, whether it was some way that the government could help with access to storage spaces in those communities or work with companies like us to be able to build bigger extensions...



– Key Informant Interview Participant



NeighbourLink Food Bank in Vanderhoof, B.C.

One key informant spoke to the need for stronger networks of distribution across provinces. Edmonton is the largest northern community in Canada by population, and is a central hub for food storage and distribution. Although it is located out of province, it is closer in distance to Prince George, BC than Vancouver, BC, where food is predominantly transported from. However, the key informant explained that it was difficult to establish an efficient distribution channel between Alberta and BC due to differences in provincial tax policies and regulations.

Another opportunity is a little bit more work between the provinces ... Edmonton is the most northern large hub that has a lot of support and people to service northern BC. We utilize our Edmonton facility to do quite a few of our northern BC locations. So, we're coming across instead of up, and there's a lot of opportunity to improve that network. There are some regulations between the provinces that make it hard for the carriers to operate in, whether it's taxes on fuel, etc., so it adds complexity to those carriers that want to go back and forth and reduces the amount that they will entertain doing it. And those highway systems are ones that we can really utilize because Edmonton is probably our most populated northern area that can support distribution centers, where maybe a smaller community like Prince George is not likely to get a distribution center built in it, but Edmonton is, so being able to get that network more efficient [is important].



– Key Informant Interview Participant

3.3.2 Food Hub

Roundtable participants in all three regions of northern BC expressed a desire for a food hub where multiple organizations could collaborate to provide more effective food provision for their communities. They believed a food hub would foster strong partnerships among organizations in their region and provide a convenient central location for community members to access food. This would help to improve food provision logistics and eliminate the need for users to source food from multiple places. Participants also spoke about how these spaces could be beneficial for storing large quantities of food and act as a shared workspace for multiple organizations. Moreover, a food hub would help to address infrastructure needs since it could be used to house equipment and tools (e.g., for preservation, processing, etc.) that a network of organizations could share.

“And I know that our local garage has a hub that’s been very organic, you know, to meet people and bring the community services there so that people aren’t having to go to “institutions” to provide better access. And I really think we’re doing a pretty good job around offering that.”



– Roundtable Participant

3.4 Grocery Store and Food Costs

3.4.1 Empty Shelves

During the site visit to food banks, it was clear that communities without grocery stores had to travel further distances to access food. If community members had a vehicle, they would potentially be able to drive to the nearest town. However, if the nearest town had empty shelves, they would

need to drive even further to find groceries. As a result, the cost of groceries increases due to the higher fuel costs and extra travel time. This has been exacerbated by the pandemic and climate emergencies where smaller, more rural and remote communities were disproportionately impacted by supply disruptions.



“One of the things experienced [during the pandemic] was the suppliers didn’t want to have to deal with the outlying communities because it was just too hard to get product there. So, what they would do is concentrate on the central community. So really only Prince George was receiving food. And then we were getting pictures of what grocery stores look like. Even in Prince George, the shelves were emptying, the fresh fruits and vegetables and meat were gone, no refrigerators had food in them. But that’s the way it was for months on end in a lot of those communities”



– Key Informant Interview Participant

Supply disruptions and panic buying during the pandemic were particularly salient in very rural and remote communities. One key informant explained that in Indigenous communities, people often shop for multiple households because they must travel longer distances to food stores. As a result, these communities were disproportionately impacted by empty grocery stores. Additionally, limits placed on how much of one product households were allowed to purchase impacted the number of people one group could shop for.

“Everyone’s felt the reactions to COVID-19 and how it’s impacted food access for everybody, I think particularly, we need to be thinking about what it’s done for rural, remote, and Indigenous communities, where it’s not so easy to just run to the grocery store and grab what you need. So, panic buying definitely was a big factor. If there’s one or two households that go out and shop for a multitude of people, then of course, they’re restricted because they weren’t allowed to buy more than two packages of toilet paper or so many [cartons of] milk or eggs, those types of staples... but then also, panic buying in the major cities really impacted the ability for the smaller stores to get any stock on their shelves at all.”



– Key Informant Interview Participant

3.4.2 Transportation to Grocery Stores

Roundtable participants mentioned that some of their clients experience challenges getting to the grocery store because of limitations related to transportation and mobility. Community members could spend several hours trying to acquire groceries, often travelling a few hours to the nearest

store, only to find the shelves bare. Those with adequate transportation and money for gas may travel to the next town with a grocery store in hopes they had stock. If they relied on a ride or shuttle, or lacked enough money for gas, travelling to the next town for groceries might not be possible. During the site visits, many food banks spoke about volunteers giving rides to people and how that was an integral part of rural and remote living.

“I live in [remote village], and at any given time if anybody wants to go to town, somebody’s gonna charge you \$100 just for the trip. So that’s one of the biggest obstacles we have here. It all comes down to transportation... one of the biggest things that we do here is logistics and some days we have to scramble.”



– Key Informant Interview Participant

The rising cost of gas was frequently mentioned as a barrier that impacted both individuals and food access organizations in northern communities. In particular, high fuel costs significantly increased expenses for organizations in rural and remote communities that had to travel long distances to procure food for their programs, as well as programs that provided food delivery services.

3.4.3 Food Pricing

The rising cost of food emerged as a significant concern throughout our engagements, further compounded by the increased cost of living more generally. While elevated food prices were seen across the region, a key informant explained that the issue was especially notable in communities

that only had one grocery store. In contrast, communities with several stores had more competitive pricing, which kept prices comparably lower. In the survey administered to food bank staff, participants spoke about the impacts of the rising cost of food staples.

“...the actual cost of buying the basic necessities (i.e., bread, milk, butter, toiletries, the list goes on) have jumped through the roof this past year.”



– Survey Participant

3.4.4 Relationships between Food Banks and Grocery Stores

Establishing relationships with grocery stores was important to food bank members. In the survey, all 14 participating food bank members reported purchasing as well as receiving some donated food from their local grocery stores. When asked what they would like to receive more from grocery stores, the most common requests were for product discounts and increased food donations (see Figure 5).

“10% is the discount we receive, but that barely covers the tax because of the increasing cost of food”



– Survey Participant

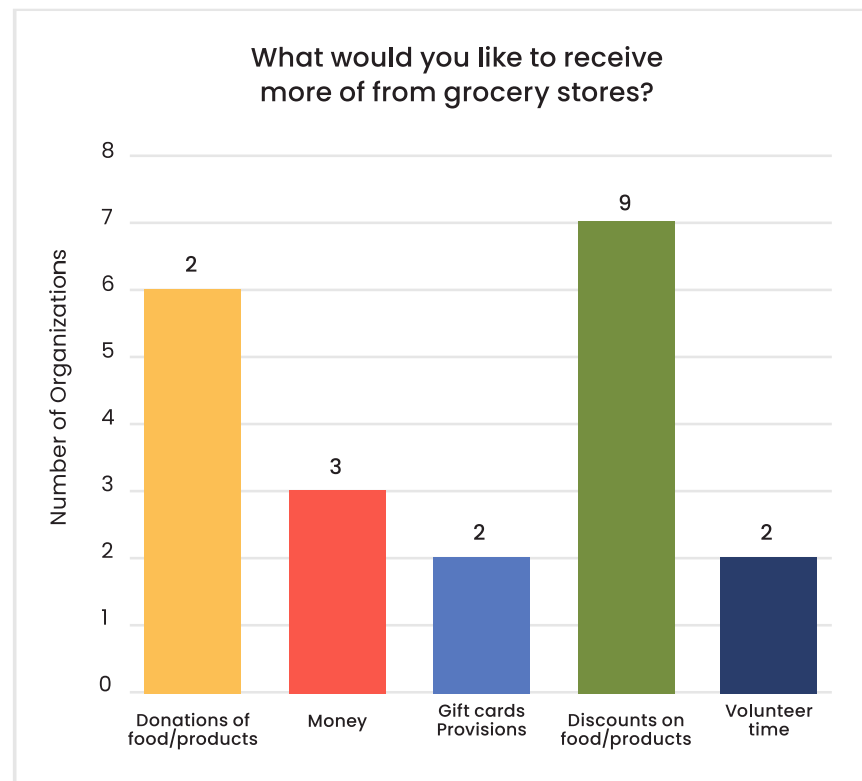


Figure 5: Response to the survey question “What would you like to receive more from grocery stores?” Data collected from the food banks survey.

While donations from grocery stores can be helpful, during our site visits, some food banks mentioned certain downsides. At times, they were burdened with sorting through food donated by grocery stores, as some items were unsuitable for human consumption, requiring them to dispose of it. This was especially challenging due to their limited volunteer and staffing capacity. One of the key informants further elaborated on these complexities during our interview.

“Every charity should have access to food that is being thrown away in their community. If the store cannot sell it, you should have a crack at it, whether it’s pre-made meals or potatoes, apples, bread, or steaks... we want charities to have access to it. But we do not want them to have the obligation to solve grocery stores problems. Grocery stores are a for-profit enterprise. Charities are a charity, you’re doing it on volunteer labour and donated funds, and to take volunteer labour and donated funds to sort corporations’ garbage is not ethical... we have seen this a lot... there’s a number of organizations that have made a business out of burdening charities with corporate garbage, and we would like to see that go away.”



– Key Informant Interview Participant



3.4.5 Subsidizing Grocery Stores in Northern BC

The “boom and bust” nature of northern communities also impacts food transportation and can lead to grocery store closures. This was clear during the site visits, where communities expressed concern that their local grocery store may close, which could worsen food access across the community. However, key informants expressed how they work hard to keep grocery stores open, even to the detriment of their bottom line.

“I think even the viability, I mean, we talked about things like closures, but you know, when you have a community that’s almost exclusively dependent on something like a mill, there now becomes an exodus or a town that begins to dwindle. When a town dwindles, and there’s no people left in it, it certainly puts a lot of pressure for us to be able to continue to support the remaining community when the community is no longer viable to sustain that store. So, there’s that pressure as well when you look at things like mills closing. The good thing with our company is, we tend not to ever leave a town because that town has made us successful overall. We have a long history of staying in communities, even if they’re on a declining trajectory. Because we are part of a community.”



– Key Informant Interview Participant

Some key informants explained that transporting food from southern BC to northern BC often costs more because of the distance the trucks must travel, and the fact that delivery trucks must pay a higher cost for the delivery if there is no load to bring back. The cost of transporting food to smaller communities doubles if they have nothing for the truck to haul back.

If there is no backhaul, the carrier providing the food must pay to haul the empty truck back. In some cases, food delivery services do not pass the additional costs onto the stores, but the higher costs are not sustainable in the long term. These costs are also impacted by labour shortages, which are further discussed in section 3.6 Labour.

We distribute the cost out based on the generalized distance [the community is] from our distribution center. But, you know, the truth is, the cost that we put out [to communities] is nowhere near close to what the real cost is, and so we have a big amount of subsidy for those stores. Because at the end of the day, we want to be able to give those stores the prices that they would have in other communities.



– Key Informant Interview Participant



3.5 Transportation

3.5.1 Road access

Many communities in northern BC are only accessible by one road in and out, which can make transportation more complex, particularly when significant or emergency events lead to road closures.



Roundtable participants expressed concerns about the limited number of access points to their communities. Transportation and delivery services are needed for importing goods and services into these communities. However, road access can often be limited due to severe weather conditions or climate emergencies such as heavy rainfalls or wildfires, which can result in road closures lasting for several days. Consequently, communities could find themselves with shortages of food in local grocery stores, requiring them to wait until the roads become clear for the next shipment of goods to arrive. Additionally, rural and remote communities have fewer access points compared to larger communities, making them more vulnerable to food shortages. As a result, residents often have to travel to nearby communities to purchase food. Unreliable transportation contributes to the high cost of food in these communities.

The transportation, the supply chain – so getting food in and out, at times is an issue. Sometimes there’s only one highway in and if something happens on that highway, nothing’s getting in. And that’s happened a couple of times where there was a flood or a [mud/land] slide, and now a community is completely cut off from resources.



– Key Informant Interview Participant

3.6 Labour

3.6.1 Non-Profit Staff Shortage and Burnout

Roundtable participants explained that their staff frequently experience significant stress and burnout in their roles fueled by the heightened food needs in their communities, staff shortages, and unreliable access to resources and funding. Moreover, participants shared that staffing issues were also evident among their partners, including grocery stores and local farms. During the site visits and roundtable discussions, organizations explained the difficulties they face in recruiting staff, expressing concerns about their inability to compete with the wages offered by the natural resource industry (e.g., oil, gas, mining, forestry).

There’s a terribly huge labor shortage in this region, and it is a significant barrier to providing food access and programming like it. It is a tremendously huge issue.



– Roundtable Participant



Similar sentiments were echoed in the food banks survey, with 64% (n = 9) reporting difficulties in recruiting or retaining adequate staff or volunteers for their operations. Moreover, many food banks rely exclusively on volunteerism to sustain their programs, with 43% (n = 6) of respondents indicating that their coordinators were volunteers. The remainder either had one full-time (50%, n = 7) or one part-time (7%, n = 1) paid coordinator.

[It’s] very difficult to recruit and retain skilled and qualified employees. The comparatively lower compensation is a contributing factor.



– Survey Participant

Have you faced challenges recruiting and/or maintaining adequate staff and/or volunteers for operations?

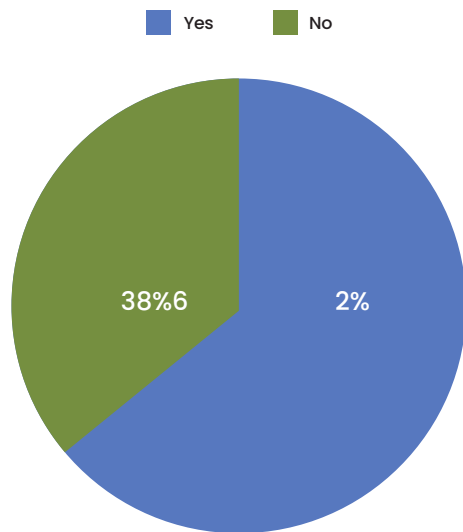


Figure 6: Response to survey question: "Have you faced challenges recruiting and/or maintaining adequate staff and/or volunteers for operations?" Data collected from the food banks survey.

Please list the type of Food Bank Coordinator you have?

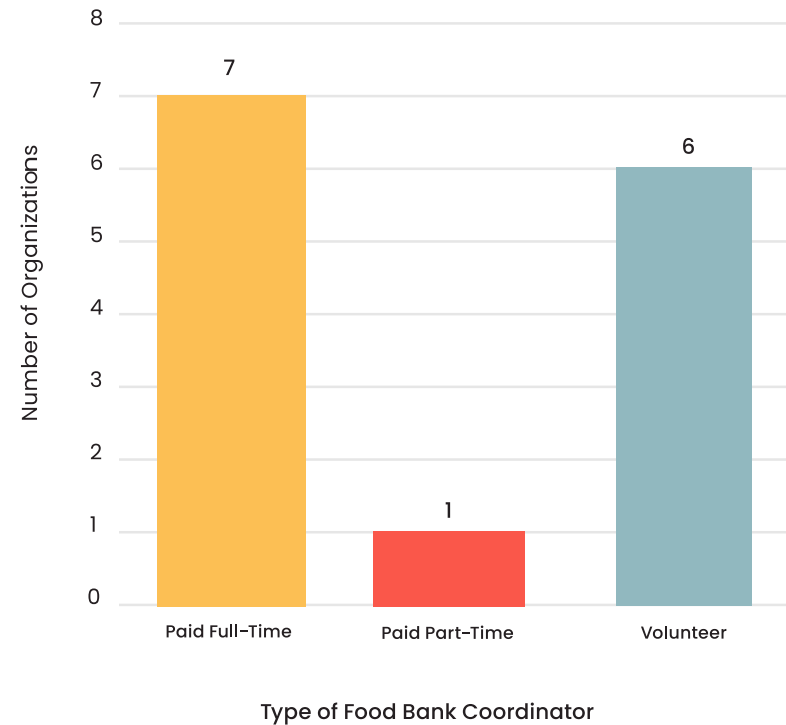


Figure 7: Response to the survey question "Please list the type of Food Bank Coordinator you have?" Data collected from the food banks survey and confirmed by Food Banks BC.

3.6.2 Seniors and Food Programming

Many of the participating food banks were led by volunteers who are seniors, and during the site visits several mentioned that it was challenging to recruit young volunteers. In the food bank survey, 50% reported that all or most of their volunteers were seniors 65+. In the comments section of the survey, some participants shared that a lack of funding for wages was a reason that they had trouble retaining volunteers. One person shared, “We see volunteers drop during COVID and [it] has been tough getting them back. No one wants to volunteer unless there is a perk or payment”.

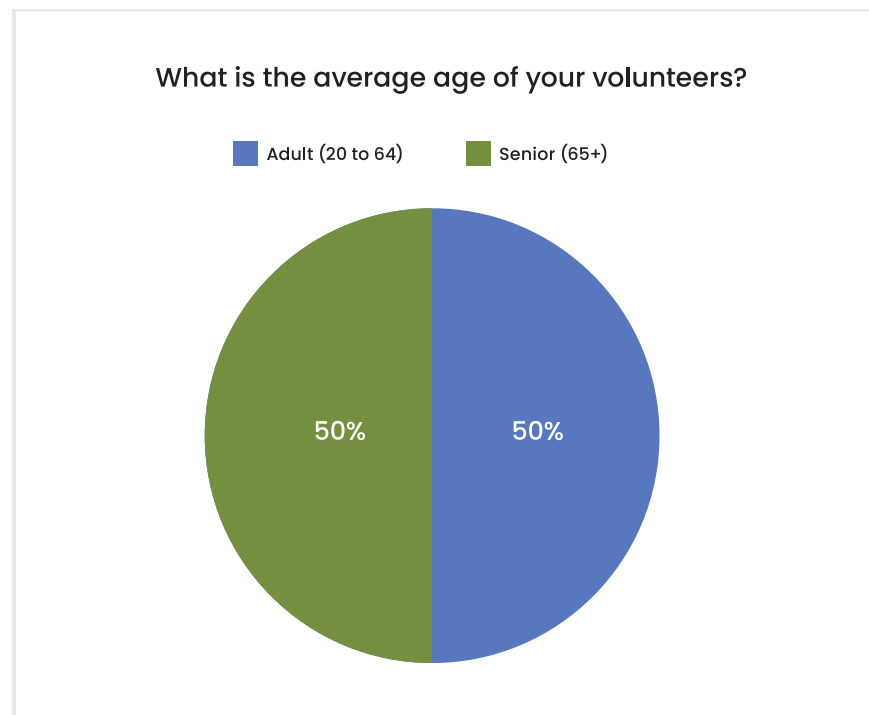


Figure 8: Response from survey question “Are all or most of your volunteers 65+ years of age?” Data collected from the food banks survey.



3.6.3 Truck Driver Shortage

One key informant highlighted the pressing issue of a shortage of truck drivers and its direct impact on food transportation to northern communities. They explained that this shortage is partly due to the high costs associated with truck driver training and the fact that longer and more remote trucking routes are becoming increasingly difficult to staff. This is exacerbated by inadequate truck stop facilities in the region, which often lack amenities like a shower, television and food that make long-distance travel more comfortable and sustainable for drivers.

“We’re seeing in the industry a trend of more and more drivers that just don’t want to do long runs, they want to be home in their own beds the same day, do an eight-hour shift, kiss their kids goodnight and wake up in the morning and do it again. And the truck drivers that are going to those distant communities, they really have a different mentality and it’s not one that is surviving. The younger generation doesn’t want to do that. I think we really have to find ways to incentivize them or find other ways that we can work around those challenges... people aren’t too interested in sleeping in a bunk in the back for days so that is very hard on northern communities.”



– Key Informant Interview Participant

3.7 Indigenous Food Sovereignty

3.7.1 Indigenous Resilience

Key informants spoke to the resilience of Indigenous communities. While non-Indigenous communities were experiencing empty grocery store shelves during the COVID-19 pandemic, Indigenous communities were able to support their own community members through the sharing of their harvest.

“If you look at any given store, they only have about three days of food supply before it runs out if there’s any disruption in distribution. There’s been a few times where shelves have been empty. During COVID-19, everybody just ran and just cleared the shelves. But, in our culture, we do prepare during summer, even in winter with what’s left of our forest, we get the odd moose... our people can eat the fish we get from the rivers. That’s just part of what our people do... they still help each other. Sharing is the biggest part of what we do.”



– Key Informant Interview Participant

Roundtable participants also spoke about the importance of collaborating with Indigenous partners to incorporate Indigenous food knowledge into programs. Several acknowledged that a connection to the land played a crucial role in their livelihoods and saw it as a potential solution for improving food access. Many organizations expressed a desire to learn more about Indigenous food practices from local First Nations as one way to build stronger relationships with the land, strengthen the local food system, and reduce environmental footprints.

I think we need to start looking at what actually grows where we're at, because Indigenous people lived off the land forever, without relying on trucks and airplanes to bring us exotic food that we've become accustomed to.



– Roundtable Participant

3.7.2 Land Back Policies and Traditional Knowledge

Key informants spoke about land back policies as an important component of Indigenous food sovereignty that would provide Nations greater access to arable farmland and waterways. They also expressed the need to ensure Indigenous-led training and knowledge building is included in food sovereignty efforts to build capacity around traditional knowledge that was lost through colonization.



This area was known for vast acres of potato farms that were so successful, and then through policies etc. and residential schools, the knowledge goes, but here we are now, ready to bring this back... but we need the policies to allow First Nations to have these tracts of land back to at least farm. Then we also have to build capacity because it has been devastated in these communities, right? We need the land to farm, but also the ability to train our people again to know how they work with the land and to do what they want with their land, for food.



– Key Informant Interview Participant

3.7.3 Health Authority Policy and Regulation

Throughout the key informant interviews and roundtables, Indigenous food sovereignty was highlighted as an essential part of promoting and protecting food access in northern BC. However, several participants explained that certain policies and regulations created barriers to preserving both Indigenous and regional food sovereignty. For example, in order to legally run food programs, organizations require approval from an environmental health officer. This was a barrier for some participants who felt certain food safety policies were too rigid, and at times impractical. When organizations do not have the capacity (i.e., time, resources, or staff) to meet the necessary regulations, food cannot be preserved or served and instead goes to waste. This was evident in food preparation protocols, such as obtaining food safety licensing for fisheries and abattoirs, which had a significant impact on Indigenous food practices by leaving some communities unable to legally serve traditionally hunted or harvested foods. While food safety regulations prevent foodborne illness, morbidity and mortality and are necessary to protect public health, these processes must also be flexible to preserve

culturally safe food practices and reduce barriers to accessing local foods. Moreover, pathways to compliance must be accessible, supported and clearly communicated. When one participant expressed their concerns to government officials, their appeal was declined and they received limited information as to why it was deemed unsafe or how to resolve the issue and find a pathway forward to serve the food.

“It is really brutal that the government makes it illegal for us to serve canned fish in our food bank. I asked the government, I wrote a whole food safety plan, I showed them how we followed FNHA’s exact process for canning food safely, and it went up to the highest level of food safety in the public health office and [they] said that is not a safe food to serve anybody. So we’re struggling to talk about this culturally safe food, and it’s illegal for us to serve it in culturally safe ways.”



- Roundtable Participant

3.8 Local Food Producers

3.8.1 Abattoirs and Butchers

Farmers that participated in the roundtables felt that having access to an abattoir and butcher would add significant value to their business and the well-being of their communities. Many communities lacked these services, so people had to travel to neighbouring towns or cities and often queue in long waitlists to be able to process meat and game. Roundtable participants believed that improving access to abattoirs and butchers would allow more members of the community to have access to meat, which would help to address food insecurity for some. However, they explained that health regulations sometimes create barriers that prevent

community members from establishing slaughterhouses and processing facilities. Those who were interested in offering these services had to meet licensing requirements, requiring extra time, funding, and energy that many people did not have.



“[Meat processing] is a huge service that needs to be streamlined from the government’s end to be able to allow more farmers [access]. That’s for poultry, that’s for large livestock, all across the board. Getting more and more butchers trained to be able to do that job, and then having the next round of people ready to do the cut and wrap. We just went to [community] last weekend and found a gentleman who does cut rapid processing, and he’s now got a mobile abattoir and wants his role to be personally filling that niche because he sees it. And that’s back to, you know, how many of us are there to be able to fill those niches when we don’t have [them] from the government?”



- Roundtable Participant

Many food banks also faced difficulties accessing these essential facilities. When asked whether they had access to a butcher or abattoir to process meat or game, half (n = 7) of the food banks surveyed reported not having access to either. Out of the remaining participants, five just had access to a butcher, one just had access to an abattoir, and one had access to both. During the site visits, several food banks mentioned that they receive donations of meat from 4H, the Cattlemen's Association, or local hunters. However, many would have to travel far distances to access services to process these meats, and they often had long wait lists of up to 1-2 years. If they were unable to get the meat dressed, they could not offer it in their programs.



“The waiting list for the butcher is over 1 year in advance since COVID. So, since 2021, we have not been able to access the butcher if we have a cow to process. We have been told we could not give out hunted game unless it was processed by a registered butcher only.”



– Survey Participant

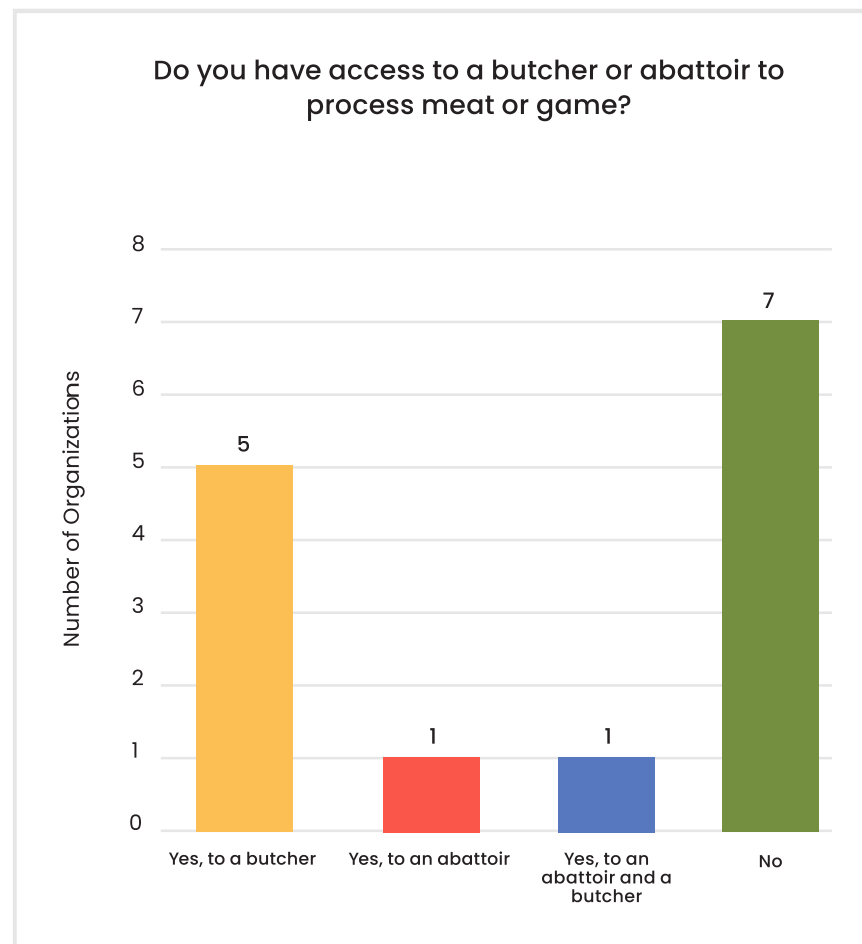


Figure 9: Response to survey question “Do you have access to a butcher or abattoir to process meat or game?” Data collected from the food banks survey.

3.8.2 Regional Food Sovereignty

In every roundtable discussion, participants spoke about the value of well-connected food systems. It was important to them that food systems were robust, could be locally sourced and owned, and that people who worked within the system were treated well. They spoke about justice within the food system and ensuring that all parts operate equitably.

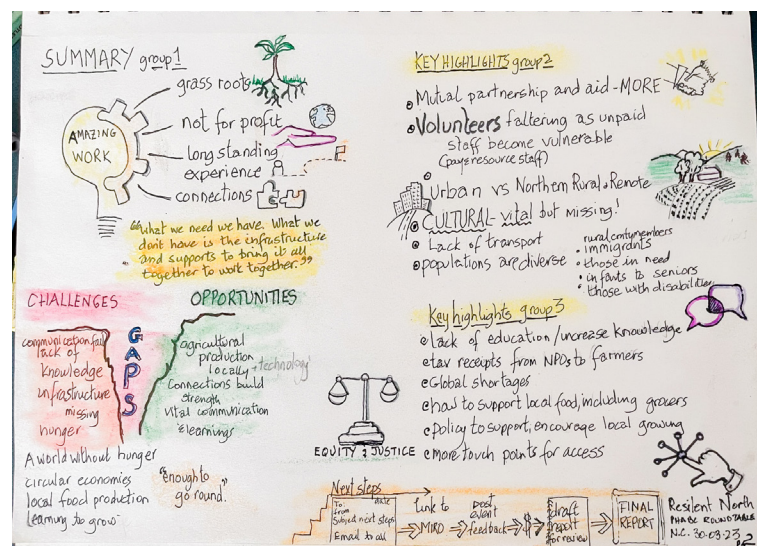
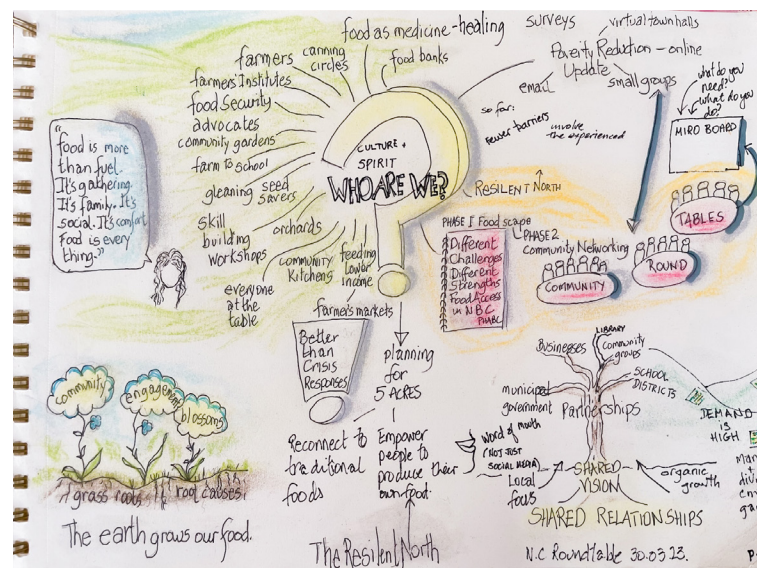
What food security looks like is resilience in food systems, and all people having equitable access [to food], having agency, having it be socially just, and having not only Indigenous food sovereignty, but food sovereignty in all systems.



- Roundtable Participant

Local food was important to many roundtable participants; they wanted the communities they served to have the ability to live off food that could be grown and produced locally. Roundtable participants discussed prioritizing local food systems instead of the larger grocery store model that most communities were reliant on, which they believed could build a stronger and more resilient food system. Participants viewed food as a network of interconnected systems and emphasized the importance of ensuring all members of the food system, including the entire community, felt a connection to both their food and the broader food system.

These illustrations, drawn by graphic facilitator Dr. Theresa Healy, capture highlights from our roundtable discussions with food access organizations in the northeast, northwest and northern interior regions of BC. See Appendix 4 for full-sized images.



3.8.3 Local Food Prices

Local farmers and food producers that participated in the roundtables shared about the challenges their sector has experienced in the face of rising inflation and how this impacted food costs. Some found it difficult to keep the prices of their products low given the increased costs associated with producing food, which is further exacerbated by the high costs of purchasing or leasing agricultural land. They explained that these low margins, coupled with the rising cost of living, meant that many farmers were not making a living wage. These issues made it more difficult to recruit and retain farmers, threatening the sustainability of the local agricultural sector.

Although they were part of the community and aware of the high costs of living, some farmers emphasized that it was important to raise their animals upon values that they believed in, which meant they had to charge more for their products. Nevertheless, they felt connected to their communities and proud of the customer loyalty they had built over the years.

“What we grapple with all the time is, because we market grass-fed beef, which is a lot higher in omega-3s, [it’s] not the typical feedlot. The animals live on the farm their whole lives. And we have free-range pigs. It takes a lot longer for these animals to get to the size that they need to. And there’s small windows of when they can actually finish when you have green grass in the summertime. So as a result, we have to charge a little more for the product. And it’s something that actually bothers us quite a bit.”



- Roundtable Participant

The BC Farmers Market Nutrition Coupon program was mentioned as one way the province is trying to make local food more accessible, particularly for low-income residents. While this program was generally appreciated, some participants felt it could be better advertised.

“Overall, I think [the BC Farmers Market Nutrition Coupon] is a really great program, it really helps people that need access to fresh healthy food and it helps farmers like myself get some extra revenue. There are some challenges with it, there’s still some confusion about how to distribute them and who’s eligible and that kind of thing.”



- Roundtable Participant

3.8.4 Relationships Between Food Banks and Local Food Producers

Despite the financial constraints that many local farms face, the majority of food banks surveyed (65%, n = 9) said they received donated products from local farmers, and another 14% (n = 2) purchased food from local farmers at a discounted price (see Figure 10).

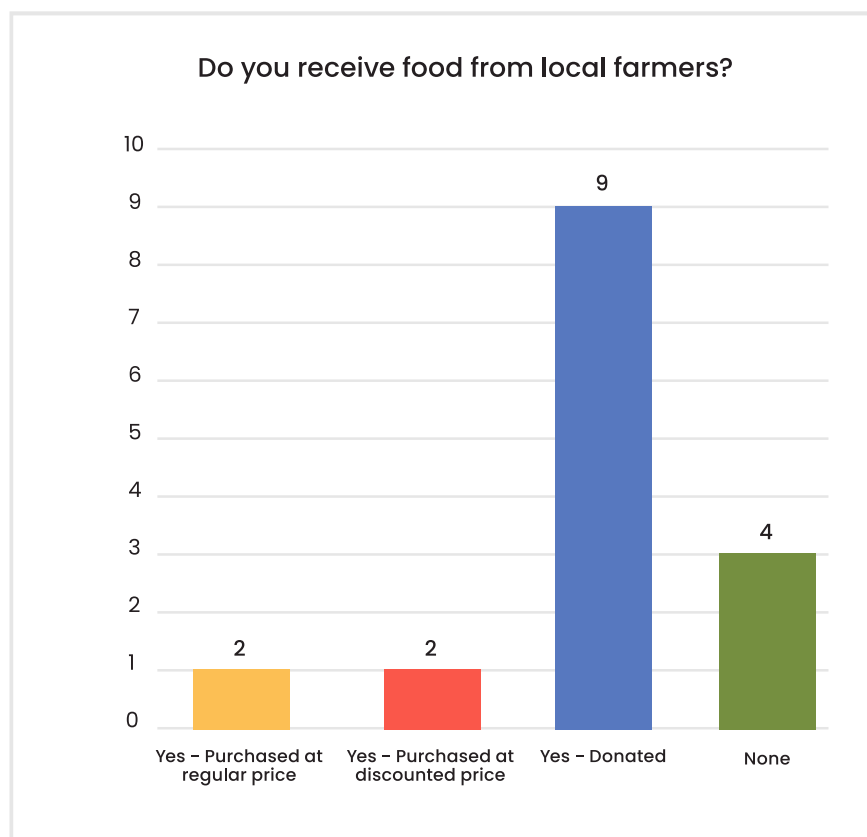


Figure 10: Response to survey question “Do you receive food from local farmers?” Data collected from the food banks survey.

Many food banks expressed a desire to have more locally sourced food incorporated into their programs. When asked about the factors that would facilitate more local food procurement, survey participants most frequently cited the need for funding to purchase food from local farmers (n = 7), followed by help building relationships with farmers (n = 4) and increased storage space (n = 3; see Figure 11).

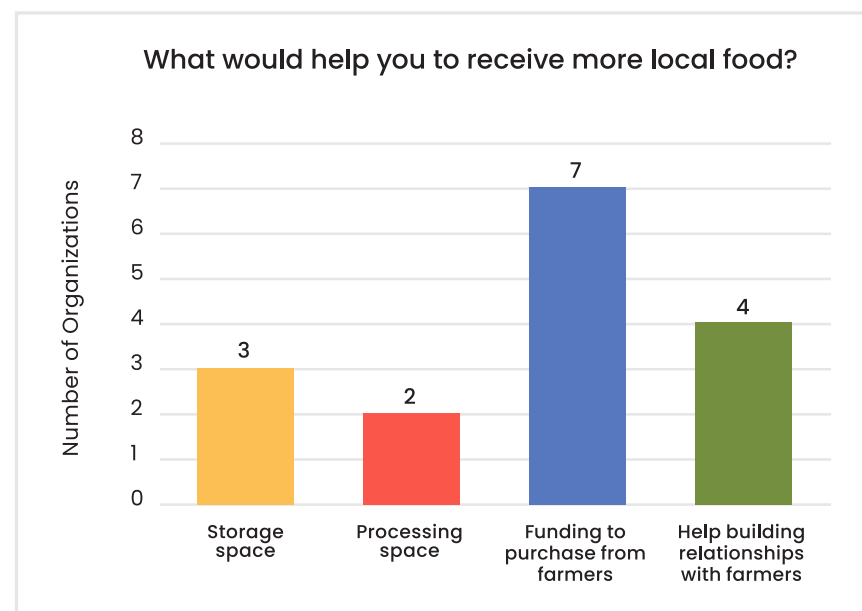


Figure 11: Responses to survey question “What would help you to receive more local food?” Data collected from the food banks survey.

During the site visits, one food bank mentioned that although they were grateful for the donations from farmers, they would rather have a formal contract in place. This would enable the farmers to plan and grow food with the assurance of a guaranteed sale, while helping to ensure a sustainable and reliable local food supply for the food bank. However, they noted that many food banks have limited time to develop contracts and often lack resources to be able to adequately pay farmers.

3.9 Dignified Food Access

3.9.1 Perspectives on Dignified Food Access

Key informants were asked to share what comes to mind with the term “dignified food access”. The main themes that emerged included: access to adequate resources, self-determination, and inclusive decision-making.

One participant felt that a central aspect of dignified food access is having adequate resources to access food in ways that people deem appropriate for themselves. This could be money to buy food and/or equipment, access to land, or other resources.

Several key informants voiced concerns about food access programs that require participants to disclose private information or impose rigid restrictions on eligibility to access services. They felt that forcing people to share private information could lead to feelings of shame and embarrassment, which strips people of their right to dignity.

If you need to sign up to get a food hamper on a monthly basis, you have to go through a lot of hoops to get to that place. What we hear time and time again is how shameful and embarrassing it is to go through all of that. And then most of them get denied. That's really even worse, because not only did you put yourself out there to get what you needed for your family, but then you weren't able to get it done, even though you made yourself completely vulnerable to do it.



-Key Informant Interview Participant

Self-determination and having agency over food choices were identified by key informants as important elements of dignified food access. One key informant emphasized that programs that incorporate a shopping-model, while less common, were a promising approach for supporting choice and agency. In contrast, highly structured and inflexible programs were seen as impeding self-determination and agency, which can lead to shame and a lost sense of dignity.

What we see as the most successful in supporting people with [dignified] food access is some of the open pantries or free stores that pop up in different communities. There's not a lot of them, but there's enough of them. That is the low-slash, no-barrier opportunity for somebody to get what they need, with nobody questioning them. Nobody asking them, how much money do you make? How many kids do you have? How long have you been out of work? What's your finances? Those [questions] are prohibitive... that really leads into this is a shameful situation.



- Key Informant Interview Participant

When speaking about the notion of dignified food access, several key informants discussed the importance of prioritizing Indigenous food sovereignty. One participant explained how Indigenous ways of knowing embody the principles of dignity in relation to food access through acts of generosity and community care.

As Indigenous people, we're always taught that if someone shows up to where you are, you treat them like they're hungry and they're tired, and you feed them and you give them a seat to sit down in. That's dignified food access... you treat everyone that comes your way like they're hungry and they don't have to ask questions, they don't need to give you nothing. You just support that. So, whether that comes in gifting vegetables or feeding people a hot meal when they come on our site. All of that is like a big picture of dignity and food systems.



- Key Informant Interview Participant

3.10 Natural Environments and Climate Change

3.10.1 Transportation and Climate Emergencies

In all interviews, roundtables, and site visits, climate change was consistently identified as a growing barrier to food access across northern BC. Extreme weather events like unprecedented wildfires, landslides, and floods disrupt the supply chain, leading to delayed food deliveries and empty store shelves. Roundtable participants emphasized that climate emergencies tend to be more extreme in northern BC, and this is exacerbated by the limited resources available for disaster planning, preparation, and recovery efforts in the region.

Access roads to many areas in northern BC are difficult to navigate and limited in numbers. Participants explained that if a road was closed due to flooding, responders would face difficulties reaching and providing aid to the affected community since they would have to find alternative routes. Since it takes more time to deliver and transport goods to these areas, the recovery process from climate emergencies is prolonged. Compromised transportation was highlighted by participants as the primary reason why major weather events hindered their ability to provide food to their communities.



“Even just the flooding that we’ve seen, and the forest fires within the province, that has been a huge factor as well. Especially for transportation, because we’ve lost some major highways, some major arteries within our province to get food to these locations.”



– Roundtable Participant

One key informant spoke about the need to prioritize food over non-essential goods during health and climate emergencies. This relates to a larger complex system of transportation networks across Canada that includes roads, trains and occasionally air travel. This key informant emphasized the need to work with federal and provincial governments to ensure food is prioritized during emergencies as it makes its way across Canada.

“Looking at food as an essential service to be able to help prioritize access to it, that would help. When we were fighting for rail capacity to get food in ... it doesn’t make sense that we’re having to fight with, I don’t know, Best Buy pulling TVs in when we’re trying to get access to food to people that really need food. So for the government to be able to provide some assistance to give us priority access, especially when it’s limited, [that] would really be important too, during strikes or during weather events or things like that.”



– Key Informant Interview Participant

3.10.2 Growing Seasons

The growing season in northern BC is shifting and changing as a result of climate change. As climate emergencies become more frequent, summers become hotter and winters become colder. Additionally, spring is becoming warmer, which causes plants to come out of hibernation, only to be killed off with the inevitable final frost. This thaw/freeze kills many fruit and vegetable plants, which negatively impacts food production. Roundtable participants described having to adapt by increasing their food preservation strategies to keep up with the shifting growing seasons. They had to purchase more dehydrators and canners, which came at a financial cost.

You can grow a lot in the summer, but then keep that food over the winter. So, I think part of food insecurity - and we have such long winters here; there's still like a foot and a half snow outside - is that it costs a lot of money to have a dehydrator and a canner and this and that and the other. So, I think that is a huge barrier.



– Roundtable Participant



3.10.3 Forestry

In northwest BC, many roundtable participants expressed concerns about the impact of the forestry industry. They noted an increasing trend of deforestation and development in the region over time and were worried about the effect it had on food access. They believed that the industry's activities were displacing natural wildlife, making it more difficult for community members to hunt and harvest food. Consequently, community members were losing access to traditional food knowledge and traditional food sources. Deforestation has also increased the risk of extreme weather events like flooding and forest fires, which added further strain on the transportation of foods.

It's been a real challenge here, to see how many trees have been cut down... For example, just down the road from us, they cleared 40 acres and it was just terrible. That was where the local wildlife were. That was where the moose were calving every year, the cougar moved over into our yard, you know? And the response was, 'Well just call the conservation officer and get rid of the cougar'. And it's like, well no, I'll just stay inside and be safe and then it moved on in the first snowfall but it did affect our movement around our property definitely. But I think that's the prevailing attitude is this capitalism 'let's move forward'.



– Roundtable Participant

4. Highlights from the Field



All the organizations and individuals consulted in this project are actively engaged in important local initiatives to expand and strengthen their food systems.

Throughout the course of this project, we identified several organizations, advocates and initiatives that we would like to highlight. The following section presents key aspects of promising programs and practices that may serve as models for adaptation, scaling and replication throughout the province.

Chetwynd – Tansi Friendship Centre Society (Food Bank Member)

In Northeast BC, the Tansi Friendship Centre Society centres Indigenous ways of knowing and being as a core part of their food programming. Recognizing that food is medicine, it is incorporated as an essential part of all programming. While Tansi Friendship Centre Society provides food hampers, they also provide meals as part of other services, which reduces stigma while building community.



Fort St. John - The Salvation Army (Food Bank Member)

In Northeast BC, Fort St. John's Salvation Army food bank has built a strong relationship with natural resource industry partners in their community. Leftover food from work camps is packaged into small individual portion freezable meal containers and provided to the Salvation Army. As many single people and seniors access food banks, food packaged in this way helps reduce meal preparation while ensuring recipients are getting full meals.



Burns Lake – The Link (Food Bank Member)

Located in the middle of northern BC, The Link is a unique food bank model that integrates community food centre principles into its operations. The centre features a shopping model-style food access program, along with a community garden and educational programming focused on gardening. The Link has an impressive reach that extends far and wide to supply food to many remote and isolated communities. This model shows an example of how food banks can transition toward strengthening dignity in access by allowing clients the freedom to choose the foods they desire in a stigma-reducing setting.



Prince George – Everyone at the Table

Everyone at the Table is a network of local food enthusiasts working hard to make the local bounty visible and accessible. One of their projects is the Canning Circle, which is a food recovery and education program for novices to learn with master canners and for the experienced to pass on their skills and trade tricks. Food processed and canned is recovered from imperfect fresh foods from Prince George's Salvation Army Food Recovery Program. This model is an excellent example of how to reduce food waste and turn it into delicious, value-added products for the community.



Terrace - Kalum Community School Society

In northwest BC, Kalum Community School Society runs a Good Food Box program that buys produce in large amounts at wholesale prices. Volunteers help pack the food into boxes, typically including basic items like potatoes, carrots, onions, celery, apples, and bananas. A model like this embodies dignified access; as community members are accessing food from the Good Food Box, no member can distinguish between those who receive it for free or at a discount and those who pay full price. While this model is not unique, it is one of the ways organizations provide food to their community in a dignified, non-stigmatizing manner.



5. What We Heard: Summary



Through our discussions, site visits, surveys and interviews with food access organizations and key informants across the region, it is clear that food access in northern BC is complex and cannot be addressed by one single solution.

Rather, many strategic, multipronged, and intersectoral actions are required to improve food access within northern communities. The section below provides further discussion on the complexities and implications of the key findings from these engagements, along with potential strategies participants put forward for strengthening food access in northern BC.

5.1 Food Access Work in Northern BC

Results from the secondary data analysis suggest that there are approximately 179 organizations and First Nations engaged in food access work in northern BC. It is worth noting that the true number of organizations doing food access work is likely higher since the analysis only included food programs listed online and those that have recently applied for food-related grants. This finding is updated from the Food Access in BC report, which estimated there to be 89 entities involved in food access work in northern BC, and 500 throughout the province. This suggests that the environmental scan conducted in the previous study, which only captured food access programs listed online, significantly underestimated the actual figures. It may be beneficial to conduct a similar comprehensive environmental scan, that also includes a

scan of grant application records and/or other alternative data sources, throughout BC in order to establish a more accurate understanding of the extent of food access work throughout the province. This will better equip food actors to assess needs and plan resource allocation accordingly.

5.2 Volunteerism

Despite the challenges and barriers to food access in the region, northern communities exhibit resilience through their robust and interconnected networks of community support. This culture of caring for one another is evident in the many community members that volunteer their time to keep food access programs running. However, an overreliance on unpaid or underpaid coordinators within these programs, coupled with the increasing demand for food, has led to high rates of burnout. Moreover, our site visits revealed that many food banks in northern BC rely heavily on seniors to run their programs and have trouble recruiting younger volunteers. With the aging population of volunteers, this could mean many food banks are at risk of shutting down in the future unless they are able to secure funding to hire a paid coordinator or attract younger volunteers. Regardless of the type of organization we spoke to, recruiting and retaining qualified staff was consistently cited as a barrier to delivering food access programming.

5.3 Funding

Accessing funding is a challenge for many food access organizations in northern BC. Participants felt that grant applications are often onerous, inflexible, rooted in colonial perspectives, and lack a holistic view of community-based programming. Our findings indicate that these organizations often deliver a variety of services and programs in addition to food, which can make it difficult to fit their programs into rigid grant application guidelines or specific funding streams, thereby discouraging them from applying. Participants expressed a desire for funders to work collaboratively with communities to remove barriers and create more accessible funding models. Community-driven models based on trust that centre around community-led priorities is one way to ensure funding can adapt to diverse programs. These models remove power imbalances that often exist within the current funding paradigm. An example to draw from is [The Northern Manitoba Funding Collaborative](#).

Furthermore, most funders are located in the Lower Mainland or Vancouver Island, making it challenging for organizations in northern BC to build relationships with them. As well, grants that are provincial in scope are often inaccessible to northern communities, which translates to fewer funding opportunities in the region. Due to resources constraints (e.g., staffing shortages), food access organizations may only have the bandwidth to submit one major grant application each year, which further limits their access to resources. Competition for funding is also an issue and leads to a lack of communication and collaboration across organizations, which can negatively impact community members and reduce their ability to participate in various programs. Additionally, since the population is smaller in northern BC, local funders have fewer revenue sources like donations. Some funders may determine an organization's funding amount based on the population size it serves, which can result in inequitable funding for

northern organizations due to their smaller client base. However, northern food access organizations often contend with higher operational expenses, including increased hydro bills, higher transportation costs, elevated food prices, and the need to offer competitive wages to attract staff in areas where the natural resource industry is dominant. This creates inequity, particularly when funding is based solely on participant numbers without considering factors such as geographical reach, food costs, and operating expenses.

Food Banks BC members in northern BC receive some core funding. One source of core funding comes from the proceeds raised during the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC)'s Food Banks Day. During this radio fundraiser, community members donate money and food items which are then distributed to local FBBC member food banks. While many of these food banks still struggle to cover their overhead costs, they appear to be better resourced on average than other food access organizations that are not members of FBBC. This type of core funding is essential for all food access organizations. Given the expansive geography of northern BC, existing FBBC member food banks cannot reach every community. Participants saw a need for consistent funding to be provided for a diversity of food access work so more communities can receive support.

5.4 Coordination

Roundtable participants spoke about the need for better coordination between food access services across northern BC. However, they expressed concern about adding coordination responsibilities to already overburdened staff roles, suggesting instead the creation of new positions in each region of northern BC. While there is a significant level of interconnection among

communities, the absence of hired regional coordinators to help with logistics, distribution, resource sharing, and regional strategic planning was seen as a hinderance to establishing a systematic approach to food access. Moreover, it places local food access organizations at risk of staff burnout, given their already stretched capacities. Navigating the web of resources available across communities was seen as a barrier to food access. Roundtable participants expressed a need for support in accessing and understanding resources, including those for granting opportunities, licensing or training programs, and food programs. They reflected that assistance in filling out complex and onerous paper work like licensing requests would help reduce barriers around these programs. Creating paid positions for food systems navigators could help ensure community members, organizations, and food producers are taking advantage of all resources available to them.

5.5 Climate Change and Environmental Degradation

Climate change and environmental degradation were highlighted as significant threats to local food production, Indigenous food sovereignty, and the consistent and sustainable access to food in northern BC. As animal migration patterns shift, growing seasons shorten and biodiversity dwindles from rising temperatures and deforestation, local food practices are threatened. Moreover, the risk of extreme weather events like wildfires and floods increases, devastating communities and disrupting supply chains. Since many communities are serviced by one road in and out of the community, a closed road can have catastrophic impacts on the supply of food in the region. Summer 2023 has been the worst wildfire season on record in BC and across Canada (CBC, 2023). As the climate continues to change, extreme weather events will become more frequent and destructive. Emergency management plans that include food planning are an important part of mitigating the effects of climate emergencies, but

more is needed. Participants expressed a need for better road infrastructure across northern BC to help prevent communities from being cut off from food supplies during climate emergencies. However, they felt it was even more vital to invest in local food production and storage infrastructure to ensure that food is available even when roads are closed. These complexities highlight the need for cross-sector collaboration to mitigate the impacts of the climate crisis and industry activities on food systems.

5.6 Infrastructure and Distribution

Improving infrastructure is vital for strengthening food access across northern BC. Throughout our consultations, poor road infrastructure emerged as a significant barrier to food access. Transporting food from warehouses in southern BC to northern communities is often inefficient and unsustainable due to long distances and inadequate road systems. Additionally, limited public transportation, high fuel costs, and time-consuming travel make it difficult for many individuals and organizations to access grocery stores and other food sources. Key informants and roundtable participants stressed the need for community-centered solutions to address these challenges, such as establishing more efficient public transportation, improving road access, funding staff travel time, and strengthening distribution channels.

Inefficient distribution channels also impact grocery stores and drive up the price of food. Due to the high costs of transporting food in the region, some grocery chains subsidize food prices in their northern BC stores to keep prices lower for the community. This type of corporate responsibility is essential for ensuring communities have access to fresh food. However, this is not a sustainable solution and barriers to access still persist, as many communities still experience inflated prices and empty store shelves.

To further compound the complexity of food distribution to northern BC, there is a shortage of truck drivers. A key informant explained that many truck drivers are unwilling to travel to remote communities with poor road conditions and insufficient truck stop amenities. This is an area that should be further explored with grocery chains and freight companies.

Lastly, a key informant noted that differences in provincial regulations and tax policies restricted the flow of goods from Alberta to BC. This made it difficult to establish an efficient food distribution channel from Edmonton to Prince George, despite it being closer in proximity than the lower mainland. Furthermore, the distribution of essential goods like food are often not prioritized over other goods during supply chain disruptions. These two policy areas warrant further investigation, as they are seen as a hindrance to food access in northern BC.

These distribution challenges highlight the importance of decentralizing food storage and transitioning to a hub storage and distribution model. Roundtable participants and key informants emphasized the need to decentralize Prince George, the only large hub for food distribution in the region, and instead build infrastructure within communities throughout northern BC. While Prince George remains an essential hub, other communities need adequate infrastructure to store sufficient food supplies, especially during emergencies that lead to prolonged road closures. In this model, communities can be more resilient by reducing their reliance on singular highway access for food delivery. Participants believed that establishing food hubs in multiple communities would also enhance coordination and leverage resources and infrastructure by creating centralized channels for receiving, processing, storing and distributing food.

Roundtable participants and key informants saw the wide-ranging potential of food hubs for serving multiple purposes. For instance, they spoke of food hubs as being a space to store and distribute local food, rescued food and imported food. Participants also wanted these hubs to provide opportunities for skills training and equipment for food processing, and to be accessible to local businesses, non-profits and community members. While the hub models in northern BC must cater to the unique needs of each region (NW, NI, NE), the [Food Security Distribution Centre](#) on South Vancouver Island is an interesting model that may be useful to adapt and scale in northern communities. In this model, the centre has several organizations operating out of it, including a food bank that focuses on the distribution of rescued food to partner organizations, a [commercial kitchen](#) that allows farmers, business and non-profits to prepare meals and create value added products (raw agricultural products modified to have a longer shelf-life and/or a higher market value, e.g., jerky, soups, salsa, pies, etc.), and a [local food](#) aggregation and distribution business.

[Loaves and Fishes Community Food Bank](#) in Nanaimo presents another example of a model that could be adapted in northern BC to help with food transportation and distribution. To increase food access in communities across their region, they operate a mobile food pantry that visits different locations, allowing people in those areas to conveniently pick up food. A model like this needs to ensure dignified food access is central to its design, as this will reduce stigma and increase usage. For instance, it could achieve this by minimizing the information required from participants and avoiding placing restrictions on who can or cannot access it. In the face of growing poverty in BC, such an approach enables people below, at, or slightly above the poverty line to access food in a way that feels non-stigmatizing.

5.7 Indigenous Food Sovereignty

The importance of Indigenous food sovereignty for enhancing food access in northern BC was emphasized throughout the roundtables and interviews, yet there remain significant barriers. Indigenous organizations felt that colonial structures of granting programs and barriers related to rigid food safety regulations limited communities' ability to participate in the food system in a fully sovereign way. For example, participants explained that serving hunted food in a community setting requires licensing under the Food Safety Act, but there are often barriers to attaining this and regulations are not always inclusive or supportive of traditional food practices. As a result, many communities cannot serve their local food. Ensuring that food safety regulations minimize the risk of foodborne illness while also being inclusive of, and honouring traditional food practices will require strong collaboration between the Province, health authorities, and Indigenous communities.

Non-Indigenous organizations reflected that honouring Indigenous ways of knowing was integral to any food access work across the region. Many expressed a desire to build relationships with and learn from local Indigenous communities in the area. As such, when engaging with Indigenous communities, it is vital for non-Indigenous organizations to ensure engagement and collaboration is grounded in cultural safety, respect, and mutual benefit. This includes ensuring Indigenous communities are adequately compensated for their time and labour so community capacity and resources are not depleted. To support these efforts, it is important for non-Indigenous organizations to engage in decolonization and anti-racism work, as this will help to ensure relationship building is done in a culturally safe way.

5.8 Local Food Production and Processing

Strengthening local food production was considered by many participants to be a key factor in addressing food access and developing more resilient and sustainable food systems. However, several obstacles to developing local food systems emerged during our discussions.

In addition to the implications for Indigenous food sovereignty discussed above, barriers related to food safety regulations and licensing requirements also impacted regional food sovereignty and local food production. While these protocols are important for protecting community safety, participants expressed a need for simplified, accessible, and clearly communicated pathways to meeting these requirements in order to reduce barriers and strengthen local food systems. This may require significant investment in public health infrastructure and human resourcing.

Several roundtable participants voiced concerns over the prohibitively high costs of purchasing agricultural land and the reality that many farmers in northern BC struggle to earn a living wage. This poses a threat to the sustainability of the local agricultural sector, as fewer individuals view farming as a viable career path to pursue. Additionally, farmers spoke about the high cost of operations and having to charge consumers more for their products in order to make ends meet. Despite this, the findings from our survey suggest that many local farmers donate food to the food banks in their community. To establish a more reciprocal and sustainable arrangement, one food bank suggested creating contracts with farmers to provide farmers a guaranteed market and fair pay for products, while ensuring the food bank has a consistent supply of fresh food. However, many food access organizations have limited capacity to initiate this, suggesting a need for further guidance and support around contract development with local food producers.

Limited access to licensed facilities for processing meat and game was mentioned as a hindrance to accessing local food. According to the [BC Meats](#) website (BC Meats, 2021) there are only five abattoirs spanning from Smithers to Fort St. James, which means large areas of northern BC do not have access to slaughter houses. Moreover, butchers in northern BC are also in limited supply. Roundtable participants explained that although some community members have a desire to establish these facilities, they have difficulty obtaining the necessary licenses to do so. There are a variety of challenges that stem from the insufficient availability of meat processing facilities. For instance, one food bank revealed they are on a 2-year waitlist to have meat dressed. Moreover, the inability to access these services deters farmers from participating in animal husbandry, which, in turn, limits the supply of fresh protein in northern communities.

In 2021, following consultations with abattoir operators, ranchers, local governments, and meat producers, the Province [introduced changes](#) to meat licensing and inspections to address these challenges and make it easier to sell locally raised meat in BC. This includes new farmgate licenses to “help new and small-scale producers sell their products locally and meet the demand for local meat in rural communities.” Additionally, [farmgate plus licenses](#) permit small producers to sell meat products in retail markets throughout BC, and, in addition to their own animals, licence holders can provide custom slaughter for other nearby producers, thereby facilitating greater access to meat processing services. While access to slaughter remained a concern during our consultations, it may improve as the impacts of these policy changes take hold and more licences are issued. Monitoring and assessing the impacts of these changes within northern communities is important to ensure access to these vital services improves.

5.9 Food Bank Relationships with Grocery Stores

Across northern BC, food banks have built strong relationships with grocery stores. These relationships are important as they facilitate access to food donations. To ensure more consistent access to food, many food banks desire greater participation from grocery stores like increased food donations or more product discounts. However, one downside to the relationship between food banks and grocery stores is that food bank staff are often tasked with the job of sorting the donated food to determine what is acceptable for human consumption and disposing of the rest, which can be time consuming and costly. This places enormous strain on food bank staff and resources, and many would prefer that sorting be done before the food reaches their facility.

Programs like [Loop](#) and [Second Harvest](#) have identified solutions to this problem. These programs are based on the belief that all food has a home, and none should be thrown in the garbage. Part of their mandate is to intercept food headed to the landfill, sort it, and redistribute it. They identify appropriate food to donate to food banks and send the lower quality food to farms for animal consumption or compost. Programs like this remove the food sorting and disposal burden from food banks and help to ensure that only the highest-quality food reaches people. Moreover, through this process, they support local farms and lessen the environmental impact of wasted food.

5.10 Dignified Food Access

Dignified food access can be defined in a number of ways. The experience of dignity itself depends on an individual's culture, lens, lived experience, or other aspects of themselves. Within this project, and in the context of food access, dignity was expressed by participants as self-determination, choice, respecting privacy, inclusive decision-making, Indigenous food sovereignty, cultural safety, and possessing the resources and ability to independently access food without having to rely on food banks and other food programs. Food programs must centre human dignity and respect. Key informants spoke about the shame, stigma and barriers to access people experience when food programs impose rigid restrictions like requiring ID or proving financial need. These rules and restrictions invade users' privacy, limit choice, and undermine agency. Dignified food programming must protect and promote the inherent worth and value of all humans while upholding the principles of equity, diversity and inclusion. At a provincial level, preserving dignity means ensuring that northern BC communities and First Nations guide all policy, planning and program development related to strengthening food access that directly impacts their communities.

6. Conclusion and Final Reflection



Communities across northern BC are resilient. People truly care about their neighbours and support one another through strong relationships and social networks.

However, the region's small communities and vast geographical expanse pose unique challenges to ensuring consistent and sustainable food access. Our consultations with northern communities illuminated the multifaceted nature of these challenges, ranging from transportation issues and staffing shortages to limited infrastructure, rising costs of living, and the impacts of climate change. Amidst these challenges, our discussions unveiled several opportunities and strategies for strengthening food access in northern BC. Key among these are the need for enhanced collaboration and coordination, infrastructure development, accessible funding sources, Indigenous food sovereignty, affordable housing and transportation, and supportive policies and streamlined processes that facilitate local food production and distribution.

Addressing the complex issues that impact food access in northern BC will require cross-sector collaboration and commitment from a wide variety of stakeholders, including northern communities and First Nations, all levels of government, Northern Health, First Nations Health Authority, food access organizations, funder organizations, grocery stores, freight companies, and natural resource industries. The people of northern BC must be at the centre of planning and decision-making related to strengthening

food access across the region. At the provincial level, this means ensuring all committees and working groups related to northern food access have strong northern representation. Fostering collaboration and actively centring northern voices will facilitate effective solutions that address barriers and challenges, leverage community and regional strengths, and advance opportunities to improve food access and create more resilient food systems across northern BC.



7. Gaps and Limitations

Several limitations emerged in this project that should be noted.

Firstly, the engagement methods used varied between stakeholder groups. FBBC-member food banks participated in the site visits and survey, whereas other food access organizations (non-FBBC members) participated in the roundtable discussions. Moreover, although they covered similar themes, different questions were asked during each of these phases of the project. A more comprehensive exploration could have been achieved by incorporating both member and non-member food organizations in each type of engagement and gathering their perspectives on the same questions.

Due to limited time and resources, the project team was unable to conduct site visits in every community in northern BC. To address this gap, representatives from all communities were invited to participate in the regional roundtable discussions.

It is also important to acknowledge that the secondary data sources (grant data and environmental scan) used to identify organizations to invite to participate in this project was not exhaustive. There are likely many other organizations doing important food access work throughout the region that were unable to be identified – for example, those that do not list their program information online or have not applied for the grants.

There were fewer participants in the northeast roundtable ($n = 6$) compared to the northern interior ($n = 18$) and northwest roundtables ($n = 20$), although some discrepancy was expected since there were significantly fewer northeast food access organizations identified in the secondary data analysis. Nevertheless, this limitation resulted in an underrepresentation of voices from the northeast region in this project. Further engagement using alternative outreach methods is warranted for this region.

Lastly, many people who were invited to participate in this project did not have the capacity to join, despite being crucial innovators and contributors in their communities. This included some food access organizations and representatives from the agriculture sector. Food access organizations often operate under tight constraints in terms of time, infrastructure, and resources, which gives little time for activities that add to the workload. This underscores the pressing need for increased financial and human resources across northern BC. As well, the summer is busy for those working in agriculture, which made it challenging to schedule meeting times.

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Appendix 1: Engagement Questions

Roundtable Discussion:

1. What is working well within the food access initiatives at your organization? How about in your community? (15 min)

Prompts:

- What supports and programs are having the biggest impact in addressing food insecurity and why?
- What makes these programs most helpful?
- How are people learning about / accessing these programs?

2. What are the main factors contributing to food insecurity in your community today? (15 min)

Prompts:

- How have recent local and global events (like COVID-19, inflation, housing crisis, climate change, etc.) made this more challenging?
- What are some of the biggest challenges your organization has experienced in doing food access work? (e.g., staffing shortages, pay rates, reliance on volunteers, accessing funding)

3. What gaps still exist in improving food security programming? (15 min)

Prompts:

- Are there key groups in your community that are facing more challenges getting the supports they need to meet their need?
- Do different programs work well together? Why or why not?

4. Imagine a world where nobody went hungry, and everyone had dignified access to nutritious, high-quality, culturally appropriate, local sources of food. What changes are needed to make this vision a reality in your community? (15 min)

Prompts:

- What opportunities for addressing food insecurity are missed?
- Are there any specific benefits or services that should be offered in the community to reduce food insecurity, but do not currently exist?

Key Informant Interviews:

1. What specific regions or areas within northern BC does your organization focus its work?
2. Which populations or demographics groups does your organization specifically service or work with (if any)?
3. From your perspective, what are the opportunities or strengths that Northern BC communities have to address food insecurity? food itself?

Prompt: How have recent global events such as COVID-19, supply chain disruptions, climate emergencies, and inflation impacted food access in Northern communities?

5. Can you please describe how your organization facilitates food access in Northern BC.
 - a. In what areas do you believe your organization is performing well in?

Prompt: Can you share any specific examples of programs and/or partnerships that are working particularly well?

- b. Where do you see opportunities for improvement?

6. What factors (if any) do you believe are hindering your organization's efforts in facilitating food access?

- a. What additional resources would further support your work?
 - b. Are there any other key stakeholders or partners, such as organizations, governments or networks, that you think have the potential to further support your work?

Prompt: In what way do you think they could support your work?

7. What does dignified food access mean to you in the context of your work?
8. Is there anything else you would like to tell us?
9. Is there anyone else you would suggest we connect with for this project?

Appendix 2: Stakeholders Engaged

We would like to thank the over 70 food access stakeholders that participated in this project and shared their perspectives, experiences and expertise with us. The following list includes several organizations that had representatives participate in the site visits, roundtable discussions or key informant interviews. As some participants preferred to remain anonymous, this list is not comprehensive.

- **Autumn Services Food Share**
- **Connaught Youth Centre Society**
- **Eaglet Farmers' Market Institute**
- **Everyone at the Table**
- **Peace Region Food Hub Agricultural Institute**
- **First Nations Health Authority – Northern Region**
- **Food Out Front Terrace**
- **Kalum Community School Society**
- **Meals for You**
- **Northern Health**
- **Nourish Fresh Food Perishable Recovery Society**
- **Skeena Heartbeat Society**
- **Terrace Churches' Food Bank**
- **University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC)**
- **Valemount Learning Society**
- **Village Greens and Farmers' Market**

Appendix 3: Secondary Data Sources

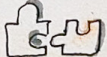
Source	Dates Collected	Publicly Available
Food Access in BC Report: Survey Participants	March 2021	No
Food Access in BC Report: Environmental Scan	2020 to 2021	Yes
United Way Food Infrastructure Grant Applications Submitted (Successful and Unsuccessful)	2021-2022, 2022-2023	No
Northern Health Food Security Grant Applications Submitted (Successful and Unsuccessful)	2022-2023	No
Food Access in BC Report: Environmental Scan	2022	Yes

Appendix 4: Graphic Murals from Roundtable Discussions



SUMMARY group 1



grass roots 
 not for profit 
 long standing experience 
 connections 

"What we need we have. What we don't have is the infrastructure and supports to bring it all together to work together."

CHALLENGES

communication fail
 lack of knowledge
 infrastructure missing
 hunger

GAPS

OPPORTUNITIES

agricultural production locally 
 connections build strength
 vital communication
 learnings

A world without hunger
 circular economies
 local food production
 learning to grow

"enough to go round."



EQUITY & JUSTICE

KEY HIGHLIGHTS group 2

• Mutual partnership and aid - MORE 
 • Volunteers faltering as unpaid staff became vulnerable (pay/resource staff)

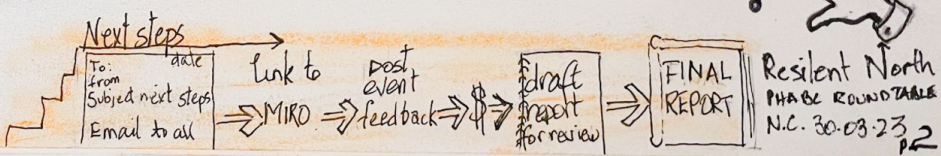
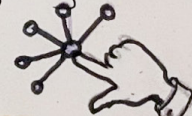
• Urban vs Northern Rural Remote
 • CULTURAL vital but missing!

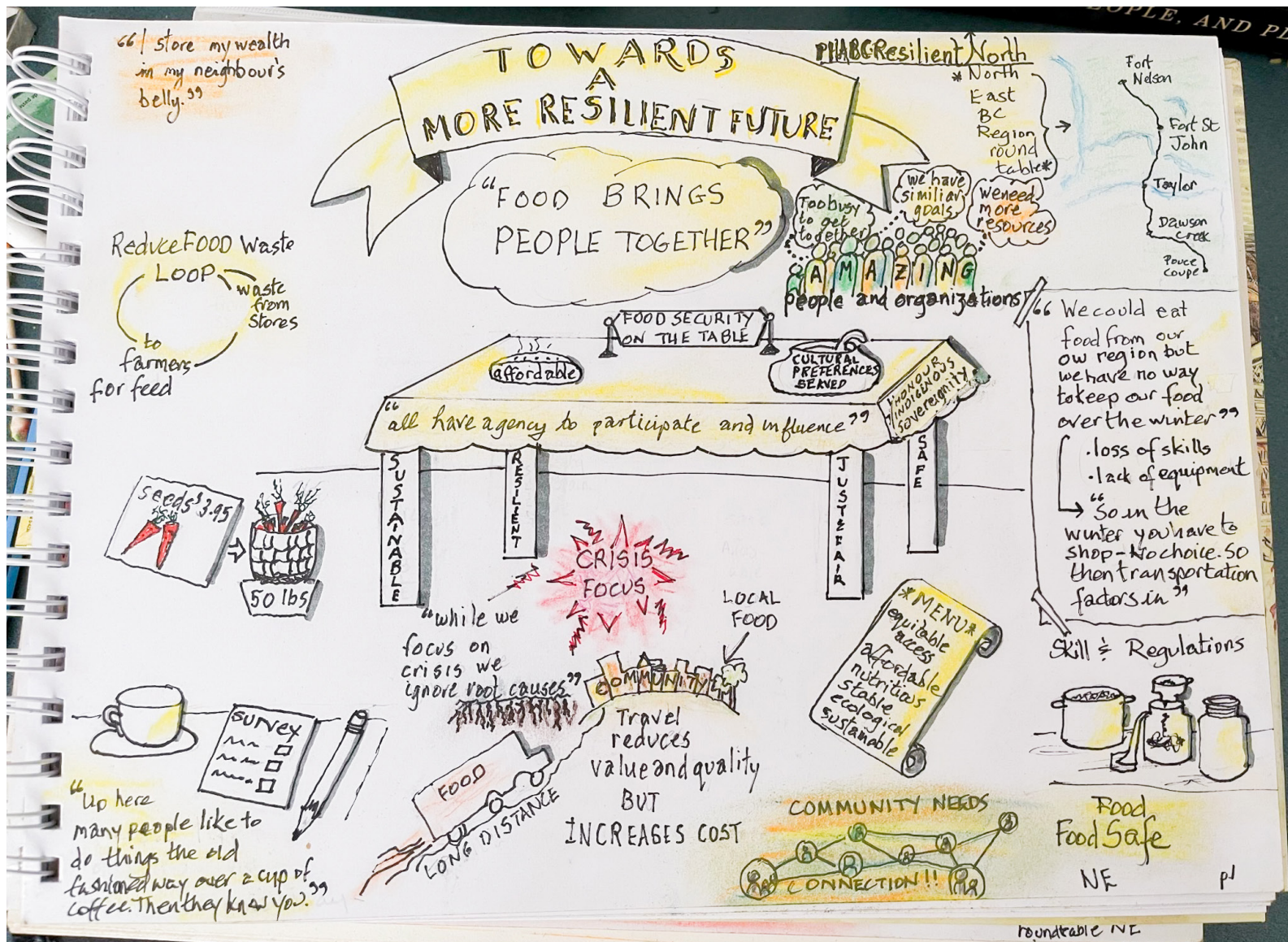
• Lack of transport
 • populations are diverse
 • rural community members
 • immigrants
 • those in need
 • infants to seniors
 • those with disabilities

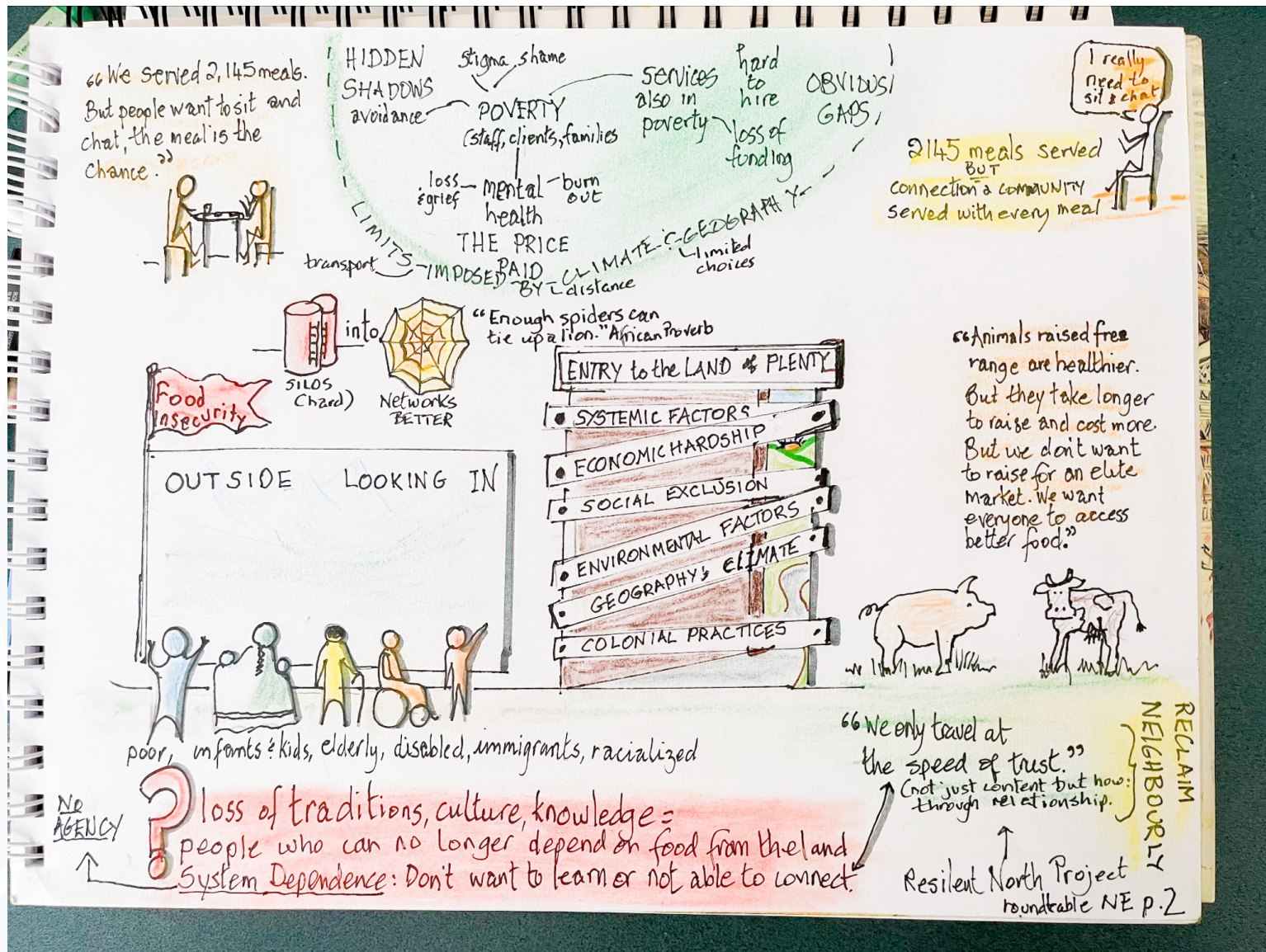


Key highlights group 3

• lack of education / increase knowledge
 • tax receipts from NPDs to farmers
 • global shortages
 • how to support local food, including growers
 • policy to support, encourage local growing
 • more touch points for access











**Division of Community
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Report

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