

Basic income could help create a more just and sustainable food system in Canada

May 5 2023, by Kristen Lowitt and Charles Z. Levkoe



A farmer at the Roots Community Food Centre urban farm in northwestern Ontario harvests Gete-Okosomin squash in summer 2021. Credit: C. Levkoe, Author provided

Canada's food system is [experiencing ongoing stresses](#) from supply chain disruptions, price inflation and extreme weather events. Canadians are feeling the effects of these stresses: in 2021, nearly 16% of provincial households [experienced some degree of food insecurity](#).

Federal programs such as the [Canada Emergency Response Benefit](#) and

the recent [grocery store rebate](#) point to the impact direct government [income](#) interventions can have on ensuring equity in times of emergency, including access to food.

Some have discussed the new grocery store rebate, which is to be delivered through the GST/HST tax credit system, as closely aligned with proposals for a basic income guarantee. But a basic income guarantee would involve regular payments, not just a one-time rebate.

A basic income guarantee could play a key role in [reducing individual and household food insecurity](#) among society's most vulnerable and ensure everyone can meet their [basic needs](#) with dignity.

What the research says

There is general support among basic income advocates in Canada for implementing [income-tested basic income](#), which would involve delivering cash transfers to individuals whose incomes fall below a certain threshold.

As sustainable food systems experts, we suggest that a basic income guarantee could not only be an important tool for addressing economic access to food, but also in supporting sustainability across the food system.

We draw on our research with [Coalition Canada](#), a network of basic income advocacy groups. Our research brought interdisciplinary teams of scholars and practitioners together to [develop a series of case studies](#) examining basic income through the lens of different sectors. These sectors include the arts, finance, health, municipalities and the criminal justice system.

Our work focused on the [agriculture](#) and [fisheries](#) sectors and involved

members of the National Farmers Union, Union Paysanne, Ecotrust Canada and the Native Fishing Alliance.

Overall, our research suggests that a basic income guarantee could have a significant impact on the [economic uncertainties faced by farmers and fishing communities](#) in Canada. It could also contribute to a more just sustainable transition in the food system.

Reducing economic uncertainty

One potential impact of a basic income guarantee would be reducing economic uncertainty for the most vulnerable agriculture and fisheries workers.

People employed in food and fish processing and as farm laborers are especially vulnerable to seasonal unemployment, low wages, uneven employee benefits and unsafe working conditions, including [high rates of occupational injury and illness](#).

A basic income guarantee could offer individuals more [financial security](#) and control over their employment choices, and thus address the racialized, classed and gendered [disparities prominent in food systems labor](#).

Supporting new fishers and farmers

A second potential impact of a basic income guarantee could be supporting new entrants in agriculture and fisheries. Across Canada, [the commercial fishing](#) and [farming workforces](#) are aging.

Supporting new farmers and fishers, especially those using more socially and ecologically sustainable practices, is an essential part of building a

more resilient food system.

[New entrants face substantial barriers](#) related to high entry costs, such as access to land and equipment or purchasing a boat and fishing license, combined with uncertain and fluctuating prices for their goods.

While a basic income guarantee alone can't address these challenges, it could provide greater [economic stability for new farmers](#) and fishers when they invest in infrastructure and training.

Preparing for future stressors

A basic income guarantee could also be a step towards building resilience against ongoing stressors, like the climate crisis and extreme weather events, along with preparing for future emergencies.

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that those with more stable incomes and flexible work arrangements are [better able to adapt to unexpected shocks](#). For example, during the pandemic, boat-to-fork seafood businesses better weathered seafood chain disruptions because of their adaptable supply chain configurations and proximity to consumers.

At present, small-scale farmers and fishers tend to receive the least support, because most [subsidies go to larger industrial enterprises](#). However, these small-scale producers play a crucial role in supplying food for regional and local markets, which can serve as important buffers during times of crisis and reduce the stress of long-distance supply chains.

Establishing a basic income guarantee would be a proactive step in [supporting equitable livelihoods](#) for [small-scale farmers](#) and fishers.

Next steps for the food system

Although a basic income guarantee has the potential to bring about many positive impacts, it shouldn't be a substitute for existing government-funded agricultural and fisheries programs such as grants, public research, and training and skills development programs.

A basic income guarantee also shouldn't replace contributory programs, like the [Employment Insurance fishing benefits](#). A basic income guarantee would offer support to fishers whose earnings are too low to qualify for employment insurance, or who are unable to go out on the water.

Further research and policy efforts will be crucial for gaining a fuller understanding of how a basic income guarantee might intersect with other financial supports like insurance, loans and climate funding.

Additional research will also be crucial for understanding how a basic income guarantee could support [migrant workers](#) brought in through the [Temporary Foreign Worker program](#). Migrant workers are an essential part of fisheries processing and meat and horticulture production.

There is also a need to think systematically and holistically about the role of basic income across the food system. The only way to accomplish this is with further input from farming and fishing communities and Indigenous communities in collaboration with anti-poverty, food sovereignty and food justice organizations.

We believe a [basic income](#) guarantee is a promising tool for contributing to sustainability and justice across agriculture and fishing sectors, while encouraging the development of cross-sectoral networks, research and policy agendas.

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