

# Tackling food insecurity requires more than charity—governments must also act, say researchers

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As more households in Canada [experience food insecurity](#), food banks

and other organizations are [struggling to meet demand](#) for their services. In 2023 alone, [around 23% of Canadian households experienced some form of food insecurity](#). That translates to 8.7 million people, including 2.1 million children, who struggled to access sufficient, safe and nutritious food.

Researchers and food-centered organizations have had long-standing concerns that food charity alone cannot effectively respond to this growing demand. Community food groups across Canada have been advocating for a more systemic, structural approach to addressing food insecurity, rather than relying on reactive, short-term solutions like food banks.

For example, [Food First NL](#) and [Community Food Centres Canada](#) are pushing for income-based solutions; the Regroupement des cuisines collectives du Québec is working on a framework bill legislating the right to food; and the [Maskwacîs Education Schools Commission](#) in Alberta has developed and implemented a Universal School Food Strategy called Nanâtohk Mîciwin.

These groups draw on decades of research on food insecurity, as well as their on-the-ground observations, to develop solutions that address food insecurity more fairly and effectively.

Along with colleagues, we recently organized the event [Food insecurity: Let's move beyond charity!](#), focused on how efforts to address food insecurity can move beyond charity. Academic research and the collective efforts of non-profit organizations highlight the urgent need to move beyond short-term fixes and adopt long-term, equitable strategies that address the root causes of food insecurity.

## **The limits of charity**

Decades of research, [exemplified by PROOF](#), the food insecurity research group at the University of Toronto, make it clear that [food insecurity cannot be solved](#) by relying on charity alone. Charity is important for helping vulnerable people.

However, the root causes of food insecurity are systemic issues like inadequate income, [social inequalities](#) and insufficient social support; food donations alone fail to tackle these underlying problems.

Not everyone is equally at risk of food insecurity. [The latest data from Statistics Canada](#) confirms that as of 2022, Indigenous and Black households, lone-parent families (women-headed families, in particular) and people living with disabilities are disproportionately affected by food insecurity.

Researchers argue that food charity [may even reinforce the problem by giving the impression that food insecurity is being addressed](#), and dulling the political imperative to seek lasting solutions. Indeed, since the 1980s, governments have [persistently favored the charity model to address hunger](#) over developing adequate social policies and welfare programs.

[Only a fraction of those who experience food insecurity use food banks](#), often due to stigma associated with poverty, the insufficient quality, quantity or appropriateness of donated food, or the absence of [food banks](#) in their communities.

Meanwhile, community food programs struggle to meet the increasing demand from those who do use them. A recent [Food First NL report](#) documents the community food programs' many challenges, including limited resources (funding, food, volunteers). The report highlights the inherent limitations of a model dependent on donations and scarce resources; it is unable to effectively and sustainably meet people's specific and household needs, such as dietary restrictions.

## What are the proposed alternatives?

Food First NL and Community Food Centres Canada are two non-profit organizations pushing for income-based solutions. In Newfoundland and Labrador, [Food First NL advocates for a basic income program](#) to provide unconditional financial support. This is a proposed solution that has [garnered significant attention in the province](#).

At the national level, Community Food Centres Canada [advocates for federal income and social policy changes, including targeted income programs with revised benefit thresholds](#), to ensure adequate financial assistance for those most at risk.

These income-based solutions resonate with the [income- and policy-based approach favored by PROOF](#). Research has identified [inadequate income as the key cause leading to food insecurity](#).

The Maskwacîs Education Schools Commission showcases an inspiring model that the federal government, having recently announced a [new national school food program](#), should pay attention to. [Nanâtohk Mîciwin](#), the commission's Indigenous-led Universal School Food Strategy, goes beyond offering free, nutritious and culturally appropriate breakfast, lunch and snacks for all students and staff in 10 schools.

The commission has created a collection and distribution system to supply traditional foods to schools, built partnerships with producers and harvesters strengthening the local food system, and enhanced connections to traditional foods and practices. Students learn about food in their Cree classes and participate in land-based food activities and harvests.

The program is an approach to food provisioning that considers cultural and environmental dimensions of food security. Based on Cree values

and a commitment to Indigenous food sovereignty, it provides a rich example of a systemic and structural solution to addressing food insecurity at a more local level.

For its part, the Regroupement des cuisines collectives du Québec [is proposing a provincial framework bill on the right to food](#), based on the work of the [United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#). Such efforts are vital. They drive home the point that addressing food insecurity is the government's responsibility, and food security as a fundamental human right.

They also approach food insecurity as a food-systems issue as much as a social inequality one, taking into account the sustainability of food production, processing and distribution. This is all the more relevant in light of the detrimental impacts of climate change on food production and access, which [predominantly affect marginalized communities](#).

## **Moving forward**

Systemic approaches to food insecurity must be focused on giving back agency and dignity to individuals and communities. Such initiatives develop long-term solutions informed by both research and the lived experiences of people struggling with food insecurity.

Food charity may still play some role in those solutions, but it must not be the main response to the challenge of [food insecurity](#). It's time for all levels of government to move beyond food charity, heed the advice of those working on the front lines of this crisis, and respond with fair and sustainable social policies and programs.

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