

SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION FOR ALL:



REVISITING THE ACCESSIBILITY OF
SUSTAINABLY-PRODUCED FOOD IN
CANADA DURING COVID-19

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**FOOD SECURE CANADA RESEARCH
REFRESHER REPORT**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At the outset, this research refresher project was led by Dr. Monika Korzun who began the literature review, designed both the questionnaires, summarized the results of the first questionnaire and presented initial findings at the Canadian Association of Food Studies conference in May 2022. Farzaneh Barak then took over to update and complete the literature review, analyse the results of the second questionnaire and integrate them with the results of the first questionnaire, and write the initial draft of this research refresher report. We are very grateful to both researchers. At Food Secure Canada (FSC), Omar Elsharkawy (Program Manager) and Susan Alexander (Senior Policy Advisor) supported their work.

We warmly thank the research participants for sharing their wisdom and experience with us.

Our appreciation is also extended to our academic advisor, Ellen Goddard, professor at University of Alberta and to the Community Advisory convened by FSC for their insights and expertise.

A note about the COVID-19 pandemic:

Although this study explores the potential impacts of the pandemic on sustainable food consumption, the authors acknowledge that the pandemic is ongoing and the full effects of COVID-19 are yet unknown. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to significantly impact people's lives and will likely leave long-term effects in our communities and beyond.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sustainable food was introduced to the participants as “sustainably grown food is that which is produced and distributed in a way that supports the longevity of the food system, including its natural resources and the wellbeing of all of its participants now, and in the future” (Kramer et al., 2019).

In 2019, Food Secure Canada (FSC) led a research project to understand better how people living on low income perceive sustainably grown foods and the related barriers to sustainable food consumption. The research aims to address the knowledge gap of how Canada can achieve Goal 12 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), increase sustainable food consumption and production, and better align with Health Canada’s latest Food Guide (2019).

[The 2019 FSC report](#) highlighted that those living with a low-income value sustainably grown food. However, the report reinforced that income and cost were the main barriers for those living with a low income to access sustainably produced food. Other barriers include access to speciality stores or farmers’ markets in their neighbourhoods, where sustainably produced food is more readily available;

transportation and mobility challenges getting to grocery stores; racism and discrimination; identifying sustainably produced foods, and judging some aspects of sustainability.

Since then, significant changes have occurred in the Canadian food system. The COVID-19 pandemic brought to light issues of food access, including issues related to sustainable food consumption. To date, there is limited evidence on the impact of the pandemic on sustainable food consumption among those living with a low, or fixed income as well as Black, Indigenous and People of colour. To address this gap, FSC revisited the 2019 report using the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic. The present research asks the following four questions, with a focus on people living with low incomes and on Black, Indigenous and People of colour.

1. **Did the pandemic change access to sustainable food?**
2. **Did the pandemic change the interpretation and value of sustainable food?**
3. **What opportunities and challenges did COVID-19 present in accessing sustainable foods?**
4. **What policy mechanisms have been effective during the pandemic to increase access to sustainable food?**

Participants of this study identified numerous ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the food system, with the most important changes being the participants' perception of increased rates of food insecurity and an increase in food prices. It was also noted that the COVID-19 pandemic brought to light issues of systemic racism, colonialism, and injustice that are embedded in the current food system. The pandemic also demonstrated the strength of non-profits to navigate, adapt and work together to help ease the dire circumstances that many faced during the onset of the pandemic.

When the participants were asked about the sustainable foods that they and the general public value, local and organic food were valued the most, followed by ethically sourced food. Comparing the present study's findings with the 2019 report, it appears that local food has become a more highly valued characteristic of sustainable food. Most respondents believed that all three aspects of sustainability, social, economic, and environmental, are important. However, they selected the economic aspect of sustainability as the most important factor for the general public, emphasizing that food cost is one of the major barriers for accessing sustainable foods, especially among those living with a low income.

As already identified in the FSC (2019) report on sustainable consumption, research participants in this study highlighted the significance of increasing food prices as a barrier to accessing sustainable food. We note that rising food prices were a concern before COVID-19, reflecting a chronic problem. Increasing food prices continue to pose significant challenges to millions of people in Canada, which means that access to sustainable food during the pandemic remained difficult.

The FSC 2019 report called for more research about the role of racism in food access and consumption as well as a greater exploration into the intersection of social, cultural and economic barriers that perpetuate and resist various forms of discrimination. As a response, this study sought to include perspectives and experiences of diverse stakeholders across the food system, including Black, Indigenous and People of colour stakeholders and others from different backgrounds, geographies, and sectors of the food system. The present study provides further nuance about sustainable consumption. Research participants of the current study identified various tensions with defining the concept of sustainability as well as that of food insecurity. The lack of including voices of those who produce sustainable food (e.g., farmers), the extent to which these concepts have been influenced by systems of racism, colonialism, and power imbalances, and the co-optation of sustainability language by large corporations are some issues that were raised in this study.

Findings from quantitative and qualitative responses revealed participants' concerns about the effectiveness and integrity of non-profit and charitable food programs in reducing food insecurity in Canada. Participants were concerned about the extensive use of food banks and emergency food providers during the pandemic. Participants were worried

that policymakers' reliance on food banks during the pandemic to address hunger shifted focus away from the underlying causes of food insecurity, and away from developing long-term solutions to food access issues.

Finally, another significant finding was that the choice and ability to access sustainable consumption is hindered by the effects of racism and other forms of oppression affecting Black, Indigenous and People of colour. Several participants highlighted that racism and colonialism significantly shape the relationship that Black, Indigenous and People of colour have with food, in addition to their opportunities for food access. For example, Indigenous-led community initiatives face barriers receiving grants and funding due to the structure and processes included in the application and reporting processes. In addition, municipal bylaws or provincial regulations can act as barriers to implementing programs that may be culturally or heritage-specific to various Black, Indigenous and People of colour communities.

In terms of policy addressing food insecurity, the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) was recognised as the most effective. Looking forward, reflecting on how to prioritise policy options to increase sustainable food consumption among the general public, those living with a low income as well as Black, Indigenous

and People of colour, showed a high agreement for the following proposed policies:

- **Any solutions must be done in a democratic, just and inclusive processes.**
- **Any potential solutions ought to take into consideration Indigenous teachings and other forms of knowing.**
- **Address issues of racism, colonialism and other forms of discrimination.**
- **Make sure that land use regulations (federal, provincial/territorial or municipal) do not interfere with local food production.**
- **Support living wage/guaranteed basic income/income floor under which no one falls.**

It is evident from the research that comprehensive food policy in Canada must push towards policies that not only address food security but advance food sovereignties, including solutions led by and for Indigenous Peoples, to ensure food consumed in Canada is healthy and sustainable for all. Making room for various types of solutions, including bottom-up solutions led by communities directly impacted by food security and food access, as well as programs and policies developed in a collaborative manner with a wide range of stakeholders, are vital to developing successful long-term solutions to issues of food access.



INTRODUCTION

Food Secure Canada (FSC)'s vision is of a just, healthy and **sustainable** food system, honouring our relationship to the earth and each other. Using the lens of sustainability emphasizes the link between livelihoods, ecosystems, society, and political economy to preserve food systems and promote food security, from the present to the future (Clapp et al., 2022). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been sudden and unprecedented socioeconomic changes worldwide, including in Canada (Aday & Aday, 2020; Béné et al., 2021). The pandemic stressed the Canadian food system and brought to the forefront of public awareness several chronic gaps in ensuring sufficient, healthy, and sustainable food for all living in Canada (Maas et al., 2022). To recover and build back better, James et al. (2021) suggest dismantling and rebuilding food systems toward more resilient, sustainable, and just food systems (i.e., redistribution of land, wealth, and power).

In 2019, Food Secure Canada (FSC) led a research project to better understand the perceptions of consumers living with a low income about sustainably grown foods and related barriers to sustainable food consumption (Kramer et al., 2019). Since then, significant changes have occurred in the food system. The COVID-19 pandemic has put into question the consumption of sustainable food. Although increased levels of food insecurity were expected during the pandemic, recent statistics on household food security status in Canada did not show a considerable increase, as many predicted (Tarasuk et al., 2022). To date, there is limited evidence on the impact of the pandemic on sustainable food consumption among those living with a low income, as well as Black, Indigenous and People of colour communities in Canada. To address this gap, FSC revisited its 2019 report to understand how sustainable consumption might have changed since then. The present research project aimed to identify the barriers faced by consumers living with a low income, with specific outreach to Black, Indigenous and People of colour communities, to highlight solutions that can be implemented to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and improve access in the long term.

Similar to FSC's 2019 report, sustainable food was introduced to the participants as food that "is produced and distributed in a way that supports the longevity of the food system, including its natural resources and the well-being of all of its participants now, and in the future" (Kramer et al., 2019).

METHODOLOGY

Using the Delphi research method, two rounds of closed and open-ended questions were answered by research participants. Monika Korzun led the work from June 2021 until May 2022. Farzaneh Barak led the work from August 2022.

Research Timeline





Second questionnaire

Circulated in April 2022 with responses received by May 2022. Analysed in August and September 2022.

Synthesis of results

The results of the first and second questionnaires and the integration with the literature review and the statistical data available (September and October 2022).

We understand that the use of certain terminologies can be complex and is often contested. For the purpose of this study, we use Black, Indigenous and People of colour, often in unison. We use this language to highlight the unique experiences and relationships that Black, Indigenous and People of colour have with whiteness and to acknowledge that all people of colour face discrimination and injustice. We also acknowledge that not all people of colour have the same experiences, especially when it comes to forms of discrimination and oppression, and that the experiences of Black, Indigenous and People of colour communities are nuanced. Finally, we are not suggesting any form of hierarchy when listing the terms.

Research Approach - Delphi method

The results of this study are based on the perspectives, opinions, and experiences of a range of stakeholders that were obtained using the Delphi method. The Delphi method is a form of group communication between individuals who hold diverse expertise, including lived experience, on a specific topic with the goal of understanding a phenomenon in greater depth.

Participants, who were kept anonymous from one another, responded to two rounds of questionnaires. The multiple steps included in the Delphi method allow the discourse to grow as a result of potentially opposing or conflicting views between participants. The Delphi method is a good tool for community-based research and decision-making by community researchers and practitioners and increasingly, the Delphi method has been used in social sciences as a way of assessing opportunities and challenges and informing policy development.

Research Participants

The research participants are all leaders within the food system in Canada. Twelve participants, selected by FSC, initially joined the study, with ten completing both questionnaires. Research participants were composed of both francophone and anglophone members and represented a diverse group in terms of gender, race, geography, and sectors. Half of the group self-identified as Black, Indigenous (First Nations and Métis), or racialized. Seven provinces and one territory were represented. Many participants lead community food programs and anti-poverty organisations; working directly with diverse communities living with low incomes and made vulnerable by intersecting inequalities. Others had a combination of academic, farming, policy-making and private sector backgrounds. Three participants came from organisations that hosted focus groups for the 2019 study. Honorariums were offered to every participant. Food Secure Canada and the authors warmly thank the participants for their contribution, especially since the timeframe of the study coincided with an ongoing period of significant stress in the sector.

Study Limitations

This study involved working with a small group of food security practitioners, non-profit community organisations, professionals and others with lived experience at the heart of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on food systems. Many of these participants continue to face pressure and strain working in this space. This may have impacted the effort and time that participants dedicated to the study.

Although we aimed to achieve diverse representation in our sample, this sample does not represent all stakeholders on sustainable food consumption, nor does it represent the full spectrum of experiences of lack of access to food in Canada. As such, this study does not allow for the replicability and generalizability of results.

The study used the same definition of sustainable food consumption as the 2019 report. For some, this definition is not nuanced or complex. Using this definition may have impacted the responses provided by participants. Despite the limitations, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of these issues.

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

FOOD SECURITY

Food security exists “when all people, at all times, have social, physical, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life,” according to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (FAO, 2001). In Canada, food security is measured by the federal government using the Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM), which mainly measures inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints. It is important to note that the extent to which food insecurity changed during the pandemic is still not fully understood, see the section below, ‘COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on the food system’, for more discussion. The recent statistics on household food security status in Canada highlight the persistently high rates of food insecurity in the past years (2019-2021), with 15.9% of households in Canadian provinces¹ experiencing food insecurity within the previous year (2021) (Tarasuk et al., 2022). It should also be noted that there are substantial differences between provinces, with 20.3% of Albertans experiencing food insecurity, while 13.1% of those living in

Quebec experienced food insecurity in 2021 (Tarasuk et al., 2022). Communities in the North, especially those living in the territories, experience food insecurity at much higher rates. For example, 57% of households in Nunavut experience food insecurity (Statistics Canada, 2018). A report by Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), the national representative organisation for Inuit in Canada, reports food insecurity rates among Inuit communities between 68.4% in Nunatsiavut and 77.6% in Nunavut (ITK, 2021). Research demonstrates that race has a significant impact on food security in Canada. Black households are 3.56 times more likely to experience food insecurity compared to white households (Dhunna & Tarasuk, 2021). Such data points to the notion that defining the cause of food insecurity simply as a lack of income is inadequate (Dhunna & Tarasuk, 2021). Increasing food security in Canada calls for addressing underlying causes of food insecurity, including racism, colonialism, and systemic discrimination towards racialized communities (Dhunna & Tarasuk, 2021; ITK 2021; Tarasuk et al., 2022).

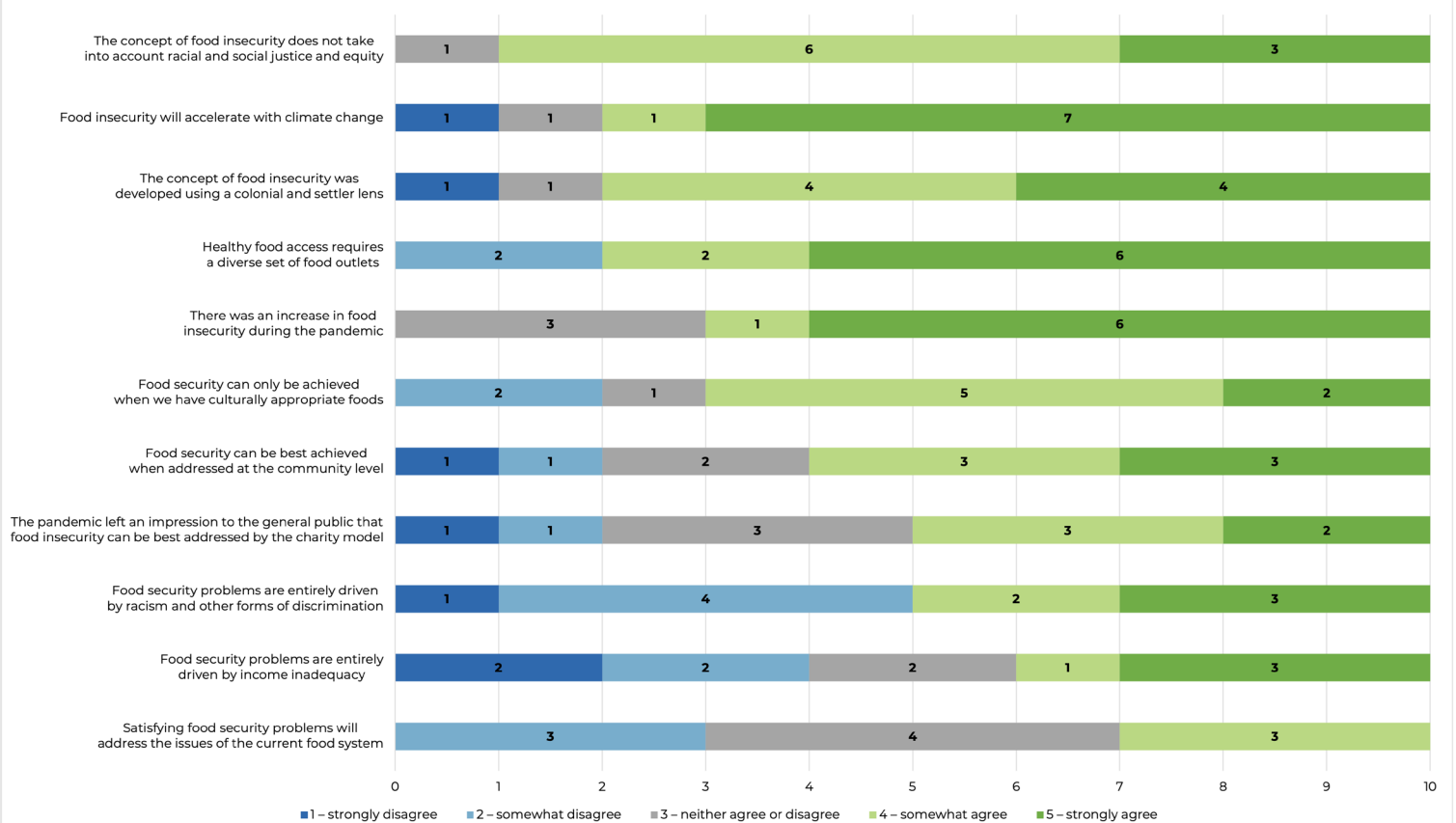
¹ This report covered the 10 Provinces but did not include the Territories due to data collection limitations.

Gaps in conceptualizing and achieving food security

In the interviews with key informants, several gaps were underlined in conceptualizing food security in Canada (Figure 1). Almost all respondents agreed that the concept of food insecurity does not consider racial and social justice and equity, and raised their concern about how this concept was developed through a settler-colonial lens. In considering equity aspects, we turn to the growing literature on the disproportionate rates of food insecurity among Black, Indigenous

and People of colour communities in Canada, highlighting the important role of race as a social determinant of food security. It has been found that the highest percentage of individuals living in food-insecure households in Canada are among Indigenous Peoples (30.7%), Arab/West Asian (27.6%), and Black (22.4%) (Tarasuk et al., 2022). In support of resolving structural barriers to food security in Canada, considerable attention should be accorded to the connection between cultural challenges and the existence of colonialism, racism, and other systems of discrimination and dispossession in conceptualizing and addressing food insecurity (Hovey et al., 2014; Richmond, 2018).

Figure 1: Respondents opinions about food security and food access



Numbers in each bar indicate the frequency of answers in each of the five response categories (n=10).



The respondents also agreed that food security can only be achieved when there is access to culturally appropriate foods. Accounting for cultural preferences and practices is included in the food security definition, “to meet their dietary needs and food preferences”. Previous studies have also pointed out its importance, yet it has not been fully achieved in Canada (Richmond et al., 2021; Shafiee et al., 2022). A recent community-based study among First Nation mothers from urban and reserve-based contexts in London, Ontario and a nearby reserve community, indicated that in addition to income as the most significant determinant of food security, the mothers also considered cultural and geographical barriers to meeting food security (Richmond et al., 2021). Shafiee et al. (2022) suggest likewise that resolving food insecurity issues among Indigenous peoples in Canada requires not only economic but also cultural solutions, addressing the availability, cost, knowledge, safety, and quality of food (Shafiee et al., 2022). Considering the disproportionate rates of food

insecurity experienced by Indigenous peoples, some studies call attention to “Food Sovereignty” defined as: “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies, rather than the demands of markets and corporations” (Nyéléni, 2007, p. 1).

Altogether, this calls for revisiting the concept of food security in Canada to include all voices at each stage, from conceptualization to implementation of programs and disseminating results. As one participant explained:

“... are we going to achieve food security? NO, because of the definition. As the definition is, we cannot ever achieve it, because Indigenous populations cannot meet the criteria. Same issue is with ‘nutrition’ or ‘healthy’...”

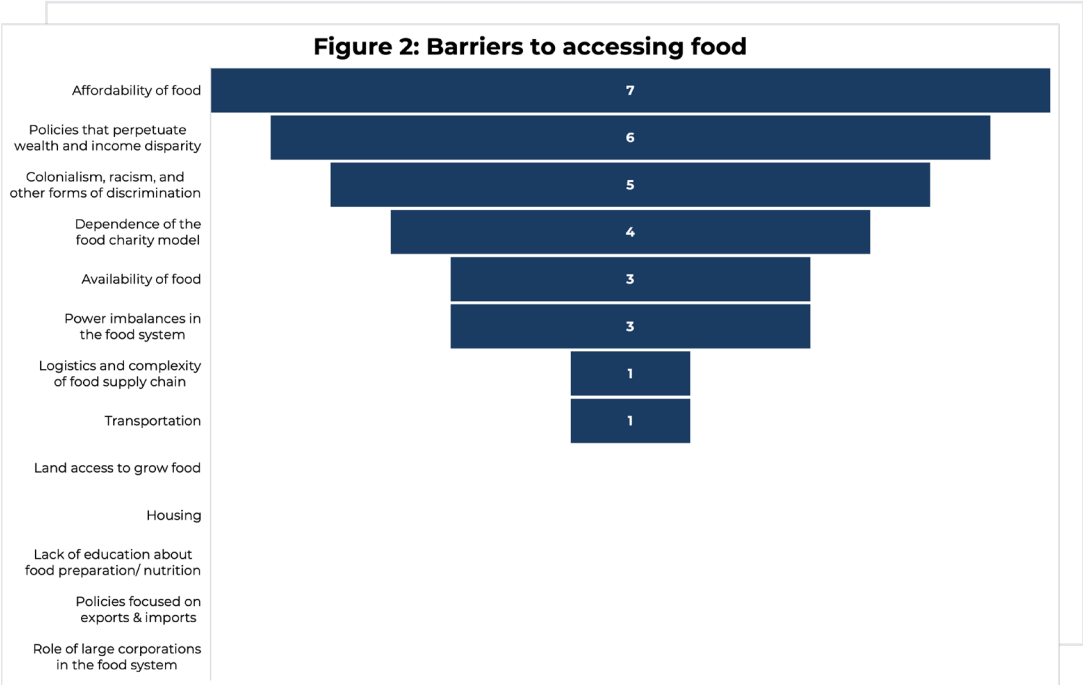
Barriers to accessing food

When asked about the top three reasons the participants believe people face barriers to accessing food from a list of 13 options previously brainstormed by the group (**Figure 2**), respondents chose the following barriers as the most important ones:

- **Affordability of food**
- **Policies that perpetuate wealth and income disparity**
- **Colonialism, racism, and other forms of discrimination**

There is extensive evidence of the direct effect of food affordability on food security experiences. A global assessment of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic during the first 12 months of the pandemic demonstrated that the most affected dimension of food security was food access (Béné et al., 2021). Unpacking COVID-19's effects on food security indicated that the

decline in food affordability resulted from a decline in salaries and revenues and, consequently, a direct impact on purchasing power at the consumer level (OECD, 2020). These rapid changes disproportionately affected people with low incomes and those who lost a large part of their savings and assets during the first few weeks of the pandemic (Gentilini et al., 2020). Since wealth and income disparity was already one of the most significant drivers of food insecurity in Canada (McIntyre et al., 2014; Tarasuk et al., 2022), many groups were already socially disadvantaged before the pandemic, and their status and needs were not adequately accounted for in the adopted policies. For instance, McIntyre et al., (2014) found that visible minority workers with comparable education levels experienced higher rates of food insecurity than European-origin workers. Much work is still needed for the policies to target the root causes of wealth and income disparity (McIntyre et al., 2014).



Numbers in each bar indicate the frequency of ratings by respondents (n=10).

Racism and colonialism continue to impact the relationship that people have with food. As one participant stated:

“ *Colonialism has an ongoing impact on how we view food, portions, and our relationships with food that is entrenched in greed and excess which needs to be challenged in order to move towards sustainable consumption.*”

Historic and ongoing colonialism in Canada has separated Indigenous Peoples from their food systems and land, imposing significant barriers to accessing land-based practices that are integral to Indigenous health and well-being (Edelman, 2014; Grey & Patel, 2015). In addition to structural barriers, Indigenous community members also face challenges to hunting and fishing, such as gas prices, inaccessible transportation and tools, and concerns about food safety. This has led to the consumption of more foods outside of traditional or country food diets, and instead relying on whatever is available at local stores among Indigenous Peoples (James et al., 2021; Timler & Sandy, 2020). Robin et al. (2021) argue that the Canadian settler state has been undermining Indigenous food sovereignty by regulating food safety across federal, provincial, and territorial jurisdictions to the detriment of traditional foodways. The authors point out the importance of working with Indigenous communities as “co-

researchers” to address the issues of power imbalance and oppression that adversely affect Indigenous Peoples’ well-being. Altogether, these barriers have resulted in disproportionately higher rates of food insecurity among Indigenous People in Canada, as discussed earlier.

For racialized communities, efforts to obtain permits or funding to strengthen food security are sometimes met with discrimination. One participant described working with a municipality in receiving permits for various events highlighting food cultures and heritage of various racialized communities. The participant reported that the city prioritised the needs of white-led projects and did not work with racialized communities to help them overcome their unique challenges. As the participant described:

“ *Looking at myself as an immigrant, I dedicate my life to this community. If I am attending any international conferences, I am speaking so highly about how the city is supportive, but actually it is not. The city gives me so much of a hard time before I get something. I have to stand for myself and the organisation. Our mandate and vision is empowering women. At this stage, I have to empower myself so I can empower other women. This is not acceptable, the way we are being treated.*”

Another participant highlighted the unique challenges Indigenous communities face in applying for funding. As they state:

“ *Many of the projects that get funding are through communities who have the wealth to hire application writers. I have seen many programs and policies that are targeted for Indigenous communities yet so little of the funding actually goes to communities who have never been successful in the application process because there are so many barriers for them. Forms submitted on the wrong size of paper. Limited internet access, unrealistic deadlines, too much paperwork.*”

Waldron (2021) examines the complexity of environmental racism and pertinent health effects on Indigenous and Black communities in Canada, using Nova Scotia as a case study. She suggests centring race in an environmental justice framework to address structural determinants and understand how it intersects with class, gender, and other social identities to generate inequities. Waldron argues that to move forward, there is a need for a holistic and “multi-pronged strategy” through collaboration between white-led environmental organisations and Indigenous and Black communities to include diverse and representative voices of these communities.

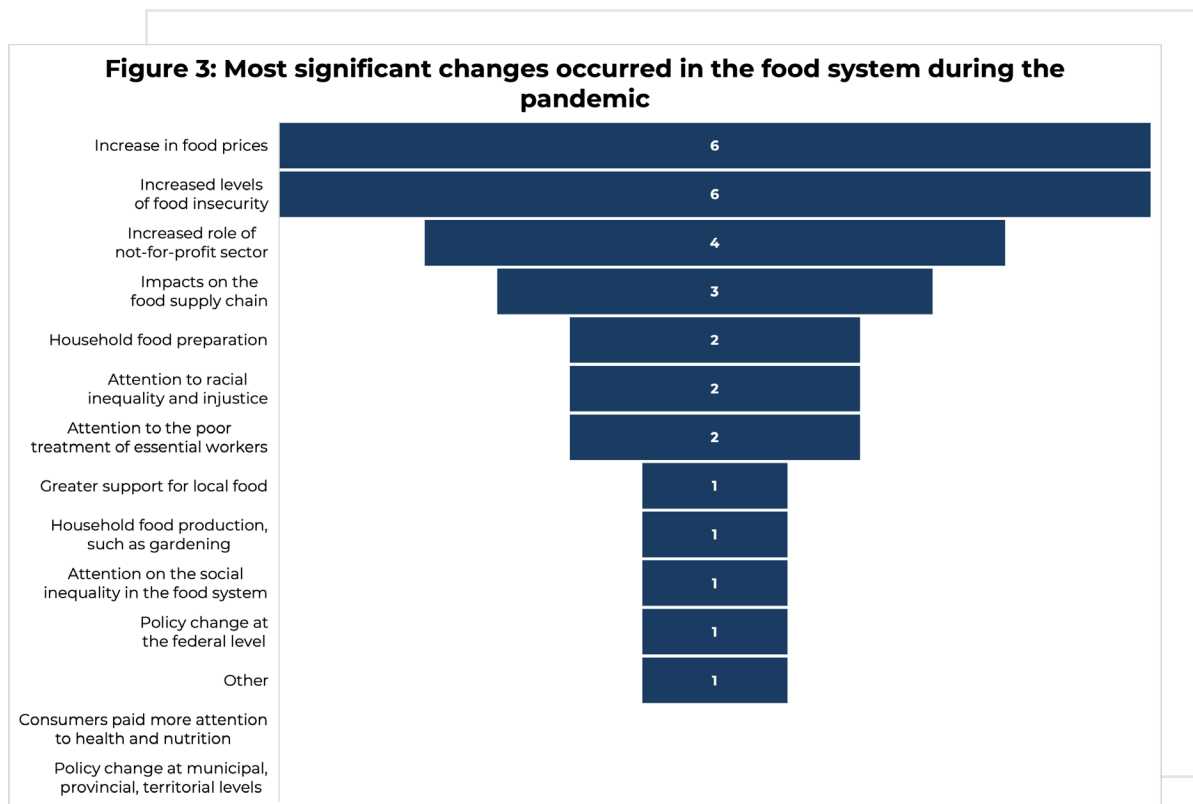


COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ITS IMPACTS ON THE FOOD SYSTEM

The global food system has experienced significant stress since mid-March 2020 when COVID-19 emerged as a global pandemic. Various aspects of the food supply chain, from production to processing, to consumption were impacted (Hobbs, 2021). The pandemic also highlighted ongoing pressure points in the Canadian food system, such as poor treatment of farm workers, the role of racism, injustice, and inequality in the food system, and the role of emergency food providers. The impacts of the pandemic on various

aspects of the food system are still ongoing.

To better understand the impacts on an individual level, research participants in this present study were asked to identify how the COVID-19 pandemic changed the Canadian food system. The respondents ranked the significant changes in the food system as shown in **Figure 3**. The changes identified most often by participants were increased rates of food insecurity and increase in food prices.



Numbers in each bar indicate the frequency of ratings by respondents (n=10).



The loss of incomes and job stability were the main reasons why food insecurity increased during the pandemic. However, participants also noted more systemic issues such as wage gaps, social inequality, and racism as significant contributors to ongoing food insecurity.

Said one participant,

“ I think that the changes in who experienced food insecurity was fairly significant, even if the levels did not change significantly. For example, those in middle or upper middle class families who lost employment were food insecure for the first time, while some individuals who availed of [Canada Emergency Response Benefit] CERB (before tighter regulations around who could apply and clawbacks were introduced) sometimes were food secure for the first time, initially.”

Closure of borders and facilities, combined with shifting consumer demands, affected all nodes of the food supply chain, all of which influenced food prices. Canada's Consumer Price Index (CPI), which represents changes in prices experienced by Canadian

consumers (Statistics Canada, 2022a), shows that CPI augmented by 2.4% in 2021 compared to 1.3% in 2020, excluding energy. Elevated CPI in 2021 was mainly attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic that affected the prices of goods and services purchased by people living in Canada¹. Despite increasing prices, there was no significant change in household food insecurity from 2019 to 2021 (Tarasuk et al., 2022). Likewise, an assessment of household food insecurity early in the COVID-19 pandemic, from September to December 2020, did not show a rise in food insecurity (Polsky & Garriguet, 2022). These results about unchanged or insignificant changes in food insecurity rates were not expected due to the adverse effects of COVID-19 on wages, employment, and overall economic status, which were documented as the major drivers of food insecurity in Canada before the pandemic. Another participant made the following reflection about the pandemic experience:

“ ... I had known that statistically increases in income are strongly correlated with food security, but it was interesting to see how true that is in practice.”

¹ Note that the data in this study were collected between April to May 2021, and the prices were not affected by the inflationary pressures stemming from the war in Ukraine yet. Still the respondents considered increased food prices as one of the significant impacts of the pandemic.

Although the Canadian government provided financial assistance such as the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) to reduce the adverse effects of economic and job disruption of the pandemic, recent statistics show that those who received pandemic-related benefits were still much more likely to be in a food insecure households compared to those reliant on employment incomes, primarily similar to the existing reports before the pandemic (Tarasuk et al., 2022). Therefore, identifying the hidden impact of the pandemic on food security requires further research at micro levels, especially in the pandemic recovery years.

When asked to identify major changes in the food system as a result of the pandemic, the third most common answer was the role of the non-profit sector. Participants believed that the nonprofit sector's role amplified during the pandemic. Nonprofits and community organisations were in a unique position to quickly adapt and address the immediate needs of their community members. They shared information and resources, coordinated efforts to provide emergency food and quickly adapted to regulatory guidelines while ensuring people receive food from emergency food providers. Nonprofits also played a key role in bringing awareness to racial injustices in the food system and beyond. Participants underlined that the pandemic disrupted previous efforts to challenge the

oppressive status-quo. It was indicated that these changes have been focused on raising awareness rather than an action to change the system. As one participant stated:

“ nonprofit and other community groups stepped up tremendously to look out for people and their communities. Without these efforts, the situation would be even more dire than it already seems at times...although it's important to bring awareness to these issues, much of the momentum and work that was happening a few summers ago has seemingly quelled, making the awareness come across more performative than genuine in challenging systems of oppression.”

Many participants worried that the pandemic created the false notion that, as a society, we need food banks and other emergency food providers. The focus on emergency food provisions has shifted the focus of many community organisations from advocacy and long-term systemic changes to providing short-term solutions, such as food donations and food boxes. Some participants identified that the nonprofit sector benefited during the pandemic, as organisations received grants and funds to distribute emergency food. Some claim that the government and corporations used the pandemic to validate the existence and structure of food banking. As one participant stated:

“ ...the non-profit sector has entrenched their role in food insecurity abatement even further. The Government of Canada and [the provincial Government] both off-loaded the funds for food insecurity into staffing costs in the charitable realm — even though we know based on research that charitable food programs are not availed of by the majority of food insecure individuals and households.”

This draws attention away from the underlying causes of food insecurity and sustainable food consumption and is a step away from creating a more resilient, just and equitable food system. This also puts a lot of pressure on the non-profit sector to do a lot of the work with limited funding and resources.

Some respondents questioned the effectiveness and integrity of non-profit and charitable food programs in reducing food insecurity in Canada and, more importantly, reaching the target groups, primarily due to governance issues and power imbalance. It was elaborated that some of the largest non-profits in the country are operated by a board of large corporations that aim to perpetuate industrial food production, food insecurity, and import/export heavy food systems.

“ The corporate for-profit food sector has been playing a bigger and bigger role in non-profit funding

and governance in food insecurity/ security realms, and so lines are too blurred to say who is truly benefitting at this point.”

Previous studies have debated and questioned the role of civil society organisations such as food banks in eliminating long-term food insecurity. Some argue that organisations such as food banks act as a barrier to reducing household food insecurity in the medium and long term because these sectors have become institutionalized and exhibit agenda distortion and reciprocity (Azadian et al., 2022; Riches, 2002, Tarasuk et al., 2020). It is worth noting that some leaders within the sector acknowledge that food banks are not a permanent solution.

“ Food doesn't solve food insecurity in Canada. We need longer-term policy solutions. Food banks can only be called on to do so much, and we really want to get the number of people relying on our services to come down.”
- Kirstin Beardsley, Food Banks Canada CEO (Doherty, 2022).

Several studies have shown the inadequate response of food banking to reducing food insecurity in Canada (Azadian et al., 2022; Loopstra, 2018; Mendly-Zambo et al., 2021; Riches, 2002, 2018). In the recent federal government's Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals Report food banks are mentioned as “National leaders to relieve hunger

today and prevent hunger tomorrow”². Yet, critics argue government’s reliance on food banks and other emergency food providers depoliticizes food insecurity as a serious public issue and absolves the government from addressing the root causes of food insecurity (Azadian et al., 2022; Loopstra, 2018; Mendly-Zambo et al., 2021; Riches, 2002, 2018).

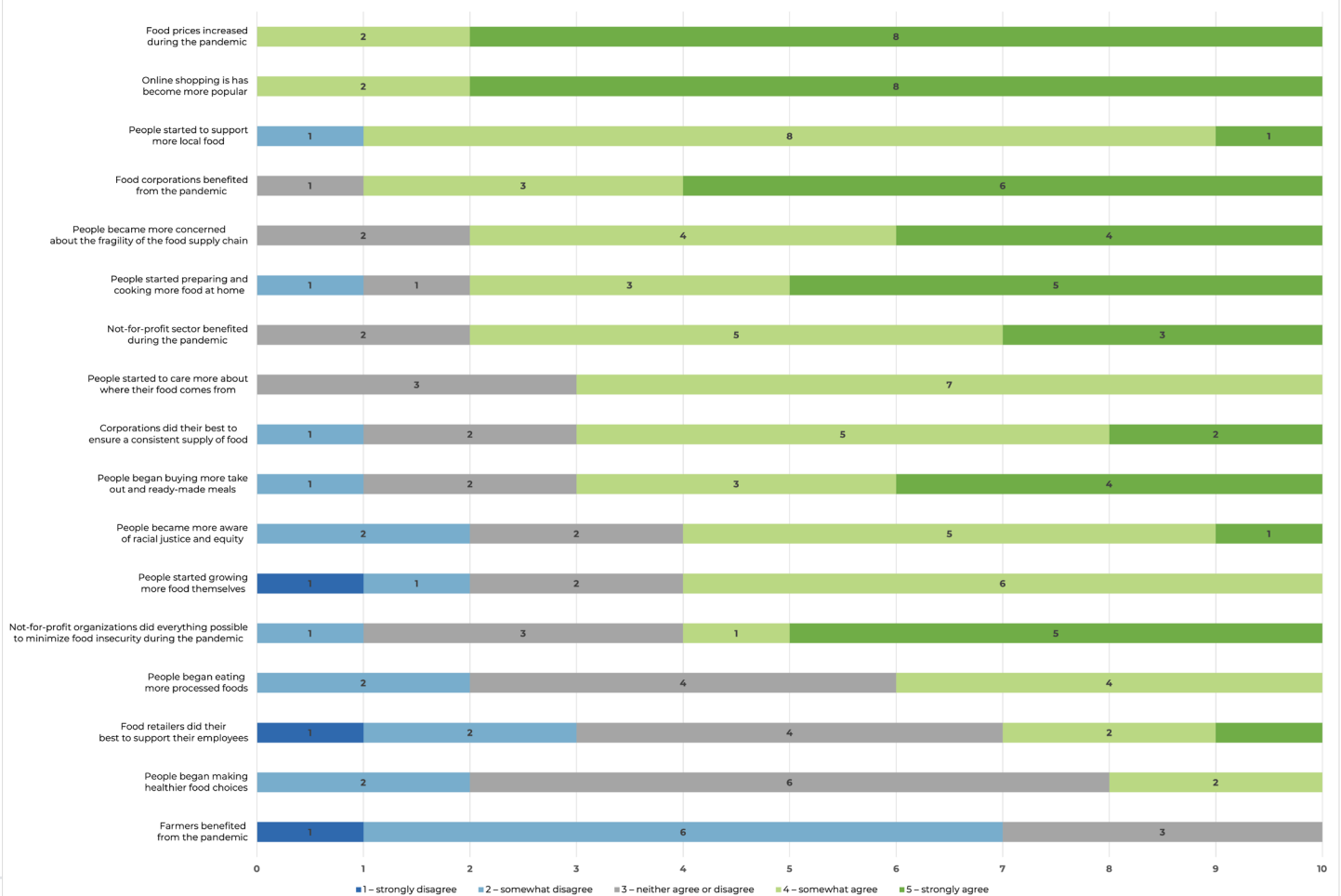
In addition to the above mentioned points, participants agreed on other changes in which the pandemic has impacted the food system:

- Online shopping has become more popular
- People started to support more local food
- Food corporations benefited from the pandemic
- People became more concerned about the fragility of the food supply chain
- People started preparing and cooking more food at home

See **Figure 4** for more details.

2 See more detail: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/catalogue/11-637-X>

Figure 4: The pandemic's impacts on the food system



Numbers in each bar indicate the frequency of answers in each of the five response categories (n=10).

Research about the multiple impacts of COVID-19 on the food system is ongoing, with data about changes in consumption patterns emerging. Participants of this study agree that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted consumer behaviour. Research suggests that consumers accessed food differently. Consumers participated in less frequent trips to grocery stores compared to pre-pandemic, dining in restaurants decreased significantly and ordering food online increased (Polasub et al., 2020). Some research also demonstrates that people were more likely to cook from home as they had more time to prepare food, which helped them focus on being healthy and it helped them relieve stress, boredom

and sense of isolation (Polasub et al., 2020). Our research supports this data as our participants agreed that people purchased significantly more food online than they did pre-pandemic and that people focused more on preparing and cooking food at home. Data on the consumption of healthy food demonstrates a range of behaviour. On the one hand, people were cooking more food at home, eating less meat and were generally more interested in healthy eating behaviour, while simultaneously consuming more sweet and salty snacks (Beckie & Tymczak, 2020). Research on the consumption of sustainable food is still lacking.



COVID-19'S IMPACTS ON SUSTAINABLE FOOD CONSUMPTION

What is lacking in defining sustainable food?

Food Secure Canada's 2019 report broadly defined sustainable food as "sustainably grown food is that which is produced and distributed in a way that supports the longevity of the food system, including its natural resources and the well-being of all of its participants now, and in the future" (Kramer et al., 2019, p. 8). When participants were asked whether they agreed with this definition, half of them agreed and found this definition simple, inclusive, and comprehensive. Participants who did not agree with the definition of sustainability questioned who gets to define sustainability and for whom. Mention was also made of the importance of including the people who produce food in the definition of sustainability. The colonialism and power imbalance embedded in this sustainability definition were also identified:

“ ‘Sustainability’ should question whose well-being is truly being supported by the food system. As of right now, ‘the food system’ benefits few

at the expense of many and definitions of ‘sustainability’ must acknowledge, address, and trouble assumptions that allow this to continue. Equitable access to land, resources, wealth, and autonomy over what kind of food one accesses should be prioritised in ‘sustainability’

Most participants were concerned that large corporations have co-opted the concept of sustainability and sustainable food. They also highlighted issues related to the impact of colonialism on the definition of sustainability, and associated privilege and power with the definition; for example, seven of the ten respondents believed that the concept of sustainability was developed using a colonial and settler lens and that sustainable foods, as defined by the West, are elitist. One participant proposed the use of an Indigenous lens in defining this concept:

“ *Traditional ways of sustainability are about the long term – where is my next meal coming from? Sovereignty is a better concept to describe the sustainability of Indigenous peoples; ... Sustainable food is just the food that you need.*”

Another respondent questioned the actual focus of large corporations on sustainability issues, arguing that:

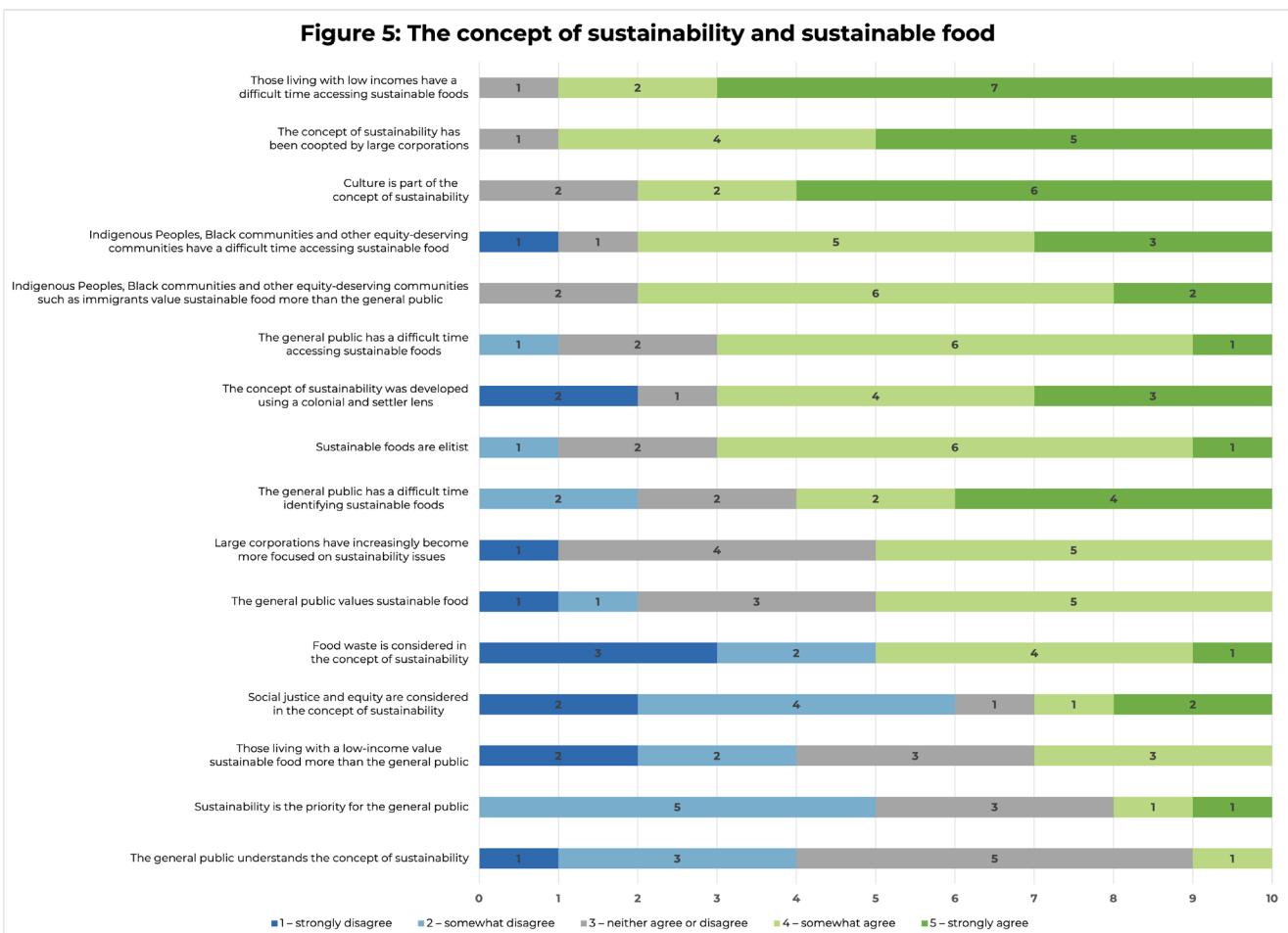
“... their “sustainability” metrics are either voluntary, self-regulated and/or arbitrary. This calls for an emphasis on the question: “Sustainability for who?”.

Similar to food security discussed earlier, previous studies have documented the related critiques concerning the privilege and power associated with sustainability.

Participants agreed that the general public has a difficult time accessing sustainable foods, including those with low incomes, as well as Indigenous

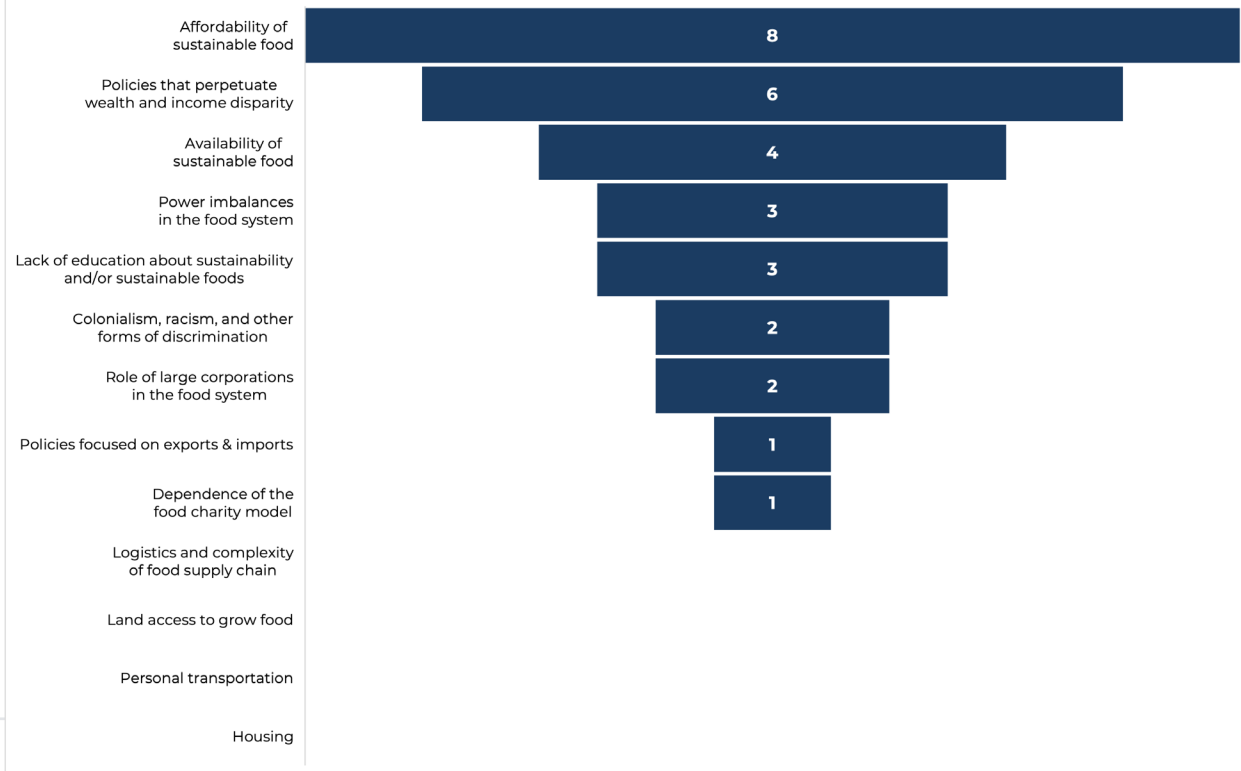
Peoples, Black communities and other equity-deserving communities (Figure 5). However, participants generally agreed that Indigenous Peoples, Black communities and other equity-deserving communities, as well as newcomers, value sustainable food more than the general public in Canada. Most participants were in agreement and explained that many newcomers to Canada have a strong relationship with growing food, as many of them grew food in their home countries, had close relationships with those who grew food, or purchased food grown closer to home. Further, sustainable food, such as fresh, home-grown, harvested, or ethically sourced food are embedded in many cultures and traditions.

Figure 5: The concept of sustainability and sustainable food



Numbers in each bar indicate the frequency of answers in each of the five response categories (n=10).

Figure 6: Barriers to sustainable food access



Numbers in each bar indicate the frequency of ratings by respondents (n=10).

Barriers to sustainable food access

The results of Food Secure Canada’s 2019 report before the pandemic (Kramer et al., 2019) found a lack of income/cost as the main barrier to purchasing sustainable foods among those living with a low income and/or those experiencing food insecurity. Similar findings were uncovered in this study, with the affordability of sustainable food being ranked as the most important barrier to accessing sustainable food during the pandemic (**Figure 6**).

The 2019 report also underlined the respondents’ opinions about the effects of racism and discrimination on

limiting and shaping food choices of communities, as well as the importance of culture when it comes to food. During the pandemic, these barriers remained. As one participant stated:

“ Before being labelled as ‘sustainable food’, those foods were deemed as just ‘food’. Affordability and access are the biggest barriers for folks to be able to acquire sustainable foods now but also, colonialism and colonization disrupted traditional foodways. As a result, there is still a disconnect with some BIPOC [Black, Indigenous and People of colour] communities and their cultural/traditional foods.”

Participants agree that the pandemic increased awareness in the public realm around racial justice and equity. Some believe that the broader Canadian population is now more aware of the opportunities and challenges that Indigenous Peoples face across the country. Some point to commitments like the Toronto Black Food Sovereignty Plan as an example that these issues are being taken seriously by decision-makers. One participant summarized this well by stating,

“ *The biggest example of this is the recent passing within the City of Toronto of the Toronto Black Food Sovereignty Plan which aims to champion the right of people of African descent to healthy and culturally-appropriate food, produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems and build their own institutions to advance community capacity and resilience for food access. This has been worked on for long before the pandemic happened but the momentum from the racial justice happening enabled this plan to be actualized and considered, finally. Will these changes remain for years to come? That is the big question that we will have to wait and see.*”

Others are more sceptical and claim it is too early to make decisions about whether substantial and concrete changes will take place, as it will require

government officials and industry leaders to make long-term changes. In addition, a couple participants have noted that they believe corporations have co-opted the language of racial equity and justice but are not committing to real change.

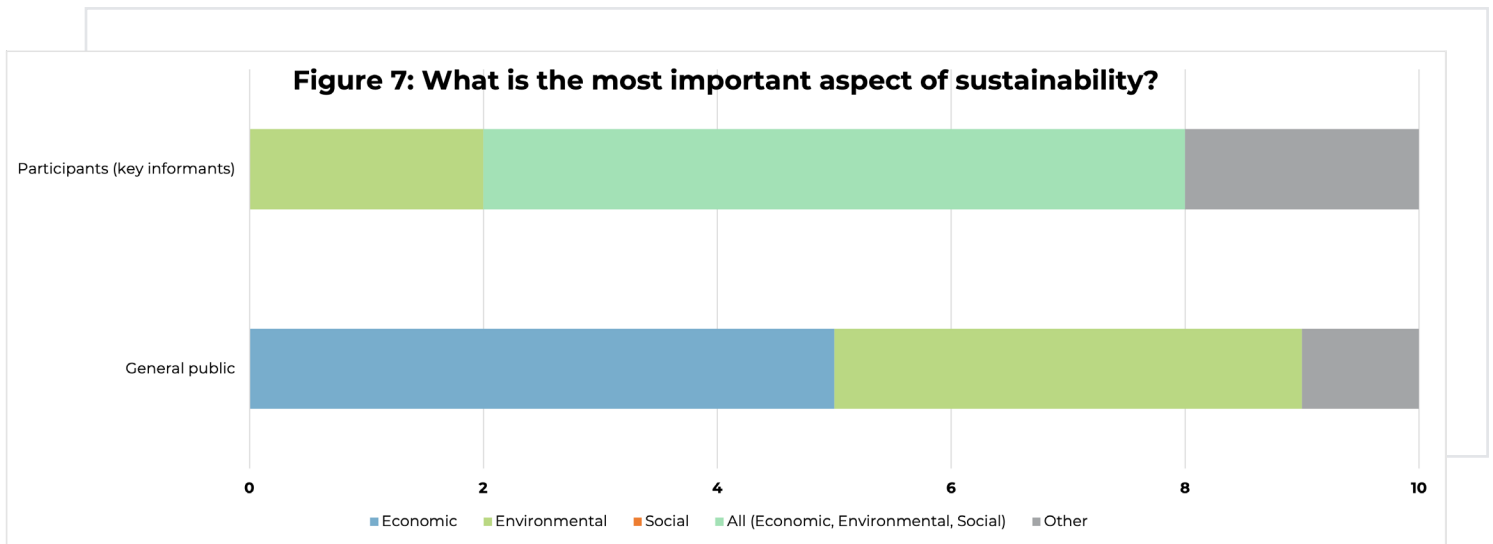
There is growing evidence on the role of structural racism and other systems of discrimination in accessing healthy and sustainable food for Black, Indigenous and People of colour (Larson et al., 2021; Marriott et al., 2022; O'Hara & Toussaint, 2021; Odoms-Young, 2018). For instance, a recent study in the United States (US) showed that food-insecure participants experienced various race-related barriers to accessing local food, including discrimination in retail food stores. As described by the participants during the interviews, their access to local retail food stores was affected by the behaviour of other customers and store employees when shopping, expressing racism or xenophobia (Larson et al., 2021). Another study in the US demonstrated the worsened condition of Black and brown low-income neighbourhoods in terms of access to local food during the pandemic (O'Hara & Toussaint, 2021). In response to disruptions in the global food supply chain and its pronounced effects on these neighbourhoods, policy innovations that encouraged community-centred strategies (such as urban agriculture) worked to increase both sustainability and equitable access to local food.

In the present study, most respondents considered policies that perpetuate wealth and income disparity as another significant barrier to sustainable food access during the pandemic. As discussed earlier, the measures taken during the pandemic did not protect those dependent on social protection benefits from experiencing food insecurity in Canada. Some studies, such as the study conducted by Pollard & Booth (2019), argue that effective government leadership using a multi-sectoral approach has a strong potential to address the social determinants of food insecurity in developed countries like Canada. Therefore, revisiting sociopolitical barriers in the moment of various crises, such as pandemic recovery and food prices influenced by the Ukraine war and other factors, helps shift the dialogue from food access to the broader goal of community empowerment.

What is the most important aspect of sustainability?

Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) defines a sustainable food system as “a food system that delivers food security and nutrition for all in such a way that the economic, social and environmental bases to generate food security and nutrition for future generations are not compromised” (Nguyen, 2018, p. 1). In this definition, economic sustainability ensures that it is financially beneficial to all actors involved in the food value chain; social sustainability accounts for the broad-based benefits for society, and environmental sustainability concerns the positive or neutral impact on the natural environment.





Numbers in each bar indicate the frequency of answers in each of the five response categories (n=10).

Figure 7 illustrates the respondents’ opinion about the most important aspect of sustainability for themselves as key informants and for the general public. Using the definition from the FAO, most of the respondents agree that all three aspects are important, and they mainly believe that economic sustainability is the most important aspect for the general public. Regarding the latter, a participant argued that because of the growing wealth gap in Canada, people are more concerned about food affordability. Some respondents considered that the general public’s awareness is low about the other aspects of sustainability, especially the social aspect. One informant believed that people generally conflate sustainability and the environment and use them interchangeably.

“ I think when you have to rely on low income, there’s very little else that can be of importance”.

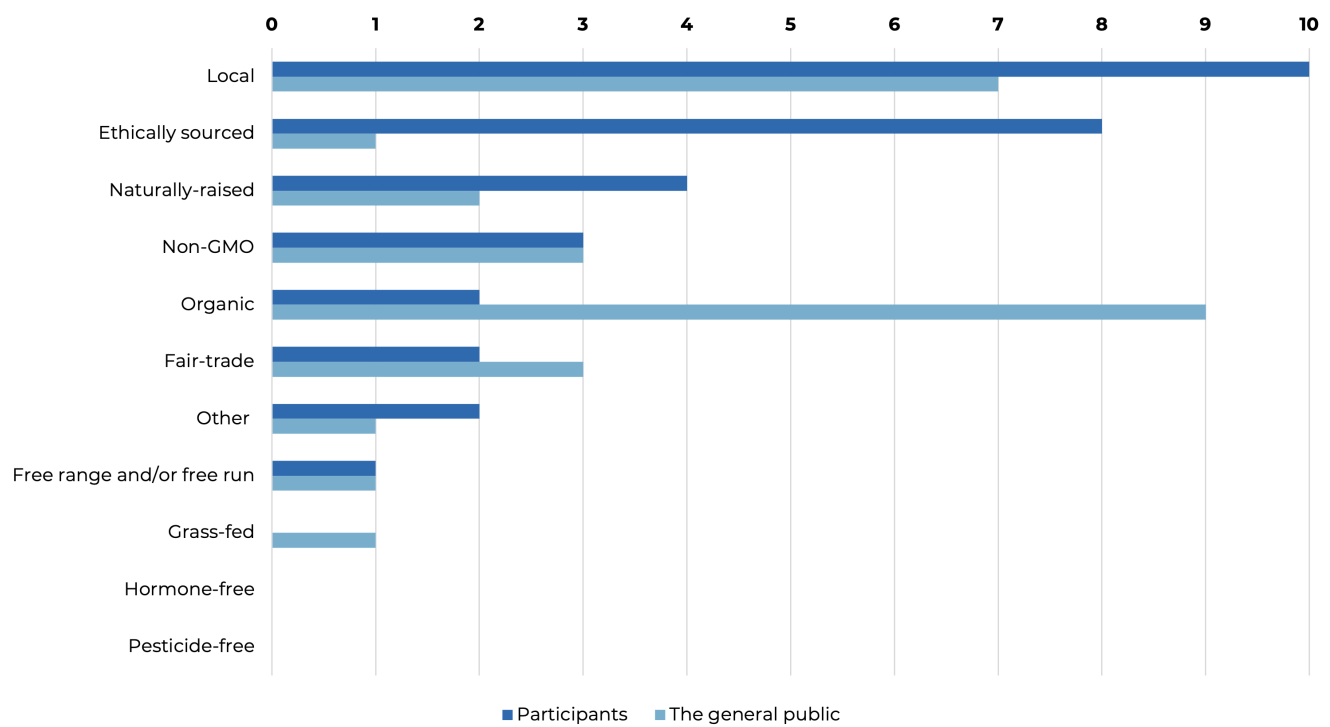
What type of sustainable foods is valued?

The 2019 report introduced sustainable food as “locally grown food that is produced without pesticides or genetically modified organisms uses fair labour practices for farm workers and treats farm animals humanely” in the focus groups. In report 2019, the most valued aspects of sustainably grown food were treating farm animals humanely and using fair labour practices for farm workers (Kramer et al., 2019).

In this study, participants identified local food as the most valuable type of sustainable food for themselves and identified organic and local food as most valued by the general public (**Figure 8**). Comparing the findings of the present study with the report in 2019, local food was ranked as more important during the pandemic. This is not surprising given that the pandemic revealed the fragility of the food system, raising concerns on the availability dimension of food security. The local food sector, by filling this gap, proved its value and received greater attention and interest in making a more diverse and sustainable food system. A recent study in Atlantic Canada attributed the pandemic to a greater interest in and

demand for locally produced foods (Maas et al., 2022). Participating in short food supply chains allows consumers to perceive themselves to have greater social benefits; more so than when participating in long supply chains (Maas et al., 2022). The study also found that consumers' value toward more local foods was motivated by supporting the local economy, freshness, product quality, and food safety (Maas et al., 2022). The current evidence, then, can inform policymakers about the value and capacity of the local food system for sustainable food consumption, raising the question of how to build a resilient local food system to promote food security in the post-pandemic years.

Figure 8: What type of sustainable food is valued by the general public and participants



Numbers indicate the frequency of ratings by respondents (n=10).

IMPLICATIONS FOR FOOD POLICY

The most recent report on the State of Food Security and Nutrition (SOFI) (2022) emphasizes “repurposing policy support to make healthy diets more affordable, sustainably and inclusively” amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (FAO et al., 2022, p. 2). The adverse effects of the pandemic on the Canadian food system drew attention to the other dimensions of food security (e.g., availability and stability) that were overlooked before the pandemic. As noted earlier, the measurement of food security in Canada is focused on the access dimension of food security. Before the pandemic, more concerns were around food access; nonetheless, food availability became a big concern for the government and people during the pandemic. The fragility of the food supply chain revealed the need to build a resilient, local food system in the post-pandemic recovery years. One participant said:

“ I never paid attention to the supply chain. We always assumed that food will always be available. But we took it for granted. We learned

more about the farmers and the production of food. We should cherish and value food more and where it comes from. The pandemic has taught us a good lesson about appreciation.”

Moreover, the pandemic uncovered previously existing structural inequalities that only policy and programs with a systematic approach can tackle. Addressing the complex nature of food systems, however, requires a combination of interconnected actions at the local, regional, and national levels (Nguyen, 2018). To meet the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030, especially SDG2 (Zero hunger), Canadian decision-makers need to recognize the right to food by including equity-deserving populations such as Black, Indigenous and People of colour and building sustainable and resilient food systems to deliver healthy and nutritious diets to all (SDG3: Good health and well-being, SDG10: reduce inequalities, and SDG11: sustainable cities, and communities).

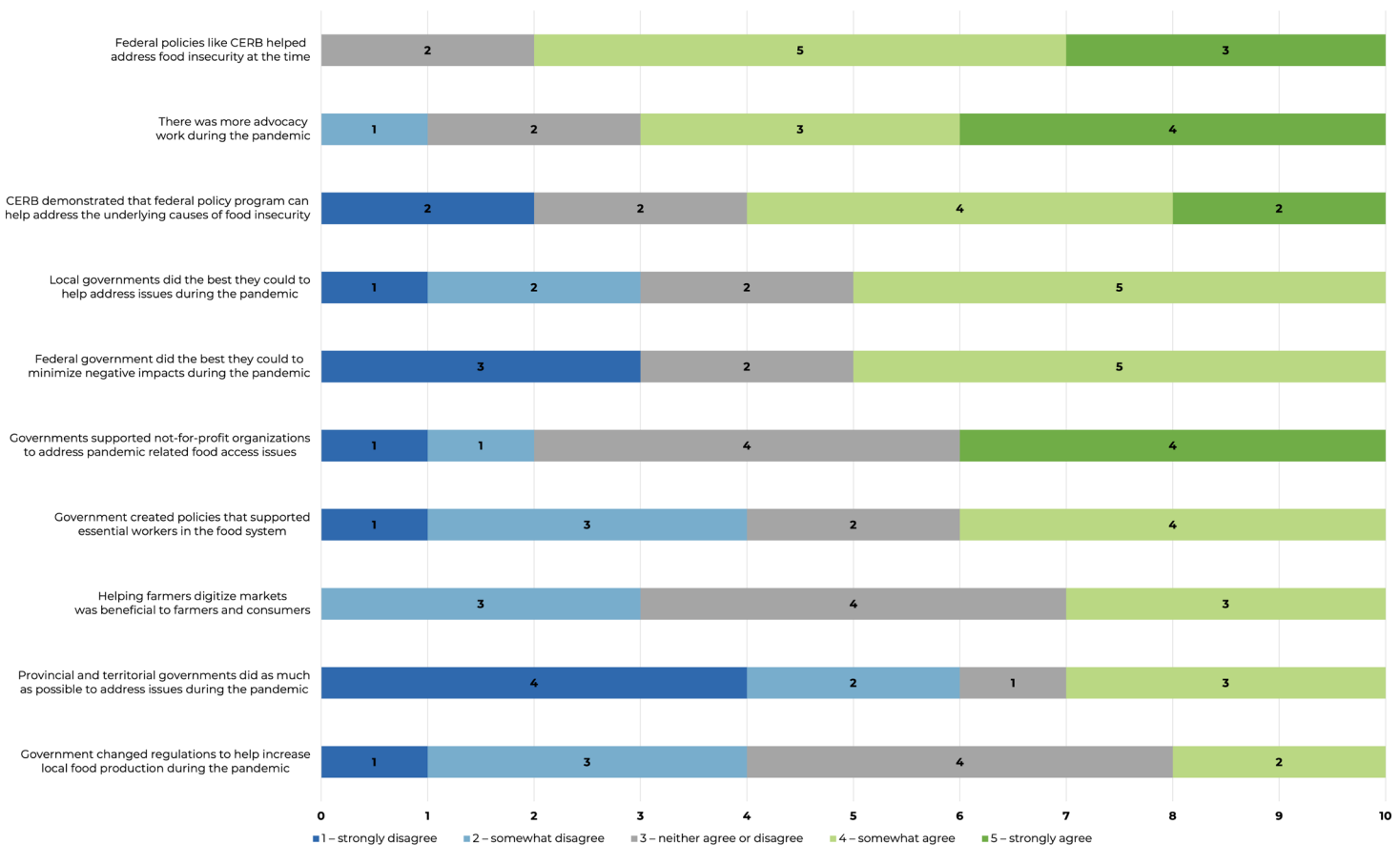
What policy mechanisms have been effective during the pandemic in increasing access to sustainable food?

As shown in **Figure 9**, participants had little agreement on which policy options aimed at increasing access to sustainable food during the pandemic worked. However, most participants did agree on the effectiveness of federal policies such as the Canada Emergency Response Benefit in reducing the risk

of food insecurity, giving evidence that income interventions work to address the underlying causes, such as poverty. While this was a good starting point for a national response, there remain some gaps:

“ CERB demonstrated that there are still huge constraints around who is able to avail of government support, who it is clawed back from, and how much political will is needed for a more long-lasting investment in people.”

Figure 9: What policy mechanisms have been effective during the pandemic in increasing access to sustainable food?



Numbers in each bar indicate the frequency of answers in each of the five response categories (n=10).



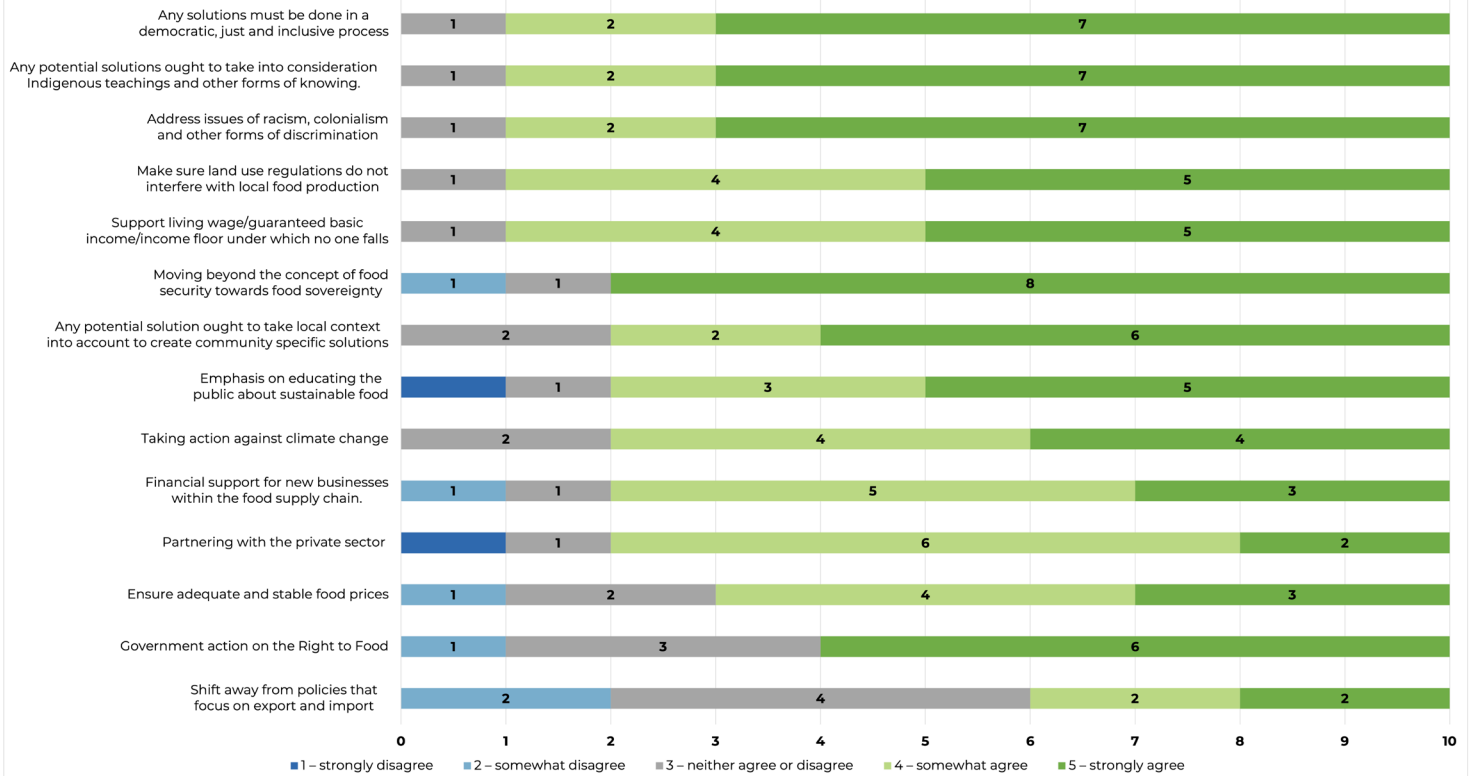
Many participants stated that there was more advocacy work during the pandemic to improve access to sustainable food. A recent study reviewed the literature published from March 2020 to the end of August 2021 to assess the role of social movements in responding to challenges facing Canada's food system (Lowitt et al., 2022). The findings highlighted the role of civil society-led food movements in raising awareness around the root causes of food security in Canada by working on the ground to enhance the food system's sustainability and equity. Other studies argue that civil society-led food movements contribute to this goal by advocating for local food systems, by emphasizing just and democratic processes (e.g., production, distribution, etc.) through which food is made available and accessible to people (Andrée et al., 2019; Clark et al., 2021). In other policy areas, the key informants were split between those who agreed and disagreed about the efficacy of policies.

How to move forward to ensure more sustainable and equitable food systems in the long term?

When asked questions about policy actions towards equity and sustainability almost all (9/10) noted the following **(Figure 10)**:

- Any solutions must be done in a democratic, just, and inclusive process
- Any potential solutions ought to take into consideration Indigenous teachings and other forms of knowing
- Address issues of racism, colonialism and other forms of discrimination
- Make sure land use regulations (federal, provincial/territorial or municipal) do not interfere with local food production
- Support living wage/guaranteed basic income/income floor under which no one falls

Figure 10: How to move forward to ensure more sustainable and equitable food systems in the long term?



Numbers in each bar indicate the frequency of answers in each of the five response categories (n=10).

Additionally, there was a high agreement (8/10) on the following solutions:

- **Moving beyond the concept of food security toward food sovereignty**
- **Any potential solution ought to take local context into account to create community-specific solutions**
- **Emphasis on educating the public about sustainable food**
- **Taking action against climate change**
- **Financial support for new businesses within the food supply chain**
- **Partnering with the private sector**

Interestingly, ensuring adequate and stable food prices was not among the highly agreed prices, although seven participants believed it could be a potential solution.

“ Any solutions must be democratic and inclusive, but such that power differentials are taken into consideration. ‘Multistakeholderism’ is exploding across food system governance, locally, nationally, and globally, but we lack the research to understand fully what that means.”

Among the various policy solutions, there was a strong agreement on moving beyond the concept of food security toward food sovereignty. As participants elaborated in the previous parts, there is an emphasis on considering the social and cultural aspects of food in food policy frameworks. Food sovereignty considers that through a set of principles that prioritises democratic control of food systems that puts people's needs, such as an ecologically sound and equitable food system, at the centre of food policies. Food sovereignty can be a prerequisite for achieving food security because it focuses on unequal

power relations, and on ensuring that interventions (i.e., economic, market-based) are linked to social and environmental outcomes for food systems (Patel, 2009).

Overall, the literature and responses from participants show that working towards just food security is not sufficient and that we should be aiming for changing the food system as a whole, no matter how complex it is. To achieve this, policymakers can work with a diversity of stakeholders to work towards strong public policies in support of food sovereignty.



CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research explored how the pandemic impacted sustainable food consumption among those living with a low income as well as Black, Indigenous and People of colour. The report highlights that concepts such as food security, sustainability, and sustainable consumption are complex and nuanced. This research supports literature that calls for the integration of justice, equity, and other social issues within the concept of sustainability (Agyeman et al., 2003). Future research can explore the opportunities and challenges of adopting a unified definition. Would this help or hinder decision-makers and practitioners to develop solutions that will increase sustainable consumption, and could it adequately encompass equity and justice imperatives? Participants' concern about the private sector co-opting the concept of sustainability adds another level of complexity.

Compared to the 2019 study, issues of racism, colonialism and systemic forms of discrimination are more pronounced and at the forefront as barriers to sustainable consumption and food access overall. Although systemic forms of discrimination have always hindered food access, these issues appear to be better understood by the general public since the pandemic. Whether these issues continue to be at the forefront of food system discussions remains to be seen. There is potential for more in-depth research about the relationship between racism, colonialism and food banking. Research can also explore how forced assimilation of colonialism impacts people's relationships with food, food insecurity, value and access to sustainable foods. There is potential to further investigate sustainable consumption among various equity-deserving groups, such as people with disabilities, people with mental health issues, the elderly, 2SLGBTQ+ or immigrants. Some of these communities were not represented in our sample of research participants nor did the study specifically focus on the impacts on these equity-deserving groups.

Other barriers to sustainable food consumption, such as food prices or policies that perpetuate wealth and income disparity existed before the pandemic and will likely continue after the pandemic. This suggests that there is a lack of mechanisms, tools, and solutions at various levels that successfully address these issues. Participants of

this study demonstrated that the non-profit sector is in a unique space that allows it to quickly adapt and accommodate the needs of communities in a time of crisis. Non-profit organisations hold a wealth of knowledge about their communities; they can navigate, adapt, and collaborate with various partners to transfer information between communities and governments. Their role in emergency management should not be underestimated, but also not replace public policy, which ultimately, should play a strong role in emergency management and systemic change.

In conclusion, emphasising sustainability in food systems policy and programming is vital to achieving progress on all 17 of the SDGs. To meet the SDGs by 2030, and especially SDG2 (Zero hunger), Canadian decision-makers need to recognize the right to food by including equity-deserving populations such as Black, Indigenous and People of colour and building sustainable and resilient food systems to deliver healthy and nutritious diets to all (SDG3: Good health and well-being, SDG10: reduce inequalities, and SDG11: sustainable cities, and communities). By assessing the impacts of COVID-19 on sustainable food consumption in marginalized communities, FSC contributes to the evidence needed to inform policy and program guidelines that encourage sustainable consumption and make it easier for consumers of all income levels to partake. The findings of this study contribute insight and information, that helps to understand better how the accessibility of sustainable foods for those living with a low income and Black, Indigenous and People of colour consumers has changed as a result of the pandemic but also, what other shifts occurred in the past two years, and how to move forward to ensure more sustainable, just, and equitable food systems in the long-term.



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About Food Secure Canada

Food Secure Canada (FSC) is a pan-Canadian alliance of organisations and individuals working together to advance food security and food sovereignty in Canada. FSC works towards a vision of a just, healthy and sustainable food system, which honours our relationship to the earth and each other. FSC strives to embed reconciliation, decolonization, racial justice and broader food justice principles in everything we do.

www.foodsecurecanada.org

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