



EAT
think
VOTE

RIGHT TO FOOD

This policy backgrounder has been prepared in collaboration with Nadia Lambek in its first iteration and with Jessica Dufresne for the current version.



FSC
RAD

Food
Secure
Canada
Réseau
pour une alimentation
durable

KEY STATISTICS:

- 13.8% percent of households in Canadian provinces experience some degree of food insecurity, meaning they lack consistent physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs.
- Food insecurity rates in the territories are well above the national Canadian average: 52.3% in Nunavut and 20.3% in the Northwest Territories.
- 38.2% of single-parent families headed by women are food insecure.
- 68% of households on social assistance are food insecure.
- Households with people of indigenous, Latin American or African descent experience significantly higher levels of food insecurity.

Context

Canada is one of the largest agricultural producers and wealthiest countries in the world, yet four million Canadians, among them 1.15 million children, have trouble meeting their food needs. This problem is far worse in northern and remote communities, where, in Nunavut, for example, two thirds of children are food insecure. Food insecurity takes a substantial toll on physical and mental health, engendering significant costs to the healthcare system.

Food is a basic human right, and we all have the right to feed ourselves, our families and our communities in dignity. The federal government has an international legal obligation to ensure the full realization of the right to food for all those living in Canada, in light of its engagement to respect (to not infringe upon), protect (prevent third parties from infringing upon), and realize (put in place programs) this right when it ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1976. As was indicated by former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food Olivier de Schutter during his 2012 mission to Canada, we have the capacity to ensure domestic access to nutritious and culturally desirable food for all and achieve zero hunger. We need the right laws, policies and programs to make it happen. The UN's top recommendation was either a comprehensive law or a Right to Food Strategy, which the national food policy should embrace.

Adopting a right-to-food approach would result in a serious change in how we think about food, govern our food system and address food insecurity in Canada. It also came with a set of obligations for the government, such as the duty to ensure participation, accountability, non-discrimination, transparency, human dignity, empowerment, and the rule of law (Panther Principles, developed by the FAO). This rights-based approach commits to the long-term goal of ending, not merely reducing, hunger and food insecurity. Social and economic rights are not expected to be realized overnight, but we can commit to core minimum standards as a starting point and work towards progressive realisation over time.



Context

The right to food implies that hunger and food insecurity should not be left to charity. It enshrines available, accessible, adequate and sustainably produced food as a human right with corresponding obligations on the state to ensure the full realization of that right.

The right to food implies a move away from focusing on low prices of foods and a reliance on charity-based approaches such as food banks, to policies that focus on rights-based social protection, redistribution of resources, protection of living wages and support of local and sustainable food production. While the causes and experiences of food insecurity are complex, the overwhelming factor is poverty, and policy solutions must therefore address income levels, including the systematic problems which lead to food insecurity.

To do so, speaking about food in terms of human rights allows us to include socioeconomic and environmental factors as connected and interdependent, which necessitates multisectoral effort at multiple levels, as well as a consistent participation from society, in addition to recognizing the needs and identifying solutions.

It is important to note that while some of the government's obligations towards ensuring the right to food require program costs (such as rights-based social protection schemes, programs for marginalized groups or extension services for agroecological farming practices), others do not. The state is also required to regulate its own activities and the activities of third parties to ensure they do not interfere with the right to food. Such regulations could include legislating living wages or reviewing and changing policies and laws in place to ensure they do not interfere with access to country foods, land for new farmers, or seeds and regulating pesticides and fertilizers.



Policy Proposals

- The national food policy should adopt a human-rights approach that should then guide the implementation and evaluation of the full suite of policies that affect food insecurity, including, in particular, the federal Poverty Reduction Strategy and Nutrition North.
- Canada's Poverty Reduction Strategy should work with provinces to improve social programs and to ensure there is an income floor below which no one can fall so that all Canadians can afford adequate, nutritious food.
- In collaboration with Health Canada and INAC, overhaul Nutrition North to improve access and affordability of food by strengthening northern regional food systems, including public support for programs enhancing access to traditional and community-grown foods.
- Ensure that international trade and investment agreements do not undermine public programs that enhance respect for human rights, sustainable livelihoods and/or food sovereignty.
- Establish benchmarks in recognizing the right to food and design programs with which to reach them. Ensure these programs are properly resourced, monitored and accountable.



Questions for candidates

- Why do you think that Canada has not yet translated its international agreements towards the right to food within the country?
- While the Food Policy for Canada represents a big step in the right direction, it does not refer to the right to food. Do you feel that the right to food should be included in the national Food Policy?
- How can we ensure that Canada respects its commitment to healthy, sufficient, and culturally appropriate food for all people in Canada? What checks and balances could be put in place?



Key resources

Documents on the Right to Food in Canada

- Olivier De Schutter (2012). Mission to Canada, report to the UN Human Rights Council, UN Doc. A/HRC/22/50/Add (see esp. recommendations)
- Lambek (2017). Right to Food Policy Brief. Food Secure Canada.
- Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (2016) Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under articles 16 and 17 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Sixth periodic reports of States parties due in 2010-Canada (57th session, E/C.12/CAN/CO/6)
- Rideout, Riches, Ostry, Buckingham & MacRae (2005) Bringing home the right to food in Canada: challenges and possibilities for achieving food security (10:6 Public Health Nutrition 566)

Documents Defining the Scope and Content of the Right to Food

- United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1999). General Comment No. 12.
- UN Committee on World Food Security (2004). The Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security.
- UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, The Right to Adequate Food: Fact Sheet No. 34 (2010).
- Kong (2009) The Right to Food for All: A Right-Based Approach to Hunger and Social Inequality (32 Suffolk Transnat'l L. Rev. 525)

Documents on National Implementation of the Right to Food

- Olivier De Schutter (2013). Assessing a Decade of Right to Food Progress UN Doc. A/68/288.
- Olivier De Schutter (2014). The Transformative Potential of the Right to Food UN Doc. A/HRC/25/57.
- Civil Society Report, "10 Years of the Right to Adequate Food Guidelines: Progress, Obstacles and the Way Ahead" (2014).
- UN-FAO, Right to Food Methodological Toolbox.
- Ad hoc working group on the right to food (2017). Ensuring the Human Right to Food Through A Food Policy for Canada.