



Nova Scotia Nutrition Council

The struggle to feed our families
in Nova Scotia:
What does story sharing tell us?
May, 2004



The Participatory Food Security Project... What is it?

The Participatory Food Security Project had two parts.

Part 1: Participatory Food Costing in Nova Scotia

The cost of a basic nutritious diet in Nova Scotia was examined. People from Family Resource Centres/Projects (FRC/Ps) throughout Nova Scotia participated as researchers and were trained to be food costers in their communities. The food costers used the National Nutritious Food Basket (NNFB) to find out the cost of a basic nutritious diet from 57 grocery stores across the province in the spring and fall of 2002. The NNFB includes a list of 66 foods that can be used to estimate the cost of a "bare bones" nutritious diet based on *Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating*. The results of this work showed that, in Nova Scotia, the monthly cost of a nutritious diet for a family of four was \$572.90. What this means is that many families in the province, especially those working for minimum wage or supported by Income Assistance, do not have enough money to purchase this basic nutritious diet when other basic costs (heat, lights, child-care, phone etc.) are factored in.

Part 2: Story Sharing Workshops In Nova Scotia

A series of 8 Story Sharing Workshops were held with 54 women from 10 FRC/Ps around the province. These women came together during the winter and spring of 2003 to share their stories about how living with food insecurity has affected their lives. Using an adapted Story Dialogue Method¹, the participants in the Workshops analyzed the stories by asking themselves four questions:

- ✓ What is going on?
- ✓ Why is this happening?
- ✓ So what did we learn from this?
- ✓ Now what are we going to do about it?

This report is a summary of the results the Story Sharing Workshops of the Participatory Food Security Project. We used direct quotes from the women who participated to answer the four questions and to tell the story of food insecurity in Nova Scotia from the hearts and minds of those who live it. You'll see these voices presented in text boxes throughout the document.

What is Food Security?

Food Security for All in Nova Scotia is the ultimate goal of the Participatory Food Security Project. **Food security** exists when everyone can get all the safe, nutritious food that they want and enjoy in a way that maintains their dignity². Food security also exists when people are able to earn a living wage by growing, producing, processing, handling, retailing and serving food, as well as when the quality of land, air and water are protected for future generations⁸. **Food insecurity**, the opposite term, means that people are not able to get enough healthy foods that they need and enjoy. It means people wonder about where their food comes from or worry about the quality of food they eat or where their next meal is coming from. It also means people wonder if there will be less food in the future because of the way we are growing and producing food now. Many factors can create barriers to food security. However, the main focus for this project was on how not having enough money prevents people from getting the food they need to support their own and their family's health and wellbeing.

This is how a young mother described food security in one of the Story Sharing Workshops:

...hunger is the actual physical pain, but when I think of food security I think more of feeling self-assured and feeling safe and feeling that okay, I am going to have enough money this month to feed my kids...

What is it like to be food insecure in Nova Scotia?

Through the Story Sharing Workshops, women were able to talk about what it was like to live with food insecurity. Hearing these rich stories allowed us to better understand the reality of food insecurity. It gave us a glimpse of the pain that people living with food insecurity feel. What we heard was that people felt an overall lack of a support from their community and from the people around them. They said that this lack of support was shown in three ways:

- Feeling judged by others
- Organizational policies/practices that do not support the real needs of people who are food insecure
- The struggle to get nutritious food

This lack of support resulted in a great deal of **stress** for those experiencing food insecurity.

Judgement

People living with food insecurity in Nova Scotia believed other members of their community judged them because of their situation. They also felt judged by the organizations that were supposed to be helping them, such as food banks and the Provincial Income Assistance Program. This feeling of being judged was often harsher in rural communities and caused people to feel bad about themselves because they couldn't "provide" for their family or meet societal expectations. They felt that people in their communities often made assumptions about why they were in the situation they were in. People living with food insecurity thought that others were insensitive because they didn't understand what their lives were like or the issues that caused food insecurity.

2. Canadian Dietetic Association (The) (1991). *Hunger and food security in Canada: The official position paper of The Canadian Dietetic Association*. Journal of the Canadian Dietetic Association, 52(3), p. 139.

3. BC Food Systems Network (2001). *Food security*. Retrieved February 20, 2003 from <http://www.fooddemocracy.org/security.html>

Voices...

Assumptions made everywhere. People can't believe others are hungry in Nova Scotia. [The hungry] get looked down on.

...If you want to speak out and say that you need help, then you always have to be thinking, you know... Is my boss gonna be [around] or my friends, or you know... Because in a small town, everybody knows...

So for some of us who end up in a situation where we don't have enough to eat, we already know shame. Shame is so comfortable. It just fits like a jacket. So, you go somewhere and someone gives you a bit more, you take it. It feels normal.

Unsupportive Organizational Policies

People participating in the Workshops felt very strongly that their real needs were not being met by the organizations that were supposed to be assisting them - for example, food banks and the Provincial Income Assistance Program.

Food Banks

Clearly, food banks play an important role in combating hunger. However, it was felt that society sees food banks as an answer to the problem of hunger and food insecurity. People participating in the Workshops; however, felt that food banks were not meeting their real needs and that in the end they were just a band-aid solution to the problem. For example, the operating times for food banks make it difficult for some people who need the service to use it - such as low income workers and students who are employed during the day. They also believed that sometimes food bank volunteers give better treatment to certain clients. In addition, many of the people who used food banks thought the quality and variety of food available was often inadequate.

The Canadian Federation of Food Banks found that in March of 2003, 20, 263 Nova Scotians used a food bank at least once.²

Voices...

I go to the Food Bank every month...It is rare to get meat or fish. The last time I brought lettuce home I peeled over half of it away to be able to eat it. Most of ten I throw out three to four cans because they are out of date or there are dents in the cans. ... My family and myself, have had food poisoning, caused from the food from the Food Bank. I have been to the doctor's and she confirmed this.

2. Orchard, L., Penfold, R. & Sage, D.. (2003). Hunger Count 2003. Something has to give: Food banks filling the policy gap in Canada. Canadian Association of Food Banks.

Income Assistance

Nova Scotians depending on the Income Assistance Program are at high risk for food insecurity. The stories highlighted a number of issues Nova Scotians have with the Income Assistance program that impact on food security. Participants indicated that they had a hard time finding out what they and their families were eligible for. They believed that policies were often inflexible and did not allow their situations to be addressed individually. They also felt that their caseworkers sometimes did not treat

them with respect. Other concerns about this program surfaced around the amount of money people on Income Assistance can keep from other jobs they may hold and the perceived "clawback" of the Child Tax Benefit. Currently in NS those on Income Assistance can only keep 30% of any income earned from jobs they may hold⁵. Also, it was thought that families are not able to reap any real benefits of the National Child Benefit as children are no longer included in the provincial Income Assistance Allowance budgets.

Part 1 of the Participatory Food Security Project confirmed what they experienced - that Nova Scotians on Income Assistance could not afford to purchase a basic nutritious diet.³

As of December 31, 2003 there were 32,608 identified clients and 56,139 beneficiaries receiving Income Assistance.⁴

Voices...

Another issue I see is the, uh, strict social assistance policy. People [Income Assistance Case Workers] hiding behind policies and rules and not looking at me as an individual.

That's a big thing. If [Income Assistance Case Workers] could respect me as an individual as a little of bit of respect goes such a long ways. Treat people as you want to be treated.

Because the child tax benefit is supposed to compensate... When they raised child tax, penny for penny they deducted it from social assistance... Penny for penny.

3. NSNC, FRC/Ps & AHPRC. (2003). *Participatory Food Costing Project: Phase 1 Building Food Security in Nova Scotia: Using a Participatory Process to Collect Evidence and Enhance the Capacity of Community Groups to Impact Policy*. Halifax, NS: Author.

4. *Employment Services and Income Assistance Program*. (2004) Personal communication.

5. Community Advocates Network. (2003, November). *IMPACT! The effect of Nova Scotia's new income assistance system on people who need assistance*. Halifax, NS.

The struggle to get nutritious food

Discussions at the Workshops helped to highlight the many challenges women living on low income face when trying to get food. One challenge is related to the "flexibility of the food budget". In food insecure households the food budget is often used to pay other bills, such as heat and lights. Also, the higher cost of nutritious foods, compared to "less" nutritious foods is also a barrier, particularly in rural areas where food costs were thought to be higher. This feeling was later confirmed by the Phase I Food Costing data, which showed that the cost of the NNFB was higher in stores located in rural compared to urban areas. Transportation was also highlighted as a major barrier to getting nutritious foods. Workshop participants also described an increase in food prices just when Income Assistance checks were issued.

Voices...

Higher gas prices and higher insurance premiums mean I have to spend more money on my car in order to get to my job. The money will have to come from my food budget.

Most parents [living on low income] their main goal is for their kids not to be hungry. You know, does it mean buying a bag of apples that they eat for a couple of days or the hotdogs they eat for a week. And they're gonna be a lot fuller eating a hotdog, so I go buy them.

... Once in a while I'll have just enough to call for a taxi. You sort of rob Peter to pay Paul. Like if you have so much to put on a bill... Sometimes if you need that extra \$5 for a taxi, but it doesn't go on your bill... It goes on transportation.

Stress

Participants talked a lot about the stress caused by food insecurity. This stress was most evident among those who cared for others - for example parents caring for children. The experiences with being judged, dealing with the Provincial Income Assistance Program and food banks and the struggles to access nutritious food caused a lot of this stress. Caregivers in food insecure households worked very hard to protect their children from the realities of food insecurity, even at the expense of their own health and well-being. However, despite their best efforts, their children were often exposed to the harshness of living with food insecurity.

Voices...

The most difficult situation I have had to face is the realization that I cannot afford to feed my family.... At times I have become very depressed and angry with myself for having children and not being able to properly maintain the type of life they so deserve. I've gone through stores with \$20 knowing that this is for two weeks... I would have never thought that I would be in such a predicament...

So social services wouldn't help me. The food bank couldn't help me. And it was really stressful to have your friends bringing you food and your kid is like, why is everyone bringing us food?... So it was stressful.

My other children now realize why we go to the food bank... My son is very embarrassed that his Mom goes to the food bank... That we are poor.

Why are some Nova Scotians Food Insecure?

The Story Sharing Workshops gave women involved in FRC/Ps across the province a chance to think and talk about why some Nova Scotians are food insecure. We knew we could not uncover ALL of the causes of food insecurity, but we wanted to uncover some of the causes that participants thought were most important. The Workshops pinpointed two main barriers to achieving food security in Nova Scotia. These were:

- ✓ Inadequate income
- ✓ Lack of social supports.

Inadequate Income

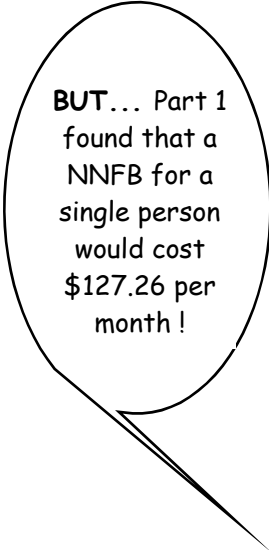
For the women who shared their stories the problem of inadequate income in regards to food insecurity centred on two main topics:

- Insufficient Income Assistance
- Low minimum wage rates

Income Assistance Rates

Many people who rely on the Income Assistance Program in Nova Scotia are at risk for experiencing food insecurity. Throughout the workshops, discussions highlighted that the amount of money available through this program was inadequate to meet basic needs. There were strong feelings that the money available through this program did not allow those relying on it to purchase a nutritious diet for themselves or their families.

The food costing data collected from Part 1 of the Participatory Food Security Project showed that a two-parent household of four (mother-30; father-30; boy-13; and girl-7) living on Income Assistance is **\$277.00 short** each month when the cost of the NNFB and all other basic bills such as housing, heat and lights are factored in.³



BUT... Part 1 found that a NNFB for a single person would cost \$127.26 per month!

Voices...

My allowance [on income assistance] for fuel... Is \$1000 a year. And my... electricity, which is, you know, my heat... in four months it was \$1500. And they [Income Assistance] give me \$1000 a year, and that's the process ... They can't give me any more than that. That's the rule. They can't give me any more than that.

I'm on assistance too because of a medical leave. And they don't provide ... very much...for food... Okay you're single. You're cut back on ... I'm only allowed \$40 a month. A full month. So I have to take a multivitamin. Pay \$10 or \$12 or a multivitamin just to get what I need. And in the past I've had to, umm... Like sell a dresser set....just to get extra food money.

Minimum Wage

During the Workshops, it also became evident that Nova Scotians working for minimum wage experience food insecurity. Many of those who live on minimum wage - the working poor - often feel disregarded and overlooked. In the discussions many agreed that there is little incentive to go off Income Assistance into minimum wage jobs.

The hardships of minimum wage workers was clearly shown in Part 1 of the Participatory Food Costing project which found that those earning minimum wage have LESS expendable income than those on Income Assistance. For example, a one-parent household of three (mother-30; boy 7, girl 4) earning the current minimum wage (\$6.25/hr) falls **\$421.15 short** each month when the cost of the NNFB and other basic costs are added.

Voices...

... Umm... You know, they looked at me and thought well if you're not on welfare why wouldn't you have money? Hello! I'm not on welfare and that's why I don't have money. I work and I try to make...I only get two pays per month.... So for me to go to that food bank... It's really something because... you know... I'm supposed to be part of the solution, not part of the problem..

I can't live off [the minimum wage]... I'm making probably a couple dollars more than minimum wage and I find it hard.

Who's gonna want to get off assistance... and work at a low paying job and make the same amount of money, minus childcare, minus spending time with your children, if they don't have to. Who's gonna do that?

Lack of Social Supports

Another barrier to achieving food security identified by the participants in the Story Sharing Workshops is the lack of social supports to help make things better for people and families living on low incomes and experiencing food insecurity. Findings from the Workshops clearly indicated that people living with food insecurity WANT to improve their situation. However, many felt that there were a lack of programs to help them do this. This lack of social supports seemed to be most serious in rural areas.

Voices...

Anyone that wants to go to school, there should be just a budget for them... And that's why I can't take a step forward and go to school.. The situation that I'm [in] now it's difficult enough... I'm imagining myself in school and having three of them [children] all like that and I mean cause you know what's gonna happen. I know that the support is not out there for me.

But, even myself being on social assistance I have a big problem with them just giving you a cheque every month. They don't put on workshops. There's no, umm, support there [to move into employment].

In our town.....It's such a small place that I don't think there is a big support system there for people.

From these discussion participants then focused on:
“So what have we learned?”

This is what was said:

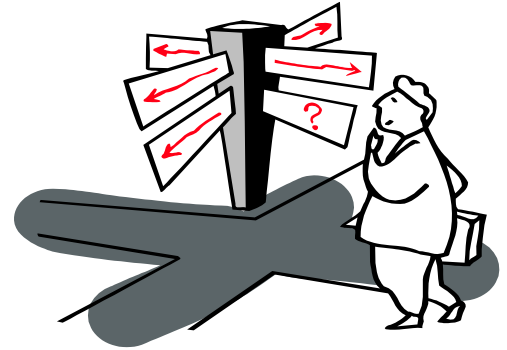
- X. **We learned** - Many families in Nova Scotia can't afford or access nutritious foods
 - Nutritious foods need to be more affordable.
- X. **We learned** - The impact of food insecurity on the health of Nova Scotians is significant.
- X. **We learned** - Minimum wage and Income Assistance rates are too low to support the health and well-being of the individuals and families that rely on these sources of income.
- X. **We learned** - People who are on Income Assistance are not always fully informed of their rights and what they are eligible for through the Income Assistance Program.
- X. **We learned** - Social supports are lacking for low-income earners who are food insecure.
- X. **We learned** - Food banks are not the answer to improving food insecurity.
- X. **We learned** - Nova Scotians who are food insecure feel judged.
- X. **We learned** - Society judges those who are living with food insecurity and make assumptions about their situations because they don't understand the issues that cause it.
 - People need to know and understand more about the actual struggles faced by those who experience food insecurity.
- X. **We learned** - The experience of being food insecure eats away at self esteem.
- X. **We learned** - Food Banks need policies that meet the needs of the hungry and food insecure people they are trying to help.



Finally, participants asked:
'What can we do to address Food Insecurity in Nova Scotia?'

Participants felt that we need to:

- ✓ **Work together** to educate the public about the real lived experiences of food insecurity in Nova Scotia and what is causing this situation. This will make it less likely that people will judge those living with food insecurity. Feeling less judged will, in turn, help decrease the levels of stress and improve the self-esteem of people who are food insecure.
- ✓ **Work together** to help those who work with programs to assist people facing food insecurity to understand and be sensitive to the issues faced by their clients.
- ✓ **Work together** to involve more food bank clients in actually running food banks. This is a way to get input from those who experience food insecurity and may allow these facilities to better meet the needs of those who use them.
- ✓ **Work together** to change policies to ensure that Income Assistance and minimum wage are adequate to support health and well-being.
- ✓ **Work together** to change policies to ensure nutritious foods are more affordable to all Nova Scotians, especially those living on low-income.
- ✓ **Work together** to increase the number and quality of social supports so that people living with food insecurity will be better able to improve their situations.



There is a lot that we can do!
Working TOGETHER we can make Food Security
a reality for all Nova Scotians.