

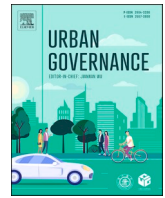


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Towards equitable & resilient post-pandemic urban food systems: The role of community-based organizations[☆]

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Introduction

In early March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a global health emergency. Among the many crises that emerged with the onset of the pandemic, COVID-19 has magnified existing weaknesses of global food supply chains and the purchasing power of consumers leading to vulnerabilities in food system resiliency. In Canada and elsewhere, job losses, restricted mobility, and vaccine mandates raise questions about who is capable of or responsible for ensuring food security and food system resilience during times of crises (Béné et al., 2016; O'Hara & Toussaint, 2021). Before the COVID-19 global pandemic, food insecurity was already a severe public health problem in Canada, affecting over 4 million people (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020). In Toronto, Canada's largest and most diverse urban region, roughly one in five residents experienced food insecurity pre-pandemic (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020). COVID-19 has magnified and further compromised the food security of vulnerable groups, including those living in poverty, those with pre-existing health conditions, the elderly, Indigenous peoples, newcomers, refugees and other racialized minorities (Blay-Palmer et al., 2016; Dachner & Tarasuk, 2017; Gray et al., 2020).

As with most North American municipalities operating within a neoliberal context, the primary response to food insecurity has been to rely on the work of community-based or social service organizations (McIntyre et al., 2016; Poppendieck, 2014). Given an ongoing lack of political will and concerted policies to ensure a right to food on a federal-level in Canada (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2017; Riches, 2011), a growing number of community-based actors have emerged to address the needs of food-insecure populations, thereby diversifying the stakeholders and organizations involved in food security governance (Edge & Meyer, 2019). However, the role of these actors in addressing food insecurity and food systems issues has been heavily debated by scholars,

practitioners and researchers alike [see (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2017; Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2012; Poppendieck, 1999; Riches, 2011; Riches & Tarasuk, 2014; Rideout et al., 2007)]. For example, some social policy advocates and scholars in Canada contend that non-profit and/or charitable food programming on the local level does not facilitate, and at worse can distract from, systemic change that is needed to prevent the experience of food insecurity and broader patterns of poverty in the first place (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2017; Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2012; Riches & Tarasuk, 2014). Despite being uniquely positioned to have a clear and well-rounded understanding of community needs, the role and value of community-based organizations is not consistently recognized as an asset to the urban region's food system resilience and underlying systems of governance.

Yet, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, community-based organizations and initiatives were pivotal in responding to what was becoming a food security crisis, raising questions about the capacity to respond to food system stressors in their absence. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic timeline, community-based organizations were leads in the response to the rising demand for food access support. Through collaborative efforts with the municipality and a wide range of stakeholders from across the food system and within neighbourhoods, community organizations were central to the goal of bringing short-term stability to the experience of food insecurity in their catchment areas. Further, community-based governance actors were instrumental in supporting short-term stability during times of crisis and brought about innovations that strengthened community self-determination and equity in food system governance, which can inform longer-term structural and policy change at broader scales [see (City of Toronto 2021a; Regnier-Davies et al., 2022)].

Despite the wide range of and number of organizations working to support food security in Canada, the literature still has a tendency to

^{*} Please note that since the original submission of this paper, the University has undergone a name change from Ryerson University to Toronto Metropolitan University.

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frame community-based initiatives and programs as being problematic as opposed to being an asset to a collaborative governance strategy that recognizes the role and value of multiple actors within a given system. Currently, there is very little focus within the food security literature regarding the role of community-based organizations and initiatives in supporting broader food system resilience. This paper aims to contribute to the literature on resilient food systems by illuminating the work of community-based initiatives in mobilizing for longer-term food system resilience and governance, and the factors that enable or constrain their capacity to do so. Specifically, we examine how the pandemic has brought actors to the forefront that are not typically considered in food governance literature, including social service sector organizations that have not been centrally mandated or traditionally focused on food systems or food security, and how the COVID-19 pandemic has brought them into this area of response and discourse.

Our work points to community-based initiatives and organizations that responded in a time of crises and catalyzed innovations for enhancing the equity and resiliency of future food systems. We begin by reviewing the literature on the shifting roles and players involved in food security governance within today's neoliberal context and consider related implications for food system resilience. We then detail the study site and methods. Following, we present findings that emerged through in-depth interviews with a range of actors from community nonprofit and municipal government realms before discussing their significance.

Background

Neo-liberal downloading and shifting roles in food security governance

Across North America, the economic instability of the 1970s brought about protectionist policies that led to cuts to social spending and protected employment (Koc, 2018). Economic recession, industrial decline and mounting social inequities severely impacted the livability of North American cities (Coburn, 2000; Husbands, 1999). As similarly seen in other regions of the world (such as the United Kingdom, Europe and South America), global economic shifts have contributed to an eroded confidence and investment in the social welfare system, bringing a rise in neo-liberal policy, including fiscal austerity, cutbacks to state programs, and an increased reliance on the market to bring stability to economies (Görmüş, 2019; Lightman & Riches, 2000; Williams et al., 2016). In Canada, welfare state reform during the 1970s, and a reduction of publicly funded social safety nets, impacted the population's ability to meet basic health needs—including their ability to adequately feed, house and clothe themselves (Coburn, 2000; Riches, 2011). Socio-economic and health inequities were exacerbated and have since persisted (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2017). By the 1980s, it became widely understood that hunger could continue to exist within nations that had so-called recovered from recession and re-entered states of prosperity (Maxwell, 1996). The COVID-19 crisis and early signs of a return to the 'new normal' are demonstrating that persistent food insecurity and interrelated health inequalities continue to hold true.

Back in 1996 at the global scale, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) held *The World Food Summit* to address growing concerns about food insecurity and the need to recognize food as being a human right. Canada was a crucial player and committed to a plan of action that aimed to address food insecurity within its borders and internationally (Riches & Silvasti, 2014; Rideout et al., 2007). The federal government introduced Canada's Action Plan for Food Security in response to the World Summit Plan of Action in 1998 (Wakefield et al., 2015). The plan, which aimed to achieve the right to food, resulted in the development of the Food Security Bureau within Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (Wiebe & Wipf 2011). However, the Bureau was short-lived and did little to create any binding domestic law to ensure food security and a right to food (Wiebe & Wipf 2011).

Despite Canada's early signs of commitment to 'food as a right',

programs and policies at federal levels of governance remain limited when it comes to addressing the underlying causes of poverty and food insecurity. In practice, the response to food insecurity has continued to reflect neo-liberal patterns of minimal government intervention and an increasing reliance on charitable resources from corporate and philanthropic sources, reinforcing systems of dependency and limiting individual and societal autonomy over food (Duncan & Claeys, 2018; Lemke et al., 2022; Poppendiek, 2014; Riches, 2011; Riches & Silvasti, 2014). However, community-based responses to food insecurity have since proliferated across North America in reflection of the growing social struggles that communities face (Riches, 2011; Smith-Carrier, 2020). The principal strategy of addressing food insecurity is to rely on the work of the non-profit and charitable sector at the local community level, many of which rely heavily on donations of both food and funds as well as low-waged or volunteer labour (Centre for Studies on Food Security 2020; McIntyre et al., 2016; Riches & Silvasti, 2014; Riches & Tarasuk, 2014). Thought to be a temporary solution, food banks and various forms of food security programming have become institutionally embedded in our social fabric for nearly 40 years (Riches & Tarasuk, 2014; Smith-Carrier et al., 2017). Today, across Canada, there are over 61,000 community-based, non-profit and charitable organizations providing food security support to local communities (Second Harvest 2021).

Charitable approaches typically deliver food programs that aim to meet the immediate food needs in a given community (Second Harvest 2021). Organizations and initiatives delivering emergency or charitable programs range from larger national or regional organizations to smaller local organizations, which, in many cases, are spearheaded by residents that have been impacted by food insecurity themselves (O'Brien, 2014). Given the wide-spread reliance on charitable models of food security response, these organizations and initiatives have been confronted with significant critique in the food security literature. Charity food models are critiqued for exemplifying antiquated British Poor Laws where participants are classified on a scale of deservedness in order to access programs and for their inability to provide nutritionally adequate or culturally appropriate food (Poppendiek, 1999; Smith-Carrier, 2020). The charitable approach is further critiqued for relying on corporate and philanthropic donations of food and funds (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2017; Poppendiek, 2014; Riches, 2011). Scholars have argued that these dependency-driven interventions have become institutionalized, replacing historically public services supported by the state, and do little to actually address the underlying causes of food insecurity and poverty in Canada (Riches & Silvasti, 2014; Tarasuk et al., 2020; Wakefield et al., 2015).

Though these critiques bring attention to important social policy issues of the federal level, the discourse is problematic as it generalizes the types of initiatives and responses that take place in real time and on the community level. Further, these critiques fail to make distinction between larger food bank models that rely on relationships with corporate actors and benefit from the institutionalization of the dependency approach, versus those that are rooted in community and that mobilize local actors and social support networks in response to local need (Levkoe, 2014; Regnier-Davies et al., 2022).

This generalization has had a negative impact on policy and practice on a local level in Toronto. For example, prior to the pandemic the City of Toronto engaged in a *High-level Food System Vulnerability Assessment* that focused predominantly on risks related to climate change and threats to supply chains and industrial flows of food, rather than threats to local food production and distribution programs serving vulnerable populations [see (Zeuli et al., 2018)]. The report downplayed the role of community-based organizations and the range of initiatives that are embedded in communities and generalized that the existing community food security initiatives would not provide adequate support in light of shock, citing common critiques of food banks from the literature to justify this perspective [see Tarasuk et al. (2014)]. Yet, at the onset of the pandemic, community-based organizations and initiatives were

central to the emergency food response, establishing new food banks, meal programs, and additional support to address the food crisis and gaps in governance capacity. Further, through the experience of community mobilization during the pandemic, leaders from community organizations have advocated for and supported the development of strategies for longer-term food security and food system resilience through localized initiatives reflective of and informed by local needs [see [City of Toronto \(2021a\)](#)].

Food system resilience

Resilience embodies a range of meanings and has been embedded within diverse disciplines. As Folke and colleagues describe, the concept was utilized to describe the ability of ecological systems to maintain stability in light of perturbations (Folke et al., 2010). The term has since evolved to examine socio-ecological systems, recognizing that the human and natural world are inextricably linked (Erickson et al., 2010). By the late 2000s, newer iterations of resilience perspectives considered political and social capital within a system, which led to the concept of *community resilience* (Cafer et al., 2019). Though several publications have examined food systems holistically through a resilience lens (Erickson, 2008; Erickson et al., 2010), the majority focus on the resiliency of agricultural systems and global supply chains, especially in light of climate change crises (LeBlanc et al., 2014; Pingali et al., 2005; van Apeldoorn et al., 2011). For this research, a *resilient food system* is defined as one that can absorb disturbances, adapt to shocks and vulnerabilities, or reorganize and transform, if needed, to retain functionality in light of changing environments (Béné et al., 2016; Folke et al., 2010; Tendall et al., 2015).

Despite its wide use in food system literature and elsewhere, scholars seem to grapple with resilience as a concept in developing frameworks for building approaches to dealing with and preparing for system shocks that emerge from broader issues such as climate change and pandemics (Prosperi et al., 2016; Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020). Some claim that resilience as a concept is yet to be fully developed as a practical framework (Béné et al., 2016). In contrast, others argue that resilience still lacks a precise definition, making it challenging to operationalize and realize social justice within the system (Hedberg, 2021). Nevertheless, as the impacts of system shocks become increasingly visible, the concept of resilience is becoming more widely integrated into local policy and practice, with an urgency to prepare for disruption and recovery (Béné et al., 2016). Béné et al. (2016) argue that despite the uncertainties, there is an opportunity to utilize resilience as a concept to promote a more comprehensive understanding of the range of governance actors and temporal interventions needed to address the underlying causes of poverty and food insecurity (Béné et al., 2016).

At the onset of the pandemic, it became quite clear that foundational inequities embedded within a city's social fabric were system vulnerabilities leading to reduced capacity to respond to and absorb shocks when a crisis materializes (Hunter 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified existing weaknesses of supply chains and the purchasing power of consumers through closures, job losses, restricted mobility, and vaccine mandates, raising questions over who is capable of or responsible for ensuring food security and food system resilience during times of crises (Béné et al., 2016; O'Hara & Toussaint, 2021). While several municipal governments in Canada are engaging in food system resilience discourse and have explored strategies to adapt to shifts in their environments [see ([City of Toronto 2021a](#); [City of Vancouver 2020](#))], cities are still not adequately addressing underlying and systemic inequalities and the range of governance actors that are supporting those most impacted, that can thereby support the realization of broader system resilience (Hunter 2021). This requires coordination between various governance actors and sectors including those involved in food production, procurement, distribution, as well as those offering social service support (Kapucu et al., 2021). As highlighted, this paper aims to address the gap in the literature and in the local discourse around who is

a legitimate food system governance actor, bringing attention to the role and value of community-based organizations and initiatives in mobilizing for not only immediate crisis response, but also longer-term food system resilience and community development.

Methods

Study site

Toronto is Canada's largest, most diverse city. The city has become increasingly segregated as mixed-income neighbourhoods become scarce, particularly in the increasingly gentrified yet under-served core. At the same time, lower-income, visible minority and immigrant populations are pushed to the city's inner suburbs, with less access to services, such as transit and grocery stores¹ (Hulchanski, 2010; United Way 2011; Zhuang et al., 2021). Within the inner suburbs is a concentration of neighbourhoods referred to as "Neighbourhood Improvement Areas" (NIAs), designated by the municipality for their concentrations of poverty, environmental and infrastructural concerns, and need for re-investment (See [Fig. 1](#)) ([City of Toronto 2014](#); Hulchanski, 2010). Over the years, many immigrant families have gravitated to these areas due to relatively low-cost housing, larger-sized apartments conducive to intergenerational living, and proximity to ethnic institutions and retail (Ghosh, 2014; Murdie & Ghosh, 2010; Zhuang et al., 2021). Many social service agencies and community organizations collaborate in these communities to strengthen and integrate health, social, legal, immigration, employment, and cultural services ([City of Toronto 2014](#)). In recent years, food insecurity has become an increasingly prominent concern for the social service sector and local organizations. Pre-pandemic, 1 in 5 residents in Toronto experienced food insecurity (Tarasuk & McIntyre, 2020), which has been exacerbated by COVID-19, especially within NIAs.

Data collection and analysis

This research takes a qualitative approach, using grounded theory to analyze and bring attention to the main insights that emerged through in-depth interviews. Grounded theory helps understand the "meaning" of concepts, events, processes and consequences from the perspective of those interviewed (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We interviewed twenty-eight (n=28) representatives from twenty-one community-based food programs and ten municipal government actors (n=10) in Toronto. The majority of the community representatives work and reside in Toronto's NIAs, serve low-income, precariously housed and racialized communities, and often have direct lived experiences (See [Fig. 2](#)). Efforts were made to engage representatives from diverse organizations, including grassroots initiatives focused on food sovereignty for Black and Indigenous health-focused community organizations, newcomer settlement services, homeless shelters, churches and community housing, cultural centres, Indigenous service organizations and children/youth-focused organizations. Organizations involved in the study delivered food programs on the community level, pre-pandemic, through various programs, including food banks and hamper programs, meal distribution programs, community kitchens, community gardens, and food literacy or skill-building programs. Though some organizations had a central mandate of addressing food insecurity, the majority engaged in food security programming as one aspect of a multi-service approach. However, food security programs became a more prominent facet during the pandemic timeline for most organizations involved in the study. All community organizations delivered food security programs out of a specific need identified in their service communities.

¹ See reference (Hulchanski, 2010) for further explanation of Toronto's amalgamation that has shaped the existing socio-economic landscape.

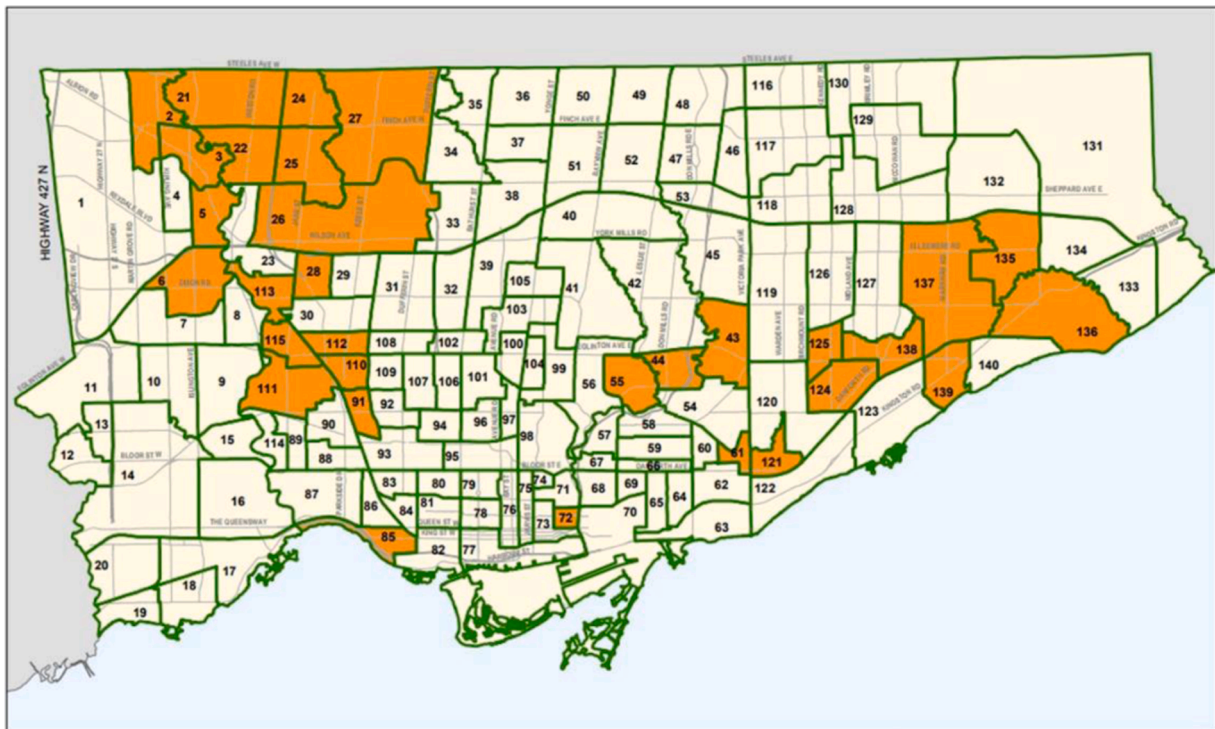


Fig. 1. Toronto's NIAs.

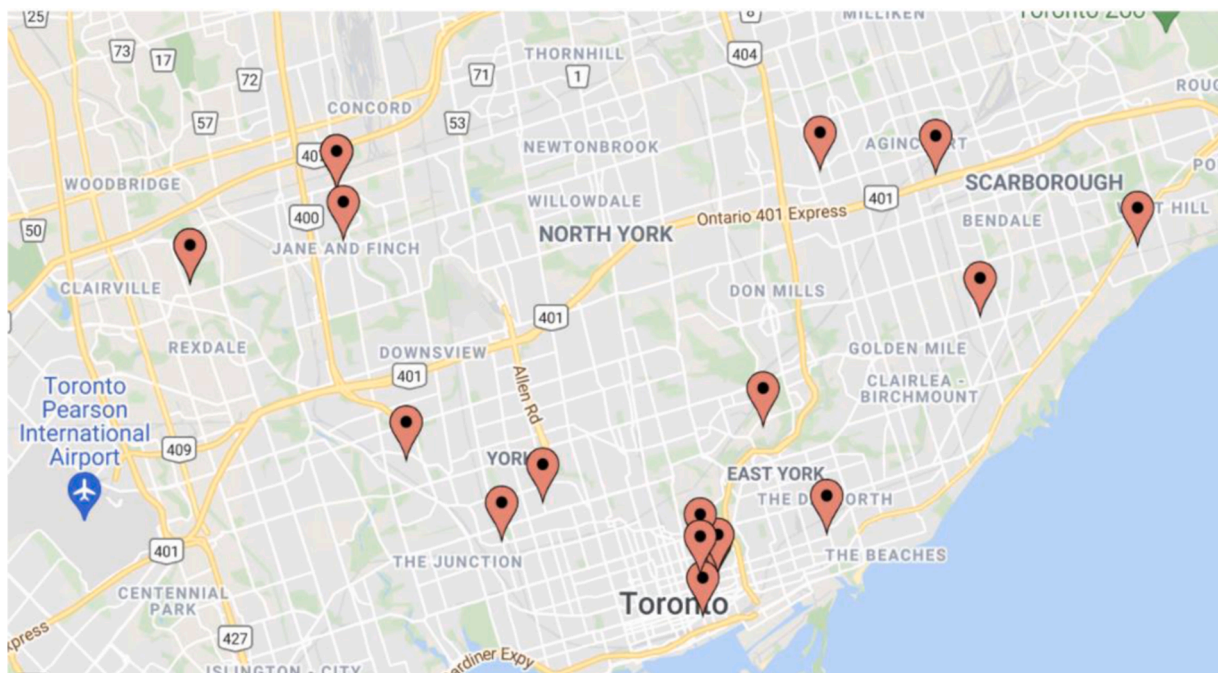


Fig. 2. Location of participating organizations.

Interviewees held either an upper management or a front-line role delivering programs and services. Each participant engaged in a semi-structured interview and were asked an array of questions including the strategies that were enacted to respond to heightened community need during the onset and first waves of the crisis, as well as how their organizations contributed to the resilience of community food security during the crises and in non-pandemic times. Those recruited from the municipality were staff and councilors that worked in response to food insecurity issues throughout the pandemic. Interviews sought to uncover

how community-based initiatives were key assets to community food security, and how those actors could contribute to longer-term food system resilience as the City worked to “build back better” post-pandemic. All interviewees are anonymous and attributed by their professional role and organization type.

Interviews were conducted virtually, recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews were analyzed through open, axial and selective coding using NVivo12 software (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). Codes generated were developed through both deductive and inductive

approaches and were analyzed by two researchers (Schreier, 2012). Interview guides and research objectives were reviewed for the development of deductive codes, and emerging themes were identified through the analysis of transcripts (inductive) (Mayring, 2019). Codes developed by the researchers were compared, and discrepancies between the two researchers were discussed and negotiated. The coding sessions led to modifications of the coding scheme and a consolidation of a common understanding of the codes between the two coders. The data analysis identified 89 codes, including a broad range of themes and discussions beyond food system governance and resilience. Topics explored in the research included, for example, the role of funders and grantors in food security programming and the perceived roles of the various levels of government in addressing food insecurity issues. Though these are important themes deserving of attention, this paper reflects upon the most prominent themes relating to food system resilience and governance at the community level.

Findings

The following reflects on various ways community-based organizations shape overall food system resiliency and capacity to withstand and/or respond to crises in ways that are attuned to equity concerns. This includes emphasis on how the City of Toronto relied on community-based actors to improve their models of service throughout the crisis. Insights from organizations demonstrate that many were better able to offer services that were generationally, culturally and locally appropriate services and were given a platform to speak more directly to the municipality about community needs. Direct communication also enabled some actors on the ground to shift their focus from reinforcing systems of dependency, to starting to advocate for the infrastructure and resources needed for a more self-deterministic approach. Community actors also push other food governance and government actors who may not have, or be as closely connected to those with, direct lived experience of food insecurity, to reconsider their approach to *resilience*, as the use and application of the concept can have unintended oppressive consequences.

Centrality of community organizations to the COVID-19 crisis response

Food had been identified early on as a challenge for neighbourhoods, as grocery store shelves started to thin, and vulnerable individuals were faced with new access barriers. Collaboration and networks between non-profit community-based organizations were instrumental to the municipality's ability to respond to community needs which prompted the development of the Food Access Table and the Community Coordination Plan (CCP).

The Food Access Table consisted of municipal staff and representatives from five mid-to large-scale organizations that specialized in food recovery and distributions. These organizations, among several other stakeholders, worked together to address broader emergency food access gaps across the city. The Food Access Table supported smaller organizations and initiatives that were responding to the experience of community food insecurity on the local level. In the initial month of the crisis, approximately 40% of preexisting emergency food initiatives closed their doors due to a lack of clarity around public health guidelines, lack of communication of what constituted an "essential service", or because individuals facilitating programs (largely volunteers) were vulnerable to the virus due to their age or other underlying health conditions. Concomitantly, new initiatives were forming on the ground level in response to these operational gaps. In an attempt to support local residents, new organizations were onboarded as sites of food distribution by the member organizations of the Food Access Table. The initiatives that were onboarded ranged from community service organizations/multi-service agencies, children and youth organizations, religious and cultural institutions, and community housing groups. One religious organization shared details about their transition

from a small-scale food bank to serving a broader community:

"When the pandemic hit, there was a lot of fear and worry during the first wave and a lot of food banks and other food agencies closed down because of the concerns of the pandemic. We started partnering with the larger agencies [on the Food Access Table] because we were already serving the communities, all we had to do was add on larger amounts of donations and start serving the communities in a broader way with wider selections of fruits and vegetables and perishable and non-perishable foods" (Ministry Director, Community Food Bank).

Organizations of the Food Access Table were critical in the food security response given their logistical expertise in food procurement, distribution and for their fleets of trucks and drivers that made food delivery to sites possible. Several city staff shared that the organizations on the Food Access Table had direct lines of communication with a broad network of community organizations delivering food programs on the ground, which was essential in identifying what interventions were considered most effective (City of Toronto Policy Development Officer; Health Promotion Specialist; Health Research Specialist).

Within a similar timeline, actors from the City of Toronto, and non-profit organization The United Way, developed the CCP. The CCP was a community response initiative that resulted in the formation of 10 geographically determined "clusters" of organizations responding to community needs on the ground. Additional clusters were formed to address the unique interests of newcomer, Black and Indigenous communities, which were not bound by geographic location. The clusters formed by the CCP largely mirrored, and were dependent upon, pre-existing networks of collaborating organizations working together at the community level who held intimate knowledge about, and relationships with local residents, however the CCP brought further coordination. For example, staff from the City and the United Way took on the administrative tasks of organizing regular calls to enable clear and ongoing communication between and amongst the networks throughout the crisis. One city councillor explains:

"Community agencies are really at the forefront of seeing community needs, so that gives us the ability to quickly hear from them and respond, and so I think, building on that is good" (City Councillor).

A city officer also adds:

"The CCP...[ensures] that there's some level of regional collection, collaboration and strategy around what's needed. It also acts as a two way conversation piece between them and us, and us in the EOC and them with the larger system. And so it was a way to work as directly and as close to the ground as possible" (City Officer, City of Toronto).

This is particularly important given food is often lost in the mix given it transcends institutional silos, as two different Councillors acknowledged:

"I'll just be honest, food has been a little bit of an orphan in the city. Food crosses all the City Committees. Food is a very cross-jurisdictional issue."

"[Food related issues] are done by different levels of government and different bodies and different organizations."

City staff and representatives from community organizations both shared that the ongoing touch points between community organizations and municipal actors created new opportunities for partnership, reduced organizational silos, and increased communication about the need for specific resources on the ground:

"The cluster model really helps in that we can have consistent information ... It creates a synchronized space where we can share updates on our status as organizations, what services we were providing, opportunities to cross collaborate, opportunities to support each other, when one may have strength and the other has a deficit ... so I would say the cluster for sure really was a game changer" (Executive Director, Children & Youth Organization).

The Food Access Table and the CCP enabled communication and collaboration with over 400 organizations across Toronto. This collective approach is seen as a positive strategy to elevate the position of community-based agencies as food system governance actors that can

speak to the needs of local populations, and communicate what's needed for better service provision and more self-determination.

Improved models of services and supports to address local community needs

Given the crisis, many organizations experienced increased flexibility in the utilization of allocated funds from all levels of government and other funders. The reduction in restrictions enabled organizations to improve their service provision and, in many cases, support communities in ways that they had not been able to previously. This points towards their potential to enhance food system resiliency when adequately resourced. Organizations highlighted that funders *trusted* them during the pandemic in ways they had not experienced before and were given the freedom to determine the best courses of action, considering their intimate knowledge of the communities they serve. One Director of a settlement agency shared that even federal funders that are typically very strict about how resources are spent demonstrated flexibility:

Like, for instance, if you were to look at the immigration funding from the federal level. It felt like the government decided pretty quickly to trust community organizations. And we were encouraged by that because they didn't say 'oh you are closing your doors, give us our money back'. What they saw was organizations like ours recalibrating and adjusting on the fly. And then what they said was, 'okay now, you know if you're going to do COVID relief, let us know what it is...and away you go' (Director, Settlement Services).

Organizations are typically limited in how they can allocate their resources. They are commonly restricted by a funder's expectations around program performance and evaluation indicators or by the limited range of funders willing to support their work. Organizations often hold limited food budgets, making it challenging to respond to community food insecurity, especially when food prices fluctuate, and community need is exponential. One agency providing immigrant settlement services, that was not previously mandated to focus on food, experienced exceptional flexibility and support from government-based funders and trust to utilize their resources to serve the community in ways they felt were needed:

I would say, by and large, all levels of government have been very responsive in allowing us to reallocate dollars... And for some of them, they even allowed us to use it for food as well. What I appreciated most was the ability to flex around all the different elements, right? From my perspective, the government, the other funders gave us the flexibility that we needed (Director, Settlement Services).

A common critique of emergency food relief programs is that they do not provide enough perishable, nutritionally dense, and culturally appropriate food. However, with greater trust and funding flexibility, several organizations shared that they could purchase foods and other essential items directly, as opposed to relying solely on donations. Given Toronto's diversity, organizations across the city serve a range of cultural groups and require different approaches to best serve their populations.

One organization highlighted a significant lack of emergency food support in their NIA during the early stages of the pandemic. The programs that existed needed additional help to serve residents adequately. In response, the organization worked collaboratively with community members, food banks, food businesses and the municipality, to launch a meal preparation and delivery program:

We were helping to serve a population that, for them, it was not as easy to access a traditional emergency food program. For example, seniors, young mums with very young children, people with mental health and addictions needs, people with disabilities. And with our food distribution program, we were able to prioritize what was

important, which was the culturally preferred and generationally preferred meals to suit the needs of the population (Grassroots organizer).

Several organizations highlighted that they were able to engage in improved needs assessment processes. This helped organizations move beyond the typical "beggars can't be choosers" mentality and provide for residents more appropriately. One interviewee shared that with greater agency over funds, they were able to purchase products for their home delivery program in a community that is majority Black and Indigenous, including culturally appropriate foods and toiletry products.

Initially, we responded with what we were donated, and we supplemented with what we call the equator foods. Plantains, mangoes, important foods that align all our equator countries. We have a high population of people from countries that are along the belt of the equator and eat traditionally similar foods. Root foods, root grains. We sent out an intense assessment and asked, not just about food, but also about hygiene. Our hygiene kits always have shea butter, black soap, and the option to get Black hair products (Executive Director, Children and Youth organization).

Further, some organizations were able to focus on acquiring foods that better support people's immune systems, particularly for those most vulnerable to the virus, including the elderly, and those living with chronic disease that were afraid or unable to get to grocery stores, and/or lacked other social support. A warehouse manager for a Black Food Sovereignty initiative discussed how many who had significant concerns about contracting the virus had to resort to eating canned and processed foods and subsequently reported feeling unwell. Organization serving highly racialized neighbourhoods immediately prioritized fresh, healthy and culturally familiar foods would be added to weekly food baskets (e.g. plantains, eddoes, ginger, garlic and lemons) to support their clients' immune systems when needed most (Warehouse manager, Black community food initiative).

Provisions for culturally, dietary and generationally appropriate food are rarely considered by donors, and seldom available through charitable channels, or at the scale required to meet community need. Community-based organizations and initiatives use their on-the-ground knowledge and lived experience to prioritize and better serve the needs of their communities, which contrasts with the 'take what you get' approach that service organizations are often forced to practice.

We started to create our database of households that need to have this kind of support...So by asking our Community Hub partners... 'you know your clients the best, can you give us a list of who would need that kind of support'? And so they did. It was like, everybody got an excel sheet template to fill out- it's very basic, like, what is their name, how many people live in their house, what's their address if they needed to be delivered if they're not able to go out and get their groceries at the grocery store...Are they vegetarian, everything that we ever gave to the Community during this time was Halal...Or do you eat meat, that sort of thing...with all of the partners everybody came together with the list and we had about 400 households at the time (Neighbourhood Engagement Coordinator, Community Hub).

Centering local knowledge to shift from dependency to self-determination

Frontline leadership and expertise have been a key asset to informing the municipality's food insecurity response strategies, and is vital to future resilience strategies and emergency response preparedness. One interviewee highlights that community leaders called upon during this time of crisis are informed not only by the communities they support, but their own lived experience:

In my experience, a lot of the nonprofits start off as grassroots organizations within the community, and I would say a lot of

nonprofits are started because someone or some people see the need within the community, right? And that need from the community may stem from their own lives (Ministry Director, Community Food Bank).

Community actors emphasize that governments often do not have a clear understanding of the types of food required by cultural groups, or the ways that food is intrinsic to cultural practice and a shared experience or way of knowing. Actors on the community level underscore how communities must be able to define their own food pathways and practices, as exemplified by one social service worker:

Food is used as a way to impart safety to people and comfort. We use it to communicate that our supports are not clinical, and our supports are cultural. We have that understanding about how food can change someone's experience. Traditionally Indigenous people end ceremony with a feast, so when we are able to provide the makings of a feast, we can impart a kind of safety and a knowledge of identity (Community resource navigator, Indigenous community services).

When asked about how to strengthen resilience and equity in food systems moving forward, many of the community-based actors called for governance approaches that prioritize and centralize those with local knowledge and lived experience. Steps towards resilience should not just be about food system *capacity* or total supply. It is about building relationships, social and physical infrastructure that supports community development, an understanding of unique local needs, and informal leadership that can meaningfully represent local communities at decision-making tables to advocate for community self-determination. Community actors claim that now is the time for such a transition:

Black communities must have the rights to their own means of production and ownership, and distribution, to the food that they're consuming and the food that communities have access to. And ensuring that it's fresh, nutritious, and culturally appropriate ... it's a community centered sort of food system or alternative food system, because our current one, it's just not working ... I feel like Black food sovereignty specifically is another means of liberation. It's another fight for Black liberation, and it's kind of just necessary (Coordinator, community food organization).

I love having these conversations, but where are the Black [owned] farms in Toronto? Where are the Black groceries that are cooperative modeled and culturally focused? How are we looking at communities truly getting sovereignty over their food system in a meaningful and recognizable way other than having discussion about it? What are the next steps in terms of action? (Executive director, children and youth organization).

This narrative is not new. Yet, the pandemic crisis and renewed social movements related to Black and Indigenous rights presents a window of opportunity to prioritize discussions about Black and Indigenous food sovereignty, not only in Toronto but for Canada more broadly. Community-based organizations were instrumental in illuminating these needs and perspectives to other food system governance actors. Consequently, such conversations are becoming more mainstream and informing changes in municipal practice and organizational strategy. As one City Councillor notes:

One of the pieces that I want to see in the future is more self-reliance on food creation locally. There's been a lot of talk, but not necessarily a lot of action, resources and people capacity. If there's a way to supplement the food supply by growing some of that yourself, and you get to build skills, then there is an economy there, and opportunities for job creation there that has never been properly explored in the city. We can actually unlock the city and government's own assets to produce the food and then to have it consumed locally, and to empower the residents, so that there is the opportunity to turn that

food into a valuable product so therefore there's a profit generation. We have to fund and support organizations that can produce yields.

Thus, there is recognition that municipal support of community-based actors is not only about food security, but individual skill-building, community, and economic development more broadly. Thanks to the grassroots advocacy work and action of community-based actors that are increasingly aligning their efforts city-wide, the municipality is starting to organize more in the direction towards community self-determination. For example, Toronto City Council officially committed to realizing a *Black Food Sovereignty Plan* and an *Indigenous Prosperity Plan* that are both under development [see [City of Toronto \(2021a,b\)](#)]. With these strategies, the aim is to secure access to infrastructure, land, sustained support and funding to build capacity for self-determination and community resiliency over the long-term.

As municipalities engage more with discussions of resilience, community actors are cautious about resilience being the end goal and express reservation around the use of the term, which is important for governmental actors to consider. Community-based organizations provide a platform for concerns held at the community level to be expressed and become more visible, compelling us to reconsider what resiliency actually means and for whom? One community organizer shares insight on the kind of trauma or insensitivity that the language of resilience imparts on communities due to past lived experiences:

Resilience is based on a lot of withstanding harm, and I have a lot of issues with how that reads as resilience and celebrated as resilience. It really overlooks the sheer violence that people have to swallow and live with in order to be resilient. Like exposing food insecurity for what it is, which is literally a form of bureaucratic violence against people. If food is a right and we know that this is true, then who is responsible for upholding that? (Community resource navigator, Indigenous community services).

Another community coordinator shares how the language of resilience can be triggering for those from the Black community, and how an alternative approach might be worth considering:

Resilience, to me, is the ability or power to overcome whatever you're faced with, or get past it and make sure to try to bring others with you. I've been thinking about resiliency, and in the context of Black folks, I feel like we're all just resilient, just naturally, because we have no choice. We have to be resilient... So resilience is something that is powerful, but it's not fair. I feel that we always have to be resilient, but it's also exhausting. We shouldn't always have to be fighting, we shouldn't always have to be exhausted thinking about what we're doing with our future (Coordinator, Food security organization).

Government and other food system experts often use the term more neutrally with focus on the resiliency of a broader system:

So I think we have to look at resilience in a very broad stroke. What is the elasticity of our economy or ability to bounce back, our reliance on outside the city? (City Councillor)

Those working at the community level are not looking for status quo systems that were in place before the pandemic to remain resilient; instead, many are calling for the support needed for communities to absorb and survive crises and chronic stresses, while also laying the foundation for more equitable systems. Many are calling for a shift towards food justice, and sustainable funding to adequately address underlying societal issues and strategies that are authentically rooted in equity and food sovereignty to enable longer-term food system resilience. Several community actors share their perceptions on how resourcing and other strategies can realize some of these shifts:

So I think where we're going to be heading towards is the need to advocate for actual budgeted dollars, which many in the food movement have been doing for years, that will go towards food

security, a national food security policy, but also budgeted revenue that's going to community support. I think the City definitely has to be looking at adding into the budget a community recovery fund. It's also very important for us to create space and opportunities to develop community and self-determine approaches to how we meet the needs. Our conversations have shifted from emergency support to ongoing community food support. How do we do that in a collective way that's self-determined? (Executive director, children and youth organization).

I think they [the City] should note that this cluster idea is a pretty good idea right, and I think you know, we need to explore that further. When it comes to our targeted investments, we all talk about strengthening neighborhoods and all of that. But we see lack of commitment there or we see like this commitment from one funder and then all organizations, they start relying on that funder. You need to work on targeted investments, for example, what is your hospital's capacities in these contexts...when it comes to infrastructure. When it comes to you know the services in the community... Like the schooling... More investments when it comes to parks, you know when it comes to the community spaces there, when it comes to housing there... It's the system, we need to work on that, so I think you know that's where the city should be (Director, Community Hub).

Discussion and conclusion

The role of community-based actors in addressing food insecurity and food systems issues has been heavily debated by academics, practitioners and social policy advocates. Critics contend that food programming on the local level distracts from federal-level efforts to address the experience of food insecurity and rescinds their responsibility of taking steps to realize the right to food in Canada (Food Secure Canada 2020; McIntyre et al., 2016; Riches & Silvasti, 2014). Further, the role of community-based actors has been all but overlooked in studies of resilient food systems (van Wassenaeer et al., 2021). However, recent work demonstrates that community-based governance actors can spur innovation in ways that strengthen community self-determination and equity in food system governance (Regnier-Davies et al., 2022). Our study contributes to the discussion by exploring the assets and opportunities mobilized by these actors in bolstering efforts to realize immediate food security to individuals, households, and communities during a time of crisis. We also consider the role of community-based initiatives in mobilizing longer-term food system resilience and governance by highlighting their work and perspectives, that provide insights to consider when it comes to building equitable systems into the future.

We are mindful that this discussion should not celebrate neoliberal downloading of governance responsibility onto non-profit, community-level actors (Baines, 2010). Though we argue community organizations representing individuals with lived experience carry an important role in determining best practices in local governance and food system policy (Lettner et al., 2013), we are aware that initiatives on the ground dedicate low-waged and free labour, which can place people in positions of vulnerability in order to serve communities (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2017). In some cases, organizations that hold relationships with large pools of volunteers celebrate this as an asset in their ability to respond to community needs. Arguably, this perspective demonstrates an internalization of the neoliberal downloading of responsibility onto local actors, whereby charity work including the act of 'tackling hunger' reinforces an embedded belief that this is how "Canadians demonstrate that they are good citizens" (Baines, 2010; Trent University 2020).

We recognize that the responsibility to support and feed community members should not be solely placed on individuals running community programs. Rather, these leading actors are seen as assets for informing

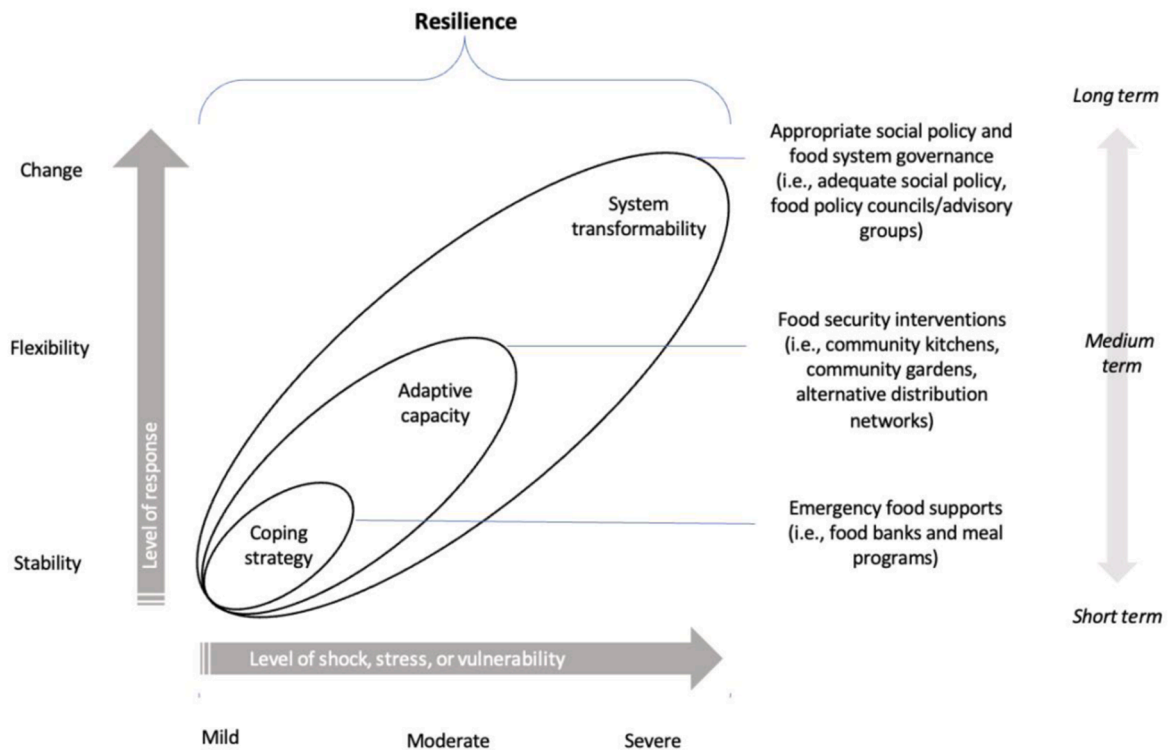
longer term strategies to address the underlying causes of poverty and food insecurity, and part of a broader process to enact change. Scholars demonstrate that food system resilience requires a range of actors to not only offer shorter term coping capacity to system shock, but also medium-term adaptive capacity to achieve longer term food system transformation (Béné et al., 2016; Folke et al., 2010; Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020). This concept has been discussed in the context of international aid and development programs [see Béné et al. (2016)]. Borrowing from Béné et al. (2016), we conceptualize a similar temporal framework that demonstrates the role of local community actors in realizing short-term coping capacity and medium-term adaptive capacities, which can influence and support longer term system transformations (See Fig. 3). We see a range of actors and initiatives contributing to both adaptive capacity and system change by enacting municipal strategies (such as the Community Coordination Plan) to better understand community needs, and through investment in local projects to glean best practices that can help inform broader structural policy changes.

The pandemic has presented a window of opportunity for improving communications between community actors, mobilizing a foundation for a more equitable approach to food system and food security discussions. Momentum driven by food system actors embedded within and informed by their local communities can also inform provincial and national policy discussions, contributing to longer term system transformation. As demonstrated in the findings, food system governance actors on the local level have much to contribute to discussions regarding longer term food system goals and policy shifts. In practice, this requires a governance structure that considers and integrates local knowledge and expertise, as well as enhanced infrastructure and the availability of resources to support more community development and self-determination around food systems to realize food security resilience.

As previously raised, explorations of resiliency within the context of food systems have typically concentrated on global supply chains and agri-industry (Tendall et al., 2015; Pingali et al., 2005). Inadequate attention has been paid to local level organizations and programs with direct relationships and access to vulnerable populations, or how resiliency can be strengthened through investment in public and private spaces that support personal and community development. Our findings demonstrate the importance of valuing the knowledge of those with lived experiences when attempting to understand a food system's resilience or vulnerabilities (Gray et al., 2020). Such an approach is essential to understanding and supporting unique cultural and other food- and health-related needs, in addition to strengthening community self-determination.

Such focus compels us to reconsider what resilience actually means and for whom? And for what? In our view, we are not looking for status quo systems that were in place before the pandemic to remain resilient, which they clearly were not (Hedberg, 2021). Instead, we want to support the ability of communities to absorb and survive crises while also laying the foundation for more equitable systems as we "build back better" through investment in social and physical infrastructure. Some equity-seeking communities may find the idea of resilience exhausting or insensitive due to traumas associated with their lived experiences. As Srivastava (Srivastava, 2021) argues, while the ability to persist through difficult conditions should be celebrated, "for many marginalized people, including Black, Indigenous and racialized people, being labelled resilient — especially by policy-makers — has other implications. The focus on resilience and applauding people for being resilient makes it too easy for policymakers to avoid looking for real solutions" (Srivastava, 2021). More focus must be placed on how to change unjust conditions.

In contrast, academics and government actors often use the term resilience more neutrally, focusing on the resiliency of a broader system. They do not pay enough attention to community-based initiatives and autonomy in supporting longer term system resilience and transformation. As municipalities like Toronto move forward with future



Adapted from Béné et al. (2016)

Fig. 3. Food security responses contributing to resilience over time Adapted from Béné et al. (2016).

emergency response planning and food security policy and decision-making, they should be mindful of how resilience is defined within these contexts and what the concept embodies (Srivastava, 2021). This reflection requires a trauma-informed approach that is cognizant of the distressful nature of food insecurity on populations and the long-term mental and physical health consequences of the lived experience (Hecht et al., 2018).

It is not uncommon in governmental reporting to acknowledge a range of players that are instrumental to a collaborative response. For example, within the City of Toronto's *COVID 19 Impacts & Opportunities Report*, when speaking about the initial emergency response, there were discussions about collaborations with large, influential non-profits or corporate partners [see Mowat and Rafi (2020)]. While recognizing the vital importance of these organizations, when it comes to acknowledging community-level agencies or local actors, this is typically less detailed, with specific organizations seldom named. A statement like “we worked with over 50 community agencies.....to accomplish such and such” is commonplace. We suggest there is a need for giving more visibility and attention to the unique roles that these organizations and initiatives play, and the unique types of functions that they provide both directly in relation to food security governance, and in providing broader social and health services. Our findings also emphasize that equitable and resilient food system change requires broadening of food system governance actors to include those working in community development (e.g. settlement agencies, community health centres, cultural associations, etc.). We must recognize the leadership within these community-based spaces, and the impact cities can have in leveraging that expertise as an asset moving forward and in building approaches to long-term food system resilience.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence

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