

Mobilizing for Food Security and Health Research

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Introduction

Community food security (CFS) is “a strategy for ensuring secure access to adequate amounts of safe, nutritious, culturally appropriate food for everyone, produced in an environmentally sustainable way, and provided in a manner that promotes human dignity”⁽¹⁾. CFS research is committed to participation of community members, and emphasizes the need to build coalitions and co-ordinate actions.

Several organizations including Foodshare, Toronto Board of Health, Centre for Studies in Food Security (Ryerson University) and the Centre for Urban Health Initiatives (University of Toronto) initiated a community based research process to identify research opportunities related to food security and health (broadly defined) policy in Toronto, Canada.

Methods

Key informants were identified by the research team and recruited at the 2nd National Food Security Assembly (Winnipeg) and a meeting organized by York University (Faculty of Environmental Studies) and the Toronto Food Policy Council entitled ‘Seeking Partnerships for the Next Generation of Alternative Agriculture and Food System Work’.

Interviews were conducted in person or via telephone, following a question checklist, and participants were asked to identify:

- successes & barriers to food security policy implementation,
- gaps in knowledge that limit food security policy implementation & innovation

Interviews were audiotaped, and analyzed via thematic coding. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Board of Ryerson University and the University of Toronto.

Results

Twenty three key informants representing civil society (community leaders, activists, writers, farming and non governmental organizations) and public sector organizations (government, public health, academics) from across Canada were interviewed by our community based research assistant.

Results clustered around the broad categories of successful strategies, barriers, potential research projects and issues and controversies.

Successful initiatives were characterized by:

- Community engagement,
- Coalition building, including relationships with government and private sector,
- Finding and building political champions and supporting them,

- Framing in relation to health outcomes and/or economics,
- Speaking with a common voice/ consistent message and
- Media coverage.

Barriers to policy implementation identified included:

- Short term focus and lack of political leadership on food issues,
- Departmental silos and disconnect between sectors that impact food security,
- Globalized food system where food is viewed primarily as a commodity,
- Complexity of food security doesn't interface well with policy making structure and,
- Narrow views of health where change in relation to food is typically seen as an individual responsibility.

Potential research projects identified included:

- Creating an inventory of best practices and,
- ‘Number crunching’ with respect to costs of food insecurity,
- Demystification of information,
- Studying the sociology of change.

Issues and controversies identified included:

- Role of health in framing food security,
- Departmentalization versus contextualization and,
- Lack of understanding and consensus in relation to definitions of food security, what food security policy is and where it is made.

Research results were summarized in a policy paper and board game format and presented at the 3rd National Food Security Assembly and distributed to research respondents

Conclusions

Results of the first phase regarding the identification of successes and barriers to food policy implementation and knowledge gaps are consistent with other Canadian research⁽²⁾.

Next steps include development of a research map and agenda for consultative workshops to identify partners, common research interests and potential resources to support food security policy research.

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