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Food Security and Insecurity in New Brunswick: Portrait, Challenges, and Perspectives

Executive Summary

Dominique Pépin-Filion, Carole C. Tranchant, Éric Forgues,
Natalie Carrier, Caroline LeBlanc, and Joannie LeBlanc

With the collaboration of Josée Guignard Noël
and Laurie-Anne Patenaude

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The **Canadian Institute for Research on Linguistic Minorities** is an independent, non-profit research organization established with funding from the Department of Canadian Heritage. Its role is to lead, bring together, and partner with researchers, community agencies, and government bodies to promote a greater knowledge of the status of Canada's official language minorities and a better understanding of the priority issues that concern them.

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New Brunswick Association of Food Banks



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Foundation

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UNIVERSITÉ DE MONCTON
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Faculté des sciences de la santé
et des services communautaires
École des sciences des aliments,
de nutrition et d'études familiales

TABLE OF CONTENTS

OBJECTIVES _____	6
METHODOLOGY _____	6
LITERATURE REVIEW _____	6
INVENTORIES _____	6
AVAILABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY _____	6
FOCUS GROUPS _____	7
SURVEY _____	8
ACTIVITIES AND SERVICES _____	8
LANGUAGE OF WORK _____	8
SUPPLY _____	8
QUALITY _____	9
CLIENTS _____	9
FUNDING _____	10
LOCAL ENGAGEMENT _____	10
STRENGTHS _____	10
CHALLENGES _____	10
DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES _____	11
NUTRITIONAL EVALUATION _____	11
FOOD BANKS _____	11
SOUP KITCHENS _____	12
PRIORITY MEASURES _____	12
RECOMMENDATIONS ET ACTIONS _____	13

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OBJECTIVES

Our study is concerned with food security in New Brunswick. The three research objectives paint a portrait of the community food security situation according to the different socio-economic, linguistic, and dietary contexts of the province's communities; describe and evaluate the approaches used by community initiatives promoting food security; and determine measures to be taken with respect to food security.¹

METHODOLOGY

The mixed methodology included six data collections and multidisciplinary analyses that paint a portrait of the situation. We conducted a review of the literature on six themes and took an inventory of food aid and food security organizations (170) and food outlets (408) in the province. An online survey (100 respondents) and four focus groups (21 participants) with the heads of community organizations and initiatives working in food security were also conducted. These were complemented by visits to food aid organizations (13) and an analysis of a list of foods (47) received by one food bank in order to evaluate the nutritional quality and safety of food aid.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review focused on a number of themes, including an analysis of public policies and government measures over the past 10 years with respect to poverty and food security in New Brunswick. The themes concern the quality of food aid and public health issues relating to food insecurity, both in Canada and in other industrialized countries. This review provided an overview of recommendations in the scientific community and in the different practice environments concerned, in Canada mostly, for improving food security. The improvement

of nutritional quality is looked at mainly from the standpoint of preventing chronic diseases related to diet and lifestyle. The last theme identifies the major components of best approaches and practices with respect to food security, i.e., those that contribute to effective promising actions.

INVENTORIES

The inventories of food security initiatives and food outlets provide a preliminary portrait of the overall situation with respect to food security in New Brunswick. In the report, the results are summarized and illustrated on maps of the province.

AVAILABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

The first inventory identifies organizations and initiatives engaged in food aid or food security activities.

170 organizations were distributed across the province.

However, there were slightly more of them in urban communities (53.5%) than in rural communities (46.5%), just like the distribution of the population.

¹ The authors wish to recognize the work that the charitable and community organizations accomplish in spite of the considerable challenges they face.

The rural organizations are farther away from centres and clearly farther apart from one another. This greater distance suggests more travel and less access in rural areas.

In urban areas, the organizations are closer together geographically in large cities, such as Moncton, Saint John, and Fredericton, but also in Miramichi and Bathurst.

The second inventory made it possible to identify 408 food outlets in New Brunswick. This portrait provides a description of the food security situation in New Brunswick from the standpoint of access to food, particularly healthy, affordable food, for all residents, regardless of economic situation. Of that number, only 195 were considered sources of food supportive of healthy eating.

Half (47.8%) of the food outlets identified in the province offer healthy food.

Food outlets supportive of healthy eating were slightly more present in rural areas (52.8%) than in urban ones (47.2%), the opposite of the rural (47.5%) and urban (52.5%) distribution of the province's population. We then analyzed the distribution of food outlets supportive of healthy eating and financially accessible, i.e., mostly supermarkets, by urban and rural community. The 119 supermarkets identified were slightly more present in rural areas (53.8%) than in urban ones (46.2%). Here again, this distribution is the opposite of the distribution of the province's population. There do not seem to be – at this level of analysis – large differences in food accessibility, at least in terms of availability and economic accessibility.

The distribution of food aid organizations and food security initiatives by Anglophone, bilingual, and Francophone communities shows that most organizations were located in communities with a high concentration of Anglophones, while they were three times less

numerous in communities with a high concentration of Francophones and in bilingual communities. About three organizations or initiatives in five (61.2%) are located in communities with a predominantly Anglophone population, while about two organizations in five are located in bilingual communities (18.2%) or predominately Francophone (20.6%) communities. If we take into account both distribution by language and distribution by urban or rural location, we can see that about 70% of organizations in Francophone communities are in rural areas, while those in Anglophone communities are almost equally distributed between urban (51%) and rural (49%) areas. Note that the organizations in communities designated bilingual are mostly an urban phenomenon (90%).

The more rural nature of organizations located in Francophone communities may be one source of the challenges faced, but further research would be required to verify this.

FOCUS GROUPS

The three main issues looked at by the focus groups with community leaders were sharing responsibility for community food security, the challenges and barriers faced by community organizations and initiatives in their actions aimed at improving local food security, and best practices with respect to community food security, including those related directly to client well-being.

The issue of sharing responsibility for community food security includes the themes of community and client engagement, the role of local food outlets, the role of the provincial government, and collaboration and coordination of actions. The focus groups enabled us to collect a great deal of information about the challenges facing food security organizations and initiatives, including regulations and policies, funding

8 Summary

and food supply, food quality, lack of education about nutrition, inadequate storage space, rural characteristics, prejudices and stigmas associated with food aid, and dependence on food aid. The best practices discussed or adopted by the focus group participants concerned the community food centre model, stakeholder engagement, supplies of fresh local food, and education about nutrition. Other best practices related to client wellness, self-sufficiency, and food skills or healthy eating.

SURVEY

The survey results describe local food security measures in the province. The survey topics included community leaders; food security organizations and initiatives; community food security services; food aid, including foods normally distributed; food sources, including nutritional value and freshness; clients; funding; engagement of local communities; strengths and challenges of organizations, including their best practices; and last of all, needs and priorities for improving and developing community food security.

ACTIVITIES AND SERVICES

Some of the food security activities of the organizations that participated in the survey started recently. In one-third of the cases (34%), they had started within the past three years. Another third (32%) were started up in the 2000s. However, the last third (35%) started in the 1990s (10%), the 1980s (21%), or earlier (4%). Many reasons and objectives behind the creation of the food security initiatives and activities were mainly to help low-income people living in poverty (34%), provide access to fresh local foods (23%), or meet a specific demand in the local community (23%).

The primary services provided by food security organizations and initiatives were diversified. About 15 services were offered. Two typical approaches were taken: food aid and food security. The first approach consists of

temporary emergency food aid (food boxes, meals, emergency aid), with or without the presence of non-food community services, such as clothing stores. This was the approach of one-third of the participating organizations, particularly traditional charities. The second approach involves alternative food security actions aimed at the long-term individual or local food self-sufficiency (community gardens, information and education about nutrition, collective kitchens, food buying clubs, and community-supported agriculture). One-third of the organizations used this approach exclusively, while the last third also offered non-food community services (job seeking help, advocacy, housing), with or without food aid. More than half (58%) of the organizations specialized in a single approach, while 42% offered more than one type of service, an approach that approximates the community food centre model.

LANGUAGE OF WORK

Two-thirds (67%) of the food security organizations that participated in the survey worked either in English only (39%) or mostly in English (29%), and a third (33%) worked in both English and French (16%), mostly in French (17%), or in French only (4%). Nearly half (48%) of those responsible for the responding organizations estimated that their clientele was less than 20% Francophone, while a quarter of them said their clientele was between 20% and 80% Francophone (25%), or 80% or more (27%).

SUPPLY

The food aid organizations had multiple of sources of food supply, but the three most common were local grocery store purchases (82%), food donations by individuals (64%), and food from the National Food Sharing System of Food Banks Canada (61%). Food donated by local businesses was a source of supply for 39% of the organizations.

Few organizations mentioned local agricultural producers (18%) or community gardens (12%) as food sources even though they considered their products to be of excellent nutritional quality.

The economic accessibility of the various food sources differed from their geographic accessibility. Purchases from local grocery stores were considered the least accessible in terms of price (68%), with nearly a third (32%) of the participating organizations considering them somewhat inaccessible.

QUALITY

The nutritional value of food received from the National Food Sharing System of Food Banks Canada was considered somewhat poor or very poor by half (53%) of the food aid organizations using this food source.

However, more than 9 respondents in 10 rated as somewhat good or excellent the nutritional quality of food from local grocery stores (96%) and food donations from individuals (95%) or local businesses (92%). All of the food aid organizations rated as excellent the nutritional quality of products from community gardens (100%) and local agricultural producers (100%).

The freshness of food received from the National Food Sharing System of Food Banks Canada was described as somewhat poor by 4 out of 10 (40%) food aid organizations using this supply source. There seems to be some discrepancy in this regard, because almost half (53%) rated its freshness as somewhat good, and even excellent (7%). This result contrasts with the other results, as more than 9 in 10 respondents rated as somewhat good or excellent the freshness of food from other supply sources.

Almost all (94%) of the organizations offering food aid reported difficulties in ensuring the freshness or safety of foods offered to clients. Two-thirds of these organizations lacked money to buy fresh food (64%) or received food donations that were expired (61%) or had been improperly stored (15%). Nearly half (45%) of the organizations did not have adequate storage space or a building or work space (24%) to ensure the freshness and safety of the foods distributed.

Half (53%) of the responding food aid organizations said they were concerned about the freshness or safety of the foods offered to clients.

CLIENTS

The clients of two-thirds (64%) of the organizations had to meet certain criteria to be eligible for services, while one-third (36%) of the organizations had no eligibility criteria, because they were open to everyone, no questions asked. More than half of the organizations that had eligibility criteria served only people in need (60%) living in their coverage area (56%). About a third of them served people living below the low income cut-off (37%) or going through an emergency situation (33%). Nearly a quarter of these organizations targeted people on social assistance (23%), and a few served only members of their organization or religious community (9%).

Six organizations in 10 (59%) were able to fully meet the demand.

4 in 10 organizations (41%) could not meet the demand, estimating that, on average, they met about half the demand (52%).

They would then adopt different strategies. Most often, they would have to rationalize their services (39%) by increasing the wait time or decreasing frequency of service, reducing food quantity or quality, prioritizing certain

clienteles, such as families with children, or following the implicit rule of “first come, first served.” Others prioritized their actions according to their or the community’s organizational capacity. Some tried to refer this demand to other services or to solicit more donations (32%). A few were resigned to turning down requests that exceeded their capacity (14%) or tried to expand in order to increase their capacity (14%).

FUNDING

The value of funding and monetary, food, or service donations receiving by the responding organizations averaged \$13,754 annually but varied considerably from one funding source to the next. The value of a funding source also varied widely among the organizations. The average value of business donations (\$32,375) and provincial government funding (\$26,581) was about twice as much as the average for all funding sources. The average value of food from the National Food Sharing System of Food Banks Canada (\$19,993) and individual donations (\$16,778) was above the average as well, while the average value of other sources was below the average: charitable foundations (\$9,703), religious organizations (\$5,830), municipal administrations (\$5,531), the federal government (\$4,700), and the NB Sharing Program (\$2,297).

This funding and these monetary, food, and service donations do not meet all of the needs of more than half (58%) of the organizations.

The consequences of this underfunding is that 40% of the organizations had to hold additional fundraisers, solicit other donations, look for new grants, or organize additional funding activities.

LOCAL ENGAGEMENT

Half (49%) of the organizations considered their local and surrounding community to be very engaged (31%) or extremely engaged (19%) in supporting their food security

activities. The other half (51%) noted moderate engagement (31%), little engagement (17%), or no engagement at all (3%).

Community capacity disparities cause local service disparities.

The organizations and initiatives reported mobilizing an average of about 50 (51) volunteers annually for their community food security activities.

STRENGTHS

Four in 10 organizations (42%) said their strengths included the engagement of their volunteers and their community, while one-third (36%) noted their food security services or their facilities. The other strong points mentioned were information and education (19%), openness, friendliness, or participation (16%), partnerships with businesses and other organizations in the community (12%), funding activities (12%), and efficient organization (7%).

Nine organizations in 10 (90%) were willing to share their strong points with other organizations elsewhere in the province in order to improve community food security in New Brunswick.

CHALLENGES

The many challenges faced by the organizations included difficult, inadequate, or irregular fundraising or donation collection (42%); insufficient volunteer recruitment, retention, or renewal (29%); inadequate local engagement or insufficient food donations from the community (14%); as well as non-existent or insufficient human resources and staff retention or burnout (14%), followed by problems related to premises or facilities, such as lack of space, storage, or adequate equipment (12%) and problems related to low or inconsistent client participation or their lack of interest and stigmatization (10%). Distance and transportation also posed challenges in terms of access to services or to perishable and

frozen foods, mostly in rural areas (7%). Clients with special needs, such as disadvantaged people and those on a special diet for health reason, and language barriers were also mentioned by some (7%), while others reported high prices and food variety and safety (4%).

DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES

The respondents felt that improving generally food security required information, awareness, and education (48%), better funding and facilities (23%), and improved access to fresh local products (16%). To improve food security in their communities, the organizations needed funding (41%), information and education about nutrition (21%), and better equipment, space, or facilities (12%). To improving their services, organizations included offering more projects, or collaboration (24%), more local support or engagement (20%), more space, equipment, or facilities (15%), more fresh and varied foods or prepared meals (13%), more funding or resources (12%), and more information and education about nutrition (7%).

Priorities for the development of community food security were community or collective gardens (31%), information and education about nutrition (31%), collective kitchens (26%), and food buying clubs (23%).

Other activities that were priorities for the communities included a community food centre (14%), client representation and advocacy (10%), job seeking help (9%), emergency food aid (9%), and mutual aid and idea sharing (6%).

NUTRITIONAL EVALUATION

The evaluation of the nutritional quality and safety of food aid was based on visits to food aid organizations and a list of foods received by one food bank. It defines and measures

success criteria for actions relating to food security and the impact of existing practices on access to healthy food. The nutritional value of food aid is assessed according to the recommended servings in Canada's Food Guide and the energy and nutrient content of foods in the food boxes prepared by food banks and foods included in soup kitchen meals. In addition, we characterized individually the food items received from Food Banks Canada by one large food bank in the province

FOOD BANKS

An analysis of boxes of food distributed by the food banks visited suggests that

Food banks can provide only half (50 %) the recommended daily servings of 'vegetables and fruits' and 'milk and alternatives'

but double the number of recommended servings of "Grain Products" and "Meat and Alternatives", like peanut butter. Also, the boxes contained on average six servings per day of "Other Foods," such as cookies, fries, or sauces, which the Food Guide recommends be eaten in moderation.

The results varied considerably among the food boxes distributed by the different food banks. The greatest variations, in the "Grain Products," "Other Foods," and "Meat and Alternatives" groups in particular, can be explained by the presence of fairly large quantities of staples or "Other Foods." The abundance of foods in these groups may, for example, contrast with the small amount of foods in the "Vegetables and Fruit" and "Milk and Alternatives" groups. In our sampling, only two boxes in nine contained fresh vegetables and fruit. When vegetables or fruit were included in the boxes, they were generally canned, salted, or with added sugar. The foods in the boxes were therefore most often processed foods, canned foods, salty meats, frozen products, or juice. The common

versions of these foods, canned in particular, are known for being high in sodium. The nutrient for which the average content of the boxes most exceeded nutritional requirements was sodium, limited consumption of which is recommended.

○ On average, the boxes of food provided more than five times (550%) the daily requirement for sodium.

This corresponded to nearly four times (377%) the daily tolerable upper intake level. The amount of sodium in all the boxes, without exception, exceeded this upper intake level by 200%. These very high values need to be seen in relation to the preponderance of processed foods in the food boxes and to the diet also high in salt of the general population. For energy, protein, folic acid, and iron, the boxes on average met the daily requirements for more than twice the planned number of days for each box. However, for vitamin C and calcium, the boxes contained just enough to meet requirements for the planned number of days.

○ Of the 50 or so foods received by a large food bank in the province from the National Food Sharing System of Food Banks Canada, two-thirds (64%) were foods of poor nutritional quality.

These foods should be limited because they are high in salt, added sugar, or saturated fats, while being relatively low in protein, dietary fibre, vitamin C, calcium, or iron. The other third of the foods received consisted of foods to be eaten in moderation (12.5%), foods of poor nutritional quality (8.5%), or foods recommended for health (15%) in the case of one food item in seven. Yet the vast majority (85%) of foods met the recommendation concerning glycemic index, since they had a low or moderate glycemic index.

SOUP KITCHENS

The lunches served at the two soup kitchens visited provided on average more than half the recommended servings of foods in the “Vegetables and Fruit,” “Grain Products,” and “Meat and Alternatives” groups but only a quarter (25%) of the recommended servings of foods in the “Milk and Alternatives” group. The nutrient and energy contents of the lunches served in the soup kitchens provided on average about 67% of the daily energy requirement, 87% of the daily protein requirement, and more than 50% of daily requirements for dietary fibre, vitamin C, and iron. For folic acid and calcium, they provided less than 50% of the daily requirements.

We did not note any apparent food safety problems in the food banks or soup kitchens visited other than food losses caused by lack of storage and expired food donations.

PRIORITY MEASURES

Our results show that three measures are priorities when it comes to reducing food insecurity and increasing food security in New Brunswick:

- a) Developing a provincial strategy to increase cooperation, collaboration, and the impact of actions taken by stakeholders.
- b) Identifying, strengthening, and increasing the number of best practices in the field and effective government measures to act on the root causes of food insecurity.
- c) Improving the supply, in terms of quantity and quality, of food aid in order to better reflect regional disparities and the economic, nutritional, and health vulnerability of people experiencing food insecurity.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTIONS

Based on the priority measures that we have put forward, we offer six recommendations, each one with a set of suggestions for practical actions:

1. Develop a provincial food security action strategy or intervention framework.
 - 1.1. Develop a coordinated, multisectoral and comprehensive strategy.
 - 1.2. Establish multisectoral government food security policy directions.
 - 1.3. Ensure participative and integrated management of food resources.
 - 1.4. Evaluate the impact that implementing the strategy has on social development and community development.
2. Encourage cooperation, collaboration, and intersectoral partnerships to promote resource sharing, joint projects, and the development of synergies in order to increase food security.
 - 2.1. Promote the transfer of knowledge and the sharing of information and expertise.
 - 2.2. Promote cooperation among partners and increase collaboration and resource sharing.
 - 2.3. Establish or strengthen local and regional mechanisms for cooperation.
 - 2.4. Hold annual regional events to raise public awareness and promote exchange and stakeholder cooperation.
 - 2.5. Develop linkages with public health, agriculture sector and agri-food sector interventions.
3. Better document, share, and increase best practices in the field with respect to food security.
 - 3.1. Identify, document, and support practices in the field that have proven their worth.
 - 3.2. Support the development and transfer of knowledge and information sharing about effective practices and actions.
 - 3.3. Support the transition towards models that facilitate resource sharing (e.g. community food centres), local food production and community development.
 - 3.4. Identify indicators for evaluating the individual and collective impact of food security.
4. Identify and strengthen effective government measures in order to act on the root causes of food insecurity.
 - 4.1. Identify the most effective structural measures in the other provinces.
 - 4.2. Index the minimum wage annually to the cost of healthy eating
 - 4.3. Evaluate the possibility of further increasing the minimum wage.
 - 4.4. Increase social assistance benefits to ensure the food security of recipients.
 - 4.5. Strengthen social housing programs.
 - 4.6. Develop and support public transit initiatives or carpooling in rural areas.
 - 4.7. Adopt legal recognition of the social economy and of everyone's right to adequate food.

14 Summary

5. Improve the quantity and nutritional quality of food aid, taking into account regional disparities and the economic, nutritional, and health vulnerability of people experiencing food insecurity.

- 5.1. Better define the provincial funding criteria for food aid in order to remedy regional and local disparities and establish funding proportional to the needs and prevalence of food insecurity within populations.
- 5.2. Promote the availability of food and access to food of good nutritional quality in disadvantaged neighborhoods or remote communities.
- 5.3. Better take into account the economic, nutritional, and health vulnerability of people experiencing food insecurity.
- 5.4. Explore avenues for improving the nutritional quality of foods provided through the National Food Sharing System of Food Banks Canada and by other enterprises.
- 5.5. Develop recommendations, tools, policies or regulations for improving the nutritional quality of foods available to people experiencing food insecurity.
- 5.6. Adopt guidelines for reducing the inclusion of salty and sweetened foods in food aid.
- 5.7. Adopt guidelines for increasing the inclusion of fresh fruits and vegetables and milk products and alternatives (perishable goods) in food aid.

5.8. Explore the feasibility of a mechanism such as a provincial program that helps food aid services purchase foods of good nutritional quality.

5.9. Promote, in areas that are less well served, the establishment of community food sources offering foods of good nutritional quality at affordable prices.

5.10. Develop community actions to help people experiencing food insecurity develop their nutritional knowledge and skills.

5.11. Evaluate the availability of food aid programs in the schools in the province.

5.12. Evaluate periodically the outcomes of actions designed to improve the nutritional quality of foods available to people experiencing food insecurity.

6. Ensure that food security stakeholders comply with food safety guidelines and the Food Premises Regulation.

- 6.1. Continue food safety training activities.
- 6.2. Make it easier for organizations to access equipment and facilities for transporting, preparing, and storing, refrigerating, or freezing.
- 6.3. Carry out campaigns to encourage the donation of healthy or fresh foods.
- 6.4. Promote safe practices for reducing food wastage.