

What can we do about food insecurity?

The approaches people have taken to address issues of food insecurity fall into three broad categories:

- 1 Short-term relief—for emergency situations
- 2 Individual and community capacity building — to produce and prepare food and to bring people together and work for change
- 3 System change—influencing policy to build food security



These three different types of strategies are interrelated and often build on one another.

Short-Term Relief Strategies

Food banks, soup kitchens, and children's feeding programs are directed at those who are the most food insecure and provide short-term relief for the immediate issue of hunger.

These strategies are considered “Band-Aids”. They cover up the problem for the short-term, but do little to address the underlying problems that cause food insecurity, such as inadequate income, inequity, and social exclusion.



Food Banks Aren't Always the Answer

Some of the participants who shared stories spoke about what it was like to have to go to a food bank. People who go to food banks include retired people, students, working people, and people who are on income assistance or receiving disability support. They told us that food banks are a great help, but the food is often enough for only a meal or two. It is not always nutritious. In some cases the food is not even edible because it is expired or damaged. Most people were very embarrassed about having to go to a food bank. They often tried to hide it from their children. Even though people who volunteer at the food banks mean well, sometimes they unintentionally make people feel bad about needing help from a food bank.

NSNC/AHPRC Participatory Food Security Projects, 2003

Individual and Community Capacity Building Strategies

These strategies help improve food security and the sustainability of the food system by building skills and moving people to work together for change.

Skill building is connected to capacity building. The concept of capacity building is described on the next page. Strategies focused on individual capacity building may include programs where individuals develop skills to grow, produce and prepare their own food. Examples include community gardens or community kitchens. Individuals participating in a community garden develop gardening skills and learn about food. At the same time, they are producing inexpensive food and contributing to a cleaner environment.

Strategies that build individual skills can also help build communities and build capacity to make change at the community level because these programs give people a chance to come together and develop social support networks. By coming together and talking about the issues that affect their food security, people can become excited about making big changes and may organize to work together to address issues that affect their food security. The *Food for Thought* example on the next page shows how individual skill building can lead to community skill building.



“Our farm has been involved with a program with community services to support low income individuals in our community. We deliver boxes of food to their houses and I mean not to say that that’s the only model, but it’s one model ...”



A group in Halifax, NS came together to learn about pricing food and comparing food costs between stores and brands. When they went out and priced food in their community they realized that the grocery store in their neighborhood charged more for the same foods as a store that was farther away in a wealthy neighborhood. They sent letters and spoke to their store manager. In the end the grocery store in their neighborhood changed its pricing practice to be more equal. The store also opened a bulk-food section that offered lower food costs too!

From: Travers, 1997

The focus of **capacity building** is on bringing individuals and/or communities together to identify, define, and figure out how to address their issues. As mentioned, it often grows from individual skill building strategies.

Any approach to truly address food insecurity needs to consider the ‘big picture’ and what can be done to benefit the whole community. Capacity building is most effective when a well-planned, long-term approach is taken. These strategies are most effective when the people in the community are included and involved in identifying solutions.

Capacity building is a process with the goal of implementing policies and systems that support community health and wellness. Capacity is built gradually and depends on:

- People who want to help and are willing to be involved
- People with skills, knowledge, and abilities related to the key issues
- Support from community institutions and businesses
- Leaders
- Economic and financial resources

One goal of capacity building is mobilizing people to organize through strategies focused on system change.

Key Term

Capacity Building

An approach to the development of skills, organizational structures, resources, and commitment to health improvement.

Capacity building can take place at the individual, organizational, community, and professional levels.

Capacity building offers a way to prolong and multiply health gains many times over.

Adapted from: Hawe et al, 1997

System Change Strategies

Many of the issues faced by communities or populations can be most effectively addressed through supportive, healthy public policy.

Strategies focused on system change aim to make improvements to policy that will build food security.

Examples of system change strategies include forming a food policy group (see page 64), doing participatory food costing (see page 19) and other types of participatory action research on the issue.

Developing healthy public policy requires that the communities affected by the policy be involved. This includes being involved in generating and gathering strong community-based evidence that will support the development of the policy. This is necessary to make the link between public policy and people's experience. For this reason, capacity building approaches, at many different levels, are an essential element in building food security through public policy (system change strategy).

As communities become involved in public policy and gain an understanding of the public policy process they become better equipped to influence the policies that address issues such as food insecurity. This can help to build food security as well as stronger, healthier communities, more responsive governments, and improved problem solving around various issues faced by communities.

Key Term

Participatory Action Research

The systematic collection and analysis of information in collaboration with those affected by the issues being studied. Participatory action research is done to educate, to inform political action, and /or to guide social change.

Adapted from: Macaulay et al, 1999

Key Term

Food Policy Organization: *An organization, network or council made up of individuals and representatives from different organizations who aim to build food security through actions directed toward policy change. The organization can represent one community or an entire region or province.*

A food policy group can be one of the most effective ways of moving the issue of food insecurity onto the public policy agenda and building food security through healthy public policy. By increasing the number of individuals and organizations involved, a stronger and more powerful voice can be given to the issues.

You'll find information on starting a food policy group in Section 6.



Participatory Food Costing

The Food Security Projects used participatory research to examine the affordability of nutritious food in Nova Scotia. Participatory approaches aim to support active involvement of the people most involved, affected or potentially affected by an issue.

The data from food costing research can be used to influence policy by providing evidence that many people are not able to afford a nutritious diet.

The participatory food costing conducted in Nova Scotia in 2002 by the Food Security Projects and partners revealed that it costs about \$572.90/month to feed a family with two parents and two children a very basic but nutritious diet. This cost is too high for many people living on low incomes like minimum wage or income assistance. This means that they cannot afford to eat a healthy diet and may be unable to meet their basic nutritional needs. The cost is different in each region and it actually costs more in rural parts of the province than it does in urban areas like Halifax, Dartmouth, and Sydney. It also costs more to buy groceries from smaller grocery stores than it does to buy from big grocery stores.

This information can be used to make recommendations for policy change, such as:

- *Adjust income assistance personal allowances to reflect the actual cost of a nutritious food basket based on the age of children.*
- *Adjust minimum wage to reflect the cost of living.*

Governments and citizens must work together to build food security by ensuring policies are developed and implemented that address the root causes of food insecurity and hunger.

Participatory research also has other benefits. For example, as a result of this participatory process, Family Resource Centres across Nova Scotia now have the capacity to do participatory food costing in their communities if supports such as childcare and transportation costs are in place.

NSNC/AHPRC Food Security Projects, 2004