



Original Research Article

Exploring collaboration within Edmonton's City Table on Household Food Insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been unprecedented attention and funding toward addressing household food insecurity (HFI) in Canada. In Edmonton, a virtual "City Table" was developed to coordinate the myriad of HFI responses and begin to explore and address systemic issues underlying HFI. In this qualitative descriptive study, we asked: what are the opportunities for and challenges to collaboratively addressing HFI within Edmonton's City Table? In 2020, we conducted nine interviews with diverse professionals representing a local funding agency, the municipal food council, the City of Edmonton (community social work), the Edmonton Food Bank, the University of Alberta, ethno-cultural organizations, and other not-for-

profit organizations supporting people experiencing poverty. Wenger's three modes of identification in a community of practice (CoP)—engagement, imagination, and alignment—were used to conceptually frame our qualitative analysis. Overall, we found that the HFI response sector reflects the beginnings of a CoP, but that inter-agency competition for funding and donations presents obstacles to the collaborative process. Findings highlight parallels between agencies and their clients, such as the mazes they must navigate to access resources. However, collaboration was facilitated by agencies' ideological cohesion and their shared struggle to address root causes of HFI. Analyses revealed some engagement amongst City Table members, but sparser imagination

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and alignment. A CoP does not yet exist because all three modes of identification are deficient in varying ways. Building engagement between agencies, shifting

staff's imagination to a collective cause, and aligning practices are monumental tasks in this context.

Keywords: Household food insecurity; community of practice; COVID-19; Alberta; Canada; Emergency food provisioning

Résumé

Durant la pandémie de COVID-19, une attention et un financement sans précédent ont été accordés à la lutte contre l'insécurité alimentaire des ménages au Canada. À Edmonton, une table de concertation municipale virtuelle a été créée pour coordonner la myriade de réponses à l'insécurité alimentaire des ménages, et commencer à explorer les problèmes systémiques sous-jacents et à s'y attaquer. Dans cette étude qualitative descriptive, nous avons posé la question suivante : quels sont les possibilités et les défis liés à la collaboration en matière de lutte contre l'insécurité alimentaire des ménages au sein de la table municipale d'Edmonton ? En 2020, nous avons mené neuf entretiens avec des professionnels représentant une agence de financement locale, le conseil alimentaire municipal, la Ville d'Edmonton (travail social communautaire), la Banque alimentaire d'Edmonton, l'Université de l'Alberta, des organisations ethnoculturelles et d'autres organisations à but non lucratif soutenant les personnes en situation de pauvreté. Les trois modes d'appartenance de Wenger dans une communauté de pratique (CdP) – l'engagement, l'imagination et l'alignement – ont servi

de cadre conceptuel à notre analyse qualitative. Dans l'ensemble, nous avons constaté qu'il y a, dans le secteur qui répond à l'insécurité alimentaire des ménages, les prémices d'une CdP, mais que la concurrence entre les organismes pour le financement et les dons érige des obstacles dans le processus de collaboration. Les résultats mettent en évidence des parallèles entre les organismes et leurs clients, tels que les labyrinthes qu'ils doivent traverser pour accéder aux ressources. Cependant, la collaboration a été facilitée par la cohésion idéologique des organismes et leur lutte commune contre les causes profondes de l'insécurité alimentaire des ménages. Les analyses ont révélé un certain engagement parmi les membres de la table de concertation, mais un manque d'imagination et d'alignement. Il n'existe pas encore de CdP parce que les trois modes d'appartenance sont lacunaires sur divers plans. Créer un engagement entre les organismes, orienter l'imagination du personnel vers une cause collective et aligner les pratiques sont des tâches monumentales dans ce contexte.

Introduction

Household food insecurity (HFI) describes the situation when a household has “inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints” (Tarasuk et al., 2022, p. 4). The state of HFI in Canada, and the potential for it to worsen, elicited public concern with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated income shocks (Deaton & Deaton, 2020; Men & Tarasuk, 2021). Because of these shocks, unprecedented amounts of funding and attention were directed towards addressing HFI, with the federal government committing \$200 million to food banks and national food rescue organizations (e.g., Food Banks Canada, Breakfast Club of Canada, Second Harvest) in 2020 (Government of Canada, 2020).

In Edmonton, Alberta, Canada—where our research team lives and works—heightened concern for addressing HFI was similarly evident. At the provincial level, the Government of Alberta (2020) provided \$5 million in funding to food banks and community organizations involved in emergency food provision. At the municipal level, in 2020, the Edmonton Community Foundation delivered \$1.1 million for emergency food funding to various community organizations via the federal government’s COVID-19 Rapid Response Fund and Emergency Community Support Fund (Lambert, 2020). COVID-19, and the associated emergency funding, created an extraordinary situation where new

organizations rapidly entered the HFI response sector, including those with no prior experience in this domain.

Reacting to this situation, a virtual “City Table” was developed in Edmonton to coordinate the myriad of HFI responses and explore and address systemic issues underlying HFI. In the qualitative descriptive research reported herein, we asked, what are the opportunities for and challenges to collaboration among members of Edmonton’s City Table? To answer this question, we interviewed nine City Table members and used Wenger’s (1998) community of practice (CoP) model as our analytical framework. CoPs are “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, para. 3). The CoP model has been cited as a useful tool in generating the social infrastructure required to create comprehensive approaches to HFI (Martin, 2021).

In this article, we first discuss the City Table’s development and historical responses to HFI in Canada. We then expand on the CoP framework used to theoretically inform this study. After describing our methods, we present and discuss study findings within the context of a CoP framework. We conclude by proposing next steps for improving the City’s collaborative HFI response.

Background

The City Table

In April 2020, the City of Edmonton invited, via email, agencies and groups who were interested and/or involved in addressing HFI. Approximately forty

agencies and groups (engaged to varying degrees) began participating in online meetings to share resources and collectively understand the problems and possibilities

facing charitable food programs. This group called themselves the City Table and met virtually monthly until May 2021. City Table members developed and signed a Terms of Reference document to guide their work. This document outlined the group's purposes: 1) to provide strategic direction and leadership to ensure low-income Edmonton residents can access food when and where they need it through coordinated community efforts, and 2) to explore and address issues underlying HFI. There were no exclusion criteria regarding who could participate. This group included representation from a local funding agency, the municipal food council, the City of Edmonton (community social work), the University of Alberta, the Edmonton Food Bank, ethnocultural organizations, and other not-for-profit organizations supporting

people experiencing poverty. Participating organizations contributed to a range of HFI-related initiatives, such as food hampers, food delivery, advocacy, grocery gift cards, systems navigation, mental health counselling, community gardens, and employment supports. Housed within the larger table, sub-tables were also developed to address HFI within specific sub-populations (newcomers, children, and seniors).

After taking a break (from June 2021 to August 2022) to reflect on their learnings and identify next steps, the City Table reconvened in September 2022 in a hybrid format, with a mixture of online and in-person participants. This reconvening was sparked by the release of a City of Edmonton Youth Council (2021) report on food waste and insecurity.

Literature review

HFI in Canada

Since 2004, Statistics Canada has measured HFI using the Household Food Security Survey Module, which includes eighteen questions about experiences of food deprivation, and their severity, over the past twelve months (Government of Canada, 2012). Some population groups are more vulnerable to HFI, including households with children, lone-parent families, renters versus homeowners, people whose primary income is government assistance, and people who identify as Indigenous or Black (Dhunna & Tarasuk, 2021; Liu et al., 2023; McIntyre, Wu, et al., 2016; Tarasuk et al., 2019, 2022). The health consequences of HFI are well-documented, with people in food insecure households being more prone to

various physical and mental health conditions, like heart disease, Type 2 Diabetes, depression, anxiety, chronic pain, and infectious diseases (Hutchinson & Tarasuk, 2022; Jessiman-Perreault & McIntyre, 2017; Liu et al., 2023; Men, Elgar, & Tarasuk, 2021; Ovenell et al., 2022; Tait et al., 2018; Tarasuk et al., 2013).

Early evidence regarding how the COVID-19 pandemic initially affected HFI in Canada indicates little change at a national level (Idzerda et al., 2022; Tarasuk et al., 2022). However, the long-term effects of the pandemic on HFI remain an important focal point of study, particularly in terms of how sub-populations already vulnerable to HFI were and continue to be impacted. Notably, the prevalence of HFI differs across

provinces, ranging from a low of 13.1 percent in Quebec to a high of 20.3 percent in Alberta (Tarasuk et al., 2022). Men, Urquia, and Tarasuk (2021) suggest these geographical differences may be traced to jurisdictional differences in income supports.

Income supports

At the federal level, shortly after the pandemic's onset, the Canadian government rolled out a series of financial relief measures for individuals and households affected by the economic shutdown. These benefits included the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB), available to people who had lost their job or were working reduced hours; the Canada Emergency Student Benefit, to assist students; and supplements to the Canada Child Benefit, to provide additional financial support to families with children. Early research indicates these benefits may have helped mitigate the impact of pandemic-related income shocks for many Canadian households (Polsky & Garriguet, 2022).

Within Alberta, a few income supports are offered through the provincial government. Short term (up to a year) income support exists through Alberta Works. "Barriers to Full-Time Employment" is for Albertans who cannot work for medical reasons and need longer term assistance. Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped is a permanent assistance program for those with lifelong medical barriers to work. All these benefits stop at age sixty-five when the federal pension plan begins. McIntyre, Dutton, et al. (2016) suggest public pensions have a protective effect on HFI because they offer more stable income indexed to inflation, in comparison with other public income supports.

In contrast with federal and provincial governments, municipalities are restricted in their capacity to access policy levers to increase income security—a key strategy

for long-term HFI elimination (Collins et al., 2014). Consequently, municipal food-based initiatives, like food banks (i.e., centralized warehouses registered as non-profit organizations for collecting and distributing food), have become the default approach to addressing HFI across Canada (Collins et al., 2014).

Ideological frictions in responding to HFI

Dominant discourses in Canada have yet to align with the robust evidence pointing to the need to address HFI as an income-based, rather than food-based, problem (McIntyre et al., 2018). The first food bank in Canada was founded in Edmonton in 1981 during an economic downturn and has lasted well beyond its original intent as a temporary measure (Riches, 2002). The charity model shaping Canada's food banks conceives of acting on HFI as an optional, moral act of good. This unsustainable, piecemeal approach to addressing HFI absolves federal and provincial governments of their responsibilities to provide adequate social supports (Beischer & Corbett, 2016; Collins et al., 2016; Lambie-Mumford & Dowler, 2015).

In contrast with the charity model, the rights-based model for addressing HFI conceives of food as a human right, not to be denied (Dees, 2012; Idzerda et al., 2022). Activists and scholars in this camp call for a problem-solving approach to address structural barriers to the right to food, predominantly through poverty reduction (Dees, 2012). Despite decades of advocacy for a rights-based approach to HFI, such an approach has not yet been adopted in Canada outside of prisons and child welfare programs (Dees, 2012).

McIntyre et al. characterize HFI in Canada as an "intractable policy problem"—that is, a problem framed as unsolvable, resulting in inaction (2018, p. 152). Ideological friction between charity and rights-based models is maintained by government inaction

supporting the right to food, leaving charities with no choice but to take centre stage in alleviating HFI (Siperstein, 2019). While food bank employees recognize limitations of the charity model, these are difficult to overcome given the lack of social support funding (Tarasuk & Eakin, 2003).

In Edmonton, a city of 1.1 million people, these ideological frictions were apparent early in the pandemic when the potential for worsened HFI rose as a community-wide concern (Government of Alberta, 2022). Thus, the City of Edmonton formed the City Table, hoping to instigate problem-solving through collaboration. Intrigued by this initiative, our research team considered the possibility for this table to evolve into a CoP.

A CoP approach

In general, CoPs involve mobilizing the knowledge of individual practitioners to a group of people who can replicate those learnings wherever else that knowledge might be useful (Edwards et al., 2021). CoPs have three key characteristics: 1) shared domain of interest, 2) shared practice, and 3) the creation of community (Wenger, 1998). CoPs help groups determine what to discuss, build trust, promote equitable processes for engagement (rather than facilitation), and draw attention to structures promoting learning (Diaz et al., 2021). Members express their belonging to a particular CoP through three modes of identification: engagement (doing things together, talking, producing artifacts), imagination (reflecting, constructing an image of the practice, seeing self as one of them), and alignment (following directions, aligning self with group expectations, coordinating actions towards a shared goal) (Smith et al., 2017; Wenger, 1998). These three modes, which are not mutually exclusive, can be used as parameters within which to conceptualize the

shift required to move from a group of agencies working independently on the same issue, to a group involved in the process of building a CoP. While there is no singular formula for establishing a CoP per se, engagement, imagination, and alignment are required as a “dynamic combination” (Wenger, 1998, p. 228). Importantly, the cultivation of CoPs cannot be forced—it is an organic and spontaneous process (Wenger, 1998).

There are several documented examples of how CoPs have been used to support local food-related initiatives. For instance, Feeding America’s (2018) pilot program led a nationwide CoP among networked food banks and pantries, leveraging the group’s collective experience to increase the scale and impact of programs trying to “conquer hunger.” In the Kollu Hills region of Tamil Nadu, India, nutrition gardening and pond fish farming CoPs formed among small-scale farmers created learning communities for collective knowledge to be shared and mobilized (Hudson et al., 2019). Within Canada, Toronto has become known for its lively “community of food practice” which has grown over the last three decades, involving collaborations across businesses, local government bodies, and non-governmental organizations (Campbell & MacRae, 2013; Friedmann, 2007; Friedmann, 2020). BlackFoodToronto is one initiative which emerged from this setting during the COVID-19 pandemic as a community-based food charity and CoP centring the three Bs: Black-led, Black-mandated, and Black-serving (Regnier-Davies et al., 2023). In Edmonton, the Alberta Flavour Learning Lab was designed as a local food procurement CoP consisting of institutional food buyers, large scale distributors, online retailers, processors, producers, researchers, and municipal and provincial government representatives (Beckie et al., 2019). Inspired by these examples, we hoped to apply

learnings from these CoPs to our study of City Table processes.

Methods

Recruitment and data generation

This project was initially designed to broadly examine organizational HFI responses. But as the pandemic unfolded, our research evolved to focus on the City Table. We used qualitative description (Sandelowski, 2000) in this study, given our desire to stay close to the data and produce a basic summary of participants' experiences with collaboration. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with professionals involved in organizational responses to HFI in Edmonton. After receiving institutional ethics approval, purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants via email through our team's pre-established relationships with City staff and local community agencies and social services organizations. Participants were selected based on having knowledge and experience in the HFI response sector. Participants also recommended other individuals who they anticipated could share useful information. Recruitment occurred until saturation was achieved; that is, when no new ideas or categories were found through data generation or analysis (Mayan, 2023). In total, twenty-one email invitations were distributed between January to August 2020. One individual declined, eleven did not respond, and nine agreed to participate. We conducted nine virtual interviews, ranging in length from thirty to sixty minutes, between January and September 2020 with professionals in varied roles and degrees of experience in the HFI response sector. Notably, four interviews were conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic was

declared by the World Health Organization. Individuals interviewed before formal City Table creation later became members of this group.

Interviews were conducted by the second author, a graduate student. They did not have prior relationships with City Table participants but did have experience as a local outreach worker and in using food banks with their family while growing up. This information was shared with participants, when appropriate, as a means of building rapport. During interviews, participants were asked to describe their roles and practices in relation to addressing HFI in Edmonton. Sample questions guiding interviews included the following: Can you walk me through your involvement with HFI? What motivates you to participate in HFI initiatives? What obstacles do you face (e.g., operational burden, government/regulatory/company policies, liability)? How do your clients interact with your agency's HFI initiatives? Looking forward, what do you want your partnership(s) with other HFI initiatives to look like? Do you see new opportunities for partnerships or growth in supports? What would facilitate the success of HFI initiatives in Edmonton? Questions varied depending on participants' roles. The interview guide was modified over time as we acquired new knowledge through each conversation. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Interviews were contextualized by our participation in four City Table meetings, document review of all City Table meeting agendas and minutes, and informal conversations with the original conveners of the group. Following a qualitative descriptive approach, qualitative content analysis was used (Sandelowski, 2000). Analyses were structured by Wenger's (1998) three modes of CoP identification (engagement, imagination, alignment), employed as a conceptual framework for examining the City Table's collaborative efforts. As interviews were transcribed, they were coded manually using the comment function in Microsoft Word and eventually, categorized. As more data were collected, new codes were identified, and some codes were discarded. Preliminary categories were discussed in later interviews with additional participants for comment. Evolving findings were also presented to the City Table; critical questions regarding how categories were developed were asked and categories were modified based on feedback. This process functioned as a form of member checking (Birt et al., 2016), enabling us to reflect on and check our interpretation of the data.

Rigour

Multiple verification strategies were used to promote rigour (Mayan, 2023). To ensure methodological

coherence, we used Mayan's "armchair walkthrough" (2023, p. 48). This process helped align our research question with our methods. We used purposeful sampling to capture a range of experiences in relation to the phenomenon under study, increasing the likelihood of obtaining an appropriate sample. Participants' expertise and awareness of their organization's mission statement and ideology enabled us to think theoretically. Being professionals in their field, participants were well-versed in HFI literature and recommended readings, including publications from their respective organizations, to inform analyses. The validity of findings was grounded in the data collected, and verified with the City Table, agency publications, and follow-up conversations with participants, who we respected as key knowledge holders.

Researcher responsiveness was achieved by maintaining open communication with members of the City Table and being creative, flexible, and sensitive to the community's needs. We recognized the fragility of group dynamics because of power relations between organizations, with some entering the HFI response sector recently due to pandemic-related funding, while others were well-established. An additional verification strategy used, detailed above in *Data Analysis*, included concurrent data generation and analysis (Mayan, 2023).

Results

We interviewed nine professionals with varied roles (see Table 1) and degrees of experience in the HFI response sector. Reported challenges to collaboration fell under two categories: 1) competing for funding and food donations, and 2) navigating the maze of emergency food programs. Opportunities for collaboration were

supported by participants' ideological cohesion and shared desire to address root causes of HFI. We elaborate on these findings in the context of Wenger's (1998) modes of identification in a CoP (engagement, imagination, and alignment).

Table 1: Interview participant pseudonyms and their affiliated organizations

Pseudonym	Representation
Mackenzie	Food rescue
Rory	Municipal food council, food rescue
Austin	Social services organization
Jordan	Food Bank
Jackie	Food rescue
Kacey	City social work
Leslie	City social work
Cameron	Funding agency
Quinn	Ethnocultural community agency

Challenges

Competing

Multiple agendas, lack of clarity surrounding agencies’ roles and responsibilities in relation to HFI, and general stressors tied to the pandemic set the stage for competition within the City Table. Leslie, a city social worker, said: “people are keen to cooperate, [but] do we always have the necessary structures in place for real collaboration? I think that takes some years to develop.” Competition was apparent in two key areas: funding and food donations.

For funding

A key determinant of an agency’s capacity to ask for and receive food is the amount and type of funding they hold. Funders, using formal application processes to distribute grants and emergency funding, evaluate agencies based on their ideas, partnerships, and capacities to use the funding to distribute food. In a standard project cycle, agencies apply for and receive funding, procure the food, provide food to the clients, and evaluate and record their activities to be successful when applying, again, for more funding. Larger

agencies like the Food Bank can hire full-time staff to write funding applications, while smaller, volunteer-driven agencies cannot.

The pandemic and multitude of agendas at the table heightened competition. Some long-standing agencies noted frustration regarding new agencies encroaching on funds they historically accessed. Jackie, a food rescue worker, lamented, “A lot of funding opportunities really pit us against each other to be like why are you unique, why are you different? When it would be much more helpful if it talked about how—or even worked collaboratively with other community organizations to expand and ensure the success of this program and how are you going to share resources and share knowledge.” Although Cameron, a funder, celebrated some instances of agencies applying for joint funding, such partnerships were not the norm, describing subtle tensions concerning individual agency evaluations. Cameron described assumptions from the “business world” about the “ideal of scalability” which did not necessarily translate in community settings. Cameron explained that even though two services may appear nominally the same, the communities they serve might have different needs and thus need two agencies doing similar work. They used the analogy of an Italian restaurant. If we were to choose eliminating duplicated services in favour of scaling up existing models, we

would only have one big Italian restaurant instead of several smaller ones. It is difficult to judge the need and potential effectiveness of similar yet distinct programs because the local and relationship-based nature of community work is difficult to accurately describe on a grant application.

However, the reasons for competition extended beyond funding, as Jackie explained, “It’s not just financial resources but it’s also about space, it’s about information...how can we share our knowledge in a way that people don’t feel threatened that we’re going to be taking away their service users or their funding?”

Quinn, a representative from an ethnocultural community agency, added “There are many organizations that are very territorial about food security, and their food clients. They won’t go to the step of working with (other agencies), because they fear...if we lose these clients, we lose the ability to report on them, or we lose a part of our identity.”

Leslie echoed Quinn: “everyone is trying to create their legitimate story as an organization, right?... I’m sure that some organizations fear some risk of loss of identity or uniqueness if they are too deep into a collaborative process.” While many participants explicitly discussed the harms of competition, they also struggled to see a way forward, given the social and economic value of having a unique identity, and because of the significant resources required for developing more collaborative processes. Jackie questioned: “how do we bring all these different organizations together to work collectively so that we’re not stepping on each other’s toes? But that’s something that requires so much capacity and human resources to do...we’re [already] so stretched.”

For food donations

In Edmonton, agencies supporting food insecure clients can either buy food (ideally through bulk purchasing) or receive donated food from retailers, distributors, or producers. Of the food donated by retail outlets, a portion of it is considered “waste food.” This food is nutritionally valid but does not meet internal quality standards of the business selling that food. The amount of waste food provided to agencies varies. Mackenzie, a food rescue worker, described how a company’s willingness to donate waste food stems from consideration on recouping the cost of waste food by discounting it, the cost of disposing that food (dumpster tipping fees, liability issues), and the business’s commitment or willingness to work with community agencies. Food stores can set requirements for integrating the donating process into their operations and prefer working with one recipient instead of five or six. They want organizations that can pick up on a regular schedule, have a single point of contact, do the logistical transport to and from, and guaranteeing that the food is safe, taking ownership of that and handling it after it leaves our premises. Hence, agencies’ access to waste food is uneven and based on individual capacity to meet these expectations.

A few participants commented on the politics and lack of transparency regarding which agencies get gleaned food and how they get it. The Edmonton’s Food Bank (2021), for example, partners with approximately 300 agencies to distribute food throughout the city. Some of these agencies serve meals, some provide food hampers, some connect other agencies with their donor networks, and some are innovative leaders in getting their food out to the community. Austin, a former chef at a social services

organization, spoke to the authority of the Food Bank, describing its “monopoly over other agencies in terms of where they spend their money and where their donations go. Like you have all these donations that get funneled through the Food Bank, by the time they hit the agencies they are garbage. So, I was trying to hit agencies [donors] that were giving to the Food Bank, before the food bank [got the food].” Conversely, Kacey, a city social worker, said that while the Food Bank may be the “main player” in Edmonton, “they have been very accommodating in getting food out to people. They are not very possessive of their food, but they seem to be the only ones who get the gleaned food.” Austin wished there was an app that showed what agencies have, allowing for more streamlined communication between the food bank and agencies, and between agencies themselves: “I think if there was more unity in the agencies who were accessing the Food Bank.... I could see the Food Bank being more useful.” This wish speaks to the maze (detailed below) that agencies described in navigating the HFI sector. Mackenzie explained how their food rescue agency *was* successful in getting food donations because they were well-organized, with pick-ups and deliveries coordinated via a newly implemented mobile app and had a large volunteer base.

While agencies in Edmonton can freely access food offered by the Food Bank, Austin indicated that food offered by the Food Bank is not always sufficient to run a not-for-profit kitchen. The limited quality, quantity, and types of food available can pose barriers to providing reliable service. Austin initially relied on the Food Bank but transitioned to canvassing businesses for waste food and donations, reducing their Food Bank visits from several times per week to roughly once a month. They acquired enough waste food and coffee to cancel an expensive coffee supplying contract, which freed up their food budget such that they could more

regularly make gourmet meals, like shrimp alfredo, for clients. This success was built on Austin’s existing relationships, their ability to form new relationships with businesses, and their enthusiasm to serve better food. They explained: “I have a lot of ins, I know a lot of people, and that’s why I was good at that job.... It’s just like, know people, and don’t be phoney.” Austin also commented that businesses are proud to be able to donate non-waste food.

Participants’ stories suggest that acquiring food donations is key to positive agency evaluations by funders and food donors, where success is determined by the amount, quality, and appropriateness of the food agencies can acquire. Food is something agencies must compete for which requires the capacity to pick up and transport food, to mobilize personal staff relationships, to form new relationships with businesses, and to align their agency with the desired ideologies of donating bodies. Most prominently however, these stories describe the food insecurity of agencies themselves as they compete to be evaluated positively by food donors to secure food.

Navigating the maze

Participants illustrated the difficulties of navigating the growing, intricate maze of agencies involved in HFI responses, which posed barriers to collaboration. This maze was evident from both the client and agency perspective. A “food insecurity continuum of needs” was often referenced within City Table discussions, as participants recognized that different clients have different food needs (i.e., some have zero access to food whereas others just need to supplement).

Correspondingly, there is a continuum of services in Edmonton that respond to clients’ needs. However, because these services are not always listed publicly or well described, it is difficult for clients to match their

food needs to a service agency. Some social service agencies, particularly those that are government-administered, create files on clients to follow them through the services they receive at different organizations. The intent of the City Table was to facilitate increased coordination, leading to a more cohesive system for clients to navigate.

Agencies had trouble navigating this maze as well, both in terms of directing clients appropriately and in acquiring funding and food access. Those who were new to the HFI response sector during the COVID-19 pandemic had to dedicate energy towards learning which agencies provided emergency food, and for which populations, as each had unique criteria. Kacey, a city social worker, elaborated on the funding maze: “there is also a maze that agencies have to go through to get at funding...there are several private funders, grants, and they all have different agendas, and they have to be applied to in separate ways.”

According to Kacey, these labyrinthine solutions to addressing HFI were not “really new.” They said, “COVID shined a light on a food system that existed before, and it also shined a light on all of those gaps that existed before.”

Opportunities

Jointly addressing their “moral quandaries”

A key element that supported, rather than challenged, collaboration was the similar “moral quandaries” interviewees spoke about in terms of their professional roles and capacity in addressing HFI. Ideological cohesion surrounding the importance of addressing the root causes of HFI was apparent across participants’ comments, as they all alluded to the disjuncture they experience between what they know as evidence-based long-term solutions to HFI (i.e., implementing income-

based approaches), versus the short-term emergency food solutions they have agency over in their professional roles. Rory, a policy advisor, and food rescue worker, said:

“It’s great that people support the [food-distributing agencies] and that they want to get into these initiatives and improve our food supply, but that conversation makes us forget that there are people living in poverty. Where regardless of how good those programs are, they will still not be meeting their needs as a result of being in poverty.”

Rory added that “they [the city] talk about having a strong and abundant food supply which is related more to food resilience and not necessarily access for people who are marginalized.” They emphasized that addressing HFI and addressing food waste were unique issues and were sensitive to the “moral quandaries” of trying to marry these two distinct social problems.

Leslie emphasized that “no one is trying to get in the way of people trying to have adequate income, that’s for sure,” but acknowledged that “when we create all of these food hampers, we can be susceptible to be seen as a community resource that provides a rationale for people’s incomes to be dropped even further.” Cameron felt it was important for agencies to determine their scope of practice and work as effectively as they can within those bounds. They said:

[social services organizations] do what they know they can do, and other people need to do other stuff. I think both the literature and 90 percent of people in the sector know that food security is primarily a problem of income security and that’s an exceeding difficult problem to deal with, particularly in this province when there is

absolutely no constituency for that in the government, in fact, negative constituency. Therefore, wishing that we could change that, or being upset that the Food Bank hasn't fixed that, doesn't get us anywhere. The people that want to advocate for living wages and better income, that's great. But in the meantime, we should try to get what food there is in the system to the people that need it, even though it's imperfect.

Mackenzie agreed, noting that their organization had refined their mission from initially being about HFI to now focussing on reducing food waste:

We have decided [agency name] is solely about reducing waste...when we talk about food rescue, it does not address food security, really the biggest impact it has is about redirecting food and while it might temporarily increase access to food at an agency, we are not bringing people out of food insecurity. And it does have a benefit to the agencies in terms of freeing up resources that might be used on food so they can invest in things like services related to housing or employment and those might have a more tangible impact on increasing people's food security.

Participants acknowledged that providing emergency food was easier to do than implementing income-based solutions and structural change; thus, emergency food provision was more likely to be perceived as achievable within grant application parameters and cycles. Cameron explained, "A lot of the emphasis would be on emergency food provision and not so much on how to build long term food security in a particular community because that's not so

concrete and it's not as clear how to do that and so those would be less appealing to (funders)." Current funding structures do not necessarily encourage the type of innovation that would be required for deeper structural change. Quinn described the lack of movement towards income-based solutions as a "complacency with the status quo":

There is that saying, 'don't expect someone to understand something if their job depends on them not understanding it.' I think that is true in the non-profit sector, if we are funding people to perpetuate food programming as it is, then they won't step back and try to find other ways of addressing the problem...oftentimes systems perpetuate that [the status quo] in terms of what we ask people to report on...innovation might mean that you have a season where numbers go down, might mean failures...If our funding and reporting is only about reporting success, we are not going to be innovative.

Quinn called for funders to take a leadership role and "challenge organizations to do something that is not replicating existing services." Rory echoed Quinn, stating, "as long as we are not thinking about those long-term [i.e., income-based] ideas, we will always be in this situation. That is why collaboration is so important." In this way, City Table members were united in terms of the value they placed on addressing the root causes of HFI. Notably, the ideologies underpinning the City Table juxtapose those of the conservative provincial policy context, wherein it remains unlikely that policy changes needed to support long-term solutions to HFI will be developed.

Wenger's modes of identification

Below, we analyze our findings using Wenger's modes of CoP identification to deepen our understanding of the City Table's collaborative efforts.

Engagement

Engagement builds trust in CoPs and reduces isolation in the problem-solving process (Patton & Parker, 2017). Engagement is the foundation of CoPs, as doing things, talking, and producing artifacts together justifies the need for a community and indeed forms the relationships from which the community is built (Patton & Parker, 2017; Smith et al., 2017). The City Table succeeded in bringing people together during the pandemic to talk about sharing food among agencies and with clients. But while community building may be easy for people sharing food in a garden, it is more challenging for food service agencies to talk about and enact sharing food, given the competitive climate and the pandemic restrictions. Agencies are evaluated individually by funders in areas of competition, like food donations. This approach of individual agency evaluation appears counterproductive to promoting a collective strategy and engagement. Though joint tasks were alluded to, there are barriers to establishing this foundation of a CoP due to competition for donations and funding and independent methods of data collection described by participants. Additionally, the virtual nature of these meetings may have impeded relationship-building, particularly for those new to the HFI sector, as Leslie elaborated: "Collaborative practices take some years to establish...there were some people new to the table who were just beginning to know each other. There are some differences between

meeting virtually and in person because we need to learn to trust each other."

Cameron similarly described how "talking about this stuff on Zoom is not going to be as fruitful as getting everybody in a big room and having this conversation that way. But, if we are going to do it this fall, that is what it has to be."

Another potential barrier to engagement mentioned by some participants is that of leadership at the Table. Leslie said: "When the City is the one calling the table together, there are questions that arise in terms of who has power at the table, do people have equal power at the table?" Quinn stated: "The city or funder who is a convener there, that's a person who is paid to take a leadership role. Don't be just like, 'I brought you here to this meeting and I'll facilitate.' It's insufficient to do that and I think leadership is necessary."

Some participants felt that the not-for-profit sector was already overextended and deserved remuneration for their contributions to the table. For some organizations with ample experience in the HFI sector, it was felt they already had relationships established and that this collective initiative was neither a good use of their time nor conducive to deepening those relationships. Other agencies, however, felt the table provided a unique space for hearing new perspectives; for example, food retail owners were invited as guest speakers to one meeting to share their challenges and interest in being part of the HFI solution.

Imagination

Imagination is indicated by transparency, explanations, reflection, and pushing boundaries (Wenger, 1998). Hopeful group imagination can also have the effect of forming goals and setting norms, which is why imagination is transitional in between engagement and

alignment (Aguirre-Garzón & Castañeda-Peña, 2017). Imagination means constructing an image of the practice and its members and seeing oneself as part of them. There were few examples of collective imagination among participants. With the competition for donations and funding, it was difficult for agencies to imagine themselves in a collective struggle to respond to HFI. Particularly during the HFI crisis triggered by the pandemic, participants' imaginations were focussed primarily on addressing their clients needs and their own food acquisition processes, which restricted development of a collective imagination. Due to deregulation of collecting poverty statistics in Canada, each agency can measure its work individually and then use these data to apply for funding or ask for donations (Riches & Tarasuk, 2014). Agencies can create their own universes to sustain themselves and use their knowledge to advance themselves and excel in the funding system. But these practices do not advance broader collaborative goals to address HFI.

Considering Wenger's (1998) indicators of imagination, explanations of and reflections on problems in HFI responses were present among participants at the Table, but not in the context of collective imagining. The hope for positive and long-term change conveyed by some participants is promising; however, competition and individualistic approaches to responding to HFI dominated the imaginations of the participants. While a CoP approach may be used to overcome this pattern of thinking by building trans-personal knowing, relationships of trust and determining common purpose and goals, the

director of a community agency spoke to the challenges, including "egos," associated with systematic approaches to cooperation. Competition is more than an imaginative tension; it is formative to agencies' self-understanding and creates a barrier to addressing HFI more comprehensively and to forming a CoP. While a CoP approach can be a valuable tool in mitigating the individualism and competitive nature of the HFI response sector, existing funding structures remain major barriers.

Alignment

Alignment, as measured by Wenger's (1998) indicators of common focus, direction, plans, standards, policies, and distribution of authority, currently does not exist in the City Table. This may partially be related to their fear of organizational identity loss, as described earlier in relation to competition. However, participants did speak about the potential benefits of creating alignment (i.e., following directions, aligning with expectations and standards, and coordinating actions towards a common goal [Smith et al., 2017]), in responding to HFI. Agencies do this internally in several ways, whether they are responding to community needs, following the law, or meeting funding requirements. However, external alignment between agencies is not historically common to Edmonton's HFI response. Cameron mentioned that the last time HFI-related agencies in Edmonton came together to coordinate their services was forty years ago, when they formed the first food bank in Canada.

Discussion

In this study, we examined the challenges to and opportunities for HFI collaboration during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in Edmonton, Alberta using Wenger's (1998) CoP analytical lens. Interviews with nine professionals from the City Table provided insights into this initiative to coordinate HFI responses among food service providing agencies. Overall, our analysis points to members of the Table making some progress towards the development of a collaborative learning community, with engagement being more commonly observed than imagination or alignment. The hope conveyed by some participants for further progress towards more long-term solutions to HFI is promising; however, competition for funding, clients and food donations, and individualistic approaches to responding to HFI dominated the imaginations of the participants and presented obstacles to more collective alignment, characteristic of the CoP process. These circumstances reflect the difficulty of agencies participating while experiencing funding and food access challenges.

Gaps in forming a CoP

For the City Table to fully achieve the characteristics of a CoP learning community, more time is needed to build and strengthen relationships and create a collective vision (imagination), goals (alignment), and strategies for achieving them—all of which are difficult even without the added pandemic-related pressures. Participants showed passion for their work, evaluated it critically, and shared a desire to improve their organization's ability to address HFI. None were content with the charity model of addressing HFI and align more with rights-based, comprehensive, and evidence-based approaches to HFI. But despite

participants' strong networking abilities and general ideological cohesion, they have not yet succeeded in solidifying a CoP. That said, because there is engagement, shared values, and new infrastructure for communication and collaboration (in the form of the City Table), there is now a social space for more collective action.

The City Table created an online platform and gathered participants, but to create a CoP, group trust, safety, and shared understanding must be built to have open dialogue to set intentions, select approaches, flesh out strategies, and proceed with transparent evaluation. Tension can arise among members of CoPs can occur, however, when they are asked to work together but are evaluated separately, sparking competition. According to Li et al., "Some people may perceive these new roles as members of a CoP as risky and uncomfortable, which may subsequently lead to less engagement. A learning community must therefore develop a high level of trust among participants in order to be functional" (2009, p. 3).

The individualism among agencies, which may have emerged in response to a highly competitive environment, erodes trust among agencies. Keenly aware of these issues, the City Table has conducted internal evaluations, including anonymous surveys, of their group processes to inform their next steps.

Moving forward

Interviews with these professionals were all conducted within the first eight months of 2020. But the landscape of HFI has changed in Edmonton, and Canada more broadly since these initial interviews. One benefit of this table is its flexibility: it can examine issues happening on the ground and respond in real time. At a City Table

meeting in November 2022, agencies reported escalating demands for emergency food since pandemic-related benefits, like CERB, had ceased. This situation is similarly reflected in the literature, with a 73 percent increase in total visits to the food bank documented in Alberta between 2019 to 2022 (Food Banks Canada, 2022).

Since the Fall of 2022, meetings have shifted to a hybrid format and include a shared meal for in-person attendees, which may help to build relationships and facilitate collaboration. Additionally, City Table members' roles in relation to HFI has morphed over time. Some have shifted their efforts towards upstream advocacy as opposed to emergency food provision. As a collective, City Table members have indicated interest in similar shifts but remain in discussions about what these efforts will look like. City Table membership and leadership is ever evolving; time will tell if it becomes a lasting City initiative. Kacey acknowledged the challenges ahead for this Table: "it's going to be long tough work with people who haven't traditionally worked together in this way."

The role of community-based partnerships in responding to HFI during COVID-19

The City Table is just one example of new partnerships formed during the pandemic to respond to HFI in Canada (Food Banks Canada, 2020; Lowitt et al., 2022; Regnier-Davies et al., 2022; Slater et al., 2022). In Manitoba, Lowitt et al. (2022) observed charitable food organizations increasingly engaging with advocacy and research groups about HFI policy supports. In Toronto, a "Food Access Table" was convened in the Spring of 2020. The Food Access Table consisted of municipal staff and representatives from charitable food organizations. Like the City Table, the Food Access Table grappled with questions surrounding how

to negotiate the need for emergency food provision while also calling for food justice and measures to support sustainable food systems (Regnier-Davies et al., 2022).

Grounded in their experiences of working with the Food Access Table and BlackFoodToronto, Regnier-Davies et al. (2023) challenge the prevailing academic discourse—reflected in City Table participants' "moral quandaries"—that charitable food organizations necessarily distract from social equity. They argue this critique does not distinguish between large corporate food banks (detached from local contexts) and community-based organizations. Given their intimate knowledge of unique community needs, community-based organizations, including City Table participants, can be "an asset in defining what those [Canada's social equity] goals should be, and how they may be implemented and supported, and by whom" (Regnier-Davies et al., 2023, p. 360). The existence of local, culturally attuned initiatives rooted in community needs does not preclude the ability to advocate for social policy change.

Strengths and limitations

Strengths of this study include our use of Wenger's (1998) CoP framework to analyze findings. This proved a useful framework for understanding and contextualizing the collaborative approach undertaken by the City Table. This research contributes to Canadian HFI discourse and to a limited body of Alberta-specific HFI literature. Limitations include that formal interviews were conducted prior to and early in the Table's formation, and our sample size (n=9) was relatively small. Individuals heavily engaged in the initial COVID-19 response may have been too busy to participate but may have had unique perspectives to contribute. Ongoing engagement with the City Table

will be valuable for longer term study of the Table's potential to contribute to Edmonton's HFI response.

Conclusions

Responding to HFI is a complex task, particularly during a pandemic. This has not stopped City Table members from coming together to share information and discuss ways to collaboratively work towards this goal. To fully develop a CoP approach to addressing HFI, concurrent efforts must be made towards engagement, imagination, and alignment. The HFI response sector in Edmonton has embarked on this process, but all three of these processes are deficient in varying ways. An effective and united CoP has potential to make strides in addressing HFI through long-term programmatic and policy changes. Competition between agencies to secure funding and donations of food, particularly during the current food insecurity crisis, erodes collaborative efforts. Building engagement between agencies, shifting staff's imagination to a collective cause, and aligning practices are monumental tasks in this context.

This research has outlined two parallels between agencies responding to HFI and their clients. First are the similarities between agencies and clients as they both navigate maze-like structures for access to resources. In agencies, this fosters an environment of individualism and competition—significant barriers to collaboration. Second, funding and resource insecurity in agencies parallels the experience of HFI insofar as agencies struggle to acquire the types and amounts of foods they need to run their programs. This

characterizes Edmonton's HFI response system as one requiring growth in its conceptualization and execution if it aims to comprehensively address HFI. Efforts to coordinate and improve Edmonton's HFI response sector require disassembling the competitive structures of operational insecurity for social services to pursue common ground and greater stability.

There are several systemic interventions that could be made to address the root cause of HFI—poverty—through the redistribution of wealth. However, systemic changes will not happen immediately and those experiencing poverty and HFI today cannot wait for the change. City Table members are doing their best to work within the current reality. In engaging with the topic of improving responses to HFI during interviews, participants underlined their own agency's vulnerability, exacerbated by the additional demands and workload created by the pandemic. Agencies can continue to address HFI individually in an environment of competition. Or they can work to coordinate their efforts and build on their strengths of networking to transition to a different and more collaborative HFI response. This has already begun through efforts like the City Table; however, more sustained work is needed to dismantle oppressive systems and generate measurable impacts on HFI in Edmonton.

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