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Research Article

"We shouldn't always have to be resilient": A critical discourse analysis of food system resilience and equity in Toronto, Ontario, in an era of global polycrisis

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Abstract

In recent years, resilient food systems have become a policy priority for municipal governments, especially given concerns about climate change, the impacts of COVID-19, and rising food insecurity in Canada. The term resilience is often used to describe the ability of individuals, communities, nations and systems to recover from disruptions. However, resilience is frequently employed within policy discourse without clear definition or communication as to who or what should be resilient. The ambiguous use of the term can lead to inadequate policy and often fails to address systemic issues that create food system and social inequities in municipalities. Our analysis examines how the City of Toronto has framed resilience within food system policy discussions and compares these framings with the perceptions of resilience held by local community-based food system actors. Through an analysis of sixteen (n=16) municipal documents and twenty-eight (n=28) key informant interviews, our findings suggest that the rhetoric of resilience has little actual influence on food policy. Instead, it is often used to describe an idealized food system and indirectly places the responsibility on individuals to be resilient amid ongoing and multifaceted crises. The study contributes to critical discussions on resilience in food systems literature, arguing that resilience often reinforces a neoliberal mindset that prioritizes economic system resilience over the well-being of populations. The momentum towards community-driven, culturally responsive, localized food initiatives in Toronto is a positive step. However, we suggest that

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food system scholars, practitioners and policymakers engage with the concepts of 'resilience' more critically and with more intention, being mindful of the systems of oppression and exploitation inherent to the concept.

Keywords: Canada; food policy; food systems; food system resilience; inequity; Toronto

Résumé

Ces dernières années, la résilience des systèmes alimentaires est devenue une priorité politique pour les gouvernements municipaux, notamment en raison des préoccupations liées aux changements climatiques, aux effets de la COVID-19 et à l'augmentation de l'insécurité alimentaire au Canada. Le terme « résilience » est souvent utilisé pour décrire la capacité des individus, des communautés, des nations et des systèmes à se remettre d'une perturbation. Cependant, dans le discours politique, il est fréquemment employé sans définition ou explicitation quant à qui ou quoi devrait être résilient. L'utilisation ambiguë du terme peut conduire à des politiques inadéquates et, souvent, ne permet pas de résoudre les problèmes systémiques qui créent des inégalités d'ordre social et alimentaire dans les municipalités. Notre analyse porte sur la façon dont la Ville de Toronto a fait intervenir la résilience dans les discussions sur les politiques touchant le système alimentaire et compare le portrait qui s'en dégage avec les perceptions de la résilience qu'ont les acteurs du système alimentaire de la communauté locale. L'analyse de seize (n=16) documents municipaux et de vingt-huit (n=28) entrevues avec des informateurs clés révèle que la rhétorique de la résilience a peu d'influence sur les politiques alimentaires. Au contraire, elle est souvent utilisée pour décrire un système alimentaire idéalisé et fait indirectement porter aux individus la responsabilité de la résilience dans un contexte de crises permanentes et multiformes. L'étude contribue aux discussions critiques sur la résilience qui ont cours dans la littérature sur les systèmes alimentaires, en soutenant que souvent, la résilience renforce la mentalité néolibérale qui privilégie la résilience du système économique au bien-être des populations. À Toronto, la mise en œuvre de projets alimentaires locaux, culturellement adaptés et dirigés par la communauté constitue une étape positive. Cependant, nous suggérons que les chercheurs, les praticiens et les décideurs du système alimentaire recourent au concept de « résilience » de manière plus critique et avec des intentions plus précises, en étant conscients des systèmes d'oppression et d'exploitation inhérents à ce concept.

Introduction and objectives

In recent years, scholars and practitioners have been actively involved in initiatives to transform or create alternatives to the current industrialized food system. Given the looming challenges presented by climate change, global pandemics, and growing inequalities in an era of "poly-crises," the focus on realizing resilient and equitable food systems remains ever more urgent (Favas et al., 2024; Ross & Mason, 2020; Weinkauf & Everitt, 2023). Greater food system equity is a goal in which all members of society share the benefits and risks of how food is produced overall (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010) and is viewed as both an essential condition for, and an outcome of, a resilient food system (Miles & Hoy, 2023).

Food studies practitioners have long sought to achieve and maintain resilient food systems, with more recent interest emerging amongst those in government and policymaking more generally. Many municipalities have developed resilience strategies as part of policy and program planning and/or have engaged in international collectives to promote urban resilience, such as the Resilient Cities Network (see Rockefeller Foundation, 2022). For example, the City of Toronto has long used "resilience" to frame an idealized food system towards which municipal staff and community actors have strived. However, food system resilience in Toronto has recently come into question as the COVID-19 pandemic magnified pre-existing issues of food insecurity and food system inequity, highlighting systemic and structural racial inequities that have underpinned the city for generations (CABR, 2022; Elsharkawy, 2024; Roberts, 2020). Growing food insecurity among racialized communities is one of the most significant signals of inequitable food system resilience (CABR, 2022).

Within policy discourse, food system resilience is optimistically framed by policy makers as the ability of individuals, communities, cities, and nations to bounce back from societal disruptions if adequately prepared and equipped to deal with looming threats and system shocks (Bergström, 2018). However, despite increasing usage, the term resilience is often employed without clear definition or deliberation on what comprises a resilient food system, which can lead to unintended consequences. Ungar (2012) argues that ambiguities in how resilience is defined and framed in policy enable biases to inform what "desired outcomes" are attached to resilient subjects. Ambiguous rhetoric about resilience discourse(s) can also lead to a failure of municipal policy, inadequate solutions to inequities, and/or an overemphasis on the responsibility of impacted individuals (Bhuyan & Leung, 2022). To address these challenges, this paper utilizes critical discourse analysis of policy materials and key-informant interview to examine how "resilience" has been framed by government and policymakers in Toronto, and, in contrast, how local community-based food system actors perceive this concept in relation to equity principles and policy in action.

Although several scholars have examined Toronto as a leader in food policy (Blay-Palmer, 2009; Stahlbrand & Roberts, 2022; Welsh & MacRae, 1998), to our knowledge, scholars have not yet examined or unpacked how the city has framed and, in turn, operationalized what it means to harness a resilient food system through policy mechanisms. This paper draws attention to where the City of Toronto has built momentum in these respects and offers insights into how the City of Toronto and other Canadian municipalities might incorporate strategies to realize more equitable practices to support resilient food systems. It considers the trajectory of food system policy in Toronto over twenty-two years, examining City of Toronto websites, staff reports,

commissioned reports, background files, and other grey literature, and it compares governmental framings of food system resilience with the perspectives of community-based actors. This research begins with an overview of the literature on resilience and the use of critical discourse analysis in food systems and food security research. Our findings suggest that, throughout our timeline of analysis, the city engaged with discursive framings of resilience. The loosely defined and inconsistent framing of resilience makes it unclear *who* or *what* is to be resilient in times of crisis and beyond. In practice, the rhetoric of resilience has little influence on food policy; instead, it is used to describe an idealized food system as an end goal and places the onus of being resilient on individuals who are most vulnerable to inequitable food systems.

Background

Food system equity and resilience

The concept of "resilience" encompasses diverse meanings that span various academic disciplines, yet it is rooted in the diverging fields of psychology and ecology. In psychology, resilience is considered the ability of a subject to "thrive despite adversity" (Garmezy & Streitman, 1974). Originating in the study of childhood trauma, resilience theory placed its focus on the capacity of an individual to return to a normal state following a traumatic event (Bergström, 2018). Resilience, as Luthar and Cicchetti (2000) articulate, is "a two-dimensional construct that implies exposure to adversity and the manifestation of positive adjustment outcomes" (p. 858). Within ecology, the study of resilience is informed by systems theory, which conceptualizes predictable relationships between risk and protective factors and the stability of ecological systems amidst perturbations (Folke et al., 2010; Ungar, 2004). As Folke and colleagues (2010) describe, the concept is utilized significantly to describe the ability of ecosystems to maintain stability in light of perturbations. Today, systems theory and resilience discourse have been adopted within food system discussions and, for many scholars, serve as guiding principles to foster equitable and sustainable food systems (Tendall et al., 2015).

In municipalities across Canada, discourse around urban resilience has become salient given unpredictable patterns of climate change (Zeuli et al., 2018) and the impacts of food system shocks visible in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic (Blay-Palmer et al., 2021). A resilient food system is often described as one that is capable of absorbing disturbances, adapting to shocks and vulnerabilities, and reorganizing or transforming as necessary to maintain functionality in changing environments (Béné et al., 2016). However, within municipal policy, the term is often used with little communication given to *who* or *what* is to be resilient (Soubry & Sherren, 2022). Policymakers have fervently adopted the language of resilience, using it vaguely and apolitically, and, in many situations, hampering genuine efforts to mitigate the damage of system shock and crisis (Soubry & Sherren, 2022). Some scholars maintain that it is problematic to prioritize resilience in urban policy as it is little more than a mechanism to address short-term disaster recovery, leaving little room for considerations of the places-based roots of vulnerability that create inequity amongst populations in the first place (Cannon & Müller-Mahn, 2010). In practice, resilience tends to "emphasize self-organization and agency" (Meriläinen 2019, p. 126) of the individual

and overlooks the unequal distribution of power across society.

Critical discourse analysis and municipal food policy

This research uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine municipal food policy in Toronto, with an emphasis on *framing* in policy discourse. Frame theory has a long history across the social sciences and has found particular footing in communications studies (Matthes, 2009), environmental studies (Kurtz, 2003), and, more recently, in the arena of Canadian food policy (Mah et al., 2014; McIntyre et al., 2018). Frame analysis focuses on understanding how problems are defined and discussed in agenda-setting and public policymaking realms (Daviter, 2011)—operating as a way of selecting, organizing, interpreting, and making sense of complex and ill-defined concepts utilized in policy discourse (Rein and Schön, 1996). This approach also brings attention to the implied elements of a policy issue by making them more explicit, naming the competing frames within the discussion, and bringing attention to how reframing occurs over time and is influenced by changing broader social discourse (Schön & Rein, 1994).

Mah et al. (2014) utilize CDA to examine how household food insecurity is framed in federal policy discourse. They unpack the underlying story of food insecurity as a policy problem and how it fails to signal importance on the federal policy agenda because of discursive policy framings. McIntyre et al. (2018, p.149) also grapple with household food insecurity as part of parliamentary and legislative sessions, and they consider how it has been rendered an "intractable" problem that perpetuates policy inaction by federal-level government actors. The authors highlight that moral claims and condemnation within rival political discourse drive political posturing around household food insecurity, creating a stalemate situation where little or no progress is made on the issue of food insecurity in Canada (McIntyre et al., 2018).

Research from Mah et al. (2014) and McIntyre et al. (2018) demonstrates some of the broader contentions that Canadian food policy scholars grapple with. Food system issues like food insecurity remain ongoing policy problems, perpetuated over forty years in Canada. Economic recession, industrial decline, and mounting social inequities through and following the 1970s severely impacted the livability of cities across North America and beyond (Coburn, 2000). These socioeconomic shifts eroded confidence and investment in the social welfare system, bringing a rise in fiscal austerity, cutbacks to state programs, and an increased reliance on the market to bring stability to the Canadian economy (Lightman & Riches, 2000). Today, socioeconomic inequalities and exacerbated health outcomes continue to deepen and persist in an era of poly-crises. Despite Canada's ratification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1976 (within which the right to food is embedded), federal- and provincial-level programs and policies remain woefully inadequate and have not prevented experiences of severe poverty and food insecurity across the country (Rideout et al., 2007). In practice, the response to food insecurity continues to reflect neoliberal patterns of minimal federal and provincial government intervention and an increasing reliance on municipalities and community-level actors to respond to the ongoing impacts of food insecurity and other food system inequities (Duncan & Claeys, 2018; Regnier-Davies & Edge, 2024).

As food system issues become increasingly apparent in Canadian cities, municipalities have developed strategies and policy commitments to improve food access and household food security in urban regions

(Mendes, 2017; Morley & Morgan, 2021; Sonnino, 2016). Although power is often somewhat downplayed in municipal politics, the range of food system levers that can inform local policies within municipal jurisdictional control is significant and worthy of attention. For example, municipalities can address a range of food system issues through zoning, bylaws, land-use regulation, and planning, not to mention partnerships with other governance actors, to support and respond to the impacts of food system issues (Mendes, 2017; Sonnino, 2016). How policy actors frame food system issues within political discourse affects how plans are implemented.

Understandings and framings of food system issues on a municipal level can also influence zoning protocols that integrate local food production and urban agricultural projects or mixed-use planning and design with small-scale ethnic food retail spaces in redevelopment projects (McClintock et al., 2021). The way municipalities discuss and prioritize food policy can influence governance measures that encourage or dissuade civic engagement in food policy in practice, including the language used in food charters that detail municipal priorities or the allocation of staff and resources (Sonnino et al., 2019; Spoel & Derkatch, 2020). Policymakers and local interest groups employ place-based framing to define and explain food system problems within municipal policy, which significantly influences how place-based solutions are proposed and dealt with over time (Daneri et al., 2021).

Methods and analysis

In this paper, we engage in qualitative policy analysis using a CDA, as modelled by Mah et al. (2014) and Schön and Rein (1994) and influenced by a practical guide as developed by Nixon et al. (2017). Our analysis examines how the Toronto government and policymakers have framed "resilience," and, in contrast, how local community-based food system actors perceive these concepts in relation to local food policy. We examine the framing of food system resilience within sixteen (n=16) City of Toronto reports, websites, staff reports, commissioned reports, background files, and other grey literature that have been made publicly available over twenty-two years (from 2000 to 2022). Documents included in the study were found on the City of Toronto website through keyword searches, including "food system" or "food policy" and "resilience." Early documents that used terminology of food self-sufficiency and self-reliance were included to demonstrate changes in food system language and discourse over time. Documents analyzed fit within the inclusion criteria of being Toronto-specific, publicly available, and municipally authored or commissioned.

We developed a five-step CDA as follows: (1) We first contextualized each of the documents, indexing meta-information on the date of publication, structure, authorship, and format. (2) We then coded excerpts based on assumptions made about resilience, including who benefits and who is disadvantaged by the term, and, in some cases, where it is ambiguous *who* or *what* is considered "resilient" in the excerpt (Nixon et al. 2017, pp. 251-252). (3) We then drew connections between the shifting concepts of resilience and discourse with broader social changes taking place in time and the given space. This process helped to (4) narrow the focus on some of the embedded values and shifting understandings, perspectives, and approaches to resilience in urban policy. Text extracts were

qualitatively coded by the first author, and emergent themes and patterns were debriefed and discussed on an ongoing basis by both authors of this paper. (5) We then analyzed the findings across time to identify the dynamics of frames in action, encompassing three key patterns: resilience as self-reliance, resilience for climate preparedness, and equity in resilience (see Table 1).

In addition, we analyzed interviews with twenty-eight (n=28) community-based actors working within organizations that deliver food programming on the community level. These key informants included staff serving as upper managers and frontline workers of organizations and initiatives that delivered emergency food responses throughout the COVID-19 crisis and were actively involved in food programming before and since the pandemic. The researchers made efforts to engage representatives from diverse service organizations, including grassroots initiatives focussed on food sovereignty for Black communities, multi-service community organizations, newcomer settlement services organizations, cultural centers, and Indigenous service organizations (see Table 2).

Interviewees were asked a range of questions, including those regarding their involvement in the food security response during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the opportunities and challenges that arose from their efforts, and their perceptions of how the municipality could overcome system vulnerability and avenues for ensuring food system resilience. Interviews were conducted virtually, recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Interview data underwent analysis using NVivo14 software and employed open, axial, and selective coding techniques. Researchers derived codes through deductive and inductive approaches. Two researchers analyzed both municipal documents and the key informant interviews, comparing and reconciling codes they generated. Coding sessions resulted in adjustments to the coding scheme and helped to establish a shared understanding of code meanings.

Table 1: Compiled Materials for Critical Discourse Analysis and their Shifts in Resilience Framings

	Title, link and document type	**Year published**	**Prominent resilience framings**
1	Food and Hunger Action Committee Phase I Report, "Planting the Seeds" (Report)	2000	Self-reliance
2	Toronto Food Charter and Food and Hunger Action Committee Phase II Report, "The Growing Season" (Report)	2001	
3	Toronto Food Charter (Charter)	2001	
4	Toronto Food Policy Council (Website)	2003	
5	Cultivating Food Connections: Toward a Healthy and Sustainable Food System for Toronto (Report)	2010	
6	Resilient City – Preparing for a Changing Climate (Staff report)	2014	Climate preparedness
7	Milan Food Policy Pact, City of Toronto (Staff report attachment)	2015	
8	Toronto Food Strategy Report, 2018 (Report)	2018	
9	Resilient food systems/Resilient Cities: A high-level vulnerability assessment of Toronto's food system (Commissioned report)	2018	
10	Food Systems Transformation, Toronto Food Strategy (Background file)	2019	
11	Toronto's Resiliency Strategy (Strategy report)	2019	
12	Resilient Toronto (Report)	2019	
13	Report on emergency food preparedness and building urban food resilience (Commissioned report)	2020	Equity
14	City Council approves first Black Food Sovereignty Plan. (City news release)	2021	
15	Confronting Anti-Black Racism Unit (CABR). Toronto Black Food Sovereignty Plan. City of Toronto. (Background file)	2021	
16	Toronto Reconciliation Action Plan (Plan report)	2022	

Table 2: Key informant organization type and position

	Organization type	**Interviewee role**
1	Community health center (NIA located)	Community Dietitian
2	Community health center (NIA located)	Community Dietitian
3	Multiservice community hub (Immigrant focussed; NIA located)	Director
4	Multiservice community hub (Immigrant focussed; NIA located)	Community service coordinator
5	Grassroots organization (Black-led; NIA located)	Executive Director
6	Grassroots organization (Black-led; NIA located)	Director
7	Multiservice community services (children and youth focussed; NIA located)	Executive Director
8	Grassroots organization (immigrant focussed)	Director
9	Grassroots organization (immigrant focussed)	Community service coordinator
10	Multiservice community services (Immigrant focussed)	Director
11	Multiservice community services (Immigrant focussed)	Community service manager
12	Multiservice community services (Immigrant focussed)	Community service coordinator
13	Grassroots organization (NIA located)	Director
14	Grassroots organization (NIA located)	Community service manager
15	Multiservice community services (Indigenous women focussed)	Community service manager
16	Faith-based grassroots organization (NIA located)	Director
17	Grassroots organization (NIA located)	Director
18	Multiservice community services (NIA located; refugee focussed)	Community service coordinator
19	Grassroots organization (NIA located)	Director
20	Non-governmental organization	Community service coordinator
21	Multiservice community services (NIA located; immigrant focussed)	Director
22	Non-governmental organization	Director
23	Non-governmental organization	Community service coordinator
24	Multiservice community services (NIA located)	Director

25	Multiservice community services (NIA located)	Community service coordinator
26	Multiservice community services	Director
27	Faith-based grassroots organization	Community service coordinator
28	Multiservice community services (Indigenous focussed)	Community service coordinator

Findings

Resilience frames in municipal policy and discourse in Toronto, Ontario

The City of Toronto has an international reputation in food system policy and has been touted as a leader and model-maker for other municipalities worldwide. The Toronto Board of Health launched a civic engagement group, the Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC), in 1991 (TFPC, 2003). In the latter months of 1999, the City of Toronto formed the Food and Hunger Action Committee (FHAC) to study food security inequalities in Toronto's neighbourhoods and to "find ways to reduce hunger and improve nutritional health among Torontonians" (City of Toronto, 2000, p. 2). Between 2000 and 2001, the FHAC published two reports that surveyed the existing "patchwork" of food programs across the city and inventoried policies and programs related to food, nutrition, and anti-hunger efforts (City of Toronto, 2000, p. 2). These reports provide foundational records of food policy discussions in the city, which is where our critical discourse analysis begins. This section unpacks the evolution of resilience framings in food policy discourse between 2000 and 2022. The compiled documents demonstrate various uses and framings of resilience, including individualized notions of self-reliance and self-sufficiency, urban climate responsiveness, and, more recently, food system equity and community resilience.

Between 2000 and 2008, many of the compiled documents did not use the specific language of resilience. Instead, they utilized adjacent terms such as "self-sufficiency" or "self-reliance" to explain why local programs should attempt to improve food literacy and individualized food access. For example, the second FHAC report, *The Growing Season*, highlights that, by bolstering urban agriculture and community gardens, the city can ensure that "ethnocultural communities" become more self-reliant and newcomers build social connections and social capital in their new communities (City of Toronto, 2001a, p. 32). The report also details that, financially, an "average [garden] plot can produce about $100 worth of fresh produce a year, which is a $300,000 contribution to food self-reliance in the city" (City of Toronto, 2001a, p. 32). Investment and support for urban agriculture and community gardens is framed as an avenue to instill food self-reliance and self-sufficiency in communities.

The Food Charter, published in 2001, is a prominent document and statement that details a broad set of goals to promote food security within the City of Toronto (City of Toronto, 2001b). The Charter utilized rights-based language to articulate the need for equitable access to an adequate supply of nutritious, affordable, and culturally-appropriate foods and advocated for income, employment, housing, and transportation policies that support secure and dignified access to the food people need (City of Toronto, 2001b, p. 1).

However, the Charter places much of its focus on the economic inequities related to income that may lead to food insecurity while overlooking the underlying causes within the urban region—without recognizing or addressing solutions to diverse and intersectional forms of inequity (including race, gender, ability, and age). For example, several statements detailed below hint at an understanding that inequalities exist but provide little direction in how to (re)shape policy to ensure that these inequities can be addressed:

> Toronto tries to be a city where everyone belongs, feels part of a larger community and has an opportunity to contribute. It does not want to be a city torn between haves and have-nots. The decision to make Toronto a food-secure city acknowledges that each of us is affected by the well-being of others. (City of Toronto, 2001b, p. 2)

> Some elderly or disabled residents rarely enjoy eating with friends and neighbours...find[ing] it difficult to get around, and so often eat alone. In a food-secure Toronto, they will enjoy more opportunities to join others for a meal. (City of Toronto, 2001b, p. 4)

The Charter also does not use the specific language of "resilience" but rather frames activities aimed at improving food insecurity (such as urban agriculture and nutrition programs) as strategies for individualized self-reliance to reduce the burden of diet-related disease on the healthcare system:

> A healthy diet is the most cost-effective form of health care available. Heart disease, strokes, diabetes and cancer, all of which are related to diet, cost Toronto $491 million a year in medical bills and lost productivity....To protect Canada's health care system, especially as the population ages and chronic diseases peak, nutrition needs to be treated as a first line of defense. (City of Toronto, 2001b, p. 3)

Initiated in 2008, the Toronto Food Strategy (a Steering Group within Toronto Public Health) led and guided many programs and initiatives delivered in collaboration with various partners across the social service sector, academia, and City departments (Toronto Public Health, 2010). The language of resilience is directly used in its first report, *Cultivating Food Connections,* to describe a functioning food system:

> Resilience can apply to a system as a whole or to individuals, neighbourhoods and cities. A resilient food system is able to meet the needs of consumers in the face of short-term crises, and resilient people are able to cope with adversity in ways that are not only effective but [also] enhance their capacity to deal with future problems. No government can ensure or instill resilience, but public supports can be put in place to facilitate it at every level of society. At the individual level, a food system that values resilience would empower people with a broad range of food skills and information. It would foster strong neighbourhoods with a sense of community where people feel they can rely on each other in difficult times. (Toronto Public Health, 2010, p. 14)

This framing of resilience places the onus of responsibility on individuals, who should be informed and educated about their food to ensure their resilience in the face of stressors, thus directly removing governmental responsibility from the equation. While the importance of societal or communal supports is hinted at, they remain vague. The excerpt also highlights the neoliberal and capitalist view of populations as *consumers* —of food as an economic commodity. Despite the questionable use of resilience in its definition, the Toronto Food Strategy report *was* a purposeful effort to develop a coherent and systems-focussed action plan to improve the local food system. It mobilized efforts to bring coherence to urban policy by initiating the use of the term "food systems lens" in food policy discussions and framing food "as a lever" to bring diverging actors together in situations where overlapping interests amongst City departments were

not always apparent (Toronto Public Health, 2010, p. 16).

In the years following the launch of the Food Strategy, the city honed its focus on environmental sustainability and placed emphasis more broadly on the resilience of food systems in light of the climate crisis. In a staff report on its Resilient City initiative, the city incorporated the language of resilience as defined by the Rockefeller Foundation: "resilience is the ability of a system, entity, community, or person to withstand shocks while still maintaining its essential functions and to recover quickly and effectively" (City of Toronto, 2014, p. 7). The City of Toronto emphasizes concerns over disrupted food supply chains in light of unpredictable weather patterns (City of Toronto, 2016). For example, in staff reports on climate change preparedness, it is not uncommon to see sentiments such as:

> Toronto's climate has changed and will continue to change into the foreseeable future. Recent studies anticipate more variable weather including drought, extreme rain and windstorms and heat, which will have impacts on our residents, businesses, built infrastructure, services, food supplies and natural environment. (City of Toronto, 2014, p. 26)

Toronto's commitment to several international pacts and declarations positioned the food system as a vital vulnerability to climate crises. The city first signed onto the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact in 2015, then became a part of the 100 Resilient Cities network in 2017, and more recently included food systems resilience as part of its list of priorities (City of Toronto, 2019). In 2019, the city declared a climate emergency and accelerated efforts toward climate action plans (City of Toronto, 2019). The city concomitantly signed onto the C40 Good Food Cities Declaration and the World Resources Institute's Cool Food Pledge in 2019 (City of Toronto, 2019).

The momentum of climate response and preparedness efforts bolstered the use of food system resilience in municipal documents, though increasingly as an adjective to *describe* the City's idealized food system and food policy goals. For example, in the City of Toronto's (2015) Milan Food Policy Pact overview, the word resilient is used repeatedly but with little explanation of how resilience would be achieved:

> Recognizing that family farmers and smallholder food producers play a key role in feeding cities and their territories, by helping to maintain **resilient**, equitable, culturally appropriate food systems. (p. 1)

> We will work to develop sustainable food systems that are inclusive, **resilient**, safe and diverse, that provide healthy and affordable food to all people in a human rights-based framework....We will review and amend existing urban policies, plans and regulations in order to encourage the establishment of equitable, **resilient** and sustainable food systems. (p. 2)

In comparison, the Toronto Resilience Strategy, launched in 2017, shifts away from framing resilience as a descriptive ideological outcome and points to specific interconnected areas of vulnerability that must be addressed to garner broader urban resilience, including social inequality and the city's capacity to respond to rapid environmental and weather pattern changes (City of Toronto, 2019). In developing the Resilience Strategy, the project team consulted over *8,000* community members about their perspectives on urban resilience in an era of climate crisis (City of Toronto, 2019). The Resilience Strategy focussed more explicitly on equity issues, which emerged from community discussions in the consultation processes. The Resilience Strategy states:

> Making Toronto more resilient requires a focus on equity. We know that residents experience resilience differently based on which neighbourhood they live in, and who they are, including in terms of their race, income, and gender. We also know that access to safe

> and livable homes and reliable infrastructure is not equitably distributed across the city. (City of Toronto, 2019, p. 7)

The report highlights the inequitable climate stress that communities in the City of Toronto experience and how chronic stress impedes the wellbeing of individuals, households, and communities and their ability to be resilient in light of sudden system shocks (City of Toronto, 2019, p. 22). The report directly communicates and problematizes racial inequity, which, until this point, had been skirted around or left out entirely in municipal documents on food systems and resilience.

Nonetheless, despite being considered a key area of focus and a foundational goal of urban resilience, the Resilience Strategy's focus more specifically on *food system* resilience remains limited. The Resilience Strategy defers much of the ongoing work to the Toronto Food Strategy when discussing steps towards improving food system resilience. It highlights the importance of incorporating a food systems approach to understanding and addressing "access, supply, experience, quality, and affordability" (City of Toronto, 2019, p. 107). It also recommends further investigation into the "last mile" of the food distribution system, investment to improve the Ontario Food Terminal's physical infrastructure, and the adoption of a "food lens" into emergency planning. The authors of the report conclude by suggesting that a "sustainable food system" falls under the jurisdiction of Public Health, guided by Toronto's Food Strategy, but it does not detail any budget requirement that would be needed for the recommended action items listed. Although the Resilience Strategy budget is not fully detailed in publicly available reports, it is apparent that resources for this short-term project were largely placed on research and consultation, whereas few resources were allocated or redistributed towards action items or recommendations to address existing vulnerabilities and inequities. Further, considering the many pacts and declarations signed by the City of Toronto, there is no clear communication about budget allocation toward improvements to food system policy to enhance resilience specifically. In practice, the City of Toronto actively *defunded* the key areas where food system policy, planning, and programs were taking place (the Toronto Food Strategy and the Toronto Food Policy Council) shortly after the Toronto Resilience Strategy report was published (see Halliday, 2022).

In recent years, there has been a tangible shift in discourse and food system resilience framing, where the inequitable and racialized experience of food insecurity has become much more commonly recognized. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and interconnected broader calls for social change (e.g., related to the surging Black Lives Matter movement and greater attention to Indigenous reconciliation) have brought about greater recognition and acknowledgement of racial inequality in Toronto (Regnier-Davies & Edge, 2024). A city-commissioned report authored by retired councillor Joe Mihevc (2020), *A Report on Emergency Food Preparedness and Building Urban Food Resilience,* details the magnified experience of food insecurity within Toronto and the importance of aiming for longer-term food system resilience to address underlying racial inequities across the city. The report brought attention to the intersection of racial inequity and the goal of resilience and recommended that the city "play a leadership role in addressing food insecurity and promoting resilient and sustainable food systems to support vulnerable communities and residents" (Mihevc, 2020, p. 2). The report also emphasizes the city's role in developing policy to address the inequities head-on: "It is clear that this is an important moment for a robust, policy-driven response to chronic food insecurity

compounded by racism and poverty in Black communities" (Mihevc, 2020, p.11).

Since the early stages of the pandemic, when discourse around racial and social inequality was magnified, the city has taken positive steps to rectify some of the structural and systemic racial inequities that communities have been calling for. For example, in 2021, the City of Toronto approved its first Black Food Sovereignty Plan (BFSP). The BFSP was born from a partnership between the City of Toronto's Confronting Anti-Black Racism Unit and Afri-Can FoodBasket, a community-based organization with a twenty-year history advocating for food justice in Toronto (CABR, 2021; City of Toronto 2021). This five-year strategy and food system approach includes investing in Black-owned small businesses, developing alternative food procurement networks, and understanding food's importance to culture, identity, and broader well-being beyond nutrition (CABR, 2021; City of Toronto 2021). In addition, the goals of food sovereignty and broader resilience in Indigenous communities have also been incorporated into the city's Reconciliation Action Plan, which aims to address colonialism's residual impacts on Indigenous communities and their relationships to the land, food, and medicine (City of Toronto, 2022). However, even within this progressive plan to realize Indigenous reconciliation, it is implied that resilience is the responsibility of Indigenous communities. The report includes quotes from community members, reinforcing the idea that the noble work of being resilient is central to Indigenous pride, and it is also work that benefits the rest of society, protecting us from climate crisis. These quotes highlight that, on some level, resilience is a trait that has evolved from oppressed people, which is a strength. But it is still placed on the individuals to maintain that resilience for the benefit of broader society:

> The City of Toronto will…prioritize Indigenous worldviews and relational views of land protection and Indigenous community leadership to enhance climate resiliency. (City of Toronto, 2022, p. 51)

> Our ways of knowing are ancient….Our contributions are boundless….Our resilience is powerful….Our hope is real. (City of Toronto, 2022, p. 62)

> Resilience is hard work, exhausting work. I'd love to see the work we do now create space for rest, joy and celebrating Indigenous excellence. (City of Toronto, 2022, p. 63)

Community perspectives and actions towards food system equity and resilience

Resilience is often signified as a symbol of pride and community strength, particularly considering the many community-driven initiatives in Toronto that have fostered positive social and environmental change or bolstered community food security. Yet conversations with community-based leaders and front-line workers reveal that many have reservations and concerns about how resilience is often discussed in the city as a definitive objective, while for many the concept of resilience can be perceived as dismissive of the traumas individuals endure and the fact that communities are often forced to be resilient with little choice. Several interviewees felt that the problem with the concept of resilience is that its goal is not for people to thrive or to be supported through social and environmental conditions but rather that people are expected and required to tolerate a certain level of agitation and stress in their daily lives.

Throughout the pandemic, significant emphasis was placed on population resilience in the media and in municipal discussions, especially during the early months of lockdown in 2020. Community members highlighted that being resilient, in practice, is often about the lowest expected level of wellbeing and can be

solely about survival. Several interviewees spoke to conflicting notions of resilience in that it is often celebrated on the one hand, yet does not protect people from the harms that cause them to be resilient in the first place:

> Resiliency is often talked about as obviously a desirable attribute. But the goal is not to continue to focus on the resiliency of individuals and communities, while ignoring a system that continues to put people under stress. Resilience is not just living...we need to also be able to thrive to our full potential. (Director, multiservice community hub)

Another participant discussed the inequitable experience of Black communities in having to withstand stress in a way that is normalized within broader society. This interviewee stated:

> In the context of Black folks, I feel like we're all just resilient, just naturally, because we have no choice. We have to be resilient. So, resilience is something that is powerful, but you know it's not fair. It's also exhausting. (Community service coordinator, non-governmental organization)

Others argue that framing resilience as an optimistic goal for society "really overlooks the sheer violence that people have to swallow and live with in order to be resilient" (Community service manager, multiservice community services).

Some interviewees brought attention to the problematic language of resilience, not only in policy and municipal government discourse but also in how organizations have been expected to communicate the impacts of their work to funders and financial institutions, often in terms that reinforce neoliberal ideals of resilience. One director expressed frustration with how they were forced to engage in the discourse when applying for resources while also struggling with the stress of the shock of the pandemic and navigating overwhelming emergency response programs within their own communities. They shared: "resilience looks good on paper for funders...okay, but why are we resilient? Because we came together and did something to help each other....But, at the same time, we've lost people in the process." They explain that the language masks compassion and understanding of the experiences of real people: "I think with talk of resilience, there is a lack of empathy. Because you know, during the pandemic, people lost their loved ones...and why did they? Maybe someone went to work and caught COVID...that person came home, and then there were actually six more family members, including two seniors. Then they lost them, right? So, how do we achieve resilience when it comes to community loss?" (Director, multiservice community hub).

Many of the interviewees expressed anger in reflection of resilience. Several saw the concept of resilience as an apolitical way of accepting status quo systemic and structural forms of racism that are threaded through Canada's social fabric. One Indigenous-identifying program manager shared that the concept of resilience was "based on a lot of the withstanding of harm." When discussing the issue of food insecurity within their community, they explained:

> I feel like exposing food insecurity for what it is, which is a literal form of bureaucratic violence against people. If food is a right, and we know this is true, then who is responsible for upholding that right? So, I think that we need to ensure that community members are kept safe and are not forced to feel responsible for not being able to be food secure and illuminating for everybody, including the government and regular people who don't know about food security, that marginalized communities are victimized by food insecurity. It's not a personal failure. It's not because they can't cook or don't know how to eat properly; it's years of systemic disenfranchisement from systems of wellness and health. (Community service manager, multiservice community services)

Interviewees also discussed that they found the city overindulged in research and consultations and put limited resources or energy into action to address the underlying inequities across Toronto. Long-time advocates and community leaders found it particularly frustrating that it took a major pandemic to bring attention to the issues that community members had communicated for decades. One interviewee shared:

> So, with COVID, it's not so much what we've learned; it was more about fortifying what we already knew. We've been long overdue as a city to move beyond our food strategy mapping and reporting, and it's really time for us to take action. (Executive Director, multiservice community services)

The interviewee highlighted that the resources invested in understanding the problems within the city far outweigh the amount of resources that have been invested in addressing the problems they continually investigate:

> I think if the city were to do an audit on all of the work they've done or the research they've supported, and in doing consultations and reports, we would see that there is a huge lack and a need to further invest in the *action* pieces in the recommendations that come out of those reports. (Executive Director, multiservice community services)

Another interviewee shared similar sentiments about the lack of resourced responses to the issues that are raised by community members through community consultation:

> At the end of the day, it's just conversations. These conversations are great, and they're happening, but at some point, we need action. But we keep doing research, and the research findings are very similar every time. But still, there are no actions taken, right? (Director, non-governmental organization)

In reflecting on what is needed as a city to move beyond the current state of social inequality in Toronto and the racialized experience of food insecurity in many parts of the city, interviewees reflected on the lack of representation and a historic lack of political voice/visibility of racialized community leaders:

> When we talked about food justice and inequity in food, especially those of us who are part of a racialized community, we're constantly advocating for this work. We constantly have to prove why this should be a topic of discussion. (Executive Director, multiservice community services)

> I think the main thing here is to focus on the communities…it's Indigenous sovereignty that we're talking about….So, I think that if we're going to rebuild better, we have to rebuild along the lines of Truth and Reconciliation….We definitely have to include the voices of Indigenous folks who haven't been taken into account when doing city planning. (Director, multiservice community services)

> When I think about long-term interventions around food insecurity, at the end of the day, it's about recognizing community voices and giving them more. The approach has historically been more top-down, and what we're trying to do right now with a food justice intervention is recognizing that communities should be at the centre of decision-making processes and that communities already know what their struggles are and where they are rooted, and that they're able to drive. So, I see that many of the solutions to these issues have community at the centre. (Director, non-governmental organization)

Community actors recognize that there have been shifts in the ways the city is currently responding to calls for social justice and change and see the value in supporting the goals of Truth and Reconciliation and developing plans to realize Black food sovereignty:

> A lot of people may not realize this, but just even five, six years ago, race was something you had to fight to speak about….And for me that really shows the paradigm we were working in and the shift that we have gone through more recently in terms of it now being something that everyone is looking at and how they can embed equity into the work that they're

> doing. (Executive Director, multiservice community services)

However, community leaders are also cautious about municipal actors co-opting the language of the community, and they question their commitment to following through with meaningful investment and to proving those commitments beyond performative, tokenistic gestures. In reflecting on the goal of resilience, these conversations underscore the need to critically reassess what resilience truly signifies and for whom. When discussing what is needed for greater food equity with community leaders, interviewees contend there is little space for resilience in that conversation:

> We shouldn't always have to be resilient. And what does that look like? What's the opposite of resilience? We shouldn't always have to be fighting, and we shouldn't always have to be exhausted thinking about what we're doing with our future. (Community service coordinator, non-governmental organization)

Discussion and conclusions

This research makes visible that the term resilience is often employed without clear definition or deliberation on what comprises a resilient food system, which can lead to unintended consequences. The ideology of resilience can and does have an inequitable and negative impact on the lives of racialized individuals. Although resilience can be framed as an expression of pride and community strength in some contexts, the drive for ongoing resilience can be particularly demoralizing and insensitive to the ongoing and historical traumas experienced by racialized individuals. As our findings demonstrate, for community-level actors responding to the crisis of food insecurity in Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities, the language of resilience often covers up stress and traumas that individuals are forced to withstand to maintain the status quo. Warner (2019) brings attention to the intersectional experience of the pressure to be resilient and argues that the pressure to be resilient can have particular implications for the lives of racialized women. They discuss in their dissertation, *Examining Resilience in the Lives of Black Women*, that Black women "have an increased likelihood of experiencing social and biological challenges" because of their common experience of "enduring the historical context of oppression, devaluation, and inequality" (p. xiv). Warner (2019) conveys that Black women have historically had to "deal with acute and chronic stressors across time and space" and "have demonstrated historical and contemporary patterns of rebounding from adversity, positively adapting, and competently functioning" (p. 44).

This paper draws attention to the equity considerations associated with the discursive framing of resilience. We observe that there is still limited discussion within food system literature that brings into question the ideological underpinnings of food system "resilience" and the implications that resilience discourse may have on racialized individuals. Scholars highlight that the food studies community and the broader "food movement" have been dominated by cis-gendered, able-bodied, white scholars/activists (the authors of this paper are not exempt from these classifications), leading to the exclusion of Black, Indigenous, and "other" marginalized voices from food system and policy discussion (Elliott et al., 2023; Swenor, 2021). The utility of seemingly neutral language, such as "resilience," demonstrates this invisibility and, at times, a lack of representation within these discussions. Similarly, the reliance on ongoing research and evaluation to understand systemic racial

equity issues in Toronto's food system have resulted in a lack of *action* that the community has been calling for over many years. Within policy literature, scholars emphasize the need for more meaningful community participation in local governance (Kiss et al., 2022; Nelischer, 2020), while placing less attention on the problem of *overindulgence* (i.e., the over-allocation of resources to municipal consultation processes). Community members explain that repeated consultations on the issues that impact them can not only induce trauma but also cause heightened frustration when little change or action is taking place.

As our findings highlight, the concept of resilience is often used in policy and municipal strategies without significant recognition of who or what is expected to be resilient. In light of climate crisis, pandemics, and other looming crises, the language of resilience used in policy discourse can indirectly reinforce the neoliberal perspective that individuals are assumed to withstand some level of shock or vulnerability to enable the resilience of broader status quo systems (Bergström, 2018; Chandler, 2014; Kałwak & Weihgold, 2022). In practice, the repercussions of adaptation to uphold resilience are locally situated and become the responsibility of individuals who often hold limited power and, in many cases, limited resources (Kalwak & Weihgold, 2022).

However critical we are of the term, we see value in "resilience" when articulated in tangible terms and associated with specific policies, resources, and infrastructure that can be accessed and utilized for downsizing/eliminating the vulnerabilities that communities are exposed to. Our recent work points to a conceptual model and temporal framework that incorporates the voices of local community actors in realizing short-term coping capacity and medium-term adaptive strategies, which can influence and support longer-term system transformations (see Regnier-Davies et al., 2022). We see the existence of a range of actors and initiatives contributing to both adaptation and system change through enacting community efforts *and* utilizing municipal strategies.

We recognize a changing tide in Toronto's approach to addressing food system inequities within and across its urban geographies. In Toronto's past, food policy discourse leaned toward efforts to bring about food security for communities within the context of existing and status quo food system practices, paying little attention to the racial inequities embedded across its wards. In practice, proponents of self-sufficiency in Toronto's early policy documents focussed on the ability of individuals to be self-reliant to avoid burdening a broader system. Through community-based efforts to realize models of food sovereignty in Toronto, the approach and vision have evolved to be more about championing greater self-determination through policy mechanisms, resource allocation, and infrastructure that results in true food system alternatives (Elsharkawy, 2024). The community-led food sovereignty approach directly opposes individualism and short-sighted mechanisms that do little to address the underlying causes of inequity. Rather, it calls for more radical systemic change by identifying food system pathways that depart from capitalist systems, such as emphasizing equitable land ownership and a community's influence over food production, food retail, and distribution for ongoing self-determined food access (Elsharkawy, 2024; Nyeleni, 2007). The degree to which the shift in discourse and food policy approach will result in systemic and structural change over time remains to be seen. However, we are optimistic that the momentum to support community-led and community-serving initiatives is a step toward enabling more culturally responsive, localized, and (ultimately) resilient food systems.

In our analysis, our aim is not to critique the work of city staff in Toronto or to diminish the tremendous amount of work that many individuals have contributed to the community in realizing a more equitable food system for Toronto. We recognize the limitations of individual staff within the confines of a broader system that makes significant change difficult to achieve, as well as the parameters that staff and departments contend with in terms of planning, zoning, funding, the confines of municipal structures, changing departmental mandates, and redeployment of both human and economic resources. However, our contributions are useful for discussions within the city as it continues to grapple with growing food insecurity rates and ongoing racial inequality, as well as questions on how to best mitigate these issues through policy and programs that support those most impacted. With talk of revising the Toronto Food Charter (see Cressy, 2022; Duhatschek, 2022), we see our contributions in this paper as timely and applicable, not only for the City of Toronto but also for other Canadian municipalities grappling with similar challenges. We suggest that food system scholars, practitioners and policymakers engage with the concept of "resilience" more critically and intentionally—being mindful of the systems of oppression and exploitation inherent to the concept.

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Jenelle Regnier-Davies: This research engages in an interpretivist methodology. I, the corresponding author, acknowledge my positionality in this work. I have firsthand experience with household food insecurity and have a professional background in food system research and community food security. As I present my research intentions today, I understand that my knowledge is socially situated and reflects my race, gender, education, and other constructions of identity. I do not claim that what I observe, analyze, and communicate in this paper will fully represent the perspectives or experiences of the research participants; instead, it is my interpretation of these perspectives.

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