



Research Article

Plural pathways to food systems change: A comparative analysis of Alberta's Alternative Food Networks

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Abstract

This research contributes to ongoing, multi-faceted, and much-needed discussions about food systems change amidst rising rates of food insecurity in Canada (and globally). It does so by providing a comparative content analysis of 141 alternative food networks (AFNs) in Alberta. AFN is an umbrella term for food systems that differ from conventional food distributions like grocery stores and emerge in response to the many problems associated with industrialized food systems (Allaire, 2025; Misleh, 2022; Tregear, 2011). AFNs can include but are not limited to farmers' markets, community gardens, seed libraries, community supported agriculture (CSAs), food forests, and co-ops. AFNs were selected because they continue to persist alongside globalized food systems and aim to operationalize key principles of food sovereignty. AFNs are tangible expressions of food sovereignty movements, even if they are partial and

incomplete. There are extensive debates in the literature about the degree to which AFNs can instil food systems change. This research contributes to those debates by examining specific programming and initiatives of Alberta AFNs and analysing the degree to which they provide narrow versus more holistic food systems change. Following Misleh (2022), we argue that AFNs are not a single social phenomenon and should be analyzed in terms of “hybridity, complexity, and diversity” (p. 1029). Moving beyond binary understandings of AFNs as “alternative” or “not” (i.e., the dominant framing in food studies literature), our analysis offers a “more open-ended, nuanced and plural understanding of AFNs and their transformational potential” (Misleh, 2022, p. 1041) by offering comparative content analysis of specific programming taking place.

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Résumé

Cette recherche s'inscrit dans les indispensables discussions multidimensionnelles en cours concernant la transformation des systèmes alimentaires, en pleine hausse de l'insécurité alimentaire au Canada (et dans le monde). Il s'agit ici d'offrir une analyse comparative de contenu de 141 réseaux alimentaires alternatifs (RAA) en Alberta. RAA est un terme parapluie pour désigner les systèmes alimentaires qui diffèrent des réseaux de distribution conventionnels des aliments, comme les supermarchés, et qui voient le jour en réponse aux nombreux problèmes liés aux systèmes alimentaires industriels (Allaire, 2025 ; Misleh, 2022 ; Tregear, 2011). Les RAA peuvent inclure, entre autres, les marchés fermiers, les jardins communautaires, les banques de semences, l'agriculture soutenue par la communauté (ASC), les forêts nourricières, les coopératives. Les RAA examinés ont été sélectionnés parce qu'ils continuent à exister aux côtés des systèmes alimentaires mondialisés et visent à mettre en pratique des principes clés de la souveraineté alimentaire. Les RAA sont l'expression concrète des mouvements pour

la souveraineté alimentaire, même s'ils sont partiels et incomplets. La littérature comprend de vastes débats sur le degré auquel les RAA peuvent instiller du changement dans les systèmes alimentaires. Cette recherche contribue à ces débats en examinant certains programmes et projets des RAA d'Alberta, et en analysant dans quelle mesure ils entraînent des transformations – qu'elles soient restreintes ou holistiques – dans les systèmes alimentaires. En nous appuyant sur Misleh (2022), nous soutenons que les RAA ne sont pas un simple phénomène social et devraient être analysés sous les angles de l'« hybridité, de la complexité et de la diversité » (p. 1029). Allant au-delà de la compréhension binaire des RAA comme étant « vraiment alternatifs ou pas » (ce qui constitue le cadre dominant dans la littérature des études sur l'alimentation), notre analyse propose une « compréhension plus ouverte, nuancée et plurielle des RAA et de leur potentiel transformateur » (Misleh, 2022, p. 1041) grâce à un examen comparatif du contenu des programmes qui sont mis en œuvre.

Introduction

The many and deepening pitfalls of neoliberal, globalized food systems are not new to critical food studies scholars. In the last two decades alone, there has been an increase in supply chain disruptions, a loss of biodiversity from mono cropping practices, and an increase in global food insecurity, despite an increase in global food production (Clapp, 2024; Lawrence & Grice, 2013; United Nations Environment Programme, 2021). From the burning of fossil fuels needed to transport food thousands of kilometres daily, to the centralization of corporate control, ownership, and profit, to the loss of traditional food systems and knowledge, and the cumulative effects these have on human, plant, and animal life and wellbeing, the shortcomings of industrialized food systems are all too abundant (Lappé, 2017; Leahy, 2017; Parizeau & von Massow, 2021; Wiebe, 2021). For those of us paying attention, “it has become increasingly apparent that the current Global food order has led us into a rather perilous place” (Sage et al., 2023, p. 1). This perilousness is not only getting worse but also becoming more apparent in the Global North, even as the Global South has borne the brunt of the downfall of the industrialized food system for far longer and to far deeper effects (Crush & Si, 2021).

As one way to counter some of the detrimental effects of the global industrial food system, critical food studies scholars have long been interested in alternative food networks (AFNs), alternatively referred to as community-based food systems, alternative agrifood movements, shortened food chains, community food, local food movements and grassroots food movements, for their capacities to re-localize food systems, address food injustice, build food sovereignty, and increase food security (Constance et al., 2014; Edwards, 2016; Goodman et al., 2012; Knezevic et al., 2017). While AFNs have long persisted alongside and at the fringes of

industrialized food systems, their promises and gains are also not without limitations. There have been warranted criticisms that AFNs focus too much on individual—as opposed to systemic—change (Allen & Guthman, 2006; Guthman, 2008; Levkoe & Wilson, 2019), and that many AFNs fail to affect those most impacted by food injustice and food insecurity (Edwards, 2016; Guthman, 2008; Maye, 2013). The following research adds to growing Canadian scholarship on alternative food networks, community-based food systems, and grassroots food movements by offering a content analysis of 141 AFNs in Alberta. The most recent western- or Alberta-specific data on AFNs were from 2012 (Beckie et al., 2012). This research aims to analyze specific programs and initiatives taking place, while also investigating similarities and differences between what these programs offer. While AFNs are largely limited in their ability to provide large-scale, systemic changes to our current industrialized food systems, they persist within academic and community contexts as ways to partially re-balance our food systems and chip away at the larger systems and structures of power and inequality, particularly as they build local food systems, create community connections, and shorten supply chains.

Our research into Alberta AFNs began with two relatively simple questions: how many and what types of AFNs existed in Alberta? These questions arose in the context of both rising and unprecedented levels of food insecurity in Canada and in Alberta. In 2023, an average of 22.9 percent of people in the ten provinces lived in a food-insecure household, up roughly ten percent from 2020 (PROOF, 2024). A recent study conducted by the University of Toronto’s PROOF research program found that Alberta had the highest rate of food insecurity among all provinces in 2021, at 20.3 percent

(Tarasuk et al., 2022). Additionally, Alberta had the highest prevalence of severe food insecurity in that same year at 6.3 percent (Tarasuk et al., 2022). Since then, Alberta’s rate of food insecurity has risen to 27.4 percent, coming fourth behind Nova Scotia (28.8 percent), Prince Edward Island (28.6 percent), and Saskatchewan (28 percent), not including Canada’s north (PROOF, 2024). Household food insecurity has reached record highs in every province. While Alberta is currently the fourth most food-insecure province, it has maintained the highest rate of severe food insecurity among the inland and prairie provinces.

Food insecurity in Canada affects Indigenous families, racialized communities, and immigrant families in greater numbers than their non-Indigenous, white, and non-immigrant counterparts (Uppal, 2023). Other marginalized groups disproportionately affected by food insecurity include those on social assistance, newcomers, children, disabled populations, seniors, and those who are single (Food Banks Canada, n.d.). Food bank use in Canada is also rising to previously unseen levels, with a 32 percent increase from 2022 (Food Banks Canada, n.d.). With another year of rising food insecurity, the percentage of people affected is at a new record high, and these rates have been exacerbated by rising retail food inflation. According to Food Banks Canada (n.d.), food bank visits have nearly doubled over the past five years and have hit record-breaking rates. Their Hunger Report states that, in March 2024, there were over two million visits to food banks across the country, the highest recorded number in history (Food Banks Canada, n.d.).

With dual concerns of rising rates of food insecurity combined with the mounting issues of industrialized food systems, this research was borne out of a hopeful curiosity that there are better alternatives to the “business

as usual” of our current food system. We sought to map the types and numbers of AFNs that existed in Alberta, what programming features they shared, and what gaps in offerings were missing. Existing literature on AFNs has documented their widespread benefits, including offering access to healthier food, mitigating food insecurity, re-localising food systems, connecting consumers and producers, developing food skills and knowledge, protecting local ecosystems, and, when working with marginalized populations, contributing to social justice and equity movements (Constance et al., 2014; Goodman et al., 2012; Tregear, 2011). Guided by our initial questions, we undertook a comparative content analysis of AFNs in the five major cities in Alberta—Fort McMurray, Edmonton, Red Deer, Calgary, and Lethbridge. We also paired this research with a publicly available podcast on AFNs in Alberta, *The Ground Up?* (Rossiter & Overend, 2024-Present), to raise awareness, bolster conversation, and support local food networks. The research component we present below maps AFNs in Alberta to help inform food policy, serve as a comparator for cross-Canadian AFNs, and analyze narrow versus holistic AFN offerings. Following Misleh (2022), we argue that AFNs are not a single social phenomenon and should be analyzed in terms of “hybridity, complexity, and diversity” (p. 1029). Moving beyond binary understandings of AFNs as “alternative” or “not” (i.e., the dominant framing in food studies literature), our analysis offers a “more open-ended, nuanced and plural understanding of AFNs and their transformational potential” (Misleh, 2022, p. 1041) by offering comparative content analysis of specific programming taking place.

Alternative food networks (AFNs)

AFNs, which operationalize the principles of food sovereignty, persist as a critical area of study in the context of addressing the environmental, economic, and social impacts of industrialized food systems (Edwards, 2016; Rivera, Diaz de León & del Rosario Pérez-Salazar, 2024; Wittman, 2023). AFNs include local food movements, community gardens, food co-operatives, urban food forests, community-supported agriculture (CSAs), and farmers' markets (as well as other related initiatives) and seek to reconnect producers and consumers through practices that emphasise sustainability, social justice, and localism (Maye, 2013; Rivera et al., 2024). As environmental and social challenges associated with conventional agriculture continue to grow, understanding the potential of AFNs to foster sustainable food systems has become increasingly important. Existing literature on AFNs covers alternative systems of food production, food policy, and consumption that aim to create more sustainable, ethical, and community-oriented food systems. AFNs typically prioritise local, sustainable food production and distribution and continue to persist as viable responses to the challenges posed by industrial agriculture and globalized food systems (Constance et al., 2014; Levkoe, 2022; Sage et al., 2023).

While informal, local food systems have always existed, the formal emergence of AFNs in North America can be traced back to the counter-culture movements of the 1960s and 1970s, where scholars, activists, and local communities collectively sought solutions outside the dangers of the industrial food system (Edwards, 2016). This led to an influx of CSAs and farmers' markets through the 1980s and 1990s, enabling consumers to purchase farm-fresh food directly from producers, cutting out profit-driven supermarkets, and shortening the distance between

farm and table. Building on the counter-cultural food movements of the last two decades, notably in the face of increased food insecurity and widespread environmental devastation caused by the globalisation of food systems, the 2000s and 2010s experienced an increase in food sovereignty and food sustainability initiatives and policies (Misleh, 2022). Recently, in 2019, Canada developed its first ever food policy advisory council, guiding the nation-wide adoption and implementation of key principles of food sovereignty (Food Secure Canada, 2025). AFNs also experienced a resurgence through the COVID-19 pandemic and widespread food inflation that followed, once again highlighting the risks and vulnerabilities associated with global food supply chains and leading to increased interest in local food systems (Clapp & Moseley, 2020; James et al., 2021).

AFNs are often characterized by several key attributes: locality, trust, transparency, and direct producer-consumer relationships. These networks distinguish themselves from conventional food systems through shorter supply chains, lower environmental impacts, and a focus on ethical consumption (Edwards, 2016; Rivera et al., 2024). Values and practices that underpin AFNs include food sovereignty, which emphasizes local control over food systems; agroecology, which looks to balance the science, practice, and social movement of sustainable farming; and civic agriculture, which supports community-centred food production. Various studies (e.g., Desmarais, 2022; Goodman et al., 2011; Levkoe, 2022) have pointed out that AFNs often challenge the traditional economic model by prioritizing social values over profit. In doing so, they also aim to challenge neoliberalized power structures and work towards decolonizing efforts (Guinto et al., 2024). Scholars

further argue that these networks aim to enhance consumer awareness of food origins and production processes, fostering more informed and sustainable food consumption habits. Consumer motivations for engaging in AFNs typically include concerns about health, environment, and social justice (Classens, 2014; McInnes & Mount, 2017; Zutter & Stoltz, 2023). AFNs often provide fresher, higher-quality food, often produced with fewer chemicals and lower environmental impacts than conventional food products, depending on specific farming practices used (Enthoven & Van den Broeck, 2021; McCurdy, 2022).

Environmental and social considerations also drive AFN participation and popularity. Environmental sustainability is a central goal of many AFNs, with research suggesting that they can significantly reduce carbon emissions associated with food production and transportation, often contributing to lower greenhouse gas emissions (Leahy, 2017; Wittman, 2023). Similarly, organic practices commonly associated with AFNs minimise the use of synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, promoting biodiversity and healthier soils (Kristiansen & Merfield, 2006; Leahy, 2017). Socially, AFNs can foster community resilience and cohesion by connecting producers and consumers through shared goals and values. Studies on CSA reveal that these networks can empower consumers by giving them a role in the food system, fostering a sense of responsibility toward food sustainability (Galt et al., 2012; Jarosz, 2008).

Critiques and limitations

AFNs are not without limitations. Economic barriers limit participation, as locally produced foods are often more expensive than conventional options. As DuPuis and Goodman (2005) point out, AFNs privilege who can participate in “alternative” and “local” food movements. Many conventional AFNs such as farmers’

markets struggle to compete with the price and convenience of globalized food systems, often excluding lower-income consumers from participation (Jarosz, 2008). As Fourat et al. (2020) and Reynolds and Cohen (2016) argue, many AFNs perpetuate inequalities by catering primarily to affluent, urban consumers who can afford premium prices for organic and/or local products. In addition to cost barriers, logistical challenges such as seasonality and limited supply can hinder the scalability of many AFNs. Without a broader and/or more intentional focus on scaling up and out, as well as economic and time accessibility, many AFNs fail to significantly impact the larger food system. As Pratley and Dodson (2014) note, AFNs are largely marginal, having positive impacts on a small group of people with limited capacity to expand their base. While AFNs may be effective at local or regional levels, it remains uncertain whether AFNs can meet the demands of a growing global population. Scholars argue that, while practices such as food co-ops, CSAs, and food forests promote sustainable practices, they may not have the structural capacity to replace conventional food systems entirely, leading some to view them as complementary rather than alternative (Tregear, 2011).

In her decades of important work on food systems change, Julie Guthman (2008, 2011, 2014, 2019, & 2024) raises critical cautions against romanticizing local and alternative food systems. First and foremost, she highlights the ways in which AFNs overwhelmingly individualize food systems change, placing the responsibility on individual consumers rather than on systemic and structural policy changes (Allen & Guthman, 2006; Guthman, 2008). Guided by rhetorics of consumer choice, localism, entrepreneurialism, and self-improvement, AFNs can reproduce and perpetuate dominant neoliberal and capitalist values rather than working against them (Guthman, 2008, 2014). While well-intentioned, without engaging systemic or

structural changes, many AFNs exclude the most marginalized. The elitism of many AFNs is evident in “the unbearable whiteness” of alternative food practices (Guthman, 2011, p. 263). Beyond the heightened, problematic focus on selective, elite individualism, she further points out that many other politics of alternative food systems are not alternative. In her book *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California* (Guthman, 2014), she critiques the idea that organic farming automatically offers a radical alternative to industrial agriculture by showing how the organic sector in California is shaped by existing agrarian relations, including poor pay and working conditions for migrant labourers. In her recent work, Guthman (2019 & 2024) critiques the dominance of techno-optimism in food and agriculture—namely the belief that new technologies or alternative proteins will fix the food system.

In a recent study of food movements in Canada, Wilson and Levkoe (2022) interviewed twenty-six long-standing food movement actors across Canada. From these in-depth interviews, they documented the following two prominent tensions: 1) balancing breadth and depth and 2) nurturing consensus alongside difference in food movement in Canada. A few of their respondents questioned whether an increase in awareness of alternative food systems leads to an increase in impact. The second prominent tension highlights the struggles of nurturing consensus and shared values of food movements alongside valuing differences in scope and approaches. Given that food movements span a range of social, community, economic, policy, and political practices, some of their respondents argued for the strength of these multifaceted approaches. Some of their respondents also lamented a lack of shared goals and visions for food movements more broadly. As one of their participants notes, “it’s always felt to me like there’s been this

bifurcation of interests in social justice parts of food” (Wilson & Levkoe, 2022, p. 112). There was ongoing tension among their respondents about who benefited most from AFNs and the idea that, to have widespread food systems change, links to other social justice initiatives and policy advocacy for structural change, such as affordable housing and basic income, are required (Levkoe & Wilson, 2022).

How “alternative” are AFNs?

The debates over the degree of alterity in AFNs are far from new or finalized. Misleh (2022) traces conceptualizations of “alternative” in unconventional systems of food provision through three phases of AFNs: 1) the over-territorialization of alterity (late 1990s to early 2000s), 2) AFNs and neoliberalism (2005 to 2010), and 3) from alterity to diversity (2010 to date). Her analysis unpacks the dualism that has been created in the literature (and by extension in academic framings) of AFNs. On the one hand, AFNs are upheld as alternative for their capacity to create sites of embeddedness, economic diversity, and close meaningful relationships with land, food, and community. On the other hand, AFNs are co-opted by market and neoliberal mechanisms, particularly through their dependence on consumer choice, commodification, and social change through purchasing power. Arguing for a “dialectical relationality of alternatives” (p. 1038) and moving beyond a binary understanding of alterity in AFNs, Misleh (2022) contends that a more nuanced approach to evaluating food systems alternatives may better reflect the work of AFNs today, marked by a diversity of approaches, aims, and ends. To move past binary framings of alterity in AFNs, Misleh (2022) advocates for an analysis of “AFNs as part of an ongoing struggle [that] requires bringing together the different dimensions that constitute them, even when they are

seen in tension” (p. 1038). Operationalizing Misleh’s (2022) call for “a more open-ended, nuanced and plural understanding of AFNs and their transformational potential” (p. 1041), our analysis of Alberta AFNs aims to provide just that. The content analysis data we present does not uphold one side of the AFN debate over the other but rather analyzes specific aspects of AFNs that are (and are not) being implemented. While AFNs are not a complete solution, they have existed

Methods

To create an index of Alberta AFNs and to explore similarities and differences among them, we undertook a content and comparative analysis organized by city. The five largest provincial cities and regions were selected due to their population size and geographical distribution across the province. Fort McMurray is an urban service centre region in northern Alberta with a 2021 population of 68,002 (Statistics Canada, 2022). Edmonton is the province’s capital, located north-centrally with a 2021 population of 1,010,899 (Statistics Canada, 2022). Red Deer is a central Alberta city with a 2021 population of 100,844 (Statistics Canada, 2022). Calgary is the largest and most central Alberta city, with a 2021 population of 1,306,784 (Statistics Canada, 2022). Lastly, Lethbridge is in southern Alberta and, as of 2021, had a population of 106,550 (Statistics Canada, 2022). Comparative content analysis data were collected for each city or region through Google searches, social media searches, and government program searches. Based on common terminology used in the wider study and practices of AFNs, the following search terms were used: “alternative food network,” “urban food solutions,” “local food solutions,” “community food movements,” “sustainable food initiatives,” “community agriculture,” “community gardens,” “food forests,” and “food co-

operatives.” These keywords were used for each of the five cities we studied.

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alongside industrialized food systems for over half a century and continue to draw attention and enthusiasm from grassroots movements, scholars, policy makers, and eaters alike. As such, their continued presence, benefits, and shortcomings warrant further research and analysis, notably amidst a growing global food crisis, to better understand what is and is not being done when it comes to possibilities for local food systems change.

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Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Amalgamating key facets of food sovereignty and food security from within the existing food studies literature, we developed a ten-item list of criteria used for inclusion and exclusion of AFNs in our study as well as for analysis, as discussed below. Given that food insecurity is more complicated than simply having access to food, AFNs that operate across multiple channels and address multiple criteria have more potential to affect systemic change. The following criteria were frequently discussed in the existing food studies literature and provided us a focus by which to analyze the breadth of Alberta AFNs. For each AFN, we analyzed whether its programming and initiatives do two or more of the following:

- 1) *Provide access to healthy eating* (i.e., does the AFN offer access to whole, relatively unprocessed fruits, vegetables, and meat products?)
- 2) *Offer food charity* (i.e., does the AFN offer free or affordable access to food through programs such as market vouchers, community orchards, pantries, and gardens?)
- 3) *Contribute to social justice* (i.e., does the AFN

aim to effect food systems change for marginalized and equity-deserving groups? Does it aim to instil food systems change at the policy level?)

- 4) *Focus on Indigenous food sovereignty* (i.e., does the AFN have an explicit Indigenous food system focus? Does it work with Indigenous communities? Does it centre traditional Indigenous foods and knowledge systems?)
- 5) *Centre other cultural aspects of food* (i.e., does the AFN have an explicit cultural component? Does it work with specific cultural communities? Does it centre traditional cultural foods or programs?)
- 6) *Connect consumers and producers* (i.e., does the AFN facilitate a connection between consumers and food producers? Does the AFN reduce the need for intermediaries like grocery stores, placing consumers closer to the production and harvesting of food?)
- 7) *Promote community engagement* (i.e., does the AFN encourage community connections such as meeting other members, connecting with local land, and participating in growing, harvesting, and sharing food?)
- 8) *Build local food networks* (i.e., does the AFN promote the development of local, rather than global, food production?)
- 9) *Develop food skills and knowledge* (i.e., does the AFN advance food skills and knowledge including food literacy, growing, cooking, and plant identification?)
- 10) *Work with/protect nature* (i.e., does the AFN uphold nature-based food systems? Is food produced with sustainable growing practices? Does the AFN have an explicit statement about working with and protecting the environment?)

While mitigating food waste is also a key component of food sovereignty approaches, we omitted this from our study as it was too difficult to gauge waste management practices based on online content alone. For example, many community gardens very likely engage in active composting practices, but they seldom (if ever) refer to them on their websites or social media platforms. Due to obvious time constraints, we could not visit 141 AFNs across the province. By omitting food waste considerations, we were able to limit our analysis

criteria to an even number of ten, enabling straightforward comparisons across Alberta AFNs and giving numeric scores out of ten, which will be discussed in the results section below.

To be included in our study, AFNs had to have a minimum of two of the above outlined ten criteria. Heeding critiques that some AFNs are too narrowly focussed on food systems change (McInnes & Mount, 2017), we kept our minimum inclusion criteria to two in order to avoid commercial AFNs that may provide access to healthy food (such as a roadside fruit stand or an independent grocery store) but do little, if anything, else to promote food security and food sovereignty efforts. Thus, to be considered an AFN for the purposes of our study, they needed to do more than sell healthy food. We included rural AFNs if they fell within an approximately fifty-kilometre radius of one of our five selected cities and catered to those cities through farm delivery, food sales, and/or farm tours. We excluded food recovery and emergency food services, such as food rescue programs and food banks, since their aims and scopes are divergent to those of AFNs. While food recovery and emergency services are a key aspect of food security for a growing number of Canadians, they are reactive solutions to food insecurity rather than long-term sustainable solutions (Möller, 2021). As such, we wanted to keep our focus on proactive sustainable food solutions. We also excluded AFNs that worked within school systems, unless they were also available to the public. Lastly, we excluded AFNs that did not appear active based on updated posts, photos, dates, events, and content in the preceding six months. In total, we coded and analyzed 141 AFNs across five cities in the province of Alberta: Fort McMurray (FM) N= 6, Edmonton (Edm) N = 45, Red Deer (RD) N = 15, Calgary (Cal) N = 60, and Lethbridge (Leth) N= 15.

Coding and analysis

We also used the same ten-item criteria described above to code and analyze our data. All the research was gathered from online sources. We relied on AFNs' own statements about themselves and assumed they were accurate at the time of data collection. While it is possible that some AFNs, perhaps especially those selling products to a consumer base, may overstate their impacts and understate their limitations, we did corroborate AFNs' stated goals and objectives through their programs, resources, and events offerings. For example, many CSAs tout social responsibility on their websites or social media platforms, but if they did not also offer food charity, community farm days, or other social-based initiatives then they would not meet the coding criteria for that section. Without being able to visit all 141 AFNs in the province, we were only able to rely on AFNs' web and social media content; however, this content is also what consumers engage with most, making it relevant for our analysis. As noted above, we omitted data that hadn't been updated in the preceding six months. Using publicly available website and social media content, including mission and value statements, event postings and notifications, public programming descriptions, and any other materials posted, such as bylaws, we undertook a content analysis of our data. All three researchers coded the data, ensuring inter-rater reliability (McDonald et al., 2019). For each AFN we analyzed, we assigned a value of one or zero for each of our above-outlined criteria, depending on whether they met the criterion or not. For example, if an AFN mentioned a canning and preserving workshop, it would get a one for "developing food skills and knowledge."

We used a binary (i.e. one/zero) coding system which assessed whether the AFN met specific criteria, instead of using a multi-point scale (e.g., zero to three) which can assess the degree to which they met the

specific criteria (Neuendorf, 2017). Given that we were analysing online content alone, a multi-point scale would have been difficult to gauge and implement. Using a one/zero coding system also enabled us to assign numeric totals out of ten for each AFN, making comparisons and analyses between them more straightforward. Numeric totals were helpful in identifying broadly focussed, moderately focussed, and narrowly focussed AFNs across Alberta. The numeric totals are not intended to indicate the effectiveness of each AFN studied. This would not be possible given our research design, nor was it within our research interests. Rather, the numeric totals help us to report on how broadly AFNs work *across* food security and food sovereignty categories. These data and analysis add new layers to the already existing literature on AFNs.

Limitations

While the data we present below provide a comprehensive account of existing AFNs in Alberta, they are not—and cannot be—exhaustive. Our searches were only conducted in English and therefore excluded AFNs operating and/or communicating in French, Cree, and other languages. Our data collection could not include informal AFNs such as personal gardens and foraging practices, community gardens or co-ops without a web or social media presence, urban gleaning practices such as foraging edible foods from grocery store dumpsters, and/or food and seed sharing common among families, friends, and neighbours. The other limitation of our study entails the sporadic, temporary nature of some grassroots AFNs that are dependent on funding, volunteers, and community engagement, which may or may not last longer than a year. By the time this study is in print, some of the AFNs in our study may no longer be active, and other new ones may have emerged. Despite these outlined limitations, the data collected remain an important contribution to

wider research fostering local food systems and exploring possibilities to mitigate widespread food insecurity as they provide as comprehensive a picture as possible of AFNs in Alberta. They also yield relevant analysis in terms of AFN programming that could

prove helpful to future studies, grassroots and activist activities, and policy initiatives.

Results and discussion

In total, we analyzed 141 AFNs across five cities in the province of Alberta: Fort McMurray (FM) N= 6, Edmonton (Edm) N = 45, Red Deer (RD) N = 15,

Calgary (Cal) N = 60, and Lethbridge (Leth) N= 15. Our results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: AFNs in Alberta

Criteria	FM (N = 6)	Edm (N = 45)	RD (N = 15)	Cal (N = 60)	Leth (N= 15)
Access to healthy food	6 (100%)	45 (97.7%)	15 (100%)	57 (95%)	15 (100%)
Offer food charity	1 (16.6%)	22 (48.8%)	6 (40%)	30 (50%)	4 (26.6%)
Contribute to social justice	1 (16.6%)	9 (20%)	3 (20%)	15 (25%)	2 (13.3%)
Indigenous focus	2 (33.3%)	2 (4.4%)	2 (13.3%)	2 (3.3%)	1 (6.6%)
Other cultural focus	0 (0%)	4 (8.8%)	0 (0%)	2 (3.3%)	1 (6.6%)
Connect producers and consumers	5 (83.3%)	29 (64.4%)	14 (93.3%)	33 (55%)	14 (93.3%)
Promote community connections	4 (66.6%)	41 (89.3%)	14 (91.1%)	42 (70%)	14 (93.3%)
Build local food networks	6 (100%)	40 (88.8%)	12 (80%)	53 (88.3%)	15 (100%)
Develop food skills and knowledge	3 (50%)	15 (33.3%)	6 (40%)	20 (33.3%)	7 (46.6%)
Work with nature	6 (100%)	31 (68.8%)	15 (100%)	38 (63.3%)	14 (93.3%)

AFNs in Alberta scored well, with scores consistently over sixty percent, in three areas: 1) providing access to

healthy food, 2) promoting social and community connections, and 3) building local food networks.

AFNs in Alberta scored inconsistently well in connecting producers and consumers and in working with nature, with three of the five cities having scores consistently over sixty percent and two of the five cities having scores under sixty percent. The AFNs analyzed scored poorly, with percentages consistently under thirty percent, in three areas: 1) Indigenous food focus, 2) cultural food components, and 3) addressing social justice and social equity. Lastly, Alberta AFNs produced moderate scores between thirty and sixty percent in two areas: 1) developing food knowledge and skills and 2) offering food charity. These numeric scores confirm that AFNs uphold some aspects of food sovereignty well but are lacking in others, echoing the wider debates about AFNs' incomplete transformational potential. Based on our sample size of 141, Alberta AFNs are providing access to healthy food through local food systems, outside of conventional grocery stores, and they are promoting and developing social and community connections through community gardens, community meals, and cooking classes. However, they are also very clearly lacking in the systemic and structural aspects of food systems change—namely advocating for food policy changes and targeting food insecure populations through access and programming. The lowest scores overall were for food culture. There were a few AFNs that offered an explicit cultural food focus, such as New Grocery Movement's cooking 4 community cultural dish night and their cultural grocery store passport, but, overall, this facet of AFNs was lacking. It is also possible that some Alberta AFNs had an invisible or implied cultural food focus, such as Polish or Ukrainian vegetables and herbs grown in community gardens, but that these practices were unspoken and/or lacked an explicit online presence.

Based on our ten-item scoring, AFNs that scored above an eight out of ten total were considered broadly

focussed because they offered more holistic and integrated solutions to food insecurity. The numeric totals are not intended to indicate an overall value of effectiveness as some AFNs who scored lower than an eight are still contributing important facets of food sovereignty to their respective communities. However, more holistic AFNs, with scores over eight, may act as models for more inclusive programming. Of the AFNs we studied, eleven of 141 (or just under eight percent) had eight or above out of our ten criteria. There was only one AFN in the entire province—The Land of Dreams in Calgary—that had all ten. The Land of Dreams is a thirty-acre community garden in Treaty Seven territory in Mohkinstsis (Calgary) that brings together refugee and newcomer communities with local Indigenous communities to collectively build food security, food knowledge, and community. They offer teepee raising and pipe ceremonies alongside year-round programming in regenerative farming and community connections guided by the knowledge of Blackfoot Elder Herman Many Guns. They also offer language, education, and training in partnership with other nonprofits (Calgary Catholic Immigration Society, 2025). Other examples of broadly focussed Alberta AFNs are listed in Appendix A, along with descriptions and website information. The majority of these were either community/not-for-profit AFNs or AFNs organized by the city/government. Notably, AFNs that had an Indigenous and/or other cultural focus tended to also be more holistic in other areas, reflecting the interrelated aspects of mitigating food insecurity and highlighting the importance of building cultural initiatives into AFN programming. The other ways these broadly focussed AFNs reflected multi-channel offerings was in their focus on marginalized communities and in linking to other food- and non-food related programming, serving as models for other AFN initiatives.

AFNs that scored a four or lower overall were considered more narrowly focussed, even though they provide valuable aspects of alternative food systems such as building local food systems. Of the 141 AFNs studied, narrowly focussed AFNs comprised thirty-eight (27 percent) AFNs in our sample. Narrowly focussed AFNs typically included those with selective offerings, such as the Edmonton Urban Hen Program and some CSA programs (e.g., those that simply sold health food), and they tended to be found in small-scale for-profit sectors as opposed to community or government sectors. Initiatives such as these may help build partial food security for a selective few (typically those with more disposable time and income), but they do not sufficiently affect systemic and structural change in local food systems. Narrow AFNs are examples of what McInnes and Mount (2017) refer to as “transition strategies” to food systems change. These are strategies that are implemented at the individual level, that enable a select few to opt out of some aspects of the industrial food system, and that aim to shorten supply chains by connecting producers and consumers. While they may be a starting place for some, they can further exacerbate already-existing health and food inequalities and tend to be fragmented and isolated as opposed to broad-based (McInnes & Mount, 2017).

AFNs in our study that scored between five and eight were considered moderate in breadth and focus. There were ninety-two AFNs (65 percent) that fell in this range and comprised most of the AFNs in Alberta. AFNs in the moderately-focussed category included programs and initiatives such as farmers’ markets, some CSAs that did more than simply sell food, and food forests. They did more than simply offer some consumers access to local foods. Many of them also aimed to develop food skills and knowledge (such as farm tours or canning and preserving tips) and promote community connections through formal and informal

processes (such as offering spaces for people to gather, speaking with a vendor, cooking classes, and/or identifying edible wild foods). As noted above, they typically fell short when it came to addressing social, cultural, and economic justice aspects within their programming. We believe that these AFNs have the most potential for diversification of offerings. By providing low-income or sliding-scale discounts or connecting more intentionally with marginalized communities, who are frequently among the food insecure, these AFNs can effect small changes for a select few. As Wilson and Levkoe (2022) point out, “good food without good politics will likely only tinker at the edges of the dominant food system” (p. 116). Because of their dominance as the most common types of AFNs, as well as their programming that already goes beyond more than simply offering good food, moderate AFNs have the most possibility for growth, especially as they align with broader and more holistic programming of the multi-faceted AFNs identified.

The division of AFNs into more and less holistic categories became even more acute when we subdivided AFNs by sector type: 1) community/not-for-profit organizations (N=50), 2) city/government initiatives (N=28), and 3) small-scale, for-profit initiatives (N=63). Community/not-for-profit organizations represented the second most common sector, included organizations run by volunteers, and had an average score across all five cities of 6.39 out of ten. City/government initiatives were the least common sector represented, included those that were run by, or partnered with, the city or province in question, and had an average score across all five cities of 6.31 out of ten. Small-scale, for-profit initiatives were the most common sector represented and had an average score across five cities of 4.9 out of ten. Notably, the sector with the highest total number of AFNs had the lowest overall scores. These data support literature that

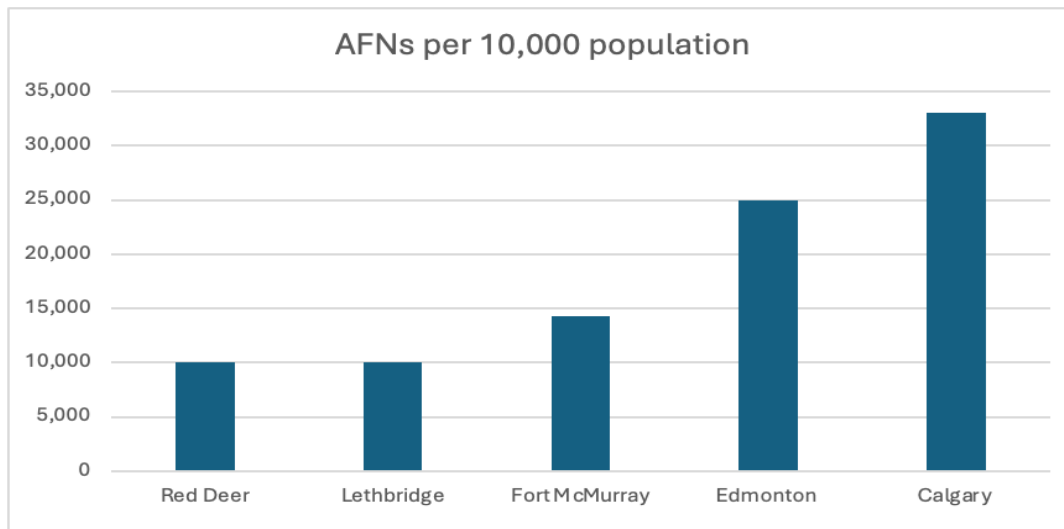
cautions against overly market-based solutions to food insecurity (Allen & Guthman, 2006; Guthman, 2008) and supports community-based initiatives towards food security and sovereignty (Regnier-Davies et al., 2022).

Inter-city comparison

The data on inter-city comparison are complex and somewhat contradictory. At first glance, the bigger the city, the more AFNs were present, with Calgary having

sixty, Edmonton forty-five, Red Deer and Lethbridge each having fifteen, and Fort McMurray with only six. However, when comparing the total number of AFNs by population density, Red Deer and Lethbridge had the most access to AFNs, with roughly one AFN per 10,000 people. In contrast, Fort McMurray had roughly one AFN per 14,286 people, and Edmonton and Calgary had roughly one AFN per 25,000 and 33,333 population respectively, represented in Table 2.

Table 2: Alberta AFNs by city per 10,000 population

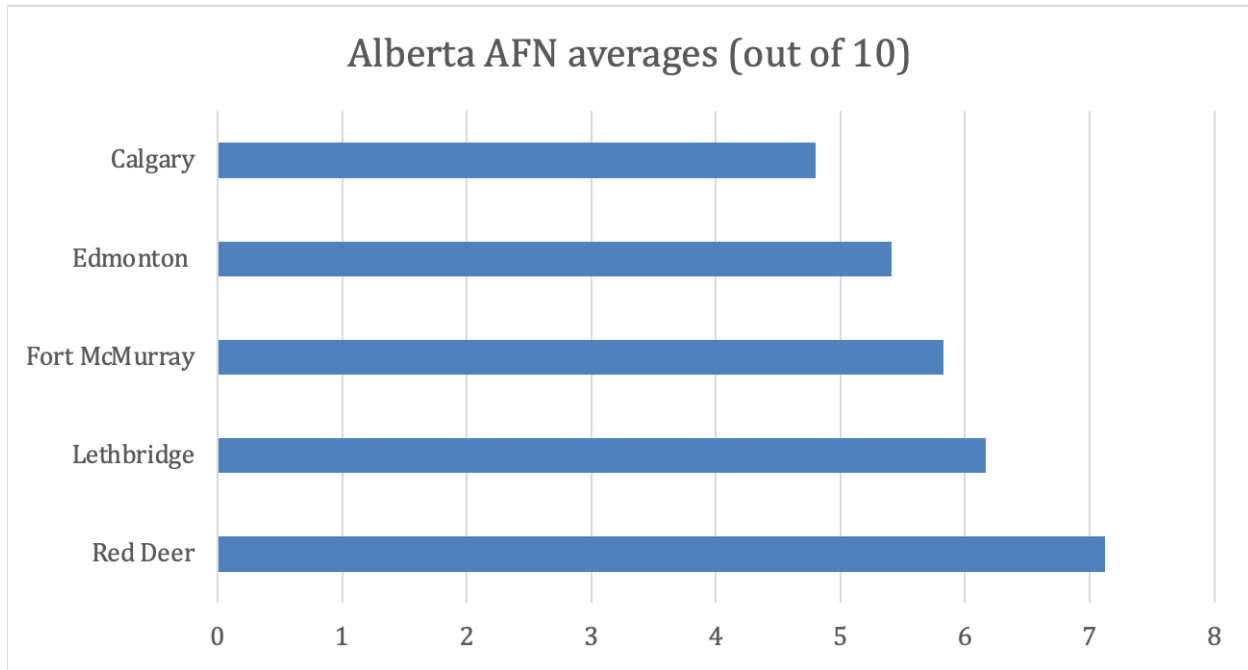


These findings point to challenges of food security and sustainability in larger cities and map onto the higher health risks of bigger city living, including diet-related diseases (Nancarrow Clarke, 2021). While AFNs like CSAs are growing in popularity (Statistics Canada, 2023) and may seem abundant in some areas, they still

serve a very small percentage of urban populations, confirming some of the critiques in food studies literature about scalability.

The overall average numbers of AFNs per city were also (more or less) inversely related to population size, apart from Fort McMurray, as depicted in Table 3.

Table 3: Alberta AFN overall average scores per city



Across Alberta, the overall city average scores ranged between 4.8 in Calgary and 7.12 in Red Deer. Red Deer had a small sample size of fifteen AFNs, and three of these AFNs scored eight and over (please see Appendix A below), raising its overall city average over seven. Calgary, by contrast, had a larger sample size of sixty, with four organizations scoring eight or higher but also many AFNs scoring four and under, lowering their city average to under five. Similar patterns were observed for Lethbridge and Edmonton, where Lethbridge has a smaller sample size of fifteen but two organizations scoring eight and over and Edmonton having a larger sample size of forty-five with two organizations scoring an eight and many others (predominantly CSAs) scoring under five. These totals point again to areas of AFNs that can be rendered more holistic. Many Alberta AFNs were lacking in Indigenous food focus, cultural food components, and addressing social justice and social equity, arguably most critically in Edmonton and Calgary, which house greater proportions of marginalized populations.

In addition to population and differences in overall average scores, the abilities of AFNs to work across a broad range of criteria may also be contingent on city-specific rates of food insecurity. It is possible that, as rates of food insecurity increase, so too does the development of local AFNs. While we were able to find city-specific rates of food bank use for 2024, we could not find city-specific rates of food insecurity for all five of our cities studied. Food insecurity rates tend to be measured by province (for example, Tarasuk et al., 2022), making inter-city comparisons within a single province difficult. While foodbank use is not synonymous with food security, it does provide an indication of need. Consistent with cross-Canadian rates, all the cities surveyed in our study reported increased food bank usage. Edmonton’s Food Bank’s hamper program experienced a 37percent increase from 2023 to 2024 (Tran, 2024). Red Deer Food Bank witnessed an 81percent increase in usage from 2019 to 2024 (Red Deer Food Bank, 2024). The Lethbridge Food Bank reported a 34percent increase from 2023 to

2024 (Keenan, 2024). The Calgary Food Bank has seen a staggering 200 percent increase from 2019 to 2024 (Wilhelm, 2024). Similarly, Fort McMurray's Wood Buffalo Food Bank experienced an 11percent increase in usage and a 20percent rise in hamper requests from 2023 to 2024 (Wood Buffalo Food Bank, 2024).

According to these data, food bank use was highest in Calgary, where there was also the lowest number of AFNs per population. However, it was also high in Red Deer where there was the highest number of AFNs per population. Food bank use was lowest in Fort MacMurray, which also had the lowest number of AFNs. However, given that food insecurity is more complex than simply a lack of food, other systemic factors need to be considered, such as household

income. According to Food Banks Canada, the average household income in the Wood Buffalo region is higher than other cities in the province, with the median household income is \$60,000 higher than that of provincial averages (Food Banks Canada, 2024). Food studies scholars have consistently identified household income as the strongest single predictor of food insecurity (Tarasuk et al. 2016), helping to explain some of Fort McMurray's low rates of food insecurity and lower numbers of AFNs in the region. However, as the incomes of working Canadians have failed to keep pace with rising food costs and inflation more broadly (Edmonton Community Foundation, 2023), more research is needed to understand the connections between food insecurity and AFN prevalence.

Conclusions and future research

Despite their incompleteness, AFNs remain part of the fabric of food movements in Canada and globally (Edwards, 2016). As such, they are deserving of continued academic attention and insight as well as public and policy support. Our research provides data on the number and type of AFNs that exist in Alberta, as well as an indexing of their overall breadth.

Upholding characteristics of food sovereignty, championed, multi-channel AFNs are better equipped to effect change within existing food systems, especially as they address access to food charity, food equity, and a focus on marginalized populations. Our findings confirm that more holistic AFNs were found in community/grassroots organizations than were found in city/government initiatives or in for-profit exchanges like CSAs, which could serve to inform future funding decisions. Our findings also confirm some areas of improvement needed for many AFNs—namely the need for changes that go beyond niche or privileged consumers (Edwards, 2016; Levkoe et al., 2019;

Matacena, 2016; Maye, 2013; Wilson & Levkoe, 2022). Following Misleh (2022), our research does not aim to uphold binary understandings of AFNs' alterity. Rather, by offering data on what Alberta AFNs are doing (and not doing), we aim to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of their programming and offerings.

A renewed interest in AFNs during the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with food inflation rates and rising food insecurity rates both in Alberta and across Canada, provide an opportunity to better understand and utilise the role of AFNs in offering some (even if fragmented and partial) resistance to global, industrialized food systems. Our research, in conversation with other recent research on AFNs, provides a building block in this increasingly critical aim. Wider data collection is needed to compare results with other cities and provinces. We plan to undertake the next phase of this work by comparing Alberta AFNs to other AFNs across Canada. Of particular

interest will be any correlations between provincial levels of food insecurity and provincial AFN density. Our future research will also ask whether any holistic models of AFNs provide distinctive ways to mitigate some of the critiques to which AFNs have been subject. Working alongside community partners, we also plan to further disseminate this research through our podcast, *The Ground Up?*, and other digital storytelling methods to bring greater visibility to AFNs among the public (Rossiter & Overend, 2024).

Overall, we uphold that AFNs continue to play a role in equitable food systems, while also concurring with wider critiques that AFNs alone cannot mitigate the complex problems caused by neoliberalism— increase in corporate control, growing gaps between rich and poor, and the many environmental problems caused by our global food systems (Sage et al., 2023). AFNs need to be combined with broader social change movements, including but not limited to widespread adoption of Universal Basic Income, housing security,

affordable childcare, increases in liveable wages, and Land Back initiatives, to have long-standing, systemic effects on peoples' qualities of life. There are no doubt limits to what many of these small, local, often volunteer-run, and grassroots initiatives can accomplish. However, in focussing on their limits, we risk overlooking their merits. Echoed in broader research on AFNs, our study confirms that AFNs in Alberta consistently provide access to local, healthy food, shorten supply chains, build local food security, and promote social and community connections among members. Amidst rising food insecurity, food inflation, and food industrialization, these benefits may not be revolutionary, but they are also not without value. While AFNs are far from complete solutions to the growing issues of food security, justice, and sovereignty, they persist in imperfect ways. Rather than dismiss them as incomplete, we aim to better understand their pieces.

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Appendix A – Broadly focussed AFNs in Alberta

AFN	Description	Website
<u>Red Deer (3)</u>		
Green Iglu	Green Iglu is a registered charity that enhances food security in remote and Indigenous communities. They achieve this by constructing multi-season greenhouses that cultivate fresh produce and culturally significant plants.	https://www.greeniglu.com/
Red Deer Dream Centre/Nu Leaf Harvest Wall	A harvest wall not only reduces overall food costs, freeing up resources for other essential services, but also fosters community engagement by involving members in food-growing activities, providing a sense of connection and purpose. Moreover, members acquire valuable transferable skills that can support their post-treatment work pursuits, an impact that extends beyond the RDDC.	https://nuleaffarms.ca/growing-farmers/community-development/projects/red-deer-dream-centre/
Common Ground Garden Project	In collaboration with the City of Red Deer, this urban farming project aims to enhance local food security by creating accessible gardening spaces for the community.	https://rethinkreddeer.ca/commonground
<u>Edmonton (2)</u>		
New Grocery Movement	With its home base in Edmonton, this non-profit organization is committed to educating and engaging communities across Canada to enhance local food security. They offer a range of workshops to empower individuals with the skills and knowledge to grow their own food and adopt sustainable practices. In	https://newgrocerymovement.com/

	<p>addition to their nationwide efforts, they run city-specific initiatives such as the Garden Club in Edmonton, which unites residents to learn about urban gardening.</p>	
Micro Habitat	<p>This predominantly Edmonton-based organization supports urban farming in and around Edmonton. They install urban farms at local businesses, offer educational workshops on urban agriculture, host recreational workshops and information booths, and provide take-home urban farming kits for schools.</p>	<p>https://microhabitat.ca/en</p>
<u>Calgary (4)</u>		
Dalhousie Community Garden and Food Forest	<p>The Dalhousie Community Association's initiative fosters a sense of community by encouraging residents to care for and maintain a shared garden and edible food forest. This initiative also hosts harvest potlucks, a seed library, and various social events to connect community members.</p>	<p>https://www.dalhousiecalgary.ca/community-garden-dalhousie/</p>
Land of Dreams	<p>This is an urban farming initiative in partnership with the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society, designed to integrate newcomers and refugees while fostering connections with Indigenous communities. Participants maintain a community garden and engage in educational programs that share Indigenous history and farming practices.</p>	<p>https://ccisab.ca/land-of-dreams/</p>
Calgary EATS!	<p>The City of Calgary's food action plan supports various community-led programs, including urban hen keeping, beekeeping, indoor farming, growing spaces, and circular food economy initiatives,</p>	<p>https://bit.ly/42jZRhz</p>

	in partnership with local organizations.	
Fresh Routes	<p>Fresh Routes operates a Mobile Grocery Store that brings convenient, nutritious, fresh, and budget-friendly food to communities in Calgary.</p> <p>In collaboration with Stoney Nakoda Nations, Fresh Routes began partnering with Indigenous communities, their nutritionists, and dieticians to bring healthy food to First Nation communities. At Fresh Routes, we believe in dignified food access for everyone.</p>	https://freshroutes.ca/inclusive-community-markets/
<u>Lethbridge (2)</u>		
Interfaith Chinook Kitchen	In collaboration with Lethbridge’s Family Centre, this initiative provides a community kitchen offering free cooking classes for adults and children. Additionally, it supports other organizations in establishing their own kitchen programs.	https://interfaithfoodbank.ca/programs-services/community-kitchen/
Seed Library	Lethbridge’s Public Library hosts a free community seed initiative allowing residents to borrow seeds to grow their produce. While returning seeds is not required, gardeners are encouraged to donate their harvested seeds to sustain and grow the library’s collection (Jarvie, 2023). The library provided just under 3,000 packages of seeds to the Lethbridge community in 2023 (Ashbee, 2024).	https://www.seedysaturdayql.com/