Vol. 13 No. 1, pp. 27–53 April 2026

Canadian Food Studies La Revue canadienne des études sur l'alimentation

Review Article

Links, ladders, and levers: Basic income and the merits and limits of innovations in the charitable food sector

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Abstract

Ample literature describes the limits of the charitable food sector in meeting the food security needs of individuals. Nascent work now highlights diverse and innovative approaches in the sector in the absence of the right to food. Given the cost-of-living crisis and intensifying food insecurity in Canada, efforts towards greater diversification and innovation may be slowing, and in some cases, advocacy for systems change has been deprioritized in favour of a return to meeting immediate food needs. The evidence is replete with calls for rights-based approaches to hunger; these have often been anchored to demands for greater income security, given that poverty is one of the principal causes of food insecurity. Yet while such calls have languished in a policy climate that appears unresponsive and impervious to human need, practitioners working in the charitable food sector have actively been working towards interim solutions that promote greater dignity, autonomy, and choice for their clients. Using Canada as a case study, this conceptual paper explores the merits, limitations, and tensions of advancing incremental and/or temporary improvements within the charitable food model as we champion and wait for the right to food to finally be enacted. In so doing, the paper examines innovations in the charitable food sector and tests them against the core principles and criteria of a robust basic income guarantee (BIG). We highlight shifts and consider their impacts as interventions that are philosophically sound, practical,

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DOI: 10.15353/cfs-rcea.v13i1.748
ISSN: 2292-3071

and policy-oriented. The paper concludes that while certain shifts and changes in the sector may offer greater degrees of autonomy, dignity, and universality than others, none meet all the core BIG criteria and thus none offer the potential to combat food insecurity in a substantive way. We underscore that a BIG (or variants thereof) would be the only viable intervention to advance an income-oriented, rights-based approach to food.

Keywords: Basic income; charitable food sector; food access; food banks; food security; income security

Résumé

La littérature décrit amplement les limites du secteur alimentaire caritatif pour assurer la sécurité alimentaire des individus. Les travaux récents mettent en lumière des approches diverses et innovantes du secteur, face à l'absence du droit à l'alimentation. Considérant la crise du coût de la vie et l'augmentation de l'insécurité alimentaire au Canada, les efforts pour davantage de diversification et d'innovation peuvent ralentir et, dans certains cas, la mobilisation en faveur de changements systémiques a été reléguée derrière l'urgence de répondre aux besoins alimentaires immédiats. Les preuves de la pertinence d'appeler à une lutte contre la faim fondée sur les droits sont abondantes ; elles sont souvent arrimées à l'exigence d'une meilleure sécurité du revenu, dans la mesure où la pauvreté est une des principales causes d'insécurité alimentaire. Alors que le climat politique néglige ces appels, apparemment peu réactif et plutôt insensible aux besoins humains, les personnes qui œuvrent dans le secteur alimentaire caritatif travaillent activement sur des solutions provisoires pour offrir plus de dignité, d'autonomie et de choix à leur clientèle. En utilisant le Canada comme cas d'étude, cet article explore les avantages, les limites et les tensions liés aux améliorations progressives et/ou temporaires dans le cadre du modèle alimentaire caritatif, alors que nous militons et attendons pour que le droit à l'alimentation soit enfin promulgué. Ainsi, l'article examine les innovations du secteur alimentaire caritatif et les évalue à l'aune des principes et critères fondamentaux d'un solide revenu de base garanti (RBG). Nous mettons en évidence les changements et observons leurs effets comme des interventions philosophiquement fondées, pratiques et axées sur les politiques. L'article conclut que même si certaines transformations du secteur peuvent offrir davantage d'autonomie, de dignité et d'universalité que d'autres, aucune ne satisfait tous les critères fondamentaux d'un RBG, et donc, aucune n'a le potentiel de contrer véritablement l'insécurité alimentaire. Nous soutenons qu'un RBG serait la seule intervention viable pour promouvoir une approche de l'alimentation axée sur le revenu et fondée sur les droits.

Introduction

There is a substantial literature base bringing to light the limits of the charitable model of support in meeting the food security needs of individuals and much work highlighting the laudable goal of shifting towards more diverse and evidence-informed models to combat food insecurity (Smith-Carrier, 2020; Rizvi et al., 2021). The most common charitable food security model, and the most recognized in the eyes and minds of the public, is that of the traditional food bank. Food banking has been a staple of emergency food provision for over 30 years, providing countless items of food to those in need across dozens of countries in the global North (Riches, 2018; Spring, 2023; Tarasuk et al., 2020). But rather than serving as a short-term emergency-oriented solution it was intended to be (Dey & Humphries, 2015), the food banking system has "become a new form of charitable social institution with a long-term life expectancy" (Riches, 2002, p. 652).

The literature is replete with calls for rights-based approaches to hunger (e.g., Smith-Carrier et al., 2017; Chilton & Rose, 2009; Riches, 1999; Riches & Tarasuk, 2014; Sampson et al., 2021). These calls have often been attached to demands for greater income security, given that financial insufficiency is a primary cause of food insecurity (McIntyre et al., 2016b; Riches, 2018; Tarasuk et al., 2022; Tarasuk & Beaton, 1999; Tung et al., 2022) within our market-based system. As such, food studies scholars frequently define food insecurity as "the inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints" (PROOF, n.d.; see also Men et al., 2021). Yet while calls for the right to food have languished in a policy climate that appears unresponsive to human need, practitioners working in the charitable food sector have actively been working towards interim solutions that promote greater dignity and choice for their clients. Using Canada as a case study, this conceptual paper explores the merits and limitations of, and tensions around, advancing incremental and/or temporary improvements within the emergency food model and tests them against seven core principles of a BIG. We argue that this critical evaluation framework be used when defining, considering, and assessing innovations in the charitable food sector. Applying such a framework, we explore whether incremental approaches—sometimes conceptualized as innovations—assist with creating genuine and impactful alternatives for charitable food recipients, or distract from income-based solutions, the absence of which could further entrench hunger.

Food poverty, hunger, and the charitable food sector

The depoliticization of household food insecurity has rendered the work of solving this social problem that much more difficult (Mendly-Zambo & Raphael, 2019). Many have critiqued the stigma, conditionality, and lack of dignity that accompany charitable food receipt (Smith-Carrier et al., 2017), while still others draw attention to the deep corporate power that has come to dominate the food bank industry (Azadian et al, 2023; Fisher, 2017; Mendly-Zambo & Raphael, 2019) and the mutually beneficial pathway forged by the industrial food waste/rescue and overproduction system, providing a win-win to transnational corporate actors and governments alike. As Kenny and Sage (2023) point out, "This model is, of course, deeply

embedded in the neoliberal narrative where food is only ever a commodity—but where philanthropic activities of well-meaning companies can enable the hungry to eat" (p. 9). Here, corporations can rid themselves of unwanted (and often expired; Smith-Carrier et al., 2017) foodstuffs, while at the same time being incentivized and rewarded for their (oft-valorised) donations by tax breaks that reduce their financial liabilities (McIntyre et al., 2017). Left to corporations and charity, food security has been denied a public policy response, and governments have essentially been let off the hook from ensuring the right to food (Riches, 2018). As Sheena Goodyear states, "Optically, it's almost like we give the government a break by being here and looking like we're taking care of it. We kind of take pressure off the government to actually solve the problem" (Goodyear, 2025).

Despite the manifold critiques of charitable food programs (see Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2012; McIntyre et al., 2016a), the reality is that food banking and, in many ways, the entire charitable food provisioning system, is now expected and perceived to make core contributions to the battle against *chronic* food insecurity. In fact, the dominance of food banking and the neoliberal logics that shore it up tend to "crowd out any space for alternatives" (Cresswell Riol & Connelly, 2023, p. 1223). Food banks have become the de facto intervention, gobbling up the lion's share of state and community resources (both human and capital), while continuing to be touted (at least discursively) as the solution to "combating hunger", "tackling food insecurity", "helping the needy" and "leaving no one behind" in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary. Emergency food aid cannot and will not remedy one of the primary causes of food insecurity—poverty (Smith-Carrier, 2020; Tarasuk et al., 2019). In the absence of coordinated advocacy efforts by sector leaders, particularly those who recognize the need for income-oriented responses to food insecurity, there has been little space to explore changes outside the current hegemonic food-based model. Furthermore, while the lack of income is the metric that is commonly used to determine and measure food insecurity, it is important to note that the dispossession of Indigenous land and water by settler colonialism and private property rights have impacted Indigenous food sovereignty and food security in Canada (Kepkiewicz & Dale, 2019; Poirier & Neufeld, 2023). Such a historical and ongoing legacy has implications for attempts to develop a truly equitable, just, and inclusive national food policy (Rotz & Kepkiewicz, 2019), even one that acknowledges the role of targeted income security policies to help combat food poverty.

Despite the laudable goal of providing a measure of relief, however inadequate, to individuals and families through the charitable food sector, practitioners and researchers alike disagree about whether the sector, and the ostensible "innovations" emerging in it, have served to further entrench hunger in the absence of systemic and rights-based interventions that combat poverty. Responding to this debate and in the spirit of much-needed transformation, De La Salle and Unwin (2016) argue that food banks should now focus on

> shifting their role from solely emergency food services to one that supports collaborative long-term solutions for community food security and social justice. This trend also includes the emergence of social justice movements that roundly include food access as a lens to socio-economic issues. (p. 4)

Some, like Berti et al. (2021), suggest that food banks ought to be considered "community-led grassroots innovations" (p. 2) that hold great transformative potential in the wake of recurrent state and market failures. Indeed, there have been some changes made to food banks over time, particularly in

relation to purchasing, donor relations, communications, and service delivery and philosophy (Haynes-Stein & Brinkley, 2023; Martin, 2021). Some even go as far as to suggest that given their reach, food banks may have unique potential for building a movement to end poverty led by those with lived and living experience (Swords, 2022). The latter however puts ever more responsibility on those shouldering the punitive demands and corollaries of neoliberal restructuring (Smith-Carrier, 2017), and does so without acknowledging the tremendous differentials of power among actors (Brennan-Tovey et al., 2023), some of whom benefit enormously from maintaining the status-quo (see Carson, 2013). There are, however, leaders in the broader community food security and food charity sector who likely would support a pathway toward movement-building; they need to be supported and engaged to work in concert with others who can deploy their skills, knowledge, and resources to challenge the extant system.

The literature on how to structure, build, and manage a sustained, pro-active shift with appropriate supports, steps, and foundations, as well as evaluations about whether such incremental approaches assist or distract from the work of income-based solutions, is less robust. Complicating matters further, food deprivation has become more pronounced, with over 25% of individuals reporting some degree of food insecurity and nearly 20% reporting insecurity characterized as "moderate or severe" (Statistics Canada, 2025). In the current cost-of-living crisis, many food banks have had to significantly reduce their food provision and/or cut services, including innovative wraparound supports such as income tax clinics, housing and utilities subsidies, or home deliveries for those with mobility challenges (Feed Ontario, 2024). While there is evidence that some food banks in BC are being forced to "try something new" as a result of rising demand (Food Banks BC, 2024) correspondence with other practitioners indicates that attention and oftentimes limited resources have been channelled into meeting the rising immediate need, leaving less time and energy to enact (and/or evaluate) more effective or transformational alternatives and additions (personal communications, 2024). Yet in the minds of some food security practitioners and leaders, questions of *how* to continue to meet the growing need *and* make progress on much-needed system reforms at the same time remain critical.

Given the gaps identified above, we propose that a critical evaluation of charitable food system interventions and innovations is crucial at this juncture. While many of these innovations *feel* positive and anecdotal feedback from some participants suggests they offer an advancement from the existing traditional model, critical reflection on their potential, including the strengths and limitations of their adoption, remains an important step as we seek to map out where and how to invest in and build food security in ways that will most likely achieve valuable returns in the years ahead. To assist with these timely efforts, we take up the task of developing a conceptual evaluation framework. This framework seeks to apply the principles of BIG, as espoused by a coalition of BIG advocates in Canada, as criteria to evaluate key programs and services associated with the charitable food model.

Conceptual approach

Given that food insecurity is directly tied to household financial sufficiency, the policy approaches that remedy poverty will also be valuable in reducing food deprivation (Tarasuk, 2017). Burgeoning literature describes the efficacy of using cash transfers (e.g., Bastagli et al., 2019; McGuire et al., 2022), and BIG programs specifically, for poverty alleviation (e.g., Forget, 2018). More recently, research has also suggested that such programs are not only necessary to assuage food insecurity, but are central to the transition to a more just food system (Power & McBay, 2022), even while they likely cannot redress all the issues that beleaguer the sector (e.g., high cost of agricultural land, exploitation of migrant workers, etc.). Even so, the "the case for BI [basic income] to address food insecurity is well-established" (Power & McBay, 2022, p. 33). *"The Basic Income We Want"* Consensus Statement (Basic Income Canada Network [BICN], 2023.), delineates the principles of robust BIG programs as reflecting: universality, non-conditionality, security, autonomy, dignity, and economic and gender equality (para. 3). The Ontario Basic Income Network ([OBIN], n.d.; see also Smith-Carrier & Halpenny, 2020) fleshes several of these out further:

1. ***Adequacy***: It's enough money to have one's basic needs met.
2. ***Autonomy***: It offers people more life choices.
3. ***Dignity***: There is no stigma attached to accessing it.
4. ***Non-conditionality***: It is provided with no (or very few) strings attached.
5. ***Universality of Access*:** Anyone who needs it, gets it (para. 2).

In expanding the Consensus Statement (BICN, 2023) principles, we add:

1. ***Security:*** Improves financial stability, reducing risks and threats to economic vulnerability.
2. ***Economic and gender equality:*** Promotes equal opportunities for all, irrespective of background or social identity, including gender.

The principles of a BIG above offer a suitable evaluation framework for several reasons. First, they represent a valuable manifestation of an income-based intervention that would address most, if not all, the inadequacy present in the charitable food model. A BIG is not the sole solution to food insecurity, but it could—if offered at an adequate level—reduce chronic food deprivation for millions of people currently experiencing hunger. It is the most direct and practical intervention that many advocates, activists, academics, and practitioners have been waiting for to remedy a primary cause of hunger and food insecurity: that is, poverty. If we accept that a BIG would be effective in combating poverty (the degree to which would ultimately depend on the proffered benefit amount), we also must then assert that these same principles offer a useful framework for evaluating what a healthy, just, and equitable right to food might resemble.

Table 1: Common food charity projects & BIG criteria evaluation[1]

Food Charity Projects	Adequacy	Autonomy	Dignity	Non-conditionality	Universality of Access	Security	Economic & Gender Equality
Food hampers (pre-packaged)							
Food banks (mediated choice model)							
Food banks (shopping model)							
Food skills (cooking and preserving, nutrition education)							
Local farm procurement contracts							
Food rescue initiatives (varied)							
Affordable markets							
Community gardens							
Community kitchens							
Subsidized seasonal veggie boxes							
Gleaning and food rescue programs (including fruit tree projects)							
Product transformation & creation for social enterprise initiatives							
Voucher/coupon programs for retail or farmers market purchases							

Source: Adapted from BICN (2023) and OBIN (n.d.)

The BIG principles outlined in Table 1 may offer a shared set of criteria that charitable food sector organizations and actors could use to guide their work and critically evaluate the programmatic and incremental, as well as structural and transformative impacts, of their existing and planned interventions. The BIG principles offer clear evaluation criteria and goals to consider. With the full recognition that continued pressure on governments to provide the economic means to enable the right to food for all members of society must be ever present in their work, we maintain that actors and organizations working in the charitable space can articulate and work towards shared national advances in dignity, autonomy, non-conditionality, adequacy, universality, security, and economic and gender equality with clear metrics of progress towards these goals.

The multi-pronged drivers of innovation

How best to propel any kind of meaningful, albeit incremental, change in the charitable food sector is complex, but for the sake of this work, we will consider it to be a two-pronged challenge. On the one hand, decades of research (e.g., Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2012; Tarusuk et al., 2020) highlights the gap between self-reported food insecurity and food bank usage. Using 2008 Canadian Household Panel Survey Pilot data, Tarasuk et al. (2019) showed that only 21.1 percent of the most food insecure households actually used food

[1] Source: BIG evaluation criteria adapted from BICN (2023) and OBIN (n.d.).

banks over the course of that year. Given the multitude of food bank limitations, not least of which includes the tremendous stigma attendant to their use, a huge proportion of households experiencing food deprivation, roughly 80 percent in Tarasuk et al.'s (2019) analysis, employ a range of other coping strategies to survive outside the charitable food model. This body of research underscores the important fact that food bank usage is a poor indicator of overall food insecurity and its various dimensions (Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2012, 2015).

Part of the incongruities of emergency food access, representing the scores of individuals and families in Canada that have avoided food banks at all costs, can be explained by the formidable stigma and undignified processes associated with its use, including means testing, pre-packaged bags/hampers (that offer no choice and are replete with mismatched and/or non-complementary items), unhealthy food items, and long, and in many cases, public, line-ups. The usage mismatch offers opportunities for the creation of new access points, or what Black and Seto (2020) describe as alternative programs, within the constellation of the charitable food space to reach those not utilizing food banks to address household food insecurity. Alongside recent evidence highlighting important shifts happening around inclusive language, personalized metrics, and more inclusive operations (Hamilton et al., 2024), observations and anecdotes from within the sector highlight that innovations in the charitable food space to reach different groups, combat stigma, improve dignity, and introduce greater autonomy are being operationalized through mediated choice models, welcoming environments, wrap-around services, the creation of more inclusive "food centres" or "food access hubs". This is happening alongside a greater diversity of food offerings, including farm fresh vegetables and attention to cultural and/or dietary preferences. Alternative access programs, or what might be called charitable food system innovations, most often revolve around the laudable goal of increasing autonomy and choice.

In exploring the decisions of people on low incomes, choice is, and historically has been, a discourse laden with assumptions (e.g., particularly in relation to motherhood, work expectations, and "welfare dependency"; Smith-Carrier et al., 2024; Solinger, 1998) that generally cast blame on individuals, not only for their poor decisions but for their poor circumstances (see Smith-Carrier, 2011). At face value, the notion of choice suggests that people can make decisions that are in their and their family's best interests, with the agency to weigh the merits and limits of a relatively balanced slate of options. In the case of decisions associated with charitable food aid use, these do not present as preferred options amongst equal alternatives, but as ones each yielding poor outcomes i.e., accepting a measure of relief to stave off hunger can take a toll on one's dignity, hope, and self-esteem (see Middleton et al., 2018; Pineau et al., 2021), skipping meals so as to avoid accessing food programs (and the immense stigma thereof) can lead to range of physical health (Tarasuk, 2004) and mental health problems (Elgar et al., 2021). As food banks have rarely been able to provide true choice to clients in terms of the foodstuffs they might avail themselves of, largely because these derive from an inconsistent and unpredictable stream of volunteer and/or corporately donated food, what some call the system of food waste (Riches, 2018), clients' ability to make healthy decisions about the foods they put on their table is altogether stymied. It is within this backdrop that choice models in food banking have begun to emerge (see Remley et al., 2013; Rivzi et al., 2021).

The literature on the efficacy of choice models at present appears equivocal. Mukoya et al.'s (2017) study

on a food bank directly serving asylum seekers in Melbourne, Australia found that incorporating client choice, while providing an increased measure of dignity to clients, did not dramatically improve the nutritional adequacy of food baskets relative to traditional offerings. However, Rizvi et al. (2021), in Ottawa, Canada, found that choice models, which included additional onsite programming in food banks intentionally integrated in Community Resource Centres, resulted in a modest decrease in the number of people experiencing severe food insecurity, and slight improvements in the mental health scores of participants experiencing moderate and severe food insecurity (albeit scores still less than the general population). Jones and Coffey (2019) highlight the complexity of teasing out choice and increased accessibility drivers in the context of food pantries given the limited exploration of these in the literature. The dearth of research on situational influences and consumption patterns in food pantries exists alongside a deep research base on consumer choice drivers in conventional retail environments. Despite movement towards choice models in Canada, the massive spike in food bank usage is putting added strain on existing limited resources (Mendelson et al., 2024), potentially foreclosing further shifts , diversification, and large-scale advocacy efforts i.e., community-based organizations taking on a larger and more dedicated role in creating access to food in communities (through, e.g., supporting food sovereignty, the right to food), while workers, budgets and organizations seek to meet the ever-rising demand.

Another challenge with the shift from the dominant charitable food model to a diverse, integrated social justice-oriented food system is the chasm between charitable food programs and conventional (or alternative) retail with regards to food access and procurement. On the one hand stands food banks/food pantries, hot meal programs, and other manifestations of "free" supplementary food, many of them rife with stigma (Brenann-Tovey et al, 2023) and limits to choice and autonomy (Booth et al., 2018). On the other, retail market prices and conventional access points, including supermarkets, farmers markets, farm stands, and local community supported agricultural (CSA) box programs. The space between free, supplementary food and the conventional retailer and/or other farm direct options can appear a formidable distance to bridge.

Redressing the income insufficiency at the root of food insecurity, through ongoing, large-scale grocery rebates (e.g., Canada, 2023) that are appropriate to the cost of food and family size, or better yet, through variants of BIG that fully support choice in how people spend their money (see Balintec, 2023), *could* help pave the road to ensure the right to food for all (Silvasti & Riches, 2014). However, we also acknowledge that a BIG may be seen as simply another neoliberal response to the problem. BIG provides economic access to food while not necessarily challenging the underlying and omnipresent market-driven food system—a system known to perpetuate food and income inequalities (see Smith-Carrier, 2021).

A BIG may be subject to a more pronounced critique when considering the sovereignty of Indigenous Peoples and nations, given that receiving it could be seen as imposing another form of financial reliance on the state. Indigenous-led efforts could help "challenge the dependency on capitalist wage-labour relations, allowing for traditional food practices, processing, and self-determination to arise" (Lowitt et al. 2025, para.24). As such, for some, a BIG may not necessarily represent an adequate or sustainable solution to food insecurity for Indigenous Peoples (even though it targets poverty directly) and some suggest that its typical focus on individual autonomy versus collective values such as community, culture, and

kinship (Cameron et al., 2024) could limit its impact in certain contexts. According to Lowitt et al (2025),

> ...[M]uch more consideration needs to be given to understanding the potential impacts of basic income on colonial policies affecting Indigenous food systems, as well as the tensions associated with relying on a policy tool administered by colonial state structures. (Lowitt et al. 2025, para. 27)

Others recognize the power of BIG to offer a "counter to state manufactured poverty" (Canada, 2018, p. 16). The Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Call for Justice 4.5, recommends that "we call upon all governments to establish a guaranteed annual income for all Canadians, including Indigenous Peoples, to meet all their social and economic needs. This income must take into account diverse needs, realities, and geographic locations." (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019, p. 182). A more fulsome discussion with Black and Indigenous communities about BIG (given their overrepresentation among those who are food insecure) would be a welcome addition to the literature in Canada and elsewhere.

The limits to charitable food system transformation

Transformation can take many forms, from incremental reform and adaptations to radical and deep overhauls (Slater et al., 2022). As a result, transformation is often viewed within a spectrum of "reformist, progressive and radical" in terms of actions, intentions and systemic change (Holt-Gimenez & Shattuck, 2011; Poppendieck, 2022). Mapped against the BIG criteria above, we argue, with Loopstra and Tarasuk (2015), that many innovations in the charitable sector that are not income oriented will fail to address food insecurity in meaningful ways. This is not to say that with sustained investment and capacity building such projects and initiatives *couldn't* scale for greater impact; it is simply to highlight the current state of what are common "innovations" within the sector. This analysis would be remiss to overlook the worthy efforts and significant merit in advancing BIG values such as dignity, autonomy, equity and slowly working towards adequacy *within* the existing charitable food model even without the resultant manifest impacts on food insecurity rates.

While questions remain about what role small-scale innovations in the charitable food sector might play in larger food system transformation, it behoves the academic community to put forward and reflect on common examples of incremental shifts in the structure and patterns of the charitable food model, while waiting for evidence-informed income-based policies to be realized. To accomplish this, we employ our three conceptual tools: links, ladders, and levers to showcase the intention of diverse innovations in the sector and then critically reflect on the role of these philosophical, practical, and policy interventions in advancing food security in Canada.

Links: Re-embedding the charitable food sector into the larger food system

Food systems embrace the entire range of actors and their interlinked value-adding activities. These take place in the production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption and disposal (loss or waste) of food products originating from agriculture (including livestock), forestry, fisheries and food industries, along with the broader economic, societal and physical environments in which these activities are embedded (Fanzo et al., 2023; Nguyễn, 2018). Concomitantly with efforts to advance the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), there is growing momentum worldwide to adopt systems approaches and recognize the centrality of food systems to achieve development through an integrated and sustainable approach (Béné et al., 2022; von Braun, 2021).

In spite of recent calls for greater integration and holistic approaches—in scholarship and practice alike—food systems are often enmeshed in parochial and fragmented processes and domains to serve the needs of disparate populations. For example, they are often framed in ways that serve to, according to Woods et al. (2023), "reduce the solution space to dichotomous perspectives" (p. 22). Such dichotomization appears in discourses on local food systems vis-à-vis global ones, or sustainable food systems versus conventional, industrial systems. Attention since the mid-1990s on "local food" has meant that the importance and contribution of food production at different scales has not always been adequately acknowledged (Palmer et al., 2017) despite the fact that while food security depends on local supplies it also requires global trade and the global food industry (Capodistrias et al., 2022; Rapinski et al., 2023). Although charitable food systems are often disaggregated from many of the others, this should not necessarily be the default case. As Schwartz and Caspi (2023) argue, "Charitable sites where food is distributed are deeply connected to specific communities…and because they are hyperlocal, pantries can provide customized and culturally tailored services to meet the needs of nearby residents" (p. 1). The authors go on to note that the charitable food sector often sources products from multiple scales simultaneously.

Haynes-Stein and Brinkley (2023) in California recognize and explore the integral, economic transactions and social roles that connect the local food movement and the charitable food sector. Building on Hinrichs' (2000) concept of embeddedness, the authors highlight the creation of value for both the charitable sector and the local food movement highlighting what they see as the "conjoined development of these two movements" (Haynes-Stein & Brinkley, 2023, p. 684). Many of those working in the charitable food sector could benefit from stronger conceptual tools to reimagine the actions and activities of the charitable food sector as part of larger food systems and subsystems. Here, the concept of links becomes a vital resource.

A link for our purposes is *a tactical choice to connect the activities, services, and discourses of the charitable food sector to the larger system in both offerings and through intentional dialogue*. While the links (and reliance) between the charitable food sector and corporate retailers are known and obvious to practitioners—played out primarily through food rescue "donations" and corporate giving (Black & Seto, 2020) or through bulk buying for consistency and cheaper prices using corporate suppliers—the links between local production and the offerings of local supply chains are often obscured (Haynes-Stein & Brinkley, 2023). Increasingly, more charitable food organizations have begun forging new relationships

with local food system actors to procure new purchases and enlist new donors. While such relationships have brought a local supply of most commonly fresh, seasonal vegetables (and in some cases prepared foods, such as breads, soups, and preserves) into the charitable sector's offerings, it is important to push back against the framing of local procurement for charitable spaces as inherently innovative simply because of spatial proximity.

Several food banks in Southwestern British Columbia (BC) have begun (or have been for some time) sourcing fruits and vegetables directly from local farms. They have built relationships with growers to supply both hampers as well as facilitate a diverse range of alternative programs (i.e., affordable produce markets, meal programs, school food programs, food skills classes). The connections being built do help highlight the role of local production and enhance access to locally grown food.

Recent years have seen the definition of food literacy expanded beyond kitchen skills and nutrition knowledge (i.e., food skills) to include food environments and the food system, but also contextual influences, such as sociocultural and socio-economic factors (Sumner, 2015). This more critical evaluation of power, conditions of production, and food environments (Farrell, 2021), as well as food system crises and opportunities for transformation (Sumner, 2015), is being added to the food skills/food literacy programs that accompany some charitable food organizations. However, research indicates that financial barriers, rather than food skills are a more significant driver of and contributor to food insecurity (Pepetone et al., 2021). The complex reasons for food insecurity mean that food literacy and food skills are only small pieces of the larger problem (Begley et al., 2019). Dachner and Tarasuk (2018) thus point out that "interventions designed to improve the nutrition knowledge or cooking skills of those experiencing food insecurity have limited capacity to lessen problems rooted in abject poverty" (p. 236). So, while there may be some linking potential, if not philosophically, food literacy as an intervention has been shown to not be useful or effective in moving the needle on household food insecurity.

A more useful example of a linkage is represented by the BC Farmers' Market Nutrition Coupon Program ([FMNCP], 2023). This program distributes $3.6 million worth of coupons to 32,000 individuals in 12,000 households through networks and partnerships with 227 charitable food providers and social service agencies. The coupons are for clients to spend at their local registered farmers' market, involving 96 communities and 111 markets (British Columbia Association of Farmers' Markets [BCAFM], 2023). A program such as this increases access to healthier food options, increases the linkages between the diversity of food procurement options, highlights the importance of local production, and results in clients spending an average of $12 beyond the dollar value of the coupons they redeem (BCAFM, 2022). Nascent evidence suggests the program may be effective in reducing short-term food insecurity (Aktary et al., 2023). Lobbying efforts are underway in other provinces to support the adoption of the program elsewhere (see Sustain Ontario, n.d.).

Finally, some local charitable food organizations have begun to offer subsidized local food boxes built through a collective of farmers and offered in a CSA style model. In the case of the One Straw Society in BC, the model consists of most subscribers paying the full amount alongside community contributions that offer the option to have 20-30% of boxes subsidized and picked up at a consistent location for all subscribers. The centrality of the pick-up location and uniformity of the boxes has been shown to significantly reduce

perceived stigma as there is no distinction between paying subscribers, partly subsidized and fully subsidized (free) subscribers (C. Fletcher, personal communication, 2023). A link of this nature offers both locally grown food and a connection back to the regional agricultural economy for those accessing charitable food services outside the traditional food bank model.

Despite the aforementioned benefits and the strong desire to "support local" and harness these links in charitable food environments, there are a few obvious barriers. These include economics (i.e., higher prices), seasonality, and volume (supply). Meagher et al. (2020) found that these linkages are associated with logistical and economic barriers, as well as weak relationships between farms and food banks. Many charitable food organizations are non-profits or faith-based organizations involving volunteers and tight budgets and therefore cannot be expected to fully shift existing relationships between people and food. While seasonal, local procurement is a rising trend, the preference of food banks for long-life supermarket foodstuffs, for reasons of distributional efficiency, has tended to exclude fresh, sustainable and local produce from charitable food parcels (Milbourne, 2024), especially on a consistent, year-round basis.

Choices around purchasing have historically been made through a price lens (i.e., trying to stretch limited dollars further) and through a logistics lens (i.e., utilizing corporate suppliers to ensure consistency, efficiency, quality, and convenience given limited staffing resources). As such, the barriers of price and supply play considerable roles in decision-making and food procurement policy decisions. Feeding people good quality food and maximizing the quantity of that food is a distinct goal of food banks. Supporting local food economies is a different, distinct, and separate ideal and goal than feeding people, which does not inherently need to be a primary concern of food banks per se. However, food banks and other charitable food programs ought to recognize that they have purchasing power and choices of what and how to purchase; in cases where funding permits it, directly supporting local food economies could become part of their decision-making and spending. Even a small percentage of local food purchased and/or coupons for local procurement distributed serves to deepen the link between a local charitable food provider and the local systems and conditions of production. Haynes-Stein and Brinkley (2023) found in their case study that "the food bank, like the farmers market, may be a broker or a bridge between the larger and smaller local food system actors and affiliated movements" (p. 693). Over a decade ago, McEntee and Naumova (2012) noted that there are opportunities to develop collaborative capacity between the charitable food system and the rural local food system in mutually beneficial ways. The recognition and actualization of these links and relationships serves multiple roles in communities and populations where the charitable food sector has, in many cases, seemingly been "lifted" out of the larger food system and siloed as a system of its own.

Upon first reflection, the examples of links above signal a few positive advantages and advances—mainly in terms of philosophical reframing and reflections on the food system beyond the confines of charitable access points and procurement methods. However, the objective of this work is to critically appraise such links and encourage reflection on these (and others) in relation to the BIG criteria. When we subject the example links to the BIG criteria, we do see elements of greater autonomy (a greater variety of product offerings and thus increased choice), dignity (the economic supports to shop in farmers markets and emergency evidence of short term food security advances), and economic and gender equality (access is not restricted to

certain populations). While these are important shifts within the sector, our evaluation shows that none of the links noted above (at least at their current scales and capacity) meet most or all of the BIG criteria and thus none hold the potential to truly remedy household food insecurity over the long term.

Ladders: New projects, access points, and opportunities for spending and engagement

We refer to the range of programs that include pay-what-you-can food access through food markets, subsidized food boxes and meal programs, low-cost and subsidized grocery stores as *ladders.* We define ladders as *programs that create new food access points that act as incremental steps between the charitable model and other forms of personal food procurement.*

With over a decade of research showcasing the gap between self-reported food insecurity and food bank usage, it is becoming clear to practitioners that the gulf between the food bank and the grocery store is wide and potentially overwhelming. Many food banks and integrated food programming organizations are recognizing this gap and beginning to shift programming to meet people where they are at, build programs that are attentive to the various manifestations of food insecurity, and offer access models that require limited financial contributions to offer an alternative to the default charitable response of "free". In BC, a recent report points out that

> Many food banks are exploring cost-recovery or low-cost food provision [...] with the hope that these innovations can meet the needs of those that have been priced out of the grocery store but have some money to spend on food, decreasing the overall demand on the charitable food programs." (Food Banks BC, 2024, p. 18)

Affordable produce markets represent one of the best examples of a ladder in the charitable food space. Affordable produce markets constitute positive tools of action that can be used to advance access to healthy, local food at lower prices. Affordable markets play a different role than food banks, empowering customers to make monetary transactions and encourage autonomous food purchasing. Affordable food markets, or what Nayak and Hartwell (2023) call "Community Markets," revolve around the sourcing of fresh products (strictly local or otherwise) and then reselling purchased goods through a farmers' market type setting. Many individuals and households experiencing financial insufficiency are not able to afford the standard prices at local farmers' markets or farm stands. Affordable markets are also solid options for fresh food provisioning in neighbourhoods and communities, or when a whole farmers' market would not be viable to cover farm costs and offer an alternative, staggered access point to fresh produce offered by traditional food banks (Nayak & Hartwell, 2023; Right to Food, 2019).

Moving beyond the seasonality and scale of affordable markets, low cost, non-profit grocery stores also play an important role as ladders. A reputable example in Southwestern BC is the Quest Food Exchange.

> By bridging the gap between food banks and traditional grocery stores, Quest provides a grocery experience based on principles of dignity, access, and sustainability. Quest believes in a grocery model that simultaneously supports community while reducing greenhouse gas emissions...Almost all of Quest's food is donated by local food partners from across British Columbia and

> delivered across our five Lower Mainland markets at reduced cost to our client communities. (Quest Food Exchange, n.d.)

Quest's values, operations, mission, and logistics fall squarely in the ladder category, as the outfit itself identifies that it acts as a "bridge" between food banks and traditional grocery stores. Quest clients are referred through various channels (e.g., social service agencies, charities, non-profits, etc.) whose mission it is to support individuals facing economic barriers. Another referral-based shopping operation called "The Gathering Markit" has found success in the city of Abbotsford, BC with a mission to turn recovered food into meal kits sold to customers "with dignity, choice and community at the core" (The Gathering Markit, n.d.). Ranta et al. (2024) offer a significant analysis of what are termed Social SuperMarkets (SSMs) in the UK and highlight their important role as procurement options that could be scaled and used in tandem with food banks and pantries. SSMs move beyond models such as Quest and The Gathering Markit, as they do not employ a referral system, do not cap the number of visits, and offer a space to amplify social inclusion and opportunities to connect with wrap-around services (Ranta et al., 2024).

Subsidized and low-cost meals prepared through food access, food literacy, or community building programs of charitable food systems can also act as important ladders. Such arrangements offer a step between the traditional soup kitchen and a full-price meal purchase in a restaurant or conventional retail store. Numerous organizations are leveraging partnerships with schools, chefs with kitchen experience and infrastructure, and community members to create meals for a fee offered through a range of programming to meet a diverse range of needs. Some restaurants have even begun to offer pay-what-you-can or solidarity pricing for members of the community to encourage them to purchase and eat meals in the restaurant space alongside members of their community, rather than in alternate locales—ones that epitomize exclusion, with de-facto designated spaces for those with restricted financial resources.

All of the ladder-type innovations we highlight certainly offer some practical and positive advancements in terms of dignity, autonomy, and universality when it comes to charitable food access. When subjected to the BIG criteria, most of the ladders noted above (Quest, referral-based seasonal food markets, subsidized restaurant meals), still fall short on key criteria such as adequacy (limited and/or insufficient products or quantities) and universality (referral-based, so not universally accessible). As Deaton et al. (2022) rightly point out, "programs that increase accessibility to food may not diminish food insecurity" (p. 306) and various access programs may be experienced differently depending on the severity and manifestation of food insecurity in question. While trends suggest that various ladder-type interventions will continue to grow over the coming years as the charitable model confronts some of its inherent limitations, seeks to diversify access points, and aims to move past the means tested, pre-packed food bank hamper model in the interest of ensuring greater dignity, autonomy and choice, the contextual factors combined with consistent resource scarcity trends (funds and labour) may continue to stymie the collective impact of such ladders.

Levers: Income security is the only meaningful intervention to combat food insecurity

Poverty is the leading killer and greatest cause of suffering in the world (World Health Organization, 1995, as cited in Murali & Oyebode, 2004). It is a driver of poor physical and mental health (Liaquat et al., 2021), poorer access to education and social mobility (Brown & James, 2020), and most relevant to the argument at hand, the adverse effects of a poor, nutrient-starved diet due to limited or restricted food access (Thompson, 2022). At the same time, the research is also clear about the inherent problems associated with income assistance schemes (Smith-Carrier et al., 2020c), which are rife with conditionality and stigma (Jun, 2022; Smith-Carrier, 2023), and that infringe upon human dignity (Whelan, 2021). We know that income security improves people's health and wellbeing—food security included—but the form of delivery matters. Ensuring financial sufficiency through dignified, nonconditional, and non-stigmatized forms of support is crucial. BIG, or variants of it, offer a veritable opportunity to act as a lever that allows individuals to recognize the aforementioned links and utilize the ladders offered. A lever for the purposes of this work can be defined as *a targeted income-oriented policy or set of interconnected policies that give people control of their individual or household food procurement, thereby reducing reliance on charitable food programs.* A BIG is a prime example of a lever that meets such ends.

Canada has already taken up multiple BIG pilots, at both the provincial (e.g., Manitoba and Ontario) and community levels (e.g., the New Leaf Project in British Columbia; Dwyer et al., 2023). These have drawn significant public and political attention to BIG over the years, particularly when the Ontario Basic Income Pilot was introduced (and later dismantled), and the state provided (temporary) emergency benefits in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., through the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit [CERB]). During the roll-out of the CERB, an economic stimulus measure not a direct poverty reduction intervention, food banks across Canada saw significant declines in their uptake, bucking the trend of steadily increasing numbers since the turn of the century. The CERB (a time-bound, short-term BIG variant) had the latent impact of contributing to the lowest rate of poverty in Canada in 20 years and a decline in food bank usage. While numbers (both national poverty rates and food bank visits) have since rebounded and are in fact steadily rising, the CERB experiment demonstrates that a targeted and efficient income delivery system can reduce food bank usage and provide time-limited income security. Furthermore, while BIG would directly address crucial aspects of income insecurity thus assisting with the economic access to food, it may also produce knock-on impacts in supporting sustainability across the whole food system and agricultural economy through encouraging new entrants, reducing economic uncertainty, and building resilience (Lowitt & Levkoe, 2023). In addition, BIG programs can help level nation-wide disparities introducing income alongside existing food subsidy programs like Nutrition North Canada (Deschner, 2018).

Some suggest that food banks and other food access programs hold great potential to become sites of more potent civic engagement. Schwartz and Caspi (2023) argue that

> Moving beyond assisting individual families, the future power of food banking may be its access to people who are not yet civically engaged and empowering them to vote and get involved in shaping policies that will reduce the problem of food security for all. (p. 3)

Engaging a citizenry who is impacted by income insecurity on a daily basis is an important step in galvanizing the political, educational, and advocacy possibilities of BIG experiments on the road to full implementation (Smith-Carrier et al., 2026). Furthermore, in the context of food insecurity, income sufficiency offers more than just income for food purchasing: BIG acts as a lever on the road to charitable food system transformation that can garner weightier benefits, including *a reframing of the historical model through the lens of human rights.* Within the policy domain, the insertion of a rights-based framework in existing federal and provincial/territorial poverty reduction strategies would signal the need for social and economic rights to be progressively realized by policymakers, subject to appropriate accountability measures and timelines (Smith-Carrier & Lawlor, 2017).

If the right to food and thus provisioning and access strategies were made available as substantive rights, the traditional food bank model would be virtually obsolete except for its original intention of short-term, emergency food provisioning. Such a shift in philosophy, and thus governmental obligations, alongside the material means (via a BIG) to achieve food security through autonomous and dignified food purchasing represents a lever that allows food insecure individuals to utilize the diverse options offered through progressive charitable food programs. The continued reliance on time-bound and proscriptive grants, and in-kind corporate and community donations, is unpredictable and offers no solid foundation from which to invest in innovation and transformation. Income security, with BIG as the most effective lever, would relieve the pressure on services, allowing organizations the space, time, and resources to chart a new pathway, both practically and philosophically, for the charitable food system as a whole. BIG may be a relatively straightforward lever to actualize. Some groups (read: traditionally "deserving" populations, including older adults and families with children) already have the groundwork for a BIG through existing programs such as the Guaranteed Income Supplement and Canada Child Benefit (albeit without meeting the adequacy criterion) and these have shown positive impacts on food insecurity (Brown et al., 2022; Kansanga et al., 2022). Other groups (e.g., lone adults in poverty, working and not), however, have habitually been overlooked in the present patchwork of tax benefits and income assistance programs. A BIG, tied to human rights infrastructure, would improve income (and therefore food) security over time (Smith-Carrier & Green, 2017).

Conclusion

To successfully shift away from the charitable food model to a rights-based approach—guaranteeing people the right to food and an adequate standard of living—*people must have the financial resources necessary to obtain their own food* (Davis & Tarasuk, 1994). While the immediate roll-out of a BIG program that provides sufficient financial resources presents an ideal avenue through which income security could be assured, there are likely intermediate steps that could be taken in the interim to shore up the much-needed shift. However,

as discussed, novel food bank models may slightly increase dignity, autonomy, and offer less conditionality than a means-tested hamper model, but still fall short in terms of conditionality or adequacy. Likewise, a low-cost market or grocery store may deal directly with the adequacy and autonomy aspects but still be conditional and non-universal through forms of means-tested memberships, agency referral systems or by people simply not having enough money to purchase food, even at a lower cost.

The presence of these new food access points that involve spending some money and attempting to reach the vast number of individuals and families who are food insecure yet not accessing food bank services—referred to in our conceptual framework as ladders—offer an incremental step on the road to the sovereignty and dignity of food purchasing for all. Such a shift, however incremental, does offer a programmatic restructuring of both how the charitable food sector links back to the larger food system as a whole and the diverse access options it offers those facing varying degrees and conditions of food insecurity. BIG, however, as a specific policy intervention to combat hunger, presents the only solution that meets all seven principles. According to Healy (2019),

> If food poverty is defined simply in terms of hunger and deprivation, then the appropriate response is to give people more food – a role that is currently being filled, to some extent, by food banks across rich, liberal economies. If, however, food poverty is linked more broadly to human rights, social justice and social exclusion, then the appropriate policy response is much broader and rests squarely with government. (p. 106)

Indeed, the state, which holds legal obligations as a duty-bearer of human rights, is charged with enacting policy decisions that redress poverty, and thus, food insecurity. To eschew or delay policy changes that shift away from the charitable food model, with its ineffectiveness and indignities, is to continue violating human rights and to ensure the perpetuation of food deprivation (Smith-Carrier et al., 2017). Hence, it is important to note that the alternative links and ladders, described in the sections above, have significant limitations. As Kenny and Sage (2023) point out,

> The questions remain as to whether these arrangements, while undoubtedly positive, can, or are designed to, tackle the structures excluding people from food systems in the first place. Do these arrangements challenge governments to assume responsibility for ensuring the right to food? (p. 11)

Here, it is imperative to keep the deliberate reformist framing of these interventions, and the critical appraisal of them, against the BIG principles in mind.

Decades of research make clear that income-based, structural solutions are needed to combat poverty, which is at the root of food insecurity (Riches, 2002; Tarasuk et al., 1994). There is widespread recognition in both the BIG movement and critical food studies that large-scale and radical food system transformation is needed (Lowitt et al., 2025) alongside massive shifts in the structural conditions that produce and sustain poverty and food charity reliance. However, this research suggests that none of the charitable interventions outlined have the potential to shift existing structures at magnitudes much different than the traditional food charity model. A national or provincial/territorial BIG program (or at minimum, more targeted BIG variants aimed directly at the overlooked demographics of charitable food services) holds the greatest promise in rendering much of the charitable food system (certainly the traditional, low choice, means-tested hamper-oriented food bank model) obsolete.

Power and McBay (2022) assert that "a basic income is necessary—but insufficient—to move towards justice in the food system" (p. 31). This is especially important to note as we reflect on contexts where food availability, traditional consumption patterns, access to markets and infrastructure pose significant challenges for specific populations, including in rural and remote areas in Canada (McPhee-Knowles & Gatensby, 2023). Furthermore, *injustice* in the food system takes many forms, including those surrounding damages related to labour, profit, environmental degradation, and corporate power and control. Moreover, additional theorizing and empirical work on how BIG might contribute to larger food system transformation and sustainability (Beck et al., 2023; Lowitt et al., 2025; Power & McBay, 2022) remains crucial and timely.

While fully recognizing that BIG is not the panacea to all our challenges, Power and McBay (2022) note that "it could provide the freedom from want, scarcity, and desperation that is essential to imagine and struggle for more just ways of living together on the planet" (p. 36). Or, as Littler (2023) notes, "The income from a UBI (universal basic income) would not provide a luxurious lifestyle, merely one that would allow for a decrease in food insecurity and an increase in dignity" (p. 153). The principles of BIG offer a useful evaluation framework to reflect on the merits and limitations of incremental and more progressive and reformist shifts in the charitable food space. BIG itself—particularly at the national scale—is a lever worth pursuing as it offers a proven structural solution to a known structural problem.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest

Author Contributions: All authors contributed to the manuscript conception and design and writing.

Funding: This study was funded by Canada Research Chairs funding. The authors declare they have no financial interests.

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