



Field Report

Fieldnotes from the organizers of the food insecurity community-oriented event “Let’s Move Beyond Charity!”: Challenges, opportunities and learnings

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Abstract

In 2024, our team organized the pan-Canadian, bilingual event, “Food insecurity: Let’s move beyond charity!” / “L’insécurité alimentaire : allons au-delà de la charité!”, which convened community and academic actors in a discussion of food insecurity in the country. In addition to serving as a space for knowledge exchange, the event anchored a broader set of collaborative efforts with the participating community groups, efforts that began well before the event and continued in the weeks that followed.

In these fieldnotes, we report on our approach to this work, the importance of community-academia dialogue, and the challenges and opportunities for food security work in institutional contexts. Our observations suggest that community-engaged activities require a significant time and administrative commitment as well as careful navigation of institutional obstacles. Such efforts, however, are justified by the value of community expertise when discussing issues of significant social importance.

Keywords: food insecurity, food charity, community-academia dialogue, knowledge sharing, systemic change

Résumé

En 2024, notre équipe a organisé l'événement pancanadien et bilingue « Food insecurity: Let’s move beyond charity! » / « L’insécurité alimentaire : allons au-delà de la charité ! », qui conviait des acteurs de la communauté et de la recherche à une discussion sur l’insécurité alimentaire au pays. En plus de servir d’espace d’échange de connaissances, l’événement a

solidifié les bases de plus vastes efforts collaboratifs avec les groupes des communautés participantes, des efforts qui ont commencé bien avant l’événement et se sont poursuivis dans les semaines suivantes. Dans ces notes de terrain, nous rendons compte de notre approche de ce travail, de l’importance du dialogue entre communauté et milieu de la recherche, et

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des défis et opportunités concernant le travail sur l'insécurité alimentaire dans les contextes institutionnels. D'après nos observations, des activités impliquant la communauté requièrent un temps considérable et un engagement ad-

ministratif aussi bien qu'une progression prudente à travers les obstacles institutionnels. De tels efforts sont cependant justifiés par la valeur de l'expertise communautaire en matière d'enjeux sociaux d'importance.

Mots-clés : insécurité alimentaire, charité alimentaire, collaboration entre communauté et chercheurs, partage des connaissances, changement systémique

Convening community experts and scholars

These fieldnotes gather some key reflections that emerged through the process of organizing the pan-Canadian, bilingual event, “Food insecurity: Let’s move beyond charity!” / “L’insécurité alimentaire : allons au-delà de la charité!”, held in Montreal (QC, Canada) on June 18, 2024. The event occurred in conjunction with the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, which was held in Montreal that year, the annual conference of the Canadian Association for Food Studies, and the Concordia DevOur Campus Conference. While we were excited by the possible presence of many food scholars around that period in Montreal, “Let’s move beyond charity!” was first and foremost a community-oriented and community-focused event that would convene a variety of participants, from food networks and community organizations in Montreal and the surrounding area to food and public health experts and authorities. In addition to the value of having other events take place in Montreal at that time, the location also represented a relatively accessible geographical location and one well suited for bilingual discussions. The event featured a community group roundtable followed by a community-engaged scholars’ panel, with ample time around and during the event for networking and informal discussions.

The event¹ was not a simple showcase, and we approached its organization as a collaboration process with the groups involved that would provide them with a space for exchange, visibility, and resources. The Connection Grant funding we received from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) was used not only to make the event happen, but also to develop

knowledge mobilization activities that took place through a process lasting more than a year and a half (before, during, and after the event).

Motivation for these fieldnotes

Much has been published already in the academic context on food insecurity: on its root causes, its various impacts, its possible solutions, and the lived experience of it. With this event, we, the three co-organizers and co-authors of these fieldnotes, wanted to hear and learn directly from—and highlight the perspectives of—community food groups currently responding to food insecurity in different ways across the country. We learned early on that even framing the issue as “food insecurity” was limiting: trying to engage some groups showed us variable enthusiasm for the topic. (We offer an example below, in the ‘Ethics as a process’ section.)

Our previous experiences working with community groups suggested that bringing these groups into conversation with one another, where they could speak from different geographical, political, and cultural contexts, might enable a space in which exchange about on-the-ground experiences, advocacy strategies, and perspectives on solutions could happen. Their participation in the roundtable entailed a brief introductory presentation from each group’s representative, facilitated discussions throughout the day, and responses to the scholars’ panel. We thought of this event as a pretext to provide a venue and resources to these groups, to amplify their work and spotlight their expertise on the systemic and structural solutions for which they advocate. With this objective in

mind, we also developed various collaborative knowledge mobilization activities that took form throughout the process, in an attempt to increase visibility of community advocacy and contribute to the public discourse around food insecurity. The activities involved support from student assistants and production of media content, op-eds, policy briefs, media appearances, and a web repository of relevant resources, along with continuous knowledge sharing among the participating groups. The event was the lynchpin of our activities, but our efforts encompassed activities reflecting a broader cultural and political approach to food insecurity.

Sharing knowledge

This was not a research project: the presenters, who actively collaborated to frame and orient the event, were not involved as research participants or co-researchers. Yet, the event and its related activities contributed to the sharing and creation of knowledge that benefitted all those involved, including us, the organizers. In a context in which institutions and funding bodies valorize and call for more community-engaged work (research, involvement in community action, knowledge sharing, etc.), institutional understanding of such work remains limited, and there is too little published on the “how to” of developing thoughtful and careful, ethically sound collaborations and relationships. One defining element in our approach to this collaboration was the respect for the time and effort required for community-academic relationship building and ethical collaboration. We were mindful of the power dynamics that often permeate cross-collaborations between academics and food practitioners. It was important for us that the focus of this event and its related activities be the food groups’ work, with research as secondary and intended to support and further validate community work. We wanted to ensure that the event would benefit ongoing community efforts, and not become “simply” a showcase of their work to academic peers.

These fieldnotes reflect on our process, and more specifically on the ethical insights and considerations we pondered. Some readers will find these familiar; anecdot-

ally, we know that many of the challenges or concerns we describe below are common. Still, there is value in enhancing the literature on this topic for emerging scholars (or established ones keen to pivot their work towards community engagement) who are considering working at the community-academia junction. We hope this piece can help nourish our collective thinking about academic-practitioner-activist collaborations and relationships with a shared goal of better food systems. To demonstrate self-awareness, we acknowledge that this piece is co-authored by three academics, to be published in an academic journal, and in a tone very much intended for an academic audience—all on the topic of community-engaged work. This is intentional: it is not up to community practitioners to educate academics on how to do community-based scholarship. With our formal credentials and associations with institutions that wield significant authority, we academics bear special responsibility to learn about ethical, respectful, mutually fulfilling, community-engaged scholarship, to practice that scholarship with diligence and humility, and to share with others what we know about it.

A few words on who we are and how we envisioned our role in this process

The three of us have a shared research interest in food justice and the inequalities found in current food, political, and economic systems. Each of us has conducted research on food insecurity and food system inequities. We share a commitment and strong desire to learn from communities and practitioners who address these issues directly, on the ground, and outside of academia. We have developed a deep interest in and experience in cross-sectoral collaborations and knowledge co-creation and sharing, along with a commitment to think through the ethics and politics of such collaborations and relationships. Our combined experience in working with communities and grassroots initiatives well positioned our team to facilitate an event like this one.

Beyond the practical demands of organizing and managing a project, we saw our role as organizers and convenors as fulfilling three functions: (1) **connecting**

scholarship and community practice, as well as facilitating connections among community groups; (2) **amplifying** community work and advocacy to increase their visibility and reach within and, more importantly, beyond academia; and (3) **channeling** resources that enhance knowledge creation and mobilization within and from the community. Below, we briefly reflect on each of these functions and then expand on ethical, institutional, and research implications of this type of work.

Connecting

As organizers and conveners of the event, we played an important role in bringing these groups together and establishing links between them. We were mindful that they addressed food insecurity in very different ways, in very different contexts, and with varied (and variable) resources. We were responsible for identifying what these groups share in terms of perspectives and approaches to food insecurity, and for highlighting how their activities connect with the event's theme. We defined the original orientations of the event (its theme, approach to food insecurity, objectives, etc.) while inflecting and refining the themes through discussions with the groups (more on this in the next section). As such, we tried to bring into dialogue the perspectives and insights coming from the academic literature with the propositions and work of the groups. We accomplished this through carefully thought-out phone and video calls with each organization, followed by calls with all of the organizations together, and finally with all of them on the same calls with participating scholars. We also had frequent meetings to consider all aspects of our planned activities, like deciding whether the community roundtable would precede or follow the research panel. (We opted for the former so that the community participants could set the stage.)

The consultations were labour intensive, but something we were committed to because we knew a relational approach would be more fruitful, albeit one that requires more work. We drew on our collective experience in community-engaged scholarship, expecting that by featuring the groups themselves as the key knowledge holders on

food insecurity and its solutions, we were creating a space and stage for these groups to be heard, seen, and recognized as valuable knowledge holders and contributors, within academia and beyond. While this approach may seem commonplace in critical food studies in Canada, it remains on the margins of much Western scholarship, which continues to privilege academic forms of knowledge production and exchange.

Amplifying community work

We saw our role as facilitating exchange and amplifying community groups' work and advocacy, offering a setting for them to share their objectives and ideas. This sharing took place both in the context of the event, but also through the knowledge mobilization activities that occurred throughout the whole process. These activities included the development of media content, op-eds, policy briefs, media appearances, and a web repository of relevant resources. We accomplished this in part by providing the groups with resources to hire research assistants. These student assistants supported the organizations in preparing for and participating in the event, while also fulfilling some of their pre-existing needs for communication and knowledge mobilization. The students conducted policy-related research, prepared communication materials, developed editorials and other media content, and produced notes from the event itself. We trusted that this event and what surrounded it could contribute to broader efforts to change the public discourse around food insecurity.

Channeling resources

Our efforts were made possible thanks to Connection Grant funding from SSHRC. This funding was necessary to cover logistical and travel expenses for the event and to hire a team of research assistants who helped with the knowledge mobilization activities over several months. While we initially thought of providing each group with a research assistant we found within our networks, our early

discussions suggested a better approach. Instead of the academic partners simply selecting students to work with the groups, we offered that the groups first determine if they already have a suitable student in their networks. This seemed more appropriate, allowing the groups to work with someone already familiar with their work, supportive of their activities, and aligned with their mandates and advocacy strategies. Similarly, while we had an idea of the type of knowledge activities we wanted to conduct (accessible knowledge outputs in text or multimedia formats), we ended up being much more flexible and agreeing that the groups should decide for themselves what they wanted to do with the resources and how. Using academic resources to support the already existing work of these groups, and enhancing their advocacy efforts, is a form of scholar activism (Sandover, 2020; Liboiron, 2021) that offers a different approach to the more conventional academic/community-engaged collaborations, which often entail a predetermined research and knowledge mobilization agenda.

The ethics and politics of curating a community-academic event

Guided by combined ethical principles of scholarship, community-based research, and Indigenous knowledge (such as the First Nations principles of *ownership*, *control*, *access*, and *possession*, or OCAP), we forefronted the value of community practitioners' knowledge. These ethical approaches consider a variety of risks to participants, which include emotional and community harm. They recognize the value of varied forms of knowledge (or ways of knowing) and emphasize reciprocal relationships as opposed to extractive approaches. They insist on working *with* and not *on* communities, and privilege scholarly activities that emerge from community needs and not academic interests. Our role in this process was to listen and facilitate. Our activities took place for several months before and after the event, because the event itself was an opportunity to crystallize—practically and discursively—the key policy and systemic goals of community initiatives working to address food insecurity. To ensure this opportunity was

used to its full potential, the event was seen as only one phase of our collaboration—an important one, but one that could not be delivered effectively without significant preparatory and follow-up efforts.

Ethics as a process

Preparatory work served to build agreement from each group and ensure that our collective activities were in line with their needs, which in turn enhanced their resulting contributions to the event and subsequent activities. The preparations involved deciding on what type of work student assistants would do, what kind of “outputs” would be most useful for the participants, and how the event space and schedule would best facilitate fruitful engagement. We provided the initial framing of the event with some specificity, but ultimately maintained flexibility to integrate different ways of defining and approaching food insecurity and its potential solutions. One example of this is when we approached some Indigenous-led groups whose work around food we saw as enacting a form of resistance to the systemic issues that lead to food insecurity. We asked them to contribute to the roundtable and offered resources for a student assistant who could support their work. The theme of our event included the idea of *advocacy* at its core, and the other groups we had approached engaged in active political advocacy-type work or lobbying. Although we saw their potential contribution as valuable, at least one Indigenous group did not see themselves fitting within this framing. While we saw advocacy as taking many forms, they feared that the dominant, largely Western understanding of the term was not a good depiction of their ongoing work of resistance.

This anecdote speaks to the challenges that scholars who are invested in inclusion sometimes encounter. Put simply, while we wanted to find ways to include a wide range of perspectives on food insecurity, not everyone wanted to be included in this specific effort. This occasion for reflexivity allowed us to recognize the limitations of how we framed the event. We imagined that our framing of food insecurity, its root causes and solutions, and the resistance—or “advocacy”—work that can be done in

response to it would speak to a wide audience. We anticipated the audience to include the other food groups across the country, and the communities and stakeholders with which they work and engage. The framing, however, was still limited by the kind of discourses and knowledge that it could produce. Some groups understandably hesitated to take part; we respected their decisions. As researchers, we continue to learn how and why inclusion is so often seen as performative and honour that self-determination is critical to respectful engagement.

Even ethical approaches have limitations

In a context in which many groups represent or work with marginalized communities, it is to be expected that many fear that their participation in events can easily become tokenized or exploited. It is then not surprising that some of the groups we approached expressed their right to refusal and declined to take part in the event. The active role we took in framing the event was also influenced by our will to alleviate the burden of that responsibility for the groups, since we were well aware of the limited resources with which most of them work. Concretely, that means that we arrived with propositions that we then discussed together and modified as needed. While this process did alleviate the amount of work and time investment required of the groups, it also predetermined the range of possibilities within which discussions, insights, and knowledge could emerge.

The knowledge generated and shared through our activities included experiences, perspectives, and observations (or “data”). The groups shared their on-the-ground expertise that spanned working with those with lived experience of food insecurity to generating their own research. They also shared perspectives on possible solutions as well as advocacy or other strategies they developed for cultural, political, and systemic change, and for immediate on-the-ground activities (e.g., creating a school food program that also favors Indigenous food sovereignty and support for a strong and resilient local food system). Instead of recording data in a conventional sense, we provided resources to the groups to facilitate their own knowledge mobilization and dissemination, ensuring that those outputs would

stay with them. Nevertheless, we, as academic co-organizers, benefitted from this process, as the knowledge they shared informed our scholarship (and will continue to do so). This raises unusual ethical questions.

Since participating groups were neither “research subjects” nor co-researchers, and since the event was to be public, we were not required to apply for institutional ethics clearance. Yet, as we were progressing with the knowledge mobilization activities, many ethical considerations arose. These concerned several areas. We had to discuss the groups’ possible use of each other’s knowledge shared in the context of the event. We had to prepare for the implications of setting the stage for the groups to share their knowledge publicly and risk having some of their propositions be appropriated or misinterpreted. We faced the conundrum of some collaborators wanting to stream the event online and others being more hesitant to do so (we did not stream because this suggestion came relatively late in the process and would have required a different kind of ethical planning). These questions, while not necessarily coming from Indigenous groups, echoed the ongoing debates around Indigenous data sovereignty: How is knowledge produced and shared, and who gets to make those decisions? The institutional approach to ethics approval would not have been very helpful for many of these questions and considerations, but it might have brought about interesting and important discussions with the groups had we made a point of formally discussing the ethics and politics of our activities early on. While we followed the OCAP principles in emphasising each group’s needs and preferences around their data and discussed ethical concerns with the groups throughout—including in the context of the knowledge mobilization activities—a more formal and explicit discussion at the very beginning of the process, around the ethics and politics of such cross-communities and academic collaboration, could have been relevant and insightful.

Institutional limitations

Funding opportunities that both encourage community-academic collaborations and recognize the nuances of such work remain rare. While we were fortunate to secure

a Connection Grant, this also came with some common institutional limitations. The funding was sufficient to put on the event and pay student assistants, but it could not fully facilitate the type of inclusion needed for discussions of such important topics. For example, simultaneous French-English translation was essential to make the event bilingual, but the expense of that service restricted the travel budget for participants. One academic participant suggested bringing a community collaborator, who also needed someone to accompany them due to medical reasons, and though this was a request we wished we could have honoured, we were unable to cover those expenses.

We were mindful that the participating groups needed not only student support, but also compensation for their members to participate in preparation, the event, and follow-up activities—but the honoraria we could offer were merely symbolic, since we were limited both in the amount of money we had and by a \$500 limit². To limit the burden on the participating groups, we tried to streamline the event's framing and planning. However, this also surfaced community-academia power dynamics and limited the type of knowledge that could emerge from the event and the entire process. The one-year span of the grant also limited our ability to develop stronger relationships with and among the community participants. That said, we also recognize that smaller grant programs provide more opportunities for more initiatives. We commend the funding bodies for continuing such programs, despite requiring greater administrative commitments from funders and reviewers alike, compared to larger grants dispersed to fewer projects. Additionally, our experience suggests that longer-term grants can also be more difficult for securing buy-in from community groups. For example, a five-year Partnership Grant can produce excellent collaborations, but many community groups cannot forecast their resources and staffing five years ahead, making it more difficult for them to commit to long-term projects.

Administratively, it was difficult to have participants from under-resourced groups plan their travel to Montreal and bring along their student assistants, as it proved nearly impossible to provide them with cash advances. This meant that most participants paid for their own expenses, which were reimbursed after the event, but not

everyone was in a position to do so. While we were able to make travel arrangements for some, this also meant significant back-and-forth around travel times and needs for overnight accommodations, with participants at times having to share personal information if they had a specific health- or ability-related requirement. In some instances, where participants were affiliated with an organization that had some resources, their participation in our event was recognized as paid work. They wanted the \$500 to be issued to their organization, but only individuals, not organizations, can receive honoraria. We made it all work, but underscore that it is important to recognize just how much administrative labour was required for a project funded through a grant of just under \$25,000.

Final reflections

We close these fieldnotes with some final reflections to inform future work on food insecurity. We hesitate to call them recommendations, as our experience with the event confirms that the conditions for successful community-academic collaborations are time-, place-, and topic-specific. Nevertheless, we offer some suggestions for institutions and funders, fellow scholars, and community groups interested in working with academics. Ongoing conversations with community collaborators and willingness to adjust plans as needed are essential. For scholars new to community collaborations, exploring context-specific resources on ethics is essential. Finding such resources best emerges through developing collaborative relationships with a willingness to learn. For instance, OCAP training offers invaluable insights that are fundamental to work with First Nations communities and can inform ethical thinking and decision-making in other community contexts. But OCAP training may not be most appropriate approach in working with all Indigenous communities, refugees, or people from other contexts.

We reiterate our commendation for institutions and funding bodies that are slowly starting to recognize and sometimes facilitate the value of community-academic collaborations when seeking solutions to critical social problems. These entities must continue to review and

revise policies, procedures, eligibility criteria, and administrative processes if current claims about inclusion and accessibility are to be put into practice in earnest. Specifically, creating mechanisms that minimize bureaucracy and enable easy and speedy advances, reimbursements, and remuneration for community partners is critical, as is compensation for organizations whose employees contribute to projects as part of their job.

Fellow scholars must be prepared for significant administrative commitments in facilitating collaborations with community practitioners—the monetary and bureaucratic obstacles and hurdles are bound to arise, and it is our responsibility as scholars to use our status, power, and institutional knowledge to usher collaborations through such hurdles. Many marginalized communities experience research fatigue in such collaborations, and our responsibility is to ensure valuable and rewarding experiences for community collaborators in working with us, without souring them on academic initiatives more generally. A skilled and dedicated team (preferably with a mix of established and emerging scholars and students) invested in the work is essential for successful community-academic events and collaborations more broadly.

For community groups working on food insecurity, we extend our gratitude for their willingness to collaborate—with us and with many of our colleagues across the country. These collaborations have been, and will continue to be, fundamental to food studies scholarship in Canada, but as scholars, we are always learning. Asking for resources and support that a community group may need to participate in such collaborations is part of our learning. We encourage community collaborators to actively voice those needs, because they allow scholars to improve and adapt their own approaches, and to advocate for changes to funding, policies, and processes.

To learn more about the event and the participating community food groups, please see [our post-event article in *The Conversation*](#).

Endnotes

¹ The event comprised two main elements: a roundtable conveying the messages of four food groups followed by an interdisciplinary panel of scholars working from different angles and perspectives on the theme of food insecurity. We invited scholars with a research practice or agenda rooted in communities and an understanding of the deeply community-oriented focus of this event. While the community groups headlined this event, integrating scholarship seemed conducive to fostering dialogue and connections between academia and practitioners, particularly since all the community groups included in the roundtable had already engaged in some form of research, either their own or in collaboration with academic institutions.

² Canada Revenue Agency considers anything over \$500 to be employment income. Whereas honoraria are also taxable income, amounts over \$500 require a tax slip be issued. Many grant opportunities do not allow for employment payments, and institutions administering grant funds avoid the burden of paperwork, but also sometimes have limiting procurement policies for “services” for amounts over \$500 that have to be invoiced by the recipient. The accounting officers at Carleton University, where our funds were held, were tremendously helpful and assisted us greatly in this entire process, but could only do so much within the existing bureaucratic constraints.

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Conflicts of Interest: None to declare.

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