

# **Preparing for food security after COVID-19:**

**Strengthening  
equity and  
resilience  
in future  
emergency  
response in  
Toronto**



**Toronto  
Metropolitan  
University**

**Centre for Studies  
in Food Security**  
Faculty of Community Services

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# Acknowledgements

June, 2022

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We acknowledge that this report was developed on the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

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# Lists of acronyms, figures and tables

## List of acronyms

B3	Black led, Black serving, Black mandated organizations
CCP	Community Coordination Plan
CSFS	Centre for Studies in Food Security
EOC	Emergency Operations Centre
MP	Member of Parliament
NIA	Neighbourhood Improvement Area
ODSB	Ontario Disability Support Program
OW	Ontario Works
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
PRSO	Poverty Reduction Strategy Office
SDFA	Social Development, Finance & Administration

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# Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a global health emergency that few governments were prepared to handle. Prior to the outbreak, food insecurity was already a serious public health problem impacting 1 in 5 residents of the City of Toronto. Food insecurity occurs when there is inadequate access to sufficient, safe, nutritious, and appropriate food necessary for supporting an active, healthy life. Food insecurity has been exacerbated by COVID-19 due to physical distancing, service closures, stay-at-home advisories and lack of PPE disrupting food supply chains and forcing food security organizations to rapidly adapt or shut down. The poor, elderly, children, Indigenous peoples, newcomers, other racialized minorities and those with pre-existing physical/mental health conditions are disproportionately vulnerable to having their food security further compromised.

The severity of impacts is dependent upon the resilience of the food system, or its ability to absorb 'shocks' and continue to function. Research and practice has not paid attention to the resiliency of food security programs and local actors serving the most vulnerable during emergency situations, with most studies focusing on threats to global supply chains and agri-industry. This research brings to light the role and value of local actors and leaders facilitating responses to crises on the ground.

## ***Purpose of the study:***

This new collaborative project brings together scholars from the Toronto Metropolitan University's Centre for Studies in Food Security and the City of Toronto's Poverty Reduction Strategy Office. The project aims to enhance existing capacity to assess how vulnerable neighbourhoods and food security organizations responded to the initial and residual impacts of COVID-19, and bridge gaps in local and expert knowledge necessary for developing an emergency preparedness strategy for future food-system shocks that upholds the City of Toronto's resilience and equity goals.

Specifically the objectives of the research are to: (1) Investigate the responses of communities and organizations, including those in Neighbourhood Improvement Areas (NIAs) to address heightened food insecurity during the outbreak and recovery in the City of Toronto, (2) Assess emergency response preparedness in food security practice in Toronto, and other cities (New York, Milan, Baltimore and Vancouver) to evaluate how equity and resiliency concerns are considered before, during and after the outbreak, (3) Broker local and expert knowledge on the impacts of the COVID-19 response on the resiliency and equity of Toronto's food systems, (4) inform and strengthen food-system practice and policy in future emergency response. This report speaks to the specific findings and emerging discussions derived from Objectives 1, 3 and 4. Objective 2 and the municipal comparative analysis is ongoing and will be reported on at a later time.

## ***Methods:***

The research presented within this report was derived from interviews with a total of forty (n=40) individuals, including twenty-eight (n=28) representatives from twenty-one different community-based food programs, and twelve (n=12) municipal government actors from the City of Toronto. Survey data from two-hundred sixty-two (n=262) community organizations and thirty-five (n=35) new initiatives that emerged in response to the crisis and to address community service gaps were also included in this study. This research also engaged in a qualitative content analysis of grey literature, exploring the language regarding the resilience of food systems, food security, and how social stability in vulnerable communities is framed in municipal reports and documents associated with the City of Toronto.

## ***Findings:***

The report considers the impact of the crisis on communities as shared by community leaders and representatives from local organizations, and considers



the crisis response of both municipal actors and community organizations. For this research, resilience is used as a guiding concept to understand the vulnerabilities and assets of community food security. Food system resilience can be defined as “the capacity overtime of a food system and its units at multiple levels, to provide sufficient, appropriate and accessible food to all, in the face of various and even unforeseen disturbances.” Resilience is deemed a balance between system vulnerabilities or shocks/stresses and the assets used to respond to those vulnerabilities over time. Therefore the analysis for this report focuses on these areas of discussion and highlights considerations for future emergency preparedness strategies.

### **System vulnerabilities**

From the perspective of municipal actors, a number of vulnerabilities were highlighted, including: a lack of emergency response preparedness; gaps in resources and feasibility challenges in responding to community requests; gaps in communication and siloed practices; policy limitations and limited human resources; and reports and strategies not translating into action. From the perspective of community actors, a number of vulnerabilities were highlighted, including: a lack of access to sustainable funding; challenges navigating public health protocols and information dissemination; community diversity and increased need; gaps in resources, facilities and infrastructure; reliance on emergency food programs; staffing and volunteer limitations, and governmental red tape.

### **Assets to resilience**

From the perspective of municipal actors, a number of assets were highlighted, including: the development of the Community Coordination Plan (CCP) and the Food Access Table; equity informed practice; a cross-pollination of resources and funding flows, as well as the availability of space for community support. From the perspective of community actors, a number of assets were highlighted, including: access to new resource streams and flexible funding; strong partnerships and networks; intimate understanding of community needs; equity, dignity and culturally-

attuned practices; human capital; opportunities for policy influence, and food sovereignty as an approach.

### ***Recommendations:***

The final section of the report offers several considerations for the future. In this section, we briefly explore 3 main areas of discussion, including the need for a resilience framework for community food security, highlighting the role and value of community organizations in bringing about short, medium and longer-term resilience. The section also discusses a suggested shift towards trauma-informed practice and approaches to urban resilience discussions, as well as equitable, accessible and sustainable support for community-based initiatives. This sheds light on emerging discussion in the realm of community funding and support, and considers the need for more trust-based approaches for community-based initiatives.

In addition to these necessary overarching principles, we highlight practical and tangible recommendations that may help strengthen future food security and emergency policy and planning discussions. The City of Toronto should develop a food security emergency action plan template that includes an emphasis on the role of community-based actors and organizations as key assets and partners. This template can be utilized to coordinate responses in times of future emergencies. The City should also continue to invest in and support an ongoing community-focused collaborative communication model similar to the Community Coordination Plan (CCP) discussed throughout this report.

The responsibility to support food insecure community members should not rest solely on community-level organizations and initiatives. Nonetheless, these leading actors should be recognized as assets for informing longer term strategies to address underlying causes of poverty and food insecurity, in addition to broader efforts to enact more resilient and equitable food systems

# 1. Introduction

## Prioritizing food security equity and resilience in Toronto

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a global health emergency that few governments were prepared to handle. Prior to the outbreak, food insecurity was already a serious public health problem in Toronto, impacting 1 in 5 residents.<sup>1</sup> Food insecurity occurs when there is inadequate access to sufficient, safe, nutritious, and appropriate food necessary for supporting an active, healthy life.<sup>2</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated food insecurity in Toronto. In the early stages of the pandemic, health and safety protocols, physical distancing and stay-at-home advisories had impacted the mobility of residents and drastically affected their ability to access food and food sources. In the early stages, emergency food access was also impacted by community service closures, a lack of PPE, and disrupted food supply chains. Those whose food security was compromised to the greatest degree were the poor, elderly, children, Indigenous peoples, newcomers, other racialized minorities and those with pre-existing physical/mental health conditions.

This report examines the role of community-based initiatives and local actors in serving the most vulnerable, and their value in strengthening community food security resilience in times of emergencies and as we ‘build back’ to a more resilient food secure future. This report aims to bring attention to the perceived vulnerabilities and the assets/opportunities that exist within communities, and within the municipality itself, that can be leveraged in light of future shocks to ensure ongoing community food resilience.<sup>3, 4</sup>

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1 City of Toronto (2019). Food insecurity in Toronto. <https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/health-wellness-care/health-programs-advice/nutrition-food-basket/>

2 FAO (2006). Food security: Policy brief. <http://www.fao.org/forestry/13128-0e6f36f27e-0091055bec28ebe830f46b3.pdf>

3 City of Toronto (April 6, 2020). City of Toronto working with community and corporate partners to implement emergency food access for vulnerable residents. <https://www.toronto.ca/news/city-of-toronto-working-with-community-and-corporate-partners-to-implement-emergency-food-access-for-vulnerable-residents/>

4 Shephard, T. (2020). High COVID-19 rates in Toronto's northwest due to ‘structural inequities’. <https://www.toronto.com/news-story/10219460-high-covid-19-rates-in-toronto-s-northwest-due-to-structural-inequities/>



## 1.1 Objectives and research methods

This report is a result of a community-focused collaborative research project developed by a team of scholars from Toronto Metropolitan University's<sup>5</sup> Centre for Studies in Food Security (CSFS) and municipal staff from the City of Toronto's Poverty Reduction Strategy Office (PRSO). The project aims to enhance the existing capacity of the City of Toronto in assessing how vulnerable neighbourhoods and food security organizations responded to the initial and ongoing impacts of COVID-19, and bridge gaps in local and expert knowledge necessary for developing an emergency preparedness strategy for future food-system shocks to uphold the City of Toronto's resilience and equity goals. This report is designed to share the research findings with any interested stakeholders in the community to ensure transparency of the research process.

Specifically the objectives of the research are to: (1) Investigate the responses of communities and organizations, including those in Neighbourhood Improvement Areas (NIAs) to address heightened food insecurity during the outbreak and recovery in the City of Toronto, (2) Assess emergency response preparedness in food security practice in Toronto, and other cities (New York, Milan, Baltimore and Vancouver) to evaluate how equity and resiliency concerns are considered before, during and after the outbreak, (3) Broker local and expert knowledge on the impacts of the COVID-19 response on the resiliency and equity of Toronto's food systems, (4) Inform and strengthen food-system practice and policy in future emergency response. This report speaks to the specific findings and emerging discussions derived from Objectives 1, 3 and 4. Objective 2 and the municipal comparative analysis is ongoing and will be reported on at a later time.

### Research methods

The research comprised within this report was derived from interviews a total of forty (n=40) individuals, including twenty-eight (n=28) representatives from twenty-one different community-based organizations and twelve (n=12) municipal government actors from the City of Toronto. Survey data from two-hundred sixty-two (n=262) community organizations and thirty-five (n=35) new initiatives that emerged in response to the crisis and to address community service gaps were included in this study. This research also engaged in a qualitative content analysis of grey literature, exploring the language regarding the resilience of food systems, food security, and how social stability in vulnerable communities is framed in municipal reports and documents associated with the City of Toronto. Note: an additional twelve (n=12) interviews with municipal actors from New York, Milan, Baltimore and Vancouver were also included in this study. The synthesis of the findings from these interviews will be included in a future report.

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<sup>5</sup> Toronto Metropolitan University is the current name for what has been previously known as Ryerson University. This University underwent a renaming process given the name is associated with a racist educational philosophy that laid the foundation for cultural genocide and intergenerational trauma.

Lastly, this research delivered a community-focused knowledge mobilization event in October, 2021, to share the project's initial findings with community-based actors, spur dialogue, and provide opportunity for feedback on study findings, and their perspectives of the COVID-19 response in the City of Toronto more broadly.

### ***The Interviews***

The majority of the community representatives interviewed for this report work and reside in Toronto's NIAs, serve low-income, precariously housed and racialized communities, and many have shared that they have direct lived experience of poverty and food insecurity. Efforts were made to engage representatives from diverse organizations, including grassroots initiatives focused on food sovereignty for BIPOC communities, health-focused community organizations, newcomer settlement services, homeless shelters, churches and community housing, cultural centres, Indigenous service organizations and children/youth-focused organizations. Interviewees held either an upper management or a front-line role delivering programs and services. Each participant engaged in a semi-structured interview, first asking about the initial impacts of the crisis on their organization and their community of focus, and secondly, asking about what is needed to increase food security resiliency in their diverse communities.

Interviewees recruited from the City of Toronto included staff and councillors that worked in response to food insecurity issues throughout the pandemic. Interviews sought to uncover the main areas of vulnerability in the communities they support and the key assets that could bring resilience if bolstered by government support. All interviews were conducted virtually and took place from June 2021 to October 2021. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews were coded and analyzed by 2 researchers collaboratively.

### ***Survey data***

The survey data includes responses from a survey delivered to community organizations in March 2020.



Survey data was provided to this project by Second Harvest (a non-profit food rescue organization), and includes insights of the impacts of the pandemic on their operations, the types of support needed to remain operational, and the support they hoped to receive from the City of Toronto. Survey data from new initiatives were also included, demonstrating where new initiatives emerged to provide support to communities where service gaps existed. Select data was used in the development of city maps to illustrate some of the patterns seen across communities.

### ***Grey literature review***

Grey literature collected for qualitative content analysis includes materials recommended for review by the Toronto municipal actors interviewed and any additional documents that were deemed appropriate for review. The inclusion criteria for data collection were as follows: documents needed to be geographically-specific; municipally authored or commissioned documents; specifically speak to the resilience of food systems or socio-economic systems within the city; or publications from non-governmental organizations or think tanks that speak to food system resilience or COVID-19 recovery.

Seventeen (n=17) reports, strategies, study results and fact sheets have been compiled, which helps

to understand how 'resilience' is perceived and operationalized by government and policymakers in Toronto. See Appendix 1 for a sample list of the materials compiled for content analysis.

### ***Knowledge mobilization***

A knowledge mobilization event took place in October, 2021 as a synchronous online event. The aim was to link food security experts formally connected to the City and Toronto Metropolitan University's CSFS with community participants operating more locally with lesser degrees of formality or visibility. Not including team members, the event hosted over a hundred participants. Small financial incentives were made available to attending research participants and funds were made available to event participants that expressed financial barriers to attending. The aim of

offering financial support was to recognize the barriers that prevent certain voices from being at the table and to ensure marginalized groups and organizations were adequately recognized and compensated for their time, and able to participate in knowledge sharing processes.

The event involved a research presentation, a panel discussion with three community leaders and one team member from the PRSO, and breakout discussions to build conversation and give event participants an opportunity to tell diverse stories and enable reflexive learning. The event was recorded and is now publicly available on the CSFS website:

[https://www.ryerson.ca/foodsecurity/projects/activity\\_covid/](https://www.ryerson.ca/foodsecurity/projects/activity_covid/)





## 2.0 The impact of COVID-19 and responses to food insecurity in Toronto

This section examines how Toronto and its communities have dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic and the concurrent food security crisis. This section first focuses on the impacts of the pandemic on communities, highlighting sentiments expressed by community-based workers, city staff and city councillors. The section highlights the difficulties that organizations experienced in supporting their communities and some of the organizational challenges imposed by the pandemic.

Secondly, this section looks at the array of responses that were deployed by both municipal actors and community organizations. The section brings attention to the ways in which community-based organizations were an asset to the City's emergency response. The section also highlights some of the challenges experienced by organizations as they were required to respond to a heightened need within the confines of new public health protocols.

### 2.1 Impact of the crisis on communities

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the food security of communities across Toronto. Food had been identified early on as a challenge for neighbourhoods, as grocery store shelves started to thin and vulnerable individuals were faced with new food access barriers. Pre-pandemic, community organizations and municipalities were quite familiar with the socio-economic inequalities embedded within the city. However, when COVID-19 pandemic emerged, those inequalities were suddenly magnified and more acute and visible than they had been previously. For example, Toronto's northeastern and northwestern neighbourhoods were significantly

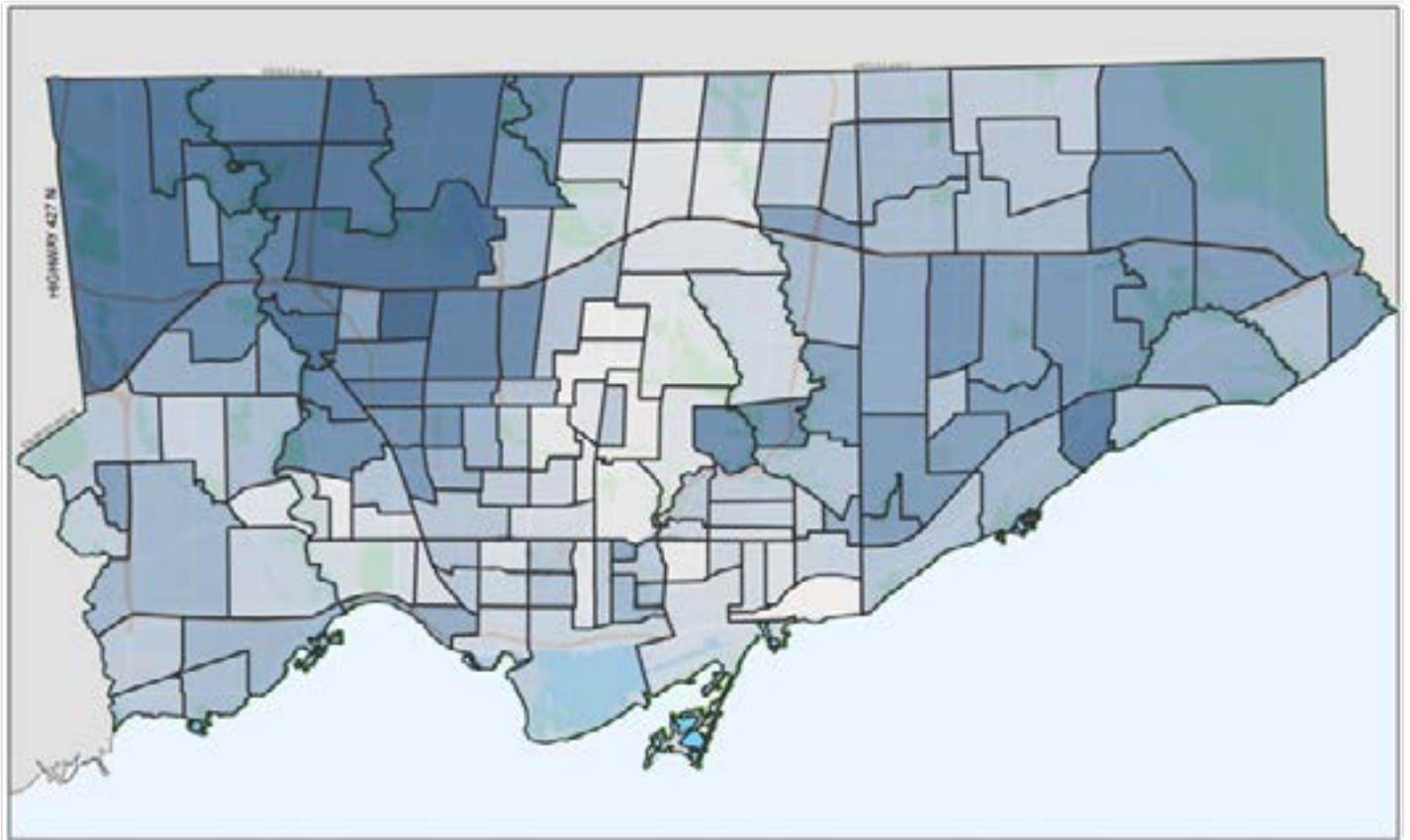
affected by the pandemic with high rates of infection, and were deemed COVID-19 "hotspots". Some speculate that these "hotspots" emerged due to their high concentrations of people who had to maintain employment in service and relied heavily on public transportation. These communities are also highly racialized, demonstrating the unequal impacts of the pandemic on communities across the City.

**"The pandemic forced the city to recognize its role when it comes to food insecurity. Food insecurity is an issue which predated COVID but was exacerbated through COVID. With the loss of income and the cutting off of various food support systems, there was recognition early on that it was an area we needed to address." -- City of Toronto councillor**

Figure 1 demonstrates a snapshot of cumulative COVID rates by neighbourhood in the City of Toronto from the start of 2020 until October 2020 (prior to the onset of Omicron), which shows disproportionate risk and impact, especially in NIAs.

Community organizations witnessed a massive increase in people accessing their programs. Some reported an increase of 200% or higher from March 2020 to July 2020 in comparison to a year earlier. Organizations suggest that the increase was a result of not only service closures of other sites, but also the impacts on the community in terms of job loss, decreased expendable income, grocery store line-ups, increased food prices, fears of health and safety risk, as well as barriers to technology to enable food delivery to households.

**Figure 1: Cumulative COVID-19 rates by neighbourhood Jan 21, 2020 to Oct 6, 2021<sup>6</sup>**



**“We kept asking people what is causing issues for you at this time. For the large part, it was people working cash-based jobs or part time work and were being laid off or just not able to get the work. So [they experienced] significant losses in funds. As we started to go through the summer and people started to be impacted by COVID more directly, then a real big focus was to make sure seniors were able to get food.” -- Community organization management staff**

Organizations also highlight that during the pandemic timeline, they witnessed an influx of program participants that hadn’t accessed their programs before. The pandemic was affecting those also considered “middle income” and also brought in individuals

**“So if you have a family of five that is struggling to pay really high market rent, you know the choice between paying their rent and maybe putting an extra hundred dollars on the groceries, families just can't afford. So hence why more people now, it's not just the people that are living on ODSP and OW that are hitting the food bank. It's people that work nine to five, you know, people that own houses, or they're just unemployed right now because of COVID, so they need that extra support. So you're just seeing a variety of different community members now coming out needing that extra support.” -- Community organization front-line staff**

<sup>6</sup> City of Toronto (2020). COVID-19: Neighbourhood Maps. <https://www.toronto.ca/home/covid-19/covid-19-pandemic-data/covid-19-neighbourhood-maps-data/>



that had been previously discouraged due to food program stigma. However, organizations maintain that those impacted greatest by the pandemic have been primarily those living in poverty, those with pre-existing health conditions, the elderly, Indigenous peoples, newcomers, refugees, undocumented peoples, and other racialized minorities. Organizations also expressed concern for the health and well-being of children and youth at this time.

Organizations spoke about the mental health issues that their communities were facing. Prolonged isolation, lack of contact and a reduction in access to community spaces have a significant impact on the wellbeing of individuals. In many cases, accessing a foodbank was expressed as one of the only “social interactions” that community members were able to engage during times of lockdown and isolation.

Organizations were significantly challenged in offering support to residents that were experiencing increased addiction, anxiety and stress. Community actors expressed concern that public health communications were focused on isolation and sanitization, and downplayed the importance of social interaction or prioritizing foods that may support a healthy immune system. Organizations highlight the need for increased mental health support in dealing with the impacts of the pandemic, as the trauma experienced will have long-term effects on mostly marginalized communities.

**“This experience made it very hard to serve folks who are now completely under a lot of stress, and have developed even deeper addictions, people who have been on the verge of evictions, people who were precariously housed, who chose to build a tent city in a park rather than to go to a shelter out of fear of being infected. The loss of public space from shopping malls and TTC bathrooms, access to water fountains all of those things have greatly impacted the people that we would normally engage with [through our programs].”-- Community organization management staff**

## 2.2 Responses of municipal actors

At the onset of the pandemic, City staff leading the Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) assessed the main areas of concern and developed the emergency response plan. Collaboration and networks between non-profit community-based organizations were instrumental to the municipality’s ability to respond to community needs which prompted the development of the Food Access Table and the Community Coordination Plan (CCP).

**“The Food Access Table was largely constituted because of the demand from the community of agencies that they were struggling.” -- City of Toronto councillor**

The Food Access Table consisted of municipal staff and representatives from mid to large-scale organizations that specialized in food recovery and distribution. These organizations, among several other stakeholders, worked together to address broader emergency food access gaps across the city. The Food Access Table supported smaller organizations and initiatives that were responding to the experience of community food insecurity on the local level.

In the initial month of the crisis, many pre-existing emergency food initiatives closed their doors due to a lack of clarity around public health guidelines, lack of communication of what constituted an “essential service”, or because individuals facilitating programs (largely volunteers) were vulnerable to the virus due to their age or other underlying health conditions. Concomitantly, new initiatives were forming on the ground level in response to these operational gaps. In an attempt to support local residents, new organizations were onboarded as sites of food distribution by the member organizations of the Food Access Table. Second Harvest, one organization on the Food Access Table, reported closures of 40% of

their 300+ member organization network, and an onboarding of 35 new sites within the first month of the pandemic. The initiatives that were onboarded ranged from community service organizations/multi-service agencies, to children and youth organizations, religious and cultural institutions, and community housing groups.

Within a similar timeline, actors from the City of Toronto and The United Way developed the CCP. The CCP was a community response initiative that resulted in the formation of 10 geographically determined “clusters” of organizations responding to community needs on the ground. Additional clusters were formed to address the unique interests of newcomer, Black and Indigenous communities, which were not bound by geographic location. The clusters formed by the CCP largely mirrored pre-existing networks in communities, however the CCP brought further coordination. For example, staff from the City and the United Way took on the administrative tasks of organizing regular calls to enable clear and ongoing communication between and amongst the networks throughout the crisis.

**“The aim of the clusters is to look at the ongoing opportunities for collaboration, for sharing not only of information, sometimes staffing, resources, sometimes other in-kind resources, in order to ensure that the residents that face the most challenges, that there’s connectivity to those residents.” -- City of Toronto staff**

**“These clusters formed across the city. There are City staff and United Way staff that help to conduct weekly meetings with community organizations in each of the clusters, and they touch base on everything emergency related whether it’s things like mental health, or COVID testing, or food. These themes come up as some of the main concerns and across most of the clusters. So it helped kind of bridge the communication gaps between the CCP and what was happening on other teams in the City.” -- City of Toronto staff**



## 2.3 Responses of community organizations

The COVID-19 crisis had impacted community organizations in significant ways. As detailed in the section above, many organizations delivering food programs were forced to close their doors at the onset of the pandemic. Gaps in service ultimately led to the emergence of new initiatives and also pushed existing organizations to revise their strategies to address the heightened need, while also accommodating new health and safety protocols. For many organizations, especially those that had not traditionally engaged in food security responses, this meant a shift in focus to address the emerging challenges and needs of communities.

**“We had not been involved in food security prior to [the pandemic]. Before we would have some people come to us with one-off needs... but not a more full fledged emergency food service piece. That was not something that was part of our scope. But our clients and community members were in urgent need of a food bank. A number of food banks actually had to close for a while in the area because they didn’t have the mechanisms wherein to get the food from their space into the hands of people in a safe matter, and there was a lot of uncertainty. We actually built from the ground up a food response program that was 100% delivery based for the first six months. We worked with and consulted with different people across the community and came up with what we felt was a culturally responsive and semi decent hamper of non perishable goods.” -- Community organization management staff**

A number of organizations launched food delivery programs to reach more vulnerable individuals that had mobility issues or were more vulnerable to severe outcomes of the virus. Senior populations and those experiencing chronic illness were of significant concern, which led to the development of food delivery initiatives across the City.

Figure 2 details the impacts of the pandemic on organizations in the early phase of the pandemic.<sup>7</sup> The map highlights that service closures were seen to a greater extent in regions of the city considered NIAs, while organizations that were able to remain operational and/or were able to quickly revise programming were concentrated in the downtown region of the city. Though this is a snapshot in time and does not fully represent the ability of organizations to remain operational throughout the entire pandemic timeline, it does demonstrate and reinforce patterns of vulnerability that should be considered in future emergency planning.

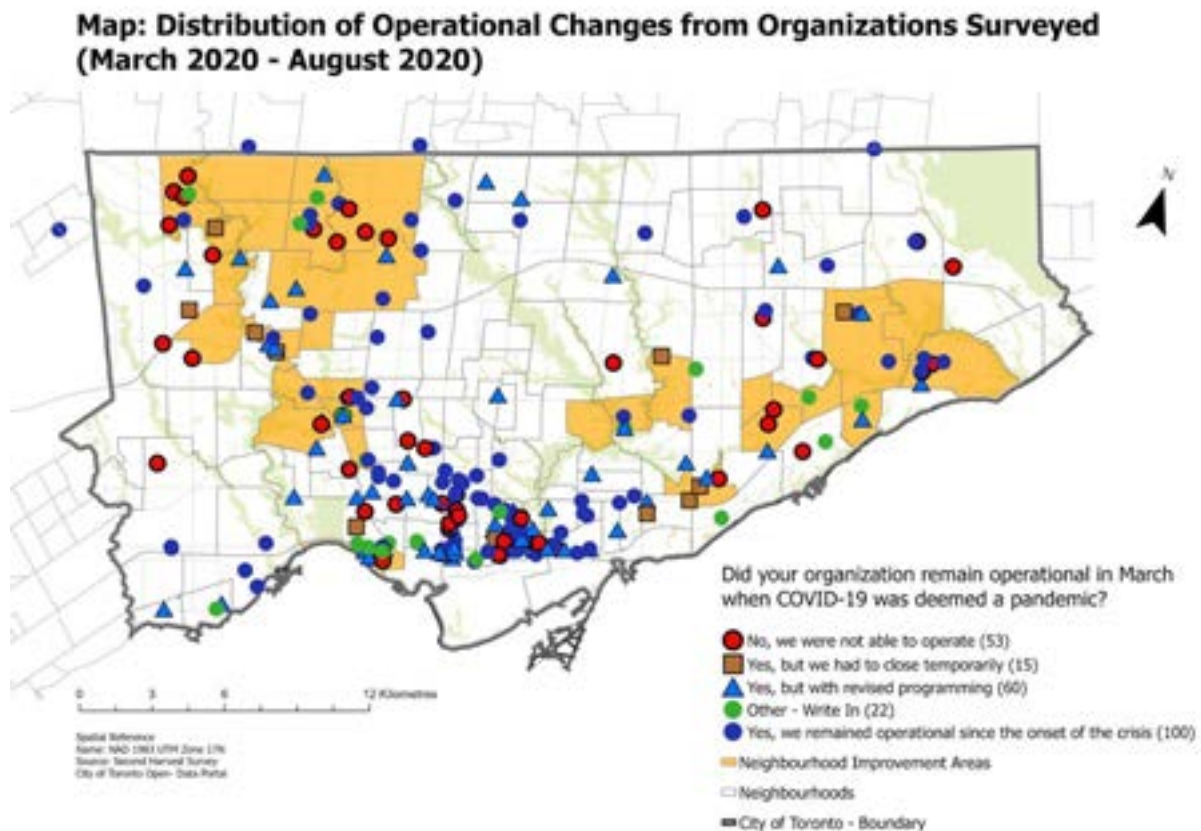
Figure 3 details organizational access to financial supports from the City of Toronto in the early phase of the pandemic.<sup>8</sup> Though this map is a snapshot in time and does not fully capture the amount of support that was provided by the City, or the full range of organizations that were able to secure support over time, it does demonstrate patterns of the distribution of resources at the onset of the pandemic. The map illustrates that the availability of municipal resources were concentrated in the downtown region of the City, while the organizations in the NIAs were directed less resources. Respondents share a number of possible reasons for these gaps, such as: they were unaware of the resources available; did not have access to contacts to secure support; were unable to secure support because of organizational closures; or secured support through other levels of government.

<sup>7</sup> Survey data made available by Second Harvest, 2020

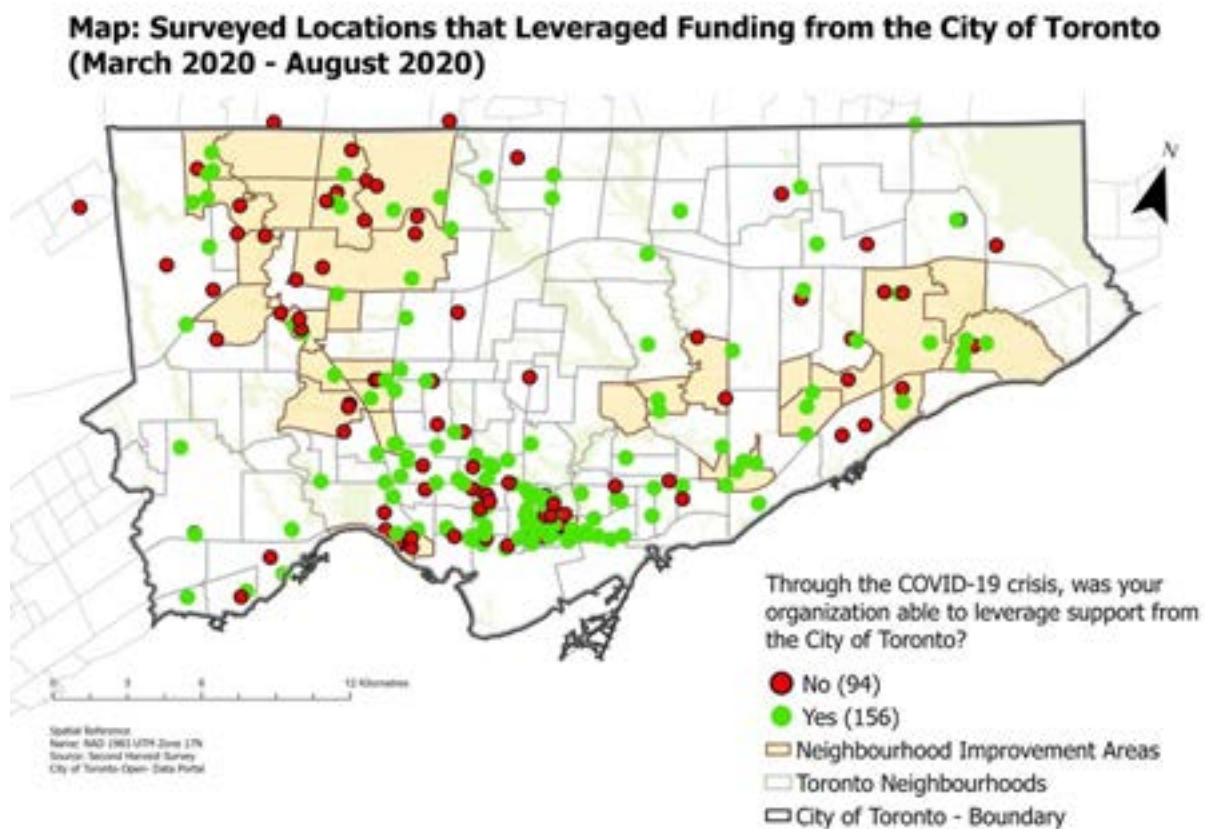
<sup>8</sup> Survey data made available by Second Harvest, 2020



**Figure 2: Operational impacts of the pandemic on organizations**



**Figure 3: Organizational access to financial resources from the City of Toronto**



## 3.0 Resilience as a guiding concept

Resilience embodies a range of meanings and is used in diverse ways by government, community and academia. For this research, we use the concept of resilience as a guiding concept to understand the vulnerabilities and assets of community food security. Food system resilience can be defined as “the capacity overtime of a food system and its units at multiple levels, to provide sufficient, appropriate and accessible food to all, in the face of various and even unforeseen disturbances.”<sup>9</sup> Resilience is deemed a balance between system vulnerabilities or shocks/stresses and the assets used to respond to those vulnerabilities over time.<sup>10</sup>

Though this research is guided by ‘resilience’, we recognize that the term holds contention and nuance worth highlighting before engaging in the discussions of what is needed to achieve a more resilient and equitable approach to food security in Toronto. The section below discusses some challenges in understanding how the term may be operationalized to achieve municipal or community goals, and some of the various ways that actors may define or understand ‘resilience’ and how it may be understood or internalized.



### 3.1 Municipal perspectives on ‘resilience’

Resilience is a concept that is gaining increasing interest among municipalities. Similar to the concept of ‘sustainability’, resilience has gained a lot of traction in municipal reports and strategies, especially considering vulnerabilities arising from potential climate crisis impacts. The City of Toronto is a member of the [100 Resilient Cities](#) network led by the Rockefeller Foundation, which aims to enable cities to “become more resilient to physical, social, and economic shocks and stresses”.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond the connection to the 100 Resilient Cities network, the City of Toronto uses the language of resilience in a number of reports and strategies. For example, the [Toronto Resilience Strategy](#), the [Toronto Food Strategy Report 2018](#), the [TORR Guide for Toronto’s Businesses, Organizations and Communities](#), the [Report on Emergency Food Preparedness and Building Urban Food Resilience](#), the [Resilient Food Systems, Resilient Cities report](#), the [COVID-19 Impact and Opportunities report](#), the [City of Toronto Official Plan 2022](#), and the [Framework for Food System Change](#) all speak to the concept of resilience.

However, the concept of resilience is used in many ways and uses diverse lenses to articulate the need for resilient urban regions and communities. Common themes among the documents listed are the need to prepare for climate crisis response and the need to improve the City’s underlying social inequities to ensure communities are adaptive to shock and have the ability to cope with chronic stresses. Other themes such as economic stability and urban infrastructure are

9 Béné, C., Headey, D., Haddad, L., von Grebmer, K. (2016). Is resilience a useful concept in the context of food security and nutrition programmes? Some conceptual and practical considerations. *Food Sec.* 8, 123–138 (2016). <http://doi.org/10.1007/s12571-015-0526-x>

10 Moser, C. (1998). The Asset Vulnerability Framework: Reassessing Urban Poverty Reduction Strategies. *World Development*, 26(1), 1-19. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X\(97\)10015-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(97)10015-8)

11 The Rockefeller Foundation (2022). 100 Resilient Cities. <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/100-resilient-cities/>



also detailed in the documents within the discussion of resilience.

These themes are important aspects of urban resilience and are worthy of discussion. However, one challenge is that the diversity of themes and perspectives makes it difficult to understand how resilience might be operationalized and how resilience goals will be aligned for internal decision making processes in the City of Toronto. For non-governmental actors, it is also unclear the level of support or the resources that may be allocated to strategies that are focused on resilience.

Though there are many overlapping themes in the above listed documents, there is no clear definition of what ‘resilience’ means to the City or detailed steps on how to achieve or measure resilience. It is also challenging to detect a specific framework or guiding principle directing the discussion of the food system or community food security resilience practice specifically throughout the documents reviewed. This makes it difficult to understand how community stakeholders might be valued or seen as having a role in realizing more resilient systems and the steps needed to achieve the many goals highlighted in the range of reports and strategies listed.

## **3.2 Community perspectives on ‘resilience’**

Resilience is a term that can be used as an expression of pride and strength, especially when considering the many community-based initiatives that exist, and have existed, in Toronto that bring about positive social change. However, through conversations with community actors, we’ve heard that the discourse of resilience can also be seen as insensitive to the traumas associated with their lived experiences.

A number of actors from community organizations expressed caution about resilience being an end goal of municipal leaders, and shared reservations around the use of the term. These discussions should compel reconsideration for what resiliency means and for whom? One community organizer shared insights on the kind of trauma or insensitivity that the language of resilience imparts on communities due to past lived experiences:

**“Resilience is based on a lot of withstanding of harm, and I have a lot of issues with how that reads as resilience and celebrated as resilience. It really overlooks the sheer violence that people have to swallow and live with in order to be resilient. Like exposing food insecurity for what it is, which is literally a form of bureaucratic violence against people. If food is a right and we know that this is true, then who is responsible for upholding that?” -- Community organization front-line staff**

Another community coordinator shares how the language of resilience can be triggering for those from Black communities, and how an alternative approach might be worth considering:

**“Resilience, to me, is the ability or power to overcome whatever you’re faced with, or get past it and make sure to try to bring others with you. I’ve been thinking about resiliency, and in the context of Black folks, I feel like we’re all just resilient, just naturally, because we have no choice. We have to be resilient. So resilience is something that is powerful, but it’s not fair. I feel that we always have to be resilient, but it’s also exhausting. We shouldn’t always have to be fighting, we shouldn’t always have to be exhausted thinking about what we’re doing with our future.” -- Community organization front-line staff**

The nuance and apparent discrepancy of how ‘resilience’ is discussed and perceived between the representatives of the municipality and the community organizations deserves consideration and deliberation. As we move forward with future emergency response planning, and food security policy and decision-making we should be mindful about how resiliency is defined within varying contexts, and have more clear and transparent discussions about what is needed to enable communities to not only be resilient, but more self-determined to address community food security needs.

## 4.0 System-wide food security vulnerabilities and assets for food security resilience

This section will discuss system vulnerabilities and assets, first highlighting the pre-existing systemic inequalities that are embedded in the city's social fabric, and the areas of vulnerability and system assets that emerged through the pandemic from the perspective of both municipal actors and community organizations.

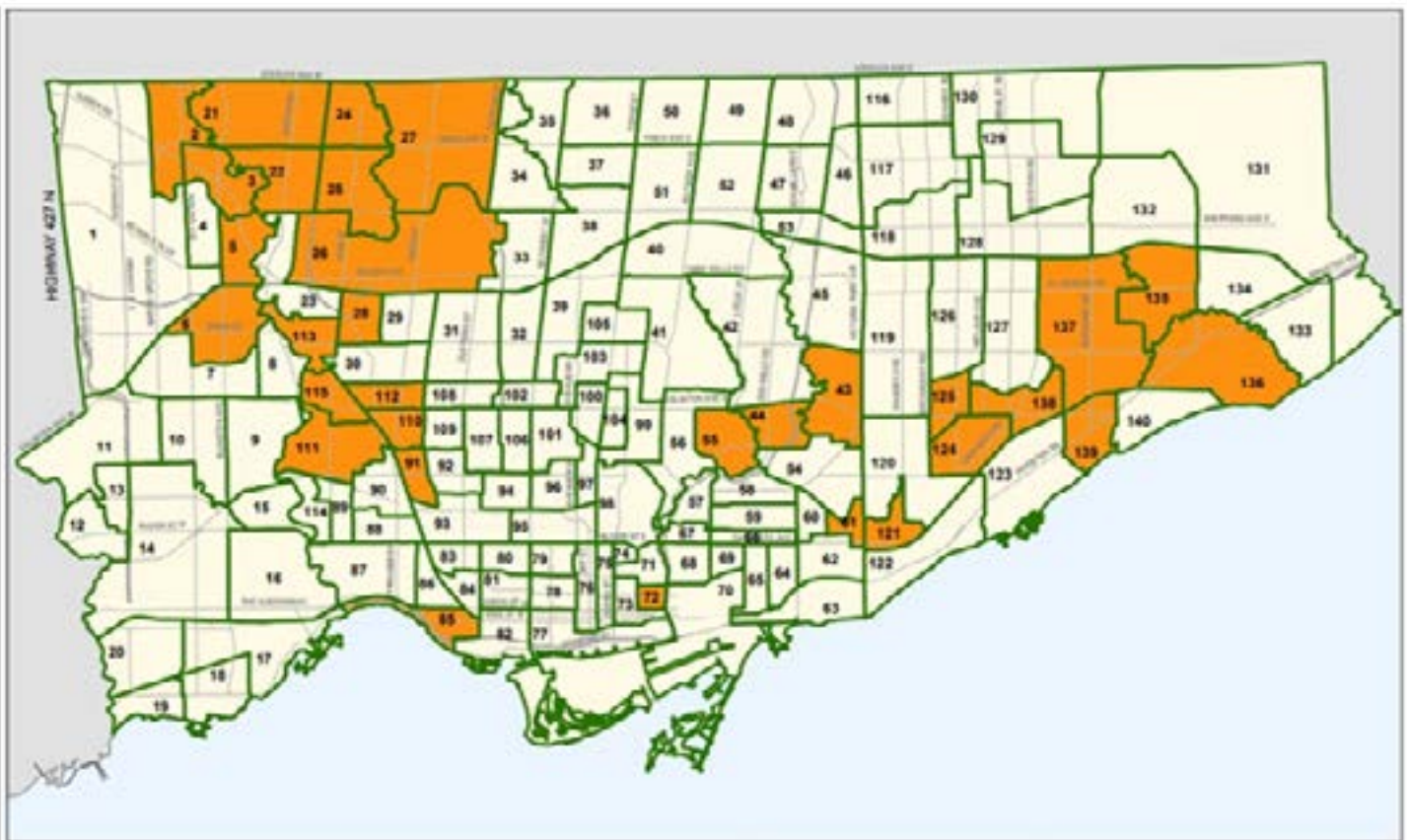
### 4.1 Pre-existing social & spatial inequalities

Toronto is Canada's largest, most diverse city. The city has become increasingly segregated as mixed-income neighbourhoods become scarce in the gentrified

core, and lower-income and immigrant populations are pushed to the inner suburbs where there is less access to services, such as transit and grocery stores. Segregation in the City ultimately has significant impacts on racialized communities. Organizations in the northeast and northwest areas of the city have communicated how the issues such as the cost of housing, poor transit infrastructure, and a lack of affordable childcare limit opportunities for newcomer and low-income groups in these regions.

Within the inner suburbs is a concentration of NIAs designated by the municipality for high levels of poverty, environmental and infrastructural concerns,

**Figure 4: Toronto's Neighbourhood Improvement Areas<sup>12</sup>**



<sup>12</sup> City of Toronto (2014). Neighbourhood Improvement Area Profiles. <https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/data-research-maps/neighbourhoods-communities/nia-profiles/>

**“When we think about development, we never talk about displacement. At the Peel Poverty Reduction Strategy Group, our representatives asked Metrolinx, “What is your commitment in helping people to stay in the neighborhoods who are currently there?” And it was zero. So from a business standpoint, people look at the rising value of real estate values, you know, as business sales go up. They don’t think at all about displacement. They don’t think about the people that are forced to go find somewhere else affordable to live. And they don’t think about how to help those people improve their livelihoods, so that they can stay and be part of the renewal. It’s really about making shareholders wealthy and sweeping poverty somewhere else so you don’t see it. I don’t think we’ve learned the lessons of colonization where Europeans came to North America, and just pushed the Indigenous populations aside while we built our settlements. We continue to do it, just to different peoples.” -- Community organization management staff**

**“Thorncliffe, Flemingdon have been gateway communities for immigrants for probably the better part of 30 years, in Toronto, maybe 40 years even. But over the last 10 years, the demographics have begun to change a little bit. Still getting newcomers, but what’s happening is people are getting stuck and unable to move out as readily and as easily as they used to. And rent prices are going up, and people end up with two or three family units sharing an apartment together, so it’s overcrowded. [The Wellesley Institute Stress Report](#) that came out in June of 2019 flagged for us that we’ve got to really turn our attention to poverty reduction because it identified that Thorncliffe, was the lowest income per capita in the GTA and Flemingdon was in that bottom five as well. Another stress factor they measured was adequate housing, and again both communities were in the bottom five. These are symptoms of poverty, and what often comes with these symptoms is food insecurity.” -- Community organization management staff**

and need for re-investment (See Figure 4). Over the years, large volumes of immigrant families have gravitated to these areas due to relatively low-cost housing, larger-sized apartments conducive to intergenerational living, and proximity to ethnic institutions and retail. As the city grows and real estate increases in value, communities express concern about patterns of displacement that go hand in hand with condo development, and transportation improvements, and overall gentrification.

Issues related to both provincial and federal level policy were also cited as issues that lead to pre-existing issues of inequality in the city. For example, the baseline minimum wage as determined by the provincial government does not reflect the living expenses for the average Toronto resident. Baseline ODSP and OW supports are also insufficient for a standard quality of life for residents living in Toronto.

The pandemic had also shone a light on issues that hadn’t previously been well understood, such as the unequal access to technology and connectivity. This issue was magnified at the onset of the crisis when many community members were forced to isolate, had mobility issues, contended with challenges of online learning, or simply could not access programs in person as they had in the past.

**“In 2019 to 2020 we had over 20,000 visits at the Hub. When we closed the Hub in March 2020, it was very challenging to connect with community members because many of the households did not have a laptop or a phone or even internet-- so connectivity was a huge issue.” -- Community organization management staff**

## 4.2 Municipal actor perspectives on vulnerabilities or challenges

Throughout the pandemic timeline, a number of emerging vulnerabilities were highlighted by municipal actors beyond the direct risk to the virus. Table 1 details the primary codes that emerged in discussion about vulnerabilities from a municipal government perspective, and their coded weight to demonstrate the number of times these issues were addressed in interviews. These themes are discussed below.



Table 1: Perceived municipal vulnerabilities and their coded weight

Vulnerability	# of times coded
Lack of emergency response preparedness	34
Gaps in resources and feasibility challenges in responding to community requests	27
Gaps in communication and siloed practices	21
Policy limitations and limited human resources	20
Reports and strategies not translating into action	4

### *Lack of emergency response preparedness*

In communicating with municipal staff, there are mixed opinions about whether a lack of emergency response preparedness should be considered a vulnerability. On one hand, some have indicated that the lack of a proactive emergency response plan was a significant shortcoming at the onset of the crisis, while others have indicated that in every emergency the job of the EOC is to assess the points of vulnerability and to deliver a plan within a brief timeline, assessing in real time.

Despite this being a common approach to emergency work, staff that had not been exposed or experienced in emergency response work did express feelings of overwhelm, confusion and stress in executing an emergency response due to internal structural changes, redeployment of staff across departments, gaps in communication and responding to changing practices in public health guidelines that unfolded

**“No matter how much you plan ahead of time, new things will emerge and you have to be adaptable and flexible enough so that you can respond to these new issues. One issue that emerged in COVID 19 is food insecurity. I cannot say that not having an established food security response in the city was a vulnerability, because that’s what happens in every emergency. You simply cannot plan ahead of time. It’s just how emergency management is.” -- City of Toronto staff**

across the province when the crisis hit. Interviewees communicated a need for having a template plan in place in light of future emergencies to ensure smoother transitions and more rapid responses in the future.



**“I think it’s really important to have certain systems in place. We weren’t necessarily well positioned-- not just as a city-- but collectively, the food system was not ready for a pandemic. And I feel like there was a lot of scrambling. It took a really long time to kind of level out to a point where staff felt like they were in a position where they were comfortable with how they were able to reach the community. We didn’t have the systems in place to be quick in our response and I think that this pandemic really taught us how important it is to ensure we have certain pieces in place so that we’re able to quickly respond.” -- City of Toronto staff**

### ***Gaps in resources and feasibility challenges in responding to community requests***

In the early wave of the pandemic, the City experienced an influx of donations that were directed to community organizations to support in their efforts to address the food insecurity emergency. However, flows of funds and support from external stakeholders declined significantly by the summer months of 2020, though community needs did not. Calls for support from community organizations were many and often noted as beyond the purview of the City to provide. Organizations and community-based initiatives asked for support and resources such as program space, food items, paper products, PPE and sanitization materials, and vehicles for food distribution.

The level of requests coming from community organizations pushed the municipality to take on responsibilities that were beyond its jurisdictional

role. For example, requests coming into the City regarding certain cultural foods, dry goods and non-perishable food items were coming to the City because there was a lack of those food items circulating in

**“Certain requests [from the community] have sometimes been challenging. We’d get donation offers and that included space, but it didn’t mean that we necessarily could meet the needs. So a lot of agencies would provide very specific requirements, like, ‘we want a kitchen, it has to be the square footage, we need a landing dock’... It’s hard to find the perfect space for all of those [requirements], so a level of flexibility was needed.” -- City of Toronto staff**





food distribution channels. For example, requests for food items like Halal meats, rice, dried legumes, and oil were being directed to the granting team, placing pressure on City staff to take on responsibilities more appropriate for their organizational partners.

**“I think it’s hard for community organizations to recognize that there are certain limitations to what the City can do, and how far we can provide support. We’re doing our best, but remember there are 400 agencies that are part of the CCP. So ensuring that we’re meeting all of their needs and trying to support each one of them is a very large piece of work. There was a lot of encouragement around how organizations could apply for funding to be able to meet some of those community needs. I’d say the coordinators that are part of CCP are really great at encouraging collaborative applications and supporting applications for different funding opportunities. But they did also share that burnout that was starting to kick in by summer [2020], as they were overwhelmed trying to ensure that all of those pieces were aligned.” -- City of Toronto staff**

**“The pace at which information was changing and needed to be shared and not just shared but also understood, I would say has been, and will continue to be, the greatest shock from the stressors that are placed upon us. Information has changed too quickly for even us as a municipality—like for myself and for any organization, who are still juggling a billion things to actually digest the process. That has been the greatest thing.” -- City of Toronto staff**

throughout the pandemic, though some noted gaps in access to information, and in some cases a lack of transparency regarding collaborative efforts in the delivery of emergency responses. While local elected officials worked closely with organizations large and small in their constituencies, access to city-wide decision makers was communicated as a significant challenge. Councillors noted a challenge in their ability to communicate the needs of their constituents, especially when council was not operating to allow for public and transparent communication. Some councillors suggest a more decentralized decision-making process that allows for engagement with elected officials that work closely with constituents.

### ***Gaps in communication and siloed practices***

Gaps in communication, changes in information (such as provincial public health guidelines or shifting roles and responsibilities of staff) and siloed practices were highlighted by a number of staff as being a point of vulnerability, especially in the early waves of the pandemic. Gaps in communication were noted to be an issue amongst City departments, between emergency operations units and city staff, between city staff and councillors, and between the municipality and community organizations.

Municipal councillors that were interviewed acknowledged the collective and relentless effort by City staff and decision makers



**“When council was shut down at the beginning of the pandemic, I had very little ability to access the City’s leadership table. So the things that I was asking for, I couldn’t necessarily ask in public. How, as a City councillor, can I bring an issue forward when the committees are not meeting? My inquiries were then done privately because there was no public facing accountability. It also meant that the answers that they provided were in private, unless I chose to make it public. But by that time you’re spilling out information in a sea of trillions of tweets and social media postings that it gets lost.” -- City of Toronto councillor**



organizations. An ongoing difficulty of addressing food security and food system issues is the siloing of efforts, a lack of human resources to address the myriad of issues, and that municipalities and organizations are placed in a reactionary position to systemically embedded issues that require broader policy changes to adequately address the underlying causes of poverty and food insecurity. Further, the focused attention on COVID-19 infection prevention and control led to a suspension of the Food Strategy work and support for the central civic engagement piece known as the Toronto Food Policy Council. This resulted in even greater challenges for organizations and actors in mobilizing food-related actions and programs to address food system and food security issues. One councillor highlights the complicated nature of food systems work in the city:

**“One of the asks from organizations has been to have more fluid communication between clusters and across the sector. And I know that that’s also been a challenge. The city is huge in terms of geography and it’s very complex. Each neighborhood and region has its own set of characteristics and history. It is really hard to ensure that everybody’s in the know, and as many partners as possible can participate in any type of collaborative approach.” -- City of Toronto councillor**

**“I’ll just be honest, food has been a little bit of an orphan in the city. Food crosses all City committees, and its a very cross-jurisdictional issue.” -- City of Toronto councillor**

Municipal actors recognize that efforts to address food-related issues are done by different levels of government, bodies and organizations. However in practice, the role and responsibility of reacting to food insecurity and other food system issues is placed largely on municipalities and community

It was also noted that during the peak of the crisis, some departments were more supportive than others when it came to offering support to address the emerging food security crisis. For example, though Libraries may not have been the most practical place to open temporary food banks, resources and support were made available by Libraries, as opposed to another division that may have had better infrastructure to store and distribute perishable food.

**“Thinking about general vulnerabilities on the side of the City of Toronto, is our size and the way we are structured. The fact that divisions has division heads that prioritized the work of their own divisions rather than the emergency response was an issue. Some division heads would just say no [on calls for support], and then there were division heads, Libraries, just one example, that made all their resources available.” -- City of Toronto staff**

#### ***Policy limitations and limited human resources***

As highlighted by some community actors, municipal staff also contend that there are policy limitations in terms of access to resources like space, sanitization facilities, water, land and infrastructure to expand localized food production and to support community food security. Policy limitations noted by councillors also included a lack of enabling green roof policies for urban agriculture developments, inflexible permitting around access to municipal property and infrastructure.

Though the pandemic had created additional challenges in terms of staff redeployment and unclear paths to City resources, staff have noted that long-standing permits and policies around access to space and infrastructure should be renegotiated and examined, given the need to be nimble in light of possible crises, to address issues of food insecurity, and to promote a healthier and more malleable food system.

**“When we’re looking at spaces and trying to figure out how to open up those spaces for food we realize there’s a lot of competing interests. And there’s permits and policies that are in place that have been in place for a while that that we need to re-think moving forward, and take another look at. It is a policy issue and I think there’s an opportunity to look at the policy limitations.” -- City of Toronto staff**

A number of city staff have also indicated that the pandemic had placed strain on human resources, making it challenging to respond to the needs of communities during heightened experiences of food insecurity. Staff have indicated that during the peak of the pandemic, they were responding to large systemic issues with minimal support, resources and capacity.

**“The biggest obstacle to us really being able to engage as much as we want to is just the lack of staffing and the lack of resourcing. For three or four or even five people to take on the food needs of the entire city is really, really challenging. I think if we were neighborhood or cluster based ourselves, maybe it might look a bit different. It kind of organically happens that some of us take on certain neighborhoods as much as we can, but it’s a challenge to not have as many staff as maybe we need.” -- City of Toronto staff**

**“At some point in time, I think we had over 200 public spaces and parks occupied within encampments. That took a lot of energy and time to address. So on top of food insecurity, which is a very big issue, we have all these other emergencies that we were managing. Sometimes we forget that we are still under this global health pandemic, we’re still in the state of emergency. Things are not back to normal, and yet there’s a bit of an expectation that we should continue to be working as we normally do. Which of course is very difficult.” -- City of Toronto staff**

#### ***Reports and strategies not translating into action***

Staff highlight that there had been work done pre-pandemic, such as the [Toronto Resilience Strategy](#) and the [High-Level Vulnerability Assessment of Toronto’s Food System](#), which did point to areas of potential social system and food system vulnerabilities. However, staff also note that limited resources have been tied to the resilience strategy and that many of



the assets highlighted in the strategy have since been removed from the City, have been defunded, or have been relegated to community organization partners. Others also identified that both the resilience strategy and the vulnerability assessment focussed on potential vulnerabilities of climate change, and did not include other forms of emergency such as pandemics or include an assessment of local food access points that are available via community networks.

Also notable, within the Vulnerability Assessment itself, the report downplays the role of community-based organizations, whether they offer food banks or other food support. The assessment emphasizes that these forms of food support would not be adequate for a food security response in light of shock. This departs greatly from the steps that were taken to secure collaboration with community partners when the pandemic crisis became a reality.

**“The kind of preparedness work before this was looking for what would be the points of stress if we were to have an emergency, but of course they were with that climate lens so on a pandemic lens is slightly different. There is still a major need to get food out, and so a couple of challenges have come up. If I were to look back over the last year? What were some of the biggest things that we faced? One of them is distribution networks. Did the city or our emergency food providers have a good sense of our distribution networks before this? Probably not. I don’t think anyone had a complete bird’s eye view of all emergency food providers and distribution routes.” -- City of Toronto staff**

**“Food insecurity is a systemic vulnerability in Toronto that would be exacerbated by extreme weather events. Although food banks and other food assistance organizations were created to help people in need during times of severe financial constraint, they are supporting those in need for longer periods of time than intended. Therefore, while they are not part of Toronto’s emergency food distribution plans, they have limited capacity to meet a prolonged increase in demand for food assistance as more households become food insecure due to disaster related expenses or loss of income, [which] is a critical component of equitable food resilience.” -- see the [High-Level Vulnerability Assessment of Toronto’s Food System](#)**



### 4.3 Community actor perspectives on vulnerabilities or challenges

Throughout the pandemic timeline, a number of emerging vulnerabilities were highlighted by community organizations beyond the direct risk of the virus. Table 2 details the primary codes that emerged in discussion about community organization vulnerabilities, and their coded weight to demonstrate the number of times these issues were addressed in interviews. These themes are discussed below.



**Table 2: Perceived community vulnerabilities and their coded weight**

Vulnerability	# of times coded
Lack of access to sustainable funding	111
Navigating public health protocols and information dissemination	77
Community diversity and increased need	50
Gaps in resources, facilities and infrastructure	44
Reliance on emergency food programs	38
Staffing and volunteer limitations	36
Governmental red tape	14

#### *Lack of access to sustainable funding*

Access to funding has long been an issue for organizations, especially smaller, community-based initiatives that do not have the capacity or expertise to engage with grant writing, or the established reputation to attract support from potential funders. Organizations mentioned an increased competition for resources during this time. Smaller organizations shared the sentiment that they were unable to compete with larger and better resourced organizations largely due to their lack of internal capacity to develop funding proposals.

Other organizations also highlighted that access to funds has become an increasingly political process during the pandemic. When a number of organizations across Canada were put in a position to grant other organizations using Federal funds, each granting organization developed their own requirements, which

**“In my experience, a lot of the nonprofits start off as grassroots organizations within the community, and I would say a lot of nonprofits are started because someone or people see the need within the community and that need may stem from their own lives. As a grassroots organization, it’s difficult when you’re trying to juggle your own needs, as well as the needs of the community... and so that that can somewhat be challenging. I’m speaking a little bit from experience. In my experience in working with and collaborating with other non profits and grassroots, sometimes there’s a lack of resources available to help those organizations grow and develop even though they’re doing very meaningful and necessary work within the community”.  
-- Community organization management staff**



led to piecemeal and inconsistent application processes across organizations. In some cases, organizations were applying for funds from other organizations that were in direct competition for similar resource streams, further politicizing the grant access process.

During the height of the first wave of the pandemic, foundations, governments, and other grantors injected funding into communities to help address the crisis of food insecurity. Despite the increased support, the funding streams and grants were largely small and short-term, which meant that organizations had to scramble to submit applications to a myriad of grantors, while also managing diverse expectations. Organizations felt an increase in competition during a period of high community need and limited staff capacity for grant writing and sourcing funds. They also experienced gaps in funds as resources ebbed and flowed, despite need continuing to grow exponentially. Another added challenge was that new and smaller initiatives were emerging to address needs in the community, which imposed an increase in the competition for resources among more established initiatives, especially in terms of requests to municipal funding streams.

**“I think, you see COVID is high in these communities. These communities are struggling with many issues, including food security issues. I don’t have to convince funders, to be very honest with you. Why do I have to convince them? It’s a given. And this is where I think there should be grant reforms that we need to do in the future, like we should be doing that. Because it’s a writing competition to be very honest with you. There were times when we did not even have time to respond to our emails. It was extremely hard. It is extremely hard, and I think funders should not be creating even more competition [for resources].” -- Community organization management staff**

**“If someone says to me, okay, you know they want to give, say, \$10,000. I say to them, like that’s good for maybe two days. It’s because you have 2800 households, it’s not a lot of funding to be very honest with you, because each hamper costs between \$50-70, and it’s not actually every week, they are getting it every other week. So, it looks like a lot of money, but it’s not actually. There are way more people and there’s a way bigger need.”  
-- Community organization management staff**

The pandemic had also impacted the ability of organizations to deliver larger fundraising events due to the limitations on social gatherings. Many organizations rely on yearly in-person galas or other forms of fundraising to raise a significant amount of their yearly budget. One organization shared how the pandemic and health and safety restrictions had impacted their budget:

**“We are a nonprofit, so we only receive up to 10 to 15% of income from government sources and the rest of the income we fundraise. The way that we used to fundraise was through summer events. We normally host two events and have a few galas and at the end of the year. All of those events were completely cancelled once the pandemic was declared. So we were in an existential situation that we didn’t know whether we were going to survive the fiscal year because if we were insolvent at the end of the fiscal year we would have to dissolve.”  
-- Community organization management staff**

Organizations have expressed an ongoing frustration by the limitations imposed by funders, and in some cases struggle to support their communities effectively, especially in terms of the allowable resources for staffing and administration. The limitation on resources allocated to staffing assumes

that organizations are able to and should draw from volunteer pools as opposed to securing paid staff to achieve program objectives.

**“Don’t throw scraps at us and expect us to weave and yarn with scraps. It doesn’t work that way. Every funder is always concerned, ‘oh what is your administration fee, you can have only 9% administration fee. What is your expectation that people are going to keep working for free? It doesn’t work like that. If I am applying to even a private foundation, the first question they ask is, ‘we want to see your financial statement to see what kind of admin your expenses are’. So that’s why they’re going to decide whether they’re going to give us money or not. So do they expect the work to just happen?” -- Community organization management staff**

**“So we are trying to now explore as many possibilities on how we can keep the service going after the end of this year, that’s sort of our critical point. The unfortunate piece is with the greenhouse, which is funded through Agriculture Canada, they don’t support staffing costs. That’s been our challenge, so a lot of people are willing to support infrastructure and capital, but not ongoing staffing costs, so that’s going to be our biggest challenge moving into the next year.” -- Community organization management staff**

### ***Navigating health and safety protocols and information dissemination***

Health and safety protocols, such as physical distancing and limiting numbers of participants in programs, meant that even outdoor programs such as community gardens could not involve as many people as they had previously. The limitations of program participation exacerbated the issue of program access competitiveness. Community members rely on these

programs not only for food but also to reduce social isolation, access to green space, and engage in physical exercise. Limits to these outdoor programs were seen as more problematic for health than the possible exposure to the risk of the virus in an outdoor setting.

Organizations have also noted that the pandemic and health and safety protocols have meant the reintroduction of outdoor lineups, the elimination of community meals and general practices that reinforce isolation and push organizations to operate in a more ‘hands-off’ approach. The strides that many organizations have made to ensure progressive and dignified social support have largely been removed. Several organizations shared how the pandemic risk management practices overturned a lot of their more progressive approaches to food insecurity and poverty responses, such as skill development programs, community-building and empowerment strategies. These approaches are typically seen as important steps away from the traditional food bank, which is often critiqued for reinforcing dependency and a less dignified approach to community support.

**“Our mission is to bring people together around food. And so, many of our programs are community building programs that intend to increase the level of skills from urban gardening to cooking, and eventually self-advocacy skills. When the pandemic was declared, it took away that element of our mission, and we were relegated to go back in time to an emergency food outlet. Our drop-in services had to be shut down, and we pivoted to emergency food access through takeaway meals. All those aspects that made us different from a food bank were taken away. And technically we have been facing very hard situations and ethical dilemmas, while ensuring first the health and safety of our staff and our volunteer body.” -- Community organization management staff**

**“We’ve been operating outdoors every week and it’s been challenging and difficult. We didn’t want to also get trapped into doing this sort of food charity model which is never our original intention. We only did this because of COVID. We want people to have affordable healthy food, we want it to be a co-op member engaged process whereby we can subsidize and support people’s food purchases and where and when possible, offer free food. We want people to be a part of the process and to be able to make choices. We don’t want to give somebody a box of food and half the stuff they don’t know what to do with, or there’s too little or they’re too tired to actually do anything with it. You know, half of that is going in the garbage.” -- Community organization management staff**

**“Before COVID, we had people come in, they sit at the same table with the same people every week and they talk and it was a very social occasion. Since the pandemic, it has become much less so. We used to do a community dinner as part of our food program and we couldn’t get permission from the church council to continue even on a takeout basis, so we did lose the socialization. It got to the point where the morning volunteers and the afternoon volunteers didn’t even see anybody.” -- Community organization front-line staff**

Traditional food bank models also noted that a change in their programming had implications for socialization within their programs which had a significant impact on community members and program participants. One church-based food bank noted that the social distancing protocols removed a lot of the social elements of their program. Though the food bank kept their grocery store model to promote a more dignified approach to food distribution, the social distancing element removed the characteristics that made their space vibrant and welcoming for community members.

Given that staff and volunteers delivering community programming also needed to be protected from the virus, many services were reduced or shifted to encourage safe distancing. For the first time, many organizations introduced virtual or remote programming to ensure staff safety. Though organizations noted that

virtual programming has allowed them to engage in innovative forms of programming and helped them to reach new populations, the shift to virtual programming had equally negative implications for the community members that had less access to technology. For example, an organization located in the Jane & Finch area of the city were able to launch new programs focussed on educating broader community members about food justice and anti-





Black racism for the first time, while also delivering food agency programming such as home growing kits to enable community members to engage in urban agriculture from home. In comparison, a newcomer settlement organization in north Scarborough noted that the shift to remote programming had a negative impact, especially on their vast senior citizen community.

**“At the beginning, when everyone began working from home, we spent a lot of time trying to plan how to deliver programming online. We found that it was extremely difficult because a lot of people who joined the programs, especially older adults, only use their phone to call people. None of them knew how to use the internet.” -- Community organization front-line staff**

Lastly, an emerging challenge community organizations and municipal actors experienced in the early days of the pandemic was the ability to adequately disseminate information regarding the changing health and safety protocols and the required programmatic revisions reflecting changing recommendations from Public Health.

**“It’s interesting how little information we were working with. What do we have to change? But there’s also just a lot of uncertainty of not knowing what restrictions are going to look like, because our program doesn’t really fit under the umbrella of a normal grocery store. So I think not understanding whether the restrictions fit us, not knowing how the numbers will change, and we didn’t know what to expect from the community. We expected an increase and we saw the increase, but we didn’t know what it was actually going to look like.” -- Community organization management staff**

### ***Community diversity and increased need***

Community organizations have noted that the types of community members they typically serve have become more diverse as numbers of program participants increase. The increased need and diversity of need has been a challenge for some organizations in serving their community. For example, one organization noted a need for more language support as well as access to foods they hadn’t previously dealt with in their food programs.

Food banks and food programs have long shared the sentiment that they do not have the resources and food supplies needed to sufficiently provide for community members accessing their programs. This challenge was





**“We want to serve everybody, and we have great representation in our staff for that. So we’re noticing now a lot more Middle Eastern families are coming. Some of the older Middle Eastern people don’t speak English, so then we’re looking for volunteers and staff who speak Arabic, so they could help us communicate with these families. I think the biggest thing we’ve heard is they want Halal meat, so that’s been a hard one and we had to do a little bit of our own fundraising. Because it has to be packaged and labeled as such and prepared and distributed. So, we’re kind of using our own resources to offset the challenges we have in dietary needs.”-- Community organization management staff**

magnified in the initial phase of the pandemic but was a long standing issue throughout the timeline of this project.

An additional barrier or vulnerability in terms of serving the increased need in communities is access to adequate facilities to store highly perishable and nutritionally dense foods, such as dairy, animal and plant-based proteins, and produce. Access to refrigeration space, storage space, transportation and gas to make deliveries, and adequate staff to keep up with the demand are common limitations for organizations. The cost of real estate and the value of space creates massive limitations for organizations that need to establish or scale up their programming to address the community’s food security needs.

**“I wrote a proposal to the province. They were doing this food rescue program and we got money to build out our program because the things we needed were space, a kitchen and a cooler. So I wrote the proposal for a kitchen, a cooler and two vans, but we never got our own space. We were unable to build a kitchen or the cooler, so we lost that money.” -- Community organization management staff**

### ***Reliance on emergency food programs***

Both community organizations and municipal actors see food banks as problematic and that residents should not have to rely on food banks as a long-term solution to address inadequate access to food. Many recognize that food banks and other forms of emergency food provision should be a short-term mechanism to bring about stability for residents. Many label these forms of support as ‘band-aid’ solutions, and that underlying causes of poverty need to be addressed to reduce the reliance on emergency food provision.

**“We want to move away from the food bank model, which is basically a band aid for ensuring food security. The reason for food insecurity, it’s systemic and it boils down to having a lack of enough income, so that people can actually choose the food that they feel at home with and have unfettered access at any point to nutritious and good food. And so the food bank model is just a band aid model. We’ve just kept it because we know that there’s a need.” -- Community organization front-line staff**

Within discussions with organizations about the role of food banks, many critique the level of resources that are concentrated in the larger-scale food banks that are able to secure larger salaries for their staff. Meanwhile, smaller organizations are left with the responsibility of food sorting, and in many cases, are provided with food that is not nutritionally adequate or culturally appropriate. Some see larger food banks as contributing to dependency and oppression as opposed to bridging support and elevating communities. A number of people interviewed noted that the emergency food effort emphasized food access, but did not do enough to consider the type of food that was being made accessible and prioritized quantity over quality.

Community organizations also recognize the level of stigma associated with these forms of programs and would like to see opportunities to develop more

**“Food has always been separated and siloed out. [The city responded to the food crisis] because of lockdown and because of rising prices, but not [to address] the quality of food or the kind of diet that might help people be strong, healthy and resilient so that they could endure lockdown, so that they could cope with children being at home and being homeschooled, so they could manage all the upheaval and losing their jobs and all that stuff. Like it was such a non-holistic approach. We saw Red Cross food coming in from St. Catherine’s, and give canned goods and pork to Muslims. It is so problematic.”**

**-- Community organization management staff**

**“The mentality is that ‘Oh we don’t want poor people coming in and standing in line... it looks bad for our other tenants’. If there are hungry people, there will be more crime in this area, we don’t want them. It is NIMBYism, and it’s mind blowing. One of the spaces where we were for a long time, the people in that building had constantly complained about us. They say, ‘oh it looks like we live in a shelter if you have a food bank on the main floor’, ‘we pay a lot for this condo, we don’t want a food bank on the main floor’. It’s so heartbreaking. There is enough data to show that food banks do not bring crime to an area. It really doesn’t and conversely, if people have access to affordable fresh healthy foods, crime probably even might go down because people don’t need to go to these extreme extents in order to fill their stomachs”. --**

**Community organization management staff**

community-based and informed programming that supports their actual needs. The stigma associated with food banks has also created barriers to accessing space for organizations. A number noted that they have been challenged with the notion that the presence of a food bank will bring about crime and violence in a

community, and some more privileged residents do not want to see lineups of people accessing food in their communities.



### ***Staffing and volunteer limitations***

Beyond the limitations of funding on an organization's ability to staff their programs, in many cases, they experienced gaps in access to volunteers that typically support their programs. Many organizations rely on support from seniors and older individuals who often have underlying health conditions, which means they are at higher risk of severe outcomes should they be exposed to the virus. Further, individuals with children were less available for volunteering due to homeschooling. The reduction of volunteers during the pandemic meant increased responsibility placed on staff who were also dealing with stresses of the pandemic. Many organizations expressed staff burnout when increased support was required from the community.

**“Our programming relies on volunteers, so when everything went into lockdown and there were the stay at home orders, we thought that it wouldn't be the best idea to have the volunteers come in. They're mostly seniors or close to that age range, they're very vulnerable people. Most of them are living with chronic conditions or other health concerns that make them more vulnerable. So if they were to get sick, it would be a big concern. So, we decided that it would become a staff only operation, which meant we had to do the same amount of work with less people. So we started to serve more people with less staff. And so that became an issue and we had to reallocate staff from other departments, other programs.” -- Community organization management staff**

**“I feel the largest problem for us was the amount of folks who registered [for the Good Food Box program], because we have a minimum amount of food boxes we can send out each week. It means there was a rotation period for a number of families, the gap to receive another food box is much wider than they expected, it may be two months before they get another food box or so because of the volume of folks that were on the list. The funding is very limited, and sometimes we can only send 200 boxes a week, while we have 3000 people registered. It is a massive challenge.” -- Community organization front-line staff**

Also important to note that volunteer pools are largely female, largely from communities of colour, and are individuals within the age range of middle-aged to elderly. Though most organizations celebrate their committed volunteers, the reliance on gendered and racialized free labour is an issue that is rarely addressed and should be considered critically.

**“I have people that've been coming since last May [2020]. It's steady steady steady, every week I have the same crew. Sometimes people left when they got their jobs back, but I've had a steady crew. One woman who builds the boxes, she's been building boxes since last May. 500 each week and she does it like you wouldn't believe.” -- Community organization management staff**

A number of organizations shared that the need for food support increased so significantly during the pandemic that the amount of support families and households were able to receive was insignificant compared to the need. One organization shared that the capacity of the team leading the project was so strained they had little opportunity for collaboration with organizations to bolster their efforts to support the community further, which had dire implications for the communities they were serving.

### ***Governmental red tape***

Organizations also highlighted a range of issues associated with governmental red-tape including challenges related to navigating municipal policies around accessing space to store and grow food, and in scaling up initiatives that require access to public outdoor space to deliver programming.

For example, provincially funded Community Health



Centres face a number of bureaucratic challenges. Laborious intake forms requiring detailed personal information to justify support can lead to distrust and discomfort from the perspective of community members. Further, when there is a lack of data collected through intake forms this also results in organizational barriers to provincial grants, even though food insecurity is a visible and known concern in their communities.

**“When we do the client intake form, they don’t usually fill out a lot of the information there. I don’t know if they’re hesitant to give us information. It is just the challenge of getting these clients to fill out this information in these demographics. In the income section, they can check off the amount of income that they earn each year. And I think it’s like probably more than 50% of the clients don’t check off that box. So I did suggest to the team that if they don’t check anything off in the income box, we should just default to ‘0 to 10, \$10,000’ income and then they can automatically be considered food insecure and get access to more monthly support. But unfortunately they said no, we can’t do that.”**  
-- Community organization management staff

An additional problem is inconsistent support made available to community members between Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) Ontario Works (OW), making it difficult for community members or staff from organizations to navigate the system to best serve those needing additional food security support.

**“A big problem is the invasive level of transparency that the community members who access those social supports are asked to divulge. There is no consistency between the workers who are administering the individual’s portfolios and most of the time, they have a lot of vague and arbitrary reasons for withholding or changing persons’ access to support. For example, special diet support between OW and ODSP are not consistent, you can receive some support on OW that you are not entitled to on ODSP. And in fact the disparity of income between those two social service supports is negligible, even though you’re getting more, technically on ODSP, there’s other supports that are clawed back if you leave OW. There’s not enough caseworkers and there’s not enough capacity for workers to exercise discretion.”**  
-- Community organization front-line staff





# 4.4 Municipal actor perspectives on assets

This section discusses the range of assets and opportunities that have been highlighted by municipal and community actors. Table 3 details the primary codes that emerged in discussion about municipal assets and their coded weight to demonstrate the number of times these issues were addressed in interviews. These themes are discussed below.



Table 3: Perceived municipal assets and their coded weight

Assets for the municipality	# of times coded
Community Coordination Plan (CCP) and the Food Access Table	60
Equity informed practice	49
Cross-pollination of resources and funding flows	39
Space	6

## Community Coordination Plan (CCP) & The Food Access Table

Organizations of the Food Access Table were critical in the food security response in the City of Toronto given their logistical expertise in food procurement, distribution and for their fleets of trucks and drivers that made food delivery to sites possible. Several city staff shared that the organizations on the Food Access Table had direct lines of communication with a broad network of community organizations delivering food programs on the community level, which was essential in understanding what was needed, by whom, and what interventions were considered most effective.

“Community agencies are really at the forefront of seeing community needs, so that gives us the ability to quickly hear from them and respond, and so I think, building on that is good.” -- City of Toronto staff

The concurrent effort in establishing the CCP was also essential in bridging communication gaps between municipal actors, community actors and residents. City staff and representatives from community

organizations both shared that the ongoing touch points between community organizations and municipal actors created new opportunities for partnership, reduced organizational silos, and increased communication about the need for specific resources and modes of resource distribution on the ground. The CCP also helped the City to understand localized issues and if those issues needed to be included as part of an escalation protocol.

“The CCP helps us to work with agencies, specifically to support that ongoing response to COVID-19 and to establish some level of regional collaboration and strategy around what’s needed and how do we bring that to life. It also acts as a two way conversation piece between them and us, and us and the EOC and then with the larger system. It is a way to be as directly connected to the ground as possible. In these calls we have strategy discussions and peer supporting conversations with organizations who are helping vulnerable and marginalized residents.” -- City of Toronto staff

Community organizations and municipal actors expressed potential and value in the CCP model beyond crisis response. While community organizations highlighted that they felt valued and recognized as leaders and informants of their local communities, municipal actors also felt the CCP was an effective communication tool that helped in connecting directly with vulnerable communities.

The Food Access Table and the CCP enabled communication and collaboration with over 400 organizations across Toronto, and at its peak, over 130 city staff. This collective approach is seen as a positive strategy to elevate the position of community-based agencies as food system actors that can speak to the needs of local populations, and communicate what is needed for better service provision, and in the long run, community resilience.

**“I think the CCP is a platform that can really be used for ongoing monitoring and ongoing coordination across regions of the city. As well, it gives us the ability for the city and community partners to be responsive to system shocks and the stressors that are happening across communities. So that’s got to be the major learning from the pandemic.”**  
-- City of Toronto staff

### ***Equity informed practice***

The City and community organizations were well aware of the socio-economic inequalities across the city pre-pandemic. Early in the pandemic timeline, it became clear that the crisis was magnifying those inequalities. City staff responded accordingly and prioritized the needs of the most vulnerable communities. For example, the foundation of the CCP was to support those most impacted and prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable.

The emphasis on Black and Indigenous food security and food sovereignty during this timeline is also notable. City staff detail that the pandemic has provided a window of opportunity to mobilize

efforts and operationalize a response to the racialized experience of food insecurity and to establish avenues for infrastructure development and institutionalized policies that will enable long-term stability for communities.

**“The Confronting Anti-Black Racism Unit talks about the right to food. It has been discussed in the food charter and in different food documents that we have at the city, but this is the first time the right to food is being operationalized and discussed on the same level as housing and the right to health care. It’s not added work. This isn’t side of desk work. This is critical work. It is a right for residents of Toronto to have access to food. So that food sovereignty frame excites me so much because it brings home that it’s our duty to ensure food for everyone.”** -- City of Toronto staff

**“Through the Black food sovereignty, we’re connected to a lot of the B3 organizations which are black led, black serving, black mandated organizations, and hearing specifically around food needs because it is a food sovereignty project. So not just emergency food, but larger needs and more longer term means around growing space and food hubs and economic development opportunities for Black communities. The other major next step is the workaround of food sovereignty and broader food work, and not not just looking at food distribution and emergency food work, but how we’re improving the food system, overall, especially for residents and communities that are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity.”** -- City of Toronto staff



alignment in the approach to, for example, granting processes, was named as an important aspect of ongoing communication amongst groups responding to the crisis. Despite perceived challenges around gaps in communication, the efforts put forward to ensure collaboration amongst stakeholders within the municipality was noted as an asset to the food security response and a notable approach that city staff hope to see in the longer term.

### ***Cross-pollination of resources and funding flows***

Municipal actors highlight the importance of community connected staff within the municipality that hold a bird's eye view of community work and who can help organizations navigate internal municipal policies, gain insights on resource opportunities, and be connected with other organizations to leverage assets. There are a number of examples where individual municipal staff were mentioned as offering this type of connection, which is seen as an asset to the municipality and organizations' ability to best serve the community.

The connectivity between the CCP, the Food Access Table and the broader EOC was also noted as a strength during the pandemic once the initial shock of the pandemic had subsided. City staff noted that these communication flows enabled them to be able to better serve communities, to have an adequate idea of community needs, as well as the types of resources that were circulating through municipal channels. Collaboration and

Also highlighted as an asset was the support from the City to enable community access to funding. Although an earlier section highlights funding barriers as a vulnerability, City staff detail the ways in which granting teams ensured access to municipal funds were flexible and more accessible during the pandemic timeline. Councillors also note how their support for communities helped to facilitate fundraising efforts to ensure continued operations of community-based initiatives.

**“If COVID has taught us anything, it’s how we can come together to address community issues. We all came together and had a laser focus on this particular health crisis. And we all stepped up. It was clumsy and it was awkward and we bumped into each other along the way, and probably still do, but we had a level of focus in collaboration and I haven’t seen in a long time. How do we translate that into more of a systemic change on things? So you have municipal governments that traditionally never had health or had those discussions with health services and vice versa, now working collaboratively.” -- City of Toronto staff**



## Space

Access to space for programming is a typical stress for most organizations and was a significant need throughout the pandemic. Though space is a significant challenge for municipal and community organizations alike, the ability of City staff to build connections with community organizations to secure space during the pandemic was also seen as an asset. For example, the availability of Libraries for pop up food bank usage not only helped to fill service gaps

but also to make available space that was seen as more dignified in the eyes of residents.

Though space is an ongoing issue for municipal staff and community actors alike, it was noted that City staff were able to enable some connections between organizations on the ground with partners to access space for both emergency food program delivery and longer term program development.

**“One Indigenous organization had an immediate need for funding. We also found space for their programs. So we used our internal connections to [secure] the space at Fort York Museum. So here’s an internal partner that is really interested in Indigenous culture. Historically there’s an interest there and there’s a connection. So in terms of looking for space, the Museum made a lot of sense. And now they’re looking at a long term relationship.”-- City of Toronto staff**

**“We were asking for suggestions about space across Toronto, whether city owned or suggestions for spaces where food banks could be open. The head of the Libraries was at that meeting and offered their space for that purpose. Libraries don’t have a complex system, so the offer to use the space from Libraries was almost immediate, and because of their history they were very willing and interested in offering both the space and staff to operationalize food banks from their locations.” -- City of Toronto staff**





## 4.5 Community actor perspectives on assets

Table 4 details the primary codes that emerged in discussion about community organization assets and their coded weight to demonstrate the number of times these issues were addressed in interviews. These themes are discussed below.

**Table 4: Perceived community assets and their coded weight**

Assets for community organizations	# of times coded
Access to new resource streams and flexible funding	115
Strong partnerships and networks	103
Intimate understanding of community needs	103
Equity, dignity and culturally-attuned practices	96
Human capital	35
Opportunities of policy influence	13

### *Access to new resource streams and flexible funding*

As highlighted in an earlier section, many initiatives and stakeholders came forward at the onset of the crisis offering support to community organizations to bring stability to community food insecurity. Resources like funds, gift cards, access to space, food, hygiene products, PPE, sanitization materials, plastic bags and boxes, and other offerings of support through municipal and other donation channels were considered important in bringing stability to communities in times of crisis.

During the early stages of the pandemic organizations also noted that many funders offered greater flexibility in terms of how resources were allocated within the organization and the timelines of program delivery. Many organizations highlighted that the reduction

**“There were flexibilities absolutely, from the big funders that we have. They allowed us to be flexible with the lines from the budget to reallocate for more food purchases and to hire more relief staff in lieu of the volunteers that we would depend on and definitely increase the frequency of these takeaway meal days.”**  
-- Community organization management staff

in restrictions enabled them to improve their service provision, and in many cases, support communities in ways that they had not been able to previously.

Organizations highlighted that in particular government funders trusted them during the pandemic in ways they had not experienced before and were given the freedom to determine the best courses of action, considering their intimate knowledge of the communities they serve. In many cases, organizations highlighted that even government funders, that had previously been rigid about how resources were spent, demonstrated a newfound flexibility during the pandemic timeline.

**“I would say, by and large, all levels of government have been very responsive in allowing us to reallocate dollars. And for some of them, they even allowed us to use it for food as well. What I appreciated most was the ability to flex around all the different elements, right? From my perspective, the government, the other funders gave us the flexibility that we needed.”** -- Community organization management staff

“Like, for instance, if you were to look at the immigration funding from the federal level. It felt like the government decided pretty quickly to trust community organizations. And we were encouraged by that because they didn’t say ‘oh you are closing your doors, give us our money back’. What they saw was organizations like ours re-calibrating and adjusting on the fly. And then what they said was, ‘okay now, you know if you’re going to do COVID relief, let us know what it is and away you go’” -- Community organization management staff

“The unrestricted grant came after a news story in February that CBC did, and a gentleman called up and said “‘I’m offering \$200,000 in unrestricted funds because I want to prove the concept that we should trust organizations that are operating by and for the community”. He understood that we have relationships and are operating in real life, adapting to changing circumstances. Unrestricted funding is more logical, especially in a situation like this, because you can’t predict what’s going to happen next.” -- Community organization management staff

“A great thing that happened with the municipality, in terms of them getting in touch with us immediately and communicating with us about how we needed to shift resources. I would say, for any organization that would have been the key challenge-- being able to access resources that you may have already had in hand, but for other programs, and shift towards the needs of the community. I think the city did a phenomenal job in getting those conversations going and responding to our requests as a sector.” -- Community organization management staff

“We formed this whole structure, a centrally organized structure where we were responsible for all the coordination pieces in terms of engaging local businesses to provide us with food items at discounted prices. We engaged with local restaurants who were not doing well during the pandemic. We had links with those restaurants because we were providing people with food as we had an after school program. Those restaurants were providing us with meat at discounted prices, but then, when we got some funding we decided to support local restaurants as well.” -- Community organization management staff

Some organizations shared that they experienced an increase in the types of funding that were made available during certain points of the pandemic. Note (above and to the right) an exceptional example of a philanthropist making a significant contribution in unrestricted funds to demonstrate that organizations should be trusted to make decisions regarding resource allocation.

### ***Strong partnerships and networks***

Organizations highlight that one of the most important assets during the pandemic timeline has been their connections and networks in the community. Though the CCP helped facilitate communication amongst

networks, many collaborative efforts had been previously embedded in the community, and aided in a swift response when the looming pandemic became a reality.

Organizations also noted the emergence of new partnerships with stakeholders that had not previously engaged in community food support. For example, real estate agents, local MPs, car dealerships, police departments and medical professionals reached out to community organizations to offer support such as access to program space, funding, appliances for improved programming/food storage, or to develop

new food programs to address the needs of the community. Local food businesses that had been impacted by restaurant closures also shifted their focus to support the local community, given their sudden surplus of perishable food inventories when restaurants were required to close indoor dining.

**“What we’re doing is we’re getting the police officers to come into our warehouse whenever they need. They build small hampers of food items that can be consumed on the road, and they load up their cruisers and go away. Whenever they see a panhandler, or a hungry person, they hand them a bag of food. So this is an important moment. The police have the infrastructure-- they are out and about in the community, they are meeting this vulnerability on a daily basis. We don’t have to reinvent the wheel by trying to figure out how to get the food to people.” -- Community organization management staff**

**“There was a group of people at Leaside, they ran a program called the Leaside Toy Drive so it’s an annual campaign to get toys to kids during Christmas. These guys, a group of them, are warehouse experts. They heard what we were doing and they came by and they taught us how to warehouse. Not only that, then they got people donating things to us. They donated all the shelving that we have in our food bank. It was donated and set up professionally by these contractors.” -- Community organization management staff**

Some organizations also noted that the pandemic had pushed organizations that had previously been in competition with one another were now working together in collaboration. The pandemic had pushed organizations to leverage resources and take a unified approach to address the issues that they were seeing on the community level.

**“Over the years it’s been very hard to work collaboratively with other organizations, because we don’t trust each other. If I went to another organization, and said listen, this grant is for \$20,000, but if we work it together, we might get \$50,000. Right away their hackles go up, and they are wondering “what does she want to get from us”? When the pandemic hit, other organizations were calling us to work together. That was one of the best things I’ve seen over this pandemic-- other Black organizations are calling us to work with us. And if we could continue that on a larger scale, I think that would be a benefit for us. I’m telling you that is what I loved about the pandemic. Organizations realize we do better together.” -- Community organization management staff**

#### ***Intimate understanding of community needs***

Organizations recognize the assets they bring to the municipality and the level of support they are able to offer in terms of community food security. Organizations bring an intimate knowledge of community demographics, have an understanding of neighbourhood histories, and also have networks and systems in place to bridge communication with residents. Organizations also highlight their ability to address language and communication barriers, which are important assets in times of crisis when gaps in communication are a significant issue.

**“We know that there are households that need support, and then it’s not just food. They need other kinds of support and other services from other partners too, such housing help or mental health support. So it’s managing the food piece but also managing that wrap-around piece and other services with other service providers.” -- Community organization management staff**

**“In our community [in Agincourt], residents might feel uncomfortable going to other places where they don’t speak Chinese. It can be daunting to them. But once they realize they can come to us and there are people who understand them. We also have other resources to help them, whether it’s regarding housing or employment. And because our agency does a lot of different programs, we are able to tell them about, or connect them to other staff that specialize in mental health, employment or whatever their needs are.”**

**-- Community organization management staff**

Many organizations keep detailed data regarding community information and are a point of contact for local residents. Throughout the pandemic timeline, organizations were able to leverage information and were direct lines of communication to residents. This made it possible to quickly gauge the impacts of shock on communities, understand the changing needs as they evolved, and respond quickly to address issues and gaps in support. Organizations recognize that they are essential for resource allocation and distribution as they have an intimate understanding of the needs of residents.

**“I think through COVID trust has been built...the trust that agencies can respond quickly and pivot quickly to address emergency situations... that we are the best conduit to make a difference in a person’s life whether it’s through programming that is led by people with lived experience or structured programming that is better delivered in the community versus the city, for example. Those types of things, though it was all there before, I think it became abundantly clear through COVID. We are good partners, deliver good services, and we have the physical structures in place to serve communities.” -- Community organization management staff**

A number of those interviewed from community organizations are themselves residents in the community that they serve, and have lived-experience which informs their intimate understanding of the barriers and challenges that residents face. Many organizations also highlight that staff and volunteers supporting programs also come from the community and provide essential feedback that is needed to inform organizational practice, the direction of programming, and to communicate needs to the broader municipality.

**“We have a community leaders program, which is something that is very central to the work we do...having the voices of community leaders involved in every part of our work. And so our advisory committee is a group of community members who are interested in seeing change and who have their own values and skills that they bring to the table. So community leaders are really key because it’s actual community members who keep growing the programs. They join our regular meetings, they’re involved in our programming, and come up with ideas to address issues in the community that they want to see changed.” -- Community organization management staff**

Organizations that were able to remain operational and continue to serve communities during the onset of the pandemic were essential in bringing stability to communities in times of crisis. Larger organizations highlight their access to resources, community networks, infrastructure, the flexibility of their staff teams, and the support they were able to secure as key elements in their ability to respond. Smaller organizations highlight that their pools of committed community-based volunteers, their insights on local needs, and their lack of bureaucracy as key factors in their ability to ‘pivot’ in light of shock. Some community-based initiatives also note that their ability to organize language specific and culturally appropriate responses as really critical during this time, as those impacted to a significant degree were newcomers,



immigrants, refugees and undocumented peoples. Overall, organizations see their vital role in bringing stability to communities, especially in times of crisis, given the range of support they are able to provide.

#### ***Equity, dignity and culturally-attuned practices***

Several organizations highlighted that opportunities such as flexible funding and newfound collaborations helped them to better support communities in ways that were attuned to their cultural needs and that supported more equitable and dignified approaches to program delivery.

**“So because we got offered that unrestricted grant, we raised a bunch of money on GoFundMe, through the media and developed a great partnerships with Muslim Welfare, a church, and other folks. FoodShare stepped forward, offered us a bunch of boxes, and with that inspiration, we started streaming food boxes too. So we worked with Afri-Can Food Basket and FoodShare to gather, collect, and receive boxes. Then we put dry goods and other stuff into those boxes to add value to them. We bought eggs and milk and then we distributed all that out. We got more and more refined as to who is on our list, making sure that big families were there and did outreach to people who might have language barriers. We organized translators to phone everybody who wasn’t cyber connected. So [the process] got more and more developed. We engaged around how to reach people in need, and particularly families because there’s a huge gap.” -- Community organization management staff**

Provisions for culturally, dietary and generationally appropriate food (such as those appropriate for young children or older adults or seniors) are rarely available through charitable channels. Several organizations noted that with greater agency over funds, they were able to purchase products for their programs in racialized communities and were able to provide culturally appropriate foods, and in some cases, cultural toiletry products.

**“Initially, we responded with what we were donated, and we supplemented with what we call the equator foods. Plantains, mangoes, important foods that align all our equator countries. We have a high population of people from countries that are along the belt of the equator and eat traditionally similar foods. Root foods, root grains. We sent out an intense assessment and asked, not just about food, but also about hygiene. Our hygiene kits always have shea butter, black soap, and the option to get Black hair products.” -- Community organization management staff**

Further, some organizations were able to focus on acquiring foods that better support people’s immune systems, particularly for those most vulnerable to the virus including the elderly and those living with chronic disease who might be afraid or unable to get to grocery stores, and/or lacked other social support. Several organizations discussed their concerns about the quality of food available to community members in traditional emergency food programs and felt a need to prioritize immunity boosting and fresh foods to enhance well-being. Organizations serving highly racialized neighbourhoods signaled that they prioritized nutritionally-dense and cultural foods as staples in weekly food baskets to support their clients’ immune systems when needed most.

**“Our biggest concern was getting culturally appropriate food out to our seniors... The box reflects what people need to keep their immune system working. Every week we make sure to include plantain, avocado, lemon, ginger and garlic, because those are also the foods that keeps your immune system boosted. You know, it’s not just about giving them food, but it is about giving them food to help keep them healthy. So, in reflection of the pandemic, boosting the immune system is key.” -- Community organization management staff**

### ***Human capital***

A key characteristic of non-profit and charitable organizations is that they typically rely on support from pools of volunteers. Labour from volunteers helps organizations to realize their mandates and deliver programs on the local level. Though the pandemic had impacted the availability of volunteers for many organizations, others also highlight that their programs flourished due to the support they received from new pools of volunteers. In some cases, volunteers were directed to community organizations via the municipality (i.e., Library workers directed to support the delivery of food programs) and via corporate channels (i.e., available workers due to service closures). In contrast, other organizations highlight an emergence of new pools of residents from the community that understood the impacts of the pandemic and wanted to contribute to efforts to address the food security issues.

**“So that’s something that we’re also pretty proud of. Through this program we were able to account for all the volunteers and all the drivers. We hired them and offered an honorarium for supporting the work. These community members have been, in one way or another, impacted by the pandemic as well... some of them lost their jobs or maybe they have young children. So either they were supporting the packaging part of things, or they were going out and delivering hampers. The drivers told us that they liked making deliveries because it’s a nice way for them to meet other people during the pandemic. Especially when they feel lonely at home, it gives them a sense of pride that they’re helping their community.” -- Community organization front-line staff**

Organizations speak to the reciprocal benefits of working with volunteers, especially those from the community that are seeking connection and reduced social isolation. The organization offers space for that connection and in return receives support in program delivery.

**“I’m finding that some of our volunteers are in the same situation as our clients. They could be here with, without status. And so they’re getting work experience and we’re also able to help them with food after they’ve done their shift, so you know I would say, probably close to half of our volunteers are in similar situations, but they want to give back to the community, they want to make connections, and they want to fit in with society.”-- Community organization management staff**

**“We have a group of volunteers come in the morning to help sort the food, and then we have a group of volunteers in the afternoon ready to distribute the food. It’s been running for over a year and we still have a lot of the same core volunteers because they love the work. They love the fact that they can have some sort of social interaction amongst their peers and the clients. So it’s interesting how it’s really cemented relationships, both from a community perspective, from a client perspective, from a volunteer perspective, and a staff perspective. It’s like Fridays are the day that we get to see each other and interact and we’re doing it for a good cause. We’re providing a valuable resource.”-- Community organization management staff**





Some organizations also highlight the role of residents and volunteers as foundational to the organization's direction and program design. These organizations feel that their pools of volunteers remained committed throughout the pandemic because of their broader involvement in the organization, making it essential to navigate barriers to ensure community involvement.

**“One of the things that our organization does is build capacity within the community. For instance, all of our volunteers are community-based. So, we started to hire staff from the community that showed a lot of initiative and have a lot of drive and dedication to address community issues. We offer paid positions, which could be life changing for someone who might have issues in terms of mental health or they may be on social assistance.”**

**-- Community organization front-line staff**

**“Even with all the struggles of being in nonprofit and with this economy, we are still able to make some changes. So for example, we decided that we should increase pay to ensure a livable wage. So, we are aiming to lead by example and advocate for changing mindsets.” -- Community organization management staff**

**“We have quite a few commitments. Our goal is to talk about policy and speak to how policy level changes are needed for food security in this community. We will never be able to move ahead... we all need to work together, understand everybody's strengths and weaknesses and work accordingly. It's like a jigsaw puzzle. And that is the aim and goal of the food strategy, that when it's ready, we should be able to share that strategy with every funder in this country. If anybody from South Scarborough is applying for a grant, they should run it through this lens and make sure the project is really applicable or is really needed in the community.” -- Community organization management staff**

### ***Opportunities for policy influence***

Though not widely discussed, some organizations highlight that they have a role in advocating for social change to ensure that the underlying causes of poverty and food insecurity are being addressed. Organizations that respond to community issues are well informed about the impacts of social policy on communities on the ground, and are in a good position to speak to the



need for change. Though organizations recognize the limitations that they face in engaging in advocacy, a number of organizations in Toronto make an effort to prioritize political activism to ensure that there is an awareness of food security and food justice discussions. Many organizations recognize the value of their voice in advocating for change and the importance of allocating resources to strong messaging around issues such as basic income, improved access to food, as well as funding limitations.

### ***Food sovereignty as an approach***

Though many organizations did not necessarily use the language of ‘food sovereignty’ in their interviews, many saw the importance of building capacity around food as opposed to encouraging a reliance on food programs and hand-outs, a common response to food insecurity issues in communities.

**“We rely on the local farms, we aim to support the local economy and we also have our urban agriculture programs. So we’re trying to build skills among people so that they can grow their own food and complement their food security... but that’s not the purpose of those programs. We will never be able to solve the food insecurity problem by growing food. The purpose of that program is to build community and to get people connected to the land and the food, so that they know where it comes from, and that they can position themselves within the whole food system.”**

**-- Community organization management staff**

Food sovereignty approaches call for more agency around food and considerations about community health, cultural, well-being, and connections around food. Many of the organizations involved in this research saw the need to prioritize community self-determination and to move beyond the emergency food response that has been deeply embedded into community practice for over thirty years.

**“You know it’s very important for us to create space and to create opportunities to develop community and self-determine approaches to how we meet the needs well. I think it’s not so much what we learned, it was more for fortifying what we already knew. I think we are long overdue as a city to move beyond our food strategy mapping and our food strategy reporting, and it’s really for us to really create action. I am an action oriented person, and that’s how I lead with my organization. For us, our conversations have shifted from emergency support to ongoing community food support. But how do we do that in a collective way that’s self determined? That is where we are looking right now.” --**  
**Community organization management staff**

**“Partnerships within First Nations communities are [foundational for Indigenous food security]. Neyaashiinigmiing, which is also known as Chippewas of Nawash, which is close to Cape Croker First Nation... they have a large fishing operation in Georgian Bay in Lake Huron. Close ties with that community enabled us to receive a ton of fish from them. Friendships and community ties that are based in Indigenous ways of taking care of each other... So it’s a truly beautiful way that we circumvent the barriers that are in place because of colonialism. There’s no set strategy. Support for the community happens and it unfolds in the moment. This tells two stories. It tells the story of how important our community connections are and our partnerships and how the community works together, but it also tells the story of how the government does not take into consideration the infrastructure pieces that enable organizations to increase safe access to food and food security in the long term.” --**  
**Community organization front-line staff**



## 4.6 Summary of vulnerabilities and assets

Table 5 below summarizes the key vulnerabilities and the assets from the perspectives of both municipal and community actors. Though the table seems to emphasize the perceived vulnerabilities over the assets and opportunities, it should be noted that this could be a reflection of the timeline through which the interviews took place. In the spring and summer of 2021, interviewees had been working in response to the pandemic for over one year, and interviewees were feeling the weight of the pandemic and faced

many challenges through this timeline. The emphasis on their challenges is reflective of their experiences of trauma and stress in responding to the crisis both at the municipal and community levels.

The weight on vulnerabilities is also a reflection of the research guide and the questions discussed in the interview process, and is not a true reflection of the full range of assets that exist within the municipality and within the community to better realize food security.

**Table 5: Summary of vulnerabilities and assets to food security food security resilience**

Source of vulnerability	Assets for resilience
<p><b><i>Municipal actor perspectives on vulnerabilities or challenges:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of emergency response preparedness</li> <li>• Gaps in resources and feasibility challenges in responding to community requests</li> <li>• Gaps in communication and siloed practices</li> <li>• Policy limitations and limited human resources</li> <li>• Reports and strategies not translating into action</li> </ul>	<p><b><i>Municipal actor perspectives on assets:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CCP and the Food Access Table</li> <li>• Equity informed practice</li> <li>• Cross-pollination of resources and funding flows</li> <li>• Space</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Community actor perspectives on vulnerabilities or challenges:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of access to sustainable funding</li> <li>• Navigating public health protocols and information dissemination</li> <li>• Community diversity and increased need</li> <li>• Gaps in resources, facilities and infrastructure</li> <li>• Reliance on emergency food programs</li> <li>• Staffing and volunteer limitations</li> <li>• Governmental red tape</li> </ul>	<p><b><i>Community actor perspectives on assets:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to new resource streams and flexible funding</li> <li>• Strong partnerships and networks</li> <li>• Intimate understanding of community needs</li> <li>• Equity, dignity and culturally-attuned practices</li> <li>• Human capital</li> <li>• Opportunities of policy influence</li> <li>• Food sovereignty as an approach</li> </ul>

## 5.0 Considerations for the future

The following section reflects on some of the key findings from the overall research project and proposes 3 main areas of consideration for future policy and practice, including the development of *a resilience framework for community food security*, the use of *a trauma-informed approach to urban resilience discussions*, and lastly, *more equitable, accessible and sustainable resources for community-based initiatives*. This section also offers several practical and applicable recommendations based on emerging discussions from this research, including a *food security emergency action plan template* and a *community-focused collaborative communication model*.

### 5.1 Resilience framework for community food security

Scholars and practitioners demonstrate that food system resilience requires a range of actors to not only offer shorter term coping capacity to system shock, but also medium-term adaptive capacity to achieve longer term food system transformation.<sup>12, 13</sup> This concept has been discussed in the context of international aid and development programs. Borrowing from Béné et al. (2016)<sup>12</sup>, we propose a similar temporal framework that demonstrates the role of local community actors in realizing short-term coping capacity and medium-term adaptive capacities, which can influence and support longer term system transformations (See

Figure 5). We see a range of actors and initiatives contributing to both adaptive capacity and system change by enacting municipal strategies (such as the CCP) to better understand community needs, and through investment in local projects to glean best practices that can help inform broader structural policy changes.

The utility of a ‘resilience framework’ for community food security would address the gap in the municipal literatures, where resilience is vaguely defined and does not pose a clear path for food system or food security resilience in the urban region. A framework would also provide a platform to recognize the role and value of community-based programs and actors, giving specific recognition to their capacities, as well as an opportunity to more clearly define how resilience might be defined or operationalized within the City of Toronto.

Though this research aims to highlight the role and value of community-based initiatives, we are mindful that we should not celebrate the downloading of responsibility onto non-profit, community-level actors.<sup>14</sup> Though this research respectfully recognises that community organizations representing individuals with lived experience carry an important role in determining best practices in local food system policy,<sup>15</sup> we are aware that initiatives on the ground dedicate low-waged and free labour, which can place

12 Béné, C., Headey, D., Haddad, L., von Grebmer, K. (2016). Is resilience a useful concept in the context of food security and nutrition programmes? Some conceptual and practical considerations. *Food Security*, 8, 123–138. <http://doi.org/10.1007/s12571-015-0526-x>

13 Folke, C., Carpenter, S., Walker, B., Scheffer, M., Chapin, T., & Rockström, J. (2010). Resilience thinking: integrating resilience, adaptability and transformability. *Ecology and society*, 15(4). <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-03610-150420>

14 Baines, D. (2010). Neoliberal restructuring, activism/participation, and social unionism in the nonprofit social services. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 39(1), 10–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764008326681>

15 Lettner, M., Sun, E., Gardner, B. (2013). Driving equity at a community level: Case studies of community-based peer-delivered health-care services and programs. *International Public Health*, 5(1): 67–78.

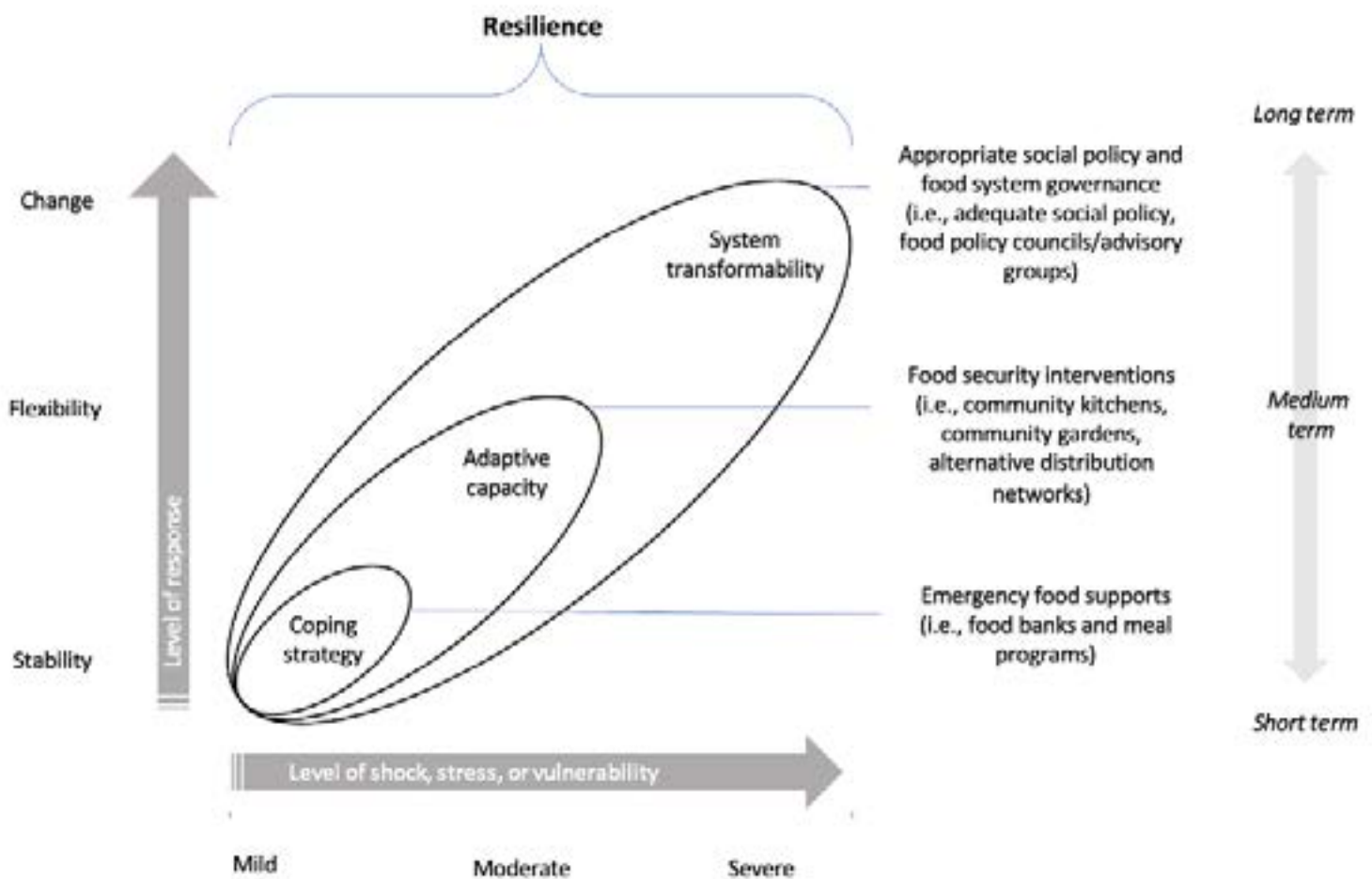
16 Dachner, N., Tarasuk, V. (2017). Origins and consequences of and responses to food insecurity in Canada. Koc, M., Sumner, J., & Winson, A. (Eds.), *Critical Perspectives in Food Studies* (2nd ed., pp. 221–232). Oxford University Press.

people in positions of vulnerability in order to serve communities.<sup>16</sup> In some cases, organizations that hold relationships with large pools of volunteers celebrate this as an asset in their ability to respond to community needs. Arguably, this perspective demonstrates an internalization of the neoliberal downloading of responsibility onto local actors, whereby charity work including the act of 'tackling hunger' reinforces an embedded belief that this is how

"Canadians demonstrate that they are good citizens".<sup>17</sup>

We recognize that the responsibility to support and feed community members should not be solely placed on individuals running community programs. Rather, we argue that these leading actors should be seen as assets for informing longer term strategies to address the underlying causes of poverty and food insecurity, and part of a broader process to enact change.

**Figure 5: Food security responses contributing to resilience over time**



<sup>17</sup> Trent University. (2020, December). Thinking outside the donation box [webinar]. Peterborough, ON, Canada. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOWV-MhfIK0>

## 5.2 Valuing local knowledge and utilizing a trauma-informed approach to food security and resilience discussions

The pandemic has presented a window of opportunity for improving communications between community actors, mobilizing a foundation for a more equitable approach to food system and food security discussions. The momentum driven by community-based actors embedded within and informed by their local communities can also inform provincial and national policy discussions, contributing to longer term system transformations. As demonstrated and discussed throughout the report, community-based organizations and actors on the local level have much to contribute to discussions regarding longer term food system goals and policy shifts. In practice, this requires a governance structure that considers and integrates local knowledge and expertise, as well as enhanced infrastructure and resource investment in community development and self-determination around food systems to realize food security resilience.

Our findings demonstrate the importance of valuing the knowledge of those with lived experiences when attempting to understand a food system's resilience or vulnerabilities.<sup>18</sup> Such an approach is essential to understanding and supporting unique cultural and other food- and health-related needs, in addition to strengthening community self-determination. Further, direct input from affected communities is essential to ensuring that program and policy decisions are equity-focused and trauma-informed.

A trauma-informed approach will help to ensure that the conceptualization and implementation of resiliency

strategies in practice, are attuned to equity and justice concerns. For example, as municipalities like Toronto move forward with future emergency response planning and food security policy and decision-making, they should be mindful of how resilience is defined within these contexts and what the concept embodies. This reflection requires a trauma-informed approach that is cognizant of the distressful nature of food insecurity on populations and the long-term mental and physical health consequences of the lived experience.<sup>19</sup>

As discussed in section 3.3, some communities find the idea of resilience exhausting or insensitive due to traumas associated with their lived experiences, and some have explicitly communicated that food insecurity is a form of trauma that is imposed on communities. As Srivastava argues, while the ability to persist through difficult conditions should be celebrated, “for many marginalized people, including Black, Indigenous and racialized people, being labeled resilient — especially by policy-makers — has other implications. The focus on resilience and applauding people for being resilient makes it too easy for policymakers to avoid looking for real solutions”.<sup>20</sup> More focus must be placed on how to change unjust conditions and this requires engagement with affected communities.

Colleagues from Baltimore, USA, share in the [Baltimore Food System Resilience Advisory Report](#) a strategy that is guided by principles of trauma-informed practice. The strategy used a framework proposed by Bowen and Murshid,<sup>21</sup> which applies six principles of trauma-informed care to the policy formulation process for policies that target social problems related to trauma (such as violence and chronic disease). The core principles are: safety, trustworthiness and transparency, collaboration

18 Gray, D., Anyane-Yeboah, A., Balzora, S., Issaka, R., & May, F. (2020). COVID-19 and the other pandemic: populations made vulnerable by systemic inequity. *Nature Reviews Gastroenterology & Hepatology*, 17(9), 520-522.

19 Hecht, A., Biehl, E., Buzogany, S., & Neff, R. (2018). Using a trauma-informed policy approach to create a resilient urban food system. *Public Health Nutrition*, 21(10), 1961–1970. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980018000198>

20 23 Srivastava, V. (2021). ‘Don’t Call Me Resilient’: Our podcast about race. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/listen-to-dont-call-me-resilient-our-podcast-about-race-149692>.

21 Bowen, E. A., & Murshid, N. S. (2016). Trauma-Informed Social Policy: A Conceptual Framework for Policy Analysis and Advocacy. *American journal of public health*, 106(2), 223–229. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2015.302970>



and peer support, empowerment, choice, and the intersectionality of identity characteristics. These core principles could be applied as appropriate in the context of the City of Toronto in further developing resilience strategies and as the municipality works to 'build back better' in a post-pandemic landscape.

It is important for municipal actors to provide more visibility and attention to the unique roles that community organizations and initiatives play, and the unique types of functions that they provide both directly in relation to community food security, and in providing broader social and health services. Though it is not uncommon in governmental reporting to acknowledge a range of players that are instrumental to a collaborative response (as demonstrated in the City of Toronto's [COVID 19 Impacts & Opportunities Report](#)) recognition is typically limited to collaborations with large, influential non-profits or corporate partners. While these organizations have been vital in supporting community food security during the pandemic timeline, the acknowledgement of smaller-scale community-level agencies is typically less detailed, with specific organizations seldom named.

### **5.3 Equitable, accessible and sustainable funding support for community-based initiatives**

Throughout this report, equitable, accessible and sustainable funding support is named as one of the key areas of concern of community-based organizations. In practice, community-based organizations are

constrained by the level of support they receive from local governments and funders. Many nonprofits operate with short-term financial resources and rely significantly on volunteer or low-waged labour. They are also expected to fulfill and prioritize the interests of their supporters (such as government bodies, foundations, and other grantors), often distracting mandates away from the vital matters impacting the communities they serve.<sup>22, 23, 24</sup>

Funders play a significant, yet under-researched, role in the food system in Canadian cities. Community Foundations of Canada (2019) shared in their Vital Signs report that 91% of community foundations surveyed across Canada support food system programs, including for example, emergency food programs, food banks, community kitchens, and breakfast programs.<sup>25</sup> Funders, such as governments, foundations, and philanthropists exercise their power by offering resources and monetary support to organizations and establishing guidelines for organizational evaluation.<sup>26</sup> A funder has a significant influence on the ability of organizations to address and respond to the needs of communities on the ground. Often funders see themselves in the role of supporter and educator, especially for smaller more grass-roots organizations that do not have long financial histories or formalized systems of evaluation. This can be problematic when the interests of funders are not aligned or informed by the organizations they are supporting. It can also reinforce systems of oppression in the common-place situation where white-led funding organizations do not have adequate cultural understanding of the organizations they support, or of the needs of the communities that those organizations serve.

22 Koc, M., MacRae, R., Desjardins, E. and Roberts, W. (2008). Getting civil about food: The interactions between civil society and the state to advance food security in Canada. *Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition*, 3(2):122-144. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19320240802243175>

23 Pereira, R., Abokor, L., Ahmad, F., & Abdikkarim, F.J. (2020). Unfunded: Black communities overlooked by Canadian philanthropy. <https://www.forblackcommunities.org/assets/docs/UnfundedReport.pdf>

24 Wakefield, S., Fredrickson, K. R., & Brown, T. (2015). Food security and health in Canada: Imaginaries, exclusions and possibilities. *The Canadian Geographer*, 59(1), 82-92. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cag.12139>

25 Community Foundations of Canada. (2019). Vital signs: Taking the pulse of community foundation food activity across Canada. [https://communityfoundations.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/PROG\\_Food\\_VSUpdate\\_EN.pdf](https://communityfoundations.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/PROG_Food_VSUpdate_EN.pdf)

26 Roelofs, J. (2015). How foundations exercise power. *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 74(4), 654-675. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajes.12112>

A recent report entitled '[Unfunded: Black Communities Overlooked by Canadian Philanthropy](https://www.forblackcommunities.org/assets/docs/UnfundedReport.pdf)', published by Carlton University, brings attention to the significant lack of adequate cultural representation within funding organizations, which historically, has meant that the needs and interests of racialized groups are often overlooked and underfunded. Some maintain that systemic barriers such as "anti-Black racism, power differentials, and inequitable granting processes" create significant obstacles to Black and communities of colour seeking funding to support their initiatives (see [report](#), pg 12). And yet, in circumstances where organizations are able to secure resources from funders, they often have to contend with short-term and unsustainable funding, preventing them from systemically developing long-term strategies to address problems on the community level.<sup>27</sup> These barriers directly impact community organizations' ability to take adequate action and respond to local-level issues, such as food security.

Since the summer of 2020 and the mobilization of the Black Lives Matters movement, funders have begun to openly recognize the inequitable practices that are embedded within the system, which has spurred discussions for change within the sector. Further, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on community-organizations has also inspired dialogue regarding the need for more trust-based approaches to funding, reduced restrictions on the accessibility of resources, and a reduction in barriers in terms of access to resources (simplified application processes). A recent report from the [Center for Evaluation Innovation and Taylor Newberry Consulting](#) detail some of the discussions regarding the long-held assumptions about how foundations should work and how they have been fundamentally challenged since the spring of 2020.<sup>28</sup> Further, another recent report by [Imagine Canada](#) details the ways in which funders can and

should engage more with unrestricted funding to allow organizations more malleability, especially in light of emerging crises that impact communities everyday.<sup>29</sup> These shifts in the funding sector signify that approaches to community support are in need of re-evaluation and reconfiguration and that there is room for change within the sector.

These discussions are useful for municipal actors that have a role in funding community organizations in the City of Toronto. Through some preliminary discussions with municipal staff working in the realm of community funding (beyond the scope of this report and research) it is clear that these themes are also informing local practice and plans for the future within the City of Toronto. However, it is still unclear the degree to which municipal funders are able to shift their approaches to adequately address the needs of the community, in light of ongoing concern about how to best allocate limited resources and maintain a degree of accountability from the organizations they support.

## 5.4 Practical applications and recommendations

Recognizing the above discussions are quite broad in nature, our team aims to ensure that we offer practical and tangible recommendations to consider for future policy and planning discussions. Beyond the considerations presented above, we suggest the City of Toronto develop a *food security emergency action plan template* that can be utilized in times of emergency, and an ongoing *community-focused collaborative communication model* similar to the CCP.

### ***Food security emergency action plan template***

In our discussions with municipal actors, a significant area of discussion centered around the need for an

27 Pereira, R., Abokor, L., Ahmad, F., & Abdikkarim, F.J. (2020). Unfunded: Black communities overlooked by Canadian philanthropy. <https://www.forblackcommunities.org/assets/docs/UnfundedReport.pdf>

28 Liadsky, B., Taylor, A., Coffman, J., Beer, T., & Lopez, A. (2021). Approaches to learning amid crises: Reflections from philanthropy. Center for Evaluation Innovation and Taylor Newberry Consulting. <https://taylornewberry.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Approaches-to-Learning-Amid-Crises.pdf>

29 Ayer, S. & Anderson, P. (2022). Trust & Impact: Funder's perspectives on unrestricted funding in Canada. Imagine Canada. <https://www.imaginecanada.ca/en/resource-download/Trust-and-Impact-Funders-Perspectives-on-Unrestricted-Funding-Canada>

emergency strategy and food insecurity response. A number of municipal staff highlight that they endured a significant level of stress due to a lack of a broader food system strategy, and highlighted that through the pandemic timeline many issues were brought forward that should be documented and accounted for to develop an informed strategy for future possible crises. We hope that this report may help to inform a future emergency preparedness strategy, and that a potential strategy emphasizes and prioritizes the role of community-based actors and organizations, highlighting their unique role in addressing issues of food insecurity and food system resilience.

### ***Community-focused collaborative communication model***

In our discussions with community organizations, a great emphasis was placed on the importance of the collaborative efforts that came out of the CCP over the pandemic timeline. One recommendation from this research is to ensure that a model of community collaboration is prioritized in the City of Toronto.

Though the urgency for collaboration between the municipality and community organizations is no longer as acute as it was in the initial stages of the pandemic, organizations highlight that the issues that they have been dealing with since March 2020 were pre-existing before the pandemic and will likely be ongoing and longstanding issues for the foreseeable future. Organizations see value in developing a version of the CCP and would like to see an institutionalized model developed for longer-term communication and collaboration led by municipal actors. Further, such a platform also helps to enhance the visibility of the role, importance, and impact of community-based initiatives and organizations.

In closing, we recognize that the responsibility to support and feed community members should not be solely placed on local community organizations and initiatives. Nonetheless, these actors are vital assets to food system resiliency and for informing and enacting longer term strategies to address the underlying causes of poverty and food insecurity.



# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Compiled materials for qualitative content analysis for Toronto

Author	Title
City of Toronto	Toronto Office of Recovery and Rebuild: Discussion Guide for Toronto's Community Agencies
City of Toronto	Toronto's Resiliency Strategy
The Initiative for a Competitive Inner City, Meister Consultants Group (MCG) and Toronto Public Health	Resilient food systems/Resilient Cities: A high level vulnerability assessment of Toronto's food system
Toronto Environmental Alliance	Community hubs and community-based responses to the COVID-19 crisis: Lessons for building a more equitable, resilient and climate-safe Toronto
Joe Mihevic	Report on emergency food preparedness and building urban food resilience
City of Toronto	Fact sheet: Community Coordination Plan
City of Toronto	Community Coordination Plan: Dashboard
City of Toronto	COVID-19: Impacts and opportunities
City of Toronto	Orientation and overview
City of Toronto and United Way of Greater Toronto	Evaluation of the Community Coordination Plan (CCP) during the COVID-First Wave: Executive Summary
Initiative for a Competitive Inner City	Food System Resilience Case Study: Toronto, ON
City of Toronto	Report for action: City of Toronto Service Restart and Recovery Update
City of Toronto	Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy 2020: Neighbourhood Action Plans
City of Toronto	Official Plan: Chapter 2
City of Toronto	Official Plan: Chapter 3
RUAF Foundation (Resource Centres on Urban Agriculture and Food Security)	Local food system responses to COVID-19: Toronto and its city region
City of Toronto, Toronto Public Health	Toronto Food Strategy Report' 2018



## Appendix 2: Interview guide samples

### Community Food Program Interview Guide

Preparing for food security after COVID-19: Strengthening equity and resiliency in future emergency response in Toronto

#### Research Objectives:

Investigate the responses of communities and organizations, including those that emerged in Neighbourhood Improvement Areas (NIAs) to address heightened food insecurity during the outbreak and recovery in the City of Toronto; Assess emergency response preparedness in food security practice in other cities to evaluate how equity and resiliency concerns are considered before, during and after the outbreak; Broker local and expert knowledge on the impacts of the COVID-19 response on the resiliency and equity of Toronto's food systems; Inform and strengthen food-system practice and policy in future emergency response.

You will be asked a series of questions related to your experience leading or supporting food security programming at the onset of the COVID 19 crisis and throughout the pandemic so far. You will also be asked the types of mechanisms your organization/program used to remain operational during this time, including what kind of supports your team may have received, collaborations that may have emerged, or challenges you've had to overcome. The aim is to capture your experience and work towards a more resilient system, so similar challenges may be avoided if we may see similar crises in the future.

You understand that participation is completely voluntary, and should there be any question that you are unsure of, or not willing to answer, we can move past it. You may end participation at any time. Further, we ensure that participation will remain anonymous. Do you agree to the use of anonymous quotations in this study?

Verbal consent – Once we start recording, I'll state the date and time and ask you to state your full name on the record and that you consent to being recorded and interviewed. Please also indicate your preference regarding quotation and attribution of things that you say during the interview in any publications to come from this research. Of these three options which do you prefer

- ☐ My comments can be quoted or paraphrased with attribution after my review and approval
- ☐ My comments can be quoted or paraphrased anonymously
- ☐ Nothing I say can be quoted or paraphrased directly

#### Section 1: General Expertise & organizational background

- Establishing questions related to key informant profile (e.g. what is your current job, or role)
- How long have you been working in this role or capacity?
- Generally, what does your role entail and how do you support food security initiatives in the community that you work in?
- Can you tell me more about the work of <ORGANIZATION THEY WORK FOR>? What kind of supports are typically offered by the organization? How central is food to the mandate of the organization?

#### Supplementary questions for manager level interviews:

- Is there an annual report that you might be able to share that details where the organizational funding comes from?

- Can you share an estimation of the percentage of the overall organization budget allocated to food programming? If so, where do those sources typically come from?
- Do you typically find you are able to keep up with the demand for food from your community or client base?
- Does your organization work with donated food products? If so, where does that come from? If so, do you feel those supports are adequate or appropriate for your community?
- If not, what other methods does your organization use to ensure you have adequate funding, resources and supports to remain operational?
- Has your organization engaged with any new or innovative methods of securing resources since the onset of the crisis?

## **Section 2: Impacts of the pandemic on the community**

- Can you recall for me those early days when COVID 19 was declared a pandemic? How did your organization initially respond? What were the major concerns of the leadership team and board in mid March last year?
- What was your biggest concern in your role at that time?
- How did your team decide to move forward on programming?
- How did your community/client base respond, and what were the main needs of community members?
- What were the biggest impacts of the crises on your organization as a whole?

## **Section 3: Supports, collaboration and challenges**

- Can you share with me what were some of the biggest challenges for your organization at the onset of the crisis and since?
- Have any significant new partnerships emerged because of the crisis? Or are older partnerships strengthened by the crisis? If so, how?
- Has the organization been able to secure new types of supports, or increase supports from existing donors, funders, supporters?
- If not, what have been the key barriers?
- How has the municipality supported your efforts?
- Do you feel that your organization has been appropriately supported by the various levels of government? (ie: municipal, provincial, federal?)
- Before the onset of the crisis, the social sector took many hits from Provincial-level budget cuts (including for example, cuts to public health, legal and settlement supports). Was your organization impacted by these cuts before the crisis emerged?
- If so, in what ways?
- What do you think are the biggest challenges of non-profit organizations today? How do you think those challenges could be rectified?
- Have you noticed an ebb and flow in the resources made available through donations of food and funds?

## **Section 4: Food security, food policy, and governance**

- To what degree do you think food security is a concern for the community that you serve?
- In your perspective, what are the impacts of food insecurity on the community you serve? Who do you think is most affected?
- What are the drivers of your organization to address these impacts? (for example, what aspects of the mandate of the organization make food insecurity a priority?)
- In what ways does your organization aim to address the impacts?
- What do you think is the role of the municipal level to address food insecurity? What is the role of the

province and the federal government?

- If you could communicate your concerns with these various levels of government what would you say?
- What does resilience mean to you for this community? What do you see as a path or process to community food security resilience?
- If people seem unclear about this question or the concept of resilience, you could state “What do you see as important to ensuring the recovery or rebuilding of community food security is sustainable over the long term?”

### **Section 5: Conclusion**

- Moving forward, our team is aiming to host an event to share back some of the findings from our research and to provide an opportunity for community-based actors and local groups or organizations to share their experiences with one another, and learn from each other about how they have been responding and adapting to the crisis and their community’s needs. Are you interested in being a part of this discussion? If so, what is a reasonable timeline to deliver such an event? In what ways could we plan this event to be as inclusive as possible to enable your participation? What kind of information or topics would you be most interested in hearing about or discussing with others?
- Do you have any questions for me about the research?
- Is there anything else you would like to mention, or revisit?
- Is there anyone or other organizations that you think should be approached for a similar interview?
- Are there other staff from your team that you think we should also interview?

### **Sample Municipal Actors Interview Guide**

Preparing for food security after COVID-19: Strengthening equity and resiliency in future emergency response in Toronto

#### **Research Objectives:**

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You will be asked a series of questions related to your experience working on the municipal level at the onset of the COVID 19 crisis and throughout the pandemic so far. You will also be asked the types of mechanisms your organization/department used to support the municipality during this time, including the practices and policies that were in place to address or mitigate the impacts of the crisis on communities. The aim is to capture your experience and inform our local policy makers in Toronto about how others have worked towards a more resilient system and to ensure we are adequately prepared if we may see similar crises in the future.

You understand that participation is completely voluntary, and should there be any question that you are unsure of, or not willing to answer, we can move past it. You may end participation at any time. Further, we ensure that participation will remain anonymous. Do you agree to the use of anonymous quotations in this study?

Verbal consent – Once we start recording, I’ll state the date and time and ask you to state your full name on the record and that you consent to being recorded and interviewed.

### **Section 1: General Expertise & organizational background**

- Establishing questions related to key informant profile (e.g. what is your current job or role)
- How long have you been working in this role or capacity?
- Generally, what does your role entail and how do you support food security initiatives in the city that you work in?

### **Section 2: Impacts of the pandemic on food security**

- Can you recall for me those early days when COVID 19 was declared a pandemic? How did your organization/department initially respond?
- What were the major concerns of your organization/department in mid-March last year? What was your biggest concern in your role at that time? What have been the major areas of concern since the onset of the crisis?
- In what ways was the City prepared for the crisis and the possible impacts?
- What policies or programs were in place to safeguard against the impacts of the crisis on food security? OR What structures were in place to try and mitigate the impact of the crisis on food security?

### **Section 3: Food security, food policy, and governance**

- To what degree do you think food security is a concern for the urban region that you serve? Who do you think are the most affected communities?
- Who are the key actors that work to address food insecurity in your City? In what ways are they being supported through this crisis?
- In what ways are you/your team/department communicating with actors that are addressing emergency food needs? What is the process for understanding the community impact and need?
- (if community consultation is used) Have there been any unexpected outcomes from the effort to consult with communities?
- Is there opportunity for actors that work in food security to influence local policy decisions? If so, how have those opportunities come to be and who oversees them? If so, in what ways are they able to influence local policy? (examples?)
- Are there specific food security projects/initiatives overseen by the municipality? If so, who leads those initiatives (what department/program etc.)?
- In your opinion, what do you think is needed to ensure food security is protected?

### **Section 4: Overcoming system vulnerability, ensuring system resiliency**

- What have been the main concerns, sources of vulnerability, points of stress in the City in regard to food security?
- In what ways are those concerns, sources of vulnerability, or points of stress being addressed/protected?
- Who are the key actors in doing this work?
- How are those actors equipped to deal with impacts of the crisis and to ensure stability at the community level?
- In your opinion, what has been learned through the process of dealing with this crisis? What would you say all urban regions/cities should have in place to safeguard against the impacts of a crisis such as this?
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### **Section 5: Conclusion**

- Do you have any questions for me about the research?
- Is there anything else you would like to mention, or revisit?
- Is there anyone or other organizations that you think should be approached for a similar interview?