

## Cultivating Black Food Sovereignty in Toronto: Towards agenda for Action

### What is food sovereignty?

In 2019, the Afri-Can FoodBasket initiated community dialogue about food sovereignty for Black communities in Toronto – the Black Food Sovereignty Initiative Toronto. *"Food Sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems."* Food sovereignty is, therefore, a holistic, healthy and sustainable approach for communities to address chronic food insecurity.

### Why are Black communities organizing for a Black Food Sovereignty agenda?

Black Canadians are much more likely than the rest of the population to experience inadequate or insecure access to food because of anti-Black racism and its effects (e.g., insufficient income, high unemployment, criminalization, lack of access to adequate housing, etc.).

Social injustice is rampant in the Canadian food system. Black people disproportionately face the detrimental impacts of land theft, lack of access to land, food apartheid<sup>1</sup> neighborhoods, diet-related health problems, and food- and farm-worker exploitation. These issues have their roots in the founding of Canada - the history of land theft from indigenous peoples and the exploitation of enslaved black and brown people.

In 2017-2018, almost 30% of Black households were food insecure, and Black households were 3.6 times more likely to be food insecure than white households. Moreover, Black Canadians will be disadvantaged by the unhealthy consequences of food insecurity for years to come - more than one-third of Black children live in food insecure households, compared to just 12% of white children.<sup>3,4</sup>

However, over the past 25 years at least, Toronto's Black population has been organizing its response to food insecurity through several community-based initiatives.

Food sovereignty will be a reality for Black Canadians when we work towards cultivating and nurturing Black leadership, building Black Sustainable Food Systems Institutions, and cultivating Black self-determination. We will secure our access to sufficient quantities of healthy and culturally appropriate food by working as a coalition of Black-led organizations and individuals, guided by egalitarian principles and ecologically sound practices, and making access to food central to our struggle for justice.<sup>1,2</sup>

### The Afri-Can FoodBasket: 25 years of struggle and service

Afri-Can FoodBasket (AFB) is a community-based, non-profit organization that has been at the forefront of championing Food Justice and Food Sovereignty for Toronto's ACB communities since 1995. The AFB provides leadership in urban agriculture, and fosters collaboration to advance food justice, health and social enterprise in the African Canadian community.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/may/15/food-apartheid-food-deserts-racism-inequality-america-karen-washington-interview>

In response to the impact of COVID-19 on Black communities, in 2020 the City of Toronto supported the AFB to develop a new food basket program - BlackFoodToronto<sup>2</sup>. The Afri-Can FoodBasket launched the BlackFoodToronto program as an initiative to address food insecurities faced by disadvantage, low income and undocumented members of Toronto's Black communities. Through this largely volunteer-run effort, the AFB delivers a basket of fresh produce weekly to Black, Caribbean, and African families in need.

### **Cultivating Black Food Sovereignty**

In 2019, the AFB brought together people from the city's Black population to reflect on the possibility of building a Black food sovereignty movement. This consultation process ended when COVID-19 emerged in Toronto.

In response to continued and worsening food insecurity among Black communities in Toronto, the AFB organized a conference on Black food sovereignty in November 27-28, 2020.<sup>5</sup> The conference brought together Black community activists, organizations, researchers and policymakers to critically reflect on the food security crisis in Black communities, strengthen their understanding of food sovereignty, discuss the potential for a food sovereignty approach to addressing systemic food access problems, and commit to embarking on a community-focussed process to achieve food sovereignty.

For the four months following the conference, the AFB will work with its partners and supporters to:

- Develop draft terms of reference for the Black Food Sovereignty Alliance (i.e., the body that will promote, champion and coordinate strategies to achieve food sovereignty);
- Publish three policy-oriented reports that will inform the work of the Alliance and the process to achieve food sovereignty;
- Organize a community roundtable in May 2021 where participants will discuss the policy papers, debate and accept recommendations based on the policy papers, identify the interim membership of the Alliance and outline a 1-year action plan, and implement a process to develop a food sovereignty strategic plan to guide the efforts of the Alliance, community stakeholders, and institutional partners over the next 3-5 years.

The call for Black food sovereignty represents a new strategic phase in asserting our self-determination, addressing the structural roots of anti-Black racism, and promoting our health and wellbeing. This will be our collective effort.

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<sup>1</sup><https://foodsecurecanada.org/who-we-are/what-food-sovereignty>

<sup>2</sup>Patel R. (2009). Food sovereignty. Journal of Peasant Studies 36(3), 663-706.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03066150903143079>

<sup>3</sup>Tarasuk V, Mitchell A. (2020) Household food insecurity in Canada, 2017-18. Toronto. <https://proof.utoronto.ca/>.

<sup>4</sup>Fact Sheet – Race and Food Insecurity. A Research Collaboration between PROOF and FoodShare.

[https://foodshare.net/custom/uploads/2019/11/PROOF\\_factsheet\\_press\\_FINAL.6.pdf](https://foodshare.net/custom/uploads/2019/11/PROOF_factsheet_press_FINAL.6.pdf).

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<sup>2</sup> <https://blackfoodtoronto.com/>

<sup>5</sup>The AFB organized with conference in partnership with the City of Toronto's Confronting Anti-Black Racism Unit, the Centre for Studies in Food Security at Ryerson University, the Network for the Advancement of Black Communities (NABC), FoodShare, and Caribbean African Canadian Social Services (CAFCAN).