



Realize the Human Right to Food

Canada is one the largest agricultural producers and wealthiest countries in the world, yet four million Canadians, among them 1.15 million children, have trouble meeting their food needs. This problem is far worse in northern and remote communities, where, in Nunavut, for example, two thirds of children are food insecure. Food insecurity takes a substantial toll on physical and mental health, engendering significant costs to the health care system.

Food is a human right, and we all have the right to feed ourselves, our families and our communities in dignity. The federal government has an international legal obligation to ensure the full realization of the right to food for all those living in Canada. As was indicated by former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food Olivier de Schutter during his 2012 mission to Canada, we have the capacity to ensure domestic access to nutritious and culturally desirable food for all and achieve zero hunger. We need the right laws, policies and programs to make it happen. The UN's top recommendation was a Right to Food Strategy, which the national food policy should embrace.



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Vital statistics

12.7% percent of households in Canada experience some degree of food insecurity, meaning they lack consistent physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs.¹

Food insecurity rates in the territories are well above the national Canadian average: 46.8% in Nunavut and 24.1% in the Northwest Territories.²

38.2% of single-parent families headed by women are food insecure.

68% of households on social assistance are food insecure.

Households with people of indigenous, Latin American or African descent experience significantly higher levels of food insecurity.

¹ PROOF (2015). [Monitoring Food Insecurity in Canada.](#)

² Briefing notes





What needs to be done

Adopting a right-to-food approach would result in a serious change in how we think about food, govern our food system and address food insecurity in Canada. This rights-based approach commits to the long-term goal of ending, not merely reducing, hunger and food insecurity. Social and economic rights are not expected to be realized overnight, but we can commit to core minimum standards as a starting point and work towards progressive realisation over time.

The right to food implies that hunger and food insecurity should not be left to charity. It enshrines available, accessible, adequate and sustainably produced food as a human right with corresponding obligations on the state to ensure the full realization of that right.

The right to food implies a move away from focusing on low prices of foods and a reliance on charity-based approaches such as food banks, to policies that focus on rights-based social protection, protection of living wages and support of local and sustainable food production. While the causes and experiences of food insecurity are complex, the overwhelming factor is poverty, and policy solutions must therefore address income levels.

Beyond realizing the right to food for all Canadians, we should strive towards a process that will lead to the application of the principles of food sovereignty, which has, at its heart, the reclamation of public decision-making power over the food system.

National Food Policy Priority Actions

The national food policy should adopt a human-rights approach that should then guide the implementation and evaluation of the full suite of policies that affect food insecurity, including, in particular, the federal Poverty Reduction Strategy and Nutrition North.

Canada's Poverty Reduction Strategy should work with provinces to improve social programs and to ensure there is an income floor below which no one can fall so that all Canadians can afford adequate, nutritious food.

In collaboration with Health Canada and INAC, overhaul Nutrition North to improve access and affordability of food by strengthening northern regional food systems, including public support for programs enhancing access to traditional and community-grown foods.

Ensure that international trade and investment agreements do not undermine public programs that enhance respect for human rights, sustainable livelihoods and/or food sovereignty.

Ensure that adequate and comprehensive national data is collected on food insecurity, by making the food insecurity section of the Canadian Community Health Survey mandatory.

Establish benchmarks and design programs with which to reach them. Ensure these programs are properly resourced, monitored and accountable.





What might this cost?

It is important to note that while some of the government's obligations towards ensuring the right to food require program costs - such as rights-based social protection schemes, programs for marginalized groups or extension services for agroecological farming practices - others do not.

The state is also required to regulate its own activities and the activities of third parties to ensure they do not interfere with the right to food. Such regulations could include legislating living wages or reviewing and changing policies and laws in place to ensure they do not interfere with access to country foods, land for new farmers, or seeds.

Key resources

Documents on the Right to Food in Canada

- Olivier De Schutter (2012). [Mission to Canada, report to the UN Human Rights Council](#), UN Doc. A/HRC/22/50/Add (see esp. recommendations)
- Lambek (2017). Right to Food Policy Brief. Food Secure Canada.

Documents Defining the Scope and Content of the Right to Food

- United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1999). [General Comment No. 12](#).
- UN Committee on World Food Security (2004). [The Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security](#)
- UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, [The Right to Adequate Food: Fact Sheet No. 34](#) (2010).

Documents on National Implementation of the Right to Food

- Olivier De Schutter (2013). [Assessing a Decade of Right to Food Progress](#) UN Doc. A/68/288.
- Olivier De Schutter (2014). [The Transformative Potential of the Right to Food](#) UN Doc. A/HRC/25/57.
- Civil Society Report, ["10 Years of the Right to Adequate Food Guidelines: Progress, Obstacles and the Way Ahead"](#) (2014).

