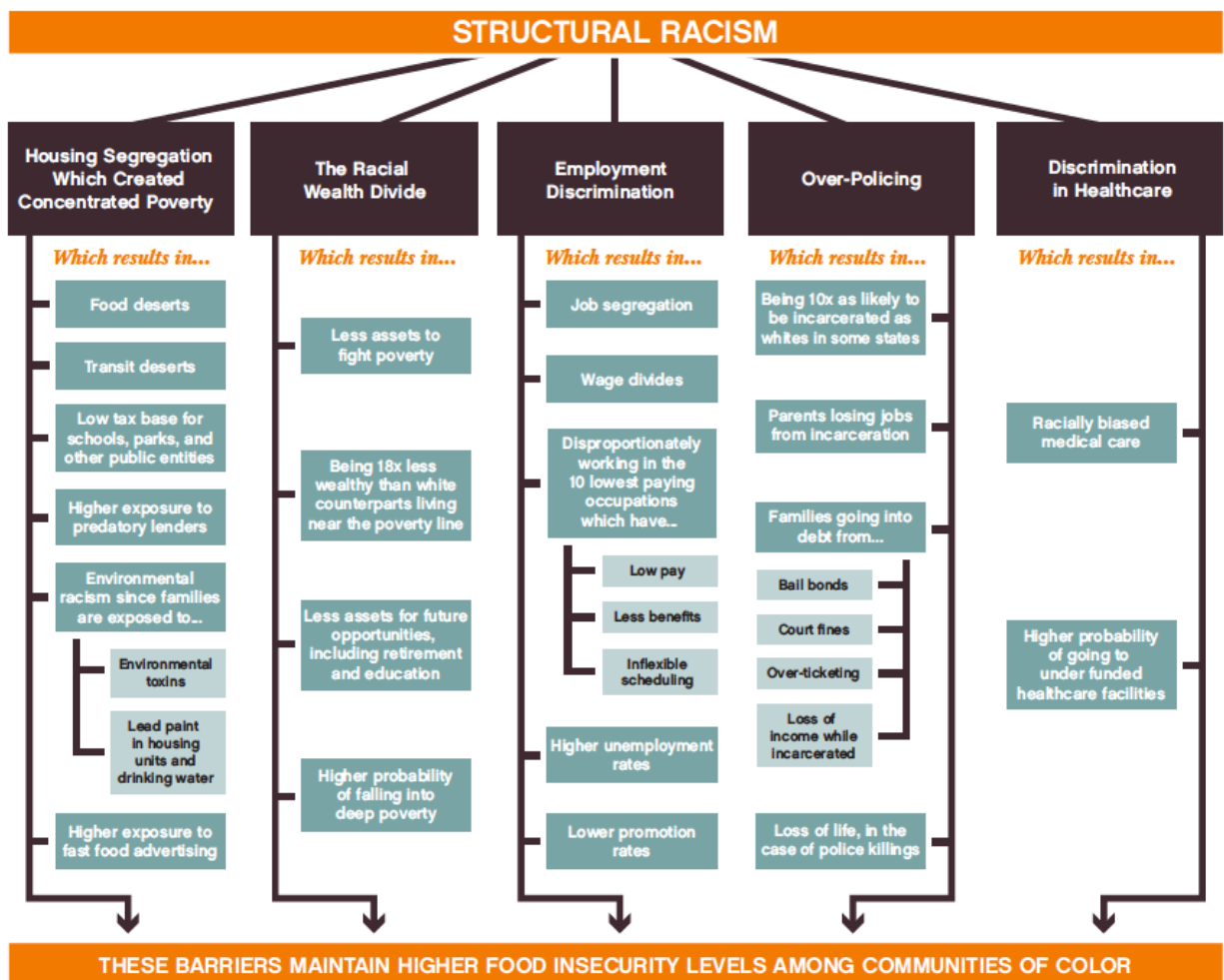


# A Food System Strategy for Waterloo Region: Applying an Indigenous Equity and Anti-Racism Lens

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# 1. Introduction

Equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) policies across Canadian institutions, organizations and companies are shifting the landscape of how anti-racism and Indigenous equity is practiced. In the area of food systems planning, we have a lot of ground to cover in terms of harmonizing our regional and municipal food policies and strategies with national and international agreements and contractual commitments. To start, Anti-racism and Indigenous Equity Units are being established at the regional and municipal level governments in Waterloo Region. We can continue to build on progressive efforts by implementing strategic actions, backed by policy changes and funding allocation, reflecting the multi-faceted ways structural racism impacts food insecurity.<sup>1</sup>



NOTE: These realities apply for communities of color living in cities, reservations, rural areas, metropolitan areas and suburban neighborhoods.  
 SOURCES: Racial Gap Learning Simulation Policy Packet; Ending Hunger in Communities Where Its Most Likely; Mass Incarceration: A Major Cause to Hunger; 2018 Hunger Report: Jobs Challenge, pgs 90-91; 2017 Hunger Report: Fragility

## *Indigenous Equity*

Our obligations to Indigenous Equity through *UNDRIP*, *CANDRIP*, and *Journey Together: Ontario's Commitment to Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples*, include the following: <sup>2</sup>

- Implementation of UNDRIP is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Call to Action #43, calling on "municipal governments to fully adopt and implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as the framework for reconciliation."
- Calls to action that arise as a result of a commitment to implement UNDRIP; E.g. How are the goals of UNDRIP reflected in Waterloo Region's Community Climate Adaptation Plan and any Sustainability plans at the regional level and within the various sub governments' plans?
- Ask Region to endorse UNDRIP as the framework for the Region to use in its ongoing process of reconciliation with local First Nations and urban Indigenous peoples
- Commit to working with other levels of government, Indigenous communities, and school boards to increase awareness within the Region of UNDRIP and why it is important

## *Anti-Racism*

Our obligations to Anti-Racism through the *UN Declaration of Human Rights*, *UN International Decade for People of African Descent*, *Canada's Anti-Racism Strategy*, and *Ontario's Anti-Racism Act*, include the following: <sup>3 4</sup>

- strengthen and standardize race-based data collection, analysis and public reporting of disaggregated data by government and institutions
- proactively anticipate and remove unconscious bias by examining how different Indigenous and racialized groups could be affected by programs and policies by government and institutions
- use race-related data collection standards and an anti-racism impact assessment framework to guide anti-racism initiatives, measurable targets, public reporting and community consultation.
- deepen the public's understanding of the many forms of racism, including a focus on anti-Black racism, anti-Indigenous racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia and other racialized groups
- acknowledge that people of African descent represent a distinct group whose rights must be promoted and protected

## *Diversity in the Region*

Having a food system that meets the needs of all our community members includes addressing the historic inequities and systemic racism embedded in the Region's institutions, policies, and processes. In Waterloo Region there are strong communities of Indigenous, Black and People of Colour and these populations are growing.<sup>5</sup>

- The visible minority population in the Region in 2006 is 19% with a growth of 64.1% (2006-16), the highest growth being East Indian ancestry
- The highest populations of visible minorities are in Waterloo (26.4%), followed by Kitchener (21.8%) and Cambridge (15.6%)

- The largest growth in visible minorities from 2006-16 was in Woolwich (300%), Wellesley (222.2%), North Dumfries (137%) and Wilmot (59.8%)
- Aboriginal Peoples increased by 87%, from 4,810 to 8,980 (2006-16), though unofficially numbers are higher (based on estimates among Indigenous leaders in the Region)

### *Food Insecurity in Canada*

Food insecurity was an issue before the pandemic for many Canadians, and COVID-19 has only heightened disparities between racialized groups and other vulnerable populations: <sup>6 7</sup>

- In 2017-18, 1 in 8 households in Canada was food insecure, amounting to 4.4 million people, including more than 1.2 million children living in food-insecure households.
- In May 2020, almost one in seven (14.6%) Canadians indicated that they lived in a household where there was food insecurity in the past 30 days.
- Households with children led by female lone parents are especially vulnerable to food insecurity; one-third of these households are food-insecure.
- The prevalence of household food insecurity differs markedly by Indigenous status and racial/cultural group. The highest rates of food insecurity are found among households where the respondent identified as Indigenous or Black (about 3 times the incidence in white households).
- Most food insecure households are comprised of members of the workforce. 65% reported their main source of income as wages or salaries from employment. Simply having a job is not enough; low-waged jobs and precarious work means people in the workforce often do not have enough income to be food-secure.
- Most (60.4%) households reliant on social assistance in Canada are food-insecure; a quarter is severely food-insecure. Local food costing tells the same story – social assistance rates are too low to enable recipients to meet their basic needs.

### *Planning for Resilience, Shifting Away from Charity Models*

How we choose to address food insecurity and the inequities in the food system should be guided by evidence-based research. Resilience in our food systems - ecological and social - requires that all members of society are meeting a universal basic income. “Household food insecurity in Canada is tightly linked to income. As a household’s income declines, the risk of food insecurity increases. However, it is not a perfect one-to-one relationship. Food insecurity reflects a household’s broader material circumstances, taking into account income, assets like property, and other resources a household could draw upon.” <sup>6</sup>

This means shifting away from charity and emergency food aid-based models in food system planning. “Recent legislation narrowly focuses on food charity (e.g. food donor laws absolving donors of liability for the safety of donated food, tax credits for local producers who donate unsold food to community agencies, Local Food Infrastructure funding as part of the Food Policy for Canada). However, there is no evidence that food charity is able to move households out of food insecurity. Research shows that most

food insecure households do not use food banks. Many food bank directors are quick to acknowledge that the people they serve need more food than they can provide.”<sup>6</sup>

### *Key recommendations and action items*

In the section that follows we outline key recommendations or action items that could be incorporated into a broader food systems planning strategy for the Region. We build on best practices from other Regional initiatives<sup>8,9</sup>, taking into account the following:

- A need to bring increased income to food-insecure households through wealth generation opportunities, especially those that channel revenue into historically disinvested and disenfranchised communities.
- The application of an Anti-racism and Indigenous Equity lens (and intersectional approach) to confronting systemic racism and racial disparities in food systems planning and to not perpetuate the status quo or “business as usual” practices.
- The development of a common understanding about how systemic racism at different points in time and across different sectors affects food insecurity, and the relevance of an equity-based model (as opposed to equality-based).
- The need to support a Regional Food Policy Council (i.e. Food System Roundtable of Waterloo Region) comprised of a broad cross-section of the community members, organizations, and institutions, such that the priorities, interests and voices of all citizens (especially those historically marginalized) are directly leading and influencing food systems planning in their respective communities and the Region broadly.

## 2. Waterloo Region Food Strategy -- Draft Proposed Action Items

### A. Access to Food

Access to food within a reasonable distance from where people live is part of applying an anti-racism and Indigenous equity lens. Ensuring that all community members (especially those who are disenfranchised) can comfortably and safely travel to obtain quality, affordable, and culturally specific foods.

- Conduct research to identify where the socioeconomic needs are and the extent to which existing food establishments serve community needs
- Increase the number of culturally specific food outlets within a reasonable distance to all neighbourhoods
- Review bus stops and transit routes to give people direct access to cultural food outlets without the need for a transfer (“grocery routes”); ensure the routes reflect community needs in terms of safety, capacity, times of the day, and days of the week.
- Ensure that existing and new cultural food outlets are supported by the Region to be able to access and provide fresh, affordable, and culturally specific foods (including items for those with special needs and chronic conditions) -- and that those foods are locally grown by BIPOC. See section on Urban/Rural Agriculture and Economic Policy Priorities/incentives.

### B. Urban/Rural Agriculture

Expand access to culturally specific locally grown foods throughout the Region by:

- increasing production support for City neighbourhoods (prioritizing BIPOC); i.e. backyard/ balcony gardening, community gardening, allotment gardening in available private and public open spaces.
- diversifying the rural farmer base in Townships, supporting the entry of Indigenous/Black/People of Colour farmers; i.e. create an implementing mechanism to transfer public land, facilitate one-to-one relationships with existing landholders for private land transfers or tenure secure long-term lease arrangements, developing farmer cooperatives and incubator hubs.
- developing sustainable neighbourhood markets throughout the City, prioritizing those neighbourhoods identified in socio-economic mapping, and providing adequate support for paid positions (prioritizing BIPOC).
- Include BIPOC leadership as decision-makers in budgeting and program design and implementation for food growing initiatives (in a paid capacity for their knowledge rather than simply “consultation”).

### C. Hunger and Malnutrition

COVID-19 has heightened the awareness and precariousness of persons and families finding that their resources are not enough to cover rent, utilities, medicine, clothes, food and other basic necessities. COVID-19 has been an effective lens to highlight the differential impacts to BIPOC groups. The elderly

population was subject to enhanced suffering from hunger and malnutrition due to isolation, lack of access to stores, inability to prepare nutritious meals, illness, general poor health and cognitive challenges. Rates of food insecurity, interacting with mental health impacts, also rose among school-aged youth and families who would have otherwise accessed consistent school food programming and other institutional supports. While emergency food initiatives alleviated some degree of hunger, COVID-19 illustrates the imperative to shift away from charity and food aid-based models, instead, to support resilient food systems planning and address the socioeconomic drivers of food insecurity.

- Institute and support community self-help projects that address hunger and malnutrition, especially the opportunity for growing and sharing fresh fruits and vegetables in backyards and community spaces, and for shared meal preparation at community kitchens
- Encourage and work with cultural and faith-based institutions to do outreach and ensure that the food needs of vulnerable groups are met (e.g. young families, elderly)
- Facilitate the development of neighbourhood associations (and other community-based networks) and their capacity to provide mutual aid and solidarity in the event of an emergency
- Support the expansion of community-based food production and processing infrastructure in all neighbourhoods (prioritizing designated neighbourhoods); e.g. community gardens, markets, kitchens, pantries, food processing, and food/meal delivery
- Develop protocols in anticipation of future emergency events, such that these community networks and food provision can continue to operate uninterrupted especially in the event of an emergency (avoiding closures and delayed openings at a critical juncture).

#### **D. Food Literacy and Diet**

Children and adults due to poor diet suffer from self-esteem, lack of energy, social challenges and various health problems. This is part of a cultural phenomenon reflecting the subsidization of processed and fast foods and marginalization of work-life balance. This is also reflective of the disenfranchisement and disinvestment in racialized communities (especially Indigenous and Black people) which impacts access to affordable and culturally specific foods through a number of mechanisms.

Another important mechanism for racialized groups is food literacy, where a narrative about what is healthy and appropriate food “for all” is shaped by western and colonial narratives. Indigenous and African communities have a long history of growing and preparing foods, and those foods and diets are central to maintaining physical health, mental well-being and healing. However, racist and white supremacist narratives in our colonial history and perpetuated today, have oppressed those practices, imposed stigma, and excluded them from the mainstream. In today’s socio-political climate it is not acceptable that the diversity of Canadian citizens is not represented across sectors, through institutional procurement policy, dietary guidelines, school food programming, etc. It is not acceptable that the traditional and ancestral foods of Indigenous and African peoples are not widely available, and that cultural diversity is not reflected through a stronger presence in restaurants and grocers on our streets.

- Design food-related institutional materials in a manner that reflects the diversity of Waterloo residents in terms of traditional Indigenous and African foods, diets, and cooking methods; i.e. dietary guidelines, school food programming, procurement policies.
- Work with a broad cross-section of the community (institutions, families, individuals, cultural and faith-based organizations) to co-create the kind of cultural dynamic we want to cultivate in the Waterloo Region
- Promote opportunities for cross-cultural and inter-generational sharing of meals and knowledge of growing, cooking, and dietary guidelines.
- Develop school food curriculum for pre-K through 12th grade and beyond, with an anti-racist and Indigenous equity lens. Curriculum can include production (on-site gardens contributing to lunch food as standard), but also touch on processing, healthy eating, recycling, composting.
- Implement data collection and monitoring to inform programs and policies, based on race, age, and gender-disaggregated data that reflects the numbers of people hungry, malnourished, overweight, and more generally experiencing food insecurity, accessing food banks, or facing barriers in access to food production or food aid.
- Educate policymakers, regional staff, public health, school boards, and relevant stakeholders on our history and modern-day implications of colonialism and white supremacy as it relates to how food security initiatives are planned and implemented, the importance of an equity-based model (as opposed to equality-based), and attention to building meaningful collaboration and relationships of trust (while respecting the immediacy of needed solutions).
- Implement public campaigns and promotions to mainstream cultural diversity in the Region, designed to channel economic wealth back to those communities that have been historically disenfranchised (especially the Indigenous and Black community). E.g. festivals and events, Business Improvement Area (BIA) restaurant promotions, food skills and cooking demos, etc.

#### **E. Economic Policy Priorities and Incentives**

The diversity of the Waterloo Region's residents should be represented at all levels in all sectors of our food system. However, here as elsewhere in Canada, racialized groups are not well represented as owners of land and across the food supply chain, are disproportionately represented as workers along the food supply chain (often under precarious work conditions), and their cultures are not widely visible and accepted. Having an economic/agricultural safety net to support the most vulnerable in our community should be included in our goals. Redefining wealth and prosperity within our social relationships and spiritual values will be a major step towards ensuring economic justice.

- Identify and eliminate barriers to participation and ownership in all aspects of the food system.
- Explore providing employment and redistribution of wealth through cooperative community ownership.
- Convene dialogues and create partnerships with local universities and national organizations advocating for racialized communities to develop entrepreneurship and low-cost loan programs which encourage entrepreneurship.



- Develop frameworks for providing business incentives (such as tax incentives, small business loans, etc.) so that businesses that receive public subsidies return maximal benefits to the surrounding community in terms of healthy food access, local employment and other forms of community responsiveness. Such frameworks should be developed in collaboration with community organizations and residents. Incentives should support development and improvement in currently underserved neighbourhoods.
- Some examples of economic policy priorities and incentives for example:
  - Schools should require school lunch programs to incorporate fresh local and diverse foods and develop relationships with those farmers who can provide educational opportunities for children (with attention to locating BIPOC farmers).
  - Encourage churches to take an anti-racism and Indigenous equity lens to food programming at church functions, church-sponsored gardens, food banks or programs, and in the formation of health ministries with a focus on dietary practices.
  - Develop procurement policy that allows small businesses to participate in a “good neighbour program” whereby they agree to sell a designated portion of culturally specific locally grown foods (prioritizing BIPOC growers/retailers).
  - Develop procurement policy at the institutional level (e.g. government, school, non-profit, church) that mandates a designated portion of food contracts be purchased from culturally specific locally grown foods (prioritizing BIPOC growers/retailers).

## **F. Overall/ General**

- Link up community economic development with opportunities for ecological restoration, climate action, etc., facilitating community organization partnerships and synergies.
- Conduct an environmental scan/mapping for complementary growing/ecological initiatives.
- Develop food systems planning that is responsive to emergencies without over-reliance on food aid; map food initiatives in the Region, understand the socioeconomic and geographic distribution of the client base, understand the organizational resource capacity; identify and target gaps and weaknesses in the system; build community-based mutual aid support networks for contingency.
- Support for a Regional Food Policy Council committed to the issues outlined herein (i.e. the Food System Roundtable of Waterloo Region):
  - a. Salary for staff support for the Food Systems Roundtable of Waterloo Region, given that funding through WR Public Health (2007-2017) was lost
  - b. Support for a speaker series (a proposed collaboration between the Roundtable and KPL); honoraria to pay speakers and offer refreshments
- Support Indigenous leadership, land back (rematriation), land access, and land-based education opportunities.
- Support for peri-urban allotment gardens (i.e. larger than community garden plots, to enable market garden scale of operations), with opportunities for new farmers and ‘youth at risk’ to be engaged in regenerative agriculture.
- Support for a farm incubator project

- Support for food forests (fedges) to be widely established in parks and at community centres and schools (e.g. championed by Nicola Thomas of Grand River Food Forestry)
- Support for food skills workshops (e.g. growing seedlings, saving seeds, preserving the harvest, foraging, plant medicine making)
- Support for community gardens (e.g. championed with City of Kitchener's grant submission with Jenna vanKlaveren)
- Support for neighbourhood markets (e.g. championed with City of Kitchener's new initiative with Kelly Steiss and My Kitchener Market)

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