

Food banks: temporary alternatives to an inadequate social safety net

New Brunswickers who participated in the Dialogue Sessions aimed at "Developing a poverty reduction plan" said that the high cost of nutritious food is a major issue that causes financial stress for poor people. There were many who said that they know that eating healthy is important, but to do so would require that a significant percentage of their income be spent on groceries. It was often stated that people living on low income buy less-healthy foods because they are less expensiveⁱ. Some of the respondents in the dialogue sessions suggested that funding to food banks should be increasedⁱⁱ.

After the release, in November 2009, of the New Brunswick poverty reduction plan, "Overcoming Poverty Together", the Department of Social Development initiated a survey of food banks and soup kitchens. Given that the role of the Common Front for Social Justice (CFSJ) is to intervene publicly on various issues affecting citizens living in poverty, its members developed a 12-page brief entitled "Food Banks and Soup Kitchens: An Overview". The full document is posted on the CFSJ website (www.frontnb.ca)

Members of CFSJ have drafted a series of recommendations which, if implemented, would significantly improve the lives of people using food banks and soup kitchens. These are regrouped under: (1) Improved funding to people living in poverty and to food banks helping them out; (2) Better administrative practices and quality control measures and (3) Enhanced cooking and gardening skills offered to food bank users.

1. Improved funding to people living in poverty and to food banks helping them out

The following recommendations are directed to the N.B. Department of Social Development:

1. Increase social welfare rates so that the people can afford to purchase food that is nutritious and which corresponds to their food habit pattern.
2. Provide a more generous and a more stable funding to food banks and soup kitchens for the period of time that the poverty level remains high in N.B.
3. Recommend that, with additional government funding, food banks and soup kitchens offer a greater variety of nutritious food as this will pay off through improved health status and reduction of provincial health care costs of food bank clients.
4. Increase the proportion of qualified paid staff in food banks and soup kitchens.
5. Subsidize bus tickets or some alternate modes of transportation to clients who cannot walk to get their food, either at food banks or at soup kitchens.

2. Better administrative practices and quality control measures

The following recommendations are directed to food bank and soup kitchen managers:

1. Examine the administrative structures of food banks and soup kitchens to ensure that their Board of Directors include representatives of food bank users and of soup kitchen clients.
2. Ensure that a mechanism is in place for clients to channel their suggestions for improvements as well as their complaints.
3. Post, on the premises of the food bank or of the soup kitchen, an up-to-date and government-approved list of food policies and regulations to be enforced at all times.
4. Request that each food bank and soup kitchen personnel follow all provincial health regulations and policies. They should have to follow the quality control procedures and good hygienic practices mandatory in all food service establishments.

5. Ensure that the staff and volunteers discard the donated food which has started to spoil, is stale or which is significantly past its "Best by" date.
6. Oversee that all the food bank and soup kitchen staff and volunteers receive training in how to deal with clients in a respectful and non-discriminatory manner (Policies in this matter should be formulated by the Board of Directors and their implementation should be monitored closely).
7. Keep an inventory of the food delivered local food banks or soup kitchens
8. Expand the food bank opening hours to better accommodate food bank users.

3. Enhanced cooking and gardening skills offered to food bank users.

In collaboration with municipalities and local community organizations, it is recommended that, where feasible, food banks expand the services offered to clients so as to increase their involvement in ensuring their own nutritional status and food choices.

1. Organize training sessions to increase the ability of food bank clients to (a) prepare a wider variety of foods; (b) learn to read nutrition labels; (c) learn about simple new recipes.
2. Organize a community garden pilot project. Through this activity, people on low income could harvest their own fresh vegetables for part of the year.

In 1981, the first food bank was introduced as a short term measure to help people during an economic crisisⁱⁱⁱ. It was thought that the situation would disappear within two to three years. Twenty-nine years later, food banks have become part of our landscape. Instead of being seen as an abnormality, they have become a socially accepted reality in Canada as well as in New Brunswick. How can we say we are among the best countries in the world when *Food Bank Canada*^{iv} reported that in March 2009, there were 794,738 Canadians citizens who went to a food bank, an 18% increase over 2008. In the province of N. B. alone, 17,889 individuals received assistance from its 64 affiliated food banks. **This number represents a 14% increase, compared to 2008.** Children of N. B. represented 34% on the 2009 food bank clients.

Food banks and soup kitchen are a signal of the collapse of our social security net. They are also an indication that our federal and provincial governments as well as some private corporations are not interested in making real changes in the redistribution of wealth so that less citizens live in poverty and are in need of food banks.

ⁱ New Brunswick Government. A Choir of Voices - The "What Was Said" Report, p. 12.

ⁱⁱ New Brunswick Government. A Choir of Voices - The "What Was Said" Report, p. 46.

ⁱⁱⁱ Opening of the first food bank in Edmonton, Alberta in 1981.

^{iv} Food Banks Canada. Hunger Count 2009: A comprehensive report on hunger and food bank use in Canada and recommendations for change.