



# PUTTING FOOD ON THE TABLE: SOLVING CANADA'S FOOD ACCESSIBILITY CRISIS

By Rick Spence and Matt Hammond



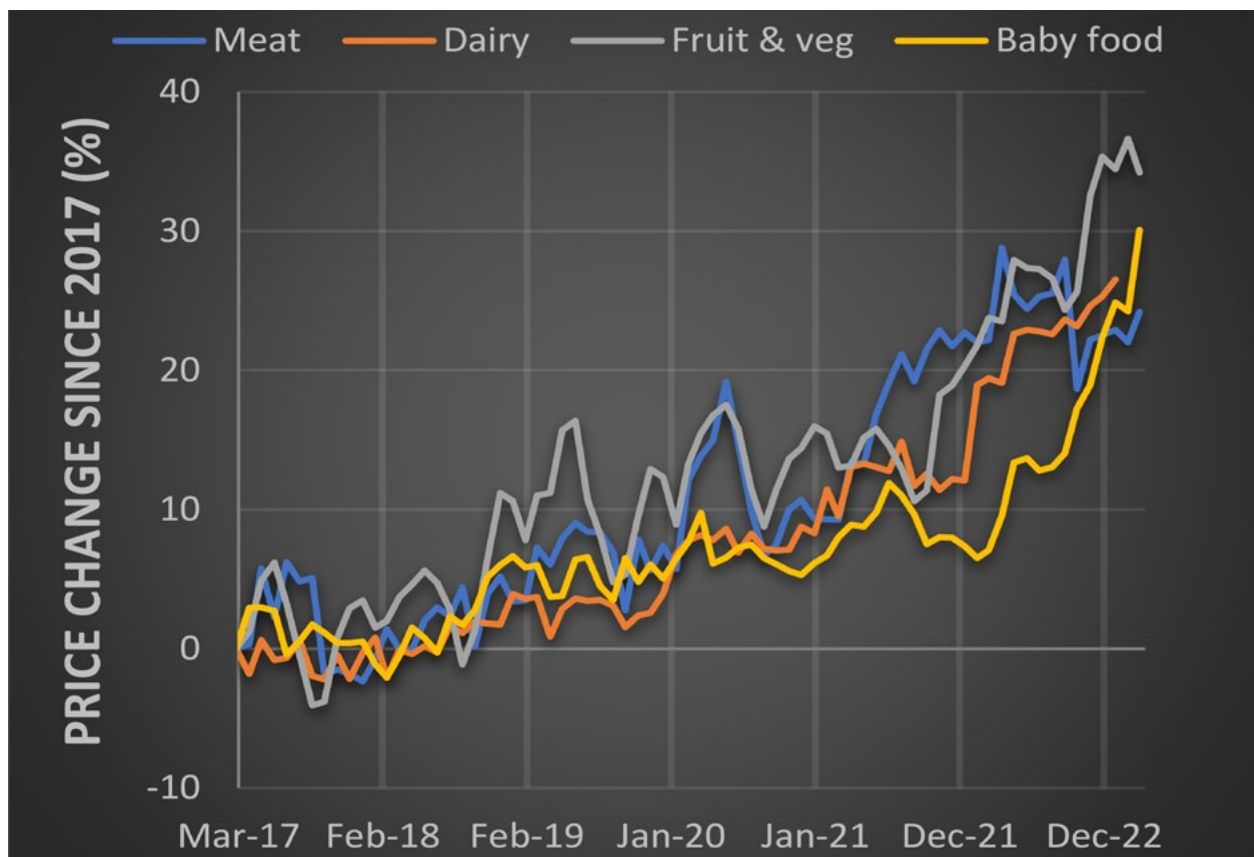
John is a single parent in Toronto whose job offers only part-time – and unpredictable – hours. When work was slow, he turned to the Daily Bread Food Bank. “I often struggled to make ends meet,” he says. “Using the food bank helped a lot, and meant that I didn’t have to make the tough decision between buying food for my son or paying rent.”

As the pandemic reduced John’s work hours even more, the food bank became his lifeline. He told Daily Bread: “People who don’t... use the food bank may not realize how much it helps. Just saving \$30 to \$40 on groceries makes a huge difference – it eases the load and helps you get through until things get a little better.”

Food banks like Daily Bread originated to help the marginalized – people on fixed incomes, people with disabilities, people

down on their luck. But that’s not the full story anymore. According to Hunger Count, a new report from Food Banks Canada, the number of clients of Canada’s 2,381 food banks rose by a shocking 35% between 2019 and 2022. A full 14% of those clients reported earning employment income.

With food prices soaring and rising housing costs in major cities, food insecurity is going mainstream. Food prices in Canada, for example, have spiked by 24-34% since 2017 (see graph of Statistics Canada 2023 data). It’s an indicator that there’s something wrong with Canada’s food-distribution system. Food banks are now hard-pressed to meet rising demand at a time when unemployment is historically low. So what will happen when employment growth starts to stall?



To explore these crucial issues, Rethink Sustainability Initiatives (RSI), a Toronto-based not-for-profit that promotes sustainable growth and resilience, brought together food-system experts from across North America for a May 3rd, 2023 virtual roundtable exploring “The Future of Accessible and Affordable Food.”

RSI founder and roundtable moderator, Yasmin Glanville, kicked off the session noting that 15% of Canadians live in food-insecure households (Statistics Canada, 2021). The roundtable’s goal, she said, was to explore the scale of the food crisis, assess the barriers to making food more accessible and affordable, and discuss active, scalable solutions.

RSI’s experts met that challenge, offering solutions that range from boosting farmers’ markets in urban neighborhoods to making food a human right. This article uses observations from the roundtable, follow-up interviews and research to explore the many ways we can feed more people today – and fix the food system to better serve all Canadians.



# Roundtable Speakers & Moderator



**Neil Hetherington**  
CEO, The Daily Bread  
Food Bank



**Julie Dabrusin, MP**  
Parliamentary Secretary to the  
Minister of Natural Resources  
and Minister of Environment  
and Climate Change



**Guy Dauncey**  
Author, EcoFuturist



**Lauren Baker, PhD**  
Deputy Director,  
The Global Alliance  
for the Future of Food



**Kimberly Zeuli, PhD**  
Founder and Managing  
Director, The Feeding  
Cities Group



**Yasmin Glanville**  
RSI & CTR Founder, Futurist,  
Innovation Strategist and  
Implementation Advisor

## CRISIS, WHAT CRISIS?

"I fully believe that everyone has a right to food, but we are failing on that front." Neil Hetherington, CEO of the Daily Bread Food Bank, launched the roundtable by setting a bold frame of reference for food-related issues – and acknowledging our record of failure. During the pandemic, he said, "While we were all clanging pots, we said that we would build back better. But we didn't. We haven't made any incremental change in social policy that would see decent affordable housing built or income security, or start to tackle the systemic challenge of precarious employment."

Now families need help. Hetherington says Canada's largest food bank served a million clients a year between 2010 and 2020. In 2022, the Daily Bread received 1.6 million visits. In the past 12 months, Hetherington said, 57% of the food banks' repeat clients have been new.

The growing problem of food insecurity is rooted in complex social, health, income and employment issues. *"Food banks can be a barometer of what's going on with poverty,"* says Hetherington. Many of Daily Bread's new visitors reported having no income, part-time income, or employment insurance or EIO benefits. They turned to the food bank because they're unemployed, new to the area, ineligible for government benefits, or because they're not getting enough hours at work. Compared to existing food bank clients, they were more likely to be racialized, newcomers to Canada, and to have children.

Even the good news is bad. After peaking at 11.6%, Hetherington noted that the annual rate of food inflation has fallen to "just" 10%. And there is hunger despite employment. According to a 2022 Daily Bread report, a full 40% of working clients have full-time

employment. "They've done everything right, but the cost of living – whether it's the lack of affordable housing or how we're dealing with inflation – is such that they still need to rely on food charity." It is a social system that has let them down.



Dr. Lauren Baker, Toronto-based deputy director of the Global Alliance for the Future of Food, broadened the view: *"The food system is making us sick."* Among the problems that together create "severe dysfunction," she counts chemical-intensive agriculture, concentrated livestock agriculture, ultra-processed foods, and deregulated supply chains. Result: a loop of harmful impacts that limit access to nutritious food, including unhealthy and contaminated foods, poorly-paying jobs, unsanitary conditions (especially in Indigenous communities and the global South), environmental contamination, poverty and food insecurity – all against a looming backdrop of climate change. It is a "poly-crisis" that requires ecological and socially relevant solutions, Baker said: "Complexity is not an excuse for inaction."

Speaker Guy Dauncey, a self-described eco-futurist and activist in Ladysmith, B.C.,

also noted the widespread impacts of food insecurity. Not only do one in eight families go hungry in Canada, he said; in the popular Vancouver Island tourist destination of Sooke, 28% can't afford to put nutritious food consistently on their tables. Nationally, a July 2022 survey by Angus Reid found that 51% of Canadians found it "difficult" or "very difficult" to feed their families. *Given tight housing markets and soaring rents, "the food crisis is really an affordable housing crisis,"* said Dauncey.

Then there are the pressures on food prices themselves, including Covid-related supply chain disruptions, the war in Ukraine and crop losses in China, India and Pakistan. According to the U.N., food shortages suffered by 230 million of the most vulnerable people on the planet could be relieved with \$51.5 billion in aid and investment. Conveniently, Dauncey noted, 20 of the world's biggest food companies paid US\$53.5 billion to their shareholders (in dividends and share buybacks) during Covid. "There's a lot of money out there, but it's not going where it's needed." To solve food issues, the economics of food must be rethought.

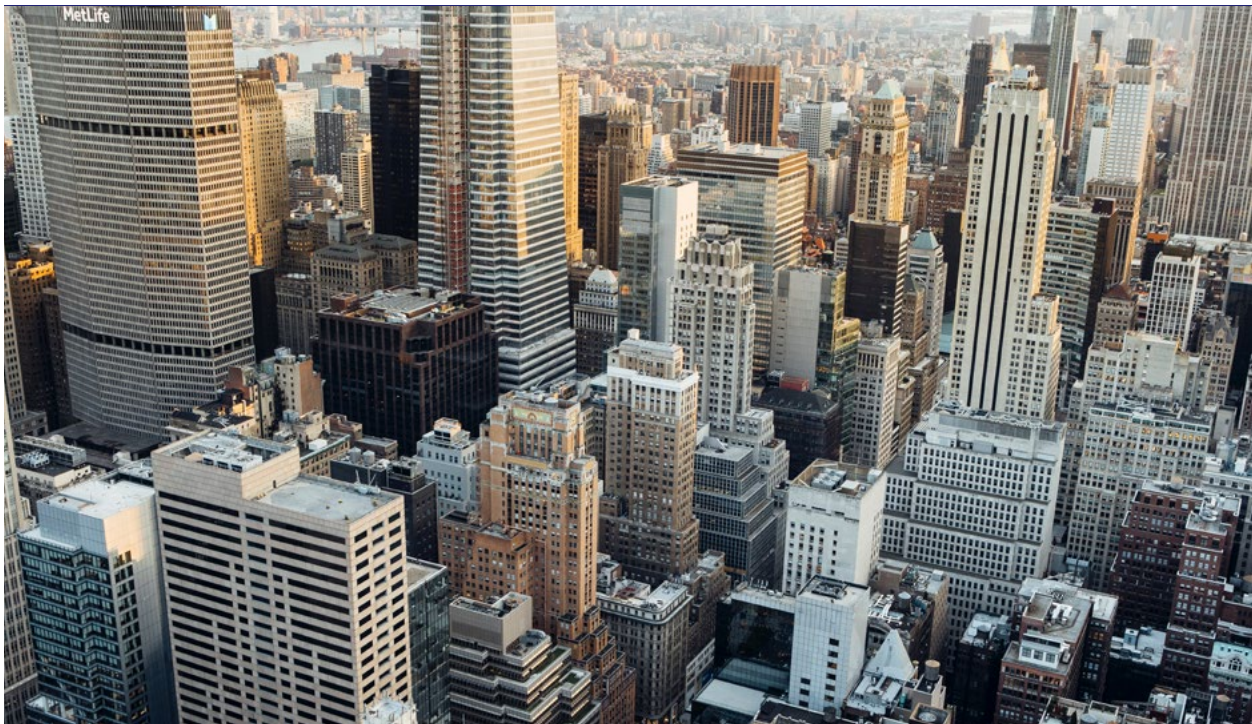
Julie Dabrusin, Liberal member of Parliament for Toronto-Danforth, and Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Natural Resources and the Minister of Environment and Climate Change, focused on the role communities can play in food access. Food insecurity – and thus food policy – was what got her started in politics. As a lawyer and community activist, she helped start a neighborhood food bank by collecting food for newcomer families from local stores and restaurants. She also collected leftover food from a local farmers' market for delivery to a local food bank -

sparking her interest in issues of food and income inequality and the higher policy need to bolster food accessibility.



The federal government introduced the first national food policy in 2019, based on input from 45,000 Canadians. Dabrusin said *"a big win" was the policy's acknowledgement of the need for a national school food program* – still a work in progress, but a major step forward in developing a national standard for healthy school lunches. Dabrusin says she was "in the room" when the vision statement for Canada's food policy was developed: "All people in Canada are able to access a sufficient amount of safe, nutritious and culturally diverse food. Canada's food system is resilient and innovative, sustains our environment and supports our economy." Good policy, in other words, is at the heart of an equitable and thriving food system.

Strong food systems also recognize communities' rights to choose. Phil Fung, Principal of Anchor Corp., specializing in indoor food production, emphasized the need for *food sovereignty*. Food sovereignty is the degree of control or agency that



people have over their food system, including the ability to access the right kind of food. Said Fung, “You can have food security where people have enough to eat, but that does not translate into healthy bodies and communities.” What is needed is access to the quality, healthy and sustainable foods that support the specific needs of an individual or community. Clearly, community food solutions can play a major role in improving Canadians’ access to healthier food.

Dr. Kimberly Zeuli, an agricultural economist and founder of Feeding Cities Group in Madison, Wisc., saw another opportunity for changing food systems: making them ready for disruption. “The real gap is around emergency food planning,” she said. Given that food banks run on philanthropy and volunteer effort, and the certainty that global warming will lead to increased natural disasters, she says, *“We need food access development. We need a singular focus on access to food in cities at scale.”*

“We’re at the brink,” Zeuli said. She points to Hurricane Katrina and its effect on New Orleans to illustrate how natural disasters affect food supply. Stores closed and shattered, people going hungry while food rotted in powerless refrigerators, and food banks caught unawares while hungry families gathered in a dirty, unsafe, sports stadium. Food retailers took years to return in some neighborhoods – if they reopened at all. Zeuli says Feeding Cities Group is organizing philanthropists to fund food-access planning, but most cities are still too busy. “Long-term planning is not something cities do well,” she says. “We’re trying to ring the alarm bells.”

Cities have to focus on food supply right now – rather than the much harder-to-solve underlying causes. “We can solve the access problem a lot faster than we can solve the poverty problem,” she says. Besides: “Focusing on food access at scale is a good organizing principle for lots of policies and investments.”

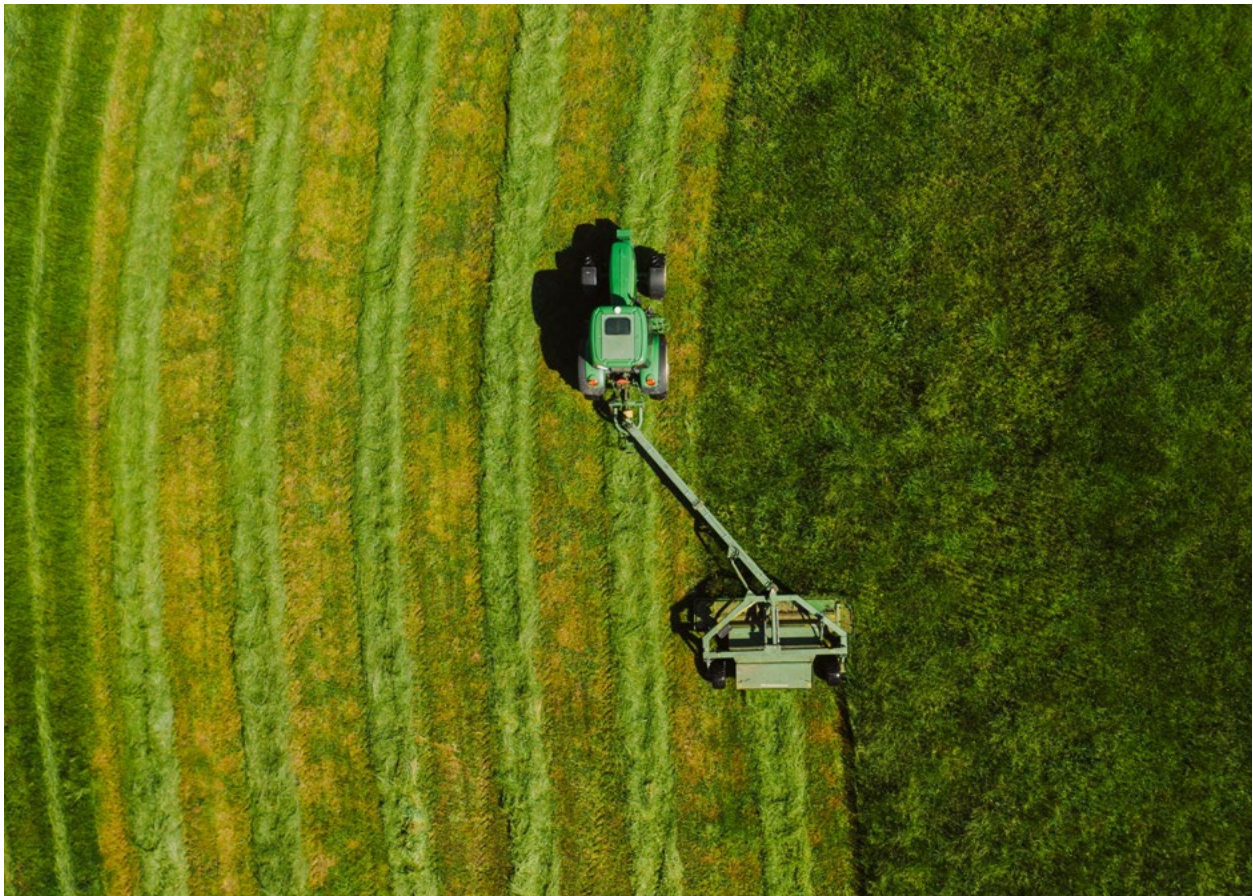
## SOLUTIONS

RSI's panelists saw no shortage of opportunities for tackling food accessibility issues, from legislative solutions to new ways of thinking about food. They spanned the entire food system from farm to fork, and included:

***Income & social policies:*** Neil Hetherington pushed for higher incomes for Canadians in need. He praised the Ontario government for recently indexing disability support to inflation – but pointed out that support payments are hundreds of dollars short of the poverty line of \$2100 a month. He also welcomed the unanimous support that MPs offered the proposed new federal Disability Benefit earlier this year. Mainly, however, he favours a guaranteed Universal Basic Income. “Food security has nothing to do with food supply. It has everything to do with housing and social structures that allow people to thrive.”

***Refocusing on health and well-being:*** Dr. Lauren Baker envisioned a suite of solutions that recognize the social and environmental impacts of food: “We need a food system transition – from a focus on yield and calories to human, ecological and animal health and well-being.” Specifically, she recommends: ***a new approach to public health that focuses on poverty, inequality, and social exclusion; converting charitable food infrastructure (e.g., food banks) into public food infrastructure; and supporting regenerative and agro-ecological agricultural practices.***

***Rethinking entrenched food models:*** Having identified a wide range of concerns, Guy Dauncey supplied equally expansive solutions - focusing on improvements to current food





business practices and models. To reduce excess profit margins in the food business, for instance, he recommended shortening supply chains; banning commodity index funds that encourage food price speculation; a windfall profits tax; and a retail code of conduct to tame supermarket prices.

As a case study in new farming models, Dauncey highlighted *Ferme de Quatre Temps*, a 160- acre mixed organic farm in Hemmingford, Que., while advocating returning land to small farmers and promoting regenerative organic farming. He said *Quatre Temps*' eight-acre vegetable garden grosses \$100,000 in crop value per acre per year. Finally, *he recommended that every community in Canada set up a community food hub, with multiple missions:* to promote farming and ecological education, house food-related social enterprises, host food festivals, provide a community root cellar, juice press and tools library, and promote social policies that reduce food poverty and insecurity.

**Food literacy & collaboration:** Based on her experiences in urban food systems, MP Julie Dabrusin identified a need for greater food literacy: "Food production is not someone else's issue. We need to improve connections between urban residents and farmers." She also recommended that people concerned about food issues communicate with their politicians – at all levels. There is strength in numbers: "I get almost no letters about food policy," Dabrusin noted. But when the federal government receives 500 signatures on an issue, she said, it is required to respond.

The private sector also plays a significant role in collaboration. Dillon Consulting, for example, is an engineering and environmental services



firm that has offered pro-bono consulting services to 250+ food organizations through its *Million Meals Campaign*. The result: More than 1.5 million meals delivered since the program's 2019 launch. According to Dillon's Food System Specialist, Dr. Mychal-Ann Hayhoe, collaboration and working across knowledge silos is the key. Working together means finding the gaps in the food system and filling them with needed skills like engineering and community planning.

**Core strategies for cities:** To build their food access capabilities, Dr. Kim Zeuli says cities must develop their own strategies and solutions – leveraging, but not depending on, state/provincial and national government resources. (In the U.S., she says, the states have told cities that with this issue, they're on their own.) Noting that most communities have no single point of contact for food issues, she says cities should build a permanent, resourced team responsible for food access.

To fund food-related activities, Zeuli says cities should look at economic-development models to develop permanent funding mechanisms. For best results, they should pursue strategic, coordinated action with companies, non-profits and other governments – and they should use real-time local data on food insecurity to develop individual neighborhood agendas.

With no shortage of potential solutions, which ones will be most effective? And which can actually get done? Roundtable panelists agreed that you can study a problem deeply to come up with dozens of policy proposals to solve it. But human nature – whether you're a politician, civil servant, investor, philanthropist or volunteer – prefers just one or two simple ideas, easy to understand, that you can get excited about and explain to other people.

As Peter Love, a former RSI board director, commented, *“multiple solutions make it easy for governments to ignore the whole issue. They don't want to have to spend the time to figure out the one thing they need to do.”*

## THREE BIG IDEAS

*So how do we move forward on the problems of food accessibility and affordability - and navigate the many possible solutions? Find one or two big ideas and fight for them. We've identified three Big Ideas that are encompassing enough to fit the problem and anyone can rally 'round. The transformation starts with mindset.*

### 1. Food is a right

Little known and oft forgotten is that Article 25 of the *United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights* – which Canada signed onto in 1976 – guarantees access to healthy, accessible, appropriate food. Specifically that “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his [sic] family, including food...” The fact that so many Canadians still go hungry confirms this right is not being realized.

As Neil Hetherington told us, “The feds acknowledge the right to food, but they don't talk about it, and they don't enforce it.” Despite the maze of social assistance programs available across Canada, [a recent study by PROOF](#), a long-term research project based at the University of Toronto, concluded that “Policy action to date has not sought to reduce food insecurity in any concerted, evidence-based way.” Most legislation related to food insecurity, rather, has centred on food banks – an approach based on the charitable model that may just “further entrench... an ineffective response for reducing household food insecurity.”

More and more food agencies are using the phrase “Right to Food” to remind people – and especially policy-makers – that ensuring adequate supplies of nutritious food isn't a request. It's not a charitable activity. It's a right.



Knowing and understanding food as a right can give Canadians the confidence to fight for food security and the same guarantees they enjoy for other life basics like health care.

## 2. Food issues belong “on the table”

You have to look hard to find someone who’s responsible for food security and nutrition. Usually, there is no-one. Kim Zeuli reminds us that many North American cities used to have active offices coordinating food supply issues – but closed them down as interest waned and budgets shrank.

Food issues need to be kept on the political agenda through advocacy. But solving problems of food access also needs active, visible, accessible and permanently funded municipal offices - dedicated to food security administration, education and innovation. They may be offices at City Hall that lead, coordinate and support the local network of food security organizations, entrepreneurs, agencies and charities, helping with funding, information and resources. Or they might take the form of community food hubs that share space with farmers’ markets, food banks and community gardens.

*The important thing is that the issue of food is put on the table – visible, central, easy to find.* A space where people can go for help, support, information, and answers. “This is very solvable,” says Zeuli. “You just make it somebody’s job.”

Guy Dauncey would take things a step further. He argues that every food security-related organization in Canada should be mobilizing as one united force – sharing one specific message. Right now, he says, “Everyone is saying different things, so it all goes adrift – and nothing happens.”



### 3. Food is a public good

In Canadian cities, we subsidize water and provide universal healthcare and education. This is because we can't imagine life without offering these services at national standards. If food is a right, we should extend this notion to healthy food.

Lauren Baker would like to see Canada's food banks and other charitable food organizations become public infrastructure – with all the financial security and predictability of a government-run utility. The federal Liberals' recent proposal for a national school meal program marks one step toward this thinking. The next step could be offering highly subsidized healthy food, possibly in the form of curated food baskets, to Canadian consumers. If this sounds like an expensive proposition, so is the cost of doing nothing in terms of healthcare: you can buy a year's supply of veggies for the cost of a night in an emergency ward. The research is clear, says Baker: "When you provide healthy food, people get better."

This is part of the "True Cost Accounting" of food: A holistic approach to profit and loss that calculates not only a product's direct costs, such as materials and labour, but also its impact on society or the environment. As an example, 38% of Canadians are considered overweight and 29% obese – food-related conditions that carry serious health consequences from heart disease to type 2 diabetes. Decisions around food change when trends like these are factored in.

The U.S., India and some European countries are now looking at using these tools to boost public health while reducing health costs. "I could see the price of food actually coming down," says Baker. "The cost of bad diets is huge, and the public sector is paying for it."

In Brazil, the government subsidizes food basics (beans, rice and local fruit) for access in supermarkets. In Canada, retailers could participate in similar schemes. But even if not, Baker says, government could distribute subsidized products to food banks – supporting their growth while reducing their costs. Hopefully, however, the service could extend to local stores, to relieve the "food desert" phenomenon in many neighborhoods – and perhaps even to the famously unhealthy "convenience stores" with their endless displays of chips and energy drinks. "There should be incentives for convenience store owners to stock accessible, affordable healthier options," says Baker. "Not everyone who is close to the line should have to line up at the food bank."



Altogether, the three Big Ideas represent a major shift in how we look at and treat food accessibility. But as food bank lines grow, we need to make that shift quickly. Says roundtable moderator, Yasmin Glanville: "The future is coming faster than we think, and we need to be scaling up now." It's time to rethink food and to act.

## THOUGHTS FROM THE ROUNDTABLE HOST: RETHINK SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVES (RSI) Continuing the Leadership Challenge

Going forward, RSI continues to be committed to mobilizing scalable solutions to the noted food insecurity issues as well as other social, environmental, economic, technology and climate change challenges impacting Canada's ability to thrive sustainably today and into the future.

We do this in a few ways:

- Partner with public and private organizations and communities
- Publish evidence based "how-to" playbooks.
- Host and facilitate multi-stakeholder education forums
- Convene and facilitate solution design and discovery workshops and roundtables for leaders, organizations and communities, shaped around a single mission, to drive positive change.
- Deliver keynote talks and fireside chats
- Mentor next generation leaders.

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