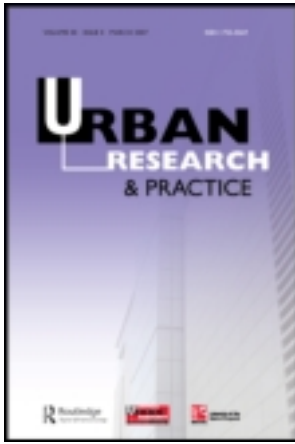


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PRACTICE ARTICLE

Food and healing: an urban community food security assessment for the North End of Winnipeg

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The North End of Winnipeg is an urban Canadian community, which is affected by poverty and food insecurity. A community food security assessment is used here as a model to understand the complexities of food security issues, which are generally embedded in cultural and socio-demographic attributes of a society. Interviews with key informants and focus group discussions were conducted with the North End Women's Healing Group to address the objective of finding the link between urban issues and food security. Through these activities, a diversity of themes relating to food security were covered, and the findings revealed an important nexus connecting nutritional state, emotional well-being, food security issues and community programming. We recommend policy and programming that can address the unique challenges found in urban settings and suggest a participatory approach to reveal such challenges.

Keywords: CFSA; community programming; emotional well-being; food security; policy; urban; Winnipeg's North End

Introduction

For the purpose of our discussion we use the definition of community food security (CFS) adapted from Hamm and Bellows (2003) as something that 'exists when all community residents obtain a safe, personally acceptable, nutritious diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes healthy choices, community self-reliance and equal access for everyone'. CFS as a model extends beyond the scope of its predecessors to include access, social factors and cultural appropriateness of food systems (Gottlieb and Fisher 1996, Slater 2007). Traditionally, many food security initiatives have focused on alleviating hunger in low-income populations through short-term relief strategies such as food banks, soup kitchens and other charitable or emergency food programmes (Slater 2007). The scope of CFS, however, is beyond anti-hunger initiatives emphasizing on long-term, systematic and broad approaches to address food insecurity issues.

The issues determining CFS are diverse and embedded in complex cultural and socio-demographic attributes of a society. Some of these issues affecting the urban environment include poverty, substance abuse, family and other forms of violence among others. Increasingly there is an awareness of food security issues among the urban poor. Originally, the organizations developed to address such issues have been those concerned with general access to food such as soup kitchens and food banks. However, knowledge of urban food

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systems may be especially problematized by the obscuration of food security issues by such dominant institutions (Riches 2002). There is, however, now an emergent and often well-established grassroots movement in many communities taking on broader and more innovative approaches to understand and work with CFS. Such grassroots movements are often in the form of community groups, lighthouses¹ or other embedded institutions that deal with the diverse urban issues and well-being (Government of Manitoba 2011).

In the Canadian inner-city context, food insecurity is especially prevalent in households with children, in female-headed households and in Aboriginal families (Power 2008). Poverty-related food insecurity has also increased nationally and globally, associated in part with the abandonment and non-existence of many social safety net programmes (Cook 2002). To this end we worked with one organization focusing on this issue in the North End community of Winnipeg, Canada. This article presents the initial outcomes of our investigation into the deeper sociocultural issues relating to food security.

The North End of Winnipeg community

Winnipeg North End is an urban Canadian community which has a history of poverty and segregation from the rest of Winnipeg going back to the late 1800s. The first settler populations into the North End were Eastern European, German and Jewish immigrant industrial workers (Levin *et al.* 2007). Following the Second World War, the North End went through two major socio-economic shifts. Many of the residents and established cultural organizations started leaving for different parts of the city, and in the 1960s and 1970s Aboriginal people, namely Ojibwe and Cree started leaving the reservations and establishing themselves in the North End of the city, which had the most affordable housing to accommodate limited budgets (Silver 2010). Today, the North End of Winnipeg continues to have socio-economic problems, which are dynamic, interrelated and often not easily determined in terms of cause and effect. The community is affected by poverty and food insecurity, especially among women and Aboriginal populations (Miko and Thompson 2004).

The North End is characterized by several of the aforementioned urban issues. Poverty and crime rates are among the highest of any Western Canadian community and the social determinants for such issues are complex. This complexity in turn creates a problematic situation for the development of community betterment programming and often misalignments between programme dollars and community needs. There is an increasing need in the North End, as well as in other urban communities, to take on more integrative and holistic approaches to issues related to social factors and food-related health issues.

Civic and federal government are largely absent in the North End amelioration programming with the bulk of the support coming from the Provincial government. The grassroots movement in the North End is comprised of women's groups, family resource centres, alternative education centres and community development organizations with Aboriginal people often taking on leadership roles (Silver 2010). One such community organization is the Ralph Brown Community Centre (RBCC), which is a lighthouse, community resource centre and youth drop-in centre. It completed its first season of community gardening and recently expanded its community kitchen. Organizations such as the RBCC are important for providing safe places for people to access social, educational and nutritional, as well as a whole other host of resources. These resources are delivered through various programmes that are supported by municipal, provincial and philanthropic funding bodies. The RBCC is therefore dependent on the policies and perceived need for supporting different kinds of programming.

Methods

We used the community food security assessment (CFSA) as a way of understanding the diversity and interrelatedness of issues, and for creating a platform for exploring new ideas and approaches to programme development (Cohen 2002). The CFSA approach is ideal for identifying gaps in the knowledge surrounding CFS and as an ideal methodological approach for informing the future development of programmes and policy (Cohen 2002, Pothukuchi 2004). CFSA is meant to be a collaborative and participatory process that systematically examines a broad range of community food issues and assets, so as to inform and build capacity for collaborative change (Cohen 2002). We acknowledged the role of leadership and the potential for innovative programming developed by such leaders in a fashion that is a reflexive product of deeply embedded experiences and knowledge. We investigated existing conditions, determinants, as well as new possible ways out of food insecurity for an urban community that has been challenged in this regard for several decades.

Within the CFSA framework, we followed focus group discussions (Cohen 2002) and interviews with key informants to address the objective of finding the link between urban issues and food security in the North End of Winnipeg, Canada. Cohen (2002) identifies focus groups as being ideal for garnering foundational data about CFS, and creating a platform for further inquiries through the process community food assessment. Participants were from the North End Women's Healing Group and included both Aboriginal, Métis and non-Aboriginal members. The community programming coordinator from the RBCC was the primary key informant for connecting with the healing group. The focus group was recorded and common themes were identified from the audio recording and notes of the interview. We used discourse themes and quotes as data to meet the study objectives (Hajer 1995).

Results and discussion

This initial discussion was regarded as a starting point and focused on the identification of root causes for North End food insecurity. The focus group discussion began with people's thoughts on food issues, challenges related to healthy eating behaviour in their community and means to address these concerns from a holistic perspective. Reflecting upon personal experiences, participants were enthusiastic in expressing their perceptions on healthy eating and food issues. They mentioned that people have food preferences based on their emotional attachment to food. Emotional ties to food starts in childhood and develops in adulthood (Kent and Waller 2000). It was expressed that if children adopted healthy eating at an early age it would last for the rest of their lives. According to one participant, 'What your family has grown up with, that is what you prefer to eat for the rest of your life.' Moreover, belief system on food was expressed as being very important for healthy living.

All participants shared their concern on ever-growing drug and alcohol addiction among the younger generation in their communities. Based on their work experiences on relevant issues, they stated that addictive substances make people less hungry as it reduces appetite significantly. Participants also mentioned that healthy eating habits can reduce the risk of addiction. They also added nutritional food plays an important role in overcoming any type of addiction, thus it helps to heal society by healing addiction. Participants also talked about the media frequently showing people eating junk food as comfort food. One example that was mentioned was seeing people treating themselves with ice cream when they are going through stresses. This portrays a message that some people prefer to have certain kind of food as comfort food when they are emotionally down. Another area

that participants addressed was their dissatisfaction with soup kitchens in their community. One of them mentioned that whatever is served in soup kitchen is not edible. In her words, ‘In soup kitchens they are providing food that they do not eat themselves. The foods are emotionally degrading and non-healthy’.

The discussions emerging from the focus group with key informants coincided in many ways with CFS discourses found in the current literature. However, the participants wanted to emphasize certain points, which they felt were less commonly acknowledged in current community programming and policy. In particular, the discussions surrounding the emotional connections to nutrition were identified as being at the root of many other food security issues. Participants felt that the emotional being and nutritional being of a person are undeniably connected and that there needs to be more education on this nexus (Figure 1), which could in turn inform programmes and policy pertaining to food security in the North End.

The participants felt that innovative healing group programmes were one effective way of addressing food security issues. However, gender was mentioned as an issue. In the focus group discussion we only had female participants and the group was interested to seeking more involvement of men in such healing groups. We feel that the gender dimension

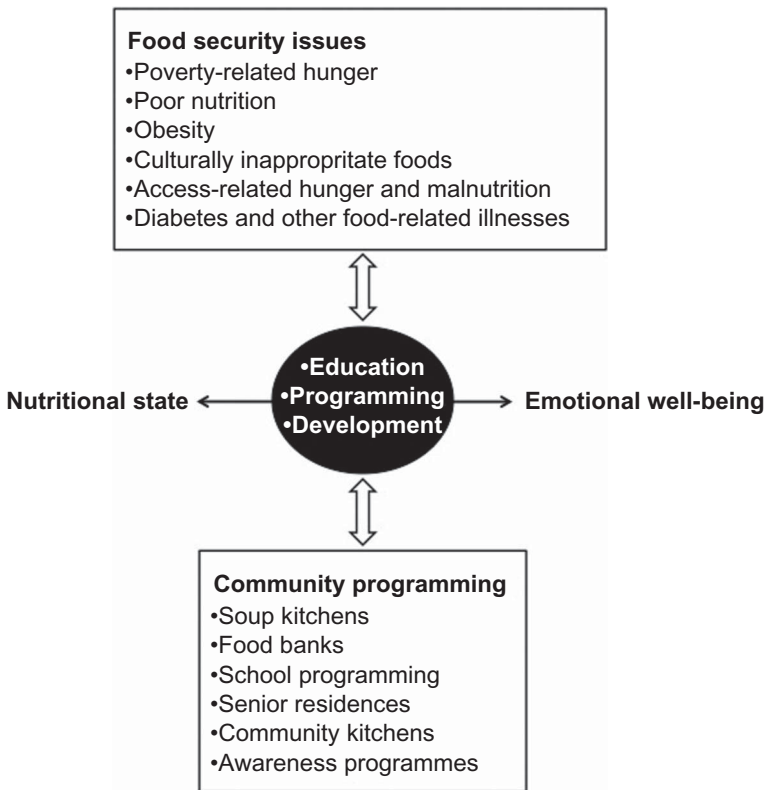


Figure 1. At the nexus of the nutritional state and emotional well-being is a nexus providing insights for education, programming and development towards CFS. The integrative and holistic understanding of the issues informs this nexus, in turn informing community programming working towards more food secure communities.

of food issues is a topic that needs to be explored further in future research on CFS. Our preliminary research in the North End of Winnipeg highlights the need for an approach that is aware of the integration of the effects of social factors on the emotional well-being of community members and how this in turn translates into the nutritional state. The acknowledgement of the nutrition–emotion nexus is one that has applications in the development of strategies for community groups, larger community programme development, funding allocation and further academic studies. We suggest that an awareness of such interconnections can only bring about better informed initiatives.

Recommendations and conclusions

The participants argued that awareness programmes for healthy and nutritious eating habits for their community members should be supported. They felt that more focus group discussions should take place in different places where people of the same age groups gather, for example, schools and pubs. Participants believe that gender roles are more blurred around food security issues and that men need to be brought more into discussions on healthy eating. From the findings of the focus group discussion we have concluded that there is an important nexus connecting nutritional state, emotional well-being, food security issues and community programming. We believe that this nexus needs to be fully acknowledged by all levels of society before effective and efficient policy and programming can be developed. We propose this as a new way forward and an area in need of further exploration in CFS programming. We see exploring emotionally focused narratives about food as a way forward for increasing awareness on this topic and generating further knowledge. This will be our next step towards collectively addressing food security issues affecting the North End of Winnipeg and beyond.

We also stress that the initiatives that aim to inform CFA policy should be in situ and participatory, rather than removed and top-down. We believe that communities face unique challenges and will require unique strategies to meet challenges in a proactive and effective manner. Through participatory approaches for policy development, policy may also encompass mechanisms for being more culturally appropriate. We recommend community guidance, or at the least consultation at the beginning of CFS initiatives, as well as a collaborative approach between communities, programme facilitators and policymakers. We also recommend that relevant connections between different social policies and programming be acknowledged and that opportunities for collaboration be explored. This case highlights the need for pluralistic approach in addressing urban issues.

Note

1. 'Lighthouse is a fund designed to help support recreational, educational and prosocial programmes after hours for young Manitobans, launched by Manitoba Justice' (Government of Manitoba 2011).

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