

FUTURE FARMERS



**THE CHALLENGE OF
FOOD SOVEREIGNTY FOR**

**BLACK
FARMERS**

IN THE GREATER TORONTO AREA

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BACKGROUND

As a result of settler colonialism, all aspects of our food systems in Canada have violated Indigenous peoples' food sovereignty. With the sustained dominance of these settler governments, white supremacy, and a capitalist economic system, this violation of food sovereignty has disproportionately affected racialized people of colour as well. This is especially evident for Black Canadians, as many are descendants of slaves who were initially brought to Canada and exploited for their labour, including labour in food production.

Out of nearly 1.2 million Black Canadians, 52.4% live in Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2019). As the most populous province for Black Canadians, 75.2% live in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Most of these Black Canadians, about 6 out of 10, are immigrants. Those who pursue employment in the food production industry are faced with substantial barriers in achieving control or ownership of their food system, accessing stable employment, and ensuring access to traditional foods for their communities. At the same time, a diverse amount of agricultural land exists locally: for example, the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) is the largest landowner in the GTA with 15,000 hectares across the jurisdiction, and in 2014 over 186,900 lbs of local food was produced on this land.

As Black student organizers we have recognized a need to critically understand the pervasive problems that impact racialized identities on and off campus. We have come to understand the role in which food plays in our communities and personal lives, leading us to challenge our campus' current food environment and the effects it has on student and community wellness. As board members on the Ryerson Student Food Council, one of our goals is to advise and support the university in the provision of healthy, affordable and culturally appropriate food on campus. This has led us to explore the ways in which food insecurity disproportionately impacts our community and how food sovereignty challenges the oppressive nature of our current food system.

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

Refers to the ability to exercise collective self-determination over food systems, or the right to healthy and culturally appropriate food. The term was first defined by an international movement of small-farm, peasant and Indigenous people known as La Via Campesina (The Peasants' Way) in 1996.

FOOD SECURITY

Refers to the state of having reliable access to affordable, nutritious food.

Essentially, food security is a goal while food sovereignty describes how to achieve that goal (Food Secure Canada, 2019).



WHO ARE BLACK CANADIANS?

Black is an identity referring to people of African descent. Black people in Canada have diverse backgrounds, with some being able to trace their roots in Canada for many generations while others have immigrated from across the world. The data used in this report on Black Canadians is gathered from Statistics Canada, which refers to persons who self-identified as “Black” in the 2016 Census.

WHAT IS THE GTA?

The Greater Toronto Area (GTA) is a metropolitan area that includes the City of Toronto and four regional municipalities: Halton, Durham, Peel, and York.

WHAT'S IN A FOOD SYSTEM?

A food system encompasses all activities involving the production, processing, transport, and consumption of food. This includes the governance and economics of food production, its sustainability, food waste, how food production affects our environment and our health (Future of Food, 2019).



75.2%

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UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE

The system of food sovereignty for Black Canadians in the GTA intersects with the broader systems of racism, food affordability, and poverty. The major challenges in this community's efforts for food sovereignty are:

1. LAND OWNERSHIP AND ACCESS TO LAND

Starting a farm in the GTA is inaccessible for most Black Canadians. There is no government funding program to assist in the establishment of a new farm venture, which acts as a barrier to accessing land. For example, many farmers have had to rely on the equity gained in the rising value of their land in order to fund their retirement. The value of these properties have spiked by nearly 40% per acre between 2011 and 2016 ("Aging Farmers", 2017). A lack of government support for new farmers has left the door open to large agricultural operations who are consolidating farmland in rural areas, or property developers are buying land and repurposing it.

The Black Creek Community Farm, which is the only Black-owned farm in Toronto, has a farm size of 3.2 hectares. This is compared to the average farm size in Ontario of 249 hectares (Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs, 2016). With a small urban farm, there is a limited amount of food that can be harvested and shared with the local community.

THE BEGINNING AND END OF FARMSTART

FarmStart began as a start-up farm near Guelph in order to provide a supportive and relatively risk free way for people from non-farm backgrounds to enter the sector. For over 10 years, FarmStart developed and offered programs and services that provided new farmers with the resources, tools, and support necessary to launch their businesses. The funding programs offered through FarmStart were especially needed to support access for young, marginalized, or Black farmers.

Over time, the negligence of national and provincial financial programs left FarmStart without start-up funding to allocate to farmers. Without this, Black farmers experienced great difficulty in acquiring start-up funding and access to land ownership. Currently, no other initiatives are providing funding and access to land in the way that FarmStart did.



2. EXPLOITATION OF BLACK CANADIAN LABOUR IN FOOD PRODUCTION

Currently, there are no Black Canadians that lead the operation of a large-scale, industrialized farm, or are involved in the leadership of a commodity organization (e.g., the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association). Instead, Black Canadians are typically employed in laborious and precarious roles in the food production industry. As well, those who are seeking temporary residency in Canada can apply to the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP). SAWP was established in 1966 as a way of bringing Jamaican workers to Canada to help make up for a shortage of apple pickers (Ruiter, 2016).

The history of Black labour in Canada is still felt today. In interviews with Anan Lololi (Founder, Afri-Can Food Basket) and Leticia Deawuo (Director, Black Creek Farm), both mentioned that the intergenerational trauma caused by slavery contributes to a reluctance for Black Canadians to engage in farming. There is a lack of awareness and education in understanding the impact of perpetuating a system where Black Canadians do not have access or opportunity to own the means of production of their food systems.

3. COMPLEX FOOD SUPPLY CHAIN FOR ETHNO-CULTURAL VEGETABLES (ECV) RESULTING IN FOOD INSECURITY FOR BLACK CANADIANS

In the supply chain, food moves from producer to consumer via the processes of production, processing, distribution, retailing, and consumption. As the supply chain has become increasingly complex, far-reaching, and expensive, it has become more difficult to afford seasonal, organically grown, nutritious produce. Instead, processed food products are inexpensive and are typically consumed by low-income community members unable to afford healthier food options, or even their own traditional foods, known as ethno-cultural vegetables (ECV) (Nawaratne, 2012).

ECVs are crops not traditionally grown in Canada, nor introduced by settlers, such as okra, guava, and papaya. With fluctuating immigrant populations in the GTA, markets for ethnic food have been expanded and are increasing in demand. There is demand for ECVs as well: within the GTA it was found that Afro-Caribbeans spend \$7 million per month on ECVs (Filson & Adekunle, 2017). However, as demand increases for these crops they become less affordable and accessible for the entire community.

Within Toronto, Black Canadians are overrepresented in low-income neighbourhoods compared to their share of the city's population. These neighbourhoods tend to have a surplus of fast-food retailers with either small, ethnic food markets or stores that are far from their homes. These areas, with little access to good quality, affordable, and nutritious foods are considered food deserts, typically characterized by neighbourhoods with low average household incomes. More broadly, about 51% of Toronto's population lives within areas of the city that are considered food deserts (Martin Prosperity Insights, 2019). This further impacts Black Canadian households as they are 29.4% more likely to experience food insecurity (Tarasuk, Mitchell, & Dachner, 2014).



REGIONAL DIETS OF AFRICAN HERITAGE

The bases of meals in Africa include beans, cous-cous, sorghum, millet and rice (Oldways Cultural Food Traditions, 2019). Both watermelon and okra are native to Africa. In Central and Western Africa, traditional meals were often based on hearty vegetable soups and stews, poured over boiled and mashed tubers or grains. In Eastern Africa, cabbage, kale, and maize were the main features of traditional meals. In the Horn of Africa, the traditional meals were based on flatbreads, like injera, and beans blended with lentils, fava beans, and chickpeas.

The traditional African-Caribbean meals introduced a variety of seafood (e.g., salt fish, conch) tropical fruits (e.g., papaya, guava), rice, and bean dishes. As well, coconut milk, yams, plantains, and pumpkins are found throughout the West Indies and Caribbean Islands.



UNDERSTANDING EXISTING SOLUTION EFFORTS

To respond to these barriers, there are locally organized solutions in Ontario and lessons to be learned from elsewhere. This includes:

1. COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEM PLANNING WITH MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENTS

In Canada, the jurisdictional authority of local governments over the food system is limited, yet local governments are directly faced with the consequences of an inadequate food system. These include the local effects of climate change and pollution, food insecurity, diet-related public health problems, loss of agricultural land, shifting population and demographics, financial struggles of food producers, and shrinking local food infrastructures and support services.

As the level of jurisdiction closest to the community and as a service provider, local governments have the power to educate, to support local initiatives, enact policies, and develop programs that can shape the local food system and respond to the specific needs of their citizens. Until recently, food system considerations had been largely absent from municipal planning. Pothukuchi & Kaufman (1999) identify five approaches by which municipal planners can engage in food system planning: 1) the compilation of data on the community food system; 2) the analyses of connections between food and other planning concerns; 3) the assessment of the impact of current planning on the local food system; 4) the integration of food security into community goals; and 5) the education of future planners regarding food system issues.

A community food system centers on the production, processing, distribution, and consumption of food being integrated into a community. This system is rooted in local efforts to create networks of food production that aim to be geographically and economically accessible and direct. This is drastically different from industrial food systems - they operate with reduced food transportation and more direct marketing, which leads to fewer people and processes between the farmer and the consumers. As a result, relationships are more likely to emerge from in-person interactions, potentially leading to a stronger social connectedness, sense of trust, and community. This is especially important as these relationships strengthen the food sovereignty movement for Black Canadians as well.

COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE (CSA) AND THE ONTARIO CSA DIRECTORY

CSA is a type of cooperative where community members buy a share in a farm's harvest, and they may also be engaged in farm labour. While there is no governing agency for CSA farmers in Ontario, there is an online directory that lists farmers who offer weekly, freshly picked farm-raised food boxes to members within their CSA.



BLACK CREEK COMMUNITY FARM (BCCF)

BCCF is the best example of a community food system in Toronto where Black Canadians have been involved in the creation, leadership, and continued employment of the farm. The mission of BCCF is to serve the local community through a thriving farm with healthy food, and to inspire the next generation by providing leadership in food justice. The property houses certified organic vegetable fields, a forest trail and food forest, 4-season greenhouses, an outdoor classroom, pavilion and bake oven, as well as a mushroom garden, chickens and beehives.

2. MOBILIZING BLACK CANADIANS FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION IN THE FOOD SOVEREIGNTY MOVEMENT

There is global recognition that Africans constitute some of the poorest and most marginalized groups, with a growing amount of studies by international and national bodies demonstrating that Africans still have limited access to quality education, health services, housing, and social security. The United Nations has declared 2014-2024 as the International Decade for the People of African Descent as a way to provide a solid framework for actors to collaboratively take effective measures for the implementation of activities in the spirit of recognition and justice.

In response, coalitions of organizations throughout the African Diaspora are working together to own and make full use of the means of food production. This is an opportunity to mobilize food sovereignty activists, and to honour the heritage of the community as food producers. This is especially important in acknowledging the role of women and Indigenous peoples, who are the historical creators of knowledge about food and agriculture and have been traditionally devalued.

Efforts to mobilize communities creates a commitment to build a collective movement for food sovereignty by forging alliances and extending solidarity. In Toronto, Afri-Can Food Basket (AFB) is an organization that provides leadership in urban agriculture and fosters collaboration to advance food justice in the African Canadian community. AFB has animated over 100 community and back-yard gardens since 1997 in partnership with the City of Toronto Community Garden program, Toronto Community Housing, FoodShare, York University, and Ryerson University. Similar to BCCF, AFB is the leading example in mobilizing African Canadians in the food sovereignty movement. AFB also operates Ujamaa Farm, a program that facilitates and supports African Canadian farmers to develop sustainable urban ecological agricultural cooperative enterprises.



ADINKRA FARM

Adinkra Farm is led by community members and acts as a place to reclaim, build, and grow a sustainable community, and is based on the Adinkra symbol (Boa Me Na Me Mmoa Wo) that describes cooperation and interdependence as central to the formation of community. Community members are invited to participate in renovation and refurbishment projects to reclaim the existing property; building new indoor and outdoor spaces; and cultivating the land to grow produce to support secure food sources.



IMPACT GAPS & LEVERS FOR CHANGE

Actors across the public and private sectors have a role in supporting the reclamation of food systems for Black Canadians. It's clear that collective action in the food sovereignty movement is needed to impact long-term, sustainable social change.

GAPS	LEVERS OF CHANGE	EXAMPLES
Shortage of financial and legislative support from the government in acquiring land and other necessary resources.	<p>Provincial government assistance in creating land ownership programs.</p> <p>Establish dedicated funding for Black and racialized farmers, or supporting the developing of a food cooperative for Black farmers and communities.</p>	<p>Provincially, revitalizing a fund through FarmStart.</p> <p>Municipally, changing zoning by-laws in the GTA to include urban agriculture in residential areas.</p>
Lack of data on Black and racialized farmers in Canada.	Collaborative efforts across community-led organizations and the municipal government to gather data on urban, Black and racialized farmers.	<p>Locally, support universities and colleges in efforts to gather this data and research.</p> <p>Federally, embed detailed questions on the identity of farmers in the Census.</p>
Unsupported transition programs for migrant labour workers to become community farm operators.	Amending federal legislation to expand work opportunities for migrant farm workers as farm operators.	Create a program that connects Black migrant workers with local Black farmers.
Absence of federal government action in allocating land to Black communities.	Granting land from historically Black settlements to Black farmers.	Supporting efforts of Black-owned farms (e.g., BCCF) in land expansion.



OUR REFLECTIONS

For many Black Canadians, food has been a way of preserving cultural identity, reclaiming identity, fighting for justice, and a constant tool of resilience. While building a just food system is complex and urgent, Black Canadians in the GTA are driving community-led, grassroots efforts to challenge the barriers to food sovereignty.

If the challenge persists, food insecurity in Black communities will continue to increase. The effects of this will be detrimental towards their health and wellness. As well, Black farmers will have less opportunity to provide essential services to their communities and continue practices that are historically significant and empowering to their identity. Through this research, we have learned about how our food system is inherently unsustainable and oppressive to marginalized communities. We have also learned that food sovereignty involves far more than producing food; it demands a radical change in the way that society is organized so that power is redistributed. It means that those who have been marginalized will gain control over their land and decide what they will grow and how they will grow it.

As the food system continues to operate without considering the impact of prioritizing profits over people, an alternative food system that champions the concepts of food sovereignty is necessary in ensuring a sustainable and healthy future for Black Canadians. In this way, food sovereignty is an integral part of the process of constructing participatory democracy, and of demonstrating that another future is possible.



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