

**Using a Community of Practice Approach to Respond to Food Insecurity During the  
COVID-19 Pandemic in Edmonton, Alberta**

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## Abstract page

Hunger and food insecurity have a long history and prevalence in Edmonton, with the oldest food bank in Canada and hundreds of community agencies responding to food insecurity. This research began in partnership with the Community University Partnership (CUP) at The University of Alberta to support network building in this sector. As the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, food insecurity increased and all levels of government responded with increased availability of funding for responding to food insecurity. This funding also allowed for new organizations to enter the food insecurity response sector in Edmonton. The City of Edmonton then responded to this change in the sector by hosting a table on the collaboration and coordination of food insecurity responses, involving several community agencies. The focus of this research shifted in partnership with what this research calls “The City Table” to support their network and community building process. This research asks: how can the experiences of community agencies, donors and funders inform the building of a collaborative response to food insecurity during crises? Qualitative interviews were used to gain a depth of understanding in this sector, which was then supplemented by the insights gained through participation at The City Table to create an iterative community based research process. Eleven interviews were conducted with professionals representing community agencies, donors of food and funders, and were selected based on the depth and richness of their anticipated insights, as informed by the research’s active involvement with this sector in a “snowball” approach. Drawing from the literature on the formation of communities of practice, the themes of engagement, imagination and alignment were used to guide the analysis of the data collected. The research found that this sector has the beginnings of forming a community of practice as a learning community that may

support collaboration on responses to food insecurity. However, competition between agencies for funding and donations, as well as unstandardized data collection in the sector were identified as obstacles to the community of practice process. Further research is recommended in bridging the learnings generated by other poverty response sectors in Edmonton, particularly the housing insecurity sector, to gain insights into supporting the community of practice process.

# Preface

This research received ethics approval from the University of Alberta Study ID: Pro00095869. Ethics approval was required due to the sensitive nature of interviewing professionals responding to food insecurity in a collaborative context.

## Situating the author in hunger research

In 2015 I did a literature review for the Ontario Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs on the formation of the Robinson Superior Treaty (Surtees, 1986). The story of the formation of the Robinson Superior Treaty was that a representative of the queen would go out in the bush every year to find First Nation folks and offer them gifts in exchange for information and the formation of relationships. Eventually those relationships were leveraged to make promises, on paper, of income, housing and medical services in exchange for their removal from the land and spread of the crown's imperial power. (Hansen, 1987).

From 2016-2018, my job was to go out into the forests of Edmonton to find people living in tents, most of whom were Indigenous. I would bring food and supplies to try to build relationships. If they wanted to work with me I could offer income, housing, and medical services to end their homelessness and to stop camping where their ancestors camped for time immemorial to the benefit of the peace officers tasked with removing them from what are now recreational areas.

When I made the connection between these two experiences, I gained a deep awareness of my role as a colonizer in this context, even though I worked for a charity trying to "help" people in poverty. Drawing from my Ukrainian ancestry, and my experience of coming to

Canada as a refugee, and the food insecurity inherent in that process, this also illustrated for me the difficulty in navigating the solutions offered by the system that was also creating the problem. My excitement in doing this community based research is tied to the potential to change an oppressive system, not only in a struggle for survival against hunger, but for the possibility of building a more humane social contract that lifts the most vulnerable in our society from poverty rather than sustaining desperation for the benefit of those who profit from the struggle to survive.

I want to honour the life-threatening experience that is hunger by unpacking some terms. Outside of Edmonton's City Hall, The City erected a memorial to the genocide by starvation in Ukraine, reflecting the work of Edmontonian's in responding to the injustice of hunger, which resulted in Canada being the first county to recognize Ukraine's genocide in 1932-33. In English the word "hunger" refers to the experience of pain due to lack of food. The strength of this word is the ability to invite everyone who was ever hungry to relate to the experience. However the weakness of this generalization is in the inability to delineate degrees of danger. This is where the concept of food security is very useful, because it expands the concept of hunger to include longer term availability, accessibility, adequacy and acceptability of food and acknowledges the long term health, emotional, social and economic costs of food insecurity (Lambert, 2020). This is a useful definition and will be used throughout this paper; however, recognizing that newcomer, Indigenous and racialized communities experience food insecurity disproportionately in Edmonton, I want to make space for a non-English definition as there are several other ways to conceptualize hunger (Lambert, 2020).

As a newcomer of Ukrainian ethnicity, I want to use the example of "holod", which is the root word of "Holodomor". The Holodomor was the Ukrainian genocide by forced starvation, for

which there is a monument in Edmonton's City Hall. Holod means hunger, cold and shade. From a Ukrainian indigenous worldview, it can be said that the experience of hunger is generated by a blockage from the earth, in the same way the experience of cold is generated by a blockage from the sun, as shade. This understanding of hunger adds three dimensions to the concept of hunger. First, it evokes an inherent relationship to the land from which we eat, second it calls attention to what is blocking that relationship, and the potential intention behind that blockage. And thirdly, by combining it with the "mor" suffix, which means "death through exhaustion", there is an understanding that though occasional blockages may not be deadly, the effect of hunger is cumulatively fatal. "Mor" can be compared to the "mare" in "nightmare" (both refer to the same life draining malicious spirit, an incubus in Western Europe), and illustrates the blueprint for the Ukrainian genocide. I will be using the terms hunger and food insecurity for the rest of this paper for clarity, however, the "holod" example illustrates the potential multiplicity of cultural conceptions of hunger that exists among those described as "food insecure".

# Dedication

This graduate thesis is dedicated to everyone I met in the bush while working as a Street Outreach Worker at Boyle Street Community Services 2016-2018. Their strength and tenacity in surviving homelessness gives me the drive to try to improve Edmonton's response to poverty.

# Acknowledgements

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This thesis was made possible by the generous and patient support provided by Fay Fletcher as my supervisor and Mary Beckie as a member of the committee.

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# Introduction

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, efforts to increase coordination of emergency food services in Edmonton have received more attention and funding than any time since the establishment of the Edmonton Food Bank in 1981. In April 2020 the City of Edmonton invited approximately 40 agencies to begin monthly online meetings with the intent of sharing resources and building a shared understanding of the problems, intentions and possibilities that charitable food services face. Similar to elsewhere in Canada, there is a significantly higher emergency food need in Edmonton due to the impacts of COVID-19.

COVID-19 affects food insecurity many ways, but two in particular stand out. The first by posing a challenge to supply chains, limiting the types and amounts of foods available for purchase (Deaton, 2020). Second, the pandemic causes income shocks that increase household food insecurity (Deaton & Deaton, 2020). COVID-19 based income shocks are, however, not equally distributed but reflect and reinforce existing inequalities built into our economic system, with racialized communities bearing the brunt of the burden (Klassen, 2020). In Edmonton, 13.8% of all households experience food insecurity. Black households in Edmonton are 3.5 times more likely to be food insecure. As well, half of all Indigenous households in Edmonton experience food insecurity (Lambert, 2020). Reliable data on food insecurity is difficult to obtain as different agencies measure food insecurity differently. For example, the Edmonton Food Bank saw a 20% increase in visits; however, this doesn't capture the food insecurity that is being addressed by other agencies, informal community food networks, or the food insecurity that is not being responded to (Lambert, 2020).

The federal government responded to increased food insecurity by providing \$150 million for emergency food; additionally, the Province of Alberta provided \$5 million and the City of Edmonton provided \$1.1 million (Lambert, 2020). This increase in funding for emergency food has created an unprecedented situation where new organizations entered the food insecurity response sector and agencies are required to explore the formation of partnerships at a much faster rate than has been the norm. In the time that this research was done, The City of Edmonton formed a voluntary round table for collaboration among and coordination of emergency food services, which will be referred to as “The City Table” in this research. The City Table represents a level of cooperation in the food insecurity response sector in Edmonton that has not been seen for decades, and is not dissimilar to other coordinated actions to address poverty in Edmonton, such as Homeward Trust’s work in housing. With more food need, more funding, and increased involvement and collaboration of different agencies, this research aims to shed light on the foundational nature of hunger in Edmonton, the weight of the task of coordination among agencies, and share insights into potential paths forward for increased collaboration.

## Research Question and Objectives

During a time when COVID-19 and food insecurity were both on the rise, and Edmonton's community agencies were coming together in search of solutions, my research was exploring the experiences of community agencies, donors and funders in the provision of food both prior to and during the pandemic. With the simultaneous development of The City Table, it became increasingly clear that the stories of those with experience in emergency food provision that I was gathering could be of great value to the work being done by The City Table as well as its sustainability beyond the crisis created by the pandemic.

My research asks: how can the experiences of community agencies, donors and funders inform the building of a collaborative response to food insecurity during crises? This question will be explored through the following objectives:

- Gather the stories and experiences of professionals representing agencies who are actively working in emergency food provision to understand the nature of the hunger response system in Edmonton
- Identify tensions and celebrate successes in network building prior to and in response to COVID-19 among Edmonton's agencies responding to food insecurity.
- Explore how the experiences of stakeholders may inform building a stronger community and collective action in a "community of practice" framework.

My research will examine the opportunities and obstacles social service agencies have been facing over the past several years that were amplified by the impacts of COVID-19 on food insecurity and related increase in government funding. By exploring the successes and tensions revealed through the stories of professionals responding to food insecurity, this research can contribute an academic analysis of their emergency response work and, further, apply those findings to initiatives such as The City Table. Specifically, by comparing the stories of these professionals to the body of literature on networks of practice, this research provides some suggestions for deepening collaborations throughout the network. It should be noted that although The City Table will be referenced as the most prominent example of collaboration in the sector, this research will serve as an exploration of the broader food insecurity response in Edmonton.

# Positionality Statement

This section describes my role as a researcher in this project and any biases I might carry. As a Ukrainian ethnic minority within the body of Bosnian refugees that came to Canada in the early to mid 1990s, I carry a particular relationship with the topic of hunger which may impact my role as investigator. I carry the intergenerational trauma of the Ukrainian holodomor (genocide by famine in the USSR), the starvation resulting from the internment of my family in WWII, my parents' experience of food insecurity during the siege of Sarajevo, and my own food insecurity growing up as a refugee in Toronto. The legacy of hunger as a violent tool of oppression runs deeper in my family than I can describe and that has motivated me in this project and in my work on poverty in general.

My previous work on food security included managing a greenhouse in the Yukon, serving meals in the context of youth literacy programs on reserves in Northern Ontario, and acting as a community engaged agribusiness advisor in Bosnia. Perhaps most relevant to this research, starting in 2016 I worked as a street outreach worker in Edmonton for almost three years. In this position I went into Edmonton's hidden spaces to find encampments and build relationships to facilitate the extension of services to some of the most isolated people experiencing homelessness in Edmonton. Though there was a high diversity of needs, I have worked with clients who were literally starving to death and had their starvation documented by medical professionals before their death. I stood by their side as we navigated Edmonton's social services matrix, including income, housing, legal, medical, and food services. All of these services proved very difficult to access, particularly for the street entrenched, and the food services I could access for my clients were rarely appropriate for their food needs.

The horror of hunger is more than on my mind, it is in my blood, and I have felt it in my stomach and in my heart, as I have taken from and given to the food bank. Participating in this capitalist colonial society as a citizen, I feel it on my hands too, which is why I took on this project with full enthusiasm. The original research, carried out by the Community University Partnership at the University of Alberta, focused on examining waste food redirection and the potential of forming a network of agencies to increase waste food distribution. The outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020 and the emerging City Table provided the opportunity to explore how a network aimed at fostering collaboration may be informed by an examination of the interview data. With that shift, this research evolved into supporting the work of that fledgling community. I hope this research contributes to the building of a sustainable community of agencies.

## Theoretical Framework

This research is informed by communities of practice theoretical framework and a lens of decolonization theoretical. Communities of practice are learning partnerships of people who find it useful to learn from each other (Smith, 2017). The City Table on collaboration of emergency food services, which has been meeting virtually since its inception due to COVID 19 pandemic public health measures, is attempting to build this sort of partnership. This theoretical framework was chosen based on positive feedback received from The City Table. Virtual networks of practice are much looser than communities of practice, have different dynamics (as they need to interface through an online medium) and are thoroughly under researched (Orhun, 2008). Most importantly, there is an acknowledgment that though networks might have a platform to operate on, there is no guarantee that a community will form (Orhun, 2008). This uncertainty of the



formation of communities makes it much more useful to think of communities of practice as processes among groups instead of the assemblies of people themselves (Pyrko, 2017).

Communities of practice are desirable forms of professional learning, however establishing this process can be difficult as it not only requires the establishment of a group, but the community building needed to maintain the excitement, relevance, and engagement to invite the interaction necessary to keep communities of practice alive (Wenger, 2002). Most of the literature on communities of practice focuses on verifying various theoretical aspects of communities of practice theory because communities of practice are so difficult to initiate and do not have a formula that generates them (Smith, 2017). For example, in Smith's review of 41 studies on forming communities of practice in an online setting, three went beyond theory verification to provide practical implications of the theory, and Smith (2017) calls for "more researchers conducting (community of practice) oriented research on online/blended learning to clearly articulate and demonstrate the practical aspects of their findings" (p. 223).

Especially because there is such limited guidance from the literature on online communities of practice formation, one of the biggest challenges in forming this sort of community is that it is a form of thinking together to achieve trans-personal knowing. This is a form of knowing that moves knowledge that is situated in individuals into an active group of knowledge holders (Pyrko, 2017). When the individuals involved are from different backgrounds and have different power gradients (such as the participants of The City Table), thinking together is difficult due to differences in ideology, interests, and positionality in group dynamics (Pyrko, 2017). More detail on communities of practice, particularly as it relates to food insecurity, is provided in the literature review.

When talking about differences in positionality and backgrounds as barriers to collaborative learning in Canada, it is imperative to include the gender and race dynamics of our colonially determined environment as there is systematic support for maintaining silence on white privilege in particular (McIntosh, 1995). Colonialism is a structure of relationships of domination and subordination designed to maintain racialized structures of power (Beirmann, 2011). Beirmann (2011, p.390)states, “In addition to structures which have institutionalized colonial ontologies and epistemologies, and rendered them invisible (and thus powerful), psychological colonialism has shaped people's individual conception of what is right, true, just, and desirable”. Hence, if The City Table aims to collaboratively set goals for responding to food insecurity, it needs to actively counteract colonial thought patterns and norm-setting to avoid replicating colonial structures in the group setting. McIntosh’s activity of unpacking an invisible backpack is a well-established way of holding white privilege accountable (McIntosh, 1995). This is especially important considering the diversity The City Table represents, as newcomer, racialized and Indigenous communities are overrepresented among the food insecure (Lambert, 2020). For Biermann (2011) to be able to “think together” in this sector, there needs to be more than a practice of “making up or getting along”(p. 393), but a serious reconsideration of the nature of the relationships trying to be formed.

The successful formation of a community of practice in the food insecurity response sector in Edmonton would therefore fit into the concept of decolonization which is an “unravelling of the long history of colonialism and returning to well being” (McGuire-Adams & Giles, 2018, p 208). This research will use a community of practice theoretical framework with a lens of decolonization because establishing the process of a community of practice is an act of decolonization in the food insecurity response sector. Forming a community of practice and

achieving trans-personal knowledge amidst an environment of diversity and history of colonization requires unraveling and accounting for persistent power relationships between individuals to foster the group well-being necessary for collective learning within a community. Bearing in mind Smith's (2017) call for research to demonstrate the practical aspects of communities of practice, bringing community of practice and decolonization frameworks together may shed light on the practical aspects of forming a community of practice against the backdrop of poverty and food insecurity as explored in the literature review.

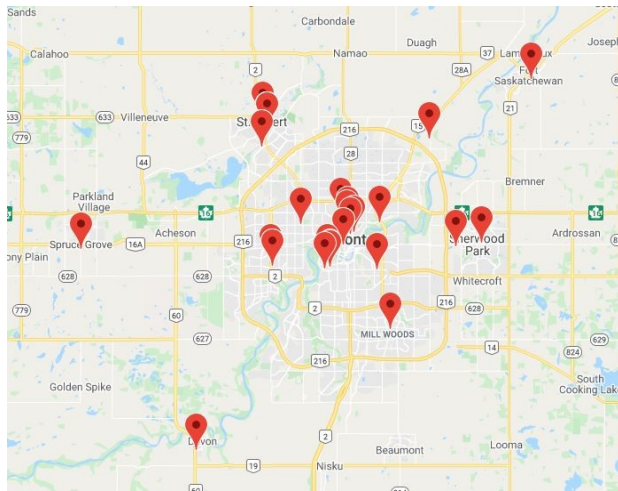
## **Literature Review**

Hunger and food insecurity have been issues present in the Edmonton community since its conception (Bankes, 2017). Currently, there are hundreds of not-for-profit organizations working tirelessly to address hunger in the City with the support of their community donors. More broadly, there has been crucial academic work in the sphere of food sovereignty by scholars like Vandana Shiva, who explores a community's right to have sovereignty or control over the food produced and consumed, from seed to table. My research focuses on the emergency provision of food, but acknowledges the need to improve upon availability and choice among recipients of emergency food (Garcia-Sempere, 2019). This literature review starts with an overview of the state of and history of food insecurity in Alberta in order to properly represent the problem that this sector and The City Table are responding to. This is followed by a presentation of the different ideologies of food insecurity responses and potential individual and organizational ideological barriers to trans-personal knowing. And finally, insights from the community of practice literature informs the work being done to overcome barriers to the formation of communities of practice.

## The response to hunger in Edmonton before COVID-19

In Western economies and Canada specifically, there has been a trend of increasing food insecurity and food bank use despite growing economies, and this contradictory situation has been called “the scandal of hunger” (Riches, 2002, p. 649). Edmonton reflects this situation insofar as the city’s GDP remained relatively constant (generally growing or contracting by less than 5%) from 2014-2017 (Edmonton, 2017); however, individuals receiving food hampers from the food bank grew by almost 50% in the same period (Food bank, 2018). The Edmonton food bank also reports that 25% of users are currently employed, while 43% have post-secondary education. Additionally, 54% of First Nations households experience higher rates of food insecurity in Alberta, compared to the rest of the province at 10% (Alberta Health Services, 2017).

Figure 1: Food supports in Edmonton



*Note.* (Searching for “food”, 2020)

There are 140 organizations offering food support in Edmonton as of October 2020 on the 211 directory of services (Searching for “food”, 2020). However, the food bank states that it partners with 250 agencies to distribute food (Food Bank, 2018). These agencies vary in size and are unevenly distributed over the city (Figure 1). Some serve meals, some give out hampers of food, some connect other agencies with their networks of donors, and others are leaders in innovation in getting their food out to the community. From supporting clients to grow their own food, to activating communities to act like a bulk purchasing collective, to pantries allowing clients to build their own hampers, to bussing discounted produce to Edmonton’s food deserts, to giving out versatile gift cards, to programs providing wild game to meet culturally appropriate Indigenous diets, several strategies exist in Edmonton to give out food among not-for-profits.

Income based supports for food security are more centralized and government based, although some of the above mentioned supports also give out grocery store gift cards. Short term (up to a year) income support exists through Alberta Works. Barriers to Full Time Employment

(BFE) exist for Albertans who cannot work for medical reasons and need longer term assistance. Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) is a permanent assistance program for those with lifelong medical barriers to work. All of these benefits stop at the age of 65, when the federal pension plan begins.

## History of Hunger

Canada is a global leader in agriculture with millions of acres of productive land (Rotz, 2017). However, Canada's food system sees very different forms of access and participation among different individuals and communities with a gradient of privilege afforded to them in Canadian society and law (Rotz, 2017). In this section, the history of hunger will show how hunger has been constructed in Alberta through an intentional colonial project and how the responses to hunger fit into that project.

### Integral hunger

As described in the book "The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor", in 2010 Ugandan villagers were forced off of their land at gunpoint and had their cattle slaughtered by local warlords with support from the World Bank (Westerly, 2014). The World Bank, who evaluated the villagers' economic activities unfavourably, had them removed to make way for what the World Bank deems to be more productive land use (Westerly, 2014). This strategy of cattle killing, forced displacement, and land use change is similar to the well documented colonization strategies employed throughout the British Empire (Johnson, 2017). Often there is a straight line between the terrible violence of hunger and starvation observed today and the colonial histories that enmesh those situations. In this section a straight line will be drawn from the violent hunger that exists today in Edmonton,

and its colonial history, to better inform perceived obstacles to forming communities of practice in response to hunger.

The country of Canada was established on the wreckage of Indigenous food systems that existed since time immemorial. Several colonial practices have resulted in the erosion and destruction of Indigenous food systems (Usher, 1997). These practices include, but are not limited to, the introduction of invasive species, the intentional destruction of keystone species (e.g., bison, beaver), direct environmental changes (e.g., deforestation, loss of grassland, desertification and climate change), and the destruction of Indigenous ways of being integral to ecosystem maintenance through the removal and forced assimilation of Indigenous peoples (Sutton, 2016). Several plants and animals were particularly important to Indigenous food systems in the prairie region, but bison were an integral food source and part of the prairie ecosystem. By the end of the 1870s, millions of bison had been slaughtered for fashion, sport, profit and military gain, completely toppling this food system (Taylor, 2011). This created widespread hunger and was a major motivating factor for the signing of treaties between Indigenous nations and the Crown, including Treaty 6, where Edmonton is situated. The process of colonialism in this region destroyed essential components of Indigenous food systems, created hunger, and then promised to provide emergency food relief through treaty rights. These treaties enabled the government to “legally” acquire the rights to the land, proceed to settle the land with European immigrants and assimilate the First Nations (Bankes, 2017). It should however be noted that Indigenous groups were amongst the first to attempt farming on the Canadian prairies, and that history is often obscured by a dominant narrative of European colonization (Carter, 2019).

This is not to say that settlers were experiencing abundance at the time. The twins of hunger and policing were extended to settlement patterns in Alberta. At the turn of the century, people of the “Slav race” were encouraged to settle the newly acquired territory, and those who are now known today as Ukrainians were particularly criminalized (Robinson, 1991). Racism was inherent in Alberta’s settlement patterns, forcing Ukrainians (among others) to settle not in villages, but along railway lines for the explicit and policed production of cash crops for the benefit of railway companies (Boyko, 2017). The policing of Ukrainians ultimately culminated in a period of internment and forced labour during WWI, which was a war crime (Boyko, 2017). Food insecurity among racialized newcomers persists today, and the Ukrainian example shows how racialization is a fluid process, targeting different groups of people over time. The systems created to support or legitimize these processes continue to legitimize equivalent processes today and are reflected in the earlier mentioned statistics of over representation by Indigenous, racialized, and newcomer groups in food insecurity.

## A legacy of hunger

The concept of providing “the poor” with scraps of food, as alluded to earlier in the poor response to hunger afforded by treaties, is based on medieval gleaning relationships. Simply giving out more food does not solve food insecurity because food insecurity is directly tied to income insecurity, rather than physical access to food, as was the case in medieval Europe (Wakefeild, 2013). The term “gleaning”, which reflects this process, is a complex term described in the Bible, Roman Law, and Medieval Law with varied meanings but generally refers to a social arrangement where landowners allow people who they consider to be in need to take waste food, generally what fell on the ground, while they reap the majority of the crops (Ault, 1961).



Though this form of informal welfare perpetuated food insecurity by improperly addressing it, when usufruct rights, like wood gathering, communal grazing and gleaning began being denied through the power of ever expanding estates in the nineteenth century, there was an accompanying decline in the social security net available to those most in need (Crummy, 1999). It should also be noted that gleaning was not simply charity, but a part of a reciprocal relationship between classes with the potential for negotiation on a lord by lord basis, which is where the practice strongly diverges from modern forms of welfare (Dikovic, 2016).

To bridge this period of gleaning to Anglo-Canadian colonization of the prairie, there is abundant literature on the role of hunger in the period of British industrialization, outlining the brutal nature of hunger in this period on the working class. In this period the cause of widespread hunger was still being debated as man-made or divinely ordained (Vernon, 2007). This period saw widespread hunger as rural poverty forced the poor into cities to work in squalid conditions to fuel Britain's industrialization (Vernon, 2007). Policing the working class remained a top priority in the transition from the medieval period to the colonial period; Britain added vast colonial possessions and penal colonies simultaneously policed the poor and populated their colonial projects (Neilson, 2013)

This literature has illustrated the well-established role of hunger, charity and policing in the monarchy's relations with the land and agricultural economic extraction by the time North American colonization began. Gleaning was used by lords to show their virtue as they profited from harvests, while peasants experienced hunger and food insecurity. In this system, responses to food insecurity did not aim to address poverty, but were rather overtly used as a tool to maintain an oppressed body of peasant harvesters integral to generating wealth.

## Hunger and neoliberalism

*I want to argue that because most Canadians associate racism with Canada's distant past, they are not able to understand and accept how a more contemporary form of racism—neoliberal racism—affects First Nations today (Mascarenhas, 2016, p. 8).*

Neoliberalism is a modern school of economic thought that manifests as a development approach that combines the liberalization of trade (globalization) with decreasing government spending on social support. Neoliberalism is marketed as a path to wealth and “development” which is supported and enforced by organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Neoliberalism can also be seen as “a political project carried out by the corporate capitalist class as they felt intensely threatened [and] desperately wanted to launch a political project that would curb the power of labor” (Harvey, 2016, p. 2). This is generally seen as the primary form of subjugation perpetrated by the “first world” on the “third world” in the context of post WWII decolonization. The oppressive process that is being referred to is the general and gradual dismantling of the welfare state put in place as a response to the economic downturn in the 1930s, in post-WWII Canada (Tarasuk, 1996). The erosion of social safety nets exacerbated the effects of income insecurity. This process was notably accelerated in the 1980's with Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher dominating global politics, and the resulting income insecurity had a direct impact on food insecurity (Banting, 1987). This early era of neoliberalism set the stage for the current context of food insecurity in Canada. Canada has neglected its obligation to provide the basic human right to food and has received international condemnation for “widespread and increasing food insecurity; a deplorable incidence of hunger and poverty amongst First Nations communities and Aboriginal peoples living in Northern Canada; and the lack of a national food policy” (Riches, 2014, p. 42). This trajectory was entrenched in 1996 with

the abolition of the Canada Assistance Plan, leaving food assistance programs to provinces, which represented a process of deregulation where Canada was no longer obliged to collect data on poverty (Riches, 2014).

In Canada, the first food bank (defined as a centralized warehouse registered as a non-profit for the purpose of collecting and distributing food) was established in Edmonton in 1981 in response to an economic downturn, and has since become the dominant food charity model for addressing food insecurity in Canada (Riches, 2002). Food banks stepped forward to bear this burden in the narrow political margins of possible interventions and so became community funded responses to hunger which fit into the prevailing neoliberal ideology of the time. This political agenda removes the poor's access to basic services and amenities from the responsibilities of government (Miraftab, 2004). Gleaning, now from grocery stores, still relies on the inconsistent generosity of owners, inconsistent amounts of waste foods, the labour of volunteers, and coordination by charitable organizations - all factors widely regarded as limitations to the services provided by food banks (Lee, 2017). It can be said that the insidious dimension of the act of food giving (mostly through hampers) has become a symbolic gesture not intended to fully address food security. Rather, it obscures clients' actual food needs through a symbolic response and this consequence is very difficult to remedy given our political limitations, namely the lack of funding for social supports (Tarasuk, 2003). In other words, clients do not have a choice in how much or what kind of charitable food they are getting in a food bank context, but must be grateful, and the food banks know this but cannot affect change (Tarasuk, 2003). The strength of the food bank model is that, in a neoliberal climate, food banks simultaneously relieve the government of its responsibility to provide the human right of food access and provide corporations and small businesses a way to dispose of unsaleable, or severely

discounted food, while expressing good corporate and environmental citizenship (Tarasuk, 2003).

## Ideologies of hunger responses

History from the perspective of hunger in Alberta reveals that our ancestors had different relationships with hunger at different times. This diversity contributes to the different narratives and ideologies that inform our individual conceptualizations of what hunger is and what should be done about it. The two dominant modes of conceptualizing hunger responses, presented below, are in ideological conflict with one another. One is a response that conceives food security for all as an optional, moral act of good, whereas the other is a response that conceives food security as an inalienable human right not to be denied. These two dominant modes of conceptualizing hunger will be followed by a review of the literature that supports expanding this dichotomy by viewing responses from several different lenses.

### Charity vs rights

Voluntary giving, usually tied with morality or charity, has played a role in society's response to hunger as documented in the history outlined above. Charity as an ideology has been an integral relationship-brokering tool between classes over time, and is foundational to oppressive concepts like the white man's burden, treaty making and residential schools. Charitable responses to hunger have proliferated in North America, and though giving out food or money for food through faith based organizations or food banks is a kind thing to do, the problem is that approach has created an essential service for the survival of recipients. The neoliberal process of absolving the government of this responsibility has the consequence of creating a disunified approach to food insecurity and data collection, which limits the advocacy potential for the cause of hunger (Lambie-Mumford, 2015). The effect of shifting the

responsibility of meeting the right to food away from the government and onto charities can even be said to form a “shadow state” (Beischer, 2016, p. 8). Additionally, charity may evoke shame for recipients, which has historically been used as a disciplinary tool to maintain orderliness in class relations, and can be considered one of the causes of poverty across generations (Caraher, 2014).

Despite support found in the literature, and decades of advocacy, a rights-based approach to food insecurity has not been adopted in Canada outside of prisons and child welfare programs. The literature supports a view of food insecurity as a function of income insecurity and calls for a problem solving approach that aims to address structural and systematic barriers to the human right to food, considering structural and systematic approaches, predominantly through poverty reduction (Dees, 2012). Unfortunately, the friction between these approaches of charity and human rights is maintained by the inaction of Western democracies to act upon the right to food and charities have been forced to take center stage in the struggle to alleviate food insecurity (Siperstein, 2019).

### Expanding this dichotomy

Discourses have the power to shape and orient our conceptions of what hunger is and what our response should be (Mendly-Zambo, 2019). Being aware of the different discourses can expand our understanding of the full breadth of food insecurity. Figure 2 provides Mendly-Zambo’s (2019) overview of different and competing discourses of food insecurity (nutrition, charity, community development, social determinants of health, and gradients of power), as well as the primary targets and role of public policy associated with each. Understanding the perspectives on food insecurity is particularly important to understanding Edmonton’s

multiplicity of responses. There are hundreds of organizations responding to food insecurity for a reason, and a part of that reason is the multiple approaches an agency can take to food insecurity.

Figure 2: Competing discourses in the Food Insecurity literature

HFI discourse	Key concept	Dominant research and practice paradigms	Primary targets	The role of public policy
HFI as primarily a nutrition/dietetics issue	Food insecure individuals experience micro/macro nutrient deficiencies that can affect health	Provision and evaluation of health education and information provision, skill development, and counselling	HFI individuals' behavior with sporadic references to access to food issues and income	Minimal attention to sources of HFI and need for public policy to address these issues
HFI as requiring charitable responses	Charitable-based food distribution activities such as food banks and feeding programs can reduce HFI	Provision and evaluation of charitable collection and distribution of food	Vulnerable individuals whose acquisition of food reduces hunger	Advocacy for policies that increase supply of food/donations with minimal reference to public policy that contribute to HFI
HFI as requiring community development	Local agency-based action such as community kitchens and gardens can reduce HFI	Establishing and evaluating community-based initiatives that provide people with local access to food	HFI communities where local activities can build social cohesion and improve access to food	Focus on securing funding for these local activities with minimal reference to public policies that contribute to HFI
HFI as a social determinant of health	Public policies are the source of HFI and its adverse health outcomes	Research state of HFI and identify public policy sources of HFI and responses	Public policymakers with some public outreach	Advocacy can lead to public policy action to reduce HFI (primarily pluralist with some recent institutionalist analysis)
HFI as an imbalance of power and influence in society	Powerful forces benefit from the public policies that create HFI as well as ineffectual activities to manage it	Explication of societal structures and processes skewing the distribution of economic resources. Organizing to produce equitable distribution of power and influence	Undue influence and power of the corporate and business sector	Political economy analysis focused on economic and political structures that shape distribution-related public policy and building political and social movements to oppose them

*Note.* (Mendly-Zambo, 2019, p.539 )

## Using a community of practice approach

Communities of practice involve mobilizing the knowledge of individual practitioners to several practitioners, which is what Pyrko (2017) calls “trans-personal knowing”. However, when working in a context of poverty, and particularly food insecurity, practitioners across agencies can have very different lived experiences, gradients of power, and may serve clients with very different needs. All of these factors may pose barriers to forming trans-personal knowing, especially in a context where there may be competition between agencies (as discussed in the findings section on engagement). Overcoming the negative impacts of these factors may

be informed by understanding the role of decolonization. This research sees the process of forming a community of practice, achieving trans-personal knowing, and overcoming corresponding barriers, as an act of decolonization and the potential formation of a community where learning can occur.

Communities of practice bridge different knowledges, positionalities, and ideologies to achieve a trans-personal way of knowing (Pyrko, 2017). There is a well-developed body of literature that explores the idea of communities and networks of practice as originally conceptualized by Etienne Wenger (1998) and has been applied to many learning contexts (Diaz, 2021). Communities of practice help groups determine the content of what they will talk about, improve the conditions in which talking happens by building trust, promote equitable processes for engagement (rather than facilitation), and draw attention to the structures that promote learning (Diaz, 2021). On a structural level, communities of practice can move knowledge from an individual practitioner to a living community that can replicate those learnings wherever else that knowledge might be useful; this is what Pyrko called trans-personal knowing (Edwards, 2021).

In their book “Reinventing Food Banks and Pantries: New Tools to End Hunger” Martin (2021) references communities of practice as a tool that can mobilize the learnings of individual agencies for the creation of comprehensive approaches to food security. For example, Feeding America’s (2018) pilot program led a nationwide community of practice among networked food banks and pantries, leveraging the group’s collective experience and thereby increasing the scale and impact of programs trying to “conquer hunger”. In Edmonton, similar initiatives exist, not related to food insecurity, but in housing insecurity, where Homeward Trust has built a

community of practice among housing agencies to foster cooperation and exchange knowledge to end homelessness (Homeward Trust Edmonton, 2010).

There was no existing community of practice in Edmonton's food insecurity response sector; however as a result of COVID-19, The City Table is bringing together 20-40 agencies (out of a total of approximately 250 agencies) with the hope of using a community of practice approach to develop more comprehensive approaches to food insecurity among agencies in attendance.

Foundational community of practice author Etienne Wenger identified three processes that occur in groups as they begin to identify as communities of practices (Wenger, 1998, p. 228). These processes are: *engagement* – doing things together, talking, producing artifacts; *imagination* – reflecting, constructing an image of the practice and its members and seeing self as one of them; *alignment* – following directions, aligning self with expectations/standards, coordinating actions towards a common goal. These do not imply a sequential formula to create communities of practice, but are necessary as a dynamic combination (Wenger, 1998, p. 228).

These categories can be used as parameters with which to conceptualize the shift required to move from a group of agencies working independently on the same issue, to a group involved in the process of building a community of practice. These three concepts will be used to guide the analysis of the findings.

According to Wenger, the indicators of engagement are: interactive technologies, communication facilities, joint tasks, availability of help, and peripherality (Smith, 2017). This form of engagement serves to build trust in communities of practice and reduce isolation (Patton & Parker, 2017). Engagement is the foundation of communities of practice as doing things



together justifies the need for a community and indeed forms the relationships from which the community of engagement is built (Patton & Parker, 2017).

Imagination is indicated by transparency, explanations, reflection, and pushing boundaries (Smith, 2017). This is a form of engagement in that it represents a collective action which is not yet tangible (Aguirre-Garzón & Castañeda-Peña, 2017). Hopeful group imagination can also have the effect of forming goals and setting norms, which is why imagination is transitional in between engagement and alignment (Aguirre-Garzón & Castañeda-Peña, 2017).

The indicators for alignment are common focus, direction, plans, standards, policies, and distribution of authority (Smith, 2017). Alignment can have a transformational role for a community of practice and is presented as the pinnacle of collaborative learning (Weller, 2017). Any given community of practice can have several barriers to alignment which is why Weller suggests thinking about alignment on a spectrum of trajectories from integration to irrelevance (Weller, 2017). Weller also suggests that a parallel trajectory for communities of practice, with no alignment, may still be productive and acceptable forms of communities of practice to its members (Weller, 2017).

## Methodology and Methods

This is a qualitative research project that gathers data primarily through semi-structured interviews with representatives of organizations involved in responding to food insecurity in Edmonton. Data was also gathered through agency websites and publications to provide additional context. This section describes participant selection, the interview process, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

Both purposeful and snowballing sampling methods were used to recruit participants. Participants included representatives of community agencies who are members of The City Table and those who are not members, as well as businesses that contribute to food insecurity responses and are not members of The City Table. As with most qualitative research, the participant selection process was spontaneous and dependent on circumstance, where the anticipated value of information rich responses was selected for (Raybold, 2013). The dominant circumstances relevant for participant selection were: the relationships formed by The Community University Partnership (CUP) and the relationships formed through The City Table. Data collection was carried out in partnership with CUP and so the participant selection process has a wealth of established relationships to draw from in the food insecurity response sector. Participants representing different organizations with direct experience with food security services, and who had established relationships with CUP were interviewed first, and then recommended participants who they anticipated had a wealth of rich information. The list of contacts was recorded in an excel sheet to keep track of all the potential participants. Potential interviewees were contacted and provided with: 1) the formal recruitment email explaining that they were recommended to participate in this research based on their knowledge and experience in the field, 2) a copy of the description of the project and, 3) the consent form.

Data collection began in January 2020 as an investigation into network building among food insecurity responding agencies and increasing agencies' access to waste food, however with the outbreak of the pandemic, the research shifted focus to supporting the existing efforts of The City Table. Interviews were conducted between January and September of 2020 and were semi-structured. Eleven interviews were conducted in total: community agencies (5), food donors (retail and producers) (4), and funders (2). The respondents are professionals with careers in food

security and were treated as experts in their field. In the interviews I asked them to provide an overview of their practice and the challenges and innovations they have experienced. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Participants have been anonymized using the job title that they were speaking from, and not necessarily the job title they currently hold, as several respondents spoke of work they did in a previous position. This approach was taken to maintain confidentiality in a tight knit community of professionals. The category of participant, the title used in analysis and a brief explanation of the title is outlined below (Table 1).

Table 1: Participants, Titles and Explanation of Titles

<b>Category</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Title Explanation</b>
Community Agency	Community Relations Officer	Respondent works to build and maintain community relations for their agency
Community Agency	Head Chef	Responsible for planning, preparing and providing logistical support, including procurement and staff management, to make meals at an agency
Community Agency	Policy Advisor	Conducts research for advocacy in an agency
Community Agency	Director	Manager of an entire agency
Community Agency	Consultant	Hired to advise on agency practices
Food Donor	Community Gardener	Organizes a community garden
Food Donor	Grower	Organizes a community garden
Food Donor	Grocer	Manages a grocery store
Food Donor	Logistics Advisor	Advises grocery store warehouses on issues that include food waste reduction and redirection
Funder	Funder	Senior member at a granting organization
Funder	Advocate	Representative of a granting organization

Saturation was determined to be achieved based on the criterias of quality of data, scope of the study, nature of the topic, and the usefulness of the information, as described by Maria

Mayan (2016). Five respondents representing community agencies were determined to be enough as the scope of the study is quite small and saturation was achieved quickly. The City Table has approximately 20 participants who attend meetings regularly, with a total of 40 on their mailing list. The five respondents spoke about issues with funding and donation management being common issues in the not-for-profit sector. The four food donors and two funders clearly outlined their processes of giving. All respondents were knowledgeable on the topic as they are professionals in their field and could support their views with their organizations' publications, which meant that the nature of the topic allowed for "a complete story, with no new information emerging and negative cases could be checked" (Mayan, 2016, p. 63), resulting in saturation. Preliminary findings were verified using an iterative process of member checking through participation at The City Table.

This research follows the human ethics process (REB 1) identified by the University of Alberta for obtaining consent to conduct this research. The anticipated risks of participation in this study were two-fold. First, this study is placing the burden of providing an interview on time sensitive organizations already stressed by COVID-19. Second, there may be a power gradient and fragile group dynamics between different community members and agencies, with some organizations entering the food security industry only recently due to increased funding due to the pandemic while others are well established, which is why individuals are anonymized and all possible identifiers have been removed. It was determined that the benefits far outweighed the risks.

## Analysis

The theoretical frameworks of communities of practice with the lens of decolonization were used to analyze the findings. Analysis was iterative and informed by the interviewees, either directly, in follow up conversation, or through The City Table. As interviews were being transcribed, they were coded and findings brought up in subsequent interviews for comment. This iterative process also provided insight into additional participants. Periodically presenting preliminary findings to The City Table, where several respondents and other professionals in the food insecurity response sector met monthly, functioned as a form of member checking (Birt, 2016). This member checking allowed me to reflect on and check my interpretation of the data as The City Table responded to the evolving situation of food insecurity response during the pandemic.

As the transcripts were coded, themes and categories emerged, new codes identified and some discarded. Priority was given to data that could support network building among The City Table as per the research question. The data was organized using principles from the community of practice literature, as described in the literature review. Triangulation was then used in between the data provided by different respondents, literature made available by agencies, and through participation at The City Table (Flick, 2004). This iterative process of data analysis allowed me to consider qualitative-specific criteria (validity, generalizability and reliability) in the research's maintenance of rigour, as described by Mayan (2016). The validity of findings was grounded in presence of the finding in the data collected, and verified with The City Table, agency publications and follow-up conversations with participants. Generalizability, or capturing a range of experiences in a phenomenon according to Mayan (2016), was particularly important.

Respondents were asked about problems in their work with the intention of working towards improving them (see appendix 2). Using a strengths based approach, it was very important to capture the tensions along with celebrating successes in order to build the existing assets of the sector. Reliability was achieved through saturation, especially as findings were iteratively presented to The City Table to capture an accurate representation of the issues presented.

In terms of verification, this research also used Mayan's (2016) process of researcher responsiveness, methodological coherence, sampling, and concurrent data collection and analysis and thinking theoretically. I was the instrument of this research and I carry biases that had to be confronted in this community context to meet the goals and objectives of this research. Through open communication with the members of The City Table and relationship-building, I had to be creative, flexible and sensitive to the needs of the community to carry out this research.

Achieving methodological coherence was incredibly important as this fledgling community needed to be supported by this research in its community building process. Interviews, follow-up conversations and presenting back to the Cityable were done in partnership with participants, acknowledging them as knowledge holders. Sampling was done in such a way to ensure that a range of experiences was captured, especially in presentations to the table as this process had to avoid alienating any points of view and present all concerns in such a way to invite further conversation. The Snowball sampling method used allowed for concurrent data collection and analysis, as an analysis of the data was necessary to select subsequent participants. And finally, thinking theoretically was easily achieved as the participants were well versed in literature on food insecurity and readily recommended reading materials to inform my analysis. As the respondents are professionals in their fields they were aware of their organization's mission statement and ideology, which they were able to communicate to me and invite me to consider.

# Findings

All respondents had the self-awareness to know that no matter how well they step up to do the crucial emergency work, agencies are not, and may not be able to change the structure of food insecurity or poverty. All respondents also responded to the rise in food insecurity with passionate commitment as they know their services are essential to their clients, not just in the pandemic but more broadly. This section will illustrate how participants' passion and commitment to providing this essential service may translate into the life force of a community of practice, which also includes the tensions that arise among agencies due to the structural issues they face. The emerging themes presented in the findings are informed by the literature on communities of practice, whereas a decolonization lens will be drawn upon more in the discussion section. As elaborated on in the literature review, community of practice scholar Etienne Wenger identified three processes (engagement, imagination, and alignment) that occur in groups as they begin to identify as communities of practices (Smith, 2017). As per the objectives of this research, these processes will guide a description of successes and tensions that arise from the stories shared during the participants' interviews.

## Engagement

Engagement means doing things together, talking and producing artifacts together (Smith, 2017). Food is about relationships formed with each other, from production through to consumption, and with the environment within which food is produced. A community gardener and donor to the food bank spoke about the links between food production and community building:

It's almost the easiest thing to lead with, it almost happens organically, community building comes quite naturally to it. The deep long-term relationships are more work, but the overall people coming in and participating, that's the easy part of it...[Community gardening is] a participatory form of engagement with the community that needs our produce, and that's what we really try to aspire to, not to produce just productivity, but having community involved.

The point of The City Table is to bring people together to talk about sharing food among agencies and with clients. While community building may be easy for people sharing food in a garden, it is more challenging when different agencies sit at a table to *talk about* sharing food. The following sections outline the barriers agencies face as a result of the evaluations they undergo to acquire food donations and funding, as well as measuring their impacts. This approach of individual agency evaluation is counterproductive to the promotion of a collective strategy and engagement, and is done in three areas of individual competition: competing for donations, funding, and data.

## Donations

Agencies can either buy food (optimally through bulk purchasing) or they can receive food as a donation from retailers, distributors, or producers. Of the food that gets donated by retail outlets, a portion of it is considered “waste food”. This food is nutritionally valid, however, does not meet the internal quality standards of the business selling that food. Much of this food is associated with a passed best-before date and needs to be rotated off shelves, either to waste disposal or, more often, to community agencies as donations. The proportion of waste food given out varies agency by agency; for example, 60-80% of the food given out by the Edmonton Food Bank annually was waste food (Edmonton's Food Bank, 2021). According to a grocer and



logistics advisor interviewed from the same business, the company's willingness to donate waste food stems from considerations on recouping the cost of waste food by discounting it, the cost of disposing that food (dumpster tipping fees, and liability issues), and the businesses' commitment or willingness to work with community agencies.

Access to this form of donation is uneven among agencies and based on individual capacity; thus, this represents a form of individual agency evaluation. The logistics advisor identified several criteria (outlined in the previous paragraph) for partnering with an agency for waste food pickup. Food stores can set out requirements that integrate the donating process into their operations. The logistics advisor explains how, from the perspective of donors, they prefer working with one recipient instead of five to six. When looking for a recipient, they want an organization that can "pick up on a regular schedule, have a single point of contact, ... do the logistical transport to and from, and they are also guaranteeing that that food is safe, they are taking ownership of that and handling it after it leaves our premises". Additional preference is given to organizations that "address potential concerns, not even concerns that have manifested in reality, but they have thought about it". These "potential concerns" were contingency plans for logistical issues that may arise in the transferring of food from one location to another and reflect thought-out procedures that a partner agency would need to propose to a donor business. The summation of these conversations with the logistics advisor and grocer is that, although their business wants to remain open to further partnerships, their existing partnerships address almost all of their food waste, which limits the potential for additional partnerships.

Smaller organizations cannot access the food waste donations of large grocers because they do not have the capacity to pick up and keep viable food quantities. However, in Edmonton, agencies can access the food offered by the food bank freely. A head chef of one of these

agencies indicated that the food offered by the food bank is not always sufficient to run a not-for-profit kitchen. The chef added that food banks do a good job of acquiring food and making that food available to their community members, but struggle with variability in quality, quantity, and types of food available, which are perceived barriers for achieving consistently reliable service. The head chef spoke of how reliant on the food bank they were initially, but transitioned from going there several times a week to perhaps once a month by instead canvassing businesses for their waste food. The head chef approached businesses for donations, acquired enough waste food and coffee to cancel a very expensive coffee supplying contract, and was able to free up their food budget to the extent that they could regularly make gourmet meals for their clients, shrimp alfredo instead of soup for example. This success was built on the existing relationships the head chef held, their ability to form new relationships with businesses, and their enthusiasm to serve better food. As explained: “I have a lot of ins, I know a lot of people, and that’s why I was good at that job. It's just like, know people, and don’t be phoney.” This process of canvassing for donations applies to acquiring any kind of donation and the head chef commented that businesses are proud to be able to donate non-waste food.

At a different agency, the community relations officer spoke about their history of acquiring food donations. The officer spoke about their success in partnering with pharmacies for food donations, as well as caterers for large community meals, and the network of volunteers that regularly supply waste food in addition to what they receive from the food bank. Whereas the head chef focused on the importance of personal relationships, the community relations officer emphasized remaining “top of mind” for food donations among donating businesses. This came with an acknowledgement of how their community gets neglected by donors and the relationship

building strategy needs to be developed knowing that organizations are concurrently seeking the same donations.

The line between community agency and food donation provider can be very blurred as some agencies also participate in growing food for their clients. One such grower with a long history in this field provided insight into inter-agency competition for food donations. The grower spoke about a large amount of food that was to be produced for an agency, but due to differences in ideology, that food was then sent to a different agency with a different distribution ideology (ie. distribution methodologies that might be perceived as more equitable or reflect more food dignity). The grower describes the situation in Edmonton among agencies reacting to the increased food need due to the outbreak of the pandemic as a “food fight” where different agencies scramble to get enough food for their clients at the expense of their relationships with other agencies.

These stories suggest that acquiring donations of food is a form of agency by agency evaluation, where degrees of success are determined by the amount, quality, and appropriateness of the food agencies are able to acquire for their programs. Food is something agencies have to compete for, to varying degrees, and this is done through their logistical abilities to transport food as described by the grocer and logistics advisor, their ability to mobilize personal staff relationships as explained by the head chef, their ability to form new relationships with businesses as explained by the community relation officer, and their ability to align their agency with the desired ideologies of donating bodies as elaborated by the grower. Most prominently however, these stories describe the food insecurity of agencies as they struggle and compete to be evaluated positively by food donors to secure food and reflect the difficulty of participating in a partnership or collaboration while experiencing funding insecurity.

## Funding

One factor that impacts an agency's ability to receive food donations is their capacity to ask for and receive food, but what mostly determines their capacity to ask for and receive food is the amount and type of funding they hold. Funders evaluate agencies based on their ideas, partnerships, and capacities to use funding to distribute food, using formal application processes to distribute grants and emergency funding. The director of a community agency voiced frustration with the general process of the formalization of services in the not-for-profit sector industry. The director describes the funding environment as a maze, with several donors providing several funding opportunities, each with their own deadline and application process. This is how they describe an incident in applying for funding to respond to the increased food need due to COVID-19:

“a funder called me during the first week...they said if you want money, you have to fill out an application by three in the morning. A week later they call me and say, you didn't get that grant but we have another grant application...They make it very difficult to just tell them the truth about what we are doing, because if you just tell them what you are doing and you don't make some other fancy thing up, nobody wants to fund it. They don't want to fund operations, they don't want to fund staff, food, that doesn't work, it's not sexy enough, so we have to make it sexy”.

The director not only voiced their frustration with the competitive nature of being evaluated by funders on the funders' terms, but also with the new agencies moving into this funding system and encroaching on funds that were historically available to particular agencies. They tell a story of how one day a well-funded organization began doing food security work, and began receiving the funding that the director's agency would usually receive. The director was very frustrated with this large agency's ability to hire multiple staff members to write funding applications as

their full-time job, where the director was writing these applications “off the side of their desk”. This illustrates how agencies are not only being evaluated individually with real consequences on their capacity to distribute food, but the evaluation is based on their ability to apply for funding and not necessarily the work they need funding for.

The grower described the process of competing for funding with the harsh term “pilfering grants”; however, in speaking to a funder, much more subtle tensions due to competitive individual evaluation were elaborated on. There is an understanding that, individually and collectively, funders do not have enough money to fund all of the needs identified in communities and the funder is particularly aware of this. One argument used by agencies for “scaling up” existing projects is the phrase “duplication of services”. This was explained as borrowing from basic economics, implying that the preferred approach is an agency scaling up a particular service rather than multiple agencies duplicating an already existing service. The funder explained that although the not-for-profit sector in Edmonton has borrowed this term, it does not apply very well to community work as even though two services may appear nominally the same, the communities they serve might have different needs and thus need two agencies doing similar work. The funder used the analogy of an Italian restaurant. If we were to choose the elimination of duplicated services in favour of scaled up existing models, we would only have one big Italian restaurant instead of several smaller ones. It is difficult to judge the need and potential effectiveness of similar yet distinct programs because the local and relationship-based nature of community work is very difficult to describe on a grant application.

## Data

Agencies apply for and receive funding, procure the food, provide food to the clients, and are required to evaluate and record their activities in order to be successful when applying for

additional funding; this is a standard project cycle. Combined with the deregulation on collecting statistics on poverty in Canada, this means that in Edmonton almost every agency collects its own data on food insecurity (Riches, 2014). This is the best data available and therefore food insecurity responses are tabulated by individual agencies (Riches, 2012). While speaking to an agency's consultant, they described how "there are many organizations that are very territorial about food security, and their food clients. They won't go to the step of working with (other agencies), because they fear losing those clients". Additionally, when the consultant described an agency that did effectively partner with another food providing agency, a stipulation to receiving more food was that the smaller organization needed to collect data the way the larger agency does, which involved a learning process and capacity building.

## Imagination

Imagination means reflecting; constructing an image of the practice and its members, and seeing self as one of them (Smith, 2017). There were very few examples of collective imagination among the respondents. With the competition for donations, funding, and data described above, agencies imagining themselves in a collective struggle to respond to food insecurity is difficult, as the funder explains:

"I think it's fair to say that a lot of the emphasis would be on emergency food provision and not so much on how to build long term food security in a particular community because that's not so concrete and it's not as clear how to do that and so those would be less appealing to (funders)".

The funder makes a very good point about the nature of the practice of responding to food insecurity, namely that there are structures in place that make it difficult to solve food insecurity and so agencies are directed to emergency responses. The kind of individual responses

described by the head chef with their “ins” and the community relation officer’s “top of mind” come to mind as successful approaches to working in this field as individuals.

According to a policy advisor, it is easy for agencies to see themselves as individual actors waiting for a proper (income based) solution to food insecurity:

“It's great that people support the (food distributing agencies) and that they want to get into these initiatives and improve our food supply, but that conversation makes us forget that there are people living in poverty where regardless of how good those programs are, they will still not be meeting their needs as a result of being in poverty”.

The policy advisor wants to remind the sector of how massive the problem of societal food insecurity is and that perhaps in constructing an image of the practice, responses to food insecurity can be seen as one component of poverty alleviation in general, “so it's all the more reason to collaborate on and to partner outside of just emergency food”.

Related to the above, the grower and director did describe their visions of incorporating their work with the other agencies in this sector. The grower suggested leveraging their positionality and privilege to have the difficult conversations needed to work with other agencies to “create bounties”. The director called on funders to mandate cooperation and inter-agency community building that can coordinate funding within grant requirements, effectively creating a new norm among agencies, explaining “funders have to lead the conversation, not be a part of it”. These two perspectives highlight the difficulties in imagining a community of practice as ideas and values of collaboration are undermined by competitive funding practices.

The Head Chef described a co-worker whose job it was to build partnerships and secure grants, but the Head Chef perceived them to be unsuccessful because they were disingenuously forming relationships; he was being “phoney” in contrast to the Head Chef’s genuine

relationship building. Pyrko talks about race car drivers seeing the car as an extension of themselves and mathematicians personally identifying with their formulas; these are both examples of what foundational anthropologist Polanyi calls indwelling (Pyrko, 2017). The idea of indwelling, or “to be permanently present in”, implies that professionals have a tacit, or an unspoken body of knowledge that can be mobilized through communities of practice by interlocking them to create trans-personal ways of knowing (Pyrko, 2017). The Head Chef provides one example of how indwelling manifests in this field as competitive pride in your work. Indwelling is an obstacle to collective imagination in this sector as agencies’ imaginations are captured by their own competitive relationship building processes.

Due to deregulation in Canada, as described by Riches (2014), each agency can measure its work individually and then use that data to apply for funding or ask for donations. This is a form of indwelling, where agencies can create their own universe to sustain themselves and use their knowledge to advance themselves and excel in the funding system. If the goal is to create communities of practice aimed at addressing food insecurity at large, these two goals may not mesh. The policy advisor puts it best,

“you need to be sensitive to the fact that charitable organizations are lovely and a lot of them are filled with amazing people doing amazing work. But there is always a bit of a lens that they bring that isn’t fully aligned with the people that they serve, so you have to be careful about that”.

By defining how data collection is done, agencies are able to effectively create their own realities, and are encouraged to do so by the funding environment they are in. A community of practice approach may be used to overcome this pattern of thinking by building the sort of trans-personal knowing Pyrko talks about through a process of expanding these individual realities.



However, the director speaks to the challenges associated with this as they call for a platform to discuss with fellow agencies. The director mentions “egos” several times as an obstacle to systematic approaches to cooperation. This makes sense as these realities were built to compete, and not to necessarily solve problems, though there needs to be a disclaimer that this is harsh language to describe hunger statistics and agencies that are the best services available to our most vulnerable Edmontonians. In summary, competition is more than a tension in this sector, it is formative to the characteristics of agencies’ self-understanding and creates a barrier to addressing food insecurity more comprehensively and to forming communities of practice.

## Alignment

Alignment means following directions, aligning with expectations and standards, and coordinating actions towards a common goal (Smith, 2017). Agencies do this in several ways, whether they are responding to community needs, following the law or meeting funding requirements. However, alignment between one agency and another or one agency and others is not as foundational or formal in Edmonton’s response to food insecurity, which is why it is not extensively represented in the data gathered from the research interviews. The funder mentioned that the last time the agencies of Edmonton came together to coordinate their services, they formed the first food bank in Canada, 40 years ago.

The funder celebrated instances of agencies applying for joint funding and the work that the food bank does in partnering with so many agencies. The advocate echoes this sentiment but also elaborates on the issues caused by a lack of alignment. Although the food bank has been very accommodating and has expanded its partnerships during the pandemic, there is still an obstacle in collecting the data on who is actually getting the food. This happens for a multitude of complex reasons.

Lack of reference to or evidence of alignment in the data manifests in multiple ‘asks’ and applications for clients as they access multiple services in the city. Also, the advocate describes how there is a continuum of needs that a client can have (from no access to food at all, to only needing supplements to their access to food) and there is a continuum of services in the city that respond to those needs. However, because these are all separate and often unlisted services, it is very difficult to match your food needs to a food service from the perspective of a client, who is already experiencing adversity. Other social services like Alberta Health Services, Alberta Works and Homeward Trust create a file on clients that follows them through the services they receive at different organizations to help guide that client through the services they need seamlessly. One outcome of The City Table that the advocate hopes for is increased coordination, perhaps starting with coordinated funding that could lead to a more cohesive system for clients to navigate.

## Discussion

The literature review examined the issue of food insecurity from the lens of colonialism and transitioned into a discussion on communities of practice, acknowledging the diversity of perspectives shaping responses to food insecurity. The findings then were organized using principles from the community of practice literature to analyze the experiences of respondents to generate insights into potentially building a community of practice that may be useful to The City Table. In this discussion I will be presenting the insights gleaned from the experiences of the participants, with The City Table in mind.

In considering building a community of practice, respondents mostly provided data relevant to engagement. Smith’s (2017) indicators of engagement, interactive technologies,

communication facilities, and availability of help, are all represented in the increased partnerships (described in the introduction) and The City Table. Though joint tasks were alluded to, there are serious barriers to forming the foundation of a community of practice due to competition for donations and funding and methods of data collection described by the respondents. In contrast, Homeward Trust's community of practice exists in a context where housing resources and data collection are centralized.

With a fragmented base of engagement for forming a community of practice, the areas of imagination and alignment are consequently lacking. Smith's (2017) indicators of imagination, transparency, explanations, reflection, and pushing boundaries, explanations of and reflection on problems in food insecurity response were present, but not in the context of a collective imagining. The hope conveyed by some respondents for positive change is promising; however, indwelling as described by Pyrko (2017) and individual approaches to responding to food insecurity dominate the imaginations of the respondents. Alignment, as measured by Smith's (2017) indicators of common focus, direction, plans, standards, policies, and distribution of authority, currently does not exist. However, the respondents do identify the potential benefits of creating alignment in responding to food insecurity. This aligns with Weller's (2017) perspective on alignment in that communities of practice can still be useful without alignment and can facilitate the work needed to establish alignment.

Representatives of agencies show passion for their work and are able to evaluate it critically as they all share a desire to improve their organization's ability to address food insecurity. For example, none are content with responses to food insecurity that align with the ideology of charity and seek more rights based and comprehensive approaches to food insecurity that align with the literature. Despite their strong abilities to network and the ideological

cohesion among agencies, agencies have not formed a community of practice, showing some engagement but sparser imagination and alignment. Because there is engagement, shared values, shared goals and new infrastructure for communication and collaboration (in the form of The City Table), there is now a platform for more collective action. But The City Table has not yet become a community of practice; that process will involve more time and community building, which is difficult even without the constraints of a pandemic.

The City Table has created an online platform and gathered participants, but in order to create a community of practice, group trust, safety and shared understanding need to be built to have open dialogue for the difficult conversations needed to set intentions, select approaches, flesh out strategies, and proceed with transparent evaluation. Several tensions may arise in this process, and structural tension among members of communities of practice can occur when they are asked to work together, but are evaluated separately, which sparks competition (Li, 2009). According to Li (2009), “Some people may perceive these new roles as members of a community of practice as risky and uncomfortable, which may subsequently lead to less engagement. A learning community must therefore develop a high level of trust among participants in order to be functional” (p. 3). It is telling that in all of the interviews the word “trust” is only used when the Community Relations Officer describes the reliability of an individual working for a partnering agency in delivering food. Therefore, it would appear that trust between agencies is highly valued, but rare in this sector. The individualism among agencies can be seen as a response to having a highly competitive environment and erodes trust among agencies. A community of practice approach can be a good tool in dismantling the individualism and competitive nature of the sector, however funding structures and data collection remain as major barriers.

Time and purposeful effort can foster the trust necessary to form a community of practice, as evidenced by the establishment of Homeward Trust. At one time, there were several housing agencies in Edmonton with diverse mission statements that would focus on housing several different demographics of people experiencing homelessness. But in 2016 Homeward Trust folded all of these housing programs under one organization. Using the Canada-wide Housing First model, housing agencies now share funding, data collection standards and client interface. Housing First also hosts a community of practice that draws in workers from all housing agencies (Homeward Trust, 2010). This approach represents a shift from several competing agencies serving separate communities, to a single standardized entity that has a higher capacity to advocate for the needs of their clients and internally refer their clients to appropriate services while allocating resources and collecting data.

The notable differences between the response to housing and the response to food insecurities in Edmonton is that the response to food insecurity has no standard data collection, funding format, or formal system for processing clients which would all help bridge the gaps between different agencies. However, the similarities include experience in working with diverse communities, agencies with similar goals and values, and a Canada-wide body in the form of Food Banks Canada.

The literature is very clear about the roots of poverty in Edmonton, from genocidal foundations where hunger is used to control First Nations in the signing of Treaty 6, to our current neoliberal political climate that maintains our government's absolution from responsibility to engage with viable solutions to poverty, like a universal basic income. Poverty is ongoing as a result of government inaction on the policy front as well inadequate support of organizations working tirelessly to prevent people from starving. Consequently, the ideology of

charity prevails as a response to food insecurity in the form of food donations, despite all respondents and leading scholars, like Valerie Tarasuk (2003), raising awareness of the limitations of this approach.

There are hundreds of agencies and programs in Edmonton tasked with addressing food insecurity, and they form a maze-like structure for clients to navigate. Respondents described not having enough or appropriate food for their clients, in addition to their struggles with securing funding to maintain their agencies. The competition and egos described in the interviews could then be seen as a by-product of this system as agencies attempt to navigate and survive in this current climate. Agencies are mirroring the lack of resources experienced by their clients. By investigating the barriers to forming communities of practice among agencies, this research has shed light on the structural shortcomings of our system of poverty response.

There are several systemic interventions that could be made to reduce poverty linked to the redistribution of land and wealth, and changes in policies. However systemic changes will not happen immediately and those experiencing poverty and food insecurity today cannot wait for the change. Agencies are doing the best to work within the current reality. With concerted efforts to address competition, indwelling, and resource distribution through formation of a community of practice, the experiences of those working in the food distribution industry, and their impacts, can improve. The “food fight” for acquiring donations may end, the perception of “pilfering grants” may diminish, and the maze of multiple asks that clients experience may be streamlined with uniform data collection on navigating food provision systems.

By taking the time to engage with the topic of improving responses to food insecurity during the interviews, the respondents underlined their own agency’s vulnerability, exacerbated by the additional demands and workload created by the pandemic. Agencies can continue to

address food insecurity individually in an environment of competition. Or, they can work to coordinate their efforts and build on their strengths of networking to transition to a different and more collaborative food security response. This has already begun through efforts like The City Table, however much more sustained work needs to happen to begin generating measurable impacts on food insecurity in Edmonton. This work would represent a dismantling of the systems of hunger that have been at work in Edmonton for hundreds of years.

## Conclusion

Responding to food insecurity is extremely challenging, as is doing this collaboratively, particularly during a pandemic. This hasn't stopped Edmonton's social service agencies from working towards these goals. To develop a community of practice as a collaborative approach to addressing food insecurity there need to be concurrent efforts made in the areas of engagement, imagination, and alignment. The food insecurity response sector in Edmonton has the beginnings of all three of these processes, especially in engagement, but all three are ultimately lacking and a community of practice does not exist. Continuing with this approach faces several barriers. There is active competition between agencies to secure donations of food and funding which erodes collaborative efforts. This competitive environment supports indwelling in agencies, which is further fueled by internal data collection practices. Building engagement between agencies, shifting staff's imagination to a collective cause, and aligning practices is truly a humbling set of tasks in this context. There are successful communities of practice in Edmonton's broader poverty response sector, and more research on extending community building practices across sectors when dealing with these types of complex societal issues is needed as food insecurity does not exist independently of other factors contributing to poverty.

However, the barriers to community of practice formation reveal the amount of growth possible in Edmonton's food insecurity response sector. This research has outlined two parallels between agencies responding to food insecurity and their clients. First are the similarities between agencies and clients as they navigate similar maze-like structures for access to resources. In agencies, this fosters an environment of competition and indwelling, both barriers to forming communities of practice. Second, funding and resource insecurity in agencies parallels the experience of food insecurity insofar as agencies struggle to acquire the types and amounts of food they need to run their programs. This characterizes Edmonton's food insecurity response system as one with several areas of growth in its conceptualization and execution, if it aims to more comprehensively address food insecurity. There needs to be a recognition that this system, in its disjointedness, maintains poverty, which has been foundational to the colonial project of Alberta. Food insecurity is disproportionately experienced by Indigenous, newcomer and racialized communities in Edmonton and efforts to coordinate and improve Edmonton's food insecurity response requires a dismantling of competitive colonial structures of operational insecurity for social services to pursue greater wellbeing.

The knowledge generated in this research project will be shared with the emergency food sector, which includes community agencies, food donors (retail and producers), the food bank, funders and most importantly The City Table on food security. In consultation with the organizers of The City Table, the findings of this research have, to date, been mobilized in a 30-minute presentation with 10 minutes for questions. The presentation was intended to "break the ice" on the topic of building safety at The City Table to facilitate frank discussion, open dialogue and hard conversations right before the city evaluated the willingness to continue meeting and



the effectiveness of the meetings themselves. This thesis and its findings will be presented to The City Table at their earliest convenience.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1 - Information Letter and Consent Form



FACULTY OF EXTENSION

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### INTERVIEW INFORMATION LETTER

**Study Title:** Building a Multi-sectoral Network to Address Food Waste and Food Insecurity in Edmonton, Alberta

**Research Investigator:**

Dr. Maria Mayan (Principal Investigator)  
Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta  
Email: [maria.mayan@ualberta.ca](mailto:maria.mayan@ualberta.ca) Phone: 780-492-9209

**Background and Purpose:**

Since 2016, the Community-University Partnership (CUP) for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families has partnered with community organizations in Edmonton to develop and grow food recovery or "rescue" initiatives where surplus food is collected from vendors and distributed to social service agencies whose clients face food insecurity. To build on this work, CUP is conducting a research study to learn about efforts to recover and redirect surplus food in order to address food waste and food insecurity in Edmonton. As part of this project, we will be speaking with actors from various sectors of Edmonton's food recovery system, including private industry, the nonprofit sector, and government. We may also be speaking with actors from outside of Edmonton in order to learn about what other cities are doing to address food waste and food insecurity.

The learnings from this project will help to inform decision-making by CUP and our community partners working to promote food security in Edmonton. This research will also help other communities to launch, grow, and sustain their own food recovery initiatives to address food waste and food insecurity.

**Study Procedures:**

Data will be collected through interviews. We will be asking you about your perspectives and experiences around food waste and recovery initiatives. Each interview should last no more than 1 hour and will be held at a time and location that is convenient for you (including by phone or Skype, if preferred). The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed. We are happy to provide you with project summaries and reports as we synthesize the learnings of this research.

**Benefits:**

Although there are no direct benefits to study participants, this study aims to create evidence to inform programs, practices, and policies around food waste and food insecurity in Edmonton. These findings may also be beneficial to other communities interested in developing food recovery initiatives. The results from this study may be published in academic and community reports, and presented at conferences and community presentations.

Study ID: Pro00095869

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**Risks:**

The risks of participating in this study are minimal, but reflecting on project or work experiences that were challenging could result in some emotional distress. To ensure you are as comfortable as possible, you can choose to not answer any questions that may lead to discomfort. If you would like to speak to someone after the interview, you can ask the researcher for support services to reach out to as needed.

**Voluntary Participation:**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and will not impact any relationship you have with the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families. You also have the right to refuse to answer any of the interview questions. You are free to stop participating in the interview at any time, and can request that we withdraw your information (audio recording and transcripts) up to two weeks after the interview. To withdraw, please contact Dr. Maria Mayan at [maria.mayan@ualberta.ca](mailto:maria.mayan@ualberta.ca) or 780-492-9209.

**Confidentiality:**

Research materials will be kept confidential and only the research team will have access to this information. Your name will be replaced with an alias in all transcripts, notes, and written documents. Identifying information that can be linked back to you will be removed before publishing or sharing any findings from this study. Electronic data will be password protected and all research materials will be stored in locked file cabinets in the research lab that only the research team will access.

**Additional information:**

If you have any questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact Dr. Maria Mayan at [maria.mayan@ualberta.ca](mailto:maria.mayan@ualberta.ca) or 780-492-9209. The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

## INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

10230 Jasper Avenue NW, Enterprise Square  
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**Study Title:** Building a Multi-sectoral Network to Address Food Waste and Food Insecurity in Edmonton, Alberta

**Research Investigator:** Dr. Maria Mayan (Principal Investigator), University of Alberta  
Email: [maria.mayan@ualberta.ca](mailto:maria.mayan@ualberta.ca) Phone: 780-492-9209

	Yes	No
I understand that I have been asked to be in a research study.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand the objectives and procedure of this study.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have read and understood the attached Information Sheet.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand the benefits and risks involved in taking part in this research study.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that I am free to withdraw my interview transcript up to 2 weeks post interview.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The issue of confidentiality has been explained to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This study has been explained to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that the interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>I agree to participate in the research study described.</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>Please complete the following questions if you agreed to participate in this study.</i>		
Name (printed): _____		
Email: _____		
Signature of Participant: _____		
Name and Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____		
Date: _____		

***If you have further questions regarding the study, please contact the principal investigator listed above.***

Study ID: Pro00095869



## Appendix 2 - Interview Guide

### Food Security Research Interview Guides

#### Interview Questions for Food Suppliers

1. Could you tell me about your organization and your role within the company?
  - Where would you locate your organization on Edmonton's Food Supply Chain (Producer, processor, distributor, retail)?
2. Can you walk me through your involvement with food recovery?
  - What is your involvement in food recovery programs?
  - What does your food recovery process look like?
  - Who makes decisions on how food is recovered?
  - What motivates you to participate in food recovery and how important is it to you?
3. What are some of the obstacles you face in participating in food recovery programs?
  - a. Operational burdens
  - b. Liability
  - c. Company policies
  - d. Government/regulatory policies
  - e. Fear of damage to company reputation
4. What would facilitate the success of food recovery in Edmonton?

#### Interview Questions for Service Agencies (Food Receivers/Redirectors)

1. What agency do you work for and how long have you worked in this position?
2. Can you walk me through your involvement with food recovery?
  - What is your involvement in food recovery programs?
  - Who makes decisions on how food is recovered?
3. Can you describe how your clients interact with food recovery programs?
  - Who does your food recovery program service?
  - How are their needs determined?
4. What challenges have you encountered in partnering with food recovery initiatives?
  - Issues with quality and quantity of food
  - Predictability of food delivery
  - Operational burden
  - Liability
  - Negative perceptions of "rescued" food
  - Government policies
5. Looking forwards, what do you want your partnership(s) with food recovery initiatives to look like? New opportunities for partnership, growth in supports?
  - a. What would support this?

#### Interview Questions for Government and Policy

1. What is your role in contributing to policies that may impact food recovery in Edmonton?
2. How do existing policies create barriers for food recovery initiatives?
  - The charitable food donation act - perceptions and misperceptions
  - Regulations around food transportation

- Policies around expiry and best before dates
3. What formal or informal policies are needed to support food recovery initiatives? Who creates these types of policies?
  4. How could charitable organizations or the public contribute to policy development and advocacy around food waste and insecurity?