

Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

Communities fighting food insecurity with self-sustaining initiatives.

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Key Messages

- Collective action in an unsustainable social-ecological system can catalyse a shift towards increased community sustainability when supported with financial resources and appropriate local institutions.
 - Cross-cultural knowledge sharing and place-based learning are integral to transforming social-ecological systems at the community level.
 - Social innovation can lead to transformation when supported by a network of collaborative organisations with a shared set of principles and a united vision to inspire change.
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Community Profile

Nova Scotia, a Canadian province on the Atlantic coast, has a rich cultural fabric, strong food traditions and a long history of fishing, farming and community self-reliance (Figure 1). Food plays a central role for personal, community and ecological health, as well as economic sustainability and vibrant rural and urban communities (ACT for CFS, 2014).

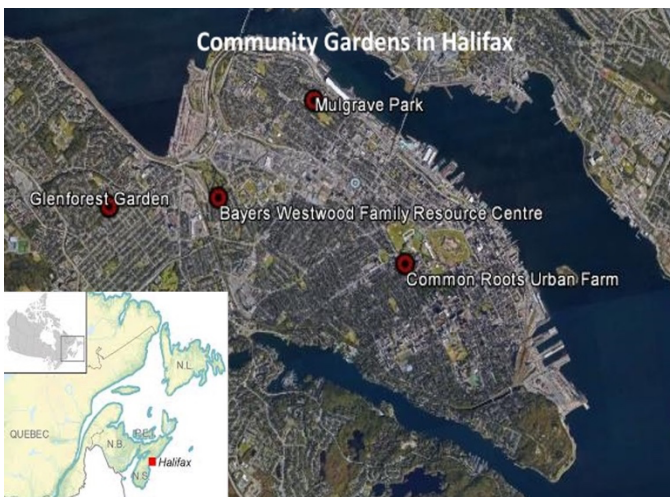


Figure 1: Map of Select Community Gardens in Halifax

Many communities in Nova Scotia rely on food from large chain grocery stores and discount stores year-round. As a secondary source, and seasonally

dependent, there are an increasing number of farmers' markets across the province. However, there are several communities in which grocery stores are physically far away, creating a situation where people rely on what's available at small convenience stores such as those associated with many petrol stations. These stores typically offer prepared, packaged and convenience foods that tend to be high in sugar, salt and fat, and many do not have facilities to offer fresh foods. This exacerbates economic and social inequalities.

Like the rest of North America, the diet of many Nova Scotians features processed and convenience meals, with trends away from whole foods or home cooked meals. In Nova Scotia itself, however, there is a strong history of growing and preserving livestock and produce, which has been resurging through the food movement over the past decade.

Conservation and Livelihood Challenges

Unfortunately, several rural and urban Nova Scotian communities face issues with accessing healthy and sustainable foods. The rate of food insecurity in Nova Scotia is the third highest in Canada at 15.4% (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020; see also Tarasuk, Mitchell & Dachner, 2016; Nova Scotia Government, Finance and Treasury Board, 2020).



The 2017–2018 Canadian Community Health Survey found 15.4% of households in Nova Scotia experience food insecurity, and it is strongly linked to low income and poverty. Furthermore, 19.5% of children under 18 in Nova Scotia live in food insecure households. These are the highest rates of food insecurity among Canadian provinces (ACT for CFS, 2014; Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020).

Further undermining the strength of the local food system, Nova Scotian farmers and fishers are growing older, with an average age of 56 years and farm debt in Nova Scotia rose fourfold between 1983 and 2010 (Statistics Canada, 2011 and 2012). The next generation of farmers is struggling to access funds and ensure future food supply.

Food security is also connected to the knowledge and skills needed to prepare fresh foods. With prepared food (often unhealthy ‘fast food’) readily available and heavily marketed, along with multiple demands on our time, preparation of fresh foods is compromised. All of this has implications for the healthcare system, with the rates of some chronic disease in Nova Scotia being among the highest in the country (Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness, 2012).

As a community response to these issues, people began initiating self-sustaining food projects such as community gardens. In the past, community garden projects conducted by organisations have not always been successful. The dynamic of underfunded organisations working with other equally underfunded organisations meant there was a propensity for projects to fail or be discontinued. Over time, it became apparent that enthusiasm was not enough to sustain individual garden projects, particularly in vulnerable communities.

Community Initiatives

Since the early 2000s, community-based organisations have been taking a closer look at local food systems and working to improve access to healthy, sustainable food. This community story

describes the work of four community groups in Nova Scotia’s capital city, Halifax, towards developing positive food environments: i) the Bayers Westwood Family Resource Centre (BWFRC); ii) the Immigrant Settlement Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS); iii) Mulgrave Park gardens; and iv) Common Roots’ Urban Farm (CRUF). These groups are linked through their close relationship with the Ecology Action Centre (EAC), an environmental NGO that has been one of the first in Atlantic Canada to begin connecting food systems and environmental issues.

Bayers-Westwood:

The Bayers Westwood community, of Halifax’s West End, is very diverse, consisting of 358 families, including 60% newcomers. These are mostly single parent families, with many living on disability and income assistance. As one community member described, “The food environment is very challenging. There is never enough food, the food bank runs out, and there are hardly any fruit and vegetables available.”



Figure 2: Community Garden at Bayers-Westwood
Photo: EAC staff

Since their partnership with EAC, the community garden infrastructure and leadership has grown significantly. Bayers Westwood Family Resource Centre hired a seasonal garden coordinator, implemented a percentage of staff time toward food and garden programs, and established core volunteer roles for the ongoing maintenance and coordination of the garden. As a result, they now have capacity to grow more produce for initiatives like local pop-up markets, making their own garden preserves, and increase garden membership. According to the centre, factors supporting healthy food access include growing space, knowledge and skill, and social support.

ISANS: Glen Forest and Multicultural Community Gardens:

ISANS is a community organisation that welcomes immigrants to Nova Scotia, offering services and creating opportunities for immigrants to participate in Canadian life. In 2012, ISANS started their first two community gardens; the Glen Forest Garden, followed by the Multicultural Community Garden in 2013. Although vandalism put the gardens at risk, engagement with EAC has increased the capacity to effectively run the gardens. Community members emphasised the need for social support, indicating a connection between social coordination and food access, such as through the ability to organise seed swaps, bulk food orders and intergenerational language exchanges.

Garden participants often lack basic social support that affects their well-being, including their mental health and livelihood outcomes. As one participant put it, “In my ideal world... I don’t have to make a decision between chicken and detergent.” As another describes, “I feel better about myself when I am able to buy necessities.”

Mulgrave Park:

Mulgrave Park is a vibrant public housing neighbourhood with a rich history, comprised of

primarily of African-Nova Scotians, in the north end of Halifax, home to over 250 families. Progress in the park is a community development initiative that seeks to empower the residents through entrepreneurial action that inspires inclusiveness and challenges stigma. One major focus of the initiative is food security, including community gardens. The community has developed 12 accessible raised beds, which were built to address the needs of residents living beside the garden. Due to the multiple intersecting social and economic barriers experienced by the majority of residents, community members were hesitant to invest in the gardening project. However, the children’s programme, ‘Plants- to-Plates’, was incredibly successful at engaging youth, and many days during the summer kids can be found playing and working in the garden. As a result, 70% of youth involved reported eating more vegetables because of the garden programme which led parents to become more open to the project. One parent had this to say about their children: “They love to help me at the garden, they enjoy watering, and enjoy the veggies that I have ready. :)” and “I have the veggies at the garden so I don’t need to buy. Just pick-up and enjoy and most important, no chemicals!”.



Figure 3: The HUGS Community Garden in Bayers Westwood.

Photo: EAC staff



Common Roots Urban Farm

Common Roots Urban Farm (CRUF) is a community garden in Halifax, building “a community-built vision of urban agriculture and productive landscapes” (Food Secure Canada, 2014), and along with over 100 individual and community plots, is made up of a market garden, edible landscaping, and places to sit and relax or learn and work together. Unlike the other gardens, Common Roots has a large volunteer capacity and the majority of participants enjoy a mid-range income. Common Roots also engages with newcomers and immigrants, many of who are living on assistance. Through programmes like Deep Roots, they invite newcomers to volunteer on the farm and employ their extensive farming skills in a new climate. In 2017, the first employee hired there came from the Deep Roots programme.

Practical Outcomes

The community garden initiatives helped build engagement and foster agency within the community and among organisational leaders. In combination with information (knowledge), motivation (attitudes and beliefs), ability to act (skills, self-efficacy and access), these individuals and groups contribute to food systems change within their own communities and by joining with others (i.e. through networks).

In short, the gardens provide ‘positive food environments’, defined by EAC as situations or cultures where communities are equipped to grow, access and enjoy healthy, sustainable, local foods. These environments include communal resources like community gardens, shared kitchens, greenhouses, root cellars and even food box deliveries. Actions can include sharing food, sharing food knowledge, and working together to create equitable, healthy and sustainable community food systems. The garden initiatives strengthen communities’ relationship to food and increase the availability and access to nutritious

food, actively involving people in the development of more localised food systems.

There are, of course, challenges to be met. For example, the ISANS community found that access is also allayed by the availability of culturally appropriate food – that is, food that residents would customarily eat – but food banks do not often serve culturally appropriate food (or familiar foods). Participants also spoke of lacking skills/knowledge on preparing the different foods. Language and literacy impacted peoples’ ability to buy at the grocery store, and community garden members commented on a lack of transparency in the food system, and an inability to “know what food has chemicals, what is organic and what is not going to cause harm.”

Since that time, several participants in the initiatives – namely, EAC, ISANS and CRUF – embarked on a pilot leadership series to up-skill dedicated community gardeners to support the coordination of their gardens, share gardening skills and increase overall sustainability through enhancing leadership capacity. The series also aims to help support agency among community members who may want to advocate for programmes. Other initiatives include exchanging and co-development of resources, as well as collaborating on community events such as farm tours and workshops.

Government Policy

The policy context for gardens on municipal land in the Halifax region is positive. For example, the proposed Centre Plan for Halifax allows and encourages urban agriculture. There is an administrative order within the Halifax Regional Municipality that allows community gardens on municipal land to sell their produce and reinvest the revenue in the garden (i.e. soil). Community development and recreation staff with the municipality may help gardens become established, helping them with the municipality’s



application process and facilitating in-kind access to on-site infrastructure such as water or electricity. There is no financial support for community garden implementation from the municipality or the province, beyond the possibility of accessing some small grants, such as through the Community Health Board funding. There are various other barriers; for example, to put up a shed or greenhouse on municipal land, garden groups must secure liability insurance, which most unincorporated, volunteer community garden groups find challenging. In turn, this may impact the development and expansion of gardens.

Ultimately, food is a topic that connects all of us. Community garden projects and food skills workshops have proven to be great entry points to increase awareness and engagement with food issues. Community food programmes are tangible and accessible, building skills and enhancing a sense of agency alongside social and community connections. 'Positive food environments' can also become points of resistance, as community members feel empowered to challenge the status quo (Williams, 2016). Without a doubt, vulnerable populations experience multiple types of marginalisation related to complex power dynamics that create barriers to agency and food security.

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Community Conservation
Research Network

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Our website is home to community stories from around the globe, short documentaries and our book:

'Communities, Conservation and Livelihoods'

www.communityconservation.net

