Empowering Communities: MFRC's Role in Food Sovereignty

by

Rishav Panda

Supervised by

Dr. Sarah Rotz

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Abstract

This paper examines how community-led food initiatives in Malvern, a neighbourhood in Scarborough, Toronto, respond to structural barriers through the framework of food sovereignty. The central research questions guiding this study are "how do community-based initiatives, like MFRC, address food insecurity and promote food sovereignty, and what kinds of impact do they have within their communities?" Using a qualitative participatory action research (PAR) approach, the study draws on interviews with MFRC staff and participants to explore how their programs challenge dominant food security and charity-based models.

The analysis includes a historical and spatial examination of Scarborough's postwar urban development. It considers how the 1946 Ontario Planning Act, Metro Toronto's hierarchical governance model and concession-block infrastructure planning produced fragmented, automobile-dependent suburban neighbourhoods, leaving areas like Malvern with limited walkable access to essential services, including affordable food.

While both state and market frameworks often view food as a secondary issue, the work of MFRC shows that grassroots organizations affirm food as central to community well-being, identity and autonomy. This study contributes to the ongoing conversation on food justice by reframing food not as supplemental, but as central to social and spatial justice in marginalized urban regions.

Foreword

This research paper is a key component of my Master in Environmental Studies and directly aligns with the learning objectives outlined in my Plan of Study. The overall focus of my project is understanding how community-driven food programs, such as those implemented by the Malvern Family Resource Centre (MFRC), work to transform local food systems while overcoming barriers. Through qualitative research and participatory action methods, this paper explores the role of a grassroots organization in their work to transform the food landscape while navigating structural barriers.

The paper fulfills multiple goals I had going into the MES program by integrating theory and community engagement into my applied research. Specifically, it applies concepts from political ecology and participatory governance to critically examine the role of grassroots organizations in addressing food insecurity. This overall project reflects the MES program's emphasis on connecting academic theory with practical solutions. The findings in the paper aim to provide actionable recommendations for both community organizations and policymakers to better support initiatives like those at MFRC in creating equitable and sustainable food systems.

On a personal level, this research comes from my belief in the power of storytelling to reveal systemic issues. I believe that while data and statistics provide important context, personal narratives reveal the lived realities behind these numbers. Listening to different people share their experiences offers invaluable insights on deeper social and environmental dynamics in play. It is my hope that this narrative-driven approach fosters a greater understanding of the barriers and opportunities within our food systems, inspiring meaningful change within the field of environmental studies.

Acknowledgements

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Thank you to all the faculty members who helped shape my learning and provided a meaningful academic experience. I am grateful to the staff and participants at the Malvern Family Resource Centre (MFRC) for their invaluable cooperation and insights that made this research possible.

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Introduction

This paper examines how the Malvern Family Resource Centre (MFRC), a community hub providing critical food programming and family services located in the Scarborough neighbourhood of Malvern, addresses food insecurity through programs that reflect principles of food sovereignty. The purpose of this study is to understand how community-led initiatives can expand beyond short-term food aid to emphasize dignity, cultural relevance and community control in food systems. Drawing on interviews with MFRC staff and participants, I ask: *How do community-based initiatives, like MFRC, address food insecurity and promote food sovereignty, and what kinds of impact do they have within their communities?*

The Malvern Family Resource Centre (MFRC) is a Community Hub that provides several programs in the area. Established in 1982, it was created by local residents to address a lack of accessible support services. Located at 90 Littles Road, the MFRC has evolved into a multi-service hub, but its food sovereignty initiatives are a critical component of its work. These include the Malvern Urban Farms project, a 2-acre farm in the Finch Hydro Corridor, a community-supported agriculture (CSA) program, a community garden, a farmers' market and food literacy workshops. By centering culturally relevant food and community participation, the MFRC operates as an alternative to conventional food charity models within a neighbourhood facing significant barriers to fresh, affordable food.

Food insecurity remains a significant issue in Canada, reflecting deeper social and spatial inequalities. While food security is often framed through the lens of household income or personal circumstance, it is also shaped by broader political and economic factors that govern land use, access to public transport and sociopolitical marginalization (Mendly-Zambo et al.,

2023). In the Greater Toronto Area, 46.6% of residents are immigrants born outside Canada, with over 2.86 million foreign-born individuals coming from countries such as India, China, and the Philippines (Statistics Canada, 2022). Many residents of neighbourhoods like Malvern face barriers accessing fresh, affordable and culturally relevant food.

Looking at these food challenges solely through the lens of food security overlooks the structural forces that shape access to food in the first place. The food sovereignty framework, emphasizing the rights of communities to define their food systems and exercise control over how food is grown, seeks to address systemic injustices and inequities, rather than prioritizing short-term solutions (Desmarais, 2015). Although both frameworks are often discussed together, they are distinct with different priorities. Food security emphasizes immediate access to adequate food at the individual or household level, through programs like government aid or food banks. The food sovereignty framework is more political. It reframes the issue of accessing food as not only a matter of supply but one shaped by power relations, community control, and self-determination (Patel, 2009). In urban settings like Scarborough, where the planning history and municipal policies have produced fragmented food landscapes, this distinction between food security and sovereignty becomes pronounced as these structural inequalities shape who has control over food systems and who remains dependent on external aid (Larsen & Gilliland, 2008).

This paper concludes that the MFRC's community-led model effectively fills the gaps left by broader food systems and municipal planning frameworks that often fail marginalized communities like Malvern. The Centre's work demonstrates that food sovereignty is not an abstract concept but a practical framework enacted through programs that provide both immediate food aid, such as a community fridge and after-school snacks, as well as long-term

capacity building through urban agriculture, food literacy and culturally affirming programming. Ultimately, the MFRC's efforts highlight the necessity of community control over food systems as a pathway toward greater food justice. This paper is organized into five sections to support the main argument. The introduction establishes the study's focus and central research question. It also incorporates both the literature review and methodology. The literature review develops the theoretical framework by examining concepts of food sovereignty and the shortcomings of conventional planning. The methodology section describes the qualitative, participatory approach that supports my research. Chapter 1 begins the analysis by providing the historical and socio-economic context of the Malvern neighbourhood. Chapter 2 presents the empirical findings, categorized by key themes such as culturally relevant food access and community involvement, which emerged from the coding process. Chapter 3 continues the analysis by examining themes related to limitations and partnerships. The paper concludes by summarizing the evidence for MFRC's role in promoting food sovereignty and discussing the implications for community-driven food justice.

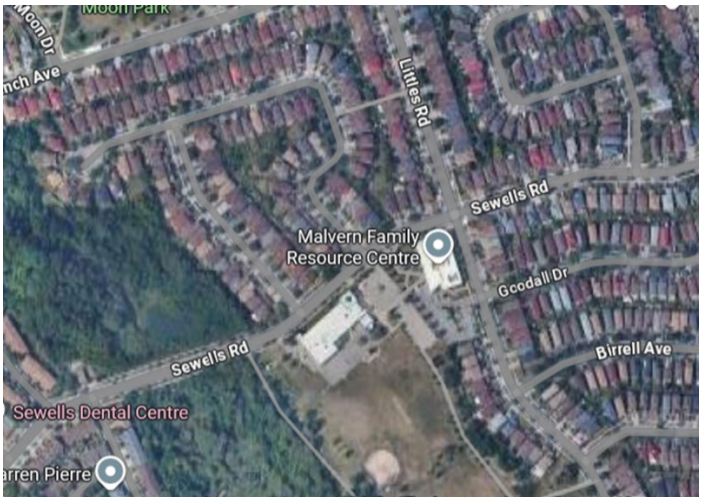

Figure 1. Location of the Malvern Family Resource Centre (Google, 2025)

Figure 2. Malvern Urban Farm located near MFRC (MFRC, 2023)

Methodology

Research design

This study used a qualitative research design informed by participatory action research (PAR). PAR is a collaborative methodology that engages community members as co-researchers. This ensures that the participants' lived experiences and insights shape the research process (Brydon-Miller et al. 2020). This makes it well-suited for research centred around community-based food initiatives. Because of its emphasis on democratic participation and respect for community knowledge, PAR provided a useful guiding framework for research centered around community-based initiatives. This is particularly significant in food justice research, where top-down policies often fail to capture the ground realities of those experiencing food insecurity. By concentrating on the lived experiences of participants, this methodology seeks to capture how MFRC's food programs promote food sovereignty. Brydon-Miller et al. (2020) argue that PAR enhances the relevance and impact of research in marginalized communities, while also promoting forms of knowledge production that are action-oriented.

However, while PAR offers a more inclusive framework, it is not without limitations. Power imbalances can persist even in collaborative settings. In their collaborative autoethnography, Smith-Carrier and Van Tuyl (2024) point out that individuals facing poverty or housing insecurity often face barriers, like limited time or unstable living conditions, which can make their full participation difficult. Their reflection also showed that some participants, despite being positioned as co-researchers, were still vulnerable to tokenistic inclusion and overwhelmed by emotional burdens (Smith-Carrier and Van Tuyl, 2024). For my own paper, PAR principles shaped how I approached the research, however I was not able to implement PAR in practice. My project ultimately relied on using traditional qualitative design, using semi-structured

interviews. I prioritized participant voices and aimed to represent their lived experiences in ways that connected back to the wider discourse on food justice but the study did not involve participants as co-researchers or engage in collective action in the way PAR envisions. This limitation reflects the challenges noted in the literature, where barriers such as time, funding, and institutional structures often prevent the full realization of PAR (Smith-Carrier and Van Tuyl, 2024).

Data Collection

Primary data for this project came from four semi-structured interviews. These included two staff members from MFRC and two participants who were involved in different programs like the community garden or food workshops. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allowed for flexibility. While I had a set of questions for each interview, the conversational nature of the interview meant that participants could share things that felt important to them, even if it wasn't something I directly asked. The interviews were done either over Zoom or phone, depending on what worked best for the participants. Each one lasted between 30 and 50 minutes. I recorded the interviews and later transcribed them using the Whisper App. After that, I manually reviewed and cleaned each transcript to make sure the quotes were accurate and clear.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited with support from MFRC staff. After my first point of contact at the organization agreed to support the project, they helped connect me with coworkers and community members who were involved in the programming. One of the interviewees also referred me to another participant. My goal was not to have a large sample size but to get different perspectives from people who had been directly involved in shaping or accessing food programming. While it was a small group, the mix of staff and participants helped provide a

more complete picture of how MFRC operates and how its programs are experienced on the ground.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. After transcription, I read through each transcript multiple times and coded recurring phrases, ideas and experiences. I used Taguette, an open-source coding tool, to help organize the data and tag sections based on recurring themes. I used an inductive approach, meaning that I didn't go in with a fixed list of codes. Instead, I let themes emerge naturally from the conversations with participants. Codes included things like "cultural relevance," "access barriers," "volunteerism," "food education," and "program gaps." After coding, I grouped the codes into four major themes, which I explore across Chapters 2 and 3. These themes reflect the patterns I saw across all four interviews and represent what participants emphasized about MFRC's food work and programs. This process also fit with PAR, because it prioritized the participants' words and experiences. Rather than framing their responses around pre-determined categories, I tried to let their voices shape the analysis as much as possible.

Ethical Considerations

To protect participant privacy, pseudonyms were used to replace any personal identifiers. Any potential personalized details were generalized in the final paper. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews, ensuring that they understood the purpose of the study, how their data was used and their right to withdraw at any time. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored on a password-protected device, accessible only to me.

Reflexivity

Although I live in the Malvern area of Scarborough, I was still relatively new to the community at the time of this research, having moved there shortly before starting this project. At first, I thought this distance might give me a level of objectivity but objectivity itself can be misleading, especially in community-based and participatory research. Being "objective" often implies standing apart but this kind of distance doesn't always lead to better understanding. My lack of experience in the neighborhood meant I had to rely on participants perspectives to fully understand the local food landscape and that became a strength in its own way, since it shifted the focus of my research away from just policy discussions and toward the everyday experiences of people in Malvern. At the same time, I share certain aspects of identity with many MFRC participants. As a racialized researcher living in a majority-immigrant and racialized neighborhood, there were common reference points that helped build connection and rapport. However, I kept in mind that while some experiences overlap, the ways people interact with food programs can vary. I tried to stay mindful of that and not let my own story shape how I interpreted theirs.

Another factor I had to consider my status as a student. My position as a graduate student gave me access to resources and institutional sources that participants may not have had. I was the one organizing the interviews, asking the questions, deciding which parts to quote and ultimately, how to write about the findings. These decisions carried power, even if I didn't always feel like I was in control. I tried to be transparent about the goals of my project and offered to share the findings with MFRC but there were limits to how participatory this research would be, considering the format of a Master's research paper. My identity and social position also shaped how participants responded to me. It's possible that my connection to a university affected what

people felt comfortable sharing. I may have had access to certain stories because of this and I may have missed others for the same reason. Overall, this research challenged me to think more critically about my role, not just as a student or community member, but as someone responsible for how stories are interpreted. I tried to approach it with care and a willingness to learn, knowing that sharing other peoples experience comes with a responsibility especially in a community I was still getting to know.

Literature Review

In this section, I first outline the key debates around food sovereignty and food security, then situate these concepts within the political and planning context of Canada. I examine both how neoliberalism and corporate food regimes shape local food systems and the following community responses. Finally, I review scholarship on food justice and community planning to highlight the structural barriers that affect racialized and immigrant communities in Toronto. This literature review provides the foundation in understanding how MFRC's programs reflect and respond to these wider dynamics and shows how local initiatives both align with and challenge broader food system trends.

Section 1: Food Sovereignty & the Political Ecology of Canada

Food sovereignty is not a fixed concept but a framework that has evolved to challenge the dominant food systems in place. The term was introduced in 1996 by La Vía Campesina as a direct response to the industrialization of agriculture, which displaced many small-scale farmers. La Via Campesina defines food sovereignty as the right of communities to healthy, culturally appropriate food produced through sustainable methods, as well as their right to control food and agricultural policies at local and national levels (Desmarais, 2015). In contrast, food security frameworks have traditionally focused on prioritizing the availability of adequate food supplies, without addressing who controls food production or how it is distributed. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations first defined food security in 1974 as the availability of sufficient global food supplies to offset fluctuations in production and prices (Patel, 2009). This early definition of food security reflects the geopolitical context of the time, as the world was dealing with food crises like the Sahelian Famine. There was also the New International Economic Order, a political/economic movement among the developing nations

that aimed to reduce the economic dependency of wealthier nations (mainly the West). However, this supply-oriented approach overlooked structural inequalities in political power, land control and market access which continue to shape food insecurity today. This distinction is important to consider in examining MFRC's programs. While food security frameworks emphasize temporary fixes, such as food banks or emergency aid, food sovereignty points to questions of control and justice. This also reveals the political dimension of MFRC's work: even though it operates at a neighbourhood scale, its programs implicitly critique the inadequacy of state-led food security measures.

The corporate food regime reflects a neoliberal revision of global agriculture that treats food as a commodity, rather than a basic human right (Patel, 2009). Under this regime, food systems prioritize corporate profit over community well-being, largely due to neoliberal policies that support the interests of large agribusinesses. Giménez and Shattuck (2011) describe how deregulation and consolidation of agribusiness where multinational companies dominate every stage of the food chain, from production to the when it hits the market. Despite the increased global food production, hunger and food insecurity persist as the corporate food regime fails to address the root causes of poverty and inequality. This contradiction shows how production alone cannot resolve food insecurity without addressing who controls access and distribution. By framing food as a private good, the corporate food regime establishes structural dependency and obscures the political nature of hunger.

A key feature of the corporate food regime is commodification of food, which shifts its value away from cultural and nutritional importance towards profitability. Rather than being valued as a part of cultural importance or a source of nourishment, food is treated primarily as a market

commodity. So, the value of food is then determined by profitability, rather than its role in supporting health or tradition. It is produced according to the demands of international trade rather than local needs, often resulting in overproduction in some regions and scarcity in others (Patel, 2009). For example, crops like soy and maize are prioritized for export rather than for feeding local populations. These crops are produced in large quantities but food insecurity continues, revealing a gap between economic output and community needs. By reducing food to a commodity, the corporate food regime normalizes inequality by framing access as a matter of purchasing power instead of a public responsibility. This shift reflects a neoliberal approach that undermines collective claims to food as a right (Patel, 2009). Additionally, as food becomes subject to global price fluctuations, small-scale farmers become dependent on unstable prices and corporate contracts, which weakens their autonomy and undermines the principles of food sovereignty. As a result, many regions in the Global South have to rely on imported food while their land is used to grow crops for export (Patel, 2009).

Friedmann and McMichael (1989) argue that the global food restructuring marked a major shift away from localized, subsistence-based agriculture to a globalized, corporate-driven model. They identify two key agro-industrial developments that marked this transition: the intensive meat complex and the durable food complex. Both developments reflect growing recommodification of food, where production prioritizes market demands over local needs (Patel, 2009). The intensive meat complex transformed livestock production by turning feedstock crops such as soy and maize into key components of industrial supply chains. These crops, primarily used to feed animals, became central to global agriculture. As a result, many small-scale farmers became tied to multinational corporations through contract farming, where they

were required to grow specific crops or raise livestock under corporate terms (Friedmann and McMichael, 1989). Meanwhile, the durable food complex transformed food from locally grown, perishable goods into mass-produced, heavily processed commodities with an extended shelf life. Advances in preservation and packaging made it possible to mass-produce food that could be shipped and sold over long distances (Friedmann and McMichael, 1989). As food became increasingly commodified throughout these changes, food security efforts prioritized the mass availability of food rather than equitable access to food. While the industrialized food systems use advancement and technologies to maximize yields, they continue to reinforce the structural inequalities, undermining food sovereignty by prioritizing mass production over letting communities shape their food systems (Friedmann and McMichael, 1989). These shifts did not just alter how food was produced and consumed, they also restructured power within the global food system. By binding small-scale farmers to contract farming and long supply chains, the intensive and durable food complexes concentrated control in the hands of corporations while displacing localized autonomy. These features that are seen as "efficient" or "innovative" end up making communities dependent on external markets and technologies. This again shows how the corporate food regime prioritizes output while reinforcing inequalities and undermining community control (Friedmann & McMichael, 1989; Patel, 2009).

Food sovereignty is not only about who controls food production but also about addressing the various political, economic, and environmental factors that shape access to food. Rather than treating food as a neutral good, the food sovereignty framework examines how power operates through food systems. As noted earlier, the corporate food regime developed alongside globalization, further reinforcing a system that treats food as a commodity rather than a basic

right. Jarosz (2014) suggests that food security's emphasis on market-based access supports a system where food is used as a mechanism of dominance. This can be seen across different historical periods. For example, during World War II food focused on ensuring national production targets were met, with little attention to how the food was distributed. In the 1970's amidst the global oil crises in that period, the focus shifted to individual access to food, linking food availability to personal economic means rather than shared resources (Jarosz, 2014). As the neoliberal policies that emerged in the 1980s redefined hunger to be an individual's challenge, this shift enabled states and colonial powers to manipulate food distribution, using access as a tool to enforce compliance with their political and economic goals. An example is when the Canadian government deliberately withheld food from Indigenous communities to force them onto reserves and later conducted nutritional experiments on Indigenous children in residential schools (Sumner et al., 2023). These examples show how food distribution is tied into systems of governance. Food becomes a tool of discipline, reinforcing broader patterns of colonial exclusion.

These colonial patterns continue to occur in modern settler systems. Bureaucratic organizations like Ontario's Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) prioritize profit-driven agriculture while obstructing Indigenous food sovereignty. When an Indigenous community proposed a project involving hunting wild game and using animal hides to make moccasins, OMAFRA rejected it for falling outside the bureaucratic definition of "traditional agriculture" (Rotz et al., 2023). In addition to these restrictive criteria, OMAFRA promotes large-scale land conversion and tolerates industrial practices like pesticide use that harm ecosystems. These disruptions degrade the lands and waters that many Indigenous communities rely on for sustenance and well-being. These practices have long undermined ecosystems that

Indigenous communities relied upon for diverse food sources and overall community health. Furthermore, these environmental harms are exacerbated by the exclusion of Indigenous communities from meaningful participation in decision-making processes, which are often reduced to procedural formalities (Rotz et al., 2023). Such exclusion undermines efforts to ensure sustainable resource use, which further lowers the resilience of both the environment and the communities that depend on it (Poirier & Neufeld, 2023). By framing Indigenous practices as incompatible with modern agriculture, institutions like OMAFRA recreate colonial hierarchies that invalidate alternative systems of knowledge. Framing this issue through food sovereignty shows that food justice efforts must address both material dispossession and the exclusion of Indigenous knowledge from decision-making.

Section 2: Community Planning & Food Systems

This section looks at how food systems planning in Canada is shaped by corporate control, settler land policies and planning strategies that often leave out the communities most affected by food insecurity. It goes over how zoning rule and settler assumptions shape access to land, resources and decision-making in cities. These patterns help explain the limits of current planning approaches and why community-led models, like those at MFRC, are so important. While Indigenous food sovereignty movements seek to address historical injustices, other political and economic structures continue to shape contemporary food systems in Canada. The expansion of corporate agriculture, along with government policies that prioritize industrial food production, has led to a concentration of land ownership and a decline in small-scale, community-based farming. Food systems planning has emerged as a critical framework for understanding political and economic dynamics. Donald (2008) mentions that food systems planning was relatively new in North American regional development, struggling to oppose long-standing corporate interest.

Although this critique is over fifteen years old, it remains relevant today, as many planning frameworks still fall short in challenging the dominance of corporate agribusinesses. While food systems planning was initially focused on agricultural production, it has since evolved to focus on the entirety of the food chain, from processing and distribution to regulation and waste management. Despite this broader approach, large corporate agribusinesses continue to dominate land-use policies, limiting opportunities for alternative food networks. This reveals a disconnect between the goals of planning for equitable food access and the reality of decision-making power that prioritizes commercial over community interests.

Zoning restrictions on urban agriculture continue to limit the expansion of local food initiatives such as community gardens, reinforcing a regulatory environment that favours large retailers and fast-food chains (Donald, 2008). Companies like Walmart Canada highlight how corporate dominance affects both wages and food access. Their partnerships with food charities, such as the one with Food Banks Canada that redirected over 16 million pounds of surplus food since 2012, position them as contributors to food relief. Yet, these efforts obscure the role their low-wage, anti-union practices play in deepening food insecurity (Mendly-Zambo et al., 2023). Walmart's closure of a Quebec store following a 2014 union vote illustrates how food insecurity can be driven not only by supply but also by working conditions. Rather than addressing the root causes of hunger through livable wages, these corporations maintain control over food access by channeling surplus through charity.

Mixed-use zoning has been proposed as a strategy to enhance food sovereignty by integrating local food options into urban spaces (Donald, 2008). An example from Canada is the Montreal borough of Côte-des-Neiges–Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, which implemented a zoning bylaw restricting new fast-food establishments to just two major streets and one shopping centre. This

policy, introduced in 2016 and upheld by Quebec's Superior Court in 2019, was intended to limit the concentration of fast-food outlets near schools and promote healthier, community-oriented food environments. The borough's decision was driven by growing concerns about rising rates of obesity and diet-related illnesses, as well as a desire to ensure better access to nutritious, locally available food options for residents (Canadian Press, 2019). Although limited in scope, such planning efforts represent attempts to regulate food environments in ways that support long-term public health. However, their impact is often constrained by broader market forces and institutional inaction. Without concurrent policies to address the underlying market forces that make fast-food a dominant model, these zoning efforts risk being symbolic gestures in the face of institutional inaction that sustains the corporate food regime.

With zoning regulations shaping food environments in urban areas, they also contribute to the emergence of food deserts. Food deserts refer to socially distressed neighbourhoods with poor access to affordable and healthy food due to the suburbanization of large food retailers (Larsen & Gilliland, 2008). These big grocery stores move out of city centers into suburban areas, where they can expand their size to serve wealthier, suburban customers. In their study on London, Ontario Larsen & Gilliland (2008) show the decline of independent grocery stores in the city's downtown core. Between 1961 and 2005, the number of grocery stores in London's inner-city neighbourhoods declined by over 50%, while suburban areas saw an increase in large-scale supermarkets (Larsen & Gilliland, 2008). The rising concentration of food retailers has also reinforced a car-dependent food system. Public transport infrastructure in many Canadian Cities, including London Ontario, is not designed to support grocery shopping as the bus routes and schedules make it difficult to transport groceries (Larsen & Gilliland, 2008). Although their study is now somewhat dated, the issues they identify, such as the difficulty of transporting

groceries on public transit, remain relevant in many Canadian cities today. The persistence of these food access issues shows a fundamental gap in municipal planning capacity. While scholars have outlined clear roles for planners, such as ‘regulation and policy reform’ and ‘coordination and facilitation’ to directly challenging planning culture, research finds that municipal departments often lack the resources and political mandate to execute them. As Zink et al. (2022) state in their critique of municipal planning, there is a critical need to “investigate the capacity of municipal planning departments to carry out these roles” (p. 174). Planners often adhere to “legalistic” interpretation of policies and a strict separation of land uses, which prevents the adoption of more holistic approaches like multifunctional agriculture that integrate food production with community and environmental needs (Zink et al., 2022). Therefore, the problem is not just a lack of resources but a lack of political will to reform planning culture itself. This institutional rigidity ensures that corporate food retail patterns, initially enabled by zoning, continue to dominate. As a result, food deserts are a direct and ongoing result of planning's cultural and institutional limitations. This uneven spatial distribution of food resources is not accidental but rather reflects deeper structural decisions about who cities are designed to serve. Neighbourhoods like Malvern face similar challenges with zoning restrictions, poor transit connectivity and reliance on corporate retail outlets to access food. MFRC’s community food programs attempt to fill some of these gaps, but they are often constrained by the same systems they are trying to resist.

Contemporary food justice scholars emphasize how Canada’s food system remains fundamentally structured by settler colonialism, even in seemingly progressive spaces. Kepkiewicz (2020), through interviews with settler food activists, shows how colonial

attachments to private land ownership persist, even among those advocating for food justice. Many activists uphold systems of colonial dispossession by failing to challenge these norms. As Kepkiewicz (2020) argues that true food sovereignty cannot be achieved through settler-led solutions alone; it must begin with Indigenous self-determination and control over land. This settler attachment to ownership not only justifies historical land theft but also supports contemporary disparities, as agricultural land use policies continue to prioritize suburban expansion over meeting the needs of marginalized urban communities. Larsen & Gilliland (2008) reinforce this, arguing that supermarket chains favour suburban relocation for cheaper land and larger footprints, a planning choice that creates urban food deserts rather than addressing access gaps. This was specifically seen in London, Ontario where 1970s zoning regulations required a minimum of 100 parking spaces per supermarket, pushing grocery chains like Loblaws towards suburban expansion, leaving urban neighbourhoods like Old East Village as food deserts (Larsen & Gilliand, 2008). The result was the active production of a food desert through policy. The London case provides a model market-led planning sacrifices community well-being for operational efficiency and seemingly neutral regulations continue to enforce corporate food geographies.

Settler colonial assumptions also appear in how food movement spaces are structured. During Food Secure Canada's 2018 Assembly in Montréal, Indigenous, Black, and racialized participants staged a walkout in protest of settler control over the planning process (Elliot et al., 2021). Those who walked out stated how settler organizers planned the event, from scheduling that minimized Indigenous food sovereignty discussions, to choosing conference formats that favoured suburban-style venues over accessible urban spaces (Elliot et al., 2021). These decisions echoed the same car-centric and exclusionary assumptions found in municipal planning

practices. Mendly-Zambo et al., (2023) further argue that corporate chains, like Sobeys, take advantage of zoning restrictions to prioritize areas with cheaper land and larger lots, which avoids urban low-income neighbourhoods. Municipal bylaws, such as the minimum parking mandates, incentivize large-scale stores outside city centers. By focusing on profit-driven land use, these planning decisions reinforce settler colonial practices of property control and reveal a pattern highlighting the failure to challenge these land distribution systems that are built on dispossession. Market-based solutions, like supermarket chains expanding to address food insecurity, assume companies like Sobey's or Loblaws will better serve low-income neighbourhoods. However, because zoning policies emphasize prioritizing retail plazas for affluent markets, profit-driven placement often favours wealthier areas (Glennie & Alkon 2018). Policies that encourage car-centric suburban development have historically made it difficult for inner-city, low-income residents to access large-format grocery stores, while simultaneously underinvesting in public transit systems that would help connect people to food sources (Larsen & Gilliland, 2008). Solutions based on expanding corporate supermarkets assume that access gaps can be fixed by better logistics but they ignore the deeper inequalities embedded in land policy and urban design.

Beyond economic barriers, food access is also shaped by social exclusion and cultural assumptions embedded in municipal food strategies. While initiatives that promote sustainability and healthy eating may appear progressive, scholars argue they reflect a narrow vision of food citizenship. Bonnevera (2024) states that in cities like Toronto and Vancouver, these strategies tend to be grounded in white, middle-class norms, framing food as a tool for soft governance. Immigrant communities are expected to participate in a government-approved form of healthy eating, rather than being recognized for the diverse food practices they bring to the city.

Additionally, these strategies often overlook long-standing community food initiatives, like informal food-sharing networks or culturally specific food businesses. Bonnevera (2024) argues that this exclusion is not accidental but embedded in planning mechanisms such as funding eligibility, access to land and partnership priorities, which often sideline groups already facing systemic barriers. Building on this critique, food scholars like Bryan Dale (2021) examine how urban governance systems, like the Toronto Food Strategy are shaped by neoliberal logic. While these strategies adopt the language of sustainability and equity, they often avoid addressing deeper issues like land access, labour justice and democratic participation. Dale (2021) mentions that authentic food sovereignty requires both community self-determination and radical pedagogy. For example, the City of Toronto emphasizes food literacy and entrepreneurship, while sidelining more radical, justice-oriented goals like land reform or structural change in governance. Overall, several food justice scholars, like Dale and Bonnevera, highlight the need for food education to transcend the Eurocentric frameworks currently being used in our food strategies. Bonnevera's (2024) critiques underscore the need for developing pedagogical practices that reflect the lived experiences of immigrants. Similarly, Sumner et al., (2023) highlight the need to reconnect with traditional Indigenous food knowledge, to challenge the predominant nutritional normative, while also advocating for including indigenous perspectives in planning. Together, these scholars call for pedagogical approaches and food strategies that center lived experience, Indigenous sovereignty and community control. These critiques offer a valuable lens for interpreting the work of organizations like the Malvern Family Resource Centre. While MFRC’s programs may not explicitly use the language of radical pedagogy or food sovereignty, they are deeply grounded in community knowledge and cultural relevance. Their efforts to create accessible, culturally affirming food spaces stand in contrast to many

institutional approaches that overlook these factors. Additionally, by centering lived experience and informal knowledge systems, MFRC's food initiatives represent an important alternative to dominant planning frameworks that reinforce the idea that community-based food practices can serve as building blocks toward a more just and inclusive food system.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Malvern, a neighbourhood located within the city of Scarborough, highlights the complex relationship between planning and food access. While the area was shaped by postwar suburban planning and intensification, Malvern is now home to predominantly immigrant and racialized populations (City of Toronto, 2021). Residents face barriers to accessing affordable, culturally relevant food due to the distance from major grocery stores, a car-oriented urban layout, and limited public transit options (Larsen & Gilliland, 2008). These challenges are compounded by lower household income levels and underinvestment in local infrastructure. While Malvern's household income is comparable with the city average, the area still ranks only 43.89 on the City of Toronto's Neighbourhood Equity Index, which is just above the city's average of 42.89 (City of Toronto, 2019).

With these compounding factors, food insecurity in Malvern is not a matter of scarcity but a result of overlapping structural factors that limit community autonomy, including spatial exclusion, economic inequality and planning decisions (Glennie & Alkon, 2018). Therefore, it is important to not only consider what food is available in Malvern but also who can access it and under what circumstances they can access food.

Historical development of Scarborough/ Malvern

The land that is now known as Scarborough has been home to Indigenous peoples whose presence has shaped both the natural and cultural landscape long before European settlers arrived. The eastern Scarborough region, where the neighbourhood of Malvern is located, lies along the Highland Creek Watershed, which is the traditional territory of the Wendat, Haudenosaunee and the Mississaugas of the Credit (Toronto, 2022). Indigenous people used the

Highland Creek and its surrounding areas for hunting, gathering and fishing. Corn was integrated into their food system and greatly influenced their agricultural practices, as it was not only a reliable food source but also culturally relevant (Toronto, 2022). Corn is a central part of the Haudenosaunee "Three Sisters" agricultural practice, which combined corn, beans and squash. This system, used widely by Indigenous communities in the Highland Creek region, reflects a deep understanding of ecological interdependence. Each plant supported the others: corn provided a structure for the beans to climb, beans enriched the soil with nitrogen, and squash covered the ground to retain moisture and suppress weeds (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2021).

Following the arrival of European settlers, the area of Scarborough went through significant changes. After being surveyed (by the British Colonial government) in 1796, Scarborough was officially incorporated as a township (Toronto, 2022). Early development in this region was primarily agricultural, with settlements and roads shaped by the natural geography of Highland Creek. As settlements expanded in the 19th century, the area remained sparsely populated and largely agricultural, with some settlements across key crossroads, like Markham Road and Sheppard Avenue (Toronto, 2022).

Following the Second World War in 1945, Scarborough rapidly transitioned from a rural township into a suburban district. Between 1951 and 1971, its population grew from approximately 250,000 to 400,000 (City of Toronto, 2022). In 1954, the Province of Ontario established the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto, a new two-tiered regional governmental structure that combined the city of Toronto with 12 other surrounding municipalities (City of Toronto, 2022). This new model was introduced to better coordinate planning infrastructure across the growing urban region, since individual municipalities struggled to manage the

demands of rapid suburbanization. As stated in the Scarborough Centre Historic Context Statement "Planning responsibilities were shared between the upper-tier and lower-tier municipalities. The Metropolitan Toronto urban planners directed metropolitan-wide infrastructure and services and high-level land use, leaving the detailed land use planning of individual parcels – local roads and services and site-specific land use – to local municipal planners (Toronto, 2022, p.14). This structure allowed for the large-scale coordination of suburban infrastructure, like the highways, public transit and sewage system, while allowing local municipalities (Scarborough) to shape neighbourhood-level developments.

This two-tiered planning system became the foundation for suburban growth in communities like Malvern. The completion of Highway 401 in the early 1960s further spurred growth by connecting Scarborough to the rest of the Greater Toronto Area, helping to define its emerging role as a commuter suburb. By the 1970's, Scarborough development shifted from fragmented suburban subdivisions towards forming a centralized urban core. The opening of the Scarborough Town Centre shopping mall in 1973 and later the integration of rapid transit via the Scarborough RT in 1985 reinforced the area's importance as a regional hub (City of Toronto, 2022). This evolution was guided by Metro Toronto's hierarchical approach, which had an emphasis on service efficiency and regional coordination. It emerged in response to postwar urban growth pressure, being shaped by the Ontario Planning Act of 1946 (Hess & Sorensen, 2015). This act was an important turning point, as it required municipalities to develop Official plans and create zoning bylaws, which laid the groundwork for modern land use planning across Ontario. Scarborough used a concession block structure, which were large, rectangular land divisions based on early colonial land surveys. Residential expansion was staged by only permitting development once regional infrastructure (like water, sewage and roads) had been

extended into a block. This system was intended to promote contiguous suburban growth by controlling the pace of development across the region (Hess & Sorensen, 2015).

While the areas surrounding Scarborough Town Centre benefitted from these planning investments, smaller neighbourhoods like Malvern were deprioritized in terms of integrated services and amenities. As Hess and Sorensen (2015) note, even communities that follow smart growth principles often remain automobile dependent and functionally incomplete. This resulted in a lack of amenities, such as grocery stores and walkable food hubs in an area like Malvern, since the planning model focused more on coordinated land servicing than on building socially complete or walkable communities.

This historical context is integral to understanding the food challenges facing Malvern today. The Metro Toronto planning framework prioritized developing infrastructure efficiently over social infrastructure, which reinforced a model of urban development that treated food provisioning as secondary rather than essential. The land was allocated and serviced according to growth management and transportation requirements, not the everyday realities of community accessibility. This led to the lack of resources within Malvern's neighbourhood design, such as walkable grocery stores and community food spaces. As a result, Malvern was left with restricted control over how their neighbourhoods could support fundamental things like food access. This is an important reason why organizations like MFRC have taken action to bridge the gap left by a planning system that has not fully addressed the everyday realities of the local community.

Contemporary Planning Frameworks

It's important to note that until 1998, Scarborough operated as an independent city within the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto. However, with the amalgamation of six municipalities into the single-tier City of Toronto that year, Scarborough became one of its administrative

districts. While it no longer functions as an autonomous city, Scarborough retains a distinct identity within Toronto, and its planning priorities continue to be addressed through area-specific frameworks such as the Scarborough Centre Secondary Plan. As Scarborough transitioned from its postwar suburban expansion into a more designated urban growth centre, municipal planning became increasingly important in its geographical and social growth. The 2005 Scarborough Centre Secondary Plan was introduced to manage the area's transformation from a low-density, car-centric suburb to a mixed-use urban hub (City of Toronto, 2005). Although the Secondary Plan does not explicitly mention dealing with food insecurity, it mentions priorities that intersect with food access. The plan mentions several times the idea of creating a "vibrant, mixed-use urban centre", which would include residential density and the development of residential/commercial developments within walking distance of key civic places (City of Toronto, 2005). However, when interpreting "mixed-use", the Plan itself centres around the idea of employment and retail, rather than everyday community services (like grocery markets or food vendors). For example, in section 1.4.1 in the Land Use section of the 2005 Secondary Plan, it encourages grade-related retail uses "within residential, employment and public use buildings" and identifies streets where these uses should be concentrated, such as McCowan Road and Grangeway Avenue. While these policies may support some level of retail food access, the language is non-specific, as there is no mention of grocery stores, fresh food markets or culturally relevant food vendors (City of Toronto, 2005). The emphasis on employment-driven retail, rather than community-oriented food infrastructure, limits opportunities to residents, especially if they do not have access to vehicles. Additionally, while the Secondary Plan focuses on transforming Scarborough Centre into a major mixed-use node, it does not provide a coordinated strategy to improve food access for surrounding communities, like Malvern. This

contributes to ongoing issues with food access in Malvern and is part of a larger trend in municipal planning where equity-deserving communities are given less priority in favour of centralized growth.

Food Insecurity in Malvern

Malvern, a neighbourhood in northeast Toronto, exemplifies the challenges of food insecurity in urban settings. According to the City of Toronto's 2019 Neighbourhood Equity Index, Malvern scored 43.89, which places it just slightly above the benchmark of 42.89 (City of Toronto, 2019). This score, which ranges from 0-100, is a measurement developed by the City of Toronto (2019) to assess the well-being of its 140 neighbourhoods. It is calculated based on 15 indicators throughout 5 domains:

1. Economic Opportunities: Unemployment rates, income levels, and access to employment.
2. Social Development: Educational attainment, early childhood development, and youth engagement.
3. Participation in Decision-Making: Voter turnout and civic engagement.
4. Physical Surroundings: Access to parks, community spaces, and quality housing.
5. Healthy Lives: Life expectancy, chronic disease prevalence, and access to healthcare services.

A lower score in any of these domains indicates barriers that impact the overall community health and access to essential services, including food. In Malvern's case, while not below the benchmark, the low score still implies system disadvantages, such as limited employment opportunities, under-resourced public infrastructure and challenges in health service access. It is also important to see how the neighbourhood demographics and socioeconomic conditions help contextualize the obstacles of food insecurity. For census and data collection purposes, Malvern

is divided into two neighbourhoods: Malvern East (Neighbourhood 146) and Malvern West (Neighbourhood 145). According to the City of Toronto's 2021 Neighbourhood Profile for Malvern West, the area has a population of 17,320 residents. It is a highly diverse community, with 91.9% of residents identifying as visible minorities (City of Toronto, 2021). Similarly, Malvern East has a population of 26,095, with 89.2% of residents identifying as visible minorities, highlighting the area's rich cultural diversity. Both neighbourhoods reflect relatively moderate-income levels, compared to the broader City of Toronto. Malvern East reports a median after-tax household income of $88,000, while Malvern West sits slightly lower at $85,000(City of Toronto, 2021). While both these figures are closer to the City of Toronto's median income of $84,000, it is important to consider that income alone does not convey the full picture of economic well-being. Malvern's demographic profile, which shows a high proportion of newcomers and racialized populations, adds layers that shape residents' experience of food insecurity. Even with the relatively stable median incomes, factors such as recent immigration status, limited access to social networks and cultural/language barriers can influence how individuals' approach and navigate food systems. These complexities suggest that economic figures alone may not capture the full scope of challenges faced by the community.

Racialized dimension of Food Insecurity in Toronto.

Food insecurity in Toronto is not experienced equally across the population, it is shaped by systemic inequalities that disproportionately impact racialized and immigrant communities. Scarborough is home to many of Toronto's racially and ethnically diverse neighbourhoods, including Malvern. Malvern specifically has a high concentration of South Asian and Black residents (City of Toronto, 2021). Black communities in Toronto, including Scarborough, experience food insecurity in critical ways due to intersecting systemic inequalities rooted in

Anti-Black racism. These communities are more likely to live in low-income, under resourced neighbourhoods that are isolated from sources of fresh, affordable food. This spatial marginalization, along with the underfunding of Black-led organizations, has historically excluded Black residents from food policy conversations and decision-making spaces, limiting the responsiveness of mainstream food programs to their needs (Demi et al., 2024). Demi et al. (2024) also note that Black individuals, especially Black women, are overrepresented in low-paying service jobs without access to benefits or job security. This was most prominently seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, where Black workers were concentrated in "essential roles" that increased their risk of exposure to the virus while offering little financial security. These jobs often did not offer paid sick leave, health benefits, or employment insurance, forcing workers to choose between their health and their livelihoods. For many households, this translated directly into food insecurity. With wages that barely covered rent or utilities, residents were often left making impossible choices, including skipping meals to pay bills, travelling long distances to access affordable groceries or relying on food banks (Demi et al., 2024). These intersecting challenges indicate that we need to view food insecurity as a reflection of broader structural inequality embedded in how cities distribute resources, define "essential" labour and design access to basic needs. While grassroots organizations in Scarborough demonstrated resilience to these challenges by mobilizing volunteers during the pandemic and offering temporary relief for workers, these efforts were underfunded and proved to be unsustainable in the long term (Demi et al., 2024).

Another aspect of food insecurity is the absence of control or choice of foods. Mainstream food programs often do not cater to the cultural, dietary or religious needs of diverse populations, which can result in both nutritional inadequacy and a feeling of exclusion. In Scarborough,

where many communities continue to feel politically peripheral to Toronto's downtown-centric planning, this lack of voice and perspective contributes to a sense of neglect. Access Alliance, a community health centre in Toronto, conducted a study in Taylor-Massey (East York) and York South-Weston (northwest Toronto) to see how residents in these neighbourhoods interacted with various food assistance services, like food banks and food box programs (Access Alliance 2018). While this study focused on 2 different neighbourhoods that are further away from Malvern and Scarborough, these neighbourhoods share similarities, as they have a high proportion of racialized and immigrant populations. In the study, 87% of participants were racialized, 74% were immigrants and over half had household incomes under $30,000 (Access Alliance, 2018). The participants of the study mentioned consistently limited options, often receiving non-perishables, like canned soup, pasta or cereal (Access Alliance, 2018). Participants mentioned that food provided by these food banks had an absence of traditional ingredients, like halal meats (for Muslim participants), Red lentils, turmeric and curry leaves (for South Asian participants).

Callaloo, cassava and green bananas (for Caribbean and African participants). This led to some participants stating they would avoid food programs altogether, despite experiencing food insecurity, because the food was either unfamiliar or not wanted in their households (Access Alliance, 2018). These stories reflect a deeper structural issue; food insecurity in racialized communities is not merely a matter of scarcity but is also a matter of denial of culture, autonomy and dignity. Although the report was not focused on Scarborough, the system barriers it showcases echo the experience of Malvern residents and highlight the shortcomings of how food aid systems are delivered.

Spatial inequality

Having examined food insecurity through the lens of historical development and demographic context, it is also important to consider how the physical layout and infrastructure of a neighbourhood like Malvern can impose barriers to food access. The design of cities/neighbourhoods, the location of retailers and the availability of public transportation play a pivotal role in everyday food access. In the case of Malvern, the physical layout of the neighbourhood directly impacts how residents access services like grocery stores. The "Malvern West Neighbourhood Streets Plan" is part of a city-led initiative to improve street safety and accessibility by identifying local transportation barriers and proposing community-informed solutions. According to this document, 73% of trips in the area are taken by car, while only 19% rely on public transit and just 8% are made by walking or cycling (City of Toronto, 2024). These statistics showcase the significant reliance on automobiles in this area and the lack of viable alternatives for residents who do not drive. Walkability is also limited in certain residential streets. For example, at the intersection near the No Frills grocery store on McLevin Avenue and Neilson, the plan notes frequent mid-block crossings by pedestrians, due to the absence of protected crosswalks nearby. Additionally, residents raised concerns about non-compliance with traffic rules, including drivers ignoring pedestrian right-of-way's, actively discouraging walking as a safe travel option. These conditions make it harder to reach grocery stores or other food providers without a car, especially for elderly residents.

Infrastructure Gaps and Accessibility in Malvern's Food Environment

The plan also notes the lack of a central, walkable hub that offers everyday amenities within reach of residential neighbourhoods. While there are large grocery stores, like No Frills on McLevin Avenue and FreshLand on Tapscott Road, these stores are located on high-speed

arterial roads (major roads that contain a high volume of traffic) (City of Toronto, 2024). Residents note that these roads are not easily accessible on foot, as they need to travel along streets with speeding traffic and incomplete sidewalks.

Another structural barrier is the lack of a permanent, accessible food infrastructure within the neighbourhood's built environment. While I mentioned the large retailers on major roads, like No Frills, these stores are located on the edge of communities. Internal residential areas lack consistent access to smaller-scale retailers, green grocers or informal vendors that typically serve as food access points in more densely zoned or mixed-use communities. Temporary fresh food markets have been tested in select areas of Scarborough to address this gap. While these initiatives demonstrated strong community interest and a clear demand for fresh, affordable produce, several barriers limited their long-term effectiveness. One major issue was inadequate infrastructure, as many markets were held in makeshift outdoor venues such as church yards or underused parking lots, which lacked access to electricity, shelter and cold storage (MarketCityTO, 2022). In addition, there was often a spatial mismatch between where food was distributed and where residents actually lived. As the Fresh Food Pilot report noted, many markets were not easily accessible by foot or transit, undermining their ability to serve the neighbourhoods most in need (MarketCityTO, 2022). Fresh food market operators noted challenges in transporting produce and attracting consistent foot traffic to these markets. These issues were especially pronounced in suburban areas where markets were not embedded in daily pedestrian flows or near transit corridors. Finally, the report highlights that Scarborough, despite its population size and diversity, lacks any year-round, permanent farmers' markets, which contrasts sharply with the infrastructure available in Toronto's downtown and more affluent neighbourhoods (MarketCityTO, 2023).

Planning Frameworks to Community Responses

Food insecurity in Malvern cannot be reduced to individual hardship. As we have seen throughout this chapter, it is the product of structural factors, shaped by the planning history, socioeconomic conditions and spatial considerations. From its colonial history and postwar suburbanization to its more recent urban intensification, Scarborough has developed under planning regimes that often prioritize centralized growth and car-centric infrastructure over equitable access to public transport. This has left neighbourhoods like Malvern disconnected from the decision-making processes that shape everyday life. On top of planning, demographic realities, including high concentrations of racialized and immigrant populations, further complicate the issue, as these communities encounter added barriers in navigating food systems that often overlook cultural specificity and accessibility. The consequences are evident in Malvern, where we see the reliance on cars and the lack of walkable infrastructure. Understanding food insecurity in this context demands more than mapping food deserts; it requires recognizing how planning, race and geography intersect with food security and establishing overall food sovereignty.

The operations of the Malvern Family Resource Centre cannot be separated from this broader planning context of Toronto. The City of Toronto has adopted a “Food Lens” framework, mandating that all its divisions consider equity and climate goals when engaging with food systems (City of Toronto, 2021). The framework highlights how systemic factors like colonialism, racism and gender inequality continue to shape food access in Toronto and calls for historically marginalized population to be at the centre of food system decision making. However, while the Food Lens Framework commits to promoting equitable and sustainable food systems, planning interventions and City investment have often been concentrated in the urban

core rather than in suburban neighbourhoods like Malvern. The uneven investment and car-centric infrastructure constrains access to healthy food. Although the City has said that food justice is a priority, its planning tools have not resolved the material conditions that produce food insecurity in suburban contexts.

As a result, organizations like MFRC step up and fill this gap. Although they are not planners in a formal sense, they respond to the consequences of planning by developing programs that make food more accessible in the neighbourhood. MFRC emphasizes the value of community-based organizations in mitigating the limits of planning and the ongoing reliance on non-profits to address inequities that result from planning decisions.

Chapter 2

Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the systemic and structural factors that shape food insecurity in the Greater Toronto Area, with a specific focus on Scarborough's Malvern Neighbourhood. It examined how historical patterns of planning, economic marginalization and spatial exclusion have shaped Scarborough resident's access to fresh, affordable food. Rather than framing food insecurity solely as result of personal hardship tied to income level, Chapter 1 emphasized the broader political and planning decisions that continue to limit community control over local food systems.

One of the integral points of previous chapter was the importance of distinguishing between food security and food sovereignty. While food security focuses on the immediate availability and adequacy of food, often through institutional programs like food banks or government aid, it does not necessarily challenge the systems that cause hunger in the first place. In contrast, the food sovereignty framework emphasizes the right of communities to shape and define their own food systems, drawing attention to questions of power, autonomy and justice. This distinction is particularly visible in neighbourhoods like Malvern, where residents may technically have access to food but that access is shaped by factors that limit this autonomy or choice.

This chapter shifts focus to the Malvern Family Resource Centre (MFRC), a community-based organization that plays an important role in providing food assistance in this area. This chapter explores how MFRC navigates the structural challenges faced by Malvern residents while developing food programs that reflect local needs and experiences. The aim is to understand how an organization rooted in the community can act as both a responder to immediate food insecurity that reflects local needs. By focusing on MFRC, we can start answering the central

research question guiding this project: how do community-based initiatives, like MFRC, address food insecurity and promote food sovereignty, and what kinds of impact do they have within their communities? This chapter will begin by outlining the history of MFRC and its various programs, to provide context for its role in Malvern. Learning about MFRC's background helps show how its food programs have developed over time. This context sets the stage for looking at how the organization responds to food issues in the community.

MFRC History and Programming

The Malvern Family Resource Centre was established in 1982 in response to the growing needs of the Malvern neighbourhood in Scarborough (MFRC, 2023). As the neighbourhood developed in the early 1970's, residents of Malvern faced issues due to limited public transportation options and a lack of social programming. A 1982 community survey involving over 800 residents of Malvern identified a significant lack of accessible support services, such as affordable childcare, language support for newcomers and access to family counselling. In response, a group of local residents and community advocates began holding meetings to organize for change, eventually leading to the creation of MFRC in the Malvern Presbyterian Church and the Church of the Nativity. (MFRC, 2023). Since it was first founded, MFRC has grown into a multiservice, non-profit organization. In 1986, MFRC appointed Girmalla Persaud as its Executive Director. Under her leadership, MFRC expanded beyond its original family-focused supports to include a broader set of community services (MFRC, 2023). These included early years programming (like EarlyON), after-school supports for youth, women's empowerment programs, seniors' wellness initiatives and food access services. While detailed records of these initial organizing meetings are limited, the focus on child development and youth engagement suggests that residents of Malvern raised issues service accessibility for families and newcomers. For example, EarlyON

programs offered hands-on literacy and play-based activities for children under six and provided pathways to connect with other family services and peer support networks (MFRC, 2023). In 2014, after years of operating out of temporary spaces, MFRC officially opened its permanent location at 90 Littles Road (MFRC, 2023). The new, purpose-built facility marked a significant milestone, offering expanded space for programming, food services and administrative operations.

In 2021, MFRC marked another major development with the launch of Malvern Urban Farms. Malvern Urban Farms, which opened in April, 2021, is a 2-acre site located in the Finch Hydro corridor (MFRC, 2023). This initiative came after seven years of community consultation and coordination with city stakeholders and was developed as part of Toronto's Community Engagement and Entrepreneurial Development (CEED) garden program (MFRC, 2023). This farm supports local residents, including 16 famers and their families. The two major goals of the Malvern Urban Farm are to, 1) offer supplemental income for residents, and 2) increase the availability of fresh, culturally appropriate produce in neighbourhoods with high levels of food insecurity (MFRC, 2023). The farm has since become a key part of MFRC's broader food strategy, reflecting a shift toward more community-led, sustainable approaches to food access and urban agriculture. While the earlier programs, like EarlyON, were developed through direct engagement with residents to meet immediate service gaps (lack of childcare in the area), the urban farm incorporates long-term thinking into MFRC's program design. The farm represents a place that goes beyond services and reimagines the urban environment as a site of collective care where residents can assert greater control over systems that shape their health and environment. Currently, the food programs available at MFRC include a Community Supported Agriculture

(CSA) Program, farmers market, community kitchen, community garden and the Malvern Urban Farm. This is on top of the workshops and food literacy programs that MFRC leads regularly.

Codes and Themes emerging from MFRC Interviews

Following the overview of MFRC's historical development and its evolving food programs, the chapter will now shift to the perspectives of those directly involved with the programs and farm. Drawing on interviews with both staff of MFRC and community participants, I explore how food insecurity is experienced and addressed in the Malvern Neighbourhood. Through inductive coding, nine distinct codes emerged from the transcripts.

Some codes were descriptive, such as "cultural relevance," "access barriers," and "program gaps," while others captured more subject or affective elements like "volunteerism," and "collaboration". After coding all transcripts, I reviewed the full set of tags and began grouping them into broader thematic categories. In total, nine codes were identified and grouped into four primary themes that reflect the key dimensions of MFRC's food programming and community engagement. The nine codes are as follows:

Code	**Description**
1. Cultural Relevance	References to culturally appropriate food, familiar ingredients, or the importance of food identity.
2. Community Engagement	Mentions of involving residents in feedback, co-creation of programs, or collaborative input.
3. Volunteerism	Descriptions of unpaid support from residents, students or staff helping run food initiatives.
4. Program Gaps and Improvements	Critiques or suggestions for improvement, including gaps in service delivery, food types, or outreach.

5. Access Barriers	Issues related to stigma, awareness, outreach, eligibility, or physical access to food programs.
6. Program Impact	Statements about the effects of programs on individual or community well-being, confidence, or relief.
7. Collaboration	Mentions of partnerships with organizations like UTSC, FoodShare, 42 Voices and government actors.
8. Infrastructure and Capacity	Challenges related to space, staffing, equipment, or funding constraints limiting program delivery.
9. Food Education	References to cooking workshops, nutrition sessions, gardening, composting, or farm-based learning.

After finalizing the codes, the next step in my analysis was organizing them into broader thematic categories. These themes were developed by identifying relationships between the codes and grouping them based on shared ideas and experiences of the participants. The themes reflect recurring patterns across the interviews, where each theme draws on multiple codes. The themes are broken down as follows:

Theme	Codes	Description	Related Scholarship
1. Culturally Relevant and Dignified Food Access	Cultural Relevance, Food Education, Program Impact	How MFRC ensures food meets cultural expectations, promotes dignity, and supports informed choices.	Bonnevera (2024) critiques how Canadian sustainable food imaginaries often erase immigrant foodways. Access Alliance (2020) emphasizes culturally appropriate food access as a justice issue in Toronto, reinforcing the need for food programs designed around residents lived experience
2. Community Involvement and Volunteerism	Community Engagement, Volunteerism	The role of residents and staff in shaping programming, informal	Peach et al. (2025): Show how relational and culturally affirming approaches to food

		feedback, and peer support networks.	distribution, such as in Indigenous-led food sharing, foster dignity and meaningful engagement. Gaventa (2004) highlights how participatory approaches can strengthen citizen influence on governance and policy.
3. Barriers to Access and Program Limitations	Access Barriers, Program Gaps and Improvements, Infrastructure and Capacity	Challenges around kitchen space, outreach gaps, and limitations in food quantity or visibility.	Block and Reynolds (2021) show that reliance on precarious or underpaid staff constrains community projects, reflecting MFRC's struggles with funding. Caraher and Furey (2022) describe the "Hunger Industrial Complex," where corporate interests shape charitable food systems to boost their image and limit organizations in addressing food insecurity
4. Collaboration and Partnerships	Collaboration, Infrastructure and Capacity, Program Impact	MFRC's work with other organizations, like FoodShare and Second Harvest	Orozco Meléndez and Paneque Gálvez (2023) argue that tackling complex issues like food insecurity requires collaborative communities that confront power imbalances and uncomfortable knowledge. Nosratabadi et al. (2020) define social capital as flows of resources, trust and knowledge between groups, illustrating how MFRC's partnerships strengthen community food security.

With the codes and themes established, the following chapters will present the findings of the analysis in greater detail. The first 2 themes will be explored first, while the remaining will be

explored in the next chapter. Each theme draws from multiple interviewees and reflects how community needs, food insecurity and MFRC's programs are experienced by both staff and community members. By highlighting these recurring themes, the goal is to show how MFRC's food initiatives respond to structural challenges while also reflecting the everyday realities.

Theme 1: Culturally Relevant and Dignified Food Access

Scholarship on food justice emphasizes that food access is not only about availability but also about cultural meaning and recognition. Bonnevera (2024) argues that sustainable food imaginaries often erase immigrant foodways, reducing diverse cultural practices to a universal model of "healthy" eating. Similarly, the justice-oriented approach observed at MFRC mirrors Access Alliance's (2020) call to prioritize culturally appropriate access as a structural issue. These insights suggest that organizations like MFRC operate within a system that often undervalues immigrant knowledge and practices. These insights suggest that struggles over food are also struggles over recognition and belonging, where access to culturally familiar foods affirms identity. While MFRC cannot address all of the structural causes of food insecurity, its practices demonstrate how grassroots organizations carve out spaces of sovereignty and dignity, reshaping the food system from below.

MFRC's commitment to provide culturally relevant food was a theme that arose frequently during the interviews. As outlined in the MFRC website (MFRC, 2023), the MFRC Growing Together Team supports food access in three main ways:

1. Growing fresh, healthy and culturally appropriate produce;
2. distributing food through community partnerships
3. educating community members of all ages through workshops and climate-related discussions

While the framework of food sovereignty is evolving, the core goals remain the same. Desmarais and Wittman (2014) describe the goals of food sovereignty as "strengthening community, livelihoods and social and environmental sustainability in the production, consumption and distribution of nutritious and culturally appropriate food" (p. 1155). Food sovereignty means more than simply distributing food equally, and emphasizes the human agency and respect of cultural differences within food systems. MFRC's programs reflect this key point of centering culture and community voices concerning food access. One of the staff members I interviewed, Elliot the MFRC Food Coordinator, stated:

> For example, the newcomer department has created the Kitchens of Malvern program where every month a newcomer receives an honorarium to cook a recipe from their home country or from their culture. And they come in and they teach other newcomers how to cook that specific recipe. And we provide all the ingredients for that. For them, that was one of the things that they wanted to do because they wanted to create community amongst the newcomers and to create those links so that people feel a sense of belonging.

The Kitchen of Malvern program brings forth a more grounded form and local scale of food sovereignty. It creates a space for newcomers to take the lead and share their knowledge and culture. This program moves from the theory of food sovereignty and provides a practical model. It directly counters what Bonnevera (2024) states as the erasure of immigrant foodways in mainstream sustainability narratives. Cultural food isn't used as simply an add-on but is an integral tool for building community and belonging. Additionally, food provided by the MFRC

isn’t solely used for its food programs but is made available for many of the programs offered at the centre. This is to ensure that no one, especially youth, goes hungry while attending their afterschool programs and workshops. But it is also important that food received reflects their cultural backgrounds. As Elliot explained in our interview:

> We've created a menu for the whole year that explores cuisines from around the world that the youth were interested in, whether that be their own cultures or others. And we're hoping to keep encouraging them in doing that and being open to trying new foods.

By designing the menu with input from the participants, the community centre avoids the one-size-fits-all approach and gives agency to the youth by letting them select their cultural dishes. Beyond food preparation, MFRC also integrates food into its broader educational workshops. The food sovereignty framework emphasizes the importance of education, as people should learn about how their food is grown. Galt et al, (2012) argue that sustainable agriculture and food system (SAFS) education needs to go beyond technical instruction and engage the values underlying food systems. In their critique, a central concern is the dominance of objectivist paradigms in education, specifically regarding agricultural sciences. They describe the idea of objectivism as an ideology that demands educators disconnect from what they teach in pursuit of “neutral” knowledge, which presents knowledge as fixed and detached from broader social or political context (Galt et al., 2012). Instead, they advocate for a praxis-oriented pedagogy, where both theory and practice work together and integrate real-world experiences and community values (Galt et al., 2012). At MFRC, examples would include educational workshops and programs like the Kitchen of Malvern, where participants get hands-on experience in designing the menu at the centre. Many of the programs at MFRC follow this integrative learning model, where they encourage youth to participate in growing food. Claire, the other staff member I

interviewed, described some of the educational programming at MFRC to be focused on “farm and growing skills.” Which she finds “really fun”. She explains that she enjoys doing the

“farm camp”, because it encourages discussion “about how different plants grow, showing kids how some of their favorite vegetables grow. Because if you don't have a backyard or have space to be growing food in, you're just never going to see that.” She finds that the program “demystifies food growing a little bit for kids” by encouraging kids to be able to plant some seeds in an egg carton and take them home. She states that “there’s something really exciting about seeing where food is grown.” She acknowledges that not every kid will end up being a farmer but it is important that people have “a little bit more information about where their vegetables are coming from and what it takes to grow them.”

Claire’s reflection captures the value-based approach that Galt et al, (2012) describe. Having kids planting seeds and seeing how vegetables grow encourages their curiosity and helps them gain an understanding of what it takes to grow their food. Claire mentions that it demystifies the process for kids who aren’t exposed to gardens or have backyards, as many children growing in an urban city might not have access to. MFRC’s programming also goes beyond the tactile example of food production and also focuses on critical food literacy, aimed at an older audience. These lessons would include workshops on navigating food labelling and expiration dates, topics where misunderstanding creates stigma. Elliot described the impact food literacy workshops had at MFRC:

> Last year, we offered food literacy workshops to seniors as well as to youth, teaching them how to read a food label. So, whether that be the best before date or nutritional values on a label. And that piece of learning that best before does not mean bad after has been huge in our food programming.

They noticed a significant positive impact of folks having that this knowledge provides especially when they receive ‘rescued’ food from Second Harvest, such as cookies, “and the best before date was yesterday”. They explain that,

> In the past, had we served those cookies, we would have gotten feedback that ‘those are bad. You can't serve those’. But now, with the understanding that those cookies are still perfectly fine for a few months to come, they're OK with serving them and they're OK with getting more food out to participants and participants are OK with receiving them. So that part has been really beneficial.

This workshop demonstrates how food literacy, when delivered in an accessible setting like MFRC, can reshape individuals’ attitudes towards food. Regarding labels and expiration dates, studies have shown that many consumers process food labels peripherally, usually reacting to a vague impression rather than fully understanding the labels (Grunert, 2011). Workshops like this provided by MFRC helps remove the fear or indifference of food labelling and offers practical knowledge, since it’s grounded in real experiences like knowing when a snack is safe to eat or not. This approach aligns with the educational model Galt et al. (2012) describes, as it emphasizes learning through real world relevance and experience. The educational value of MFRC’s workshops can be further contextualized through Vidgen and Gallegos’ (2014) foundational work on food literacy. They defined food literacy through an iterative research process that combined Delphi interviews with food/health expert and in-depth interviews with young participants (between 16 and 25 years old) who experienced some form of disadvantage (like homelessness, unstable housing, etc.) (Vidgen and Gallegos, 2014). This approach allowed them to define food literacy not only by professional standards but by the lived experiences of individuals facing food insecurity. They define food literacy as,

> The scaffolding that empowers individuals, house-holds, communities or nations to protect diet quality through change and strengthen dietary resilience over time. It is composed of a collection of inter-related knowledge, skills and behaviours required to plan, manage, select, prepare and eat food to meet needs and determine intake. (p.54)

MFRC's hands on approach aligns with this model of food literacy, by allowing participants to navigate decisions about food in reference to their own lives. Food budgeting, food waste and learning to read expiry labels empowers participants and acts as a dynamic tool for self-determination, especially in the face of economic pressures. This empowerment reflects the food sovereignty vision described by scholars such as Desmarais and Wittman (2014), where communities shape their own food systems through grassroots knowledge and democratic engagement.

Beyond Food Access: Mental Health and Cultural Connection

While Claire and Elliot spoke to the goals of specific MFRC programming, like food literacy workshops, I was also interested in seeing the perspectives from outside staff, from the participants first- hand experience. Since this paper has taken a thematic approach, I made sure to ask questions that allowed people to share their personal reflections and stories. One of the questions I asked participants of MFRC was "What are some positive impacts you have noticed because of MFRC?" and if they were willing to share any stories. I particularly appreciated Yaso's insights regarding the community and the centre. Yaso has been involved with MFRC for over five years as a volunteer and has a plot in the Malvern Urban Farm. Yaso shared many happy stories with me about different families benefiting from either the community garden or the Urban Farm but one story he shared, about a family with a young autistic child, stood out to me. The family had brought their autistic child to the farm and told Yaso "Now we are here,

we're going to get some rest", explaining that they usually had to hold their child's hand constantly in public, otherwise he'd run off. Yaso encouraged them to let their child roam freely in the in the lot, reassuring them that the open area was safe. "Let him run", he told them, adding that he would be watching him also. To their surprise, the child simply ran circles near them, never straying further than the lots. Later on, Yaso encouraged the child to help water the plants, which they enjoyed doing. Over time, the family began returning to the farm regularly and even brought others with them. As Yaso reflected, "that family tries to visit several times to have fun because of this kid, because the kid finds it joyful." He also noticed that the family brought in another family who spent time there as well and the child has been doing well. In his view, farming goes beyond just food sustainability and it also provides important mental relief.

I was interested in this story because it showed an aspect of community spaces I hadn't considered; how community spaces centered around food/farming can offer emotional relief. In this case, the garden became an environment where the parents could relax while the child could move freely without fear. This anecdote shares themes from the work of Minkoff-Zern et al. (2024), which shows the importance a food sovereignty framework has on the mental health and sense of agency on refugees. Their mixed-method study on refugee gardeners in New York showed how gardening helped reduced their stress and some of the refugees stated that the physical nature of gardening was beneficial to their health. Additionally, the study showed that gardening helped the refugees grow culturally specific foods that are harder to find in grocery stores. This helped refugee participants feel more connected to their homelands and helped reclaim their traditions and culture (Minkoff-Zern et al., 2024). While the gardeners at both Malvern Urban Farm and Little's Community garden may not all be refugees, many are still

racialized immigrants who might face cultural estrangement and social isolation and the garden serves as an integral site of placemaking.

MFRC's approach to its food programming prioritizes the cultural and educational aspects of food sovereignty. Through initiatives like kitchens of Malvern and the various gardening workshops, the centre is fostering a sense of agency and providing cultural affirmation, which are core tenets of the food sovereignty framework (Desmarais & Wittman, 2014; Patel, 2009). As stated earlier, scholars argue that meaningful food education must go beyond technical instruction and emphasize praxis, where values and real-life engagement connect with learning (Galt et al., 2012). MFRC's food literacy workshops and farm-based education achieves this form of education by situating knowledge based on the participants lived experience. Explaining food labels or learning how vegetables grow highlights this praxis-based education, as these workshops encourage critical thinking and practical skill building while avoiding the top-down dynamics that is prevalent in institutional learning. For example, when Claire talks about demystifying the process of vegetables growing, it allows youth participants to learn where their food comes from and empowers them. Children can see themselves as participants in the cultivation and care of food rather than just being passive observers or consumers.

Going back to the overall theme of "Culturally Relevant and Dignified Food Access", we see how MFRC's food programs are rooted in more than simple redistribution of food but is grounded in recognition, education and community wellbeing. The emphasis on culture and lived experience reflects the broader food sovereignty framework, moving away from the traditional food aid model, where recipients are typically treated as passive beneficiaries. Stories like Yaso's highlight how spaces like MFRC and its community gardens serve not just as sources of nourishment, but as places where people feel emotionally grounded and socially valued. These

are not just sites to pick up food, they are spaces where individuals participate, connect with others and environment. As Minkoff-Zern et al. (2024) note, acts of growing and sharing food can foster well-being and self-determination, especially for communities facing structural exclusion. For many participants in Malvern, gardening or volunteering with MFRC becomes a way to reclaim a sense of purpose, cultural identity, and social connection. Yaso's story expands the scope of food sovereignty to include mental well-being and the creation of safe, inclusive spaces. The value of the urban farm is not just in its food output but in its function as a place of care that counters the stresses of marginalization. For both racialized and neurodivergent communities, who often face judgment in public spaces, this ability to shape their own food space is itself a source of mental and emotional well-being. This experience stands in contrast to the realities of food bank reliance described by Rizvi et al. (2022) in their 18-month study qualitative study on food banks in Ottawa, Canada. For the study, they interviewed participants who wee accessing the food banks and asked about their experiences of food insecurity, long-term use food banks and the challenges they faced. Participants of the study reported long wait times and poor food quality, experiences which left them feeling disrespected. Many described having to compete for unwanted food, dealing with arbitrary rules, and experiencing what Rizvi et al. (2022) refer to as “compulsory gratitude,” which can feel dehumanizing over time. These accounts highlight the charity food model, while addressing short-term hunger, fails to support people’s long-term well-being, as well as their autonomy and sense of belong. In contrast, MFRC’s approach emphasizes relationships and community voice. Many participants design and lead workshops and programs at the centre and feedback from participants is used to further improve future programming. The next theme focuses on the significance of community involvement in shaping MFRC’s food programs. It focuses on how local residents, including

volunteers and participants, actively contribute to the development of the food initiatives at MFRC.

Theme 2: Community Involvement and Volunteerism

Community involvement and volunteerism are central to MFRC's food programming, reflecting a broader shift in food justice scholarship toward relational and participatory approaches. Peach et al. (2025) shows how culturally affirming practices in food sharing create long-term engagement, which moves beyond transactional models of aid. Similarly, Gaventa's (2004) insights on participatory approaches emphasize how grassroots voices can shape governance and challenge top-down decision-making. At MFRC, the active involvement of participants in shaping programs suggests that community knowledge and lived experience are not treated as secondary but as essential forms of expertise. This theme explores how volunteerism and participant input reconstruct the boundaries between service providers and community members, creating a more collective model of food access. When I interviewed the participants of MFRC, both shared they had input in the program's development. In my experience working with other non-profit organizations, community consultation was a big aspect of program development. However, at MFRC, the depth of involvement went beyond meetings and surveys. For example, individuals with farming experience were invited to lead workshops and demonstrations. Elliot, the food coordinator, explained how MFRC gathers feedback not just through formal evaluations but also by listening to participant stories. They shared that for many families, the food provided through MFRC's afterschool program may be the only meal they received that evening. "Whether that be… an extra fruit that maybe they wouldn't have gotten at home, or maybe it's their whole meal for the evening," they noted, this food can make a critical difference in daily nutrition. Similar concerns emerged from youth and senior participants, who shared that "if they

don't get a meal from us in that evening, maybe they're not going to eat at night." Regarding seniors facing rising food prices and limited income, Elliot explained "The center has heard that how hard it is to live on a pension and how food prices keep rising".

These stories offer a form of "anecdotal evidence that we can only capture from the participants that we do see," which are integral in understanding the programs value. Quantitative data is important since it gives us the numbers, like how many people are using the program, how much food is needed or how much space is needed to grow certain plants. But as Elliot's reflection showed, hearing participant stories offers a depth of understanding that numbers cannot. These stories capture abstract feelings, like why participants come to the program and what the programs actually mean to them. So, when a parent expresses gratitude that their child received food or when seniors share their struggle of living on a pension, these narratives offer social and emotional context that raw data alone cannot achieve. They can also give a sense of urgency, especially in the context of fundraising. Hearing a statistic like "10 percent of seniors in Malvern face food insecurity' is useful, but a more personal account of hearing a senior skipping meals due to rising food prices carries more emotional weight and puts a human face to the issue. This kind of narrative-based insight is echoed in other food justice work, such as the Indigenous-led Food Share program studied by Peach et al. (2025). The program provided weekly baskets of fresh, traditionally grown food to approximately 60 families (Peach et al., 2025). What made the program stand out from other food programs was not the food itself but how it was shared. The participants of the Food Share described how staff members took time to speak with participants and exchange messages throughout the delivery process. This relational approach made the program feel approachable and affirming rather than dehumanizing, with participants describing how it didn't feel like they were "just a number picking up a box" (Peach et al., 2025, p. 5).

MFRC staff take a similar approach, like Elliot taking time to listen to participant stories. Developing these personal relationships can shift food support from being transactional to something more meaningful and rooted in the community.

Elliot's reflection aligns with Gaventa's (2004) concept of "citizen voice", which highlights the importance of creating spaces where marginalized individuals can articulate their lived realities. Rather than rely on external metrics to define what counts as a "success", MFRC actively listens to the people using its services. This allows for everyday knowledge, like the stress of living on a fixed income or the comfort of knowing your child is fed, to inform how programs are evaluated and improved. Furthermore, Gaventa's (2004) concept of citizens voice emphasizes the need to create spaces where individuals can contribute their situated expertise to collective problem solving. The use of participant experiences and stories demonstrates this form of knowledge democratization. Rather than relying solely on abstract metrics, the organization prioritizes narratives as crucial markers of program impact. Narratives can also play a role in greater critical awareness of food justice issues and give a strengthened sense of civic engagement. In a student-led course on sustainable food systems at Emory University, the students conducted interviews and collaborated with farmers markets, community gardens and food justice organizations (Self et al., 2012). Although the course took place in an academic setting, it encouraged students to work directly with local food actors to understand the barriers residents face in accessing food. MFRC's emphasis on participant story-telling as feedback mirrors the course at Emory University, as much like the students taking the course, MFRC participants are not passive beneficiaries but co-creators of knowledge and change. The space created for participant voices at the center will foster long-term engagement with food justice, as students in Self et al.'s

(2012) study reported sustained engagement in food systems work after hearing community narratives and engaging with their local food actors.

As seen from Elliot's reflection, these narratives don't emerge from passive observation but come directly from participants who are actively engaged with the program. Community members are asked to co-lead, suggest and reflect on the programs as they continue evolve. This type of participatory action aligns with Charle's Levkoe's discussion of "democratic learning", where he argues that powerful learning occurs through direct participation in collective spaces, such as MFRC (Levkoe, 2006). Levkoe argues that learning is inherently social and occurs in contexts that shape what and how concepts are learned. In MFRC's case the context is a trusted, community-based environment where participants feel safe sharing knowledge. It is a safe space which makes learning more affirming and practically useful. Parallels can be drawn between MFRC and another food justice space mentioned in his study, "The Stop Community Centre", located in Toronto's Davenport West neighborhood. Through its Urban Agriculture program, staff invited participants to make decisions through an advisory council. Decisions included what types of plants to cultivate, how to organize the plots, and what kinds of workshops to host (Levkoe, 2006). One example mentioned was due to the United States invasion of Iraq. Here the Stop volunteers chose to design a section of their garden in the shape of a peace symbol (Levkoe, 2006). While MFRC doesn't have a story that centers around a symbolic protest like The Stop, it still mirrors the ethos of democratic learning as community members with lived expertise are encouraged to lead workshops, propose new ideas and offer feedback that shapes future programming.

Noemy was another participant I interviewed who frequently volunteers at MFRC. She spoke about leading a workshop on growing microgreens at MFRC, which she designed herself. She explained that she teaches others how they can:

> "...Make simple, delicious food with microgreens. And I have lots of opportunities. Every Wednesday, I go and make a new food item and give a free sample, and encourage them to get to know about it."

Eventually university-aged youth got involved, encouraged her to continue, and began to collect and share vegetable seeds with "other farms and other people to get to know different plants and different produce". Noemy also helped to prepare kits consisting of soils, seeds and containers, which helped to teach people how to grow them indoors "even with whatever bad weather is outside, you can grow inside and get some fresh produce."

Noemy's description of her role at MFRC, like designing the microgreens workshop and preparing soil kits, echoes what Levkoe (2006) states about democratic learning; learning is a process that occurs through direct engagement in a collective, group-based activity. Noemy takes an active role in the program development which reflects a shift from being a recipient of the program to a contributor and co-educator, similar to how volunteers at The Stop Community Food Centre became collaborators. Community-driven education as a framework, proposed by Merritt, Clark and Freedman (2024), aligns closely with the engagement done by MFRC contributors like Noemy and Yaso. They argue that food justice and food sovereignty approaches must be grounded in "deliberate, situated education", a form of learning that is within everyday realities. Rather than focusing on expert driven model, this form of education focuses on lived experiences and supports a peer-to-peer exchange of knowledge, similar to the concept of democratic learning (Levkoe, 2006; Merritt et al., 2024). Noemy's microgreen workshop falls

under this kind of education, since it is designed around affordable plant growing techniques that take into account various practical limitations faced by MFRC participants. As she stated, these microgreens can be grown indoors, regardless of the weather, as they do not take up much physical space. Finally, Noemy's workshop shows the potential of volunteerism when placed within an organizational structure, in this case MFRC. However, this reliance on volunteer labour also exposes an issue. While empowering for individuals like Noemy, it highlights the dependency on unpaid work to address community needs This model functions within a context of public sector underfunding, where essential services are increasingly delegated to non-profits and their volunteers. The empowering aspect of volunteerism exists in tension with the reality that it compensates for a lack of sustained public investment, which can consequently reduce pressure on the state to provide meaningful, long-term solutions. On the other hand, Merrit et al. (2024) state that volunteer contributions in food justice based social enterprises can drive innovation, while also creating educational experiences for both the participants and the volunteers. A social enterprise in this context refers to much more than revenue generation but rather, to an organization that supports values such as participatory governance and redistributive justice (Merritt et al., 2024). While MFRC does receive donations, it does not operate as a social enterprise in the traditional sense, since its programs are primarily funded through grants or public subsidies. Nonetheless, it still aligns with many of the values associated with social enterprises. For example, the centre creates spaces for peer-led learning, such as Noemy's workshop, where community members share skills and knowledge with one another. MFRC enables a model of volunteerism that encourages democratic engagement, rather than unpaid labour, and allows all participants and volunteers to see themselves as knowledgeable and empowered within the food system.

Both Elliot and Noemy's reflections show how MFRC functions as more than a service provider but as a learning space that encourages volunteerism and community participation. As Elliot explained in their example, stories are an useful tool in determining program success and reflects MFRC's commitment to reflecting lived experience. This aligned with the framework of democratic learning, where meaningful education emerges from collective participation and recognition, as evident by the case study of The Stop Community Food Centre (Levkoe, 2006). Participants are encouraged to help develop the programs and sometimes even lead them. I was fortunate enough to speak with Noemy, who led the microgreens workshop and I got an idea of how the programming at MFRC is developed alongside participants. Her role at MFRC is what Merritt et al. (2024) describe as a deliberate situated education. In this framework, volunteering becomes a tool for participatory governance, rather than being a stopgap for underfunded services. MFRC's practice of codeveloping programs aligns closely with food justice values, affirming the thought that those most impacted by food insecurity are also quite capable of crafting their own solutions. However, these progressive food justice movements, especially community-driven ones, operate in limited, under resourced systems. As Shattuck and Holt-Giménez (2011) observe, these progressive food movements, while being rich in community participation, can form a "patchwork of successes and failures", where powerful local work struggles to shift the broader dynamics of the corporate food regime. While MFRC exemplifies many of the progressive food justice trends, such as fostering grassroot engagement and learning, it does so in a system shaped by resource inequities, policy gaps and systemic constraints. This dynamic, where democratic engagement and learning coexist with systemic and institutional constraints, raises questions about the transformative capacity of organizations like MFRC. It made me think "How far can volunteer-driven, community-based models go in building

equitable food systems when they remain dependent on precarious funding and limited space?". With my next and final chapter, I will explore the final two themes: first, by examining the barriers that limit program access and visibility; and second, by exploring how partnerships with other organizations both support and complicate MFRC's food justice mission. By doing this, I hope to place MFRC's participatory model in the larger political and material framework that influences the practical outcomes of food justice efforts. Limits of Participation in Unequal Systems

In this framework, volunteering becomes a tool for participatory governance and not just a stopgap for underfunded services. MFRC's practice of codeveloping programs aligns with key food justice values, especially the belief that those most impacted by food insecurity are capable of crafting their own solutions. Through peer-led workshops and consistent community feedback, MFRC shows how people experiencing food insecurity can be active participants in creating solutions that reflect their own needs.

However, these progressive, community-driven food justice movements often operate within under-resourced systems. As Shattuck and Holt-Giménez (2011) observe, these progressive food movements, while being rich in community participation, can form a "patchwork of successes and failures," where powerful local work struggles to shift the broader dynamics of the corporate food regime. MFRC is no exception. While the centre exemplifies many of the progressive food justice trends, such as fostering grassroots engagement and learning, it does so in a system shaped by resource inequities, policy gaps and systemic constraints. This dynamic, where democratic engagement and learning coexist with systemic and institutional constraints, raises questions about the transformative capacity of organizations like MFRC. The experiences at MFRC illustrate both the potential and the limits of participatory engagement in community food

work. Participants' stories and contributions validate Peach et al.'s (2025) argument that food spaces can foster dignity and connection, rather than dependency. At the same time, the reliance on volunteer labour and informal participation raises questions about sustainability and equity. It reflects the systemic underfunding that shifts responsibility from state institutions onto communities themselves.

This raises an important question: How far can volunteer-driven, community-based models go in building equitable food systems when they remain dependent on precarious funding and limited space? With my next and final chapter, I will explore the final two themes: first, by examining the barriers that limit program access and visibility; and second, by exploring how partnerships with other organizations both support and complicate MFRC's food justice mission. In doing so, I hope to place MFRC's participatory model in the larger political and material framework that influences the practical outcomes of food justice efforts.

Chapter 3

Understanding the limits.

Before discussing the remaining themes, it is important to review a point made earlier on in the literature review: from a public service perspective, when people go hungry, you provide food as a solution. Public food provision alleviates the immediate problem of hunger, and providing food for is a compassionate act toward those who do not have adequate access to food. However, as many of the existing scholarship around food sovereignty and food justice suggests, this form of intervention functions in a system that reproduces the conditions it seeks to alleviate. Scholars like Raj Patel (2009) and Gimenez and Shattuck (2011) both discuss the corporate food regime and how it perpetuates this cycle of food aid by prioritizing global market demands. Its important to also acknowledge where MFRC falls under in the variety of responses to food insecurity. As Gimenez and Shattuck (2011) discuss in their paper, there are four major trends to food system transformation: neoliberal, reformist, progressive and radical. Based on how MFRC operates, I argue that the organization and its programming fall largely under the progressive trend. While the reformist trend works within the current food system and aims to make the food system more equitable through technological fixes and expanded aid, it still works under the same system without challenging the underlying political and economic structures (Gimenez and Shattuck, 2011). On the other hand, the radical trend aims to dismantle the existing structure completely through policy reform that is explicitly anti-capitalist and anti-colonial (Gimenez and Shattuck, 2011). The progressive trend is the 'middle ground', where it acknowledges the social and cultural aspects of food insecurity and aims to create sustainable, locally governed food systems through initiatives like community assisted agriculture, and food literacy programs. While the reformist model delivers food aid through a top-down model, like food banks, the progressive model highlights the importance of community participation and specifically, democratised food

access (Gimenez and Shattuck, 2011). As mentioned in the previous chapter, MFRC emphasizes active community involvement in developing and leading its programs. As Elliot mentioned, food choices for the various programs are informed by participant feedback and Noemy was active in developing the microgreens workshop using her own experience as a starting point. These efforts aren't just focused on reducing hunger, but on the social aspects of food insecurity that are not usually addressed through top-down, reformist models like food banks, which are criticized as short-term solutions (Giménez and Shattuck, 2011). Food sovereignty also includes a cultural and political dimension. As Desmarais (2015) explains, it is not just about self sufficiency but about reclaiming this power within food systems so they reflect the values of the people they serve. This framework also considers the cultural aspect of food, not treating it just as a commodity but as an important aspect of people's culture and identity. Critics argue that urban food systems often promote a homogenized ideal of what food should be, emphasizing terms like "local" and "traditional" without considering whose traditions are being prioritized (Bonnevera, 2024). Specifically, immigrant foodways are frequently erased and/or tokenized with what Bonnevera describes as "sustainable food imaginaries," even though immigrants play an essential role in shaping urban foodscapes. Without intentional efforts, food security initiatives risk reinforcing exclusion by only valuing dominant food systems, which would further alienate marginalized groups under the guise of being sustainable. These critiques are important to keep in mind when analyzing community-based programs like MFRC, especially in diverse areas like Malvern.

This point is significant, as the following theme discusses barriers and limitations to MFRC and its programming. This theme examines the limited infrastructure, access barriers and various other challenges that MFRC faces, from the perspectives of both staff and participant. While

some of the barriers overlap, participants and staff members often described these challenges differently based on their roles within the organization. Staff tended to focus on broader challenges at the institutional scale, such as funding limitations. Meanwhile, participants spoke more about the immediate challenges, such as the stigma of relying on food from the centre or the lack of public awareness due to limited outreach and signage. This contrast between institutional and individual perspectives is important for understanding food justice. While some barriers are structural, focusing on infrastructure and funding, other barriers are shaped by emotions and the social perceptions that surround food insecurity.

Theme 3: Barriers to Access and Program Limitations

Community food initiative often face structural barriers that constrain their ability to achieve transformative change. For MFRC, these constraints take the form of limited funding, infrastructure gaps and dependence on external partners. Block and Reynolds (2021) explain that these limitations are not incidental but are built into funding systems that privilege accountability to donors and institutions rather than communities themselves. Additionally, Caraher and Furey (2022) describe the 'Hunger Industrial Complex,' where charitable food systems are sustained in ways that reproduce dependence rather than dismantle inequality. They argue that corporate food aid works in ways that benefit the corporations, rather than solving the issue of hunger.

When I spoke with participants and staff members of MFRC, the last question I asked was "What improvements or changes would you like to see in MFRC?" The question was a forward-looking, inviting them to imagine possibilities or future changes. However, participant answers often pointed inwards instead, revealing the current barriers and limitations. Participants responded by describing what was missing or difficult to sustain in the program. Elliot, the Food Coordinator, explained that "budget is always a constraint." As a non-profit, MFRC constantly

relies on funders and must "prove the necessity of integrating food within the activities that they're potentially willing to support." For instance, a funder may be open to supporting a program, but may question why snacks are needed as part of it. Elliot noted that MFRC often has to "have those conversations with the funders and larger conversations with the municipality and other larger players" to show the value of including food supports. Elliot's comments points to the broader issue of food being treated as an add-on to the community programs. MFRC views food as beyond just simple nutrition but something integral for the program, even if its not directly food related. Many of the afterschool programs at the center provide a snack so that no one goes hungry during the programming. When Elliot talked about something that should be simple, asking for snacks to be included in the programming, it showed the disconnect that funders often have with the everyday realities of community work. Food needs to be justified within the language and priorities of funders, otherwise, it is seen as an unnecessary cost. This reflects a broader issue that Lucy Jarosz (2014) identifies: food security frameworks at the institutional level often adopt individualized, technical approaches that detach food from its social and political meanings. This logic can be seen in how MFRC must justify the inclusion of snacks in youth programs. This becomes more than just an inconvenience, as this logic further shapes food programs over time.

As Block and Reynolds (2021) describe in their study of a major food justice initiative in Chicago, even the most well-intentioned collaboration can come apart under the logic of funding. Their study of the Chicago Food Systems Collaborative found that once funding was secured, the coalition's broader grassroots vision narrowed to fit the grant's parameters. What began as an open collaboration became increasingly dependent on the fiscal host and vulnerable to shifting funder priorities. Additionally, Block and Reynolds (2021) highlight that many projects rely on

unpaid or minimally paid staff to meet funder-driven evaluation criteria, which limits who can meaningfully participate. These constraints reflect what Jarosz (2014) describes as the depoliticization of food. In this context, something as basic as including a snack for an afterschool program becomes a site of negotiation.

The issue of funding came up again in my conversation with Claire, but in a different way. Rather than focusing on securing money, she spoke about the structure of funding, such as who controls funding and how it is allowed. As she explained:

> … It's going to come back to funding…the difference with the kitchen renovation is that someone is paying for it instead of giving us the money to do it. And I think that's fine, but maybe more creative approaches to funding, to be able to sustain and enhance some of the work that we're doing.

Claire mentioned funding as an issue but spoke about how, although they receive the funding, the decisions on what to do with the money is made by the external funders and not by MFRC. That is another key issue, the lack of flexibility in how funding is used, even when available. This lack of autonomy matters because it can affect what kind of programs can realistically plan. If the funding comes with certain conditions, MFRC is forced to shape their work around external priorities rather than fulfill the community needs. This mirrors what Graham Riches and Valerie Tarasuk write in their critique of Canada's food charity system. They argue that many community food programs are "constructed to fit within the existing operations, resources and mandate of the host agency" (Riches & Tarasuk, 2014 p. 48), rather than being designed to meet actual nutritional or structural needs. Claire's quote showed this happening in real time, as a useful renovation was made (the kitchen) but the organization had little in say about how the support was structured or what additional investments are needed. So, the underlying problem

isn't solely the lack of resources but also the control of these resources by funders and institutions who don't share MFRC's justice-oriented understanding of food work.

These concerns regarding external control over funding reflect Caraher and Furey (2022) describe as the "Hunger Industrial Complex", where corporate and political interests shape charitable food systems in ways that reinforce their image, rather than serve the community needs. They argue that this system often allows corporations to present food donations, often unsellable items or surplus, as charitable acts. This distracts from the root causes of food insecurity and allows governments to scale back social assistance, while using charity to fill the gap (Caraher & Furey, 2022). Food corporations gain a "halo effect", where they get public approval while avoiding the responsibility of addressing structural causes of the issues. This creates a troubling dependency, where organizations like MFRC are caught between wanting to serve their communities and being limited by donor conditions and funding that aligns more with corporate social responsibility goals, than with food justice. Antonio Roman-Alcalá (2017) argues that many contemporary food systems, including well intentioned community programs, operate under he calls growth-oriented regimes which prioritizes economic efficiency and institutional legitimacy over community-defined values. Even when food justice rhetoric is used by funders of food movements, they still fail to challenge the practices that perpetuate inequality. As Roman-Alcalá (2017) states "FSMs call for both change within and the replacement of capitalism. This is important to post-growth theory, which in its most radical forms seems to imply that capitalist markets and states must be abandoned to achieve post-growth economies" (p. 125). While MFRC's programming shows a deliberate move toward participatory approaches, this is limited by external expectations.

This kind of funding structure also allows governments to avoid making meaningful investments to food policy. As Riches & Tarasuk (2014) argue, food charity in Canada has gained a high degree of public legitimacy, not because it effectively deals with hunger but because it appears to be a compassionate response. The authors argue that the rise of food charity actually depoliticises hunger. They state "hunger has successfully been socially constructed as a matter for charity and not an issue requiring the priority attention of the state and public policy" (Riches &Tarasuk, 2014, p.49). Both staff members I interviewed describe the effects of working under a system that, as described by Riches & Tarasuk (2014), looks generous but is ultimately limited and shaped more by donor optics rather than community priorities. While MFRC's programs are grounded in participation and democratic learning, as we explored earlier in the previous themes, they still need to navigate framework built on short-term relief, not long-term empowerment. This connects directly to earlier discussions of the Reformist model, where it appears to be progressive but ultimately reinforces the system it tries to change.

While the staff members at MFRC identified the structural and funding related barriers that affect programs at an organizational level, participants identified more personal issues. One of the issues was visibility of the programs themselves. Noemy, who was involved with the Farmers Market program, explained that the turnout was low because people simply didn't know the market was happening. She said "…Only people who live very close to the Malvern area know [about it]". She also suggested putting up signs and boards in the neighbour hood to let more residents know when and where the market was taking place.

Her suggestion of adding more signs seems simple but it points to a larger issue: when the programs are invisible, they are functionally inaccessible. MFRC has a variety of programs, many of them working to benefit the surrounding neighbourhood but if people don't know it

exists, it may as well not exist. It also raises the question about whose responsibility it is to make the program more visible. Should the burden fall on participants to spread the word or on the organization to invest in public engagement? Another part of this barrier is the idea of stigma surrounding using food aid. While none of the participants I interviewed directly stated that stigma was an issue, Noemy emphasizing public signage could reflect underlying discomfort people have with food aid programs. Noemy did mention the community fridge and pantry that MFRC has is located at the back. She stated:

> …some people, they, they don't even have anything at home to eat. They're shy to come and ask for it. So, this is a very good idea to put the fridge and pantry outside facing the road, the roadside. So, nobody knows who's going to come and get it.

Her comment was framed more positively, since she appreciated the fact it was placed roadside, where people could access it discreetly. This design choice can be seen as a strength of the program, as it shows awareness of the barriers individuals may face when seeking support. While the need for discretion points to the broader issue of stigma around food insecurity, MFRC's approach shows sensitivity to these social dynamics and an effort in reducing discomfort for those who may feel hesitant accessing these resources. Rebecca de Souza, author of the book "Feeding the Other: Whiteness, Privilege, and Neoliberal Stigma in Food Pantries", describes this feeling of shame as the internalized effects of what she describes as neoliberal stigma, where individuals experiencing food insecurity blame themselves for their situation. As De Souza (2019) states "Even amid the most grueling of life circumstances, individuals highlight their hard work and their personal responsibility, and in the most sorrowful of stories, people blame themselves for missing the economic mark" (p.71). The author argues that this awkwardness isn't just a personal issue but a socially produced issue. It stems from systems that frame food aid

as something shameful rather than something everyone deserves. Making programs more visible, both physically and socially, is not just about increasing the signage but also requires shifting the views of food aid. Realistically, MFRC can't singlehandedly undo this stigma but it can still work to reduce it. The organization has taken steps like involving participants in developing their programs and framing themselves as a community hub that helps everyone, not just the "needy".

To conclude, across my interviews with both staff members and participants, a range of barriers were mentioned. Many of these challenges stemmed from two central issues: lack of stable funding and lack of public awareness/visibility of the centre and its programs. For staff, the issue wasn't just securing the funding but being allowed to use the money in ways that would align with MFRC's food justice goals. For participants, the problem wasn't the programs being offered and more about whether people knew about them, and when explored a bit deeper, whether they felt comfortable using them without judgement. Both issues are two sides of the same coin. When funders do not recognize food programming as an essential service, food itself becomes a luxury rather than a necessity. Programs built around food then become underfunded and difficult to promote. These barriers reflect what Riches and Tarasuk (2014) identify as a broader issue: that food charity in Canada has been normalized as a default response to hunger instead of actually targeting the roots of food insecurity. They argue that the visibility of charitable initiatives, like food drives and food banks, creates a "public legitimacy" that's masks the absence of accountable food policy (Riches & Tarasuk, 2014). While MFRC works toward a more progressive approach to food justice through community participation and culturally relevant programming, it still operates within a system shaped by reformist structures. As discussed earlier, limited flexibility in funding, external control over program design and the need to constantly justify food as essential reflects the constraints that MFRC has to navigate.

MFRC's struggles cannot be read as organizational shortcomings but as symptoms of a broader political economy that prioritizes efficiency and optics over justice. By exposing the limits of donor-driven and resource-constrained models, MFRC's experience highlights the need for structural investment and policy reform if food sovereignty goals are to be realized. Yet, while MFRC operates under these constraints, the organization actively seeks to push against them, specifically by strategic collaborations. These partnerships allow MFRC to gain resources and develop programming that would be harder to sustain on their own. The next and final theme explores how collaboration and partnerships enables the organization to navigate through limitations and broaden their scope of food initiatives.

Theme 4: Collaboration and Partnerships

MFRC as an organization does not operate in isolation, the organization works with a diverse group of external partners and organizations to meet their goals. These partnerships aren't seen as just solutions to the gaps identified in the previous theme but as opportunities to help bridge the gap in areas where MFRC is limited. However, as partnerships expand, concerns can arise about decision making. Scholars argue that partnerships can be double-edged. While they can expand organization capacity, they can also introduce new power dynamics. Orozco Meléndez and Paneque Gálvez (2023) argue that partnerships are most effective when they go beyond resource-sharing and confront power imbalances directly, allowing grassroots organizations to shape decision-making. This tension between resources and influence was seen in MFRC's experience with its recent kitchen renovation. While both staff members noted the renovation was beneficial, Claire reflected that MFRC had limited input on how the funding was structured While not an overall negative experience, this showed that even supportive collaborations can

limit the organization's autonomy. This tension within partnerships is exacerbated when dealing with complex issues, like food insecurity. As Orozco-Meléndez and Paneque-Gálvez (2023) explain, collaborative efforts designed to address systemic problems often fail to integrate what they call "uncomfortable knowledge", which are insights that reveals inequities or expose the uneven distribution of power within the partnership itself. They argue that uncomfortable knowledge is an unavoidable part of addressing "wicked problems" (complex, multilayered issues where there are no simple solutions, like food insecurity). So, in these cases, working together isn't just about pooling resources but creating extended peer communities, where a diverse set of actors including community members and organizations can come together and produce knowledge, while also being critically reflective of power dynamics (Orozco-Meléndez and Paneque-Gálvez, 2023). If these partnerships are managed with shared goals and transparency, they offer critical support that can expand overall capacity. If these partnerships are managed with shared goals and transparency, they offer critical support that can expand overall capacity. This can be seen with the organization Second Harvest, which who worked with MFRC to provide resources. As Elliot explained, Second Harvest has been "incredibly valuable," providing "over 250 pounds of product" each week, a contribution they describe as essential for running the programs at the centre. This consistent support allows MFRC to stretch its budget and access items like milk and dairy products that "potentially couldn't have afforded in the past". Elliot also noted that when certain items couldn't be used internally, they were placed in the community fridge and pantry, so participants could "go home and cook the foods that they want to cook at home with these items." The partnerships extend the reach of MFRC's programming, while simultaneously increasing the food access across the community.

Second Harvest is a food rescue organization based in Toronto. They recover surplus food from businesses and redistribute them across communities and organizations, like MFRC (Second Harvest, 2025). Second Harvest's main goal is to fight food waste while working towards the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, specifically SDG 12 Responsible Consumption and Production, SDG 13 Climate Action and SDG 2 Zero Hunger. This partnership is a clear example of how external organizations benefit the food programs in a meaningful and tangible way. They align with MFRC's environmental goals while also providing items that MFRC would not be able to afford. In addition to partnerships that provide material resources, MFRC is also involved with knowledge-sharing networks. During my interview with Elliot, they mentioned MFRC's involvement with the East Scarborough Storefront, a community hub that operates in the neighbouring Kingston-Galloway-Orton Park area (East Scarborough Storefront, 2025). They describe their practice as a "connected community approach," which emphasizes building change through local assets, collaboration, and resident leadership (East Scarborough Storefront, 2025). Their role is to connect organizations and ideas to develop community-driven solutions, particularly in communities facing systemic barriers like high poverty. Elliot described the Storefront as a "big incubator for ideas," noting that they and Claire have attended meetings over the past year to learn what other organizations, grassroots leaders and residents are doing. In a context where "most food support providers are stretched incredibly thin," these interactions have offered reassurance and guidance. Working with a larger network has served as a reminder that MFRC is "not doing this alone or in our own little bubble," but is part of "a larger ecosystem of other organizations that are also sometimes struggling to meet the needs of all of their community members." These connections have supported MFRC and highlighted the importance of shared knowledge and guidance across the sector.

Elliot's reflection aligns with the concept of social capital as described by Nosratabadi et al. (2020). Social capital refers to value created through social relationships, specifically like trust, cooperation and information exchange that occurs when people and/or organizations interreact. Social capital can function in two ways: bonding capital, which describes the strengthening of the connection within a group or family and bridging capital which describes linking different groups together, allowing resources and ideas to flow across organizations (Nosratabadi et al., 2020). The relationship Elliot describes with the East Scarborough Storefront falls under bridging capital, as they describe an "ecosystem of other organizations" benefitting from leaning and learning from one another. By engaging with a wider network of grassroots organizations, MFRC gains access to shared knowledge and support that strengthens its programs. These collaborations also open up opportunities for local residents to take on leadership roles in shaping community food systems. This is seen with Malvern Urban Farms, where Yaso took on more of a leadership role in the farm and lead many of the programs. Yaso stated:

> They were actually initiated with some local political leads from locally and even from federal government, local government, City of Toronto and the municipal government, all these people helped us. Particularly speaking, Jennifer McKelvie, she is one of the champions of this Malvern Urban Farm Initiative. And we got some help from our leader, Vijay Thanigasalaman, who carries on the science and technology. So, all these people came and said that we actually want this land and that was successful. Successfully we landed Malvern Urban Farm under Ontario's hydro land. We started that opportunity too.

Yaso's description brings another important layer regarding collaboration, specifically about the role of political partnerships have in making food initiatives possible. I mentioned the importance of grassroot organizations working together and sharing ideas/resources but working

with municipal officials and policymakers is just as essential. Access to land, like the hydro corridor land falls under the Ontario's Provincial Secondary Land Use Program (PSLUP), which allows community groups and municipalities to use transmission corridor lands for secondary purposes, like urban agriculture (Infrastructure Ontario, 2025). Yaso mentioned Jennifer McKelvie, who was the former deputy mayor and now MP and MPP Vijay Thanigasalaman being involved in Malvern Urban Farms. Having engagements with elected officials helps provide a catalyst for acquiring the land and without having them champion these initiatives, securing spaces like the corridor and community garden can be an uphill battle.

Taking all this together, we see that MFRC's partnerships operate at different levels: from securing surplus food from Second Harvest, to participating in knowledge sharing with organizations like East Scarborough Storefront and finally navigating political spaces to acquire land for initiatives like Malvern Urban Farm. Each of these examples show how MFRC leverages partnerships to extend its own capacities and adapt to the community needs to address gaps that cannot be solved on their own. This is evident in MFRC's partnerships, as seen by Elliot's explanation of their involvement with East Scarborough Storefront, which they referred to as an "ecosystem of other organizations" where they exchange ideas, gain knowledge from one another, and provide assistance when resources are strained. This kind of partnership demonstrates how MFRC creates bridging capital that actively strengthens its food initiatives. However, as we explored earlier in Theme 3, these partnerships and efforts still work within a broader system where food insecurity is often depoliticized and food programs/initiatives are treated as peripheral (Riches &Tarasuk, 2014). This is important to note, as the reality is that while collaboration provides significant opportunities for organizations, it cannot fully compensate for structural limitations imposed by funding constraints, as Claire and Elliot

described with renovations at MFRC. Additionally, the role of political actors, like the MPP and deputy mayor, in Malvern Urban Farms highlights their role in accessing land, which remains contingent on governance structures like the Provincial Secondary Land Use Program (Infrastructure Ontario, 2025). Overall, I do not want to disparage the importance of reaching out and having partnerships, as this provides critical support. However, its important to note that they still operate and are frequently constrained by the barriers mentioned earlier. These include the underfunding, fragmented food policy that offloads responsibility onto non-profits and the stigma associated with food aid.

Conclusion

My goal for this chapter was to see how community-based organizations address food insecurity and promote food sovereignty, specifically around their surrounding community. The idea of addressing food insecurity has evolved over time, shifting from a narrow focus of availability of food towards more complex considerations of equity and access within food systems. Food insecurity is increasingly recognized as a symptom of systemic inequalities rooted in class, race, and geography. Scholars such as Raj Patel (2009) argue that these inequities are sustained by a corporate food regime that prioritizes efficiency and profit at the expense of community well-being. When exploring these ideas of transforming the food systems to center around the rights of communities to establish their own agricultural practices and control their own food and land. This concept falls under the food sovereignty framework, which calls for communities to control their own food systems, including how food is produced, distributed and consumed (Desmarais, 2015). While this framework initially emerged through agrarian reforms and coined by a Vía Campesina as part of global peasant and farmer movements, the food sovereignty framework has expanded to encompass broader struggles, including those other marginalized groups and urban communities (Desmarais, 2015).

Considering all these factors around food sovereignty—the cultural aspects and power dynamics within food systems—is what led me to the Malvern Family Resource Centre. While not exclusively an organization that deals with food insecurity, a portion of this centre deals with food justice. They have a community garden, urban farm and many of the workshops they offer are related to food literacy or are food related. More importantly, their approach isn't a top-down charity model but prioritizes empowering the surrounding community itself. After speaking with staff and participants, I gained a better perspective on how they respectively see the programs

benefits and limitations. Both staff members, Claire and Elliot mentioned how the food programs go beyond provision and actually help participants learn literacy skills. Elliot mentioned seeing the results of these programs and how the center takes in feedback to improve the programming going forward. Yet they also highlighted the barriers of underfunding and restricted donor expectations. From the participants sides, Noemy and Yaso spoke about how MFRC provided a space for people to access foods and food literacy in ways that preserved their dignity and reduced stigma. They both stated that MFRC could use better outreach and signage to improve their visibility. There are tangible results that MFRC has on the community as described by staff members and participants, through their own metrics and anecdotal evidence.

Going back to my central question, MFRC *does* play a role in promoting food sovereignty in the area. The programs act as an immediate response to food insecurity, such as the community fridge or providing snacks during after school programs. At the same time, MFRC also has programs that focus on the long-term solutions for food insecurity, like the various workshops they offer on microgreens, food literacy and the CSA program. Through these ways, MFRC fills the gaps of the broader food systems in place that often fail marginalized communities like Malvern. However, as I explore in the paper, community-driven efforts on their own cannot resolve the structural roots of food insecurity. Even the most impactful programs at MFRC are constrained by factors that are beyond its control. Long-term change requires more than grassroots actions, it requires shifts in policy, resource distribution, awareness, de-stigmatization and what I consider the most important, people caring about the issue. Meaningful change requires governments, institutions and communities to move beyond temporary relief measures and invest in long-term solutions. Programs like the ones at MFRC cannot and should not substitute for broader systemic changes required at an institutional level. While their efforts

alone cannot dismantle the corporate food regime, they provide a tangible example of how localized, community-driven, and justice-oriented approaches can begin to reshape food systems from the ground up.

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