



National Collaborating Centre
for Determinants of Health

Centre de collaboration nationale
des déterminants de la santé

FOOD JUSTICE

PRACTICE BRIEF





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This practice brief aims to support the public health community to take action to advance food justice. It presents public health strategies to address food system-related inequities and advance food justice at different scales. This resource builds on the [Determining Health: Food systems issue brief](#),¹ also produced by the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health (NCCDH), that examines the health impacts of food systems in Canada.

This resource is divided into six sections:

2 SECTION A

provides an overview of food justice concepts and a brief history of the food justice movement.

8 SECTION B

describes the relevance of food justice to the field of public health and its alignment with daily public health work.

9 SECTION C

includes an overview of eight principles of food justice and a summary of public health strategies for each principle.

13 SECTION D

dives deeper into ways to apply the eight principles, including:

- concrete actions to advance food justice, and
- reflection and discussion questions.

29 SECTION E

presents healthy school food programs as a promising area for public health action to advance food justice.

31 SECTION F

identifies additional questions to help guide action on food justice.

INTRODUCTION

“Food systems are the webs of activities, people, institutions and processes that bring food from the fields, forests and waters to our plates, and beyond.”^{1(p4)} Industrial food systems are the dominant type of food system in Canada, harming both people and planet.² They contribute to problems like hunger, nutrition-related diseases and climate change.¹ And they put workers throughout the food supply chain, including those who grow and sell our food, at risk for injury and illness.³ Today’s industrial food systems in Canada harm some groups

more than others, including racialized and Indigenous communities, communities living with low income and migrant farm workers.

Given the pressing challenges of our current food systems, growing numbers of people are calling for policies and strategies centred on food justice. Food justice is a concept, approach and social movement focused on ensuring everyone has access to the food they need and benefit from the systems that provide our food.

A

WHAT IS FOOD JUSTICE?

Food justice seeks “to achieve equity and fairness in relation to food system impacts and a different, more just, and sustainable way for food to be grown, produced, made accessible and eaten.”^{4(p223)}

The concept of food justice finds origins in the activism and resistance of Black farmers and communities in the United States (see the accompanying box) and has been defined in many ways. In this practice brief, we describe food justice as a social movement, approach and set of principles that:

- recognizes food as a human right;⁵
- has an explicit focus on racial equity and justice;⁵
- works to dismantle the structural barriers that prevent all people from having nourishing, affordable and culturally relevant food;^{5,6} and
- intimately links food systems to public health.⁴

Importantly, food justice centres those most impacted by food system-related inequities to confront the barriers that lead to poor health outcomes and transform food systems.^{4,5}

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FOOD JUSTICE MOVEMENT

In the Mississippi Delta in the 1950s, most rural Black farmers lived on cotton plantations and grew their own food on small pieces of land called truck patches. The food was often not enough to feed themselves and their families during winter months, so they relied on the federal surplus commodities food program for additional food. In 1962, the governing body for Leflore County — many of whose members were part of a White supremacist organization called the White Citizens' Council — cut funding for the program. The result was widespread hunger and malnutrition. Historical accounts suggest this was done to disempower Black farming families who had been engaged in activism around voting rights.^{7,8}

The funding cut became known as the Greenwood Food Blockade. It is what many food justice advocates point to as the beginning of the food justice movement, though the idea of food justice has a much longer history, rooted in resistance to the transatlantic slave trade.⁹ In response to the blockade, civil rights activists came together to gather food donations and pressure the United States Department of Agriculture to require that Leflore County reinstate the program, which happened in 1963.⁸

The food justice movement gained further momentum through the Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast for School Children Program in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The program was based on the idea that well-fed children learn better and that hunger impedes Black liberation. By many accounts, the free breakfast program later inspired the U.S. Congress to increase funding for the National School Lunch Program. Together, the responses to the blockade and the breakfast program laid the foundation for the contemporary food justice movement.⁷

The movement has grown in the years since, including in Canada where it is led by people and organizations committed to ensuring access to food for all and addressing (racial) injustice within our food systems.^{7,10} Early events in the Canadian food justice movement included the participation of Canada-based groups in the Growing Food Justice for All Initiative, aimed at dismantling racism within the food system,⁴ and the founding of the non-profit organization Afri-Can FoodBasket in 1995.⁹

The movement for food justice in Canada is closely related to struggles of Black, African Nova Scotian, First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples for self-determination. Over the past decades, there has been a marked growth in projects, strategies and organizations in Canada explicitly naming food justice as a focus and goal. While this has led to increased awareness of important food justice concepts and ideas, there has also been evidence of fragmentation within the movement and decreased attention to racial justice.⁹ Ensuring food justice work remains focused on racial justice and links with larger efforts toward social justice is important for its ability to support transformative change.

With thanks and recognition to Anan Lololi⁹, a key leader in the food justice movement in Canada, for his contributions to this document.

DIMENSIONS OF FOOD JUSTICE

“The problem is multifactorial; therefore, the solutions need to be multidimensional.”

Ellen Gregg¹¹

Food justice can be broken down into three interrelated dimensions: distributive justice, procedural justice and recognitional justice. Table 1 outlines these dimensions, with key questions related to each, and Figure 1 presents them visually.

TABLE 1: DIMENSIONS OF FOOD JUSTICE

Dimension	Focus	Description	Key questions
Distributive	Fair share	Distributive food justice is about who gets what and how much. Among other things, it concerns the distribution of resources needed to acquire or produce food, and the rates of injury and illness among workers in the food system.¹² Disproportionately high levels of food insecurity among Black and Indigenous communities in Canada is an example of distributive injustice.¹	- Do all people have access to nourishing, affordable, culturally relevant food at all times? - How are the risks and benefits of our food systems distributed? What factors contribute to their distribution?¹
Procedural	Fair say	Procedural food justice relates to how decisions are made about the ways our food systems are designed and operate. It involves ensuring that decision-making practices, procedures and institutions are fair and inclusive.¹³ Procedural justice considers who is, or ought to be, included in decision-making and the distribution of power among those involved.¹⁴ The major influence of corporations on food advertising policy in Canada is an example of procedural injustice.^{1,15}	- How are decisions about food systems made? - Who is included or excluded from decision-making processes? - What mechanisms support inclusive decision-making? - Do people have the power to make decisions about their own food systems?

Dimension	Focus	Description	Key questions
Recognitional	Equal respect	Recognitional food justice puts respect for the inherent dignity of all people and their (collective) identities, concerns and needs at the centre of food systems planning and implementation.¹³ It means that the perspectives and knowledge systems of certain groups (e.g., racialized communities) are not devalued or ignored while others dominate.¹² Recognitional justice requires recognizing and confronting past and ongoing systemic injustice.^{13,14,16–18} The construction of pipelines on Indigenous lands and territories, threatening Indigenous foodways, is an example of recognitional injustice (i.e., misrecognition).^{19,20}	• Do our food systems recognize and respect the values, perspectives and knowledge systems of groups most impacted by food system inequities? • Are the traditional ways that communities produce, obtain and consume food respected and safeguarded?



FIGURE 1: DIMENSIONS OF FOOD JUSTICE GRAPHIC

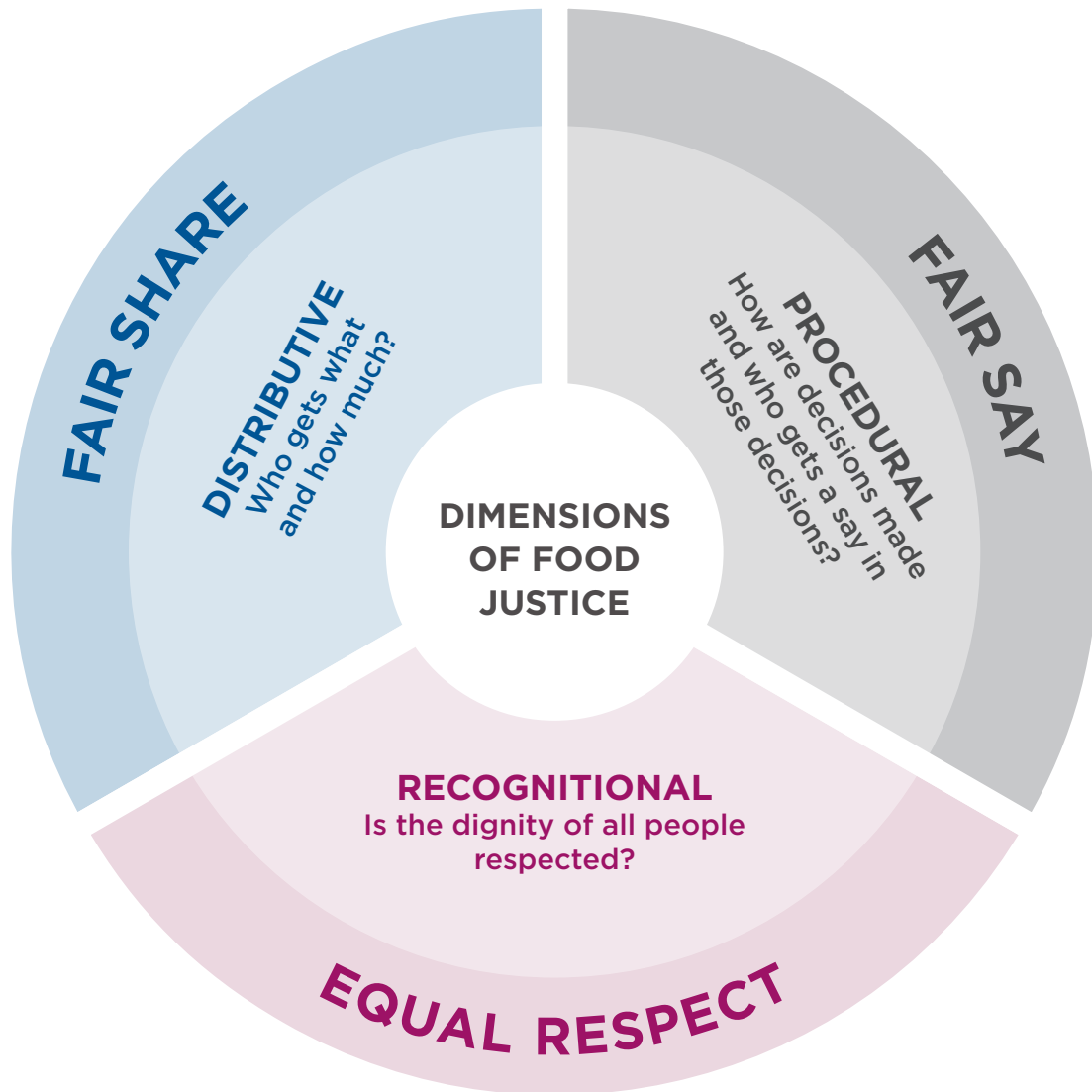


Figure adapted with permission from Smaal et al.²¹

WHY A FOOD JUSTICE APPROACH?

“The food justice movement is fundamentally a social justice movement.”^{22(p100)}

This practice brief focuses on using a food justice approach to food systems for these important reasons:

Food justice centres racial equity and justice — a lens either absent or minimized in many other approaches to addressing food systems. Racism is woven into the fabric of our industrial food systems, making a focus on racial equity and justice critical to building better food systems.

Food justice recognizes the complexity of interwoven influences on food-related health outcomes, like racism, settler colonialism and economic oppression. As such, it is well aligned with public health actions to address the structural and social determinants of health.

When food justice strategies are linked to work on other justice issues like climate justice, worker justice and housing justice, they fit well into a larger scope of public health work on health equity and justice.

Beyond food justice, there are several other approaches to understanding and addressing food system problems, including food sovereignty, food democracy and food security. These approaches share many similarities with food justice but also have key differences.²³ For example, food sovereignty generally places greater emphasis on land rights and reform than food justice, and Indigenous food sovereignty is an Indigenous-led and -focused movement. Advancing food justice involves

understanding its similarities and differences with other frameworks for change. The choice of approach informs what strategies are pursued to build healthier, more sustainable and just food systems.

“Commodification of food is the root of the problem.”

Dr. Tammara Soma²⁴

B

WHY DOES FOOD JUSTICE MATTER FOR PUBLIC HEALTH PRACTICE?

“Just food systems sustain life, connect us with each other and our environments, and promote health and dignity for all.”^{1(p2)}

Food and the systems that deliver it to our plates and beyond are important determinants of health.^{1,25} Thus, how food is grown, distributed and consumed, among other processes, is relevant to public health work. Food-related inequities increase people’s vulnerability to nutritional diseases, poor mental health, various infections and a host of other health issues.²⁶

Public health practitioners and organizations have an important role to play in advancing food justice. For example, public health inspectors play an essential role in ensuring a safe food supply. Public health nurses, dietitians and nutritionists support the development of food skills and healthy food environments. Public health epidemiologists study patterns in nutrition-related chronic diseases.

“What are your values?
What is most important?
What should we prioritize?”

Ellen Gregg¹¹

A food justice approach offers a framework to plan, implement and coordinate public health food systems work. It also allows for greater attention to equity and justice in these efforts. For example, a food justice approach to healthy food environments may promote universal school food programs that serve culturally relevant meals. And a food justice approach to chronic disease tracking may use data to show the relationship between limited access to fresh food in certain neighbourhoods (i.e., food apartheid²⁷) and rates of chronic disease.

Critically, a food justice approach supports the public health community to move beyond an emphasis on individual behaviours (e.g., eating habits) to focus on the underlying causes of inequities (e.g., income inequality, corporate influence within our food systems). By calling attention to problems at the root of our food systems, food justice provides a framework to drive transformative change and support people to live healthy, dignified lives.²⁵

C

TOWARD A FOOD JUSTICE APPROACH FOR PUBLIC HEALTH

“When people are left out of shaping the solutions to the problems they face, the solutions fail. To make a new food system we need everyone at the table.”²⁸

This section describes ways to adopt a food justice praxis in public health: an approach that combines reflection and action for transformative food systems change. Actions to advance food justice must depend on the shared vision and priorities of community members in specific contexts.²³

“Ask: who are the programs being designed for? How are the decisions being made? How does leadership inform the programs being developed?”

Bibiana Virgüez²⁹

In this section, Figure 2 identifies eight principles of food justice and Table 2 summarizes corresponding public health strategies for each principle. Section D then provides concrete actions and examples to apply each of the principles to advance food justice. These principles have been informed by the social justice literature and consultations with people doing food justice work in various settings. The NCCDH's four public health roles for improving health equity (i.e., assess and report, modify and orient interventions, partner with other

sectors, participate in policy development and advocacy)³⁰ are woven throughout the proposed strategies and actions.

The information in these sections can be used to:

- work with communities and partners to determine food justice priorities,
- guide planning and implementation of food justice work,
- learn how the principles relate to each other and identify opportunities to act in multiple areas, and
- reflect on opportunities to shift current public health food-related work.

Because advancing food justice requires a combination of actions at multiple levels,^{23,31} meaningful change can only happen through working with others across the food system.³²

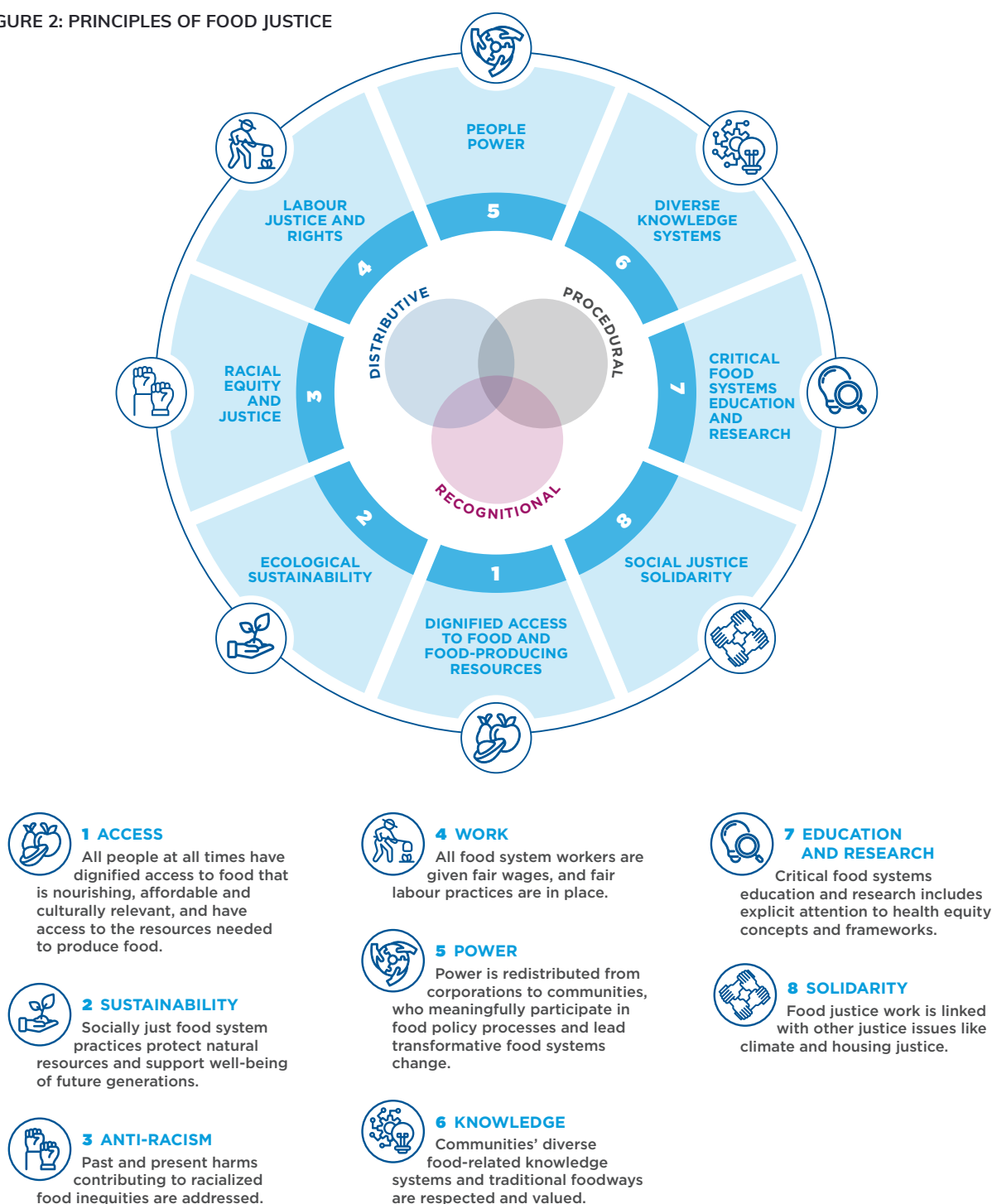
“When you are thinking of a solution, ask yourself if the solution is just moving the problem to somewhere else instead of actually addressing the root of the problem itself.”

Dr. Tammara Soma²⁴

KEY PRINCIPLES (CHARACTERISTICS) OF FOOD JUSTICE

Food justice understandings and practices vary widely based on context. Figure 2 depicts eight non-exhaustive, interconnected principles of food justice related to distributive, recognitional and procedural justice. These principles serve as important action areas to plan and advance food justice work.

FIGURE 2: PRINCIPLES OF FOOD JUSTICE



PUBLIC HEALTH STRATEGIES FOR FOOD JUSTICE

Table 2 lists some key strategies public health can undertake related to the eight principles of food justice. It also identifies helpful resources and examples to further understanding and support planning, organizing and taking action for food justice.

TABLE 2: SUMMARY OF FOOD JUSTICE PUBLIC HEALTH STRATEGIES BY PRINCIPLE

Principle	Strategies	To learn more
1 Dignified access to food and food-producing resources	- Advocate for poverty reduction and livable wages - Support and learn from food justice organizations - Support communities and local producers to grow food - Advance healthy school food programs - Uphold the right to food as a basic human right - Address inequities in the built environment that impact food access - Support access to traditional foods and Indigenous-led strategies for improving food access	Food Secure Canada. <u>Five big ideas for a better food system</u>³³ American Public Health Association. <u>Creating the healthiest nation: Food justice</u>³⁴
2 Ecological sustainability	- Contribute to food waste prevention, recovery and recycling strategies at household, retail and production levels - Make food justice a central pillar of climate strategies - Partner with others to address environmental racism - Call on all levels of government to invest in sustainable food production	Second Harvest. <u>Food waste</u>³⁵ NCCDH. <u>“Disrupting environmental racism”</u>³⁶
3 Racial equity and justice	- Build organizational capacity to support a racially just and equitable food system - Centre the food justice leadership of racialized groups - Apply intersectionality within food justice efforts	NCCDH. <u>Let’s Talk: Racism and health equity</u>³⁷ Sustainable Food Places. <u>Race, equity, diversity & inclusion (REDI for Change)</u>³⁸
4 Labour justice and rights	- Advocate for a decent work policy agenda - Address the structural and social determinants of migrant farm workers’ health - Address climate-related hazardous working conditions	NCCDH. <u>Determining Health: Decent work practice brief</u>³⁹ Migrant Workers Alliance for Change. <u>Farm workers</u>⁴⁰

Principle	Strategies	To learn more
5 People power	• Support and participate on food policy councils • Create spaces for communities to inform public health policies and practices • Address the commercial determinants of health	NCCDH. <u>Let's Talk: Determinants of health</u>²⁵ NCCDH. <u>Let's Talk: Redistributing power to advance health equity</u>⁴¹
6 Diverse knowledge systems	• Foster intergenerational learning • Support communities' foodways	City of Toronto. <u>Toronto Black food sovereignty plan</u>⁴² Rizarri. <u>Tkaronto is a place for sustenance</u>⁴³
7 Critical food systems education and research	• Foster critical food literacy with individuals, families and communities • Generate and share evidence on food systems and strategies for change • Provide public health food systems training • Engage in ongoing critical reflection	Allen and Gillon. <u>"Critical pedagogy for food systems transformation: Identifying and addressing social-justice problems in food systems and society"</u>⁴⁴ Locally Driven Collaborative Project. <u>A call to action for healthy eating: Using a food literacy framework for public health program planning, policy, and evaluation</u>⁴⁵ NCCDH. <u>Let's Talk: Intersectionality</u>⁴⁶
8 Social justice solidarity	• Connect food justice work to other initiatives • Establish and participate in communities of practice • Build relationships and partner with community organizers and grassroots movements	Human Impact Partners. <u>Resources for power sharing and collaboration between government agencies and community power-building organizations</u>⁴⁷

D

CONCRETE ACTIONS TO ADVANCE FOOD JUSTICE

This section can be reviewed in any order based on context-specific priorities and needs, recognizing that transformative change requires a systems approach with action across multiple areas.⁴⁸ The principles and actions outlined in this section intersect. For example, working to ensure all workers within the food system are paid fair and living wages also means advancing racial equity and justice.

For each of the eight principles, there is discussion of its importance, identification of specific public health actions for the strategies summarized in Table 2, and a list of questions to help guide action. Practice examples also are provided for many of the principles.

1 DIGNIFIED ACCESS TO FOOD AND FOOD-PRODUCING RESOURCES



Why it matters

Worldwide, we produce more food than ever, enough to feed everyone on the planet.⁷ Yet millions of people in Canada do not have enough food to eat, a number that is rising and disproportionately affecting racialized communities and people with disabilities.^{1,26,49} What's more, the land, tools and other resources needed to produce food are concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, harming small-scale farmers and local food systems.⁵⁰ Critical to food justice is a rights-based approach to food. This involves ensuring nourishing, affordable, culturally relevant food for everyone and making sure people have the resources they need to produce food.

What public health practitioners and organizations can do

Advocate for poverty reduction and livable wages to reduce income-based household food insecurity

ACTIONS

- Participate in anti-poverty coalitions focused on addressing the root causes of income-based household food insecurity.
- Support relevant position statements and advocacy documents, such as the [Position statement and recommendations on responses to food insecurity](#) from the Ontario Dietitians in Public Health.⁵¹

Support and learn from value-aligned food justice organizations

ACTIONS

- Provide financial and other resources to food justice organizations working to improve access to food.
- Explore job shadowing or secondment opportunities in partnership with food justice organizations for better understanding of their work. For example, create a visiting position within your organization that allows for a food justice expert to inform policies, services and programs on food access.

Support communities and local producers to grow food

ACTIONS

- Partner with communities to co-develop inclusive food-growing strategies.
- Work with planners and other government officials to:
 - » enable people to use public spaces to grow food;⁵²
 - » use measures that protect growing spaces, like zoning policies, removal of private development rights, and community land trusts;^{23,53,54}
 - » support local farmers through local food procurement strategies;²³ and
 - » remove barriers to allow small businesses to sell their produce, such as through pop-up sales and sales directly to consumers and retailers.⁵⁵
- Generate and share evidence on the connections between urban agriculture (e.g., community and school gardens, urban farms) and various health and well-being outcomes (e.g., social connectedness, access to nourishing food).⁵⁶
- Call on provincial governments to restrict the acquisition of rural farmland by financial institutions, investment firms and pension funds, as has been done in Saskatchewan, that can push out small-scale farmers.^{57,58}

Advance healthy school food programs

ACTIONS

- Work with school communities, government bodies and other relevant partners to support the design, funding and implementation of healthy school food programs. Support programs that (a) centre equity and justice; (b) link with local growers and producers; (c) are universally delivered; and (d) provide culturally relevant, nourishing and sustainable food.⁵⁹

Uphold the right to food as a basic human right

ACTIONS

- Remind the federal government of its legal obligation to ensure the right to food under international human rights law through communication campaigns, op-eds and media interviews.^{33,60,61}
- Use “right-to-food” language in programs, policies and services when conveying information about food insecurity.⁶²
- Amplify the work of food justice organizations that adopt a right-to-food approach in their programming.

Address inequities in the built environment that impact food access

ACTIONS

- Use data, storytelling and other forms of evidence to share information with decision-makers on how the built environment affects access to food.⁶³ For example, use GIS mapping software to illustrate inequities in the concentration and distribution of food retailers by neighbourhood. Avoid referring to food deserts or food swamps to describe spatial inequities. Use food apartheid as applicable instead.¹

Support Indigenous food systems and Indigenous-led strategies for improving food access

ACTIONS

- Work with communities and partners to support Indigenous food systems and improve access to food among First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities, including through restructuring Nutrition North Canada.^{33,64}
- Take action to support the Land Back movement that demands the return of land taken from Indigenous Peoples through land theft and dispossession, and that seeks to revitalize Indigenous life.^{65–67}

Reflection and discussion questions to guide action

- How can food initiatives focused on charity shift to address the root causes of income-based household food insecurity?
- How can you ensure your work does not contribute to increased stigma surrounding food insecurity?
- What are ways to ensure initiatives do not worsen inequities and mainly benefit those with already high levels of food security?
- How can efforts around access to food bring together both income-based and food-based strategies, rather than positioning them in opposition to one another?
- How might urban agriculture initiatives reinforce settler colonialism, and can this be prevented?

Food justice in practice

FoodShare Toronto

FoodShare is a food justice organization that works to advance the right to **dignified access to food** in Toronto and beyond. Programs include food justice education; urban farming initiatives; local produce markets; and awareness building around the relationships among food, power, colonialism, racism and capitalism. Central to its food justice efforts is collaboration with other local organizations, including public health partners. Key food justice campaigns include the [Right to Food](#), featuring in-person town hall meetings with community leaders, working with city council to pass a motion to update the Toronto Food Charter, and a Digital Day of Action that saw large-scale email outreach to municipal staff and council calling for food justice.⁶⁸



Why it matters

Our food systems are major contributors to climate change and environmental degradation through various pathways with uneven impacts.¹ For example, food that ends up in landfills (i.e., food waste) creates methane gas and contributes to global warming.⁶⁹ Food waste also impacts human health through exposure to hazardous substances from landfills, consumption of contaminated food and water, and wasted nutrients.⁷⁰ Ensuring everyone has enough food to eat for generations to come means producing, distributing and consuming food in ways that protect both people and planet.

What public health practitioners and organizations can do

Contribute to food waste prevention, recovery and recycling strategies at household, retail and production levels

ACTIONS FOR PREVENTION	• Advocate for the federal government to actively promote and work toward a pan-Canadian food loss and waste target in alignment with the <u>United Nations Sustainable Development Goals</u>⁷¹ and <u>National Zero Waste Council</u>.⁷² • Disseminate information to clarify the meaning of best before, use by, sell by and expiry dates for food — a major cause of household food waste.^{72,73} • Call for Health Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency to require simplified and standardized date labels on food products. • Resource institutional food procurement strategies (e.g., school food programs) that rely on direct sourcing from local food producers. • Support efforts to advance circular food systems based on the reuse and regeneration of resources.⁷⁴
ACTIONS FOR RECOVERY	• Partner with food rescue organizations to divert surplus food from places like farms, grocery stores and restaurants away from landfills, and redistribute it in non-stigmatizing ways.⁷² • Work with federal, provincial, territorial and municipal authorities to develop guidelines on food waste recovery to promote the safe and dignified redistribution of surplus food.^{72,75}
ACTIONS FOR RECYCLING	• Advocate for a pan-Canadian ban on commercial food waste in landfills and the imposition of appropriate financial penalties to companies for disposal.^{72,76} • Support a call for the implementation of local green bin programs across the country and the measurement of their impacts.⁷⁷

Make food justice a central pillar of climate strategies

ACTIONS

- Work with other sectors (including planners) to integrate food justice considerations into existing climate action or emergency response plans and documents.⁷⁸

Partner with others to address environmental racism

ACTIONS

- With community partners, raise public awareness of environmental racism — the disproportionate siting of waste and polluting facilities in racialized communities.^{36,79,80} For example, disseminate information about the concentration of industrial agriculture and meat-processing facilities, which contribute to soil, air and water pollution, in racialized communities and communities living with low income.⁸¹
- Participate in the development of pan-Canadian strategies to address environmental racism and advance environmental justice.⁸²

Call on all levels of government to invest in sustainable food production

ACTIONS

- Call for the provision of resources, training and other supports to help farmers and fishers transition to more sustainable forms of food production.³³
- Advocate for a federal strategy to reduce the use of artificial pesticides and fertilizers in agriculture.³³
- Urge all levels of government to implement strategies aimed at protecting biodiversity, including policies and regulations on genetically modified crops, land management and land use.^{33,83}
- Support learning from Indigenous knowledges and sustainable farming practices.⁸⁴

Reflection and discussion questions to guide action

- What are some opportunities to support efforts to redirect surplus food while working toward long-term structural and policy change?
- What roles can you play in addressing environmental racism?
- What values and world views underlie unsustainable food system policies and practices?
- How can you share messages and stories to increase support for ecological sustainability?



Why it matters

Racism is built into and shows up in our industrial food systems in many ways. Some examples are racial differences in access to food, the ill-treatment of migrant farm workers, and the disruption of Indigenous food systems and lands.^{1,85} Attention to racial equity and justice should underpin all food justice work. Accordingly, actions to promote racial equity and justice — a society where all people can thrive — are embedded throughout this document. Here, we outline additional actions relevant to food justice efforts.

What public health practitioners and organizations can do

Build organizational capacity to support a racially just and equitable food system

ACTIONS

- Provide and participate in learning about the historical and contemporary connections between industrial food systems in Canada and different forms of racism.
- Engage in training focused on developing skills to analyze and act on racism within the food system.^{37,86}
- State a commitment to supporting a racially just and equitable food system in your organization's values, policies and procedures.^{38,86}
- Support an ethno-racially diverse workforce with skills to advance food systems change.
- Identify and co-develop tools to assess the impacts of your organization's food system-related policies and practices on racial equity and justice.⁵⁴ (See the [Food System Racial Equity Assessment Tool](#)⁸⁷ for an example.)

Centre the food justice leadership of racialized groups

ACTIONS

- Build meaningful, ongoing relationships with food justice groups and organizations led by Indigenous, Black and other racialized communities.
- Work with racialized-, Black- and Indigenous-led groups to learn of community priorities and identify ways to support public health food justice action.
- Acknowledge and profile the work of Indigenous, Black and other racialized food justice leaders in food system-related communications and documents.
- Support efforts to ensure adequate funding and resources for food justice (and food sovereignty) efforts led by Indigenous, Black and other racialized communities.

Apply intersectionality within food justice efforts

ACTIONS

- Co-design and implement actions that apply intersectionality, recognizing how systems of power (e.g. racism and colonialism) work together to influence food system-related health outcomes for various communities differently.⁴⁶

Reflection and discussion questions to guide action

- How can you centre the leadership of Indigenous, Black and racialized communities in your food justice work?
- How can promotion of healthy eating and food programs shift away from White-centred approaches to be inclusive of racialized communities?
- How can your organization's commitment to food justice better include goals related to racial equity and justice?³⁷

Food justice in practice

Black Creek Food Justice Network

The Black Creek Food Justice Network is a community-organizing group that brings residents together with community organizations to work toward food justice, with an approach strongly grounded in **racial equity and justice**. This network led a food justice project centring the lived expertise of residents on issues directly affecting them, describing how structural and social determinants affect their experiences of food justice. This project identified the challenges experienced by residents of Black Creek, including experiences of racism, high rates of poverty, disproportionately high food prices compared to the rest of the city, transportation difficulties in accessing fresh produce, high rates of precarious and low wage employment, policing and mental illness. The resulting report, *Fighting for food justice in the Black Creek Community: Report, analyses and steps forward*, presents community voices and perspectives on these issues; statistical data; supplementary resources; and a list of recommendations from the community for what needs to be done to improve urban growing opportunities, food affordability, food worker conditions, and the connections between food and health.⁸⁸



Why it matters

Our food systems rely on workers who are often racialized, underpaid and facing poor employment and working conditions, compromising their health and well-being. Food justice demands that all workers are paid livable wages and experience decent work.^{1,54}

What public health practitioners and organizations can do

Advocate for a decent work policy agenda

ACTIONS

- Collaborate with worker-led groups and other partners and sectors to champion legislative and policy changes around fair and living wages for workers, minimum employment standards, and occupational health and safety protections.^{39,53}
- Support efforts to ensure migrant farm workers receive permanent residency status on arrival in Canada.⁸⁹

Address structural and social determinants of migrant farm workers' health

ACTIONS

- Build relationships with farm worker organizers and migrant farm workers to better understand their needs.
- Carry out ongoing and unannounced inspections of migrant farm worker housing (i.e., not only before the workers' arrival).⁹⁰⁻⁹²
- Advocate for a national housing standard to protect migrant farm workers consistent with international standards like the United Nations guidelines on the right to adequate housing.^{90,93}
- Support migrant farm workers' access to culturally and linguistically appropriate health and social services.⁹⁴

Address climate-related hazardous working conditions

ACTIONS

- Partner with relevant agencies, authorities and worker-led groups to push for and implement robust heating and cooling requirements in agri-food workplaces (e.g., maximum and minimum temperature workplace policies).^{95,96} Relevant partners include the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health Safety, Canadian Environmental Law Association, occupational health and safety specialists, workers' unions, and worker solidarity networks.
- Conduct extreme heat and health vulnerability assessments that account for the occupational hazards faced by food system workers. Assessment methods could include literature reviews, consultations with invested groups, epidemiological studies, and climate models to identify heat-related health risks and adaptation measures.⁹⁷
- Work across sectors (e.g., agriculture, labour) and with worker-led groups to co-design, implement and evaluate climate adaptation strategies.^{39,98}

Reflection and discussion questions to guide action

- What are the current worker rights and protections in your province or territory? What types of workers are excluded from these protections?³⁹
 - How can you shed light on the exploitation food system workers experience, and champion policies and legislation to protect their rights?
 - How will you build meaningful relationships and collaborations across sectors and with worker-led groups to support labour justice and rights?
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Food justice in practice

Community-centred collaboration responds to Cargill outbreak

In April 2020, the largest outbreak of COVID-19 in North America at the time occurred at the Cargill meat processing plant in High River, Alberta. Food processing workers experienced increased exposure to, and infection with, COVID-19 due to unsafe working conditions, low wages, lack of paid sick days, lack of protective barriers and poor sanitation conditions. To help address the high infection and illness rates, public health staff at Alberta Health Services established formal networks with primary care providers and community organizations to connect food processing workers with health and social services, formalize data and evidence-sharing agreements, and address hazardous working conditions to advance **labour justice and rights**.⁹⁹ Public health also “helped build worker power by centring workers and community groups at decision-making tables and following through on workers’ recommendations in the public health response” to the outbreak.^{39(p12)}



Why it matters

The power of large corporations in our food systems is growing as they control core food system activities from food production to waste. Contributing to their growing power are changes to trade agreements, increasingly complex global food systems and, ultimately, the commodification of food (where food is primarily considered something bought and sold for profit instead of a human right). Corporations influence food systems in ways that benefit their commercial interests, weakening the power of governments and the people they serve.^{1,31,100} Food justice demands that people, not corporations, are at the centre of food policies and are able to decide how their food systems are designed and operate. This involves building community power and addressing the commercial determinants of health: “the systems, practices, and pathways through which commercial actors drive health and equity.”^{101(p1195)}

What public health practitioners and organizations can do

Support and participate on food policy councils

ACTIONS

- Participate on and amplify the work of food policy councils that bring together people from across the food system (e.g., farmers, food workers, residents) to inform food policies and strategies.
- Ensure that communities most affected by food system-related inequities can meaningfully participate in different capacities (e.g., leadership roles, coordination).¹²
- Eliminate barriers to participation by, for example, providing interpretation services and paying for council members' time, childcare and transportation.¹²
- Ensure participatory and anti-oppressive principles are embedded within council practices, such as shared power, inclusive participation and reflexivity.

Create spaces for communities to inform public health policies and practices

ACTIONS

- Convene advisory groups, participative workshops, consultations and other opportunities for communities to inform public health organizational policies and practices on food and food systems.
- Ensure that public health food justice strategies include community advisors.⁴⁷

Address the commercial determinants of health

ACTIONS

- Conduct a power analysis with partners to discuss and strategize around who holds decision-making power within the food system and how best to influence change.^{102,103}
- Share evidence on how corporate actors impact food-related health outcomes. For example, assess and report on how racially targeted food marketing impacts health inequities.¹
- Engage in advocacy campaigns that urge legislators to pass laws restricting food advertising to children (e.g., [Bill C-252](#)¹⁰⁴).
- Evaluate policy options for reducing ultra-processed foods in terms of their equity implications (e.g., taxes on sugary drinks).
- Develop and participate in long-term networks and coalitions that resist the power of corporate actors in the food system.¹⁰⁰
- In hiring, actively recruit people who have the skill sets to uncover food industry tactics and implement strategies in response (e.g., digital and political strategists, community organizers, investigative journalists).^{47,100}

Reflection and discussion questions to guide action

- How might you best support community-led food justice work (e.g., funding, sharing evidence)? (See [*Let's Talk: Community engagement for health equity*](#).¹⁰⁵)
 - How can you work with people most affected by food inequities to build the infrastructure needed to influence decision-making and support food justice? (See [*Let's Talk: Redistributing power to advance health equity*](#).⁴¹)
 - Does public health have relationships with corporate food actors and, if so, how can these be shifted to address the commercial determinants of health? (See [*Let's Talk: Determinants of health*](#).²⁵)
 - How is the impact of governance structures that support local food systems measured, and how can public health support their impact and effectiveness?¹⁰⁶
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Food justice in practice

Halifax Food Policy Alliance

The Halifax Food Policy Alliance is a cross-sector initiative with representation from provincial health authorities, community health boards, academic institutions, and various community and food security organizations. Following local food assessments and the development of a food charter for the Halifax Region, the Alliance launched efforts to develop an action plan informed by engagement sessions with community members, partners (including public health) and food system actors. These sessions identified gaps, opportunities, and “the need for a comprehensive food strategy that ... addresses the root causes of food insecurity, localizes the food system, disrupts colonialism and systemic racism, and builds community capacity and food system resilience”^{107(p38)} — and ultimately builds **people power**. The resulting [*JustFOOD Action Plan for the Halifax Region*](#) is divided into two parts. Part A describes the regional food system, summarizes engagement findings and presents recommendations for building food justice in the region.¹⁰⁷ Part B identifies specific practical strategies to strengthen food justice activities in six main areas: governance, municipal capacity, food access, community vulnerabilities, emergency food and food system change.¹⁰⁸

6 DIVERSE KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS



Why it matters

Diverse knowledge systems include the collective wisdom, values, beliefs and practices developed by people and communities in particular places and passed on from generation to generation.¹⁰⁹ Food justice work requires bringing together diverse knowledge systems to deepen our understanding of food systems and needed solutions. This involves engaging across sectors and disciplines and with local communities to share knowledge and co-produce and implement food justice strategies.^{110,111}

What public health practitioners and organizations can do

Foster intergenerational learning

ACTIONS

- Create and support opportunities that connect young people, Elders and older adults for knowledge sharing about ancestral and traditional food practices, including through storytelling and oral history.^{107,112–114}

Support communities' foodways

ACTIONS

- Work with partners to convene forums for dialogue and exchange among diverse knowledge holders on ways to honour, safeguard and revitalize communities' foodways¹¹⁵ — the cultural norms, beliefs and practices surrounding food and eating.¹¹⁶
- Support Indigenous, Black and other ethno-racial groups in offering culturally rooted programs and initiatives such as seed-saving workshops, land-based learning, community kitchens and gardening programs.^{42,43,107,117}
- Promote awareness and understanding of Indigenous knowledges of food and plants as medicine.¹⁰⁷
- Support treaties, policies and legislation that advance Indigenous-led conservation and stewardship of lands and waters.

Reflection and discussion questions to guide action

- How do foodways matter for the health and well-being of diverse communities in your area?
 - What assumptions do you hold about what is high-quality, credible evidence and information?¹¹⁸
How may these views serve to devalue other forms of knowledge?
 - What are opportunities to bring together different knowledge systems in food systems-related planning and programming?
-

Food justice in practice

Qakuqturvik Community Food Centre (QCFC)

QCFC is a charitable community organization focused on addressing Inuit food insecurity, strengthening local food systems and improving access to healthy food as a human right across Nunavut. Founded on the vision of “food sovereignty and security for Nunavummiut [the people of Nunavut],”¹¹⁹ QCFC delivers programming designed to develop food preparation skills as well as supply healthy food boxes and meals directly to community members. Supported by the Government of Nunavut, QCFC draws on the place-based knowledge and lived expertise of community members to establish organizational standards, including strategic priorities and benchmarks in its 2023–25 strategic plan.¹¹⁹ Supporting Nunavummiut to advocate for policy change and food sovereignty is a core focus of QCFC through training, education and access to peer advocacy services. Recent activities have also included a Right to Food Nunavut campaign and a community toolkit for country food box to support a vast network of hunters and partners to establish their own local food box programs that feature traditionally harvested meat and a consistent supply of land-based foods.¹¹⁹



Why it matters

A critical approach to food systems education and research means bringing together knowledge and action for social justice. It involves the use of evidence, the examination of values and power, and the promotion of social change.¹²⁰ A critical lens invites us to question how, why and where food is grown; who can access it and who can not; and who benefits and who does not. In these ways, it helps propel action toward transformative change.¹²⁰

What public health practitioners and organizations can do

Foster critical food literacy with individuals, families and communities

ACTIONS

- Use a definition of critical food literacy in public health programs, services and policies that integrates the following components:
 - » having knowledge of food and food systems, including its nutrients and where it comes from;¹²⁰
 - » being able to purchase, prepare, handle and store food;^{45,121}
 - » understanding the underlying drivers that influence food systems;^{1,122}
 - » recognizing the multiple values and perspectives that shape food systems;¹²² and
 - » being able to take action to promote healthy, sustainable and just food systems.¹²²
- Assess “healthy eating” programs with a critical food literacy lens to identify ways to strengthen these programs.⁴⁵
- Reorient programs focused on food knowledge and skills toward integrated approaches that recognize broader determinants of food decisions and provide opportunities for collective action.

Generate and share evidence on food systems and strategies for change

ACTIONS

- Collect, analyze and use quantitative and qualitative data and other forms of evidence on (a) the social and structural determinants of food (in)security and malnutrition, and (b) actions needed to transform food systems.¹²³
- Apply an intersectionality lens to the collection, analysis and use of data.⁴⁶
- Ensure data are interpreted and reported within their broader contexts. For example, in population health status reporting, interpret higher levels of food insecurity among racialized communities with explicit recognition of the factors that drive these numbers (e.g., anti-Black racism).⁴⁶
- Share data and information on food justice concepts with partners and decision-makers to inform action.¹²⁴

Provide public health food systems training

ACTIONS

- Integrate content on food systems into undergraduate and graduate public health curricula. Curricula should cover how food systems affect population health; critically analyze food systems change strategies; and provide opportunities to engage in self-reflection and develop skills around food systems change (e.g., advocacy, intersectoral collaboration, building community power).^{125,126}
- Provide funding to staff and teams for short courses, workshops and other learning opportunities on food systems.

Engage in ongoing critical reflection

ACTIONS

- Build your understanding of food systems to guide reflection and action.⁴⁶
- Reflect critically on your social positions, values and beliefs and how they relate to working with others for food justice.¹²⁶
- Engage in ongoing critical reflection to identify areas for practice change to better work with communities most impacted by food system-related inequities.⁴⁶

Reflection and discussion questions to guide action

- How could a critical food literacy lens transform your “healthy eating” programs, policies and services?
- How will you deepen your understanding of food systems and the social and environmental structures inherent in them?
- What various social positions and identities do you hold? What forms of privilege and/or disadvantage do you experience related to these positions and identities? How do they influence your daily food-related work?⁴⁶

8 SOCIAL JUSTICE SOLIDARITY



Why it matters

The challenges facing our current food systems relate to many other issues that affect health equity and justice, including housing, immigration status, labour, health care and more. Advancing food justice requires breaking down silos and working in solidarity with others to address interconnected inequities.⁶⁰

What public health practitioners and organizations can do

Connect food justice work to other initiatives

ACTIONS

- Gather and share evidence on the connections between food justice and other public health issues, such as decent work, climate change and housing.
- Integrate food justice priorities into strategies in other areas. For example, link efforts to address affordable access to food with strategies to address gentrification and displacement.^{52,127}
- Require all public health programs involving food adopt food justice-related criteria, for example, the procurement of food that is culturally relevant and justly grown (i.e., respects workers and protects the planet).¹²⁸
- Unite local food justice projects and link them to regional, federal and global initiatives. For example, engage in networks and partnerships at different levels, and use global frameworks (e.g., [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#)⁷¹) to plan and implement local strategies.

Establish and participate in communities of practice

ACTIONS

- Convene and participate in communities of practice to engage in collective learning on supporting social justice-oriented change, including food justice.
- Cultivate an inclusive and diverse membership with representation from across organizations, sectors and geographic regions.
- Exchange ideas, information and resources to support collaborative action.

Build relationships and partner with community organizers and grassroots movements

ACTIONS

- Build meaningful, ongoing relationships with community organizers, grassroots movements and organizations striving for social justice, built on deep listening, humility, trust and respect.^{47,129}
- Work in solidarity with community organizers and advocates to address the intersections between food justice and other related issues, and their impacts on health equity.

Reflection and discussion questions to guide action

- How can you connect food justice work to your organization's other public health priorities?
- What grassroots groups are organizing in your area that you can build relationships with based on shared values and interests?²⁴⁷
- How can food justice strategies help address systemic factors of colonialism, income inequality, poor housing and other related structural and social determinants of health?

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE: SCHOOL FOOD PROGRAMS – A PROMISING AREA FOR FOOD JUSTICE ACTION

School food programs (i.e., breakfast, lunch and snack programs^{59,130}) can play an important role in advancing food justice. These programs have been identified around the world as a promising strategy to achieve multiple food justice-related goals. For example, beyond improving academic performance,¹³¹ school food programs can reduce hunger,⁵⁹ help young people eat more nutrient-rich foods¹³² and build food skills.^{4,133} These programs can also strengthen local food systems, for instance, through the procurement of local sustainably produced foods.⁵⁹

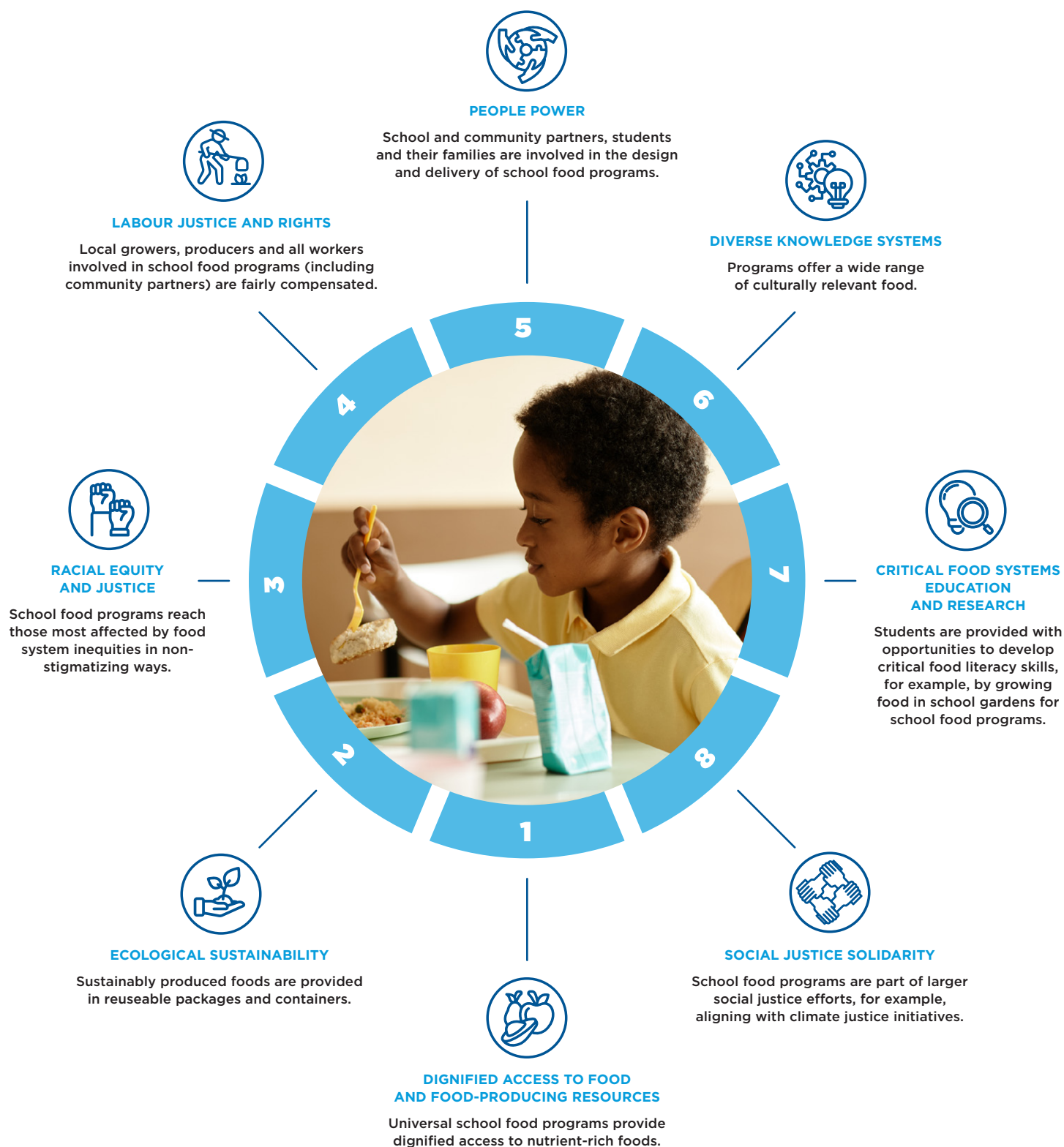
Prior to 2024, Canada was the only G7 country without a national school food program or national standards.¹³⁴ For decades, programs relied on piecemeal funding, able to reach only a small percentage of school-age children and youth. In April 2024, the federal government announced a new National School Food Program, with a commitment to invest \$1 billion over 5 years and reach 400,000 students beyond those already served by existing programs.¹³⁵ The federal government also pledged to work with provinces and territories to expand the reach and capacity of school food programs, with the long-term goal being universal access for all students. In many ways, the federal government's announcement was the culmination of years of intersectoral action and advocacy by diverse groups of actors, including public health practitioners.

For public health practitioners and organizations, the commitment to fostering school food programs across the country presents a critical opportunity to support food justice-oriented school food programs that advance health equity. Figure 3 visualizes some of the (possible) connections between school food programs and the eight principles of food justice.

Public health practitioners and organizations can engage in multiple strategies to support these connections. Actions may include:

- Provide guidance on designing and operating a school food program. See, for example, [Middlesex-London Health Unit's guide on starting a school food program](#)¹³⁶ or the [Public Health Association of BC's farm to school guide](#).¹³⁷
- Inform school food menus. For example, in the [City of Toronto](#),¹³⁸ public health dietitians are available for consultation on menu planning.
- Participate on school food and health-related committees (e.g., healthy school committees). For example, see this [Healthy Schools BC resource on comprehensive school health for health professionals](#).¹³⁹

FIGURE 3: EXAMPLES OF HOW SCHOOL FOOD PROGRAMS CAN ADVANCE FOOD JUSTICE



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QUESTIONS TO GUIDE ACTION ON FOOD JUSTICE

1. How can attention to distributive, procedural and recognitional justice be integrated into current efforts related to food (in)security, sovereignty and other food-related programming?
2. What opportunities exist to link food justice with other public health equity efforts? For example, initiatives in anti-racism, decolonization, income and housing equity, decent work?
3. How can key principles of food justice be applied to organizational strategies, work plans and other activities?
4. Who in your communities is already engaging in food justice-related activities? How can your organization build relationships with them and support their work?



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