

September 2020

To Whom It May Concern:

This open letter on behalf of the Ontario Emergency Food Forum is addressed to governments and all relevant stakeholders concerned with our local food system.

We are Farmers, Food Justice Organizations, Co-operatives, Workers, Educators, Environmentalists, Human Rights Defenders, and people who need to eat safe healthy food. We are calling for urgent action and immediate investment to rapidly mobilize people and resources towards a just, sustainable, pandemic/climate resilient healthy food system in response to rising food insecurity.

[According to the Ontario Human Rights Commission:](#)

“It is essential that responses to COVID-19 be aligned with Canada’s international human rights treaties, domestic human rights laws and the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. The laws governing declarations of emergency in Ontario and at the federal level expressly recognize the importance of complying with existing human rights protections, even in emergency circumstances.

The pandemic also offers a generational opportunity to more effectively realize rights protected in the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#). Many groups are particularly vulnerable to negative impacts from COVID-19 *precisely because* their economic, social and cultural rights, right to equality and Indigenous rights, have not been effectively protected or realized in Ontario and Canada over many decades.”

Human Rights law requires that all Canadians, children and future generations are entitled to healthy food, water and a safe environment^[1]. Our governments are obliged to uphold and protect the standards of the [human right to food](#). Canada has made many commitments to respect these rights, most recently the [National Food Policy](#). Moreover [Toronto is signatory to the Milan Food Agreement](#). It is therefore our collective responsibility to work with our communities and our local and federal governments, to ensure safe access to local healthy food.

We hold the following to be true:

Canada's resource-intensive and fossil fuel-dependent food system is highly vulnerable to economic, logistical, and climate disruption. The supply of imported foods we rely on during winter is at risk due to the COVID-19 pandemic and extreme conditions such as drought, floods, wildfires and pests. Canada is also a global exporter in a time of current and projected global famine and climate chaos.

The pandemic has revealed and exacerbated existing problems within our current food system. Migrant farm workers, slaughterhouse and meat packing employees have faced unsafe and unjust working conditions that have resulted in COVID-19 outbreaks. Low-paid food system and other essential workers are more at risk of contracting COVID-19 as they are pushed to work to make

ends meet, frequently interact and travel with the public, and some employers are not providing proper safety measures.

Low-income and isolated communities are already facing food shortages. It has long been recognized that there are too many [food deserts](#) in Toronto and the GTA, where many essential workers and their families also live.

There is no guarantee that today's global supply chains will be able to provide access to healthy nutritious food for all Canadians this winter. Neither can Canada's current at-risk food system guarantee sufficient supply to international aid and trade partners *and* maintain our own domestic food security, until next years' harvests.

Climate and pandemic chaos is also impacting the home countries, communities and families of our migrant farm workers and Toronto's diverse racialized communities from the Global South. These countries will be hard pressed to provide healthy food security for their own people *and* export enough to feed the millions of Canadians facing hunger this winter. Given that the global food crisis affects us all, just and sustainable local to global solutions are urgently needed.

Food insecurity in Canada already affects 1 in 6 children (PROOF 2019) Healthy, locally-produced food is already inaccessible for low income communities, and food prices are on the rise. People of African descent, Indigenous people, People of Colour, recent immigrants, (and otherwise marginalized) rural and urban communities are [disproportionately impacted by our failing food system](#) (*Toronto Star*).

Food banks, reliant on grocery surpluses and volunteers, are not a reliable or sustainable strategy for addressing hunger during and after a pandemic. They are, at best, a temporary solution to the on-going problems of the unsustainable industrial food complex.

National, provincial, and local organizations have been conducting research and hosting discussions with diverse stakeholders on how to address the challenges of our food system and the COVID-caused food crisis, such as [Food Secure Canada](#), [The National Farmers Union](#) and our Emergency Food Forum (2020). It was concluded that rapidly implementing a just, sustainable and resilient local food ecosystem is necessary to meet the needs and sustain the health of all communities.

Therefore, We, the Emergency Food Forum, comprised of 73 food, farm, and food advocacy organizations in rural and urban Ontario, **urgently recommend:**

- 1. Immediate action and investment in re-purposing and improvement of local land, infrastructure, resources, and skilled labour to dramatically increase our local supply of healthy food; using emergency measures as required.** This includes prioritizing the food sovereignty of Indigenous and People of African descent, preventing development on existing farmland, and encouraging the creation of urban farms that can grow food year-round in Toronto, especially in vulnerable communities.

2. **Support for local organizations, co-ops, and farms in mobilizing a pandemic-prepared workforce to assist farmers and communities with the harvesting, processing and distribution of as much healthy food as possible;** to supply farmers, food system and other essential workers, their families, and the most at-risk communities.

3. **Ensuring that adequate incomes, safe working and healthy living conditions are guaranteed for all farmers and food system workers.** They are performing skilled work essential to preventing hunger, disease, and civil unrest while working towards the human right to healthy, safe, and sustainable food for all.

4. **That government civil services collaborate with civil society to allocate the resources and infrastructure required to enable the resilience, sustainability and inclusivity of local secure healthy food systems.** A bio-culturally diverse, year-round, regenerative local food economy can sustain the local population through future pandemics, disruptions, and emergencies while transitioning our economy and society to meet climate action targets and prevent ecocide.

In conclusion:

That all parties involved conduct this emergency/recovery food system response in accordance with the Dish With One Spoon Treaty's mandate to protect and preserve the natural resources and food supply of the great lakes region for current and future generations; the UN covenants on the [Rights of the Child](#), Economic Social and Cultural Rights, the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People \(UNDRIP\)](#), and other indivisible articles of human rights treaties, [The UN Decade for People's of African Descent](#) and the [17 Sustainable Development Goals](#), and all related domestic policies that Canada has committed to protect, uphold and fulfill; by law and in deed.

Signed: The Emergency Food Forum

Sources:

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