

GLOBAL
ALLIANCE
FOR THE
FUTURE
OF **FOOD**



***beacons of hope**
STORIES OF
FOOD SYSTEMS
TRANSFORMATION
DURING COVID-19

GLOBAL ALLIANCE FOR THE FUTURE OF FOOD
MAY 2021

DISCLAIMER

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FOREWORD

There is an old maritime expression that says the best way to navigate a storm is with a compass and hope. COVID-19 has presented the world with a moment of reckoning. It's an alarming and unsettling time: We're concerned about the health and safety of ourselves and our loved ones. We're disquieted over the well-being of our planet for future generations. Many people around the world are worried about how to feed their families.

Over a year into the pandemic, we're now gaining a better understanding of the ways in which it affects our food systems. We know more about how deepening inequalities and altered food environments impact the most vulnerable groups worldwide. We see how disrupted supply chains have forced us to create more diverse, sustainable, and shorter food networks. These challenges are not new, but they are considerably more apparent. The urgency of COVID-19 has put food insecurity on the public's radar like never before.

Importantly, this attention has also shone a light on the individuals and initiatives that embody resilience and creative resistance in the face of crisis. This is where we see hope.

Building on a program of work launched in 2019 — ["Beacons of Hope: Stories of Transformation"](#) — this short report shares stories of food systems initiatives and the people who responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with creativity, adaptability, and resilience.

These Beacons of Hope are as diverse as they are inspiring. Led by community groups, innovative policymakers, and progressive private sector players, each initiative intervenes at a different point in the food systems. Each initiative pushes back against prevailing narratives that shape discourse and thinking about the future of food — including productivity-at-all-cost, privatization, and those who claim our food systems can be run only by technical or scientific experts. Together, they demonstrate that transformative change is happening all around the world — and that it can and must be accelerated. Their stories seep under the skin and take a seat at the very core of our mental models.

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As [Kania, Kramer, Senge argue](#), mental models are *habits of thought, deeply held beliefs, assumptions, and taken-for-granted ways of operating that influence how we think, what we do*, and the narratives we tell ourselves and others over and over again. In turn, these narratives shape political debate and much of our policy and practice.

This document is organized into four sections. Each section pairs two Beacons of Hope from different hemispheres with one another, and is preceded by a short commentary that offers an analysis against a dominant narrative or concept that currently shapes food systems discourse. In doing so, the stories not only reveal what we need to change but also the reasons why it's so necessary.

It's our hope that these Beacons of Hope present an inspiring, sustainable, and equitable way forward — helping us not only brave this current storm but also steer clear of others. These stories set a direction for our compass, and the hope they provide is the wind in our sails.

RUTH RICHARDSON

Executive Director, Global Alliance for the Future of Food



In June 2020, experts from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) [released an update](#) on COVID-19 and its consequences for food security and food systems. One of the report's first lines lays bare the reality of the world's situation: "Today's challenge is not food availability, but food access."

This is a bold and important statement at a time when the COVID-19 crisis is projected to force an additional 83 to 132 million people into food insecurity.

For decades, a false narrative has prevailed: a belief that boosting agricultural production is the best and only way to solve food insecurity challenges. This narrative promotes productivism and, although it has been proven false, it remains surprisingly persistent — despite having been challenged by many food systems experts who view the root causes of food insecurity as much more complex.

We now understand the importance of applying systems thinking to food security and food sovereignty. [The Common Market](#) (USA) and the [Lagos Food Bank Initiative](#) (Nigeria) push back against productivism through counter-narratives that present alternate pathways forward. The success borne from valuing community-building, addressing both short- and long-term needs, and taking into account the social, cultural, health, and environmental impacts of their programs demonstrates this systemic approach.

Speaking with the organizations' founders, Haile Johnston and Tatiana Garcia-Granados (The Common Market), and Michael Sunbola (Lagos Food Bank Initiative), we were struck by their powerful backstories and comprehensive programs. Though located an ocean apart, both The Common Market and the Lagos Food Bank Initiative understand that food insecurity is a complex problem that requires observing all dimensions of food security: availability, access, stability, and utilization, as well as agency and sustainability.

With inequitable access to fresh produce and nutritious food pervasive in urban centres, The Common Market has spent the last 12 years connecting local family farms with under-served markets in nearby urban centres. While some people were panic buying and fretting over global supply chain disruptions at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, The Common Market continued devising ways to get fresh food to some of America's most food-insecure neighbourhoods. They explored different public partnerships, working with, among others, the City of New York and the United States Department of Agriculture to provide emergency food assistance. The Common Market also launched its Farm-Fresh

Box initiative, which ultimately tackled two challenges: meeting the immediate food needs of vulnerable families while at the same time strengthening shorter and more local supply chains.

The Lagos Food Bank Initiative examines how the organization has evolved since 2015 to address the root causes of hunger. This includes programs that focus on livelihood support; economic empowerment; nutrition for mothers, infants, and school-age children; and education. Further, the organization's Family Farming program helps people establish small garden plots on their property, putting affordable, fresh produce within reach and reducing a dependence on expensive, imported food.

When COVID-19 began, both The Common Market and Lagos Food Bank tapped into their years of relationship-building and partnership. This social infrastructure — in addition to their agile and decisive leadership — meant the two organizations were able to quickly pivot to address the crisis. From volunteer networks to farmer contracts, we think you'll be inspired by how these two organizations creatively reimagined their missions to impact hundreds of thousands during this difficult time.



THE COMMON MARKET

CONNECTING FARMERS, FAMILIES, &
FOOD DURING COVID-19 IN THE US

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Build physical and social infrastructure. While food systems require physical infrastructure such as transportation and storage facilities, The Common Market also invests in building social infrastructure, such as meaningful relationships and trust between rural farmers, market-based partners, and families. These relationships have been re-engaged and strengthened during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Develop institutional partnerships. Engaging institutional food service markets has helped The Common Market reach lower-income communities who depend on meals received while in school, elder homes, hospitals, and correctional facilities.

Scale mindfully. The Common Market has expanded its impact through independent chapters across the United States, replicating the model while localizing it to meet the unique needs and growing conditions of different regions.

Link social and environmental benefits. By increasing access to nutritious, locally grown food, The Common Market is improving food security in lower-income communities and providing a new market for farmers. This approach reaps environmental benefits in the form of reduced food loss and waste, shorter supply chains, and more sustainable agricultural practices.

When it comes to feeding the world's fast-growing population, productivism is often proposed as the silver bullet solution: the belief that we can solve all global food insecurity challenges by producing greater volumes of food.

The Common Market knows there's a better way. Based in Philadelphia with locations across the American mid-Atlantic, southeast, and Texas, The Common Market is a non-profit distributor of sustainably grown food. These regional food hubs work with small-scale farmers to improve access to nutritious food for all, particularly vulnerable, low-income communities of colour.

The organization's approach offers an alternative pathway to food security, based on shorter value chains, direct distribution, and fostering closer relationships between farmers and the people they feed. Over its 12 years of operation, The Common Market has moved more than US \$63 million in food and invested \$90 million into the communities where it works. These successes — both economic and social — demonstrate the incredible potential of building responsive and impactful food systems infrastructure and creative distribution models.

LEADING CHANGE IN ONE'S OWN BACKYARD

The Common Market was first envisioned in 2003 when co-founders Tatiana Garcia-Granados and Haile Johnston moved to the North Philadelphia neighbourhood of Strawberry Mansion. Despite its opulent name — harkening back to a time when farmers renting the mansion would serve strawberries and cream to the public — **Strawberry Mansion** is ranked as one of the Philadelphia neighbourhoods with the worst health outcomes and obesity rates.

Community challenges quickly became apparent to the married couple: food insecurity, the demolition of homes, a mass exodus from the neighbourhood, and youth who were under-employed and unengaged. Driven by these observations and conversations with their neighbours, Tatiana and Haile began thinking about positive ways to engage the young residents of Strawberry Mansion.

Soon, they were constructing gardens in abandoned lots, planting trees, and brainstorming how food could be used to build the foundation of a healthy community. That included the need to improve access to more nutritious, affordable food. Despite our evolving global food system, neighbourhoods like Strawberry Mansion can be devoid of healthy food options and left behind in terms of market access. This is true across the United States and much of the world where lower-income neighbourhoods are more likely to experience **food insecurity**.

Tatiana and Haile didn't need to look far to find healthy food sources. "In Philadelphia and the mid-Atlantic, we exist in a place where small- and mid-size family farms are still vibrant and abundant. But while they're literally an hour or two down the road, a lot of that product wasn't finding its way into the communities where the greatest food access was needed," says Tatiana.

That's not to say local food systems weren't in place. Locally grown products were being sold at farmer's markets, upscale farm-to-table restaurants, and through community-supported agriculture, but access was often restricted to the most affluent communities. "Our focus was really to try to figure out how to democratize food access and how to do so at an appropriate scale," Haile concludes.

DEMOCRATIZATION, SCALE, & ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION

That statement from Haile is worth unpacking. To democratize food access, The Common Market partners with institutional food services such as those within schools, hospitals, elder homes, colleges, universities, and correctional facilities. These institutions were almost completely unserved by small- and mid-size sustainable family farms, and yet they were also where many of the lowest-income community members received the majority of their daily calories. By recognizing this gap, The Common Market has created a new opportunity for farmers and reached more people in need.

When it comes to scale, Tatiana and Haile have always focused on growing their activities to reach the greatest number of food-insecure people while selling the largest volume of food on behalf of their farmer partners. Though structured as a non-profit, they operate The Common Market as a social enterprise that can economically sustain itself while upholding its social mission.

Their work in Philadelphia has become a replicable model where the approach is being adapted to meet the unique needs of respective communities and the farming conditions in different geographies.

The Common Market first scaled to Atlanta in 2016, and the organization has since been working with a group that equips new Americans and refugee farmers with agricultural skills and land access. Another replication has since happened in Houston, Texas, and Tatiana and Haile have fielded interest from potential partners across the country.

Haile's earlier phrase, "appropriate scale," means being mindful of the costs of sustaining facilities, transporting products, and paying staff and farmers fairly. In the case of The Common Market, successful scaling extends beyond physical infrastructure and hinges on building social infrastructure — the meaningful, transparent relationships that have been fostered between communities and rural farmers.

Tatiana and Haile are also committed to improving ecological outcomes to benefit people and the planet. Their team provides technical assistance to farmers, helping them understand market opportunities, plan crop plantings, and shift to more sustainable production practices. The latter not only helps regenerate and heal the environment but is also a way for farmers to differentiate themselves in the marketplace.

THE COVID-19 BUSINESS PIVOT

The Common Market has more than 100 agreements with farmers across its regional chapters. By March 2020, all were beginning to plant under the assumption that the organization would bring their food to market.

COVID-19 closed nearly every one of the institutions where The Common Market had been selling. Flexibility and adaptation became business survival principles.

“We simultaneously recognized that with all of the job loss and health challenges that people were facing with the crisis, there was an even greater need for us to connect this high-quality food with communities,” says Haile.

Much has been written about how racialized and marginalized communities are disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Public health data indicates that Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) communities are **at greater risk** of contracting the virus, and the pandemic exacerbates the inequities that already face low-income families: levels of food insecurity, experiences with homelessness or crowded housing, and a greater reliance on jobs in the service sector.

To reach these communities during the pandemic, The Common Market began to identify and respond to emergency food assistance opportunities that emerged at the municipal and national level. With traditional supply chains facing disruptions and uncertainty, The Common Market again found its stride in working directly with local family farms, aggregating products and distributing them as part of a new, free-of-charge Farm-Fresh Box initiative. Funding for the boxes came from a variety of new partnerships created with federal and local government agencies, in addition to a number of community-based distribution partners.

“It was exciting for us to be able to build upon all of the relationships and systems we had in place, and really meet our mission in deeper ways than ever before,” reflects Tatiana. Community-based distribution partners remarked on the quality and nutritional value of the food provided through the Farm-Fresh Box initiative — much different than the shelf-stable, highly processed food that is typically distributed by food banks.

Since March, The Common Market’s activity has increased tenfold. That included a contract with the United States Department of Agriculture in the mid-Atlantic and Southeast to distribute emergency food assistance.

To keep up with demand, the organization hired more than 150 people from communities most affected by the virus, many of whom lost their jobs or have been chronically under-employed.

The Common Market’s farmers are also thriving. “[Our partners] have shared the most remarkable stories of resilience and growth through this time,” says Haile. “This is

becoming the best business year they've ever had." With relationships strengthened and new communities reached, Tatiana and Haile hope that the Farm-Fresh Box initiative can continue post-pandemic under a fee-for-service model.

The Common Market's mission demonstrates that addressing food insecurity demands looking beyond food production and distribution alone. It's even about more than nourishment — it's a sense of community and connection.

By helping alleviate poverty in American neighbourhoods, and empowering local small- and mid-size farmers, The Common Market team is hopeful that they can continue to inspire others and learn more from like-minded solution-seekers worldwide.



LAGOS FOOD BANK INITIATIVE

SERVING UP FOOD & ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT
IN AFRICA'S LARGEST CITY

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Address immediate food needs and operate long-term programs simultaneously.

While long-term nutrition and economic empowerment programs are important, infants, children, and adults must have their basic food and nutritional needs met in order to ensure proper brain development and to facilitate focus at school and work. The Lagos Food Bank Initiative tackles both sides of this equation.

Think beyond production. While increased food production could help relieve food insecurity constraints in Lagos State, other pillars of food security — availability, access, utilization, and stability — must be considered and addressed. The Lagos Food Bank Initiative looks beyond production and distribution to address individual agency, institutional capacity, and the nutritional needs of mothers and infants.

Invest in multi-sectoral networks and partnerships. When the COVID-19 lockdown started, the Lagos Food Bank Initiative had the connections, trust, and infrastructure to scale its operations fast. These partnerships and support from volunteers are key to its operations.

Reform subsidy and incentive programs. Governments can play an active role in creating regulations around the cost and importation of essential foodstuff. Tax incentives can also be used to curb food loss and waste, significant environmental threats.

Draw from lived experiences. Personal passion is a powerful tool in creating change and building resilience.

The Lagos Food Bank Initiative (LFBI) originated with a simple mission: feed vulnerable families in Nigeria's Lagos State.

For Michael Sunbola, President and CEO of LFBI, that mission is deeply personal. Growing up in Lagos, Michael and his family experienced food insecurity first-hand. He remembers the lengths he and his siblings would go to in order to afford a meal: carrying planks of wood from the local sawmill and foraging fruits that had fallen from trees. There were even times when Michael would sell his blood to the local blood bank. "It was such an unpleasant experience," he says of that time. "This has been my drive, to be at the forefront of helping the most vulnerable families put food on the table, because I know what it feels like to not have that."

Today, Michael is a food systems activist, lawyer, and managing partner in his own legal firm. Driven by his personal passion and experience, Michael invested much of his law firm savings into the 2015 opening of LFBI. The food bank is Nigeria's first, and its long-term initiatives go well beyond the emergency food distribution provided by traditional institutions.

An estimated 14 million people call Lagos home, making it the most populous city in Nigeria and on the African continent. Despite Nigeria having the largest economy on the continent, **an estimated 1 in 5 Lagosians subsist on less than \$1.90 a day.**

Lagos is projected to become one of the world's largest cities in the next century, compounding challenges further still. If food insecurity can be addressed at scale in Lagos, it can inspire systemic shifts elsewhere.

THE LAGOS FOOD BANK INITIATIVE NETWORK

Food banks are not common in Nigeria. While there are plenty of international aid programs that distribute food, what's different about LFBI is that it's Nigerian-run and distributes fresh and non-perishable goods to families on a monthly basis. The organization buys these products directly, has them donated, or works with farms and other processors to distribute excess bumper crops and products. With a main warehouse in Lagos, the initiative has also formed more than 50 partnerships across the state so various agencies can reach the communities they know best.

The work of those partner agencies and LFBI's team of 21 is supplemented by a network of nearly 10,000 dedicated volunteers. Many are young people who learned of the organization's work through word of mouth, email campaigns, and social media (the organization has **more than 53,000 Instagram followers**). Michael says the majority volunteer because they're keen to help people, but that a desire to professionally network or meet like-minded friends is also a motivating factor.

Though LFBI is a traditional food bank in the sense that it meets the immediate needs of its clients, Michael says the organization's approach has shifted greatly since its founding.

Based on feedback from community members, LFBI has launched initiatives that use nutrition, livelihood opportunities, and education to address the root causes of hunger.

“We went back to the drawing board and started looking at how we can solve these more long-term problems,” says Michael of this period of change. “We have to look at the cost of poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa, and malnutrition is just part of that.”

The result was the creation of several new programs, each itself a sustainable solution that targets the causes of food insecurity within the broader context of peoples’ lives. A goal of these nutrition and economic empowerment programs is to build community resilience and move people beyond the point where they need the food bank’s services.

A SUITE OF FOOD SECURITY SOLUTIONS

The organization’s first intervention is a Family Farming program that supports Lagosians, especially women, to establish their own household poultry, snail, or vegetable farm in order to ensure greater food security.

Lagos State is estimated to produce just 3% of its total food needs. Though agriculture is prevalent in Nigeria’s countryside, Lagos’s quick-growing population means the sprawling megacity encroaches on and limits nearby farmland. As a result, most food arrives at one of Lagos’s shipping ports — often subsidized imports that undermine local food production. Even food brought in from other states is often unaffordable, with demand pushing prices higher still.

By helping families produce directly on their property, the Family Farming program improves nutritional agency and creates an alternative value chain that lessens the reliance on expensive, imported goods. It also re-connects families with the process and pride of growing their own food. Over the next 2 years, the Family Farming program expects to support 2,000 households in growing nutritious food to eat and potentially sell to earn an income.

The second intervention is a job placement program that matches skilled community members with small businesses and large companies that might need their services. By increasing their household income and financial autonomy, Michael says the program offers a more sustainable way to help people get out of poverty.

Finally, there are LFBI’s nutritional interventions developed in collaboration with trained dietitians. The first is NUMEPLAN (Nutritious Meal Interventions for Vulnerable Mothers and Children), a program that ensures these groups get the diversity of nutrients they need to lead a healthy life. Mothers and infants receive nutritious food support every 2 weeks. Special attention is paid to infants in their first thousand days of life — the key period during which malnutrition and under-nutrition can lead to irreversible developmental damage.

Another is NIDS (Nutrition Intervention for Diabetes Self-Management), which is targeted at food-secure adults living with diabetes. Working in low-income communities, NIDS provides individuals with free diabetic-appropriate meals or foodstuff, plus nutritional advice on how to manage the disease.

Similarly, LFBI's school feeding program, Edufood, addresses food insecurity issues within low-cost private schools across Lagos State, helping kids get nutritious meals so they can better focus and learn.

Diverse and ever-evolving, each of these programs connects to Zero Hunger, the second Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), as well as a number of intersecting SDGs, including No Poverty, Good Health and Well-being, Decent Work and Economic Growth, and Sustainable Cities and Communities. It's a demonstration of the many co-benefits that can be gained through food systems transformation.

MOBILIZING TO MEET LOCKDOWN NEEDS

The pandemic was a "game changer" for the LFBI. "We had similar impacts [as in other parts of the world], only Lagos has no safety net system that could address the needs of people while in lockdown," Michael explains. "The lockdown had a devastating impact on a whole lot of families, and people trekked up to 20 kilometres to get food. They weren't allowed on the road, but they did it anyway because this was about survival."

LFBI was the only food bank given government permission to operate throughout the lockdown. In response, the organization mobilized its networks and created the **COVID-19 Emergency Food Intervention Plan (CEFIP)**. Michael and his team brought together public and private stakeholders, forming new partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) across Lagos State and with multinational corporations such as Unilever Nigeria and General Electric.

Trust and goodwill were paramount. Michael says partnerships with large private companies would not have been possible without LFBI's 5-year track record and careful annual reporting of its finances. Volunteers, though given accreditation to move freely when on food bank business, were willing to put themselves at risk because they knew of LFBI's community impact.

Volunteers and staff travelled from community to community, providing door-to-door delivery of staple foods such as grains, fresh produce, rice, beans, fish, and meat. By the end of May, CEFIP had provided essential food relief for nearly 126,000 vulnerable families and frontline health workers across Lagos State.

"We had built the system to respond swiftly to crisis," Michael says of those busy weeks in March, April, and May. "Our connections and trust made all of this possible."

EYEING THE FUTURE

Remaining responsive to the emergency food needs of community members, the LFBI is also planning what comes next. In the long run, Michael would like to see the Nigerian government implement some sort of regulation on the price of staple foods and offer tax incentives for farmers or businesses to donate their food before it goes to waste.

As for LFBI, one of Michael's long-term goals is to see the organization become a social enterprise that could make food available to people at affordable rates. This could begin by encouraging farming as a way to kickstart the supply of locally grown crops. For that, Michael says LFBI could turn to its large youth population — 44% of Nigerians are under the age of 14.

Ultimately, Michael says the immediate needs satisfied by food banks should go hand in hand with empowerment and nutritional programs. By reducing some of the inequities faced by food-insecure communities, initiatives like LFBI are rewriting traditional power norms and providing individuals and families with greater agency over not only their nutritional choices but decisions in general.

According to Michael, there's also one more ingredient for impact: "Passion is key to everything. Ask yourself, 'Why are you solving this problem?' For me, it's my personal experience, and this went a long way in building resilience for me as a social entrepreneur."



DISMANTLING “BUSINESS AS USUAL”

COVID-19 has substantially impacted our food systems. Increasing levels of food insecurity faced by vulnerable populations and disrupted distribution chains are just two of the major consequences. While these are severe challenges with long-lasting implications, it is important to remember that our food systems were far from performing well before this crisis hit.

The past few decades have seen the steady increase in food production to keep pace with a fast-growing population. But as productivity ramped up, the overall performance of global food systems became largely unbalanced, unequal, and unsustainable. Despite major progress in closing the food inequality gap, the positive trend halted around 2014, with rates of food insecurity growing in recent years.

In 2019, before the COVID-19 crisis hit, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) noted that 690 million people are hungry, and an astonishing 2 billion do not have access to safe, nutritious, and sufficient food. This growing food insecurity is accompanied by a rise in other forms of malnutrition (micronutrient deficiencies and obesity, among others). The outcome is that approximately half of the world's population is either undernourished or malnourished. COVID-19 exacerbates these public health implications further still — and this does not even touch on the environmental consequences.

On that thread, the two Beacons of Hope in this section have long been addressing specific food systems challenges in their contexts. The first story takes us to the South Pacific, where we examine Fiji's agricultural policy response to the pandemic. When COVID-19 began, the national Ministry of Agriculture was already innovating to address some of the country's major food challenges: a dependence on food imports and processed food. Once the crisis hit, the Ministry used the moment to push for even stronger food systems changes. The past months have seen Fiji increase its focus on production and consumption of locally grown food, promote organic production, and shift public perception to view farming as a sector worth investing in.

Gastromotiva, a Brazilian NGO, took a similarly creative approach. The organization has years of experience investing in social gastronomy — using food and the tools of gastronomy to spark social change. Their programs train young cooks and entrepreneurs from low-income neighbourhoods. In response to COVID-19, Gastromotiva launched a network of Solidarity Kitchens, where students and alumni cooked from their homes and

provided meals to vulnerable people in their own communities. It's an innovative project that links social inclusion, food security, and entrepreneurship for the common good.

Both Beacons offer important lessons. COVID-19 motivated these two groups to push for the food transformations they envision. We hope some common themes are clear in reading their stories, including the importance of using existing social and institutional networks; of decentralizing food supply and distribution to strengthen the food skills held by farmers, gardeners, and cooks; and of re-purposing infrastructure and programs. These initiatives reflect an interesting, innovative care economy that builds resilience and enables rapid response to a crisis like COVID-19.



FIJI'S MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE
GOVERNMENT PANDEMIC RESPONSE BUILDS
FOOD SYSTEMS RESILIENCE

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Build resilience by increasing self-sufficiency. A significant percentage of Fiji's food supply is imported. Not only is much of this food highly processed, but it's also prone to supply chain disruptions similar to what we saw at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Increasing self-sufficiency and the local production of healthy food will build resilience.

Use short-term programs to achieve long-term transitions. Despite being an emergency response measure to COVID-19, the Ministry of Agriculture's Home Gardening Program and Farm Support Package both contribute to the government's longer-term mission of producing more local food, shifting to organic agriculture, and getting more people involved in the agricultural sector.

Implement programs through existing networks and institutions. The Ministry of Agriculture tapped into its large workforce of extension officers to distribute seed packages and reach farmers. Also important were its relationships with village spokespeople and local advisory councils in order to connect with those living in villages and settlements.

Shape approaches based on the audience. The Ministry of Agriculture tailored its COVID-19 response based on whether it was supporting urban households, rural villages, or commercial farmers. Each group required different seeds and support and had varied access to land for farming.

This has been repeated countless times since COVID-19 escalated in March 2020: the urgency of the pandemic has brought to light and compounded previously existing challenges, inequalities, and vulnerabilities — including the many ways in which our food systems are flawed.

The shortcomings in our food systems are consistent worldwide — import dependence, supply chain disruptions, precarious labour, food insecurity, and unhealthy diets — and yet they take on an added urgency when focus is placed on the unique regional challenges that exist for remote, small island states in the South Pacific, including the country of Fiji.

An archipelago of more than 300 islands, Fiji's larger geographic size relative to other Pacific islands means more freshwater resources and arable land to grow crops. Despite conditions being favourable for local production, the country imports 80% of its rice from Vietnam and Thailand. Fiji produces just half of the food its population requires, and urban centres are greatly dependent on imports from Australia, New Zealand, and China.

Over the past half-century, Fiji's food systems have changed dramatically. Fijian diets traditionally included nutritionally diverse and balanced dishes: locally fished seafood served alongside root vegetables like cassava and taro, for example. Recent decades have seen the rise in cheap, processed foods, particularly in cities. But the permeation of processed, imported food extends further still — visit a small town on an isolated Fijian island today and you're just as likely to be served a pack of instant noodles as you are fresh fish.

This is consistent with a nutritional and dietary transition currently underway worldwide, where people are increasingly attracted to processed food for a number of factors, including price, taste, availability, and status. Fiji has, in turn, seen an increase in diabetes and obesity rates, particularly among Indigenous Fijians.

The COVID-19 response implemented by Fiji's Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) was about more than addressing the immediate supply chain disruptions and emergency food needs faced by the country — although it also did that.

More notably, the urgency and altered political climate of the pandemic meant the MOA was able to accelerate some of its goals through programs that were already underway. This included increasing the production and consumption of locally grown food, focusing on organic agriculture, and shifting public perception to view farming as a sector worthy of investment. It's because of this comprehensive approach — and its ability to turn crisis into opportunity — that the MOA is profiled as a Beacon of Hope.

COVID-19'S IMPACT ON FIJI

COVID-19 triggered a reduction in air travel worldwide. That not only impacted leisure travel in Fiji — tourism is the country's largest economic generator — but also the importation of food and other essential products by air and shipping freight.

Both continued, but frequency was significantly scaled down. This reduction in supply was met with high demand locally, particularly among urban families who flocked to supermarkets to stock up on imported food products for the uncertain months ahead.

Vinesh Kumar had a front-row seat of this scene as it unfolded. As the Head of Agriculture Operations and Services with Fiji's MOA, he and the Ministry were tasked with developing a plan to address food shortages at a household level and find ways to support the country's struggling agricultural sector.

Vinesh is based in Lautoka, on Viti Levu, Fiji's largest island. Lautoka, which is the second-largest city in Fiji, is on the opposite coast of Suva, the country's capital city. To address twin lockdowns in Lautoka and Suva, the MOA introduced its Agriculture Response Package for COVID-19 in March 2020.

While the Ministry first began by reallocating crops from the countryside into the city through a "green link" program, Vinesh says they quickly pivoted this growing, transporting, and reselling approach: "We realized this couldn't go on forever, and we thought of the idea of people growing things in their backyard," says Vinesh. The MOA revisited its intervention and created the Home Gardening Program and Farm Support Package, two comprehensive initiatives that go beyond emergency food distribution to address self-sufficiency and long-term resilience for people and the environment.

The activities were supported by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) through the European Union-funded [Pro-Resilient Fiji program](#).

NEW DEMAND, REIMAGINED SUPPLY

The Home Gardening Program was designed for people living in urban and semi-urban settings. By the end of March, MOA extension officers were distributing 12 varieties of seeds for short life-cycle crops. Beyond the work of these extension officers, the MOA mobilized its other relationships: municipal councils in urban centres, village spokespeople, and advisory councils in settlements. "Fiji has had a number of disasters — cyclones, etc. So, our networks are quite strong when it comes to disseminating information to the communities," explains Vinesh.

Through this network, households were given seeds in order to plant, tend, and harvest their own food. Whereas pre-pandemic supply chains would commonly extend across oceans, this initiative meant fresh food was only as far as the nearest garden plot.

Demand was high, and in less than a month the MOA had distributed more than 11,600 seed packages to 5,000 households. Soon, the Ministry began to ask farmers if they had surplus seeds to sell, spurring the creation of a seed buyback program where MOA bought seeds from local farmers and redistributed them to people in urban areas. In circumstances where urban residents didn't have space to grow crops, the government would buy other locally grown produce and distribute it through a food assistance program.

From the outset, the purpose of the Home Gardening Program was manifold: to increase access to nutritionally rich foods, save families money on grocery bills, build an emergency

food supply for households in case production and trade levels remained low or decreased further, and ensure a continuity of food supply for the future.

“We have seen a lot of new farmers coming into the market,” says Vinesh of the months following March 2020. According to him, a labour shortage in the agricultural sector is one of Fiji’s biggest challenges. Though the landscape is conducive to farming, more than half of Fijians work in the service sector where, pre-pandemic, cash flow was steadier.

“Many who lost their jobs in the tourism sector started back farming,” says Vinesh. The MOA is hoping to take advantage of this moment to demonstrate that agriculture can be a viable and secure livelihood, especially for those out of work due to the pandemic.

SUPPORTING COMMERCIAL FARMERS

While individuals and households were reconnecting with the land, the MOA needed a different policy response for larger players. The Farmer Support Program, created by the MOA, encouraged farmers to boost their production of crops that have shorter life cycles and provided free seeds to farmers. Not only did the increase in harvest improve food security for the farmer’s family (like the Home Gardening Program), but surplus crops could also be sold to meet shortages in urban areas — a market that was non-existent before the pandemic because of the reliance on imported, processed food.

Many of these larger-scale producers were growing papaya, okra, ginger, and other crops for export, and another task of the MOA became transitioning these companies to sell domestically instead. New supply chains needed to be established, as food that typically would have been sold to tourist establishments was now available for the local market.

THE MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE’S BROADER, BIGGER PICTURE APPROACH

While these two COVID-19 response initiatives were meant to address short-term needs, they fit into a longer-term reimagining of Fiji’s food system. Vinesh says the MOA is constantly striving for import substitution — reducing imports of rice, citrus fruits, and other crops that can be grown locally by improving farmer self-sufficiency.

Increasing rice production is a particular focus. “Rice is a staple found on kitchen tables throughout the country. But all too often that rice is grown thousands of kilometres away,” said Fiji’s Prime Minister Frank Bainmarama earlier in 2020. “There’s no reason that Fiji and our ideal climate for rice cultivation can’t make that journey from the rice paddy to our tables much shorter.”

In an attempt to increase domestic production, the MOA has reached out to more than 1,000 villages to encourage them to start farming rice. By supplying free seeds of indigenous and improved varieties of rice, alongside some machinery, storage, and financing, the MOA is hoping to make communal rice growing more appealing and less labour intensive. Other policy programs are similar: distributing tree seedlings, investing in

the local dairy industry, and encouraging every household to have a coconut tree, moringa, and lemongrass.

Increasing self-sufficiency is about more than boosting productivity. The MOA is also promoting organic agriculture to improve the health of people and local ecosystems. A recent project launched by the Ministry provides a form of cultured bacteria to farmers that can be used to speed up the decomposition process for their compost. Once they understand how to produce and use compost, the hope is that farmers will transition away from harmful chemical fertilizers — the likes of which the MOA is also trying to take off the market.

Ultimately, these COVID-19 response initiatives are complementary to Fiji's agricultural policies and programs, which include a shift to organic agriculture, locally grown food, and self-sufficiency. The pandemic accelerated this work, and the seeds that have been planted in response to the crisis will continue to bear fruit for years to come.



GASTROMOTIVA'S SOLIDARITY KITCHENS IN BRAZIL, THE SOCIAL GASTRONOMY MOVEMENT EXPANDS TO HOME KITCHENS

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Challenge deep-seated inequalities. Brazil is one of the most unequal societies in the world, and food insecurity is a challenge. Gastromotiva recognized this long before the COVID-19 pandemic started. It pioneered the social gastronomy movement, which uses the power of food and the tools of gastronomy to address social challenges.

Harness the passion, skills, and knowledge of chefs. Gastromotiva has trained a network of professional cooks through its education programs. The organization called on their culinary skills and community knowledge for the Solidarity Kitchens project.

Reimagine how food systems work and who they serve. Gastromotiva's approach combines capacity-building, youth entrepreneurship, and an innovative, decentralized model of food distribution where cooks feed thousands of vulnerable people in the communities they themselves live in and know.

Be agile to change. Like the other Beacons of Hope, Gastromotiva demonstrated tremendous resilience and creativity in the face of COVID-19. Solidarity Kitchens utilizes the resources of the organization and the skills of its alumni to create an effective, place-based food systems response.

In every city around the world there are those who are consistently failed by the food systems we have created, those who face food insecurity, rising rates of malnutrition, and empty shelves.

There's nothing quite like sharing a meal with friends and neighbours. For most, the experience of breaking bread has looked different since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Some people are able to prepare their meals at home, and ready their cups for a "cheers" shared over video call. But in every city around the world there are those who are consistently failed by the food systems we have created, those who face food insecurity, rising rates of malnutrition, and empty shelves.

Brazil is one example of this social inequality and food insecurity. The country has one of the world's highest levels of income inequality and, in cities like Rio de Janeiro, significant gaps exist between the most affluent neighbourhoods in the South Zone and the surrounding *favelas* (slums). This includes unequal access to nutritious meals.

It's in this context that the idea of cooking for neighbours has come to be redefined during the pandemic — this time in a more positive light. Since the end of March, home cooks across Rio de Janeiro have opened their kitchens to prepare food for thousands of their neighbours as part of [Gastromotiva's Solidarity Kitchens project](#). It's an innovative example of public food infrastructure in action.

Unlike traditional top-down approaches that identify "beneficiaries," the Solidarity Kitchens project takes a decentralized, place-based food systems approach, and it's the cooks themselves who identify where meals are needed the most. This is an important acknowledgment of their unique role and sense of belonging within their communities.

For many of these professional cooks, social inclusion and food solidarity have been an ingredient in their cooking since they first learned the trade. The home cooks have each been involved with [Gastromotiva](#), a global initiative and non-profit organization headquartered in Rio de Janeiro.

GASTROMOTIVA & THE SOCIAL GASTRONOMY MOVEMENT

Founded in 2006 by Brazilian chef and entrepreneur David Hertz, [Gastromotiva](#) pioneered the social gastronomy movement, taking aim at the inequalities that exist in Rio de Janeiro and the other cities where it works.

"Social gastronomy is a human-centred solution that uses the power of food and the tools of gastronomy to address some of the most complex issues in our society: poor nutrition, food waste, poverty, and social inequality," explained David [in a 2018 interview](#).

Social gastronomy is connected to the idea of food solidarity — recognizing that our food systems need to fundamentally change so that people worldwide have equitable and universal access to healthy food.

Capacity-building and empowerment programs are one of the ways in which Gastromotiva addresses food solidarity. The organization offers free cooking skills training for marginalized youth in low-income communities, including an entry-level course for those without previous kitchen experience. A second program focuses on social entrepreneurship, equipping small food entrepreneurs in underprivileged communities with business management skills and support to develop their own culinary idea. Today, these education programs are run in partnership with private universities that generously open their doors to Gastromotiva students.

According to David, food and cooking skills really can be tools for social change. “Social inclusion requires education, because education leads to job opportunities which can help you provide for your family, but it also means you’re known by society, you’re recognized as a citizen,” he told [TED Ideas in 2018](#).

“This education and gastronomy for social change have been part of our DNA for more than 15 years,” adds Winnee Louise, Gastromotiva’s Coordinator of Social Impact. “This is the topic under which all our other programs are connected.”

CREATING A COMMUNAL CANTEEN

Education met outreach in 2016 when the organization launched Refettorio Gastromotiva. Opened just months before the Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, the canteen brings food, culture, and dignity to the city’s vulnerable residents.

Refettorio Gastromotiva is part of a global network of communal canteens. The premise was conceived by Food for Soul, an Italian NGO that has teamed up with social organizations in Paris, Milan, London, and Bologna to operate similar social gastronomy ventures.

Part communal restaurant, part cooking school, Refettorio Gastromotiva’s canteen is staffed by students enrolled in Gastromotiva’s professional culinary course. It’s also a place where community members can dine for free each lunch hour and dinnertime. “The population that is served includes people who live on the streets or who take refuge in any of the social institutions from the municipality of Rio de Janeiro,” expands Winnee.

Demand for Gastromotiva’s nutritious meals remained high when COVID-19 began, though the communal dining experience had to be paused and reimaged. Gastromotiva launched its latest project in response: Solidarity Kitchens.

FOOD FOR ONE, FOOD FOR ALL

The Solidarity Kitchens are a creative remix of Gastromotiva’s 14 years of social impact

efforts. Harnessing the culinary skills and social networks of its students and alumni — and building on the social inclusion values of the organization — the project encourages chefs to transform their home kitchens into communal canteens.

“It’s really a guerrilla home kitchen,” explains Ellen Gonzalez, the Solidarity Kitchens coordinator. “There were some colleagues who knew very little about being in a professional kitchen but still decided to enlist in the war.”

With just three home cooks involved at the end of March, Ellen joined the organization in May and brought that number to 50 operating kitchens by July. Now, around 87,000 meals are served each month, with more than 500,000 meals served as of December 2020. The canteens offer a successful example of public food infrastructure and decentralization at a time when access to nutritious meals can be concentrated among socio-economic lines.

Each cook prepares an average of 300 meals per week, but sometimes their contributions go well beyond. “Some go crazy and prepare 600 meals and ask us for more ingredients. It happens because they’re cooking 7 days a week and are seeing how many people are dependent on this,” says Ellen.

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Gastromotiva offers a range of support for its Solidarity Kitchens: everything from helping cooks buy larger pots and pans to working with a nutritionist to develop recipe suggestions. The organization covers the cost of ingredients and sustainable packaging, which chefs pick up on a weekly basis. Home chefs also receive a monthly aid from Gastromotiva and are reimbursed for their transportation costs. A dynamic WhatsApp group serves as a platform to exchange ideas and hints, such as how to reduce food waste by using the peels, roots, and leaves of vegetables.

While Gastromotiva provides these inputs, each cook brings their own skills and motivations for opening their home as a Solidarity Kitchen.

“These people were seeing the community they live in getting more and more fragile because people were losing jobs, and they saw critical increases in food insecurity,” says Ellen. Most cooks live outside the affluent districts of Rio de Janeiro and witnessed the crisis unfold before their eyes.

Importantly, the alumni themselves decide where and how to distribute the prepared meals. This is a testament to the diversity of *favelas* and other underprivileged

neighbourhoods, where, although many struggle with poverty, there are always those willing to lend a helping hand and share a nourishing meal.

A couple of alumni cook in Maré, a well-known *favela* in Rio; others go to Cracolândia, a neighbourhood associated with high levels of drug activity and homelessness; yet others distribute in churches or orphanages, despite not having a formal relationship with those establishments — anywhere in the city where they see a need.

KEEPING FOOD SOLIDARITY ON THE MENU

The Solidarity Kitchens started in response to the pandemic, but Gastromotiva intends for the approach to continue alongside Refettorio Gastromotiva in the future. Ellen, the project coordinator, says 30 cooks have been selected for phase two of the project, where they will be given additional support and mentorship to operate their kitchen as a social enterprise and determine who is dependent on the meals.

It all connects back to Gastromotiva's long-standing values: using education and the power of food to create a more inclusive and equitable society.



MOBILIZING FOOD AS A PUBLIC GOOD

Food security means that every person, irrespective of social status, has the right to access sufficient and culturally acceptable food at all times. The right to food is referenced in many human rights norms and treaties around the world. Food justice recognizes that racialized people and communities experience higher levels of food insecurity due to structural inequalities.

Within these concepts, governments have an obligation to respect, protect, and fulfil the right to food and ensure food security for their citizens. Other food systems actors have a complementary responsibility. Together, all must ensure that food systems are governed to primarily fulfil this public need.

This interpretation does not often play out in reality. That is, in part, due to a common narrative in food governance that upholds and enables the privatization of food systems, allows markets to lead food systems transformations, and reduces public space for food. Those governance and market-based decisions are often deeply inequitable — made by people in positions of power with little input from the general public.

It is widely acknowledged that the majority of food is produced, processed, and traded by individual private actors across markets. At the same time, these transactions are regulated by a series of norms, rules, and behaviours set out by society and policymakers. With shifting public opinion comes the pressure to do things differently. This includes momentum to see food as a public good in the same way that public transportation and access to public utilities (such as water and electricity) and other services are seen as public goods in many jurisdictions around the world.

COVID-19 may have shifted thinking around this subject. Many food systems responses to the crisis acknowledge the need for food as a public good. While the pandemic has brought severe consequences to the crisis of global food security — such as widening social inequalities, food price shocks, and altered food environments — we are increasingly hearing about the importance of public health systems, alternative food distribution, and growing solidarity in our food systems. Public responses such as wide-sweeping stimulus packages and strengthened social security policies are also on the table, and others have asked if we have reached the limit of privatized food systems.

Quito, Ecuador, is a city recognized as a leader in putting food policy on the municipal agenda. For two decades, the municipality has been building integrated, inclusive, and

participatory food governance as well as the institutional infrastructure to support a sustainable food system. Quito has invited diverse actors — private and public — to take part in building sustainable and inclusive food systems. The city's resilience strategy, Quito Resiliente, proved key when it came time to plot a COVID-19 response, a sign that local food resilience heavily depends on the institutions that regulate food systems.

While the pandemic has brought severe consequences to the crisis of global food security — such as widening social inequalities, food price shocks, and altered food environments — we are increasingly hearing about the importance of public health systems, alternative food distribution, and growing solidarity in our food systems.

Toronto, Canada, is the setting of our second story. Despite the right to food being guaranteed in the city's Food Charter, nearly 1 in 5 Torontonians continue to suffer from food insecurity. It's a shocking figure that reminds us that leaving food governance primarily to private actors will not fulfil the right to food, irrespective of the affluence of cities. FoodShare is a leading organization in Toronto and has been advocating and acting for food justice since its founding 35 years ago.

Alternative food infrastructure supported by FoodShare, such as Good Food Markets, provide communities with a sense of local ownership and decision-making over food governance. Meanwhile, the organization's Emergency Good Food Box launched in response to COVID-19 is a practical solution that fills the social gap where private markets and public governments have failed in securing the right to food.



QUITO RESILIENTE

RESILIENCE-READY, THE MUNICIPALITY OF QUITO TAKES ON COVID-19

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The importance of local food policies. The Municipality of Quito prioritizes food systems planning. Because of this, they easily mobilized existing agri-food strategies and partnerships when the pandemic started. These local food policies frame food as a public good and a key component in creating a resilient city.

Rethink partnerships and collaboration. A central value in Quito's approach is to gather actors across food systems, from food distributors, NGOs, civil society groups, food industries, retailers, academia, and beyond. These connections and shared perspectives enable the diversification of creative, collaborative food systems — before and during emergencies. As part of the Quito Resiliente strategy, the municipality also has a network of hundreds of local leaders who are ready to mobilize in their neighbourhoods.

Strategies at scale. Quito's resilience and food strategies work through different scales within the food chain of the city. Prioritizing interventions in the most vulnerable neighbourhoods has been central in Quito's COVID-19 response.

Resilience and strong local food systems go hand in hand, and Quito, Ecuador, is proof of that. The Latin American city is regarded as a leader in putting food policy on the municipal agenda through the creation of local institutions and partnerships. In fact, David Jácome Polit calls food the "basis of the development of a city."

Jácome Polit should know: He is the Chief Resilience Officer with the Municipality of Quito, and led the creation of **Quito Resiliente**, the city's resilience strategy released in 2017. The agrifood system is one of the plan's main focuses.

"[Quito's agrifood system] is dependent because a large part of the food consumed in the city comes from other regions of the country and abroad," wrote Jácome Polit in 2019. "It is vulnerable because the city itself, and the regions that provide food, face natural threats that can greatly affect the system and, therefore, the availability of food." By strengthening local food systems, the resilience of the city is also bolstered.

TWO DECADES OF FOOD SYSTEMS FOCUS

Quito's focus on food systems change started in 2002 with the launch of the city's Participatory Urban Agriculture Project (AGRUPAR). AGRUPAR is a municipal program that focuses on building resilience at a household and city level by helping vulnerable Quiteños start small-scale farms. Those farms produce 1.35 million kilograms of fresh, ecologically grown food each year, nearly 60% of which is eaten by the urban farmers themselves with the rest sold locally.

According to Alexandra Rodríguez, coordinator of AGRUPAR, it's vitally important that this program be run locally. Municipal leadership enables the program to reach groups and areas not served by NGOs and private supermarkets. It also allows the municipality to link urban agriculture with activities related to culture, education, health, and environmental management — examining how food security fits into the creation of a thriving city.

In 2018, Quito's focus on sustainable food systems culminated in the creation of the Agrifood Pact of Quito (PAQ), a municipal-led platform that resulted in a new city-wide strategy and agrifood charter to promote a sustainable, resilient, diversified, and inclusive food system.

PAQ includes 25 organizations and institutions of all sizes and sectors. Jácome Polit says recognizing these diverse actors and their roles within the food system is incredibly important to build consensus and have long-term impact.

Though he acknowledges that these actors may not always see eye-to-eye on how the food system should work, the strength of PAQ is that everyone is invited to the table and has the chance to influence local food policies.

Jácome Polit admits that these discussions are a work in progress. He adds that more formal spaces are needed in order to have these complex conversations and further institutionalize the PAQ platform and policies.

ACTIVATING FOR COVID-19

The PAQ and Quito Resiliente strategies meant the municipality was able to lead a coordinated response when COVID-19 hit. “If we understand that a system works before a catastrophe happens, then that system has a better possibility to work after that crisis and respond in a better way,” said Jácome Polit during a webinar in May 2020.

Turning to data from Quito’s food and resilience strategies, the municipality was able to quickly target the neighbourhoods and populations most vulnerable to diet-related health issues and food insecurity. The strategy also offered insight into how private supermarkets and public markets were spread across the city. This readily available information allowed officials to more efficiently deliver food to vulnerable people, improve retail distribution, know which products would likely sell-out first, and channel other efforts.

Another strength of Quito’s approach has been its focus on building resilience at different scales, including at a neighbourhood level. Like most cities, Quito is incredibly diverse, and availability and access to food differ greatly. This emphasizes the importance of hyper-localizing food resilience strategies.

During COVID-19, this hyper-localization has been led by local leaders in 373 Quito neighbourhoods — a network established as part of the city’s broader resilience strategy. These individuals play a key role in identifying who needs support, the kind of help that’s most valuable, and communicating other special needs to the municipality.

Finally, the municipality’s pandemic response was also supported by its established relationships with diverse food systems actors. These connections made it easier for municipal staff to create partnerships between the private sector and neighbourhood shops, and understand how distribution chains were affected across the system. “Because there were actors who were already working in collaboration, it was easier to connect with each other and, through that, implement a better response,” says Jácome Polit.

GAPS & OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE

Nearly a year into the pandemic, life is still far from normal in Quito. Most public markets remain closed in order to reduce virus transmission. This leaves food distribution almost exclusively to private markets, with small shops, urban farms, and food banks filling in the gap.

In many ways, the pandemic has provided an opportunity to test and tweak Quito’s resilience strategies in real time. Several new measures involve a diversification of distribution channels, including the sale of weekly food baskets in local gardens, neighbourhood food delivery coordinated by collaborative partners, and an expansion of the urban agriculture program.

Ultimately, food is a public good, and the Municipality of Quito is constantly adapting to make that so. As Jácome Polit puts it: “When people cannot access or go to where food is, food finds a way to make itself available for people.”



FOODSHARE

A LOCALLY ROOTED FOOD JUSTICE APPROACH
TO COVID-19 RESPONSE IN TORONTO, CANADA

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Taking a food justice lens. Mainstreaming conversations about how White supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism have shaped the food system and movement — and then working to dismantle them — are a cornerstone of FoodShare’s work.

Promoting community ownership of markets. Good Food Markets supported by FoodShare enable communities to choose what produce is sold and prioritize what is important to them.

Leading a values-based COVID-19 response. FoodShare used its pandemic response to further its mission of food justice. It did this by partnering with 95 community agencies and grassroots groups to identify people who could most use an Emergency Good Food Box.

Moving beyond policy. FoodShare influences policies at a municipal, provincial, and national level, but views it as just one piece in the puzzle. The team also focuses on public education and mobilizing people to get policies implemented.

The right to food has been guaranteed under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for more than 70 years — and yet this pledge goes unfulfilled for so many around the world. This includes in Toronto, Canada, a city committed to food security, as documented in the [Food Charter](#) that was passed unanimously by the municipal council in 2000. However, fast forward 20 years later and food insecurity continues to affect nearly 1 in 5 Torontonians. **FoodShare** is one of the organizations that is making sure the value of food as a public good is not only stated on paper but actually done in practice.

FROM FOOD SECURITY TO FOOD JUSTICE

FoodShare was founded in 1985 by the City of Toronto with the aim of finding systemic and long-term solutions to poverty and food insecurity. Today, the organization is well respected within Canada’s largest city. It’s still known for taking a multi-pronged approach to food systems transformation, with a diversity of programs that focus on education, community outreach, urban agriculture, and more.

Katie German, Director of Advocacy and Programs, has spent the better part of a decade working with FoodShare. She says she respects the organization's willingness to critique its own approach and its commitment to food justice.

There's an important difference between food justice and food security. Food security is typically concerned with questions of whether people have enough food and access to sufficient daily calories. "It doesn't necessarily ask questions around where there's power imbalances, injustice, and inequity within both the food system and the food movement," German explains.

These inequities often run along racial lines. Research done in partnership between FoodShare and PROOF revealed that Black households in Canada are 3.5 times more likely than White households to face challenges putting food on the table.

FoodShare works with Toronto neighbourhoods and communities that experience the most food insecurity in order to ensure food truly is a public good.

A NEW OPTION FOR NEIGHBOURS

Imagine a public park, the lobby of a community housing building, or the entrance to a senior's residence — these are a few of the places where you may come across a Good Food Market. The markets are a partnership between FoodShare, community organizations, and neighbourhood leaders.

No two Good Food Markets are the same, and community groups prioritize ordering what produce is most relevant to them. Sometimes that means ordering cultural food staples or placing orders based on affordability. The markets are one example of how alternative food infrastructure can more effectively serve people.

The Good Food Markets, and all FoodShare's programs, are run on a non-profit basis. They're funded, in part, by FoodShare's food distribution social enterprises. That includes the Good Food Box, which has inspired spin-off initiatives across North America.

For as little as \$17 per box, Torontonians can receive a Good Food Box of fresh produce delivered to their door. It was here that FoodShare was able to pivot its approach during COVID-19.

FOODSHARE'S EMERGENCY GOOD FOOD BOX

Throughout its 35-year history, FoodShare has made it clear that it's not a food bank, the likes of which can be ubiquitous with pre-packaged food or produce leftovers and not the dignified-access-to-food mission that FoodShare stands behind.

But COVID-19 presented unprecedented challenges, and FoodShare found itself distributing free food for the first time.

Launching its Emergency Good Food Box, FoodShare partnered with 95 community agencies and grassroots groups to identify people who could use a free produce box. The boxes were paid for by individual donations through FoodShare's Emergency Food Relief Fund and government COVID-relief funding.

"Part of being a food justice organization meant that we applied that lens when looking at which community organizations we were going to work with and which recipients we wanted to prioritize," explains German, saying that boxes went to migrant farm workers, sex workers, Black families, and other groups disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

FoodShare went from 300 deliveries a week to as many as 3,000. In the first 2 weeks of the pandemic, they hired 65 people and re-assigned staff members who formerly ran school programs. Team members who couldn't work from home are still receiving a \$4 an hour pay increase and 10 additional sick days.

This Emergency Good Food Box response likely would not have been possible if FoodShare didn't have the online ordering infrastructure, distribution system, staffing, and community connections to mobilize so quickly.

As an organization that has never run a food bank, German says it's challenging for FoodShare to decide at which point it should stop distributing the Emergency Good Food Boxes — especially when there is such a demand.

Ultimately, that question feeds into FoodShare's longer-term advocacy work. While immediate emergency response is important, the organization wants to continue appealing to policymakers in a way that addresses food justice questions both during and after the COVID-19 crisis.

For German, the need for greater policy action can be summed up in one story: "We heard from one senior who had gotten an Emergency Good Food Box and a month later she got her next one. She told the driver that she hadn't had any fresh produce since the last time the box was delivered, because she wasn't going to the grocery store. So it's nice to know you're helping, but it's also enraging to know this is the situation for people."



GOING BEYOND “BUILD BACK BETTER”

Since the early days of the pandemic, people have spoken about the need to “build back better” and to create a “new and better normal.” Statements and slogans like this acknowledge two fundamental facts: 1) that many challenges preceded the pandemic, and 2) that this experience has revealed important lessons to carry forward into the future.

The seven initiatives spotlighted as part of this COVID-19 Beacons of Hope series have done an exceptional job of handling the emergent and additional stress that the pandemic layered on existing challenges like hunger, malnutrition, unsustainable ecological practices, fragile supply chains, and countless others.

Further, these stories demonstrated how individuals and communities worldwide are pushing back against harmful narratives claiming that privatization, increased productivity, and top-down approaches must be the defining principles of our food systems. Diverse in their scale and scope, these Beacons of Hope show that more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable solutions exist:

- **THE COMMON MARKET** (USA) tapped into the relationships and trust built by years of working directly with local family farms and communities to access the public procurement opportunities that emerged during the pandemic.
- In Nigeria’s largest city, the **LFB** departed from the traditional food bank model, providing immediate relief through food distribution while also addressing the root causes of hunger.
- **GASTROMOTIVA**, a Brazilian NGO, launched a network of Solidarity Kitchens where its students and alumni cooked in their homes and provided meals to vulnerable people living in their own communities.
- In Fiji, **THE MOA** saw the pandemic as an opportunity to push for food systems change, focusing on the production and consumption of locally grown and organic produce, and on shifting public perception to view farming as a sector worth investing in.

These stories demonstrated how individuals and communities worldwide are pushing back against harmful narratives claiming that privatization, increased productivity, and top-down approaches must be the defining principles of our food systems.

- The **MUNICIPALITY OF QUITO** (Ecuador) coordinated a comprehensive local food systems response to COVID-19 based on the resilience strategy they had designed for other disasters.
- The Toronto, Canada-based organization **FOODSHARE** applied a food justice lens to its pandemic response, partnering with community agencies and grassroots groups to ensure its alternative food infrastructure reached communities most in need.

To go well beyond “build back better” — and to truly *transform* food systems — we must bridge lessons from these innovative and inspiring emergency responses in the medium and long term.

The final story in this COVID-19 collection further supports this argument. Gardens for Health International (GHI) is a Rwandan organization that focuses on chronic malnutrition, especially among children. Motivated by an understanding that a lack of dietary diversity is a significant contributor, GHI’s comprehensive programs link agriculture, nutrition, and health to improve multiple determinants of good health.

Faced with COVID-19 disruptions, the GHI team continued supporting these core values. They ensured school gardens were maintained, partnered with government-run community health clinics to offer nutrition and COVID-19 prevention training, and adopted other innovative approaches. All the while, the team continues to push for policy change at a national level.



GARDENS FOR HEALTH INTERNATIONAL
THE HARVEST IS HEALTH: AN APPROACH TO
ENDING CHRONIC MALNUTRITION IN RWANDA

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Food determinants of health. GHI takes a comprehensive agriculture, nutrition, and health approach to address the root causes of malnutrition and improve multiple determinants of good health.

Nutrition-sensitive agriculture. Nutrition is about more than ensuring people eat enough calories each day. GHI supports the planting of a variety of crops so families can increase their dietary diversity and get the micronutrients they need.

Arms-length partnerships. While not itself a government agency, GHI works closely with government-run community health clinics to reach more families, while also re-orienting Rwanda’s food systems policies over time.

The [Gardens for Health International](#) team believes the long-term cure for chronic malnutrition isn't found in a health clinic but instead can be grown in one's own backyard.

Chronic malnutrition is a widespread issue worldwide, particularly in low- and middle-income countries like Rwanda, where GHI is based. It's caused by a deficit in essential micronutrients such as iron, zinc, and an alphabet-array of vitamins. Chronic malnutrition has lasting effects on families and communities, putting people at higher risk of getting sick, hindering brain development in children, and trapping generations in a cycle of poor health and poverty.

Within Rwanda's context, GHI **notes a striking disconnect**: despite 80% of families in the East African country growing their own food, more than a third of children are chronically malnourished because of a lack of dietary diversity. "Our work is motivated by this notion that food alone does not equal nutrition," explains Solomon Makuza, GHI's Executive Director.

Founded in 2009, GHI has developed innovative agriculture, nutrition, and health programs. Its interventions were designed alongside local community members and its early employees. Today, GHI is overseen by a Rwandan team, many of whom come from Musanze or Gasabo districts where the organization works.

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A BALANCED APPROACH TO BALANCED EATING

GHI's solution to chronic malnutrition involves a simple trio: seeds, skills, and nutrition education.

[The organization's 2019 annual report](#) introduces Marie Jeanne, a single mother who lovingly prepared large meals of potatoes and beans for her daughter, Quevinne. That's until a visit from a health worker revealed that Quevinne was malnourished.

Marie Jeanne was surprised — she wanted what was best for her daughter but did not realize the importance of **dietary diversity** and the role micronutrients play in childhood development.

Enrolling in GHI's Child Nutrition program, Marie Jeanne received seeds to grow nutritious vegetables like squash, carrots, and amaranth. The program also trains participants in how to create compost and natural pesticides and to maximize crop yields using local knowledge and organic techniques.

Marie Jeanne learned how to prepare nutritious meals using her harvest. This was done through a playful “One Pot, One Hour” cooking demonstration (and through song and dance) delivered by a GHI Field Educator.

“Now I know that I must cook meals using four colours of food to prevent malnutrition in my family,” Marie Jeanne describes, referring to GHI’s encouragement that families incorporate green, orange, white, and brown ingredients to create dishes that are both filling and micronutrient-rich.

As well as training moms like Marie Jeanne, GHI’s School Feeding Initiative teaches students about gardening and the importance of eating balanced meals. Further partnerships with several government-run community health clinics enable the organization to reach families with educational messages about breastfeeding, good hygiene practices, and other health-related topics.

A COMPREHENSIVE, COMMUNITY-LEVEL COVID-19 RESPONSE

GHI’s combined agriculture, nutrition, and health approach became particularly important when the COVID-19 pandemic started.

Rwanda has faced two country-wide lockdowns since March 2020. “[The lockdowns] really put a lot of under-served families at risk of only accessing cheap, affordable food that is not necessarily diverse and does not meet the nutrition needs of their bodies and families,” said Solomon Makuza during a November 2020 webinar.

With its programming on hold because of the lockdown, Makuza and the GHI team knew they could not simply sit and watch.

Observing that many families didn’t have enough for their daily meals, GHI started distributing food, including staple grains, oil, and nutritious vegetables directly from their farm. In partnership with the World Food Programme, GHI also provided additional seeds and funding to schools to ensure the upkeep of their vegetable gardens. GHI participants and graduates like Marie Jeanne were already more resilient, tending to at-home gardens and sharing harvested vegetables with neighbours.

GHI also deployed its team of Field Educators and other staff to government-run community health clinics. “We found it very important to be present on the frontline, and work with the health clinics providing nutrition education and counselling and also support the COVID-19 prevention work that was happening,” says Makuza.

Field educators teamed up with community health workers to screen young children for malnutrition. They also used the clinics as a forum to train hundreds of new families each month on the importance of good nutrition, even during the time of a pandemic. GHI further supported the government by sharing public health messaging and providing community members with face masks and handwashing supplies.

“We were able to do what we did because of such a strong relationship that is based on trust [and] understanding that we’ve had with the community, the health clinics, and the government of Rwanda for such a long time,” shares Makuza. “Now more than ever, community-based missions like ours are vital to the survival of the world’s most vulnerable.”

Makuza says the organization has identified plenty of exciting opportunities for the future. For one thing, the team plans to continue offering nutrition education through community health clinics. New demonstration gardens established at the clinics and nearby schools will also serve as a living classroom and a local source of seeds. Finally, GHI is in the midst of finalizing new permaculture operations at their farm headquarters in Gasabo District.

Meanwhile, the organization continues to urge national policy change that promotes sustainable, nutrition-based agricultural practices as a way to prevent and treat malnutrition in the long-term. With replication to other regions also on the horizon, there’s little question — good things are growing for GHI.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, all of the Beacons of Hope featured in this work provide inspiring examples and evidence that the transformation we collectively seek as a global community is possible. They demonstrate that food systems can be reimagined to promote human, ecological, and animal health and well-being. Learning from them, we must now, collectively, seize the moment to shine a light on the failures of the old system, on the possibilities of the new, and on the active change agents who are leading the way.

To take this Call to Action forward, we invite you to use and explore this Toolkit, which includes a Food Systems Transformation Framework and Discussion Guide. It can be used to analyze and explore the transformation process, learn about the experiences of diverse Beacons of Hope, and facilitate discussion and action that accelerates food systems transformation.

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ABOUT THE GLOBAL ALLIANCE FOR THE FUTURE OF FOOD



The Global Alliance for the Future of Food is a strategic alliance of philanthropic foundations working together and with others to transform global food systems now and for future generations. We believe in the urgency of transforming global food systems, and in the power of working together and with others to effect positive change. Food systems reform requires that we craft new and better solutions at all scales through a systems-level approach and deep collaboration among philanthropy, researchers, grassroots movements, the private sector, farmers and food systems workers, Indigenous Peoples, government, and policymakers.

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