

# **Food Security, Poverty, Housing and the Local food system; closing the loop in the Comox Valley**

*by: Andrea Cupelli and Maurita Prato*

## **Executive Summary**

There is a lack of sustained access to healthy local food and food skills for vulnerable populations across the Comox Valley. One root cause of this issue is poverty, held in place by systematic resource flow inequalities, which are entrenched within the nature of our global and local economic systems. This issue is also impacted by resource flows and attitudes that focus a majority of charitable and government resources on emergency health and food services rather than a focus on empowerment, education and preventative measures or upstream approaches.

At the same time, entrants into the local food economy (new farmers and food producers) face economic and other barriers set in place by the global food economy which was built on inequalities, externalities and subsidies. This has led to global competition that limits local markets.

Through a socially innovative process of community input, this action plan recommends the designing of a local food aggregation and distribution system to support more consistent local food access for people living in social, supportive and transitional housing across the Comox Valley. More specifically, the action plan includes the creation of 'futures' contacts between farmers and housing providers, a good food box, and the injection of local food into existing food programs as well as the development of a 'menu' of food literacy and skill building opportunities for people who live with housing and food insecurity. The ideal is a move towards empowerment and away from social isolation- supporting the social determinants of health and increasing health and wellbeing outcomes over the long term.

## **Introduction**

### **Food Systems solutions for Food Systems issues - A History**

There can be a tendency in community food security work to separate people experiencing barriers to food access from the people who are producing food. The movement and activism of community food security came out of the Global North (in the 90s, although the term Food Security was used as early as the 70s but with a focus on food security as an individual rather than a community issue) with the goal that 'all people in one's community at all times have access to adequate amounts of safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food' and places the responsibility on the community rather than the individual. At the same time there was another

global movement largely growing out of the Global South (1990s) - a peasants uprising movement with a focus on 'Food Sovereignty' in response to the World Trade Organization. Food Sovereignty is a more complex concept that essentially challenges the inequities in the global market, and encourages peasants, farmers and producers to have control over the means of producing food (for example, having control over the land - long term land security, being able to choose what is grown, how it is grown and how it goes to market, being able to save seeds, and owning the tools that are used). Interestingly these two issues, although interconnected, are often not presented as such from an activist or solutions based perspective and in some way these ideas have been presented as if they were at odds with one another.<sup>1</sup>

The separation of these issues leads to such assumptions as: 'People experiencing food insecurity cannot afford to purchase food that is produced locally, or in a way that is just and ecological.'

The view or lens that this project takes is that food security and food sovereignty are interconnected food systems issues and they need to be viewed as a failing of the global food and economic system. To be truly addressed we need to think about an alternative solution that will lead to a more just food system for all. In that way we are looking for food systems solutions to food systems problems.

When the true costs related to the global food system such as the ecological degradation, social issues related to poor global standards for workers, and overproduction of commodity grains through subsidies leading to an epidemic of health related diseases) are taken into account, the return on investment of providing local food and food programming to people who are dealing with housing and food security on a regular basis is very positive. This includes a bolstering of financial, social, cultural and natural capitals. In other words, there is a case to be made that this model makes good financial sense while also supporting several other wellness outcomes (although measuring these costs and outcomes is outside of the scope of this report).

## **The connection between Food Security, Poverty & Housing**

The root cause of food insecurity is poverty. In the Comox Valley the poverty rate is 15.6% of the population, or approximately 10,500 people. Children are significantly impacted by food insecurity, with 1 in 5 experiencing poverty<sup>2</sup>, and 31% of food bank users being children<sup>3</sup>.

LUSH Valley Food Action Society (LUSH) is a local non-profit organization who envisions a region where healthy local food is at the heart of community wellbeing. LUSH Valley supports the Comox Valley community in gaining food-systems skills and knowledge to increase food security, self-sufficiency and local food production across the region. One of LUSH's strategic objectives focuses on diverse community collaboration to shift the root causes of food insecurity.

---

<sup>1</sup> This section is paraphrased from Wayne Robberts, The no-nonsense guide to world food New Edition, 2013, New Internationalist (publisher)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.sparc.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2017-BC-Child-Poverty-Report-Card.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://comoxvalleyfoodbank.com/gratitude/>

The Comox Valley Coalition to End Homelessness (Coalition) works as a collective to plan, coordinate, recommend and implement community responses to homelessness. According to their 5 Year Plan to End Homelessness<sup>4</sup>, some of the main causes of homelessness in the Comox Valley include low incomes, lack of employment opportunities, a 0.5% rental vacancy rate and sky-rocketing rents and housing prices. Housing is considered affordable when it costs less than 30% of pre-tax household income, and is currently the largest component of annual expenses for residents of the Comox Valley making up 35-45% of total household costs<sup>5</sup>

Both LUSH Valley and the Coalition advocate for the health and well-being of our community members, and work with all levels of government, other organizations, and people with lived experience to ensure safe, affordable housing and food security - both of which are social determinants of health. Social determinants of health include a broad range of personal, social, economic and environmental factors that contribute to individual, family and community wellness<sup>6</sup>. When these determinants of health are addressed, people have a better chance of long term wellness. Appropriate, affordable, safe, and secure housing is a necessity for reducing the risk of many physical and mental health problems. Similarly, when people are food secure and eating a healthy, diverse diet they live with greater dignity and higher physical and mental health. Together, housing and food security greatly improve the health and well-being of our community members.

Next to housing, rising food costs have the biggest financial impact on those who earn low wages. According to the 2019 Canada's Food Price Report<sup>7</sup> and 2018 BC Food Basket Report<sup>8</sup> food affordability has increased by \$78/month for a family of four since 2015, (a total increase of \$1043 per year) and is predicted to increase another \$411 per annum in 2019 with a 6% increase on the cost of vegetables being predicted.<sup>9</sup>

Due to these rising costs, many families and individuals must make a choice between making rent, utility payments, transportation, or buying food. When food is purchased it becomes a challenge to buy healthier options after meeting other basic needs as prices for healthy, local and unprocessed foods are often more expensive than processed commodity foods. Therefore, access to healthy local food is unlikely for lower income or marginalized people.

A less discussed aspect of food insecurity is a lack of food system engagement and food literacy. LUSH Valley has engaged with many people experiencing food insecurity who do not feel they have control over their food choices. Programs which promote food literacy (food skills such as shopping, cooking, preserving, and eating together), and co-production (whereby consumers are also producers of some of the food they consume) have been shown to both

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.cvhousing.ca/the-5-year-plan/>

<sup>5</sup> [http://rentalhousingindex.ca/en/#comp\\_cd](http://rentalhousingindex.ca/en/#comp_cd)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cvchn.ca/determinants-of-health>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.dal.ca/faculty/management/news-events/canada-s-food-price-report.html>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.bccdc.ca/pop-public-health/Documents/food-costing-BC-2017.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/canada-food-price-report-2019-1.4930130>

decrease food insecurity and increase feelings of empowerment and control while also creating other community and health benefits such as increasing trust and friendships and decreasing isolation.<sup>10</sup> The positive correlation between brain and mood health and healthy eating is also well documented.<sup>11</sup>

## **Where are people who experience barriers to healthy food access in the Comox Valley currently getting their food?**

By having conversations with people currently experiencing food and housing insecurity and by cross referencing with the Vancouver Island 'Food Atlas;<sup>12</sup>' (an on-line mapping tool that showcases local food services and food programs) we gathered information on where people in the Comox Valley are currently accessing food and the quality of the food they access.

In the Comox Valley, community kitchens and food literacy workshops are offered by Salvation Army Family Services who have a full and waitlisted cooking program for Moms and Tots, as well as Comox Valley Family Services who offer several food programs for families, specifically focused on prenatal nutrition and early years. There are also community kitchens operated by LUSH at the BC Housing owned and operated Washington Park subsidized apartments, and LUSH also frequently runs a Young Cooks program (an in-depth cooking series for youth), Dad's Night Out for fathers/male caregivers and their children to come together and eat a healthy meal once monthly, and other community cooking workshops. LUSH is also partnered with Indigenous Education and School District 71 to run a weekly healthy soup program that serves 600-800 children a week.

Some people receive fresh produce from the LUSH Valley Share the Harvest Community garden located in the heart of downtown Courtenay in an accessible location close to other social service agencies. In addition, hundreds of community members receive fresh produce from LUSH's Fruit Tree and Farm Gleaning programs. Last year, these programs brought in over 50,000lbs of fresh fruit and farm produce which was shared among 12 community partners including the Comox Valley Food Bank, K'ómoks First Nation, BC Housing's Washington Park Apartments, and the Comox Valley Transition Society. LUSH receives many requests from community organizations who would like to receive fresh gleaned produce, and LUSH is interested in expanding this program to reach more people.

Washington Park apartments have contracted LUSH Valley through their People, Plants and Homes program which includes a monthly community kitchen as well as 12 garden allotment plots for tenants, as both a therapeutic garden and one that will provide more fresh food for tenants who experience food insecurity.

---

<sup>10</sup> Food education programs are seen to create a sense of community, which helps reduce social isolation by building friendships (Topley, 2013). At the table: A case for food literacy coordination.

<sup>11</sup> The Role of Nutrition in Mental Health Promotion and Prevention. Toronto: Dietitians of Canada, 2012.: [www.dietitians.ca/mentalhealth](http://www.dietitians.ca/mentalhealth))

<sup>12</sup> <https://foodatlas.ca/>

There are free lunches in the Comox Valley, mainly operated by volunteers and with donated food, hosted by Wachiay Friendship Centre (weekly for elders only), Comox Valley Transition Society (weekly for women only), St. George's United Church's Sonshine Lunch Club (5 days a week serving hundreds of people), Food Not Bombs (weekly lunch on Sunday), and other churches host free lunches on a less regular basis. The Connect drop-in program for those who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness offers a light lunch/snacks 2 days a week and other community organizations sometimes offer morning coffee and muffins. For many people, these free meals serve as their only chance to eat for the day.

Free food hampers can be accessed at Salvation Army Family services daily, and at several other churches on a monthly basis. The Comox Valley Food Bank can be accessed weekly. Church hampers do not offer fresh produce, but the Salvation Army Family Services and the Food Bank frequently do. Local farmers often donate their excess produce directly to social service agencies, and/or through LUSH's gleaning programs.

When individuals in our community do purchase food, it is generally from grocery stores, either with their own money or through subsidies including gift cards or farmers market tokens. The majority of social service agencies purchase their food for programming directly from grocery stores, or those who provide housing and shelter may use a combination of contracts with commercial food distribution companies or directly from grocery stores.

In social housing, some tenants receive meals as part of their tenancy. Transitional housing and Comox Valley recovery centres (30, 60 or 90 days stay) include cold breakfasts, snacks, lunches and dinner. The Junction Supportive Housing for those who have experienced chronic homelessness includes a cold breakfast and a hot dinner, and residents also have a small fridge, convection burner and sink in their suites to cook on their own. LILLI House Emergency Shelter for women and children fleeing domestic violence provides cold breakfasts and dinners, as does the Salvation Army Pidcock House Emergency Shelter.

## The root causes of unjust global industrial food systems and the social innovation of local food systems solutions

John Muir observed long ago, “when we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe”<sup>13</sup>;

One of the aims of this action plan is to disrupt the global industrial food system, albeit in a small way. Through social innovation,

**“A social innovation is a project, process, or program that has the potential to influence societal, environmental or cultural systems. Social innovation tends to disrupt existing systems and challenge the status quo. The change that happens through a social innovation can be in what we believe or how we behave. The transformation can happen within our institutions, social structures, policies and laws. The impact of a social innovation benefits society as a whole, rather than individuals or groups. Social innovations can also draw on or adapt traditional Indigenous or other cultural knowledge and practices to influence a current situation.”**

**( [Vancouver Foundation's Systems Change Grant Guidelines, January 2019](#) )<sup>14</sup>**

The idea is to create new pathways and options for local food producers to have market incentives and for organizations providing social housing to have a local food option to support the health and well-being of their tenants.

When we take a ‘brief history of industrial food systems’ we see the root causes of our outdated system extend as far back as the neolithic revolution up to 12,500ybp- when a mass movement from nomadic to sedentary lifestyles and cultures set up the ability to stockpile food resources and stratified society at a scale much more extensive than previous nomadic cultures.

The twin processes of colonization and the rise of capitalism changed the global food system again with the rise of the industrial revolution in the 1800s. Land and resource grabs by the Global North, with a primary focus on agriculture for food and materials to feed the workers of the industrial revolution, set up systems that drained the Global South and crippled it in ever deepening debt. These systems of global inequalities were deepened massively during the rise of the industrial revolution in Europe in the 1800s. The ‘post war’ period of 1940-70 in North America featured cheap oil and chemicals left over from the war which were turned into

---

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.brainpickings.org/2018/05/10/john-muir-nature-writings/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://uwaterloo.ca/waterloo-institute-for-social-innovation-and-resilience/research/indigenous-innovation>

agricultural inputs (chemical pesticides and fertilizers) and farms moved to the outskirts of town, where subsidies, cheap fuel and mechanization were designed to have farmers grow the highest yields possible of certain commodity grains. These grains were low in nutrition but high in shelf life and did well in the commodity market which was flooded, driving the global price down, creating cheap feed for farmed animals, and the rise of food processors developing and marketing new processed foods.

The problem with high yielding and shelf stable grains, is that these foods have become artificially cheap through this system, and they are low in nutritional value. (Foods high in nutrients break down much faster and therefore are not good candidates for the global market).

Essentially this post war industrial food system is the same one we have today, and now there is much more land under this type of cultivation than there was in the 1970s.<sup>15</sup>

While we cannot single handedly change how the dominant global food system produces food, we can look to our local food producers for a more just, ecological and healthy way to ensure that vulnerable members of our community have more opportunities to access local food.

Global food systems and the commodity food market have been built on inequalities, subsidies and externalities (such as water and air pollution) making ecological, just and local food production at a structural disadvantage in the global market. New entrants to locally produced foods need some assurance in the marketplace to make a sound investment into a food producing career.

These issues of access to local and healthy food are inherently connected to the limitations of local food production and the difficulties that new entrants into ecological food growing face. If long term community food security is the goal, then a more supportive system for new food and experienced growers needs to be created.

It was our hope that through our research into the needs of local growers and food producers we could find some creative solutions to incentivise new growers, and provide a more secure income for those farmers already producing in the Comox Valley.

We worked to engage those most affected by food systems in our communities, both local food producers, and those experiencing a lack of access to healthy local food, and asked what would be envisioned to 'close the loop' in order to provide local food to people living in social, supportive and transitional housing.

---

<sup>15</sup> Adapted from: \*This Wayne Robberts, The no-nonsense guide to world food New Edition, 2013, New Internationalist and Stuffed and Starved, the hidden battle for the Worlds' Food System by Raj Patel, and In defense of food, by Michael Pollan)

# **Research Methodology**

## **The Research Team**

Maurita Prato MSc- Strategic Leadership towards Sustainability and Executive Director of LUSH Valley Food Action Society. Maurita has spent the last 15 years working and leading in the areas of local food production and food security advocacy and programming. She has run her own organic farming business and knows firsthand the barriers that new entrants to farming face.

Andrea Cupelli is the Coordinator of the Comox Valley Coalition to end Homelessness, the owner of Jump & Fly Consulting, and serves on the board for Dawn to Dawn: Action on Homelessness Society. Andrea has seen firsthand, the inextricable links between food security, housing and poverty in her previous work as Program Manager for LUSH, and as an urban farmer in Toronto.

## **Steps in the Research Process**

### **Scope for the project**

There are many institutions and housing providers in the Comox Valley that may serve people who are housing and food insecure. When scoping this project the focus remained on people living in transitional, supportive or social housing in the Comox Valley. This meant there was an ability to partner with housing providers to support tenants and the possibility of tenants to receive more consistent access to healthy local food over time. Limited time and resources were also factored in. By providing this scope we could show early successes that might lead to a more comprehensive model in the future. While recommendations might contribute to those living in private long term care facilitates or other groups wanting to purchase local food, they were not included in this study.

### **Timeline: December 2018- July 2019**

1. The research team drafted a community engagement strategy and brainstormed key informants in the community for this work. (*Please see appendix A for a list of people contacted and met with\**). The team looked for those that had specific knowledge and experience regarding local food production, local elected officials, institutional purchasing, people providing housing and/or meals and services to vulnerable people, and people with lived experiences of poverty (including housing and food insecurity).

*\*the original proposal didn't include local political leaders as informants to the action plan, however we found that there was an interest and benefit in engaging with several municipal and regional leaders, some of who attended community meetings and showed their support for the ideas generated.*

2. Dates for community meetings were set and presentations created to explain the project and goals for the research. (*Please refer to Appendix B*), promotional materials were

developed, and the community meetings were promoted throughout the community. The research team created a process for the meetings that included key questions for each (*Please see Appendix C for a full list of questions asked*)

3. The team presented the project proposal to each of the following groups; local food growers and producers, housing providers, and people with lived experience of food and housing insecurity. Afterwards, facilitated discussions were held via multiple community meetings in order to get in-depth input from each of the three groups.

The goal was to facilitate a process of community engagement to uncover two main sets of information. We wanted to understand the various barriers and needs of each community group (for example; farmers and growers had a need for expanding markets for local produce but also experienced barriers to finding new markets and distribution.).

The other goal was to discover social innovations and actions which could lead to region wide solutions and initiatives to address specific needs. (For example; a local food distribution system that was easy to use for growers and housing providers who are serving meals).

The anticipated outcome of these conversations was an action plan that points to the building of a new system of local food flows and resources to support needs across the spectrum of social, supportive and transitional housing.

Three group meetings were facilitated in the community, 2 focus groups (one of which was facilitated by a tenant support worker with more of a focus around services), and a total of 18 individual meetings took place including individual meetings with experts in social procurement, housing providers, growers and farmers, people with lived experience, community leaders and elected officials, community planners, other food security experts. (*see Appendix A for details*).

There were some changes from the initially proposed draft format of 4 community meetings, 4 focus groups and 8 individual meetings. Two of the community meetings were postponed due to weather (heavy snow) and another meeting was interrupted by the selection and preparation process by housing providers and outreach workers who were overwhelmed with getting tenants into 'The Junction' and 'The Station' - two new social housing facilities.

Some preliminary discussions were held, and there will be a continuation of more fulsome discussions once tenants have settled into their new housing.

4. The research team worked with the raw data and coded it so that key patterns and solutions could be recognized. The team considered background research on root causes and community solutions as well as the capacity and readiness within the region to determine their recommendations. A draft report was compiled.

5. On June 12th, 2019 the key findings and recommendations from the team's research and draft report were shared with the community and opened up to feedback.
6. Community feedback was integrated into the draft report and the report was completed in early July 2019. At this time the report was edited, finalized and submitted to the Vancouver Foundation as a part of their reporting process.

## **Research Findings**

### **Barriers to Closing the Loop in the Comox Valley**

It is important to continue to recognize that poverty is at the core of barriers experienced by people facing food insecurity. Our systems need changing, as there is a lack of equity in access to resources, perpetuated by capitalist global and local economic systems. Social service agencies, and local housing providers are also impacted by the systemic focus on emergency health and food services rather than empowerment, education and preventative measures.

The disadvantages of a commodity food market built on inequalities, subsidies and externalities is at the centre of the majority of barriers for local food producers. Local, fair food production is at a structural disadvantage in the global market, making it next to impossible for new, young, farmers to enter a food producing career.

When the symptoms of the core causes of these barriers are looked at, besides thinking about long term sustainability of any project or program that aims to close the loop on food security, other major barriers for local farmers, social housing providers and those experiencing food insecurity relate to the scale/scope of the local food system, with much consideration to be taken regarding infrastructure costs and needs on both ends of the farming and social housing/social service spectrum.

In the past, food producers in the Comox Valley found that produce orders for local procurement were either too big and challenging for small farms to fulfill especially without a paid coordinator to keep track of contracts, payments and deliveries, or too small and not financially viable when produce could be sold to markets at a higher price point.

Cost can be prohibitive to individuals experiencing food insecurity, social housing providers, agencies providing food programming who have limited budgets, and to farmers who cannot afford to sell their food for wholesale prices and cannot compete with global food pricing.

Both local food producers and social housing providers also experience the lack of infrastructure to support the local food system as a major barrier.

For farmers, especially new entrants, infrastructure costs such as equipment, land, and staffing can be challenging to fund, and can take years before a return on investment is seen. Appropriate agriculturally zoned land can be extremely difficult to find due to cost, leasing versus owning, and figuring out how much of the land to dedicate to food growing for social programs at less than market value. It can be challenging for farmers to find investors that would support growing food for social programming as there is often an assumption that they would need to be willing to forgo the full market value of local produce. For food growers and food purchasers the rising costs of fuel, land, food, supplies and wages for staff can be prohibitive.

Transportation is another major barrier both to people trying to access food programs such as hampers, soup kitchens, food banks, farmer's markets and grocery stores due to poorly serviced bus routes, physical challenges and other restrictions to accessing transportation. For local food producers, delivery is often not an option, and many social service agencies do not have the time, staff or vehicles to pick up produce.

Storage is also an issue, whether it is a not for profit agency operating a food hamper program who has no more room in the fridges and freezers needed to keep local produce fresh, farmers who lack the storage capacity on their own land, social housing providers who don't have appropriate kitchen space to cook and serve, and the very people who may benefit from local produce who may not have their own kitchen, fridge, stove or other tools necessary to cook.

To a lesser degree, concerns around liability and regulations can create a barrier to those who are providing food whether it be reclaimed, grown, or donated and rules, regulations and multi-year contracts with corporate food service providers for meals in social housing can also prevent local food from being purchased.

And finally, the lack of access to healthy food for those with lived experience, including the lack of access to food specifically for dietary considerations such as dental, dexterity, diabetes, low-sodium, and even a lack of culturally appropriate food. Some individuals may be resistant to eating produce due to never being introduced to them or other social barriers. Additionally, local food bank culture can be challenging where many people feel ashamed to go or feel there is a lack of fresh produce. Others simply cannot pick up food from the food bank due to restricted hours of operation.

## Assumptions

### **The high cost of local vs conventional food.**

There is an assumption that local food will be more expensive and more work than conventional food (or global food). The assumption that local is always more expensive than global food, was brought up in community conversations with a few interesting viewpoints.

Our research led us to speaking with Sandra Hamilton who has worked extensively on social procurement of local food in the Comox Valley to the then privately run St. Joseph's Hospital. There was an opportunity for a local food trial with 4 specific vegetables. The trial was found to be 'cost neutral' meaning there was no additional cost to the hospital to switch over to wholesaling local food. This cost neutrality was based on cutting out a number of players along the value chain and having the food come directly to the hospital from the farm.

At a group meeting, Arzeena Hamir (Farmer and Comox Valley Regional District Board of Director) spoke to the fact that the economics of local food systems are tied to different factors than just the global food system. Meaning that some elements that impact the global market may be different than the local food market. The suggestion was that factors such as stock market instability and climate change may give local food an edge in terms of stability and economic feasibility over the long term.

### **People experiencing food insecurity are unskilled, and don't want to eat healthy**

**"I loved watching the complexion of our tenants change from grey/white to a rosy blush from eating the fresh, organic greens; I loved witnessing the bulking up of individuals as they actually ate real food on a regular basis"** - Bev Miller tenant support worker

According to a recent study by the University of Toronto PROOF report on Food Insecurity in Canada, there is no indication that programs that simply teach people to cook or budget will reduce food insecurity. The study discovered that those who experience food insecurity have comparable food preparation, budgeting & cooking skills to those who are food secure. Only 2% of Canadians report not knowing where to start when it comes to cooking, regardless of food insecurity status.<sup>16</sup> However, in the Comox Valley people very much want more of these types of programs where people are not just learning to cook but will also have access to a healthy meal and eating together. The new Canada Food Guide speaks to the importance of eating together and this is something that these programs provide. These types of programs also act as an important wellness opportunity, decreasing social isolation and connecting people to more food access programs.

---

<sup>16</sup> <https://proof.utoronto.ca/food-insecurity>

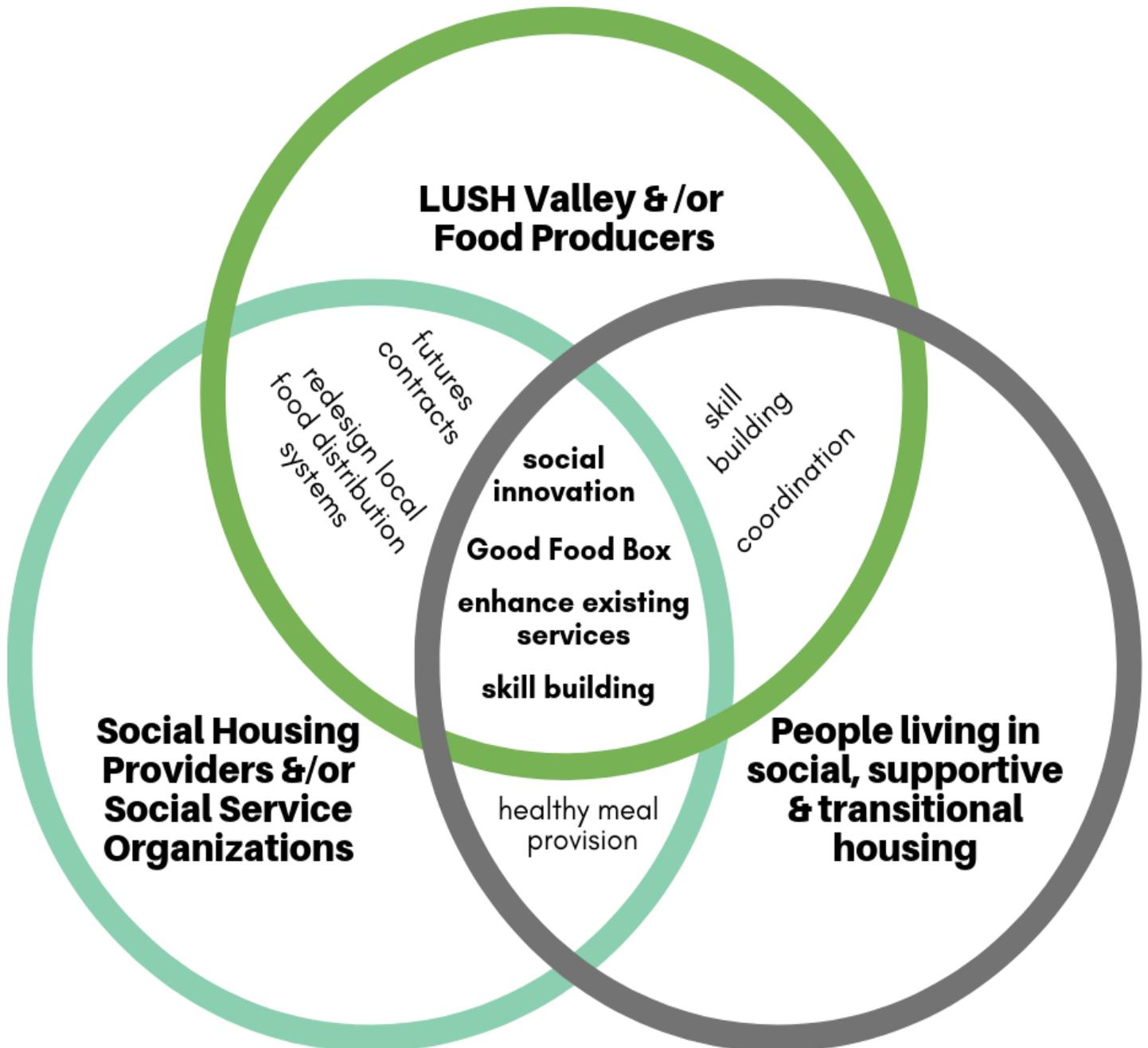
There was consensus from the people who access food programs and services, the social service agencies who provide them, as well as the food producers in the community that although there are many food programs in the Comox Valley such as food hampers, soup kitchens, and meals provided in social housing, that the quality of the food could be much improved by offering more local, fresh produce.

For many people who access food hampers or programs, they felt that having the option to choose some added fresh vegetables and fruit would go a long way in ensuring their personal food security. Many people also indicated the great need to include a range of foods for specific dietary requirements such as dental needs, diabetes, or low sodium options

DRAFT

## Ideas from the Community

This Venn diagram shows the intersection of the ideas that were proposed by local food producers, social housing providers & other social service agencies, as well as people living in social housing.



## **Programs that already exist and can be enhanced**

### **Food Literacy workshops**

Across the spectrum, food literacy workshops were the highest ranked suggestion of how we could improve people's lives. Many food literacy programs already exist in the Comox Valley, but an emphasis was placed on food literacy programs and workshops that were practical, affordable, and accessible.

Suggestions included enhancing the current The Farmers' Market Nutrition Coupon Program<sup>17</sup> for families, seniors and pregnant women by providing an opportunity for program participants to either take cooking workshops where they learn new ways of cooking with the produce from the market, or are given recipe cards with simple meals that can be made with commonly found local food items. A similar workshop series was suggested regarding the wide variety of items that could be found in a Food Bank Hamper.

These food literacy workshops would continue to be a space for people to access healthy food/meals and to reap the benefits of social inclusion while refreshing and building on food skills and learning new healthy recipes put together by farmers and regular families. The workshops would also focus on specialty classes such as: cooking for one, cooking for those who have limited kitchen equipment (ie; just a hot plate or microwave), dietary needs such as cooking low-sodium, diabetic friendly etc. and health benefits and tips from a registered dietician.

There was also an interest in 'on-site' cooking workshops and programs at supportive and transitional housing where communal meals are provided. Some farmers were even interested in building direct relationships with those in social housing by providing cooking workshops, or creating seasonal events around eating together.

### **Providing Healthier Options in Existing Food Programs**

There was consensus from the people who access food programs and services, the social service agencies who provide them, as well as the food producers in the community that although there are many food programs in the Comox Valley such as food hampers, soup kitchens, and meals provided in social housing, that the quality of the food could be much improved by offering more local, fresh produce.

Fresh produce is often missing or not abundant in local food hampers due to its perishable nature, cost, donation factors, and lack of refrigerated storage. For many people who access hampers, they felt that having the option to choose some added fresh vegetables (particularly

---

<sup>17</sup> <https://bcfarmersmarket.org/coupon-program/how-it-works/>

those that store well such as root veggies) and fruit would go a long way in ensuring their personal food security.

Hot meals from soup kitchens, lunch programs, and meals served in social housing and emergency shelters could also be improved by the addition of fresh, local produce.

Including a range of foods for specific dietary requirements such as dental needs, diabetes, or low sodium options would also go a long way to improve the health outcomes of those who are accessing food programs.

## **Community Gardens**

There were suggestions to increase community gardens and food growing skills through onsite gardens at housing locations and/or through existing farms and gardens. Currently, LUSH operates a community garden in the downtown core of Courtenay. The Share the Harvest Community Garden provides a safe and nurturing place where families and individuals who don't have access to garden space can grow food for themselves, their family and/or their community. Several social service agencies have clients growing food in the garden and attending facilitated food growing sessions. There is an opportunity for social housing providers to work with tenants to create on-site gardens. Local food producers identified the possibility to teach workshops on a rotating basis, and assist with garden planning, seed saving, or provide mentorships and consulting.

## **Farm Gleaning and Fruit Tree Programs**

LUSH Fruit Tree Program volunteers harvest and redistribute thousands of pounds of fresh fruit and produce from homes, farms and orchards that would otherwise go to waste, and redistributes the produce back to the community. The program increases access to fresh local produce for people who need it, decreases food waste and emissions and decreases bear and other animal attractants.

LUSH Valley is currently starting its second season of farm gleaning. The farm gleaning program uses a 'farm-centric' approach, meaning it trades labour when farmers need it most in exchange for produce that is unsaleable. In the 2018 season the program worked with 12 farms, and 10 community partners and brought in and distributed a value of \$23,000 in produce for a \$12,000 cost for coordination and distribution.

Community partners who received local produce included tenants at BC Housing's Washington Park Apartments:

**"The impact of this program is amazing, our tenants have access to quality food and it has changed the social dynamics of the community. I see people chatting over the food, talking about recipes and interacting in a whole new way"** - *Bev Miller*  
*tenant support worker*

This program is a good example of a social innovation that integrates volunteerism and captures additional value in the local food system. Programs such as the farm gleaning program can help to keep costs of a program such as a 'good food box' low.

Local food producers, social housing providers, and service agencies were all interested in continuing to be involved in these programs and receiving produce, providing produce or volunteering to glean. One new addition to this program would be to start connecting food growers/volunteers to those who have backyard space using the Farm Gleaning model.

## **New programs that can help in closing the loop**

### **Good Food Box Program**

One of the ideas that was brought up by food producers, housing providers, social service agencies and people experiencing food insecurity was a local 'Good Food Box'.

A Good Food Box could provide a weekly box of local produce, as well as rescued and gleaned fruits and vegetables from the LUSH Valley Farm Gleaning and Fruit Tree Programs. Volunteers (including those with lived experience) interested in receiving a good food box could sort and pack the Good Food Box. Delivery of the box to neighbourhood or social housing pick-up sites would be preferable. Some local farmers are willing to provide produce at a below market rate, or culled at ½ price, or via the farm gleaning program where volunteer labour on their farms is exchanged for produce. Some of the people with lived experience indicated they would be willing to pay up to \$12.50 a week for the box, or that they could partner with others to share a box, therefore reducing costs. The Good Food Box model is also an opportunity for those in transitional and supportive housing who have their own kitchen space, and a free Good Food Box could be offered to all new residents to welcome them to the space and encourage them to sign up for the program.

Much like the food literacy workshops, it was suggested that we offer simple recipes and fact sheets about the produce offered inside the box to enhance food literacy.

## **Training, Employment and Skills Building Programs**

Programs related to building skills and providing training and employment programs in the local food system came up frequently among local food producers and social service agencies, but to a lesser degree from those with lived experience.

Suggested areas of training and employment were in farming and growing food, kitchen and cooking, delivery and transportation and the sorting and distribution of a Good Food Box. In the future, there may be more employment and skill building opportunities in providing services, as opposed to local products. A Good Food Box could tie together the service and product training opportunities.

There is a lot of interest and potential within the transitional recovery programs where residents are required to do some sort of workforce training as part of their recovery program, as well as developing peer mentorship programs around employment skills.

There are also already existing local employment and skill building programs in the community who could assist in matching people from a range of different backgrounds and demographics to labour and training opportunities related to food growing.

Local food producers indicated that there was a high interest and need to find funding for farm intern positions, and to incentivize a new population of farmers.

There was less interest at this time from those experiencing food insecurity in kitchen/cooking or farm training internships. However, there was an interest in participating in LUSH's Farm Gleaning and Fruit Tree Program which is a gentle entrance into the world of farming. Working and organizing produce and working with local farmers can be a lead-in to future farm training for those who are interested.

## **Future Contracts and Coordination for Local Food Producers**

Perhaps the biggest and most important idea is to create a system for coordinating and creating 'futures contracts' with local food producers. These contracts are necessary to provide any of the suggested or improved programs outlined in this report.

A hired coordinator would be necessary to establish contracts between social service agencies and housing providers with local food producers, as well as to manage revolving orders, payments, deliveries, volunteer/training programs, ensuring all parties adhere to local VIHA regulations, Food Safety certifications and other administrative and operational tasks needed to ensure the ongoing success of programs.

The earlier contracts are established with local food producers the better for crop planning. Ideally, contracts and deposits would be completed between August and December. Minimum amounts, levels of processing (less processing means lower cost) requested crops, quantities,

for how many people, and some flexibility around variables, (such as seasonality, weather, crop failures, gluts etc) need to be taken into consideration within the contracts. Housing providers would prefer to have year-round orders, and the coordinator could consider different farms to provide different produce to ensure a wider variety of goods for food programs, meals, and Good Food Boxes. Local food producers cannot price their food lower than wholesale but bulk ordering helps to reduce the cost making it appropriately affordable for social programs.

Ensuring contracts can also be extremely helpful for new entrants to farming, and gives them a target to attain and provides financial stability if contracts are year-round.

## **Emerging Local Food and Food Security Initiatives in the Comox Valley**

The following are initiatives that are outside of the scope of this action plan but would help support or augment the suggestions in this report.

### **Comox Valley Local Food Aggregation and Distribution Hub**

At the time this report was being written there was interest from the province (BC Ministry of Agriculture) to look at a feasibility study for the Comox Valley, with the potential to further support a local food aggregation and distribution plan (with a likely focus on schools). The hope is that this action plan, and the feasibility study could inform and support one another.

### **Comox Valley Food Policy Council**

Also at the time that this report was written, the Comox Valley Regional District has given LUSH the go-ahead to form a regional Food Policy Council to support planning processes within the region and provide support for best practices with regards to food security, local food production and food systems education. The CVFPC will be recruiting its members in the summer of 2019 and aims to have the first meeting in the early fall of 2019. *(For a look at the draft Terms of Reference and background documents please see Appendix D).*

### **Other suggestions from the community**

A few other ideas were brought up that could be of benefit in the future once other programs have been established and successful. These ideas currently don't have a clear path forward either due to capacity or scale.

A meal delivery service for those who are isolated or have severe barriers to accessing food and reducing social isolation, something similar to a subsidized and healthy 'Meals on Wheels' service.

Multi-generational housing on a farm, which could provide the food for social housing in the community, creating a small closed loop system.

## **Recommendations**

Many of our recommendations come directly from the community meetings we undertook. Because of this, the recommendations section is brief as full concepts of these recommendations are mainly described above.

### **Social Housing Inventory and Food Programing Needs and Recommendations**

In order to better illustrate the scale of our recommendations within our community we have created an infographic.

The Comox Valley Coalition to End Homelessness has a Housing and Supports Continuum which is updated annually and acts as an inventory of current social housing. 129 residents are being served meals as part of their housing agreement, which indicates the opportunity exists for 9 potential 'futures' contracts between local food producers and social housing providers, 9 potential employee/skills training opportunities, and 946 potential Good Food Box recipients. This inventory does not include people who are accessing food programs, community kitchens, or the food bank who may also be interested in receiving a Good Food Box.

The following infographic gives a snapshot of the Comox Valley's social housing community, and how their food access and programing needs may best be met based on our research.

# Social Housing Inventory and Food Programing Needs Assessment

**Emergency Shelters**  
 Salvation Army  
 Pidcock Shelter  
**26 people**  
  
 LILLI House Shelter  
**14 people**  


**Supportive Housing**  
 John Howard Society  
 The Junction  
**46 people**  


**Transitional Housing**  
 Dawn to Dawn Action on  
 Homelessness Society  
**46 people**  
  
 John Howard Society  
 The Station  
**11 people**  
  
 Comox Valley  
 Recovery Centre  
**11 people**  
  
 Stepping Stones  
 Recovery Centre  
**8 people**  
  
 Amethyst House  
**7 people**  
  
 Salvation Army  
**6 people**  


**Subsidized Housing**  
 BC Housing  
**151 people**  
  
 Housing for seniors/people  
 with disabilities  
**570 people**  
  
 M'akola Housing  
**88 people**  
  
 Comox Valley Transition  
 Society  
**4 people**  
  
 Maple Pool Campground  
**52 people**  
  
 Avalanche Hotel  
**35 people**  


**Symbol Key**



meals are served onsite



potential for a contract with local food producer(s)



skill building



potential recipients of a Good Food Box

  
**129** people served meals as part of their housing agreement

  
**9** potential futures contracts with local growers for social housing where meals are served

  
**9** potential employment skills program opportunities (*Good Food Box, food growing, cooking etc.*)

  
**946** potential Good Food Box program recipients

## **Food Systems solutions to Food Systems Problems**

When the needs and the suggested actions from the community are brought together, it is easy to see there is a systems level change needed to create the majority of these recommendations. There is a need for a 'disruption in the global food resource flow' and to redesign a new local food flow.

### **Redesigning a system of local food aggregation and distribution**

The first overarching recommendation is for a local food-to-housing coordinator who can focus on the aggregation and distribution of local food to housing providers, people with lived experience and existing food programs.

In order to achieve these goals, across all of the recommendations there is a need to disrupt current systems and food resource flows. Housing providers may want to provide more healthy local food to their tenants, but feel that there are no alternatives to purchasing food from the larger industrial food providers. In order to support housing providers to include more local and healthy food, food producers and housing providers need to work together to create new pathways and local food flows across the region. Due to the complex needs of various local food producers, housing and service providers, and people with lived experience, a coordinator/distributor role is needed to 'disrupt' current food flows and create new pathways and agreements between local growers and people living in social housing. Once new systems and relationships can be established the ideal is that over time there would be less dependent on a 'brokerage' organization to support the ongoing perpetuation of a new system. For the first few years in order to establish a new food system a lead organization is needed. The suggestion is that LUSH Valley Food Action Society is well positioned to take this on, due to the existing networks, supports and staffing of the organization.

The first task would be to get even more clear on the needs of all of the players and then designing a new system of local food flows (aggregation and distribution) between key partners until these relationships and networks are established and become more normative.

Again, there is a need for a lead organization that can be creative about taking away some of the financial risk for housing and other service providers that want their tenants and clients to have more local and food programming access and participation.

By having an organization set up contracts between growers and organizations, and providing help with distribution and food costing there will be more support over the long term.

LUSH Valley has already established some socially innovative programs that provide local food to people with barriers at no to low cost. These programs would continue to lower the overall costs of access to local food and include community solutions such as Fruit Tree and Farm Gleaning Programs, and community gardens with free access to plots to learn how to grow

food. All of our proposed recommendations would include participation from people with lived experience, providing returns on investment that go much deeper than financial.

## **Social innovation approach**

Throughout this project we looked to our local community to provide local and specific knowledge to create suggestions that will work for our community. A Socially innovative approach is about creating solutions together and supporting those solutions on the ground. This plan takes a 'slow grow' or iterative approach to leave time to 'pivot' or make small changes as we grow.

## **Shared cost model**

For each of the proposed solutions we are looking at a shared costing model during the 3 year trial period. This means housing providers would be asked to use some of their existing budget for food and programming towards these program(s). Additional fundraising for coordination, local food and food programs would continue with a long term goal of less dependence on fundraising once new local food flows were established. (See appendix # for more information on funding streams).

## **Futures contracts/healthy meal provision and Good Food Box**

A new system of local food aggregation and distribution will allow for the slow growing of 'Futures' contracts and a Good Food Box.

'Futures' contracts are contracts between local food growers/producers and housing providers that are agreed upon in advance of the growing season to allow for crop planning to meet the needs of the housing providers. The hope is that these contacts will provide local food in season to housing providers that provide meals to their tenants/clients. In the Comox Valley we currently have 129 residents of social housing who are offered one or more meals.

A Good Food Box is an (often) a weekly delivery of local produce in season. The produce can be aggregated and sorted by volunteers and then delivered. The good food box is usually subsidized and offered on a sliding scale. We would recommend that tenants help with the aggregation and sorting and that the boxes are picked up at their respective housing locations. In the Comox Valley we currently have up to 946 tenants that have their own kitchenettes and may be interested in receiving a weekly in season good food box.

## **Enhancing existing services**

As mentioned above there are many existing services which housing and food insecure people in our community utilize. We are suggesting that with the development of a local food aggregation and distribution system there will be an increase in local food available for these existing programs.

## **Skill building programs**

The research indicates 9 current opportunities with housing providers for more food literacy/food education programs (such as community kitchens, community gardens) for with people facing food insecurity. These 9 housing providers have an existing budget for skills building programs for their clients/tenants, and the proposed outcomes of these programs would be higher quality of life and wellness.

## **Three year plan: 2020-2022**

When we spoke with Sandra Hamilton and others about social procurement and local food, we asked the question 'why didn't the social procurement work with the hospital?' Sandra indicated that the producers simply couldn't keep up with the demand. When we suggested an approach that was iterative she thought that a 'slow growth' of the local food market would be best. One farmer suggested that the local food economy (from the producers point of view) could grow at 15% each year. The question of the rate of which the local food economy can grow is outside the scope of this report, but generally speaking it seemed important to grow markets at a pace that could allow for a flexible platform so that if we needed to pivot this was possible. This will be 'action research' as we test the concept.

### **2020**

- Work with local growers and producers, and housing providers to set 2 or more 'future' contracts for providing meals for tenants/clients.
- Pilot a Good Food Box program for up to 50 tenants- tenants would be involved with sorting and packing produce.
- Work with an existing program to integrate more local food into their program
- Provide a 'menu' of sliding scale (shared cost) food literacy and skill building programs (food growing, cooking and eating together programs) for housing providers.
- Create an evaluation system that focuses on two sets of indicators:
  - a. Tenant wellness
  - b. Measuring the success of expanding the local food market.

## 2021

- Use the evaluation system to make improvements to programming
- Maintain existing futures contracts and add 2 or more.
- Expand the good food box up to 100 tenants
- Continue to offer a sliding scale 'menu' of food literacy/food skills programming.
- Work with another partner to integrate local food into an existing program.
- Evaluation

## 2022

- Maintain and grow programming from year 2.
- Major evaluation

## **Conclusion**

This report suggests that food systems changes are needed to start to address the root causes of food insecurity and the unsustainability of global food systems. This will be accomplished through a socially innovative process of community input and by deepening relationships with social housing partners and local growers, by providing local food access and programming through a good food box, and the injection of local food into existing food programs, as well as the development of a menu of food literacy and skill building opportunities to people who live with housing and food insecurity. All along the way, measuring well-being impacts, and entering into long term contracts between growers and housing providers in order to grow capacity in the Comox Valley.

The ideal is a move towards empowerment and away from social isolation- supporting the social determinants of health and increasing health and well being outcomes over the long term

A successful long term plan and project would include measurable long term health and well-being outcomes for food-insecure tenants in social housing, as well as measuring the increased flows of local food resources with increased incentives for growers.

The next step will be finding the resources to support a local food aggregation and distribution system that offers an alternative to the conventional global food system. The results could bolster community capitals such as: social, natural, cultural, and financial capital, while providing long term community health and well-being outcomes. Our hope is that this action plan will inspire continued growth of the local food system and a reduction of overall food insecurity for the Comox Valley.