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Innovations from the Margins: The Community Ideas Factory community collaboration

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Innovations from the Margins: Creating Inclusive and Equitable Academic-Community Research Collaborations

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Abstract:

This paper explores the importance of building more inclusive, equitable, and mutually-beneficial partnerships in academic-community research collaborations for social innovation. The Community Ideas Factory is a research project that examines food security, affordable housing, employment equity and wrap-around services in the Region of Halton in Ontario, Canada. The project is a unique and dynamic collaboration between researchers from Sheridan College and the Oakville Community Foundation. In recognizing the limitations of traditional, paternalistic, subjective academic-community research collaborations this paper discusses how Participatory Rural Appraisal tools and other community-based problem-solving activities can be used to help communities define and prioritize their own problems, identify resources, and develop practical solutions to the problems they experience. We seek to demonstrate the potential of a new role for the ‘researcher’; one in which she/he assumes a more active and dynamic, yet facilitative, role in community project-building. Drawing examples from our research into food security this examination aims to provide insights, directions, and considerations for scholars, community stakeholders, and granting agencies alike who share an

interest in the prospects and possibilities of academic-community collaborations for social innovation research.

Keywords

Academic-Community Collaboration, Community Based Participatory Research, Participatory Action Research, Creative Problem Solving, Food Security, Participatory Rural Appraisal

Introduction:

As part of its ongoing efforts at social innovation, the Canadian government recently launched new funding initiatives that seek to connect the talent, facilities and capabilities of Canada's post-secondary institutions with the research needs of local community organizations. The aim of these initiatives is the facilitation of "collaborative social innovation research that brings together researchers, students and community partners to address research challenges in social innovation, leading to solutions addressing a Canadian community need" (Natural Science and Engineering Research Council of Canada, 2017, p.1). These funding initiatives are welcomed, often with great fanfare, as post-secondary institutions are seen as offering valuable resources to be leveraged in support of innovation in the non-profit sector (Conference Board of Canada, 2010).

Yet, in our enthusiasm, we may miss the *de facto* reality of academic-community collaborative research; namely, that conducting an equitable, productive, and mutually-beneficial academic-community research study is a challenging task. With 'research' being the traditional purview of the academy, it is not uncommon to find 'community partners' passively positioned as 'subjects' by their adept and well-meaning academic counterparts in research studies that provide much researcher benefit in the form of publications, publicity, and future grant funding but offer little concrete value or substantive benefit to the community partner (see: Ahmed et. al., 2004). In our own discussions with friends in the not-for-profit sector, we hear echoes of Green et al. that conventional academic research can be paternalistic and irrelevant to their specific needs (1995).

How, then, might we build more inclusive, equitable, and mutually-beneficial partnerships in our academic-community research collaborations for social innovation? Thankfully, a large body of social science literature has theorized activist participatory approaches for better positioning participants and community in the research processes. These approaches include, but are not limited to, "participatory research" (see: Green et al., 1995), "participatory action research" (see: McIntyre, 2008), "action research" (see: Stringer, 2007), and "community-based participatory research" (see: Israel et al, 2013). Adding to these approaches, some scholars are reaching into the toolkits of 'development practitioners' in an effort to find the appropriate tools for enabling the 'participatory processes' advocated for in the aforementioned literature. Sethi and Belliard (2009) exemplify this new movement in their application of development planning tools, such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools, in facilitating the process of self-discovery of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) in the context of participatory health assessments in Haiti. In merging the *concepts* and *processes* of activist participatory research with the *tools* of participatory development practitioners, Sethi and Belliard hint at the possibility of a new and more dynamic research relationship; one in

which the researcher's role is to serve as convenor, catalyst, facilitator, and advocate of the needs assessments, prioritizations, and solutions developed by communities themselves.¹

In this paper, we present and discuss our own attempts in this regard. Specifically, we discuss a research project for Food Security in the Region of Halton in Ontario, Canada. The project is a collaboration between researchers from Sheridan College and the Oakville Community Foundation (OCF). The OCF is a community organization tasked with managing and disbursing donor contributions for philanthropic projects in the Town of Oakville. In 2016, the OCF approached the Sheridan research team for assistance in improving the efficiency and effectiveness in their grant application and disbursement process. Both parties agreed that gains could be made if new funding proposals were developed collectively by clients (service users) and agencies (service providers) alike. Such an approach stands in contrast to the past practice wherein individual charities developing their own proposals, independent of knowledge about what others are doing, in response to a broadly positioned Request for Proposal (RFP) issued by the OCF. Hence, to facilitate a new, collective, and participatory approach to directing donor funding, we brought 48 Food Bank 'neighbours' (service users) and agency representatives (service providers) together to participate in two problem-solving sessions. Here, we used a combination of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools such as cause/effect mapping and mind-mapping, and community problem-solving activities such as brainstorming, dot-voting, and stakeholder assessments in order to produce 'fundable solutions' that could then be brought before the Oakville Funders' Roundtable for project funding consideration.

Our intention in this paper is show how PRA tools and other community-based problem-solving activities can be used to help communities define and prioritize their own problems, identify resources, and come-up with their own practical solutions to the problems they experience. In what follows, we outline the unique stages of our research, drawing attention to both the participatory methods deployed and the findings they produced. Taken as a whole, the article means to provide insights, directions, and considerations for scholars, community stakeholders, and granting agencies alike who share an interest in the prospects and possibilities of academic-community collaborations for social innovation research.

Background to the Study: The "Community Ideas Factory" Initiative

Established in 1994, the Oakville Community Foundation (OCF) plays an influential role in the Town of Oakville by linking philanthropic families and organizations with the needs of the local community. Managing the contributions of Oakville's donors, the OCF seeks to ensure that funds are utilized in a way that they can continually make an impact on the local community year after year. In the spring of 2015, the OCF approached a team of researchers from Sheridan College to help develop and facilitate a series of *Creative Problem Solving* workshops that would engage community stakeholders in a "Community Conversations" event in a discussion of the key issues to be addressed and included in the OCF's upcoming 2015 Vital Signs Report. In this effort, Sheridan College hosted several Creative Problem-Solving workshops for over 20 community agencies in the summer of 2015. The results of these sessions were included in the OCF's 2015 Vital Signs Report and specifically, were used to identify the most significant issues

¹ This sentiment is well expressed in the work of Robert Chambers and his advocacy for PRA as technique for development practice. Though Chambers writings are primarily centered on the role of the 'development practitioner' as 'outsider', his insight and concepts have more recently informed a re-casting of the role of the academic researcher (as outsider) in community-based collaborations in the developing world. See: Chambers, R. (1994). The Origins and Practice of Participatory rural Appraisal. *World Development*, 22 (7): 953-969.

affecting quality of life in the Oakville community. Among the key target areas identified for action in the Report were Food Security, Access to Affordable Housing, Employment Equity, and Mental Health.

Success in this initial collaboration sparked new conversations between the Sheridan team and the OCF about how to advance progress on the Vital Signs issues. Both parties agreed that advances could be made by improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the application and disbursement process for allocating funds in the Halton Region. Specifically, it was agreed that gains could be made by adopting a more broad-based, participatory, and collectivist approach to the funding process. Here, the move towards ‘participation’ was initially embraced for its *instrumental* value; including: a) better alignment of strategic funding priorities of the RFP’s with the needs and priorities identified by front-line clients and service providers, b) a reduction in proposal duplication and inter-agency competition in funding competitions; and c) improved inter-agency coordination, collaboration, and resource-sharing in proposal development and new program planning. Beyond its instrumental value, the team also recognized the capacity of ‘participatory approaches’ to increase the independence, awareness, and capacity of marginalized populations using the services.

These conversations materialized as “The Community Ideas Factory”; a proposed project that would leverage Sheridan’s research and creativity expertise, its creative spaces, and its creativity resources in supporting the Foundation’s efforts to implement a participatory decision-making approach with a view towards the creation of new, fundable projects that align with and advance work on key Vital Signs issues. The project team secured funding for initiative from the College-Community Social Innovation Fund of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) in 2016. Over the course of the project’s two-year life-cycle, the partners would apply participatory approaches in order to build new ‘program concepts’ that would address four key Vital Signs issues areas; namely and in order: Affordable Housing; Food Security; Employment Equity; and Wrap-around Support Services.

The principle of ‘broad-based, community participation’ figured centrally in this partnership and ensuing research. Specifically, the Project Team adopted the principles of “Community-Based Participatory Research” (CBPR) in order to guide our research approach. While various definitions abound, CBPR can be loosely defined as “systematic inquiry, with the participation of those affected by the problem, for the purposes of education and action or affecting social change” (Green et al. 1995: 2). Defined in this way, the Project Team gravitated towards CBPR in light of its emphasis on the active involvement of community organizations or members in framing all stages of the research process (Savage et al 2006; O’Fallen & Dearth, 2002; Israel et al, 1998) as well as its non-traditional ‘results-orientation’ and emphasis on ‘action’ as a critical part of the research process (Minkler et al, 2011). In order to ensure effective and authentic community involvement in decision-making of the “Community Ideas Factory” itself, the project partners established a Project Advisor Committee (PAC), which would serve as a standing advisory community for the project team. Specifically, and according to the Terms of Reference established for it, the PAC was tasked with providing the project partners with strategic input, consultation, and feedback on proposed research directions; providing strategic consultation and feedback on matters related to community-based activities such as event planning, invitations, and scheduling; providing information and updates about existing research, policy and/or program initiatives that may be of interest and/or relevance to the project; providing aid and direction in the communication, dissemination and celebration of notable project achievements. PAC members included the Executive Director of Food for Life

(the largest food recovery program provider in the Region), the Director of Community Development at the Halton Poverty Roundtable, the CEO of the United Way of Oakville, and the CEO of the YMCA of Oakville.

In January 2017, the Community Ideas Factory began its work on the Vital Signs issue of “Food Security”. Our approach to this topic utilized a three-step process. In Step 1, we used the PRA tools of cause/effect mapping and mind-mapping to work with Food Bank “neighbours²” in order to identify challenges and obstacles in the area; with specific attention to the lived-experience. In Step 2, we used the information from Step 1 to engage a community stakeholders in problem-solving workshops with a view towards creating social innovations for greater efficiency and/or effectiveness in the target area. We cross-reference findings from both steps with our understanding of the research on Food Security in Canada and elsewhere. We outline the methodological procedures and findings from these steps below:

Methods and Findings:

A series of participatory data collection activities were undertaken with people who access services in the targeted area. The overarching purpose of this first step is exploratory and descriptive: to draw on a combination of formal research and direct empirical realities to garner a deeper understanding of the nature of the problem (in terms of related service barriers and gaps) and to generate a collaborate list of ideal programming characteristics to be considered by funders, policy-makers, and programmers in the targeted area. Data collection was conducted with Food Bank Users (Neighbours) held at the Oakville Neighbourhood Centre on February 22, 2017. The number of Neighbours participating in activities fluctuated between 35 to 48 participants throughout the activities. Some participants came for lunch however left before the activities were fully underway; others came part way through the activities as they came after stopping at their normal food program or once their children were in programs for the afternoon. In total, we collected data from 36 Neighbours.

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) Techniques: Cause/Effect Mapping

Cause-effect mapping is central to many forms of project planning among development agencies. A PRA tool for cause-effect mapping, known as call ‘Problem tree mapping’ (see: World Food Programme, 2001), was used to help the group find solutions by mapping out the anatomy of cause and effect around the issue of ‘low access to quality food’. This methodology allowed us to break down the problem of ‘food access’ into definable themes and to better understand the interconnected and even contradictory causes of ‘neighbours’ challenges’ in accessing quality food. In this exercise, the problem of ‘low access to quality food’ was written in the centre of the flip chart and became the ‘trunk’ of the tree as the ‘focal problem’. Next, the group identified the causes of the focal problem (the roots). Next, the group identified the consequences, which become the branches. These causes and consequences were created *by the group* through the discussion. Of greatest interest in this exercise was the discussion, debate and dialogue that was generated by participants as they arranged factors and formed sub-dividing roots and branches; all of which helped us better define the nature of the problems neighbours confront in accessing quality food.

² In Halton Region the nonprofits located within the food sector refer to foodbank and program users as neighbours, thus we have adopted their terminology here.

Problem-Tree mapping facilitated nuanced discussions and accompanying visual depictions that helped neighbours, artists, and facilitators define and articulate the nature of the problem vis-à-vis its interconnected and even contradictory causes and consequences. Together, these discussions pointed to four main barriers to accessing healthy food in Halton and five main consequences of these barriers. These identified sets of factors, which correspond with findings from the literature review.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

The four main causes of ‘low access to healthy food’ identified by neighbours were: 1) lack of financial means; 2) challenges and obstacles navigating access to food services; 3) lack of quality, quantity, and variety of foods available at food banks; and 4) experiences of stigmatization when accessing food services. The first of these – that is, an inability to afford required foods because of income levels – was the most often cited barrier to neighbours’ food security. Other noted access-related barriers included not knowing the location of local food banks, not having transportation to get to food banks or other food services, and not being able (or wanting) to access food banks when you must provide proof of food insecurity and/or when you experience discrimination and stigmatization for needing to access them.

At the same time as many participants expressed gratitude that food programs exist in Halton (and more broadly), they also had notable concerns about both the quantity, quality and variety of foods offered thereat, as well as the humiliation they felt because of their need to access these services to provide basic nutrition for their families. In the former case, neighbours’ most common concern was in relation to a general absence in local food banks of healthy foods that also meet varying health and cultural needs (e.g. diabetics, gluten allergies, vegans, halal) and/or that are ‘kid friendly’ (i.e. neighbours with young children asserted a desperate need for baby formula and baby food). In relation to feeling stigmatized, neighbours noted that not only did they feel general shame for having to rely on food banks, but they also felt incredibly judged by other food bank users and volunteer staff when accessing these and related services.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Of course, barriers to accessing healthy food in Halton have real consequences in peoples lives. Six such themes emerged: low physical health; low mental health; low emotional health; financial crisis; feelings of isolation; generational issues. The former three of these themes are inter-related and somewhat difficult to pull apart. Nevertheless, from neighbours’ experiential knowledges, the research team identified separate aspects of this components of overall health and well-being. For example, most neighbours noted a deterioration in their physical health (i.e. strength) due to being chronically hungry and/or skipping meals to ensure that their children eat. Participants also related numerous negative effects their being chronically hungry and/or concerned about potential hunger had on mental aspects of their health: feelings of hopelessness, depression, lethargy, stress, and anxiety, for example. Given these experiences, it is not surprising that many participants also noted significant deteriorations in their emotional wellbeing. Within this thematic grouping, senior neighbours articulated that they never imagined that after working and paying taxes for most of their lives they would end up in a situation where they needed to rely “on handouts” and those with children to feed said they felt great shame and

embarrassment for their decided personal inability to provide adequate nutrition for their families.

The latter three above-listed consequences of neighbours' 'low access to healthy food' also are inter-related. For example, some participants spoke about financial consequences such as being so hungry that they felt they had to make the decision to forgo paying bills (e.g. hydro and/or rent) so that they could purchase food instead while other people suggested that their hunger-related inability to concentrate resulted in them losing their employment. Building on this theme, some participants stated that a continual inability to provide food for their children resulted in them moving in with and/or relying on family members for food and money. In some cases, this necessity resulted in family breakdowns and thus isolation – an issue that is exasperated by a general inability to socialize outside of the home due to a lack of necessary finances. Finally, participants who had children at home to feed expressed not only shame and embarrassment that they cannot independently provide adequate nutrition for their families, but also fear about reproducing poverty and related stigmatization in their children's lives. They articulated this by reasoning that children who lack nutritious food are unable to concentrate at school and that even those children who are lucky enough to attend a school with a child hunger program are stigmatized for accessing such services. The participants noted that their children often exhibited behavioural problems at school that they felt certain was directly related to their lack of nutrition and subsistence.

The findings from the Problem-Tree Mapping exercises corroborated much of what we found in the literature on Food Security in Canada. For example, a Toronto-based report on food bank usage conducted by Loopstra and Tarasuk (2012) found that almost all families who accessed food banks communicated concern about being able to meet their food needs, or not being able to do so.³ For instance, 22% of families felt that their food needs were unmatched with what was provided at food banks in terms of nutrition (i.e. lack of availability of fresh fruits and vegetables) and/or necessary dietary and/or cultural restrictions (e.g., Halal). Specifically, these families described receiving rotten produce, "junk food", foods that were past their "best before" dates, and/or only canned foods. Moreover, many people expressed the feeling that this general, overall poor quality of foods offered makes it not worthwhile for them to access food banks.

A meta-analysis of research on food bank systems across different countries, including Canada, by Bazerghi, McKay, and Dunn (2016) supports these findings. This research corroborates our own findings in pointing out that people who access food banks want a greater range of foods, particularly more fruits and vegetables, dairy, and meats. At the same time as these researchers highlight a desire among recent immigrants who access food banks for more culturally appropriate foods, they also point to a more general desire among people who access food banks for greater consistency across food items and quantities, especially for staple items and age and health related "special needs food" (e.g. nutrient-rich foods to support children's cognitive development and ability to learn).

Together, these sources stress at least two aspects of this issue. First, they highlight the common belief that food banks are responsible for providing 100% of households' grocery needs when, in fact, most programs are designed only to supplement people's food and/or nutritional

³ Thirty percent of families were identified as severely food insecure, 32 percent were moderately food insecure, and 13 percent were marginally food insecure. This study also reported that an overwhelming 91 percent of families indicated they would have needed to spend more money to meet the needs of their household compared to the previous month at the time of the interview (Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2012).

needs. At the same time, these studies emphasize an increasing demand for more food item diversity from food banks, and to commonly reported access-related difficulties from a range of culturally diverse populations vis-à-vis communicating and having their food-related needs heard, for examples, and/or receiving information about how to use unfamiliar foods.

Compounding these findings, our own findings, and the broader research point to a need for an extensive restructuring if these services and related programs are to allow people to meet their food-related needs with dignity. Warren (2011), for example, examined the experiences of two single mothers' who were former food bank clients. Consistent with Loopstra and Tarasuk's (2012) research, Warren (2011) found that people who access food banks are resistant to accept charitable food donations and thus often they find themselves struggling to negotiate feelings of pride with the need to attain food for themselves and/or their children. Moreover, as the mothers' in Warren's (2011) study explained, these agitations only increase with the realization that, in many cases, food banks are the only available means to meet these needs.

Again, this may be especially true for people who receive social assistance (welfare) and who had little money left for groceries after paying for other life expenses; as one mother in Warren's (2011) study explained, rent accounts for three quarters of her already meagre monthly income, thus requiring her – somehow – to budget the remaining 25% to meet all her family's other basic living expenses (i.e. food, clothing, transportation, etc.). As this all too common example makes clear, hunger co-exists with (and is a symptom of) poverty; as such, "the best and most effective way to put an end to food insecurity is to work collaboratively to develop strong public policy that tackles the root causes of the problem... [b]y addressing the [inter-related] need for affordable housing, secure employment, and improvements to social assistance" (Ontario Association of Food Banks, 2017 p. 21).

Recognition that food banks are no longer just providing temporary hunger relief has caused many food banks and their supporters to challenge the present situation and to spearhead the fight against chronic food insecurity. For example, Halton has taken a lead in this area by conducting numerous surveys aimed at identifying specific agency and community food needs. In addition, with its strong base of dedicated volunteers and enthusiasm among local organizations to collaborate and support one another, along with an emergent community awareness about issues of poverty and hunger, the Region hosts the largest food drive in Canada. Moreover, in 2016 the Executive Director of Food for Life shared a number of hunger relief efforts currently being implemented in Halton, which included: 15 food banks and agencies with food banks; 38 Outreach Programs; 40 food distribution agencies; 19+ food literacy programs, community gardens and community kitchens; 8+ collaboratives involved directly/indirectly with food/income related issues.

At a systems level, Canadian food banks are becoming more aware of existing nutritional deficiencies and are continuously working to integrate new strategies to increase the supply of fresh produce being offered. This is often reflected through the development of partnerships with community gardens, community kitchens, and farmers' markets, as well as implementation of strategic policies to ensure a certain level of adequacy of fresh produce donations and infrastructural investments in refrigeration (Food Banks Canada, 2012). For example, integrated farm-based programs like the ones implemented by The Stop Community Food Centre (n.d) in Toronto are examples of notable responses to reported shortages of fresh produce at food banks. As Levkoe and Wakefield (2011) note, The Stop has developed and introduced a policy that prioritizes the purchasing of local products and the fostering of direct relationships with local farmers and suppliers. To this end, monthly, this Centre uses a dedicated grant to purchase a

topic quality “food of the month”, which is typically a fresh produce item that is organic and sourced from a local farmer.

PRA Technique: Mind-Mapping

Following the cause/effect mapping exercise, group facilitators and illustrators captured participants’ informed contributions, this time as a Mind Map: a graphic technique particularly appropriate for working with groups to generate ideas around a single concept or theme, which in this case was ‘Ideas for Making your Food Program Better.’

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

Artists wrote this phrase and wrapped it in an image in the center of another blank flipchart page. Next, the teams worked to brainstorm associated representations (e.g. images, phrases, words) that were added and layered around the central phrase. To sustain the group discussions until thematic saturation, facilitators asked probing questions like “what kinds of food”, “where would it be located”, “how do you access the program” while artists connected major ideas directly to the central concept and branched the others out from those.

The six thematic areas that emerged from this Mind Mapping activity about ideal food programming in Halton as very reminiscent of those outlined by De la Salle and Unwin (2016) and discussed below. The first centers around the intake process. Despite some noted concerns that some people accessing food banks too often when they do not need them, neighbours maintained that, in an ideal food program, people would automatically be given access to food services and programs without any burden of proof of poverty. Second, every participant table imagined food programs that include community based cooking and nutritional classes. In relation to this programming theme, some groups underlined the importance of instituting community gardens where neighbours can actively participate in growing their own food. In addition, neighbours suggested collective canning events and batch cooking where they could swap meals with others. Other groups suggested the possibility of offering weekly community dinners to not only provide food, but also to help alleviate some of the social isolation many neighbours experience (see above). Perhaps one of the most unexpected programming suggestions – and yet one also brought forward by every table – was to introduce a policy that requires individuals who work in the food security sector (either for pay or as volunteers) to go through mandatory preparatory sensitivity training to help decrease the shame and stigmatization neighbours experience.

Building on this point, overall, participants recognized that food programs associated with low income housing locations are ideal because food is delivered directly to the location, thereby preventing the difficulties some residents experience from having to make their ways to and/or search out food service programs. The most common suggestion within this transportation/access theme was to offer food delivery services, especially for elderly neighbours, lone parents of young children, and/or for people with any type of disability.

Given the tendency for people to express concern about the quality and types of food available in food banks (see; Bazerghi, McKay, and Dunn, 2016; Loopstra and Tarasuk, 2012) it is not surprising that neighbours’ ideal food programs would have fewer foods that are low in nutrients and high in sugars and starches. They also would have better strategies for ensuring well-labelled foods and foods that meet a wider array of cultural and dietary needs and

restrictions. Also, on a related but somewhat divergent point, neighbours' ideal food programs would be advertised using a wider array of communication strategies (e.g. not only posters throughout the Region, but also weekly email updates, phone calls, and door-to-door advertising) so that even people without phone and/or Internet amenities could learn about the services.

Within this same communication strategy theme, participants suggested that social assistance offices, employment support offices, subsidized and cooperative housing units, apartment buildings and houses in known low income areas make widely available pamphlets that list food programs and services offered in the Region (including hours of operation and intake requirement details). Also, they noted that it would be ideal if program administrators and boards of directors worked to build communication bridges between executives and neighbours both to help reduce the latter's experiences of being stigmatized and, thus, to make access local food services a more pleasant experience. Clearly, these points mirror research findings that the people most likely to access food programs also often require the support of other governmental and/or charitable services. As a result, neighbours reasoned that an ideal food program would be offered in a central location of the Region, in a building that shared – and connected – food services and programs with other essential wraparound programs and services.

Community-Based Problem Solving Workshop

These examples illustrate a need to restructure food bank delivery systems; however, review of the related literature suggests a shortage of Canadian publications outlining specific innovative and/or best practices that make food bank operations successful. In the United States, it is common for individual food banks to publish their scores vis-à-vis best practices based on rubrics produced by the Food Research and Action Center (Edwards, 2014) and the West Michigan Food Bank (Arnold, 2004). By comparison, there is a dearth in Canadian contributions to the community of learning within food banks around strategies and best practices in that, to date, the Greater Vancouver Food Bank has published the only documented efforts to address this topic.

Written by De la Salle and Unwin (2016), this environmental scan notes social innovations in Canadian and US foodbanks vis-à-vis development of a community of practice and related partnerships. Following this report, some food banks in Canada working closely with community health service providers to connect clients with other services: accounting, dental, employment, grooming, and legal services and opportunities. Thus, this provides some evidence for the existence of food programming in this country which seeks to address overlapping contributing causes and consequences of community and/or individual need for food assistance.

Specifically, De la Salle and Unwin (2016) list thirteen dimensions of social innovation, which represent the core functional areas of food bank work, as well as new areas of activity for food banks, in which social innovation in food programming may occur. In addition, they point to nine patterns among the thirteen dimensions that are currently enabling North American food banks to break the normative mold and shift towards a community food security model. More importantly, they reveal that there is a great deal of social innovation in food programming happening in Canada and that many examples constitute best practices.

For instance, De la Salle and Unwin's (2016) Partnerships dimension calls for the development of collaborations between food banks and other service providers beyond food assistance. In this regard, they find that many individual food banks across the country partnering with community health service providers to connect food bank members with added

dental, accounting, legal, personal hygiene, and employment services and opportunities, for example. Community Kitchens, where people unite by learning new recipes and cooking techniques and sharing the meals they've created together, also are great examples of this trend and more than 500 organizations in Canada that handle food banks operations offer this type of program (Food Banks Canada, 2012). As De la Salle and Unwin (2016) maintain, by collaborating with other service providers and leveraging existing community assets, food banks are better positioned to help members access a wider range of services and strong partnerships among food banks, food donors, and other service providers are a stepping stone for achieving the broader systemic change that is needed for people like then women in Warren's (2011) study (see; Ontario Association of Food Banks, 2017 p. 21).

Programming & Member Engagement is yet another example of a best practice identified by De la Salle & Unwin (2016) for fostering long-term food security solutions. Here, again, The Stop Community Food Centre (n.d.) is described as exemplar. Recognized today as the Greener Village Community Food Centre, The Stop is a Toronto-based food bank that combines emergency food programs with additional programming such as food literacy and skill building classes as well as learning environments to pilot mobile fresh markets and new formats for distribution, and gardening workshops that bring together a experienced growers with children and adults who gain hands-on experiences in sustainable food production.

Current food banks are well-positioned to collaborate with other service providers to help people who access food banks to access a wider range of supports. More so, existing efforts in this regard point to a shift toward a food security model that includes a community of learning and practice sustained by the sharing of documented evidence of innovative and effective practices regarding food services and programming. Whether reacting to the ever-present issue of food insecurity or making conscious efforts to prevent it, research suggests that collaborations between public, private, and non-for-profit organizations at a federal, provincial, and municipal levels are vital. More so, following the research reviewed above, reducing the burdens of food insecurity necessitates using cross-sectional evidence about what has and has not worked in various contexts while also being aware of – and responsive to – the challenges faced by service users and providers in specific regions.

In April, 2018, the Community Ideas Factory hosted a six-hour Creative Problem-Solving (CPS) Workshop on Food Security at Sheridan College. In total, 37 people representing 27 organizations (not-for-profits, public, and private) participated in the CPS Workshop. Participants were seated at 6 different tables, with each group assigned its own CPS facilitator from Sheridan College.

Creative Problem-Solving is an overarching approach to developing interventions that includes at least 172 techniques and instructional creativity enhancements methods used to develop people's creative thinking skills and creative achievement (see, Smith, 1998). Over the years, general consensus has emerged within the field that the "Osborn-Parnes Creative Problem-Solving" program yields high and consistent returns in terms outcomes judged to be novel and useful (Rose and Lin, 1984; Scott et al., 2004; Torrance, 1972). The hallmark of this program, which was developed in 1953, is the dynamic balance of divergent thinking (i.e. a broad search for many diverse and novel alternatives) and convergent thinking (i.e. a focused and affirmative evaluation of novel alternatives), which are both applied across seven discrete phases of a problem-solving process (i.e. Orientation, Preparation, Analysis, Hypothesis, Incubation, Synthesis, and Verification).

Over the years, through research and further application, the Osborn-Parnes model has evolved significantly. For example, the “Thinking Skills Model” developed by Puccio, Mance, and Murdock (2007) at the International Center for Studies in Creativity at SUNY Buffalo State University revises the Osborne-Parnes model to include three conceptual stages, six explicit process steps (each with a repetition of divergence and convergence), and one executive step at the heart of the mode (see also, Puccio et al., 2012).

In the current context, a modified CPS approach based on the “Thinking Skills Model” was used to guide stakeholders through a thinking process characterized by: problem selection and definition (developing an enhanced understanding of complex problems); idea generation (generating ideas through a structured, participatory approach); solution generation (comparing, evaluating, and developing solutions using an affirmative and inclusive approach); and implementation planning (collectively developing a strategy for implementing solutions).

In the problem selection stage, we built on the findings from the literature review, problem-tree analysis, and mind mapping exercises and created a ‘challenge statement menu’ in order to help groups frame and align the focus of the CPS session around the key issues and opportunities identified. The ‘program menu’ for our event (called “Creative Ideas Factory Feature Items”). The menu featured 12 challenge statements that flowed directly from the literature and research. These challenge statements were framed as opportunities for ‘social innovation’ in Food Programming.

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

After reviewing each of the challenge statements, participants were invited to engage in a process of ‘dot voting’; wherein participants were asked to affix three sticky dots on the challenge statements they felt were most important (or promising) and could be addressed by the group. At the conclusion of the ‘dot-voting’ exercise, groups were then invited (collectively) to discuss results and select (or revise) a challenge statement to be pursued for their CPS workshop session.

INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE

The selected and revised challenge statements served as the foundation for the ideation stage of the workshop. During this phase, participants were asked to respond to their chosen challenge statement, which was stated using open-ended language, using the hallmarks of the Osborn-Parnes Creative Problem-Solving program: divergent thinking and convergent thinking (see; Rose and Lin, 1984; Scott et al., 2004; Torrance, 1972). To achieve the former, groups were guided through a ‘stick-em up’ brainstorming activity that encouraged them to generate as many responses to their challenge statement as possible while also suspending evaluative judgement so as to continuously build upon and embrace one another’s seemingly wild and/or unusual ideas. These principles were encouraged with a view towards encouraging maximum group participation and diversity, novelty, and creative expression. Once a sufficiently diverse set of options, ideas, and possibilities was generated, groups were guided through a convergent thinking exercise that involved both dot-voting and idea clustering to facilitate idea vetting, evaluation, and selection discussions that prioritized novelty and affirmative judgements when deciding on viable solutions for further development and stating these as ‘solution statements’ (e.g., what I see us doing is...) that best expressed their chosen alternatives.

INSERT FIGURE 6 HERE

The third phase of the CPS workshop involved development and refinement of the chosen solutions into more robust, concrete social innovations that could then be framed as fundable solutions to food insecurity in Halton. Here, the team of facilitators helped groups to negotiate a variety of tools to evaluate the components, resources, and limitations of the chosen alternative by, first, getting groups to articulate how their chosen solution would actually work by explaining 5-7 key features of their ‘social innovation’ and then engaging in a ‘stakeholder analysis’ activity to identify the key actors and their roles and expected contributions, as well as any anticipated challenges involved in the execution of this targeted solution. The workshop ended with participants being given 25 minutes to develop a ‘2-minute pitch’ for their group’s targeted – and fundable – solution to food insecurity in Halton.

The two-minute pitch portion resulted in six different innovations. The innovations focused on improving intake systems, distribution of food, food literacy and community partnerships. “*Mission Nutrition: Building Access to Healthy Food*” and “*Path to Plate*” were presented as solutions to existing issues within the present intake system. Currently, most of the organizations in Halton require their own needs testing prior to access, different personal identification, and have varying limits on the amount of times a family can access food within a month. Both innovations included a common intake system wherein users build specific profiles and become registered within a common, online system (possibly managed by the Region).

The “*Mobile Hub*” and “*S.P.A.C.E Hub*” were two different innovations, which addressed access to food programs. These creative programs both offered non-traditional distribution points for those that have difficulty accessing services while also recognizing that those facing food security are also often confronted with a host of other issues that need servicing simultaneously. The *Mobile Hub* is a mobile service unit in the community that provides access to services such as food, mental health, and professional supports in response to community needs. As a service vehicle, the “*Mobile Hub*” would have the capacity to travel throughout the community and feature ‘breakout stations’ (tents/tables) to enable service offerings, user registration, and donations intake. Whereas the *S.P.A.C.E Hub* is an Integrated Neighbourhood Hub to address these same needs. The core of this innovation is a re-centering and re-grounding of philanthropic service provision (i.e. food programming, coupled with other social service offerings) at the level of individual community ‘satellites’, which are linked together through a centralized hub/base. The community satellites could be centered in schools or other local buildings, mobile units, or virtual sites and would feature service and resource offerings that are fluid and adaptable to local community needs and assets, but which are also linked together through the centralized hub in order to coordinate action and intake processes.

“*Interconnected Centre for Careers in Food and Farming*” aims to create a space and infrastructure to provide food members (and others in the community) with an opportunity to develop skills necessary for careers in the food sector for our neighbours in need. The innovation is to provide a site and program that teaches food skills to members of the community; including food safety, handling, growing/farming, and business development. This innovation provides unique opportunities for industry collaboration in skills training and food provision and has the potential to develop into a social enterprise.

The final innovation, “*Sponsor a Family Program for Food Security*”, focuses on community involvement in helping to care for the less fortunate members in Halton. The goal of

this social innovation is to improve access to healthy food for food programming users through matching donor families with service providers in order to provide specific meals (and other services as appropriate) for food programming members. Similar to the many 'Christmas Family Sponsor Programs' in the Halton Region, the innovation would leverage the generous donations of community members, those willing and able to donate prepared meals for food program users. Sponsor and recipient families could be matched directly or the service agencies could serve as the go between. It was widely held that the innovation could greatly enhance wider community investment and involvement in neighbour food recovery.

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper attempts to explore how we can build more inclusive, equitable, and mutually-beneficial partnerships in academic-community research collaborations. We recognize this to be a challenging task and in trying to better understand our role as researchers working with community partners we have highlighted our experiences as a starting point for more comprehensive analysis and reflection. It was not necessarily a conventional research endeavour that drove the initial collaboration - rather our aim was to act as facilitators who could provide some actual and substantive benefit to our community partner. The Community Ideas Factory worked from the basic premise that meaningful social innovations about food security, affordable housing, employment equity, and holistic support services must transcend traditional academic and community-partner relationships. Our community partners were active at all stages of the research process, development, and collection stages and played an integral role in determining our focus through their own prioritizations. We also approached the relationship and research activities more as facilitators to help guide, advocate and illuminate the needs of neighbours themselves and as a result, created a unique and equitable partnerships both with our community partners and those accessing services. The collaboration was driven by the explicit needs of our partners and by utilizing PRA tools, like; cause/effect mapping and mind-mapping, and community problem-solving activities such as brainstorming, dot-voting, and stakeholder assessments we generated innovations that are dynamic, creative and have impacted policy, practice, and funding models in Halton Region and beyond.

The central aim of these efforts was to transform the OCF's RFP process; rendering it more responsive, efficient and strategic through the adoption of a participatory framework. Towards this end, the findings and recommendations produced through the project were brought forward by the research team to a Funder's Roundtable in November 2017 (a meeting of Halton's biggest philanthropists). The Roundtable, in turn, agreed to provide funding for some of the identified priorities. Their funding commitments materialized in the issuance of two Request for Proposals (RFP's) supporting our strategic recommendations for projects in Food Security. Decisions and result announcements from the current RFP competition are expected in April, 2018. In this way, the new RFP process has enabled a new, set of strategically-focused projects that are informed by evidence and best-practice; and, more importantly, responsive to input and contributions of the clients (services users) and agencies (service providers) who will benefit from them.

More broadly, the Community Ideas Factory collaboration hints at an underlying Freirian theme that challenges the notion of a clear-cut border between academic research and community development (see: Freire, 1970). Building on this theme, the principles of CBPR have proven to be instructive in helping all members of the project understand and strive to realize the cooperative component of knowledge creation. Here, particularly, the importance of

‘stories from the front-line’ proved invaluable in helping the team to both understand the community’s reality and successfully advocate for donor dollars. Although we have chosen to discuss these themes and insights elsewhere, we would be remiss in overlooking a mention of them here; if however briefly.

As with almost every instance of participatory development, there are always opportunities for improvement. In the current project, we acknowledge there were inherent power structures, fiscal limitations, conflicting individual objectives or agendas, and socio-legal/historical/political realities that likely have influenced the outcome in ways that are not inclusive or readily understood by the research team. Our chief concern revolves around the sustainability of the participatory framework we have built through this project. Specifically, will the OCF have the resources to embolden such wide and far-reaching participatory engagement strategy once the funding for the project comes to an end? While all stakeholders no doubt have learned important lessons regarding the value, workings, and possibilities of participatory approaches in philanthropic funding, we have also come to realize that a broad-based participatory engagement strategy requires a significant amount of resources in order to be sustained and effective. The challenge of finding and mobilizing these resources for participatory engagement becomes particularly challenging in a sector confronting audacious, social problems while being relatively hamstrung by funding shortfalls.

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Figure 1: Problem-Tree Group 1

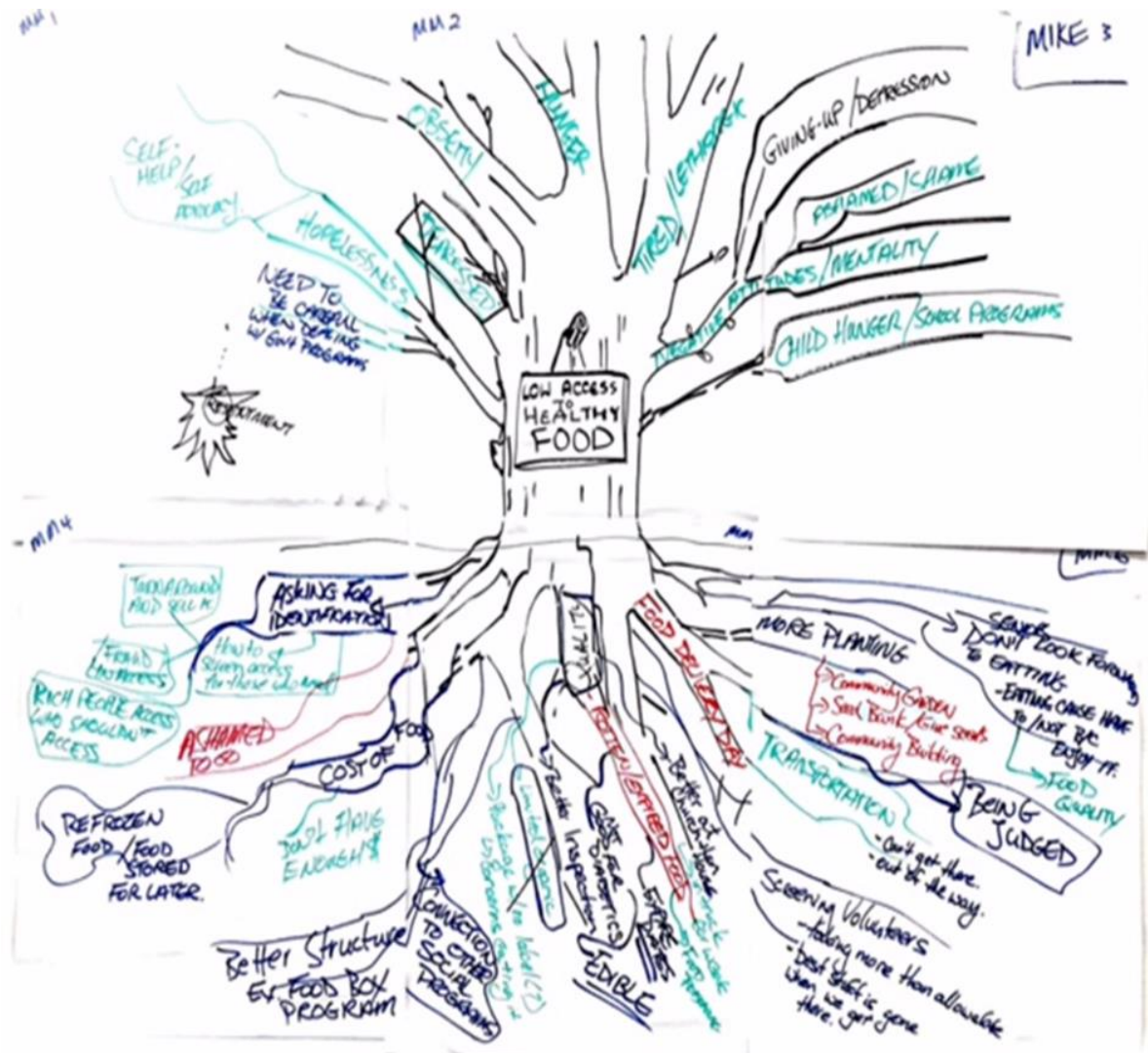


Figure 2: Problem Tree Group 2

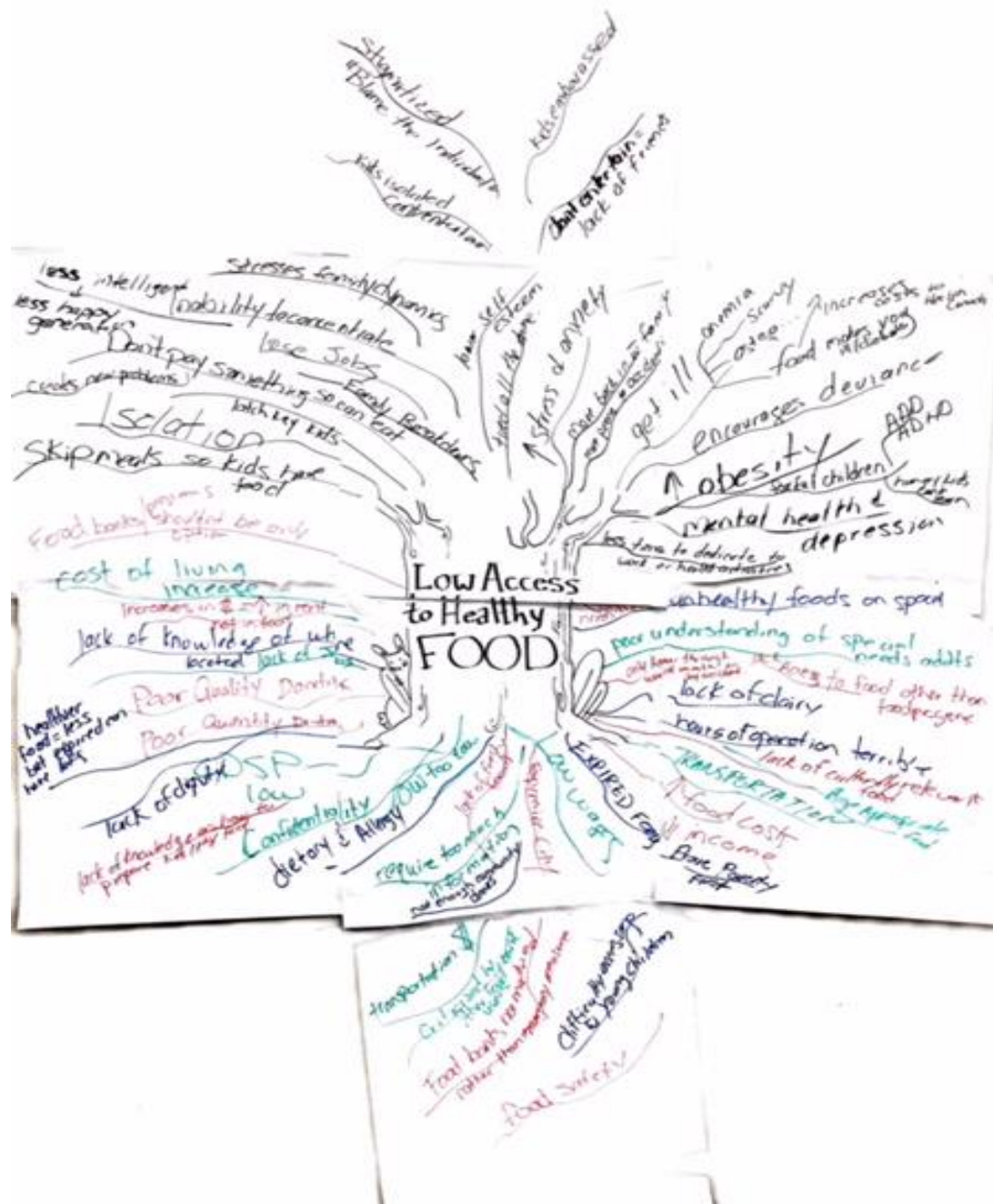


Figure 3: Mind-map

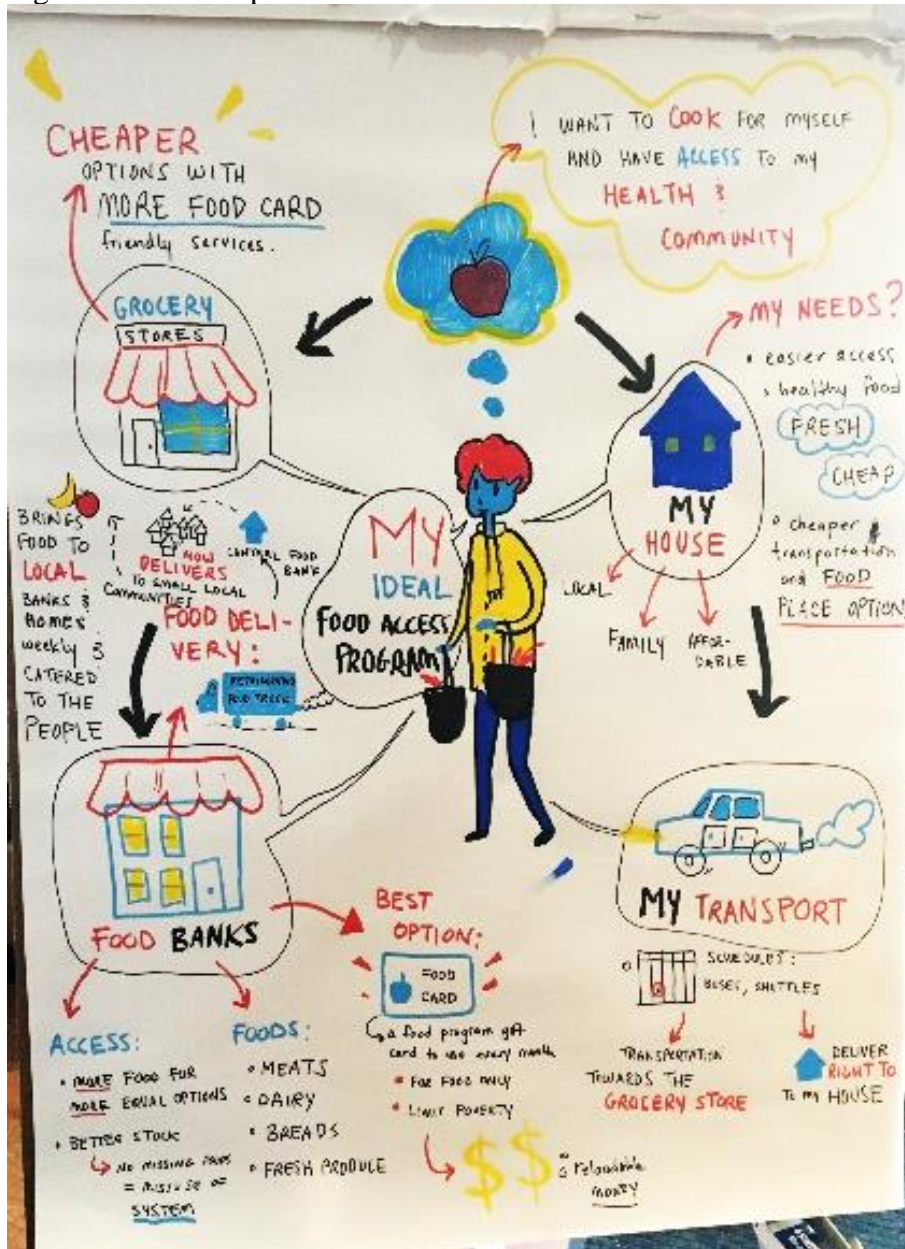


Figure 4: Idea Menu

Creative Ideas Factory Feature Items

For April 4th, 2017

Today's fare features some of the finest social innovations in food programming from across North America, complimented by an assortment of uniquely local contributions. Your facilitator will be more than happy to help you and your group with your selection.

Food Distribution to Members & Partner Agencies

- **How might we improve social innovation by combining food distribution with food skills?** Observed innovation in this area includes recipe cards, food demos and tastings, labelling repackaged food with specific ingredients
 - **In what ways might we create a more innovative, low barrier intake systems?**
- **How might improve social innovation by utilizing non-traditional distribution points?** Identifying where the people in need are and what types of foods would be beneficial to distribute from that location. Ex., Feeding America is increasing food distribution at hospitals, clinics, schools, and colleges

Data Collection & Metrics

- **In what ways might we develop more innovative information sharing mechanisms?** For example, innovations in performance benchmarking dashboards have helped food banks to identify, connect, and learn from other food banks in the network.

Partnerships

- **In what ways might we improve social innovation by linking to other social service providers?** Food banks are connecting food bank members with other services such as dental, legal, pensions, newcomer programs, accounting, haircuts, and employment opportunities.

Programming & Member Engagement

- **In what ways might we improve social innovation by linking programs to employment and economic development?** Examples of innovation in this area include linking food distribution with employment skills/opportunities and supporting food security through local economic development programs
- **How might we improve social innovation by increasing food literacy and food skills for all?** Examples of innovations in this space include food skill courses; including how to preserve food, prepare healthy affordable meals, or read food labels.
- **How might we improve social innovation by integrating community gardens?** Community garden spaces are providing opportunities for multiple programs and are being used by food banks in providing food literacy, food production skills, farmer training programs, gathering and community spaces, and fresh produce for programs.

Community & Donor, Education & Engagement

- **How might we improve innovation in community/donor education and engagement?** Tours and volunteer events can be used to explain root causes of food insecurity, why 'traditional' food banking is not working, and how new strategies can support the reduction of need for emergency food services.

Food Purchasing

- **How might we improve social innovation by building relationships with local farmers and farm associations?** Many food banks are creating new direct purchasing relationships with local producers to increase the quality of food being distributed.
- **How might we improve social innovation by growing food for programs?** The Saskatoon Food Bank produced 20,000 pounds of food for distribution. These gardens can have many educational programs in addition to production for distribution.

Communications

- **How might improve social innovation by leveraging social media to communicate to and engage with our members/neighbours?**

Figure 5: Selected and Revised Challenge Statements from the Groups

Selected/Revised Challenge Statements

- Group 1: In what ways might we create a more innovative, low barrier intake system?
- Group 2: How might we improve social innovation by increasing food literacy and food skills for all?
- Group 3: In what ways might we improve social innovation by linking programs to other services?
- Group 4: In what ways might we improve social innovation by linking programs to employment and economic development?
- Group 5: In what ways might we improve social innovation by linking to other social services?
- Group 6: How might we improve social innovation by utilizing non-traditional distribution points?

Figure 6: Picture from Creative Problem Solving

