

FOOD FOR NOW AND THE FUTURE

A FOOD AND NUTRITION STRATEGY FOR ONTARIO

**A Discussion Paper By The Ontario Public Health Association
Food Security Work Group**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At the recent International Conference on Nutrition held in Rome under the auspices of the Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Health Organization, all nations were called upon to develop and implement measures to ensure food security for their nations and the world. In response, Canada has made the commitment to develop a National Plan of Action for Nutrition. Provincial governments have been encouraged to be a part of this process. Prior to this international conference Alberta, Quebec and Newfoundland had developed provincial food and nutrition policies.

The government of Ontario recognizes that health is strongly influenced by actors that are beyond the scope of health education and treatment. In the document "Nurturing Health", the Premier's Council describes these factors or "determinants of health" and their impact on the well-being of individuals and groups. Adverse social and physical environments, unemployment, poor housing and inadequate social support limit access to safe, nutritious food in amounts adequate to achieve and maintain health. Disadvantaged residents of Ontario are at particular risk of poor nutrition, which increases the risk of other health and social problems. It impairs quality of life and productivity, making escape from continuing disadvantage more difficult.

It is also evident from the number of existing food and nutrition initiatives in Ontario that the provincial government recognizes that adequate nutrition is a precondition to a healthy population.

A comprehensive food and nutrition strategy that addresses the determinants of health is needed to ensure food security for all residents of Ontario. This food and nutrition strategy will also give direction to and improve co-ordination of existing government initiatives. Traditionally nutrition policy has focused on disease prevention, while food policy emphasized agricultural and economic concerns.

What is unique about food security work is that it looks at sustainability and food access issues in addition to the traditional policy issues. Food security has been defined by the Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) Food Security Work Group in the following way. "People have food security when they can get enough food to eat that is safe, that they like to eat and that helps them to be healthy. They must be able to get this food in ways that make them feel good about themselves and their families."

In 1988, the OPHA made the recommendation that a task force be established to develop a food and nutrition policy that "...ensures healthy food is available to all, that nutrition goals and related strategies to achieve them are adopted and policies are oriented towards sustainable development." To further this recommendation in 1993, the OPHA Food Security Work Group was established to advocate for the adoption of a provincial Food and Nutrition Strategy for Ontario.

This discussion paper, prepared by this Work Group describes the critical factors that influence food security in Ontario and presents three essential goals for a provincial food and nutrition strategy. The paper closes with recommendations for immediate and longer-term actions that can be taken to ensure that these goals are achieved.

GOALS FOR AN ONTARIO FOOD AND NUTRITION STRATEGY

Food security includes, but is much broader than, ensuring access to food. The goals of a comprehensive provincial Food and Nutrition Strategy are:

- To ensure that all Ontarians have the means to access affordable nutritious and personally acceptable foods.
- To ensure a sustainable, safe, high quality food supply in Ontario.
- To promote food consumption patterns that maximize health and minimize disease in Ontario.

CURRENT ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Although Ontario has an abundant food supply, many people living in Ontario today are not able to achieve food security no matter how hard they try. There are many underlying reasons for this. Different factors combine to create different situations that limit food security for some residents of this province.

Equal Access to Food

Food security includes having sufficient resources to obtain food without having to invest extraordinary energy. Resources refer to economic resources and also to the time, knowledge and skills needed to shop for and prepare nutritious foods. Many Ontarians simply do not have the economic, physical or other means to put healthy food on the table in the amount needed to meet basic needs. The Ontario

Association of Food Banks estimates that 250,000 Ontarians use food banks on a monthly basis.

High unemployment, low incomes for the working poor, the relatively high cost of housing, transportation and other basic necessities and inadequate social assistance payments all help to create and maintain poverty. Many other factors, including low literacy levels, a lack of opportunities for skill development and limited access to quality child care make it difficult for people to find ways to break out of the cycle.

A Sustainable, Safe, High Quality Food Supply

Ontario's domestic food production system and the farmers at the local level of it face considerable challenges in ensuring the long-term survival of a "home grown" food supply that meets optimal standards of quality and safety. These challenges include low prices paid to farmers for domestically produced food and agricultural practices that have taken a gradual toll on soil, water and natural habitats.

The traditional, large scale, centralized approach to food production and distribution gives rise to new issues around maintaining the quality and safety of some foods. It also means that the domestic production system is less sensitive and less able to respond to changing food preferences and to the needs of "special interest" population groups.

Along with the previously mentioned factors, there is a lack of information that enables consumers to make informed choices that would benefit domestic food producers and support sustainable food production.

Food for Health

Good nutrition means much more than the absence of illness caused by a lack of vitamins, minerals or other nutritional factors. A lifetime of making healthy food choices helps to enhance the quality and productivity of day-to-day life. In addition, we now know that good nutrition reduces the risk of developing lifestyle-related conditions like osteoporosis, heart disease and some types of cancer that are leading causes of death and disability for so many Ontarians today.

Obesity is a cause for concern, as is the widespread and unhealthy preoccupation with weight and body image. The very real risk of eating disorders results from this preoccupation.

Many factors influence the food choices that people make. These include the aggressive marketing and ready availability of foods high in fat, salt and sugar and low in nutrients; declining opportunities to learn about choosing and preparing healthy foods; and changes

in society (e.g. family structure and values, employment patterns, leisure activities) that have resulted in different food patterns.

FUNDAMENTAL BELIEFS

- Current inequities must be addressed to ensure that food security is enjoyed by all residents of Ontario, with priority given to those who are the most nutritionally vulnerable. This includes people living in poverty, especially growing children, women of reproductive age, people with disabilities or chronic illnesses and the elderly, Aboriginal people, refugees and the homeless.
- Strategies must be implemented in an environment that addresses the impact of the determinants of health on the well-being of Ontarians.
- We recognize that financial resources are limited at the government level and therefore recommend that reallocation of current resources (financial, technical, material) take place to ensure the realization of both immediate and longer-term actions.
- Many changes will be needed to arrive at a system that ensures and maintains food security for all Ontarians. Some of the recommended actions that can be taken are immediate and relatively simple. Others are longer term and will require more effort and more resources to realize. A demonstrated commitment to short and longer-term actions is an essential precondition to success.
- The implementation of an effective Food and Nutrition Strategy will require a common vision articulated at the provincial level. It will be co-ordinated by many players from various levels of government, business, health and agriculture with communities across Ontario.
- Policies and strategies can help remove barriers and build on the inherent ability of individuals and communities to care for themselves and to find appropriate ways to enhance their own food security.
- Food and nutrition issues overlap the mandates of many ministries, but policies do not always take complementary approaches toward food security-related issues. It is critical that the policies and actions of various provincial ministries are coordinated and consistent in their approach to the achievement and maintenance of food security.
- In recent years a number of documents produced by provincial and national bodies have addressed issues and recommended strategies compatible with the achievement of food security. For example, Canada's Guidelines for Healthy Eating and the companion Food Guide can be used as a framework for both policy development and for nutrition promotion strategies. Other examples of valuable existing resources include:

