

EXCERPTS FROM

BRIEFING NOTE: Legal framework & what would it take? A vision of food security for ALL Canadians

Building Food Security in Nova Scotia Partners & Supporters

Office of Mr. Olivier DeSchutter, Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food
May 4, 2012

Nova Scotia: At or near the lowest social assistance rates in Canada

In Nova Scotia, there is NO legislative provision which protects the right to food. People living in low-income situations are reliant on legislated social assistance programs in an effort to have minimal financial security – which is essential for any food security at all. Social assistance legislation in Nova Scotia (and this is true throughout Canada) creates an entitlement to benefits, however, there is absolutely *no* legislative obligation to ensure that social assistance benefits will be adequate.

In the absence of any recognized constitutional or legislated right to adequate food, those living in poverty in Canada are entirely reliant on what governments choose to provide by way of social assistance payments. The Canadian government's own advisory body on social assistance/welfare matters (the *National Council of Welfare*) [has concluded](#) that no province in Canada provides anything close to adequate social assistance rates. The result, as our [participatory food-costing research in Nova Scotia](#) has shown, is that many Canadians' right to food continues to be violated. (Interestingly enough, the *National Council of Welfare* will, itself, be eliminated under the eCanadian government's very recent Budget legislation.¹)

What would it take? A vision of food security for ALL Canadians

Food security – when all citizens have access to sufficient healthy foods to meet their needs for an active and healthy life – has been identified as a social determinant of health and more broadly, as a determinant of dignity, progress, justice, and social, cultural, economic and sustainable development. Every day millions of Canada's citizens do not have enough nutritious food to feed themselves and their families. The continued inadequacy of minimum wage, income and income support policies, denies Canadian citizens their right to food, affecting not only individuals, but entire communities and society as a whole. In Nova Scotia, we can make this statement with certainty. We have produced over a decade worth of unique and robust data that leaves no doubt many individuals and families in our communities cannot afford to eat nutritiously. For example, research published this month in the *Canadian Journal of Public Health*² shows that households in Nova Scotia dependent on Income Assistance would face a significant monthly deficit if they purchased a basic nutritious diet; moreover this potential deficit has increased significantly between 2002 and 2010. Our affordability scenario estimates have shown that the deficit can be as high \$523 a month (in 2010 for a lone male scenario). When incomes do not cover fixed costs such as housing, utilities and transportation, funds will often be taken from the food budget for these or other expenses, placing an individual's right to a basic nutritious diet out of reach.

1 See [Bill C-38](#), s. 685 (tabled April 26, 2012)

2 Williams PL, Watt C, Amero M, Anderson B, Blum I, Green-LaPierre R, Johnson, CP. Affordability of a Nutritious Diet for Income Assistance Recipients in Nova Scotia (2002-2010). *Can J Public Health*. In press.

The participatory food-costing work carried out across Nova Scotia has effectively put an end to any claim that people living in poverty would be able to enjoy the right to food if they simply made better expenditure choices. We have done this work using a community and university-driven participatory action research model and a decade-long partnership with individuals whose right to food is being violated and with family resource centres/projects funded by the federal Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program and Community Action Program for Children. The flexible funding, managed through collaborative, joint federal-provincial committees, allows more than 800 community-based programs across Canada to play an important role in addressing the violation of the right to food at both community and grassroots policy levels. These community-based programs provide local supportive environments for some of the most vulnerable Canadians, including women, children, and Aboriginal Peoples, as well as those in more hard-to-reach rural and remote areas.

In Nova Scotia, the provincial government, along with multiple partners, has committed to building food security through the development and implementation of [Healthy Eating Nova Scotia](#). This provincial healthy eating strategy, released in March of 2005, identified food security as a priority action area. This means that the government has committed, in a partnership role, to implementing a plan to ensure that all people, at all times, have access to nutritious, safe, personally acceptable and culturally appropriate foods, produced (and distributed) in ways that are environmentally sound and socially just.

Many steps have been taken at the federal, provincial/territorial and community levels to build food security across Canada; however, our current research clearly illustrates more is needed. Canada has an opportunity to be a leader in ensuring the right to food for ALL. What is needed now is better income and income support policies, changes to public pension systems and affordable child care, housing and transportation. Canada requires a federal poverty reduction strategy, including a new cost-shared social assistance program with the provinces that would focus on income adequacy and be guided by human rights principles, particularly the right to an adequate standard of living. We must also ensure long-term sustained financial support to effective federal programs including the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program, the Community Action Program for Children, and Aboriginal Head Start that target and are highly successful in reaching many of the individuals and families most vulnerable to food insecurity.

Sincerely,

**Barb Anderson, Nova Scotia Participatory Food Costing Project and School of Nutrition and Dietetics,
Acadia University**

Peter Andr e, Associate Professor, **Department of Political Science, Carleton University**

Larry Baxter, **Halifax, Nova Scotia**

Sheila Bird, **Public Health Services – South West Health, Yarmouth, Nova Scotia**

Vince Calderhead, **Nova Scotia Legal Aid**

Sara Collyer, **Neighbour to Neighbour Centre, Hamilton, Ontario**

Food Action Committee, **Ecology Action Centre, Halifax, Nova Scotia**

Craig Foye, **Hamilton Community Legal Clinic / Clinique juridique communautaire de Hamilton,
Hamilton, Ontario**

Doris Gillis, **Department of Human Nutrition, St Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia**

Christine Johnson, **Activating Change Together for Community Food Security, Nova Scotia**

Sara Kirk, Canada Research Chair in Health Services Research, **School of Health and Human Performance
Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia**

Wendy Knowlton, **Family Matters: Annapolis County Family Resource Centre, Nova Scotia**

Darren Leyte, **Nova Scotia Food Security Network**

Stella Lord, **Community Coalition to End Poverty in Nova Scotia, Nova Scotia**

Rita MacAulay, **Public Health Services – Capital District Health Authority, Halifax, Nova Scotia**

Michelle Proctor-Simms, **Nova Scotia Advisory Commission on AIDS**
Daniel Rainham, Elizabeth May Chair in Sustainability and Environmental Health Environmental Science
Program, **Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia**
Debra Reimer, **Kids Action Program, Canning, Nova Scotia**
Av Singh, **Nova Scotia Food Security Network**
Cynthia Watt, **Nova Scotia Nutrition Council**
Patty Williams, **Canada Research Chair in Food Security and Policy Change, Participatory Action
Research and Training Centre on Food Security and the Department of Applied Human Nutrition,
Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia**

For more information contact:

Patricia Williams at Patty.Williams@msvu.ca or Irena Knezevic at Irena.Knezevic@msvu.ca
Participatory Action Research and Training Centre on Food Security
Vince Calderhead at vincent.calderhead@nslegalaid.ca
Nova Scotia Legal Aid