

# Unique Get Together Society (UGTS) and Urban Indigenous Food Insecurity in British Columbia

A systematic analysis of the disproportionate rates of food insecurity experienced by Indigenous communities in British Columbia



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# Table Of Contents

Introduction	1	Executive Summary .....1 Positionality .....1 Research Methods & Unique Get Together Society (UGTS) .....1
Challenge Landscape	2	Root Causes .....2 Symptoms of Food Insecurity .....3 Power Dynamics Between Those Impacted .....4 Those Furthering the Challenge .....5 Most Power to Create Change .....7
Solutions Landscape	8	International Initiatives .....8 National Initiatives .....9 Provincial Initiatives .....9 Community Initiatives .....9 Private Sector .....10
Gaps & Levers of Change	11	Initiatives Are Not Supporting Co-creation and Self-Determination .....11 Researchers Can Perpetuate Harm .....12 Lack of Upstream Approaches .....13 Inconsistent & Underfunding .....14
Key Insights & Lessons Learned	15	Key Insights & Lessons Learned .....15

# Introduction

# INTRODUCTION

## Executive Summary

British Columbia (BC) has the second-highest Indigenous population in all of Canada with over 60,000 Urban Indigenous Peoples (UIP) in Vancouver (Statistics Canada, 2017). In BC, off-reserve Indigenous households experience one of the **highest rates of household food insecurity** compared to other ethnicities, which equates to **1 in 3** off-reserve Indigenous households (Li et al., 2016). We can only assume that with COVID-19 this number has increased. Despite the high prevalence, urban Indigenous food insecurity is often underrepresented in food insecurity discourse.

The aim of our research is to investigate the complex interplay between oppressive systems that firmly hold urban Indigenous food insecurity in place.

Review Appendix 1 and 2 for terms used throughout the report and background context.

## Positionality

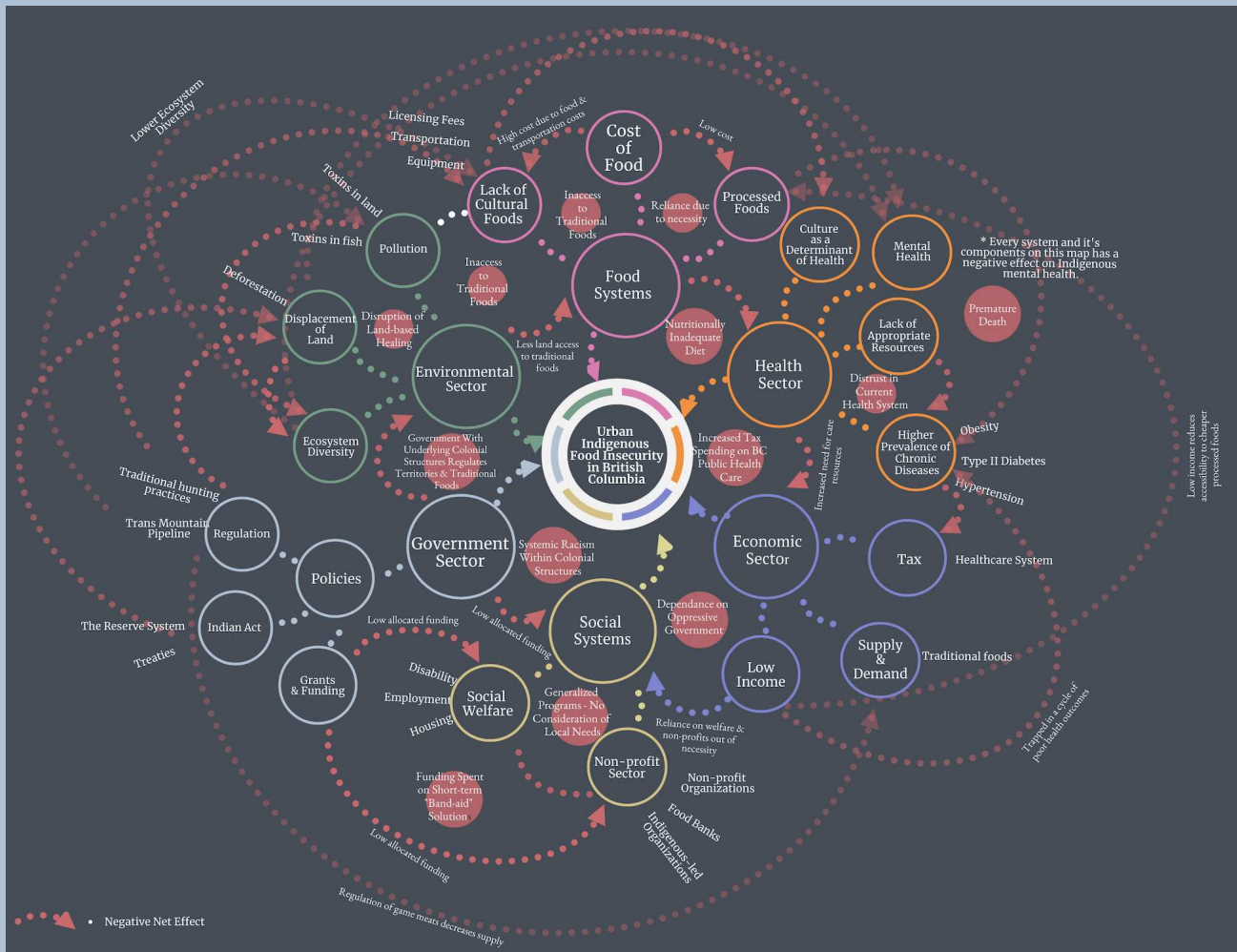
Our team consists of three researchers of Asian descent with no lived experience with food insecurity. It is important to acknowledge that our interpretation of urban Indigenous food insecurity is **limited to the lens of non-Indigenous settlers** and is situated within the scope of colonial perspectives and structures. Our understanding of positionality is a methodology requiring researchers to identify degrees of privilege as an intersection of "race, class, educational attainment, income, ability, gender, and citizenship" (Duarte, 2017, p. 135). Acknowledging positionality and complex power dynamics in society is a step in decolonizing our research (Feminist Research Ethics, n.d.).

## Research Methods & Unique Get Together Society (UGTS)

To evaluate the UGTS' Essential Food Basket, we conducted a survey of 20 anonymous users in the Lower Mainland, an urban area, to collect information on access to cultural foods, level of food insecurity and barriers to accessing food (Appendix 9).

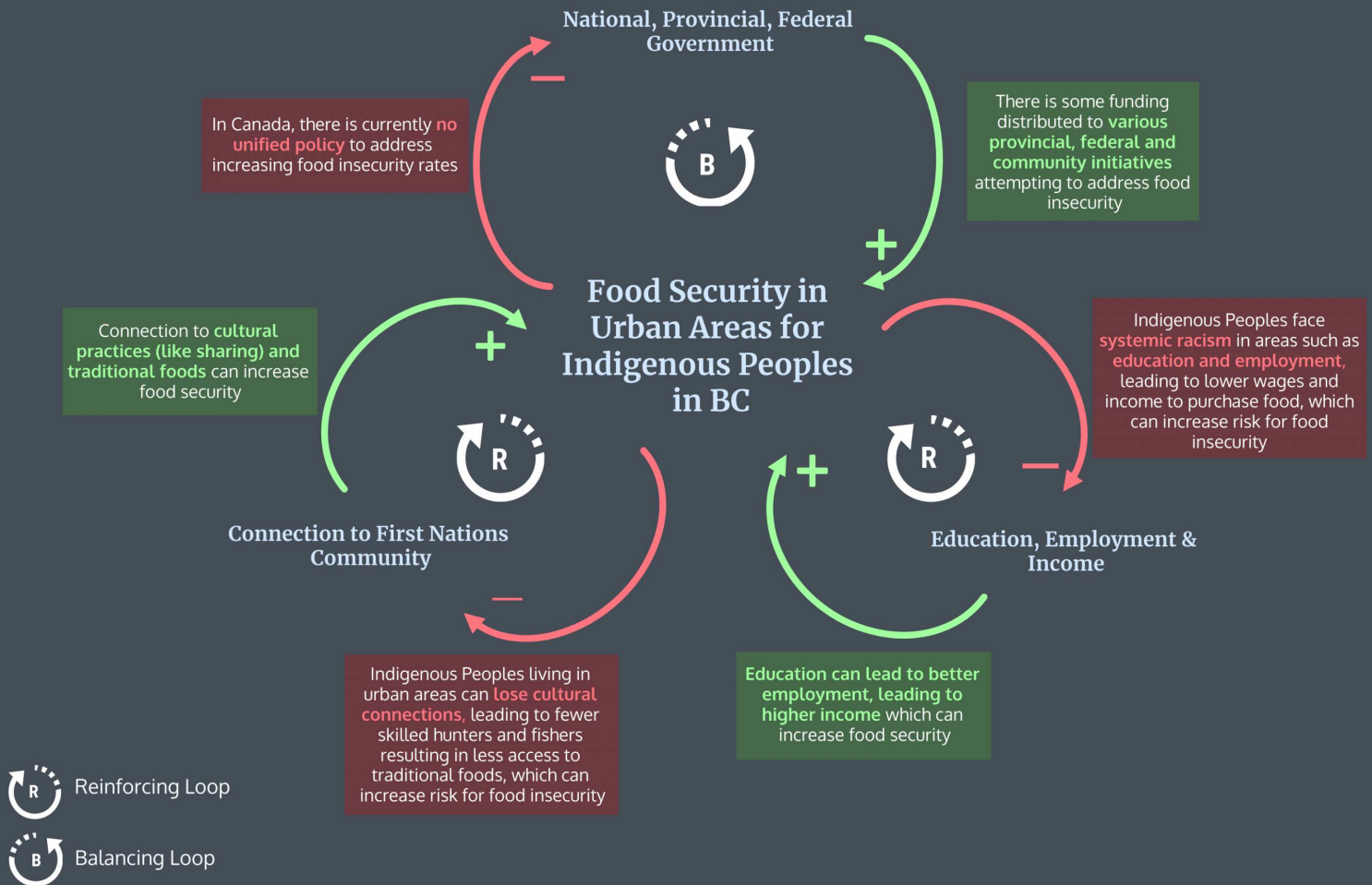
Refer to Appendix 3 for research methods and background information on UGTS.

# Challenge Landscape



# CHALLENGE LANDSCAPE

## Root Causes



## 1. Governmental Policies

Public policies have not addressed upstream factors contributing to food insecurity and have not prioritized reducing its high prevalence in Canada (Lang & Rayner, 2012; Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020). Currently there is **no unified policy** in response to food insecurity as food insecurity is primarily addressed by initiatives, programs and frameworks led by various organizations from different sectors, resulting in minimal impacts when tackling this issue (Food Secure Canada, 2019).

Policies regarding the management and power over land ownership and redistribution of resources are not centered around UIP. Vancouver resides on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of Indigenous Peoples, however, they have no power over what happens on their land. We need to recognize that Indigenous traditional and cultural foods are land- and ocean-based (Interviewee 6, SFU Food Systems Professor) and that policies need to allow UIP to **govern over the unceded land** to allow for cultural practices within a traditional food system (People's Food Policy Project, 2011).

BC's Food Premises Regulation is a colonial regulation that can limit traditional foods from being served in facilities. It fails to recognize that Elders and Knowledge Keepers have "traditional food safety knowledge" and protocols to ensure food safety, **restricting access to culturally-appropriate food** (Mundel et al., 2016, p. 3). Governmental policies over time have disrupted Indigenous food systems (Government of Canada, 2020a). **Canada needs a unified food policy, as food systems are interconnected and essential to the wellbeing of Indigenous communities** (Government of Canada, 2020a). The way food is produced, processed, distributed, consumed, and disposed of has a direct impact on Indigenous food security (Government of Canada, 2020a).

# Root Causes, Continued

## 2. Social & Indigenous Determinants of Health (Income & Employment)

Colonial structures and governmental policies have direct and indirect effects on Indigenous Determinants of Health (Appendix 4). Income is a key predictor of food insecurity (Nord, 2014) with low-income households at high risk (Ramsey et al, 2012). In Canada, Indigenous Peoples' median total income is \$11,000 lower than non-Indigenous Peoples (Statistics Canada, 2015). Compared to non-Indigenous peoples in Canada, First Nations women and men experience a 24% and 23% lower employment rate, respectively (Hu et al., 2019). In regards to impacts by COVID-19, 36% of Indigenous Peoples reported that their ability to meet "financial obligations" and "essential needs" were affected (Statistics Canada, 2020, Table 3).

## 3. Environmental

Low income is a barrier when living in urban areas as the cost of basic living expenses are often higher than on-reserve, and the food environment consists of multiple components, including affordability and accessibility (Richmond et al., 2020; Skinner et al., 2016). Furthermore, UIP may struggle with balancing traditional values and living in a fast-paced urban environment (Elliot et al., 2012). UIP have fewer opportunities to form relationships with Elders and can lose connection to cultural food practices, skills and traditional knowledge (Elliot et al., 2012). This loss can result in fewer skilled hunters and fishers which can lead to lack of access to cultural and traditional foods (Elliot et al., 2012). These barriers can impact food security (Elliot et al., 2012; Kerpan et al., 2015).

# Symptoms of Food Insecurity

## 1. Poorer Health Outcomes

Food insecurity can have detrimental effects on dietary quality and result in an inadequate intake of various nutrients (Davison et al., 2017; Davison & Kaplan, 2011). This can also impact mental health, as Indigenous Peoples experiencing food insecurity are more likely to have poorer mental health and experience more stress than those who are food-secure (Willows et al., 2011).

## 2. Loss of Tradition and Culture

Indigenous Peoples residing in urban areas may be further away from their home communities. This can decrease the ability to share traditional foods and knowledge within families, in addition to living in an environment that heavily promotes purchasing over sharing foods (Elliot et al., 2012). Increasing opportunities to share Indigenous knowledge and practices is one step that can facilitate Indigenous Peoples' connection to their traditions and culture within an urban setting (Elliot et al., 2012).



# Power Dynamics Between Those Impacted

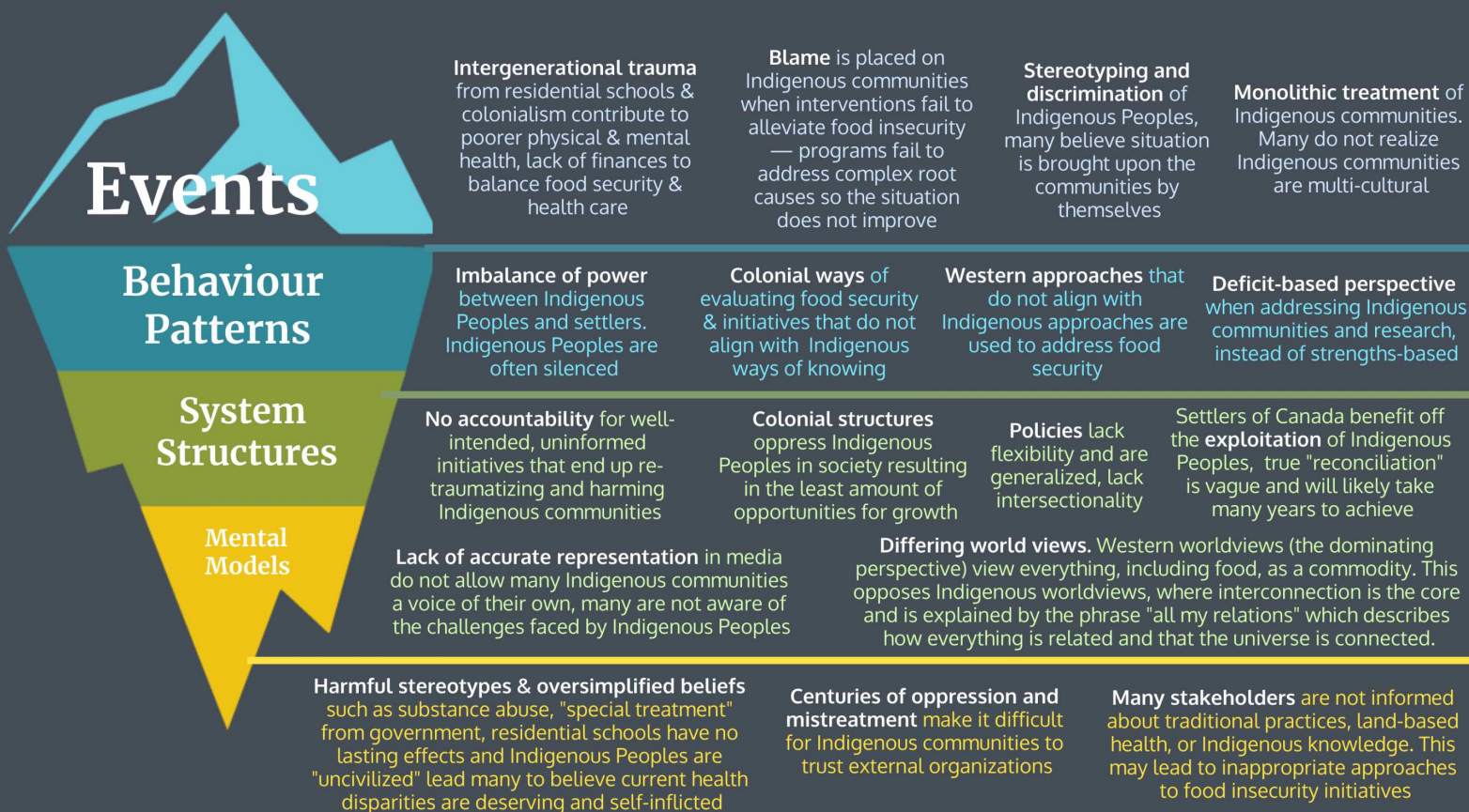
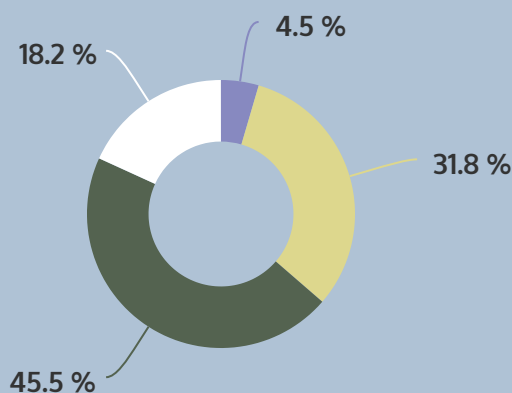


Figure 1. Data from UGTS Essential Food Basket Survey, Users' Household Food Insecurity Levels

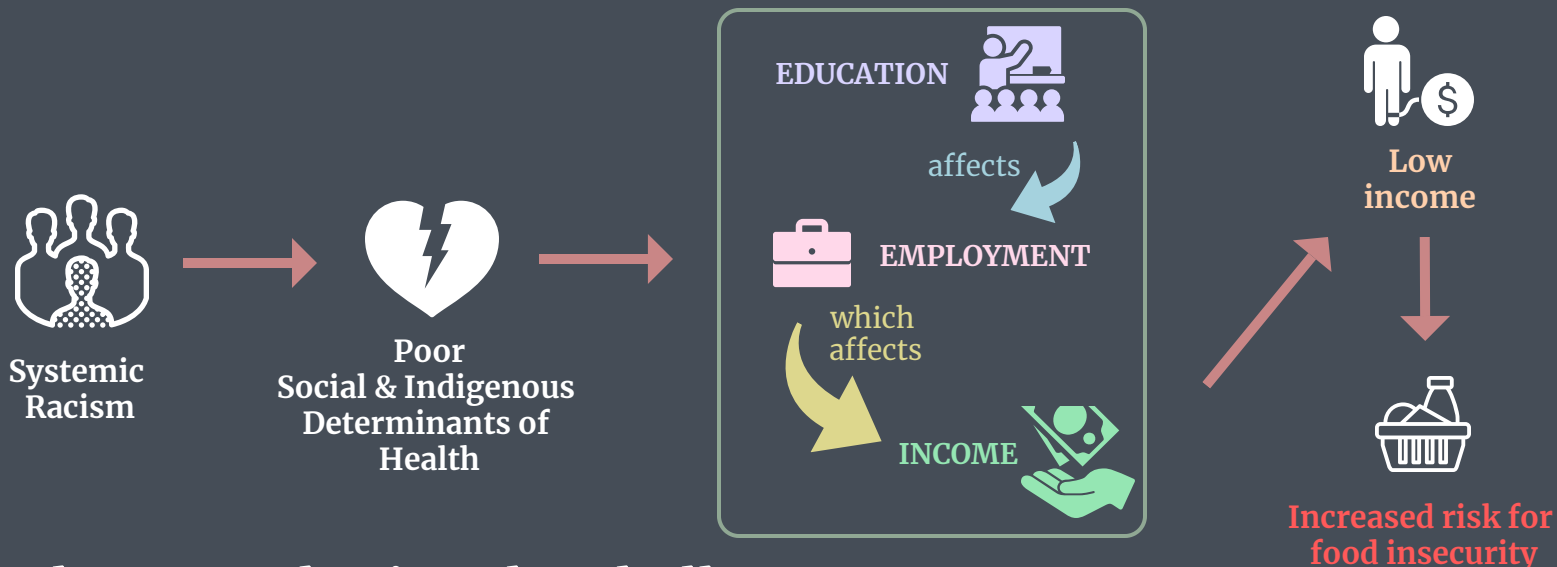
How would you rank the level of household food insecurity that you may be experiencing? (Definition: Food insecurity is the inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints)



- No longer food insecure (e.g., not worried about food or running out of food)
- Marginal food insecurity (e.g. worried about running out of food and/or limited food selection)
- Moderate food insecurity (e.g., compromise quality and/or quantity of food)
- Severe food insecurity (e.g., missing meals, reducing food intake, and at the most extreme go day(s) without food)

Our survey found that **95.5%** of respondents experienced some degree of food insecurity





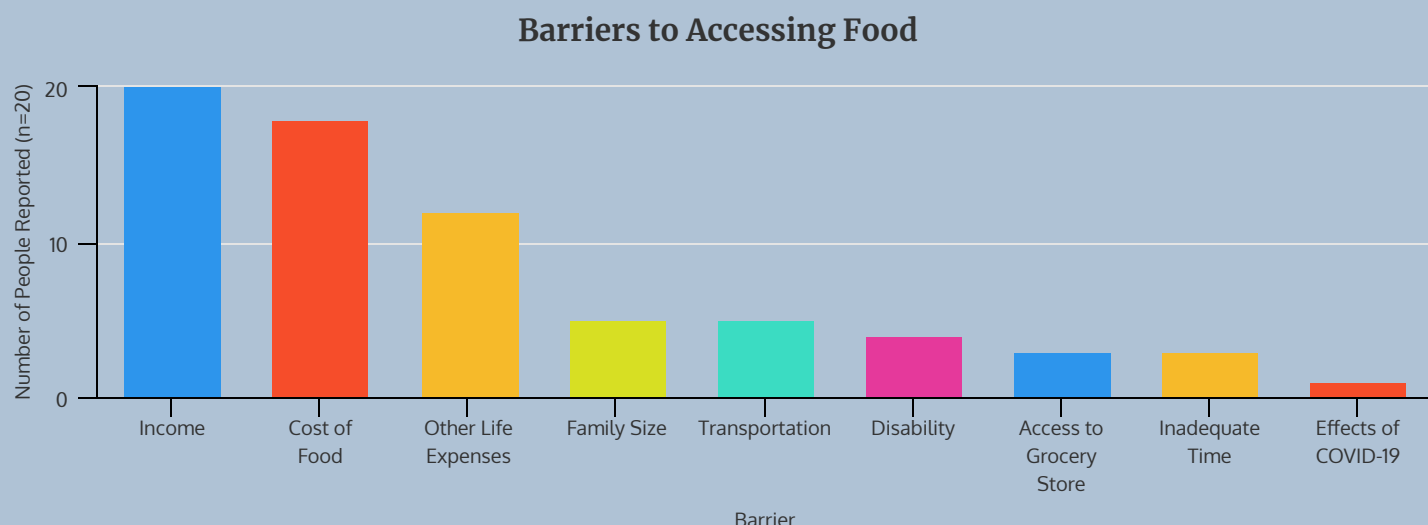
## Those Furthering the Challenge

### 1. Systemic Racism

Food insecurity for UIP is perpetuated by systemic racism and commoditization (Interviewee 6, SFU Food Systems Professor), which are closely related to the ongoing impacts of colonization and living within colonial structures (Paradies, 2018). Systemic racism is widely present in the social determinants of health such as employment (Arceo-Gomez & Campos-Vazquez, 2014; Booth et al., 2012; Hughes & Davidson, 2010), education and income (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2017; OECD, 2018), where income is a key predictor of food security.

In addition, there is consistent growth of Indigenous Peoples in urban areas as they may move to these locations for greater opportunities relating to education, employment and income (Place, 2012). While education and employment rates are positively correlated, Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals **do not experience equal rates of employment despite having the same level of education** (Appendix 5; OECD, 2018). In Canada, within Indigenous groups, there is unequal labour market participation with First Nations experiencing the lowest labour market outcomes at 47% (Appendix 6; OECD, 2018). Employment barriers are high for Indigenous Peoples and those who are employed experience disparities in wages and income (Appendix 7 & 8; OECD, 2018). Additionally, many employers still do not practice inclusive hiring practices and contribute to exacerbating systemic racism within Canadian labour markets faced by Indigenous Peoples (OECD, 2018). These barriers contribute to the growing risk of food insecurity for UIP (OECD, 2018).

Figure 2: Data from UGTS Essential Food Basket Survey, Barriers to Accessing Food



100% of respondents emphasized income as a significant barrier to food security

# Those Furthering the Challenge, Continued

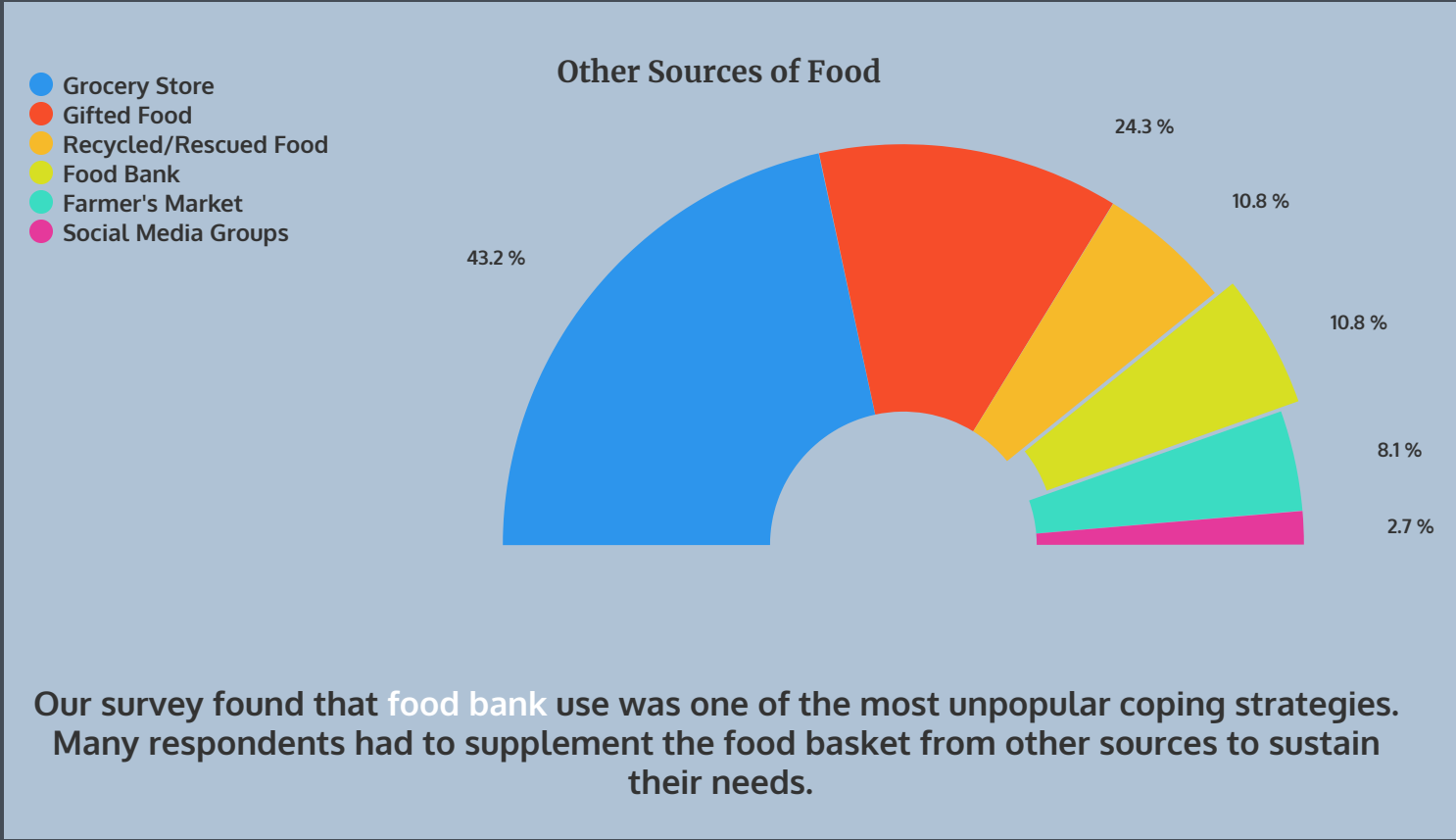
## 2. Food Banks

Food banks remain the primary response to food insecurity in Canada and worsen the situation (Tarasuk et al., 2020). They do not address underlying issues such as income and systemic racism. The use of food banks are often seen as the exception and not the norm for those who are food-insecure (Tarasuk et al., 2020). Food insecurity is correlated with low income and many either seek support from family or friends, pawn possessions, or skip meals before utilizing food banks (Gundersen et al., 2017). Food banks give the illusion that a solution exists, resulting in less attention being brought to this issue.

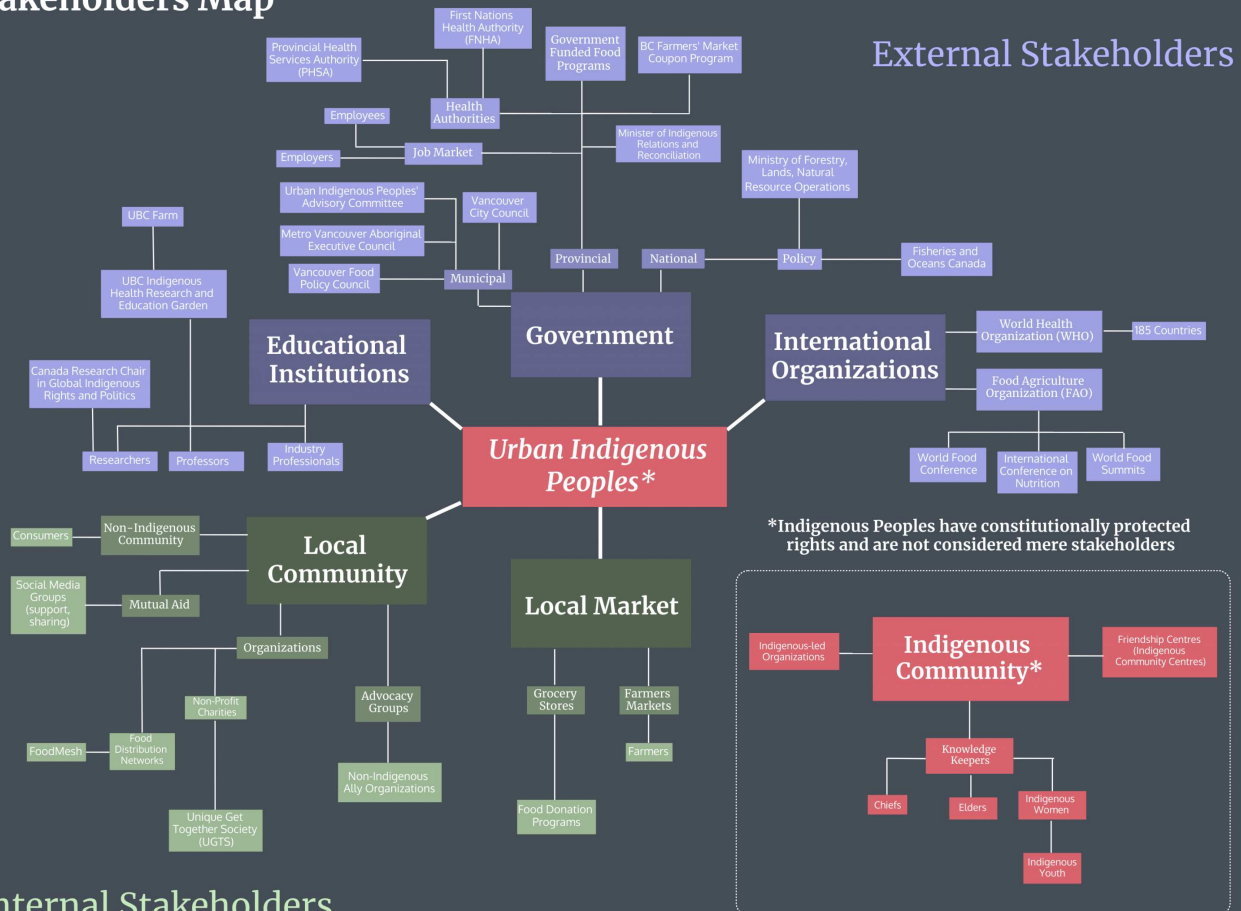
Food banks have been found to be ineffective in resolving food insecurity due to barriers such as stigma and therefore cannot be fully depended on (Tarasuk et al., 2020). A Vancouver food bank study found that 55% reported no change in hunger, 36% reported reduced hunger, 9% reported increased hunger and 62% reported that food banks were insufficient in meeting household needs (Holmes et al., 2018; Holmes et al., 2019).

Until more sustainable initiatives are implemented, food banks will still be relied on. The UGTS Essential Food Basket Program has implemented strategies to reduce barriers and stigma by delivering food and eliminating proof of need. However, UGTS is limited due to underfunding, and is currently operating at full capacity while continuing to receive more applicants than they can serve throughout COVID-19 (Interviewee 1, UGTS Representative).

Figure 3. Data from UGTS Essential Food Basket Survey, Users' Sources of Food



# Stakeholders Map



## Most Power to Create Change

### 1. Government

The government can impact UIP food insecurity by **addressing root causes through policy change and implementing initiatives**. They must implement policies and programs that ensure consistent and sufficient income to afford adequate food, improve access to affordable foods in all communities, commit to annual reporting on all levels of household food insecurity, frequently evaluate the impact of poverty reduction and protocols for screening, support continuous research in addressing gaps in literature regarding under-researched populations experiencing a high prevalence and severity of household food insecurity and use those findings to inform strategies and policies to reduce food insecurity (Dietitians of Canada, 2016). The government must **follow the lead of Indigenous Peoples to ensure that policies and initiatives reflect Indigenous perspectives** and meet the population's aspirations in improving access to sufficient, safe, and culturally appropriate food, as well as ensure that data collected include culturally relevant health measures (Loppie Reading & Wien, 2009; People's Food Policy Project, 2011). In addition, the government must implement strategies such as land back, which addresses Indigenous food sovereignty by giving Indigenous Peoples the power to govern lands and resources to obtain traditional foods (Dietitians of Canada, 2016; Interviewee 6, SFU Food Systems Professor; People's Food Policy Project, 2011).

### 2. Indigenous Community

Indigenous communities possess valuable perspectives, traditional knowledge, and skills that allow self-determination to decide how to **best utilize traditional food systems and what actions are effective in achieving food security** (Nutrition Division, 2013). Access to adequate resources and funding is essential to implement these initiatives to support and address their aspirations (People's Food Policy Project, 2011).

### 3. Allies

Allies of Indigenous Peoples have the power to create change, especially those with existing privilege in society. Together, allies can **advocate for support** for Indigenous Peoples and raise up Indigenous voices (Interviewee 6, SFU Food Systems Professor).

# **Solutions Landscape**

# SOLUTIONS LANDSCAPE



Food insecurity is a complex and ongoing challenge and to address food insecurity effectively multi-dimensional interventions are critical (BC Ministry of Health, 2013). Indigenous food security should be approached **holistically** and recognize that some initiatives work within colonial structures (Interviewee 4, UBC Indigenous Relations Advisor; Interviewee 8, VCC Instructor & Indigenous Chef).

Initiatives that are most successful **prioritize self-determination and co-create with Indigenous Peoples** to support food sovereignty (Interviewee 3, UBC Land and Food Systems Professor; Interviewee 4, UBC Indigenous Relations Advisor; Interviewee 7, Grandview Woodland Food Connection Representative; People's Food Policy Project, 2011).

## International Initiatives

### Australia

**Welfare "quarantining"** restricted a portion of payments that could only be used to purchase food at government-approved stores. This forced small community stores out of business, increased travelling distances, and resulted in insufficient vouchers (Davy, 2016). This forced food-insecure individuals on welfare to allocate specific amounts to food and was **ineffective as purchasing food is often not a priority** (McIntyre et al., 2016). Many individuals would rather sacrifice food compared to other basic needs like housing and medicine (McIntyre et al., 2016).

# National Initiatives

**Nutrition North Canada (NNC) program** launched by the Government of Canada aimed to make nutritious food affordable and accessible in northern communities by providing support through a subsidy, a support grant and nutrition education initiatives (Government of Canada, 2020b). However, after the full implementation of NNC, the rate of **food insecurity increased by 13.2%** and has made food insecurity even more prevalent, affecting **46.6% in 2014 compared to 33.1% in 2010** (St-Germain et al., 2019). While the NCC has been deemed a **"failure"** (Fitzgerald & Hill, n.d.), the program has continued receiving funding, with \$103 million in 2020-2021 (Government of Canada, 2020b).

# Provincial Initiatives

**The BC Farmers' Market Nutrition Coupon Program (BCFMNCP)** provides low-income recipients coupons that can be redeemed for fresh produce, meat and dairy at local farmers' markets (Ottem, 2010). In 2020, they reached **~16,000 individuals with 22% of users identifying as Indigenous** (BC Association of Farmers' Markets, 2020). This program reported that 99% of participants ate more fruits and vegetables, 70% felt healthier and 61% felt connected to their community (BC Association of Farmers' Markets, 2020). This program supports local farmers' markets and has been a powerful food security tool (BC Government News, 2020). Although initiatives like BCFMNCP are not specifically for Indigenous Peoples, they **support self-determination** (Interviewee 4, UBC Indigenous Relations Advisor).

# Community Initiatives

## Charitable Food Programs

This includes food banks, soup kitchens and meal programs that provide **short-term relief** to communities, individuals and families experiencing food insecurity rather than addressing the root causes (BC Ministry of Health, 2013; Bocskei & Ostry, 2010; Tarasuk & Dachner, 2009). Many barriers exist in accessing food banks including transportation, stigmatization and policies which limit how often an individual can receive assistance (Dietitians of Canada, 2012). In addition, food banks often provide insufficient quantities of food, leaving the needs of households unmet (Holmes et al., 2018; Holmes et al., 2019).

## Non-Profit Organizations

**The UGTS Essential Food Basket Program** delivers food across the Lower Mainland to BIPOC families and individuals who are food-insecure (Interviewee 1, UGTS Representative). This program allows individuals to request foods and can provide foods that are often inaccessible such as meat and dairy products (Interviewee 1, UGTS Representative).

## Food Recovery Programs

Food recovery has been adopted by organizations to collect excess perishable food and redistribute it to people through food banks, shelters and social service agencies. FoodMesh is an organization that supports food recovery by connecting local organizations, such as UGTS, to grocery stores (Interviewee 2, FoodMesh Representative). However, while food recovery reduces food waste and provides food to those who are food-insecure, **evidence does not support food recovery as a method to improve food insecurity** (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2017).



## Patterns Within the "Solutions Landscape"

 Effective Initiatives	 Ineffective Initiatives
Benefit and address aspirations of the community	Do not include Indigenous voices
Foster self-determination	Fail to recognize the importance of cultural and traditional foods
Co-create & co-develop initiatives	Do not address barriers and stigma
Promote Indigenous self-governance and value Indigenous voices	Exploit Indigenous Peoples while adopting colonial strategies

## Community Initiatives, Continued

### Urban Agriculture

**Indigenous-led community gardens** can offer a land-based learning space to pass **cultural knowledge and strengthen food sovereignty and spiritual connections** (Interviewee 7, Grandview Woodland Food Connection Representative). However, evidence suggests that community gardens are limited when addressing those living in severe poverty and **do not benefit those who are the most food-insecure** (McElroy, 2019). Additionally, developers can turn private lots into community gardens to save on taxes, which has increased the number of community gardens with minimal benefit to the community (Molko, 2019).

### UBC Farm

**The Tu'wusht garden project** is an Indigenous-led initiative providing support for Vancouver's Indigenous community living in the Downtown Eastside (Louis, n.d.). The project creates a safe space for intergenerational teachings, promotes healing through gardening for medicine and sustenance and builds connections to land and knowledge (Louis, n.d.). The farm provides a way to reflect on traditional teachings from Elders in an urban setting which includes ceremonies and celebrations with harvest feasts (Indigenous Research Partnerships, n.d.). While the program has been very successful, it was **cancelled temporarily due to COVID-19 in 2020 but has since been suspended due to lack of funding** (Vancouver Aboriginal Health Society, 2021).

## Private Sector

### Corporations

**The BC Farmers' Food Donation Corporate Income Tax Credit** encourages farmers and farming corporations to donate produce to food banks and school meal programs to receive a **tax credit of 25% of their donation** (Government of British Columbia, n.d.). However, many food-insecure individuals do not use food banks, therefore, **increasing donations to food banks are ineffective** (Kinach et al., 2019). In addition, food donations to food banks from private food producers, suppliers and retailers are often of low nutritional value or quality resulting in **high costs for food banks to dispose of inedible food** (Pawson, 2015).

# Gaps & Levers

# GAPS & LEVERS OF CHANGE

Before stakeholders approach Indigenous communities, it is essential to **build a relationship** and establish **trust and respect** to avoid initiatives being ineffective (Interviewee 2, FoodMesh Representative). Stakeholders approaching Indigenous communities must be informed of historical trauma, and empower those in the community with a voice and a choice (Zgoda et al., 2016).



Many government programs such as NNC fail to alleviate the prevalence of food insecurity and **ultimately worsen** the situation (St-Germain et al., 2019). For the NNC in particular, it was **ineffective** due to the lack of collaboration and consultation with community members, restrictive eligibility requirements, refusal to invest in the health of Indigenous communities, lack of self-determination and no respect or support for Indigenous traditions and culture (Chin-Yee & Chin-Yee, 2015). The program **ultimately failed** due to its **exploitative and colonial strategy** towards northern food insecurity where the aspirations of northern Indigenous Peoples were **largely ignored**.

## Stakeholder Action

### Government, Educational Institutions & Non-profits

- Indigenous communities and stakeholders must co-create interventions together with involvement of Elders, Chiefs, Councils and Indigenous community (Interviewee 3, UBC Land and Food Systems Professor; Interviewee 4, UBC Indigenous Relations Advisor; Interviewee 5, BC Community Project Manager)
- Acknowledge that Indigenous communities are diverse in culture, thus have different preferences
- Implement Two-Eyed Seeing Approach, support self-determination and respect Indigenous traditions and culture



Research on Indigenous communities led by non-Indigenous researchers is often one-sided where **knowledge is taken** with no benefit being returned, resulting in Indigenous Peoples being neglected in the process (McClelland, 2011). Indigenous research initiatives must implement the **First Nations Principles of OCAP** (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2021), a **Participatory Action Research approach** (Baum et al., 2006; Peltier, 2018) and a **Two-Eyed Seeing Approach** (Iwama et al., 2009; Peltier, 2018) to avoid exploiting and taking advantage of Indigenous knowledge (Coram, 2011; McClelland, 2011). In addition, data collected should be strengths-focused and relevant to UIP experiencing food insecurity.

## Stakeholder Action

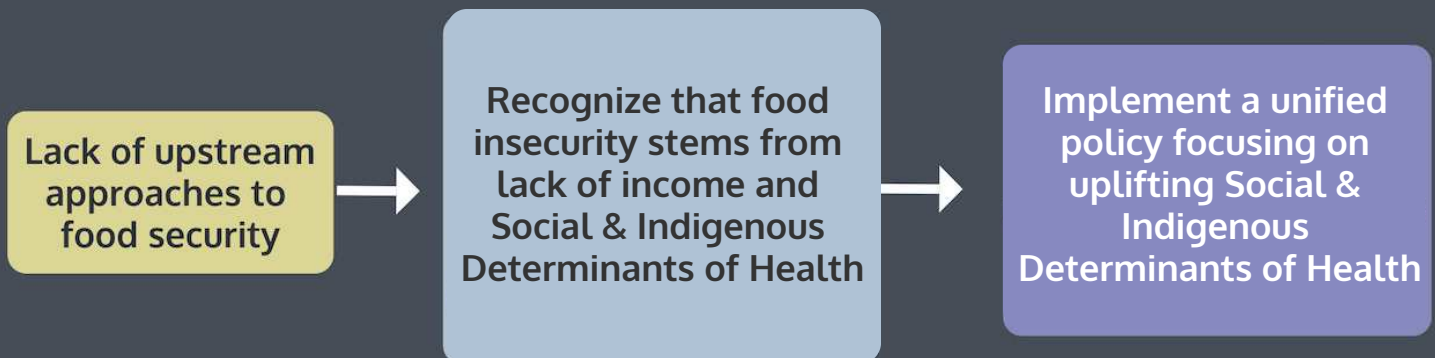
### Educational Institutions

- Include Indigenous perspectives and take time to learn each Nations' customs
- Ensure outcomes benefit the community and findings are disseminated back
- Acknowledge positionality of researchers
- All research policies involving Indigenous Peoples must implement the First Nation Principles of OCAP
- Incorporate sharing circles in research and teaching methods
- Distinguish research between urban, rural and specific Indigenous communities
- Allow Indigenous Elders and other Knowledge Keepers to also be knowledge translators (Interviewee 3, UBC Land and Food Systems Professor)
- Advocate for strengths-based research, as current colonial perspectives on Indigenous Peoples are deficit-based

## GAP

## LEVER

## INTERVENTION



Without policy intervention focused at the **root causes**, food insecurity will persist (Tarasuk et al., 2020). Actions such as implementing **basic income**, improving benefits for low-income workers, increasing funding for social welfare programs and affordable housing will contribute to **long-term alleviation** of food insecurity (Dietitians of Canada, 2016; People's Food Policy Project, 2011).

### Stakeholder Action

#### Government

- Policies must focus on addressing the social and Indigenous Determinants of Health
- Prioritize reducing food insecurity for UIP
- Instead of only consulting Indigenous Peoples they should be co-developers when co-creating initiatives together (Interviewee 3, UBC Land and Food Systems Professor).
- Mandatory implementation of UNDRIP at all levels (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).
- Implement provincial Indigenous Food Framework (Interviewee 7, Grandview Woodland Food Connection Representative)

#### Organizations

- Advocate for policy action together with the Indigenous community

## GAP

## LEVER

## INTERVENTION

Inconsistent funding & underfunding of Indigenous- and BIPOC-led organizations



Prioritize consistent funding of Indigenous- & BIPOC-led organizations



Create low barrier funding opportunities and expand funding for current successful initiatives

Indigenous- and BIPOC-led non-profits can **act quickly to support their local community** due to their own lived experience with systemic racism and involvement in the community (Interviewee 1, UGTS Representative; Interviewee 5, BC Community Project Manager). However, these organizations often **struggle to receive funding** to continue and expand their programs due to prioritizing taking action instead of establishing logistics and collecting data, which are needed for funding (Interviewee 1, UGTS Representative; Interviewee 5, BC Community Project Manager).

### Stakeholder Action

#### Government

- Allocate low-barrier funding specifically for BIPOC-led non-profits
- The Federal, Provincial and Municipal government must consistently fund effective, Indigenous-led local organizations and initiatives (Interviewee 5, BC Community Project Manager). Many Indigenous-led organizations are impactful, but are shut down due to underfunding (Interviewee 1, UGTS Representative; Interviewee 5, BC Community Project Manager).
- Expand funding to support current successful initiatives instead of creating new initiatives



# Key Insights & Lessons Learned

# KEY INSIGHTS & LESSONS LEARNED

Our team acknowledges our privilege of having no lived experience of food insecurity, and our perspectives are limited to those of settlers. We were unaware of the degree of food insecurity experienced by the Indigenous population within BC. In the presence of many food security initiatives, we were initially under the impression that they were sufficient in addressing food insecurity in our community.

Through our research, we learned that food insecurity and more specifically, Indigenous food insecurity is a **complex and systemic issue** that has been **prevalent for decades** without sustainable interventions being implemented. Additionally, the current discourse may assume that the majority of people living in urban areas experience little to no food insecurity, however, UIP are especially vulnerable due to various intersecting factors. Urban areas allow for a mixture of Indigenous populations to gather from many different communities which presents the challenge of considering **198 distinct First Nations groups** in BC without treating all Indigenous Peoples as a **single monolith** (Appendix 10).

Furthermore, our current dominant Western worldview of food as a commodity resists Indigenous worldviews as food is connected to the land (Interviewee 6, SFU Food Systems Professor). For Indigenous Peoples, food impacts not only **physical wellbeing**, but also **mental, spiritual and emotional wellbeing, diet quality and connection to culture, community and land** (Elliot et al., 2012; Interviewee 8, VCC Instructor & Indigenous Chef; Johnson, n.d.; Nutrition Division, 2013). Therefore actions towards addressing Indigenous food insecurity and food sovereignty must recognize and value the **significant role food plays in healing and providing nourishment**.

Finally, it is important to recognize that **not every Indigenous person** will want to participate in traditional practices or eat traditional foods, and to assume otherwise would be a colonial projection (Interviewee 4, UBC Indigenous Relations Advisor). Future research, programs and policies must be **co-created together** to support **Indigenous self-determination** to meet the specific aspirations of the community (Interviewee 3, UBC Land and Food Systems Professor; Interviewee 4, UBC Indigenous Relations Advisor). True systemic change requires **land back, land ownership, food sovereignty** and incremental steps that build up to be transformative.

