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BEYOND FOOD SECURITY
A PARTICIPATORY STUDY OF OTTAWA'S LOWERTOWN EAST COMMUNITY KITCHEN PROGRAM

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1. Introduction

    1.1. Food security in Canada: the charitable model

In Canada, 13% of the population can be identified as food insecure, meaning they lack

reliable access to safe, quality, nutritious food, mainly as a result of low income, an issue which

affects approximately four million Canadians at any given time (Food Banks Canada, 2015).

Food security is linked to income and has significant individual and public health implications

(Health Canada, 2004; Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2009; London Poverty Research Centre, 2014). In

fact, the demand for charitable food distribution has been steadily increasing since the advent of

programs such as the Food Bank in the 1980s (Tarasuk, 2001). In 2015, the Food Bank served

over 850 000 Canadians, of which over 40% were Ontarians (Food Banks Canada, 2015). This

food insecurity affects many families in Ottawa, and the problem is worsening. In 2013-2014

alone, the Ottawa Food Bank spent over 11.5 million dollars to serve a record approximately 50

000 people, due to exacerbating factors such as rising food prices, expensive housing, and an

uncertain job market (Ottawa Food Bank, 2015). Almost half of these users are families, and

well over one third are children (Ottawa Food Bank, 2015). This represents a significant

financial burden, in addition to the social and health implications such as negative effects on

learning and productivity, increased health-care needs and social exclusion (Hamelin, Mercier &

Bedard, 2008). This burden is not evenly distributed however, as issues such as food security

and well-being are variables which differ by region as a result of social and economic factors; the

burden disproportionately falls on low income neighbourhoods (Furber *et al*., 2010). Food

security varies as a function of geography and scale, changing depending on whether it is

considered locally, nationally, or globally (Jarosz, 2014). Food security is determined by a

complex cluster of social and economic factors (Hamelin, Mercier & Bedard, 2011), which vary

through space. For example, individual and household level food insecurity may be shaped by different conditions from place to place, and influenced structurally by dynamic national and international contexts (Jarosz, 2014). Therefore, programs responding to these needs must consider issues of scale and be tailored to the geography and demographics of the community and its residents' needs.

1.2. Alternatives to the charitable model: community and collective kitchens

Despite the existence of programs such as the Food Bank, there remain significant gaps in terms of addressing long-term food security issues in the Ottawa region, especially within low-income neighbourhoods such as Lowertown East. Research has shown that charitable food programs, such as those discussed above, are often inadequate as demand exceeds supply and therefore the quality and quantity of food per person is reduced (Tarasuk, 2001). The program is also reliant on fluctuating donations and has been shown to be demeaning for its users (Tarasuk, 2001). Despite the clearly established need for more and/or different programs that address food insecurity, The National Population Health Survey estimated that only one fifth of Canada's food-insecure population take advantage of food support (Hamelin, Mercier & Bedard, 2011). Community food initiatives are alternatives to the charitable model, intended to fill the gap that remains despite charitable models of food distribution such as the Ottawa Food Bank. Community food programs often contain a social element or focus on skill and community building (Tarasuk, 2001) and may include activities such as community gardening, targeted food education activities/workshops, and also group cooking activities. While the term 'community kitchen' generally refers to a broader umbrella definition of many different structures of food-related programming, the term 'collective kitchen' is often used to describe a particular model of

community food program in which a group pools resources to produce large quantities of food at a reduced cost (Engler-Stringer & Berenbaum, 2007). These programs are intended to address both issues of food insecurity, as well as social isolation, resulting in stronger more empowered individuals and communities with better cooking skills and nutritional knowledge (Iacovou *et al*., 2012). Community kitchens are one of many strategies used in low income neighbourhoods in Canada to address food insecurity (Raphael, 2009).

1.3. Benefits and challenges: are community food programs effective?

Community and collective kitchen models have been shown to contribute towards dignified access to food services, better community awareness of food-related issues, facilitation of social interaction and support networks, provision of nutritious food, education, and skill-building (Engler-Stringer & Berenbaum, 2005; Engler-Stringer & Berenbaum, 2007; Iacovou *et al*., 2012; Fridman & Lenters, 2013; Barry & Draper, 2014). Yet, despite the established benefits of community food programs, significant gaps remain in the literature. Although there is general consensus that the educational and social benefits of community kitchens are significant, studies are either inconclusive or present dissimilar results regarding the impact of collective and community kitchens on food security (Iacovou *et al*., 2012; Engler-Stringer & Berenbaum, 2005, 2007). Research tends to focus only on the direct impacts of such programs on food security; however, the discussion may be broadened to include a given program's contribution to food security in two ways: first, by directly increasing food resources; and secondly, by indirectly impacting food security through skill-building, community building, and social interaction (Tarasuk, 2001). Therefore, in evaluating the success of a community food program, both indirect and direct contributions to food security are important considerations.

Though food security and well-being are variables that differ by region as a product of socio-economic status and social factors, only some researchers mention the link between the place-specific or neighbourhood-specific nature of community needs and community kitchens (Furber *et al*., 2010; Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2013; Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2009). As such, there is a need for additional research and clear discussion of how space and place affect food-programming such as community kitchen activities. Research also indicates that barriers to participating in community food programs include inaccessibility and lack of fit with community needs and interests (Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2013), which identifies a need to examine how community kitchen models differ and can adapt to community needs. It is important to have programming at a community level that is community-led, participatory in nature, and self-sustaining (Iacovou *et al*., 2012; Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2013; Engler-Stringer & Berenbaum, 2005); studies have shown that a participatory model is necessary for the success of collective kitchens in particular (Iacovou *et al*., 2012). This points to the need for contributions to community kitchen research to be participative and community-led. Following from these identified gaps, a collaborative and participatory research project was initiated in order to evaluate a successful community kitchen model in Ottawa's Lowertown East neighbourhood.

1.4. Lowertown Good Neighbours Community House: the Collective Intercultural Community Kitchen

The Lowertown Good Neighbours Community House (LGNCH) is a multi-purpose resource centre for a densely populated, low-income neighbourhood in Ottawa. The Lowertown neighbourhood has a population of over eight thousand people, with both English and French speaking residents, one third of whom live on low income (Ottawa Neighbourhood Study, 2015).

Lowertown is also culturally diverse neighbourhood; there are also a greater percentage of immigrants and a greater percentage of the population who identify as a visible minority than within the city as a whole (Ottawa Neighbourhood Study, 2015). The area is comprised mostly of high rise, low rise, and row housing, and 80% the population are tenants, compared to the Ottawa average of 33% (Ottawa Neighbourhood Study, 2015). Almost 30% of the population live in subsidized housing, and there is higher than average unemployment (Ottawa Neighbourhood Study, 2015). In terms of family structure, there are significantly more single person households, and more single parent families, particularly female single parent families, when compared to the average of the Ottawa population (Ottawa Neighbourhood Study, 2015).

Specifically mandated to serve several low-income housing units in Lowertown East, the LGNCH programs reach far beyond that, serving community members from throughout Lowertown East, Sandy Hill, Vanier, and beyond. The House hosts multiple programs that serve a range of needs and clientele which reflect the neighbourhood demographics, including weekly food bank distribution. At varying times the LGNCH has run different food-related events and workshops, and as part of regular programming the LGNCH initiated a collective kitchen in 2007 that ran monthly for over six years. It evolved from a collective kitchen model to a hybrid community kitchen model in order to better meet community needs; initially it served a limited number of registered participants with a focus on meal distribution to participants' households. In response to community feedback, the program shifted towards a more open, participatory kitchen focused on the social and cultural importance of food (A. Fields, personal communication, May 20, 2015; K. Vardon, personal communication, November 20, 2015). The model, deemed "Collective Intercultural Community Kitchen" (CICK) by the Community House, served a broader range of participants and promoted the sharing of culturally-linked food preparation

skills and knowledge. Participants responded positively and the program was deemed successful; however, it folded in the spring of 2014 due to lack of funding.

The personnel at the Community House recognize that despite the importance of Food Bank distribution, other more diverse food-related programs are needed in order to meet the community needs for food security (A. Fields, personal communication, May 20, 2015). This issue is compounded by the lack of resources available to fund programs and services that contribute towards sustainable food security. The LGNCH is currently undertaking a planning process to develop a 5-year Food Security Strategy. Within this context, the organization is interested in identifying and building sustainable programming that goes beyond the charitable model of food distribution. The intention of the LGNCH planning is to: build individual and community capacity around food procurement, including knowledge and skills related to food selection, use, production, preservation and preparation; promote the development of personal capacities such as self-esteem and leadership; and, develop transferable skills, such as project management, communications and event planning. In this way, LGNCH recognizes that food security is broader than just tangible access to food.

1.5. The Emergence of a multi-stakeholder participatory project

Given the community interest in bettering food-related programming, and the financial obstacles in providing this service, this project emerged from a partnership between the Ontario Public Research Interest Group (OPIRG), the Lowertown Good Neighbours Community House (LGNCH), and researchers from the University of Ottawa's Department of Geography. As a non-partisan group dedicated to social, economic and environmental justice, OPIRG was initially approached by LGNCH regarding food security-related questions. The idea for this research

project emerged through a series of conversations between researchers and community representatives to focus the research on community needs. Given the significance of adequate food security and its particular importance in low-income neighbourhoods, this project aimed to actively engage low-income populations in Lowertown East, Ottawa in the participatory development of successful community programming. For the program to be considered successful, it needs to be tailored to community needs and have a positive impact on food security, health, and encourage social strengthening through social and cultural interaction. The long-term goal is to inform funding decisions to support populations in the Lowertown East neighbourhood, and other similar communities, in gaining/sustaining access to more effective community food programs.

This research aims to answer the question: in what ways does a participatory community kitchen program in a low-income urban neighbourhood, such as the LGNCH program, fulfil community needs while addressing various aspects of food security? Secondly, the research aims to assess the development and evolution of the CICK program to determine: what can be learned in terms of developing more effective community kitchen models to better address community needs? This project used a participatory research model to engage leaders and clients of the LGNCH in assessing the utility, benefits and challenges for the sustainability of collective kitchen programming, with the objectives of:

(1) Understanding the evolution of the Lowertown East community kitchen, and how it differs from more typical collective kitchens;

(2) Identifying the benefits and challenges in meeting the place-specific community needs of a low-income, primarily immigrant population in terms of both food security and other aspects of well-being; and,

(3) Collaboratively developing a collective kitchen model that meets needs, is

sustainable, and contributes to the LGNCH 5-year Food Security Strategy.

In addition to contributing towards food-related programming in the Lowertown East

community, the broader aim of this research is to contribute to the growing research that

highlights the diverse components of individual and community food security, including both

direct and indirect aspects.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Community kitchens: food security and beyond

Food security is a measure of the ability of an individual, household, or community, to have

access to safe, quality, nutritious food in a manner that maintains human dignity. Food insecurity

can have significant impacts on physical, mental, and social well-being (FAO, 2015; Engler-

Stringer & Berenbaum, 2007; Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2009; London Poverty Research Centre,

2014), and is a significant individual and public health challenge. Food insecurity is complex, as

it arises from "a cluster of problems" resulting from different situations (Hamelin, Mercier &

Bedard, 2011), at the root of which is low-income (Health Canada, 2004; Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk,

2009; London Poverty Research Centre, 2014). This means that food security is of particular

concern within low income neighbourhoods (Furber *et al*., 2010).

Given that food services such as the Food Bank were originally introduced as emergency or

ad hoc services, and have now become "necessary community resources" without having

resolved the problem of food security (Tarasuk, 2001; Marquis, Thompson & Murray, 2001),

alternative food programs and initiatives fill an important gap. Community food initiatives such

as collective kitchens are community programs that operate community cooking activities

(Engler-Stringer & Berenbaum, 2007). While there is no single definition, the term community kitchen is generally used to describe all cooking-type programs, while the term collective kitchen has typically referred to a group which pools financial and labour resources to produce large quantities of food a reduced cost (Engler-Stringer & Berenbaum, 2007). These programs are intended to address both issues of food insecurity and social isolation, resulting in stronger, more empowered individuals and communities with better knowledge of nutrition and food preparation (Iacovou *et al*., 2012). Recognized as early as 1985, the collective kitchen has developed into a model now seen in operation across Canada, with the estimated total exceeding 2500 separate collective kitchens (Engler-Stringer & Berenbaum, 2007; Engler-Stringer & Berenbaum, 2005). Though the definition of the typical collective kitchens refers to the pooling of resources and preparation of larger quantities of food, the definition has expanded to include more formal programs that occur in community spaces, and can include elements of formal learning, skill-building, social interaction and health promotion (Fridman &Lenters, 2013). Collective kitchens programs are grouped under the broader umbrella term of community kitchens. Different models of these programs are determined by various factors such as rules, fees, funding, and space utilisation; because of the variation, the lines are often blurred between the identification of a program as a community versus collective kitchen (Fridman & Lenters, 2013). The dynamic and diverse nature of community food programs is also its strength (Fridman & Lenters, 2013), as they are adaptable and can fulfill different needs. Understanding which type of program fits the needs of the community is important in order to effectively utilize what scarce funds are available to address issues of food insecurity. Recognizing that models differ, this research in part aims to examine how participatory and flexible community needs-based models can be more effective in certain communities.

2.1.1. Contribution to food security, and other benefits

Studies show that benefits from collective and community kitchens can be far-reaching and diverse. An international review published in 2012 found that participants consumed more nutritious food with increased quantities of fruits and vegetables, and were able to have a more diverse diet (Iacovou *et al*., 2012). While some research suggests that collective and community kitchens cannot resolve food security issues as they do not alter economic status (Iacovou *et al*., 2012; Hamelin, Mercier & Bedard, 2008), studies have demonstrated that the educational benefits of participating in collective and community kitchens allows participants to build cooking skills, practice better decision making, and improve budgeting skills that enable purchasing more nutritious food at lower costs (e.g. buying in bulk), and eating less fast food (Iacovou *et al*., 2012; Engler-Stringer & Berenbaum, 2007; Marquis *et al.,* 2001; Lee *et al.*, 2010). Part of the definition of food security is the dignified access to food, and research has shown that collective kitchens may be less stigmatizing as participants feel better about accessing food in this environment as compared to other programs such as the Food Bank (Engler-Stringer & Berenbaum, 2007).

When the success of collective kitchens is measured against individual-level or household-level impacts on food security, findings are often mixed and highlight that the programs have little impact on underlying causes of food insecurity (Fridman & Lenters, 2013). For example, a study from Quebec found that although community food programs may indeed provide food, skill development and support, these cannot compensate for the lack of financial control over household food security (Hamelin, Mercier & Bedard, 2008). In this sense, community food programs have limited potential for solving food insecurity issues as they do not significantly alter economic conditions. While these studies are clear that income-related food

security cannot be resolved through collective kitchen programming, collective and community kitchen programs do contribute to short-term or indirect food security and overall community development through contributions to community awareness, facilitation of social interaction and support networks, provision of nutritious food, education, and skill-building (Engler-Stringer & Berenbaum, 2005; Iacovou *et al*., 2012; Fridman & Lenters, 2013; Barry & Draper, 2014). A 2004 Calgary-based study found that although many participants experienced food-related benefits, they joined the program originally seeking social interaction and community support (Fano, Tyminski & Flynn, 2004). This may point to the importance of social interaction to reduce isolation, which is an important benefit and incentive to participate (Racine & St-Onge, 2000; Engler-Stringer & Berenbaum, 2007). This is also acts as an indirect contributor to food security through the creation of social support networks (Fano, Tyminski & Flynn, 2004). In this way, collective kitchens contribute to individual and household structural support by supporting the formation and strengthening of social networks, and functional support because it creates a positive and comfortable environment in which to enjoy food (Engler-Stringer & Berenbaum, 2007).

The debate surrounding the effectiveness of community food programs such as collective kitchens remains warranted however, given that food insecurity has remained a persistent problem despite the increasing popularity of community food initiatives (Hamelin, Mercier & Bedard, 2008). Additionally, Canada's National Population Health Survey estimated that only 20% of food-insecure households participate in food support programs (Hamelin, Mercier & Bedard, 2011). This points to an ongoing need to assess the impact of community food programs on food security.

2.2. Challenges in implementation & gaps in the literature

There are also challenges to the typical model of the collective kitchen in which resources are pooled to produce larger quantities of food. For example, research has found that participants can be deterred or excluded from participation by very small financial contributions, such as those required in the typical non-subsidized collective kitchen (Engler-Stringer & Berenbaum, 2007; Hamelin, Mercier & Bedard, 2011). This can have significant implications for lower income individuals and neighbourhoods. Another Toronto based study found that participation rates in low income areas with ample access to food-related programs such as collective kitchens were extremely low, and therefore not a significant contributor to food security (Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2009). Under-participation may be explained in part by a lack of fit of different food programs to community needs, highlighting the need for programs to be situation-specific and adapted to the needs of each particular household or individual (Hamelin , Mercier & Bedard, 2011). This lack of fit is a common theme as yet another study found that participants felt food programs were inaccessible and did not accommodate or fit community needs and interests (Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2013). Collective kitchens also serve less vulnerable populations than the charitable model (i.e., Food Banks), which suggests that there is a need for improved accessibility to programs such as the collective kitchen for vulnerable populations who represent the population with the most significant need (Roncarlo *et al*., 2015). Overall, this review of existing studies emphasizes the need for further research into how collective kitchen and community-food programming models differ in order to understand case-specific conditions that contribute to their success or failure.

The consideration of community needs is essential to the discussion of food security, particularly because research has shown that community and household needs are often differently perceived by program leaders versus members of food-insecure households (Hamelin,

Mercier & Bedard, 2008). While program leaders felt that the quantity of food needed for survival was more important to low income households, the community members felt that balanced diet of better quality food, which corresponds to their personal preferences, was much more significant (Hamelin, Mercier & Bedard, 2008). This disconnect between community needs and the provision of food-related programming, such as collective kitchens, was highlighted as a significant barrier given that activities were not reflective of community needs, and therefore not effectively reducing food insecurity (Hamelin, Mercier & Bedard, 2008).

Further, because collective and community kitchens aim to address issues such as food security, a variable which differs by region as a product of socio-economic status, they must be tailored to the geography and demographics of the community and its residents' needs. As such, it is important to have programming at community level that is participatory in nature and self-sustaining (Iacovou *et al*., 2012; Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2013). Studies have shown that a participatory model is necessary for the success of a collective kitchen (Iacovou *et al*., 2012), and more generally for successful food security at a community level (McCullum *et al*., 2005). Although many authors recognize that programming must address the needs of the community, particularly for low-income or vulnerable populations (Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2013), others call for programming that goes beyond community-level food security, and addresses needs at a household-level (Hamelin, Mercier & Bedard, 2011). Another challenge noted by Iacovou *et al.* is that studies, due to ethical issues related to randomized control-trials, have often examined known low-income communities which may not be representative of all vulnerable and low-income populations (2012).

As is evident from conflicting views on community kitchen programs, and despite the known benefits and failures of different models, significant gaps remain in the literature. Although there

is a general consensus that the educational and social benefits of community and collective kitchens are significant, studies are either inconclusive or present dissimilar results regarding the impact of the collective kitchen on food security. In order to have effective solutions to food insecurity, the benefits of community kitchens must respond to both community and household needs. Therefore the evaluation of both successful and unsuccessful programs is an essential step in determining how food programming can adapt to diverse and changing community needs.

In order to gain insight into community kitchen programs in low-income neighbourhoods, this paper will use the following organisation: the methodology of the research will be detailed, including a summary of the focus groups, interviews, data analysis, and limitations; the results of the focus groups and interviews will be presented and discussed with reference to relevant literature; the reach and evolution of the program will be detailed; the benefits and challenges of the program will be discussed; and, the paper will conclude with a reflection on the significance of these findings in addition to suggested directions for future research.

3. Methodology

Through a community-based research partnership, this project recreated the previously established Collective Intercultural Community Kitchen program at the Lowertown Good Neighbours Community House (LGNCH) by offering four sessions between the months of July and October 2015, preceded by an open house planning session in July. Each collective kitchen served as an opportunity for participants to reflect about benefits of the learning and skills they have acquired, as well as challenges and successes of the collective kitchen. The thematic focus of each discussion had two components: first, the issue of the sustainability of the program was addressed through discussion of the feasibility and logistics regarding possible community ownership of program; and secondly, the participants were encouraged to discuss their

experiences of the CICK, with a focus on benefits and challenges of the program, with special

attention placed on the issue of food security. The research committee was comprised of a

representative of the LGNCH, two University of Ottawa researchers, and the OPIRG research

coordinator from the University of Ottawa guided the direction of this project while using a

consensus-based decision-making model and process. This aided in avoiding a one-sided

narrative, and ensured collaborative exchange to increase the richness and variety of topics raised

in discussion (Freire, 2000). Active participation of community leaders and community members

was therefore governed by consensus and sensitivity to the needs and wishes of those involved.

3.1. Focus groups

Using a participatory research process, community participants took part in each of four 1-2

hour focus groups held during CICK sessions from July 2015 to October 2015. Due to the open

nature of the CICK program, participant numbers fluctuated significantly between focus groups;

sessions had the following number of participants: July, n=23; August, n=26; September, n=15;

October, n=12; overall, a total of 38 individuals participated in one or more sessions. The

dynamic of the focus groups was variable given that participation ranged from 12 to 26 people;

larger groups tended towards question and answer type structure, with little participation from

less vocal group members. Smaller groups sizes enabled a more conversational discussion

between community members and allowed more of the group to share. While 31 of the total

respondents were women, only 7 of the participants were male; this is a reflection of past CICK

events which were often female dominated. Participants came from both family and single

person homes; in addition to the 38 adult respondents, three children attended one or more

sessions. Many of these participants were immigrants, from regions including West, Central, and

Northern Africa, the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, and East Asia. Many participants were

bilingual, and several spoke neither French nor English; French, however, was the language of choice for a majority of the participants.

The collective kitchen sessions were expressly scheduled following the existing model that has proved to work best for these community members. The first two sessions were held monthly on the Friday of the last week of the month, from 10 am to 2 pm. In consultation with participants, the final two sessions were held the last Monday of the month also from 10 am to 2 pm. The participatory focus groups took place during the collective kitchens and invited an open conversation to allow participants to express their experiences participating in these collective kitchens. Each session was conducted in both French and English, with every comment from both the researchers and participants translated into the other language to ensure all comments were shared and understood within the group. The sessions were audio recorded, and responses were noted on a flip chart, allowing participants to collectively identify the issues on which they wanted to focus during the subsequent conversation. In this way, participants had the opportunity to decide which benefits, challenges or successes to explore further. Participants were also offered the opportunity to undertake a face-to-face interview with the project partners to further explore issues identified within the conversations.

Participants were initially invited by staff at the Lowertown Good Neighbours Community House, who connected with all relevant contacts. Invitations were also posted on the public bulletin board at the LGNCH, and a message was shared via email using the LGNCH contact list. After the initial planning meeting with community members to explain the research project, a new contact list was developed, which was subsequently used to call and email participants monthly in order to advise of the next kitchen and research session. Public notices were also posted. Both former and new participants were welcome to the collective kitchen sessions. In

keeping with the previous CICK structure no advanced sign up was necessary. Conversations took place at the Lowertown Good Neighbours Community House during the collective kitchen events. The location is known to most community members, and accessible to all. Participants provided informed consent before taking part in all activities, as stipulated in the University of Ottawa ethics board approval.

3.2. Key informant interviews

In addition, two key informant semi-structured interviews were held in May 2015 and November 2015, with the Executive Director and Program Coordinator at the LGNCH. The interviews followed a flexible conversation guide (Hay, 2005), with questions focused on the development and evolution of the CICK, as well as its successes and challenges. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. Although other participants were approached for interviews, they declined or were not available. Again, key informants provided informed consent before taking part in all activities, as stipulated in the University of Ottawa ethics board approval.

3.3. Data analysis

Data derived from this project includes audio recordings and notes from both the focus groups and interviews. Names have been removed and replaced with 'participant' in transcripts of audio-recordings in order to maintain confidentiality; however complete anonymity could not be guaranteed during group activities, since participants were aware of the others taking part. The audio files and flip chart notes were transcribed, then coded and analyzed thematically in accordance with established qualitative methodologies (Creswell, 2003) using Dedoose software version 6.2.17. Analysis focused on the structure, benefits, challenges and sustainability of the collective kitchen model for Lowertown East community members.

3.4. Limitations

Following the existing structure of the CICK, focus groups were limited to once-monthly

sessions over the course of four months, which was determined to be the most effective way to

avoid respondent fatigue and to ensure maximum participation (A. Fields, personal

communication, May 20, 2015). As such, the research was limited both in terms of time and

structure. Focus groups were chosen as the primary method to allow participants to explore

different points of view and to reconsider or negotiate certain ideas or understandings as a group

(Hay, 2005). During the focus groups, no maximum number of participants was set, given that

the community event was open to all members of the community. While the participatory

process aimed for consensus and collective decision-making, several sessions were held with

larger group sizes, introducing the possibility for less vocal groups to be marginalized (Kindon,

Pain & Kesby, 2007). Participatory action research (PAR) is a collaborative process, and was

chosen expressly to reduce researcher bias and avoid top-down research, resulting in more

diverse and contextually relevant results (Kindon, Pain & Kesby, 2007); however bias in

questioning and facilitation is also a possibility as researchers were involved in guiding the group

discussion. The active engagement of participants aimed to ensure that community members

have social ownership of the research process to improve the relevance and utility of research

outcomes for the group (Kindon, Pain & Kesby, 2007).

PAR and the development of community capacity take more time than the confines of this

project allowed for. While research objectives (1) and (2) were met, objective (3) was only

partially addressed. The third objective was to build capacity and encourage a more sustainable

community-led program. It is clear that while there may be interest from participants, four

sessions is not a sufficient timeframe in which to develop and transition to a more community-

led program. Mobility or health constraints also limit the capacity for some participants to

engage in such an endeavour (K. Vardon, personal communication, November 20, 2015). To mitigate this limitation, further funding has been sought through OPIRG to continue participatory action meetings with community members, in order to develop a community-led steering committee that can determine the future of the program. Currently, funding has been secured until February 2016, at which time the program will be evaluated and further funding will be sought.

It was also a challenge to facilitate effective focus groups in a situation where cooking and eating are the primary focus, rather than research. Although fitting the focus groups into an existing structured event was advantageous in the sense that it allowed a successful program to continue, the research-related discussion competed with food and socializing. There was also a lack of consistency in the event schedule, as timing was restricted, and varied based on food preparation needs for that particular day. In addition, the findings presented here represent the opinions of the participants able and interested in participation in the CICK; opinions on the success and challenges of the program may differ among those who were not present.

4. Results & Discussion

The main findings from this research can be categorized into two broad themes. The following section will first describe the evolution of the CICK program, detailing the model of the current program, including its structure and reach. This responds to objective (1) of the research, understanding the evolution of the Lowertown East community kitchen and how if differs from more typical collective kitchens. Second, the results will address objective (2). The discussion focuses on the benefits and challenges of the LGNCH CICK within the particular context of the place-specific community needs of a low-income, primarily immigrant population in terms of food security and well-being.

4.1. Reach of the program

The mandate of the LGNCH is to serve Lowertown East, specifically the adjacent/nearby Beausoleil and Beausejour low income housing units. Though neighbouring high-rise apartments have their own meeting space in their buildings, the LGNCH Food Bank distribution reaches all of Lowertown, and neighbouring areas including western Vanier and a small part of Sandy Hill, which has enlarged the reach of many LGNCH programs (A. Fields, personal communication, May 20, 2015). This has meant that the scope of their other programs often includes community members from outside the officially mandated area, as many people coming for Food Bank distribution may learn about and attend other LGNCH events. Many participants who attend the CICK from areas outside of Lowertown are individuals who previously lived there or were invited by friends or family members. Some participants travel significant distances to attend CICK events (e.g., Beacon Hills, Centretown, and Overbrook) (see Figure 1).
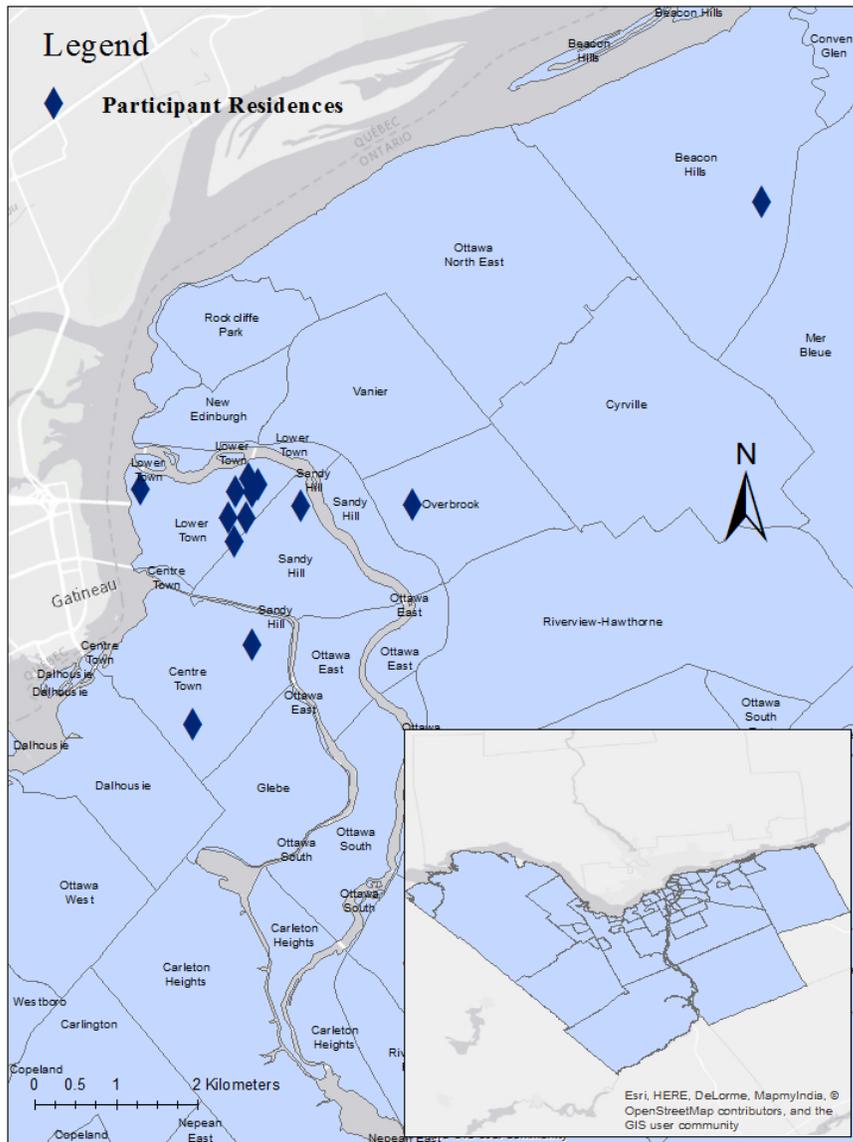
Figure 1 Distribution of the LGNCH Collective Intercultural Community Kitchen program participants' residences.

The reach of program is an important consideration given that it may be an indication of the popularity of the program. This may also point to a lack of similar programs in other neighbourhoods, or to a preference for the LGNCH program. In addition, this demonstrates that the LGNCH indeed serves its mandated population, but also facilitates the creation of larger

networks that cross neighbourhood boundaries. The importance of the creation of such networks within the Lowertown East area and beyond was raised by several participants throughout the study, and will be discussed further below.

4.2. Evolution of the program

What is now the CICK program at the Community House began over eight years ago, arising out of community requests for a collective kitchen program despite the fact that collective kitchen programs had been run in the past and were deemed unsuccessful due to low participation (K. Vardon, personal communication, November 20, 2015). The program began as a typical model of a collective kitchen, where registration allowed for a maximum of eight participants who would meet, cook a recipe together, and bring portions home. Unlike the typical model, however, there was no pooling of resources by participants, the cost of purchasing food was covered by the LGNCH, and recipes were developed and cooking was led by employees of the LGNCH. After several months following this model, it became clear that registration had become a barrier for many participants; thus, to encourage participation, registration was removed from the model early on with successful results. Community members were more likely to participate when advance commitment was not necessary, and individuals could show up without need for advanced planning. As participation improved, community members began to take on more roles and responsibilities, requesting to cook and "showcase" recipes that reflected their cultural backgrounds (K. Vardon, personal communication, November 20, 2015). The focus began to move away from food distribution and towards a celebratory experience in which food was only one of many layers (A. Fields, personal communication, May 20, 2015). The Executive Director describes how the program began to take on a more cultural aspect as community leadership within the program increased:

And from there then of course it became, well, once one community member and two community members were doing it […] it snowballed and people were wanting to showcase their recipes […] and of course we have a very diverse community, so […] I say that I went around the world with the collective kitchen, because then it became like recipes from different influences from around the world. And then the participants were starting to ask, well I'd like to know a little bit more about, you know, the Congo, I'd like to know a little bit more about Vietnam […] so some of the participants even added some cultural components, they were bringing music. (K. Vardon, personal communication, November 20, 2015)

As popularity of the program increased and the cultural and social components became highlights, the program was less able to guarantee that each participant would receive a given number of meals to take home. Due to the fluctuating number of participants and lack of advanced registration, on some days there would be plenty of leftovers, and on other days there would be only small amounts (K. Vardon, personal communication, November 20, 2015). As the program began to better reflect community needs and interests, which are specific to Lowertown East, such as cultural learning and the social aspect of meal-sharing, the program took on "its own sort of character […, including] ownership from the community, and of course it evolved" (K. Vardon, personal communication, November 20, 2015). The program moved away from a more typical collective kitchen model, towards the less rigid structure of a "communal meal program" where members gather regularly, prepare a meal and eat together (Fridman & Lenters, 2013).

The LGNCH leaders questioned the efficacy of the program's contribution to food security as the program moved further away from the typical collective kitchen model. Yet as the focus moved away from bulk cooking with an emphasis on taking meals home, they found that the community members consistently enjoyed the program and in fact preferred it to the original collective kitchen (K. Vardon, personal communication, November 20, 2015). In order for this evolution to be possible, the LGNCH had to be open to making adjustments to their

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programming to better align with the needs of the community members; this was feasible as they were not restrained at the time by funding restrictions, for example requiring each participant leave with a certain number of meals (K. Vardon, personal communication, November 20, 2015). The LGNCH Executive Director expressed that often funding requirements such as this can limit community programs and prevent their success, as following a top-down enforcement of rules can be at odds with community needs.

> And to me it came across as such a contradiction, because there's a lot of talk about community driven, community led, and going with what the needs [are], and what people are telling you, and yet we resist it [laughs] […] this is so much more exciting and better and people seem to be enjoying it so much. The other way it always felt like we were twisting everybody's arm and saying well you know, you need to register […] so it seemed really very you know robotic, and very, well, who's this really for? […] There was some pressures, you know, like well we have to be able to fill in this blank on our form, but we can't [laughs], so it was interesting. (K. Vardon, personal communication, November 20, 2015)

This reflects what appears to be a common failure of many community food programs and collective kitchen models, where there is a lack of fit between a program and community needs or interests. Various researchers have found that food programs have low levels of participation, are inaccessible, or do not accommodate or fit community needs and interests (Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2009; Hamelin, Mercier & Bedard, 2011; Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2013). The Program Director at the LGNCH also highlights that although the typical collective kitchen model may be effective within certain communities and demographics, needs differ between different population groups.

> I think it might more naturally have blossomed and grown to suit the Lowertown community specifically. […] this is a highly international community, um, this is definitely, you know, a very intercultural community for that reason [laughs], many languages, many backgrounds, um, and many people in a variety of situations that may leave them vulnerable. So you may have people who are isolated due to health, […] ability related to age, or, you know, it could be a feeling of being kind of cut off and not knowing how to meet new people because

they've just come to the country, right? So, I think needs like that in a community may influence the effectiveness of what a more traditional [collective kitchen] model may or may not bring. Um, and also, the need may be heightened for other things, in a way that it may not in other groups […] here the special dynamic is addressing the diversity. (A. Fields, personal communication, May 20, 2015)

In the Lowertown East neighbourhood, many immigrants make for a diverse population in terms of race, culture and language. Other factors such as lower income, an aging population, lower literacy rates, level of French or English language comprehension, and social isolation, mean that programs must be able to adapt to many diverse needs. The success of the LGNCH CICK program is specifically tied to its flexibility and responsiveness to community needs, and its participatory community ownership.

4.3. Benefits

Throughout the research process five key themes emerged, as summarized in Table 1. Each of these themes will be discussed with reference to specific reflections from participants. In addition to establishing the context and significance of each theme, the findings will be discussed in relation to other studies, and the interconnected relationships between each of the benefits will also be analysed.

Identified Theme	*Times mentioned*
Social interaction and networks	N=15
Cultural and linguistic learning	N=25
Skill-building & leadership	N=10
Validation and empowerment	N=14
Contributions to food security	N=12

Table 1 Most significant themes raised during focus groups and interviews.

4.3.1. Social interaction & networks

One of the most recurring themes throughout the research process was the repeated observation that socializing at CICK events led to the creation of strong community networks (Table 1). While the reach of the program across several Ottawa neighbourhoods may indicate the extent of the group, in this case it also demonstrates the extent and strength of the social network created by the CICK, as many individuals chose to remain connected to the LGNCH despite moving out of the neighbourhood.

The benefits of socializing at the CICK can be considered as twofold. There is the social aspect of coming together in the kitchen and sharing a meal and conversation, which occurs at the community kitchen event itself. This is important for individuals in order to reduce isolation and foster interpersonal relationships, which in turn can strengthen community bonds. Over time, relationships and friendships solidify and extend beyond the confines of the event, creating networks of support within the community. In this way, collective kitchen activities contribute to functional support because they create a positive and comfortable environment in which to enjoy food, and contribute to structural support by creating social networks (Engler-Stringer & Berenbaum, 2007). This benefit was raised by many participants throughout the research process, and is articulated by one participant here:

> J'aime la cuisine collective parce que, quand je suis arrivée ici j'ai rencontré les dames qui ont ma peau […]. Quand j'ai commencé avec la cuisine collective j'ai trouvé les gens avec qui on peut parler de tout et de rien […]; on s'est créé des amitiés [… et] nous sommes devenu une famille. Je suis malade, elles viennent; elles sont malades, je pars. (Focus group participant, 2015)

This reflection indicates that despite being a newcomer to Canada, the CICK allowed this participant to connect with others of similar cultural backgrounds, and subsequently more generally with other members of her community. The participant describes how these friendships

solidified into a support network, which is important during times of illness. This indicates that the social benefits of the CICK contribute in the long-term to the creation of a stronger, more resilient community where residents can find mutual support. This is also particularly important in neighbourhoods with more vulnerable populations who may have limited family or social networks in Canada. For example, one participant noted that the community in Lowertown East acts as her support network, given that her parents and family live outside of the country:

> Je veux le faire pour les gens de mon quartier; ça, ça c'est ma contribution, ça c'est mon concept. C'est la moindre des choses. Je suis dans un quartier, si quelque chose m'arrive, je touche du bois, c'est vous qui allez être là. Même mes parents en Afrique ils pourront pas venir, donc je dois penser à tout ça. On vie en société, on doit s'entraider […]; aujourd'hui c'est moi, demain ce serait elle […]. J'ai envie de partager avec mes sœurs, mes frères. (Focus group participant, 2015)

This essential component of the current CICK is also recognized by the staff of the LGNCH, who note that "impoverished communities, may be more vulnerable […] certain demographics not being able to access things or have the resources or energy to do it, but in a group they can" (A. Fields, personal communication, May 20, 2015). This highlights not only the importance of community connections and networking for vulnerable populations, as in Lowertown East, but also demonstrates that the creation of social networks facilitates skill-building and community capacity. Socializing during the event itself was also noted as important factor for breaking the social isolation of many participants, particularly for older members and those with mobility issues, who noted that the CICK was an opportunity to eat in family environment, something that is lacking for many at home (Focus group participant, 2015). The issue of social isolation was also raised in several other studies (Racine & St-Onge, 2000; Engler-Stringer & Berenbaum, 2007). More broadly, these findings are supported by other studies that found that food-insecure households needed socially-focused programs with activities which incorporate both food and

socializing (Hamelin, Mercier & Bedard, 2011). The emphasis placed by participants on the

social benefits of the CICK also reflects similar findings that demonstrate that participants joined

cooking programs originally seeking social interaction and community support (Fano, Tyminski

& Flynn, 2004).

The LGNCH Program Director recalls an anecdote concerning a past participant, who

offered to cook food from her country with the express purpose of trying to connect with other

community members and reduce her feeling of isolation, and while hosting the event met another

couple from the same country:

> […] you could tell for both parties that this was really special, and you know, there was
> this outpouring of like emotion, and like um stories, and like they were from different
> regions and had some similar experiences and they had come here, you know, for their
> own, yet […] also connected reasons. […] So, you could see after that, that they were
> friends and it had built like a strength for them in the community; that before if they'd
> remained isolated, they'd kind of felt like, oh there's no one who knows me, no one
> knows my experiences. That might have left that group or, you know, that individual
> feeling like they were disconnected. (A. Fields, personal communication, May 20, 2015)

In addition to participants who highlighted the necessity of coming to meet and socialize with

friends and newcomers, others noted that their participation in the CICK was also important as a

way to connect with other events that are happening within the community, food-related or

otherwise (Focus group participant, 2015). This idea of using the social space as a hub for

accessing other services is also a significant benefit to community members. This has been

identified by other researchers as an important benefit of community food programs; a recent

study in Toronto for example, found that community kitchens acted as a hub for the creation of

social enterprises and food-business ideas (Fridman & Lenters, 2013).

The creation of social support networks is not only important in and of itself; it is also an

indirect contributor to food security (Fano, Tyminski & Flynn, 2004). A study in the United

States found that increased social capital, a measure of community reciprocity and trust, reduces the risk of food insecurity among households with limited finances or food resources at both household and community levels. Reciprocity between neighbours, in particular, was cited as a significant contributor to household food security (Martin *et al*., 2004). This study underscores the importance of creating neighbourhood-wide social networks for improved resiliency and food security, such as those facilitated by the LGNCH CICK. This also demonstrates that effectively measuring the success of food-related programming, such as community kitchens, relies on a more holistic understanding of the contributors to food security beyond the economic impacts of meal provision programming.

4.3.2. Cultural & linguistic learning

The cultural experiences and language-related learning which accompany the meal preparation at the LGNCH CICK is a unique reflection of the community demographics. The evolution of the program and increasing involvement of community members over time led to the emergence of a culturally-focused meal preparation program which responded to the community desire to share and learn about the diverse population with varying backgrounds. The Program Director describes the program beyond its role in meal provision:

> The focus isn't so much about Tupperwares to bring home […] but it was more about celebrating around the table […] cultural celebration. It was a learning opportunity and a bonding opportunity and a chance to really hear one person's perspective about that type of food and how, if it was from um their background, you know, there were traditions and folk tales and music and, you know, things that you're really left saying, wow I feel a little bit like I had […] a cultural exchange workshop, even though the theme was food. (A. Fields, personal communication, May 20, 2015)

This "cultural socialisation" as one participant put it, breaks down cultural barriers between community members (Focus group participant, 2015). Beyond the positive impacts on social

interaction, networks and integration, the cultural aspect of the CICK also positively impacted participants' sense of food security. Focus group participants felt that having the opportunity to learn how to prepare recipes from different countries also allowed them to expand their diet and skill-set concerning food preparation. This allowed them to use more varied ingredients, some of which can be harvested for free in the neighbourhood. Figure 2 illustrates this connection between social interaction, cultural learning, empowerment and validation, skill building, and food security.
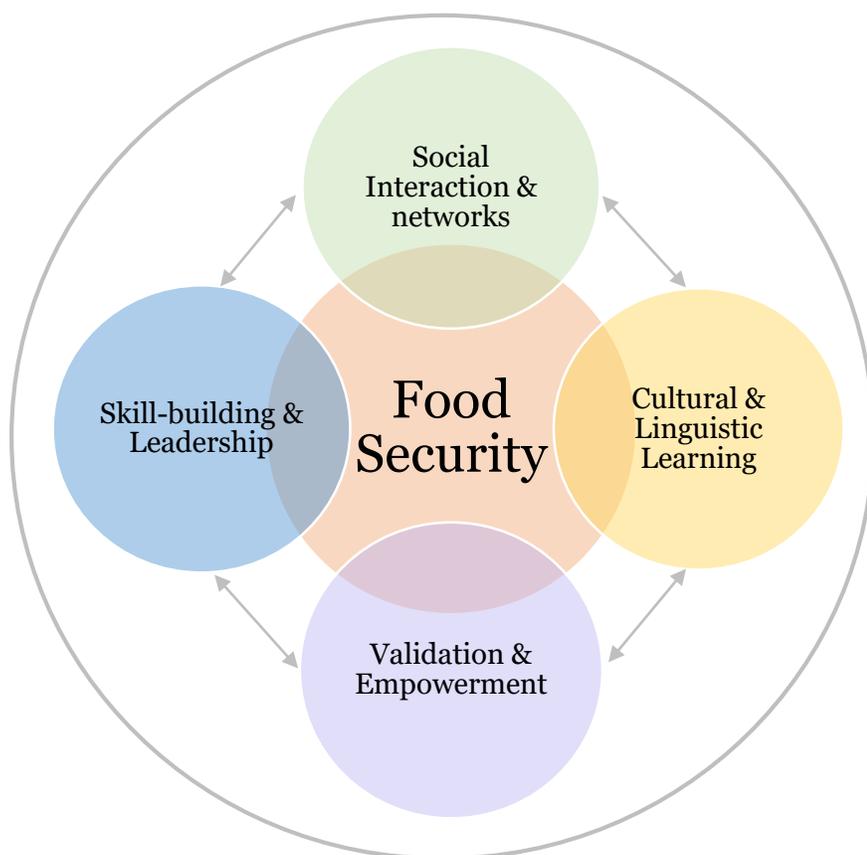

Figure 2 Building stronger communities and food security: visualizing the multiple benefits of CICK programming at the LGNCH.

Part of the cultural experience many participants enjoy includes engaging in multi-lingual exchanges and practicing both English and French language skills. Not only did most focus group participants value the opportunity to practice their own French or English, they felt that the CICK provided an opportunity for learning and socializing, which could occur even for those who spoke neither official language (Focus group participants, 2015). One participant noted that the social support provided in the CICK, regardless of language barriers, was necessary for immigrants to feel supported and heard within the community:

> Il y a des gens quand ils viennent [au Canada] ils parlent ni l'anglais ni le français […] quand on arrive on connaît personne, quand on vient dans ce genre d'endroit on est un peu soulagé […] au moins ici on peut s'exprimer, on va vous connaitre, on va s'attacher à vous […] ici les gens nous écoutent et nous donnent le temps de parler […] ça nous fait du bien, le soutien, le support. (Focus group participant, 2015)

This illustrates how communication within the context of the preparation and enjoyment of food can also transgress language barriers. As one participant noted, "on apprend à travailler ensemble et puis à communiquer sans, euh, au-delà de la barrière linguistique" (Focus group participant, 2015). This is particularly important in a community with a large immigrant population, who may experience barriers to integration and participation in other programs due to language barriers.

Food can also play an important role in bringing people together (Fridman & Lenters, 2013), helping to bridge language divides and cultural differences. The intersection of food and cultural learning was raised multiple times throughout the focus group discussions as a mechanism to promote integration and resolve cultural difference and prejudice. This sentiment was noted by the LGNCH Executive Director, "In my mind as well, it was also an activity that was truly about integration, […] and learning about each other, […] our different backgrounds, culturally speaking […]" (K. Vardon, personal communication, November 20, 2015). The idea

that "the food opens your mind to difference" was an important theme evoked throughout the research (Focus group participant 2015). Again, the benefit of cultural and linguistic learning which occurs at the CICK is particularly well-tailored to the demographic of Lowertown East and is highly valued by both CICK participants and LGNCH personnel.

4.3.3. Skill-building & leadership

Skill-building also contributes to food security both on an individual level and within the community as a whole. On an individual level, skill-building refers to individual food-related abilities that are learned or ameliorated through the CICK, such as budgeting and food preparation skills. Many studies have demonstrated the presence of these educational benefits through participation in collective and community kitchens, citing improved cooking skills, practice of better decision making, and improved budgeting skills (Iacovou *et al*., 2012; Engler-Stringer & Berenbaum, 2007; Marquis *et al.,* 2001; Lee *et al.*, 2010). Beyond food-related skills, the CICK is also an opportunity for participants to practice transferable skills, including language, organisation, team work, and leadership: *"*I think it can be skills building, and I think […] they're automatically exhibiting some leadership skills […] I think there are a lot of skills there that are also transferable" (K. Vardon, personal communication, November 20, 2015). In addition, the community members as a whole are able to build capacity in self-organisation while working as a team despite differences. These finding are supported by evidence from an international review of many community kitchens, in which skill-building is cited as an important benefit of community kitchens (Iacovou *et al*., 2013).

Skill-building is also facilitated within the program's multicultural environment; participants gain language and social skills within a multicultural environment, in addition to knowledge of food preparation:

The intercultural model […] opened people's eyes to different types of food and different ways of preparing and cooking it, because many traditional recipes around the world are not meat and potatoes oriented. They teach you to extend your meat dollar, […] get inspired to cook differently and it might be something they could use to cook on a budget. (A. Fields, personal communication, May 20, 2015)

The practical food-related skills mentioned by the Program Director, such as budgeting and expanding one's recipe base, are facilitated in a multicultural environment with cross-cultural exchange of food related knowledge. One participant articulated how language and communication skills are built during mutual knowledge-sharing, which results from the community collaboration around food preparation:

Food is a very important part… and also the preparation of the food, usually we, everybody prepare(s) a little bit, and in cooking together I find it very interesting and very worthwhile…learning from each other […] it's more like you all know how to cook, and sometime we take turns, and we all know how to cook, just to know how to deal with a situation where people talk different languages, how to do it and bringing a good result in the end which is a very good meal. (Focus group participant, 2015)

In this sense, the cultural and linguistic aspects of the CICK are directly linked to their contribution to community-level skill-building through teamwork. This capacity and community empowerment is enabled by the interactions and learning surrounding food. This participant also felt that the community kitchen was an arena for knowledge sharing among community members, rather than a place where skills needed to be taught through workshops, such as presentations by a dietician (Focus group participant, 2015). Teaching activities such as presentations and workshops were discontinued from the CICK several years ago, due to lack of participation and negative feedback from the community members (K. Vardon, personal communication, November 20, 2015). This is another example of an instance where the program was successfully modified to better reflect the specific needs of the Lowertown East community. Furthermore, this supports findings that households participating in other collective kitchens felt

they had sufficient food-related skills, which conflicted with programmers' perceptions that the community was lacking skills (Hamelin, Mercier & Bedard, 2008). In the case where community members and program leaders have conflicting perceptions of community needs, this may result in a program which does not fit within that neighbourhood and therefore fails to achieve success.

Overall, while Lowertown East community members did feel that the CICK contributed to skill-building, and that skills and recipes learned during the event were useful in preparing a more varied diet with different ingredients (Focus group participants, 2015), these findings also highlight that the skills, knowledge and capacity related to food preparation are already present in the community. Thus, while the CICK is an opportunity to build skills, share knowledge and strengthen capacity, perhaps community food programs need not focus on teaching, but rather on providing a space for people to use and share food-related knowledge.

4.3.4. Validation & empowerment

Both community participants and LGNCH staff indicated that validation and community empowerment was fostered through the community kitchen program. Positive feelings are associated with having a cultural dish recognized, enjoyed, and praised by other individuals in the community, which not only builds social cohesion and cultural understanding, but also provides validation (A. Fields, personal communication, May 20, 2015). This is particularly important for community members who may feel disconnected or isolated as new immigrants in Canada. Many focus group participants felt that having the opportunity to share their culture and food in a positive and open environment affirmed the importance of their cultural heritage, and provided them with a sense of community support despite differences. Again, this highlights the interconnected nature of social interaction, culture, validation, and empowerment (Figure, 2).

Other community members also felt that participating in the CICK allowed them to contribute to the community, fulfilling their need to feel useful to the community and give-back in a meaningful way (Focus group participant, 2015). This finding is supported by previous research which found that many participants who received support through personal networks within their community felt embarrassment or dependant, a feeling which could be mitigated by making their own contributions with food at social gatherings (Hamelin, Mercier & Bedard, 2011). This fulfillment provides validation by allowing them to feel that their contributions are worthwhile, and can empower community members to participate more actively in contributing to community events. As one participant notes, the CICK provides a community space in which participants are accepted and recognized for who they are, and are listened to; this provides validation, which in turn motivates them to contribute to the community:

> Ça veut dire que nous sommes importants et que nous aussi nous avons notre mot à dire, et que les gens s'occupent de nous, ça c'est très important. C'est-à-dire, nous avons une responsabilité vis-à-vis du quartier, nous comptons, nous sommes importants, nous comptons, et que les gens attendent quelque chose de nous, donc les gens nous valorisent […] ça c'est très important pour moi, c'est très important. Les gens nous valorisent à tel point que, nous-mêmes nous savons que nous avons des devoirs vis-à-vis du quartier […] le quartier a besoin de nous, les gens qui habitent ici ont besoin de nous, et pour moi c'est très important. (Focus group participant, 2015)

Empowerment also comes from being able to have access to food in a dignified way, which is one of the aspects that defines food security (Engler-Stringer & Berenbaum, 2007). There is a psychological component to food security, which is associated with stress and decreased feelings of self-worth (Engler-Stringer & Berenbaum, 2007) which can be minimized when people in need can access food in a positive environment without stigma. This highlights the importance of the impact that successful community kitchens can have on mental health, in addition to nutritional health.

4.3.5. Contribution to food security

Access to ample quantity of healthy, quality, delicious food is also an important aspect of the program. It is the food and the meal that attract participants and provide a platform for social, cultural and linguistic exchange. Despite the relative small amount of food brought home, the LGNCH CICK was found to be important as a direct contributor to food security, in terms of providing increased quantities of food to community members. One participant noted that the abundance of food at the community kitchen was of key importance, as many do not have the opportunity to eat to satiety at home:

> C'est l'abondance, parce que la plupart des gens qui viennent ici, on n'a pas l'abondance chez nous, on a des petites portions […] alors qu'ici on peut manger ce qu'on veut. On a l'abondance, et ça c'est là, quelque chose qui est très, très, très important aussi. (Focus group participant, 2015)

This demonstrates not only the impact that the CICK has on providing an increased quantity of food to participants, but the positive feeling associated with the ability to eat without restriction, and the positive impact of this on participants' sense of well-being. Again, this is linked to the concept of accessing food in a dignified way. Other participants agreed that the relatively small contribution of the one or two meals provided monthly by the CICK does help their budget: "I always look forward to it because the food is really great and, uh, it helps you budget too […] it helps your spirit" (Focus group participant, 2015). Again this participant highlights the positive relationship between a contribution to better financial control over their food resources, and improved sense of mental well-being.

While the focus of the CICK evolved away from preparing meals to take home, participants still found it helpful to take home what small portions of leftovers remain: "Often there's surplus food so you have a chance to take some food home, and you can have another one

or two meals at home, so that's a really nice thing" (Focus group participant, 2015). Community

members also repeat the recipes they learn here, and are able to transfer skills and recipes to their

everyday cooking, using more diverse ingredients: "It expands your dietary experiences…

find[ing] out about using foods in different ways that you weren't familiar with before" (Focus

group participant, 2015). As discussed previously, learning and building skills may enable

participants to make more efficient use of their limited resources, for example by extending their

meat dollar (A. Fields, personal communication, May 20, 2015).

There is also a cumulative effect of these community food programs, which arises when

considering that a participant may be accessing several food programs or meal services at any

given time. While many researchers question whether these programs have community or

population-level impacts as they fail to solve the root cause of food insecurity, poverty (Fridman

& Lenters, 2013; Iacovou *et al*., 2012; Hamelin, Mercier & Bedard, 2008). These findings

illustrate that community food programs definitely can have a positive impact, particularly on an

individual level:

> For [one] individual, that might be, you know, something that makes a lot of difference
> […] even if they do a couple of them each month in different groups, you know, that
> could add up to providing that person [with] a lot more stability in what they're receiving
> nutritionally, than, you know, what you would anticipate just by looking at one event. (A.
> Fields, personal communication, May 20, 2015)

Several focus group participants noted that they do participate in multiple food-related programs

throughout Ottawa in addition to the CICK, including meal provision services. They also often

compared the LGNCH CICK with these other programs, noting that the portion sizes and

positive cultural and social environment of this particular program provided them with a much

more positive and rewarding experience when compared to other Ottawa food services (Focus

group participant, 2015). These cultural and social benefits, in addition to the skills, networks,

and feeling of empowerment, which were identified as important benefits of the program (Figure 2), also all contribute indirectly towards food security. For example, social interaction indirectly contributes to food security as it creates social support networks (Fano, Tyminski & Flynn, 2004) through which individuals can be supported by other community members in times of need. This interconnected relationship between food security and the other benefits of the program was identified by the Program Coordinator:

> If anything, I just want to emphasize, I know it's not directly food security, but the social strengthening of communities does lead to greater food security because it raises more awareness of those who are going without, and it encourages more assimilation, integration and mutual knowledge, than leaving them on an island where people aren't aware, um, of their needs. And I think more momentum is built when you have a more diverse group that's including people in that. (A. Fields, personal communication, May 20, 2015)

In comparing the results of this study to findings from other researchers, it is clear that the CICK resembles other community food programs in that it has a relatively small community-wide impact on food security when measured by the quantity of food eaten monthly by participants. My research has highlighted, however, the importance of this program beyond its nutritional impact, accentuating the importance of social interaction, cultural learning, empowerment and validation, and skill building, in their contributions to food security. While it is clear that broader long-term support is needed to reduce poverty and increase household control over food resources, this does not minimize the real impact that the program has on individual experiences of food security. Participants overwhelmingly felt that the CICK helped their budget and improved their sense of well-being, allowing them dignified and enjoyment access to food within their community.

4.4. Challenges

Despite the importance of the program and its clear success, there are challenges to its

implementation, as evident given its discontinuation. The most significant challenges to the

program are the lack of funding, barriers to access, use of space, and community capacity.

4.4.1. Funding

Financial and funding issues were consistently raised as the most significant barrier to the

success of the program. Despite the fact that the CICK participants are not deterred or excluded

from participation by very small financial contributions, such as those required in the typical

non-subsidized collective kitchen (Engler-Stringer & Berenbaum, 2007; Hamelin, Mercier &

Bedard, 2011), this was often raised by participants and LGNCH employees who were

concerned that this may become necessary due to lack of funding. Moving away from this type

of model allowed for the success of the program, but also meant that the CICK was reliant on

external sources of funding, and therefore while it is "a successful program, it's just not a funded

program" (A. Fields, personal communication, May 20, 2015). Both the LGNCH Executive

Director and Program Coordinator felt that sufficient funding no longer exists to support such

community kitchen programs, and that while some funding may be available the LGNCH was

unable to access it, as they had insufficient human resources and time to seek out potential

opportunities (K. Vardon, personal communication, November 20, 2015; A. Fields, personal

communication, May 20, 2015). There was also a perception that most funders focused on the

quantification of the direct impacts of the program on food security in terms of the provision of

meals, rather than a holistic assessment of the many other benefits:

> I learn more and more that food security is not an island, you can't just quantify it strictly
> by numerical assessment and forget the human element, because many of those things
> they all feed in, and it's more of a holistic approach I think that's needed […] I think the
> numerical data is important, I wouldn't say we should abolish, we need it there. But I

think we need other layers of awareness and sort of a more in depth understanding of the other things at play and how those numbers come about and why. (A. Fields, personal communication, May 20, 2015)

Whether this perception reflects the reality of current funding opportunities was within the scope of this research. Regardless, recognizing the interconnected nature of the various benefits of the program (Figure 2) may contribute to a more holistic understanding of community food programs, which in turn may impact how funders measure success.

4.4.2. Access

Access to the program was also identified as a challenge for participants. Even though the financial barrier has never been an issue for this particularly program, focus group participants identified that access was physically difficult for less mobile participants, particularly during winter and for those with multiple children who could not ensure childcare. During the four CICK event, several children were often present, and participants noted that the group had previously made the collective decision that children are welcome. While childcare had been raised as an issue by some, there was not significant interest in providing child-minding as a part of the program. There were contrasting opinions and concern about the resources and logistics of providing quality care. There was a general consensus that if a participant brings one or two children it is acceptable, but any more would be unwelcome given the small size of the space. One mother described how the CICK "was a good place to come as a single mom […], a good place to come with my child, for the um, the community experience, um and the healthy food" (Focus group participant, 2015). The same community member also described the impact that this program had on her child, citing the fact that the CICK was the first time he accepted to eat certain foods such as fish, as it was presented in a new and flavourful way, which ultimately expanded his dietary preferences.

In the interest of time and resources, we were not able to consult community members who did not regularly participate in the program, and in this case more barriers to access might have been identified. Despite this limitation, participants felt the LGNCH CICK was generally accessible and in line with the needs and interests of the community members.

4.4.3. The LGNCH space

The community space provided at the LGNCH was often discussed as both a challenge and benefit. Many participants felt that the smaller more intimate space contributed positively to the atmosphere of the event, while others recognized that the small space limits participation in some ways. The space is universally accessible and cost-free, so while the kitchen space is limited, participants make do by sharing tasks and working on tables in other areas. It is also important to note that the LGNCH is located in a low-income housing unit; therefore, rather than being designed as a community centre would be, it has the same floor plan as many of the houses in Lowertown East. The type of space makes it challenging to accommodate community events, but it may also contribute to the atmosphere of the event by providing a familiar family setting that reflects the home environment.

4.4.4. Community capacity

With reference to objective (3), this research aimed to begin the process of collaborative community involvement to support the continuation of the CICK program. As the LGNCH no longer has the financial resources or support staff to run a community kitchen, community members were asked whether they would like to continue the program, which was met with a unanimously positive response. In order to continue, the CICK ought to be community-led, meaning the roles and responsibilities of the organisation of logistics of the program need to be

taken on by community members. This was identified as one of the most significant challenges to the continuation of the program; the participatory nature of the research aimed to begin the conversation of how the program might continue. The continuation of this conversation has been taken over by OPIRG, which has secured funding for the short-term in order to hold a series of planning meetings and community-driven sessions, which will subsequently be followed by an evaluation of the program.

While some focus group participants expressed reticence to commit to taking on responsibilities, others felt that they would be willing to take on leadership roles, citing the need for community members to contribute what they could. A number of participants felt that given their particular health or socio-economic positions, taking on roles and responsibilities would be a challenge. For example, one participant explained the effect of her health on her ability to participate:

> When I was healthy I would have been able to do a leadership role, but now I'm in too much pain; so although I have the skill, I don't have the time, or the, you know, I can't concentrate […]. A leadership position is very time consuming, and requires a lot of skills. (Focus group participant, 2015)

A participatory research process takes time to effectively support community members in building capacity and taking on responsibilities, as is necessary for the CICK program to continue without reliance on external contributions. Findings from this research process demonstrate that, while many Lowertown East residents face barriers, community interest and capacity to organize this program is possible. As demonstrated by the community momentum and involvement in the program since its inception, participants have already taken some ownership of the program. They have guided the creation of a community kitchen that responded to their needs. The Executive Director of the LGNCH noted that, outside of the potential

financial barrier to participation, Lowertown East community members are capable, resourceful, and engaged in the community:

> Mostly everyone is on very very, very, very, very low, extremely low [income], I would say way below […] what's considered the poverty line. So they have limited resources, financial resources. I'm not saying about other resources, because I think they're very resourceful people and they're all, you know, actually I think very involved, and they have a lot of talents, and personal resources. But no matter, there's still some items that have to be purchased. (K. Vardon, personal communication, November 20, 2015)

As the participatory action research continues with funding from OPIRG into 2016, decisions will rest in the hands of community members and participants regarding the continuation of the program and whether it can evolve into a community-run endeavour.

5. Conclusions

Having examined the Collective Intercultural Community Kitchen in the Lowertown East neighbourhood as an example of a program that has evolved to meet community needs, it is clear that the context and process of this particular community kitchen has generated positive results. Similarly to the findings of other studies, the CICK's flexible and participatory nature and its emphasis on socio-cultural interaction were significant contributors to the success of the program, allowing for improved social and nutritional health (Iacovou et al., 2013). Despite the challenges of implementing the program, participants felt the program had a significant positive impact on their lives in terms of social interaction, cultural learning, skill-building, and validation, empowerment, and both direct and indirect aspects of food security. This research highlights the importance of community food programs beyond their nutritional impact, accentuating the importance of social networks, community strengthening, empowerment, and individual skill-building in their contributions to food security. Participants' experiences illustrate how food security relies on a complex interaction of many factors, including: social

interaction and the resulting feelings of belonging, friendship, and the subsequent development

of networks; cultural learning and linguistic learning, which breaks down barriers of race and

language, reducing prejudice and strengthening community bonds; skill-building and teamwork

at a community level, and the development of food-related and transferable personal skills;

providing a sense of empowerment and validation to participants, which creates a positive

feedback loop in which community members become more involved; and, contributing to food

security in terms of dignified access to food in a positive environment, which in turn has a

positive impact both physical and mental health. This research highlights the need for broadening

our understanding of food security in order to recognize food programs which focus on providing

food security using a more holistic understanding of its complexity at an individual and

community level. While it is clear that broader long-term support is needed to reduce poverty

and increase household control over food resources, this does not minimize the real impact that

the program has on individual experiences of food security. As such, it is important to consider

the CICK not an alternative to, but rather as a complement to charitable models of food

distribution:

> I know there's a lot of push to completely abolish charity models and things like that. I think it's more about building on, rather than taking away. I think we need to instil more dignity and confidence and, you know, if we're going to truly empower people, layer on things that assist them more in giving additional options, not downloading work on them and taking options from them. You know, kind of creating more for them versus doing more with less. (A. Fields, personal communication, May 20, 2015)

This is an important consideration in terms of practice and policy. Organizations and funders

who implement programs need to recognize that food security results from an interaction of

multiple factors, and that there is no single solution to this issue. This needs to be taken into

consideration when measuring the success of community food programs, rather than focusing

uniquely on a quantitative assessment of how much food is provided, or how much money it saves participants.

This study has also demonstrated the importance of qualitative participatory action research. Stakeholder perspectives are important in order to have a more accurate understanding of the issues at play in a given community, and to identify the issues that are of real concern to community members. Without this understanding, there will continue to be a gap between community needs and interests, and what community programs are provided to address issues such as food security. This type of research also brings a richness and depth to the discussion, and aims to contribute positively to the community. Participatory action research and capacity-building takes time, however, and we were not able to fully incorporate this component into the research given the time constraints. It is important that this part of the research be continued with the aid of OPIRG, and that the results of the process be evaluated.

An understanding of context is important for this study given that the success of the LGNCH CICK is related to its flexibility in adapting to suit community needs and interests which are particular to the Lowertown East neighbourhood. The findings from this study may differ with those from other programs with different target populations. Future research should focus on comparing several community kitchens throughout the Ottawa region, with a focus on examining the experiences of existing community kitchen participants in addition to those who do not participate. There is also a need for mixed methods studies that use both qualitative and quantitative methodologies in order to demonstrate that community kitchens can be effective interventions (Iacovou et al., 2013). A mixed methods approach would be effective, as it is able to evoke the nuances of participant experiences and bring depth to the issue, while also providing quantifiable results, which enable a comparison across a range of cases.

It is hoped that the results of this research and the ongoing participatory action project will help to inform the programming goals of the Lowertown Good Neighbours Community House, and influence funding decisions for community-based programming related to food security issues, ultimately making healthy and affordable food more accessible and creating stronger more empowered communities. This research may also be shared to benefit other Community Houses and vulnerable populations throughout the city. It is our hope that this research can improve policy and funding decisions at a broader level, and have a positive contribution to the continuation of programs that empower, validate, and enrich the lives of their participants.

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