

Nanaimo Foodshare Society: Building a More Resilient Nanaimo

Allison Ritchie

11/24/2016
Don Alexander

Introduction

Hunger, poor nutrition, inadequate access to food: these conditions are not unfamiliar to millions of citizens across the country. The Canadian Community Health Survey found that four million individuals across Canada face the effects of food insecurity (PROOF, 2014). To put this number into perspective, the survey was taken through Statistics Canada and did not include those most at-risk to food insecurity, including the homeless, persons in prison, individuals living on First Nations reserves, or full time members of the Canadian Forces (PROOF, 2014). One reason for this could partially be caused by the fact that Canada is one of the few developed nations that lacks a national food strategy (Gorman, 2012). In 2012, food expert and rapporteur to the United Nations, Olivier De Schutter, visited Canada and made the comment that minimum wage and social assistance are too low for people to obtain adequate nourishment (Gorman, 2012). Marjorie Stewart, the board chairwoman of the Nanaimo Foodshare Society at the time also noted that

the future lies in agro-ecology, not in the massive industrial systems that are failing us today. There are different ways of defining efficiencies and economists' definitions can sometimes be way out in la-la land....To you and me efficiency means producing more food for people to eat. To an economist it means low prices, however you can get them, and that not be very practical (Gorman, 2012).

This reflects the root problems driving food insecurity in our country. Citizens shopping in the supermarkets have little control over the food that ends up on their plates. Problems stem from economists viewing our food as a commodity to capitalize on. In the wake of food security threats, concerned individuals, groups, households, and organizations have come together and founded initiatives in attempts to mitigate these problems. One key type of initiative is through

non-profit organizations. And while these organizations focus in on food security, it is important to note that that is not all they stand for. They also stand for social justice and the demand that communities take back the power and security of food, and to reconnect in a way that makes us resilient.

Nanaimo is not exempt from the above conditions. The basic nutritional needs of Nanaimo's most at risk populations are not being met (RDN, 2008). Nanaimo also faces issues surrounding poverty, health (mental and physical), education, housing, and unemployment (City of Nanaimo, 2013). Many of these issues are commonly seen in other cities across Canada and rely heavily on the third sector for support. Many non-profit organizations contribute to supporting and strengthening Nanaimo's communities. A shining example of an organization in Nanaimo that engages and strengthens the community on multiple levels is the Nanaimo Foodshare Society (NFS).

Their key focus is to provide resources for members of the community to become more food secure in their own lives, and to support sustainable and self-sufficient community food systems. I am inspired by the Foodshare Society because I am passionate about what they represent and the work they do in the community. The services and connections they provide for the community are extremely valuable.

The NFS engages in economic activity and enhances many different forms of capital that strengthen Nanaimo. The forms of capital they strengthen are: natural, social, cultural, economic, human, and physical. This organization is an ideal case study because it optimizes all forms of capital we have discussed throughout the semester. The NFS is a co-operative in the community, and also a registered charity. It is located in downtown Nanaimo at 271 Pine Street and is accessible by public transit buses 40 VIU-Woodgrove and 6 Harewood. It donates much of its

food production to its social programs. These programs include: The Lunch Munch program, The Foodshare Farm Box, Farm to School, Kids get Cooking, and Homegrown. Their slogan is “Local Food Matters”. The description they provide on their website is:

Through education and facilitation, we strengthen and support sustainable, community food systems. At Nanaimo Foodshare, we support people to develop a passion, interest and commitment to healthy, local food in children, their families and the communities they are in. We are committed to helping people develop the skills they need to increase food security, build community and be self-sufficient.

Capital

Human capital - There are a whole range of skills individuals can gain from being an active part of this society. Some of these include, constructing, organizing, gardening, watering, weeding, seeding, composting, cooking, nutrition, health, community, cleaning, networking, and even the opportunity to teach others through volunteering. They are also building human capital by building strong and healthy bodies - both physically and mentally. The photo below is a group of children taking part in the Kids get Cooking program.

They also work with numerous schools in the Nanaimo area where they have garden beds set up and employees to go guide workshops with the school children. This not only provides the children with knowledge but also opens new doors and opportunities for those children who may not have healthy relationships with food in their own homes. The organization enhances this form of capital well by providing a very broad range of skills that can be developed. It is inclusive of people with many different interests, as well as people of different ages and skill levels. One weakness I feel the society has in this aspect is the lack of an online presence. Although the society stands for human connection and person-to-person networking I feel it falls

short in utilizing the internet to connect people to their programs. Human capital could be improved greatly if their website provided more information because that would encourage people to get more involved.

Natural Capital - The key natural capital provided is the food. There are two areas of food the society has a part with. First, they grow their own food, which is either distributed amongst members, sold, or used in the community kitchen for social programs such as teaching children how to cook. The other involvement with food is through a wholesaler. The society acts as a middle-man, buying wholesale food from sellers, and providing a way by which individuals in the community can buy healthy food at wholesale prices. The redistribution of food is extremely valuable for households and individuals who face financial constraints. This service provides an alternative to shopping at the grocery store where these constraints are not recognized. The society also has a compost program which enables them to be more self-sufficient in growing medium. Their ecological impact is also greatly reduced by using organic farming and gardening methods.

Physical Capital - The physical capital ranges from equipment for gardening, to buildings where social programs and basic functions of the society are conducted. Some of these forms of capital include: garden beds, fences, compost bins, the organization's vehicle for transport, greenhouses, gardening tools, the community kitchen, cooking dishes and utensils, to name a few. Having a physical space to create the atmosphere of support, connection, and community contributes to resilience immensely. It would be nearly impossible to have any other form of capital without the physical capital as support. It also provides opportunity for skill development for individuals who may not have financial ability to purchase things like gardening equipment or cooking dishes and utensils.

Financial Capital - NFS contributes to financial capital in a number of ways. Mainly through the programs they run at their Pine Street location. At this location they run programs such as “Lunch Munch”, which provides healthy lunches for children at schools in the community. They also sell two different types of food boxes, monthly or bi-weekly. One box consists of produce solely from Vancouver Island, majorly from Nanaimo and surrounding area. The second consists of the wholesale produce I mentioned in the previous capital section. The photo below is of the Good Food Box and shows the amount of food you get for a very small price.

Going back to the comment made by NFS board chairwoman Marjorie Stewart, financial capital is the number one obstacle people have when it comes to being inadequately nourished (Gorman, 2012). I think this form of capital is the most tended to throughout this organization and others like it. This is because we live in a society where everything is quantified numerically. Which is part of the problem. The other forms of capital that are more difficult to transfer are those our society is seriously lacking in. They are also arguably more readily accessible because they are more understood, in contrast to having social or cultural capital support which requires more devoted time and energy to exploring and building.

Social Capital - The community garden, the Pine Street location, the community kitchen, and now the Urban Farm Project all contribute to social capital. These all act as gathering places for members of the community to come together and build relationships. The larger the community grows the more it is able to provide the other forms of capital for Nanaimo and the surrounding area. The Community Kitchen is also a separate organization within the Foodshare Society building. Social capital is the most underrated form of capital in our society. It is the social capital that allows the NFS to thrive and to remain resilient. The feeling of connection allows

people to communicate on levels that expose them to vulnerability and create a sense of understanding and belonging. It also creates a support system that speaks to love and belonging, which Maslow places on his hierarchy of needs just above basic physiological needs and the need for safety (McLeod, 2016). This connection is something that many non-profit organizations are trying to tap into in recent years. The need for the feeling of belonging is crucial.

Cultural capital - The NFS contributes to cultural capital in a unique and important way. When choosing which crops to grow they are conscious about the plants they introduce to their plots. It is crucial to protect the native species of Nanaimo as well as to bar invasive species. It is also becoming more well known that species of traditional aboriginal heritage exist throughout the area and need to be protected as parts of their culture. The NFS is conscious and respectful of traditional plant species and contributes to species preservation in this way.

Transferability

The idea of a FoodShare organization is not new. The first food share organization in Canada was founded in 1985, and is credited to the former mayor of Toronto, Art Eggleton (Johnston, 2003). The organization was part of his campaign and a self-promotion tool. Not the ideal motive, but it got the ball rolling nonetheless. This organization, FoodShare Toronto, still exists today. The approach the NFS uses is highly transferable and seems to be incredibly similarly structured to FoodShare Toronto. One aspect of the society that makes it resilient is the modularity. NFS acts as an umbrella society under which the Community Garden, the Community Kitchen, the ***** . Furthermore, a number of different programs are run through the society that operate separately, by entirely separate individuals, and these facets do not rely on one another. For example, the program “Farm to School” is carried out by a

facilitator who goes to the school and provides knowledge and experience, but uses the school's physical capital and social connections to strengthen the community.

Moreover, the Community Kitchen is an entirely different organization in itself but shares resources and connections with the NFS in the form of physical capital and the "Lunch Munch" program. These programs operate entirely separately in terms of location and capital, but unite under the NFS. The organization is also resilient because its programs are diverse. There are programs for children, adolescents, adults, families, and seniors.

Another organization that operates on the same approaches is called LifeCycles, which is based out of Victoria, British Columbia (LifeCycles, 2016). Yet another is the Community Kitchen Program of Calgary (2015). Both of these organizations redistribute wholesale food in the same way NFS does through their Good Food Box programs. They also both have programs to feed children through public schools.

Conclusion

The NFS provides the resources and opportunities for individuals and communities to become more food secure and creates a more self-reliant and sustainable community. The emphasis they put on social connection, human capital, and natural capital address some of the initial problems that have contributed to food insecurity. While they also place value in the financial capital, their diversity with other forms of support are what keep them strong as a resilient organization in the community. They do not see food as a commodity from which to capitalize and instead see the human connection to food that humans have seemed to lose over the past few decades. The value placed on community engagement means people are involved and trust is held among one another. Resources are shared and a co-operative style approach allows a traditional sense of democracy to take hold. The organization stands as a great model for replication.

References

- City of Nanaimo (2013). City of Nanaimo Health and Social Forums: Findings and Recommendations Report. pp. 2
- Community Kitchen Program of Calgary (2015). *Stories*. Retrieved from <http://www.ckpcalgary.ca/index.php/stories>
- Figure 1 (n.d.) Children in the Garden. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/nanaimofoodshare/>
- Figure 2 (n.d.). Group of Kids from the Kids get Cooking Program. Retrieved from <http://nanaimofoodshare.ca/kids-get-cooking/>
- Figure 3 (n.d.). The Good Food Box. Retrieved from <http://nanaimofoodshare.ca/good-food-box/>
- Figure 4 (n.d.). Price Comparison of Lunches. Retrieved from <http://nanaimofoodshare.ca/>
- Gorman, Toby (2012). UN Report Highlights Canadian, Local Food Security Issues. *Nanaimo News Bulletin*. Retrieved from <http://www.nanaimobulletin.com/news/152100935.html>
- Johnston, J. (2003). Food for all; the story of FoodShare shows how community food security programs can make a difference, even if they can't end hunger. *Alternatives Journal*, 29(4), 29.
- Johnston, J. & Baker, L. (2005) Eating Outside the Box: FoodShare's Good Food Box and the Challenge of Scale. *Agriculture and Human Values*. 22: 313.
- LifeCycles (2016). *About Us*. Retrived from <http://lifecyclesproject.ca/about-us/>
- McLeod, Saul (2016). *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*. Retrieved from <http://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>
- Nanaimo Foodshare Society (2016). *In Facebook [About]*. Retrieved October 10th, 2016. From: https://www.facebook.com/nanaimofoodshare/about/?ref=page_internal
- PROOF (2014). Monitoring Food Insecurity in Canada. Food Insecurity Policy Research. Retrieved from <http://proof.utoronto.ca/resources/fact-sheets/#monitoring>
- Regional District of Nanaimo (2008). *A Response to Homelessness in Nanaimo: A Housing First Approach*. City Spaces. ES-2.