

Major Research Project

Developing a food equity framework for Kitchen Connect Food Hub

Sponsoring organization:

CRFAIR

In partnership with Iyé Creative and Kitchen Connect

Supervisor:

Dr. Lenore Newman

Nelly E. Jiménez Morales

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School of Environment and Sustainability, Royal Roads University

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Developing a food equity framework for Kitchen Connect Food Hub

Abstract

This study followed a participatory research approach to recommend a food equity framework for Kitchen Connect Food Hub. A series of interviews and a focus group were held to have the voices and experiences of newcomers and immigrants in the city of Victoria, BC., to understand the challenges and constraints they face when accessing and producing their cultural foods. Language barriers, lack of access to information, strict regulations, funding, finding an approved commercial kitchen, and several market barriers were the most significant limitations. Initial diagnosis of the organizational values of Kitchen Connect and the information collected from the interviews helped to develop recommendations to make the resources of the Food Hub more accessible for those groups and to strengthen the value of food equity within the organization.

Introduction and relevance of the sponsoring organizations

The transformation of food systems needs to follow a holistic and systems approach. A food system approach recognizes all the elements and activities related to food production, distribution and consumption. It identifies the interactions, impacts, synergies, and trade-offs between those elements across the system (Béné et al., 2019). A holistic approach promotes all dimensions of economic, social, and environmental well-being (Moscatelli et al., 2016). In that sense, local initiatives, such as food hubs, represent an excellent opportunity to revitalize local economies and, at the same time, foster social justice to overcome the inequalities of the dominant food system.

The present study is part of the Food Connections Project and the Cultural World Foods Initiative, a collaborative effort between The Capital Region Food and Agriculture Initiatives Roundtable (CRFAIR), Iyé Creative, and the Victoria Community Food Hub Society (VCFHS).

CRFAIR is an independent organization that promotes healthy, equitable, and sustainable food systems in the Capital Region (CRFAIR, 2023). CRFAIR is the core of a vibrant and dynamic community

building up a positive change in food systems. It has successfully supported collaborative efforts among different organizations and initiatives with shared goals. The organization provides services to community organizations, industry, and government. Through its core groups and partnerships, CRFAIR has developed public food policies, promoted food literacy, developed action research projects with different stakeholders, and strongly supported local food systems within a context of social justice and sustainability. CRFAIR shares the values of food justice with Iyé Creative, a grassroots collective that encourages food equity and racial justice in local food systems. Both organizations are interested in the well-being of the community through equal access to nutritious, culturally significant, and healthy food. Iyé Creative pays special interest in communities experiencing systemic racism and equity denied groups, and strengthens networks to support them, valuing their voices, culture, and history (Iyé, 2023).

CRFAIR also has a key partnership with the Victoria Community Food Hub Society. CRFAIR supports the local food economy and cares about all the actors along the supply chain. In the same way, food hubs are place-based community models that support and encourage beneficial connections between all actors, from farmers, processors, and entrepreneurs, to consumers, offering diverse services such as food aggregation, distribution, processing and marketing. (Shariatmadary et al., 2023). Food hubs play an important role in the local farm and food sector capacity building (CRFAIR, 2023). The most recent initiative from the VCFHS is the Kitchen Connect Food Hub, a shared-used food processing facility that provides infrastructure, resources, collaboration, and training to start or scale up local food businesses. With the aim of good food for all and access to healthy and culturally appropriate food, this Food Hub seeks to strengthen the value of equity and support vulnerable and equity denied groups (Kitchen Connect, 2023).

The Food Connections program builds networks, facilitates infrastructure, and provides training through the food hubs of the VCFHS. The program aims to support Indigenous, racialized, newcomers, and low-income participants, providing them with skills to develop their initiatives and enterprises to

produce their culturally relevant food. In that regard, the collaboration with Iyé Creative is essential through the Cultural World Foods Initiative, which seeks to empower those groups and facilitate access to resources that will impact their well-being, such as the opportunity to access and produce their culturally relevant food. It is an initiative to create economic opportunities for them and encourage cultural connections. To achieve this goal is fundamental to hear their voices and understand their needs through an equity lens. Therefore, the present study is part of a collaborative effort among the three organizations to strengthen the value of food equity within Kitchen Connect Food Hub and to promote actions towards a more just and sustainable local food system.

Literature review

In the context of our current food systems' social, economic, and environmental impact, it is essential to understand the urgent need for actions at all levels to drive change. Food systems are responsible for 20%–40% of global greenhouse gas emissions, contributing to climate change (Tubiello et al., 2021). At the same time, climate change impacts the efficiency and quality of food production, and threatens the distribution and access to food, which can lead to food insecurity and malnutrition (Myers et al., 2017). The environmental impact of food production can also be seen in water pollution, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and land degradation (FAO, 2023). Furthermore, hunger, malnutrition, unequal power dynamics, and systemic inequalities are significant burdens of our current food systems (Rawe et al., 2019).

According to Dinesh et al. (2021), the transformation of food systems requires initiatives and policies at all levels that address mitigation and adaptation to climate change, reduction of the environmental impact, sustainable development, promotion of sustainable healthy diets, and food system values based on inclusive growth, and social justice. This transformation must be based on strengthening resilience in food systems. Our food systems are exposed to current disruptions in global supply chains, economic and political crises, and environmental catastrophes. Several internal and

external factors challenge the capacity to provide food for all (Tendall et al., 2015). Resilience is the "capacity of a system to persist through continuous development in the face of change and to innovate and transform into new, more desirable configurations" (Folke, 2006, p. 260). A food system encompasses the interactions between actors and food production, distribution, and consumption activities. Appropriate interventions must be taken across the system to strengthen the capacity to adapt and overcome challenges while maintaining positive social, economic and environmental outcomes. (Schipanski et al., 2016). In terms of food security, Bullock et al. (2017) defined resilience as "maintaining production of sufficient and nutritious food in the face of chronic and acute environmental perturbations" (para. 2). Tendall et al. (2015) argued about the importance of seeing our food system from a holistic and long-term perspective. From that point of view, Hodbod (2021) emphasized the relationship between sustainability, resilience, and well-being. According to the author, the goal of a resilient and sustainable system is to maintain people's well-being over time and overcome disruptions. It is essential then, to understand the perception of well-being for different groups of people. From an equity lens, people are diverse and need different levels of support to achieve food security and well-being. Therefore, the relevance of this study relies on this understanding, considering that to improve people's well-being and better access to food, it is necessary first to hear the voices of specific groups to provide support and propose interventions that are aligned with their realities, day-to-day challenges, cultural values and perception of well-being.

Values of Social justice should be inherent to food systems no matter the level, either large-scale or locally produced. This approach focuses on access to food for all, examines the roots of social inequalities, and addresses actions toward a profound change (Allen, 2010). A values and rights-based approach integrates the concepts of food sovereignty and equity, which are interrelated and play an important role in food systems. Food sovereignty refers to the people's right to define how to ecologically produce food that is culturally appropriate to them under the foundations of health and

sustainability (Food Secure Canada, 2023). Moreover, food equity focuses on ensuring access to healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food for all and fair and equal access to the means of food production (UCI Law, 2023). "Access for all" to sustainable healthy diets is a fundamental priority under climate change and health concerns (Dinesh et al., 2021). "Sustainable Healthy Diets are dietary patterns that promote all dimensions of individual's health and well-being; have low environmental pressure and impact; are accessible, affordable, safe and equitable; and are culturally acceptable" (FAO & WHO 2019, p. 9). There is an urgent need in all countries to shift to sustainable diets to meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The goals regarding good health, well-being, and sustainable consumption are based on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2023).

It is also essential to consider the production and supply chain to assess and alleviate the food system's environmental impact. Aldaya (2021) mentioned that research on local/regional food systems from a holistic, environmental, and context-specific approach is needed to analyze the sustainability of diets. In recent decades there has been a great interest in relocalising the food systems to strengthen resiliency and balance the negative impact of the industrialization of food at a large and global scale, in which people have no control over what and how food is produced. Local efforts have been centered on revitalizing local farming, enhancing local economies by supporting local food processors, and providing markets for both. Some others are also centered on sustainable practices and community engagement (Allen, 2010). Brinkley (2017) declared that reducing the geographic distance in the food supply chain encourages a closer and more beneficial relationship between producers and consumers, providing foundations for social values and raising awareness of the impact of food systems. The author also mentioned that local food production and consumption have been promoted through farmers' markets and food hubs, among other initiatives. These actions strengthen the value of food sovereignty; encouraging agency at a local level to define the type of food produced and how it is distributed, which

changes the dynamics of global food systems and boost resilience in local communities. Furthermore, it represents an opportunity for better access to nutritious food (Sampson et al., 2021).

The United States Department of Agriculture defines a food hub as a “business or organization that actively manages the aggregation, distribution, processing and/or marketing of source-identified food products primarily from local and regional producers to strengthen their ability to satisfy wholesale, retail and institutional demand” (USDA, 2017). These shared-use facilities provide expertise and resources to support local producers’ and processors’ growth and encourage food security (British Columbia, 2023). There is a wide range of food hubs depending on the services they provide, purpose, ownership, and scope. In general, some food hubs focus on supporting the local economy, while others focus more on alleviating food insecurity from a social approach (Levkoe et al., 2018). Several food hubs also emphasize social connections around food and promote community engagement (Horst et al., 2011).

The biggest challenge for food hubs is being profitable within a system dominated by large-scale companies and, at the same time, driving an alternative food system that promotes social justice and sustainability (Cleveland et al., 2014). The first approach is producer-product centered, and the second one is humanistic and health-centered. Thus, there is an excellent opportunity for food hubs to encourage community engagement and social justice, and in that way, support a vibrant and equitable local food system (Horst et al., 2011). Encouraging local production and local supply chains is important. Still, food hubs should also embed values of inclusion and equity to avoid repeating the injustices and power dynamics of the conventional and dominant food system. Food hubs must provide opportunities for all people to connect and benefit from their services, improving access for all. Within a food equity framework, communities experiencing systemic racism, immigrant, and equity denied groups should be embraced and represented in the food hubs (Jones et al., 2018).

Food hubs represent an opportunity for the economic development of those groups. Khojasteh (2022) discussed the importance of adequate interventions for immigrants, racialized, and low-income communities to thrive. External interventions to address food insecurity, such as food banks, only provide temporary solutions. The author argued that encouraging and supporting food entrepreneurship among those groups to produce their culturally relevant food leads to better social and economic well-being. It also provides an equitable framework for place-based economic development and long-term solutions that strengthen resiliency in local food systems. As mentioned before, well-being and resilience are experienced differently among different actors, therefore is important to understand the challenges those groups face when accessing food.

There has been significant interest in understanding and addressing the food insecurity of immigrants in Canada. Immigration policies support the country's economic development. Therefore, immigrants' adaptation is essential for their social and economic integration. Newcomers face social and economic challenges when arriving in Canada. In that sense, Tarraf et al. (2017) argued that access to culturally relevant food impacts the immigrant's well-being. Food insecurity and changing dietary patterns to more processed foods may affect their physical and mental health (Davison & Gondara, 2019). Studies have shown that western diets are less healthy and sustainable than dietary patterns from other countries (Mejía et al., 2018). Frequently newcomers find junk and high processed foods more accessible and affordable than healthy food (Vahabi & Damba, 2013). Furthermore, low accessibility to culturally relevant food also impacts their mental health, as for some groups of immigrants, food is part of their identity and represents a social connection to their traditions and roots (Tarraf et al., 2017). Accordingly, the present study represents an opportunity to understand the needs of those groups and foster participation and connection to people and resources that might be beneficial for them to produce nutritious and culturally relevant food.

Racial structures are still embedded in our food systems. Ramirez (2015) claimed that black people's historical oppression and exclusion remain in power asymmetries in food systems. Roberts (2020) mentioned that black communities in Canada are three times more exposed to food insecurity. The author discussed the importance of understanding intergenerational poverty and systemic racism to provide adequate long-term solutions to food access for those communities. Unequal access to healthy food is also rooted in economic inequality. Racialized communities in Canada face labor market discrimination, lower income, and higher unemployment. This is particularly important as the racialized population in Canada accounts for 22%, being South Asian, Chinese, Black, Filipino, and Latin American, the most prominent groups (Block et al., 2019).

Local food projects, such as food hubs, represent an opportunity to embed values of food justice in food systems and to be agents of change. To achieve this is not only necessary to empower equity denied groups but also to take responsibility for making changes in the institutional design, and continually assess their practices toward this goal (Allen, 2010; Nelson & Landman, 2020).

To promote food equity, it is essential to engage diverse stakeholders in the design and implementation of food hubs' programs. Participation mechanisms and community engagement in local food systems provide foundations for change and transformation (Perret & Jackson, 2015). According to Bineshi (2022), community members and local leaders facing the challenges of system inequalities and climate change are the ones who can bring up the best solutions that work for them. Participation allows hearing the voices of groups that might be underrepresented and encourages leadership. At the same time, local leaders build momentum that fosters community engagement (Blaine, 2020).

To build resiliency and justice in food systems, it is essential to identify gaps, interview stakeholders, and conduct work that brings people together. To heal system inequalities and build beneficial relations, it is important to have the notion of food as a source of connections, culture, and

physical and mental well-being and not as a commodity. Investing in food justice improves social, economic, and environmental systems (Soma, 2021).

Purpose of the study

This study aims to provide a food equity framework for Kitchen Connect Food Hub and to develop engagement strategies to include newcomers/immigrant groups in practices to produce and access their cultural foods.

Research questions

1. What are the challenges and constraints newcomers/immigrants face when accessing and producing their cultural foods?
2. How can these groups be included in the conversations, programs, and practices of Kitchen Connect Food Hub within an equity framework?
3. What strategies can Kitchen Connect Food Hub develop to make its resources more accessible for newcomers/immigrants to access and produce their cultural foods?
4. How can this information support the development of food equity policies to effectively apply the interventions needed for a sustainable and value-based local food system?

Research objectives

1. To have the voices and experiences of newcomers/immigrant groups to understand the challenges and constraints they face when accessing and producing their cultural foods.
2. To examine how Kitchen Connect Food Hub can address inequities and increase access to growers, producers, suppliers, and consumers from those groups.
3. To identify opportunities to link growers and makers with Kitchen Connect Food Hub to produce their cultural foods.
4. To promote participation, engagement, and leadership of the newcomers/immigrant groups.

5. To provide recommendations and a framework for equity practices within Kitchen Connect Food Hub.

Methods

The study followed a Participatory Research (PAR) approach based on Food Equity to engage the voices and experiences of immigrants and Kitchen Connect Food Hub leaders.

PAR is a qualitative methodology in which participants from the community and researchers collaboratively generate knowledge from current social issues and actively participate in developing solutions, actions, and social transformation (Herr & Anderson, 2009). In this type of research, participants are empowered to create personal and collective change. They improve their life by increasing awareness and critical understanding of the roots of their problems (MacDonald, 2011). PAR encourages citizen participation, engagement, and accountability, which leads to better access to public services and resources (Institute of Development Studies, 2023).

PAR has been widely used as a research approach to work with disadvantaged or marginalized groups building up beneficial changes for the community (Schubotz, 2020). Social transformation is often found in PAR studies where the marginalized are encouraged to explore and unmask dominant ideologies (O'Leary, 2021). Furthermore, Reason and Bradbury (2008) mentioned that PAR is suitable for studies related to local cultural revival and deconstruction of global uniformizations, two critical approaches for the present study.

Participation and people engagement provide solid foundations for building up local food systems. Perret and Jackson (2015) claimed that people committed to transforming the global status quo and current dominant practices play an essential role in increasing the potential of local initiatives. In an equitable food system, everyone can participate, benefit from opportunities, and access healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food. For those reasons and the purposes of this study, the PAR approach will contribute to strengthening social justice values within Kitchen Connect Food Hub.

This qualitative study was set in the City of Victoria, BC., where Kitchen Connect Food Hub is located. It was divided into two parts:

- The first part of the study consisted of one in-depth interview with Kitchen Connect leaders to know their operational values and to identify how the value of equity is integrated into the mission, structure, and practices within the food hub.
- The second part of the study was divided into two phases. Phase 1 consisted of Informal semi-structured individual interviews with ten participants representing the newcomers/ immigrant group, all of them producing cultural food and recognized as potential users of Kitchen Connect services. Participants recruited were immigrants from Korea, Japan, Chile, Mexico, Colombia, the Philippines, and Thailand. These food makers provided in-depth insights related to the challenges and constraints they face when accessing and producing their cultural foods. Phase 2 consisted of a focus group designed for participants from the individual interviews to share and enrich their perspectives and experiences. The conversation included a reflective discussion focused on potential solutions to overcome their challenges and identifying common ways for active participation.

All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The responses were manually coded, categorized into themes, and analyzed descriptively because of the small sample size. The codes were generated from the data, following an inductive coding approach. Inductive coding is suggested in exploratory studies that require transparency and to find direct information from the data (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019) and this coding technique was used here. The most recurrent words expressed in the individual interviews were identified to complement the analysis of the themes. The word frequency was used to construct a “word cloud” (visual representation of the word frequency).

Positionality statement

I am a newcomer in Canada. My research interest started with sustainable food systems, and I wanted to understand the dynamic of the food systems in the Capital Region. I developed my professional career around food and have always been aware of the impact of food systems on the environment. My bachelor studies were in Food Processing Engineering; I worked for a transnational food company and later became an entrepreneur, running a vegetarian restaurant. I have always been interested in food as a source of health and well-being. I come from Mexico, a country rich in ancestral traditions around food and recognized by its gastronomy and diversity of natural ingredients. As a newcomer, I have faced the challenge of accessing affordable and nutritious food in the Capital Region. Through this research, I am interested in learning how to make bridges and networks to support immigrant communities and, most importantly, from that experience, how to contribute to transforming local food systems. My studies in Canada with a cohort from 14 countries allowed me to develop interpersonal skills that supported the active listening required in PAR and to understand the worldviews of diverse communities. From that, I recognized my role as a facilitator in the research process and the importance of being constantly aware of my position to avoid mirroring my experiences to those of the participants.

Findings

Kitchen Connect initial diagnosis of equity practices

The mission of Kitchen Connect Food Hub expresses an explicit commitment to support equity denied groups and support a sustainable and equitable food local food system that provides Good Food for All. As a recent initiative from the VCFHS, it has the advantage of belonging to a group of organizations working in food security and equity for several years. As mentioned by their leaders, this research is part of the aim of VCFHS to align all those experiences, reach out to food processors through Kitchen Connect and continue serving the community and supporting equity denied groups. The Food

Connections program plays an essential role in developing knowledge and resources to support those groups. Kitchen Connect Food Hub is starting operations, and so far, they have prioritized providing fair prices and paying special attention to the services and schedules they can offer to meet the needs of different food makers. An important challenge leaders recognized is how to spread the information to make more people know about the food hub.

Leaders have identified opportunities from having the South Island Farm Hub (SIFH) facilities next to Kitchen Connect. Through this, they can foster a closer relationship between makers and growers, thus improving the local supply chain and community access to healthy and culturally relevant food. Moreover, Kitchen Connect is part of the BC Food Hub network and the Good Food Network, which leads to great opportunities for sharing knowledge and successful experiences that can be implemented in the food hub. From this, leaders also recognize the valuable peer support and mentorship opportunities. Kitchen Connect leaders also emphasized the importance of partnerships with organizations such as Iyé Creative, which have constantly provided recommendations around food equity and facilitated the understanding of what people need instead of making decisions for the people.

Besides offering a space to produce culturally relevant food, leaders are aware of the work opportunities they could provide to equity denied groups at some point. Furthermore, through SIFH and the partnership with CRFAIR, they have the experience of accessing different grants for producers or employment opportunities, such as the work experience grant for low-income groups and people with disabilities provided by the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction. The VCFHS has established policies for a fair living wage for all permanent employees within all the initiatives. Kitchen Connect leaders addressed the value of providing a welcoming space that fosters collaboration and community engagement. Leaders hope to support groups that have been left aside from the

conventional food system and be part of the initiatives building a new, alternative, equitable and sustainable food system.

Challenges and constraints immigrants face when accessing and producing culturally relevant food

To start the conversation and provide initial insights, participants from individual interviews were asked about how important it is for them to access and produce their culturally relevant food. Participants related the emotional and physical need for their home country's authentic ¹ food and the value of sharing that heritage as some of the most important motivations to start their food businesses.

The most cited terms expressed during the individual interviews were identified. The next figure shows the word recurrency in the interviews.



Figure 1 Word cloud showing the most recurrent words expressed during the individual interviews.

¹ Several participants used the word “authentic”, referring to food that is prepared according to traditional culinary practices from their home countries.

Regarding the main challenges and constraints participants face when accessing and producing their culturally relevant food, six themes described the experiences they shared. Figure 2 summarizes the challenges and constraints found, and explanations of the identified themes are discussed below.

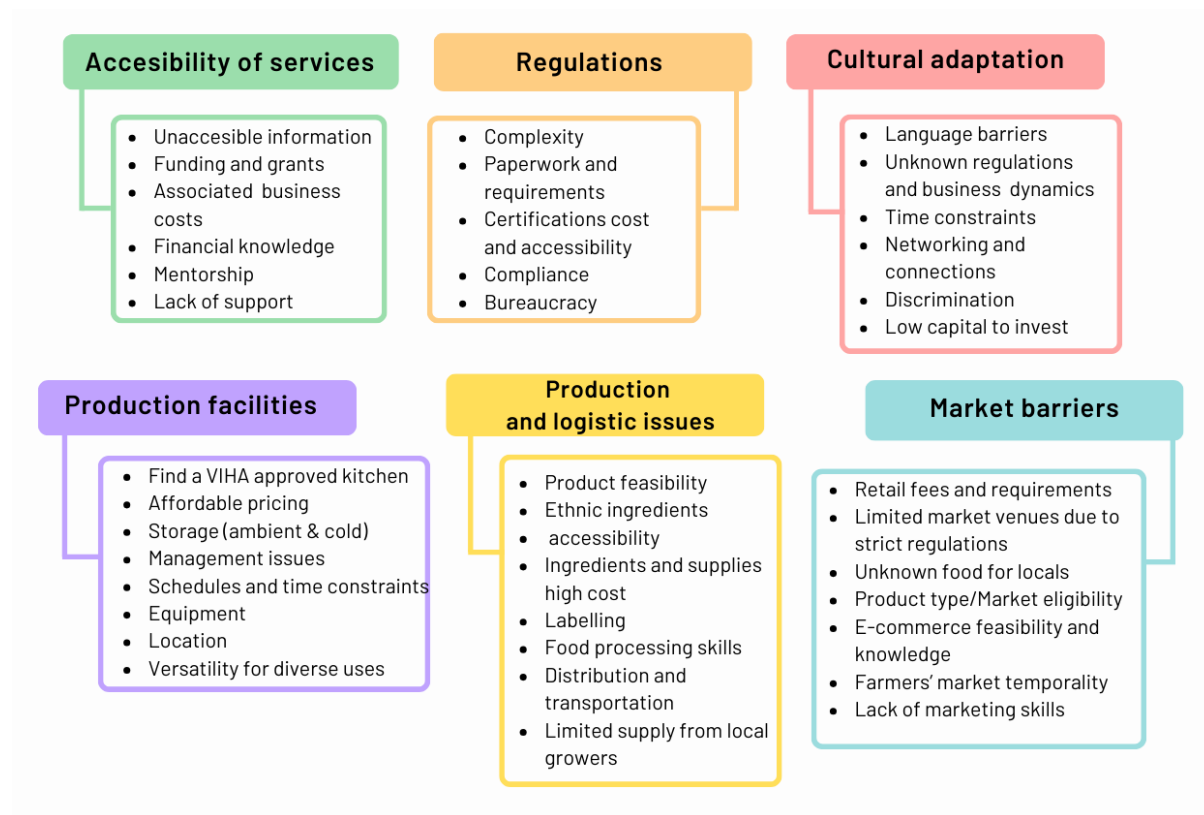


Figure 2 Challenges and constraints participants faced when accessing and producing their culturally relevant food.

Accessibility of services to start and grow a food business

Interviewees mentioned that there is a lack of information regarding the steps needed to start and run a food business. Nine out of ten participants experienced that information was difficult to find and unclear. Information and resources regarding available facilities, regulations and legal requirements are not readily accessible and demand looking at different sources and organizations, which sometimes

is confusing and time-consuming. Some resources are available online, but it can require persistence to locate the necessary information.

Most participants said that they learned and got support more through networking and talking with other food makers rather than from specific related organizations. Guidance from experienced individuals was often necessary. Participants expressed the challenge of knowing which local authorities and agencies to approach for permits and licenses and how to do it.

The following quotation illustrates this perception:

"I feel like a lot of immigrants want to be entrepreneurs. because they take a chance. They have already taken the biggest chance in their life to come here and change their whole life, so like starting a business is not going to be a huge deal to them. But if they have all these barriers, it's just gonna make it really hard, unnecessarily hard, really, because the resources are there. It's just like finding the information becomes so hard and challenging".

One participant was enrolled in a food business incubation program developed for immigrant women at Camosun College. For this reason, she did not face this challenge in the same way.

The second most cited challenge was the need to access funds and grants. Participants expressed that grants and financial assistance from institutions could significantly support their journey and overcome financial challenges. Lack of financial support was mentioned as a constraint to start, grow and scale their businesses. They highlighted accessibility issues related to business-associated costs such as licenses, insurance, and certifications. At the same time, participants related this challenge to the requirements to access funding. Fulfilling the requirements represents a constraint as frequently a well-structured business plan is needed to access those services and at least two years of business operation and taxation. In addition, participants mentioned time availability as a constraint to look for funding resources and explore eligibility.

Many of the participants found it challenging to acquire financial knowledge. In this context, taxation was considered one of the most significant challenges. As expressed by several participants,

immigrants starting a food business in Canada often had a different work or professional experience in their home country unrelated to business, making this issue more challenging.

One-third of the participants emphasized the need for adequate and constant mentorship in food business management and production. Some others mentioned that mentorship and support are also needed to fulfill the paperwork required to apply to Farmer's Markets and at the first stages of the business when applying to get licenses and looking to comply with all the regulations. All participants agreed that there is a need for better support, especially for newcomers. Eight out of ten participants contacted organizations providing free workshops for new entrepreneurs, such as Small Business B.C., Futurpreneur and the Farm Food and Drink Association. Some participants had a sense of lack of support for immigrant businesses. As one participant expressed:

“There is realistically no breaks and not really support for the small business. In my opinion they should support a little bit this part of the economy. I mean If they are supporting that part of the economy, How? Tell me, forecast it. Tell me how I can do it. Don't hide it in like the page 7 of a PDF and the small letters. So this is hard”.

Most participants mentioned that there might be support but there is a lack of knowledge about programs they can access.

Legal framework and regulation issues

In this sense, the accessibility of information plays a significant role, as all participants mentioned their willingness to comply with regulations. Regulatory requirements and related permits are essential but can be challenging to navigate, especially for newcomers. More than half of the immigrant entrepreneurs in the study felt that Canadian government regulations, while important, can sometimes be inflexible and complex, making it challenging for small business owners to understand and, therefore, comply. In that regard, regulations were also seen as constraints, especially concerning

activities related to market venues, product sampling, cook-on-site production and selling ready-to-eat food at farmers' markets.

In addition, food regulations impacted two participants' businesses. As producers of less conventional cultural foods, they faced stricter regulations and had to explain their processes to regulatory authorities who were unfamiliar with these products. Some types of foods have different regulations that represent an extra challenge. This is the case of one participant who faced challenges producing ice cream, which is usually required to be produced in a dairy facility unless some adjustments are made to the formulation. The participant said that when she was ready to launch the product, she was informed by VIHA authorities about this regulation. She had to change the recipe and look for an ice cream base supplier to comply with the regulation and be able to produce in a commercial kitchen, as access to a dairy facility is limited and costly. The lack of knowledge of this regulation led the participant to waste time and resources.

Finally, some participants provided relevant comments related to bureaucracy; they referred to how difficult is to communicate and find solutions, especially with CRA authorities. This view was supported by anecdotal evidence of trying to reach out to this authority and getting a response from them. One of the participants noted: *"All of my friends from my home country, and then living here, are just like so frustrating, even just trying to call CRA takes forever. And we have to call 2 hours ahead because of the time in Toronto. And then also like, even if they make mistakes, they never properly apologize or anything. They always make an excuse to get away and stuff like that."*

Process of Cultural adaptation

According to the majority of the participants in the study, the language barrier represented one of the most significant challenges to accessing and producing culturally relevant food. Adapting and adhering to the rules and regulations of the new country was considered crucial for them. From their experience, obtaining permits and certifications is often challenging, especially regarding food safety

permits and compliance with health safety department requirements. Language barriers make all the processes even more difficult. Language barriers and complicated application processes in Canada hinder immigrants' access to different services and markets. Two participants mentioned that managers and authorities sometimes lack empathy to understand this barrier, which requires extra support and guidance.

Newcomers face the challenge of not being familiar with the regulations and business dynamics of the new country. Some participants mentioned that this lack of understanding led to business cost underestimation. Half of the participants provided insights into the difference in developing food businesses in their home country, where regulations less constrain the way food is commercialized and sold.

Several participants emphasized the importance of social connections in the new country to overcome all those challenges, which smooth adaptation to a different culture. As one participant expressed, networking and building connections with local organizations and individuals, including through volunteering, play a crucial role in overcoming barriers and accessing support. Obviously, this process took time.

The economic and social challenges associated with migration highly impact the development of immigrant businesses. For the majority of participants, their food business represents a second source of income. The economic demands of adapting to a new country led to low or no capital to invest and time constraints. Most participants mentioned that they mainly fulfill their economic needs with a full-time job, which represents a constraint to dedicate time to developing their food businesses and navigating through all the regulations. According to one participant, there is also a lack of self-confidence derived from all those challenges related to cultural adaptation when starting a food business in Canada.

Except for one participant, no entrepreneur directly mentioned discrimination as a barrier to their business. However, some insights from personal experiences suggested a certain kind of systemic discrimination and racism while accessing and producing their cultural food and in personal experiences. Two participants shared experiences associated with the fact of being a newcomer, having a language barrier and less understanding of some rules, which affected their relations with some managers and the way they were treated. One participant said that some farmers' market managers can sometimes be racist. Another participant shared that even though she has been in Canada for several years, she still feels a difference in the way she is treated when she attends some stores to buy cultural food. This participant mentioned that she prefers not to think about it. Another participant related that her young family members sometimes feel ashamed to take their cultural food to school because of how local kids react to unknown odours and flavours.

Conversely, regarding selling their cultural food, participants expressed that most of the customers at farmers' markets embrace diversity and multiculturalism. An important insight in that regard was the vision of one participant who realized that being from a different country and offering nutritious, culturally relevant food represents a marketing strength. Something that at the beginning he considered of non-importance, such as the origin of the ingredients and the cultural meaning, represented a marketing tool that he started using to sell more.

Production facilities

Finding the proper commercial kitchen or production space at an affordable cost was the most recurrent challenge mentioned by all participants, even for two of them lucky enough to use the facilities of restaurants with approved kitchens in which they had worked before. As one participant noted, the rental cost can be high and challenging for businesses with limited cash flow.

In that regard, two participants reported that they have yet to decide to scale up and diversify the products they currently produce at home because they are unsure if they will be able to afford to

rent the facility. As production at home is approved but limited to certain low-risk products, this represents a constraint. With this limitation, they can only sell through certain farmers' markets and cannot offer other products that might be more welcoming among potential customers.

Half of the participants emphasized the importance of adequate storage (ambient and cold) for ingredients and finished products at the processing facility. Some of the food makers interviewed rely on freezing their products to extend their products' shelf life. Participants facing those constraints must transport their products and ingredients back and forth between the facility and their homes. One participant even mentioned that every time she produces, she needs to take extra kitchen utilities and tools from home that are not available and cannot be stored at the kitchen facility. The storage limitation generates other constraints, mainly if the facility is not located close to the food makers' homes. In such cases, proximity to home is a consideration, as travelling long distances to the commercial kitchen with ingredients, finished products and kitchen utilities is not ideal. Besides, some food makers need to store their equipment at the production facility, which might generate an extra rental cost, as explained by two participants who faced this challenge.

Access to kitchen facilities is often limited by operation hours and availability. Some producers require early morning access, which they mentioned can be challenging. Participants also shared challenges derived from management deficiencies from kitchen owners and managers, such as deficient communication, unclear rental conditions, and inadequate hygiene protocols.

Participants expressed that they value a facility where they feel respected, trusted, and treated with empathy. There was one experience shared in which issues with the facility owner disrupted the operations and led to an unexpected relocation, impacting business stability.

For a couple of participants, finding a facility where they can use some space to offer workshops is also important. It is essential for them to share their culture and educate their clientele on how to consume and prepare dishes with their products, increasing the willingness to buy them.

Production and logistic issues

According to the majority, one of the primary challenges when accessing and producing culturally relevant food is the limited access to ethnic ingredients in the city, which is worsened by the fact of being located on an island. This leads to higher prices and shipping costs. Some participants need to rely on suppliers from Vancouver, where there is more accessibility to ingredients from different countries, or they even must travel to get those ingredients. These extra costs impact the final product's price and the business profitability, also considering the rising cost of food ingredients and supplies. Finding suppliers who can provide these items at a reasonable cost, especially when the business is small, is challenging.

Additionally, some culturally relevant food is prepared with fresh fruits and vegetables, which access is limited due to seasonal challenges or that are not available due to the appropriate climate in which certain ethnic produce can be grown. In that regard, some participants have substituted fresh produce for frozen products, while others have developed recipe adaptations using the available ingredients that are locally grown. This is particularly important to note, as all participants showed awareness and willingness to support local growers. Some have already built relationships with local growers to source fresh ingredients, but growers face the challenge of growing small quantities as there is yet to be a huge demand for some cultural food, which tends to increase the price of produce. Another challenge is ensuring the reliability and quality of the ingredients. This is essential for high-quality and organic products, as mentioned by one participant. Despite their willingness to buy local produce, a couple of participants highlighted the difficulty of making their products accessible due to pricing, especially when using organic and local ingredients. The pricing issue was also expressed by a participant trying to develop eco-friendly packaging for her product.

An equally important challenge was the food product feasibility to easily access different markets and start producing at low cost. All participants except one mentioned experiences in which,

after developing a first idea of the cultural product they wanted to sell and investing time and money in doing so, they realized that they would have to invest much more time and economic resources to comply with all the regulations and be able to reach different market venues. Some participants had to change the product or faced more challenges once they started the business. This represents a lack of knowledge of food production, food safety, market requirements and associated regulations that led to a waste of time and resources. According to this challenge, one individual expressed a strong need for mentorship from someone with experience and knowledge about the type of product this entrepreneur sells. All participants had no prior food processing experience or guidance, which added time to the learning curve. A recurrent topic in the interviews was the challenge related to product labelling. More than half of the participants said they have faced difficulties in developing a proper label that complies with all regulations to sell in retail, including bar code and nutritional value. Furthermore, Canada has strict label regulations, such as bilingual labelling requirements, which add challenges for small producers in terms of additional costs and complexities. One-third of the participants also mentioned the challenge of selling, storing and distributing products that need cold storage. This requires a high investment in equipment, which limits access to some market venues.

Market barriers

Participants highlighted various challenges they faced when commercializing their products, particularly when scaling up from farmers' markets to retail stores. The most cited market barriers were the high fees and the requirements to access retail stores. Participants expressed that they must comply with stricter regulations, certifications, branding, packaging, and labelling that generate extra costs. Furthermore, this barrier is also related to the type of product and market venue feasibility. Special requirements for high-risk, short-shelf-life or cold-storage products may demand more time, resources, and equipment investment. The profit margins for small producers can be drastically reduced in the retail sector due to various expenses and the high fees to promote and distribute the

product. One participant mentioned that to fit into the retail scenario he had to increase the product's price, while others expressed that an increased price could affect consumer willingness to buy the product.

The majority's second barrier was the strict regulations limiting marketing venues and sales strategies. Two participants provided the example of selling in certain public spaces, which is quite limited and might require a huge investment to buy a food truck. Another two participants explained some limitations of selling ready-to-eat food or providing samplings of their products in prepared foods when selling at farmers' markets. The regulations from VIHA (Vancouver Island Health Authority) require mechanical refrigeration for certain food products at farmers' markets. This regulation poses a barrier because investing in the necessary equipment is expensive and may not be cost-effective, as they explained.

Selling products can be challenging, especially if they are unique or culturally specific. Seven out of ten participants mentioned that one of the greatest challenges is getting locals to try food from a different country. They also expressed that sometimes selling culturally relevant food requires adapting to local tastes and educating potential customers about how to consume that food and the uniqueness of the product. In that regard, several participants agreed that farmers' market in Victoria primarily attracts Canadian customers, mostly adults and seniors who may need to learn how to use or cook that food.

Half of the participants provided insights related to e-commerce and social media. On one hand, they expressed the importance of having an online presence but face the barrier of lack of knowledge in that matter. On the other hand, only some of the products are suitable for online sales. Some products need to be refrigerated, making it challenging to sell them online due to the need for temperature-controlled shipping.

A couple of participants also mentioned the challenge of temporality. As farmers' markets are the principal venue for small food makers, and not all the markets are open all year long, participants had to develop different strategies to maintain their sales during the off-season.

Potential solutions to overcome those challenges

During the individual interviews and focus groups, participants were encouraged to generate ideas to improve the accessibility of resources to access and produce their culturally relevant food. This practice was aligned with the principles of Participatory Research, in which participants generate knowledge and become active actors in the generation of solutions that impact their lives (O'Leary, 2021).

Several participants expressed the need for a centralized governmental body or office that provides information and guidance especially tailored to newcomers and immigrants interested in starting a food-related business. This entity would provide information on all the steps needed to start and run a food business, legalities, and potential solutions to address the most common challenges.

Some participants also identified the need for a database of resources such as local food growers, commercial kitchens, suppliers, professional services, funding opportunities and a list of organizations that can support them in their journey. All this information could be shared through a website or by developing a guidebook that also provides the estimated costs associated with every step of the process.

To overcome the language barrier and understand regulations, many participants mentioned the opportunity to have mentors or volunteers attending immigrants, who, with compassion and empathy, support them in accessing information and applying for licenses, permits or the farmers' markets.

One participant generated the idea of a "kitchen student for a day" in which a potential food maker could access the commercial kitchen to run a trail. The objective would be to understand the

production side and regulations before committing to a rental program or even before deciding to start their business, and in that way, better plan the cost and resources needed.

Participants also mentioned the possibility of sharing services to increase accessibility, such as labelling, digital marketing, cold transportation, and collective distribution to retail.

Several participants have provided guidance to other immigrants interested in producing their cultural food. In the same way, a couple of them showed a willingness to participate more, providing talks or workshops to other immigrants and supporting them in their journey. Two participants emphasized the importance of having opportunities to attend events to network and create a “virtuous cycle” to connect new food makers with others who are more experienced and then, after some time, keep this cycle of sharing experiences with more new food makers.

Another interesting proposal was to assess the possibility of delegating the production to trained staff from the certified commercial kitchen thus increasing the economic feasibility of certain projects. The participant mentioned this could be an option for food makers trying to scale up after passing the farmers Market stage. Following specific procedures, producers could share the workforce and other production costs. This might also be applied to distribution services.

Participants generated different ideas in terms of funding. One participant shared the idea of passing grants from one entrepreneur to another as their business grows. Another one mentioned the option of providing funding for hiring employees to expand small businesses. One more emphasized the importance of knowing how to access funding, grants, and resources, for instance, according to the business ownership. This is the case of funding focused on women entrepreneurs. Business mentors could guide immigrants in terms of strategies to access funding.

One participant referred to the idea of a big farmers Market expo like the ones that already happen in big cities such as Vancouver, where they can have more exposure to new clientele.

Participants also shared some thoughts about the support that different immigrant organizations could provide and the importance of linking all those efforts to improve the accessibility of various resources.

Discussion

The conversations in this study exposed the importance of tailored support for newcomers and immigrants interested in producing culturally relevant food. Starting a food business represents a big challenge for them as they need help accessing the information that guides them on this journey. Newcomers face economic and social constraints when moving to a new country; therefore, they cannot risk all their efforts and time in entrepreneurial activity and do not have all the resources to do so. For that reason, they need more access to services and support. The lack of familiarity with administrative processes and language barriers can slow the business establishment.

Limited financial resources can hinder business start-up and growth due to the high investment required in certifications and production facilities. Even participants with more experience emphasized the need for support from organizations helping them to overcome their challenges. Based on the social and economic challenges mentioned before, evaluating the financial need for immigrants to access services is essential. It is interesting to note that participants mentioned the need for funding but, at the same time, provided ideas to give back some of those resources for the benefit of new immigrant entrepreneurs.

When approaching institutions and regulatory entities, immigrants can face covert discrimination or racism that limits their access to resources. Although most participants did not directly relate discrimination experiences to their businesses, it is essential to listen to the perception of their personal experiences to understand the impact of systemic racism and inequities on those groups, as illustrated by one participant who stressed the lack of empathy from managers when immigrants face language barriers.

Small producers often face several barriers to accessing a production facility. Finding a commercial kitchen at an affordable cost was the main barrier they faced. They mentioned other obstacles associated with infrastructure, such as limited storage and equipment. Along with the need for a proper facility, they need food processing skills and food business knowledge. There was a particular interest in food production and food business mentorship. Food makers need guidance in selecting appropriate products to start a business, which will determine the market feasibility of their products. In that regard, support during the planning process is essential before immigrants engage and get licenses for their products. Moreover, when facing financial constraints, deciding where and how to invest the resources is critical and can impact the success of their business. Finding a mentor, receiving financial assistance, and expanding the knowledge base are essential steps to support those groups.

Commercial kitchens and food hubs have the opportunity to provide spaces to encourage social connection, networking and support among growers, producers and the community. Social connections smooth the adaptation process and provide resources for immigrant entrepreneurs to succeed.

Notably, most participants expressed various constraints that limit market opportunities. On the one hand, they lack the economic resources to comply with regulations and requirements to expand to different market venues, such as retail. On the other hand, strict regulations limit the type of products they can sell and how they can commercialize them. Collaborative efforts among small producers, facilitated by organizations such as food hubs, can provide services such as labelling, good manufacturing practices, certifications, and distribution, making it more feasible for small businesses to produce and commercialize their products and overcome the market barriers they face. This represents an opportunity for immigrants to access collective services that they otherwise could not access individually. Moreover, food hubs can help producers identify alternative market venues aligned with fair trade that impact less on their profit. Sales training and marketing skills are also essential to overcome market barriers, as selling food from different countries represents a challenge.

Farmers' markets are an excellent opportunity for immigrant start-ups to sell directly to customers, offering them better profit and allowing the connection between makers and consumers. Participants shared important insights about the customer dynamics they have seen in farmers' markets. They considered that choosing the right farmers' market to participate in is important. Markets with a diverse and multicultural customer base can be more receptive to diverse cuisines. Several participants agreed that farmers' markets in Victoria primarily attract Canadian customers, mostly adults and seniors. More efforts must be made to bring new customers and young people to those markets and educate people about the importance of supporting local growers and makers. Even immigrants willing to consume their cultural food might face barriers to attending farmers' markets that must be considered.

An interesting discussion among the participants was related to the accessibility of their products in terms of pricing and the limited market venues. Small-scale production impacts on cost. They perceive that some of their products are not accessible to immigrant communities. One big concern is how to increase that access and promote the consumption of healthy and culturally relevant food among their immigrant communities, especially for low-income groups.

All participants showed awareness of the importance of connecting with local growers and producers. Most of them have opportunities to reach growers only through the same farmers' markets where the producers usually sell. More accessibility of this information and networking would be beneficial. Furthermore, as individual requirements for growing certain ethnic ingredients are not always feasible, communication among food makers requiring similar ingredients would encourage local production, strengthen the local supply chain, and make the food production of cultural food more sustainable.

Food makers face time constraints. Most participants have a food business and a full-time job. It is essential to consider the availability of food makers to provide training and other resources at the

proper time. Participants considered spring and summer the highest sales seasons and, therefore, the busiest one. When approaching potential participants for this research, several showed a willingness to participate but faced time constraints during spring to adjust to all their commitments, as some of them usually attend more than two farmers' markets, offer catering services, and attend seasonal events. One participant even mentioned her willingness to enroll in some workshops but could not attend during this season.

There are currently organizations supporting the settlement of immigrants in Victoria; however, there is a need for specific support for immigrant businesses, and further than that, food makers require specific support due to all the regulations related to food production and health risks. Understanding all regulations becomes crucial for people willing to produce culturally relevant food. Providing resources and support tailored to immigrant entrepreneurs could empower them to overcome barriers more effectively. Working closely and aligning efforts with community organizations, cultural and social groups from different countries, and universities is crucial to strengthening networks and supporting immigrant businesses, leading to a successful adaptation to a new country.

It is important to address the lack of awareness of existing support. Word of mouth was usually the way participants knew about some resources, and some participants mainly accessed free workshops that some organizations provide for all types of businesses. Several participants did not know about organizations that support immigrant settlement in the city. More efforts must be made to inform these groups about the resources they can access to thrive and grow.

Immigration policies should address all these challenges, as there is a need for more inclusive policies and practices in regulatory entities and institutions to ensure newcomers and immigrants have equal opportunities to access information, resources and funding to produce their culturally relevant food. Those practices should help to disrupt systemic racism and discrimination within institutions and society, contributing to a local equitable food system.

Kitchen Connect leaders have a clear vision and understanding of their food equity principles to support equity-denied groups. The great challenge is implementing actions and tangible methods that reflect the mission and vision of the Food Hub. It is crucial to think about people from equity denied groups not only as recipients of supporting programs but also as active participants who significantly contribute to the organization's growth. A meaningful inclusion that avoids tokenism is based on disrupting the structures and layers of the systemic inequalities, having a deep understanding of the barriers equity-denied groups face and implementing actions that impact those groups' well-being.

Recommendations for a food equity framework for Kitchen Connect Food Hub

A collaborative review of this study with the stakeholders will provide an opportunity to share key findings and review the following recommendations for an equity framework for Kitchen Connect Food Hub. As Kitchen Connect is a recent initiative, it's a great opportunity to embed the values of social justice, promote citizen engagement and include participation and leadership of immigrants and equity-denied groups.

Provide representativeness and support

- Identify ways to contribute to the development of a centralized entity or resource that provides all the information needed to start and run a food business.
- Participate in designing and implementing government policies to incentivize newcomers and immigrant entrepreneurship and improve access to resources to produce culturally relevant food.
- Evaluate the integration of funding and grants to support incubation programs, training, certifications, and rental of the facility and resources. Incentivize the completion of training programs.

Sustain immigrant entrepreneurship

- Create and strengthen strategic partnerships with entities offering support for immigrants, such as universities, community groups, cultural and social foreign countries associations, and entities working to ease the settlement and economic integration of immigrants, such as VIRCS, ICA, and Red Hispana, among others.
- Identify strategies to reach out to immigrant communities and promote the resources that Kitchen Connect provides. It is important to understand and identify the best communication channels to approach those groups.
- Partner with volunteers who can help immigrants to address language barriers.
- Create partnerships with people interested in being mentors of new immigrant entrepreneurs and with volunteers providing different professional services.

Strengthen the support network in the local supply chain

- Contribute to developing a database or platform where growers, makers and suppliers can list their products and services.
- Foster connections between immigrants and different local supply chain actors through networking events, roundtables, and training workshops, among others.
- Facilitate and strengthen a collective connection between immigrant food makers and local growers to assess potential opportunities for growing some of the ingredients needed to produce their culturally relevant food.
- Create periodical roundtables with food makers to strengthen collaboration and share learnings, experiences and opportunities to thrive. Create opportunities to foster support among different people facing the same barriers.

Foster fair trade and collaborative practices

- Promote a value-based retail strategy to create a portfolio of cultural products to improve access to retailers and food service businesses.
- Promote shared resources to reduce product costs and promote collaboration, such as access to professional services and suppliers.
- Identify ways to support immigrants and equity denied groups in the transportation and distribution network, especially those requiring cold storage for their products.

Strengthen equity and meaningful inclusion

- Promote job opportunities for immigrants and people from equity denied groups, ensuring equitable wages and just working conditions.
- Prioritize the inclusion of a diverse group of food makers and employees. To avoid tokenism, engage immigrant and other equity denied groups as active stakeholders, participating actively in designing and implementing different food hub support programs and strategies.
- Promote leadership from those groups and allow representativeness and involvement in decision-making processes and the co-creation of solutions to address their main challenges.

Promote food justice literacy

- Seek a constant relationship and partnership with Food Justice initiatives.
- Engage with the local community to connect food makers with customers and educate them about the value of their cultural food. Provide a space for educational workshops, cooking classes, and social gatherings honouring and sharing nutritious and culturally relevant food.
- Embed the opportunity to add vibrancy to the community. Build social and cultural connections with people interested in supporting growers and producers. Allow community-driven initiatives.

- Promote education for all food hub collaborators and food makers to raise awareness about unconscious biases and systemic inequities.

Follow up on the implementation and assessment of equity practices

- Establish a way to periodically assess the proper implementation of programs supporting immigrants and equity-denied groups. Evaluate to what extent those programs are being reflected in actions. Establish metrics or performance indicators as part of an evaluation framework to measure the impact of those actions. Develop resources to obtain feedback from food makers.

It is important to note that although the recommendations are focused on newcomers/immigrants producing their culturally relevant foods, most of them are aligned with the support several equity-denied groups need. However, research focused on specific groups is needed to avoid homogenizing diverse experiences and develop tailored suit strategies to address their own challenges and better support their access to healthy, affordable and culturally relevant food.

Conclusion

Facilitating the establishment of food businesses by newcomers and immigrants provides economic benefits for the city and creates opportunities for immigrant integration into the local workforce. Most importantly, immigrant food makers contribute to the access to nutritious food that impacts the well-being of those groups. Immigrants, especially newcomers, are vulnerable to food insecurity, as they face uncertainty and economic challenges when moving to Canada while facing other social and cultural adaptation challenges. For food hub leaders, deepening into the main challenges vulnerable groups face and hearing their voices to provide adequate support is crucial. Food hubs may drive an alternative food system that offers beneficial opportunities for vulnerable groups and creates solid foundations for change toward a more sustainable and equitable food system.

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