

**Examining the Role of Board Governance Education on Food Security and the Right to
Food in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside**

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June 21st 2019

In Vancouver, Canada, there is a neighbourhood plagued by mental health illnesses, open drug use, survival sex work, high poverty rates, homelessness/unstable housing, high instances of bloodborne illnesses and rampant food insecurity- the Downtown Eastside (DTES). Media sources often focus on these aspects as a perverse peep show without reporting on the most valuable commodity in the neighbourhood, namely, the community and its cohesion. The Downtown Eastside has been instrumental in activist movements in Canada such as the feminist movement, Indigenous rights movement, and safe injection site procurement in North America. Neighbours love the area and their community members, often volunteering with social services in the neighbourhood and receiving trainings that could improve their quality of life.

One social service provisioner that provides trainings to the community is the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House (DTES NH). The ethos of the neighbourhood house is centred around the Right to Food, which is not a legally recognized nor enforceable right in Canada. Fresh, non-processed food, that is culturally diverse and served in a dignified space is crucial to the programming at the DTES NH. According to community members, this is why they feel safe, respected and comfortable here.

During trainings, community members have expressed frustration to the DTES NH with talking about solutions, strategies and activities to improve life in the Downtown Eastside but never actually implementing anything. From this sentiment, a truly community-led research project was born. Community members who are engaged with a capacity building education program at the DTES NH wanted to know why other members in the neighbourhood do not access some of

the services in the area, such as shelters, food programs and other social services. They wanted to know what the barriers to access for these people were.

We know that low income is a significant predictor for food insecurity and one of the reasons it is so high in the DTES. Enabling neighbours to learn skills that could be used to find employment could prove to be very useful. So, myself and the programming director organized trainings for community members to be versed in research methods so that they could undertake focus groups with their neighbours themselves, rather than us doing that work. This enables them to learn a valuable skill and also apply it in a meaningful way.

My research focuses on how participants (i.e. community researchers) in the program feel that the skills they have learned throughout the capacity building trainings and research with their peers has impacted their Right to Food, food sovereignty or food security. Capacity building is a relatively new area of focus in impoverished communities in Canada, which relies heavily on charity food models to combat food insecurity.

Participatory action research (PAR) will be used as the qualitative research method in this project. PAR attempts to balance power dynamics within research by allowing both participants and researchers to learn from one another (McIntyre 2007). Recognizing multiple, subjective realities as valid and important to research are central to PAR (MacDonald 2012). Additionally, PAR rejects prescriptive research methods, instead it “provides opportunities for codeveloping processes with people rather than for people (McIntyre 2007).” Accepting that researchers projects are inherently influenced by their own experiences and humanity is a crucial part of

PAR; assuming that the researcher is objective in the research is rejected (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon 2013). In order to understand and intervene with the researcher's own self-interest, critical self-reflection is an extremely important aspect of PAR (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon 2013).

Semi-structured interviews will be undertaken with program participants in order to understand their experiences trying to build their own capacity while understanding their neighbours barriers to accessing social services. Questions will attempt to elicit how a community member feels that these new skills have helped them with food insecurity. Do community members feel more qualified to apply to jobs? Do they have better knowledge about their community members' struggles or community programming? I expect to wrap up my interviews by mid-August and will have the initial analysis finished by early September.

This research project has implications for policies which seek to address food security in communities which face multiple, complex social obstacles in an urban setting. We have clearly seen in Canada that relying on donations and charity models for providing food do not work in improving rates of food insecurity; empowering communities to take their food systems into their own hands is crucial to solving this problem. Perhaps capacity building education could be an avenue for this, or maybe we need to explore other directions in this neighbourhood.

References

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