

Taking action on food security: *Overview of the Community Food Action Initiative evaluation*

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What is food security?

Food security means that everyone in your community can get and afford to eat healthy foods. Food security means people know how to make healthy choices and nutritious meals for their families and themselves. They can find foods that fit with their cultural, religious and other beliefs. They also may grow their own fruits and vegetables in home or community gardens.

Food security involves people working in the food system as well—for example, people who grow, process, ship or sell food need to be able to make a living. Food security includes growing and processing methods that don't damage the environment or the safety of the food you eat. It supports local farmers and food producers so food travels less distance to your table (meaning less fuel, cost and pollution involved in shipping food).

People are *food insecure* when they can't afford or get the foods they need to live healthy and active lives. About 10% of British Columbians are food insecure. The risk of food insecurity increases for people with low incomes and for some immigrant and cultural groups, Aboriginal peoples, single parents, seniors, youth, and people living in remote communities. They may end up eating less healthy foods (like fast food or junk food) because that's what is affordable or available. People who are food insecure are more likely to have poor health and chronic diseases like diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure. Food insecurity also can harm children's health, development and learning.



The Community Food Action Initiative (CFAI) supports communities to increase food security for all British Columbians, and especially those living with low incomes. The CFAI, started in 2005, is a partnership of the the BC Ministry of Healthy Living and sport and BC's six health authorities. During its first two years, the CFAI funded 155 community projects and involved over 14,000 people across BC in building food security knowledge, skills and policies.

This report gives an overview of the results of a province-wide process evaluation of the CFAI. The evaluation asked people involved in the CFAI about their experiences, the program's progress and next steps for increasing food security in BC. The three groups surveyed in the evaluation were:

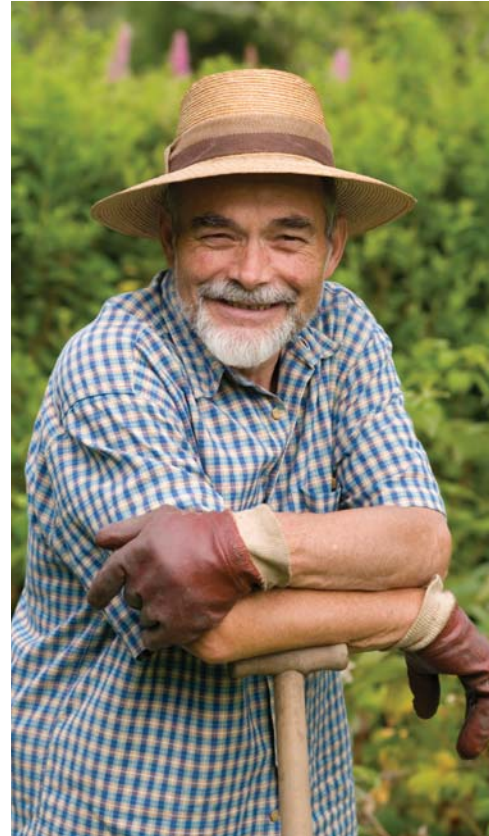
- staff in the Health Authorities and Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport who delivered the CFAI (program deliverers)
- people who ran the community projects (project leaders)
- community members who took part in the projects (project participants)

Putting the CFAI into action

The CFAI was launched in 2005 as a health promotion program within the ActNow BC healthy eating strategy. The CFAI is funded by the BC Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport and coordinated by the Provincial Health Services Authority. It is delivered by the five Regional Health Authorities and put into action through community projects across BC. The CFAI works with local networks and organizations to build on community strengths and help communities take part in more opportunities and partnerships around food security.

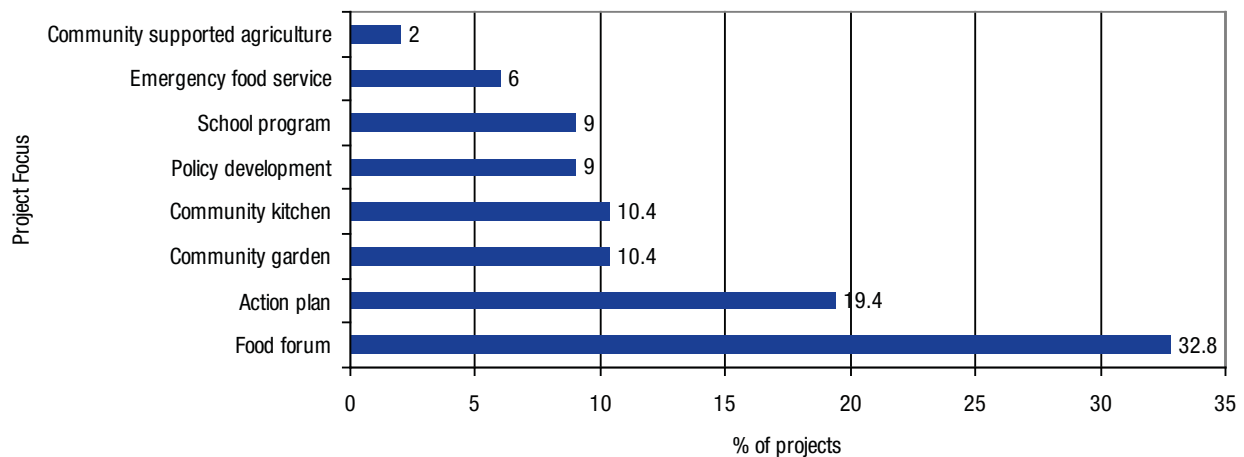
This community-based approach is very important to the CFAI's success. The CFAI looked different across the province as each Regional Health Authority delivered the program to fit with local needs and priorities. CFAI projects and activities encouraged community involvement, decision making and partnerships. In turn, communities were more likely to support the projects and contribute other resources and volunteer hours.

Getting community input was an important part of planning for the CFAI. Many projects in the early stages of the program included food forums to raise awareness, bring people together around food security, and set priorities and directions. Other kinds of projects involved action plans, community gardens, community kitchens, school programs and food policies. The 155 community projects differed in size and scope across regions, with CFAI funding ranging from \$5000 to \$35,000.



“Every community approaches it differently and we need to honour what the community needs to do. There is no cookie cutter approach to food security.”
— Program deliverer

Project Focus (% of projects)



“We are all vulnerable here. If the road closes—it can get blocked off—and we do not have food coming in. We have a very vulnerable population in the entire community.” — Program deliverer

“One of our new Canadian parents joined the Community Kitchen a few months after enrolling her son in our school. It allowed her to become comfortable in the school community, practice her English on a regular basis. She then became more involved as a parent volunteer with a food rescue program and helping with our hot lunch program for students.” — Project leader

“We were able to get lots of participation from Aboriginal communities—that really helped when we were trying to figure out where we were going and what we do.”
— Program deliverer

“I think that having over 100 people turn out, including farmers, city councillors, environmentalists, grocery store owners, social service providers, families and people living in poverty, was a huge success.”
— Project leader

Regional Health Authorities identified groups at risk of food insecurity in their areas. Many CFAI projects targeted people with low or fixed incomes, along with families, single parents, children, youth, Aboriginal peoples and seniors. CFAI projects were successful at reaching these groups and getting them involved in the CFAI by working with partners and other organizations in their communities. They also noted things that made it difficult for people to take part—for example, they didn’t have transportation or child care, or there were language and cultural barriers.

People involved in the CFAI said they were satisfied with the way the program was run and with their projects’ activities and accomplishments. The next few pages look at how the CFAI is making progress on five specific aims of the program:

- Increasing awareness about food security
- Increasing access to local healthy food
- Increasing food knowledge and skills
- Increasing community capacity
- Developing policies to support food security



Increasing awareness about food security

The CFAI helped to increase interest in food security and make it a priority in communities. It helped build momentum and also tapped into people's willingness to get involved. At CFAI events like food forums, people learned about the importance of food security and food security issues in their communities, and they began identifying actions and solutions.

"Wherever I go, I hand out pamphlets that contain a list of locally grown foods. I love to spread the word about healthy eating and living."

— Project participant

"We've continued to host community potlucks since the event and bring more people into the food network." — Project participant

"Having my eyes opened about this critical issue and being inspired to get directly involved in cultivating food security...Proof positive that we each CAN make a difference."

— Project participant

Involvement in CFAI projects was a direct way of increasing food security awareness for partners, staff, volunteers and participants. Project participants also said they shared information from CFAI projects with others in their community, including family and friends (helping the program reach even more people).

Program Deliverers noted that there were other food security programs and media attention that contributed to increased awareness—but it also was good timing for the CFAI to take advantage of this interest in food security.



Increasing access to local healthy food

People may not be able to get local healthy food because they can't afford it, don't have local grocery stores or transportation, or live in remote communities where nutritious foods are hard to get and expensive. The CFAI aimed to increase access through projects that taught food and cooking skills (giving people more options) and through community kitchens and community gardens that made nutritious foods and fresh produce more available.

Increased access to healthy foods was difficult to show in the evaluation, and it is an area where the CFAI would like to improve. Program deliverers did report more access to healthy foods through projects that involved specific groups, such as community kitchens for youth or pregnant women. Project leaders and participants both said that increased availability of healthy food was one of the most important outcomes of the CFAI. For project leaders, affordability and poverty were among the top food security issues in their communities. For project participants, being able to learn cooking skills, grow their own food and enjoy foods with others in the CFAI projects were valuable experiences.



“The students love the salad bar program and ask for it.” —
Project leader

“We have had meaningful contact with a number of members of the community who have made dramatic changes in their lifestyle around growing food and nutrition as a result of their participation in the project.”

— Project leader

Increasing food knowledge and skills

The CFAI helped build food knowledge and skills in communities and for the people involved in the program. Program deliverers, project leaders and participants all said they knew more about food security because of the CFAI. They also took what they learned in the CFAI projects and applied it in their lives—for example, making healthier food choices, preparing healthy meals and becoming more active. Again, project participants said they shared their new knowledge with others outside of the projects.

“Making the youth aware of their ability to feed themselves—this is important because so many of them spent time at home alone.” — Project leader

“I taught my kids and my niece how to plant vegetables.” — Project participant

“Seniors, children and youth sharing skills, working together, eating together, gardening together.”
— Project leader

What participants liked about being in the CFAI:

- Learning, enjoying, having nourishing food and knowing where it comes from.
- Seeing other people's pride and satisfaction in growing their own vegetables and seeing people have a fun social experience in the community garden.
- Getting food that I can feel good about eating and being able to tell others about it, hoping they will join up.
- The opportunity to reach out to our neighbours of different ethnic backgrounds.
- Seeing the actual interest in our community. Having people join the project who are willing to be actively involved in making change in our community.



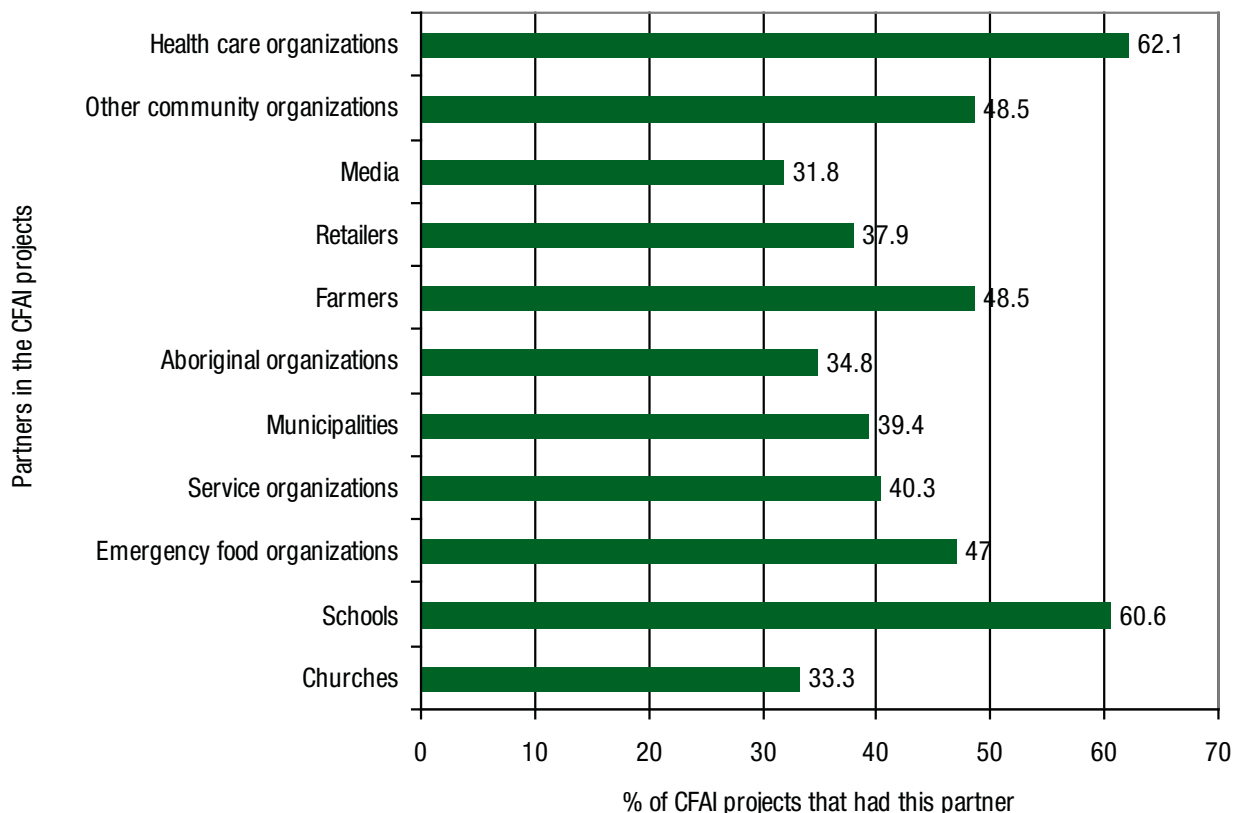
The CFAI projects provided a mix of learning opportunities: nutrition, cooking skills, growing food, learning about locally grown foods and the food system. Projects like community kitchens and community gardens that focused on skill building produced the largest increases in food knowledge and skills (especially when they involved specific target groups). These projects had other benefits for participants. They increased access to healthy foods. They supported healthier eating by building participants' confidence to use different foods and take steps to improve their health. Through the CFAI projects participants also were able to meet other people in their community with the same concerns, share support and develop more coping skills (overcoming social isolation and building social support).

Increasing community capacity

Increasing community capacity involves helping individuals and communities to recognize their strengths, develop new skills and resources, and work together to reach their goals. The CFAI encouraged capacity building and meaningful community participation and support. It brought together people experiencing food insecurity, other community members, service providers, local groups and networks, and governments to develop solutions together for the food security needs and issues in their communities.

Important measures of increased community capacity for the CFAI were the number of partnerships and other resources contributed to the community projects. They showed that the community had confidence in the project's abilities and actively supported it. These partnerships and resources also were key to the success of the projects. Program deliverers and project leaders said they had new or existing partnerships with a wide range of groups for the CFAI, including health care organizations, schools, farmers and other community organizations. Community contributions to the CFAI included funding and other supports like staff time, meeting and project space, and volunteering. About \$1,000,000 in additional funding and 3,250 volunteer workdays were contributed to CFAI projects across BC in the first two years of the program.

Partners in the CFAI projects (% of projects)



Project leaders said their projects partnered with several different organizations. On average, projects had about five partners.

New food security champions and leaders also emerged as a result of the CFAI. These new champions included nutritionists, nurses, teachers and students, managers, community developers and community members.

Capacity building happened at many levels of the CFAI—for the communities, groups and people involved. Project leaders said their project groups developed more skills and strengths as a result of the CFAI. Project leaders and participants felt that their own abilities and skills grew by being involved in the CFAI and that they now feel like they can make more of a difference.

“There is a greater sense of community, that we’re all into this together...We build a greater sense of collaboration and coordination.” — Program deliverer

“I was blown away that people are looking at food security really broadly. At the table, we had Ministry of Education, Ministry of Employment and Ministry of Agriculture and Food. That was the biggest shift I have seen.” — Program deliverer

“For every one dollar, there was two to three dollars given from local communities. Where do you begin and end with communities?” — Program deliverer

“It brought everyone together at one table to talk about what they were doing, what the needs were and how we could make a more coordinated effort to deal with hunger issues.” — Project leader



Developing policies to support food security

“Local stakeholders are in the process of developing a food security policy for our city.” — Project leader

“A couple free-food service agencies made connections with local growers and the local organic grocery store and now buy all their foods from local businesses.” — Project leader

Policy development is a long-term strategy for improving food security and making lasting changes. In the early years of the CFAI, many projects focussed on building knowledge and capacity. Some projects were able to influence policy—for example, policies for the workplace, urban agriculture and buying locally produced food. Project leaders said the biggest change is that more people now understand the importance of policy and the process of policy development has started.

Program deliverers noted other policy changes, including hiring more staff to work in food security, designating land for community gardens and making healthy food available in schools and vending machines. They would like to see more projects able to influence and develop policy as the CFAI continues. When projects are able to contribute to policy development, they have more impact on improving food security.



Next steps

The evaluation of the CFAI showed that community-led solutions, capacity building, relationships and partnerships are essential for increasing food security. The CFAI helped increase interest in food security and understanding of its importance for all community members. It put food security on “people’s radar” and made it a priority. And it brought people together — including people living with food insecurity and new partners at local and government levels — to focus action on food security.



People involved in the CFAI said they were very satisfied with the program’s progress and projects, and they want the CFAI to continue. They also had some suggestions for further developing the CFAI and building on its successes:

- Maintain the CFAI’s community-based approach to fit with local situations and build capacity. Encourage more partners, community leaders and community members to get involved. Do more outreach to people living with food insecurity and support their participation in projects (for example, child care, transportation).
- Continue to staff the CFAI and make sure there are coordinators at all levels (in projects, Regional Health Authorities and provincial government).
- Continue to provide funding for CFAI projects. Make more funding available and support multi-year projects for continued progress. Funding is needed for start-up costs of new projects and also ongoing costs of established projects. Allow more time for staff to work with communities and groups to develop proposals for CFAI funding.
- Provide training for community members on running projects. Organize events for communities to share knowledge and network. Include a “train-the-trainer” model to share skills among community members.
- Keep developing and offering education, workshops and resources through the CFAI. Focus on practical skills and easy-to-use formats. Include more topics and hands-on experience.
- Develop a province-wide communication strategy for the CFAI. Marketing the CFAI will help increase interest and involvement and strengthen the identity of the program.

“Food security is all about the people.” — Program deliverer

“We are successful because of the relationships we have. If we do not have the networks, we would fail.” — Program deliverer

“There was an awakening of the system at the higher level—programs taking notice of food security where they had not before.” — Program deliverer

“Sharing of info would be nice...It would be helpful to know what other groups are doing with their funding. This would lead to fresh ideas, what works and what doesn’t work for other groups.” — Project leader

“CFAI was very supportive and enabled us to do things the way we saw fit. This was very empowering.” — Project leader