

BEYOND CALORIES AND CURRENCY:
EXPLORING THE IMPACTS OF A FARMERS MARKET
COUPON PROGRAM ON MORE-THAN-FOOD-SECURITY

by

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ABSTRACT

This undergraduate thesis explores the impacts of a farmers market coupon program on folks for whom their local market may not otherwise be accessible (such as people with low incomes). The Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program is a provincially funded program, that, in 2021 reached over 500 households across 27 farmers markets in Nova Scotia, Canada. Through an “anonymous”, reoccurring coupon system, folks can purchase whatever they wish at the farmers market, over a period of at least 6 months (or the length of a market season). Through 61 semi-structured interviews spanning 12 diverse farmers markets, the impacts and experiences of the Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program were investigated. Findings showed that participants in the program experience it in vastly different ways, albeit mostly positively/constructively. The impacts and experiences of the program in the eyes of participants, extended far beyond a method of food provision, and served to enhance people’s sense of belonging, social/emotional wellbeing, security, citizenship, quality of life, self-efficacy, and awareness of local-global systems; as well as materially nourished connections with people, places, and things that may have otherwise not been made possible. Participants also stated that the program contributed to the social and economic fabric of their communities, which in turn may strengthen community and ecological resilience. In experiencing the farmers market, participants may have also been exposed to new ways of ecological thinking and relational experiencing, which may have the potential to provoke small interruptions to potentially harmful aspects of neoliberal and anthropocentric thinking, knowing, structuring, and experiencing the world. As such, this paper puts forth the notion of more-than-food-security, through which programs such as this can be understood, grappled with, and celebrated. This paper also provides recommendations and good practices which can inform the development of the current program, as well as motivate a reimagining and proliferation of farmers markets coupon programs (and other food justice/sovereignty and broader community work), elsewhere.

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DEFINITIONS

Food security	When all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (Food and Agriculture Organization, 1996, p.2).
Food insecurity	Whenever the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways, is limited or uncertain (Anderson et al., 2012).
Community food security	When all community residents have access to enough healthy, safe food through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance, and social justice (Williams, 2013, p.5).
Food sovereignty	The right of people to determine their own food and agricultural policies (Patal, 2009, p. 682).
Food justice	A holistic and structural view of the food system that sees healthy food as a human right and addresses structural barriers to that right (Food Print, 2018).
Community resilience	The ability of communities to adapt, persist, and thrive in the face of change.
Anthropocentrism	The view that humans are separate from and superior to Nature.
Neoliberalism	A political-economic policy that asserts the primacy of the market in the free flow of capital by reducing the role of the state and increasing privatization of public services (Harvey, 2007).
More-than-food-security	An analytical, methodological, and ontological approach that forefronts the material, visceral, and relational web through which social and ecological responses to food-issues can be examined and (re)imagined.

ABBREVIATIONS

AEC... Acadia Entrepreneurship Centre

AFN... Alternative Food Network

FM... Farmers market

FMNS... Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia

\$MM... Market money

NRT... Non-representational theory

NC... Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program

PEB... Political Ecology of the Body

SNAP... Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

WFM... Wolfville Farmers' Market

INTRODUCTION

Well, initially I figured [the program] was just like helping poor people be able to get fresh vegetables and stuff like that; but it's more just trying to connect people with their community. There's way more to the market than just food.

—Jannie (program participant)

If this thesis were about food or food-security, I would start by saying something about how universal food is. I would explain how food is a compelling entry point because it offers a rich and tangible object of inquiry into and between almost any topic, discipline, and sub-field (Cook et al., 2013). I would attempt to write something rhythmic about how food's universality offers relevance, its interconnectedness provides potential, its materiality offers tangible politics, and its rootedness (and routes) provides scope. I would share my delight in expressing how food is also conveniently positioned to bridge the human-nature "divide", on multiple scales: from that of the microorganism, to the topographical, to the atmospheric (and everything within, around, and beyond). If I were writing about food, I would quote Lein (2004) in expressing that "the essential function of food is its capacity to make connections" (p. 9) then segue into a something about how as an engine for cultivating social connection and rich culture, food can also by the same measure be an isolating factor when people do not have enough of it, or when they have to secure their next meal in undignified ways.

That is the paragraph that I did write and a version of the paragraph that many scholars on the topic of food have written at some point. These paragraphs abound because they are deeply relevant and provide context to important dimensions of food. However, at the heart of this project are also topics of community, connection, care, equity, socio-economic systems, resilience, health and wellness, decolonization, joy, and reimagining an ecology of possibilities. Food can be a vehicle for all this, and it is an increasingly common point of dispatch for post/transdisciplinary scholarship, given its enmeshment

with culture, space, power, politics, materiality, and ecology (Goodman, 2016, p. 258). Goodman has labelled this post-disciplinary theme as “more-than-food”, adapted from Lormier’s (2005) “more-than-representational” term describing the multisensual, non-categorical worlds that humans live in. The title of this paper, and the content that follows, are a riff on their ideas.

What seems as coincidental, the term “more-than-food”, also appears verbatim in the “practitioner world” as an established framework in a few food pantries in the United States as an attempt to “address the root causes of food security within the charitable food system” (More Than Food, n.d.). In the Canadian context, Food Banks Canada lists that one in five Canadian Food Banks “offer more than food” including “training, education and/or help with finding employment” (Food Banks Canada, 2021). While some scholars would consider “working to address the root causes of food security within the charitable food system” a flawed and futile endeavour (Poppendieck, 1998; Parr et al., 2021), the concept of “more-than-food” as both a theoretical framework and a pragmatic approach is helpful for discussing the Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program (otherwise referred to as ‘the Nourishing Communities program’, or simply, ‘the program’ for the purposes of this paper).

Without necessarily using such language, many existing organizations in Canada currently work to both meet immediate needs while working to address a broader (yet interrelated) array of issues alongside policy change and advocacy work. Foodshare is one example of a Toronto-based food justice organization by advocating for the right to food through community-led initiatives (Foodshare, n.d., *About*). Similarly, Community Food Centres Canada has developed a robust organizational network and theory of change that seeks to “build health, belonging, and social justice in low-income communities through the power of food” (Community Food Centres Canada, n.d., *Mission and Vision*). More on more-than-food principles in theory and practice will be discussed in the coming chapters, but this introduction serves to situate the Nourishing Communities program as more-than-food-security in both existing and emerging theory and practice.

A brief introduction to the Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program

The Nourishing Communities program is administered at Nova Scotian farmers¹ markets and aims to provide access to the local market to community members who may not otherwise access it (or be able to access it in their preferred way). This is done through an anonymous coupon system whereby participants receive market money (herein referred to as \$MM), which participants can use at the market on anything that is produced locally (agricultural products, beverages, artisanal products, and anything else one might find at a farmers market). The program is mostly funded by the provincial government, administered through Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia (FMNS), and coordinated locally at 27+ farmers markets across Nova Scotia (Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia, n.d.). Farmers markets partner with local organizations, who then select participants who may benefit from the program. Partner organizations are instructed to select participants who may be experiencing food insecurity, and as such, the program is largely promoted as one that addresses food insecurity while also supporting local vendors; however, as this thesis aims to ascertain, its impacts are far more expansive.

Research purpose and guiding questions

The overarching purpose of this thesis is to explore what sort of expanded ways a food security initiative (in this case, the Nourishing Communities program) might be understood, (re)imagined, and related to. The work that follows foregrounds individual “visceral experiences” (Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy, 2013) in relationship with others (human and non-human) and overarching neoliberal (often oppressive) structures, inspired by Seth and Pittoello’s (in press) “entangled landscapes”, as well as Alison and Jessica Hayes-Conroy’s *Political Ecology of the Body* (2013; 2017). Its secondary (complementary and constricting) purpose is an evaluation of sorts and to provide feedback and insight on

¹ Following Alkon (2008), I choose to omit the apostrophe to denote that farmers markets belong to all those who participate (human and more-than-human), rather than exclusively to the farmers.

the program to administrators. In this way, this project is a material expression of meta-reflexivity in practice, at best, used to inform the next iteration of the program for the next researcher to pick up again and examine through their own experimental lens.

In short, this project exists to muse over the following research questions: what impacts does the Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program have on participants and their communities? How is the program understood, used, and experienced by participants? What sorts of ways might the program be reimagined as one that seeks to foster more-than-food-security? How might the program be improved and leveraged to better promote more-than-food-security for Nova Scotian communities?

Overview

The remainder of this introductory chapter will provide some contextual information about the origins and administration of the Nourishing Communities program. It is followed by a selective literature review (rather than an exhaustive one), highlighting relevant scholarship on food-security and more-than-food-security, as it relates to contemporary political, human geography, and community development sub-fields. In Chapter Three, transdisciplinary, interpretivist, and critical social science research paradigms are introduced in the context of this research, followed by an explanation of the research methods that produced the results of this study. Twenty-seven ($n=27$) participants from twelve participating farmers markets in Nova Scotia were interviewed in two semi-structured interviews, three to five months apart. In addition, eight program administrators are interviewed—their perspectives are integrated throughout to provide context, colour, and contemplative material. Results (Chapter Four) show how participants use, understand, and experience the program in a wide variety of ways, which ultimately inform how they describe and experience the impacts of the program (and are discussed using the analogy of a three-stranded braid). Thereafter, Chapter Five includes a discussion on what I view as compelling findings and implications of this research on broader notions of neoliberal (food) systems and interrogating the

proposition of the Nourishing Communities program (and farmers markets more broadly) as sites for equity and resilience work in the “ecology of problems in the Anthropocene” (Bennett, 2010).

A note on the usage of “I”

I make use of first-person language throughout this paper in keeping with autoethnographic and transdisciplinarity scholarly approaches to research which call for an integration of the inquirer into the inquiry (Montuori, 2010). As transdisciplinary (ibid.), autoethnographic (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011), and critical social science (Neuman, 2006) methodologies emphasize, I strive to place myself within my research and weave my own learning, thoughts, observations, and reflections throughout the paper—while clearly marking when I do so.

In keeping with this theme, I want to note that this project is a personal and intellectual experiment that is unfinished and evolving. I am certain that I do not currently have the language, nor the capabilities to describe the connections that I sense between contemporary political thought on new materialism, human geography of food and visceral foodscapes, and community development pragmatism in this case study. I leave breadcrumbs for myself in this thesis to fuel a more nuanced and complex version of thinking for my future self. Here is my past self, trying to express what my present self is still grappling with:

Journal Entry July 29, 2021

A Web of Possibilities

I'm trying to get to the bottom of why I think this research is important. I think it might be because we treat issues of oppression and equity (such as food insecurity, poverty, oppression) as if they are somehow compartmentalised which makes the systems at play hard to see and an intervention or way forward limited in its ability to address upstream causes. Perhaps by expanding the notions of health, security, fulfilment, safety, equity, we can begin to intervene at multiple different levels and in different spaces throughout the web that characterizes wicked problems. Expanding what is conceived as the relevant processes, rituals, impacts, and outcomes that make this program worthwhile allows it to take on infinite meanings in people's lives. For some people it provides a vehicle for connecting with family. For others, a step up in launching their own business, for others it makes life a degree easier as a parent of a high-needs child. Infinite possibility is the value proposition... abundance!

Knowing food (otherwise?)

In many ways this thesis is about bringing to the forefront the sometimes overlooked and undervalued parts of Western society using food as a medium. For those who already *know* food as more-than-food, this thesis is probably going to be an amateur (and sometimes confused) attempt at explaining an already embodied understanding of food as more-than, and thus may not be all that provoking beyond providing more evidence of the same. For those who come from cultures like mine—with a stubborn habit of reducing food to its caloric, nutritional, or dollar value (rather than *knowing* it as more than its composite parts), this thesis may hold more merit. In other words, I am writing to counter Anthro/Eurocentric, imperialist ideology, and my point of dispatch is one that starts with knowing food as a caloric commodity (i.e., a view primarily held in Western cultures), and providing evidence for *knowing* food otherwise.

In some ways, I worry that this work colonizes what has been known by people all over the world for centuries, in an effort to “make legitimate” ancient knowledge by slapping a Western-academic lens on it. In other ways, examining this work from a “scholarly” perspective could be viewed as an act of resistance in seeking to foreground ways of knowing, being, and doing that are often backgrounded or considered inferior forms of “soft science”. Although parts of this work probably actively uphold a settler/Western epistemology (Held, 2019), I hope it is a worthwhile endeavour to (re)centre and celebrate the more-than-food parts of the Nourishing Communities program as compelling pieces of the puzzle. Nonetheless, these are meaningful tensions to grapple with in the meantime.

Personal research statement

I am a white settler studying, living, working, and playing in Mi'kma'ki, currently known as Nova Scotia. At the time of writing this, I am completing my bachelor's degree in Community Development at Acadia University, also located on the unceded ancestral territory of the Mi'kmaq People, situated in what is otherwise known as the rural town of Wolfville, Nova Scotia. I was first introduced to the Nourishing Communities program (colloquially known as the Food Bucks program) in my very first Community Development class in 2017. I was an eager 17-year-old, fresh out of high school, sitting in Dr. Mary Sweatman's Leadership in Community Development class. She only briefly mentioned the program, which at the time would have been in its second year of development and described it as a rather elegant way of attempting to make farmers markets more equitable and accessible by offering anonymous coupons (\$MM) to folks experiencing food insecurity.

I did not grow up visiting farmers markets in my hometown of Cambridge, Ontario, so, when I came to Nova Scotia to start my undergraduate degree, the farmers market culture that is embedded in both “the big city” (Halifax) and small towns like Wolfville, and even smaller rural settlements like New Ross, stood out to me. Part of my interest in farmers markets was probably a romanticization of small town, maritime culture, but I also liked the idea of a weekly community ritual that provided community

members and visitors alike the opportunity to enjoy the products of local growers and makers, as a wholesome way of doing something together.

In the summer of 2020, I took a co-op position with the Wolfville Farmers' Market (WFM). I was a semi-regular market goer prior to taking the position and had enjoyed Wednesday night market suppers as an escape from the University Meal Hall to enjoy a \$10 homemade meal. "The market" was a recurring case study and discussion point in my coursework as I moved through and beyond that first-year class with Dr. Sweatman, and so I was excited to apply my learning during this four-month co-op placement.

One of my roles that summer was administering the Nourishing Communities program—the same one I had heard about three years earlier. Jen Bolt (my supervisor on this project) and I had to navigate how to administer the program in the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. Because of the way the program is administered at the WFM, I had the opportunity to get to know a lot of the participants in the program. I visited some of their homes to drop off and collect program surveys. I spoke with them on the phone to explain how the program worked and to remind them to pick up their \$MM each month. I also placed orders for two participants and delivered groceries to their homes biweekly in an effort to make the program accessible for folks who do not have access to the internet or transportation. Most of my interactions with participants were friendly and short-lived, and the experience of getting to know community members outside of my university bubble was probably much more meaningful for me than it was for the participants I worked with.

For most of my degree, I had known I wanted to engage in an honours research project and had been waiting for a topic to strike me in a lightning bolt of inspiration (as many novice researchers do). Ultimately the subject of this thesis arose out of much more of a slow burn. I became curious to know what potential visiting a farmers market might have on someone's life, who may otherwise be experiencing isolation and lack of novelty due to the multi-leveled ways society often isolates those experiencing poverty. I wondered if, and to what extent, getting out of the house, into the community, and experiencing new things, might have positive impacts on someone's well-being and quality of life, beyond the more easily observable empirical nutritional and financial impacts of the program. I held this

hypothesis lightly as I moved through the research process, and while it served as my initial motivation for the research, I also remained open and curious in designing the research questions and ‘following the data’.

After landing on a research topic, I was fortunate to secure funding from the Change Lab for Action Research (CLARI)² to support the research and to interview participants over the summer, as well as provide participants with a \$40 honorarium for each interview. I partnered with Farmers’ Markets of Nova Scotia to obtain the grant, as they were also quite interested in gaining a more in depth understanding of the impacts of the program from the perspectives of participants. Since 2016, the program has grown on a provincial scale — what was a small but impactful pilot project started by Acadia University Community Development student, Jessica Wall for her honours thesis, grew into what is now a \$350 000+ program spanning 27 farmers markets and serving over 500 households across the province (Farmers’ Markets of Nova Scotia, n.d.).

The program has impacted everyone who has touched it in as many ways as there are people who interact with it. It has defined my work over the past two years and has helped to shape how I view the world. It has had profound impacts on who I am, how I think, and how I strive to show up in my personal and professional life. It has also had meaningful impacts on folks who participate in the program (along with less-meaningful ones too, which will also be discussed). This is a story of some of the ways the program has intersected with people in their lives and the specific effects it has had on them. It is a celebration of the good in this province and a testament to the potential of small things, which in this case, started with the honours project of an ambitious undergraduate student.

I had the chance to chat with Jessica Wall in the fall of 2020. After she graduated from Acadia, she stepped away from the program to work in the food security space in New Brunswick, a neighbouring province to Nova Scotia. She had no idea that the program had continued, or scaled up since she walked

² CLARI is a Nova Scotian research partnership initiative that funds research projects by facilitating partnerships between community partners and faculty/ student researchers around contextually relevant and community-identified research projects (CLARI, n.d.).

away, and was delighted to hear how it has expanded over the past 7 years (Wall, personal communication, Oct 30, 2020).

This thesis is dedicated to all the people committed to maintaining ecosystems of love, care, and good things in a world that at the time that I am writing this, sometimes feels violent, volatile, and heavy. I was honoured by all those who shared their humanity in telling me their stories. This program is a testament to why we all can act like our little efforts of love, care, and connection can have infinite potential in the world, because they do. This program is an example of that.

Background & context

Culturally and regionally, farmers markets can take many different forms and serve different purposes. In Nova Scotia (the context of this study), there is a rather robust and unique farmers market landscape. There are over forty certified FMNS farmers markets in the province, the most per capita in Canada, the majority of which are situated in rural contexts (“Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program”, n.d.). Farm stands, roadside farmers market stores, local food organizations, as well as informal local food economies also have a predominant presence across the province, contributing to the region’s propensity for “supporting local”. Alternative Food Networks (ANT’s), specifically farmers markets, are often discussed in the literature as bridging the rural/urban divide and are frequently critiqued as elite, white, spaces (Blumberg, 2015; Guthman, 2011). This can certainly be true in the Nova Scotian context (and will be interrogated more deeply in following chapters) however the local food landscape is also nested in and characteristic of the broader Nova Scotian culture. Although markets vary widely across the province (the city of Halifax (population 439, 891) sprawling Seaport Market is starkly different than the hamlet of New Germany’s (population 458) seasonal market which is held in the parking lot of the Anglican Church). Market-goers and vendors tend to be “salt of the earth” people, and small-town, low-key, community atmospheres often imbue the market experience. These atmospheres range from the way people dress, to the scrappy and makeshift set-up of many market venues (of course,

not all), to the kinds of products sold (think handmade sea-glass crafts, apple cider from a man with a scraggly beard and a sleeveless shirt, and homemade haskap jam with handwritten labels from someone who looks like my grandma). For these reasons, much of the literature on farmers markets must be filtered through the local context given the uniqueness of this ecosystem in Nova Scotia.

The Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program began with a collaboration between former Executive Director of Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia, Keltie Butler, and Acadia University Community Development Student, Jessica Wall (2017, p. 4). It was inspired by the Farmers' Market Nutrition Coupon program in British Columbia and piloted at the Wolfville Farmers' Market in 2016 as a part of Wall's honours thesis project. It was named the Wolfville Local Food Bucks Program and supported nineteen households for six weeks over the summer (*ibid.*).

In its inaugural year, Wall collaborated with the Wolfville Area Food Bank to recruit participants for the program and for her study. She interviewed 19 participants twice over the duration of the program (2017). In this pilot year, the program was designed in a participatory spirit, and participants were consulted in the design and evaluation of the program; however, most of the planning and execution of the project was masterfully completed by Wall as a part of her honours project. Wall took great care to ensure that the program was dignified and accessible for participants and was in close connection with them throughout the program. She also volunteered at the Food Bank, which she described as a major asset in designing the program and developing relationships with participants founded on trust, respect, and a mutual understanding of each other (Wall, 2017). The program was considered a success and many of the findings in Wall's thesis are still applicable today.

Wall did not remain involved with the program after she graduated from Acadia. However, the program endured following her departure and grew over the next seven years to a provincial level, each year expanding the number of participating markets, and often the number of participants at each market, as well as the duration of the program. In 2021, the program supported over 500 households, at 27 farmers markets across the province ("Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program", n.d.). The \$350 000+ program is now funded through the Nova Scotia Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism,

and Heritage as well as many independent donors across the province (“2022 Farmers’ Market Guidebook”, 2022).

This thesis attempts to pick up where Wall left off and examines the program through a different lens than her 2017 project. The program today is also a very different program than the one Wall initiated and studied, given the scale to which it has grown. Wall was a nutrition student before transferring into the Community Development program at Acadia. Her thesis centered food security, nutrition, and local food systems, which is the foundation upon which the program was built. She expresses a critical and expansive view of food security in her 2017 thesis, and in her findings, she discussed “stronger relationships” and “increased community connectivity” as predominant impacts of the program (Wall, 2017). In her discussion of the findings, however, there is little emphasis on how these “social” impacts contribute to food security or how impacts beyond food security might make the program worthwhile in and of itself. These outcomes were considered valuable, and sometimes surprising, but were portrayed as peripheral to her thesis, given its focus.

My project centers these “peripheral” outcomes and examines them in the context of (more-than) food security (in the broadest sense of the term— as is discussed in the following chapter). The findings of this research support that improved nutrition and an increased sense of security are impacts of the program, however these are embedded in a network of many other prominent impacts that influence one another. This thesis alongside Wall’s should be viewed as complementary by examining the program from two different entry points: Wall, departing from the premise of food security as the goal, and I, departing from a curiosity in food security as a gateway to an ecology of possibilities.

Provincial administration

The Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program (also known as the Food Bucks Program) is funded through the Nova Scotia Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism, and Heritage as well as independent donors across the province (ibid.), which has been written into the provincial budget and is a

guaranteed minimum for the foreseeable future. In addition, individual farmers markets can (and do) fundraise to supplement their allotted program budget. Money is allocated to farmers markets based on size and the number of vendors it hosts. Farmers market managers (or program coordinators) seek partnerships with organizations in their local community that “work with individuals and/or households who may be experiencing food insecurity” (“2022 Farmers’ Market Guidebook”, 2022). Market managers are encouraged to seek partnership with organizations that serve “underrepresented groups” such as BIPOC, LGBTQ2IA+, disabled, or New Canadians (ibid.). Farmers markets, as well as partner organizations, are required to sign a contract agreeing to the terms and conditions of administering the program (as determined by FMNS).

Over recent years, the program has become more systematized and standardized as it has scaled up. Farmers markets are required to have market-specific alternative currency, called market money (\$MM), that must be purchasable independent from the program in an attempt to preserve the anonymity of participants. Although the program is meant to be anonymous by design, in practice this is frequently not the case— often due to the lack of anonymity in small-community contexts at farmers markets in general. Starting in 2022, \$MM used for the program must have an expiration date on it and FMNS provides a suggested amount of \$MM a week to be allotted to participants, based on the number of people in the household (i.e., \$20 for individuals, \$25 for couples, \$30 for families <3, \$40 for families 4+). The minimum duration of the program at any given market is 6 months, or the length of a market season.

Markets are also required to track the spending of \$MM according to eight different categories:

1. Primary produce (fruits & vegetables)
2. Other agricultural products (meat, eggs, fish, cheese, maple syrup, honey, etc.)
3. Prepared foods (prepared meals, baked goods, etc.)
4. Value-added foods (coffee, tea, spices, preserves, jams, jellies, non-alcoholic beverages, etc.)
5. Beer, wine, or spirits
6. Personal hygiene (soap, shampoo, etc.)
7. Artisans, crafts, services

8. Other / unknown

This tracking must not be traceable back to individual spending (although some markets do not always adhere to this rule), rather FMNS requires that \$MM be aggregated for reporting purposes (specifically for reporting to donors and to help secure funding for the following year). Tracking of \$MM also allows each market to measure the \$MM redemption rate. Any unredeemed money must be returned to FMNS at the end of the program cycle. An administrative budget is claimable by farmers markets to support tracking, and other administrative costs, in addition to a production budget (for printing of \$MM, etc.). Participants are requested to fill out a survey (designed by FMNS and the Acadia Entrepreneurship Centre) in the final month of the program, which is analyzed by the Acadia Entrepreneurship Centre. These surveys are anonymous, and the results are shared each year in a summary report that is usually published and distributed in the spring following the program year. FMNS also provides welcome materials for participants; guidebooks for vendors, farmers markets, and partner organizations; contracts, intake forms, and tracking sheets; as well as ongoing support for program administrators.

While there has been an effort to standardize the program on the provincial level, FMNS appreciates that each market has different capabilities and strives to be accommodating, supportive, and flexible towards the needs and contexts of participating markets (Jen Bolt, ongoing personal communication, 2020-22). That said, there will always be some growing pains as programs scale up, and part of the challenge for FMNS has been in balancing the necessity of standardization for scale, with the grassroots tactics and contextual needs of individual markets (especially for those markets who have administered the program “their way” for several years).

On the ground, the program looks a little different at each farmers market. It is largely the responsibility of Market Managers (or depending on staffing capabilities, another member of staff or a volunteer) to get the program off the ground and keep it going. Wall (2017) notes how developing strong relationships with participants and the partner organization was critical to the success of the program, which still stands true. Depending on the partner organization, the relationship they have with their clients (i.e., program participants), as well as the relationship between the partner organization and the farmers

market, the program is administered and communicated to participants in particularly different ways. Participant orientation, distribution of \$MM, as well as the level of contact with participants throughout the program varies immensely. Some participants meet for programming at their partner organization multiple times a week, while other participants are onboarded by a partner organization and “passed along” to market representatives to be their point of contact for the remainder of the program, while other participants have very loose ties with both organizations and are not involved with anyone in particular. More on how the variability of the program at each farmers market influences participant experiences and impacts is included in the chapters that follow.

The Nourishing Communities program is a rather elegant and symbiotic way of addressing relevant issues in Nova Scotia. Nova Scotia claims titles of both the highest provincial food insecurity rates in Canada and the province with the most farmers markets per capita (“Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program”, n.d.). It is a reciprocal meeting that has been quite successful in scaling up, while maintaining significant impact beyond that of other institutionalized short-term food assistance initiatives (such as food banks). This meeting of an Alternative Food Network (i.e., the farmers market) and a prevalent social/economic/health issue (i.e., food insecurity), forms the basis of the literature review that follows.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study serves to promote a more expansive view of food security (and beyond food security) by calling on a transdisciplinary body of literature. I begin by providing a brief overview of food security related issues in the Global North which led to the proliferation of food assistance mechanisms, such as food banks. Neoliberal policies and ideologies underpin these discussions, which will bridge into a discussion of visions of food security and more-than-food (security), and food sovereignty/justice. To support this discussion, I call upon reasoning from Gibson-Graham's (2008; 2014) diverse economies, and Goodman's usage of more-than-food (2016), to make way for closing remarks about how the program might promote new forms of relating using J. Hayes-Conroy & A. Hayes-Conroy (2013) visceral politics and their (2017) Political Ecology of the Body as a guide. Bruckner et al.'s (2021) recent participatory research study will then be examined alongside Larsen's regions of care (2016), and Hope & Turner's (2014) notion of farmers markets as sites for reimagined ecological thinking, to ultimately explore how the Nourishing Communities program might foster deeper equity work, long-term food security and resilient communities.

Furthermore, this study builds upon emerging scholarship on visceral geographies of the Slow Food Movement and school/garden healthy eating programs in the US and Canada. These theorizations have not yet been applied in the context of farmers markets and have focused on Alternative Food Networks (AFN's) as sites of "feel-good-food" rather than in the context of hunger, exclusion, malnutrition, and/or material lack. Goodman (2016) identifies this gap in the literature and posits that "a visceral approach to food is well positioned to tell us the deeply personal and troubling stories of the continuing inequalities across the foodscape" (p. 261). This study links the established scholarship on the visceral geographies of AFN's while also attempting to plant roots in the sparse landscape of this literature as it relates to food-insecurity.

Inequality, social assistance, and food security in Canada

The global narrative of growing (income) inequality is often attributed to neoliberal capitalism, which Harvey defines as a political economic policy that asserts the primacy of the market in the free flow of capital by reducing the role of the state and increasing privatization of public services (Harvey, 2007). Rolling back of welfare programs and the privatization of public enterprises, among other ideological, political, and economic reforms that characterize neoliberalism, took hold world-wide starting in the 1970's, which is a widely recognized catalyst for increased inequality both globally, and on national and regional levels (ibid.). Canada was no exception to this global trend, and income inequality rates rose significantly, up until the 1990's (Business Council of Alberta, 2021). This coincided with the proliferation of food assistance supports, including private, charitable food programs (such as food banks) (Poppendeick, 1998). Although Canada was known to have a strong social safety net prior to the neoliberal economic and social-political shift (sometimes referred to as trickle-down economics or Reaganomics), this period contributed to a widening gap in social safety nets, stagnate social assistance rates (despite rising costs of living), as well as growing inequality in wages and gaps in full-time employment status (Food Banks Canada, 2019).

It is unclear how income inequality has trended since the turn of the century. Some sources claim that it has more or less stabilized (and in some cases decreased) in Canada, perhaps thanks to factors such as the introduction of the Canada Child Tax benefit in 2016 and an increase in the top tax rate (Business Council of Alberta, 2021); while other sources attest that the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen (The Conference Board of Canada, 2011). Food insecurity is largely a result of poverty (which in itself is a complex phenomenon). According to statistics Canada, about 3.7 million Canadians, or 10.1% of the population, lived below Canada's Official Poverty Line in 2019, down from 11.0% in 2018 (Statistics Canada, 2021). "Unattached" (i.e., single people) and lone-parent households remain the most vulnerable to poverty (ibid.).

Furthermore, poverty and food insecurity have serious health effects on the millions of Canadians who experience material lack. Health-care costs for severely food insecure Canadians are 121% higher

than for those who are food secure (Tarasuk et al., 2015); 40% of food insecure Canadians report struggling with anxiety and other mood disorders, roughly double that of food secure households (Tarasuk et al., 2018); and people living with low incomes have been found to be six times more likely to be socially isolated (Hortulanus, et al., 2006). Food banks historically proliferated as a way to respond to the problem; however, while they address emergency food needs, they have not reduced the incidence of hunger and food insecurity in Canada (Community Food Centers Canada, n.d., *Backgrounder: Poverty and Food Insecurity in Canada*).

Furthermore, while the Covid-19 pandemic has caused pervasive loss and disruption in the lives of many, Food Banks Canada saw a decrease in food bank users at the start of the pandemic which coincided with the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) (Food Banks Canada, 2021). A year later, in March 2021, 47% of food banks continued to report decreased visits, while one quarter reported increases of over 50% (this increase was mostly in urban centers that coincided with the ending of the CERB and is also attributed to pandemic-related unemployment rates, lockdowns, as well as the rising cost of living) (ibid.).

Considering this complicated description of *some* empirical data regarding food insecurity and poverty in Canada, I do want to caution here that it is easy to depict a stark, one-dimensional picture of ever-rising rates of inequality and food insecurity that does not necessarily reflect economic and social metrics. There is a formulaic narrative of the “rich get richer while the poor get poorer”, that often spills from the United States, north of the border that does not always reflect the social/economic realities of Canada (Business Council of Alberta, 2021, also corroborated by data from Statistics Canada, 2021). I include this more nuanced picture of the state of inequity in Canada at the top of this review, because in the pages that follow, I frequently grapple with using eco-centric values, diversity (as opposed to universality), community-based programming, and interconnectedness to position the Nourishing Communities program as antithetical to the ideologies that underpin neoliberalism and neoliberal stigma. Although seductive, I want to challenge the notion of good triumphing evil or framing the Nourishing

Communities program as a heroic struggle against all-pervading neoliberal capitalism. As Liboiron (2021) puts it,

“that characterization gives capitalism and colonialism more power than they merit by erasing not only their diversity, but also the patchiness, the unevenness, and the failures of those systems to fully reproduce themselves. It erases the other kinds of economies and L/land relations that happen within, alongside, and in spite of capitalism” (p. 130).

Maintaining an uncritical view of social/economic realities for the purposes of crafting an antagonist force that is to be overcome, is not only deceptive, but also perpetuates dualistic ideology that glosses over the complexities and contours of issues of inequity, capitalism, and food insecurity. This is my first effort to challenge binary and reductive thinking as part of an overarching theme in this thesis.

Food security and the neoliberal project

This is not to say that there is not a need in Nova Scotia that this program aims to address; Nova Scotia consistently has one of the highest rates of food insecurity in the country (Food ARC, 2020). Although definitions of food insecurity are abundant, it is defined broadly by Anderson et al., (2012) as “whenever the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways, is limited or uncertain” (p. 254). Socially unacceptable, for many researchers, including Anderson and colleagues, includes acquiring food through charitable sources or emergency food supports, such as food banks (ibid.).

Emergency food distribution has been criticized by many scholars as a stopgap solution or as contributing to neoliberal models of food (Poppendieck, 1998). Beginning in the 1980s, the prevalence of food assistance supports, such as food banks, grew rapidly in Canada and the United States (followed by other “wealthy” countries on the other side of the pacific) (Poppendieck, 1998). Currently, in Canada there are over 600 food banks and 3000 food agencies serving as food assistance support for Canadians (Food Banks Canada, n.d.). Poppendieck (1998) describes the enmeshment of food banking and

charitable assistance into social safety nets as “at once a symptom and a cause of our society’s failure to face up and deal with the erosion of equality. [...] the proliferation of charity contributes to our society’s failure to grapple in meaningful ways with poverty” (p. 5).

Most scholars refer to the dependence on charitable food assistance, income inequality, as well as the privatization of public goods and global (food) markets as a function of the neoliberal project. In addition, Bruckner et al., (2021) describe how the neoliberal narrative has manifested relationally in food banking and food assistance programs, arising “through narratives and practices which frame people as deserving of food based on notions of individualism, hard work, and responsibility” (p. 101). On the production side of the global food system, Bittman explains how food production and supply under neoliberalism has created a false sense of cheap food by externalizing costs on the healthcare system, the environment, and on the social safety net via unlivable wages and moving jobs overseas (Milman, 2021). Detaching people from the true cost of food, as well as perpetuating unlivable conditions, and convoluting food access with meritocratic ideals, is all wrapped up in the neoliberal project.

Three alternatives to food security

Alternative visions for food security that resist (in different ways) conventional neoliberal narratives and practices were birthed out of a need to address underlying systems of oppression, capitalism, and the global corporate food regime (Holt-Gimenez, 2011), while also balancing the reality that “acquiring adequate food and other resources to metabolize social reproduction” is necessary (Spring et al., 2019). These approaches were also born out of a need to look beyond the individual to try and address food insecurity at a more collective and systemic level. In other words, “if we readily accept the position that one’s condition, i.e., food insecure, is that person’s fault, or assume that the condition can be addressed with a one-time hand out of food, then we will not devote adequate time to probe more deeply into the social, political, or economic forces that shape the lives of people and their communities” (Winne, 2003, p. 4). Community food security, food justice, and food sovereignty developed from a

recognition of such forces that perpetuate food insecurity (both at home and abroad), and a call to reform, transform, or dismantle the current system (Holt-Gimenez, 2011).

The first concept of community food security recognizes that people do not live in isolation, and that the causes and impacts of food insecurity extend into the broader community where people live, work, and play. Community food security places an emphasis on human and economic rights, community empowerment and self-reliance, and a systemic understanding of sustainable natural resource use (although it should be considered whether viewing the environment as a “resource to use” could ever be “sustainable” (Liboiron, 2021)) within a food system context (Hamm & Bellows, 2003). It was defined by Hamm and Bellows (2003) as “a situation in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice” (p. 37). Considering issues of food security from production, distribution, consumption, waste, and ecology, it is important to move away from viewing food security as only a matter of caloric sustenance, towards one that addresses the complex, global systems that shape the food landscape of communities (ibid.).

A second framework for addressing issues of food insecurity is food justice, which responds to the racial, colonial project that contributes to hunger, exploitation, and environmental degradation (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011) and tends to promote local alternatives to better serve economically disadvantaged communities (Holt-Gimenez, 2011). Food justice is defined as “a holistic and structural view of the food system that sees healthy food as a human right and addresses structural barriers to that right” (Food Print, 2018). This progressive approach is based on the right to food, better safety nets, and more citizen involvement in decisions regarding community food systems (Holt-Gimenez, 2011).

Foodshare is a prominent Canadian organization based in Toronto whose work centers food justice. This involves the acknowledgment that colonialism, capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy are some of the organizing principles embedded in current food systems, and thus their work involves dismantling sites of exploitation within the food system and the food movement which they are part of (Foodshare, n.d., *Food Justice*). They actively put poverty reduction practices into play in their own

organizational pay structure, as well as work to form long-term relationships with grassroots organizations— especially Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities, and actively embed equity, anti-racist, and reconciliation principles into organizational operations, programs, and policies (ibid.). Foodshare also has embedded the notion of body liberation into their organizational mandate where they strive to create spaces where everyone can feed themselves with joy and dignity (Foodshare, n.d., *Body Liberation and Fat Acceptance*). In these ways, food justice organizations see food insecurity as inherently *more than* economic and geographical barriers to access, and whose work not solely involves meeting immediate needs, but also towards long-term structural change in everyday organizational practices, public approaches to programming, and political/organizational activism (ibid.).

The third alternative to food security that will be discussed, that is food sovereignty, was described by Paul Nicholson (a founding member of the international peasant coalition La Via Campesina) as “the principal alternative to the neoliberal model” (Patal, 2009). In simple terms, food sovereignty is “the right of people to determine their own food and agricultural policies” (ibid., p. 682) and involves “democratization of the food system in favor of the poor and underserved” (Holt-Gimenez, 2011, p. 324). It has planted roots as autonomous, multicultural, and pluralist, that has materialized through (and beyond) Via Campesina, as a global peasant movement (La Via Campesina, 2021). As described by Christine Schiavoni, food sovereignty,

involves restoring control over food access and food production from large corporations and international financial institutions back to individual nations/tribes/peoples – and ultimately to those who produce the food and those who eat it. [...] It puts those most affected by food and agricultural policies at the center of decision- making. And contrary to the one-size-fits-all mentality, food sovereignty, by its very definition, is locally adaptable (Patal, 2009, p. 682).

Food sovereignty is considered a precondition for genuine food security in the ways that it requires ecologically appropriate and socially just, local food systems as materially (and ethically) necessary to tackle hunger and poverty for long-term security for all people’s (including those who

produce food) (Patal, p. 665). It (re)centres those diverse groups involved in this kind of food production (including those who till the land, fishers, migrant workers, Indigenous people rural workers) and promotes community control over resources (La Via Campesina, 2021). Whereas notions of food security often fail to distinguish where food comes from and how it is produced, distributed (often exploitative in nature) and the conditions under which it is consumed (Change for Children, n.d.); food sovereignty renders visible the assemblages of food production (such as the workers who are often made invisible through global industrial food systems and the notion of externalities), as well as defends people's right to make (food) decisions that align with their "material, natural, and spiritual heritage" (as written in the Declaration of the Forum for Food Sovereignty: Via Campesina, 2007). Central to food sovereignty are themes of autonomy, collective vision, choice, place appropriate practices, and dignified livelihoods. These themes are in many ways congruent with the implicit and explicit tenants of the Nourishing Communities program (and also differ in other ways).

A more-than-food-security approach

Some scholars and activists have an "all or nothing approach" to issues of food inequity and tend to adopt a singular framework in studying and working towards food security related causes (such as adopting a food security approach to "feed the masses" *or* a more progressive framework) (Bruckner et al., 2021, p. 101). Often times, this "choosing a stance" is framed as an explicit push back against conservative food security/charitable approaches. As stated previously, these food security efforts under the reformist umbrella (food banks often fit this category) are often criticized for upholding or even perpetuating violent systems by addressing symptoms of food insecurity at the level of the individual, thus, it is argued, disabling the potential for collective action, and increasing individual shame and insecurity, while soothing neoliberal systems just enough to fill holes in the social safety net (May et al., 2019). Many scholars maintain that without systems change and a dismantling of power, cycles of liberalization and reform will repeat while plunging the world into graver food crises (Holt-Gimenez, 2011, p. 325).

In addition, because food security is intersectional (i.e., social markers and identities, such as age, class, ethnicity, education level, sexual orientation, gender identity, and so forth intersect to form new sorts of vulnerability to food insecurity), other relevant systems of oppression, such as racism, colonialism, and growing income inequality and health disparities, cannot be conveniently (i.e., apolitically) detached in order to address food insecurity effectively (or at all) (Clement et al., 2019). Each system cannot be fully grappled with without also addressing the others, which are the core tenants of food justice and sovereignty.

In a detailed review of emergency food assistance literature, McIntyre et al. (2016) found that current action recommendations emphasize *either* to seek to improve existing emergency assistance policies and practices *or* seek to address the underlying causes and systems; thus emphasizing a need for scholarship and praxis to link these two constructs. Cloke and colleagues (2017) propose an alternative view of food banking “in the meantime”, in response to the “revolutionary versus reform binary” (p. 719), and argue for food assistance services to be considered spaces of care, “introducing values other than those of neoliberal capitalism as a response to the austere conditions of the here and now” (p. 704). They argue that hegemonic views of emergency food systems can lead to self-fulfilling, overly formulaic, and potentially uncritical analysis that overlooks the potential for hope and possibility within these spaces of care (p. 706). Bruckner et al. (2021) write that while there is debate about whether emergency food assistance should be seriously considered in discussions about food justice and sovereignty, there is an important role these services have as an “immediate and direct contact point with/between millions of people facing food insecurity” (p. 123).

Important to note here is that this “either-or” tension exists primarily in the food security space (rather than food justice/sovereignty movements)—often in ways that are seen to uphold neoliberal values. Much of what is involved in food justice/sovereignty includes meeting immediate needs in dignified and ecologically responsible ways, while also seeking to challenge and dismantle oppressive (food) systems. Community Food Centers Canada is a good example of this blended approach whereby they work with food banks to make their policies and processes more socially and ecologically dignified

(they have put together a manual on this very topic that could translate to the Nourishing Communities program in ways that could spark important discussions and evolutions of the program— see Community Food Centres Canada, 2017, publication titled *Beyond the Emergency*), while also engaging in deeper systems work.

A “more-than-food” approach in contemporary scholarship captures the “multitudinous, shifting and contingent ontological, epistemological and methodological ways this hyphenated convention suggests” (Goodman, 2016, p. 258). Thinking about foodscapes as more-than, although not always explicitly termed as such in the literature, reflects a general shift towards holism, relationality, complexity, transdisciplinarity, and non-categorical thinking in emerging scholarship (often prevalent in the sub-fields of human geography, feminism, and new materialism) (Goodman, 2016). A more-than-food approach, according to Goodman, is a radical, post-disciplinary approach to analyzing food issues that captures the visceral nature of eating and politics, as well as food’s vital materialisms that constitute food production, food waste, and eating networks (ibid.). It offers a framework for interrogating food issues beyond a categorical vantage-point.

This framing of food as “more-than”, follows suit of the more commonly used phrase: “more-than-human”. Gibson-Graham makes use of more-than-human in the context of reimagining economy-ecology relations as ethical practices of living in— and beyond—the Anthropocene (Gibson-Graham & Miller, 2015). The Anthropocene can be understood as a commonly held (often discursive) view that humans are separate from and superior to Nature. Gibson-Graham’s feminist economic geography proposes reimagined visions of economic relations that transcend a hyper separation of human/nature and uses more-than-human to draw attention to and problematize anthropocentric views of human supremacy, domination, and control (ibid.). It is in a similar vein that more-than-food intends to reimagine what food is, what it means, and who/what it includes. Although more-than-food-security does not currently exist in the literature, it expands on these works and gestures towards a flatter ontological view of the world (Bennett, 2010), that is meant to provide a theoretical and practical methodology to capture similar themes of reimagining by casting a wider net on “what counts” as food security work and who/what is

involved. By illuminating the inter-relational, interdependent situatedness of food and food security in a web of forces and actors, the program (and programs like it) might be able to move beyond prescriptive, narrow categories of traditional food security work that too often perpetuate an “either/or” approach. More-than-food-security provides a framework for ideas that are discussed in the sections that follow.

Alternative food networks and beyond alternativity

Gibson-Graham’s feminist economic geography can also aid in contemplating Alternative Food Networks in light of this more-than approach. Alternative Food Networks (otherwise known as AFNs) are broadly known as systems of food production and consumption in which “customers” and “suppliers” are in close proximity with each other – and often includes (implicit/explicit) education on the value of local food, sustainable farming practices, and awareness of seasonality (Guthman, 2011, p. 264). Community-supported agriculture (CSA’s), farmers markets, community gardens, and urban farms are some examples of AFNs (Diekman et al., 2020). These more direct, ‘alternative’ shopping experiences “offer consumers a form of reconnection into the [local] food system” and are often thought of as more ethical and just sources of food provenance (Turner & Hope, 2014, p. 175).

But what exactly are AFNs alternative to? Broadly they are often depicted as antithetical to the (growing?) disconnect between people and the food system (ibid.), specifically, they are considered a counter-response to the global corporate food regime (nested within neoliberal capitalism) (Holt-Gimenez, 2011; Beachman, 2018). Of course, the labeling of “alternative” as such has not gone uncontested. Wilson (2013) suggests that the usage of “alternative” signals that these networks are always destined to remain subservient to a hegemonic mainstream, while there is also a bounty of scholarship that critiques the idealized and uncritically appraised inherent goodness, sustainability, and just-ness of local/alternative food (Guthman, 2011). Goodman et al. (2012) argue that such a stance is adversely reductive and call for a more open-ended considering of AFNs that “seek to reconfigure the ‘orderings’ of the socio-ecological engendered by conventional agro-food provisioning” (p. 51).

Similarly, using Gibson-Graham's diverse economy perspective, AFNs cannot be simply considered a counterview to a singular, solid, monolithic capitalism but rather within "a zone of cohabitation and contestation among multiple economic forms" (Gibson-Graham, 2006, xi). As can be observed in participants' descriptions of the Nourishing Communities program, the experience of attending a farmers market does not easily slide into one categorical version of a capitalocentric market-based activity, or its clean counter-vision. Gibson-Graham calls for rethinking the economy as ecological livelihoods, where "dynamics of appreciative inquiry into diverse forms of interdependence, complex relations of community-making" are used to imagine and enact new economic politics (beyond a singular capitalist system or its opposite) (2014, p. 6). Similarly, viewing the Nourishing Communities program itself as transcending a static, universal, individualized method of food provision, supports a notion of reimagining food security work as neither upholding or countering neoliberal capitalism (or reform versus revolution approaches to food security work). Instead, a *more-than* approach could endorse more relational, diverse, and interdependent methodologies for tackling the "ecology of problems of the Anthropocene" (Bennett, 2010).

A brief note on food coupon programs

Before swimming deeper into the theoretical underbelly of (more-than) food security, I would like to take a moment to resurface to explore the less murky waters of food coupon programs in Canada and the United States. The Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program in Nova Scotia was inspired by and adapted from the British Columbia (BC) Farmers' Market Nutrition Coupon Program (Wall, 2017). This version of the program on Canada's Western coast, is promoted as a "healthy eating initiative that supports farmers' markets and strengthens food security across British Columbia" (BC Farmers' Markets, n.d.). Pregnant folks, seniors, and low-income families are eligible for the program and must apply through or be referred by a community organization. Coupons can be spent at any farmers market participating in the program across the province, but must be exclusively used to purchase vegetables,

fruits, nuts, eggs, dairy, cut herbs, meat, and/or fish (ibid.). While Nova Scotia's version of the program was adapted from this one, the details that shape the two programs differ in subtle but significant ways. Note that the Nova Scotian program does not restrict choice, nor does it require an application process. Additionally, \$MM in Nova Scotia can only be spent at a single farmers market (not province wide, like the BC program). I also assume based on descriptions on the BC Farmers' Markets website, that coupons are exclusively used for the Nutrition Coupon Program (thus, participants are identifiable as users of the program), rather than the more anonymous coupon system (although not entirely effective in practice) of the Nova Scotian program (ibid.).

South of the boarder, there has been extensive research on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)— previously known as food stamps— both as a standalone case study of food assistance programs in the United States, and also in relation to SNAP purchases at farmers markets (a practice that was integrated into farmers markets between 2014-2017) (U.S. Department of Agriculture, n.d). Most of the literature on the SNAP, however, appears to focus on fruit and vegetable intake and the program's efficacy in improving the health of SNAP users through short-term nutritional metrics (see McCormack (2010), or just do a scholarly search using terms "SNAP Farmers' Market" and browse the titles).

An exception to this relatively narrow and "methodologically weak" body of research (as described by Aktary et al., 2019) is a longitudinal study of the BC Farmers' Market Nutrition Coupon Program, which found that "farmers' market food subsidy programs may represent a promising multilevel approach to improving the diet quality and psychosocial well-being of low-income populations" (ibid., p. 2). And while this longitudinal study espouses a far different research paradigm and epistemological approach than my current project, there is a recognition among the scientific community that "given that the determinants of dietary patterns are complex and multifactorial, it is crucial that public health initiatives address all socioecological levels to reduce dietary and health inequities in low-income populations" (ibid.).

As far as I can tell, there is not an existing farmers market coupon program in North America that mimics the choice and autonomy embedded in the Nourishing Communities program which permits participants to spend their money on more-than-food. Short of initiatives that mimic a Universal Basic Income, similar farmers market programs are explicitly designed and promoted as healthy eating initiatives (often cited to address disproportional obesity rates in low-income populations) where coupons can only be spent on what is deemed as healthy food. The uniqueness of the Nourishing Communities program in this way is pretty remarkable and is one of the motivations for framing this thesis around more-than-food (-security). There are exciting opportunities to share this approach with other farmers market coupon program stakeholders in North America to promote a reimagining of the ways farmers market coupon programs might respond to (food) inequity.

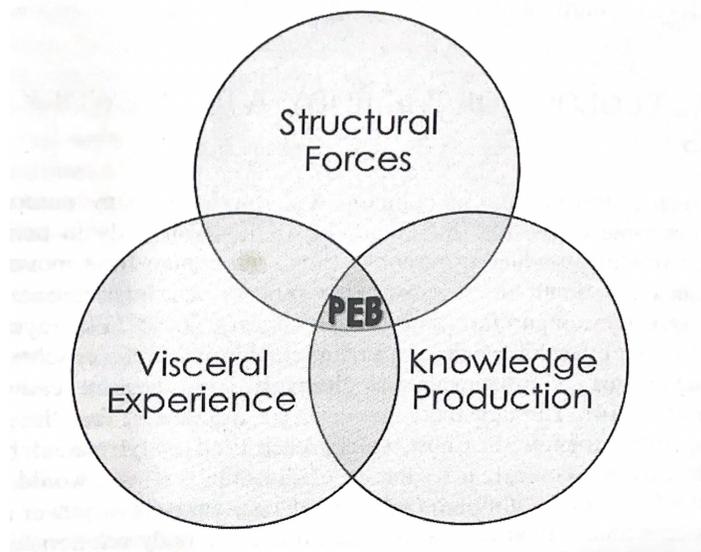
Materiality, visceral politics, and Political Ecology of the Body (PEB)

A similar type of reimagining is completed by Jessica and Alison Hayes- Conroy (2008; 2013; 2017), in their work on food visceralities and school gardening and cooking programs (2013). In the context of school gardening and cooking programs (SGCPs) in Berkley California and rural Nova Scotia, these authors maintain that objectives of these programs should not be about conditioning children about what they “should” be eating or what constitutes “good” food, the “right” food, or even “healthy” food, according to “expert” knowledge. These authors propose a more precise and fulsome understanding of these programs to expand narrowly-focused healthy food initiatives:

In bringing disenfranchised students into relation with new foods and new food ideas, they also widen the scope of emotional possibilities that are available to these students. ‘Possibilities’ in this sense refers to students’ abilities to develop what we have called elsewhere *visceral imaginaries* that is, [school gardening and cooking programs] give students a chance to have novel experiences with food/practices, which allow them to interrupt current habits of bodily (re)action and begin to feel out different ways of being and becoming” (2013, p. 84)

It is in this vein that Alison and Jessica Hayes-Conroy (2017) propose a Political Ecology of the Body (PEB) to capture “how the particular physicalities of specific bodies and specific embodied emotions mediate conflicts over resource access/use, challenges of environmental governance, and our human-environment relationships and struggles most broadly” (p. 2). PEB is a methodological framework that enables the analysis of interplay between 1) structural forces; 2) knowledge production; and 3) relational ontology (p. 85). A copy of their model is included in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Hayes-Conroy’s Political Ecology of the Body model (p. 662, 2017)



In applying PEB to the school garden example, they write, in this rhizome of intersecting forces, a student’s affective/emotive ability to be motivated to eat healthy, alternative food therefore depends upon not just her/his ability to exchange money for a product, or her/his geographical closeness, or knowledge of the food, but upon her/his articulated bodily capacity to feel a certain level of comfort, excitement, affection, pride, and so on, for what she/he is eating. This articulated capacity is influenced by geographic and economic and intellectual forces, but it is also always more than the sum of these. (p. 86)

This model is deployed later, in Chapter Four, to aid in bridging the theory-practice divide. The model was developed with the intention of providing a tool for scholars, policy makers, (and I add here, practitioners and community organizers), to

think systematically and holistically about questions of bodily experience, health and wellbeing, and about how these relate to the discursive and structural implications of a wide variety of political processes and policies, which almost inevitably affect bodies in their practice, sometimes in ways that go unnoticed (2017, pp. 663-664).

It is a comprehensive yet critical method of viewing the material body that challenges the individualist ideology of neoliberal capitalism, because it is always viewed as “relationally and contextually produced, never as purely individual” (p. 664). It is in this way a radical pushback against neoliberal discourses of food insecurity as an individual failing, or that personal generosity through charitable food assistance is a legitimate response to pervasive inequity in the Global North (Poppendieck, 1998). In the context of this research, it provides a mechanism for viewing the visceral experience of participants in the Nourishing Communities program, in relationship with a web of other relational, structural, and contextual factors which program administrators (and many other interdependent forces) often shape. It provides a basis for considering the program as more-than-food-security given the myriad of unpredictable visceral, structural, and knowledge-producing forces at play (how could such a program have narrow, predictable outcomes when there is such an interplay of dynamic forces producing it? Hint: it doesn't). In this way, it provides a both/and (rather than an either/or) approach to considering participant experiences in relationship with the messages that are ingested about the explicit/implicit rules of the program (often defined by administrators/funders rather than participants themselves); as well as broader understandings of who is “deserving” of what kinds of supports; alongside the structural factors (such as program design, funds allotted, administrative processes, structural barriers to access) that also shape these experiences.

Reimagining what “counts”: relational access, embracing multiplicity, and regions of care

Scholarship of the last decade across subdisciplines such as politics, human geography, and Indigenous studies have provoked a widening of the foodscape with new and exciting possibilities for reconsidering the heavily researched topic of food (Bruckner et al., 2021; Carney, 2014; Cloke et al., 2017; Hayes-Conroy 2010, 2013, 2017; Larsen, 2016; Seth & Pittoello, in press; Spring et al., 2019; among others). Below I use three examples from the literature that relate to how the Nourishing Communities program might also be reconsidered.

In an application of visceral politics as it relates to neoliberal stigma, Bruckner et al. (2021) interviewed twenty-six (n=26) food-bank users using Media-Elicitation methods, about their experiences of food insecurity and accessing food banks in Boulder, Colorado. They conclude that food access should not be considered in only structural terms (such as hours of operation, proximity, affordability, etc.), but also demonstrate that a more relational view of food justice provides a framework whereby the processes of “challenging assumptions of what food is, not just as a metabolic source of nutrition, but as a cultural signifier, and an opportunity for community building and redistribution of power” can be grappled with (2021, p. 105). Their study examines the negative visceralities of accessing emergency food through food pantries which contribute to what they term as *relational access*. They conclude by asserting that food banks are important sites for contending neoliberal structures and stigma (rather than sites that simply uphold these systems— as scholarship on the topic frequently does), offering recommendations and analysis on how relationships and an understanding of visceral experiences are key in working towards procedural justice (not just distributive justice of structural access). *Relational access* (and *structural access*) will be used in this text to capture the distinct ways visceralities might contribute to participant experiences in the Nourishing Communities program.

Returning to Jessica and Alison Hayes-Conroy’s study, (2013) on school garden and cooking programs, these programs were considered by teachers and administrators as an equally accessible learning tool because they engaged the senses in a “natural” way (as opposed to the intellectual work that some students may find hard to do ‘correctly’). These programs were also accompanied by healthy eating

curriculum in the classroom where it was explicitly taught as a tool for encouraging more “healthy food” (specifically, fruit and vegetable) consumption. Jessica and Alison Hayes-Conroy were concerned about the prescriptive, and objective-driven administrations of the program and the discursive use of “naturalness” embedded within descriptions and execution of the program, writing that,

there is a certain lack of agency in both the nature narratives and the socially attuned re-framing, a certain amount of pre-scripted teleology that did not allow room for the real complexities and ambiguities of food, eating, and life that we witnessed within classrooms. Whether through nature or social construction, these stories did not adequately explain how students, teachers and parents, in interacting with each other in bodily ways through food, have a role in affecting outcomes that are far from fixed. (...) Certainly, students come to classrooms with plenty of visceral topography; their senses do not lead them all in the same direction, and their “petty” differences are not overcome by a shared meal. Indeed, for many students the goodness of food is not something that can be defined solely by their class, but is instead something that is experienced as negotiable and differentiable among families and communities. (p. 83)

Hayes-Conroy’s work brings forth a second scholarly theme that I will apply liberally throughout this text to describe a shift towards viewing participant experiences as diversely negotiable, dynamic, and influenced, but by no means contingent on, what the program is ‘supposed to do’ (i.e., address food insecurity or improve fruit and vegetable consumption).

Finally, Larsen (2016) calls upon Indigenous politics to mediate materiality scholarship by proposing a place-based, regional political ecology. Larsen critiques the materialities perspective in that it lacks place-based roots that ground human/non-human interactions. Larsen thus proposes a theory of regional political ecology whereby networks are rooted

through the land into a matrix of places that sustains (human and nonhuman) livelihoods, nourishes a sense of belonging (and motivates struggles over who and what belongs), and provides the material-semiotic terrain for working through the problems of environmental politics, management, and justice. (p. 164)

Regions, Larsen writes, “provide an ontological bridging of place and network” (ibid.). This regional political ecology is premised on place-based, reciprocal relationships between human and non-human entities that can provide a lens through which the concerns of many communities engaged in coexistence can be noticed and grappled with. Care, Larsen clarifies, are relations between human and more-than-human beings defined by a disposition for encounter and mutual duties and obligations to preform.

in the performance, they affirm not only their own entanglement, renewing the threads of reciprocity that will tie them together even after they depart, but also their mutual entanglement with the spacetime of country, that is, the entire matrix of relationships that sustains life. "Care", then, is not something one chooses to grant or confer, but rather signifies the disposition for encounter, an attraction to interactions with the others with whom one is connected. (2016, p. 162)

Care, as Larsen explains it, can sustain progressive collaborations between human and nonhuman matters. “In this manner, regional political ecology might contribute to the new environmental politics of the Anthropocene in a way that is attuned to—and involved in—the concerns of the many communities engaged in this work. (p. 165)”. When applied to the Nourishing Communities program, Larsen’s description of care provides a lens through which the place-based relationships between participants, administrators, vendors, and non-human forces, are viewed as reciprocal performances and used to describe a “disposition for encounters”. It is this way that the program does not exist to provide for the passive recipient, but is instead characterized by an ecology of actors that are entangled in a place-based landscape.

Ecologies of possibility and beyond-food-security

These three ideas have implications for what a more progressive view of the Nourishing Communities program might look like. Building on these ideas, the program, and farmers markets more

broadly, might be considered spaces of care where the possibility of individuals and collectives to “be caught up (often unintentionally) in transformative praxis, and in doing so become (in Freire’s terms) ‘conscientized’” (Cloke et al., 2017, p. 705). This resembles the imagining of Jessica and Alison Hayes-Conroy’s (2013) view of what makes Political Ecology of the Body (PEB) a compelling framework,

PEB allows for, even insists upon, narratives that are complex, contradictory, and unfinished.

However, what we like most about such (re)imagining are the implications of these narratives for our political and pedagogical practice: the insistence on moving beyond static goals and fixed assessments. It is in this way that such description can ‘go beyond’ the limited case-study boundaries of being ‘moments-in-time-and-space’ and become something that, as we (re)imagine and (re)practice food-body interventions, can affect other political moments and mobilizations.

(p. 86)

By expanding (or editing) implicit prescriptive measures by which the Nourishing Communities program is considered successful (i.e., increasing food security), and uplifting the parts of the program that already enable people to experience community, security, health, and food in non-prescriptive ways (i.e., the element of choice), other possibilities for imagining the program can come to the fore. Turner and Hope (2014) apply this sentiment in examining the potential of farmers markets to challenge (if only minimally) anthropocentric thinking by opening visitors up to the notion of “relational agency of others” (p. 186). These researchers found that farmers markets facilitate a connection to direct sellers, seasonality, freshness, and place, through which visitors can be (re)acquainted with their local food system (as opposed to the detached nature of the global corporate food system). Market-goers are also lightly exposed to the idea that food, “pests”, disease, the weather, and seasons assert themselves as players in the lives of humans— subtly defying the notion of all-encompassing human domination and control. In the words of Turner & Hope (2014), “through these processes, there is a glimmer of hope for a growing awareness of the interconnectedness of humans and non-humans in a broader, intimate ecological web” (p. 186). In this way, the program (and farmers markets more generally) may attune folks to the concern of many (human/non-human) communities engaged in the challenge of co-existence (ibid.).

Integrating new materialism scholarship, complexity theories, and contemporary human geography literature (such as Hayes-Conroy's Political Ecology of the Body, or Larsen's Regional Political Ecology of Care), provides an epistemological scaffold for doing this type of unlearning of "naturalized" neoliberal, colonial, Western worldviews and cognitive processes (Gibson-Graham, 2014). Zia Sardar terms a related idea as "decolonizing the imagination" by tapping into what he terms as the "Unthought Imagination" which requires,

decoupling with the dualistic mind and recoupling with the holistic mind. Where knowledge and values, epistemology and ontology, reason and intuition, are in perfect balance. Unthought imagination can only be invoked beyond the confines of the dominant framework of thought. Only unthought imagination can generate ways of knowing, doing, and being that will successfully help us navigate the contradictory, complex, and chaotic post normal times. (In press).

What ways of reimagining food security/justice, community resilience, and equity work are made accessible when rigid views of what "counts" as "legitimate" food security efforts are undone? What kinds of beyond-Western/-settler epistemologies, radical thinking *processes*, and new ways of relating enable this reimagining? Thinking about the world as an ecology of human and non-human actants in dynamic relationship with one another is a possible starting place.

Conclusion

In sum, this selective literature review serves to introduce and explore contemporary ways of imagining social/economic/ecological/existential issues of the times. Applying these perspectives enables the program to be reconsidered in a way that recognizes the agency and interconnectivity of participants as active contributors to the Nourishing Communities program (rather than passive recipients). It also provides a lens through which non-human actants are considered a part of the farmers market experience, and food security issues more broadly (the impacts of this are unpredictable and emerging). This

perspective enables experimenting with the program through the lens of deep ecology, where participants are (re)exposed to local food systems, which has the potential to yield a shift towards more eco-centric worldviews and behaviours. Furthermore, engaging with this literature seeks to transcend anthropocentric epistemologies around food issues that often uphold discourses of individualism, linear causality, binaries, and rigid categorical thinking. This literature represents alternative ways of knowing (food) issues (more relationally, viscerally, in place-based ways) and provides a theoretical basis for reconsidering the Nourishing Communities program in a similar vein. It provides scholarly basis to advocate for a more expansive and relational view of farmers market coupon programs that stands to nourish more-than-food-security on multiple timescales.

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Research paradigms

This thesis is informed by critical social science, interpretivist, and transdisciplinary research paradigms. Critical social science is considered by Neuman (2006) as “a critical process of inquiry that goes beyond surface illusions to uncover the real structures in the material world in order to help people change conditions and build a better world for themselves” (p. 95). This epistemological approach enables a lens through which to assess the systems of power, oppression, and inequity that underpin issues such as food insecurity. Since critical social science is conducted with the goal of social change in mind, it also offers a container through which relevant social issues can be both intellectualized and grounded in practice with the aim of bringing about meaningful change in the world. For this reason, it is both a contextually relevant and practically helpful for this research.

The interpretivist paradigm that informs this research provides a basis for understanding participant experiences in the Nourishing Communities program. Interpretivism asserts that truth and knowledge are subjective and ultimately culturally and historically situated (Ryan, 2018). This paradigm foregrounds the meaning that individuals and communities assign to their experiences with the aim of gathering a more robust understanding of the whole. Similarly, researchers can never be fully removed from their values and beliefs which will ultimately inform the research process (ibid.). This paradigm welcomes the notion that participants experienced the program in divergent and distinct ways, while also providing lens through which the landscape of food security (and all its related subjects) can be better texturized.

The third complementary research paradigm that is used to underpin this research is transdisciplinarity. It is described by Donnelly (2016) as “rooted in the need for practical knowledge in an uncertain and rapidly changing world. It calls for ethics and values to be reintegrated into knowledge creation and application” (p. 51). Contemporary views of transdisciplinarity in academia understand research as inquiry driven, rather than discipline driven, and integrate the inquirer into the inquiry

(Montuori, 2010). This paradigm reflects what I hope this research provokes, that is a more comprehensive, cross-cutting, multi-way of knowing, and a holistic notion of food security (and its multitude of related subjects). It offers a less rigid, but rigorous method of viewing and acting in the world that, like an interpretivist approach, embraces the organization of knowledge as complex (Donnelly, 2016). This paradigm reflects what I believe to be important and compelling about this research (and the world)— that is the infinite number of ways and dimensions that the Nourishing Communities program is, and can be understood, experienced, and leveraged to bring about a more equitable, ecologically ethical, and interconnected world.

Methodology & methods

This is a qualitative research study that takes form as an Action Research Study. Each year, Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia (FMNS) collects surveys from hundreds of participants provincially and sends the data to the Acadia Entrepreneurship Centre (AEC) for analysis and reporting. So, although there is a rich set of quantitative and short-form qualitative data that continues to be collected on the program each year, there is a need to hear more in-depth participant experiences to help understand, evaluate, and inform the future of the program on the provincial level. Qualitative research lends itself useful here to help uncover new and relevant insights about the program that may otherwise not be captured fully in participant surveys. It helps to animate the intricacies and complexities that are difficult to convey using only quantitative methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 19). Viewing the program through an interpretive, qualitative lens is also ethically important in maintaining an aspect of the “participatory” nature of Wall’s original, intentionally designed “participatory action research project” (2017). The practice of sitting down and listening to participants is not only an effective research method but also perhaps an ethical practice to ensure *participants* are able to deeply *participate* in the evaluation and design of the program. Some participants also expressed that it was a meaningful experience to be able to share the impact that the program has had with another person face-to-face.

Action research as defined by Costello (2003) as a cyclical process of observation, reflection, planning, and action. This research aims to intellectualize, problematize, and investigate the topics at hand through a scholarly lens, while is also highly motivated by its pragmatic purpose of contributing to the evolution of the program ‘on the ground’.

Primary data was collected by way of semi-structured interviews with both program participants and with program administrators (either representatives from farmers markets or partner organizations who were involved in administering the program locally). Program participants were interviewed twice with the intention of holding interviews at the outset of the program, and then again at the end of the program.

Participant sample

Participants were onboarded with the help of FMNS and the AEC. Thanks to funding from CLARI, it was advertised that participants would receive \$40 for each interview that they engaged in. A section was included in the bottom of the provincially administered onboarding survey that prompted participants to leave their name and number if they were interested in learning more about the research study (see Appendix A). Participants who indicated an interest in the study on their survey, were forwarded to me. Furthermore, a card was placed in each of the tote bags given to every participant at the beginning of the program with my contact information so that anyone who was interested in participating could contact me directly (see Appendix B).

A number of external and opportunistic factors drove the selection of participants from there. I received responses from roughly 240 participants interested in the study via the surveys and/or through direct contact (majority via survey responses). These responses tended to trickle in sporadically over the period of several months— usually grouped by market. Interviewing participants from a variety of different farmers markets was critical in gaining a more accurate representation of the range of participant experiences at different markets. For this reason, I did not contact each potential research participant

when I obtained their survey. Instead, I selected two markets in the nearby region to start interviews with first (that is the Wolfville Farmers' Market and the North Mountain Community Market), while more surveys trickled in. Due to timing constraints, participant selection was largely based on when I obtained the survey and how many interviews were already completed. To the best of my ability, I selected a handful of participants from markets that varied in size, geography (rural/urban, location across Nova Scotia), and evolution in the program. I also prioritized contacting participants who self-identified on the intake survey as a member of a minority group, first and/or those underrepresented in the sample of surveys I was receiving. The hope was not that the sample would be representative of those who participate in the program, rather that it would offer a wide range of diverse perspectives that would broaden the notion of what participant experiences look like. I tried to remain aware of any unconscious bias that would prevent this from happening or privileging a certain demographic, through check-ins with my supervisor, and in keeping a detailed spreadsheet where my own selection patterns were easily visible to me. I generally made first contact via a phone call where I would explain the study, ask if they would be interested in participating, and if so, scheduling an interview. For this reason, participant selection was also at the mercy of who answered the phone or returned my calls.

In the end, I interviewed people from 27 households from 12 different markets across the province. One interview was with a couple (2 people); however I refer to their interview as one participant for the purposes of this study. Table 1 breaks down the number of interviews at each market.

Table 1: Number of interviewees by market

<i>Market Name</i>	<i># Of Participants Interviewed by Market</i>
<i>Annapolis Royal Farmers' & Traders' Market</i>	1
<i>Antigonish Farmers' Market</i>	4
<i>Bridgewater Farmers' Market</i>	1
<i>Fairview Clayton Park Farmers' Market</i>	1
<i>Halifax Brewery Farmers' Market</i>	3
<i>Musquodobit Harbour Farmers' Market</i>	1
<i>New Germany Farmers' Market</i>	1
<i>New Glasgow Farmers' Market</i>	3
<i>North Mountain Market</i>	2
<i>Truro Farmers' Market</i>	4
<i>Cape Breton Farmers' Market (Sydney)</i>	3
<i>Wolfville Farmers' Market</i>	3 (first round)/ (2 second round)
<i>Total</i>	=27 (first round)/ 26 (second round)

Data collection

I was the sole interviewer for all the interviews with program participants and with program administrators. The first round of interviews with program participants were held between June 24th and August 25th, 2021. This timeline was more extended than I had originally intended given the unforeseen slowness of waiting for surveys to come in and logistically organizing locations and interview dates. The second round of interviews were held between November 15th and December 16th, 2021. Interviews were mostly held in person, at a variety of locations across the province. My first preference for interview locations was always at local farmers markets, but when this was not possible, interviews were hosted in

community centers, public libraries, and, on rare occasions, in participant homes. Some interviews were held over Zoom, however this was also an exception rather than a norm.

Interviews were semi-structured in nature. The first round of interviews included questions about their experience in the farmers market (see Appendix C), and about their life more broadly as well. I found the question “can you tell me your story?” particularly helpful in getting to know participants and gaining context to who they are and where they come from. The second round of interviews focused almost entirely on participant experiences in the program and was more reflective in nature, seeing as many of the participants were wrapping up or had completed the program (see Appendix D). Interviews lasted between 10-60 minutes (averaging around 29 minutes) and were audio recorded. 27 participant interviews were held during the first round, and 26 were interviewed in the second round (I was not able to get in contact with one participant to conduct a second interview. Although their data was not removed from general analysis, quotations were not used from their interview since I could not receive their approval for the publication of specific quotations). However, n= 27.

Data analysis

Audio recordings of each interview were transcribed using the transcription software, Trint. Transcripts in their raw (unedited) format were then uploaded to the data analysis software, Atlas.ti. Interviews were coded using the open, axial, and selective coding strategy described by Corbin & Strauss (1990) to identify themes and make sense of the data. Transcriptions and the corresponding audio were reviewed simultaneously during the open coding process, which enabled a deeper engagement with the data. Codes were sorted into code groups, and then into categories, which make up the themes and results of this thesis. Quotations used in this thesis were approved by participants to ensure clarity and accuracy of meaning, and in an effort to make sure participants words are transmitted with their utmost consent. Filler words and sounds such as, “um” “like” and “you know” were mostly omitted from any quotations (unless it seemed relevant to depict tone and cadence and/or meaning). A preliminary version of the

results of this study was also circulated to participants to check for accuracy and open opportunity for feedback. These processes of participant checking yielded only one minor change to word choice, all other participants approved their quotes as written in this thesis.

Trustworthiness

Assessing trustworthiness in qualitative research has been discussed extensively and most often adapted from Guba's (1981) four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability (Shenton, 2003). I employed several strategies to establish trustworthiness that are described below.

Interviews were held with both program participants and administrators, as well as checked against my own prior knowledge of the program and in informal conversations I was having with program administrators locally and at the provincial level. Although the latter information source is not an official data set in this study, it did help me to contextualize, understand, and corroborate the information I was hearing in the interviews. In intentionally striving to hear from participants from a wide range of markets (i.e., size, location, history of administering the program), and of diverse demographics (age, gender, self-identified minority status, work status, family structure, etc.), data triangulation was achieved in these two ways by interviewing a wide range of participants to inform the results of the study. Shenton describes how this strategy can enrich trustworthiness, "here individual viewpoints and experiences can be verified against others and, ultimately, a rich picture of the attitudes, needs or behavior of those under scrutiny may be constructed based on the contributions of a range of people" (2004, p. 66).

The intention of interviewing participants twice at different stages in the program was to assess whether their experiences in the program changed over time. Although upon data analysis, it was decided that changes in participant experiences were difficult to measure and not significantly relevant for the purposes of this study, interviewing participants twice was tremendously helpful for me to develop what Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to as 'prolonged engagement' with both the study participants and the research topic. It gave me time as a researcher to orient myself, build trust with participants, grapple with

my own biases and preconceptions, and follow lines of inquiry with participants in the second round of interviews that arose by virtue of being able to reflect on emerging data from the first interviews. It also gave me a welcome buffer, as a first-time researcher, to develop my interview skills over the prolonged period of data collection without compromising the data.

My work with the Wolfville Farmers' Market since 2020 and involvement with the administration of the program locally provided context and continuity to the data being collected and ultimately generated a more grounded and informed picture of the program. My involvement with the Wolfville Farmers' Market cannot be detached from this research in that it was from my prior knowledge and experience with the program "on the ground" that this research project came to fruition. It was through my involvement with participants in the 2020/21 program, as well as countless conversations I have had with market folks and partner organization representatives in the last 2 years that motivated this research project, and informed research design, interview questions, and existing knowledge that I approached the data with. Having worked with a range of program participants before, I called on this experience to also ensure that I designed research materials and presented myself in an approachable, accessible, and respectful manner to meet the needs of the wide range of participants that I interacted with. This aspect of my prior knowledge contributed to thick description, which was also supported by the line of questioning I employed in the interviews to better understand how each program was administered and experienced in different contexts around the province. Shenton (2004) describes the importance of thick description by affirming that "detailed description in this area can be an important provision for promoting credibility as it helps to convey the actual situations that have been investigated and, to an extent, the contexts that surround them" (p. 69).

Nonetheless, reflexivity was a priority for me, and I strove to practice it throughout the entire research process by taking field notes during and after interviews (and revisiting them), drafting memos during the analysis process, keeping a research journal where I would often explore my own thoughts, feelings, and motives in the research, and continually questioning if and how my own background, beliefs, biases, and values were shaping the research (and adapting accordingly). Analysis and writing

were data-driven and choices that I made about how to represent the data were thoughtful made in an effort to “accurately textualize the data” (Donnelly, personal communication, Jan 31, 2022).

Finally, member checks were also used to verify a preliminary version of the findings with participants. Participants were provided with a list of quotations that they could revise and retract if they wished to do so, along with a version of the results for them to provide feedback on. This strategy has been utilized by a number of researchers to ensure credibility (Shenton, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mill & Huberman, 1994) and to also promote honesty in participant responses (since they knew they could retract/revise their answers, participants may have felt more inclined to speak openly).

Program administrator interview process

A similar process was followed as it relates to partner organization and market representatives’ interviews. A FMNS staff person sent an email to representatives from farmers markets whom I was interviewing participants from, asking them to contact me if they were interested in participating in an interview (Appendix E). In total, I interviewed eight program administrators (just one time). Interview questions were designed to capture both practical feedback and more abstract reflections on the program (Appendix F), and these interviewees were required to give their consent prior to participating (see Appendix H). Interviews were mostly held over zoom.

Ethical considerations

Informed consent

I was very mindful of receiving participants’ informed consent all throughout the interview process. In making first contact with participants over the phone, I explained the purpose of the study as well as what was involved in participation, prior to asking if they would be willing to participate. Upon meeting for the interview, I reviewed the consent form with the participant at length to ensure comprehension and welcomed any questions or concerns along the way (see Appendix G). I assured

participants that “I did not work for anyone”, and that there were “no right answers” to any of the interview questions and made clear that I was curious about their honest opinions. I assured participants that they could terminate the interview at any time and that they were welcome to skip questions and take breaks if needed (no participant used these methods). Participants were also made aware that they would be compensated with a \$40 honorarium, plus any transportation and/or childcare money before the interview started, and that they would not suffer any financial penalty ever, including if they chose to end the interview, skip a question, or omit any information. As stated on the consent form and explained to participants verbally, all participants consented to the recording the interviews and the usage of a pseudonym (of their own choosing) that is used to reference things they said in any published information.

In the second round of interviews, I made the consent form accessible to participants to review and ask questions about. I reminded participants about the parameters of the study, and the ‘rules of participation’. No interviewee chose to refrain from answering any research questions in either interview. Participation was voluntary throughout the study, and participants were able to withdraw their data at any time without consequence, up until 30 days after their final interview (however, it was made clear that during member checks, that participants’ wishes to revise or retract specific quotations would be honoured).

Debriefing

After each interview, I explicitly stated that audio recording had stopped and gave participants an opportunity to ask any questions or voice any concerns. I also reviewed next steps and told them when they could expect to hear from me next and reminded them of how they could contact me in the meantime. In March, 2022, I sent a follow up email (and in some cases a phone call/text) where I thanked participants for taking part in the study, included any quotes for their approval, and attached a version of the results for their feedback (see Appendix I).

Confidentiality

All participants in the study were assured that the collection, analysis and distribution of the data will remain confidential. Participants were prompted to choose a pseudonym that is used to reference their words in publicly disseminated materials. They were assured that their information would remain confidential and anything they said would only be shared with their permission and ascribed to the pseudonym of their choosing.

Because of the nature of conducting research in a small community setting, there were some instances where representatives from farmers markets were aware of a participant's participation in the study or where anonymity about their participation in the study was less guaranteed. Participants were made aware of parties who may have known about their participation in the study, and every effort was made to minimize the instances of this happening. In any case, the information that participants provided in the interviews can not be linked back to them through publicly accessible materials and any identifying information such as the name of the market they attended, identifying characteristics, or their locations were omitted from reporting.

Data storage

Audio recordings were stored on a password protected laptop and on the Trint transcription software. Backup recordings were also stored on a recording device and on my phone that is only accessible to me. Once writing is complete, audio recordings will be destroyed. Transcribed interviews will be stored on my personal password protected laptop and any hard copies will be deleted five (5) years after the completion of the study. Field notes were kept in a single notebook, stored safely in my home or on my person. Data will be backed up on Atlas Ti's backup software, as well as on my personal, password protected, Acadia One Drive account.

Ethics approval

Ethics Approval was obtained on May 6th, 2021 (application #: REB: 21-21) from the Acadia Research Ethics Board (REB).

Dissemination

This honours thesis will be submitted to meet the requirements of Acadia University's Bachelors of Community Development Honours Program. The findings will be reported back to FMNS with the hope that they inform further development and improvement of the program, along with providing qualitative evaluation and opportunities for reflection of how the program is received in relation to what the program aims to do. In addition, the results will be shared at the first Nourishing Communities Learning Summit, in April 2022 to market managers, program administrators, and FMNS staff. Additional reporting and presentations will be conducted in partnership with CLARI and FMNS to mobilize the research and to fulfill the grant deliverables. At least one article may be submitted for peer review publication.

Limitations

The sample of this study is not representative of the experiences of participants in the program, nor are the experiences of each person representative of the program implementation at each specific market. For example, for those markets where I only interviewed one or two participants, I could not corroborate their renditions of program details or experiences with others from the same market. Although this study does not seek to unveil a universal truth about the Nourishing Communities program, a lack of representativeness limits what sorts of patterns can be spotted about how people experience the program according to characteristics of market-specific administration. In addition, I had the sense that participants often equated my role in the program as an internal, administrative one, which made me concerned about the extent to which they were crafting responses based off what they thought I wanted to

hear. I tried to mitigate this by reminding participants before and during interviews that “I don’t work for anyone and there are no right answers”.

Participants were onboarded mostly by convenience, although efforts were made to try to hear from participants of diverse identities, ages, and circumstances, across a varied set of markets in Nova Scotia. That said, there is a lack of African Nova Scotian and Indigenous voices in this study. Attempts were made in the selection process to prioritize onboarding of folks who self-identified as part of these groups, however timing constraints meant that participants were onboarded based on if they answered the phone or returned my call, and with what ease I was able to secure a location for interviews, as well as how many participants were interested in being interviewed at a given market. According to AEC’s evaluation of the 2021 Nourishing Communities survey results, only 3% of survey respondents (which represented roughly half of program participants) self-identified as African Nova Scotian, and 1% were recent immigrants (Stoddart, 2022). Although Black Nova Scotians made up about 2.5% of the population in 2016 (Statistics Canada, 2016) they are 3.5 times more likely to experience food insecurity compared to white Canadians (Roberts, 2020). Recent immigrants (in the last 10 years) represented 2.2% of the population in Nova Scotia (Statistics Canada, 2016.). Given the increased vulnerability of these populations to food insecurity, there seems to be a slight underrepresentation of marginalized groups in this program in general, despite encouragement from FMNS to market managers to partner with organizations who work with these groups.³

Furthermore, the period when the first round of interviews was held lasted longer than expected (June 24th 2021- August 25th 2021) due to logistical challenges in receiving FMNS surveys and scheduling constraints. The original intention was that participants would be interviewed at the beginning

³ This underrepresentation could be partially attributed to a lack of African Nova Scotian, Immigrant, and BIPOC survey respondents rather than representative of who participates in the program (language barriers may pose a barrier for recent immigrants to fill out the survey). It could also be attributed to the lack of connection between (often white led) farmers market managers, and BIPOC community organizations (Seth, Personal Communication, April 15, 2022). Cultivating anti-racist, anti-colonial, diverse and inclusive spaces and practices is ongoing work for farmers markets. Doing so in the context of this program seems particularly relevant. The contextual, regional nature of the program means that these efforts must be grappled with in place-based ways.

of the program (ideally before or just after their first market visit), and then again at the end of the program to identify any changes in their perspectives or experiences. I was unable to begin the first round of interviews before the program started, and for most participants, I first interviewed them weeks or months into the program. In addition, since the program's duration differs at each market, the second round of interviews also occurred at various times in participants' experience of the program (i.e., when I met with people the second time, some participants had been done the program months, while others were just wrapping up, while others had several weeks left). Nonetheless, I did notice that interviewing folks in the summer was helpful given that their experiences were often novel, exciting, and "fresh" in their minds, compared to at the end of the program in the winter months when participants experiences were more routine and there was often less variety at the market thanks to seasonality. The second round of interviews were characterized by a more reflective tone, and participants did mention evolutions in how they came to view and experience the program, which proved to be helpful, although not necessarily a major finding in the study.

This study was certainly constrained by my budding, beginner research skills and was a learning experience for me. The timeframe of the final interviews (ending in December) also meant that I completed data analysis and writing in the span of 2 months, which proved to be quite the challenge and limited my ability to confirm my findings against the data a second or even third time or read through transcripts multiple times. I did however, listen to the audio recording of each transcript as I coded the raw data which meant that the time I spent with each interview was intentional and thorough, even though time did not allow me to return to it. Data analysis was also completed with efficiency in mind, given the large quantity of data. Also due to my own emerging understanding of the purpose and nuances of the study in relation to relevant scholarship (along with a procrastination habit that I have not quite conquered), the final version of the literature review was conducted after data analysis was complete (although a preliminary one was completed in the fall of 2020). My exposure to some of the theories and ideas that this study attempts to engage with (i.e., new materialism, political ecology, and food sovereignty) are occurring while I write this, and so sensemaking is happening in real-time and is not yet

fully formed. This is all to say that this study is an imperfect yet resolute first attempt at a large scholarly project; and as much as I hope that it prompts learning for program administrators and provides titbits of scholarly considerations for the few academics who engage with it, the pleasure is all mine when it comes to learning and growth as a result of this study.

RESULTS

This chapter consists of a series of snapshots of how people interact, experience, and perceive the Nourishing Communities program. I have intended to bring participant voices to the forefront in the sections that follow, to provide a window into their experiences as they describe it. Nonetheless, my own filter has been applied to the results below, in the ways I choose to deconstruct and reconstruct the data. The organization of the following data is just one interpretation of what could be infinite interpretations of the same data (Holliday, 2007, p. 91). Decisions on how to present this vast body of data were both driven by the data (i.e., what the data appeared to “say” from my perspective) and by what I consider to be important, interesting, timely, and helpful given my prior knowledge of the program. In that same spirit, my own reflections and discussion points are lightly woven throughout the following chapter to offer context, analysis, and depth. I mark these personal points of analysis by using first person language to indicate when a thought is my own. A deeper dive into my own contemplations is included in the following chapter with a richer discussion on why I think the program and this research are meaningful and provocative.

This chapter begins by providing some contextual data that lays the groundwork for the findings that follow. An overview of the wide variety of ways participants orient toward and use the program is provided here. Then, an in-depth review of the research findings as they pertain to the following research question will be had: what impacts does the Nourishing Communities program have on participants and their communities? In the discussion that follows, I address additional questions, such as what potential does the Nourishing Communities program, and farmers markets more broadly, have in contributing to more-than-food-security?

This guiding question takes us into the heart of the research; that is the abundance of impacts that the program has on participants and their communities. I divided these impacts into three strands: 1) impacts on participants; 2) supporting local; and 3) nourishing community and connection. As will be discussed, these strands weave together (sometimes so tightly that they are inseparable) in meaningful

ways which have the potential to inform ways forward for administrators of the program. Text boxes are used throughout this chapter to offer glimpses into applied impacts of the program on a single participant and to provide additional detail or related caveats that further texturize the results.

The final discussion questions address what I see as the deep, messy meaning of the research. It delves into questions of “why it matters” and “so what?” and serves as an invitation into the conundrum of food sovereignty work in the broader context of climate crisis, equity work, and systems change.

Groundwork: Who are research participants and how do they use the program?

This first section highlights some key contextual information about participants themselves, along with how they use and understand the program. This serves as a foundation in examining many of the impacts described in the section that follows which are predicated on these types of contextual details. The next section describes the many impacts of the Nourishing Communities program.

Demographics

In total, I interviewed 26 individuals and 1 couple (n=27). 21 women, 7 men, 18 parents (or grandparents) actively taking care of children, 10 of those people were solo- (grand)parenting, 4 students, 4 immigrants (within the past 10 years), 3 seniors (65+). Participants are self-described activists, entrepreneurs, couch-dwellers, volunteer firefighters, community volunteers, crafters, caretakers, survivors, farmers, growers, bakers, retirees, living “the good life-ers”. This is a non-exhaustive list of the many ways people described themselves to me.

The program was used in various ways depending on the size of the market, its geographical location (i.e., if it was in a rural, or urban setting), and how the program was administered by the local market and partner organization. Most of the participants (n=23) participated in the program primarily by visiting in person and using physical market money (\$MM) (this currency could take form as paper money, tokens, coins, or buttons). One participant used \$MM in the form of a credit-card like gift card.

One person ordered online and went to the market to pick up their order biweekly. Two participants participated in a food box delivery version of the program, where program administrators delivered a box of food to their homes every Saturday. These participants did not choose what was in the box, it was selected for them. Due to transportation and childcare barriers, one participant had another participant pick up their market products for them and delivered to their house each week. Although there is some discussion of the impacts of the food box delivery version of the program, the results overall, are written to centre the experience of the majority of participants who visited the market in person; nonetheless comparing these different versions of administering the program shed light on important program principles in the sections that follow.

Furthermore, the distribution and usage of the \$MM was also varied across markets. Depending on the market, participants would receive their \$MM weekly, biweekly, or monthly. For some participants, a representative from their partner organization delivered their \$MM to them regularly, for others, they picked up the \$MM at their partner organization, while others picked up their \$MM at the farmers market. At some markets, participants had to spend their \$MM in a set timeframe (i.e., within two weeks of picking it up) before they could receive their next installment. For most markets this did not apply, and participants could spend the money in whatever ways they wished so long as they continued to pick up their \$MM on a consistent basis.

Secondly, not all participants engaged with the program equally. For instance, some participants visited the farmers market every week, while others went biweekly, others monthly. Many participants frequented the market in varied and sometimes sporadic ways, as life circumstances changed and schedules shifted throughout the duration of the program. As a general observation, participants' experience of the impacts of the program was a function of how frequently they visited the market. For instance, I observed that people who built going to the market into their weekly routine, and/or who visited the market more weeks than not, in any given month, also tended to report that the program had a more significant impact in their lives and in their communities, compared to participants who visited more sporadically and less frequently. For instance, Jannie really looked forward to visiting her market every

week and described how “you get to make friends with vendors that you see every week!” (Jannie); speaking to the association between relationship building and a feeling of connection, with the frequency of market visits. It is not surprising that the level of engagement in the program is a precursor for its level of impact.

Moreover, I sensed (and sometimes explicitly observed) that the way the program was communicated to participants and vendors had a significant and lasting impact on how participants used it. 11 participants reported feeling unsure or unclear of details about the program, such as if the \$MM was used just for the program or not (i.e., if they were identifiable as a participant in the program by using the \$MM), who funds the program, and if the vendors get reimbursed. Two participants were under the impression that the program was a one-time-deal until, to their surprise, they received their second round of \$MM.

Shaped by research

A surprising number of participants (roughly 6) viewed the program itself as tied to its research and data-collection function. Jude explained the purpose of the program as “a study to see if made a difference and what kind of difference” (Jude) regarding what she said was a buzzword term these days (i.e., food insecurity). Fahim Dahi said that part of its purpose was to “create a data-bank of information so people can see how these programs work well in the future” (Fahim Dahi). The FMNS distributed survey, the extent to which participants were aware of (or involved with in some cases) tracking the \$MM, as well as my own interactions with participants in the program, are examples of ways that the research functions of this program impacted participants’ understanding of it (and thus their experience). My research role was often perceived by participants as an administrative one, or that I was internal to coordinating the program rather than peripheral. My presence shaped people’s understanding of and experiences in the program in subtle ways.

Furthermore, a few participants noted the FMNS distributed surveys signaled to them that the program has “some study” attached to it. Mel noted how this survey, as well as our interviews, sensitized her to some of the community aspects of the program that she had overlooked, “I think even having these check-ins with people who were in the program... [the first interview] made me think”. She goes on to describe how the FMNS survey primed her to notice things she otherwise may not have noticed,

it was suggested in the [survey] about community [impacts]. It gave [me] the thought... I thought, okay, I can either test this out, or just be a grinch and go in and get what I want and leave. So, I took that opportunity to test it out (Mel).

For Mel, research interventions not only shaped how she understood the program, but also changed her behaviour to try to engage with more people during her farmers market visits, which, in-turn, informed how she viewed the program.

The research and data-collection aspects of this program are not separate from participant’s experiences of it. Knowing that there was a study attached to the program and that their information was being collected in some way, shaped what they noticed about the program, what they thought the program stood to accomplish, the unwritten rules of participation, what they thought administrators thought of them, and so forth. This shows that when participants interact with research efforts, it primes them to notice aspects of the program and contributes to how they come to understand it. “The research” is not separate from the program— it is a part of this “entangled landscape” (Seth & Pittoello, in press).

It makes it all the more important for provincial administrators, future researchers, and myself in this study, to be reflexive about the roles we play in shaping participant experiences (along with how participants and the program are shaping us). Attentiveness around the implicit (or explicit) messaging that is embedded in surveys, interviews, orientation materials, and interactions with participants themselves is important. This program is alive, and its various parts are in constant relationship with each other in a perpetual state of meaning making.

Broad sweeping background

I sought to determine if this diverse group of participants shared similar experiences in different dimensions of their lives. Three patterns that I heard in the first round of interviews include the following: ~18 participants (66%) identified financial insecurity as a major challenge in their lives. This ranged from having an unreliable income, to depending on government income support/supplements, to stretching out a single income to support a family. Many participants cited the cost of living, affordable housing, and the cost of (healthy) food as major concerns for themselves and folks in their community. ~15 participants (58%) identified mental health struggles or caring for someone with mental health issues as a significant challenge in their day-to-day life. For many folks this was exacerbated by the pandemic, and while others did not explicitly disclose mental health issues, the pandemic was cited often as a stressor and a disruption in their lives. Lastly, ~13 participants (48%) described significant events, or enduring periods of physical or emotional isolation. Hussy, a recent immigrant to Canada, described how the pandemic has impacted his family's sense of support and access to community in response to a question I asked about how he experiences community in his life,

we are not aware of these types of things, but this [healthcare provider] introduced this [farmers market] community for helping. [...] I really understand that we have a helping community here; but the problem, due to Covid, [is that] we don't go and explore [and meet] other people. So, we don't get any information. We are just sitting in a closed room. (Hussy)

“Sitting in a closed room” was not only experienced by Hussy, but other participants also expressed a need for more information about community supports or groups to take part in, especially in the aftermath of the pandemic.

I use the ‘~’ symbol above to indicate that since I did not explicitly ask participants about these topics, these are not statistically precise findings. Rather, the fact that these challenges were identified frequently by participants, unprompted, is a loose indicator of some of the needs and challenges participants face and might open up possibilities about what sorts of ways the program might be able to meet participants where they are at. It should be stated here that participants identified a range of

challenges, and some, none at all. As will be reinforced throughout, the program experience is highly variable, and participant circumstances varied dramatically.

Choice, flexibility, & communication

Much of the success of the program is in its rather elegant and straightforward design. Participants frequently described the program as simple and convenient, and often said that there was nothing about its design that needed to be adjusted.⁴ Reflecting on the program as a whole, Marie, D. states “it's good. It's easy. It's accessible” (Marie, D.). When asked if there was anything that could be improved about the program, participants said they could not think of any improvements more often than not. Having the flexibility to use the program according to individual needs and evolving life circumstances was an important part of maintaining ongoing participation. For several participants, their schedules shifted throughout the program: they moved, their child’s schedules changed, they found work or changed jobs, they were recovering from a surgery or illness, or described themselves as “just forgetful”. The ability to miss a week (or more) if needed and having the reassurance that they would not lose their \$MM if they did so, is an important piece in ensuring the program works for participants, and is also a respectful, anti-surveillance practice.

I also observed that ongoing contact with a program administrator (either market staff person or partner organization representative) was integral in ensuring that participants remained engaged with the program. Some participants had no idea who to contact if they had questions about the program (this was in cases where the partner organization was far removed from both the program and the participant, and the participant was never clearly introduced to a market representative). In other cases, partner organizations were highly involved in delivering \$MM to participants regularly and in engaging with their clients outside of the farmers market. The latter proved to be more favorable in promoting participant

⁴ Wall also stated that vendors in the 2016 pilot study also found the program to be simple and straightforward (p. 64).

comfort and engagement. In any case, having someone to call with questions or a point of contact at the farmers market, proved to be helpful (sometimes in profound ways) in cases where this existed.

Furthermore, adequately orienting participants at the start of the program appeared to ease nervousness and increase participation. Where orientations were missing or incomplete, it often instilled a sense of worry and unease in participants. A partner organization representative, who has been running the program successfully for years, explained how hosting an orientation session at the beginning of the program is vital to ensuring that participants remained engaged and felt comfortable, and also gave them an opportunity to voice questions, concerns, and provide feedback on what would make the program work better for them. She said that in 2020, “when we couldn't do the meeting [due to Covid], I had to handle so many more [problems]”. Not only do orientation sessions help to enhance the participant experience, but according to this partner, they also help to prevent problems down the line.

Megan, a participant, explains how an orientation session with the Market Manager proved to be helpful in assuring participants that the program is adaptable to the needs and preferences of each individual and ultimately helped relieve initial nervousness, uncertainty, or hesitation about the program, having [the Market Manager] actually come and talk and explain, ‘you don't *have* to do this, or you don't *have* to do that, it's just literally *going*. And... you can go together with a friend, you can bring your kids. It's *very* easygoing. You can come at the end of the market when it's not busy or come at eight o'clock in the morning. (Megan)

Wall (2017) also explained that a pre-program gathering proved to be exceptionally helpful in the pilot version of the program to orient participants, build excitement, alleviate initial nervousness/worry, and ensure that they felt at ease with the program.

Finally, as was also a major theme in Wall's (2017) findings about the Wolfville Local Food Bucks Program, the element of choice that is built into the program is critical. From choosing how to participate in the program (for example, for one participant the option to order online allowed her to participate), to the freedom to choose what to spend their \$MM on, the *ability to choose* enables agency. Some participants compared the program to experiences at the Food Bank by saying things like, “the food

bank is the food that other people have donated. So, it's not necessarily something you would have picked up for yourself" (Jannie); and, "it's not like when you go to the food bank— like here's your box of food and we'll see you later. It's just nice to be in control of what it is that you're picking and choosing and planning. Like I said, I'm a foodie and I like to think ahead" (Dexter).

Participants also expressed that unlike food banks, they were able to buy food that aligned with their dietary needs. For participants who received food boxes, being unable to select products for themselves was a negative aspect of the program. Wall writes in her evaluation of the 2016 program strengths and weaknesses, "people were not only receivers of a service, but they had gained some sense of ownership because they were able to choose where they wanted to spend their coupons" (Wall, 2017, p. 70). Jazzy expressed how she enjoyed this aspect of the program, "you could just spend what you want, it was very freeing" as Marie D. reiterates, "the sense of freedom is a big deal" (Marie, D.).

Who for?

Roughly three-quarters of participants saw a (or the) main purpose of the program as seeking to support people with low-incomes, or those who might be in precarious or trying circumstances. Tommy says, "I feel like the first priority is to help people out" (Tommy). Folks often saw the program as a means of providing access to healthy food to low-income populations (n= ~16), but rarely cited addressing food insecurity as a purpose of the program. In the second interview, more participants were apt to include social impacts, supporting mental health, facilitating connections, and supporting vendors as major purposes of the program. Tommy goes on to explain that other purposes of the program could include,

I don't know [if it's] my personal feelings, but [the purpose of the program might be] to find these connections I was telling you about. Maybe it's a bit of that and like incentivize people to buy from local vendors and support your own local economy. (Tommy)

Participants who saw the purpose of the program as narrowly benefiting only “poor people”, tended to also report a narrower experience of the impacts of the program. The greater degree to which people saw the program as having multifaceted purposes and multifunctionality, the more accessible an expansive profile of impacts was to them. This is demonstrated in the food box delivery example below.

The food box delivery experience

Two participants had food boxes delivered to them. These participants did not select the products in the box, rather, as explained by an administrative representative from this market, each vendor would bring a set amount of food to put into the participant boxes, and then at the end of the market, vendors would often “donate” things that did not sell during market hours to participant boxes. The market representative was enthusiastic about how the value of the box was more than the allotted amount of \$MM that participants received thanks to these donated “extras”. Receiving the box was described “like Christmas morning” by both of the participants who I interviewed from this market.

The language used in describing the food box delivery program is very different from how other (non-delivery) participants described the program. Descriptors such as “recipients, donations, generosity of vendors, like Christmas morning” were only used when referring to this version of the program. These descriptors are in opposition to how other participants describe (in the sections below) a sense of contributing to the market, helping their neighbours, and actively engaging in the program (rather than being recipients or gifted donated food). Furthermore, being able to choose for oneself how to spend the \$MM is an important aspect of the program that is lost when items are pre-selected for them, or when they are given “left-overs”.

One food-box participant expressed a lot of frustration with the items in the box not being labelled. I observed in this instance, that ‘farmers market food’ may not have been familiar or accessible to them, and without an opportunity to ask vendors questions or learn about such products, this participant ended up giving unmarked and unfamiliar food items away to family members. Furthermore, this

participant described the experience like “a handout” which elicited strong feelings about not wanting “people to think that I'm out to get just whatever I can get, because I wasn't brought up that way”. This participant was the biggest outlier in the data, and I perceive these negative (yet complicated) feelings as somewhat correlated with the design of pre-selected, “donated”, delivered food boxes, which strongly resembles that of food hampers and the experience of using a food bank. In some ways these negative feelings were exacerbated because the participant was “selected” to participate in receiving “charity”, which elicited feelings of frustration with being seen as “needy” (rather than seeking out assistance for themselves, as Food Bank users do).

This participant just saw the program as well-intentioned people “just trying to be nice” but expressed strong feelings of frustration, indignity, and disempowerment when describing their experience. It also should be noted that this participant did not have a literacy level that would have allowed them to express these feelings through a survey. Although this is a very specific case, due attention should be given to cases where potential harm or alienation is perpetuated, albeit well-intentioned. The other participant who participated in the food box delivery program did not share these negative feelings and enjoyed the program, however did express that they would have preferred to shop in person.

Conclusion

This introductory section highlights some of the general demographic and background information of participants, and presents some of the ways that participants come to know, use, and experience the program. Notably, participants overwhelmingly stated that the program is easy to use and convenient. Furthermore, the element of choice serves as an important feature of the program— this finding will be discussed further in the sections that follow.

Research findings: What impacts does the program have on participants and their communities?

The impacts of the program extended far beyond what the program was designed to do in the narrowest sense— that is to address food insecurity.

These impacts proved to be abundant and can be loosely parted into three strands:

- 1) impacts on participants
- 2) supporting local
- 3) nourishing community and connection

These results closely resemble the FMNS framework of the program as presented on their website which describes the Nourishing Communities program as: “supporting small, local business; building community; and addressing food insecurity” (Farmers’ Markets of Nova Scotia, n.d.). One of the central arguments of this thesis is to probe the notion of the program as “addressing food insecurity” in an empirical or narrow sense. The data shows that the program is rarely used as an emergency food source, (although, food security is much more than not needing emergency food). While many participants reported increased levels of food security and improved nutrition while participating in the program, there were also a myriad of felt and relational impacts that are often overlooked in “mainstream” discussions of food access and security. Figure 2 depicts a mind map of the research findings, divided into their respective colour-coded themes, and their embedded connectedness through the usage of connected lines.

Jen Bolt, the Volunteer Coordinator for the Wolfville Farmers’ Market describes the program using the metaphor of a 3-legged stool, where each leg represents an “issue” that is addressed by the program: food insecurity, social engagement, and supporting the local economy. “I know that’s important to government—I think that’s the success of getting the government funding—is those three beneficiaries”, Jen said. The three-legged stool analogy is highly congruent with the findings of this study.

Inspired by Jen’s analogy, I decided to depict the three main impacts of the program as a three-strand braid, to illustrate the intimacy, malleability, inseparability, and synergy of these impacts. These strands weave together in intricate, sometimes subtle, and important ways.⁵ For sake of communicating these ideas, this section is divided into three distinct sub-sections, however, as is demonstrated in participants’ words, these strands overlap, contradict, and expand on each other in ways that are not neatly divided into three distinct containers. Figure 3 illustrates the braid that represents how I understood the entangled impacts of the program as described by participants.

⁵ In using the braiding metaphor, I want to acknowledge its importance in some Indigenous traditions. Even though I am not building on Kimmerer’s work directly, in *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013) she uses the braid to integrate three strands: “indigenous ways of knowing, scientific knowledge, and the story of an Anishinabekwe scientist trying to bring them together in service to what matters most. It is an intertwining of science, spirit, and story” (p. x.). She writes that “sweetgrass, as the hair of Mother Earth, is traditionally braided to show loving care for her well-being. Braids, plaited of three strands, are given away as signs of kindness and gratitude” (p. 203).

Figure 2: Results mind map



Figure 3: Weaving impacts of the Nourishing Communities program



Strand One: Reported impacts on participants themselves

Consider this first strand an attempt at representing the many ways that the Nourishing Communities program impacted participants themselves. It is by no means a comprehensive list, but it is extensive and captures the most profound, frequently experienced, or surprising impacts that the program had on participants themselves.

Although this section is about how participants saw the program impacting themselves as individuals (or as a family), each of the impacts listed below are predicated on interaction with human/non-human forces and relations in multi-directional ways. This strand is not as straightforward as ‘addressing food insecurity’, nor do these impacts live within the clear bodily container of the participant. The decision to label this strand as such was made for organizational ease and should not be understood as separate from the rest. If anything, these findings support the case for interconnectedness by providing evidence of impact on multiple scales (including that of the individual).

Rarely an emergency food supply

One participant reported using the program as an emergency food supply. I interpreted an emergency food supply as relying on \$MM as a main food source, and without it, it was uncertain how

food would be accessed. This participant struggled to even define food security because he did not have any for a period of time,

I couldn't afford to buy groceries. Literally, there was no fucking money left to buy groceries.

After you pay bills and stuff like that, I mean, I had *no food security* at that time. For four months

I had none. Except for the market bucks. But that was my security for the longest time.

For the remaining 26 participants, the program served many other purposes. For some it was a way of freeing up money in their budget, for others it was something they used on treats, crafts, or what could be considered as “pleasure items”, and for others it enabled them to purchase (more) high-quality produce. The list goes on.

This is not to diminish any particular way the program is used and what impacts it has. Food (in)security is a fluid continuum and so there were instances of the program increasing security in different ways. It is clear, however, that the program is rarely used as an emergency food supply for participants (nor designed to be used as such).

Increased financial security

The Nourishing Communities program increased the financial security of a handful of people (~5-7 participants). For some it allowed them to feel more at ease with their finances, knowing that there was a buffer of money available thanks to the program. For others, it meant that they felt more secure knowing there was food in the freezer that they could count on. Here are a few participant voices that illuminate these impacts,

it has certainly affected other areas of my life outside of my interaction with the market. But I think they are in ways that are more subtle until I just thought about it now. [...] It has freed me up to not feel quite so pinched a lot of the time about how can I afford this, how can I afford that? Because I know that I have food in the freezer and I'm good. (Jude)

Even though most participants did not use the program as an emergency food source, it increased people's feeling of security in some cases with the reassurance that there was money available if they needed it.

Sarah: I think that the biggest thing- is that we are still really struggling financially, and it was a huge part to alleviating some of that burden, because it was something that I knew like, okay, well, if I just spent my last 20 bucks, at least I know that on Saturday, I have this buffer right, to get me through; and I can get some stuff for food and the kids lunches for the week. So that was huge. [...]

Erika: What does it mean for you now that the program's over?

Sara: it means budgeting differently. [...] it means that I don't have that buffer

Tommy explains how it was reassuring to have a dependable source of food each week, to help supplement his budget as a student,

at the start of the semester I was a bit anxious about not having enough money to survive the next month or the next two. I guess this program was helpful because I stocked up on a lot of frozen food, and that's really easy. [...] I got like lasagna and like ready to put in the oven pasta. [...] So it helped me for like, maybe like for like two days of a week. Because I could get like food for two days of the week. So it was really it's nice to know that you have support. (Tommy)

Participants also expressed how having a set amount dedicated for food was also a helpful budgeting tool. Food insecurity arises because it is often considered negotiable part of people's budgets (opposed to rent or electricity) which means that buying/eating less or using supports is a strategy for meeting other needs. Therefore, it was reassuring for some people to have a reliable amount set aside that could be used on food if needed. Fahim Dahi explains how it was a helpful budgeting tool for him and his family:

you can't just, misplace it, mismanage it. It creates a very specific budget system for healthy food and access to food that you cannot use in any other way. It gets you out of the house. It's a backup system for if you do make mistakes in your budgeting, because we all do right. Like rent's getting

higher. Living wage is like getting there, but it's tricky. So, you're guaranteed access to food. I've never spent it all once, I had it for almost the whole month, every month because of the way it was designed. (Fahim Dahi)

In addition, for Fahim Dahi, being in the program gifted him with some time to look for a job in his field instead of being at the mercy of whatever he found first. He said that the program “gave me time to look for a job in my field rather than just picking any job. It gave me a little bit of bargaining time” (Fahim Dahi). It is in this way that one of the key tenets of the program, that of choice (about what \$MM can be spent on and how the \$MM is used), manifests itself in various ways; for Fahim Dahi, the program enabled a choice of employment.

Increase financial freedom

Roughly 60% of participants (16 out of n=26 (second interview)) described the experience of financial freedom or ease as a result of the program. This theme was voiced in the following ways, “it was nice to come and actually be able to get things that you like, that you may not be able to afford within your budget typically” (Leeann); and “[I liked] being able to get something for everyone [in the family]” (Samantha); and “with this program, I get something extra which I was not buying usually. So, this is some kind of extra thing” (Jem); and “it made me happy knowing that I had the extra stuff in there for the kids. [...] it frees up that extra income for the extra things that people need” (Marie, D); and “it allowed us to get stuff that we normally wouldn't be able to afford to have. Like honey and jam and pictures or sea glass crafts, or like stuff that we normally wouldn't [buy]” (Mandy).

Leeann described how being able to say yes to buying things at the market was meaningful for her as a parent,

I hate having to say no because we can't afford it. [...] like coming here and seeing something they really like, or they really want to get and saying, ‘hey, you know what? Yes. Here you can go get it’. So, it's important that I don't have to say no all the time because then I become the “no”

mom- going to school, 'oh mom will never let me get this, she never lets me get that'. And I don't want people to think I'm a bad mom, because I'm not. So it's more or less being able to do something with them and being able to say, 'hey, you know what? You can get that. (Leeann)

One of the more illuminating findings of this research is that on the spectrum of consumption, participants frequently used the program to purchase what they perceive as "extra", rather than essential items. Sometimes this manifested as replacing a product that they normally bought at the grocery store (such as pancake syrup) with a higher-quality product (such as Nova Scotian maple syrup). Sometimes it meant getting something that they would not have considered purchasing otherwise, such as a craft or cookie-making set as an activity to do with the kids (Leeann). Victoria bought gifts for people in her life. She said, "anybody that I did give a gift to, they really appreciated it, which would make me happy. That was cause and effect of coming to the market" (Victoria).

Sara allocated a set amount of her \$MM each month to each of her children in an effort to instill some ownership, money management skills, and agency. She said that her kid also chose to buy gifts sometimes, "my youngest is incredibly generous. Would try to be buying presents for other people too, which is nice" (Sara). A number of participants also mentioned in the second interview that they used the last of their \$MM to buy Christmas presents as the program came to a close in the fall/winter.

Many of the items purchased were catalysts for connection with food, products, or people that were embedded with meaning beyond nutritional value. Participants chose to spend money on what made sense at a specific time in their lives. Often it included food, and sometimes it did not. Without knowing participants' full stories and the context in which they are deciding to purchase something, I do not think value can be assigned to one "category" of purchasing over another.

A new set of teeth

Mel, a repeat participant, uses the program (and other social supports) in a strategic way. She spends the \$MM on things that she would already be buying at the grocery store (i.e., the essentials), and saves her money that would otherwise be spent on those essentials. After committing to this strategy for a while (including using other community supports in similar ways), she was able to buy herself a whole new set of teeth,

it's kind of nice being able to be a part of the farmers [market program] because it helps me out financially, as in saving for these teeth. My teeth had rotted in my head from neglecting my dental care—the last time I was to a dentist was 40 years ago. And it was two years ago[...] I went into [the dentist] and [...] they removed all of my top teeth and the couple on the bottom, and I now have dentures. So, it gave me back my smile. I'm learning an awful lot to love myself. It's been huge in the last 11 years as a change. In being able to use the food bank and being able to use the market bucks, I'm able to save money for my teeth or other things, which is kind of nice.

She later describes the culture of short-term, self-perpetuating money spending habits, and how she learned to use the resources in her community to transcend living precariously,

sometimes people who are low income (because I hear many people talking when you're sitting in the lineup of the food bank) they don't think of the idea of using the resources to save money elsewhere to use it. It's just blow your money and then just go to the food bank as a last resort or [with the program] the same idea is, say, blow it, just because it's extra money to buy things that perhaps you don't need. And I can understand wanting to have something different when you're used to not having too much. But I find that if you use it appropriately, you have more money. For the first time in my life, I've been able to save money. So, when done the right way, the resources can really be beneficial for somebody. I'm not sure if there's enough education in that. (Mel)

On scarcity, abundance, and having enough

One of the themes that emerged was regarding scarcity, abundance, and a feeling of enough. This could be material scarcity as it relates to not having enough food, finances, or time, for example. When people described eating smaller portions to make sure that their kids had enough to eat, or trying to stretch out their budget to last them the week, I took note. This also includes psychological scarcity which Mel describes in her own experience with hoarding food,

I can remember [...] when I was dieting 11 years ago, I had 20 jars of peanut butter in the cupboard, who needs 20 jars of peanut butter? [...] I think in the fact of not knowing if we would have money, we would hoard whatever we could at the time. [...] But I'm grateful to have a program like this [...] I'm okay, I can get produce. (Mel)

The Nourishing Communities program subtly promotes an alternative mindset for a lot of folks, where they are able to spend the \$MM as they wish, and participants often use it on products considered as “extra”. Being able to say yes to things that normally they would not be able to say yes to, buying treats for the kids or buying a gift for a loved one, or trying something new because they felt like there was money to do so. These are all functions of feeling like there is enough room to give and enjoy.

For Robin, alleviating a sense of scarcity quite literally allowed her to see the abundance in her community. When asked if anything surprised her about the program or the farmers market experience, Robin responded:

what was actually there. I guess when I went there prior to the program, I overlooked a lot of things because I was like, ‘Oh, I can't afford that, or oh, that's not something I may be interested in’. But with the farmer's dollars, I kind of took time to really see what was there. It allowed you to kind of be more aware of what was actually offered. I guess I didn't realize they had as much as they did, until I was spending time there and going every other week. (Robin)

Jude has the skills to feed, cloth, and house herself with her own hands. She is a grower, a maker, and carpenter, who is deeply involved in food security work in her community. Her personal, self-sufficiency, and her outward, community activism work are deeply intertwined. In fact, she spends much of her time running the community garden, teaching food preserving workshops, and writing opinion articles for the local newspaper. Jude also helped to start the farmers market in her community! This is what Jude had to say on the topic of abundance and scarcity in her second interview:

it's been interesting just trying to think differently about how one operates in the world in general. Mother Nature is very generous. You know, there's stuff growing everywhere. And the place is full of food and resources to use. Not necessarily to exploit— but to use. And if you want to take a more narrow focus, back to the market bucks program, just knowing that I had kind of extra in the fridge and in the freezer took me somewhere sort of mentally to a better state of ease, kind of generally, knowing that there's enough. And really, in this part of the world, there's always enough. And it doesn't make sense that so many people don't have enough. (Jude)

For some folks, this program shifted the way in which they move about in the world, and what sorts of possibilities are accessible to them. Cultivating a sense of security, “enough”, and abundance can act as an interruption to stressful cycles of scarcity, that may even have significant physiological, mental, and behavioural impacts on the ways in which people are able to show up in the world knowing that they have “enough”.

Improved nutrition and promote healthy living

Nearly three quarters of participants (n=19) reported that they ate healthier while they were in the program. When asked if the program impacted their health in the initial interview, participants first response was usually about improving their physical health by eating more fruit and vegetables and purchasing higher quality foods. Robin expressed how it was an enabling factor in including more produce in her diet,

I'm more apt to go and buy the veggies and the peppers and the things that you'd want to buy at the grocery store that you can't afford to buy, but you have a chance to buy it now. So there's no excuse to say no to having a healthier eating habit or lifestyle or whatever. (Robin)

Participants had slightly different understandings about what “eating healthier” meant. For some it was about buying fresh fruit and vegetables (Alex and Mae), for others it was about access to spray-free and organic products (Hussy and Jazzy), Dolphin Dodge felt strongly about local food as inherently healthy, while for others the program was a catalyst for trying out different recipes from cooking with whole foods (Marie, D. and Leeann). A handful of participants (n= <6) said that the program supported their unique diet plan. Angel said that the most significant part of the program for her was, “losing weight and feeling a lot healthier” (Angel).

The program facilitated a deeper engagement with food in some instances, and increased awareness of health (via nutrition and mobility) for several people. Depending on how participants saw the purpose of the program (i.e., if they saw its value as partly nutritional), regular visits to the market often offered a dedicated and reoccurring time to engage with food and nutrition. Robin again explains how this program helped her to dedicate some time every week to help fit healthy eating into her busy schedule:

I have two jobs. I have a two-year-old daughter. I am usually on the go a lot [...] I do 12 hour shifts a lot, I'm working a lot. [...] I try to have healthy food on my table. I try to normalize eating your breakfast, lunch and their supper with my kiddo and teaching her good eating habits and all that stuff. But it's a struggle sometimes. You know, life gets ahead of you and sometimes [...] I find myself going a mile a minute, and then at least if I have something like this program to give me an idea to take two hours and go to the farmers market, you know what I mean? (Robin)

When asked what the most significant impact of the program was for her, Robin replied:

I guess being mindful of a product that I'm taking in my house [...] I shop a little more vegan now, and plant based just because of what's offered at the market. So I've changed my lifestyle a

little bit in regards to eating and products that I'm taking into my home and sharing with my child.

(Robin)

Jannie also describes how her kids crave healthier foods as a result of the program, “the kids want healthier food now. They missed the cucumbers. Not so much the fudge. They've accepted that there's no fudge, but they miss the cucumbers” (Jannie). Elaine describes a similar shift in her kids. She received food boxes, and said that,

this is helping them want a lot more healthier stuff because they see the newer stuff in there and they want to try and they want to eat it more. So it's encouraging them to go for the healthier fresh fruit and vegetables, rather than go to the cupboard and grab bag chips or Bear Paw. (Elaine)

For the minority of participants (n=2), the program seemed to have a negative impact on their nutrition due to purchasing “treats”. For these participants, the program was beneficial in other ways (see all other impacts).

Agency, meaningful participation, and learning something new

Building off themes of choice and autonomy presented in the first part of this chapter, in addition to eating healthier, participants also described learning new things—often times about food or other products at the market. The program facilitated learning and encouraged participants to engage in “new things” in several ways. Firstly, people would often describe interactions with vendors as educational exchanges. Lots of folks enjoyed being able to ask vendors questions and learn about their products.

Jannie explains,

you can look at the person that is providing the food, whereas in the store you don't know where it came from. You don't even know if it came from the same country that it's in right now. You don't know how long it's been sitting there. And you can't ask questions on it because no one knows. But at a farmers market, you talk to them and ask them questions, find out more about food that you're about to eat. (Jannie)

Participants shared with me, things they learned about specific products such as golden beets, sprouts, and solid honey via their interactions with vendors. In addition, participants would regularly share how they learned more about local food systems and seasonality as a result of the program (see “connection to seasonality” in the following section for more detail). When asked if she saw any long-term impacts of the program, Veena responded “perhaps not in the sense that they wanted to achieve—as in food security” she goes on, “but it definitely got us thinking more about what can be locally sourced from the area that we live in. I think there were definitely educational benefits to the program and connecting people for sure” (Veena).

Many participants learned that there was a farmers market in their community through the program and even more participants visited their local farmers market for the first time because of the program. About a third of participants visited their farmers market for the first time thanks to the program. Another five participants only visited the market once or twice, prior to joining the program. Some people were initially excited to add a new activity to their routines, while others were apprehensive at the beginning. For folks who struggle with social anxiety, the program incentivized them to do something out of their comfort zone in a relatively manageable and accessible environment.

Hussy explains that as a newcomer to Canada with farming roots in his home country, learning about the farmers market was very important to him. He explained that he lives very close to the market “we’re two kilometers close”, but he had never known it existed prior to the program, “but I [have] never [been] here before. Once I get this program and get in, then every week, I go. That’s help[ed] me. Also, I introduce a lot of my friends” (Hussy). He said that these friends were also immigrants to Canada and the farmers market turned into a weekly outing, initiated by Hussy, where a handful of families visited the market together each week (none of them were in the Nourishing Communities program except for Hussy); which also provided cherished social time where their children could play together, and adults connected over what Hussy described as a nostalgic experience from his home country. Mandy, on the other hand had lived in her community for years and did not know there was a farmers market “right down the road” (Mandy).

What is more, is that a considerable number of participants said that they were surprised to find out that the farmers market offered more than just produce. Victoria explains how she was surprised by the different stuff that's here. The different options like food or clothing items or jewelry items, just the variety of the stuff that's here is pretty shocking. If you've never been in the doors before, you would think it's just going to be fruits and vegetables and stuff like that. It's totally more than that. (Victoria)

This aspect expanded some people's notion of what was available in their community more broadly and opened some participants to the expansiveness of what can be procured locally, "I've never been to [the] farmers market and now I am familiar with who works there and the product they sell. I'm learning about the community. I'm feeling more connected, and I have satisfaction that I'm supporting local food producers" (Jem).

In a similar way, the program was an incentive to try new things. Megan is a participant in the program and she works for the partner organization that administers the program in her local community (she is not the only participant that I interviewed that held this dual role). In her dual role, she is often in relationship (or minimally in contact) with other participants in the program. She told me about the significance of

seeing people try new things and get out of their comfort zone... and for me, being able to let the kids try just whatever they want. [...] [Community X] is not great for meeting new people and getting out there. We really don't have a lot, other than like Church. (Megan)

For many participants, having the \$MM reduced the risk of trying something new. It was considered a reliable source of "free money" for a lot of folks, and thus there was less pressure to spend it sparingly (see section on cultivating abundance above). Bailey, an online ordering participant said that her child ordered three different kinds of apples one week to see what kind was best. She spoke to the impact of being able to try things, "I love that there is still a great variety online [...] I can try different things that maybe you kind of hummed and haaa-ed about whether to spend money on something. Rather than,

okay, we can try this!” (Bailey). Especially for participants with children, the ability to say yes to trying new things was impactful for both the child and the parent.

Regular activity to look forward to out of the house

Another frequent theme that emerged from the data was having the excuse to “get out of the house”. For roughly half of the participants, going to the farmers market was usually described as a helpful incentive to “get out” on a regular basis. Considering that almost half of participants identified instances of feeling isolated in other aspects of their lives, this is a significant aspect of the program that can act as an antidote for isolation and was often considered a positive outing that broke up people’s weeks. It was especially meaningful in the context of the pandemic and lockdowns. It also helped people who may otherwise be relatively reticent to get out of their own homes and into a new, community-based environment. It gave people *something to look forward to*. It gave people *a place to go*. It was an incentive to *get out* of their homes and *out of themselves* (emphasis signals the words of participants).

Fahim Dahi said that the market was a positive place that kept him going during a rough period in his life,

it kept me going—I kept going somewhere. I could easily fall into a trap where I just don't leave my house for months. And I was in that trap, but in this way it got me going somewhere else, and it got me coming to a place that wasn't super toxic. (Fahim Dahi)

Robin further explains why getting out is important for people who may otherwise spend much of their time at home, “I think it's a really good excuse to get people that may not necessarily go on their own to get out into the community and see that there's so much more out there than the four walls of their home” (Robin).

Supported mental health and wellbeing

When asked if the program impacted their health, participants frequently stated that in addition to physical health, it supported their mental health for several of the reasons listed in other sections, (i.e., getting out of the house, trying new things, learning, making connections, spending time with loved ones, eating healthier, supporting vendors), and more. For many participants this program proved to be an invaluable tool in maintaining or improving their mental health.

Mandy said that she was “glad that it was there” and that it helped her to be “a lot more sociable and outgoing and comfortable to come to a building with lots of strangers and not be so nervous [...] it lowered my social anxiety” (Mandy). She continues by emphasizing why having somewhere to go impacts a sense of purpose and belonging in the world, “because if you have nowhere to go and nothing to do, you feel down about yourself. If you go somewhere and your around people, you feel like a sense of— a need—that you’re needed and wanted in the world” (Mandy).

For Jannie, it gave her “something to look forward to every week. And it's fun!” she said, it gave me a break. Gave me something to focus on that was positive. Really hard to make a negative out of it, which is nice considering there's a lot of negative around. So it was a nice change of pace to go somewhere and it was just all positive. Bit of a mood lift [...] (Jannie).

Sara similarly said her social and mental wellbeing improved while she was in the program, by “having something to look forward to. I’m still not working and still looking for work— so it gave me purpose every week to get out. That was important” (Sara). Marie, D. shared an analogous story,

I lost my job because of Covid and then I’m on maternity. So it's a big help in itself. But what I found when I got here, it was just the connection again, meeting people... it’s just emotionally— emotionally has been the biggest piece of this puzzle for me. (Marie, D.)

Health impacts often extended to people that participants brought with them to the market; partners, parents, children were also reported experiencing improved mental health thanks to the program.

Contributed to self-esteem and personal growth

Spending the \$MM, was for some people, a difficult or embarrassing experience (as discussed in the final strand). For others, it instilled confidence, a sense of pride, and was a vehicle for personal growth. For a subset of participants (typically those who considered the \$MM a more reciprocal exchange and those who were connected with other participants through their partner organization), a sense of pride and increased confidence in using the \$MM was reported. For these folks, the program spilled into their personal lives in an enriching way.

Victoria explained how having money to walk through the doors of the market was good for self-esteem. She said it supports participants

to have their head up and not be worried about buying something that they may not have been able to afford, because now they can. Now they can afford it, and it instills a little bit of confidence in you that way. (Victoria)

Mandy was particularly attuned to this aspect of the program and explained how it helped her with her social anxiety and gave her an opportunity to develop social skills that she had not been able to develop as a child. She describes how her first market experience, prior to the program, she was too scared to even go in the building, and instead waited for her friend outside for 20 minutes. Now she says she “comes here, and I feel confident”. She said she is “more involved in life,” and the program has helped her “grow as a person” (Mandy). She can now go out in public by herself, which she attributes to the program.

Marie, D. reiterated that the program impacted her confidence to become a vendor at the market there's no two ways about it. [The program] gave me the confidence to come back and try my own hand here” (Marie, D.). Finally, Fahim Dahi explained the impacts the program has had on him as a person and as a father:

it made me more confident when I wasn't feeling too confident. [...] I've never been in a parenting situation before, and there was a lot going on at the same time, so it was kind of scary because I always imagined that I'd be the perfect dad and I was living in a very imperfect world.

And it was very hard. But no matter what, the kid looked up to me, she saw that I was a provider. She saw that I was a person who would go home and cook from scratch, and it gained her respect and gained my partner's respect. I mean, I gain respect in other ways, too, but like that was very, very important for me. (Fahim Dahi)

Strand Two: Supporting local

This second strand underscores the many ways that participants saw the program impacting people and communities beyond participants themselves. Participants were particularly sensitized to the notion that the Nourishing Communities program materially benefited vendors along with their broader community. This proved to have implications on how participants used and experienced the program, and what sorts of effects it had.

A boost to the local economy

Supporting local was one of the major themes identified by participants. 58% of participants saw one primary purposes of the program as a boost to the local economy and a means of supporting local people in their community. Mandy explains how her participation in the program ultimately contributed to the local economy, “people in the community [are] able to make more money on us. And that is more community money brought into [the region]” (Mandy).

Participants also saw the program as contributing to the local food system by supporting local farmers. Marie D. articulates how the program is a “really good boost to the economy, the Nova Scotia economy. It's helping farmers keep going. Farming is really risky, but it's probably the most important job” (Marie, D.). She goes on to say that the price of food is related to the rising costs of production for farmers, which makes farming a volatile undertaking “they work really hard and it's good to have stability for them” (Marie, D.).

Furthermore, for some, it enabled a consciousness-raising experience about the value of goods and brought the notion of neoliberal, global, capitalist systems to the fore. Jazzy held values of

supporting local prior to the program, and appreciated the fact that this program enabled more of that. She describes, “I like things handmade, and I like things hand grown. I don’t like big manufacturers, I prefer to support local” (Jazzy). Participants expressed an appreciation for the human labour, love, and creativity that goes into products that can be found at the farmers market. “It’s the craftsmanship that you’re buying, right? Not the mass-produced garbage” Dexter exclaimed.

This exchange is made even more significant when, in the words of Victoria, the impact of the program includes “more people that are coming to the market as a whole and probably a potential sale for somebody that wouldn’t get it otherwise because we wouldn’t have had the funds to get the item” (Victoria). Livelihoods of vendors are more supported when “the middle-man” are people who are now connected to the market that may have not been before. In the words of Dolphin Dodge, “it’s more or less advertising” (Dolphin Dodge) for farmers markets and the vendors themselves.

Roughly a third of participants had never visited their farmers market prior to the program. Samantha stated how the program served as a welcome incentive for her, “I’ve never been here other than being part of the Food Bucks program, and I always wanted to come. [The program] gave me the incentive to come” (Samantha).

This impact is not limited to the timeframe of the program either. It is also impacted indirectly when participants who were not previously connected to the market continue to support vendors and visit after the program comes to an end, such as Sara who explains, “not only just that the [vendors] are being supported during the duration of the program, but people like me who form some relationships with some of the vendors that I wouldn’t normally have made those relationships or connections [with], and now I am going to keep returning as a customer” (Sara).

Furthermore, a boost in the sales of vendors, and to the regional economy is impacted (even if only marginally) when participants promote the market within their own circles- to people who may not have been connected to the market prior to the program. Bailey, a participant for whom the option to redeem her \$MM through online ordering is extremely congruent for her life, said

I've told everybody about the online ordering. A few my coworkers didn't even know you could order online. [...] And even my co-worker said— because I might place an order next week— he's like 'if I just give you money will you just place my order with yours?' (Bailey)

Interviewees were aware that they were supporting local people to varying degrees. A few indicated that they strove to use their \$MM to support a variety of vendors as the program progressed to try to “share the love”. Participants like Hussy mentioned that he “introduced a lot [his] friends” (Hussy) to the farmers market and noted how that increased vendors sales. Other people said that they were excited to talk about the market with their friends, family, and co-workers. Veena said that she took vendors' cards to promote to her friends, “I took all of their name cards as well and I keep recommending them to my friends. I mean, we're living in the same place so it's always good to promote them, right?” (Veena).

Although still a market-driven activity, there was a clear felt experience in the exchange of \$MM for handmade, homegrown, and homemade, products that stood out for some participants. On a personal scale, the program enabled many participants to live into their values or sparked the onset of a new value set that involves thinking about the impact of their own consumption behaviours, as it did for Robin,

[I'm] changing my perspective on shopping local. How much of an impact it really does have on your community when you shop local. [...] Being able to afford to do it and kind of realizing what is actually out there, in your community and how you can support your community and how it goes back to them. Sometimes when you go to a bigger box store, it doesn't necessarily go back to anybody, so this way it's going back to the person that produced it or made it. (Robin)

Participants identified a few different ways that the \$MM they spent made an impact on multiple scales, from the individual vendors with whom the \$MM was exchanged, and also for the local economy more broadly. Participants understood these impacts through the immediate injection of dollars into the local economy when \$MM was passed from the hands of participants into the hands of vendors.

Supporting another person in the community

Participants emphasised the quality of local goods at the farmers market being much higher than what they saw at “big-box” stores. Most of participants who said that farmers market goods are more expensive expressed that this increased price reflected the higher value of the good. Not all participants felt this way however; Mae for example found the prices at the market to be surprisingly high, and was not entirely sure why, “I was surprised that some of the prices were so high” Mae said. I asked her why she thought that was and she responded, “I really don't know other than it's just local farmers trying to make a living” (Mae).

While many participants expressed that prices at the farmers market are higher than what is found at the grocery store, most of them justified these prices by knowing that they were supporting a person in their community, which made them feel good about spending the \$MM. The feeling of being able to divert money from corporations into (often small, rural) Nova Scotian neighbourhoods is not just economic, it is understood by a visceral sense of caring for each other. Elaine describes,

a lot of the local businesses are run by people no different than me or you or my next-door neighbors, and they need to make a living too; and if people aren't shopping local and they're going to all these big branch stores, then [local people] don't make that money to put food on the table for their family and friends and get-togethers. (Elaine)

As Elaine suggested, participants often expressed a deep sense of satisfaction knowing that they were supporting a real person in their community. This aspect of the program had an undertone of camaraderie and solidarity because participants often saw vendors as peers. In this way vendors and participants were on an equal playing field because the program was reciprocal; as Jannie describes, “you can just look around, see what people are making by their hands, and you get to *help* them by buying something that you *need*. So you're helping *each other*...”; she adds as a side note, “and you end up with favorite booths very quickly” (Jannie).

There was not an obvious vertical hierarchy present in interactions with vendors since participants held the purchasing power and were actively contributing to vendors livelihoods. In Nova

Scotia, farmers and market patrons tend to be from the same rural community (rather than a meeting of the rural/urban that is predominantly described in the literature). In some instances, participants saw vendors as potentially being in precarious situations themselves. Upon reflection, Dexter expressed that the program is beneficial because it helps both participants and vendors who may find themselves in precarious situations, “you’re helping families in need” (i.e., participants). “Plus, you’re helping small entrepreneurs trying to support their own families. Maybe some of these people find themselves in the same situation— you don’t know right?” (Dexter). Being able to support someone in need in the local community created the sense of contributing to a chain of support that existed beyond the participants themselves. Robin describes this network,

you’re giving back to that community and it’s going back into the hands of somebody else that may need it. You don’t know the situation of that vendor. Well, they’re feeding their families so it’s rolling into other things, [...] it’s supporting other families by it coming down the line. (Robin)

Jude, a farmer/grower herself and community organizer around local food systems, reiterated the importance of connecting folks with local producers,

I also see [the program] as a means to support especially small local farmers markets. I mean, if you have more customers, they’re buying stuff from local producers, it does a number of things: you end up then with the more educated shopper who’s not buying the imported crap at the local supermarket; and you also end up with local producers who have more of their product purchased and used and understood. That also encourages an interaction between the grower/producer and the person who might not have been a farmers market shopper prior to that. (Jude)

A “helping community”

A key indicator for experiencing a sense of belonging (which will be discussed in strand three), as well as an antidote to stigma of receiving charity, that I observed in participants was the extent to which they saw themselves as actively contributing to the market community by participating in the program.

Many participants described experiences of “helping one another” as the building blocks of what it means to be a community. Jannie’s reflections capture this:

I feel like I belong to a community that’s helping one another. Because it’s all like individuals, not businesses, although farming is a business... But like you’re looking at the person that grows the carrots that you’re buying. And in a time like this, everyone could use a little extra help, especially the people that don’t get like corporate bailouts, like the farmers. So, we’re getting something we need. They’re getting something they need. (Jannie)

This reflection demonstrates how this “supporting local” strand is emmeshed in the feeling of belonging to a community of care and support (themes in strand 3).

Livelihood-making

Marie, D. described in her first interview that the pandemic had taken a toll on her and her family's lives. For health reasons, she and her young children remained intentionally isolated for most of the pandemic. She had been running an online crafting business on the side for a while and described how going to the market through the Food Bucks program helped her "get her social back" and gave her the confidence to try her own hand at the market. She explains,

because we were in the midst of that lockdown, [...] and because of that isolation piece, I became really... I became like a hermit, and then I didn't want to leave, and I knew that wasn't healthy. But I also knew that I needed to get out, and I knew that [going to the market] would be a really good start. And since I knew I was going to be going to the market anyways because of the program, that's when I decided to take my work there, not just online. And I'm glad that I did, because now I have an income coming in and I can stay at home with the kids— as hard as that is right now— but I don't have to worry about going out for a job. So, it really did impact [me becoming a vendor] because I went from not wanting to leave the house to actually making a business. It was not a registered business before, because I didn't realize the potential.

She described how she vendored at the market several times, which gave her a deeper appreciation for what a sale can mean for vendors at the market:

I [vendored] quite a few times, and it was always a really successful experience for me. And it really made me happy to spend my [\$MM] because I knew firsthand what that felt like being on the other end— like the receiving end, for your work. [...] It just made me happy knowing that we were supporting real people. The difference it makes in your family, like whether you have extra money or not, or whether you're paying your bills or not, or whether you're going to have Christmas money, gas to put in the car, like the cost of living right now is crazy.

She goes on to say that "[the program] is keeping these farmers, vendors, makers, crafters— it's keeping them here. It would be awful sad if they had to fold and they aren't here next year."

Marie, D. was not the only participant who became a vendor at the market thanks to the Nourishing Communities program—another partner organization representative also stated that she knew of few participants over the years who have similar stories of becoming vendors at the market after being (re)acquainted to it through the program.

Conclusion

The economic impacts of this program both impact Nova Scotian households, and the local economy as a whole. Many participants were sensitized to knowing how it feels to live precariously and being able to support another person in their community in sustaining their livelihood was often viewed as an act of care and solidarity. It is for this reason that “supporting local” cannot only be understood in the syntax of dollars. The emotive and relational experiences of both participants and vendors must also be considered rich pieces to the program.

Strand Three: Nourishing Community and Connection

For people who did experience a change in how they saw or experienced the Nourishing Communities program between the first and second interviews, the perspective shift was usually a greater appreciation for the community-based, experiential, social, connection that the farmers market often fosters. This impact can often be overlooked or hard to grasp, but it is both important for participants, as well as the market community. Jen Bolt explains why this strand of the program is important from her perspective as a program coordinator:

The other issue [that the program aims to address] is around social engagement. So [the program is] bringing a diversity of community to the market community that isn't otherwise often there. And I think that's beneficial not only to the people who are sometimes very socially isolated, but to [the market] community it's very beneficial, because we can look like the Supper Club— we've often been called a pretty “clubby” kind of environment. So, I think we're always needing to be welcoming to diverse groups, and we've learned a lot about enlisting people in the program to ensure that that social engagement is a positive thing for them because it's not always for everyone. (Jen Bolt)

She goes onto explain how this aspect of the program is reciprocal and is a significant piece to help to address the culture of elitism and exclusivity that sometimes characterizes farmers markets. She explains how this piece of the program is sometimes overlooked,

I think this social engagement [piece] is the most elusive and hardest to measure; and people often think about it as being beneficial to the participants. 'It's *all for them*'. I firmly believe that it's two sided, because we *really* need to do a better job— all farmers markets— of understanding that we attract a certain kind of people and local food is not just for *those* people. It's not. And if we limit it to that, we're never going to change the eating behavior and the community around this that we need to, right? (Jen Bolt)

The results discussed in this section are from the view of participants, which limits the extent to which reciprocity can be observed beyond benefiting the participant. Interviews with vendors, other market patrons, and market staff may be able to illuminate this multi-way exchanges with greater accuracy.

A socialization tool

The social function of a farmers market was commonly highlighted by participants. Visits to the farmers market were recounted as a social activity in a variety of ways and to varying degrees by participants. Jannie, for example, saw the social side of the market to supersede its mercantile purpose:

I'm sure everyone feels a certain connectiveness because it seems like more of a social environment than like a market... It feels more like a social setting than a market. Like [vendors] are just kind of hanging around with their stuff, as opposed to there to sell [their] stuff. [They're] more just hanging around, having some conversations. If people buy stuff from [them], then they do that. If they don't, [they] still get a conversation out of it. (Jannie)

Marie, D. said that the program helped her “get her social back” after many months of living in lockdowns during the pandemic. Mandy expressed the profound ways that getting out of the house and into the community contributed to increasing her wellbeing and quality of life:

our life is better than not doing anything. It's like *worth living*. Some people don't have a job to go to every day or can go [see] family every day. So, for the social aspect [...], for their mental health to stay sane [...] [visiting the farmers market] every Saturday, once a week, and get the schedule into you... it makes [life] better. (Mandy)

Robin noted that for her two-year old daughter (a pandemic baby), having a place to interact with strangers is an important part of her development:

she's a Covid baby, and so she's able to see people and know that there's more people outside my immediate family and there's a whole other world out there. I feel like she's been a little sheltered because of Covid. So it's an excuse to at least have interactions with people. [...] so she's not timid around people and help her with her social skills. (Robin)

I observed that the way that participants use the program has implications for how and in what ways they might experience this social function. For instance, people who described lingering and taking their time during market visits and were more open to chatting with people, experience this social aspect differently than those who see the market in a more goal-oriented way (i.e., get in, get what you need, and get out). Veena explains how she experienced the market in these different ways as time went on,

[at the beginning] I'd stay there for such a long time and just talk to people. It was crazy, but it did help my sense of community for sure. [...] But then again, I feel like towards the end of the program, it did just become goal oriented because I went to get the things I wanted and then got right out. (Veena)

Dexter described how even though he was also more goal-oriented, he did appreciate the chit-chat he had with vendors:

you have the sense of community [in visiting the farmers market]— like you belong and you're helping your neighbors and you're helping other families and stuff like that. Not to say that I've

made friends here or anything like that, but I've certainly made acquaintances. [...] I don't go hang out with these people, but I run into the fellow that sells the vegetables and stuff to me. I'd run into him quite frequently, and we'd stop and shoot the shit. We recognized each other. And I mean, we didn't know each other's names, but we would always recognize each other and stop and have a chat and stuff like that. So yeah, there's sense of community there, for sure. (Dexter)

Strengthening pre-existing relationships

Not only does the market offer an avenue into connection with vendors and a sense of community more broadly, but the program also acts as a vehicle for strengthening pre-existing relationships. Roughly half of participants indicated that they regularly visited the market or engaged with the program (via online ordering for example) with loved ones. Alex said that going to the farmers market was something she looked forward to doing with her family, “life's been very hectic and stuff. So, when I had the time to go on Sundays, it was kind of like, looking forward to having that hour of family time” (Alex). For participants like Alex, the program incentivized “doing things together”.

Visiting the farmers market was often viewed as an activity in and of itself, and sometimes also promoted “activity-stacking”. Megan for instance described how for her and some other participating families, visiting the market instigates a routine of weekly activities that they gather around, “there's probably like at least four or five consistent parents— we go to the market, then we go to the library to get books, and then we hang out” (Megan). This idea of ‘doing things together’ was particularly pertinent for parents for whom the market offered an activity to do with their child(ren). For others, it was a dedicated time, once a week, to be child-free. Jannie described how she came to really cherish this weekly time with her husband, “it's something for just me and my husband to do without the kids, which is something we don't get a whole lot” (Jannie).

Connecting with vendors

A common highlight for participants was the relationships that were forged with vendors over the course of the program. Robin explains,

with the farmers dollars you start to get to know the vendors if you find something you like. So you have a little bit of a connection like, ‘hey, how’s it going? You were here last week, blah blah blah. How’s your little one?’ You start to make connections with people. So it was kind of nice to not just be a customer—they would actually know you by name. (Robin)

Participants often spoke about the increased familiarity with vendors that was often reciprocated (i.e., participants became familiar with vendors, and vendors came to recognize participants). The experience of becoming familiar with vendors was cited in many of the interviews, and often participants would refer to vendors by pointing to where they were usually set up (if we were doing the interview at their farmers market) and naming them by what they sold (i.e., “my chicken guy”, “the fudge lady”, “the blueberry family”). The experience of being remembered by vendors is meaningful. It can cultivate a sense of being seen and valued that is rarely experienced in detached consumption environments (like your “average” supermarket or big retail stores). Tommy explains how this aspect of visiting the market sets it apart from other retail and grocery experiences,

we develop more connection with the place and the people. I think the more you go to the market, [and] the more the vendors recognize you, you form like a bond—people remember your face.

It’s nice. It makes you want to buy from them and, support them and shop... Yeah, it’s like... it’s a good feeling. (Tommy)

This might be particularly significant for people who might experience isolation in other aspects of their lives, or who may not feel like a seen and valued community member very often (due to the way societal structures and cultural messages “others” or makes poverty invisible). Regardless, the experience of feeling seen and being remembered feels good. Jannie gives an example from her own market visits:

[my kids] liked the cucumbers. There was a vendor- every time we went, we would get four cucumbers, so he started setting aside four cucumbers and when he saw us coming, he'd go and get them for us.

Erika: Nice. How did that feel?

Jannie: That felt awesome. I'm like, he's setting them aside just for us!

Miscommunications

A handful of participants (n= <5) experienced interactions where vendors were unclear about what the \$MM was, and how the process of redeeming it worked. In these cases, the onus was on participants to explain to the vendor that the \$MM was a legitimate currency (in some cases participants “outed themselves” in doing this). Of these, one participant had repeated interactions where vendors seemed hostile and hesitant to receive the \$MM. The design of the program can instigate these types of negative interactions when participants for instance, have to initiate a purchase from a vendor to get a “receipt”, and then go back to an information booth to pay for the item, and then back to the vendor table to show “proof” of payment and retrieve their item. A participant who experienced this type of design said that it “felt like you were stealing” until they brought back that slip to show that it was paid for. The same participant reported an incident in the second interview where a vendor asked, “why [they] kept coming back”. In comparison to other approaches, not only is this system inefficient, but it can also create a structural and relational barrier for participants and increases the likelihood of negative interactions with vendors— especially if vendors are uninformed about the program (which they seemed to be).

These negative interactions with vendors are the exceptions in the data (n=1), however they underscore the importance of clearly communicating the program with vendors and ensuring that they see the program as mutually beneficial. It also highlights how interactions with vendors in general are how participants mainly interface with the farmers market and with the Nourishing Communities program;

therefore, adequately orienting vendors should be prioritized. The participant above had plenty of other positive interactions with vendors, and all other participants told stories about positive (and sometimes deeply meaningful) interactions.

Reoccurring nature facilitates connection

People tend to visit the market at roughly similar times, which increases the potential for invisible and weak ties (as postulated in the discussion). Elaine voiced how farmers markets serve as a weekly gathering that builds community, “I think the farm market impacts communities by a whole [...] just everybody meeting weekly. It’s a lot of the similar faces and community-based people, and you get to know each other a little bit better” (Elaine).

The reoccurring nature of the farmers market proved to be an indispensable quality that drives connection to place and people. What is viewed by some as an economic strategy for farmers to have a single point of sale for one or two days a week with high sales and low time invested (so they can spend more time farming), is also a rather elegant way of bringing people together for a regular community congregation and cherished social activity. Because of the reoccurring nature, condensed timeframe, and geographic-boundedness of visitors (i.e., people usually live in the same community as their local farmers market), farmers markets can be sites where community members run-into people they know, come to recognize people they do not yet know, build connections of all kinds with neighbours and local producers, and contribute to a sense of collectivism that is increasingly hard to come by in today’s world. Tommy explains how this differs from a typical shopping experience,

I feel like it’s important because you don’t get that type of interaction when you go to the grocery store. [At the grocery store] you’re by yourself, and get in and out; and if you meet someone then [...] it’s not always [likely] that you will see the same person again. (Tommy)

Feeling “a part” of

Feeling “a part of the farmers market” was a major theme that emerged in the research.

Participants often reported that the program impacted their sense of belonging in their community. For Victoria, it started by being asked to participate, “it felt like when you got the money that it was a sense of belonging and that we were *wanted* at the market because of having the food bucks” (Victoria). Elaine also describes this in being asked to participate in food box delivery version of the program,

I felt more of a part of the community by even being asked to participate in it. [...]

[Since] the boxes came to us, and I didn’t get down [to the market] to get very connected with all those people, I have a little bit of a connection to the ones that were mainly running it and dropping off boxes, and they made me feel [...] in the community. More like [...] instead of just living here, I’m *part* of the community and we matter too. (Elaine)

As these quotations demonstrate, being asked to participate in the program was an invitation into the market community, as Victoria describes, and into the broader geographic community as Elaine sees it.

Mel, a repeat participant in the program noted that over the years of participating, she has gotten to know the vendors and describes how she is both missed, and misses going to the market, on the rare occasion when she is unable to attend. Being remembered and recognized by vendors contributes to feeling “a part of”. When asked what stood out about the program for her, Mel responded,

I think feeling *a part of a community*. When a person is away a week and comes back the next week and [someone says] ‘we were wondering where you were’, it makes you feel *a part*. Now, they may not know my name and I don’t know theirs, but they realized I was away. So that’s kind of cool being *a part of something*. (Mel)

The farmers market provides an opportunity to engage in a values-based activity (Alkon, 2008). It is also a space for people with shared place-based identities to congregate regularly. Along with the other community impacts discussed in this section, and because participants genuinely participate in these market functions, feeling “a part” of the market community was a potential outcome that was made

accessible to most participants. Less than 6 people indicated that participating in the program/visiting the farmers market did not impact their sense of belonging in their community (3 of which did not attend the farmers market in person). One participant had stronger, mixed feelings about the culture at their local market, and described it as being exclusive, elitist, and described it as “crunchy-granola”. Mel explains how she held the belief of the farmers market as “hoity toity”, that eventually dissipated as she interacted with vendors week after week:

I don't know whether [the] farmers market has always been noted as hoity toity, [...] but going around, no one treats me any different. I suppose, because they're all trying to make their money here. [...]. You get to know other people on a level when you come here weekly—you get to know them. So therefore, they're not— how would you put it— behind the glass and thinking that they're high up there; you get down and you get in *amongst* them and you feel very much at home, as *a part of* the community. (Mel)

There are obviously mixed feelings about how elitism manifests in different markets and for different participants across the province. This minimally came up in the interviews, however, it discussed at length in the literature (start with Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Guthman, 2011). Nonetheless, feeling “a part” of the market is predicated on an inclusive and welcoming culture (which is how participants often described the farmers market experience in the context of this program).

Embarrassment, shame, fear of judgement

Feeling “apart of” is inversely related to the experience of shame, embarrassment, and fear of judgement that participants often expressed as reservations they held about the program. For example, in response to a question about if attending the farmers market changed her sense of community, Sara explained that her sense of community increased by “being reintegrated into [the farmers market] through the program and that feeling of not feeling judged” (Sara).

Roughly half of participants voiced concerns of being judged for using the \$MM or stigma about using them in the first place. Most participants for whom fear of judgement was present, attributed it to a personal problem that they just had to “get over”. The majority of these concerns were alleviated as the program progressed and most people cited that the absence of negative experiences with vendors, along with personally getting more comfortable with the program and the farmers market environment eventually eased initial worries. Leeann voiced her initial concern that vendors would look at her differently,

I guess that was one thing too that would worry me... if I give them [the \$MM], are they going to think something different? Like no, no one ever looks at me any different. They're always polite and pleasant. So, I've never really had a bad experience. (Leeann)

I observed this to some extent, that participants who did not see themselves or the program as for “poor people” tended to not experience as much worry of judgment or embarrassment. Samantha, for example, perceived the program to also support folks with financial means, “there's people in the food bucks program that make more money than me and you put together, so I don't feel judged at all” (Samantha). An absence of shame, stigma, and embarrassment was also observed in some of the students interviewed (who saw the program as a fun initiative to support students rather than low-income folks). Most participants, however, did not see the program as Samantha and the students did, and often described it as a program to help people in their communities who were experiencing financial hardship. Additionally, I also observed that the degree to which participants materially relied on the program in terms of finances or nutrition (as opposed to viewing it as “extra”), the greater degree of fear of judgment or embarrassment was reported.

Making the \$MM publicly purchasable (similar to a gift card) is meant to buffer against this stigma by making participants anonymous to the market community. This is an example of a design feature meant to alleviate emotional/relational barriers to access through structural means. Some participants cited this as a valuable feature of the program that did in fact safeguard their privacy and was an effective way of reducing embarrassment or stigma. Other participants did not know about this aspect

of the program and were unsure if the \$MM was used outside of the Nourishing Communities program. Yet some participants, particularly those in smaller market environments, voiced the reality that they were identifiable as program participants in practice. Sara expressed her reservations,

the thing that makes me nervous is that I do know a lot of the vendors here. So, the fact that I don't feel super anonymous handing over my food bucks—and I know that it's a gift certificate program—like if you purchase a gift certificate that's what it would be; but having an envelope filled with [\$MM] doesn't make me anonymous [...] Because it's a small community and people chat. So that's a barrier for me. (Sara)

While in theory, using \$MM does not make participants identifiable, in practice, the reality of using \$MM week after week in a small community environment rarely makes it so. This demonstrates that while steps can be taken to remove structural barriers to access, emotional barriers to access are also at play as Sara describes. A way of addressing these barriers thus is not only distributive and structural, but also procedural and relational (Bruckner et al., 2021). Here, it is also important to name the broader context of cultural and social stigma around poverty and accessing support, as well as the complex issues of inequality, classism, racism, and neoliberalism, in which this program is situated. This backdrop is the context in which the program is administered and experienced and is not “solvable” through a swift modification to the program design. This is the work of food justice and food sovereignty more broadly.

“A secret program”

A tension emerged in one participant between upholding notions of discretion and safeguarding participant privacy (through measures like discreetly handing out participant envelopes, often not “outing” participants to each other or to the market community, and general discourse around not talking about participant circumstances, and so on). As a former administrator of the program, I was worried about the ways that upholding discretion in the program might inadvertently reinforce the idea that participants had something to be kept hidden or feel embarrassed about. There is also an aura of not

talking about people's financial struggles or "imperfect" circumstances that exists in the program (and in society) as a whole. Jude clearly identified this aspect of the program:

it was akin to when you have your welfare cheque [...] Unfortunately, so-called mainstream society sees someone who's on welfare, or income assistance, or whatever, as lacking or not trying hard enough. So, at first, there was a slight aspect of that [in the program] like, oh, I'm just identifying myself as one of the *needy* people in the community. And then I thought, "screw it, I don't care". So that's why I started to turn around and say— because a couple of times people said, "oh, how do you get [the \$MM]?"—and I said, "it's because I'm an official poor person". So, I just sort of put it out there. (Jude)

She goes on to assert that this sense of stigma attached to the program is connected to the way the program isolates participants from each other (making it seem like they are alone in the experience) and perpetuates the sense that participants have something to feel embarrassed about.

I think the whole thing of privacy in keeping participants from knowing each other, I think that's a slight problem, actually, because it means that I'm always acting in isolation. I never see anybody else at the market using Food Bucks. So, who the hell are we all? Do I have anything in common with these people? Could we support each other in any way? Could I encourage them to come and grow stuff at the community garden? How else could I have an affect or how else could we, as a group support and affect each other. I think [meeting other participants] would be really useful. [...] I guess this whole thing of sort of secrecy/privacy, it kind of gives a slight impression that there's a reason to kind of stay hidden. Like no, no, no! (Jude)

Inversely, I was struck by instances where stigma was completely absent from participant experiences, and in specific cases, participants reported excitement and pride about using \$MM. When asked if there was anything that she felt nervous or stigma while using the coupons, Mandy responded: "I'm not worried about [that]. I'm kind of proud that I [am a part of my partner organization] and that they have this program for us" (Mandy). Almost always, these participants were closely connected with other participants and experienced the program among a community of peers. In these cases, participants were

connected through their partner organization and often engaged in other programming outside of the farmers market that complemented the program. In one case this looked like a Facebook group for participants (and other community partner clients) where they could share recipes and pictures of the goodies that they got from the market each week. In other cases, it was that the same group of participants who attended weekly programming at their partner organization and decided to attend the market together each week as an activity to do with friends. In yet another case, parents were connected with each other through their partner organization and encouraged to meet at the market at a certain time and bring their kids with them. This ended up being a regular outing that participants and children looked forward to where families connected with each other weekly, while their kids played together in a nearby greenspace.

Implications of these findings will be discussed in the following chapter, but for now, it is worthwhile to note that findings of this study demonstrate that there may be structural and relational ways to help minimize some of the shame/embarrassment/worry about using the \$MM, given that participants for whom these negative feelings were absent, frequently cited external (often relational) reasons (rather than a personal, individual, internal propensity to experience less shame) to as why these feelings were absent in their experience.

Beyond the farmers market walls (or perimeter of the parking lot)

Community exists on many scales and is conceptualized in numerous ways. The segment on “helping communities” that precedes this one refers to the market as a community in and of itself. This segment instead refers to farmers market as a point of entry into the broader community where one might live, work, and play. Jude describes the program as an “entry into connection” that is especially important for those who might be experiencing isolation.

Marie, A. only visited the farmers market every month or so, but still developed her favorite vendors. She said that one of her favorite vendors has a shop near her house that she would have never

considered walking into until visiting the market, “the [vendor’s store] [...] is a kilometer from my house and I [...] might actually go there now because I tried it here” (Marie, A.). For Marie, A. the community in which she lives feels a little bit more accessible to her. Mel reflects on a similar experience, “even one of the vendors, we’ve gone to their business outside of this place [...] so you know, that community has gone outside of this place” (Mel).

Fahim Dahi, an aspiring entrepreneur, saw the market as a networking opportunity with potential suppliers and supporters. He described a unique impact of the program as “a chance to make potential connections for business. [...] I know all the farms now, I know all the producers of food, I know a lot of companies now because of this place” (Fahim Dahi).

This phenomenon also transcends the mercantile realm, and spills into people’s personal lives in both tangible and nonphysical ways. Megan, a repeat-participant in the program provides an example from her own experience,

if you come at the same time and it's always like the same basic group of people that you can kind of depend on. And we joined one of the [community] gardens because we met somebody [at the farmers market] that was running one. (Megan)

Victoria said something striking that I had not considered before. She was particularly preceptive of the artisans at her local market and described all the beautiful crafts and handmade products. I asked her if the program impacted her sense of belonging, and she responded, “to have the interaction outside of where I live and to see all of the beautiful things that are here and the products that people think of and the creativity of the [community] as a whole, and *knowing that I am part of that because I'm from here*” (Victoria). She described a shared sense of creativity and talent that she felt a part of, knowing that she shares the same place-based roots as vendors. It signals that creativity, making, growing, cultivating is not an isolated endeavour, and in and of itself can be considered an act of community.

A subtle reminder of humanity

Fahim Dahi was experiencing some discrimination and harassment in his community which was having a major impact on his life. He described how visiting the market regularly was a needed morale boost during a difficult time in his life, and how that reflected more broadly on how he viewed his community.

it restored my confidence in the community, or at least maintained it. But I mean, sometimes when you feel outnumbered and you're going through a problem, it's hard to remember that there's good people in the world. So, it kind of kept that fresh. That part of my mentality didn't completely deplete. I mean, it was pretty close. It was like aversion therapy, it kept reminding me, 'hey, we're still good, we're still good, we're still good.' There are still good people. Some people still care, and some people still have good hearts, and you can do business in a capitalistic sense without being harmful. You can make money and create a good business that people can benefit from.

He later said how his positive interactions with a male vendor was particularly helpful in reminding him that there are kind and non-discriminatory men in his community.

the vendors were really nice and [vendor name]- he's always really sweet to me, so that helps. It helps to have positive experiences from other men who are not necessarily gay. That remind me, "hey, I don't see you that way. You're good in my books.' You know what I mean? So that helps.

Connection to seasonality and local food systems

Roughly a third of participants indicated that they were exposed to seasonality by being a part of the program and visiting the farmers market. I interpreted this generously as when someone mentioned that a certain vendor was seasonal (like how the blueberry guy or the peach family were only at the market for a few weeks), or if a participant commented on different varieties of food that were available for a short period of time. Fahim Dahi more explicitly said that it gave him "a realistic perception of what foods in season when" (Fahim Dahi).

Jude explains her frustration with the detached, import-dependent culture of food in North America, and explains why possibly (re)acquainting folks with local food systems has potential for long-term educational impacts,

we have become, as a society, thinking that stuff is available all year round—out of season. And that really annoys me. It's not that long ago that we were all seasonal eaters. And so I think the market bucks program encourages/enhances that interaction between potentially a new customer and the grower/producer. And I think that has quite a long-term potential repercussion in a positive way. (Jude)

Fahim Dahi explained how this type of learning extends into the homes of participants for whom this learning is applicable. From his perspective, the program helps with,

educating your child or your family members on how to buy local; how to plan and produce the meals based on what the season provides for you; how to talk to the vendors; how to negotiate with them; where to get food... Also, education on local farmers, local butchers, local food production. It just really educated me on a lot of that. (Fahim Dahi)

For most participants, they described exposure to seasonality in much subtler ways, such as indicating how produce at the farmers market changes with the seasons, or about how weather patterns influence crops. Having the vendor/customer interface where folks can ask questions and learn (if they chose to), contributes to an implicit/explicit awareness of seasonality and subtle alter/anti-anthropocentric thinking practices.

Infinite potential of connection

The potential impacts that meeting a neighbour or making a connection that would not otherwise be possible is also limitless. Jude describes how markets offer an accessible way of entering into community that has infinite potential:

here's a place where you can go, that's kind of low key and pleasant and you don't have to dress up. You don't have to have anything to go there. You'd be provided with market bucks, so you can go there, and you can buy stuff that you need/want/just like. So, again, it kind of cuts through the isolation factor [...] and I'm glad this program is operating long enough that people can go on

a weekly basis and slowly make a connection or two or more or whatever. I think then the positive repercussions of that are expansive. (Jude)

Robin reaffirms the potential of making connections in her own words, “it allows you to meet people and find out about what other people are doing. Maybe there are supports out there that other people are benefiting from, that you potentially could benefit from. Maybe there's an opportunity for you to get involved” (Robin).

The evolving ramifications of entering into community, making connections, and developing social ties are difficult to measure in a study of this limited timeframe. Often it is only in hindsight where this potential moves into view as a pivotal moment or subtle nudge in someone’s life that has profound impacts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this strand of nourishing connection and community demonstrates the range of ways that participants see the program nourishing connections to community, vendors, place, and non-human things/forces where there may have not otherwise been a connection. It can result in felt experiences of increased sense of belonging, a way to actively contribute to the community, and opens up the possibility to experience the expansive potential of connection-making. This strand speaks to welcoming people into the “farmers market community” who may have otherwise never stepped foot in the doors. The program can be considered an introduction that can be beneficial for all members of the farmers market community. It broadens the demographic of who is considered welcome and “a part” of, which goes beyond constructing a superficial image of inclusivity (although that may certainly be a dynamic at play as well), but as is described above, often involves genuine reciprocal connections and exchanges.

Gratitude

Overall, every participant voiced an overarching positive sentiment about the program. 100% of participants said that they recommend the program to a friend, and everyone said that they would participate again, although two participants said that they would prefer that someone new experience it before doing it again. Below are some closing remarks from participants, reflecting on the program as a whole:

I remember when I got the text saying, 'hey, we have this new program. We think that if you're interested, it would be awesome' and I was really shocked to read up on it. I was just like, 'holy, that's pretty cool!' It made my heart happy knowing that there are people going out of their way to collect the funding to give it out. (Marie D.)

well, the fact that the program even existed, that was kind of a surprise [...] I just appreciated it more, [...] I knew it wasn't going to last forever, so getting down to the wire, it was humbling to know that it was there and that it was an option. Like I said, to get those couple of things that you might not have gotten otherwise. (Victoria)

it was generous. Somebody cared enough to do that. [...] It was just made me feel like yay, somebody actually does care! It gave me a good feeling in my heart. You know, somebody was compassionate and caring and loving those things. (Angel)

overall, I'm so grateful to be a part of this. Just even to have this interview has been nice, so somebody knows the benefits that programs like this have. And it benefits everybody. It's not just myself, it benefits the vendors and stuff like that. Like your supporting your community in sense. (Dexter)

The most frequent response to the question of "how could the program be improved" was for it to run longer and be expanded to include more people. People frequently voiced how they thought that a lot

of people in their community could benefit from the program and that they wish everyone had an opportunity to try it. Many participants were sad to see it come to an end in their lives, and hope that it starts again when spring rolls back around.

Conclusion

In concluding this results chapter, I would be remiss if I omitted a final experience from the results. This can be considered a non-impact. 100% of participants said that they would participate in the program again and they would recommend the program to a friend. That said, for a select few people, (n= ~2) the program was overall characterized as “just nice”. These participants did not identify any significant impacts that the program had in their life, nor did they express any strong feelings (positive or negative) towards the program.

This is not to diminish the countless, and often profound impacts that are described on the preceding pages. It does reaffirm that participants experience this program in all kinds of ways, including in relatively neutral ones. There was also a level of straightforward pleasantries that was embedded in participants’ descriptions about the program in general. The level of profoundness that participants experienced is on a spectrum as well. In all cases, this program is just one tiny experience in each participant’s otherwise complicated, challenging, joyful, and mundane life. This paper misconstrues this fact, in centring the Nourishing Communities program in their lives, which may give the impression that the program was “bigger” than it was. I had to remind myself through this process that just because the program has been at the centre of my work and thinking for the past 18 months, it has not had the same prominence in people’s lives as I might be inclined to think it does. As well, I am wary of sensationalizing these impacts to paint a picture of the program as a one-stop-shop solution, or through the lens of a saviour-complex. It is neither a solution to anything nor is it saving anyone. It was, however, a very positive presence in many people’s lives (sometimes exceptionally so) that had and will continue to have various impacts on individuals and their communities.

The results of this study showed that the program has a wide range of impacts and meaning in people's lives. It demonstrates that the simplicity, flexibility, and autonomy that characterise the program, also nourishes a vast landscape of impact and meaning that was demonstrated at the collective level. A program administrator described their organization's heuristic of "meeting people where they're at", and while the Nourishing Communities program does not "work" for everyone, in general, is used in a myriad of ways to meet people where they are at instead of prescribing a one-size-fits all "solution" (and to what "problem"?). The characteristics that make farmers markets compelling community spaces (such as their reoccurring, social, seasonal, sensory nature) are foundational for nurturing these impacts, and in many cases, participants equated the Nourishing Communities program to the farmers market experience more generally. Barriers experienced by participants, both as they relate to structural and relational access, are sites for critical thinking and offer practical paths forward for program administrators. Furthermore, the illustration of the three-stranded braid demonstrates the interwoven impacts of this program that exist complimentary and synergetic (as well as contradicting) ways. The strength of the program lies in the intimate overlap of these three strands and cannot be separated without unravelling the whole. The next section muses over some of the results above, and proposes further questions for inquiry.

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This section aims to explore meaning-making questions, such as: what potential does the Nourishing Communities program have in addressing food justice/sovereignty, wellbeing, and resilience at multiple scales? What potential do farmers markets have more broadly in addressing food security, community building, and equity? What are the limits of the program and what sorts of ideas might scholars and practitioners consider and contemplate in doing this kind of community building work?

I will first discuss some of the findings from the research and their implications on many of the questions I have listed above. I will then move into a discussion of the results more broadly, as it relates to the literature. Finally, some broad, pragmatic takeaways, leverage points, and opportunities for improvement will be provided to help inform the future development of the Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program, and other programs beyond Nova Scotia.

Analysis of findings

Farmers markets as lively places

While each participant related to their farmers market differently, it is in the most basic, surface level function of farmers market that they can be considered relatively accessible, ordinary, “every-day” places. Megan explains, “everybody goes grocery shopping, but this is something that’s a little bit different”. Indeed, farmers markets are different than grocery stores, in both subtle and explicit ways. Some participants were delighted to discover that market offered more than “just produce” (both in terms of material products sold, and in terms of the experience). Many participants highlighted the artisanal products, the diverse array of meals beyond that of the typical North American diet, the music, and rotating vendor booths. When asked what stood out about the market for her, Veena responded:

the diversity and how welcoming everyone was. I know they're businesses and stuff, but they choose to be kind and it's just the experience. Honestly, you enter, and you can smell all that fresh bread and all those vegetables, and as you go inward there's more cooked food and really good... aroma. There's always a local musician or someone who's playing a guitar. It's bustling and... it's in such a pretty place downtown. [...] You go there, and you don't even need to buy anything. You can just take an hour to talk to people, maybe test out a couple pieces of cheese. Just get out [of the house]. That's a day on its own. (Veena)

From Veena's description it is clear that the farmers market is a sensory experience, distinctly different than a grocery store. Of course, the degree to which a given market engages the senses is dependent on its size and location; and also, the person that is experiencing it. That said, most farmers markets are distinctly un-sanitized compared to a visit to the supermarket. Florescent lights are often replaced by sunshine, rain, wind; un-corporal meat products are made reanimate; imperfect produce has remnants of the soil from which it was cultivated, and labours of love lay on rickety tables. The smell of homemade meals and sound of chatter layered atop of the melody of local artists fills the space between the moving, feeling bodies. Farmers markets have a buzz— a pulse. They are alive, animate, imperfect, rooted places.

Experiences of novelty that were often expressed by participants in going to the market for the first time, trying new things (a major finding), and witnessing the creativity of their community, was frequently described with surprise, awe, and wonder. Maybe this is what Jane Bennett is referring to in the preface of *Vibrant Matter* when she writes that “a version of this idea already found expression in childhood experiences of a world populated by animate things rather than passive objects” (2010, vii). Perhaps novelty and proximity to sources of things can spark a kind of reanimation required to notice things as vital (rather than the familiar and detached interacts with “stuff” often characteristic of modern-day consumerism and materialistic (in the capitalist sense) practices)?

Building connection to place and expanding participants' sense of community to include the market is an important function of the program, which was identified by participants during interviews.

The sensual experience of the market is another layer in the visceral topology of the Nourishing Communities program which contributes to a reimagining and reanimating of consumption rituals and “place-based obligations” (Liboiron, 2021). The program (and farmers markets more broadly) stimulates novel and animate community experiences and consumption rituals. In doing so, interactions that are often made invisible (thanks to the global industrialized food system, and the propensity of neoliberalism to render “assemblages” (Latour, 2005) externalities— such as environmental degradation and the exploitation of often racialized farm workers) are made visible to everyday people who themselves, are too often backgrounded in society (due to the way poverty is often hidden or viewed as shameful).

Placemaking and relationship building

Farmers markets are made alive also through their social function. A market is a site of various types of interactions. Participants described making new friends and acquaintances, running into old friends, meeting their neighbours, socializing with other market-goers, chatting with vendors, and interacting with a number of ‘familiar strangers’ (Felder, 2020) every week. The depth and kind of relationships that a person can have at the farmers market are highly variable, which is one of the reasons they are important. Farmers markets serve to both deepen and broaden people’s social networks which can have profound impacts on their quality of life, health, and material and felt sense of security (Jacobs, 2002). Although some participants built deep connections through attending the market, I more frequently heard about the weak and invisible ties that were forged in visiting the market regularly. *Invisible ties* (as coined by Felder, 2020) refers to the relationships among “known strangers”, who are anonymous yet become recognizable over time (Felder, 2020). Farmers markets are rich places for invisible ties, given their reoccurring nature, and the ritualistic way that people use them (i.e., people tend to visit at the same time, each week). Whereas weak ties often serve as a bridging relationship between social groups, invisible ties serve as “reference points [that] do not necessarily help value an environment, but they

support a feeling of ease and belonging and can become meaningful for residents' sense of place" (Felder, 2020, p. 687).

The division between strong, weak, invisible, and non-existing ties is constructed to define these categories with clear boundaries, however in reality, the spectrum from anonymity to intimacy is fluid and blurry. This is also just one way of knowing the value of socialization and connection. As is described below, people experience the richness of connection, community, and friendship, without knowing or using these terms. In some ways, it feels reductive and unnecessary to attempt to intellectualize or make a framework out of what is an often accessible, relational, sometimes spiritual, felt, human (and beyond-human) experience. Nonetheless, this spectrum can be helpful as one way of gauging how and why these relationships are significant for individuals and in communities in the context of this research. The nourishing connections and community strand illustrates the public market as an important site where a range of connections are developed and sustained.

What is more, participants frequently cited connections with vendors as prominent aspects of the market experience. I perceive these relationships as important not only because they were connecting over a shared experience and a material product being exchanged, but familiarity was built with vendors in a place-based way that exists on multiple scales. Because the farmers market is a place-based activity, participants could look forward to seeing the same vendors, in their same "spots", each week. It offered an aspect of familiarity and rootedness to grow relationships. Furthermore, because many vendors often live and work in the same (or proximate) places as market-goers (in the Nova Scotian context), participants also reported running into vendors "in town", or visiting their shop outside of the market. Even learning where vendors run their business from in the area, helps to geographically mark one's sense of community. Market-goers (including participants) are in this way expanding their connection to and with place and people when they form relationships with vendors.

Tommy describes why these public, alive, meeting places are important:

I think in every community, there should be places where people can safely meet and engage in interactions with other people and use that place to share things. Or have business going on there,

and doing things at that place and, everyone knows where that place is, so everyone can join there and [it] makes it easy for like social interaction and human connection in general. (Tommy)

Farmers markets, although not necessarily public spaces in that they are often on private property, are often perceived as mixed-use landmarks and sometimes described as “town-squares”. Building connection to place and expanding participants’ sense of community to include the market is an important function of the farmers market, which was identified by participants during interviews. Even if only a few fold-up tables scatter a parking lot for a couple months in the summer, farmers markets connect people with their food, with local producers, and with community places in visceral, place-based ways. The sensual experience of the market is another layer in the visceral topology of the Nourishing Communities program.

Farmers markets, like the Nourishing Communities program, are felt, relational, sensory spaces. Visits to the market are not just a matter of sustenance; at risk of sounding cliché, farmers markets are food for the senses and the soul. In the North American context, public community gathering places are not particularly prevalent in the patchwork of today’s digitized, pandemic-recovering, privatised, and neoliberal society. This can make the farmers market an even more relevant space for accessing the broader community (i.e., what is commonly thought of as place-based, geographical bounded communities— otherwise understood in terms of the village, town, or city where people reside). Literature on placemaking, although beyond the scope of this research, can provide a lens to traverse these lively sites (see Jacobs, 2002; Hamdi, 2010; and the Project for Public Spaces).

Participants were often excited to tell me about their favorite vendors or how they came to be recognized as “a regular” at the market. Being recognized, and recognizing, is a part of what makes visits to the farmers market a ritualistic event. Its reoccurring nature prompted a new addition to their routines by which participants experienced connection through repeated interactions with one another. I cannot help but feel that this reoccurring, place-based, social event (centred around food) appeals to an intrinsic remembering within humans that serves an important spiritual and collective purpose. In Sara’s words,

“it’s some people’s Church” in that it serves as a weekly community gathering, that is utilized by many as more-than a means of obtaining sustenance.

Furthermore, the ability to help another person in the community (by spending the \$MM and supporting vendors) was described as a somewhat of a precursor for a sense of belonging. Many participants defined community generally by describing actions or instances of helping one another, so it makes sense that people experienced belonging when they were not merely the ones being helped, but also saw themselves as *active contributors* in an interdependent ecosystem. Communities, in this felt sense, are not “black boxes” or pre-existing and ever enduring, elusive “things”; they are verbs that exist only in “doing them”. In this way the market community was born and is actively maintained in ‘practicing community’. It would not exist in the same way if farmers markets were to stop meeting every week—even though all the parts of the community still materially exist separate from the whole. Community is forged by the actions of members in relation to other members. Communities are inherently dependent on the actions that connect individuals, rather than individuals themselves. Jude explains, “community gains identity and shape from the people who live here, who actively participate in what goes on, who care about what goes on” (Jude).

This way of understanding community attends to the civic function of farmers markets, in addition to the social function that was described at the beginning of this section. For those who are open to it (and not all participants are), there is a subtle, yet distinct way that the program moves from a sense of familiarity with place and people through socialization, to a responsibility to contribute and engage meaningfully with the community. The program, when viewed from a particular angle, can facilitate both.

It is the sensory, relational, rooted, reciprocal, community-based features of the market that support the program as more-than-food-security because farmers markets themselves are sites for more-than-food-provision. They are important community places that not only support the economic and local food-system infrastructure of (usually small) Nova Scotian communities, but they also exist to support the social/spiritual/relational infrastructure of these places as well. This is why it is all the more important to strive to ensure that farmers markets are places that are accessible to most people in the local community

(I say “most” because farmers markets will never be accessible to all— nor should they be— universal inclusion is a myth from my perspective). If the public market is to be truly a public meeting place, efforts must be made to remove structural and relational barriers to access for folks who are not your “typical” market patron (i.e., often times white, middle/upper class, educated, “hippie”, environmentally aware folks). Challenging neoliberal capitalism, the global corporate food regime, and income inequality in the context of farmers markets, means ensuring that these places are not just for palest, wealthiest, and “morally righteous” among us. Farmers markets will not be able to contribute to food justice, food sovereignty, and resilient (food) systems in meaningful ways until they are accessible the community in its fullest sense- not just comfortable places for those who may already be connected to their community and acquainted with the local food system. More on making farmers markets more accessible in general, is discussed in the last section of this chapter; the Nourishing Communities program however can be viewed as a step towards doing so. Probing the ways this program can be made more accessible, dignified, and viscerally fulfilling is a good place to start.

Using the Nourishing Communities Program with dignity

Many participants who I interviewed did not describe experiencing food insecurity or cited it as a major concern in their lives. While definitions of food insecurity are broad, for all but one participant, the program was not used as an emergency food supply, but rather was used as a financial buffer, as an opportunity to buy “something extra”, or to buy higher quality and/or local foods.

Research on neoliberal stigma associated with food insecurity tends to focus on experiences of those accessing emergency food assistance (such as food banks), and finds that many users experience shame, stigma, or guilt in accessing such supports (Bruckner et al., 2021; Purdam et al., 2016; Swales et al., 2020; van der Host et al., 2014). However, the dominant focus in food security scholarship and cultural discourse tends to privilege the analysis of structural barriers to accessing food (such as proximity to food, cost of food, availability of healthy food) (Bruckner et al., 2021), and tends to eschew emotional

barriers to access, which has been found to decrease people's likelihood of accessing sufficient food support, or at all (Swales et al., 2020). When this emotional burden is acknowledged in the literature, it is often termed as neoliberal stigma, in which individuals blame themselves for their lack of food (sometimes in subtle and indirect ways) (Bruckner et al., 2021). It is said to be exacerbated by focusing food security initiatives at the level of the individual rather than acknowledging underlying systems at play and engaging the ethics of the right to food in general. Bruckner et al. (2021) write,

the policy and practices focus on the individual subject as either falling into a deserving category or not — and that food is then not a right, but instead something that is related to economic capital and individual hard work. This characterization of the food as meritocratic within a capitalist economy leads food insecure people to feel like their individual failings have brought them to the food pantry. (p. 103)

In some senses, it is surprising that worry about judgment was frequently stated in participant interviews because unlike the research on neoliberal stigma in the context of food banking, most people did not use the program as an emergency food supply, and therefore it could be assumed that some of the stigma attached to “needing to ask for help” would be alleviated. The fact that participants were asked to participate in the program rather than having to seek out help could also be thought to buffer against this kind of stigma.

The Nourishing Communities program deviates from the studies cited in the literature review regarding neoliberal stigma, because is not designed to serve as emergency food assistance, nor is it used as such. Even though most participants interviewed did not use the program as an emergency food supply, the prevalence of feeling embarrassed, worried about being judged, or even shameful about using the \$MM was common (over half of participants indicated feeling nervous, embarrassed, shameful, or worried about being judged). Most of these participants also indicated that their feelings were their own to “just get over”. Bruckner et al., (2021), observed a similar phenomenon in their study of the experiences of food bank users, stating that they

were struck by how often participants in the study expressed the similar iterations of stigma and shame around food assistance. Yet, despite the resounding similarities for us (as researchers), we perceived little sense that participants felt their stigma and shame around food assistance was a collective experience also shared by others. (p. 104)

This next section probes how certain aspects of the program might perpetuate individualism, and thus act as opportunities to challenge neoliberal discourses around shame and individual inadequacy as a source of shame.

Confidentiality conundrums

In conducting this research, I wondered to what extent prioritizing anonymity of participants perpetuated shame and stigma around food assistance or broader social disenfranchisement. Poverty can be an isolating experience, and part of the neoliberal project is to perpetuate the myth of the individual by working “as a deterrent towards feeling a collective desire to form community or relationships with others in that space” (Bruckner et al., 2021, p. 104). Furthermore, it is well understood that emotive experiences of shame are predicated on secrecy (Brown, 2021). Well known emotions researcher Brené Brown writes (2021),

shame thrives on secrecy, silence, and judgement. If you put shame in a petri dish and douse it with these three things, it will grow exponentially into every corner and crevice of our lives. The antidote to shame is empathy. If we reach out and share our shame experience with someone who responds with empathy, shame dissipates. Shame needs you to believe that you are alone.

Empathy is a hostile environment for shame. (p. 138)

Jude identifies these dilemmas in describing the program as “a secret program”. Quoting her again from Chapter Three, she expresses,

I think the whole thing of privacy in keeping participants from knowing each other, I think that's a slight problem, because it means that I'm always acting in isolation. I never see anybody else at

the market using Food Bucks. So, who the hell are we all? Do I have anything in common with these people? Could we support each other in any way? Could I encourage them to come and grow stuff at the community garden? How else could I have an affect or how else could we, as a group support and affect each other. I think [meeting other participants] would be really useful. [...] I guess this whole thing of sort of secrecy/privacy, it kind of gives a slight impression that there's a reason to kind of stay hidden. (Jude)

Not only does Jude identify the underlying systems at play in the program (i.e., the neoliberal stigma attached to accessing support as it relates to “secrecy”), Jude specifically uses the language of materiality scholars in saying “how else could I have an *affect*... or how could we as a group support and *affect* each other” (emphasis added as a nod towards materiality scholarship on affect). Stifling opportunities for connection from this perspective, not only feeds the myth that individual struggle is the result of an individual failing (rather than a part of a collective struggle), but it also inhibits potential for positive affect among participants.

This proves that not only is connection/community (or empathy as Brown explains it) an antidote for shame, but that by upholding the notion of individual anonymity as central to the program, that potential to affect and be affected are hindered. There is also a missed opportunity to attune people to the notion of the potential of networks of affect (using affect terminology of materiality, and referring to the intervention potential that Cloke et al. proposes, 2016).

This is not to say that I think that privacy is not an important piece in upholding the safety and dignity of participants, because it is, and many participants cited it as such. Perhaps though, considering ways of addressing relational access of the program in addition to structural ones is a worthwhile endeavour. In fact, many participants proposed the idea of connecting with past and current participants, especially at the beginning of the program (through an orientation session and/or in meeting up with others and visiting the market together— a practice that Wall (2017) recommended as helpful and well-received by participants). Giving participants the option of connecting with each other may make space for coalition building, facilitate empathetic exchanges (serving as an antidote for shame), open the

potential to build a network of support, may make the program feel a little less “secret”, or at minimum initiate potentiality for positive affect.

Conclusion

I chose to highlight farmers markets as lively sites in relation to the experiences of shame, stigma, nervousness, and embarrassment in this section, because this is where an increased potential for impact can be considered within a lively, place-based ecosystem. This program is compelling, in part, because of the setting it operates within (that of the farmers market). This is a big part of what distinguishes the program from other widespread food assistance programs— it is experiential, place-based, and open-ended. Additionally, the fact that shame, stigma, nervousness, and embarrassment are included in the farmers market experience for program users, is a unique case study through which to view AFNs, in the context of equity work. It also offers evidence help motivate and orient administrators around how the program might be improved. The fact that these negative emotions mostly dissipated for participants as they moved through the program is significant and should be celebrated as evidence that the program does stand to address inequity and bring people into relations with community in relatively dignified ways. Of course, there is always more work to be done, especially considering that racialized communities seem to be less frequent users of the program (and yet statistically, they are more vulnerable to food insecurity (Roberts, 2020)).

Discussion & connection to the literature

Emerging scholarship in human geography and political theory traverses these foodscapes in rethinking and reimagining how current food assistance models can critically expand the notion of what food security work is, and what it might do (Bruckner et al., 2021; Cloke et al., 2017; Spring et al., 2019). I also engage with literature on how farmers markets offer entry points into destabilizing rigid

anthropocentric epistemologies by providing embodied experiences that nod to other ways of knowing and relating to the world (Turner & Hope, 2014).

Part of my motivation in doing this is because time-bound food security initiatives are not sufficient responses to food insecurity (although may be pragmatically necessary). Moreover, food provisioning through charitable models often has an undertone of dehumanization, pity, and saviour-complexes. As Poppendieck first wrote in 1999,

the proliferation of charity contributes to our society's failure to grapple in meaningful ways with poverty. [...] this massive charitable endeavour serves to relieve pressure for more fundamental solutions. It works pervasively on the cultural level by serving as sort of a "moral safety valve"; it reduces the discomfort evoked by visible destitution in our midst by creating the illusion of effective action and offering us myriad of ways of participating in it. It creates a culture of charity that normalizes destitution and legitimizes personal generosity as a response to major social and economic dislocation. (p. 5)

As a critical community development student, I strive to practice reflexivity about the impact of well-intentioned initiatives, especially when working with disenfranchised or vulnerable populations. As a recreational political thinker, I strive to problematize the practices and political embodiments of programs like these, and interrogate them within their nested social, political, chaotic, worldly, contexts. If the program is a food security initiative, then what sets it apart from other food assistance models that often serve as a pressure-release valve for harmful neoliberal systems and serves to institutionalize self-perpetuating "solutions" instead of seeking systems-change? What types of futures is the Nourishing Communities program motioning toward for Nova Scotia? What unintended impacts (positive or negative) does this program have?

From where I stand, there are three aspects of the program that make it distinct from other large-scale food security and charitable efforts:

1. Supporting local & reciprocity
2. Choice and autonomy

3. Experiential and “unintended” impacts

Supporting local & reciprocity

The ‘supporting local’ strand is empirically straightforward; in part because it is a quantifiable economic measure through which to view the program. Through an economic lens, X dollars are injected into the local economy— specifically into the hands of small-scale producers and makers, through the Nourishing Communities participants. In the words of Fahim Dahi, it is a “**win-win**” for both farmers and participants.

From what I understand from being in and around discussions about the Nourishing Communities program, this aspect of the program is treated as a straightforward positive feature that does not require much probing or deeper engagement. Vendors (for whom “supporting local” predominantly involves) remain relatively removed from discussions about the program and are regularly omitted in its design and evaluation (for better and for worse), despite being the primary interface in the program for participants. This is not to say that vendors need to be more involved in discussions about the program (although they might), but it does demonstrate the discursive backgrounding of this aspect of the program. Participants were glad to know that their money was being injected into the place that they lived. For some, this offered an avenue into “living their values” by providing access to small, local vendors, even if they may not ordinarily have the budget to do so. This can have profound impacts on how people feel about what would normally be a relatively inhuman economic transaction. From this vantage point, farmers markets are anti-materialistic (in the capitalistic sense), because the motivation behind consumption is not in pursuit of “more”, but rather is it a function of supporting a neighbour through a mutually beneficial exchange.

Not only was supporting local and reciprocity identified frequently by participants as a significant purpose, element, and outcome of the program, but it is also what distinguishes the program from conventional food assistance models (such as food banks) and provides some theoretical basis for

considering the program as a longer-term food security strategy (by strengthening the local food system). Participants would often contrast the Nourishing Communities program to food banks, and for some, the difference lies in two distinctions: 1) being able to engage in *supporting* another person by spending \$MM, with the awareness that they were *actively contributing* in a genuine way; and 2) that they were positively participating in a *local* system with the awareness they are interacting with people with whom they were in close proximity and who shared similar identities, and that participants themselves are embedded within that same local system. Participants often saw the program tangibly benefiting people other than themselves, which is a key distinction from other “charity” models of food provision where the sole beneficiary is the person “in need”. The program existed to support people beyond participants themselves *and* had felt implications for participants who saw it as such.

Furthermore, a major impact of the program is around strengthening local food systems. \$300 000 injected into the local economy every year has significant ramifications. When Wall wrote about the program in 2017, these impacts were constrained to what she thought was a one-time, 6-week, \$4000 case, and at that time, such impacts may not have appeared to be as significant. This version of the program in 2022, is a substantial investment into the local economy that can contribute significantly toward long-term food security and community resilience at scale. During the pandemic, it was observed how fragile global supply chains are—the interconnectedness of local-global systems has become too glaring to be ignored. It can only be expected that as we continue to navigate climate crises, and an evolving restructuring of world order, volatile political environments, and grapple with social change, new ways of thinking about resilience and sustenance are necessary. An established response (although not the only response) for surviving this crisis-prone epoch is to look towards local systems— especially local food systems. It is in this way that resilience at the “end of the world” (Grove, 2021; Morton, 2013) is fortified through programs like the Nourishing Communities program. We are strengthening local (food) systems for the future.

Choice and autonomy

Being permitted to choose how they wanted to participate in the program, as well as what they spent the \$MM on, enabled a sense of autonomy in participants that is not always embedded in social assistance programs or the experience of living precariously. Poverty is often associated with a loss of choice— that is people’s ability to choose becomes increasingly constrained (Curtis and Saul, 2013). In the case of food banks or food box delivery programs, the ability to choose (what products, what type of food, how much, and so forth.) is often removed completely. Inversely, choice has a pragmatic appeal because when people can choose how to participate according to their evolving needs, it is assumed that the program will have a greater congruence in their lives, therefore inciting more consistent engagement the program (i.e., redemption rates will indicate that people are using the program consistently). Choosing how to engage with the program allows people to identify for themselves what sorts of ways the program might serve them in their own life at a given moment. But upholding the right to self-determine how to use the program goes beyond redemption rates. It also instills dignity and respect, and challenges neoliberal discourses about who is deserving of support and what kinds of support. It instills a sense of trust and pushes back against paternalistic policies and surveillance practices that often pollute the food security landscape (this is also the work of food justice and sovereignty more broadly).

Moreover, resisting prescriptive rules about what the \$MM is for, allows space for contextually and culturally appropriate engagement, it also gives room for people to viscerally experience the market in novel, expansive, complex, and emerging ways. In Hayes-Conroys’ (2013) work on school gardening and cooking programs, they problematize prescriptive programming in the context of a healthy eating curriculum:

by disallowing meat and other ‘bad’ ingredients from the kitchen classrooms, the cooking lessons offered in these spaces often end up being more comfortable or familiar to the students who already eat similarly. Moreover, feelings of tension and confusion can emerge in places where school and home practices conflict. Both students and parents from such families articulated

feelings of discomfort, anger, frustration, and hostility towards their program, particularly in (re)action to the perceived judgments coming program leaders (p. 84).

They also write that “the scientific backing of alternative foods has helped to universalize and naturalize the tenets of alternative consumption, promoting local and fresh eating as a natural and apolitical act, rather than something that is both social and questionable” (Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy, 2013, p. 82). Farmers market food is often posited as “natural” (similar to the naturalization of the gardening experience in the above example), and yet for some folks, “farmers market food” might feel foreign and inaccessible in a number of ways. For other people, using produce and cooking from scratch are everyday occurrences in their lives, and so the impact that the program has may not be a shift in eating behaviours per se, but it might involve other experiential aspects of the market, or trying products beyond the produce they are used to buying. This is why prescriptive programing and narrowly defined objectives are not helpful. Jessica and Allison Hayes-Conroy (2013) instead explain why school garden and cooking programs might be valuable beyond teaching students what they “should” be eating, “school gardening and cooking programs give students a chance to have novel experiences with food/practices, which allow them to interrupt current habits of bodily (re)action and begin to feel out different ways of being and becoming” (p. 84). Enabling novel experiences is one of the strengths of the Nourishing Communities program that is facilitated by choice.

The BC Farmers’ Market Coupon Program restricts its usage to vegetables, fruits, nuts, eggs, dairy, cut herbs, meat and fish, in an effort to promote healthy eating for lower-income families, pregnant people, and seniors (BC Farmers’ Market, n.d.). This research project illuminates how this may perpetuate unhelpful and potentially harmful messaging over who is deserving of what sorts of products, and narrowly defines what is considered healthy food. In an attempt to prevent restricting purchases, FMNS tracks the \$MM spent through the Nourishing Communities program to justify to funders that without restriction, people still use the majority of \$MM on food. This is a contentious and politically driven practice, that at worst might perpetuate surveillance and paternalistic practices that too often characterize “charitable” efforts. I feel inclined to warn against further extensions of these types of

practices, especially as the program continues to grow and scale across Nova Scotia (and beyond?). I hope that this thesis provides evidence that the Nourishing Communities program is so much more valuable than what people spend their money on, and that these benefits are in many ways predicated on choice and a sense of agency to engage in the program with minimal restriction or supervision. For example, I wonder if people would report feeling “a part of the farmers market community” if they were not able to participate in the farmers market like every other market shopper. Or I wonder if some people for whom cooking with whole foods is inaccessible but who may really benefit from the weekly social outing, would be deterred from the program if they knew non-agricultural purchases were frowned upon. I also wonder what sorts of experiences would be missed out on by invoking rules (explicitly or implicitly) about what purchases are permissible or not; would the meaning-filled experiences invoked through purchases such as cookie-making sets, jewelry for a loved one, or Christmas presents be missed out on? What does this say about who deserves joy, connection, and pleasure? This cautionary note raises broader questions around how people living in poverty are deemed deserving or not, and how this is enacted in the ways public funds are distributed and programing is policed.

Expanded ways of relating and “unintended” impacts

By unintended impacts, I refer to any impacts beyond food provisioning *for* participants. I say unintended due to the formal and informal ways the program is defined and communicated that centres food security. I see any impact beyond increasing food security as an unintended impact given that the program seeks to “address food insecurity” (Farmers’ Markets of Nova Scotia, n.d.). This includes socialization, community building, increased sense of freedom, deepened relationships, getting out of the house, connecting to place and people, learning, improved confidence, engaging in novel experiences, the list goes on. Food is a gateway to all these “other” impacts that have profound meaning in people’s lives. What if, instead of attempting to address food insecurity, the program aimed to facilitate expanded ways of relating to community, health, economics, and ecosystems, by bringing people into relationship with

their farmers market who may not have otherwise been connected? What sorts of new possibilities might be unlocked when expanded ways of relating are facilitated by attending the farmers market? How might the program not only attempt to feed people calorically, but also metabolize new senses of what is possible in doing so?

I think these are the impacts that are most compelling because it justifies short-term food provision as a means, not an end. If the Nourishing Communities program can facilitate new connections to place and people, prompt (re)thinking of global/local food systems, decrease materialistic consumption behaviours, increase feelings of safety in the community, expose folks to seasonal food, get people out of their homes and out of themselves, engage with food cultures, and ingredients, beyond that of the standard North American diet, facilitate bonding experiences with children, buy a new set of teeth, spark entrepreneurship, make members feel seen and wanted in their community—this is why the program is worth investing in.

This is not to say that the Nourishing Communities program is either about food *or* beyond-food. I hope that this research serves to challenge the reform/revolution, food/non-food, donor/recipient binaries by demonstrating the interconnected potential of the program, including increasing food and financial security. The fore fronting of the more-than-food-security impacts in this project is not only representative of the data, but is also meant to legitimize such impacts and flatten the ontological “worthiness” (nodding towards flat ontology or the Heidegger-influenced object-oriented ontology (Harman, 2002)) of these visceral experiences and beyond-food a/effects in the eyes of program administrators. In doing so, participants are no longer passive recipients of charity, but are active contributors in an ecology of actors that make this program work so symbiotically. Viewing it in this way does not diminish the need to work towards food justice/sovereignty, systems change, equity, decolonization, climate action, and community resilience. We live in an ecology of problems in the Anthropocene, and work is needed at all levels. This program offers a glimmer of hope and a micro-ecosystem of possibilities in inching towards more equitable, connected, abundant futures.

Nourishing communities for more resilient futures

I have only recently become oriented towards *the future* (personally and scholarly), thanks to mentors like Dr. Gabrielle Donnelly and Dr. Can Mutlu. I am also coming of age during a time characterized by the “unprecedented” events of the past two years (the Covid-19 pandemic, racial reckoning in the United States (with aftershocks globally), severe climate events around the world, the discovery of mass graves of Indigenous children in Canada, political/media-driven social divisiveness and unrest, and Russian invasion of Ukraine, among others). Although not unrelated to each other, these events seem to have sparked a collective visceral knowing that the world has entered a crisis-prone epoch (although it is hard to tell if we were ever not in one) and a collective consciousness-raising about what the future is going to look like. It is hard to avoid these questions as these acute events are live-streamed through our cellphones. It is all to say that my orientation to the future is not only a product of my proximity to brilliant minds thinking about these topics, but it is also a sign of the times we are living in.

It is likely that we will continue to face more crises causing global disruptions to supply chains and food systems in my lifetime. The Nourishing Communities program does not only invest in local systems, but through the farmers markets, it exposes a lot of people to seasonality, resilience practices, and agency bolstered by acquiring enhanced knowledge, skills, and connections. The program connects people who may otherwise be marginalized or deemed as “passive recipients”, with their communities, with local growers/makers, and with substance systems, in ways that contribute to important long-term equity work. It brings folks into a network of collective agency, active contribution, and human/non-human relations in ways that parallel essential survival skills in my mind. This is the type of work that feels urgent to me about the Nourishing Communities program.

Pragmatic offerings

As we traverse this more-than-food landscape back down to the ground level, I would like to offer some practical takeaways, informed by the findings from this research, that may not only aid

program administrators of the Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program in Nova Scotia, but which might also provide some good practice and contemplative material for scholar/practitioners beyond the Nova Scotian context who may want to apply some of the learnings in developing a similar more-than-food-coupon program. First, I apply Hayes-Conroy's Political Ecology of the Body framework as a theoretical and practical tool for analyzing programs like this one, and then harvest some key takeaways from this research that can be used to fuel future iterations of this program.

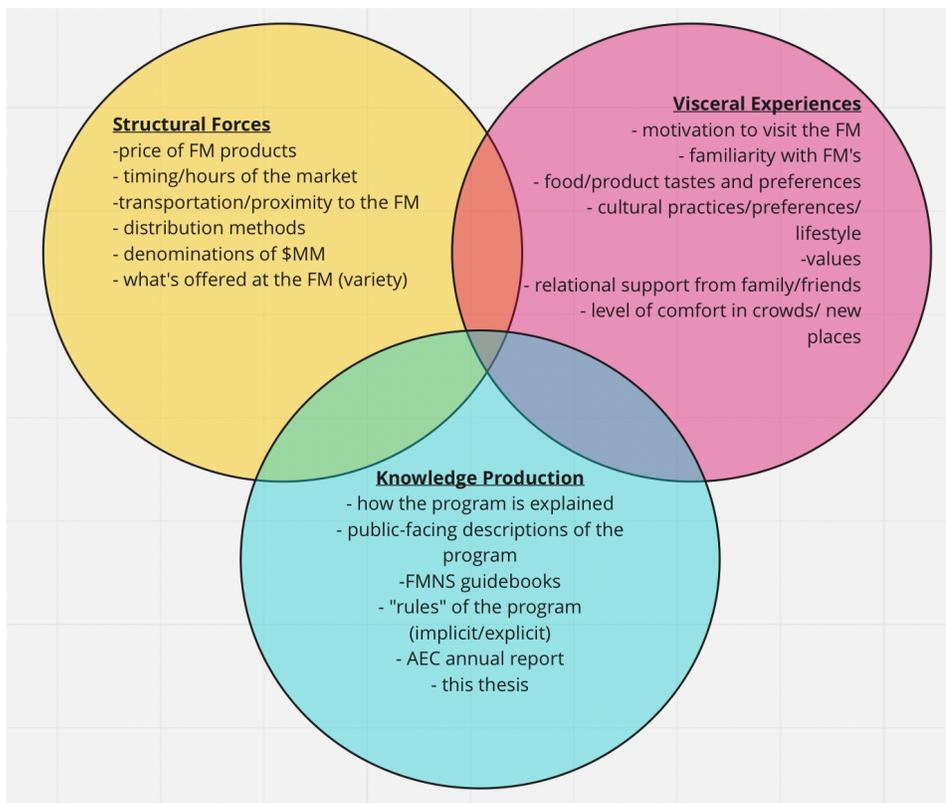
Through a Political Ecology of the Body lens

One of my early observations in interviewing participants from a variety of markets, was that peoples' understandings and interpretations of the program appeared to be constructed based off how the program was explained to them, the implicit messages about what the purpose of the program ought to be, and the structural design of the program at each market. For example, a number of participants were onboarded through an organization where they volunteered their time making crafts (and got to socialize and learn in the process). This group of individuals were much more apt to view the program with pride and ease, because the \$MM was implicitly tied to a reciprocal exchange (i.e., volunteer time in exchange for \$MM), and a part of a collective project (i.e., all the participants from this organization visited the market together and met frequently throughout the week). The way the program was explained to participants, the relationship with the organization that they were onboarded through, as well as the design features at the particular market all impacted things like how much shame or nervousness participants experienced, what they thought the \$MM should be spent on, how hesitant participants were about visiting a new place, to what extent they saw the program impacting people beyond themselves, and so forth.

However, there was also individual differences, even if participants were from the same market, which my reasoning did not account for. This is where Hayes-Conroy's visceral geographies lends itself useful as the third precursor for how participants come to understand, use, and experience the program.

Figure 4 demonstrates their three-wheeled model that puts some of the elements discussed in the preceding and proceeding pages into relationship with each other. In applying this model, we can interrogate the reasons why participants might experience the program differently, what sorts of intervention capabilities administrators have in improving participant experience, and why understanding participants' felt and relational experience with the program is a key piece to exploring how and in what ways the program can bring about more-than-food-security. Examining the program through the lens of the PEB wheel (Figure 4) is a helpful tool as the program continues to grow.

Figure 4: A Nourishing Communities PEB Framework (adapted from Hayes-Conroy's PEB model (2017))



When applied in practice, this model can help evaluate the program in terms of barriers to access, impacts, and exploring how it is understood, administered, and experienced. For example, if this model

were employed to examine what sorts of barriers might influence redemption rates, the following questions could be prodded:

- Structural forces: what kinds of structural barriers might deter people from spending their \$MM? Is transportation, childcare, hours of operation of the farmers market, preventing people from attending? Do participants feel that the design of the program is straightforward and easy to use? Do the denominations of the \$MM work for participants and how do they feel about not being able to receive change for the denominations? Are there any inefficiencies or design considerations that can be improved to make it more accessible?
- Visceral experience: what impacts participants' motivation to come to the market? Does it feel like a safe, welcoming, inclusive space, or do they feel nervous or hesitant about visiting? Is a fear of judgement or sense of stigma in using the \$MM preventing participants from attending and using the \$MM? Is there food at the farmers market that participants recognize; are there culturally appropriate ingredients/meals available? In what ways might the farmers market make it feel exciting and safe to learn from vendors and try new things?
- Knowledge production: what sorts of messages are participants ingesting about the program? Do participants (and vendors) feel confident about how to use the program? What do participants think the \$MM can/should be used for and how does this align with their lifestyle, culture, previous experiences, and abilities? What sorts of explicit rules and implicit messages inform their understanding of the program? Are there any instances where they are unclear about the "rules of engagement" or where their understanding of the program is not compatible with how they prefer to use it (and is this preventing them from engaging with the program fully)? Does public-facing information about the program feel dignified, true, and respectful? Is the way the program is described congruent with how participants experience it and how does this impact their motivation and ability to lean into the program?

The same sorts of questions can be asked and applied in examining the program at many levels and with different foci. For example, at the provincial level, FMNS could use this framework to examine why

different farmers markets design programs in different ways and how this then impacts participants varying experiences. It could be applied to examine how and why stakeholders experience benefits of the program to varying degrees. We could also take the specific issue of tracking \$MM and examine issues of administrative (structural) barriers to tracking, how it is being used for knowledge production and procuring funding (are there legal ramifications to this in terms of informed consent and protecting participant's privacy?), and the motivations behind why funders/administrators feel the need to track, and how tracking might feel for participants.

This framework is a flexible but comprehensive method of examining topics that considers the lived, felt, and relational experiences of stakeholders without excluding the structures and knowledge that are also at play. It allows administrators to take into account overarching systems (such as neoliberalism), contextual forces (such as the community-centered culture in Nova Scotia) and structural inequities (such as access to transportation in rural areas), while also recognizing the diverse identities and experiences of individuals. Again, this framework offers an alternative to revolution/reform, theoretical/practical, individual/systemic, relational/structural binaries by taking into account multi-dimensional aspects of the program and examining how they intersect and inform each other. This is a procedural tool that practitioners can apply in many contexts. The next section offers content-centered learning to inform future programing.

Pragmatic takeaways

This section provides a synthesis of practical findings of the research, as they relate to what aspects of the program work well, and where there is opportunity for improvement and contemplation.

What works well about the Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program?

Most of the strengths of the program have been discussed in the sections that preceded this one, however I will reiterate and synthesize what I see as important aspects of the program based on the research in the context of practical takeaways:

1. Choice and flexibility of method participation: participant choice of not only what to buy, but also how to engage with the program (i.e., how frequently they visit the market, options to order online, being able to skip a week or save money for a more expensive product, and so forth) are foundational aspects of the program that respects the autonomy of participants (which has impacts in and of itself). This also makes the program malleable to suit participant's unique and evolving needs and life circumstances, which (from my perspective), increases (or at least maintains) engagement with the program.
2. Relationships: connections with vendors, partner organization representatives, market folk are essential aspects of the program. In many ways, I see successful onboarding of participants a function of their relationship with their partner organization (in other words, the stronger the relationship between the partner organization and the participant, the smoother the onboarding process, and more engaged the participant tends to be). Additionally, relationships with vendors were often a highlight for participants and an entry point into a lot of the benefits of the program (learning exchanges, supporting a local person in the community, anti-materialism, feeling of reciprocity (beyond charity), making connections, increasing a sense of belonging and familiarity with the broader community, and so on). Finally, the connection between the partner organization and the market should not be overlooked as potentially symbiotic relationships that can lead to possible spin-offs and a more connected community. For example, one partner organization said that thanks to the Nourishing Communities program, their partner organization now partners with the farmers market for other cooking and healthy eating programs! Like Wall, (2017), I too see the program as a relational one. The benefits of these relationships extend beyond the participant and infiltrate the many crevasses of community landscapes in infinite ways.

3. Farmers markets as more-than-food meeting places: the sensory, place-based, community-oriented, animated characteristics of many farmers markets are an asset to this program and to the community more broadly. Consequently, visiting the farmers market is not just a means of obtaining substance, but it is an experiential activity through which to engage in social, civic, and ecological community. Unlike grocery shopping, for many folks it can be a fun activity to wander and bear witness to the creative endeavors of artists (musicians, crafters, makers, painters, to name a few). As a weekly, social, place-based activity, the ways the farmers market appeals to the senses (and spirit?) enriches the program as more-than-food-security.
4. Preserving an ecology of possibilities and measuring multitudinous impacts: although the program is largely promoted as one that addresses food insecurity, in practice, the program allows for much more expansive profile of outcomes. Program outcomes are held lightly and are loosely monitored in a way that permits an expansiveness of impacts to be experienced. Specifically, the program does not mandate or impose specific outcomes on participants or administrators. Although it is implicitly encouraged that participants use it for healthy food (whatever healthy food is), in practice, it is designed so that the benefits of the program can be felt in a multitude of ways, according to individual experiences of the program. This is to say that what I see (and what participants described) as the most significant benefits of the program were not experienced in the syntax of redemption rates, ratio of food purchases to artisanal products, dollars, or calories; the impacts of the program transcended these narrow categorical metrics in often profound ways, thanks to the openness and flexibility of its design.
5. Reciprocity: is inherently built into the program in the way that it supports local vendors. Participants tended to be highly attuned to this function of the program, and in my eyes, it is a key factor in offsetting the degree to which neoliberal stigma/shame is experienced, and the ways the program manifests as a moral release valve that often characterize charitable efforts. Materially, the money also benefits the local community two-fold— it passes through the hands of participants, and through vendors (in the words of a market manager, the money doubles!), which

has economic (and more-than-economic) impacts for local, (often rural) people, small businesses, and communities. Because participants are the movers of these funds, they experience the program as one that has benefits beyond themselves, which has implications on their felt experience of it (for example, some people felt good about using the \$MM because they were helping another person).

How can the program be improved? What are some general things to be wary of?

1. Orientation, communication, and clarity: one of the most common and straightforward pieces of constructive feedback that emerged from the research was a need for the program to be more clearly communicated to vendors, participants, and partner organizations. I perceived feelings of nervousness and hesitation from participants were often due to a lack of understanding about how exactly the program was going to work, what the rules and expectations were, and being in a new environment for the first time. Additionally, there were multiple instances where participants had to explain how \$MM worked to vendors which may have resulted in uncomfortable and potentially embarrassing or shameful interactions. Thoroughly orienting participants and vendors alike, as well as maintaining ongoing communication to address emerging questions and concerns is a relatively straightforward way to attempt resolve these issues, but more importantly prevent them from happening in the first place. This means that sufficient runway time is needed to both onboard and orient a community partner, as well as orient the participants. Although guidebooks for participants, markets, and vendors, are provided by FMNS, there is a need for a more interactive and thorough orientation where people can ask questions and problem solve together. In the cases where this did happen, it resulted in a smoother experience for both participants and administrators. I also predict this is a factor that impacts redemption rates.
2. Navigating public-facing neoliberal shame/stigma, safety, and promoting a discourse of dignity: a few program administrators voiced a concern that farmers market staff/volunteers are not

necessarily trained in harm-reduction approaches to working with vulnerable populations; nor are they necessarily well-versed in equity-related issues or critical social science (although some of them are!). A few examples of published news articles and inconsiderate language emerged in interviews and in informal conversations with program administrators (i.e., participants being called “needy” and non-consensual information being released). While almost always, administrators are well-intentioned, there is potential for harm in the language people use, public-facing material that is published, and in the ways that administrators and vendors interact with program participants. This is also an opportunity for learning, awareness-raising, and challenging the stigma around poverty and food-insecurity. A spirit of respectful curiosity to learn and an awareness of the basics of harm reduction are good practices to ensure that all community members are respected, and that their safety, privacy, and dignity not be compromised as the result of this program. Being in consultation with participants and partner organizations is also a good practice. I have a sense that intentional learning and thoughtful strategies (beyond avoiding the topic all together) are needed at the provincial level that might help guide administrators locally.

3. Awareness of paternalistic & surveillance practices: in a similar vein, program administrators (locally and provincially) should be encouraged to remain aware of the policies, practices, and attitudes that perpetuate paternalism and policing of the program. There is a delicate balance between doing what is needed to secure funding to expand the reach of the program and engaging in potentially harmful practices that could undermine people’s experiences and benefits of the program. As the program continues to scale across the province, reach more people, and gain more exposure, this tension will persist. Probing the perceived need, utility, and underlying philosophy behind surveillance practices (such as tracking), needs to be ongoing from my perspective. This serves as an opportunity to shift views of funders and challenge biases that may inform the need to continue these practices. Programming founded on informed trust, strong relationships, mutual understanding, and clear boundaries are (from my view) effective strategies

for ensuring that these programs are dignified and mutually beneficial, however more learning, inquiry, and dialogue is needed here from those with lived experience as well as those who are trained and well-informed on best practices.

4. Making farmers markets more accessible: as was demonstrated in research, participants experiences of the farmers market were in many cases equated with their experiences in the Nourishing Communities program. This means that working towards more accessible and equitable farmers markets *is* working to make the program more accessible. This also has implications for who feel welcome and able to participate in farmers markets beyond the program. Working to challenge farmers markets as white or colorblind spaces is (and must be) ongoing work. Examining who feels welcome at the market, and what types of customers markets attract is not only a matter of equity, diversity, and inclusion, but is also an urgent step in transforming food-systems and working towards long-term food justice. Financial constraints and the price of farmers markets products were cited by participants as the biggest barrier to continuing to visit the farmers market after the program was over. Exploring ways of making farmers markets more financially feasible places to shop is needed (including advocating for subsidies for local farmers). This is also the work of food justice/sovereignty and systems-change more broadly.
5. Who is missing? Program administrators should not have an uncritical view of who is included in the program. This program will not work for everyone who might have a low-income or experiencing food insecurity. Moreover, it could have profound benefits for folks who identify as neither low-income nor food insecure. Since onboarding in the program is done in partnership with partner organizations (a practice that I think is important), attention should be given to who markets decide to partner with, who the partner organization serves, and what that means about who the program is for. While representation may not be the goal of the program, due attention should be given to ensure that populations made vulnerable, and who are disproportionately affected by income inequality and food insecurity are not being further excluded at scale

(particularly African Nova Scotians and BIPOC communities). The program has an ability to meet a real need, and so ensuring that it does so (at scale) will further amplify impact. Exploring the following questions is a place to start: Who's not included in the program? What kinds of needs exist locally that this program could help address? Who is not included in the program because they are not already being supported by a partner organization? How might we consider reaching people for whom it might have impact but who may be systemically underserved?

Where are there leverage points and what are some ideas for consideration?

1. Relationships: cultivating connections between participants, among participating market administrators, between partner organizations and farmers markets is a leverage point. As mentioned in the results, a handful of participants voiced a desire to meet other participants. Retrospectively, many of them said that having met with a prior or current participant may have made them feel less nervous, more enthusiastic, and provided an opportunity for coalition and relationship building. As mentioned earlier, this may also act as an antidote for neoliberal shame in challenging a sense of individualism (as well as open the door for mutual affect). Furthermore, as was voiced by some market representatives, there is so much potential for cross-market learning given that each market operates in particular contexts, and with varying degrees of experience in delivering the program (i.e., some markets have been delivering the program for 7 years, while others will be participating for the first time in 2022). Providing avenues for mutual learning, dialogue, and connection has immense potential. Finally, strengthening relationships between partner organizations and farmers markets not only aids in effective program administration, and provides opportunities for mutual learning (especially around issues discussed in the previous section regarding harm reduction principles); but viewing these more holistically might prompt reimagining of how these relationships might exist beyond the context of the

Nourishing Communities program. It is in this way that the program has the potential to strengthen the fabric of communities and the connectivity of organizations doing important work.

2. Engagement: what sorts of expanded ways of relating (to food, health, community, local systems, and so forth) are facilitated by attending the farmers market and how might these be better leveraged? Here, the conundrum of “nudging” participants to engage with the program in particular ways can be interrogated. For example, I observed that participants who attended the market in person on a regular basis were more likely to experience broader and deeper impacts than those who did not attend the market as frequently in person. However, for some folks, being able to order once a month online was a huge help since they experienced barriers to visiting the market in person. Cultivating the conditions for participants to engage more deeply with the program and open up the potential for novel experiences and new ways of relating, through methods such as a thorough orientation sessions, regular check-ins and ongoing communication, connecting participants with each other if they wish, and providing options to receive recipe cards, newsletters, join Facebook groups, or participate workshops are all ideas that participants voiced in interviews. The potential to engage participants after the program is finished was also another interesting idea posed by a market representative. This is all part of the work of administering a more-than-food program, however, it is my perspective that principles of choice, autonomy, and flexibility should always be prioritized. Everyone experiences the program in vastly different ways and allowing room for different levels of engagement is a strength of the program that should not be sacrificed in an effort to narrow what a meaningful experience looks like.
3. Reimagining the program as more-than-food-security: food security has proven to be an effective vehicle for funding and leveraging support for the program; but what would a more true-to-life and holistic version of the program sound like? Is it wise to reimagine the program publicly if food security has been an effective “tag-line” thus far? There are tensions in the program that stem from the inconsistent nature of “what the program thinks it is” versus “what it is”. Tracking

the \$MM is an example of this, but so is language use around who benefits from the program and who participants are, how participants experience stigma and shame, to what extent market managers and partner organizations can leverage the benefits of the program beyond-food security, and who is able to learn from and connect to the program, are examples of products of these inconsistencies. Food security is compelling entry point, but it does not end there. How might a more-than-food-security program mandate be communicated with funders, and is it important to do so? How might doing so open potential for funders (often government officials) to reimagine food security and perhaps offer alternative (novel?) ways of relating? How might this program be an example to help broaden the notion of equity work at the level of the government? Food for thought...

CONCLUSION

This project was born out countless conversations and interactions with, about, and separate from the Nourishing Communities program that demonstrates its significance because it is about both food and more-than-food. For many folks, it expands and even opens up new possibilities about how they might relate to food, to their community, to loved ones, to consumption rituals, to ecological processes, and to themselves. It is not a revolutionary proposition; however, it is a push-back against rigid and categorical approaches to addressing the “ecology of problems of the Anthropocene” (Bennett, 2010). The proposition is that working towards more secure, well, and resilient futures requires efforts that enable an ecology of possibilities— not just one set of stiff prescriptive outcomes which conventional research often delineates through the syntax calories or currency (i.e., increase fruit and vegetable intake! Lower your BMI! How many people below the poverty line?). Many of these possibilities include material outcomes—a new set of teeth, a successful small business venture. Others are visceral and relational— a fond memory, a new connection, increased confidence, a reminder of humanity, shifted perspectives on shopping local, an increased sense of belonging. It is my hope that futures are not merely defined by having enough to eat (while this is irrefutably important), what if we defined worthwhile undertakings not just by the absence of lack, but in the pursuit of connection, wonder, possibility, and visceral joy? This is my hope for more-than-food-security.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A) BLURB AT END OF THE PRE-PROGRAM SURVEYS

Question 20: PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR A FOOD BUCKS RESEARCH STUDY

Acadia University student, Erika Bout, is searching for participants who are interested in being interviewed about their experiences with the Food Bucks program. Interview participants would be compensated \$40 per interview. Is this something you would be interested in considering? If you answer 'yes', please leave your name and contact information, so that Erika can follow-up with you and provide you with more details.

- Yes, please contact me to share more details (remember to leave your contact information)
- No, thank you

APPENDIX B) RECRUITMENT CARD PLACED IN EACH PARTICIPANT'S

WELCOME BAG

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

*For an Acadia University Food Bucks
Research Study*

Participants will be compensated
\$40 per interview

Participants will be asked to
complete 2 interviews about their
experience with the Food Bucks
program

**CONTACT ERIKA BOUT FOR
MORE INFORMATION ON
HOW TO PARTICIPATE**

Email: 142190b@acadiau.ca

Call: 519-841-1318

This project is approved by the Research Ethics Board of Acadia University and is on file as REB #21-21.

APPENDIX C) ROUND ONE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

First Interview:

1. Tell me your story
2. Why have you decided to participate in the Food Bucks program?
3. What do you understand as the purpose of the Food Bucks program?
 - a. Probes:
 - b. How do you understand the Food Bucks program?
 - c. What do you think the Food Bucks program intends to accomplish?
4. Have you ever visited a Farmers' Market before? Why or why not?
 - a. Probe:
 - b. If you have, what was the experience like for you?
5. What does an average week look like for you?
 - a. Probes:
 - b. How do you spend your time?
 - c. Are you involved with any community groups (formal and informal)?
6. How do you experience community in your life?
 - a. Probes:
 - b. You mentioned (X, Y, Z) can you share a little bit more?
 - c. How do you experience a sense of belonging?
7. What kinds of supports, if any, do you experience or access?
 - a. Probes:
 - b. Formal or informal
 - c. If you're comfortable, would you mind sharing with me if you access any social services?
 - d. You mentioned (X, Y, Z) can you share a little bit more?
8. If you are comfortable sharing, what kinds of challenges come up for you in your day-to-day life?
 - a. What do you spend time worrying about?
9. Are there any kinds of supports that you feel are missing in your community that might help with some of those challenges?
 - a. If yes, can you tell me more?
 - b. What kinds of changes need to happen in your community that might better support you?
 - c. Can you think of changes at the provincial or federal levels that might better support you?
 - d. You mentioned (X,Y,Z), can you share more about that?
10. What do you think participating in Food Bucks program is going to be like?
 - a. Probes:
 - b. Do you think the program is going to benefit or support you? Why or why not?
 - c. What, if anything, makes you nervous about participating in the program?
 - d. Do you expect the program to impact your sense of belonging? Your health?
11. Is there anything that you would change about your experience with the Food Bucks program so far?
 - a. Probes:
 - b. How do you understand the process? How do you understand its design?
 - c. Is there anything that would make it work better for you?
 - d. Why would you make those changes to it? Why wouldn't you make any changes to it?

APPENDIX D) ROUND TWO INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Second Interview:

1. Where are you at with the program?
 - a. Done? or are you still participating in it?
2. Can you tell me about your experience in the Food Bucks program?
 - a. What was it like visiting the market?
 - b. What, if anything, surprised you?
 - c. What, if any, challenges or obstacles did you encounter?
 - d. You mentioned feeling (X,Y,Z), can you tell me more about that?
3. Did you experience the program differently as time went on?
4. Did the program impact your life outside of the market?
 - a. If so, how, if not, why not?
 - b. Is there anything that has changed for you over the last 6 months that you attribute to the program?
 - c. Has it impacted your health, relationships, financial situation, sense of belonging, self-image, knowledge, security?
 - d. Is there anything you do now that you didn't do before coming to the market?
 - e. Do you plan on continuing to visit the market?
5. In what ways, if any, do you see the program impacting people other than those who received Market Money?
 - a. If so how, if not, why not?
 - b. What about your family, your community, vendors, the market itself?
 - c. In your experience, do you see the program benefiting people or communities beyond yourself?
 - d. In what ways, if any, do you think you might have impacted other people in your community by participating in the program?
6. What do you understand as the purpose of the Food Bucks program? Has your sense of the purpose of the program changed over time?
 - a. Probes:
 - b. How do you understand the Food Bucks program?
 - c. What do you think the Food Bucks program intends to accomplish?
 - d. Do you think the program fulfills this purpose?
7. Can you describe how you've experienced community over the past 6 months while participating in the program?
 - a. Has your sense of community changed in any way by attending the market?
8. What does food security mean to you?
 - a. Has your experience in the program impacted the way you view/experience food security?
9. Do you think that programs like the Food Bucks program can address food insecurity? Why or why not?
 - a. Do you think that programs like the Food Bucks program can address other big problems? (Such as poverty, obesity, isolation, etc.)
10. You mentioned in your first interview that (X, Y, Z) were some of the challenges you faced, is this still true for you?
 - a. Has being in the program impacted what kinds of challenges you face?
 - b. Has it impacted what kinds of support you need?
11. How do you think the program can be improved? *I don't work for anyone*
 - a. How might it better fulfill the purpose you described at the start?
 - b. How might it better support you?
 - c. Is there anything that would make the program work better for you?
 - d. In a perfect world and money wasn't obstacle, what would the Food Bucks program look like?

- e. ***You mentioned XYZ, is this something that the program could address that/ improve to help with that***
12. Would you participate in the program again?
- Why or why not?
 - Would you recommend the program to a friend?

Process Feedback Questions:

- Is there anything I didn't ask?
- Do you have any feedback for me?
 - What didn't you like about the interviews? How can I do better?
 - What did you like?
- What do you want to see happen with this research?
- How much do you want to be involved moving forward?
- Did you enjoy being a part of the study? Why or why not?
- How might this research (or other research) benefit you? How might it benefit your community?

APPENDIX E) ADMINISTRATORS ONBOARDING EMAIL

* Sent by a staff person at FMNS*

Hi _____,

I'm reaching out to ask for your help with a research project related to the *Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program* that is being completed by Acadia University Honours student, Erika Bout.

The study seeks to understand the experiences of those who participate in the Food Bucks program, as well as get feedback about how the program is working for participants and Partner Organizations/Program Coordinators.

As a part of the project, Erika will be conducting interviews with representatives from Partner Organizations and/or Program Coordinators to get their feedback on the program. Interviews will be approximately 60min in length and will be scheduled in September-October over Zoom. Results of the study will be made accessible to participating markets.

I know that your market is in a unique position as United Tapestry is acting as the partner organization. I wondered if you or someone else involved in the program at North Mountain might be comfortable taking part in the interview.

Please don't hesitate to reach out to Erika at 142190b@acadiau.ca or (519) 841-1318 if you have any questions about the study or if you or someone else from your organization is willing to participate in an interview.

This project has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Board of Acadia University and is on file as REB #21-21. Any questions, comments, or concerns should be directed to Erika Bout at (519) 841-1318 or 142190b@acadiau.ca, her supervisor Dr. Gabrielle Donnelly (gabrielle.donnelly@acadiau.ca) or the REB Chair Dr. Stephen Maitzen at smaitzen@acadiau.ca or 902-585-1407

APPENDIX F) ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How did you come to work at **insert organization**? Tell me the story of how you got to where you are now.
 - a. What is your role at your organization and with the Food Bucks program?
2. How does administering the Food Bucks Program work at your organization/market?
 - a. How did the partnership start?
 - b. Describe logistics and design of program
3. How would you describe the Food Bucks program?
4. What do you see as the values of the program?
 - a. What is its purpose?
 - b. From your point of view, does it achieve its stated purpose?
5. What do you consider to be the most significance aspect the program?
 - a. Why does it matter?
 - b. What impacts might it have?
6. Who is the Food Bucks Program for?
 - a. Is it meant to serve a specific demographic?
 - b. Is defining who the program is for helpful? Limiting?
7. Do you think that programs like the Food Bucks program can address food insecurity? Why or why not?
 - a. Do you think that programs like the Food Bucks program can address other big problems? (Such as poverty, health, isolation, etc.)
8. Have you observed or noticed any impacts on individuals who participate in the program?
 - a. Impacts on health, security, nutrition, belonging, etc.
9. What impact, if any, has the program had at your organization, at the Farmers' Market, in your community?
10. Have you observed the program impacting people other than those who received Market Money? (Give examples, such as families communities, vendors..)
 - a. If so how, if not, why not?
 - b. What about families of participants, communities, vendors, the market itself?
 - c. Do you think the program benefits people/communities beyond the participants themselves?
 - d. Do you think that you contributed to your community by participating in the program?
11. What are important values to ensure that the program is mutually beneficial and dignified?
 - a. Is reciprocity important in the design of programs?
 - b. How might the Food Bucks program better integrate these values?
12. How might the Food Bucks program and those like it better serve vulnerable populations? How might they better serve their communities?
 - a. How can the program be improved?
 - b. Expanded? Is it in the interest of communities/participants to expand the program?
13. What role do Farmers' Markets have in communities?
 - a. What potential is there for Farmers' Markets to be sites of social support and health promotion?
 - b. What other ways might Farmers' Markets be leveraged to nurture other aspects of individual and community health, security, and wellbeing?
14. Is there anything you're curious to know about the program from the perspectives of participants? Anything you think might be surprising? Anything you'd wish you could ask participants yourself?

Process Feedback Questions:

- Is there anything I didn't ask?
- Do you have any feedback for me?
- What do you want to see happen with this research?
- How might this research (or other research) benefit you/ your organization? How might it benefit your community?

APPENDIX G) PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Participant Consent Form

You are being invited to participate in the Food Bucks Acadia Research Study. This study seeks to understand what impact the *Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program* has on those who participate in it.

The study is being conducted by Erika Bout, Honours student in the Community Development program at Acadia University. The project has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Board of Acadia University and is on file as REB #21-21.

Purpose of the Study

The study aims to explore what impact attending a Farmers Market has on people's health, wellbeing, security, and sense of belonging. In addition, this study aims to provide Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia with valuable insights and new understandings about the Food Bucks program and how Farmers' Markets more broadly may be able to better serve their communities.

Who Can Participate in the Study?

Any adult (18 years and older) who is participating in the Food Bucks program is eligible to participate. Basic literacy skills are required, and participants must have access to phone or email.

What will you be asked to do?

You will be asked to participate in two (2) one-on-one interviews. These interviews can be held in-person in your community, at a location you are comfortable in. They may also be conducted over a video conferencing software (such as Zoom) or over the phone, according to your preference. Each interview will not exceed more than 90 minutes in length and will occur once at the beginning of the program (in June/July 2021), and once near the end of the program (in November/December 2021), at a time that is convenient for you. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed, and the transcription will be sent to you following each interview for you to review and revise as needed.

In January/February 2022, an optional focus group will be held to help interpret and make sense of the results. A separate consent form will be used for this portion of the study. You are not required to attend this focus group to participate in the study.

Compensation/Reimbursement

You will be compensated \$40 for each interview you participate in (\$80 total). Compensation will be provided to participants before each interview. Participants do not need to complete the interview to receive payment. Transportation and childcare costs incurred as a result of participating in this study will also be reimbursed, and any other expenses may be eligible for reimbursement as well (the researcher should be notified of any expenses prior to conducting the interview). Participants who choose to participate in an optional focus group will not be compensated for their participation but will be reimbursed for travel and childcare costs incurred.

Participation and Withdrawal

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may ask any questions, comments, or concerns at any time. You may choose not to answer any questions without penalty. You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, up until 30 days after the last interview. After this time, you will no longer be able to withdraw your data. If you withdraw before the end of the study, you will still be compensated.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

All the information you provide will be considered confidential by the researcher. Participants have the option to choose a pseudonym before the first interview (or a researcher will assign a pseudonym) which will be used in any publicized material to reference insights or quotes you may have had. Any identifying information such as the name of your community, the name the Farmers' Market you attend, or the names of any other person linked to you will not be made public at any time.

Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. Audio recordings will be stored on a password protected USB memory drive, only accessible to the researcher. Once data analysis is complete, audio recordings will be destroyed. Transcribed interviews will be stored on the researcher's personal password protected laptop and any hard copies will be deleted five (5) years after the completion of the study. Participants will be sent a copy of their transcribed interviews following each interview, where they will have 14 days to review, revise, and retract any comments made in the interview. Following the initial data analysis, participants will also have the opportunity to review the results and provide input.

In some cases, representatives from your Farmers' Market and/or partner organization may be aware of your participation in the study for communication and logistical purposes. Participants will be made aware of parties who may be required to know of their participation prior to asking for their consent.

You are required to sign this consent form to participate in the study. This consent form will be stored in a secure location, separate from the data.

Note: The researcher is legally required to inform authorities in cases where evidence of abuse is forthcoming.

Risks and Possible Benefits

If you choose to participate in this research in person, you acknowledge that there is a risk of COVID-19 transmission, even by strictly adhering to provincial public health protocols. All COVID-19 Health protocols will be strictly followed at all times during this study and participants will always have the option to cancel, reschedule, or reformat interviews to online/over the phone, according to their comfort level regarding COVID-19 and public health.

This study may prompt you to express emotions, feelings and experiences regarding difficult and sensitive topics. Topics such as food insecurity, poverty, socio-emotional wellbeing, health, accessibility, discrimination, isolation, capacity, and so forth, can be difficult to talk about, especially for those with lived experience. There is a potential that you will be asked questions that may connect with emotionally difficult or intense topics and experiences, such as the ones listed above. The interview questions have been designed so that you can choose how much you'd like to share and what topics you are comfortable raising for discussion. You are not required to answer any questions or discuss any topics that you find overly distressing. The researcher will discuss ways you can communicate boundaries and ongoing consent throughout the interview process, and you are able to take breaks, skip questions, refrain from sharing, or terminate the interview at any point in the process, without penalty.

The potential benefits of the study include those associated with any learning that may be accomplished through the reflection and learning that this study aim to facilitate. Participants will have the opportunity to shape the way results are interpreted and have influence over future how the Food Bucks program might be improved and conceptualized.

Report on the findings

The results of this study will be shared in the following ways:

- The publication of an accessible report to be shared online
- The sharing of results and key findings in a public presentation to Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia and other stakeholders
- A written summary of relevant findings to be shared with Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia
- The final Honours thesis report

Additionally, preliminary results from this study will be shared in the focus group to be further analyzed and interpreted. All identifying information will be excluded from this focus group and any final reporting *unless you sign a waiver indicating that you would like to be identified.*

Participants will be sent a copy of the final report, along with the accessible summary report.

Funding Sources

The study is being supported by the Change Lab Action Research Initiative (CLARI) in partnership with Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia (FMNS), and the Youth Partnership Initiative (YPI).

Questions about the Study

This project has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Board of Acadia University and is on file as REB #21-21. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns, or would like more information to make a decision about participating in this study, please contact Erika Bout at (519)841-1318, or 142190b@acadiau.ca, or her supervisor, Dr. Gabrielle Donnelly, at gabrielle.donnelly@acadiau.ca. If you wish to direct any questions, comments, or concerns resulting from your participation in this study to an individual not directly associated with this study, please contact the REB Chair, Dr. Stephen Maitzen at smaitzen@acadiau.ca or (902)585-1407.

Thank you for considering participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Erika Bout
Student at Acadia University
Community Development
519-841-1318
142190b@acadiau.ca

Please read the following information carefully before signing.

I understand that interviews that I participate in will be audio recorded and transcribed

- I understand that insights from the interviews may be included in publications to come from this research and that the quotations will be anonymous, *unless I give my consent to be identified.*
- I understand that I will receive a copy of the transcript of each interview and can retract and revise the transcript up to 14 days after receiving it.
- I understand that I will receive a copy of the initial results of the study, along with any quotations that will be used in publicized material to review and provide input on.
- I understand my participation in this study is voluntary. I am under no obligation to answer any particular question or participate in any of the tasks/activities during the course of the study, and I can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty up until 30 days after the last interview. After this time, I will no longer be able to withdraw my data. I understand that if I choose to withdraw from this study, I will still receive the compensation for any attempted interviews.
- I understand that the researcher is legally required to inform authorities in cases where evidence of abuse is forthcoming.
- I understand that my name or any information that could identify me (i.e., unique characteristics, location, name of Farmers' Market attended, etc.) will not appear in any report or publication from this study, *unless I give my consent to be identified.*
- I understand that participating in the final sensemaking focus group is optional, that compensation is not available for this event, and that I will be required to sign a separate consent form if I wish to participate in this session.
- I understand that once data analysis is complete, the audio recordings from my interview will be destroyed.
- I understand only the researcher will have access to identifying materials and confidential information
- I understand that a representative from my local Farmers' Market or partner organization may be aware of my participation in this study but anything I say in the interviews will not be disclosed to them without my consent
- I understand that this study is financially supported the Change Lab Action Research Initiative and by the Youth Partnership Initiative of the Co-operative Enterprise Council of the Annapolis Valley Region.
- I understand that any data sent electronically or stored online may be legally accessed by domestic or foreign authorities.
- I understand that consenting to participate does not waive any rights I have to legal recourse in the event of research-related harm.
- I understand that there is a risk of COVID-19 transmission if I agree to participate in face-to-face research activities, even by strictly following all provincial health protocols.
- I understand that I will likely experience some challenging or intense emotions in the interview process and in reflecting on sensitive topics.
- I understand that I am able to skip questions, withhold information, take breaks, and terminate the interview at any time during the interview process

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

I have read, understood, and agree to the above conditions.

Please print your name: _____

Phone Number: _____

Address (if delivering the transcript): _____

Email: _____

Your Signature: _____ Date: _____

Contact Information:

Erika Bout, Phone: 519-841-1318, email: 142190b@acadiau.ca

Dr. Gabrielle Donnelly (supervisor), email: gabrielle.donnelly@acadiau.ca

APPENDIX H) PARTNER ORGANIZATION CONSENT FORM

Partner/Market Representative Consent Form

You are being invited to participate in the Food Bucks Acadia Research Study. This study seeks to understand the experiences of those who participate in the *Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program*.

The study is being conducted by Erika Bout, an Honours student in the Community Development program at Acadia University. The project has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Board of Acadia University and is on file as REB #21-21.

Purpose of the Study

The study aims to explore what impact (if any) attending a Farmers' Market has on people's health, wellbeing, security, and sense of belonging. In addition, this study aims to provide Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia with insights and understandings about the Food Bucks program and how Farmers' Markets more broadly may be able to better serve their communities.

Representatives from partner organizations and participating Farmers' Markets will have valuable insights and observations about how the program has impacted those who've participated in it, how it might be improved to better serve their local community, and how the program has impacted and influenced health and security in their community.

Who Can Participate in the Study?

Any representative of a participating Farmers' Market or partner organization who is involved in coordinating the 2021/22 Food Bucks program.

What will you be asked to do?

Representatives will be asked to participate in one, 30-60min interview. Interviews will be held over Zoom unless otherwise negotiated. Interviews will be held between September and October 2021. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed and then results will be shared with Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia, and the broader public.

Participation and Withdrawal

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may ask any questions, comments, or concerns at any time. You may choose not to answer any questions without penalty. You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, up until 30 days after the interview. After this time, you will no longer be able to withdraw your data.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

All the information you provide will be considered confidential by the researcher. Interviewees have the option to choose a pseudonym before the first interview which can be used in any publicized material to

reference insights or quotes you may have had. The organization you represent will be kept confidential unless you provide consent for any identifying information to be disclosed in published material. Any individuals mentioned or names of specific Farmers' Markets will not be made public at any time unless consent is provided by all parties.

Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. Audio recordings will be stored on a password protected USB memory drive, only accessible to the researcher. Once data analysis is complete, audio recordings will be destroyed. Transcribed interviews will be stored on the researcher's personal password protected laptop and any hard copies will be deleted five (5) years after the completion of the study. Interviewees will be sent a copy of any quotations or specific insights from their interview that may be used in any published material. Interviewees then have the opportunity to revise, retract, or add to these quotations as they see fit (for instance, to ensure accuracy or to protect confidentiality/anonymity).

You are required to sign this consent form or provide verbal consent to the researcher to participate in the study.

Note: the researcher is legally required to inform authorities in cases where evidence of abuse is forthcoming.

Risks and Possible Benefits

If you choose to participate in this research in person, you acknowledge that there is a risk of COVID-19 transmission, even by strictly adhering to provincial public health protocols.

This study may prompt you to express emotions, feelings and experiences regarding difficult and sensitive topics. There is a potential that you will be asked questions that may connect with emotionally difficult or intense topics and experiences. However, the interview questions have been designed so that you can choose how much you'd like to share and what topics you are comfortable raising for discussion. You are not required to answer any questions or discuss any topics that you find distressing and you are able to take breaks, skip questions, refrain from sharing, or terminate the interview at any point in the process, without penalty.

The potential benefits of the study include those associated with any learning that may be accomplished through the reflection and learning that this study may facilitate. Participants will also have the opportunity to shape the way results are interpreted and have influence over future how the Food Bucks program might be improved and conceptualized.

Report on the findings

The results of this study will be shared in the following ways:

- The publication of an accessible report to be shared online
- The sharing of results and key findings in a public presentation to Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia and other stakeholders
- A written summary of relevant findings to be shared with Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia
- The final Honours thesis report

Additionally, preliminary results from this study will be shared in the focus group to be further analyzed and interpreted.

Interviewees from representative organizations will be sent a copy of the final report, along with the accessible report. Other reporting documents can be sent to participants upon request.

Funding Sources

The study is being supported by the Change Lab Action Research Initiative (CLARI) in partnership with Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia (FMNS), and the Youth Partnership Initiative (YPI).

Questions about the Study

This project has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Board of Acadia University and is on file as REB #21-21. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns, or would like more information to make a decision about participating in this study, please contact Erika Bout at (519)841-1318, or 142190b@acadiau.ca, or her supervisor, Dr. Gabrielle Donnelly, at gabrielle.donnelly@acadiau.ca. If you wish to direct any questions, comments, or concerns resulting from your participation in this study to an individual not directly associated with this study, please contact the REB Chair, Dr. Stephen Maitzen at smaitzen@acadiau.ca or 902.585.1407.

Thank you for considering participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Erika Bout
Student at Acadia University
Community Development
519-841-1318
142190b@acadiau.ca

Please read the following information carefully before signing.

- I understand that interviews that I participate in will be audio recorded and transcribed
- I understand that insights from the interviews may be included in publications to come from this research and that the quotations will be anonymous, *unless I give my consent to be identified.*
- I understand that any identifying information about another person or parties will not be disclosed in any public material unless consent is provided by all parties.
- I understand that I will receive a copy of any quotations that may be publicized and can retract and revise these quotations before they are published
- I understand my participation in this study is voluntary. I am under no obligation to answer any particular question or participate in any of the tasks/activities during the course of the study, and I can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty up until 30 days after the last session. After this time, I will no longer be able to withdraw my data.
- I understand that the researcher is legally required to inform authorities in cases where evidence of abuse is forthcoming.
- I understand that my name or any information that could identify me (i.e. unique characteristics, location, name of Farmers' Market, etc.) will not appear in any report or publication from this study, *unless I give my consent to be identified.*
- I understand that once data analysis is complete, the recordings will be destroyed.

- I understand only the researcher will have access to identifying materials and confidential information
- I understand that this study is financially supported the Change Lab Action Research Initiative and by the Youth Partnership Initiative of the Co-operative Enterprise Council of the Annapolis Valley Region.
- I understand that any data sent electronically or stored online may be legally accessed by domestic or foreign authorities.
- I understand that consenting to participate does not waive any rights I have to legal recourse in the event of research-related harm.
- I understand that there is a risk of COVID-19 transmission if I agree to participate in face-to-face research activities, even by strictly following all provincial health protocols.
- I understand that I am able to skip questions, withhold information, take breaks, and terminate the interview at any time during the interview process

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

I have read, understood, and agree to the above conditions.

Please print your name: _____
 Phone Number: _____
 Email: _____
 Your Signature: _____ Date: _____

Contact Information:

Erika Bout, Phone: 519-841-1318, email: 142190b@acadiauc.ca

Dr. Gabrielle Donnelly (supervisor), email: gabrielle.donnelly@acadiu.ca

APPENDIX I) DRAFT OF RESULTS FOR PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

Rough Version of the Findings of the Food Bucks Study

Conducted by Erika Bout

March 28, 2022 | Acadia University

The purpose of this study is:

- to explore what impacts the Food Bucks program has on participants and their communities
- to explore how participants understand, use, and experience the program
- to provide feedback on the program for administrators from the perspectives of participants

Results:

- overall, people enjoyed the program. 100% of participants said that they would participate in the program again, and everyone said that they'd recommend the program to a friend.
- The impacts of the program can be roughly separated into three sections:
 - 1) Supporting local
 - 2) Nourishing community & connection
 - 3) Impacts on participants
- Participants experienced and used the program in very different ways, according to the design of the program at each market, and personal preferences and lifestyle.
- Most participants cited that the program was about more than just food for them. Factors like feeling an increased sense of community, connections with vendors, spending time with loved ones, getting out of the house, socializing, learning something new, decreased financial stress, improved mental health, etc. were all mentioned as significant impacts of the program.
- Most participants said that the program could be improved if it could reach more people (i.e., growing the program).
 - Other ways of improving the program include:
 - Increased communication and clarity to participants- especially before the program starts
 - Making sure the design of the program at each market is easy to use and straightforward
 - Ensuring that vendors are well informed about the market money and supportive of the program
 - Opportunities for participants to connect with other participants (if they want to)

See mind map below for a more detailed version of the results

Overall:

- The program seemed to work well for participants. Most people were enthusiastic about it and appreciated having a little bit extra. One of the main findings was that for most participants, the program was about more than just food. Participants often described reasons the program was beneficial to them, and for their community, beyond just another way to get groceries.

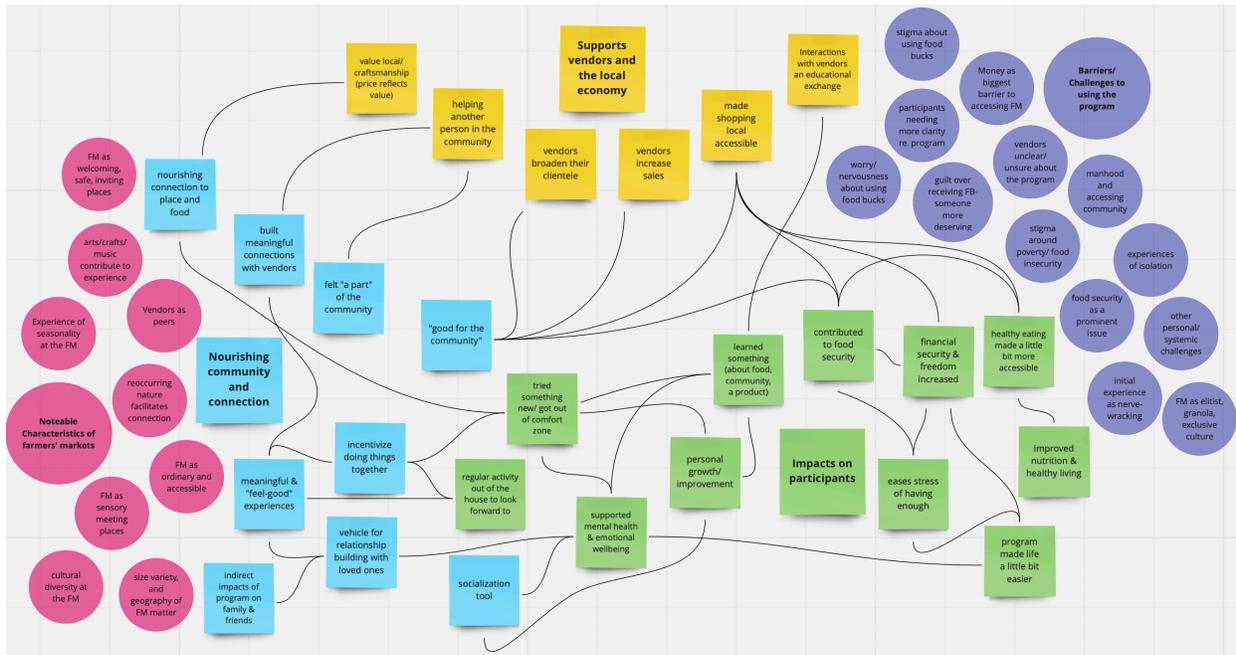
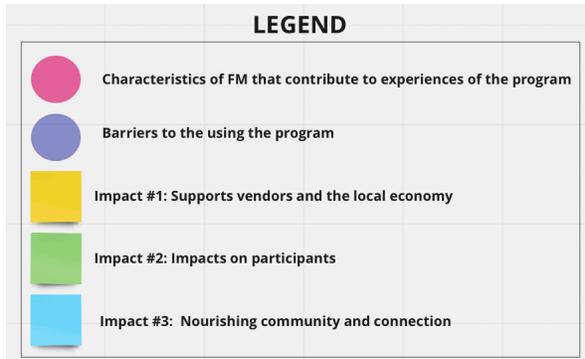
Another way of showing the results

On the next page is a mind-map of the main themes and topics that came up in the interviews.

The square boxes indicate impacts of the program from the perspective of participants.

The lines that connect the boxes indicate that the impacts are connected.

The circles represent other aspects that contributed to participant experiences of the program.



There are many ways of representing the findings of the study. This is just one way!
 *FM stands for Farmers' Market