

Food accessibility should be everyone's right

by Mark Pavilons

Despite our vast array of accomplishments and our position at the top of the food chain, our world is still burdened by hunger.

Haile Selassie once said that we all seek a world in which we are free and free from the burdens of hunger, disease, poverty and ignorance.

It seems feeding the world has been a monumental task for decades and continues to weigh heavily upon our shoulders.

When we talk about hunger, malnutrition and starvation, we often think of the struggling nations, and poverty-ridden countries plagued by disease, drought and conflict.

We often don't see what's under our noses.

More than 4 million Canadians lack reliable access to healthy food, according to the Maple Leaf Centre for Action on Food Security.

In a country as affluent as Canada, with the set of social values that we embrace, everyone should have the ability to access the food they need to live a healthy, dignified life. The fact that millions of Canadians struggle to feed themselves and their families goes against everything Canada stands for. It is #unCanadian and that's why the Centre launched their recent awareness campaign.

Food insecurity affects roughly one in eight households, including one in six children. The Centre says this is not a food availability issue, it is a poverty issue, which disproportionately impacts low income households and minority group populations.

"Canadians like to think of ourselves as being equitable, inclusive and caring," said Michael McCain, president and CEO of Maple Leaf Foods and honorary chair, Maple Leaf Centre for Action on Food Security. "We like to think of Canada as a place where all people can thrive. So, it's shocking that in one of the richest countries in the world, over four million people can't meet the most basic need to reliably feed themselves or their families. This is intolerable, and we need to do more. Surely in a country as affluent as Canada, people shouldn't have to depend on charity to meet their most basic need for good food."

The Maple Leaf Centre for Action on Food Security (the Centre) is a registered charity committed to working collaboratively, across sectors, to reduce food insecurity in Canada by 50% by 2030. The Centre advocates for critical public policies and works with innovative food-based programs that advance the capacity of people and communities to achieve sustainable food security.

This access to healthy foods seems to know no bounds, and is creeping into all of our lives.

Food costs are rising faster than inflation and healthy food may be getting out of the reach for many Canadians simply because it's becoming too expensive.

In the recent election campaign, most parties pointed to affordability of average Canadians. The parties promised housing affordability and reducing certain taxes, but none addressed food affordability.

I understand that the economy, health and the environment are very important issues in society. But let's face it folks, we all have to eat! And we all have to rely on agriculture and the efforts of our farmers and agri-food industry.

Farmers often like to espouse that if you've eaten today, thank a farmer. That's so true.

But we seldom think about the long, sometimes complicated and political process that takes food from the field to the table.

At the grocery store, we want our produce to be perfectly shaped, without a single mark or imperfection. This leads to mountains of waste. My wife and I often buy "perfectly imperfect" produce at No Frills.

In our society, we order in, pick up or head out, expecting our t-bone to be cooked just right, or our penne to be al dente. We want our veggies fresh, lightly oiled and salted. We like to make sure our fresh-baked bread pulls apart just so.

Canada's Food Price Report predicted vegetable costs to rise 6% this year, but I think they've surpassed that. Canadians, in 2019, likely had to absorb roughly \$400 more in grocery costs this year. And it's likely to continue to rise. That is much higher than inflation and the increases vary a lot for certain products, prepared foods, packaged foods, sugary foods, etc.

One of the reasons Canadians (North Americans) are not eating well is that junk food is a lot cheaper than healthy food. The sugary cereals, "healthy" nut bars and enriched white bread are killing us slowly.

Eating healthy costs a fortune!

It's all well and good for Health Canada to recommend more fruits and veggies in our diets, but for many, it's cost prohibitive.

I recall that celery - likely the cheapest veggie on the planet - rose to almost \$6 a bunch over the summer. Many types of berries will skyrocket now that we're in the off-season.

Food security seldom rears its head, but is buried in policies on agricultural development, and sustainability. Even when addressing food waste we don't talk about cost or accessibility. It's like watching the elephant in the room munch on roots and berries, while we grab a chocolate bar!

Many Canadians will agree that food affordability should be the government's priority for the next term.

Again, it's tough to make life choices when your tummy is rumbling.

It's hard to foster leaders of tomorrow when our kids go to school hungry.

It's tough to spark the economy when food bank use is increasing.

If you get a chance, thank a farmer and support our agricultural industry. Support any policy that improves sustainability and access to food.

We owe it to our fellow men, women and children.