

THE “GOOD FOOD” PROJECT



Understanding
sustainability through
immigrant perspectives

Isabela Bonnevera



Photo credit: Swati Chakraborty

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INTRODUCTION

What does “good food” mean to you?

In February 2024, eight immigrant women came together with facilitators Isabela Bonnevera of ICTA-UAB and Wallapak Polasub of KPU to discuss this question. More than ever, Canadian cities are paying attention to how to make food systems more environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable (see pg. 5).

However, the voices of newcomers are often not sufficiently included in these dialogues, even though they hold valuable knowledge and skills related to sustainable food. Therefore, the “Good Food” Project sought to



understand how immigrant women perceive the concept of sustainable food, and what barriers they face to accessing it.

To answer these questions, the project used Photovoice, a participatory methodology. Photovoice involves collectively agreeing on a research question and taking photos to respond to it.



The “Good Food” group from left to right: Maryam (Iran), Desiree (the Philippines), Makia (Afghanistan), Ana María (Peru), Isabela (Canada), Wallapak (Thailand), Regine (Singapore), Jean (China), Selam (Eritrea), and Swati (India)

Participants agreed to use the term “good food”, as the word “sustainable” does not have a translation in many other languages and lacked resonance for many. However, they defined the core concept in a similar way: participants wanted to look at the ways that food can serve social, environmental, and economic good.

With this methodology, participants become “citizen scientists” — a term that affirms their expertise in documenting and understanding issues they live every day.

Thanks to a grant from Simon Fraser University’s Community-Engaged Research Initiative (CERi), all participants were paid a living wage for their time.

The group met once a week for a month, presenting their photos and collectively deciding on common themes. After aligning on five key criteria of “good food” (see pg. 9), they analyzed challenges with food access and made recommendations on how the food environments in Metro Vancouver could be improved (see pg. 24-29).

This book highlights some of the photography that came out of the project, accompanied by captions that provide additional context (pg. 8-27).

It also highlights policy recommendations made by the citizen scientists related to food access, affordability, and equity, which the group presented to the Vancouver Food Policy Council in September 2024 (pg. 27).

The aims of this book are twofold. While we hope our findings can support initiatives to improve food justice in Metro Vancouver,

we also hope this book — and further research related to it — can contribute to scholarship and policymaking related to sustainable food by providing a more nuanced understanding of what “good” or “sustainable” food means to people from diverse cultural communities. As governments and organizations all over the world work to make our food systems better for people and the planet, this knowledge is essential if we are to ensure food justice for all.

**-Isabela Bonnevera and
Wallapak Polasub, 2024**

From left to right: Wallapak Polasub (KPU), Isabela Bonnevera (ICTA-UAB), and Emily Vera (research assistant and Isabela's mom)



BACKGROUND



Sustainable food systems and immigrant perspectives

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) defines a sustainable food system as one which “delivers food security and nutrition for all in such a way that the economic, social and environmental bases to generate food security and nutrition for future generations are not compromised” (FAO, 2018). According to FAO (2018), there are three dimensions of sustainable food systems:

1. Economic sustainability: the system is profitable
2. Social sustainability: the system has benefits for society
3. Environmental sustainability: the system has a positive or neutral impact on the environment

Sustainable food systems will play a key role in fighting the climate crisis. Across the world, there has been a surge in city governments — who can often enact green policies more nimbly than nation states — taking action on food systems.

As most of the world's population lives in cities, the policies and plans that cities are developing have the potential to impact many people's interactions with food and their food environments. Over 200 cities (including Vancouver, where the "Good Food" Project took place) have signed the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact to promote "sustainable, inclusive and resilient urban food systems".

While the term "sustainable" is common in academic and policy documents, research shows that the word doesn't always mean the same thing everyone (Brons et al., 2020). In some languages, there is no direct translation for the word "sustainable", and what the meaning of what constitutes "sustainable food" may vary between individuals, communities, and decision-makers.

In North American cities, sustainable food initiatives (both at a grassroots and government level) have been critiqued for excluding minoritized and/or racialized populations, including immigrants. Immigrants have specific needs and challenges related to the food system but often find it hard to have their voices heard, despite the fact that they hold valuable knowledge and skills related to sustainable food (Bonnevera, 2024). Research has even shown that in some cases, urban policymakers consider immigrant communities to be "hard to reach" or perceive them as uninterested in sustainability efforts (MacGregor et. al, 2019; Fry et al., 2024).

The “Good Food” Project seeks to challenge and reframe that narrative by demonstrating that immigrant communities actively engaged with the concept of sustainable food and seeking to improve their food environments. The project focused explicitly on minoritized immigrant women in Metro Vancouver for two reasons. Firstly, women remain responsible for the bulk of food-related labour worldwide, and therefore their engagement with food is central to sustainability efforts. Secondly, immigrant women from cultural backgrounds that are minoritized in the Canadian context can face additional challenges participating in sustainable food systems, including stigma, language barriers, and unfamiliarity with the local food environment.

Our photobook begins exploring how the “Good Food” group conceptualizes sustainability. Citizen scientists preferred to use the term “good” rather than “sustainable” food; they recognized that “good” implies a higher degree of subjectivity, but agreed that the concept had similar components to what would normatively be defined as sustainable. The “Good Food” criteria on pg. 9 outline these elements; they emphasize the social dimension of sustainability in particular. We then present citizen scientists’ photos, which demonstrate the diversity of ways that immigrants define the concept of “good food”. These rich and nuanced definitions suggest new ways of thinking about the concept of “sustainability” in the food system, emphasizing not only physical health and environmental protection but mental well-being, connection, and culture.

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THE “GOOD FOOD” CRITERIA



**Good for
physical
wellbeing**

Nutritious & healthy



**Good for
emotional
wellbeing**

Sparks joy, evokes emotion

**Participants saw
these five
categories as
intrinsically
interlinked. Many
of the photos they
shared relate to
more than one.**



Good quality

Fresh, unprocessed & tasty



**Brings people
together**

United families,
communities & societies



**Culturally
respectful**

Honours diverse traditions

PHOTO GALLERY

A note on photo curation

This book presents 10 photos from the eight citizen scientists who participated in the project. We started with approximately 60 photos: each citizen scientist presented 5-8 at the start of the workshops and later went through a selection process to narrow them down to five with the support of a project facilitator. The process was designed to encourage citizen scientists to think more critically about their relationships to food, as well as to ensure a balance of key themes across their own photos, as well as the group's final selection.

Project facilitators selected the final 10 photos with the



aim of representing the key themes discussed and ensuring that all participants have a photo included. Citizen scientists approved the final photo selection. Some photo titles and captions were written by citizen scientists themselves; others were drafted by project facilitators based on field notes and later approved by citizen scientists.

Good food is good for physical and emotional well-being

The Good Food citizen scientists depicted good food contributing to physical health by providing essential nutrients that keep bodies and minds energetic. Some citizen scientists mentioned that food in their home countries felt healthier than in Metro Vancouver, whereas others felt that “Canadian” cuisine was more healthy. Citizen scientists with children placed high importance on purchasing nourishing foods for them. However, in some cases, they reported that their kids felt embarrassed to bring cultural foods to school due to teasing from other students and instead asked for more “typical” Canadian meals.

For the citizen scientists, health was a holistic concept: “Good food” is good for physical health but also for mental well-being, and the two go hand-in-hand. Many noted that mental well-being can be strengthened by eating food that is not only nutritious but also vibrantly coloured and aesthetically pleasing, highlighting the importance of visceral experiences in determining food choices. One citizen scientist also highlighted the relationship between food, waste, and a healthy environment, noting that improperly disposed food waste can make us sick.

NUTRITIOUS / SPARKS JOY / EVOKES EMOTION



On the boardwalk

To me, this photo represents life. The sun, the light blue of the sky, and an orange make me feel happy, refreshed, and full of energy. Oranges contain a significant amount of water and vitamin C which is helpful to stay hydrated on sunny days. Before, when I was physically or mentally tired, I would drink black tea with sugar, which was bad for my health.

Now, I have an orange. I also find the contrast in colour between the pomegranate and the orange beautiful. Colour creates happiness, and that is good for mental health. This is especially important for immigrant women, who have experienced many changes.

– **Maryam, Iran**



Magic Spices

This is an Indian spice box. It is full of healthy herbs and spices, and has the magic to create good food for my family. The spice box is spiritual: for example, the turmeric represents the calmness of the body. Spices provide us with the critical nutrients we need for good moods, and the experience of consuming them creates an emotional release.

Mood is also an important component of good food: your positive energy goes into the food you cook for your family. Some of these spices are much more expensive to buy in Canada, so I grind more potent versions at home myself.

– **Swati, India**



Healthy Environment, Healthy Citizens

This photo shows that someone ate a pizza and left the box as trash on the street near a building, even though a garbage bin was very close by. It is so important to clean up your environment.

A clean environment is good for you and your neighbours, making us healthy and happy citizens; when our environment is dirty, it can make us sick and less productive.

– **Makia, Afghanistan**

High-quality and culturally respectful

Good Food citizen scientists were very concerned about the quality of food: its freshness, taste, and suitability for consumption. Cultural appropriateness was seen as an important component of good food, and one they experienced viscerally and emotionally. For them, cultural foods promote mental well-being by bringing back memories, reaffirming identity and traditions, and teaching children about their ancestral homes. Many citizen scientists felt that food in Metro Vancouver isn't as "fresh" or "tasty" as back home, whether due to the need to import certain cultural ingredients (therefore losing their flavour along the way) or due to differences in factors as varied as the mineral content of tap water, the functionality of kitchen appliances, and the content of livestock feed. Additionally, citizen scientists reported that cultural foods were often more expensive to purchase in Metro Vancouver. As a result, some citizen scientists engaged in growing food or making raw ingredients at a household scale.

In addition to being perceived as healthy and tasty, cultural food traditions — such as abstaining from eating meat and dairy two days a week or using all parts of an animal — offer environmental and animal welfare benefits. Citizen scientists' stories also captured how culture and taste are not static, but evolving experiences constantly shaped by changing environments, seasons, people, and feelings.

Homegrown Garlic

Garlic sprouts are common in China. Over there, we don't grow them because they are easy to buy from the store. Here in Canada, they are harder to find and more expensive, so growing them in water at home has become a cherished endeavour. This simple yet fulfilling process allows me to enjoy a touch of freshness and flavour.

As the vibrant green shoots emerge, they signify resilience and self-sustainability; the sprouts are so hardy that you can even grow them in the wintertime.

– **Jean, China**





Returning to my Roots

I am fortunate to live in downtown Richmond near many ethnic food stores, and I can buy these traditional Filipino foods within walking distance. These foods offer health benefits like antioxidants, vitamins, minerals, and fibre. We boil the black chicken into soup, using all the parts and leaving behind no waste.

These foods, which are traditional in my family, often taste different to me than the more processed foods I got used to having mainly grown up in Canada. I sometimes feel a bit disconnected from these more "fresh" tastes.

– **Desiree, the Philippines**

A Taste of Home

This small, family-run Eritrean restaurant in Burnaby is my beacon. It offers dishes from home that taste like nostalgia, bridges the gap of homesickness with comfort and hope, and creates a feeling of home away from home. The restaurant follows Orthodox Christian traditions like serving dishes free from meat and dairy on Wednesdays and Fridays,

and certain religious holidays. It also uses halal meat; in Eritrea, I did not eat halal, but here in Canada, I prefer its taste to conventional meats.

– **Selam, Eritrea**





Thanksgiving, With a Twist

This picture shows a Canadian Thanksgiving dinner with an Indonesian rice platter and traditional side dishes served alongside a classic turkey. It was enjoyed at home with Indonesian friends whose cuisine is similar to that of my home country, Singapore. Since migrating here, my family has learned to adapt to a new multicultural environment and new foods, especially seasonal foods.

My first year in Canada, I missed food from home a lot, but now, my tastes and relationship to food are changing; I think more healthy ingredients, and how to balance health and taste with affordability.

– **Regine, Singapore**

Good food brings people together

For Good Food citizen scientists, social sustainability was a critical issue. They saw a central element of “good food” as its capacity to bring people – families, communities, food producers and consumers – together. Many citizen scientists saw food is a way to connect with diverse cultural communities in Metro Vancouver and to understand each other’s shared experiences and struggles. One citizen scientist noted how this act of coming together can be experienced viscerally through the brain-gut axis. Citizen scientists also shared photos of community initiatives, like gifting groups, that help to reduce waste while connecting people to others in need. Many citizen scientists felt an important part of good food is its role in family celebrations, or its ability to nourish the bodies of people they love.

Some citizen scientists noted that good food should bring us closer to the people who produce it. However, many highlighted that getting to know local food producers is challenging for immigrant communities due to issues with geographic accessibility, time, and cost.



Coming Together

During Interfaith Harmony Week, different faith and cultural communities gathered to demonstrate world peace and love. I like this kind of event, as it promotes understanding and tolerance, including of other people's cultural foods. To me, good food is a good time, with good people, and this experience leads to a good mind.

A good mind is important for good digestion: when you feel safe and secure, food will be more nourishing. Even plain bread will be good if you feel calm and can digest it. Sharing experiences and establishing commonalities over food can help you to feel calm in this way.

– Swati, India



A Community of Sharing

At first glance, the small lemon-jelly box might seem insignificant, but to me, it represents something much deeper—an act of sharing. I am part of a neighbourhood group where we share items like food (including this jelly box), clothing, tools, and furniture. In our group, every contribution matters. I have seen neighbours share everything from a half loaf of bread to a complete dining set, as well as skills and services, such as providing transportation to doctor's appointments.

What we truly share, however, is care, time, and a sense of community. I'm grateful to be part of this group, where every act of sharing connects us to a larger network of kindness and generosity.

– **Ana María, Peru**

Securing a Sustainable Food Source

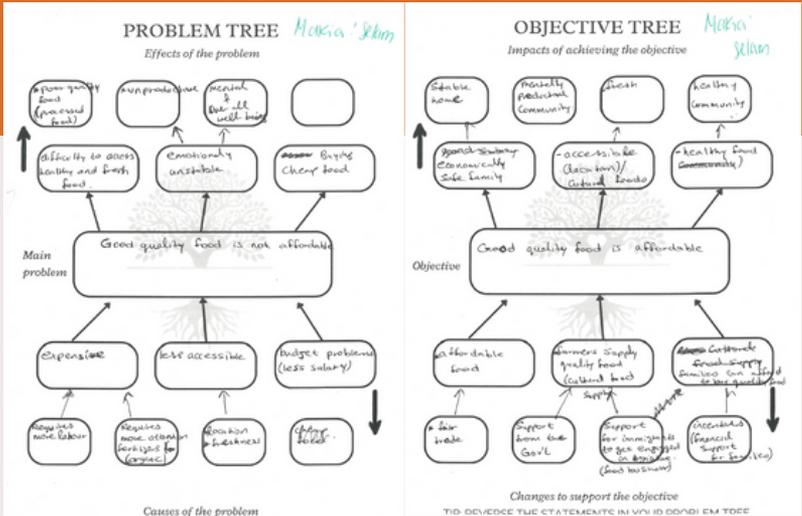
At the Granville Market during the Spot Prawn Festival, we bought fresh live spot prawns from the fishing boat. The fishermen told us that undersized prawns are returned to the ocean, and once a fishing area is closed, it will remain closed to protect the spawning female prawns. I didn't know much about spot prawns before, so I was grateful to hear this information and to connect with our food producers.

Between the traffic, parking fees, lineups, and cost, attending the festival was a big effort — but worth it for the lessons it taught my daughter. The prawns were so fresh that my daughter said they tasted like the ocean!

– **Regine, Singapore**



ANALYSIS, IMPACT & POLICY



Project impact

Out of discussions related to the 10 photos featured here and many others presented during our workshop, citizen scientists agreed on four key policy issues concerning good food. These challenges also relate to the good food criteria (see pg.7).

The group elaborated upon these challenges through a problem and objective framework in the final Photovoice session, allowing them to parse out the root causes of the problem and make recommendations for change.

CHALLENGE 01

Good quality and culturally appropriate food is not affordable

Root causes of the problem

Labour is expensive; inputs for farming are expensive, especially for organic; not much culturally appropriate food produced locally

Symptoms of the problem

Newcomers/immigrants eat more poor-quality, processed foods; they feel emotionally unwell and unproductive without cultural ingredients

Recommendations

- Support newcomer/immigrant families and individuals financially so they can buy healthy food
- Support immigrants to become engaged in agriculture
- Expand food waste redistribution
- Provide more spaces for newcomers and older residents alike to organize and advocate for change

CHALLENGE 02

Newcomers/immigrants feel disconnected from local food producers

Root causes of the problem

Lack of access to outskirts areas; limited and/or expensive public transportation; lack of knowledge about local farms; lack of financial support for farmers; lack of advertising

Symptoms of the problem

Newcomers/immigrants know less about and buy less local produce; they struggle to engage with the local food economy

Recommendations

- Improve transportation to farms, for example through public transport, or a private/public mix (e.g., a van that goes to a farm from a certain neighbourhood)
- Increase the number of weekly farmer's markets in the city
- Provide financial support for farmers to introduce themselves to the public and deliver/transport products to consumers
- Have stores offer discount on buying local
- Encourage businesses to have a special corner for local products

CHALLENGE 03

Newcomers/immigrants can be stigmatized for food choices

Root causes of the problem

Lack of information about newcomers' food cultures; locals unfamiliar with diverse products; lack of tolerance and open-mindedness; insufficient information for newcomers on local food safety practices

Symptoms of the problem

Newcomers/immigrants avoid eating traditional foods; they feel confused about their identity and disconnected from the local community; this has a negative impact on professional performance and causes mental and physical health issues

Recommendations

- Host more events in schools and community centers on diverse cuisines
- Organize city-sponsored "food tours"
- Include multicultural food in cafeterias
- Encourage workplaces to highlight food diversity
- Facilitate opportunities to exchange knowledge on food hygiene and safety practices across cultures

CHALLENGE 04

Newcomers/immigrants have limited opportunities to engage with community food spaces and initiatives

Root causes of the problem

Lack of promotion of events to newcomers; language barriers; lack of budget and physical spaces; lack of planners; community leaders may lack awareness on cultural food diversity

Symptoms of the problem

Newcomers/immigrants experience feelings of non-belonging; limited opportunities to build cross-cultural understanding; immigrants experience isolation and loneliness

Recommendations

- Host more food-related events in workplaces, schools, community centers and city spaces
- Create specific programs related to food with multiple times/locations; increase the budget
- Increase the number of cultural food festivals in the city
- Educate community leaders to share knowledge on food diversity
- Communicate information in multiple languages
- Increase the use of social media to disseminate information

ANALYSIS, IMPACT & POLICY

Advocacy efforts

The Good Food citizen scientists presented their policy recommendations to the Vancouver Food Policy Council at Vancouver City Hall in September 2024. The audience included Vancouver Food Policy Council members, urban planners, and civil society representatives. The Council and other attendees were excited to have the chance to hear directly from immigrant residents, who are often under-represented in regular meetings. The presentation was later shared widely among food justice-related organizations in the city and province.



FINAL WORDS

Citizen scientists felt that collectively talking about “good food” was a powerful and political act. In our last session, participants hung their photos on the wall used post-its to highlight what they learned from one another’s work.

As facilitators, we were struck by the level of engagement with sustainable food, particularly social sustainability. While participants may not explicitly frame “good food” in terms of sustainability, their photos highlight their commitment to using food to unite societies, promote physical and mental well-being, and maintain cultural practices. They also offer nuanced insights into how visceral experiences — like emotions, taste, and aesthetic — impact our food choices.



We also noted that participants held food practices that would be considered environmentally sustainable by Canadian norms.

The project itself contributed to food justice efforts. Participants said that the experience of coming together across diverse cultures made them feel less alone and more empowered to organize and challenge inequalities in the food system.

In the words of the participants:



Ana María, Peru

"It was powerful to come together as a community — not only to advocate for change in the food system but also to uplift and support each other."



Desiree, the Philippines

"Growing up mostly in Canada, I had the idea that good food was cheap and convenient, but this project helped me to reconnect with values like tradition and well-being."



Maryam, Iran

"I learned that I am not alone in my 'new adventure' in Canada, including adjusting my tastes to new foods."



Selam, Eritrea

"I learned about our multicultural differences and similarities – in terms of emotions and the impact of foods in our lives."



Swati, India

"We have so many challenges as a new immigrant in Canada. I enjoyed getting to share my views on food, spirituality, and mental health."



Jean, China

"This program has deepened my understanding of the diversity of food and has made me more excited about sustainable food."



Makia, Afghanistan

"I liked looking at pictures of parties and special dishes from different cultures; learning about diverse customs was very interesting for me."



Regine, Singapore

"This program has made me think more about the bigger cycle of "good food" – thinking about the environment, mental health, and society."

The Good Food group looks forward to staying in touch and is grateful for the new community we've had the opportunity to build.



THANK YOU.

For more information about The Good Food project, contact Isabela Bonnevera at isabela.bonnevera@uab.cat.

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Ana Cañizares



Bonaventura
Laboratory for Urban
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ICTA-UAB



Institute for
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Institute



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