



Extraction to Reciprocity: A Planning Student's Reflection on Food Security

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For the past four months, I interned with PIBC, studying food security planning in collaboration with a municipality. My experience revealed the complexities of addressing food security, especially when community needs far exceed what food hubs, neighbourhood houses, and non-profits can offer. My internship involved researching municipal food policies, facilitating stakeholder meetings, and assisting in drafting recommendations for food security initiatives.

A key takeaway was recognizing the critical role the non-profit sector plays in food security. Through my work with a municipal food advisory table, I spoke with non-profit leaders, city staff, and community advocates, which gave me firsthand exposure to the constraints and challenges in food systems planning. Assisting with engagement efforts further highlighted the urgent need for infrastructure that tackles food insecurity and poverty. While municipalities contribute through food systems planning and social enterprises, their efforts represent just one piece of a larger puzzle. Sustainable and equitable solutions require a coordinated approach that leverages the strengths and leadership of multiple sectors.

Planners are often tasked with addressing food security but must do so within bureaucratic constraints that limit their ability to respond to immediate community needs. As I progressed through my internship, I couldn't help but ask: How then, can this work be enough?

Planning scholarship highlights how people outside of professional planning engage with planning (Caggiano et al., 2022) and how these actors produce their own urban infrastructure (Brandtner and Dunning, 2020). Non-profits are at the frontlines of the issues planners engage with, directly meeting the needs of community members. These organizations function as neighbourhood anchors,

creating networks of care through social ties, resources, and a sense of belonging. I witnessed how food security organizations struggle to maintain stable funding, rely heavily on volunteers, and must constantly adapt to shifting policies and grant structures. But what does the planning field offer in return? Or, perhaps more importantly, what is the planning field willing to offer?

I'm not entirely sure I have the answer to that question, so instead, I offer key takeaways from my internship that might help in answering it.

Extraction vs. Reciprocity

In planning school, there is an emphasis on retracing the steps (and missteps) of prior planners. I have heard the terms "top-down" and "bottom-up" more times than I can count. More often than not, I think existentially about these concepts, and I imagine my approach to planning practice will be no different.

But is there a better way? What does it mean to be in relationship with other people? The principles of Indigenous knowledge emphasize reciprocity and interconnectedness. While municipal planning departments conduct community consultations and engagements, these processes often place the burden on non-profits and food security advocates to provide unpaid labour and, often, difficult and personal insights without formal mechanisms

for reciprocity. By embodying these ideas in planning, can we shift away from extractive processes that demand unpaid labour, participation, and care from community organizers and instead move towards something restorative and life-affirming?

Restorative Planning

Restorative justice theories suggest that a failure of restoration is a tragic loss that diminishes the community. Following this framework, planning should be a collaborative and creative process that explores the root causes of food insecurity and acknowledges historical and present injustices. This is especially crucial when considering food sovereignty for Indigenous peoples.

A review of Official Community Plans in BC revealed that only 8% included policies supporting Indigenous foodways (Robert & Mullinix, 2018). A truly restorative approach to food security planning begins by critically examining who is included in these conversations and what roles they hold. Are we continuing extractive planning practices, or are we fostering genuine co-creation with communities? This means ensuring proper compensation and leadership opportunities for those who have historically been excluded from decision-making.

Notably absent from many food security discussions were both Indigenous peoples and those in the agricultural sector. Farmers and agricultural workers play an essential role in maintaining viable food systems, yet their expertise, challenges, and perspectives were rarely considered in planning processes. Similarly, Indigenous foodways, which have long upheld sustainable and reciprocal relationships with the land, continue to be marginalized in municipal food policies. Farming and Indigenous land-based practices can work to not only connect us to food production but also strengthen our relationships with each other, our cities, and the land itself. Yet, education and awareness about both Indigenous food sovereignty and agricultural sustainability remain largely overlooked in food planning discussions. Bridging these gaps—through policy, education, collaboration, and opportunities for their leadership—can help us build a food system that prioritizes sovereignty, and justice, ensuring that those who cultivate and care for the land are valued as essential partners and leaders in shaping our collective future.

Food systems leadership can embody these restorative principles, ensuring that planning moves toward reparative practice rather than perpetuating harm

Life-Affirming Planning

Is there a path forward where planning can be a life-affirming practice? That is, are we

prepared to love a place and its people radically? Many in my planning cohort struggle with the idea of the saviour complex within our field. Planners are often positioned as experts, but real expertise comes from those with lived experiences.

A life-affirming planning approach requires us to move beyond the mindset of fixing communities and instead recognize the value that already exists and thrives in communities. It means an emphasis on relationship-building, uplifting and doing our best to reproduce *constellations of care* (Mahtani, 2024), acknowledging grief and trauma, and supporting communities in ways that honour and affirm their agency, resilience, and joy!

Trauma-Informed Planning

One of the most important lessons I learned during my internship was the value of allowing space for people to be upset. Traditional definitions of professionalism are inherently colonial, limiting the acceptable expressions of anger, grief, and power in planning spaces.

Trauma-informed planning acknowledges that previous planning decisions have harmed many communities. Whether through urban renewal projects that displaced marginalized groups, changing the shapes of communities, or food systems planning that ignored Indigenous food sovereignty, past harms cannot be ignored.

Recognizing this trauma means approaching planning with sensitivity, patience, and a commitment to resisting re-traumatization. In community meetings I attended, I noticed how food security advocates often shared stories of personal and collective trauma related to food insecurity, yet planning discussions rarely accounted for these realities in a way that led to material change. Planners engage with these issues compassionately, but I still can't help but wonder, what does a truly compassionate response look like? Can planning move beyond acknowledging harm to actively repairing it?

Recognizing this trauma means approaching planning with sensitivity, patience, and a commitment to resisting re-traumatization. It also means leading creatively and compassionately to embrace more inclusive and participatory decision-making models.

Learning and Empowerment

How do we move away from extractive planning? This question is particularly difficult to answer in a Canadian context, where the planning field has historically been (and still is) contingent on the colonial expansion project.

How do we show up for others in meaningful ways? Perhaps planning is just a job for some, but if half our day for years is spent in this work, what is our impact on people's lives and how they move through and experience space?

I entered planning school wondering what cities could look like if we planned with kindness, love, and curiosity. At first, I thought these ideas were naive, but now, I believe they are more radical than ever.

The field of planning must reconsider the relationships it seeks to build. My internship reaffirmed that planning cannot be done in isolation—food security solutions require long-term commitments to community partnerships; ongoing collaboration between municipalities, non-profits, community organizers, and those with lived experience of food insecurity, rather than one-off engagements or policy gestures. Are we engaging with communities as planners, as institutional representatives, or simply as people who care?

During my internship, I saw how planners and food security advocates often worked separately, not just from the city, but sometimes each other, despite sharing common goals. In shifting away from extractive planning practices and embracing reciprocity, restorative justice, and trauma-informed approaches, we can move toward a planning practice that is interconnected, life-affirming and hopeful.

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References

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