

Richmond Review Article – Playing in the Big Leagues
By Stephen C. Mullins

Imagine you are in a pub filled with excited football fans watching a World Cup match when you notice someone sitting nearby you, obviously puzzled by what they are seeing on the TV.

So you take it upon yourself to explain the rules of the Beautiful Game to them. You have it all planned out; you'll start with the basics, like how it is properly called football and not soccer, then moving on to explain how many players are allowed on the field, how off-sides are determined, and finally you'll finish with a carefully crafted narrative about strategies and playmaking.

But then, just as you begin your lesson, the puzzled patron stops you and asks "What is a sport?" And in that disconcerting moment, you realize that you have a much bigger education project on your hands than you realized. This is the problem many advocates for food security still face.

When I talk to people in Richmond about food security, the responses I get vary greatly. A few know exactly what it is, while others hold basic misconceptions. But many have never heard of the concept at all. This lack of basic knowledge leads to confusion that can create unnecessary resistance to the goal of ensuring public food security.

Some dismiss food security as a leftover hippie cause, or something they don't participate in because they don't use the community gardens. Others mistake the meaning of the 'security' part of the phrase and think it has something to do with guarding food. These responses, though inaccurate, are at least kind compared to some of the more virulent responses seen in parts of the USA, where efforts to promote food security have been denounced as a sure way to make people lazy, or as part of an insidious plot by the U.N. to take away their personal freedom.

What this indicates is that many people don't understand that food security isn't just some local issue, or a good cause you can support like many others, or something you can opt into or not at your whim, but something entirely more fundamental. It is like saying you can opt out of breathing air or drinking water. Food security affects people whether they've heard of it or not.

Every day, in Richmond and all over the world, people ask themselves "What am I going to eat today?" Their choices will be affected by the answers to other questions that are at the core of food security. Is the food affordable, or easy to get access to? Will it be nutritious, and free of contaminants? Is it locally grown, and will it be acceptable to their cultural or religious beliefs?

The thing is people usually don't sit down and ask themselves these questions deliberately (if they ask them at all), any more than people debate the issues about our

water supply when they're thirsty. Instead, they just go and get a drink. No, usually most people are too busy to contemplate the broader context of their food choices. That quickly changes, of course, if they are hungry and they can't do anything about it. When food security turns into food insecurity, then people become perfectly aware of how fundamental the issue is.

However getting people to recognize the broader truth that poor food security can be as damaging to public health as severe droughts or horribly polluted air won't automatically cause everyone to stop fighting over it. After all, you're talking about a topic that touches on GMOs, land development, and international trade agreements, so it will be a while yet before everyone is holding hands. But it's a good place to start, and there is hope.

Just look at what happened in India in 2013, where their Parliament passed the National Food Security Act (NFSA), also known the Right to Food Act. This is a huge measure, on a scale almost incomprehensible from a Canadian point of view. Though there is sharp controversy over the merits of the Act, it provides subsidized food grains to almost 800 million of India's 1.2 billion citizens, with a special emphasis on providing for the needs of pregnant women, lactating mothers, and children. This Act affects twenty two times more people than the entire population of Canada.

Food security is a much steeper problem in India than in Canada, so it is not surprising that their awareness of scope of the challenge to secure it seems to exceed our own. India is trying bring a measure of food security to hundreds of millions of people by acknowledging that it is just as important to the well-being of their citizens as clean air and fresh water, and by treating it as a right, not as an act of charity. They have recognized the challenge they face; now they just have to figure out the rules.

Steve Mullins is the communications manager for Richmond Food Security Society. We work to ensure that all people in the community have access to safe, nutritious, culturally appropriate foods that strengthen our environment and society. To contribute, check out www.richmondfoodsecurity.org and find out how you can get involved.