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## Indigenous Food Sovereignty in Canada: Policy Paper 2019



This policy brief acknowledges the information shared within has existed since time immemorial and has emerged from Indigenous Knowledge systems. This knowledge transfer is possible only through the gifts of Indigenous Elders, Knowledge Keepers and community members.

### Background

Indigenous Nations in Canada have and continue to deal with a colonial food system that leaves many of these nations located in, what can be best described, as food wastelands, and at worst, imposes a lifetime sentence to a food prison (Finley, 2014). As we walk toward a path of reconciliation, it would be wise to acknowledge that Indigenous people had a well-developed, complex and thriving social-economic systems prior to colonial contact. Recognizing the depth of their intra-generational knowledge and deep understanding of the land can facilitate the development of a meaningful national and Indigenous food policy. One that recognizes *mino-pimatwisin* (Anishinaabe for good life) and *maligit* (balance) in *Quajimajatuqangit* (Inuktitut for Inuit Traditional Knowledge) *nidiawemaginidog* (Anishinaabe for “all my relatives”). Resulting in a robust and meaningful Indigenous food production system.

Inclusion and recognition of Indigenous food production perspective would create an authentic path to the promise of a nation to nation reality. A path that may redress the current situation which sees Indigenous people leading the list of food related diseases such as diabetes, stroke, heart and kidney disease due to the decreased access to traditional foods (also referred to in the various nations as sustenance, country or on the land foods) and imposition of a less than secure and less healthy and less sovereign food distribution system. Diabetes alone costs Canada 14 billion dollars in 2017, at an estimated 1/3 of Indigenous Canadian suffering from diabetes, that result is a staggering 207 million dollars. It is expected to rise to 252 million dollars by 2025 (Krotz, 2018). *A Food Policy for Canada* needs to acknowledge the Indigenous perspective and recognize the enshrinement of local food pathways (including recognition of supportive place of traditional food (Belanger, 2018, p. 191). This food policy should stress the unique role that food play plays in facilitating health for Indigenous communities (Beck, 2017).

## Food Sovereignty Issues Faced by Indigenous Communities

At the heart of the struggle for many Indigenous communities is the “continuation of anti-colonial struggles, even in post-colonial contexts” (Grey and Patel, 2016, p. 431). Canadian Governmental policies, including Nutrition North (Government of Canada, NNC), the broken food distribution system operated by the largest northern food retailer, the North West Co., the adverse multi- generational effects of residential schools, the Indian Act, the 60’s scoop, and systemic and prevalent racism scoops have eroded Indigenous food sovereignty and Indigenous faith in the established systems that were to secure a better food future. Corporations remain profit focused, and governments push top-down policy agendas. These agendas result in adverse outcomes in Indigenous communities, with Northern Manitoba suffering from a level of food insecurity at 60 percent and Inuit communities in Nunavut facing a rate of 70 percent in terms of food security (Burnett et al., 2016, p. 404). In the Urban Indigenous context, the closure of Winnipeg’s North End’s Neechi Common’s Co-op has resulted in the loss of the sole grocery store for a largely Indigenous area, further complicating the future of food security for a marginalized part of Winnipeg.

Communities such as Fort McPherson (YK), Fort McKay (AB), Fox Lake (MB) and the *Eeyou Istchee* (QC), are seeing significant changes in the availability of food that has sustained them since time immemorial. These changes can be traced to climatic change in the case of Fort McPherson, and the negative effects on traditional food that has resulted from resource development (MB Hydro) projects in Fox Lake (MB), *Eeyou Istchee* (Hydro Quebec), and Fort McKay (Oil Sands). The loss of traditional food ways increases the reliance on imported foods and a loss of food knowledge (which is a result of loss of Elders passing) increases the loss of understanding of the relationship of food to health and well-being. As expressed by the Fort McKay community who view the “land as all that remains of their rights to the wilderness — a lifeline to their culture. Many Fort McKay residents still practice their traditional ways of life here: hunting, fishing, trapping, collecting wild plants and cultivating spiritual practices” (Elkaim, 2018).

## Indigenous Communities’ Contribution to Re-framing the Food Sovereignty Discussion

Due to the growing health threat from the loss of food self-determination numerous discussions are emerging around the creation of solutions, including changing local policies and practices. Food sovereignty conversations are taking place from east to west: from Mi’kmaq communities of the Atlantic to the call to protect Salmon by West Coast Indigenous Nations, to reserves in Central Canada to the high Arctic, from the food movement within the Six Nations of the Grand River to the Inuit in Nunavut reversing local practice to unwind the degradation of their traditional food sources. These call for a new collaborative approach to the development of food policies that directly engage and fully consult Indigenous communities.

Food as medicine, food as a teacher and food as a relative, are three pillars of the complex foundations of Indigenous thoughts and world views. Food as medicine, recognized by the Quw’utsun Nation (BC) (Quw’utsun Cultural, 2013) enlivens the notion of valuing food medicine - the *Kwakwaka’wakw*, Haida *Nuu-chah-nulth* people practice the consumption of a variety of berries (wild blueberries, cranberries salmonberries and soapberries) as everyday staples, but also use them medicinally, as they have antibacterial and healing properties. The cultivation and harvesting of *Anishinaabeg*, view *Manoomin* (wild rice) as an instructor of “central philosophical and spiritual tenets.” (Carleton, 2016). Various Indigenous cultures viewed food through a lens of “reproduction of the social relations with and between families and communities” (Merchant, 1989, p. 15). Viewing food as a relative imbues it with an element

of responsible consumption, “It is the animals who control the success of the hunt and hunters have obligations to respect for the animal” (Berkes, 1999, p. 79).

Indigenous communities have sustained themselves on Turtle Island (North America) and forged a good life prior to contact. Adapting their nations knowledge, allowed them to synchronize to their food systems; enabling greater possibilities of understanding and appreciation. Chief Byron Louis, “A[a] griculture is central to a lot of first nations cultures” (Standing Committee On Agriculture And Agri-Food, 2018). Knowledge synthesis exists in every Nation across Turtle Island, and that knowledge transfer that can contribute significantly to a new dialogue on food sovereignty. Reflecting Indigenous Law, perspective and understanding. Cherished food laws practiced across Canada—in Old Crowe (YK), the Gwitchin interact holistically, spiritually and value the health effect that consumption of the Vutnut Caribou herd. In the T’sou-ke First Nation (BC), traditional food practice is celebrated in the sharing of community food (Lowan-Trudeau, 2016, p. 126). And looking to an Anishinaabe Nation, towards the teachings shared by Winona LaDuke, challenging a return to practice by calling for re-appreciation and connection to food. “I don’t want to hear about what you have to say until you can grow corn” (Mancall-Bitte, 2018). The reality is that Indigenous produced food accounts for very small amounts of the food consumed, with an unbalanced “3% of Aboriginal firms operating[e] in the agriculture sector, despite a disproportionate number of Aboriginal people living in areas largely associated with agriculture” (Canadian Council of Aboriginal Business, 2018).

Indigenous strategies that recognize the value of “hyperlocal, ultra-seasonal, uber-healthy, non-processed foods, no sugar, no wheat (or gluten), no dairy, no high-cholesterol animal products...naturally low glycemic, high protein, low salt, plant-based with lots of grains, seeds, and nuts” (Sherman, 2017) based diets are starting to re-emerge from communities. Indigenous communities have within the last decade awoken some of the most innovative food sovereignty initiatives. These initiatives range from the O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation’s (MB) *Ithinto Mechisowin* (Anishinaabe for ‘food from the land’) movement connecting people to the land by re-establishing sustainable and healthy food systems (Kamal et al., 2015), to Naujaat (NU) whose community fridges contain close to 50% of country foods, to the Blackfoot Nation turning to traditional food systems that allowed them to survive their own cultural genocide (Beck, 2017). **Indigenous food movements, be it on or off reserve, are fortifying community-based sovereignty movements.** These include a range of new restaurants and markets, a recognition of the role of land and food are re-forming of Indigenous legal paradigms and birthing agri-cultural restoration.

### Areas for Policy Development

Apparent gaps of comprehension in current food distribution and consumption models are summarized below:

- As Elders and Knowledge Keepers pass away, communities are developing an enormous food knowledge loss, with no ways to replenish (Nishnawbe Aski Nation, 2018).
- Over-reliance on packaged and prepared food amongst Indigenous youth (Robidoux, and Mason, 2017)
- Policy blindness to existing, healthy, cost effective, and community land based solutions that exist in the informal economy (Robidoux, and Mason, 2017).
- Lack of support for Indigenous food distribution models, that are re-emerging in some communities but are missing in most (NAN, 2018). These new models be they co-op’s, gardens or food sharing programs have emerged to counter act some of the traditional colonial models

- The Canadian Food Policy formation process not only requires a constitutional “Duty to Consult” with Indigenous Nations but a fiduciary duty to implement food sovereignty as recognized in all 654 First Nations and Métis and Inuit communities. Recognizing Indigenous Law, in terms of food matters and accepting that “mother earth (was) Indian Land before it was the Euro-American legal thing called ‘Indian Land’” (Ruppel, 2008, p. 8). Affirming the role of food in law would affirm the relationship, in a recognized *Annishinaabeg* way, of the government to Indigenous people (Craft, 2013).
- Canadian food policy requires an integration tool to facilitate and support burgeoning initiatives in Indigenous Agriculture and Agri-Food and bridge those with the pressing food needs of Indigenous communities.

Indigenous based initiatives which create food *mino-pimatwisin* and food self-determination are required to **help build unique policies**. Using stories and shared knowledge in a way that is culturally, socially, and spiritually respectful and relevant, may facilitate and promote local, sustainable food systems. This may include, but not be limited to, policies that:

1. **Promote local community healthy eating guides**, based on a holistic blending of community, Elder and Health Canada guidelines (Nishnawbe Aski Nation, 2018).
2. **Create local and regional food distribution hubs** built on recognized local food and acknowledging Indigenous knowledge that trade, confederacies and trade routes were created by socio-economically strong and vital Indigenous communities prior to contact.
3. **Address food related deficits in the current food policy** as addressed in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007). Establish tri-level government agreement that support Indigenous systems; and create policies that address the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action (2015).

## Recommendations

The current development of *A Food Policy for Canada* presents an opportunity for the RPLC to make federal policy recommendations that can improve food *mino-pimatwisin*. Incorporating Indigenous laws and local knowledge to inform and enact recommendations is critical to the building of more inclusive National Food Policy for Indigenous peoples in Canada.

### 1. Food sovereignty must be locally defined and based in Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being.

In order to create long term health in a recognized Indigenous way, food sovereignty and self-determination must recognize solutions that are based in community practices, knowledge and beliefs. It is critical to Indigenous communities that they restore their cultural relationship with food, “through the revitalization of Indigenous foods and ecological knowledge systems as they assert control over their own foods and practices” (Cote, 2016, p.1). Reinforcing this is the call from Kassi to ensure “Communities need to develop their own strategies, which are relevant, empower, and lead to action to be more food secure.” (Kassi, 2018)

### 2. Reinforce and protect the sacred relationships that Indigenous food systems hold within Indigenous communities

Respect the spiritual dimensions of the systems, including food, that enable human life and ensure the three pillars: food as medicine, food as a teacher and food as a relative, inform policy development in

holistic ways. As these pillars are essential to the foundation of Indigenous food thought, they also should be integral to Canadian policy and practices that deliver a more sustainable food system.

### 3. Food *mino-pimatiswin* recognizes and reinforces Indigenous sovereignty and recognizes Indigenous laws.

A fully de-colonized food system will become evident through real food sovereignty. Food distribution, food conceptualization and food control must rest in those nations where the food consumption takes place.

### 4. Facilitate intra-agency co-operation between Indigenous Agriculture, Agri-Food production and Indigenous Services to build a supply to chain to Indigenous and non-Indigenous markets.

Essential to breaking the well-intentioned, but broken policy foundations that have been built over the last 150 years, is the facilitation of a collaborative integration system. One that supports and connects the Indigenous food producers with communities that are looking for supportive tools to build food sovereignty and enable the creation of a vibrant diverse Indigenous economy.

## Conclusion

When the original inhabitants of Canada are liberated to live with systems “that enhance our relationships and increase our abilities to live in accordance to our own dreams” (Borrows, 2016, p. 204-205), then food sovereignty will be re-enacted. Accepting that Indigenous nations can “survive and thrive on their own” (Stewart as quoted by Alfred, 2009, p. 192), does not suggest they are free from respectful policies. However, a new national policy must be **adequately** and **genuinely** informed by Indigenous perspectives—using an Indigenous and Western consultation framework. By ensuring that the discourse moves beyond food security to sovereignty, “Only then can we map out the kinds of policy changes that will be required to realize improved outcomes” (Clapp, 2016, p. 4). The government of Canada and its people, being beneficiaries of treaties, have a constitutional, fiduciary, legal, and moral obligation to consult and engage Indigenous nations on defining what good food systems look like. The creation of meaningful food policy would address food sovereignty, food *mino-pimatiswin* and food *maligit*, that lie within Indigenous communities who understand and consume food, and who seek to sustain their health and enhance community well-being. As Indigenous communities have been subject to far too many obstacles on their path to food sovereignty, their needs ought to be prioritized in a Canadian national food sovereignty agenda.

Photo Credit: Personal Collection of Stephen Penner

This policy brief was prepared by Stephen Penner, Rural Studies PhD Student in the School of Environmental Design and Rural Development at the University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada, with support from a grant from the RPLC.

Dr. Kathleen Kevany, Associate Professor, Department of Business & Social Sciences at Dalhousie University, Nova Scotia, Canada, Advisor.

Dr. Sheri Longboat, Assistant Professor, School of Environmental Design and Rural Development, University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada, PhD Research Advisor.

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