

Food insecurities and dependencies: Indigenous food responses to COVID-19

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Abstract

Food sovereignty is a relatively new concept in the literature that has evolved as a way to address widespread food-related issues for many Indigenous communities around the world. One of the many crucial lessons we have learned from the COVID-19 pandemic is the importance of this concept in ensuring food sufficiency in Indigenous communities in Canada. In this article, we provide a commentary on food insecurity in Indigenous communities in Canada and how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated it. We also highlight the government's response to mitigating hunger and spotlight how Indigenous peoples are navigating the pandemic's impact through food sovereignty.

Keywords

food, Indigenous, insecurities, pandemic, sovereignty

Introduction

For Indigenous peoples in Canada, the history of food insecurity is a long and complex tale of forced starvation, coercion, and oppression (Lux, 2001; McCallum, 2017; Mosby, 2013; Robin et al., 2020). Early attempts to colonize Canada involved the deliberate eradication of key species such as the bison and beaver in the prairies, and the destruction of the cedar forests on the west coast (Daschuk, 2013; Kimmerer, 2013). The loss of such species created conditions of starvation and decimated systems of trade within and among communities, resulting in a state of dependency (Atleo, 2012).

This dependency was a new experience for Indigenous communities, who had previously lived in relation to the land in order to sustain the water, plants, and animals for past, present, and future generations (Martens, 2021). While experiences of scarcity occurred prior to colonization due to weather and climate, a rich and robust trade network also existed, and the land provided all that was needed to survive (Council of Canadian Academies, 2014). Following colonization, Indigenous food processes and practices, such as fishing, harvesting, gathering medicines, and feasting as a family were interrupted, and in some instances, made punishable by law (Manuel & Derrickson, 2015; Monchalín, 2016; Shewell, 2004). Over time, Indigenous peoples were forced onto reserves, where land was of marginal quality, and far removed from the rest of civilization (Carter, 1990; Daschuk, 2013; Wilson & Macdonald, 2010). Starvation, malnutrition, and the decimation of traditional food systems were the goals and products of these colonial impositions (McCallum, 2017; Mintz, 2020).

Canada's colonized food system speaks to the lack of agency Indigenous peoples have over their lives and livelihoods. Through colonization, Indigenous peoples were forced to become dependent on the government; indeed, this dependency is a central tenet of colonialism (Alfred, 2009). Today, food insecurity is still a major challenge for Indigenous peoples in Canada. Like millions of others worldwide, this insecurity has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 global pandemic (Dahir, 2020; Levi & Robin, 2020). History is repeating itself, and once again, Indigenous peoples are struggling to feed their families despite government intervention. While the federal government declared that Indigenous peoples were a priority for assistance and vaccination during the pandemic (Alhmidi, 2021), it has taken significant effort to make that happen, and these initiatives are devoid of any other consideration for being well, including addressing food insecurity. This commentary article considers the role of outside actors charged with feeding Indigenous communities, particularly rural and remote communities, and argues for the support of Indigenous food sovereignty through systemic change in the face of a global pandemic and beyond.

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Indigenous peoples in Canada

Indigenous peoples in Canada—First Nations, Métis, and Inuit—are diverse peoples with unique cultures, histories, and languages. Socio-economic outcomes and quality of life vary for these populations across Canada and yet, across a wide range of indicators, including health, education, employment, housing, and access to food, Indigenous peoples experience poorer outcomes (Adelson, 2005; Wilson & Macdonald, 2010). More than 1.67 million people or 4.9% of Canada's population identify as Indigenous. First Nations represent 60% of Indigenous peoples, followed by Métis (36%) and the Inuit population (4%) (Statistics Canada, 2017).

First Nations includes those who are registered as Indians under the Indian Act, as well as people who are not, regardless of whether they are members of an Indian band or First Nation. In Canada, there are over 630 First Nation communities, representing over 50 Nations and 50 Indigenous languages (Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, 2021). About 44% of the 744,855 First Nations individuals with registered or treaty Indian status lived on reserve in 2016, and the rest of the population lived off reserve (Statistics Canada, 2017).

Three-quarters of Inuit in Canada live in 53 communities across the northern regions of Canada in Inuit Nunangat, which means *the place where Inuit live* (Statistics Canada, 2017). Inuit Nunangat comprises four regions: Inuvialuit (Northwest Territories and Yukon), Nunavik (Northern Quebec), Nunatsiavut (Labrador), and Nunavut. In total, approximately 64,235 Inuit live in Canada (Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, 2021). The Métis are a separate Indigenous group with a distinctive identity. The Métis Nation is made up of people who are born of relations between First Nations women and European men, and the offspring of these unions were of mixed ancestry (Métis Nation of Ontario, n.d.). A total of 587,545 Canadians self-identified as Métis in the 2016 Population Census. Métis are primarily concentrated in urban areas in Ontario and the western provinces (Statistics Canada, 2017).

Indigenous peoples in Canada continue to grapple with the challenge of hunger, regardless of where they live—north or south, rural or urban areas, on reserve or off reserve (Richmond et al., 2020). That notwithstanding, the approaches and strategies to addressing this challenges must be distinctive.

Food insecurities

According to the findings from a project commissioned by First Nations Food, Nutrition and Environment Study (FNFNES), a 10-year project that examined food and diet in 100 randomly selected First Nations in 10 provinces in Canada, there is a very high prevalence (48%) of food insecurity in First Nations communities (Chan et al., 2019). The survey describes how traditional food utilization is linked to geography, household engagement in traditional food gathering activities, age group, gender, and education.

The research also identified industrial activities and government regulations as *structural-level barriers* to harvesting combined with insufficient means to purchase and operate equipment, recognized as *household-level hurdles* (Chan et al., 2019). Importantly, the FNFNES further notes that the diets of First Nations adults across Canada do not meet nutrition recommendations, citing inadequate intakes for critical vitamins and minerals. However, the FNFNES notes that on days when traditional cuisine is available, recommendations for several nutrients are more likely to be met (Chan et al., 2019).

Findings reveal that the highest prevalence of food insecurity was found in Alberta (60%) and remote communities across the country (Chan et al., 2019). The Boreal Cordillera in northern British Columbia had the lowest rate of food insecurity (23.7%) of any ecozone. Food insecurity was found to be lower in households with two or more full-time workers, adults 71 years and above, males, and those who self-reported good health and were non-smokers. Obesity and diabetes rates are higher in the general population compared to the Canada average (Chan et al., 2019).

Overweight or obese individuals made up 82% of the adult population, and for all adult individuals, the age-standardized rate of diabetes was 19%. Self-reported good health was significantly lower in the three provinces of Manitoba, Ontario, and Saskatchewan and one ecozone—the Boreal Shield. From northern Saskatchewan to Newfoundland, this ecozone stretches north of Lake Winnipeg, the Great Lakes, and the St. Lawrence River (Parks Canada, 2013). In addition, households with no traditional food activity reported poor health (Chan et al., 2019). The resulting poor health conditions experienced by Indigenous peoples is a major cause of poverty, which in turn further exacerbates their food insecurity (Power et al., 2016). As a social determinant of health, food insecurity wreaks havoc on Indigenous bodies, communities, and futures, and addressing this challenge must take a holistic approach that is rooted in context.

Notwithstanding that some still live a subsistence lifestyle, including hunting, fishing, and gathering, Indigenous peoples have generally had little control over what they eat and ample opportunity to mistrust food following colonization. The colonized food system that was forced onto communities has altered Indigenous peoples' relationships to the land, families, and communities (Robin et al., 2020). Today, foods presented in the Canada Food Guide as being indicators of good health, including fruits and vegetables, are often unavailable on reserve, and when they are, poor quality and prohibitively high prices are the norm (Thompson & Pritty, 2020). Moreover, they do not reflect the original diets of Indigenous peoples. Early nutrition interventions have sought to work with Indigenous communities based on ideas of what a proper diet entailed; land-based practices were seen as savage-like, while kitchen-based practices were viewed as proper (Acoose, 2016).

Many food security interventions struggle amid the Canadian settler state's continuous undermining of

Indigenous food sovereignty. For example, while greenhouses have been recommended as a means of providing fruits and vegetables in communities where soil and climatic conditions are too poor to grow food, the start-up and maintenance of greenhouses are often not feasible (Paci et al., 2004). Similar costs exist for harvesting food from the land; fishing, trapping, and hunting require machinery, gas, tools, and other resources. Without access to these tools, the ability to practice culture, support families, and provide food is lost (Lambden et al., 2006). Of particular concern for Indigenous communities today are issues around the safety of food from the land. Contamination, the destruction of lands, the introduction of non-native species, and rapid changes to the landscape due to large-scale industries such as hydro (Hoffman, 2008) and the tar sands (McLachlan, 2014) are all too common in Indigenous communities. With the intensification of weather patterns and resource development, the future of Indigenous lands and the food provided from the land is uncertain. This is particularly troubling for a population that experiences such high rates of food insecurity, and for whom food from the land is synonymous with being well (Adelson, 2000; Dennis & Robin, 2020).

Food security studies in an Indigenous context have been subject to much criticism for failing to adequately capture the realities of Indigenous food systems (Martens, 2015; Power, 2008). Perhaps the most important criticism of the food security movement is its failure to adequately address the power inherent in food systems, especially colonized food systems. Colonialism is more than a theory or a lens through which to examine social problems; it is a lived and living experience for Indigenous peoples that often reflects a state of powerlessness (Alfred, 2009). In a pandemic, power becomes even more critical to examine in an effort towards alleviating inequities and bringing faces and voices of marginalized people to the table. As Mataira et al. (2020) write, the COVID-19 pandemic has “helped coalesce pervasive intersectional struggles of Indigenous peoples” (p. 1). That is, systemic issues are part of the infrastructure of Indigenous lives, and the pandemic has only made it worse.

Pandemic feeding: more dependencies

According to Aguiar and Halseth (2015), high rates of Indigenous unemployment and poverty are linked to the destruction left by the residential school system, the Sixties Scoop, and other government interventions meant to destroy Indigenous lands, lives, livelihoods, and cultures. As Alfred (2009) writes,

this complex relationship between the effects of social suffering, unresolved psychophysical harms of historical trauma and cultural dislocation have created a situation in which the opportunities for a selfist in alp-sufficient, healthy, and autonomous life for First Nations people on individual and collective bases are extremely limited. (p. 42)

Food insecurity represents one such suffering, the history and presence of a colonized food system ever present in Indigenous peoples’ daily lives. Starvation, malnutrition, and food insecurity have been well documented as strategies of subjugation, attempts to rid Canada of its Indian problem (Lux, 2001; McCallum, 2017; Mosby, 2013; Robin et al., 2020).

Promises of rations, for example, made explicit in treaty negotiations, were enticing to Indigenous chiefs who were concerned for the future of their communities. Sadly, many of these promises never materialized. In some instances, rancid rations were fed to Indigenous communities deliberately, resulting in illness and death (Daschuk, 2013). In other cases, rations were used by Indian Agents who were government officials mandated by the Indian Act of 1876 to implement federal Indian policy and control the communities they were working in. This was a particular burden for Indigenous women, who were sexually assaulted and abused so that the Indian Agents would release food for their families (Daschuk, 2013). Given this context, any outside interventions that purport to feed Indigenous peoples cannot be treated as benevolent.

The pandemic brought significant stressors to the market-based food system with particular concerns for Indigenous populations whose access to safe and nutritious food is further complicated by geography. In response to lockdowns and empty grocery shelves, the government of Canada distributed \$100 million to six non-Indigenous organizations, namely, Food Banks Canada, Breakfast Club of Canada, Second Harvest, Community Food Centres Canada, Salvation Army, and Quebec’s La Table des Chefs in Spring of 2020 under the Emergency Food Security Fund (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2020a). It is worth note that none of this initial fund was specifically allocated to Indigenous organizations. In the fall of the same year, an additional \$100 million in funding was announced, and this time, \$30 million was allocated to Indigenous Services Canada (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2020a). Furthermore, in 2021, an additional \$130 million top-up was announced in two batches, with the same six non-Indigenous organizations being the only recipients (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2021).

A total of \$330 million was announced for the Emergency Food Security Fund; however, only 9% of this was allocated to Indigenous communities despite Indigenous peoples constituting 4.9% of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2017), and being two to three times more likely to experience food insecurity than other Canadians (Statistics Canada, 2015), and in rural, remote, and northern areas, five to six times more likely (Council of Canadian Academies, 2014). Although Indigenous organizations may apply to Food Banks Canada for funding from their larger fund, this again positions Indigenous organizations in a dependency role.

In Northern Canada, particularly in Nunavut, food security has been a perennial problem and has continued to worsen despite the introduction of Nutrition North Canada, an initiative intended to improve food access and

affordability in isolated communities in Nunavut. Research has demonstrated a steady increase in food insecurity since the programme commenced in 2011, and it is believed the programme perpetuates colonialism (Galloway, 2017; St-Germain et al., 2019). Notwithstanding this fact, the government pumped an additional \$25 million into the programme during the pandemic (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2021; Nutrition North Canada, 2021), leaving one to wonder about the true intent of the government programme.

Indeed, the funding of food banks during the pandemic was not only intended to solve food insecurity, but also to help with the purchase and distribution of excess food resulting from the pandemic. This became evident with the launch of the Surplus Food Rescue Program, a \$50 million initiative, meant to help the Canadian food systems, farmers, processors, and distributors to ensure food availability for all Canadians (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2020b). While on the surface it may appear to be part of a larger policy approach to address food security, this funding was intended to help manage and divert current surpluses to organizations tackling food insecurity and prevent food waste (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2020b). This provided producers with protection and is consistent with a colonial perspective. In accordance with this policy, 10% of the food that was saved was to be given to isolated communities in the north (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2020b), once more placing Indigenous peoples in a dependency situation.

According to Feed Ontario, the number of people using food banks increased in 2020 compared to the previous year (Feed Ontario, 2020). Food banks in Ontario experienced a jump in demand at the start of COVID-19, with a 26% increase in first-time visitation between March and June 2020. While food banks are important mechanisms in the food system to prevent hunger, charity and benevolence do little to confront the systemic poverty Indigenous peoples experience in Canada. According to Graham Riches (2018), encouraging and implementing a charity-based hunger relief strategy is tantamount to outsourcing hunger to charity by the government, which enables it to turn a blind eye, and at the same time, leading the public to believe that distributing left-over food to people who are left behind is a morally acceptable and effective policy. Besides, food charity only provides a channel for manufacturers and retailers to revalue unsellable food waste and redistribute it as a surplus to the poor (Lohnes & Wilson, 2018), while also benefitting from the incentives provided in return by the government for their kind gestures (Lohnes, 2021).

The colonial food system and associated problems cannot be addressed by way of food banks and charitable giving. The government, through the food bank model, has relinquished its responsibilities in protecting one of the fundamental rights of Indigenous peoples. The failure of the Canadian government to consider how they are perpetuating colonial food systems is problematic. In this current era of reconciliation, Canada can no longer afford to perpetuate the harms that come with taking on feeding

Indigenous peoples. These interventions continue the cycle of dependency between Indigenous peoples and the state, and that dependency must be severed. To do so requires a radical re-imagining of Indigenous food futures, a process and way of life called Indigenous food sovereignty.

Indigenous food sovereignty

Indigenous food sovereignty offers a new pathway to address food security, *by* Indigenous peoples, *for* Indigenous peoples, and *with* Indigenous peoples (Martens et al., 2016). However, there is a danger to limiting the focus of Indigenous food sovereignty as merely addressing food insecurity. Food, for many Indigenous peoples, is more than consumption. Food represents connection to ancestors, community, family, land, nation, and governance systems (Coté, 2016; Delormier et al., 2017; Robin, 2019). It contains spirit and is a way to provide nourishment for mind, body, and spirit. Food, for many Indigenous cultures, is interconnected in all aspects of life. Indigenous food systems are vast and include not just the living and non-living elements of the natural world, but also people, and the systems of Indigenous cultures such as law, language, and governance (Robin, 2019).

Indeed, Indigenous food systems are upheld through Natural Laws in which roles and responsibilities of Indigenous peoples are front and centre. In a responsibilities-based discourse, Indigenous peoples have the responsibility to enact their food and cultural practices, thus upholding long-standing traditions and commitments to creation. Morrison (2011) has argued that there is no singular definition of Indigenous food sovereignty, that Indigenous communities are unique and thus have their own approaches and practices towards food and the land. Similarly, Daigle (2019) has challenged us to consider food *sovereignties* rather than a singular idea of food sovereignty. Throughout the pandemic, Indigenous peoples in Canada have developed community-led responses and approaches to feeding themselves that align with the principles of Indigenous food sovereignty, which adopts distinction-based approaches as opposed to pan-Indigenous approaches offered by non-Indigenous organizations that aim to feed Indigenous people.

Indigenous food sovereignty has been said to be local, relational, reciprocal, spiritual, responsibility-driven, and holistic (Coté, 2016; Daigle, 2017; Morrison, 2020; Robin, 2019). For example, nearly a quarter of the 360 houses in Skidegate, an Indigenous community in British Columbia, are already gardening (Duchesne, 2020). This has helped to mitigate the impact of job losses caused by the pandemic. In addition, three community gardens are thriving, with 75 fruit trees planted across the neighbourhood. Greenhouses are located in both elementary and high schools, and students bring plants home to their families. Everything from squash, tomatoes, and artichokes to medicinal plants and even potatoes are being grown by gardeners. Food security is attained by a collaborative effort involving local fishermen, hunters, farmers, and gardening mentors. Ninety families receive a weekly food security box with wild and

traditional items like deer sausage and halibut, as well as pantry essentials (Duchesne, 2020). Initiatives like this are important steps for Indigenous communities to reclaim self and community sufficiency, not only to meet food needs, but also as part of maintaining a healthy community and enabling land-based cultural practices that are critical to overall wellness. The success of these approaches also serves as a motivation to engage in other traditional practices including hunting and fishing, and other Indigenous communities can also adapt the approach to fit their local contexts.

Other communities such as Chipewyan Prairie First Nation and Fort McKay Métis community in Alberta are navigating the COVID-19 pandemic by leveraging their relationships with local companies to make food available for their people. They have been taking care of themselves through a mutually beneficial agreement with local companies, as well as through extra revenue already in the community. Through this collaboration, the local food distribution companies make regular deliveries into these communities. This strategy has helped the communities to stockpile extra food, hence fewer people needed to leave the communities to buy essential items (Williscraft, 2020). While these kinds of collaboration are important stopgap measures in tackling the perennial hunger in Indigenous communities to keep people alive, supporting communities to embrace more sustainable approaches to achieving food security—approaches that do not perpetuate colonialism and dependence—are highly beneficial. Such approaches should be community-driven, land-based, and rooted in culture.

Conclusion

Indigenous food sovereignty describes an epistemology, movement, and way of life in Canada whereby Indigenous communities and peoples are revitalizing Indigenous food systems. Support for Indigenous food sovereignty means changes to local infrastructure are necessary to build a longer, more stable pandemic response by and within Indigenous communities. Importantly, we must not let the need for self-determination take a backdrop to a larger, national pandemic response. Indigenous communities have their own responses to food insecurity, pre- and post-pandemic that are not tied to charity, but rather to responsibility (Morrison, 2011).

Indigenous food sovereignty provides a pathway towards long-term strategies for communities to build sustainable and living food stores and their associated cultural responses, such as ceremony, language, and traditional governance. The future remains hopeful, but uncertain. We know that the pandemic has left millions going hungry across the globe (Dahir, 2020; Laborde et al., 2020), and that the effects of the pandemic have resulted in higher levels of abuse, violence, and even homelessness (“COVID-19 Is Worsening Homelessness and Insecure Housing for Women”, 2020; The European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless, 2020). These issues are intertwined for Indigenous peoples and in Indigenous peoples’ lives. Many

of these challenges stem from colonization and are exacerbated by colonial forces continuing to operate in colonial conditions. Further colonial efforts to feed Indigenous communities miss the mark and risk contributing to a larger fissure of Indigenous peoples as others. Food banks are not an appropriate cultural response, and the scope of food security is too narrow to understand Indigenous food realities. Rather than government funds collecting in non-Indigenous agencies charged with feeding Indigenous peoples, Indigenous peoples, their allies, and indeed all Canadians must advocate for direct community funding, including rural, remote, and urban Indigenous communities, so that Indigenous peoples may feed themselves. This is our responsibility!

Authors’ note

Babatunde Olusola Alabi, MPH, MDP, is a newcomer Canadian of African ancestry. He is highly grateful to Indigenous peoples in Canada for sharing their sacred knowledges with him while studying for graduate degree in Development Practice (Indigenous Development) at the University of Winnipeg.

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