

Final Report

Defining Food Security for Urban Aboriginal People

UAKN Prairie Regional Research Centre

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The Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network, the UAKN, is a community driven research network focused on the Urban Aboriginal population in Canada. The UAKN establishes a national, interdisciplinary network involving universities, community, and government partners for research, scholarship and knowledge mobilization. This research was funded by a SSHRC Partnership grant entitled Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network: research for a better life, for more information visit www.uakn.org.



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Abstract:

While food security is an urgent social, economic, cultural and health issue for Aboriginal people in urban areas, and particularly those living in inner city areas, there are unique elements of food security related to cultural values. The Environics Institute found that 44% of Aboriginal people in Winnipeg felt that it was important that future generations know about traditions pertaining to food (Environics Institute 2011). Food security, as defined by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations “exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and health life” (FAO 2010: 8). The four pillars of food security – access, availability, utilization, and stability of supply take on unique characteristics in an Aboriginal (Power 2008) and urban (Mundel and Chapman 2010) context.

Yet, there is very little research that explores what food security might mean for Aboriginal people in the city. This study explored this issue with the objective of making policy and programming recommendations to better meet the needs of increasing urban Aboriginal populations. Using Winnipeg, Manitoba, as a case study, the following objectives of this research included to:

- Explore the concept of food security from an urban Aboriginal perspective.
- Explore the challenges of maintaining access to culturally valued food in the inner city.
- Make recommendations concerning food systems policy in order to meet the needs for culturally valued foods for urban Aboriginal households.

Literature Review/Conceptual Framework/How Research is Community-Driven:

The topic of food security for urban Aboriginal people requires an examination into several important theoretical areas including culture and food consumption, food security, and access to food variety and quality in inner city areas.

2.1 *Culture and Food Consumption*

The relationship between culture and food consumption is not well understood in academic literature besides a small number of research projects (Adekunle et al., 2010, 2011, 2012; Abdel-Ghany & Sharpe, 1997; Wang & Lo, 2007). Some literature has emerged in recent years attempting to examine the complex relationships between ethnicityⁱ, consumption and acculturation in Canada (Abdel-Ghany & Sharpe, 1997, Adekunle, et al. 2010).

Food consumption plays a central role as a cultural foundation for Aboriginal people. Yukon first Nations people interviewed about their consumption of traditional food indicated that eating it supported basic cultural values including keeping people “in tune” with nature, facilitating sharing, was a way for adults to display responsibility for their children and to practice spirituality (Receveur et al. 1998: 118). Wilson (2003: 88) noted that there was a strong link

between food and medicine for Anishinabek people in Ontario. She indicated that: “Certain plants, berries, and animals...are not only consumed for nutritional reasons but can also be used in the production of medicines.” Lambden et al’s (2007) study of Yukon First Nations, Dene/Metis and Inuit women found that they considered traditional foods to be culturally beneficial. To date, though, there has been almost no work on urban Aboriginal peoples preferences and attitudes toward traditional foods.

2.2 Food Security

The experience of food insecurity exists on a spectrum which ranges from “food anxiety to qualitative compromises in food selection and consumption, to quantitative compromises in intake, to the physical sensation of hunger” (McIntyre and Rondeau, 2009: 188). Many Aboriginal people experience food insecurity, specifically as it relates to compromises in types of food as the foods they would normally consume are inaccessible due to availability or price (Sinclair 1997). The financial burden of providing for family requires many Aboriginal people to the city to reduce their food budgets. The result can be a decline in food with high nutrient content. In their study based on the 1990/99 Canadian National Population Health Survey data, Che and Chen (2001:18) found that the prevalence of food insecurity was high among Aboriginal people living off reserves with more than one-quarter (27%) reporting at least some food insecurity, and 24% experiencing a compromised diet. Aboriginal people were about one and a half times as likely to live in a food insecure household that non-Aboriginal people.

Power (2008) however, has argued that cultural food security is an additional level of food security and suggests that additional research is required to understand Aboriginal perspectives on food security. She suggests, for example, that “in terms of access, food security may be affected by access to traditional/country food, as well as access to market food” (2008:96). Milburn (2004) noted that national food guides are often based on Western ideas of categories of food and do not reflect Indigenous realities. Willows (2005: 34) identified a knowledge gap concerning Aboriginal beliefs about food. Existing work has focussed primarily on rural areas, and there is very little research available concerning urban Aboriginal people.

2.3 Food Deserts and Inner City Access

Researchers have found that inner cities or areas with low-income populations often have less access to supermarkets (Cummins and Macintyre 2005). This means that residents are more dependent on smaller food and convenience stores which are more expensive and less likely to offer a range of healthy foods (Donkin et al. 2000). Accessibility to food retailers that provide healthy foods at low prices affects the dietary choices that individuals make (Wrigley et al. 2003). While there has been relatively little research on supermarket accessibility in Canadian cities, two recent studies suggest that high need and inner city neighbourhoods often have less access to supermarkets (Peters and McCreary 2008, Smoyer-Tomic et al. 2006). It may be that the lack of access to supermarkets also means that there is less access to culturally important foods. It is important to note, that in Winnipeg, Neechi Foods, an inner city Aboriginal co-op, provides access to many of these foods, for example fish, bison and blueberries. We will explore the impact of inner city residency on access to culturally valued foods.

Research Question/Objectives:

Using Winnipeg, Manitoba, as a case study, the specific objectives of this research are to:

- Explore the concept of food security from an urban Aboriginal perspective.
- Explore the challenges of maintaining access to culturally valued food in the inner city.

- Make recommendations concerning food systems policy in order to meet the needs for culturally valued foods for urban Aboriginal households.

Methodology:

Indigenous people have challenged academic researchers to decolonize their research relationships with Indigenous people so that academic research begins to meet the needs and priorities of Indigenous people themselves (Pualani 2007). Collaborative research practices involving Indigenous organizations may begin to address some of these concerns (Howitt 2001). We began this research by working with Winnipeg Indian and Metis Friendship Centre personnel.

An Indigenous graduate student from Winnipeg (TM) was hired as the primary data collector as she had an extensive network of friends, family and peers who were either working in food related areas, or who had a vast knowledge of food security/food sovereignty issues in the city. Because of her network and pre-established relationship with participants, issues around trust and access were not barriers, however protective measures were offered including the control and review of transcripts. Interviews were conducted with the blessing of the participants, and in the location of their choosing. Three focus groups were held with a set of questions focussing on not only access to cultural foods in the city but also a discussion of the connection between cultural food and larger well-being. In addition, ten interviews were held with participants answering similar questions. The interviews were transcribed and coded.

Results/Findings:

Food, culture and health are linked. The impacts of colonialism on Indigenous food systems is well noted in the literature within a rural, remote, northern and reserve context. The gap in literature is consistent with the notion that as people migrate from remote, rural communities into urban centres, their access to goods and services increases. Participants also made the link between food, culture and health. The three key areas identified by participants as being pertinent to Indigenous food security in Winnipeg include: (1) growing, harvesting, preparing and eating cultural food as ceremony, (2) cultural food as a part of connection to land through reciprocity and (3) re-learning IFS practices to address food insecurity.

1. Growing, Harvesting, Preparing, Eating and Sharing Cultural Food as Ceremony

Participants described a spiritual connection to cultural food. They reminisced about participating in food production and consumption; however these stories went beyond a nostalgic return to the “old ways”. Respondents identified the process of growing, harvesting, or catching of food as having a spiritual element which is consistent with the work by Receveur et al. (1998) describing the role of mentoring cultural practices and spirituality to children. This is also aligned closely with the work of Baskin et al. (2009) where urban Toronto Aboriginal women made the connection between cultural food and cultural knowledge transmission to children. The knowledge and understanding associated with growing and nurturing your own food is connected to a larger understanding of the relationship between the environment, spirituality and people.

This was described by a participant:

That understanding is something that I would like people to have – the cycle of the food, and where it comes from, and why we do what we do. It’s about respect – especially the respect - and respect of the growth. It’s another life that you’re bringing and growing, and

you're harvesting that life form in a respectful way and putting it in your body. There's that circle of life happening.

One of our respondents described the relationship she has with fish: "with salmon, it's kind of like going to communion because it's the one food that I feel the spirit in." Another respondent described the process of cooking and eating food as a part of a ritual: "to me that is a cultural food, and there is a ritual that goes with it. Whenever a relative would come by and give my mom deer meat, moose meat or fish, it was always a big deal to cook that up and have everybody come over and eat."

The ceremony described by participants related also to the experience of relationship building that comes with sharing traditional food. As one respondent noted "I think it's the way people enjoy it, and come together to enjoy it. With cultural food come community, fellowship, family and ritual." The ritual and ceremony around eating was described extensively by one participant.

The elders where I come from were very strict about the ritual; how the food came out, how things happened, how you came in, how you left, how you sat, where you sat, how you held a sacred item or what you did with it, or how you said something. When everyone was together and the elders started talking, everyone stopped, and was quiet and listened. The young people had to get up and serve the elders, and there were tiny offerings of food that we would make to the spirits. It's symbolic, and it shows gratitude. It says thank you for looking out for us, we appreciate and we give this thanks.

One participant described the relationship with food as a spiritual process: "It wasn't the food itself that was important; it was what we did with it, how we interacted with it, how we learned about it, and how we were thankful for it. It became a spiritual process."

When food harvesting, preparation and consumption contain an element of ceremony and spirituality, a different kind of intention becomes embodied. Careful consideration of techniques, and an appreciation for the broader connections between food, land and past and future generations become a part of the connection to food. This intention is evident in the description of one participant's observation of her mother's cooking techniques: "when my mom prepared food for ceremonies, like bannock or stew, she would take the ingredients, even the peas, and she would hold on to them, she would pray with them, and then put them in. She would take the greatest care with every single item." The principles of IFS are connected to the sacredness of food as described by these participants (Morrison 2011). Another participant described participating in ceremonies and the role that cultural food plays and how it connects people:

I do a lot of traditional work with traditional people – sweat lodges, Sundance, and other ceremonies – and a lot of it involves food, specifically traditional foods. I do have a lot of access in that regard, not as food security but as my own path if you want to call it that.

At powwows they have foods – a "wild feed" they call it in the States. It's a feast.

Participants also described the places in which they consumed cultural foods. At many gatherings and feasts, cultural foods are highly valued. One participant describes what a family gathering looks like in terms of cultural food:

The majority of the time I bring something like berries. It's like a potluck, and maybe the host would have the meat, usually a stew of some sort. Somebody else brings bannock. It doesn't mean you have to always eat traditional food, as long as you acknowledge the ceremony and put that spirit plate out. But the majority of the time we do have at least one wild food, what we call traditional food. And most of the time that's me bringing the berries. Blueberries are my favorite. I eat one cup every day.

2. Cultural Food as a Part of Connection to Land Through Reciprocity

Obtaining access to traditional food in the city is different than for people living in rural and reserve communities. In some cases, participants were from communities near the city, but in other cases, participants were from rural and remote communities. Being in the city has meant that many participants act as a host to family and friends who are visiting the urban centre. Participants described being “gifted” with food such as wild meat (bison, moose meat or fish) or as a part of larger family exchange. One participant described this:

There is an assumption about people in the community, that if you are no longer hunters or gatherers or fishers, you are totally disconnected from your traditional food. I say that’s not true because I get it through my relatives, and I am still connected through them. I don’t go personally shoot a moose, but I will eat moose when my relatives hunt and they send me some.

Participants also discussed participating in urban gardening programs or Community Shared Agriculture programs (CSAs). Informal economic transactions were also discussed including the role of bartering. As one participant described, the practice of bartering is also related to traditional teachings around reciprocity:

I also barter now instead of taking cash for my teachings. People will bring me meats or yarn, and then there’s less of the “I bought you” attitude. The person asking or the teachings has to go out and actually participate in getting that product for me., That tells me that they actually respect the knowledge enough to do so. I found that it made the teachings too commercial. People love it. I had a guy last year that dries rabbit and he loved dried peaches, so I dried a bunch of organic peaches and other fruits for him in exchange for two rabbits.

In an urban context, being able to access cultural foods is a challenge. As one participant described: “My access to traditional foods comes from both of my parents. So even if I worked at McDonalds, I would still have the exact same access to traditional foods.” For our participants who were working in areas of food, they found it less of a challenge. Other participants described being creative in developing networks:

I don’t have family or friends at all, but I find it still happens because you’re in food. When you’re on the bus and you start a conversation about the crate of onions you’re carrying, you find out that the other person has a friend that has a whole bunch of this or that and they want to trade. Facebook is good too.

Participants also described the importance of relationships not only to those who harvested the food, but for the larger process of food giving up its life to support people. Understanding the importance of reciprocity between the provider and receiver of the food is about cultural exchanges. One respondent describes this reciprocity: “are we respectfully honouring and giving thanks to that food and where it comes from? Those are the most important parts.”

Participants identified the consumption of traditional food as facilitating cultural values such as sharing and responsibility which was also identified by Receveur et al. (1998). Several participants described the need to start developing an awareness of IFS with children. For example, a participant stated: “We need to re-involve children in the miracle and circle of life and understanding, so they will see the importance of traditional foods, and what is traditional to them.” Another participant described the need for children to be better connected to food systems:

Every child should plant things, and they should be aware of the whole process leading up to eating it. If you have a relationship with your food, like peas, beans or squash, you

have a new way of being grateful and showing that gratitude when you eat. People need to really understand the circle of life, and that we are a part of it. We are not more important than plants, fish, birds or animals; we are part of it all, and every part is important. Until that respect is there, traditional foods will continue to die. Part of tradition is who we are inside, and those plants can only nourish us totally if we are part of that circle of life. To bring back traditional ways, we need to show our kids how to plant gardens, whether it's what was planted 200 years ago, or a new kind of food that the Europeans brought... We need our children to understand the habitats of animals, and to learn to live in harmony with them.

3. Re-learning IFS to Address Food Insecurity

Access to cultural food in the city is about alleviating food insecurity, but also about a larger reclamation and connection to food and food production. Indigenous food sovereignty (IFS) goes beyond food security in that it looks to reconnect people and their food systems and is guided by four main principles: (1) the recognition that food is sacred; (2) participation in food systems; (3) self-determination; and (4) supportive legislation and policy (Morrison 2011). One participant describes the sacred element of IFS: "the spirit of the food is very different. I think it connects with your body in a way that is genetic. I believe that we have a genetic memory of eating, especially fishers." Respondents discussed the relationship between control over food sources, cultural connections as distinctive elements of IFS.

One respondent described how IFS has been impacted by larger forces of assimilation. She described the connection between Indian Residential Schools and food:

That was the piece that really interrupted our food sovereignty (residential schools), and our relationship to growing what we eat, and even the hunting. I look around now and there are hunters on the reserves and in the community, but I don't have that kind of connection to them anymore.

Another respondent described the shift to urban centres as being one of the forces that limits food sovereignty not only because of the loss of land to practice land based harvesting: "the move to the city is a downward trend where you're deskilling and you don't have access to land for gardening... I see my generation as completely de-skilled and totally dependent on commercial source of food and on having money to buy food". This "de-skilling" as described by participants is something that they described as needing to be taught at earlier ages: "how do you re-teach these cultural connections to the younger generations? How do we teach them about food and how it's part of their ancestry and culture? These things are significant." One focus group participant described an experience of trapping with his daughters:

When I took my daughters out trapping, one daughter put her snare up high – about a foot and a half off the ground. I tried to encourage her to put it lower because it would have to be a really big rabbit to get caught in it! As it turned out it snowed that night – all the way up to that trap – and she was the only one who ended up catching a rabbit! There was something inside of her that just knew... it was in her genes.

Another participant describes operationalizing IFS principles in an urban context. He describes how harvesting practices like maple syrup is possible in an urban context:

I know of guys that actually tap the maples in the city. There is a misconception that if a plant is inside the city then you can't eat it because of contaminants. But those plants take those contaminants and convert them into good medicine for the body. Our Native tea plants will take arsenic from the soil and convert it into selenium, which is what we need.

Just because the soil is bad, doesn't mean what you plant in it is going to be bad. It matters in how its cared for.

IFS is also related to a return to health for Indigenous people. While the poor health of Indigenous people is well documented with high rates of chronic and infectious disease (Waldram, Herring and Young 2006), much of the chronic disease that is so prevalent in Indigenous communities is preventable, and related to the consumption of low nutrient quality food. One participant describes the rates of disease in relationship to urbanization and food patterns shifting: "The minute we left the community and entered the city we started eating differently...our whole diet changed. On came the diabetes, high blood pressure and other problems because of food that our body wasn't used to. We couldn't process it properly."

Discussion, Knowledge Mobilization Activities, Recommendations:

Based on this preliminary research, we identified the need for urban organizations to work with the community to participate in "upskilling" around cultural food. As such, we are embarking on the second phase of participatory action research.

The research question for this second phase is to *explore the ways in which urban organizations can "upskill" Indigenous food practices such as food growing, harvesting and production to diminish food insecurity and promote principles of Indigenous Food Sovereignty (IFS) within an urban context*. This research will explore the operationalization of IFS principles by undertaking a series of traditional food preparation, cultivation and procurement workshops followed by focus groups to talk about IFS principles within an urban context. It will provide a larger context for urban organizations, specifically Aboriginal organizations that focus on food security, to better understand how to develop programs and policies which support traditional and culturally based food production and food preparation.

This research project will use traditional foods workshops and focus groups around these workshops to better understand Indigenous food sovereignty in an urban context. Working with our partner, the North End Community Renewal Corporation (NECRC) through the North End Food Security Network (NEFSN) and Neechi Foods (Neechi Commons), we are proposing to develop a series of workshops designed to build skills and awareness (upskilling) around traditional foods. These workshops will be held in the North End of Winnipeg, which is a predominately Aboriginal urban community and will be promoted through their food security networks. A series of six workshops will be offered as follows: growing three sisters; wild teas; fishing (and filleting); re-inventing bannock; cooking with bison; and cooking with three sisters. These workshops will be directed by the NEFSN's Food Security Coordinator and are based on the NEFSN's experience working with Aboriginal people in the North End. These workshops will be facilitated by research staff, NEFSN staff, and local Indigenous knowledge keepers. Three focus groups will be held with workshop participants, one at the beginning of the workshop series, one mid-way, and one at the end of the workshops. These focus groups will help us better understand the value of these workshops and how we can increase food security and traditional food access through IFS. Focus group questions will be developed in collaboration with our community partner. The focus groups will be audio and video recorded. The workshops will be video recorded and a short video will be prepared for our partner and participants. Similar to the first phase of this project, this research will provide mentorship from an Aboriginal scholar (JC) to an Aboriginal scholar in training (TM).

This project considers community based research as appropriate for multiple audiences, and the ability to translate knowledge is a key tenet of this approach. This project was developed

based on initial research conducted in the community through a multi-funded project (including UAKN). Our findings have indicated that while food insecurity does exist for urban Aboriginal people, there is an important connection between food and social wellbeing. Cultural food specifically provides more than mere sustenance, and urban Aboriginal people have varying degrees to access and/or grow and harvest their own food within the city or through inter-familial connections to rural and reserve communities. However, despite the varying degrees of access, the respondents indicated that they were limited in knowledge and skills in preparing these cultural foods, which likely also impacts their ability to access and/or grow and harvest their own food. Urban Aboriginal organizations, or those that primarily serve Aboriginal populations can provide an important opportunity to build capacity (which we refer to as “upskilling” because capacity insinuates that there is limited skills or capacity to begin with) when it comes to preparing cultural food.

This research hopes to begin a dialogue at the local level for understanding not only how to access cultural food, but how to authentically engage in IFS through a knowledge and awareness of food preparation. Through the workshops on food preparation, we will engage community members on returning to some of these traditional practices and discuss whether this knowledge and awareness impacts the movement towards the practice of IFS. This is aligned with the food security work of the NEFSN and Neechi Commons, and will translate to other urban organizations attempting to address food issues. Through a successful demonstration of this action oriented research, we will attempt to address how policies around food security can be expanded beyond the current models (including urban gardens and food co-operatives).

Researchers will also find this action oriented research important as the dialogue on how to move IFS from a concept to a practice. This is especially significant in an urban context, because much of the IFS and Aboriginal food security research tends to focus on remote, rural and northern communities and disregards urban Aboriginal populations as facing their own unique opportunities and challenges.

In addition to this work, we are also working with the Indian and Metis Friendship Centre of Winnipeg with their summer students to develop a curriculum on healthy traditional food preparation which will be conducted throughout the school year. This project, called “Let’s Eat Together” is described below and related to the second phase of this project.

The IMFC and Dr. Cidro will develop a year-long cooking series which focusses on “re-inventing” the cooking of cultural foods in ways that support heart healthy eating and diabetes prevention. In addition, the IMFC will be working with their current partners Niji Mahkwa School and their local seniors group to bring together youth and seniors in a way that supports trans-generational skill building, cultural sharing and develop relationships and understanding between generations.

The IMFC is seeking funding to hire three students over the summer to do the following:

1. Identify current models for trans-generational cooking and healthy eating programs with an Aboriginal focus.
2. Identify recipes that support healthy eating and support local food production. Identify local food sources for cultural food (country food) such as Neechi Commons.
3. Develop a curriculum for an eight month cooking series program in partnership with Niji Mahkwa School and the IMFC Seniors group.
4. Pilot test two cooking sessions with seniors and youth and hold a sharing circle as an evaluation tool to modify the cooking series curriculum.

5. Develop an evaluation framework to be used throughout the cooking series to identify shifts in eating habits amongst participants.

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ⁱ It is important to note that we do not see Aboriginal people as an ethnic group. However some of the literature on ethnicity and food preferences may be useful in providing a background for the proposed research.