



UAKN Prairie Research Centre: Traditional Food Upskilling as a Pathway to Urban Indigenous Food Sovereignty

KEY FINDINGS

- Indigenous people living in urban centres face a wide range of food security issues from limited access to healthy and affordable foods including limited access to cultural food.
- This study examines the ways in which urban organizations can ‘upskill’ Indigenous food practices such as growing, harvesting, and production to diminish food insecurity and promote principles of Indigenous Food Sovereignty within an urban context.
- More than simple access to food is needed, this research demonstrated that traditional or cultural food “upskilling” is central to operationalizing IFS principles, and in an urban context, creativity is required to adapt these food skills.
- There were four key findings that emerged from the research: 1) Food as a part of reclaiming identity; 2) Food memory; 3) Practicing culture in the city; and 4) Food as relationship building.
- Urban Indigenous organizations who are seeking ways of weaving culture into programs and services may consider traditional food upskilling as one important mechanism that will result in a range of social, cultural and economic benefits.

INTRODUCTION

This research brief explores the concept of food sovereignty from an urban Aboriginal perspective. This project is a second phase in response to the project, Defining Food Security for Urban Aboriginal People. The study builds on the concept of food security in an urban Aboriginal context and discusses how Indigenous Food Sovereignty (IFS) can be used to give urban Aboriginal populations control over their food production and consumption. Food sovereignty can be defined as the increased control over food systems and this concept has emerged as a means of addressing food insecurity. Food sovereignty

places control over how, what, and when food is eaten with people and encourages a close relationship between production and consumption. IFS is important tool to combat food insecurity especially in urban centers as inner cities are known for having food deserts, and access to cultural foods is limited to trade networks and a small number of market providers. The goal of the study was to provide insights into how urban organizations that focus on food security can better develop programs and policies to support traditional and culturally-based food production and preparation.

IFS is guided by four main principles; the recognition that food is sacred; participation in food systems; self-determination; and supportive legislation and policy. These principles also recognize that food has an historical element for Indigenous people.

PARTNERSHIPS

North End Community Renewal Corporation
North End Food Security Network
Indian and Metis Friendship Centre

METHODOLOGY

Data and research conducted for this paper were gathered from a series of six workshops and follow up focus groups. Groups met at the end of each workshop and a more intensive focus group was held after the final workshop and feast. Focus groups were questioned about their experiences with and learning about traditional food skills, and whether there was any consciousness shifting around access to cultural foods in an urban context.

Ground theory methodology was then used to view and analyze the data taken from the workshops and focus groups. Ground theory allowed researchers to approach the topic of which not many facts are known gather data and then use it as the foundation of the theory. The development of concepts on the topic comes from the data collected.

MAIN FINDINGS

1. Food as Reclaiming Identity

Culture food and food skills were a way in which participants could learn about their culture and identities as Aboriginal people. Participants felt that the food skills they participated in learning had a deeper link to understanding their Indigenous culture. The food skills demonstrations not only provided opportunities to learn tangible skills but also allowed facilitators to share some of the history and cultural knowledge about the food and food skills. The participants discussed intergenerational knowledge transfer around food practices and how many were concerned with their diminishing knowledge regarding the harvesting, gathering, and preparation of food which are all embedded in culture and respected.

2. Food Memory

Prior to attending the workshops many participants described their food skills as limited. As they started to learn the food skills participants described feeling like they had learned these skills before. Once they handled the food many described as being overcome by memory, this can be referred to as food blood memory. Some participants had been taught some food skills in their youth but as they grew older and made the move into an urban setting they forgot these skills. Participants also described a lack of acknowledgement and value placed on these skills within their urban communities.

3. Practicing Culture in the City

Maintaining cultural connections within the city was an important part of maintaining a cultural identity to the participants. While there are organizations in Winnipeg's North End who do provide cultural programming including cultural food, many participants felt there was a disconnect in the city between culture and food as they were only able to access the cultural food during special events and certain times of the year. Through the food skills demonstrations participants discussed the importance of learning how to practice their culture in the city through food. The newly learned skills will allow the participants to practice culture in the city through fishing, growing cultural food, and purchasing it.

4. Food as Relationship Building

Prior to the food skills workshops and focus groups most of the participants did not know each. Participants described the process of growing, harvesting and preparing food as a social connector. By learning about tangible skills that were closely connected to their own culture and identity, participants felt connections to one another that were significant.

CONCLUSION

Indigenous Food Sovereignty principles are important and can be used in a number of different ways in an urban setting. Not only can they address food insecurity but they can also be used as a tool for cultural reclamation. The research conducted on the relationship between the urban Aboriginal population and cultural food demonstrated that cultural food 'upskilling' is central to operationalizing IFS principles and in an urban community.

Our research indicates that cultural food skills can be adapted to an urban setting and can have a tremendous impact on how urban Indigenous people consider their food systems, their identity, the relationships they have with one another, and practicing culture in ways that may have been considered inaccessible.

More than simple access is needed, this research demonstrated that traditional or cultural food "upskilling" is central to operationalizing IFS principles, and in an urban context, creativity is required to adapt these food skills. Traditional food upskilling benefits extend well beyond addressing some food insecurity needs, but are more deeply embedded in

connection to culture, community and relationship building. Urban Indigenous organizations who are seeking ways of weaving culture into programs and services may consider traditional food upskilling as one important mechanism that will result in a range of social, cultural and economic benefits.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Indigenous organizations, especially those who serve urban Indigenous populations should consider incorporating traditional food skills into their skill building programming as a way to enhance self-esteem building as it relates to cultural knowledge and development. Food practices such as growing, harvesting, and production to diminish food insecurity and promote principles of Indigenous Food Sovereignty within an urban context can have a positive impact in addressing the issue of food insecurity.
- In order for urban IFS to be fully operational, a re-building of urban Indigenous food must take place. Winnipeg's Neechi Commons is a great example of how the community has addressed the needs for market foods as well as cultural foods. Indigenous organizations, or those who serve urban Indigenous communities may consider incorporating traditional food skills into their skill building programming as a way to enhance self-esteem building as it relates to cultural knowledge and development.

For more information on this project visit:

<http://uakn.org/research-project/traditional-food-upskilling-as-a-pathway-to-urban-indigenous-food-sovereignty/>

ABOUT US:

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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. For more information visit: www.uakn.org



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