



Final Report

Traditional Food Upskilling as a Pathway to Urban Indigenous Food Sovereignty

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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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Report Submitted to UAKN

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Introduction

Food sovereignty has received a great deal of attention as an intervention to address not only food insecurity, but a larger attempt to regain control over food systems and health. The North End of Winnipeg, one of the most economically challenging locations in Winnipeg, faces significant food insecurity. Underneath the limited grocery stores and the limited access to cultural food lies an important strength that challenges notions of food insecurity. Indigenous people in Winnipeg have been working towards “Indigenous Food Sovereignty” (IFS) with regards to cultural food specifically. Indigenous people in urban centres face a wide range of food insecurity issues from limited quantities of healthy and affordable food, to limited access to cultural food. Food security, while a separate concept from food sovereignty, is certainly aligned, however in an Indigenous context, is mostly discussed for remote, rural communities. Food insecurity certainly exists in urban centres for Indigenous communities. In 2013, we conducted preliminary research which found that Indigenous people in the city experienced food insecurity, but also were working towards larger goals of what is being called “Indigenous Food Sovereignty” with regards to cultural food specifically (Cidro & Martens, 2014).

This research explored 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. Our research looked at operationalizing IFS principles by undertaking a series of traditional food preparation, cultivation and procurement workshops followed by focus groups to talk about IFS principles.

The goal was to provide insights into how urban organizations, specifically Indigenous organizations that focus on food security, can better develop programs and policies to support traditional and culturally-based food production and food preparation. This second phase of the project takes the position that IFS needs to be understood as operational also within an urban context, and when Indigenous people have the skills to practice IFS, a whole range of positive benefits to their social and economic wellbeing will unfold. This paper will first identify the conceptual themes that guided this second phase of our project, followed by the methods, findings, analysis and conclusion.

Conceptual Framework

Culture and Food Consumption: The relationship between culture and food consumption is not well understood in academic literature beyond 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, and was a way for adults to display responsibility for their children and to practice spirituality (Receveur et al., 1998, p. 118). Wilson 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” (Wilson, 2003, p. 88). 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 people's preferences and attitudes toward traditional, or cultural, foods. A 2012 Vancouver study discovered traditional knowledge is key to Aboriginal empowerment for participants, and that incorporating Aboriginal perspectives and worldviews are necessary in understanding food security (Elliot et al., 2012).

Food Security: The experience of food insecurity exists on a spectrum ranging from “food anxiety to qualitative compromises in food selection and consumption, to quantitative compromises in intake, to the physical sensation of hunger” (McIntyre & Rondeau, 2009, p. 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 in 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, p. 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 than 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” (Power, 2008, p. 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, p. 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.

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 & 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 & 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, which is an inner city Aboriginal co-op, provides access to many of these foods, for example fish, bison and blueberries.

Indigenous Food Sovereignty: Food sovereignty, or the increased control over food systems, has recently emerged in the literature as a means of addressing food insecurity. Food sovereignty places control over how, what, and when food is eaten with the people and encourages a close relationship between production and consumption. Indigenous food sovereignty (IFS) has been described as a “living reality” for thousands of years however, colonial impacts and landscape changes have threatened traditional and local food systems resulting, in part, in high levels of food insecurity and a need to reconnect people to their food systems (Morrison, 2011).

According to Morrison (2011), 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 recognize that food has an historical element for Indigenous people; indeed, many IFS initiatives are centered on traditional food practices. Kamal and Thompson (2013), for example, have documented an Indigenous land-based food movement in O-Pipon-Na-Piwin, Manitoba. Rudolph and McLachlan (2013) have also documented IFS initiatives in northern Manitoba. To date, little information exists with regards to IFS in an urban context. The Urban Aboriginal Garden Project at the University of British Columbia, one urban example, found the garden to be a decolonizing experience for participants because it helped reduce dependence (Mundel & Chapman, 2010). This project will describe an urban Aboriginal journey to Indigenous food sovereignty, through workshops on food skills, and the conversations that support the journey.

Methods: This research project took place in the Winnipeg's North End which comprises a large urban Indigenous population. In partnership with the North End Community Renewal Corporation (NECRC) through the North End Food Security Network (NEFSN) and the Indian and Metis Friendship Centre (IMFC) we developed a series of six traditional food skills workshops designed to build skills and awareness (upskilling) around traditional foods. A series of six workshops were offered beginning in June and ending in early fall which included (1) growing three sisters (corn, beans and squash); (2) harvesting and preparing wild teas; (3) fishing (and filleting); (4) re-inventing bannock; (5) cooking with bison; and (6) cooking with three sisters. These workshops were co-directed by two Indigenous researchers and the NEFSN's Food Security Coordinator. The workshops were designed based on the NEFSN's experience working with Indigenous people in the North End, as well as findings from our phase one project. The workshops were facilitated by researchers and the NEFSN Food Security Coordinator, and local

Indigenous knowledge keepers were brought in for some workshops. Participants in the project were also program participants from the IMFC and NEFSN who conducted the recruitment. Each day-long food skills workshop was followed by a focus group, and the final feast was followed by a more extensive focus group. Participants were also provided with a gift certificate to a local Aboriginal food cooperative (Neechi Foods). Questions in the focus groups focused on their experiences learning traditional food skills, and whether there was any consciousness shifting around access to cultural foods in an urban context. Focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Some principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) methodology were used in this project because this approach is particularly suitable when little is known about a topic such as operationalizing IFS principles. Grounded theory is an approach in which the collected data is the foundation of the theory in which leads to the development of concepts. Grounded theorists start with “data and construct these data through observations, interactions and materials gathered about the topic or setting”(Charmanz, 2014, pg 3). Beginning early in data collection using the process of coding, we sorted, separated and synthesized data. Preliminary findings presentations were done which allowed for fuller distillation of themes (Charmanz, 2014).

A photographer was present to capture some of the food demonstration activities. At the end of the workshop series, participants were provided with hard copies of the photographs that they were in, along with a recipe book. There was high participant retention and enthusiasm for this project which was expected given the hands-on and participatory nature of the research as well as our partner connections to the community.

Findings

There were four key findings which emerged from thematic coding process: food as reclaiming identity, food memory, practicing culture in the city and food as relationship building.

1. Food as Reclaiming Identity

Cultural food and food skills were considered a conduit to culture, and subsequently to identity.

In an urban context, formulating and maintaining cultural identity can be challenging.

Participants felt that the food skills they participated in learning had deeper links to understanding their Indigenous culture. The food skills demonstrations not only provided an opportunity to learn tangible skills, but were an opportunity for facilitators to share some of the history and cultural knowledge around the food and food skills. Personal stories about farming practices, and the colonial impacts of policies as they pertained to limits on food production were an important source of cultural knowledge reclamation for participants.

Cooking with Three Sisters
Food Skills Workshop with
Jasmine Tara (NEFSN
Coordinator)

Photo credit Jesse Vanderhart,
2014.



Participants also shared and learned about the larger forces that undermined their ability to make choices that support their culture and identity. One participant describes the issue of self-determination and food: “You know, the Aboriginal people had been...had their choices taken away and it’s [food] just one more way to make a choice.”

Intergenerational knowledge transfer around food practices was also discussed by the participants. The role of food harvesting, gathering and preparation is embedded in culture, and participants were concerned over the diminishing knowledge base around food. As one participant described: “give our kids healthy food, traditional knowledge, and pride in their tradition. Did they even know that these things are tradition? Like cooked corn is traditional, farming is traditional, a lot of kids.... you know I wasn’t taught that.”



Cooking with Three Sisters
Food Skills Workshop with
participants (Laura with
granddaughter Jaslyn).

Photo credit Jesse Vanderhart,
2014.

2. Food Memory

Participants described their food skills initially as limited prior to the food demonstrations. The food demonstration workshops were designed to not only provide hands-on learning opportunities, but were informal in nature, so there was a great deal of conversation and storytelling. Participants described feeling like they had learned these skills before. Once they had their hands on the fish, or in the soil of the garden, they described being overcome by memory,

what we refer to as food blood memory. Participants also described the challenges of forgetting these food skills once you relocate to an urban community, and the lack of acknowledgement of these skills as being valued. As one participant describes:

You know this is for me... just reconnecting...like my great grandpa, my Auntie Jean's grandpa. He takes me out in the bush and we go pick medicines. I remember this stuff, the fishing. I have that memory of this, but reconnecting again...because when you come to the city, all those skills are not acknowledged as skills. They are put aside and now it's time for books and school and city life and getting street smart. You put those traditional skills away and you just lose them. So to learn this stuff again..... actually I still do make wicked bannock!



Fishing and Filleting Food Skills
Workshop with participants
(Frank with granddaughter
Jaslyn)

Photo credit Jesse Vanderhart,
2014.

3. Practicing Culture in the City

Participants described the importance of maintaining cultural connections in the city as being critical to their identity. Winnipeg's North End has numerous organizations that provide cultural programming including feasts which often have cultural food. Participants felt that there was disconnection in the city between culture and food, other than being able to eat it at certain

events and gatherings. Through the food skills demonstrations, participants discussed the importance of learning how to practice their culture in the city through food. The ability to fish in the city, to grow cultural food, and in some cases, purchase cultural food is about practicing culture in the city.

One participant describes how to incorporate gratitude that he learned from his family in an urban context. The participant describes the practice of offering tobacco in her garden in the city is akin to how her father offered tobacco when hunting:

I like the traditional aspect...like when you get a fur, or that sort of thing. My dad hunts and when he hunts, if he kills a moose he puts down tobacco. It's the same thing you know, when you're taking plants, you have to be thankful to the earth and to give back so it's nice to incorporate that.

Another respondent describes the connection she has for the food in her garden and the importance of connecting to the land even in an urban context: "just getting my hands dirty [is good]... It's kind of weird, but I feed them [the plants] and check up on them. To have that connection, you know...that's what I get out of gardening. I've been gardening for a couple of years and it's just that connection."

Cooking with Three Sisters
Food Skills Workshop with
participants.

Photo credit Jesse Vanderhart,
2014.



4. Food as Relationship Building

The project participants for the most part did not know each other prior to participating in the food skills demonstrations and focus groups. Over the course of four months, participants got to know each other and shared stories about themselves and their families. Food provided an opportunity for people who may not have met one another to share important bonds and build relationships.

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. The communal nature of food skill building was discussed by one respondent:

I feel like cooking together and “doing it up” before we do anything else is a really good way to get to know each other. That’s something people don’t really do in groups anymore, but historically that is how people ate. They ate in groups and cooked in groups. Everybody participated, which is something that was kind of cool for me to watch us all do. Everyone had a little task, a little job, a little something to do and it was sort of a good way for strangers to get to know each other.



Final Food Skills Feast with participants (left to right: Tabitha, Laura, Monica, Melissa, Sadie, Jean, Colleen, and Jasmine).

Photo credit Jesse Vanderhart, 2014.

Analysis

Food insecurity is very narrow in scope and discounts the strides that communities take in regaining control over their food systems (Cidro & Martens, 2014). Inner cities are synonymous with food deserts, and access to cultural foods is limited to trade networks and small numbers of market providers. Operationalizing IFS must be done at a very tangible and practical level. In urban settings, IFS is often encumbered by lack of access to traditional territories outside of the city, but it doesn't have to be. Urban IFS must be approached with the viewpoint that food skills are at the heart of regaining control over food systems. Our findings indicate that participants felt an important cultural connection, using cultural food skills development as the conduit. The importance of inter-generational knowledge transfer and the close link between food and the natural world discussed by participants resounds closely with the work done by Receveur et al. (1998) and First Nations people in the Yukon. The link between cultural foods and practicing culture described by participants is also closely linked to Lambden et al.'s (2007) work with Yukon First Nations, Dene/Metis and Inuit women. Elliot et al.'s (2012) work had some similar

findings in terms of “empowerment” of urban Indigenous people through traditional food practices.

Urban Indigenous organizations who focus on issues related to food often do so through a lens of food security, or as an intervention for chronic disease such as Type II diabetes. However, there is an important opportunity to operationalize IFS principles as a means to not only address food insecurity, and chronic disease, but as a pathway for cultural reclamation. It is often challenging to “practice” Indigenous culture in an urban setting because the environment is often not conducive to many land based activities. However, 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.

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.

Conclusion

Winnipeg’s North End is a unique part of the city and boasts an important source of cultural knowledge that has been adapted to an urban Indigenous environment. While not immediately apparent, cultural food needs are increasingly being met with the expansion of Neechi Commons and increased number of local merchants providing access to market cultural food. Winnipeg’s Indigenous community also participates in trade networks as an important way to access foods.

Cultural foods, particularly land based foods, are rich in nutrients, and can provide an important mechanism to offset urban food insecurity, especially in areas experiencing food deserts. To rebuild a culture of urban Indigenous food, 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. The benefits to traditional food upskilling 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.

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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.