

INTRODUCTION

Food security exists when people have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious foods to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (World Food Summit, 1996). Food security is a prerequisite to broader health (World Health Organization, 1986). Remote First Nations communities deal with many social problems, including food insecurity, which stem from colonization. Access to healthy, inexpensive, and culturally appropriate foods will not solve all of these problems; however, healthy food is a prerequisite for wider social change and improved health. In addition, food sovereignty—culturally appropriate, locally determined food systems and food distribution—enhance community independence.

This study¹ focuses on knowledge in a northern community, and transforms community-based, anecdotal evidence into data that can be used to lobby governments for increased funding and new food programs and policies. Despite widespread knowledge of the food crisis in remote communities, little attention has been given to community members' suggestions for addressing these problems. This paper embraces Indigenous story-telling as a narrative framework. Stories and oral tradition provide ethical guidance: "the stories people tell have a way of taking care of them" (Lopez, 1990, p. 48). As an Elder put it, "you always start with a legend or tell a story. Then you combine with that story what's the purpose of what he's trying to say." An Elder in a northern First Nations community opened the Talking Circle by saying:

A long time ago when the Creator was building or making Mother Earth...he had a purpose to build, to do things regarding what he has to offer us...God or the Creator put everything what we can use as a Native people in here. He provided animals, all different kinds of animals for us to eat, the fish. Also the trees, different kinds of trees, and in every tree there is an herb where we can make our medicine.

After outlining the literature on food insecurity in the north, we describe our collaborative partnership and the ethics and method of our project. Our evidence illustrates that First Nations community members are ready to solve this problem.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Legal context

Personal security cannot be obtained without food security, and the *Charter* imposes upon Canadians an obligation to ensure freedom from want for all. This obligation is heightened in the context of a history of colonialism and the rights given to First Nations People under s.35 of the *Charter* (Macklem, 1997). Control over food, and denial of access both to traditional food (through seizure of Indigenous lands, residential schools, loss of traditional language and foodways) and of market foods (because of transport, price, and poverty), have been tools of colonialist control. As Damman, Eide, and Kuhnlein state, ill health "may reflect the failure of the state to respect and protect [I] ndigenous peoples' rights...territories and livelihoods" (2008, p. 150). The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples includes the "right to the highest possible standard of physical and mental health" (United Nations, 2007, Article 24).

Food insecurity defined

Food insecurity occurs whenever "the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain" (Andersen, 1990, p. 1576S). Remote northern communities are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity (Ledrou & Gervais, 2005). The risk of food insecurity among Aboriginal people is disproportionate; it is one and a half times greater than that of non-Aboriginal people (Che & Chen, 2001), and double that of non-Aboriginal people (Ledrou & Gervais, 2005).

Food insecurity is directly related to low income (Power, 2005). Recent studies in urban centres in Canada document this problem (Nova Scotia Nutrition Council, 2003). Despite this understanding, little has been done to regulate the cost of nutritious food in Canada. The problem of food insecurity is heightened in Aboriginal communities, partly because Aboriginal people are more likely to have low incomes. This is not a problem unique to Aboriginal populations in Canada. A large body of literature documents similar problems in other countries, particularly in remote Indigenous populations in northern Australia (Gracey, 2000; Jones & Smith, 2006; Lee, O'Dea, & Mathews, 1994; Ruben & Walker, 1995; Sullivan, Gracey, & Hevron, 1987).

Food insecurity contributes to malnutrition, poor learning outcomes, developmental delays, low birth weights,



depression, anxiety, and suicide, all of which are pressing problems in remote Aboriginal communities (Barton, Anderson, & Thommasen, 2005; Che & Chen, 2001; Knip & Akerblom, 2005; Moffatt, 1995; Newbold, 1998; Willows, 2005). Although these wider problems will not be solved immediately through improved diet, food security is necessary to improve the lives of Aboriginal Peoples.

Food availability and food accessibility

Lifestyle and poor choices have often been blamed for lack of good nutrition. Aboriginal communities, however, have had their “access to traditional environments reduced” (Richmond & Ross, 2009, p. 403). Access to traditional food is very limited and sometimes risky (Assembly of First Nations Environmental Stewardship Unit, 2007). In the absence of reliable and universal access to traditional foods and gardens, market foods become important in the food intake of Aboriginal people. Choice of market goods can be severely decreased by high food costs, poor availability of healthy food, low income, and/or high housing and heating costs. Limited evidence has been collected about food prices in the North. Researchers have recently argued that information on food pricing is essential to food security research and policy-making (Power, 2005). By establishing a Northern Food Price Survey program, the province of Manitoba has acknowledged the importance of food pricing in providing enough healthy food in the North (Northern Food Prices Project Steering Committee, 2003). The steering committee noted that there is “strong support from northern organizations and communities to use this much needed data base as a planning and decision-making tool” (p. 27). Our partnership with remote northern Aboriginal communities also illustrates this support. However, the only way to get a clear picture of the current food (in)security situation in northern communities is to get the information at its source: from community members and market food providers. A partnership based on mutual trust and respect has been established, as described in the next section.

METHODS: A COMPREHENSIVE DESIGN OF STORY-TELLING AND TALKING CIRCLE

Ethics and values: A self-determination approach

When designing this community project and partnership, we purposely rejected “destructive practices of colonial

research by fragmented social sciences” (Findlay, 2006, p. 47) and used a holistic and decolonizing approach that gave control over data and interactions to participants, and defined questions in terms of community needs (Smith, 1999; Weber-Pillwax, 2001). This approach reflects the fact, as one Elder put it, “in the community, we have lots of knowledge.” We used a holistic approach to food, the environment and health expressed by community members, and defined partnership as working together in “kindness, caring, and understanding.”

Colonialist-style researchers go into a community to extract information, abruptly leave, and are the only ones who benefit from the research. Instead of this approach, we established a decolonizing relationship with community members based on reciprocity. The National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO, 2004) refers to this as self-determination applied to research. This model is based in ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP) of the generated information or data.

Partnership: The Miichim Reference Group

Over a period of 2 years, a partnership was developed with Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN), an Aboriginal political organization in Ontario representing 49 First Nations communities within James Bay Treaty 9 territory and the Ontario portions of Treaty 5 (<http://www.nan.on.ca/>), which resulted in the creation of the NAN/Matawa/Lakehead University Miichim² Reference Group, which guided the research design and ethics protocol. We obtained permission to enter a northern community from the community’s chief and council and from NAN.

Comprehensive approach: Talking Circle and stories of healthy eating

We conducted a Talking Circle with members of a northern community in Ontario, to hear directly from local residents about the challenges around obtaining food, and to ask about solutions to food insecurity. A Talking Circle, unlike interviews or focus groups, allows participants to drive discussion and avoid research-determined questions. The Talking Circle was conducted in September of 2009 and included 18 community members. Participants were recruited by a community member and included two Elders and one child. Eleven (61 per cent) of the participants were women, which we considered important since obtaining and preparing food remain largely the responsibility of women. A weakness of this sample is that, while it included Elders



I can't really get that much access to traditional foods. Like my mother-in-law would invite us over sometimes but like where I really see a lot of it is in the communities, but there is also women whose husbands go out regularly and they get it regularly. But with us, it's once in awhile when we buy it or if someone gives it to us.

In addition, the traditional practice of food-sharing is disappearing with the traditional foods. Foods obtained in the traditional ways were always shared by the whole community but these values are being lost, and the usual practice of sharing wild food has turned into storing traditional food in freezers.

Another participant mentioned the cyclical nature of traditional food collection and consumption:

Well, the fall and spring is moose and the spring is duck too. And in the spring is the goose too. Spring is fish. I guess you can get it throughout the summer but we usually mainly have it in the spring...We're usually travelling. In the fall, moose, it's mainly moose in the fall...Once in a while, a beaver.

The cyclical nature of obtaining and eating food, the importance of feasts and family celebrations, and the holistic connection to the land were summed up as a sense of connection that could not be achieved through the purchase of food in a store:

Like when I go pick that mint, like I feel a connection with kind of how I was taught, you're not supposed to pick all of that in that area. I feel the connection with my grandmother because she's the one who showed me.

This connection, it was repeatedly stated, must be taught to the young people, who need to learn how to hunt, how to cook traditional foods, and how to treat the land, plants, and animals with reverence.

Change will be difficult despite a desire to increase traditional knowledge and eat more traditional food. As one participant explained it, time, money, and knowledge are all challenges:

Well, lack of knowledge I guess. Because I really don't have the knowledge myself and time I guess. Because I know it takes time to do all of those things and you just can't stop work to go and do the stuff you want to learn. And money to buy the equipment or to hire someone to

build a teepee for you because I don't have the time for that either. So time, knowledge, and money.

Knowledge gaps exist because children and young people leave the community for education but also because

[t]here's some families that like even though they might stay here, they still don't have that traditional ways, don't carry on the traditional parts of it. Maybe it's because they don't have the means now. There is people that if they had the boat and motor and if they had the nets you know because all those cost a lot now and rather than getting those they have to buy what they have at the Northern.

Excessive pricing: Food accessibility

When access to traditional foods is limited, market foods become very important in the diet of community members. Most foods in the community are purchased from the Northern Store, which, except when winter roads are operational, has a monopoly. All the participants in the Talking Circle realized that foods are expensive in the Northern Store. "I'm interested in the study group because I'm concerned about the prices of food at the store." Despite this general belief that prices were very high, the individuals who worked at the local Northern Store were not blamed. While critique of the Western profit-based business was present in this discussion, it was acknowledged that regarding the Northern Store Manager:

We said don't blame everything on her because of what's inside the store...I think that's the reason why she's here today. She wants to work with us, she wants to better things for our own health. And our kids...the company is, like I said, is looking after its bottom line and unfortunately it's a corporation.

As another Elder stated, the community "knows that you have your own bosses and can't just lower the price." Although solutions were not discussed, a distinction was drawn between prices in the store and the positive community contribution of the store manager. This suggests that community members believe that solutions to the access and pricing problems in the community must be addressed through policies from government not through private businesses. Community participants' critique of prices in the Northern Store implicitly suggests that policy change is necessary. Stocking a remote store is expensive, a fact that is understood by community members. A private business



will not lose money and continue to serve the community. Solutions must be sought through government subsidies and increased assistance or perhaps through the development of cooperative, not-for-profit stores.

DISCUSSION: COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS

Solutions to food insecurity and ill health must be multifaceted, which the community participants in the Talking Circle made clear in their suggestions. Participants emphasized the importance of increased access to traditional foods and knowledge on the collection and preparation of such foods. Researchers are also beginning to understand that “traditional food is critical for providing many essential nutrients...[and] protection of traditional food environments is critical (Kuhnlein, Receveur, Soueida, & Egeland, 2004, p. 1452). The role of Elders in teaching young people was highlighted: “Share what life was like back then and share with the younger people and how to live a good life.” Community members expressed recognition and regret that a full return to traditional foods and ways of living would not be possible but also said that a better balance must be found:

What made us go on an unhealthy path is completely dropping ours [traditional diet] and having to start with theirs [diet of white Westerners]. We didn't slowly pick up but went straight into it for something we weren't used to. Nowadays we're starting to develop more balance between the two [diets]. There were things in the bush that we weren't able to get so we had to find some common ground between the two and stick to it. That's all I have to say.

Community members also emphasized the need for education on the healthy preparation of market foods. Unlike teachings about traditional foods, this knowledge would not necessarily be transmitted by Elders. Instead, participants suggested that the store could play a role in education: “I think we should do taste tests.” It was also suggested that healthy menus could be promoted in the store: “I want to talk more about healthy foods in the store. I would like to see more advertisement on what types of food that are healthy and how to actually cook it and what ingredients you can add to it.” These suggestions echo the findings of other researchers who reported that “a variety of intervention programs to improve market food availability

and choices, as well as acceptable preparation methods, are called for” (Kuhnlein, Receveur, Soueida, & Egeland, 2004, p. 1452).

One participant also suggested gardens as a potential partial solution to the problem of food insecurity:

Healthy foods in my family are we grow our own vegetables and we just got into in the last few years but we find it's better that way because we find there is no preservatives and all of that in there. And there's actually more pride knowing that we grew it ourselves in our reserve...Potatoes are flawless here. We grow onions and find that radishes grow really well; beets we growing; beans are amazing. Peas are ok but the birds seem to like the peas too.

Additionally, this participant linked gardening not only to healthy eating, activity, and well-being but also to connection to the land:

[M]y dad's diabetic. It's his way of working off his sugar. He's actually very healthy for being diabetic. He's healthier than me. He can outrun me. And I'm just learning off of him and also it's a bonding cause we go out there together.

This participant's family was the only family in the community to garden. Vandalism is a consistent problem and the garden has to be grown in the bush: “we grow it out in the bush because we find a lot of people are disrespectful and if we have it in the reserve, we find that it gets trampled on and destroyed.” However, producing vegetables on site would reduce the cost of provisioning the community. Education in the school system about the value of gardens, and participation in gardening by children could overcome this problem of vandalism.

CONCLUSIONS

Food sovereignty will come from increased access to traditional foods and food systems. This requires political sovereignty and an emphasis on the transmission of traditional knowledge from Elders to younger community members. Since not all food will be provided through traditional means, potential solutions to the food insecurity crisis also include targeted subsidies, the development of northern community gardens, perhaps a community



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communities. The following website provides Nutrition North Canada's food eligibility list: <http://www.nutritionnorthcanada.ca/index-eng.asp>.

⁵ <http://aptn.ca/pages/news/2011/04/12/federal-government-cuts-water-out-of-food-program-for-northern-communities/>

⁶ http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/friah-spnia/promotion/public-publique/water-eau-eng.php#how_many

⁷ <http://www.marketwire.com/press-release/Government-Canada-Announces-Nutrition-North-Canada-Support-Healthy-Eating-North-1264589.htm>

ENDNOTES

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² Miichim is the Anishininimowin or Oji-Cree (Severn dialect) word for food. Oji-Cree language consists of many different dialects.

³ These suggestions also echo the recommendations of the community that were used in the development interventions, which encouraged the promotion of traditional foods, family meals, promotion of healthy foods at point of purchase, and education through local media and in-store workshops (Sharma, Gittlesohn, Rosol, & Beck, 2010).

⁴ The Food Mail program (see <http://ainc-inac.gc.ca/eng/1100100035755>) provided nutritious, fresh food and other essential items at reduced postal rates to remote northern





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