

# WISE PRACTICES

## FOR PROMOTING LIFE IN FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES

### REGENERATING INDIGENOUS FOOD SYSTEMS AS A PATHWAY TO COMMUNITY WELLNESS: WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

#### WHAT IS INDIGENOUS FOOD SOVEREIGNTY?

FOOD SECURITY is a term often used in reference to the ability to access food (Gulrukh Kamal, Linklater, Thompson, Dipple, & Ithinto Mechisowin Committee, 2015). The four pillars of food security are identified as “access, availability, utilization, and stability” (p. 26), but this does not take into consideration the sourcing of food, and particular cultural and spiritual priorities for Indigenous communities (Cidro, Adekunle, Peters, & Martens, 2015, 26). Food sovereignty, in contrast, relates to a Nation’s own right to produce its own foods, respecting cultural diversity (Cidro et al, 2015).

Rocha and Liberato (2013) clarify that “FOOD SOVEREIGNTY is often seen as a necessary condition for food security” and that “belonging” is central in achieving this (p. 591). This is particularly important for Indigenous communities the world over, who have “seen a steady decline in the availability of their traditional foods, due to environmental changes, ‘development’ projects ..., migration to urban areas, and/or the loss of traditional knowledge and skills” (p. 592) through the impacts of colonization. Access to land is key to both food sovereignty and food security – thus, Indigenous peoples who have been displaced or whose territory is being encroached upon are deeply impacted.

Ryser, Bruce, Gilio-Whitaker, and Korn (2019) point to origin stories and related teachings and ceremonies that center a long-term and collective vision of HOLISTIC HEALTH AND WELLNESS that is cultivated in relation with land, plants, and waterways. Importantly, tribal communities were also connected with each other, and through many rituals and practices grew and stayed strong by working together. These often involved moving seasonally in relation to food and other resources, and working together to prepare and preserve food for times of year during which it was less abundant. Through all of this, societies were sustained in all their complexity, and cultural and spiritual practices were exercised to maintain control (sovereignty) over food access.

“Tribal food self-sufficiency involves the coordination of complex social, political, religious, economic, and environmental concerns” and how groups approach this varies greatly, in part because access to resources varies due to colonial imposition (Mihe-suah, 2017, p. 9). Ideally, food sovereignty means an Indigenous community is able to control the production, quality, and distribution of its food – which obviously requires other forms of sovereignty as well (land sovereignty, political sovereignty). It also involves a shift from viewing land as a resource to instead entering into REVERENT RELATIONSHIP WITH LAND and all other beings.

#### CHALLENGES TO ACHIEVING FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

Several studies point to a range of colonial forces, policies, and practices that directly disrupt(ed) Indigenous food sovereignty by separating Indigenous peoples from their territories, each other, and their ways of living in order to access power, land, and resources. These include the reservation system, treaties, industrial development, and

capitalist relationships with land and food (Gupta, 2015; McMillan, 2015; Mihesuah, 2017; Rudolph & McLachlan, 2013; Ruelle, 2017). HUNTING, FISHING, AND GATHERING RIGHTS – and treaties or agreements that reinforce them – are vital for food sovereignty efforts, but negotiating these in today’s world is not easy due to so many competing interests and powers at play. Furthermore, the knowledge and skills to exercise these rights (including how to butcher and preserve game) also need to be built up through cultural practices that have deteriorated in the face of colonial forces. Healthy ecosystems are also necessary in order for these rights to be exercised (Mihesuah, 2017).

Since Indigenous ways of procuring and sharing food have been so compromised, Indigenous peoples are among some of the most food insecure the world over, leading to poor HEALTH, ECONOMIC, AND SOCIAL OUTCOMES (Gulrukh Kamal et al, 2015; Mihesuah, 2017; Spurway & Soldatic, 2016). Of course, attempts to occupy lands and assimilate people were and are met with resistance, including the invocation of Indigenous peoples’ own legal traditions. Food sovereignty, including exercising traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering practices for food, medicine, and trade are important elements of this resistance (McMillan, 2015). Today, due to the persistence of Indigenous peoples around the world, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* asserts the “... urgent need to respect and promote inherent rights of indigenous peoples ... especially their rights to their lands, territories and resources” (p. 140).

## WHY FOOD SOVEREIGNTY MATTERS FOR LIFE PROMOTION

Indigenous food systems culturally incorporate harvesting and sharing food with sustainable care for land. Food is also a valued source of medicine. So food sovereignty impacts all elements of health and wellness. INDIGENOUS FOOD SOVEREIGNTY in particular is “inherent and collective” (Gulrukh et al, 2015, p.565). It is intimately connected with land and community, and as such, is a significant decolonial tool. It is also an important strategy for supporting engagement with life in Indigenous communities.

Food sovereignty STRENGTHENS COMMUNITIES and community members in a number of ways. One is economic: In a household survey, 9 out of ten people indicated they would choose traditional food if it was accessible to them; however, at the time of surveys 8-to-ten people were accessing non-traditional food from grocery stores. This led to millions of dollars leaving the community, which could otherwise be redirected to support local food and other initiatives (Ryser et al, 2019).

But perhaps more importantly is the fact that for Indigenous peoples, food practices have been “a lifeline to cultural, emotional, and physical

## PARTICIPANT VOICES

ERICA WARD (MANAGER, NATOAGANEG COMMUNITY FOOD CENTER, EEL GROUND FIRST NATION):

That aligns with our mi’kmaq culture really closely: Food is the center of every ceremony and celebration. Building community off of good food.

ROCHE SAPIER (ABORIGINAL WELLNESS CONSULTANT, NEW BRUNSWICK)

When one young person started working at the Natoaganeg Community Food Centre as a summer student helping out in the garden, she didn't realize what a big impact the experience would have on her life. Helping to maintain the garden, she's learned a lot about what it takes to turn tiny seeds into rows upon rows of colorful, nutritious food.... . Since then, she's learned to cook, tried lots of new healthy foods, and felt more connected to the Eel Ground community she grew up in.

survival through multiple generations” (Mihesuah, 2017, p. 20). Thus, food production is a “WAY OF LIFE” – not just a way to make a living. It is also connected with a broader concept of health and wellness that includes spiritual and mental wellbeing that involves a deeper connection with ancestors that is fostered through food practices (Ngcoya & Kumarakulasingam, 2017, p. 485).

Resurgence of food practices is a gateway to teachings, spirituality, language, and meaningful relationships with humans and non-humans (Rocha & Liberato, 2013). Food is not solely about nutrition. For many Indigenous peoples it is about SACRED ECOLOGICAL RELATIONSHIPS with other human and non-human beings (living and nonliving) (Ruelle, 2017)>

A study from Australia suggests that Aboriginal people with disabilities are among the most food insecure (Spurway & Soldatic, 2016). This has implications for economic wellbeing and physical health. In the remote areas of West Kimberly, the cost of living (and food) is high, and people living there generally have low incomes. This, in combination with discrimination around disability, racism, and classism, increases the likelihood of experiencing chronic food insecurity. Interestingly, research with Aboriginal people who have disabilities (and their carers) indicates that ways of coping with these challenges often involve engaging in traditional food practices ‘in country’, including crabbing and fishing on traditional lands and waterways. Findings from this research indicate that “exercising food sovereignty was necessary, and sometimes the only means possible, to guard against secondary disability and further chronic illnesses and disease”. And importantly, “ACCESS TO LAND and country – land sovereignty – is inherent to securing food sovereignty for indigenous communities” (p. 1127).

## WAYS FORWARD

Given the disruptions that have occurred, connecting young people with plants and animals – in large part by connecting them with Elders and the land – are vital to regaining Indigenous food sovereignty. Creative partnerships can facilitate these connections. Building relationships among YOUNG PEOPLE, PLANTS, LAND, AND ELDERS is central (Ruelle, 2017).

Cherokee youth and elders who participated in a study by Corntassel and Hardbarger (2019) highlighted the repetitive, ongoing, and collective nature of their “lifeways”. It is the little things that are done together over time that comprise their identity and culture, and sustain their community. “The practice of gathering food as a family, specifically wild onions and mushrooms, was a recurring theme” (p. 98). Everyone works together, gets to know their territory, and learns important skills around food preparation for instance. Detailed knowledge is transferred to the next generation, and responsibilities to community are learned through this process over time. Language and ceremony are other everyday acts that perpetuate Cherokee lifeways. All of this happens through family and community relationships, and relationships with the land and water. The perpetuation of lifeways and related knowledge is, importantly, EMBODIED – not cognitive – and occurs by doing and being together.

This echoes Gupta (2015) who points to Indigenous SELF-DETERMINATION through doing – shifting focus from state-based solutions and towards relationships with the land that can be nurtured in through EVERYDAY community-based food practices.

“Tribal food self-sufficiency involves the coordination of complex social, political, religious, economic, and environmental concerns” and how groups approach this varies greatly, in part because access to resources varies due to colonial imposition (Mihesuah, 2017, p. 9). Research by Rudolph and McLachlan (2013) indicates localized responses are multi-faceted and include such things as: “revival of country food traditions, individual and community gardens, agriculture in the North, and better quality imported foods” (p. 1079). Some participants emphasized that “food sovereignty would only be achieved through political sovereignty” (p. 1091).

Regardless of the approach taken, it is important for decision-making around food practices to be “COMMUNITY-DRIVEN, culturally appropriate, to reflect local priorities in order to effectively address the northern food crisis, and, ultimately, ... to work towards Indigenous food sovereignty to be effective” (p. 1079).

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