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The right to food security in a changing Arctic: the Nunavut Food Security Coalition and the Feeding My Family campaign

In Nunavut in the Canadian Arctic, Inuit are mobilising themselves and their government to address rising food prices and food insecurity; focusing on the right to a traditional way of life and the challenges brought by climate change and industrialisation.

Overview

About 160,000 indigenous Inuit live in four countries across the Arctic – Canada, Greenland, United States (Alaska) and Russia (Chukotka) and are represented internationally by the Inuit Circumpolar Council. All have faced significant cultural, environmental and economic changes over the past 60 years. The transition from a semi-nomadic subsistence culture to living in communities with mixed subsistence and wage-earning economies has tested both their resilience and adaptability. And while many changes are affecting Arctic ecosystems, brought primarily by climate change and industrialisation, the impacts on food security are fast becoming a central topic of conversation.

For Inuit, achieving food and nutrition security is about more than ensuring people are free from hunger, it is about the right to harvest and pursue a traditional subsistence way of life. In other words, Inuit view food security as a right that encompasses the cultural and environmental aspects of their lives.

For Inuit, the concept of 'food sovereignty' includes political, legal and other rights that add up to the right to make their own decisions about food and define their own food systems, including production, distribution and consumption.

Causes of food insecurity. Inuit communities' rich cultures centre on harvesting plants and animals for subsistence, and for hundreds of years Inuit have developed and adapted in response to the dynamic environments in which they live. But rapid climate change is threatening Inuit ability to pursue these traditional subsistence food sources.

For example, traditional food sources may be compromised when climate change alters animal migration routes, and some such impacts are already seen in eastern Arctic communities. Other environmental changes such as thinner ice, late ice freeze-up, early ice break-up, more variable snowfall, unpredictable weather, warmer temperatures, as well as more frequent and intense storms make hunting harder. Increasingly common extreme weather hazards, including high winds and blizzards, can also delay food shipments to communities that are accessible only by air except during the ice-free season, and this limits the availability of fresh food stocks in local stores.

Shifting socioeconomic conditions also threaten food security. International pressure for conservation in the Arctic is often at odds with traditional hunting livelihoods. This adds pressure to shift to a more industrialised society that means fewer active hunters are harvesting traditional food. Meanwhile, the cost of bought food is rising. The relatively

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recent shift to a cash-based economy among Inuit also brings challenges of money management skills, exacerbated by other household priorities such as the costs of fuel, power and rent, and this is compounding the issues of unaffordable food prices and low incomes.

Yet Inuit remain confident that as a culture they will not only survive these changes but thrive. Local solutions to mobilise communities to address food insecurity are emerging. This case study examines two such approaches in Canada, the Nunavut Government's Nunavut Food Security Coalition and a grassroots community mobilisation effort called Feeding My Family that is using social networking to raise awareness and discuss food security rights.

Inuit rights in Canada. Approximately 50,000 Inuit live in 53 communities in Canada's Arctic region. Canadian Inuit rights are conceptualised and codified in myriad ways at national and international levels, including treaties, land claims agreements, global Indigenous Peoples' rights, health rights, the right to food and nutrition, rights to access and own land, water rights, rights to the means of food production, and, more broadly, human rights. Achieving food sovereignty in the rapidly changing Arctic environment particularly requires that Inuit are empowered to shape global, national, regional and local decision-making processes related to biodiversity conservation initiatives.

Food insecurity in Nunavut, Canada. A visit in 2012 by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food Mission to Canada directed particular attention to the situation of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada, as well as food security considerations for rural and remote communities across the country – especially in the north.¹ In Nunavut, Canada, household food insecurity rates are five to six times higher than the national average. Researchers from the Inuit Health Survey (2007–2009) estimate that 70 per cent of Inuit pre-school children live in food-insecure homes and that Nunavut students are more likely than other Canadian students to go to bed hungry because there is not enough food at home. Community-based studies in Nunavut indicate rates of food insecurity range from 50–80 per cent. Poor nutritional quality, as well as food scarcity imposes an additional burden and associated consequences for Inuit health.

Interventions and impacts

Results from research on how to address food insecurity suggest that recognising and respecting Inuit human rights can reduce people's vulnerability to hunger, under-nutrition and climate change. Three

primary factors appear to influence food insecurity in Nunavut:

- **Knowledge and awareness.** Traditional knowledge and traditional food systems support both cultural identity and food security, but are declining;
- **Physical access.** Climate change effects and restrictions on harvesting rights are limiting access to traditional food.
- **Economic status.** Poverty is restricting people's pursuit of traditional livelihoods.

Developing a coordinated government and stakeholder approach. The Government of Nunavut has recognised the social cost of food insecurity in the territory and the importance of traditional food in the fight against it.

Because addressing this complex issue is broader than the mandate of any one organisation, the Nunavut government approach has been to embed food security actions within a larger mobilisation for poverty reduction. An integrated, coordinated and collaborative approach involving commitment and resources from many partners is deemed the only way to achieve meaningful impact on this profoundly important issue.

In 2011, the Nunavut Food Security Coalition (NFSC) was established to “develop a long term, ongoing, inclusive and sustainable approach to food security in Nunavut”. The NFSC draws representatives from seven departments of the Government of Nunavut and four Inuit organisations. Its goal is to engage a broad group of partner organisations and the public to create a collaborative strategy of programmes, policies and initiatives on food security. The focus is on identifying initiatives that can be undertaken within Nunavut, using existing resources. By ensuring all stakeholders have a say in developing the vision for food security in Nunavut, the coalition aims to ensure that the rights of Inuit in the communities are upheld.

Over the past year (2012–2013), the NFSC has held thematic discussions, organised public engagements, sought ongoing academic and expert advice, and in January 2013 held a symposium to bring together all interests. The coalition is now evaluating a draft strategy for implementation from spring 2013.

Grassroots mobilisation: the Feeding My Family Facebook group. There has also been a large community mobilisation around the issue of food insecurity in Nunavut, propelled by the Feeding My

Inuit view food security as a right that encompasses the cultural and environmental aspects of their lives



Sara Statham, Government of Nunavut

Family (FMF) group on the popular social media networking website, Facebook.² FMF was created by a mother (Leesee Papatsie), who wanted to raise awareness about the struggle Inuit face to feed their families (see Box 1). Since its creation in May 2012, more than 20,000 people have joined FMF, which provides an online discussion forum. Inuit understand hunger, and its stories and legends permeate their culture. FMF uses this innate understanding of the issue to get people talking about the high cost of food, to gain followers, and to work for change.

Main achievements and challenges

FMF has given Inuit people a place to voice their concerns and has empowered them to speak up for themselves – something that is against the traditional ‘norm’. FMF also promotes Inuit knowledge and traditions, like sharing food among the family, to tackle food insecurity.

The public pressure raised by FMF is helping ‘jump start’ faster collaboration between the Nunavut

Box 1. Leesee’s story

“One day I saw a person was taking a stand against the high cost of food in Nunavut right outside our local store. At that time, I was unable to join him but I supported what he was standing for. It inspired me to organise a campaign to stand together and speak with one voice on the high cost of food in Nunavut. Inuit are good at coming together for a common goal and have been working together to fight hunger for hundreds of years. I also knew that many Northerners³ use Facebook as a way of communicating with the outside world and that it would be a useful way of connecting people around the issue.

There are three people living in our household, we spend about 500 Canadian dollars per week to feed ourselves and others (Inuit will share their food among family members – this is the norm for us). For example, frozen concentrated juice can cost CAN\$8.59. We are lucky compared to other families as both my husband and I have jobs and we have a house. Nunavummiut (the people of Nunavut) struggle to put food on the table and a lot of people are trapped in a vicious circle – they get paid, pay the bills and buy food, but often have to borrow money for food before their next payday. Many households have one or two working folks supporting eight to ten people.

Changes in weather are also making it difficult for Inuit to harvest animals. One year, we tried to go fishing through the sea ice. The travel conditions were so poor, we had to turn back despite this time of year normally being a good time to travel and fish.”

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government and Inuit organisations, strengthening the public mandate for the NFSC. Existing programmes are being reformed and more food banks are being set up.

But the biggest challenge is still the failure of some community members to acknowledge the severity of food insecurity in Nunavut. "I don't believe this is happening in Canada" is a remark frequently posted on the FMF Facebook page. Another challenge is that dependence on social media as a platform for the Feeding My Family campaign means the message does not reach low-income families or those without access to the internet.

Yet FMF has demonstrated the effectiveness of taking an unexpected and non-traditional approach – that is Inuit voices speaking up for their rights, and being heard. Working together is an important tradition for Inuit and by doing so they are driving change in Nunavut.

Lessons

Food security is a complex issue with myriad influencing factors, and achieving it may require communities that are empowered to shape global, national, regional and local decision-making processes. In the rapidly changing environment of the Arctic, all these levels of decision making can affect Inuit food systems.

Recognising the right to food is an important step in triggering more sustained action on food and nutrition security by government and civil society. International human rights covenants can play an important role in informing and shaping policies at national and sub-national level.

Meaningful intersectoral engagement is needed to develop culturally appropriate solutions that improve lives and ensure the right to access safe and nutritious food in the context of a changing climate. Experience in Nunavut highlights the importance of strategic planning and advocacy, and of seizing opportunities for action when political will, research or public mobilisation raise the profile of an issue.

Inclusive participation and collaboration by all major stakeholders is essential. Government, NGOs and civil society in Nunavut are mobilising collectively and this promising process may yield the kind of collaboration that is needed to defend Inuit rights to affordable, safe and nutritious food. Citizens are encouraged to participate in decision making and strategy development and will play an important role in ensuring that the Nunavut Food Security Coalition implements its strategy.

Recognising traditional rights and culture is likely to have the most impact on food security, and to be the most cost effective. Achieving food and nutrition security is about more than ensuring people are free from hunger. For Inuit people it is about the right to harvest and to pursue a traditional subsistence way of life.

Unifying communities and encouraging them to speak up on their right to food can help lobby the government and private sector and raise household awareness on health, food and nutrition. By supporting community empowerment the Feeding My Family group has allowed Inuit to strengthen their voice and demand their rights.

Notes

■ ¹ 800,000 households are food insecure in Canada, despite the fact that Canada is a G8 country that often tops rankings in the UN Human Development Index (source: UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2012). ■ ² www.facebook.com/groups/239422122837039; www.feedingmyfamily.org ■ ³ Northerners is a term used to describe people living in the North.



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