

Food sovereignty vital to create First Nations food security

BY CHARLES Z. LEVKOE
AND JESSICA MCLAUGHLIN

IN CANADA, one in eight households struggle with food insecurity; that — is, they do not have access to enough nutritious and culturally appropriate food — and these numbers are far greater among First Nations communities. Why is a population that managed to feed itself prior to European contact among the most food insecure in the country today?

The answer to this question is complicated but we do know that it is not for lack of food. Instead we need to consider that food insecurity is much more than a food problem, but an indicator of material deprivation and the result of many factors beyond the direct control of individuals. It demands a serious look at the ongoing impact of settler-colonialism on changing diets, the forced removal of Indigenous people from their lands and waters and the limiting of self-determination and decision-making power over their lives and food systems.

Solutions that address the root of food insecurity must go beyond charity and support Indigenous people to take back control of their food systems. Faced with an array of challenges imposed through settler-colonialism, Indigenous people have struggled to reclaim their cultures and autonomy. The concept of Indigenous food sovereignty refers to the vision and practice of a food system that provides healthy, culturally appropriate and environmentally sustainable food while ensuring that communities (not governments or businesses) are able to make decisions about how their food systems should work.

Indigenous food sovereignty understands that food is sacred and part of a web of relationships with the natural world that sustains cul-



ONE CITY, MANY VOICES

Thunder Bay's Anti-Racism and Respect Committee produces this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.

ture and community. Through food sovereignty, Indigenous people and communities around the world are reclaiming their cultures and autonomy, asserting and practicing their inherent rights while preserving, protecting and integrating traditional food practices into everyday life.

To these ends, Understanding Our Food Systems has been a collaborative project based in Northwestern Ontario with a goal to enhance and support Indigenous food sovereignty. The project was co-ordinated by the Indigenous Food Circle, a collaborative group of Indigenous-led and Indigenous-serving organizations in the Thunder Bay region that aims to support and promote Indigenous perspectives and experiences around food. Using food as a tool for reconciliation and resurgence, the Indigenous Food Circle creates the space to reclaim and weave Indigenous knowledges and experiences into food systems.

Together with the Thunder Bay District Health Unit and Lakehead University, the Understanding Our Food Systems project worked with 14 road-accessible First Nations in Northwestern Ontario to develop and implement community food sov-



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Chef Rich Francis, right, prepares Lake Nipigon trout on an open fire for participants at the Understanding Our Food Systems gathering held in January at the Regional Food Distribution Association in Thunder Bay.

ereignty visions and identify ways to improve food security. This involved community visits, a regional scan of available resources and the development of short-, medium- and long-term activities determined and led by each of the First Nations communities.

From Jan. 22 to 24, a regional gathering was held in Thunder Bay that included an interactive workshop to prepare for implementation of the action plans and community food sovereignty visions. The gathering provided communities and supporting partners with a forum to learn and work together.

Shelly Livingston, from the Bigitigong Mno-zhi-yaawgamig/Pic River First Nation Health Centre and participant in the project, noted: "Our biggest discovery in this work,

is how food insecurity and food sovereignty are at the core of many of our biggest challenges."

She explained: "We are still very much separated from our traditional food systems, and what we have managed to maintain are still over-regulated in the colonial system. Our people were cultivators and we had intimate relationships with our food. It was filled with spirit and social systems. It was more than a means of survival; it was cyclical and interdependent."

Through the Understanding Our Food project, the participants took leadership in their communities, strengthened networks with other First Nations and allies across the region, and implemented short-term actions to improve their food systems. While there were many suc-



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Jessica McLaughlin, co-ordinator of the Indigenous Food Circle, splits wood to start a cooking fire during the Understanding Our Food Systems gathering.

cesses to report, the most important learning from the project was that food security for First Nations requires Indigenous food sovereignty. This work will take generations of continued hard work and meaningful partnerships based on trust and respect

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