Policy Brief

Reducing Basic Needs Poverty through Inuit Food Security in Northern Canada

Image: (Hobson, 2014)

Revitalising local food production for food sovereignty is key to addressing significant food insecurity in Inuit Nunangat.

Provincial, Territorial and Federal governments must work together to:

1. Establish country foods programs.
2. Subsidize equipment for hunters.
3. Establish a project committee to create recommendations for infrastructure development.

> **"Inuit populations experience the highest rate of food insecurity of any Indigenous population in a developed country."**
>
> *Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2017*

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Introduction

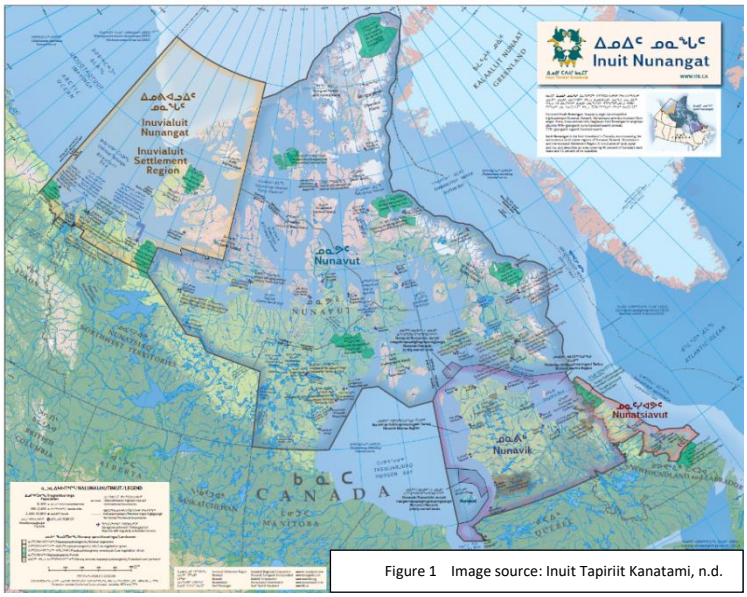

Figure 1 Image source: Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, n.d.

The Inuit[1] homeland, Inuit Nunangat (IN) encompasses the most northern areas of Canada; Nunavut, Nunavik, Nunatsiavut and the Inuvialuit Settlement Region of the Northwest Territories (Figure 1) (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, no date). The cost of living in IN is extremely high, with Nunavut[2] having a poverty rate of 44.5% (Statistics Canada, 2024) and a child poverty rate more than double the rate for Canada (Amautiit and Campaign End Child and Family Poverty, 2023). Food security, which is defined by the United Nations (UN) as having "regular access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life" (United Nations, no date a) is very low in Nunavut, with nearly 63% of the population experiencing food insecurity (Statistics Canada, 2024). This is a barrier to basic capabilities of adequate clothing, food, shelter, and education required to function in society, which according to Amartya Sen, is the definition of poverty (Banerjee, Bénabou and Mookherjee, 2006). The food systems in IN are unique from other parts of Canada (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2017). Harvesting[3] food is central to Inuit culture (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2021). Prior to the arrival of European settlers, the Inuit were self-sufficient, relying on hunting and seasonal nomadic settlements to harvest from local stocks of plants, mammals and fish, which is referred to as country foods.

European settlers forced Inuit into permanent settlements in mostly unfamiliar areas with inadequate conditions and children were prevented from learning traditional skills like harvesting (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2017). Colonialism severed the traditional way of life through forced relocations and residential schools, damaging traditional learnings and increasing dependence on colonizers through reliance on imported foods. Neoliberal policies led to the globalization of food systems and concentrated decisions over food policies that focused on meetings agribusiness industry needs as opposed to hunger problems (Coté, 2016). These factors led to dependency theory where local systems were exploited to enrich the European settlers at the expense of the local population (Mckay, 2004).

Food insecurity is exacerbated by climate change and the Inuit peoples rely on ice for livelihood. The Arctic is warming at a faster rate than global average which increases difficulties in accessing country foods like seal (Panikkar and Lemmond, 2020). Climate change also increases irregularities of food shipments due to weather issues (Herrmann *et al.*, 2021).

Infrastructure is an ongoing challenge with the remote locations of many communities, the majority being reachable only by air year-round. This inflates food prices as importing groceries is very expensive (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2017). Due to high costs of fresh, nutritious foods, shelf-stable, low nutrition foods make up a large portion of northern diets (Herrmann *et al.*, 2021) . The resulting poor diets can often lead to physical and mental health issues (Thompson *et al.*, 2012).

With the complex nature of the problem, an effective solution requires collaboration and will need to include the following organizations to whom this policy brief is addressed:

- Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (CIRNAC) which devises northern policies and manages northern affairs including the main program targeting food insecurity, Nutrition North Canada (NNC).

[1] Inuit is a Northern Indigenous person from Artic areas in Canada, Alaska and Greenland.
[2] Nunavut is the only Canadian Territory exclusively part of IN, therefore Nunavut statistics have been used to represent IN.
[3] Harvesting food in Inuit culture consists of fishing, gathering, hunting and trapping from local areas, once harvested is called country foods.

- Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency (CanNor) whose role is to support economic development in Canada's Territories. CanNor provides funding for specific development projects.
- Provincial, Territorial and Federal Departments responsible for economic development and infrastructure policy and planning for land that falls within IN. This includes Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada (HICC) responsible for Canada's infrastructure plans and provincial and territorial counterparts.

Why this requires urgent action

Improving food security is a requirement for alleviating basic needs poverty in Inuit communities. Largely due to high costs resulting from lack of infrastructure and the ability to access country foods, Inuit populations experience food insecurity seven times higher than other Canadians, which is the highest rate of food insecurity of any Indigenous population in a developed country (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2017).

Food security is a crisis in IN and is a human right, according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, no date b). There is currently no effective policy that upholds this right for the Inuit population.

The Inuit population is also younger and growing faster than the Canadian population, making them an important part of Canada's future economic growth (Statista, 2024).

Policy Gaps

Despite wide acknowledgement of the importance of improving food security in IN, there is a gap in solutions.

The NNC funds nutritional education initiatives and provides subsidies to retailers to pass along savings to consumers for mostly perishable foods (Nutrition North Canada, no date). This program was introduced in 2011, however, food insecurity has only increased since the program's introduction (St-Germain, Galloway and Tarasuk, 2019).

Shortcomings of NNC identified by Qikiqtani Inuit Association (2018) include:

- Lack of subsidies for hunting and fishing activities fundamental to country food production
- Increasing access to country food is nearly nonexistent (less than one percent of NNC budget)
- Lack of transparency including whether NNC subsidies actually reach consumers

Figure 2 breaks down which products are subsidized for retailers by the NNC.

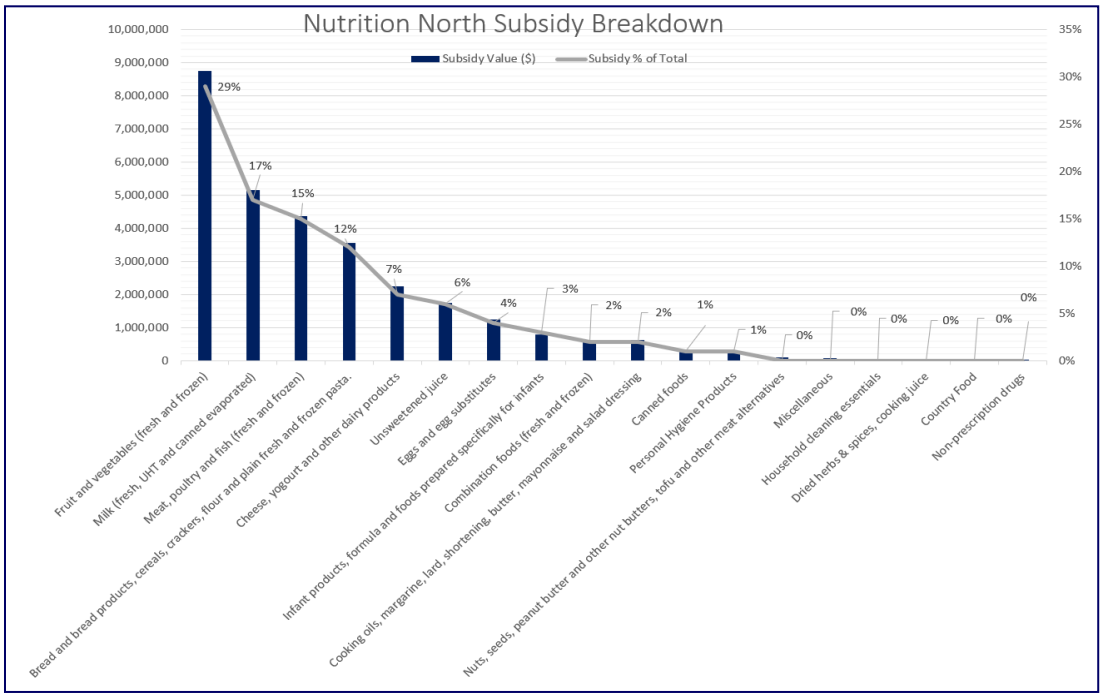

Figure 2, (Nutrition North Canada, 2023)

Research findings

Inuit peoples globally view food security through a social ecology lens, seeing the interconnected effects on society of the interactions between humans and nature and incorporating the situated dimensions of these interactions into Indigenous local knowledge (Frank, 2017, Inuit Circumpolar Council-Alaska, 2015). Their traditional way of life is rooted in communitarianism, a form of social solidarity that emphasizes the balance between community and individual goals (Nyerere, 1967). The Inuit value sharing and often harvesters share with their community (Qikiqtani Inuit Association, 2018).

A solution focused on local food production that ties in the interconnectivity, cultural knowledge and complexity of the Inuit food system is needed (Northern Food Prices Steering Committee, 2003). This requires a shift in policy thinking to promote food sovereignty, focusing on traditional country foods to achieve food security (Qikiqtani Inuit Association, 2018).

Food Sovereignty

Through examining social transformation discourses, Arturo Escobar (2015) discusses several viable transformation paths to poverty reduction via alternative models to modern capitalist solutions. One of the concepts Escobar discusses is Buen Vivir (BV) which emphasizes "wellbeing according to culturally appropriate conceptions and the rights of Nature" (2015). The concept of food sovereignty pinpoints neoliberal policies and centralized government control over food policies as a root cause of global food insecurity (Coté, 2016). Food sovereignty is linked to Buen Vivir as it involves culturally appropriate solutions led by a participatory approach to problem-solving for food insecurity in IN, putting those that consume, produce and distribute the foods at the heart of decision-making, empowering communities to define their own food systems. Food sovereignty is at the center of the traditional Inuit food system (Herrmann et al., 2021). With lack of success in development projects that do not take into account the nature of rural poverty, participatory approaches ensure local knowledge and solutions are prioritized (Gardner and Lewis, 2015). Chambers (Chambers, 2005) has documented successes of participatory solutions.

Country food programs built around community led food sovereignty reduced food insecurity more than any other variable.

Thompson et al., 2012

Some communities in IN have built country food programs, which employ and train locals in hunting and fishing skills along with conservation and environmental stewardship practices important to the culture (Thompson *et al.*, 2012). Foods are tracked and distributed among community members (Thompson et al., 2012). The Ittaq Heritage and Research Center (IHRC) began a program in 2017 that hired salaried hunters. The goal was to build an "Inuit centric economy," reframing hunting as an essential service and to increase food security via access to country food (Williams, 2022). The program has expanded and received government funding as part of a Northern food innovation challenge (Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency, 2020).

Another successful program is the country food box program at the Qajuqturvik Community Food Centre (QCFC) which sells country foods from local hunters at "pay what you can" prices (Qajuqturvik Community Food Centre, no date). Since it began in 2022, the program has expanded to distribute over 400kg of food a week from over 50 hunters.

When hunting is a full-time job, hunters become effective due to familiarity with the land and can pass on deep cultural knowledge to future generations and other community members (Williams, 2022). Fostering knowledge of the ecosystem will aid Inuit communities in building community-based responsive solutions to climate-related challenges, which according to Bocking via Frank (2017) will more effectively prepare communities to address local needs in the future such as such as changing migration patterns due to climate change. Cultural practices of fishing and hunting not only ameliorate social well being but improve the nutritional quality of Indigenous diets (Herrmann *et al.*, 2021).

Thompson et al.'s 2012 study demonstrated that country food programs built around community led food sovereignty reduced food insecurity more than any other variable. For country food programs to be successful, investment is required. Equipment required includes skidoos, rifles, boats, fuel and clothing. These costs are not currently covered by NNC, creating obstacles to learn hunting skills.

Investment is also required in supporting marine infrastructure, training and facilities for safe access, packaging and distribution of country foods (Qikiqtani Inuit Association, 2018). A lack of safe marine infrastructure hinders economic development for communities; for example, 26 communities in Nunavut are along coastlines, however, a lack of infrastructure creates unsafe conditions for boats (Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 2023). Fisheries are Nunavut's most significant renewable resource with opportunity to capture hundreds of millions in revenue and provide seasonal employment (Government of Nunavut, 2022), aiding with basic needs and monetary poverty. Additionally, lack of northern processing plants to vacuum pack and preserve food prevents food from staying local, hindering possibilities for food sovereignty and economic development from employment opportunities (Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 2023). Challenges to infrastructure implementation exist, not limited to high maintenance expenses, procurement and planning challenges and industry capacity (Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 2023).

Summary statement

Current programs and subsidies are not relieving food insecurity

Food sovereignty via revitalising local food production is key to food security but infrastructure and subsidies for equipment are key to success

In 2019, Canada released its first food policy which emphasized supporting food security in northern communities (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2019). However, as of late 2023, the Canadian Food Policy Advisory Council noted significant gaps remained. Given the complexity of the northern food ecosystem and the need to understand the land for survival, the issue of food security in the north cannot be achieved without a participatory approach led by Inuit communities who are empowered to achieve food sovereignty.

The content above demonstrates that the key current policy, the NNC program is not effective in reducing food insecurity. The strong value of country food programs that incorporate Inuit cultural knowledge regarding hunting and fishing demonstrates the need to decolonize our thinking and be open to non-capitalist solutions to problems in communities that were self-sufficient pre-colonizers. However, there must be proper infrastructure to support the development of a strong country foods program.

Policies should therefore target food sovereignty through infrastructure development and building country foods programs.

Policy recommendations

Three options are recommended to aid with the challenges discussed above.

1. Establish country foods programs through partnerships.

   CanNor should allocate project funding to partner with organizations such as IHRC and QCFC to build country food programs in other communities. The QCFC supplies a toolkit covering program elements such as food safety and operational elements like building a network of hunters, managing orders and finances (Qajuqturvik Community Food Centre, 2024).

2. Subsidize hunting equipment through the NNC.

   To increase the ability to obtain country foods, CIRNAC should allow subsidies for equipment for hunters supplying communities through country foods programs. Redirecting some NNC subsidies on non-essential items such as unsweetened juice, (6% of NNC annual subsidies per figure 2) can provide funding.

3. Infrastructure.

   The government of Canada recognizes that Infrastructure is essential for northern food security and sovereignty. A project committee consisting of representatives from HICC and Provincial and Territorial counterparts should be established to create recommendations for cross-functional collaboration and financial resources for scoping and infrastructure development.

   Infrastructure like packaging facilities would not only increase food security, but also increase local employment opportunities.

Further reading

On Food Sovereignty and Country Foods Harvesting

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Inuit-led Food Security Strategy

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On the Importance of Community-led Solutions to Food Sovereignty

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Toolkit to Running a Country Food Box Program

Qajuqturvik Community Food Centre (2024) *Qajuqturvik launches community toolkit for country food box program*, *Qajuqturvik Community Food Centre*. Available at: https://www.qajuqturvik.ca/post/qajuqturvik-launches-community-toolkit-for-country-food-box-program

Information on the need for better infrastructure for food sovereignty (see pages 92-99)

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Week 2 reading

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Week 2 lesson

Chambers, R. (2005). Ideas for Development. Earthscan. http://5.160.140.181/images/Uploaded_files/[Robert_Chambers]_Ideas_For_Development(BookFi.org)[2744344].PDF

Week 3 reading

Gardner, K. and Lewis, D. (2015) 'The Anthropology of Development', in *The Anthropology of Development: Challenges for the Twenty-First Century*. London: Pluto Press. Available at: Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. (Accessed: 23 November 2024).

Week 4 lesson

Nyerere, J. (1967) *The Arusha Declaration and TANU's Policy on Socialism and Self-Reliance*, *Tanganyika African National Union*.

Week 6 reading

Escobar, A. (2015) 'Degrowth, postdevelopment, and transitions: a preliminary conversation', *Sustainability Science*. Springer Tokyo, pp. 451–462. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-015-0297-5

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