

Food politics: Finding a place for country food in Canada's Northern food policy

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The Government of Canada is currently reviewing the Nutrition North Canada program, which subsidizes perishable store-bought foods in remote Northern communities. The move delivers on a Liberal campaign promise to improve the program, which has proven controversial since it replaced the Food Mail Program in 2011. The bigger question remains: How should policy address food insecurity in Northern Canada, where rates are the highest nation-wide (Tarasuk, Mitchell, & Dachner, 2016)?

As part of the government's review, public engagement sessions were held in 20 communities across the North last year, from Old Crow, Yukon to Rigolet, Labrador (details at: <http://www.nutritionnorthcanada.gc.ca>). Decisions over the future of Nutrition North are still pending, but summaries of these community meetings offer a window onto some of the frictions over Canada's Northern food policy – as well as suggestions for how it could be improved.

Northerners call for support for traditional food

In community meetings, participants were asked for feedback on how Nutrition North can be “more transparent, cost-effective, and culturally appropriate” (Nutrition North Canada, 2016). In many communities, participants said that while the subsidy is welcome, food prices remain prohibitively high. Many expressed ongoing concern about whether retailers fully pass the subsidy on to consumers, despite changes to the way retailers are monitored following an Auditor General's report that was critical of the program (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2014). Participants asked that the subsidy be restored to hygiene items like diapers, and extended to non-perishable staples like pasta and rice. They argued the subsidy should prioritize what Northerners actually buy and eat. (In Iqaluit, for example, participants questioned whether subsidized tofu burgers and dragon fruit made sense).

While feedback varied across communities, most people agreed on one thing: Better support for traditional food is needed, whether under Nutrition North or through a complementary program. Under current

policy, the bulk of Nutrition North's \$68.5 million annual budget (2015-2016) subsidizes store-bought foods shipped north by air. Dairy products, eggs, meat, and fresh fruits and vegetables flown in from the South are available at subsidized rates through private retailers like the North West Company (Northern and North-Mart stores) and Arctic Co-operatives Ltd., both active proponents of the program.

Local fish and meat, however, are effectively excluded. While commercially produced country food is technically subsidy-eligible, the absence of licensed processing facilities in the North means few subsidy dollars go to local foods. Since the program was implemented, country food has amounted to less than one percent of subsidy expenditures, and in the most recent quarter (October-December 2016) Nutrition North reported spending a total of \$88 for 153 kg of subsidized country food nationally. (That's less than three caribou).

In many communities, participants asked that subsidies for harvesting equipment, such as fishing nets, tents, shells, and fuel, be restored (some equipment was eligible for subsidized freight under Food Mail). Participants asked for better support for community hunts and community freezers, and for family-to-family food shipments between communities. Some participants asked that program funding be administered more flexibly to allow communities to determine their own priorities, such as developing community gardens or hunter support programs. Harvester support programs do exist in some regions (notably Nunavik, and until two years ago, Nunavut) but funding for harvester support pales in contrast to Nutrition North's annual budget.

Communities offered different responses regarding how to support traditional foods. For example, the idea of directly selling traditional food or making it available in local retail stores was raised in some community meetings, but not others, and may be controversial where food is traditionally shared, not sold. But while the form such support might take varied, participants from across the North agreed: Increased support for country foods could both help support harvesters, and fix inefficiencies in the current program.

Food politics

This is not a new story. Inuit and Northern First Nations have been calling for recognition of the importance of harvesting and traditional foods for decades. The feedback from the Nutrition North community meetings marks the latest in a series of appeals for support for traditional food. Similar calls were recorded several years ago by Nutrition North's own advisory board (Nutrition North Canada Advisory Board, 2013). These results serve to affirm ongoing efforts to support local food sovereignty by Northern grassroots organizations like Feeding My Family. Efforts to strengthen traditional foodways are set within the wider struggle for self-determination and Indigenous rights that is underway across the North.

However, the Government of Canada's orientation towards a more southern diet is equally enduring. Food has played a critical role in Northern Canada's colonial history, both as a priority in its own right, and as a way to advance other policy agendas.

In the Eastern Arctic, which today is the region that relies the most on Nutrition North, federal food distribution programs date to the 1940s Family Allowance program, brought in amidst a national expansion of social welfare programs. Family Allowances were initially given in-kind in the Arctic, and consisted of imported food rations such as flour, molasses, rolled oats, eggs (dehydrated or fresh), canned tomatoes, lard, and cod-liver oil. This diet was determined to be of sound "nutritional value" by the Northern Administration, with no reference to how such foods might fit within local diets or food preferences (Tester & Kulchyski, 1994).

Colonial attitudes pervaded decision making, and these early food relief programs were premised on a belief that a southern diet was nutritionally superior. For example, faced with high rates of child malnutrition in the 1940s, the Department of Health and Welfare misattributed the problem to traditional diets and mothers' care (not the economic changes wrought by the fur trade). It embarked on a scheme to introduce powdered formula and Pablum to Inuit mothers, characterizing these as "good food" for babies (Tester & Kulchyski, 1994). In doing so, the department may have contributed to the very problem it was seeking to remedy.

Increasing reliance on outside foods was further cemented by the centralization of Arctic communities in the 1950s and 60s. Where previously the Government had dissuaded Inuit from settling near trade posts under a "Policy of Dispersal," in the 1950s the Government of Canada embarked on policies to deliver health, housing, and education in centralized communities (Damas, 2002).

This move was catalyzed by growing concern about food shortages, after starvation conditions in the Kivalliq (previously Keewatin) region drew widespread attention and outcry in the early 1950s. Since Arctic settlements were rarely ideal harvesting sites and concentrated harvesting pressures on local species, cen-

tralization brought about greater reliance on imported foods. In turn, the provision of imported foods through the Family Allowance program encouraged Inuit to settle in centralized communities.

As food policy became increasingly interwoven with wider policy priorities, ideas of addressing food needs by expanding access to local foods was dismissed; Northern administrators viewed the idea as outdated and idealistic (Tester & Kulchyski, 1994). At the height of acculturative policymaking in the Post-War era, many policymakers and academics instead predicted the total demise of subsistence cultures and harvesting, and sought to speed it along.

The importance of country food

Of course, this has not come to pass. Across the North traditional foods continue to be nutritionally and culturally essential, and attest to the resilience of subsistence culture. If there is any doubt that wild foods make a significant contribution to the Northern food system, the Nunavut Wildlife Harvest Study (Priest & Usher, 2004) shows that the average annual consumption from all wildlife sources across the territory for the survey's five years was over 1,325,000 kg, or about 56 kg for every man, woman and child. According to the Survey of Living Conditions in the Arctic, Country foods made up half or more of the meat and fish eaten in 73% of Nunavummiut households (Tait, 2001).

Beyond its caloric and nutritional value, country food plays an essential cultural and social role. In the North Baffin region, Inuktitut-speakers refer to country food as *niquituaq* – real food. *Niquituaq* keeps one warm while traveling on the land, and contributes to good health and wellbeing. As it is redistributed, *niquituaq* reaffirms and strengthens relationships. *Niquituaq* is the product of an active subsistence economy, which continues to function together with the market system. All of this begs the question: Can one be considered food secure without access to "real food"?

Although traditional food holds such cultural and nutritional significance, and many Inuit and Northern First Nations remain actively involved in the subsistence economy, barriers to accessing traditional foods are of widespread concern. A recent survey of more than 2,000 households across Northern Canada and Alaska found that financial costs were the most widely identified barrier to harvesting, followed by time limitations associated with school, training, and employment (Natcher, Shirley, Rodon, & Southcott, 2016). Such barriers are of course embedded within colonial histories that have dramatically reshaped Northern food systems.

These challenges do not diminish the significance of country food to Northerners, who have



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Tent in Nunavik.

repeatedly articulated its importance – as they have done again in the 2016 Nutrition North engagement process. But they do suggest that support for locally available, culturally desirable food has a critical role to play in addressing food insecurity in the North.

Finding a place for country food in Canada's food policy

The centrality of traditional foods to all areas of life – family, economy, health, culture – is still frequently invisible to outsiders, much as it was in the 1940s and 50s. In the southern imagination, hunting and fishing remain recreational, and traditional food is frequently treated as a throwback – views that crop up all too easily in southern policy conversations. Just last fall, Newfoundland MP Nick Whalen apologized for insensitivity after tweeting that Inuit in Nunatsiavut concerned about methylmercury contamination from the Muskrat Falls hydro development could “eat less fish.”

The review of Nutrition North offers a real opportunity for the Government of Canada to move away from a colonial policy history that has frequently positioned Indigenous foods as inferior and outdated, and instead show its support for traditional food systems and harvesting, whether by adapting Nutrition North or putting support behind alternatives like Harvester support programs.

When Nutrition North Canada was first introduced in 2011, Northerners expressed dissatisfaction that they were not properly consulted. Careful listening to the feedback given now will be critical if Canada's approach to food policy is indeed to become more culturally appropriate and effective in addressing food insecurity in Northern Canada.

Prime Minister Trudeau has said he wants to establish a new relationship with Indigenous Peoples within Canada. The review of Nutrition North offers an opportunity to make Northern food security efforts a part of this “new relationship” with Inuit and Northern First Nations. After decades of policy measures that have undermined traditional food systems, Canada has a responsibility to do things right. ●

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