

Food Insecurity in the Northern Indigenous Communities of Canada: Exploring the Principles of Bioethics and the Role of the State

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Word Count: 1497

Introduction:

The Truth and Reconciliation Report documents the systematic oppression of indigenous rights through Canadian history, highlighting their lack of accessibility to healthcare, appropriate nutrition and water, among other factors. The oppression of traditional values and the traumas of colonialism has led to several negative outcomes (TRC, 2015). Substance abuse, poverty, house-crowding and hunger prevail within these communities after years of negligent policies and programs (Burnett, Chambers & Hay, 2016). The cycle of poor health and dysfunction will continue if social environments are not improved through investments and macro-level changes (Richmond & Ross, 2008). The following review explores the topic of food insecurity in the northern indigenous communities of Canada. Nutrition North Canada (NNC) and Community Food Programs (CFPs) are the major food security initiatives within this region. Both programs are evaluated by considering the pillars of food security, the role of the state and the principles of bioethics, including beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy and justice. Recommendations to address food insecurity are also provided.

Overview: Nutrition North Canada (NNC)

NNC is the current federal initiative targeting food insecurity in the isolated communities of Northern Canada. The objective of NNC is to increase the availability and affordability of nutritious foods through subsidization (Galloway, 2014). This initiative was proposed to replace previous programs due to its transparency and accountability mechanisms. The government claims to monitor pricing and affordability by analyzing point-of-sale receipts regularly (Galloway, 2017). However, there are crucial errors within the program design, which affect sustainability and distribution of benefits. Independent research studies have evaluated the impact of NNC on food security, through analyzing program documents such as audits and compliance reports (Galloway, 2014; Galloway, 2017). Researchers concluded that NNC is largely ineffective due to the lack of reporting and evaluation structure. Retailers do not have to disclose actual transportation costs and weights of individual items being shipped (Galloway, 2017). Therefore, there is no real way to evaluate whether the subsidy is being passed on and if there is a fair distribution of subsidy funding across all regions (Galloway, 2017). The government utilizes a Revised Northern Food Basket (RNFB) to measure food environments and costs. This assessment tool does not account for land or water-based food acquisitions, and the data collected is incomparable with Southern Canada (Skinner et al., 2016). Overall, it is difficult to determine whether program objectives are being achieved.

Implications and Ethicality of NNC

To date, all government initiatives within this region have restricted food choices, including NNC, which is another intrusive policy on the intervention ladder. Over the years, products eligible under NNC expanded to include family-friendly items, along with grants that support traditional practices. However, the underlying factors of insecurity fail to be acknowledged, including the lack of indigenous knowledge translation, climate change and hunting restrictions, which further reduces community access to traditional foods. Following the principles of bioethics, NNC does not promote beneficence, non-maleficence or justice and it has not made significant improvements in food security rates. NNC is a paternalistic approach that interferes with the autonomy of the population to make their own decisions. Instead, it is guiding choice towards European-based foods through subsidization. The suppression of indigenous autonomy and food systems has increased the population's dependency on the state (Burnett et al., 2016). NNC is unable to promote culturally-appropriate foods, which disregards the pillar of food availability (O'Neil, 2018). Subsidized nutrient-rich products are still unaffordable for the target population, leading to increased reliance on processed, unhealthy foods (Shukla et al., 2019). This reliance has great implications on health, with rising diet-related complications like diabetes, obesity and heart disease within the community (Pal, Haman & Robidoux, 2013).

Overview: Community Food Programs (CFPs)

CFPs include food banks, soup kitchens and friendship centres, which have been increasing in the region to address the food crisis. Research studies found the users of these services to be largely comprised of indigenous populations who moved off-reserve, have unstable employment and lack hunting knowledge (Ford, Lardeau & Vanderbilt, 2012). CFPs improve food access and availability to communities that are growing in population size through in-migration and have changing economies. There is a decrease in food sharing networks within cities due to the growth of waged jobs and the lack of time for hunting and other traditional activities. (Ford, Lardeau, Blackett, Chatwood & Kurszewski, 2013). Although waged jobs have significantly increased in cities, workers are often on contract or seasonal. Social welfare from the government is insufficient to cover housing and food costs, especially for large, single-parent households. Therefore, community programs such as food banks provide users with more reliable food services. However, CFPs often lack funding and infrastructure necessary to improve food accessibility (Fieldhouse & Thompson, 2012). Food banks are only allowed to provide commercial, typically European foods, due to safety regulations. Traditional items are only found in a few programs through friendship centres.

Implications and Ethicality of CFPs

Without funding from government agencies, most programs must support themselves through fundraising activities (Ford et al., 2013). Therefore, it is difficult for CFPs to provide foods of high nutritive quality, which reduces users' access to healthy, fresh foods. Researchers emphasized that CFPs do not promote healthy choices in food insecure populations, nor do they promote prevention of chronic disease (Pal et al., 2013). This contributes to the community's reliance on processed goods, leading to increased prevalence of malnutrition, obesity and diabetes (Pal et al., 2013). The exclusion of traditionally appropriate foods restricts the choice of users, thereby reducing their autonomy. However, CFPs address the principles of beneficence, nonmaleficence and justice by providing a valuable service that is benefiting the community without harm. The benefits of these programs are distributed equally amongst vulnerable populations.

Recommendations

Indigenous food sovereignty can be achieved through a combination of initiatives that target federal, provincial and community-based levels. First, the government must ensure that current programs within the region have a functional monitoring and evaluation structure. This enables officials to determine program effectiveness and make appropriate adaptations that benefit the target population equally. In addition, current policies must be improved to compliment indigenous needs and revive traditional food systems. Current provincial regulations do not allow harvesters to sell produce on a large-scale, disabling any chances of generating income (Ford et al., 2012). Subsidizing indigenous practices can help increase interest in relearning traditions about wild foods and hunting, especially within younger generations. The *Harvesters Support Grant* was initiated by the government in 2016 to increase the affordability of traditional hunting and harvesting practices (Government of Canada, 2019). Providing this grant is the first step through which hunters can afford hunting gear while on a waged-income. Greater government support, especially through substantial funding and grants, is necessary for communities to connect with the land and improve gaps within traditional knowledge.

Another recommendation involves the development of greenhouses through a combination of government and NGO funding. With educational support and agricultural tools, local communities can tend to the greenhouses themselves. This learning opportunity will be beneficial for younger generations and contribute to community health. Due to weather uncertainty in the north, agricultural ventures are difficult to maintain and have short growing seasons (Rudolph & McLachlan, 2013). Introduction of large-scale, commercial greenhouses will create jobs and extend the communities' ability to harvest higher yields. Crops can be adjusted to suit traditional preferences by including culturally-appropriate and healthy foods. Proper educational training can be provided by agencies to improve understanding on how greenhouses are to be maintained. Elders and Dietitians within the community can use this platform to teach the upcoming generations about the nutritional value of local foods. This will not only improve the conditions of insecurity, but also provide a means through which the community can share indigenous culture and values.

Improved food sharing networks can also alleviate hunger and insecurity within the target population. Many research studies have indicated the importance of traditional foods for participants, regardless of whether they are living in regional communities or on-reserve (Fieldhouse & Thompson, 2012). However, harvesting, hunting and food sharing activities have declined due to increasing waged-income jobs, hunting restrictions and climate change. Financial support is necessary to establish networks that can support the growing needs of the indigenous community. Introduction of a formalized sharing network which provides food that is hunted/harvested by the community can increase the stability and availability of food. To form an organized distribution system, infrastructure, administrative support and funding is required. Social workers can organize how food will be shared within the community by prioritizing low-income, lone parent and/or elderly households.

To conclude, inclusion of indigenous opinions and suggestions is crucial throughout the program formulation, implementation and evaluation stage. These programs must address the principle of autonomy by providing choice, rather than a restrictive, paternalistic approach. It is vital for programs to integrate indigenous youth into the framework, to increase the sustainability and maintenance of changes. Overall, the indigenous community needs initiatives that promote

self-sufficiency, sustainability and traditional market systems. This will reduce dependence on state, improve dietary quality and preserve indigenous culture and values.

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