

A.C.C.E.S.S.
(Aboriginal Communities Controlling Economic Self-Sustainability)

An Analysis of Urban Food Security Initiatives in Winnipeg

Urban Aboriginal Economic Development Literature Review
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Research Question/Statement

Where single/low-income Indigenous families are concerned in Winnipeg, the issue of food security is especially pertinent as it is not an essential service provided by the Manitoba Provincial Government. The Food and Agriculture Organization has defined this term as, “a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO:2003). Further, vital Municipal and Provincial services continue to be under-funded, creating significant strain on temporary alternatives such as food banks, which struggle to cope with the requirements of an increasing urban Indigenous population. Although dated, a MANA report in 2000 stated, that in single income households, 93% of Status Indians were below the low-income cut off marker as recognized by Statistics Canada. This was followed by figures on non-Status Indians (78.8%) and Metis (85.8%)(Manitoba Aboriginal and Northern Affairs:2002).

(1) In a Nation-State as wealthy as Canada, why is food security not being advocated for in terms of a basic human right, instead of a financial privilege? (2) With regards to single income Indigenous households in Winnipeg, how is food security a site where social capital may be strengthened through partnership between Governments, Indigenous owned and operated businesses, grassroots organizations, and Indigenous/Settler peoples? (3) **Through an analysis of pertaining literature, how are food security initiatives being designed and implemented so as to resist the charity models which entrench dependency and devalue the rights and agency of at-risk single, Indigenous mothers within Winnipeg’s inner city?**

The Definition of Food Security and its Various Transformations

Published in 2003, the Food and Agricultural Organization report titled, *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2001*, uses the definition of ‘food security’ agreed upon at the 1996 World Food Summit (Rome) as,

a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food

that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (FAO:2003).

As noted on the FAO's website, within the section *Chapter 2. Food Security: Concepts and Measurement*, this current definition has been critically re-evaluated and revised on numerous occasions (1974, 1983, 1986, 1994, 1996, 2001). The following review will highlight the factors contributing to each conceptual transition and then incorporate relevant literature that demonstrates how these factors influence the process of food security within the context of single income, Indigenous households in Winnipeg's inner city. The developing definition of food security will also draw primarily from the Food and Agricultural Organization, as its findings generally provide the standard by which the concept is measured and applied.

Initially, food security represented an empirical measurement of the volume of food products produced on a domestic scale and available for distribution within a global market economy. Such a quantitative analysis reflects limitations of the discourse that shaped the drafting of the first formalized definition between multinational organizations at the World Food Summit in 1974. As is mentioned, during the course of that year, crop failures, increased rates of famine and ailing infrastructure were widespread throughout export-oriented, agricultural nations (consisting primarily of Third World countries)(FAO:2003). However, these crises were not explicitly presented as a cause and effect relationship between the investment of foreign national organizations into specific production sectors and the subsequent exploitative labour practices or systemic underdevelopment of those nations' economies. Without acknowledging this reality as a point of engagement, the FAO observes that any definition of food security was immediately limited to a primarily economic discussion.

The first revision in 1983 incorporated the term access, which sought to emphasize the human component that was initially absent. In doing so, the FAO recognized that achieving food security was, in effect, a simultaneous two step process that relied upon: 1) the capital investment and infrastructural maintenance of the multiple agents within food production economies and 2) at-risk populations possessing both the physical and financial means to acquire dietary staples. Recognizing at-risk populations

also required a distinction between prolonged periods of inaccessibility and temporal disruptions (FAO:2003).

Based upon the recommendations put forth in the World Bank's 1986 "Poverty and Hunger" report, the FAO recognized that systemic poverty was a fundamental condition causing "chronic food insecurity" (FAO:2.2:2003). Systemic poverty was further described as a cyclical process that limits successive generations of people within the same community, region or nation to occupying low-income employment sectors. Consistent with this pervasive individual/collective economic reality is structural poverty, which is represented as an absence of culturally specific educational services or vocational training programs, inadequate funding for social services and deteriorating physical conditions (such as housing).

A "transitory" period was the second classification in which the presence of food security was measured. Within this stage, access to sufficient food is hindered by events such as natural disasters, political unrest or economic crises. Under section 2.3: *The Process of Liberalization and Transitory Food Insecurity*, the FAO report recommends a closer and more critical evaluation of policy mandates that suggest severe food crises (and the possibility of eventual chronic food insecurity) can be countered via foreign capital investment. This argument, that global food production and/or monetary loans are sufficient to stem famine or food poverty, is misleading as it directs focus away from the actual long-term economic debt that is borne by Nations where transitory food crises are present. Resulting employment shortages, State sanctioned budget cutbacks and subsequent reduction of vital services only compound to increase poverty levels amongst already at-risk populations.

The economic correlation between subsidizing food production costs and consumer access underlines a component of food security that received increased consideration in the mid 1990's; the role of culturally appropriate foodstuffs. Regional diets, therefore, not only encapsulated the necessity of ensuring sustainable localized food production but, from a social context emphasized the relationship between nutritional requirements and culturally centered expectations/preferences. Such a mandate requires that food security be treated as a transformative process rather than an end goal simply to counter hunger.

Factors Contributing to Food (In)security

While, for example, the concept of food security continues to evolve by incorporating the relevance of culturally appropriate foodstuffs or the environmental benefits of sustainable local food economies, access remains the fundamental factor in determining whether a household is food (in)secure. Rather than skewing the focus through a narrow analysis of the price affordability of foodstuffs, (in)access encompasses a vast set of conditions, which need to be addressed as inextricable from one another within a broader socio-economic framework. In their report, *Including Low Income Women With Children: Program Policy Directions*, Scruby and Beck cite as examples; access to medical/mental health services, affordable/adequate housing, availability of childcare, presence of educational programs and socially inclusive activities (Scruby and Beck:2007). Combined, it is these necessary aspects of daily life, each of which ultimately require an investment of time, resources, and capital that promote individual health and subsequently increase the collective health of members within a household. Where single income families headed by Indigenous women in Winnipeg's inner city are concerned, availability of the aforementioned services are especially crucial in determining whether sufficient income can be generated to ensure food security.

This particular literature review comes at a time when the National GDP and various Provincial economic sectors are slowly rebounding from the recession that began with the sub-prime mortgage crisis in mid 2007. During the month of "January 2010, the value of Manitoba building permits increased 7.1%" (Manitoba Finance:2010:4), matched with a 91% increase in housing starts of individual-family units (Manitoba Finance:2010:3). With a minute possibility of trend deviation aside, both figures correspond with the indication that Manitoba's economy is, "forecasted to rise 2.5% and 4.0% in 2010 and 2011, respectively" (Royal Bank of Canada:2010:5). This prediction is also met with an estimated population increase of 8100 people by July 1, 2010, or the equivalent of 0.9% (City of Winnipeg:2010:1). The forecast for both a strengthening Provincial GDP (due to manufacturing and agricultural sectors) and a rising population, however, has adverse effects on single income households or those receiving social assistance.

The annual Canadian Food Banks report titled, *Hunger Count 2009*, cautions that without a careful cross sectional examination of employment statistics, the broad economic projections for the Province of Manitoba hide an ugly reality in regards to the expectations of rising poverty levels. It notes that between August and September of that very year, a 2.4% lay off rate of or decrease in part-time employment positions occurred (Flett:2010:28). This figure corroborates the statistic of an annual 18% increase of demand on Manitoba food bank services (Flett:2010:28). While a large portion of those people recently laid off from their part time employment were already accessing food bank services to supplement household budget shortfalls, it can only be assumed that incidences of food insecurity within single, low-income households headed by Indigenous women, will multiply. Roselle Miko and Shirley Thompson explicitly point out that the dominant discourse within Canada surrounding poverty, and by extension food insecurity, is framed within a gender-neutral context. Exposing that 43% percent of Indigenous women in Manitoba lived below the 2004 Low Income Cut Off level of \$20,337.00 per annum as compared with 27% of Indigenous men, clearly demonstrates that a steady “feminization of poverty” is occurring (Miko and Thompson:2004:1). Further, Miko and Thompson incorporate into their research paper the transcriptions of interviews conducted with two Indigenous mothers, both qualifying as financially ‘poor.’ The descriptions of hunger pangs and the stress associated with trying to secure sufficient monies for rent provides a sobering, qualitative insight into the magnitude of food insecurity that is represented by statistics such as, 89% of Indigenous children in the Winnipeg Health Region living in single mother households.

Within the Point Douglas, Inkster and Downtown neighbourhoods, the population representation of Indigenous peoples is concentrated at 25.9%, 14%, and 17.1%, respectively (Winnipeg Regional Health Authority:2004). Similar to the Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) of greater Winnipeg, vacancy rates in these aforementioned neighbourhoods were registered in October 2009 at 1.6% (Carter:2008:2). While the demand for affordable housing intensifies, many landlords or rental agencies are capitalizing on a saturated tenant market by raising monthly rental costs. In turn, this prevents marginalized, single Indigenous mothers from being able to secure housing that may not even be safe or affordable within a constrained budget in the first place. In

theory, subsidized social housing represents the Federal and Provincial Governments' commitment to prevent homelessness. However, during 2008 in Winnipeg, a severe shortage of subsidized housing units had roughly 2300 people on a registered waiting list for the Manitoba Urban Native Housing Association alone. (MUNHA:2008). For those who did manage to secure subsidized housing, accommodations are often unsuitable in terms of size and safety for families with multiple children.

Extensive analyses have documented the challenges facing low-income, single parent families in search of affordable housing in Winnipeg's inner-city neighbourhoods. Two of the frequent observations, which have a considerable impact on the potential food (in)security of these households are: 1) the gravitation of urban Indigenous peoples towards living in culturally familiar or inclusive communities (Silver:2006, WRHA:2004, Brown, Higgitt, Wingert, Miller, Williams and Morrisette:2004) and 2) the presence/responses of social support networks comprised of community members (Power:2005, FBC:2009). Whether characterized by extended family, acquaintances or Aboriginal organizations, these networks are the pillars upon which community development is taking place within Winnipeg's inner-city. Jim Silver articulates this development as, "people themselves identifying the problems that they want to solve and the ways they want to solve them, and this does not imply the adoption of the attributes of the dominant culture" (Silver:2006:41).

At the core of what keeps community development relevant to the needs of the individual and by extension the community s/he is a part of, is the awareness that complex and deleterious processes deriving from colonial ideology are constantly at work. In their analysis of anti-racist curricular planning within Prairie school systems, Verna St. Denis and Carol Schick observe that,

dominant cultural practices are always 'on,' always the standard or fallback position for 'the way things are done.' This gives enormous privilege to those whose histories, ethnic backgrounds, social class, family assumptions, and personal knowledge are in line with these dominant practices (Shick, St. Denis:2005:300).

It is these practices that are guided by: 1) rigid ideology pertaining to methods of addressing social needs and expectations in a manner that is distinctly Euro-American

and often exclusive of marginalized peoples, 2) non-Indigenous ontological perspectives, as well as 3) staff members with culturally differing values. An undeniable parallel, therefore, exists between the legitimization, standardization and unconsciousness acceptance of white privilege within the education system and the mandates of certain service organizations designed ‘to help’ Indigenous peoples. Amongst members of the urban Indigenous community in Winnipeg, a common response is one of frustration and/or a sense of exclusion. As one of the Indigenous contributors reiterates in Jim Silver’s chapter, *Aboriginal Organizations Run by and for Aboriginal People*, non-Indigenous peoples are making their living and supporting their families (and by extension their communities) from the continuing oppression of urban Indigenous peoples (Silver:2006:156). Non-Indigenous people fulfilling the position of service providers may be able to sympathize with Indigenous struggles, yet the non-Indigenous person is not subject to the same daily realities of colonial trauma, discrimination and systemic racial profiling. The debilitating influence of colonial ideology on the part of the colonizer, however, contorts this abstract reality of privilege and benefit into an acceptable reassurance that his/her work contributes to ‘social progress’ and is steeped in moral righteousness. Ultimately, the scope of this profiteering is articulated as a, “government-funded healing industry that has arisen to the advantage of this situation...Governments and settlers do not want to get to the root of the problem but hope to contain the situation to a set of individual processes of hurt and healing” (Alfred:2005:165).

Compartmentalizing hurt and healing as Alfred describes invariably translates into the passive, material-oriented responses that are a trademark of the bureaucratization of State governance practices. Further, the institutionalization of charity based models entrenches the commoditization of hunger. As access to adequate, nutritious and culturally appropriate food is not a constitutionally protected right, monies for food stuffs or the quality of food purchased, is often sacrificed to meet non-negotiable financial responsibilities, such as rent (Power:2005:3, FAO:2004:12). With the median income of urban Indigenous women in Winnipeg registering at \$13, 252.00 (WRHA:2004), single mothers on a low income salary and/or receiving social assistance are on average spending 30% of an already insufficient budget on accommodation and respective

utilities (Miko and Thompson:2004:3). According to current income assistance figures, which are calculated based on the age margin and the number of children in a household, a single parent of one teenager and qualifying for shelter assistance will receive the maximum allowance of \$5601.64 per year (Manitoba Family Services:2010:1). Even with a probable, slight increase in median income for Indigenous women since 2004 and present social assistance, the aforementioned family would remain around the 2010 poverty marker of \$22,171.00. Factoring in the price of child-care, personal health products, clothing, transportation and other daily necessities for both mothers and their children, these at risk households often have little choice but to rely on benevolence as a means of preventing hunger. While food banks provide an essential service in the short term, it is their institutionalization that reinforces a destructive individual/collective cycle of dependency. Single, Indigenous mothers are thus further marginalized as numerical recipients of aid. To counter this exclusion and denial of agency, community development envisions a reality beyond charity services, as participants are the integral component in shaping and determining the management of initiatives which have a direct impact on their daily lives (Silver:2006, Brown, Higgitt, Wingert, Miller, Williams and Morrisette: 2004). In her analysis on Indigenous approaches to promoting food security amongst women in urban centers, Cindy Baskin reflects that community centric models for participatory action also serve to build upon the resourcefulness, ingenuity and vigor of Indigenous women as decision makers and leaders within their communities.

The Right to Food

The emergence of food banks as frontline national services, intended to mitigate the levels of individual and household food insecurity, has allowed both the Federal and Provincial Governments to transform food security into a matter of economics, rather than pursue it along the terms of human rights and social justice. It should be noted that active on October 1, 2010, minimum wage in Manitoba will increase to \$9.50, a 0.75cent increase from the previous raise in May of 2009 (Government of Manitoba:2010). Labour and Immigration Minister Jennifer Howard argues that, “this increase will help maintain the spending power of approximately 28,000 people working

in minimum wage jobs,” and “the improved wage will give them a fairer income while helping Manitoba businesses recruit and retain workers” (Government of Manitoba:2010). This recent announcement recognizes, in part, one of the recommendations (to raise the Provincial minimum wage) made in the annual *Hunger Count* report by the Canadian Association of Food Banks. According to the Provincial Government’s *Budget 2010 Highlights* report in conjunction with Manitoba’s five-year economic plan, however, there is no explicit mention of any funding allocated for initiatives concerned with food security. It is thus imperative, that the specific scope of the Federal and Provincial Governments’ responsibilities to food security be defined in terms of their justiciability. The Food and Agriculture Organization’s *Right to Food Case Study: Canada* observes that,

while the Federal Government may have stated that the Charter protects economic and social rights, Canadian courts have not yet held that (s.)7 actually requires Canadian governments to respect, protect and fulfill (facilitate or provide) the right to food in Canada (FAO:2004:30).

This finding refers specifically to *Gosselin v. Quebec(Attorney General)*, in which the appellant (a single woman registered below the low-income cut off marker and receiving social assistance) argued that the payment amount of \$170/month violated her right to life, free from discrimination based on her income. The case was the first of its kind to establish a possible legal precedent between food security and (s.)7 as well as, (s.15) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The ruling, presented by Chief Justice McLachlin of the Supreme Court, denied this claim arguing that the lower Courts had not sufficiently defined the legal parameters of food security in accordance to the State’s responsibility to ensure that each person benefits from life, liberty and security of person (SCC:2002:84). Within the context of Manitoba, such an appeal has yet to be presented within the lower Courts due in part to the extensive period of time, financial investment and other resources required. While Canadian Courts have no established precedent from which to determine the justiciability of food security as a right, a possible but equally untested forum may present itself through International Law. Canada’s ratification of the

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1976 in Part II,

Article 2 (1.) commits that,

Each State Party to the present Covenant undertakes to take steps, individually and through international assistance and co-operation, especially economic and technical, to the maximum of its available resources, with a view to achieving progressively the full realization of the rights recognized in the present Covenant by all appropriate means, including particularly the adoption of legislative measures (CESCR:1966).

Community Development Initiatives

In working to deconstruct the inequity, ghettoization and systemic marginalization experienced by urban Indigenous peoples in Winnipeg, community based social support networks have taken the initiative to provide culturally relevant services for which Government/non-Indigenous agencies are unqualified to operate on the ground. Reciprocity, participatory action and transparency are commonly cited by these organizations as the values that define their operational protocols. Expressed within the *Mission Statement* of the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre is that, “all of Ma Mawi’s programs and services are community based and operate within a philosophy that is embodied in our name, which translated from Ojibway means “*We all work together to help one another*”” (Ma Mawi:20 April 2010). Through its three care sites located in the McGregor, Spence and Anderson neighbourhoods, Ma Mawi offers a near daily meal program serving breakfast and lunch. The centre recognizes that addressing food insecurity requires both an immediate program of preventing hunger, but also the development of food knowledge (nutrition/cost efficient purchasing) and culinary skills. Thus, two of the sites have built upon the participatory action approach to incorporate community kitchen models. Guided by the values of reciprocity, responsibility and interaction, “a community kitchen is a small group of people who get together to pool their resources to make healthy, nutritious, and low cost food that they take home and share with their families” (North End Food Security Network Kitchen Partnership: no date). Community kitchens, which have been met with varying degrees of success within Winnipeg’s inner city, serve as a proactive model that ultimately seek to unite people

under a common purpose, thereby, developing trust and familiarity. It is this process of strengthening social networks through individual and collective empowerment that Robert Putnam refers to as building social capital (Putnam:2000:19). Ma Mawi's mandate to provide a holistic approach to individual, family and community development recognizes that food security is dependent upon a set of multiple, yet interconnected factors. Accompanying its initiatives around food, are programs for parenting, women's wellness as well as home based crisis prevention.

For single Indigenous mothers who must delicately balance a low-income budget with financial responsibilities, food insecurity is also precipitated by the insufficient nutritional quality of processed foodstuffs that are purchased or acquired. These items are usually less expensive than fruits and vegetables sold in grocery stores, or in the context of food bank donations, manage to keep from spoiling for longer periods of time. The danger, however, is that processed foods contain the highest concentration of trans fats (boosting high cholesterol), refined grains (increasing high blood pressure, insulin resistance/diabetes), unhealthy salt levels (raising high blood pressure) and high fructose corn syrup (associated with heart disease and diabetes)(Canadian Cancer Society:20 April 2010). In many instances, processed food that is microwavable or falls under the "fast food" category is chosen for convenience purposes as time constraints, stress or depression may prevent proper meal preparation. (Baskin:2008:22). Community gardens, therefore, have been established by Indigenous community organizations throughout Winnipeg's inner city to enhance community development while promoting nutritional education and physical wellness. The North End Food Security Network, in partnership with the North End Community Renewal Corporation, articulates that community gardens are a key component in establishing a social network that provides, "resources to all residents, with the ultimate goal of creating a stronger, more sustainable and equitable food system" (North End Food Security Network:5 March 2010). Establishing cross-neighbourhood networks and opening lines of communication between organizations and residents, however, has been slow to occur. (Silver:2006:53) Wanda Wuttunee remarks that despite incongruent mandates in accordance to jurisdictional authority/representation or shifting leadership, community based organizations must commit to interaction between one another if effective capacity building is to occur (Wuttunee:2004:75).

Heeding this call came in the form of the NEFSN's establishment of an online database in 2007 that provides open information about the site locations of and contact information for active community gardens. Included is information pertaining to available spaces for community kitchens, operating food cupboards, food buying clubs as well as programs for youth, parents with children and seniors (NEFSN:5 March 2010). While the yield from community gardens is limited to seasonal conditions and resource/time commitment, it is possible that this model will contribute to the expansion of community social enterprise within the inner city.

Posited as recommendation #5 within the *Vision Statement* of the Manitoba Food Charter, food security is a process that requires, "Province-wide availability of a variety of nutritious and affordable food through accessible retail outlets and food service operations" (Manitoba Food Security Network:20 April 2010). For residents of the North and South Point Douglas neighbourhoods in Winnipeg, opportunities to access local grocery stores, food vendors or even food banks are limited. For single mothers, the cost of transportation is one of the multiple factors that detract from a monthly food budget that is already stretched thin. It is with this awareness that the Neechi Foods Community Store operates and provides residents of the neighbourhood with a central location in which, "oven-fresh bannock, fresh and frozen blueberries, wild rice, local fruits and vegetables, Manitoba-caught fish, specialty jams, hand-crafted moccasins, Aboriginal artwork and children's books" can be purchased (Enterprising Non Profits:20 April 2010). Implicit in its philosophy is to offer foods that are not only culturally acceptable, but originate from, are prepared and handled in such a manner that is both relevant and congruent to social expectations (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada:1998:9). Run as a worker owned co-operative, Neechi Foods is based on the principles of mutual participation, the right to ownership and collective decision making which define the concept of community development as advocated by Jim Silver. This approach is also centered in community economic development. Residents are encouraged to invest into neighbourhood oriented services, thereby establishing the foundation for programs which focus on skills training, employment or capacity building between Indigenous organizations and the community at large. Through this active promotion of skill sets, food insecurity is directly targeted. As strengthening personal and collective agency is a

primary premise of community development, there is a recognition that alternate forms of economy may substitute for a system directed by transfer of monetary capital. Neechi's policy to participate in an informal trade economy and provide credit for items produced by residents honours what Amartya Sen refers to as "own-labour entitlement" (Sen:1981:2). For single mothers who are either earning a part-time minimum wage or on social assistance, implementation of a credit system may well be the difference between relying on charitable services (food banks) and the dignity deriving from increased self-reliance.

Recommendations

Investigating the factors that cause individual and household food insecurity amongst single Indigenous mothers earning a low-income salary or on social assistance has required a review of numerous, comprehensive research studies. In fact, this literature review is at best a brief overview of some of the primary observations. One concern, however, was the narrow focus of certain studies. While limited/expensive housing or inadequate wages may represent the financial burdens borne by marginalized, single income households, food insecurity occurs due to a complex set of multiple, inextricable challenges.

Cindy Baskin's fieldwork, as well as that of Roselle Miko and Shirley Thompson, demonstrates that with reference to the women whose experiences the research was based around, understanding the process of maintaining food security requires a holistic analysis. This of course amplifies the magnitude of such an investigative project. With a rapidly increasing urban Indigenous population in Winnipeg over the next decade, effective food policy must be guided by the participatory relationships between community based organizations representing the perspectives of Indigenous residents and civil society, the private business sector as well as Municipal/Provincial/Federal Governments. To avoid food security from being segmented, the presence of an organization such as the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg would be invaluable. Past president of the ACW, Mary Richards has stated,

we have been able to talk with the three levels of government without dividing our community or categorizing the problem into a federal or provincial concern. We speak to the government about the problems that face all Aboriginal peoples... We face them together as a community rather than get into different jurisdictions (as cited in Wuttunee:2004:67).

In examining food (in)security amongst Winnipeg's Indigenous population, especially single mothers, there is a substantial absence of academic or policy research regarding community based initiatives that tackle the issue. Jim Silver's, *In Their Own Words: Building Urban Aboriginal Communities*, offers one of the most in-depth and relevant analyses as social capital and community development are at the core of both immediate initiatives to relieve the presence of food insecurity and long-term solutions. If conducted appropriately and in accordance with community determined ethical standards, a possible research recommendation might be a case study of Neechi Foods. The Co-op is a pivotal operation within the North and South Point Douglas neighbourhoods and may provide insight into how community economic development and social capital are being shaped and practiced in a manner that is reflective of the values of Indigenous peoples.

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