

**Beyond Food Security: Understanding Access to Cultural Food for Urban  
Indigenous People in Winnipeg as Indigenous Food Sovereignty**

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*Abstract*

Access to safe, affordable and nutritious food is an obstacle facing many Indigenous people in the inner city of Winnipeg, which is known for having vast food deserts. While food security is an urgent social, economic, cultural and health issue for Indigenous people in urban areas, and particularly those living in inner city areas, there are some unique elements of food security related to cultural values. Access to cultural food in urban communities is a challenge for Indigenous people. This paper discusses the results of some preliminary research conducted which explored the experiences and meanings associated with Indigenous cultural food for Indigenous people living in urban communities and the larger goals of what is being called “Indigenous Food Sovereignty” (IFS) with regards to cultural food specifically. When Indigenous people have the skills to practice IFS, a whole range of positive benefits to their social and economic well-being can unfold. Three themes which emerged from this research include (1) growing, harvesting, preparing and eating cultural food as ceremony, (2) cultural food as a part of connection to land through reciprocity and (3) re-learning IFS to address food insecurity in the city.

*Keywords:* sovereignty, Indigenous, cultural food, inner-city

***Canadian Journal of Urban Research***, Volume 24, Issue 1, pages 24-43.  
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ISSN: 1188-3774

*Résumé*

L'accès aux aliments nutritifs, sains et abordables est un obstacle auquel sont confrontés de nombreux autochtones dans le centre-ville de Winnipeg, qui est connu comme un des plus grands déserts alimentaire. Alors que la sécurité alimentaire est une urgence sociale, économique, culturelle et sanitaire pour les populations autochtones dans les zones urbaines, et plus particulièrement pour ceux vivant dans les quartiers défavorisés, il existe des éléments uniques de sécurité alimentaire liés aux valeurs culturelles. L'accès à la nourriture culturelle des communautés urbaines est un défi pour les populations autochtones. Ce document décrit les résultats de recherches préliminaires menées explorant les expériences et les valeurs associées aux aliments culturels pour les communautés autochtones vivant dans des collectivités urbaines et les grands objectifs de ce qu'on appelle Souveraineté alimentaire Autochtone (IFS). Lorsque les communautés autochtones acquièrent les compétences de pratiquer l'IFS, toute une gamme de bénéfices à leur bien-être économique et social en découle. Les trois thèmes qui ont émergé de cette recherche incluent (1) la culture, récolte, préparation et consommation de la nourriture culturelle en tant que cérémonie, (2) la nourriture culturelle comme liaison à la terre par la réciprocité et (3) le ré-apprentissage IFS afin d'informer sur l'insécurité alimentaire dans la ville.

*Mots clés:* souveraineté, autochtones, nourriture culturelle, le centre-ville

**1. Introduction**

Canada as a whole has achieved economic advancements, and many experience a high standard of living with little first-hand experiences associated with physical hunger. However this perception is very narrow and fails to address the essence of food security for diverse and marginalized populations. The economic advancement of Canada notwithstanding, food insecurity, which includes accessibility, availability and utilization of culturally adequate and acceptable foods, has been recorded and is a major concern especially among the economically vulnerable groups (McIntyre et al. 2000, Che and Chen 2001). Access to safe, affordable and nutritious food is an obstacle facing many urban Indigenous people<sup>1</sup>, particularly in the inner city of Winnipeg, which is known for the vast food deserts. In recent years, Winnipeg's inner city, including the north end and downtown area has experienced the shutdown of the majority of the discount grocery stores, leaving people with few choices to access affordable and nutritious food. A feasibility study conducted in 2013 revealed that closure of grocery stores coincides with other development debates around the downtown area's potential for growth and momentum, suggesting that the limited supply of downtown grocery options is a potential barrier to future downtown growth—particularly residential development (Kaufman, 2013, p. 3). While food security is an urgent social, economic, cultural and health issue for Indigenous people in urban areas, and particularly those living in inner city areas, there are some unique elements of food security related to cultural values.

In an Indigenous context, food security is mostly discussed for remote, rural communities. However, food insecurity also exists in urban centres for Indigenous communities. The Environics Institute found that 44% of Indigenous people in

Winnipeg felt that it was important that future generations know about traditions pertaining to food (EnviroNics Institute 2011). Food security, as defined by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations “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 2010, 8). The four pillars of food security—access, availability, utilization, and stability of supply take on unique characteristics in an Indigenous (Power 2008) and urban (Mundel and Chapman 2010) context.

This paper discusses the results of preliminary research conducted which explored the experiences and meanings associated with Indigenous cultural food for Indigenous people living in urban communities. The research found that Indigenous people in the city experienced food insecurity, but also were working towards larger goals of what is being called “Indigenous Food Sovereignty” (IFS) with regards to cultural food specifically. Research was conducted in partnership with the Indian and Metis Friendship Centre of Winnipeg to explore food security from an urban Indigenous perspective with a particular focus on maintaining culturally valued food in the inner city.

The ways in which IFS is operationalized within an urban context requires further understanding. Relatedly, when Indigenous people have the skills to practice IFS, then a whole range of positive benefits to their social and economic well-being will unfold. Three themes which emerged from this research include: (1) growing, harvesting, preparing and eating cultural food as ceremony, (2) cultural food as a part of connection to land through reciprocity and (3) re-learning IFS to address food insecurity in the city. These three themes will be explored in more detail.

## **2. Background**

Indigenous people and food are often explored within a deficit based construct, and most often in a traditional environment or rural and/or remote community. Food security has also been explored in the literature with a focus on urban Indigenous people, but less so with a focus on cultural foods (Zurba et al. 2012; Willows et. al. 2011; Baskin et. al. 2009). The topic of food security for urban Indigenous people requires an examination into several important theoretical areas including culture and food consumption, food security, food deserts and inner city food access, Indigenous food sovereignty, Winnipeg’s Indigenous population and food, cultural food and health and urban Indigenous people and culture.

### **2.1 Culture and Food Consumption**

The relationship between culture and food consumption is not well understood in academic literature besides a small number of research projects (Adekunle et al. 2010, 2011, 2012; Abdel-Ghany and Sharpe 1997, Wang and Lo 2007). Some literature has emerged in recent years attempting to examine the complex relationships between ethnicity<sup>2</sup>, consumption and acculturation in Canada (Abdel-Ghany and Sharpe 1997, Adekunle, et al. 2010).

Food consumption plays a central role as a cultural foundation for Indigenous people. Yukon First Nations people interviewed about their consumption of traditional food indicated that eating cultural food supported basic cultural values including keeping people “in tune” with nature, facilitating sharing, was a way for adults to display responsibility for their children and to practice spirituality (Receveur et al. 1998, 118). Wilson (2003, 88) noted that there was a strong link between food and medicine for Anishinabek people in Ontario. She indicated that: “certain plants, berries, and animals...are not only consumed for nutritional reasons but can also be used in the production of medicines.” Lambden et al’s (2007) study of Yukon First Nations, Dene/Metis and Inuit women found that they considered traditional foods to be culturally beneficial. In Toronto, work by Baskin et al. (2009) describes young Aboriginal women’s lack of access to traditional foods as being problematic because they “tied their Aboriginal cultures to such foods and wanted to be able to pass this knowledge on to their children” (8). To date, though, there has been almost no substantial body of work on urban Indigenous people’s preferences and attitudes toward cultural foods especially in an urban context.

## 2.2 Food Security and Indigenous People

The experience of food insecurity exists on a spectrum which ranges from “food anxiety to qualitative compromises in food selection and consumption, to quantitative compromises in intake, to the physical sensation of hunger” (McIntyre and Rondeau 2009, 188). Canada has expressed its commitment to the achievement of food security for all Canadians, with a particular recognition of Indigenous people through the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 169 (1989). This convention recognizes that food insecurity amongst Indigenous people can be addressed through ensuring access to both traditional and market food. However, there has been a politicization of food security among this group. The focus has been primarily on rural, remote and reserve communities, not urban Indigenous populations (Cuthand 2012).

According to Willows et al., (2011) 33% of Indigenous households are food insecure compared to 9% of the non-Indigenous households. This has led to a rapid change in eating patterns, reduced food intake and increased anxiety over food among many Aboriginal families. Furthermore, the findings of Oliver De Schutter, United Nations Special rapporteur of his 2012 visit of the poor inner-city neighbourhoods and remote Indigenous communities in Manitoba and Alberta showed that 2.5 million Canadians were food insecure and that many lived in desperate conditions (Cuthand 2012), while Mercille (2012) reported more prevailing food insecurity among the geographically isolated Indigenous communities. Food insecurity among the Indigenous population is an urgent issue because of the resultant high rates of health and diet related complications.

Food insecurity is prevalent among many urban Indigenous populations in Canada, however little information is available in this area. In an urban context, food insecurity information on Indigenous people has depended on small samples obtained from food bank users (Tambay and Catlin 1995). As Power (2008) has observed, this information has failed to address the diversity of the urban Indigenous people in terms of location, age and gender.

Many Indigenous people experience food insecurity, specifically as it relates to compromises in types of food as the foods they would normally consume are inaccessible due to availability or price (Sinclair 1997). The financial burden of providing for family requires many Indigenous people in the city to reduce their food budgets. The result can be a decline in food with high nutrient content. In their study based on the 1990/99 Canadian National Population Health Survey data, Che and Chen (2001, 18) found that the prevalence of food insecurity was high among Indigenous people living off reserves with more than one-quarter (27%) reporting at least some food insecurity, and 24% experiencing a compromised diet. Indigenous people were about one and a half times as likely to live in a food insecure household than non-Indigenous people. Food insecurity is inextricably linked to poverty and related issues such as lack of affordable housing. Baskin et al. (2009) describes the connection between poverty and food insecurity in Winnipeg:

There are over 3,000 families currently on the waiting list for rent-gear-to-income accommodations, with many of the homes not large enough for families with multiple children. This lack of affordable housing could mean that many Aboriginal lone parents are spending the majority of their income on housing which causes financial shortages that result in food insecurity. (Baskin et al. 2009, 2)

Power (2008) however, has argued that cultural food security is an additional level of food security and suggests that additional research is required to understand Indigenous perspectives on food security. She suggests, for example, that “in terms of access, food security may be affected by access to traditional/country food, as well as access to market food” (96). National food guides are often based on Western ideas of categories of food and do not reflect Indigenous realities. The Canada Food Guide was revised in 2007 to include versions specific to First Nations, Inuit and Metis populations, with translated copies available in Anishnawbe, Plains Cree, Woods Cree, English and Inuktitut (Health Canada 2007). Willows (2005) identified a knowledge gap concerning Indigenous beliefs about food.

### **2.3 Food Deserts and Inner City Access**

Researchers have found that inner cities or areas with low-income populations often have less access to supermarkets (Cummins and Macintyre 2005). This means that residents are more dependent on smaller food and convenience stores which are more expensive and less likely to offer a range of healthy foods (Donkin et al. 2000). Accessibility to food retailers that provide healthy foods at low prices affects the dietary choices that individuals make (Wrigley et al. 2003). While there has been relatively little research on supermarket accessibility in Canadian cities, two recent studies suggest that high need and inner city neighbourhoods often have less access to supermarkets (Peters and McCreary 2008, Smoyer-Tomic et al. 2006). It may be that the lack of access to supermarkets also means that there is less access to culturally

important foods. It is important to note that in Winnipeg Neechi Foods and Neechi Commons, an inner city Aboriginal cooperative enterprise, provides access to many of these foods, for example fish, bison, blueberries and wild rice.

## 2.4 Indigenous Food Sovereignty

Food sovereignty, or the increased control over food systems, has recently emerged in the literature as a means of addressing food insecurity. Food sovereignty places control over how, what, and when food is eaten with the people and encourages a close relationship between production and consumption. The term food sovereignty was devised by La Via Campesina, a group of land-based peasants, farmers, and Indigenous people, in 1996 to protest the globalization of food systems (Wittman et al. 2010). Yet despite the Indigenous roots of food sovereignty, there are gaps around Indigenous food sovereignty in the literature (Rudolph and McLachlan 2013). According to these authors, “This is especially true as it relates to the potential of food sovereignty for Indigenous communities in Canada, with the important exception of the Indigenous Peoples Working Group of Food Secure Canada (PFPP 2010) and the British Columbia Indigenous Food Systems Network (IFSN 2012)” (Rudolph and McLachlan 2013).

Indigenous food sovereignty (IFS) has been described as a “living reality” for thousands of years however; colonial impacts and landscape changes have threatened traditional and local food systems resulting, in part, in high levels of food insecurity and a need to reconnect people to their food systems (Morrison 2011). According to Morrison (2011), IFS is guided by four main principles: the recognition that food is sacred; participation in food systems; self-determination; and supportive legislation and policy. These principles recognize that food has an historical element for Indigenous people; indeed, many IFS initiatives are centered on traditional food practices.

Relationship formation is an integral part of food sovereignty and it advocates for new relationships not just among people, but between people and the land (Wittman, et al. 2010). There is an integral gender component to food sovereignty and in fact one of La Via Campesina’s food sovereignty campaigns involved a focus on ending violence against women given the integral role of women as food providers (Wittman et al. 2010). Relatedly, Patel (2012) has argued that one of food sovereignty’s greatest strengths is its commitment to women’s rights. It is through this movement that production is linked to consumption and that how food is produced is emphasized (Desmarais 2003) which is embedded in relationships.

Within the context of Indigenous communities in Manitoba some important work is underway around IFS. Kamal and Thompson (2013), for example, have documented an Indigenous land-based food movement in O-Pipon-Na-Piwin, Manitoba. Rudolph and McLachlan (2013) have also documented IFS initiatives in northern Manitoba. To date, little information exists with regards to IFS in an urban context. The Urban Aboriginal Garden Project at the University of British Columbia, one urban example, found the garden to be a decolonizing experience for participants because it helped reduce dependence (Mundel and Chapman 2010).

## 2.5 Winnipeg's Indigenous Population and Food

Indigenous people in Canada experience high growth rates and in 2006 surpassed the one million mark. The census indicates that Indigenous people represented 3.8% of the Canadian population. Of this population, 60% identified themselves as First Nations, 33% Métis and 4% Inuit (Statistics Canada 2008). The census also revealed that more than 50% of this population were urban dwellers, an increase of 4% from the 1996 figure.

Winnipeg has one of the largest urban Aboriginal populations in Canada. In 2006, 10% of Winnipeg's population was comprised of Aboriginal people (Statistics Canada 2010). The National Household Survey identified a total of 86,600 First Nations, Metis and Inuit people living in Winnipeg (total single and multiple Aboriginal ancestry responses) (Statistics Canada 2011). The migration of Aboriginal people to Winnipeg has fluctuated over the years, and the net population change can be attributed to three factors: (a) natural increase (the excess of births over deaths), (b) net migration (people coming into the city vs. people leaving the city) and (c) changes in how people identify themselves in the census (Norris, Clatworthy, and Peters 2013).

Winnipeg exists at the junction of the Assiniboine and Red River and the name originates from the Cree language which translates into "Win" meaning muddy and "nipee" meaning water. The forking of these two large waterways resulted in a strategic location for First Nations people to meet and trade with other First Nations people. Winnipeg is also significant because it is surrounded by different First Nations groups included Dene people from the northern part of the province, Swampy Cree from the north and east, the Anishnaabe from the south and east, and the Dakota to the south, and the Nakoda from the southwest (United Way 2010).

Winnipeg's inner city is defined by the City of Winnipeg through the Community Data Network to include areas to the north along Inkster Road, to the east neighbourhoods such as South and North Point Douglas, North and Central St. Boniface, and Chalmers, neighbourhoods in the south including Wolseley, McMillan, and River Osborne and to the west, neighbourhoods east of McPhillips Avenue. The official downtown is included in the inner city (City of Winnipeg, 2006). The inner city of Winnipeg has the highest portion of urban Indigenous people. Census Canada reports that 25,485 people reported having Aboriginal identity which represents 10% of the population of Winnipeg, and 21% of the population of the inner city (City of Winnipeg, 2006) and is also home to many urban Indigenous organizations including the Indian and Metis Friendship Centre of Winnipeg. Winnipeg's inner city has shown marked economic and social disparities compared to other parts of the city. Winnipeg's north end within the inner city is in an impoverished area and experiences "food deserts" as many grocery stores have moved out of the area resulting in the experience of food insecurity for residents (Zurba et al. 2012). Socio-economic problems "which are dynamic, inter-related and often not easily determined in terms of cause and effect" are a challenge in Winnipeg's north end (Zurba et al. 2012, 285). Food aid is provided in the inner city (including the north end and downtown) in the form of food banks and soup kitchens. However for longer term solutions to food insecurity, nutrition education programs and community gardens may be developed by

non-profit organizations (Malabar and Grant 2010, North End Community Renewal Corporation 2013). “The Good Food Box,” coordinated by the Winnipeg Foodshare Co-op, provides various sized-boxes of fresh seasonal fruits and vegetables to inner city residents with no profit earned. The Co-op provides free delivery purely as a service to the community and customers pay only for the cost of the produce (Winnipeg Foodshare Co-op 2013).

## 2.6 Urban Indigenous People and Culture

Silver (2006) describes the destruction of Aboriginal cultures as the “Canadian government’s deliberate strategy from the late nineteenth and most of the twentieth century with respect to Aboriginal people was assimilation” (Silver, 2006, p. 139). Assimilation and urban migration are related processes. The variety of factors leading Indigenous people to migrate to cities or remain in cities vary, as does the ways in which people participate in activities that support culture. One persistent perception exists is that once a person leaves a First Nations, Inuit or Metis community that they leave their culture “behind”. As Restoule (2006) describes, these perceptions are related to the lack of obvious visible symbols of culture such as dress, wild traditional foods, and housing, however it is the values that provide the mechanism for cultural survival and sustainability. Relatedly, a common perception is that the decision to migrate is based on a rejection of traditional culture (Norris, Clatworthy, and Peters 2013). These notions have also been shaped by indicators and measurements by Canada’s Supreme Court who measure identity as being consistent with the activities and distinctive culture of Indigenous populations at the time of contact (Newhouse and Fitzmaurice 2012). Wilson (2008) describes the shaping of cultural ideas as being molecular memory and that being removed from practicing traditional lifestyles does not equate to a loss of the underlying beliefs that shape a culture.

Urban communities across Canada have become centres of cultural identity and resurgence, first evident in the development of Indian Friendship Centres. As urban Indigenous people became increasingly mobilized, urban organizations began to develop and flourish across Canada. Many of these organizations began as social support organizations with a cultural focus, and have now grown to respond to the prolific urban Indigenous arts, culture, business and education communities. Silver (2006) describes the connection between healing, personal rebuilding, and revived communities as being connected directly to the revitalization of Aboriginal culture which coincides with the development and building of Aboriginal organizations. Winnipeg is home to many Indigenous organizations that not only serve the urban and remote/rural populations, but also play an integral role in the inter-cultural context of the city. The basis for much of this success is the grounding of Aboriginal cultures within the organizations. Silver (2006) points to the success of adult education programs in Winnipeg as due in part to the designing of educational initiatives on the basis of Aboriginal culture. Settee (2013) describes the connection between community development and sovereignty has been rooted in healing for the “Aboriginal individual and spreads to the community agencies and government structures” (Settee, 2013, p. 34).

## 2.7 Cultural Food and Health

As Indigenous people migrate from rural and remote communities to urban centres, the immediate access to traditional or cultural foods is lessened with an increased reliance on market foods (Socha et al. 2012). Many market foods have diminished nutrition, however are sought out amongst populations with limited financial resources. As such, many urban Indigenous people make unhealthy food choices out of necessity (Power 2008, Socha et al. 2012). There is an abundance of literature which points to the link between increased store bought food and the onset of chronic and lifestyle related disease such as Type II diabetes, obesity and heart related illness (Kuhnlein and Receveur 1996). Indigenous people in Canada experience higher rates of diabetes than non-Indigenous, a condition attributed to the change in diet from the more nutritious and health traditional foods to junk food. Food insecurity in Indigenous populations has not only manifested through a lack of adequate and culturally accepted foods but has also been noted in their low consumption of fruits and vegetables. Adekunle et al. (2010, 2011, 2012) suggest that the consumption of vegetables contributes to physical and mental well-being, and promotes health. The low consumption of fruits and vegetables may be as result of economic factors, lack of variety in local stores, or the negative perceptions about fruits and vegetables (Sharma et al. 2008). The link between cultural food and health goes beyond sustenance for many First Nations people:

Traditionally, Aboriginal diets and consumption patterns arose from complex and holistic food systems that provided health benefits beyond nutrition. Culture—a determinant of health, is intricately tied to traditional Aboriginal foods. Not only are traditional foods valued from cultural, spiritual and health perspectives, but the activities involved in their acquisition and distribution allow for the practice of cultural values such as sharing and cooperation. (Earle 2011, 3)

Scholars such as Willows et al. (2011) discuss the link between food, culture and spirituality:

The cultural worldview held by some Aboriginal peoples is that traditional food by its very nature is health promoting and good to eat. For this reason, in addition to nourishing the body, traditional food—as compared to commercial food—has the advantage of nourishing the mind and spirit, being an anchor to culture and personal well-being, and is an essential agent to promote holistic health. (Willows et al. 2011, 6)

Food and health are indelibly linked. Food is at the source of preventative health. One of the ways in which to achieve it is through a healthy diet consisting of nutrient dense foods, including fruits and vegetables, which provide vitamins, minerals, and fibre which can reduce the risk of chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and cancer (CDC 2012). Some of the problems that may be associated from nutritional deficiencies when eating too much protein, fats and sugars, and not enough of the nutrients provided by fruits and vegetables (vitamins, minerals, fibre, micronutrients)

can include diabetes, obesity, and other metabolic disorders (Hung et al. 2004). Almost three in ten Indigenous adults live in food-insecure households (off reserve) and these households tend to report in general much poorer health (36% poor health in food insecure I(Hung et al. 2004). ndigenous households compared to food secure Indigenous households (21%) (Willows et al. 2011). The issue of household food insecurity is an important predictor of “suboptimal dietary intakes and compromised health and well-being” (Willows et al. 2011).

### 3. Methods

Indigenous people have challenged academic researchers to decolonize their research relationships with Indigenous people so that academic research begins to meet the needs and priorities of Indigenous people themselves (Pualani 2007). Collaborative research practices involving Indigenous organizations may begin to address some of these concerns (Howitt 2001). We began this research by working with Winnipeg Indian and Metis Friendship Centre personnel.

An Indigenous graduate student from the University of Manitoba was hired as the primary data collector as she had an extensive network of friends, family and peers who were either working in food related areas, or who had a vast knowledge of food security/food sovereignty issues in the city. Because of her network and pre-established relationship with participants, issues around trust and access were not barriers, however protective measures were offered including the control and review of transcripts. Interviews were conducted with the blessing of the participants, and in the location of their choosing. Three focus groups were held with a set of questions focussing on not only access to cultural foods in the city but also a discussion of the connection between cultural food and larger well-being. In addition, ten interviews were held with participants answering similar questions. The interviews were transcribed and coded. Participants were primarily from the inner city including downtown Winnipeg and the north end, all were Indigenous and all were working in the area of food security and education.

### 4. Findings

Food, culture and health are linked. The impact of colonialism on Indigenous food systems is well noted in the literature within a rural, remote, northern and reserve context. The gap in literature is consistent with the notion that as people migrate from remote, rural communities into urban centres, their access to goods and services increases. Participants also made the link between food, culture and health. The three key areas identified by participants as being pertinent to Indigenous food security in Winnipeg include: (1) growing, harvesting, preparing and eating cultural food as ceremony, (2) cultural food as a part of connection to land through reciprocity and (3) re-learning IFS practices to address food insecurity.

#### 1. Growing, Harvesting, Preparing, Eating and Sharing Cultural Food as Ceremony

Participants described a spiritual connection to cultural food. They reminisced about participating in food production and consumption; however these stories went beyond

a nostalgic return to the “old ways.” Respondents identified the process of growing, harvesting, or catching of food as having a spiritual element which is consistent with the work by Receveur et al. (1998) describing the role of mentoring cultural practices and spirituality to children. This is also aligned closely with the work of Baskin et al. (2009) where urban Toronto Aboriginal women made the connection between cultural food and cultural knowledge transmission to children. The knowledge and understanding associated with growing and nurturing your own food is connected to a larger understanding of the relationship between the environment, spirituality and people. This was described by a participant:

That understanding is something that I would like people to have—the cycle of the food, and where it comes from, and why we do what we do. It’s about respect—especially the respect—and respect of the growth. It’s another life that you’re bringing and growing, and you’re harvesting that life form in a respectful way and putting it in your body. There’s that circle of life happening.

One of our respondents described the relationship she has with fish: “with salmon, it’s kind of like going to communion because it’s the one food that I feel the spirit in.” Another respondent described the process of cooking and eating food as a part of a ritual: “to me that is a cultural food, and there is a ritual that goes with it. Whenever a relative would come by and give my mom deer meat, moose meat or fish, it was always a big deal to cook that up and have everybody come over and eat.”

The ceremony described by participants related also to the experience of relationship building that comes with sharing traditional food. As one respondent noted “I think it’s the way people enjoy it, and come together to enjoy it. With cultural food come community, fellowship, family and ritual.” The ritual and ceremony around eating was described extensively by one participant.

The elders where I come from were very strict about the ritual; how the food came out, how things happened, how you came in, how you left, how you sat, where you sat, how you held a sacred item or what you did with it, or how you said something. When everyone was together and the elders started talking, everyone stopped, and was quiet and listened. The young people had to get up and serve the elders, and there were tiny offerings of food that we would make to the spirits. It’s symbolic, and it shows gratitude. It says thank you for looking out for us, we appreciate and we give this thanks.

One participant described the relationship with food as a spiritual process: “It wasn’t the food itself that was important; it was what we did with it, how we interacted with it, how we learned about it, and how we were thankful for it. It became a spiritual process.”

When food harvesting, preparation and consumption contain an element of ceremony and spirituality, a different kind of intention becomes embodied. Careful consideration of techniques, and an appreciation for the broader connections between

food, land and past and future generations become a part of the connection to food. This intention is evident in the description of one participant's observation of her mother's cooking techniques: "when my mom prepared food for ceremonies, like bannock or stew, she would take the ingredients, even the peas, and she would hold on to them, she would pray with them, and then put them in. She would take the greatest care with every single item." The principles of IFS are connected to the sacredness of food as described by these participants (Morrison 2011). Another participant described participating in ceremonies and the role that cultural food plays and how it connects people:

I do a lot of traditional work with traditional people—sweat lodges, Sundance, and other ceremonies—and a lot of it involves food, specifically traditional foods. I do have a lot of access in that regard, not as food security but as my own path if you want to call it that. At powwows they have foods—a "wild feed" they call it in the States. It's a feast.

Participants also described the places in which they consumed cultural foods. At many gatherings and feasts, cultural foods are highly valued. One participant describes what a family gathering looks like in terms of cultural food:

The majority of the time I bring something like berries. It's like a potluck, and maybe the host would have the meat, usually a stew of some sort. Somebody else brings bannock. It doesn't mean you have to always eat traditional food, as long as you acknowledge the ceremony and put that spirit plate out. But the majority of the time we do have at least one wild food, what we call traditional food. And most of the time that's me bringing the berries. Blueberries are my favorite. I eat one cup every day.

## 2. Cultural Food as a Part of Connection to Land Through Reciprocity

Obtaining access to traditional food in the city is different than for people living in rural and reserve communities. In some cases, participants were from communities near the city, but in other cases, participants were from rural and remote communities. Being in the city has meant that many participants act as a host to family and friends who are visiting the urban centre. Participants described being "gifted" with food such as wild meat (bison, moose meat or fish) or as a part of larger family exchange. One participant described this:

There is an assumption about people in the community, that if you are no longer hunters or gatherers or fishers, you are totally disconnected from your traditional food. I say that's not true because I get it through my relatives, and I am still connected through them. I don't go personally shoot a moose, but I will eat moose when my relatives hunt and they send me some.

Participants also discussed participating in urban gardening programs or Community Shared Agriculture programs (CSAs). Informal economic transactions were

also discussed including the role of bartering. As one participant described, the practice of bartering is also related to traditional teachings around reciprocity:

I also barter now instead of taking cash for my teachings. People will bring me meats or yarn, and then there's less of the "I bought you" attitude. The person asking or the teachings has to go out and actually participate in getting that product for me. That tells me that they actually respect the knowledge enough to do so. I found that it made the teachings too commercial. People love it. I had a guy last year that dries rabbit and he loved dried peaches, so I dried a bunch of organic peaches and other fruits for him in exchange for two rabbits.

In an urban context, being able to access cultural foods is a challenge. As one participant described: "my access to traditional foods comes from both of my parents. So even if I worked at McDonalds, I would still have the exact same access to traditional foods." For our participants who were working in areas of food, they found it less of a challenge. Other participants described being creative in developing networks:

I don't have family or friends at all, but I find it still happens because you're in food. When you're on the bus and you start a conversation about the crate of onions you're carrying, you find out that the other person has a friend that has a whole bunch of this or that and they want to trade. Facebook is good too.

Participants also described the importance of relationships not only to those who harvested the food, but for the larger process of food giving up its life to support people. Understanding the importance of reciprocity between the provider and receiver of the food is about cultural exchanges. One respondent describes this reciprocity: "are we respectfully honouring and giving thanks to that food and where it comes from? Those are the most important parts."

Participants identified the consumption of traditional food as facilitating cultural values such as sharing and responsibility which was also identified by Receveur et al. (1998). Several participants described the need to start developing an awareness of IFS with children. For example, a participant stated: "We need to re-involve children in the miracle and circle of life and understanding, so they will see the importance of traditional foods, and what is traditional to them." Another participant described the need for children to be better connected to food systems:

Every child should plant things, and they should be aware of the whole process leading up to eating it. If you have a relationship with your food, like peas, beans or squash, you have a new way of being grateful and showing that gratitude when you eat. People need to really understand the circle of life, and that we are a part of it. We are not more important than plants, fish, birds or animals; we are part of it all, and every part is important. Until that respect is there, traditional foods will continue to die. Part of tradition is who we are inside, and those plants can only nourish

us totally if we are part of that circle of life. To bring back traditional ways, we need to show our kids how to plant gardens, whether it's what was planted 200 years ago, or a new kind of food that the Europeans brought... We need our children to understand the habitats of animals, and to learn to live in harmony with them.

### 3. Re-learning IFS to Address Food Insecurity

Access to cultural food in the city is about alleviating food insecurity, but also about a larger reclamation and connection to food and food production. Indigenous food sovereignty (IFS) goes beyond food security in that it looks to reconnect people and their food systems and is guided by four main principles: (1) the recognition that food is sacred; (2) participation in food systems; (3) self-determination; and (4) supportive legislation and policy (Morrison 2011). One participant describes the sacred element of IFS: "the spirit of the food is very different. I think it connects with your body in a way that is genetic. I believe that we have a genetic memory of eating, especially fishers." Respondents discussed the relationship between control over food sources, cultural connections as distinctive elements of IFS.

One respondent described how IFS has been impacted by larger forces of assimilation. She described the connection between Indian Residential Schools and food:

That was the piece that really interrupted our food sovereignty (residential schools), and our relationship to growing what we eat, and even the hunting. I look around now and there are hunters on the reserves and in the community, but I don't have that kind of connection to them anymore.

Another respondent described the shift to urban centres as being one of the forces that limits food sovereignty not only because of the loss of land to practice land based harvesting: "the move to the city is a downward trend where you're deskilling and you don't have access to land for gardening... I see my generation as completely de-skilled and totally dependent on commercial source of food and on having money to buy food." This "de-skilling" as described by participants is something that they described as needing to be taught at earlier ages: "how do you re-reeteach these cultural connections to the younger generations? How do we teach them about food and how it's part of their ancestry and culture? These things are significant." One focus group participant described an experience of trapping with his daughters:

When I took my daughters out trapping, one daughter put her snare up high—about a foot and a half off the ground. I tried to encourage her to put it lower because it would have to be a really big rabbit to get caught in it! As it turned out it snowed that night—all the way up to that trap—and she was the only one who ended up catching a rabbit! There was something inside of her that just knew... it was in her genes.

Another participant describes operationalizing IFS principles in an urban context. He describes how harvesting practices like maple syrup is possible in an urban context:

I know of guys that actually tap the maples in the city. There is a misconception that if a plant is inside the city then you can't eat it because of contaminants. But those plants take those contaminants and convert them into good medicine for the body. Our Native tea plants will take arsenic from the soil and convert it into selenium, which is what we need. Just because the soil is bad, doesn't mean what you plant in it is going to be bad. It matters in how its cared for.

IFS is also related to a return to health for Indigenous people. While the poor health of Indigenous people is well documented with high rates of chronic and infectious disease (Waldram, Herring, and Young 2006), much of the chronic disease that is so prevalent in Indigenous communities is preventable, and related to the consumption of low nutrient quality food. One participant describes the rates of disease in relationship to urbanization and food patterns shifting: "The minute we left the community and entered the city we started eating differently...our whole diet changed. On came the diabetes, high blood pressure and other problems because of food that our body wasn't used to. We couldn't process it properly."

## 5. Conclusion

As Indigenous people continue to flock to cities, and lifestyle related illnesses continue to escalate, the need to address the foundational issues become pressing. The cultural food needs of Winnipeg's diverse and growing Indigenous population are not being met. Winnipeg's inner city is home to vast food deserts, and many urban Indigenous people have little choices available for healthy and nutritious food. Food insecurity is only one part of the larger issue. Being disconnected from food coincides with a disconnection from culture and contributes to poor mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health. In an urban context, revitalizing the ability of community members to address food insecurity through IFS is one way to move beyond the issue of food as being about immediate sustenance.

Operationalizing IFS principles in an urban context is a challenge and cannot be considered inside a vacuum. The importance of re-building a culture of Indigenous food is indeed possible in the city, and requires the same resiliency and creativeness that has been the source of the flourishing of Indigenous populations despite repeated obstacles. Much of these efforts require a focus on consciousness shifting which happens when families, including parents, uncles, aunties, and grandparents, re-learn and share IFS with children. We can look to many urban and inner city organizations in Winnipeg as facilitators of this re-learning or re-skilling through many programs that encourage reinventing food that both celebrates Indigenous traditions, but also considers larger health implications of IFS. By re-situating our relationship to food by returning to the ceremony of food production, processing and consumption, by celebrating the gift of food as a part of a larger reciprocal arrangement with the land, IFS can become more operational, particularly in an urban, Aboriginal context. As one

participant described, this work is important, and the conversation about IFS is about planting seeds, and connecting younger generations to older generations:

It needs to be taught—especially to our kids. There are people that are open and seeking it and that’s really important. I didn’t see it much for a long time, but it’s more noticeable in the last ten years. When I was in school I searched for it. It makes me happy to know that it’s coming back and that people are talking about it and discussing it, and telling the old stories about it. I think just having that space available for people to begin to talk about it. It’s not something in history: it is alive and well and continuing. It is possible to live a good life and to get back to the original ways in terms of the spirituality of the food and what exactly that means. There are ways of doing it that makes it healthier. My hope is to be able to see that happen. It’s about slowly planting seeds and getting people to think about it. I see that as my job.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to gratefully acknowledge the Indian and Metis Friendship Centre of Winnipeg (Jim Sinclair) as well as University of Winnipeg Anthropology students Janaya Rieger, David Syvitski and Kacey Fields. This project was generously funded by the Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network (SSHRC), Manitoba Research Alliance (SSHRC), Government of Manitoba Ministry of Indigenous Affairs, University of Winnipeg Major Research Award, University of Winnipeg Partnership Development Grant, and the University of Winnipeg Discretionary Grant.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In Canada, Section 35 of the Constitution recognizes Aboriginal people as three distinctive peoples: First Nations, Inuit and Métis. First Nation began to be used in Canada in the 1970s to replace the term Indian. This term typically applies to both Status and non-Status Indians. Inuit refers to a cultural group of people living in far northern regions in territories such as Nunavut, parts of Labrador, Quebec and the Northwest Territories. Inuit people are not a part of the Indian Act, and have Inuit beneficiary cards instead of Indian Status cards. Métis is a more problematic term. It refers both to historically created communities along the Red River in Manitoba and Saskatchewan created by mixed unions between French and Scottish fur traders and Native people and in some cases, to contemporary unions between non-Native and Native people. Métis organizations grant people membership cards if they can prove an ancestral link to a historical Métis community. The term “Indigenous” is now increasingly used in the literature, and when used in a Canadian context, refers to First Nations and Inuit people. However for the purposes of this paper, Indigenous and Aboriginal will be used synonymously. Many people live “off reserve,” which may refer to people living in urban centres or in rural areas. The term rural refers to areas that are non-reserve, and are either “remote or wilderness areas and agricultural lands, small towns and villages with populations of less than 1000 people and population densities of less than 400 people per square kilometer” (Statistics Canada, 2003: 18).

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that we do not see Aboriginal people as an ethnic group. However some of the literature on ethnicity and food preferences may be useful in providing a background for the proposed research.

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