

Our food, our future: Indigenous Action for Food Sovereignty

Report from the September 4, 2024 Iqaluit Gathering
and a Manifesto for Indigenous Food Sovereignty and Wellness

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community food centres
CANADA good food is just the beginning



Summary

On September 4 2024, a pivotal gathering took place in Iqaluit to explore the profound significance of food sovereignty for Indigenous communities.

This report encapsulates the core themes and valuable input garnered during the assembly, recognizing that while our desire for sovereignty is universal, our food systems and challenges are diverse. Colonial legacies have impacted our nations differently, affecting our access to land, knowledge, and resources.

Yet we stand united, culminating in the shaping of our manifesto: a flexible compass for catalyzing action towards food sovereignty and asserting our inherent rights – because we are Indigenous and this is our sovereign right, regardless of our specific circumstances. We will not wait.



Qajuqturvik CFC in Iqaluit, NU. (Photo by Frédérick Arsenault, 2024.)

Defining Indigenous Food Sovereignty

“Food security is protection, food sovereignty means sitting at my grandmother’s table.”

We need to think about food sovereignty differently from food security.

Food security is about the protection and distribution of existing food systems – to make sure there is sufficient access to food. It is a reactive solution to poverty within the Western colonial and capitalist system, but it doesn’t tackle the underlying problems of the capitalist food system itself.

Food sovereignty is responsive. It is about reasserting an entirely different system – one that takes a holistic view and supports our inherent rights to access, protect, and nurture our own lands, waters, and traditional food sources. It is outside the Western capitalist food system – and inside the idea that the people who produce, distribute, and consume food also control the mechanisms and governance of production and distribution. Food sovereignty is required to restore our lands and waters – serving our innate rights and opposing the outside governance that has been imposed.



Barriers and Challenges to Practicing Food Sovereignty

Environment & Land Issues

“Clear-cutting causes water to warm, so the salmon are not as plentiful. Salmon spawn upriver from us but then travel to other parts of the Maritimes.”

From the depletion of traditional foods like salmon in Miramichi, to overfishing and rising water temperatures, to toxic spraying that annihilates local species, to the dominance of harmful forestry that increases wildfires, to land being wrecked by mining and pipeline projects, environmental barriers to food sovereignty are vast.

The reality of climate change also means that we need to think about food differently.

Land and Food Sovereignty

“How come the community doesn’t know when BC hydro blows up a river making the water flow a different way? What about our consultation rights?”

We cannot talk about food sovereignty without understanding its relationship and innate connection to land sovereignty, our inherent rights, and the environment.

Encroaching settler communities, mining and forestry projects, title disputes, and the failure to respect the duty to consult, remain major barriers to achieving food sovereignty.

For instance, mansions keep getting built on reserve lands, and time limits are imposed on fishing in TLBN. At Natoaganeg, they have Irving dump sites on both sides of their community, which is increasing cancer rates. Two-thirds of New Brunswick is under a land claim, but Irving is now pulling out of discussions.

In looking for solutions, being forced to use the very system that we are trying to overcome, poses a unique and structural obstacle to achieving any form of sovereignty.



Economic and Policy Challenges

“Elders are falling through the cracks, unable to pay their bills.”

Some of the major policy challenges noted in our discussions include restrictive funding criteria, budget limitations (including those that affect the ability to bridge and serve on- and off-reserve communities), the amount of time taken up by lengthy grant writing, the manufactured urgency of colonial timelines, and how policy and programs tend to view access to food as a poverty-reduction strategy rather than part of a holistic system encompassing our relationship to the land, sovereignty, our rights, and knowledge.

Major economic barriers include the high cost of food, exclusionary shipping and transportation costs, and lack of ability to set up more community stores, and how Elders who are core to food sovereignty, are falling between the cracks, unable to pay their bills.

There are also legislative barriers including restrictive wildlife and fishing laws, the lack of respect for the duty to consult on resource projects, the lack of clarity around consultation obligations at the municipal level, and the tension between provincial rules and practices with federal law, namely the Indian Act.

Social and Cultural Barriers

“How the west sees its food systems and how we see our food systems, for example, hunting. We don’t want to hunt an animal when it is stressed as we eat the stress – this is a part of how we consume food.”

Lack of trust: People remember the time when the land was stolen. How do you create trust when there is a history of distrust and dishonesty? We need more stories about how this relationship has transformed.

Allies: We understand that we are in a space sharing with settlers. We understand some want and claim to be our allies. Some people have surrendered land back for First Nations people. Others need to learn how to take a back seat, and stop weaponizing our struggles. We need to have more conversations with the decision-makers, teachers, and youth about being a good ally.

Racism: In Lil’wat there are a lot of settler farmers. Racism, subversive and overt, is common. But having the visibility of farm staff at the market where local settlers go is a good thing. How would Lil’wat community members feel being at these farmers meetings?

Lateral violence: There is so much lateral violence; it’s a product of the current system being forced on us. We have to be conscious of lateral violence but not let it destroy us.



Solutions and Actions

Empowering Indigenous Wellness and Food Sovereignty

“Accessing our land and our food systems, that is wellness – not just survival but wanting to live.”

Healing: We need time to heal our relationships to our knowledge and centre ourselves and community (rather than white saviour approach to us), on our own timelines. We have a responsibility to heal ourselves in tandem with responsibility to help others to heal. We need to figure out what is important to them and work in these spaces.

Building our own capacity: We need ongoing growth and learning from Indigenous perspectives that help us understand how to support others in taking the path because we have taken it too.

Building community capacity and passing on traditional teachings and knowledge: How do we empower families and get them to participate in our programs? We need to get people to events and teachings to build capacity and support teachings on traditional food systems – for example getting youth to these programs to teach drying salmon, and how to treat an animal after it is hunted so that the food is well-used (how to smoke it, how some pieces go to women, some go to Elders, etc.).

We need to empower youth to know their rights and connect to the lands and waters. We need Elders and knowledge-keepers engaging youth and community on our lands, and teaching how to respect the land by only taking what's needed, and using proper harvesting techniques.

Lobbying and Advocacy

“The time for the youth is now”.

First Nations are getting loud. Elders were afraid to say something because they would lose their children. Now we are speaking out. The time for the youth is now.

We need a reduction in emissions.

Nutrition North's changes in programs is an example of how lobbying can have an impact. But is there a plan or regulatory body to avoid abuse of the program – is there any policy that can prevent stores from making funds? How much money is going in the pocket of community members? Have retail prices increased?



Reimagining Practices and Systems

“We don’t have the fish that we used but still need to cook it up in a way that the whole community can access it. We need to shift from individualism to a collective community where everyone is getting a piece of it.”

We are not getting back to what it was – so we need to reimagine our principles and ways of working. In our communities we do it in pieces – we need to think about it holistically. We take for granted what family and kinship mean in our communities.

We need to include science, but we also have to shift out of the numbers for why we do what we do and use qualitative means, eg. our relationship to each other. We need to sit more in this unknown space.

Representation: who is telling our narratives. How do we make sure we are telling our stories? We need some visual sovereignty – not perpetuating the narrative that we have to be saved.

Community Empowerment and Self-Determination

“Half the battle of self-determination is believing that we can. We think we need to be granted something. We do not need permission.”

We are not going to sit around and wait. We just need to do it. Taking little steps at a time. Gathering & foraging – let’s claim our space and ensure safety in numbers.

For example, in 2023 when Lil’wat and N’Quatqua asserted their title rights and shut down public access to Joffre Lakes Park to enable harvesting and gathering. This is sovereignty.

We need to ensure that community success is community-led, and community-driven, and we have the resources to meet community needs. We need to create more stores at the community level.

Let’s celebrate where we are and what we have achieved so far. We are not starting from zero.



Conclusion

Decolonizing Our Plates: A Manifesto for Indigenous Food Sovereignty and Wellness

This manifesto exists to reclaim our power. It is our sovereign right to practice food sovereignty, connect with our lands, and carry forward the teachings of our ancestors. Colonial systems have tried to control and limit our rights for too long, but this is a reminder that no one grants our sovereignty—it's inherent.

These words are a guide for taking action on our own terms, asserting our responsibilities, and defining our future without waiting for approval. We will not wait.

I. Reclaiming Our Rights

We assert our own inherent right to access, protect, and nurture our lands, waters, and traditional food systems. It is our sovereign right to reclaim what has always been our right. Our rights are not defined by government-imposed laws but by our ancestral teachings and our responsibility to future generations. This is what we do. This is who we are.

II. Honoring Our Ancestors

Our ancestors lived in harmony with the land, respecting its cycles and teachings. We honor their legacy by continuing to live in balance with nature, practicing our traditional teachings, passing our knowledge forward, and rejecting systems that seek to commodify and exploit our resources. It is our sovereign right to live according to the wisdom passed down through generations.

III. Empowering Our Communities

Our strength lies in our communities, where each member plays a vital role in our collective well-being. We refuse to be fragmented by external forces and instead choose to build unity, resilience, and self-determination. It is our sovereign right to empower youth to connect to the lands and water, and Elders and knowledge-keepers to pass down their teachings that empower future generations. It is our sovereign right to empower ourselves and each other.

IV. Healing Our Relationships

We recognize the importance of healing—within ourselves, our communities, and our relationships with settlers and the land. This healing process is ours to lead, without external interference, validation, and the timelines demanded by colonial urgency. It is our sovereign right to heal in our way, on our terms.



V. Living Our Sovereignty

Indigenous sovereignty is not just a concept; it's a way of life. It's about living with intention, practicing our traditions, passing down our knowledge, and safeguarding our cultural heritage. This is what we do. This is who we are. It is our sovereign right to practice our sovereignty every day, in every action we take.

VI. Defending Our Lands

The land is not just a resource; it is a living entity that sustains us. We stand firm in our responsibility to protect it from exploitation and degradation. It is our sovereign right to defend our lands from those who seek to harm them.

VII. Resisting Colonialism

Colonialism seeks to deny, destroy and distract, but we reject its power over us. We refuse to be passive in the face of oppression and instead actively resist through our actions, our voices, and our presence. It is our sovereign right to resist and to thrive.

VIII. Asserting Our Wellness

Wellness is not just survival; it's about thriving. It's about living fully, celebrating our cultures, and nurturing our spirits. It is our sovereign right to live well, to be joyful, and to pursue our vision of a healthy, vibrant future.

IX. Creating Our Own Path

We chart our course, guided by our values, our knowledge, our connection to the land, and our own timelines. We are not waiting for external approval and support. It is our sovereign right to create the future we envision for ourselves and our descendants.

X. Manifesting Our Vision

This manifesto is a declaration of our intent to live as we always have—connected, strong, and free. We commit to taking the small, consistent steps that lead to profound change, always grounded in our identity and our connection to all living things. It is our sovereign right to manifest our vision.

We are Indigenous. We are sovereign. We don't need permission.

