

Beyond food security: Accounting for community food needs in Kugaaruk, Nunavut

Merissa Daborn



Photo Credit: Merissa Daborn

Frozen fish on the kitchen floor, Kugaaruk, Nunavut.

I have created a slideshow full of photographs of food for presentations that I give on my research about food insecurity and food policy with the community of Kugaaruk, Nunavut. The photographs are of the community as the ice was just starting to break up in the spring, empty Co-op shelves after a food shipment couldn't land, caribou and bannock, and "the-best-lunch-ever" courtesy of the school

lunch program. My favourite slide contains two simple photographs: a Nutrition North tag on the floor of the Co-op, and a frozen fish on the kitchen floor of the home I was staying at.

These two relatively simple photographs speak volumes when combined. My personal experiences and research in Kugaaruk in 2016 revealed that the presence of Nutrition North, the federal govern-

ment's Northern food subsidy program, in the community was seemingly insignificant in comparison to what country food offers. Unlike the discarded tag on the Co-op floor, a frozen fish is an event: It fills stomachs, brings family together, fills a kitchen over the lunch hour, and is a significant site where the sharing of knowledge occurs.

My research in Kugaaruk addresses food insecurity and federal food policy in Nunavut. Through interviews with community members, I consider how federal food policy needs to be reoriented to specifically accommodate Inuit food-sharing culture. My research addresses how a reorientation from food security to food *sharing* can produce food policy that integrates sharing between community members, which is a practice that is already carried out with both country foods and store bought foods.

Food security in Nunavut is *beyond* the point of crisis. According to the research group PROOF: Food Insecurity Policy Research, household food insecurity rates in Nunavut measured using Statistics Canada's Canadian Community Health Survey were as high as 46.8% in 2014.¹ In 2015, the cost of imported southern food being sold in Northern grocery stores was on the rise across the territory.² These and other measures³ point to a food security crisis in Nunavut.

Astronomically high food prices, such as two litres of milk for \$8.99, and 1.75 litres of orange juice for \$16.89, suggest that Nutrition North's subsidies aren't sufficient to meet the needs of Northerners, including Inuit, who rely on the program. But this isn't the only problem. Rather, there is an urgent need for new policy approaches that are grounded in the everyday experiences of community members. For many Inuit, this requires programming to include support for access to country food, a food source that has largely been left out of federal food policies to date.⁴ Policy approaches adopting a food-security framework tend to be aligned with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) definition of food security meaning access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that also meets the individuals' dietary needs and food preferences.⁵ When food security hinges on *access*, programming has tended to focus on increasing economic capacity, affordability, or increasing access to specific foods that are either dietary staples or deemed nutritious by Southern standards. If Northern federal food policy needs to undergo change to take into account the needs of communities, then other crucial supports such as supporting local hunters or community run food programs must be part of the equation.

Nutrition North cannot be expected to fulfill all the requirements of Inuit in meeting their food needs, but it can be expected to do better than its

current form. When Nutrition North replaced the Food Mail Program in 2011, it replaced many aspects of programming that were well suited to Inuit food needs such as the subsidization of non-food items that Inuit need for harvesting country food. This has created barriers for meeting food needs when items that are needed for harvesting country food are inaccessible due to high costs. Inuit communities have been asking for the return of these items to the eligible subsidy list since the transition from the Food Mail Program to Nutrition North.⁶

In Nunavut, food security is made possible by networks of relationships among Inuit who share country food. Nutrition North programming needs to complement this already existing system in order to support access to nutritious Northern country foods. Programming that meets the specific needs of Inuit communities will result in more long term benefits than *just* lowering the prices on select foods in stores. Northerners have long been demanding the subsidization of items such as fuel, ammunition, and equipment, which were previously subsidized with the Food Mail Program. While these are non-food items, their availability would result in greater access to country food. Moreover, supporting hunting and fishing in communities maintains traditional ecological knowledge, supports intergenerational knowledge transmission between Elders and youth, supports local economies, and can provide savings for families who do not want to rely on purchasing imported meat for the bulk of their diets. Most importantly, it puts fish on the floor, caribou in hungry bellies, nutrients in bodies and bones, and seal in the school's soup.

Throughout my work in Kugaaruk, I consistently heard that retail food prices needed to be lower. But I also heard that it was not all that was needed. Kugaaruk community members work hard to ensure the community has much needed services such as a food bank, an Elders lunch, a school breakfast and lunch program, a soup kitchen, and many other services that meet needs that are unmet by Nutrition North. These programs provide essential services that will still be needed in communities, even if prices are lowered. Lower prices will not remedy the need for food sharing, social opportunities for Elders, or diversifying diets of students while ensuring they have the fuel to make it through a day of learning.

Nutrition North has been under fire by Northerners, particularly through the End the Price Hike campaign.⁷ The End the Price Hike campaign was created in partnership with the Feeding My Family group and was designed to raise awareness about the high cost of food in the North, and to lobby politicians for change because "the current national strat-

egy simply isn't working."⁸ The campaign began at a critical time when the federal government was undergoing transition from a Conservative majority to a Liberal majority. Mere months after the election of a Liberal majority government in 2015, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada announced that it would be conducting Nutrition North Canada Engagement 2016 beginning on May 30th, 2016 and running until December 9th, 2016 to seek input from "community members and other stakeholders on how the program can be more transparent, cost-effective, and culturally appropriate in the face of growing demand for healthy food in the North."⁹

Nutrition North's engagement session in Kugaaruk took place on November 3rd, 2016. The community identified several priorities and key issues that they wish to see reflected in the Nutrition North program, including: greater subsidies of staple foods; subsidies of family necessities such as infant formula; regional adjustments to reflect the needs of each community; the need to ensure Nutrition North's programming complements other forms of programming; and promotion of access to country foods by supporting local hunters through subsidies of supplies required for hunting such as ammunition, fuel, and equipment.¹⁰ It is no surprise that these priorities are mirrored in other community engagement sessions across the North.¹¹

Northerners are participating in these engagement sessions and have no shortage of innovative ideas of what will work for their communities. While my research specifically considers the needs of Inuit communities, the consultation process is an opportunity for the food needs of all Northern communities to be reflected in policy. Along with many Northerners I will be curious to see whether the federal government embraces community input for a program that extends beyond the grocery store or falls back on the status quo that only subsidizes the cost of shipping and stocking perishable foods.

If the federal government is serious about revitalizing food policy, we should all be asking the following: How can the federal government be held to account to ensure the needs of Northern communities are met by Nutrition North? And perhaps most importantly, is Nutrition North bringing Inuit together to eat together, share together, and survive together, or is it actually serving to restrict access to both store-bought and country foods and limiting food sharing among relations? ●

Merissa Daborn is an MA candidate in the Faculty of Native Studies at the University of Alberta. She is the Editorial Assistant for Aboriginal Policy Studies, and works as a research assistant for two Northern research projects. Find her on Twitter at @merissadaborn or visit www.merissadaborn.com.

com to see more of her work.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the financial support from the following: University of Alberta Northern Research Awards Grant, Northern Scientific Training Program Grant, Ashley and Janet Cameron Fund, and the Evelyn Kline Memorial Award in Community Development.

Endnotes

- 1 Tarasuk, V., Mitchell, A., & Dachner, N. (2016). *Household Food Insecurity in Canada, 2014*. Toronto: Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity (PROOF). Retrieved from <http://proof.utoronto.ca/resources/proof-annual-reports/annual-report-2014/>
- 2 Nunavut Bureau of Statistics (2016). *Food Price Survey – 2015-2016 Price Difference Stats Update, 2016*. Retrieved from <http://www.stats.gov.nu.ca/en/Economic%20prices.aspx>
- 3 "Rates," Nunavut Food Security Coalition, accessed December 31, 2016, <http://nunavutfoodsecurity.ca/Rates>
- 4 Nutrition North does subsidize country foods if they are sold commercially. However, commercially regulated country food is not available in every community and isn't a feasible purchase for many low income families to make.
- 5 Boulton, D. (2004). *Hunger In the Arctic: Food (In)security in Inuit Communities: A Discussion Paper*. Ottawa: Ajuunginiq Centre, National Aboriginal Health Organization; Ford, J. D., & Beaumier, M. (2011). Feeding the Family During Times of Stress: Experience and Determinants of Food Insecurity in an Inuit Community. *Geographical Journal* 177 (1), 44-61. FAO, IFAD & WFP (2013). *The State of Food Insecurity in the World, 2013: The Multiple Dimensions of Food Security*. Rome: FAO.
- 6 Stanton, B. (2011). *From Food Mail to Nutrition North Canada: Report of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development*. Ottawa: Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.
- 7 End the Price Hike (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://endthepricehike.ca>
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Government of Canada (2016). *Nutrition North Canada Engagement 2016*. Retrieved from <http://www.nutritionnorthcanada.gc.ca/eng/1464190223830/1464190397132>
- 10 Government of Canada (2016). *What we heard about Nutrition North Canada*. Retrieved from http://www.nutritionnorthcanada.gc.ca/eng/1465233643322/1465234133331#chp2_8
- 11 The notes from the engagement session in Iqaluit on September 26, 2016 include recommendations that are distinct from those suggested in Kugaaruk; however, it includes the recommendation to tailor the food eligibility list for each community because food preferences in Iqaluit likely differ from those in smaller communities.



Photo Credit: Merissa Deborn

Nutrition North label on the floor of the local supermarket, Kugaaruk, Nunavut.