



## Perspective

# **Toward anti-colonial food policy in Canada? (Im)possibilities within the settler state**

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## Abstract

This perspective piece teases out some of the tensions between the development of a national food policy, which has gained significant traction in Canada over the past few years, and Indigenous food sovereignty, which long predates the Canadian government and its policies, and has a rich history and current practice of organizing. Drawing from our observations and discussions at conferences, workshops, and events, and pointing to key aspects of discourse commonly embedded in such discussions, we critically reflect on how settler engagements with Indigenous peoples in developing a national food policy may reify, rather than dismantle, colonial relationships. Additionally, we emphasize the importance of process and the ability for settlers to accept discomfort and incommensurability if we are to move towards spaces that embody solidarity, respect, and resistance.

**Keywords:** Indigenous food sovereignty, national food policy, Indigenous food systems, settler colonialism, policy development, discourse

## Introduction

During a recent roundtable discussion about a national food policy led by a panel of settler academics and community organizers, a settler audience member noted the need to consider how

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food policy frameworks are often rooted in colonial assumptions and discourses—a point that has been raised by Indigenous activists and academics many times before. This prompted comments from other settler audience members about the need to “include,” “give voice to” and “involve” Indigenous peoples in developing a national food policy. As the conversation wrapped up, one of the panelists asked, “How can we use conflict as a tool in the process?” Another asked, “What are the conversations we want to have as Canadians about food?” Within this paper we examine how these comments are representative of broader themes and exchanges that we, as young settler academics and activists, have observed while attending food conferences, gatherings, and policy conversations that are often dominated by settler peoples. To do so, we look to the work of Indigenous scholars and activists for guidance, as well as drawing on our own learning experience as settlers within Canadian food movement spaces.

In the following sections, we aim to question the possibility of a national food policy as a space to (re)build Indigenous-settler relationships. Instead, we suggest that such a policy may work to reify colonial structures and relationships. At the same time, we want to encourage the uncomfortable conversations that have arisen in relation to a national food policy, in order for settlers to problematize Canadian state structures and to take concrete actions to support Indigenous resurgence and resistance. In making these arguments, we recognize that we are rooted in a white settler worldview, and as Rose (1997) notes, our perspectives can only offer partial knowledges and never-complete understandings. We are not experts, but our intention is to offer the following as part of a broader conversation about Indigenous-settler relations in order to better hold ourselves and our communities accountable to Indigenous nations.

### *Inclusion*

Anti-colonial and anti-racist scholars and activists have shown that the language of inclusion must be used with caution (e.g. Jodi Byrd, Kimberlé Crenshaw, bell hooks, Bonita Lawrence, and Lee Maracle). On one hand, this language often implies welcoming and working together. On the other, dominant groups, such as those the two of us occupy (i.e. white, settler, able-bodied), often use “inclusion” to call for the participation of marginalized groups without engaging with the ways such invitations require the transformation of underlying social, economic, and political power structures that preclude meaningful participation. The language of inclusivity often reinforces certain norms and centers certain bodies—bodies that often look similar to our own. For example, in a recent policy brief that calls “for a focus on farm renewal, business development and labour in the next agriculture policy framework,” one of the recommendations is to “expand the definition of ‘beginning and young farmer’ to encompass all new entrants, including those not from farming backgrounds, second careerists, Indigenous Peoples and New Canadians” (Food Secure Canada [FSC], 2016a, p.2). The discourse of inclusion here is meant to broaden who is considered a farmer, but in doing so it positions communities such as new Canadians and Indigenous peoples in relation to an unnamed but assumed norm (Lorde, 2007): young white Canadian citizens from a rural background.

This positioning centers white bodies as farmers while failing to engage with the history and continuing agrarianism of Indigenous nations. For example, the Haudenosaunee began farming long before European settlers arrived, cultivating crops such as corn, beans, and squash for centuries (Monture, 2014). Furthermore, the positioning of farmers as white fails to appreciate the ways in which the colonial government (the same government posed to establish a national food policy) has, and continues to, suppress Indigenous agrarianism as well as other forms of food provisioning. For instance, in the Prairie West and southern Ontario, Indigenous farmers who practiced western style agriculture were prevalent throughout the 1800's. As they began selling their crops, settlers felt threatened and implemented a number of amendments to the Indian Act, including the permit system, which restricted agricultural sales by Indigenous Nations (Carter, 1990; Government of Canada, 1881). Additionally, Indigenous farmers were effectively banned from using agricultural machinery, which, alongside rapid land loss by encroaching settler farming and lumber interests, made it nearly impossible for them to continue to farm (Bateman, 1996; Carter, 1990).

These policies restricted Indigenous peoples from accessing land across Canada, making it increasingly difficult for them to hunt and gather. Together with resource exploitation and legislated famine, this amounted to no less than a “state-sponsored attack on indigenous communities” (Carter, 1990; Daschuk, 2013, p. 114). Meanwhile, the same Indigenous land appropriation enabled the establishment of the white, male-centered system of “conventional” agriculture—land that was not the Crown's to give away to white-European immigrants in the first place. Together with colonial institutions, policies, and discourses that constructed Indigenous peoples as outsiders who must “adopt dominant middle-class Canadian social and moral codes and pro-capitalist values,” these forces aimed to eradicate Indigenous nations and transcend colonialism by naturalizing white male settlers as “Indigenous,” exalted national subjects (Bohaker & Iacovetta, 2009, p. 427; Thobani, 2000, 2007).

In this context, settler people such as ourselves need to consider the ways that inclusion has been used to co-opt Indigenous peoples into the Canadian colonial project. Maracle (2003) explains that “constitutional inclusion [of Indigenous peoples] has only served to maintain the colonial history and practice of dismantling Indigenous national governments by sanctioning colonial rule” (p. 310). Byrd (2011) further elaborates that “inclusion into the multicultural cosmopole, built on top of indigenous lands, does not solve colonialism: that inclusion is the very site of the colonization that feeds U.S. empire” (p. 10). In relation to food, settler governments have long sought to “include” Indigenous communities in settler foodways in order to gain and maintain control over Indigenous lands and peoples. Therefore, we feel it is necessary to ask how a national food policy will ensure that it does not do the same, while also understanding how it has done so in the past through policies and programs like the Indigenous version of Canada's food guide (Burnett, Hay, & Chambers, 2015).

We also want to highlight the problematics of asking for Indigenous involvement in a consultation process for which the frames of reference have already been set and which is led by a colonial government. The federal Agricultural Minister has been mandated with leading the

policy, using a “collaborative style of leadership within the federal government and with other levels of government” while at the same time committing to “a renewed, respectful and inclusive Nation-to-Nation process to advance progress on priorities identified by First Nations” (FSC, 2016b). Following Thobani (2000), we suggest that by maintaining a colonial structure and process, the policy will produce colonial (and in turn racist) outcomes, as Canada’s immigration policies have repeatedly done.

Within these colonial structures we ask: is a nation-to-nation relationship possible if the process is directed, controlled, and organized by only one nation? Particularly when one nation-state continues to enforce its own legal and political systems over all nations within this relationship? While settler recognition of nation-to-nation relationships is a change in *discourse* from an earlier rhetoric of assimilation, the political structures and decision-making processes remain the same. Coulthard (2014) raises these concerns in his argument that the Canadian state’s shift from discourses of exclusion and assimilation to recognition and accommodation continue to reproduce “configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power” (p. 3). Following Fanon, Coulthard explains that “in situations where colonial rule does not depend solely on the exercise of state violence, its reproduction instead rests on the ability to entice Indigenous peoples to *identify*, either implicitly or explicitly, with the profoundly *asymmetrical* and *nonreciprocal* forms of recognition either imposed on or granted to them by the settler state and society” (p. 25).

For example, while many assume that the government’s implementation of the comprehensive land claims policy is a step in the right direction for Indigenous rights and title, the “inherently colonial nature of the land ‘claims’ process” has reduced it to an act of municipalisation for First Nations, wherein monetary settlements are offered for Indigenous compliance while the state maintains control over Indigenous lands (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 125). Nor is this issue limited to bureaucratic government or corporate projects. Well intentioned scholarship, activism, and programming that supports issues of environmental justice, for instance, may slip into what Paperson (2014) describes as “settler environmentalism” without careful attention to how and for whose identities environmentalism is carried out. In turn, the implications of certain “solutions,” such as renewable energy and local food, get taken for granted or naturalized by non-Indigenous people. The role of the government often goes unproblematized, erasing Indigenous people’s ongoing relations with the state, ranging from planning and urban redevelopment to land conservation and agri-food governance.

Our concern is that a national food policy has the potential to become another tool to subsume Indigenous peoples within the colonial state system and undermine Indigenous self-determination. For instance, governments at all levels have long ignored Indigenous calls to change relationships, including honouring nation-to-nation agreements and returning land to Indigenous nations. It is unclear how a national food policy that follows the same colonial structure (as policies and procedures related to, for instance, land claims) offers different outcomes than what Indigenous peoples continue to encounter. Too often decision-makers and bureaucrats lack an understanding of settler colonization. At the same time, political and

corporate lobbying works to maintain settler control over lands and resources, leading to decisions that ignore Indigenous perspectives and maintain settler control. Much of this is made possible because the state uses notions of “inclusion” to build policies and programs *about* Indigenous peoples that are created and informed *by* settlers, *for* settlers. As two settlers writing about critiques that we think other settlers need to hear, we recognize the potential for a similar danger. However, we attempt to shift the academic gaze that often falls on Indigenous communities toward our own communities of settler activists and academics, while taking guidance from the work of Indigenous scholars and activists.<sup>1</sup>

From this perspective, we ask ourselves and other settlers the following question: how can a national food policy structure itself and its processes differently? We suggest that an answer begins with understanding that food justice work is not about including those who are marginalized in nation-state projects spearheaded by white settler people. Rather, it is about supporting the work and resistance happening for over 500 years within Indigenous communities, including dismantling settler government structures. We also suggest that settlers, ourselves included, radically reimagine politics in order to better engage in nation-to-nation relationships, taking guidance from Indigenous governance systems about what these relationships might look like, as Simpson has argued (2011). Moreover, following Corntassel and Gaudry (2014) we suggest that it is necessary for settlers to understand how everyday actions make us complicit in—and help to reproduce—the structures and institutions that marginalize certain communities in the first place.

### *Giving voice*

Here we want to address the frequent use of the phrase “giving voice” when referring to the “inclusion” of marginalized groups. For us, this phrase fails to recognize the obvious truth that marginalized communities have their own voices, and have continually articulated the most important and complex understandings of oppression. The phrase also fails to recognize that dominant groups are often the root of the problem: that it is settler ears who refuse to listen, often due to our positionality within structures of colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy. Furthermore, “giving voice” suggests that dominant groups, rather than marginalized communities, produce liberatory politics. In contrast, we suggest discarding moves to “give voice” and instead underline the possibilities of breaking down structures that work to deafen ears in the first place, while taking action that is directed by the struggles of marginalized communities.

Indigenous activists and knowledge holders have very clearly articulated how Indigenous food systems are the basis of all people’s food systems on Turtle Island, emphasizing the ways that food is sacred (Coté, 2016; Manson, 2013; Martens, 2015; Morrison, 2011; Peoples’ Food Policy Project [PFPP], 2011, p. 10). Indigenous peoples have also clearly underlined how colonialism has undermined Indigenous food systems through the creation of public and private

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<sup>1</sup> Strega and Brown (2015) suggest that academics “reverse the gaze” as one aspect of anti-oppressive research.

land as well as economic projects, such as “hydro development that prevents the migration of fish” (PFPP, 2011, p. 10). In spite of colonial projects and policies that undermine Indigenous access to food systems, Indigenous peoples continue to feed their communities. For example, in the Kawartha Lakes region of Ontario, the Nishnaabeg harvest and process Manoomin (wild rice) despite difficulties related to pollution, private property, changing water levels, and settler entitlement to waterways (Simpson, 2016). Similarly, after succeeding in negotiating their Treaty hunting rights, which is limited to six days per year in Short Hills Provincial Park, the Haudenosaunee’s annual harvest has been met with sharp criticism and protest from the white settler community (Fraser, 2016). Meanwhile, the Haudenosaunee continue to articulate the role that the traditional hunt plays in Indigenous food sovereignty, self-determination, and resurgence.

In these ways and many more, Indigenous nations continue to articulate and engage with their food systems, identifying issues and building more equitable sustainable food systems. Why then does the discourse of “giving voice” to Indigenous peoples persist within discussions about a national food policy? Why are so many settlers unaware of the rich and varied discussions about these issues by Indigenous peoples? Following numerous Indigenous scholars, we suggest that settler colonialism is based in the logic that “Indigenous peoples ultimately disappear as peoples,” and part of the way this logic expresses itself is through colonial structures that work to deafen settler ears (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 123). Settler moves to “give voice” to Indigenous peoples, are therefore based in logics that attempt to erase Indigenous presence, resistance, and knowledge. These moves also contribute to settler colonial logics and perceptions that historicize Indigenous food provisioning as a thing of the past or, at best, emphasize the affects of colonialism but not the 500 years of Indigenous resistance and resurgence.

Meanwhile, settlers use various means to undermine Indigenous struggles to maintain their food systems, including settler protests over traditional hunting and the destruction of land and habitat. As well, settler institutions demand that Indigenous peoples access their foods through the same unsustainable industrial food system that settlers built and benefit from. For a food policy to meaningfully shift this irony in ways that prioritize Indigenous resurgence, the *structure* of the policy development process needs to be deconstructed in order to be Indigenous-centred, no matter how uncomfortable ceding power may feel for the colonial state. Additionally, we underline the problematics of scaling a policy at the nation-state level as it reifies Canadian state power over Indigenous nations who have developed diverse food provisioning practices and protocols over many centuries, and which are specific to place.

### *Involvement*

Thirdly, we want to tease out some of the tensions around settler calls to involve Indigenous peoples in developing governmental policies, such as a national food policy. In one sense, it would be ideal for settlers to develop policy in collaboration with Indigenous nations. However, when settlers ask for (and increasingly expect) this involvement, we need to be clear about the

context and relation within which we are asking for Indigenous involvement. The Canadian government's relationship to Indigenous nations continues to be one of violence rooted in the logic of Indigenous elimination: settler colonialism “destroys to replace” with the primary goal of obtaining land and denying Indigenous self-determination (Wolfe, 2006). Settler colonial logics allow settlers to feel “at home” (Morgensen, 2011), as though we/they have rightful claim to land and resources.

This entitlement is operationalized and made material through mechanisms such as settler legal systems, property regimes, and education systems that reinforce the belief that Turtle Island was vacant and the Canadian state is legitimate. In these ways, settler colonialism uses “policies of direct extermination, displacement, or assimilation” to erase Indigenous nationhood and sovereignty “so that settler nations can seamlessly take their place” (Lawrence and Dua, 2005, p. 123). For example, in a context where Indigenous peoples are only recently considered to be “included” in the category of new farmers and within a nation-state that considers agriculture to be “king” (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada [AAFC], 2015), the seemingly innocuous claims that “new farmers” and “youth and young farmers” are “the future of Canada's agriculture and agri-food sector” (AAFC, 2016; FSC 2016c) positions white settler farmers as “the future,” while ignoring both the agrarian and non-agrarian food provisioning practices of Indigenous peoples and the futures they are building.

It is therefore important for settlers to understand how state calls for the involvement of Indigenous peoples in white western society are often violently enforced through policies of assimilation. As noted earlier, while government attempts to involve Indigenous peoples in agriculture programs designed to “civilize” and control, governmental policies have actively prevented and eroded the viability of Indigenous agriculture while simultaneously blaming Indigenous peoples for their failure to succeed at farming (Carter, 1990). Policies of assimilation with the goal of elimination continue today, “couched in the language of development, opportunity, and incorporation, which is characterised by a preoccupation with inclusion rather than a logic of separation” (Burnett et al., 2015, p. 3). Burnett, Hay, and Chambers (2015) explain how this elimination is apparent in government health and nutrition programs that attempt to maintain control over Indigenous foodways, while at the same time blaming Indigenous communities for their inability to choose the “right” foods and participate in food systems based on the industrial market economy.

It is therefore crucial to consider what it means to ask for Indigenous involvement in the development of government policies. For settlers, involvement might feel like a step toward reconciliation. However, are settlers actually giving up power if we enter into a process with pre-formed frameworks, scales, and limits in place? Additionally, how might these frameworks, scales, and limits impact Indigenous work around decolonization that involves repatriating Indigenous land and ways of life? Regarding Indigenous involvement in national food policy development, it is essential for settlers to ask: a national strategy for what and for whom? It is often assumed that national policies address everyone's needs (typically couched in vague language such as “the public”), when in reality, that would be impossible without, for instance,

demanding equal rights for migrant food workers and returning lands to Indigenous peoples, demands that may feel indeterminate and uncomfortable for many white settlers.

In writing this article, we ask ourselves and our settler food communities: what is the purpose of Indigenous involvement? Is it to reaffirm settler ideas and ways forward? Does Indigenous involvement open settlers to challenging the legitimacy of the settler state and settler entitlement to lands and “rights” to determine food systems? Or does Indigenous involvement merely allow settlers to feel better about processes we control, lending legitimacy while soothing settler conscience? If in the process of developing a national food strategy, settlers are looking for affirmation or are unwilling to challenge our “right” to define food systems in Canada, we risk performing what Tuck and Yang (2012) call “settler moves to innocence.” These moves “are those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all” (p. 14). Instead, settlers are often credited “for being so sensitive or self-aware,” thus increasing their own credibility, professional standing and ability to work with marginalized groups (ibid.). Yet, as Tuck and Yang explain, settler moves to innocence “only serve the settler” (ibid.).

### *Possible ways forward*

What does this mean for those interested in developing food policy in Canada while working within current colonial structures? We suggest critically questioning settler desires and discourses to “include, give voice to, and involve” Indigenous peoples. We also echo Indigenous activists and academics who emphasize that process is vital. For example, the *First Principles Protocol for Building Cross-Cultural Relationships* (FPP) emphasizes the importance of establishing principles for “guid[ing] the work of individuals and organizations involved in the People’s Food Policy Project” (2010). These principles are meant to establish a process, or a way for people to work together and build relationships. This protocol is a “living document” with the possibility for continued revisions, demonstrating the importance of figuring out how we will relate to one another *before* beginning to speak about policy.

Questions that might be helpful for settlers to consider when thinking about establishing protocol and process may include: How do we work in a way that respects nation-to-nation relationships? And perhaps more uncomfortably, how do settlers build meaningful relationships with Indigenous nations and lands, especially when decolonization becomes, as Tuck and Yang (2012) describe, incommensurable with settler processes and objectives, requiring white settlers to cede power, land, and privilege? In thinking through these questions, the FPP (2010) acknowledges that colonial injustices are ongoing while emphasizing Indigenous self-determination and resurgence. The FPP also states that “the relationship between governments and Indigenous people is colonial in nature” and that colonialism is a global phenomenon related to neoliberal economies and trade policies. In this context, the protocol commits to changing these institutions and engaging in “activities and policy creation that is not *about* Indigenous



peoples' food systems, but that *learns from and is informed by* the experiences and expertise gained through a multi-millennia of practice.”

From our perspective, moving food work forward is premised on the actions and resistance of Indigenous nations, and directed by their visions of liberation and decolonization. This might mean creating a food policy for Canada that works together but separate from Indigenous nations and their frameworks for food sovereignty, or it may mean multiple regional policies are developed by different Indigenous nations (including those already developed). Additionally, it likely involves learning from the transformative work of groups such as the Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty in British Columbia, the Northern Manitoba Food, Culture, and Community Collaborative, and other grassroots groups involved in this work. For example, the Indigenous Circle of the PFPP lays out several policy suggestions including giving back and designating lands for Indigenous hunting, fishing, and gathering, prioritizing Indigenous access over recreational land use, and providing comprehensive funding and resources to Indigenous nations to regenerate their diverse and varied food systems (FSC, 2011). However, the Circle also notes, “while these are short-term food security solutions, permanent solutions must lie within the domain of inherent sovereignty to our lands and ways of life” (ibid.). Following this understanding of government policy as a short-term tool for addressing immediate issues of access, we emphasize the *impossibility* of a national Canadian food policy as a space for decolonization precisely because it is a policy overseen and enforced by a colonial government. Decolonizing such a policy is impossible without repatriating lands to Indigenous nations and ceding governing power and jurisdiction to Indigenous nations.

As the People's Food Policy Project stresses, Indigenous peoples speak for themselves, an assertion that applies to all aspects of this discussion. Significantly, the addition of a seventh pillar of food sovereignty—food is sacred—can guide our work through its emphasis that “food, water, soil, and air are not viewed as ‘resources’ but as sources of life itself” (PFPP, p. 9). This pillar demands that settlers reimagine relationships to land and food, particularly in relation to regimes that require these to be treated as commodities, including private property regimes, production-based food systems, and market economies. To advance these recommendations, settlers have a responsibility to “deepen our understanding and work towards respectful relationships” (FPP, 2010). Pragmatically, this necessitates a process that identifies and moves away from colonial assumptions around policy structure and governance, which must start by asking hard questions about what ceding colonial power requires, both on paper and in practice.

Documents such as the *PFPP Discussion Paper on Indigenous Food Sovereignty* (FSC, 2011) and the *FPP* (FSC, 2010) provide space to consider how these conversations have developed, and offer insights for moving forward. The challenge is how we, as people who are non-Indigenous to this land, resist the structures of settler colonialism that benefit us in various (and often deceiving) ways. Settlers have a responsibility to hold uncomfortable conversations and consider painful options and, further, to remain reflexive about how deeply and unconsciously privilege can permeate within us. Rooted in this reflexive approach, settlers have a responsibility to support Indigenous struggles for land and food systems, rather than continuing

to forward settler visions for future food systems. Our hope is that through these personal and collective actions, settlers can move (and often stumble) towards spaces that embody solidarity, respect, and resistance.

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