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Commentary

"Moving from understanding to action on food security in Inuit Nunangat": ArcticNet, 5th December 2022, Toronto, ON

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Abstract

This Commentary details key challenges and opportunities relating to the promotion of food security in Inuit Nunangat, discussed as part of the event "Moving from understanding to action on food security in Inuit Nunangat", convened at the ArcticNet Annual Scientific Meeting on 5th December 2022 in Toronto. The purpose of the event was to explore opportunities for action on food security in northern communities, and to mobilize knowledge on current and future food security programming. A range of stakeholders from across Inuit Nunangat and Canada were involved, including representatives from Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Nutrition North Canada, territorial, regional, and community food security co-ordinators and government delegates, academics, and community members. Points of discussion across the day included the integration of culturally appropriate country foods into food programming; the importance of human and financial resources to program success; interactions between COVID-19, climate change, and food security; challenges relating to the classification of "households" in food security surveys; and the crucial importance of school food programs for reducing food and income stress on families.

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Résumé

Cette analyse présente les principaux défis et opportunités liés à la promotion de la sécurité alimentaire dans l'Inuit Nunangat qui ont été discutés dans le cadre de l'évènement « Passer de la compréhension à l'action en matière de sécurité alimentaire dans l'Inuit Nunangat », à l'occasion de la rencontre scientifique annuelle d'ArcticNet, le 5 décembre 2022, à Toronto. L'objectif de cet évènement était d'explorer les possibilités d'action en matière de sécurité alimentaire dans les communautés nordiques et de mobiliser les connaissances autour des programmes de sécurité alimentaire actuels et futurs. De nombreuses parties prenantes de l'Inuit Nunangat et du Canada y ont participé, notamment des représentants de l'organisation Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami et du programme Nutrition Nord Canada, des coordonnateurs territoriaux, régionaux et communautaires de la sécurité alimentaire, des représentants gouvernementaux, des universitaires et des membres de la communauté. Parmi les sujets de discussion abordés, citons l'intégration d'aliments traditionnels culturellement appropriés dans les programmes alimentaires, l'importance des ressources humaines et financières dans le succès des programmes, les interactions entre COVID-19, changements climatiques et sécurité alimentaire, les défis liés à la classification des « ménages » dans les enquêtes sur la sécurité alimentaire et le rôle crucial des programmes alimentaires scolaires pour réduire le stress lié à l'alimentation et au revenu des familles.

Introduction

According to the most recent 2017 Aboriginal Peoples Survey, 76 percent of Inuit over the age of fifteen living in Inuit Nunangat (the Inuit homeland in Canada) are experiencing either "marginal," "low," or "very low" food security (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami [ITK], 2021). Although a wide range of food initiatives exist, both in the form of community-based programming and federally funded subsidies, ensuring adequate access to culturally and nutritionally appropriate food in the region remains a considerable challenge.

This Commentary summarizes the key discussion points from a day long side event, 'Moving from understanding to action on food security in Inuit Nunangat,' convened on 5th December 2022 as part of the ArcticNet Annual Scientific Meeting in Toronto, Canada (Naylor et al., 2023a). The purpose of the event was to mobilize knowledge on current and future food security programming, and to explore opportunities for action on food security in northern communities. There were fifty-one attendees in total (thirty-six in person, fifteen online), comprising stakeholders from across Inuit Nunangat and Canada, including community, regional, and territorial organizations and government representatives, academics, and regional food security coordinators. Activities included presentations on program updates by Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) and Nutrition North Canada (NNC), regional updates from food champions working within community programs and initiatives, and breakout discussion groups. This timely event followed the recent publication of ITK's

Inuit Nunangat Food Security Strategy and its forthcoming Implementation Plan, recent enhancements to the NNC subsidy program, and the renewal of federal pandemic funding for food programming and subsidies. The meeting proceedings and agenda can be found in Naylor et al. (2023a). This Commentary specifically highlights the challenges and opportunities for promoting food security in Inuit Nunangat discussed throughout the day. While attendees recognized poverty, low income, and high food prices as crucial drivers of food insecurity in Inuit Nunangat and advocated for income-based solutions (Arrigada, 2017), discussants primarily focussed their contributions on community-based approaches to measuring and addressing food insecurity. Specific themes from the day included the incorporation of culturally appropriate country foods into food programming; the importance of human and financial resources to program success; interactions between COVID-19, climate change, and food security; challenges relating to the classification of "households" in food security surveys; and the crucial importance of school food programs. These and other points are explicated below.

Measuring the prevalence of food insecurity in a manner appropriate to northern communities remains a challenge, particularly when attempting to represent the importance of country foods

Accurate data that reflect the complex realities of northern food systems are crucial for effective food policy and program development. Discussants recognized the limitations of Health Canada's Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM), which is the most common tool for measuring food security in Inuit Nunangat (Health Canada, 2007). Of particular concern was the survey's designation of a "household" as all people living within the same dwelling. It was noted that classifying households as a socioeconomic unit in this manner does not reflect norms relating to food or resource distribution in many communities, whereby food is often shared between multiple homes and across generations according to kinship ties and cultural expectations (Harder & Wenzel, 2012; Collings et al., 2016). Secondly, as the HFSSM has remained largely unchanged since its initial inclusion as part of the 2005 annual Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), several participants questioned whether it had kept pace with new conceptual developments and understandings of what it means to be food secure in northern food environments (Inuit Circumpolar Council Alaska [ICC-Alaska], 2015, 2020; Naylor et al., 2023b; Zimmerman et al., 2023). For example, the module's focus on "money" when asking about the procurement of foods may occlude other key factors or resources that can affect food access in Inuit Nunangat, such as time available for engaging in harvesting, the availability of hunting equipment (e.g., ATVs, ammunition), social relationships, and Indigenous knowledge (Ready, 2016; Naylor et al., 2021a; Ford, 2009). Participants felt that this biased the survey away from the country food aspect of northern food systems, which remains nutritionally and culturally significant in many communities (Wenzel, 2019; Aker et al., 2022). Based on these limitations, discussants raised concerns over how metrics derived from the HFSSM subsequently inform policy approaches and program evaluation in Inuit Nunangat. Participants welcomed the

development of the more nuanced and culturally appropriate tool within the 2017 *Qanuilirpitaa?* Nunavik Inuit Health Survey, which makes reference to "resources" instead of "money" when asking about food access, specifying that these might include "equipment to go hunting/fishing/gathering with, or relations/connections you have that you can get food from when you need" (Furgal et al., 2021; Hamel, et al., 2020, p.248). Aspects of the survey are set to form the basis of the Inuit Nunangat-wide *Qanuippitaa?* National Inuit Health Survey (QNIHS), which is currently under way.

Human resources (both paid and volunteer) and infrastructure capacity are some of the greatest limiting factors when facilitating food security programs

Discussants voiced concern that a lack of long-term, sustainable funding sources limits investment in infrastructure (e.g., kitchens and appliances) and leads to an overreliance on poorly paid, part-time, and volunteer roles when developing and facilitating community food programming. High staff turnovers lead to a loss of institutional knowledge around funding applications, creating challenges when securing extensions, finding alternate sources of funding, or producing annual reports. Limited financing was further seen to reduce the ability of programs to involve key stakeholders at certain stages of project development; as a consequence, it was felt that this could curtail the integration of diverse perspectives into food security programs (e.g., those who have different experiences based on age, gender, or multiple dimensions of intersectionality), constraining their scope and breadth and their ability to maximize their impact for all members of communities. For these reasons, flexible project funding and community autonomy around budgeting, development, reporting, and deployment were viewed as essential to the success of food programs.

A complex regulatory landscape is creating obstacles to the provision of country foods in institutions and for the formalized distribution (sharing or selling) of country foods within communities, although this varies considerably by region

Attendees discussed the importance of providing culturally appropriate and healthy country foods (received through purchase or donations) in institutional settings (such as hospitals, schools, and long-term care facilities) and through community food programming. However, regional representatives noted that federal and provincial food safety regulations and legal obstacles preventing the sale of country foods create barriers to serving or distributing country foods in these environments. Regulatory barriers can have knock-on health effects, particularly when considering the importance of eating country foods for socioemotional wellbeing and their nutrient density compared to retail foods (Ford et al., 2016; Pufall et al., 2011). A positive example of institutionalizing country foods was given as the Inuvialuit Country Food Processing Plant (ICFPP), an Inuvialuit Community Economic Development Organization (ICEDO) initiative. Having sought the correct permits and inspections, ICEDO was recently able to donate country foods processed by the ICFPP for the first time to The Children's First Society, a daycare and child support centre in Inuvik, in addition to several elders' homes across the community.

Breakfast and lunch programs are operating in many schools across Inuit Nunangat; they are considered essential for ensuring student wellbeing and may reduce food and income stress on families

The prevalence of child food insecurity continues to be a concern for Inuit Nunangat, making the provision of breakfast and lunch programs in schools particularly important (ITK, 2021; Huet et al., 2012, 2017). Discussants—several of whom were involved in school food initiatives—pointed out that programs prioritize nutrition when deciding which foods to provide, aiming to integrate country foods into their provision or purchase healthy foods from community stores. Past research has suggested that adults in food-insecure households may forego meals to prioritize feeding children or other family members (Beaumier & Ford, 2010; Egeland et al., 2011). Several participants considered whether school food programs in Inuit Nunangat might therefore reduce food or income stress for some households with children more generally by increasing the number of meals available to families each day. There is a nascent body of research highlighting the importance of school food and snack programs for nutrient intake among children in First Nations communities (Gates et al., 2013, 2016; Skinner et al., 2012; Browne et al., 2020), yet there appears to be limited data or monitoring of the impacts of school food programs on child or household food security in in Inuit Nunangat (Kenny et al., 2018), representing an area for possible future research. Funding for programs is often channeled through each region's respective school or health and social services board. However, it was pointed out that budgets are often overstretched and since the pandemic there has been an increase in demand for programming. Despite its inclusion as an "action point" in the Federal Food Policy for Canada white paper, Canada remains the only country in the G7 without a nationally harmonized school food program. Representatives from Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami highlighted that the organization's 2023 pre-budget submission included an ask of $1.66 billion over fifteen years to develop an Inuit Nunangat School Food Program, which aims to create Inuit Nunangat-wide school food programming, covering the costs of "food, labour and training, operations and maintenance, and infrastructure." (ITK, 2022).

Complex factors in Inuit Nunangat continue to intersect with and affect food insecurity prevalence

The COVID-19 pandemic created additional obstacles to improving food security in Inuit Nunangat by disrupting food programs and food transportation, exacerbating cost inflation, and increasing unemployment rates (ITK, 2020). While some programs (e.g., Nutrition North Canada) received additional funding to assist communities in dealing with the immediate and knock-on effects of the pandemic and have seen some success in combatting food access issues, attendees raised concerns that additional funding may not be extended long-term despite the continued impacts of the pandemic.

Climate change was also cited as a concern. This included its effects on country food systems and animal populations, such as altering species migration patterns and health (and therefore availability), its impacts on the safety of traditional means of food preservation and storage (e.g., smoking, drying, traditional cellars), and its potential to affect the safety of hunters when they are out on the land due to changing and less predictable land, ice, ocean, and weather conditions (Yoshikawa et al., 2022; Harper et al., 2015; Naylor et al., 2021b; Bunce et al., 2016; Clark et al., 2016). Discussants also noted the compounding effects of climate change on socioeconomic and political factors engendered by historic and contemporary colonization. For example, it was suggested that changing species availabilities in the future might mean the further supplantation of country foods by nutrient-poor and culturally insignificant market foods, contributing to the socioeconomically and politically driven context of the dietary transition for northern communities (Little et al., 2020; Damman et al., 2008)

Paths forward and concluding remarks

This Commentary presents highlights from the side event 'Moving from understanding to action on food security in Inuit Nunangat', funded by an ArcticNet Project (grant no.P74) of the same name. The topics discussed above illustrate the salience of current policy directions and actions taken by the federal government and Inuit organizations, including plans for a National School Food Program in the Federal Food Policy for Canada (Agriculture and Agri-food Canada, 2019), ICEDOs creation of the ICFPP, or the Inuit Nunangat School Food Program, for which ITK requested funding in their 2023 pre-budget submission to the government of Canada. However, wider issues relating to limited funding for infrastructural and human resources, the measurement and conception of what it means to be food secure in Inuit Nunangat, and the complex regulatory landscape that exists for integrating country foods into programming in institutional settings, remain obstacles that require further exploration and attention by both funders and policy makers.

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Angus Naylor is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the School of Public Health and Social Policy at the University of Victoria, having previously completed their doctorate at the University of Leeds. They are also a subject editor for the journal Regional Environmental Change. Their research explores the political ecology of food and foodways, conceptualisations of climate change vulnerability and adaptation, and determinants of hunting group productivity in Inuit Nunangat.

Tiff-Annie Kenny is an assistant professor in the Department of Social and Preventive Medicine at the Laval University Faculty of Medicine. Her research focuses on environmental and social determinants of health, with a particular focus among Indigenous communities in the Arctic and other coastal regions of Canada. As a visitor in these spaces, she remains dedicated to approaches which affirm local knowledge, governance, and leadership in research.

Chris Furgal is an Associate Professor and Co-Director of the Indigenous Environmental Studies & Sciences Program at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario. He has a multidisciplinary background in natural, social and health sciences and studies and

holds a cross-appointment to the Chanie Wenjack School of Indigenous Studies and the Trent School for the Environment. His research and teaching focus on environmental determinants of Indigenous health. He has had the privilege of learning from and with Inuit and other Arctic communities through his research on food security and safety, environmental change and health, among other topics, for more than 30 years.

Dorothy Beale is a graduate student at the University of Victoria, she holds a BA in Global/International Studies and is currently studying for a Master of Arts in the Social Dimensions of Health. Dorothy has previously been a Junior Policy Analyst at Indigenous Services Canada. Her current research interests include women's changing roles in Inuit society and Indigenous Peoples' food security.

Duncan William Warltier is a food systems researcher with the Centre for Indigenous Peoples' Nutrition and Environment. His work focuses on financial metrics used in the study of food systems, as well as legally protected rates of harvest.

Marie-Hélène Carignan holds a master's degree in marine biology and is currently a master's student in epidemiology at Université Laval, her work focuses on diet modelling and food security in Nunavik. Her experience in environmental research projects with the Cree communities in Eeyou Istchee (James Bay) and long-term interest in northern research brought her attention to the complexity and importance of traditional food systems and shaped her evolving definition of Health beyond the boundaries of the human body.

Lynn Blackwood is a Nunatsiavut Beneficiary born and raised in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, NL. Lynn completed her Bachelor of Science in Human Nutrition at St. Francis Xavier University and her Dietetic Internship with the Health Care Corporation of St John's, now Eastern Health in St. John's NL. Lynn works with the Nunatsiavut Government as the Food Security Programs manager focusing on the Food Security file and is one of few Indigenous Dietitians in Canada. They have worked over 20 years as a Dietitian in the Northwest Territories, British Columbia, and Newfoundland and Labrador. Lynn is a jury member of the Canadian Space Agency's Deep Space Food Challenge as well as a director of the Dietitians of Canada and Canadian Foundation of Dietetic Research board. In her spare time, Lynn enjoys cooking, reading and exercise as well as spending time with her husband, daughter and two dogs.

Brian Wade is an Inuvialuit beneficiary, a hunter and fisherman, and Director of the Inuvialuit Economic Development Organisation (ICEDO) with the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation. He lives in Inuvik and loves living off the land. Making sure that our land is taken care of is important to him as he lives a subsistence lifestyle. He enjoys fishing, hunting and being out at his cabin with his family. He is passionate about the Inuvialuit people and Inuvialuit culture.

Gabriela Goodman is the Territorial Director of Population Health for the Government of Nunavut and holds a Master of Science degree with a focus on Population and Public Health from McGill University. In their role they are responsible for ensuring that territorial health promotion programs and services are mandated and delivered in accordance with the Public Health Act, and works to support the implementation of the Nunavut Public Health Strategy and the Nunavut Wellness Agreement.

Jordyn Stafford is the Food Security Manager for the Nunavik Regional Health Board, where she works alongside community food projects to strengthen food security through an Inuit-lead approach. She completed her studies on sustainable food systems and environmental science at Dalhousie University. Jordyn's passion both in work and life, sits at the intersection of food and the environment.

Matthew Little is an Assistant Professor in the School of Public Health and Social Policy at the University of Victoria. His research examines food security and nutrition-related health inequities in Canadian and global contexts. He is a settler of Irish and English heritage currently living in the ancestral and unceded territory of the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) Nation.

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