



## Research Article

# Colonial approaches in Canadian national food policy development: Carving our space for Indigenous partnership

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## Abstract

The Government of Canada has claimed that the relationship with Indigenous peoples, that of First Nations, Inuit and Métis people, is their most important relationship. The rhetoric around reconciliation and Indigenous-Crown relationships are a major directive within federal policy. Using the theoretical framework of discursive institutionalism, this journal article looks at how this approach has, or has not, shaped the development of a national food policy. Discursive institutionalism is critical to understanding the complex relationships and perspectives embedded in national food policy development. Looking at the federal

government's reports, discourse, and actions, this article highlights how Indigenous people continue to be seen as stakeholders, as opposed to partners in nation-to-nation relationships. This paper analyzing the government's approach to food policy stresses that the government recognizes the importance of having a national food policy, as well as acknowledging that Indigenous people need to be a part of the process. Indigenous peoples are distinct peoples with inherent rights that must be recognized and supported by the Crown, and that understanding needs to be a part of all policies and laws that can impact Indigenous peoples and communities.

**Keywords:** Canadian food policy; discursive institutionalism; Indigenous food; national food policy; policy considerations; Truth and Reconciliation

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DOI: [10.15353/cfs-rcea.v11i3.700](https://doi.org/10.15353/cfs-rcea.v11i3.700)

ISSN: 2292-3071

## Résumé

Le gouvernement du Canada a affirmé que la relation avec les peuples autochtones – les Premières Nations, les Inuits et les Métis – était sa relation la plus importante. La rhétorique autour de la réconciliation et des rapports entre les Autochtones et la Couronne est une directive majeure de la politique fédérale. En utilisant le cadre théorique de l’institutionnalisme discursif, cet article examine comment cette approche a, ou n’a pas, façonné l’élaboration d’une politique alimentaire nationale. L’institutionnalisme discursif est essentiel pour comprendre les relations et les perspectives complexes inhérentes à l’élaboration des politiques alimentaires nationales. En examinant les rapports, le discours et les actions du gouvernement

fédéral, cet article met en évidence le fait que les populations autochtones continuent d’être considérées comme des parties prenantes, plutôt que comme des partenaires dans des relations de nation à nation. Cet article souligne, en analysant l’approche du gouvernement en matière de politique alimentaire, que celui-ci reconnaît l’importance d’une telle politique nationale ainsi que la nécessité que les peuples autochtones participent au processus. Les peuples autochtones sont des peuples distincts dotés de droits inhérents qui doivent être reconnus et soutenus par la Couronne. Cette compréhension doit faire partie de toutes les politiques et lois susceptibles d’avoir un impact sur les peuples et les communautés autochtones.

## Introduction

In Canada, the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis—the Indigenous Peoples of this land—have a distinct constitutional relationship with the Crown. This relationship, including existing Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> and treaty rights, is recognized and affirmed in section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982* (*Constitution Act, 1982*). Under Section 35, Indigenous communities have unique rights and interests as peoples with distinct cultures, governments, histories, languages, perspectives, needs, and aspirations. Section 35 also promises that Indigenous nations will become partners in Confederation based on a fair and just reconciliation between Indigenous Peoples and the Crown.

Since 2008, Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (CIRNAC) has assisted in coordination and has advised federal officials on the duty-to-consult (DC). DC is an integral part of federal government activity regarding regulatory changes, licencing and authorizations of permits, operational decisions, policy development, and negotiation. It may be referenced as part of statutory obligations, provisions in land claims agreements, and consultation protocols (CIRNAC, 2024b). The government of Canada recognizes that Indigenous self-government and laws are critical to Canada’s future and that Indigenous perspectives and rights must be incorporated in all aspects of this relationship (Government of Canada, 2021). When properly designed and executed, “consultation in the context of the legal duty can support reconciliation through relationship building with Indigenous Peoples” (CIRNAC, 2024a, para 4).

DC and reconciliation in food policy development speaks to the needs and history of Indigenous People. How food is framed points to essential facets in the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and the federal government. Comprehensive policy development proactively identifies and considers the impacts of the policy. In turn, the operational side of policy development is vital for determining if and how the internal workings of the Canadian state support DC and reconciliation when developing food policy.

In 2023, national Indigenous organizations, including Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami<sup>2</sup> (ITK, 2023), Assembly of First Nations<sup>3</sup> (AFN; Forster, 2023), and the Native Women’s Association of Canada<sup>4</sup> (NWAC; 2023) argued the federal government continues to come up short in advancing reconciliation. This observation echoes the argument that it is impossible to dismantle colonial relations within a settler state (Alfred, 2009; Coulthard, 2014; Maracle, 1996; Simpson, 2011; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Reflecting on national food policy, Sarah Rotz and Lauren Wood Kepkiewicz (2018, p. 250) explained “that decolonization requires Indigenous self-determination and land repatriation to Indigenous nations,” arguing “as long as settler governments continue to claim sovereignty over Indigenous land and nations...it is impossible to decolonize a national food policy that is administered by the federal government.”

*Food Policy for Canada: Everyone at the Table!* (FPC; AAFC, 2019) is an example of consultation with reconciliation and the DC as federally mandated policy priorities. This research considered what DC,

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<sup>1</sup> Aboriginal is the legal term for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people in Canada, particularly around issues related to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. It will be used when appropriate (Department of Justice Canada [DJC], 2018).

<sup>2</sup> ITK is a non-profit national advocacy organization representing 65,000 Inuit across the Inuit Nunangat (ITK, 2017, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> AFN is the national organization representing over 900,000 First Nations people (AFN, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> The NWAC is a national non-profit Indigenous organization representing a political voice of Indigenous (First Nations, Metis, Inuit) women throughout Canada (NWAC, 2018).

reconciliation and a nation-to-nation partnership(s) looked like in Canada's political institutions when developing FPC. This paper focuses on the federal public service: Did Agriculture and Agri-Food (AAFC) include processes and spaces in the policy's development that supported DC and reconciliation frameworks? While public consultations included Indigenous Peoples, we argue Indigenous voices were situated as stakeholders, which did not demonstrate respectful nation-to-nation relations.

The paper unfolds as follows. First, this research's theoretical framing, methodology, and methods are presented. Then, colonialism and the historical relations

between Indigenous communities and the federal government are highlighted, scoping to the legal obligations central to DC and food policy. Next, the process for developing FPC is presented. The information presented is focused on engagement between AAFC, national Indigenous advocacy organizations, and Indigenous communities. The final section discusses key observations and recommendations for more meaningful nation-to-nation consultation in Canadian food policy.

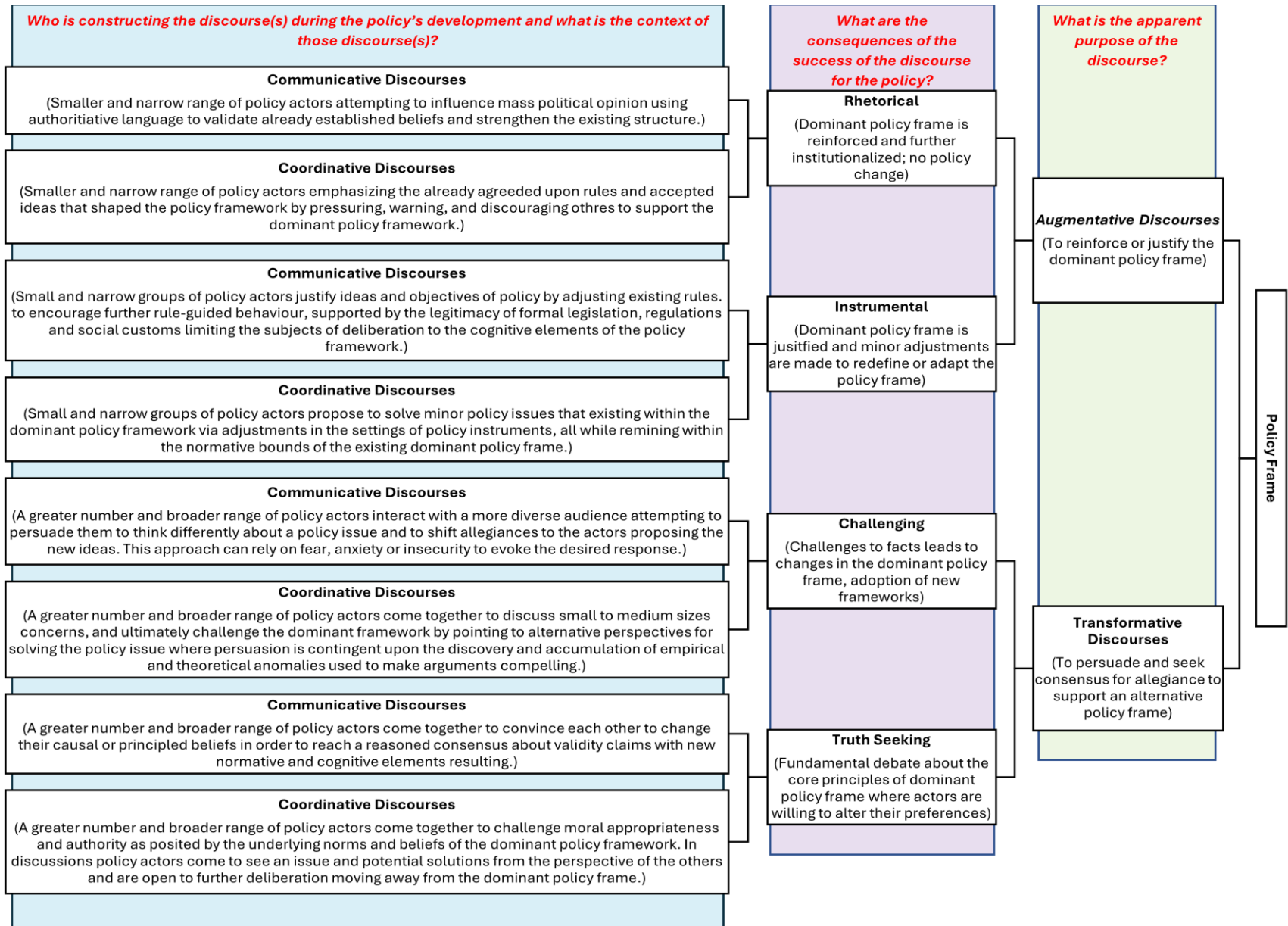
## Theoretical lens, analytical framework, and methodology

Discursive institutionalism is a practical analytical framework for studying the complexities and power dynamics of food policy development in Canada (Coulas, 2021). Discursive institutionalism offers an interdisciplinary perspective for explaining food policy development within Canada's complex institutional environments by considering how ideas and the way those ideas are communicated influence decision-making. It also provides the means for studying transformative power in institutions and policy making (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016; Coulas, 2021). Discursive institutionalism considers how norms and preferences persist or change (Schmidt, 2010). For FPC, the discursive interactions and hierarchies between actors and consideration of political institutions' influence on actors and vice versa reveal enabling factors and obstacles in policy development.

To identify and assess the conceptual and institutional elements, an analytical framework (Figure 1) was developed.<sup>5</sup> Figure 1 rests on three questions: 1) Who is constructing the discourse(s) and what is the context of those discourse(s)?; 2) What are the consequences of the success of these discourses?; and 3) What is the apparent purpose of these discourses? (Coulas, 2021). The first question draws out normative and cognitive elements found in policy. Data was categorized as coordinative discourse if it demonstrated policy actors engaged in creating, deliberating, arguing, bargaining, and reaching an agreement on policies or as communicative discourse if it showed an attempt to influence mass political opinion and engagement with the public to elicit support or disapproval for a specific policy frame.

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<sup>5</sup> The analytical framework was previously published in Coulas 2021. Tenets from Vandna Bhatia and William Coleman's (2003, p.720-721) *Framework for Analyzing Political Discourse and Policy Change* were foundational for this framework.



The second question then considers different kinds of influence and power actors held and executed (or withheld) in shaping policy. As the research focuses on the causal forces of discourse and how communicative or coordinative discourses can reinforce or alter an existing policy framework, the data was categorized under rhetorical, instrumental, challenging, or truth-seeking discourses. The third question was addressed once the data was classified: Was continuity or transformative policy change observed?

Between 2016 and 2020, data was gathered via (a) fifty-nine semi-structured interviews,<sup>6</sup> (b) participant

observation, and (c) analysis of 331 government and stakeholder documents. This research was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Partnership Grant, Food, Locally Embedded, Globally Engaged (FLEdGE). These methods were employed to reveal power dynamics within policy actors' experiences during the development of FPC and to provide triangulation for analyzing the data. The overarching methodology<sup>7</sup> was discourse analysis—a qualitative text analysis method (Schmidt, 2011).

## The intersections of duty-to-consult and food policy development in Canada

DC is crucial for supporting Indigenous food sovereignty. In Canada, there is a need to address food insecurity within Indigenous communities, as 30.7 percent of off-reserve Indigenous People experience food insecurity (Tarasuk et al., 2021). Further, 30.9 percent of Indigenous People over the age of sixteen experience some form of food insecurity—whether marginal, moderate, or severe—while 24.1 percent of Indigenous Peoples experience moderate or severe food insecurity (Statistics Canada, 2022). These statistics stand in stark contrast to the general population of Canada, with 18.4 percent of all people in Canada experiencing some form of food insecurity, while 12.9 percent of people experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity (Statistics Canada, 2022). This highlights the critical need for a holistic approach to ensuring the food security of Indigenous People across Canada, regardless of residency.

However, government-led food policy and research approaches have a shared history of colonialism. There needs to be more respect and transparency that underpinned the Canadian government's approach to relationships with Indigenous People. For example, Ancel Keys' groundbreaking University of Minnesota starvation experiment between 1944 and 1946 was used to craft Canada's nascent food guide in the 1940s (Mosby, 2013). Similar studies were used to understand how Indigenous bodies reacted to malnutrition or certain vitamin deficiencies, which were the basis of recommendations for the benchmark for Canada's nutritional needs.

Since the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP; Library and Archives Canada, 2016), concerted efforts have been made to address this history. RCAP was the most significant production of research, engagement, and consultation about

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<sup>6</sup> Interviewees included politicians, public servants, academics, agri-food industry representatives, and not-for-profit organization representatives. Of the fifty-nine interviews, twenty occurred with state policy actors and twenty-seven occurred with non-state policy actors.

<sup>7</sup> The methodology is also published in Coulas 2021.

Indigenous Peoples' history, conditions, issues, and aspirations in Canada. Highlights from RCAP get at the principal tenor of the entire process: "We held 178 days of public hearings, visited ninety-six communities, consulted dozens of experts, commissioned scores of research studies, reviewed numerous past inquiries and reports. Our central conclusion can be summarized simply: *The main policy direction, pursued for more than 150 years, first by colonial then by Canadian governments, has been wrong*" (CIRNAC, 2010, para 6, emphasis in original).

The federal government largely ignored RCAP's recommendations; it was still a milestone in Crown-Indigenous relations. It articulated the experiences, perspectives, and voices of Indigenous Peoples in a way that the Canadian government had not heard. It highlighted the longstanding policy failures rooted in paternalism, assimilation, and colonialism. Since the 1990s, researchers and government officials have shifted their perspectives on collaborative research. Collaborative research means that Indigenous voices, attitudes, and values are incorporated at every project stage, from the planning to the final product.

Historically, the federal government's DC approach has predominantly been used around research development and extraction. In turn, the history of Crown-Indigenous relations in Canada warrants skepticism about the strength and willingness for consultation to be done in good faith. The source of DC is the Supreme Court Case *Haida Nation v. British Columbia* (2004), which states that the Crown must consult with Aboriginal people before making decisions or taking initiatives that may infringe upon existing Aboriginal rights. While the DC emerged from the courts as an extension of the longstanding reworking of Crown-Indigenous relations, it is not strictly bound to the court or legal system. The DC interweaves policies,

laws, history, and relations to ensure Indigenous rights are upheld and respected.

In response to the Supreme Court of Canada's decisions in *Haida Nation v. British Columbia*, *Taku River Tlingit First Nation v. British Columbia* and *Mikisew Cree v. Canada*, the federal government launched an *Action Plan on Aboriginal Consultation and Accommodation* in November 2007 (AANDC, 2011). The initiative engaged sixty-eight Indigenous communities and organizations, as well as industry, provinces, and territories, in the engagement process from January 2009 to March 2010. Participants identified numerous requirements for meaningful consultation emphasizing duty-to-consult cannot be "interpreted narrowly or technically, but must be given full effect in order to promote the process of reconciliation between the Crown and Aboriginal peoples as mandated by s.35(1) of the *Constitution Act, 1982*" (CIRNAC, 2024a, Annex B para 8). Further, more explicit standards for the pre-consultation period were called for to ensure Indigenous communities could be prepared by identifying community objectives, goals, and authorities. In short, the Crown and Indigenous communities must have a mutual understanding of what consultation means when First Nations, Inuit, and Métis perspectives are involved.

More recently, on June 21, 2023, the federal government passed significant legislation adopting Bill C-15, an *Act Respecting the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People* (Minister of Justice, 2020). This could be a powerful vehicle to establish standards for protecting Indigenous rights and ensuring genuine consultation. The preamble states (UNDRIP, 2021, p. 2): "Whereas the Government of Canada is committed to taking effective measures—including legislative, policy and administrative measures—at the national and international level, in consultation and cooperation with Indigenous Peoples, to achieve the

objectives of the Declaration.” Article 19 (UNDRIP, 2021) states that: “States shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the Indigenous Peoples concerned through their representative institutions in order to obtain their free, prior, and informed consent before adopting and implementing legislative or administrative measures that may affect them” (p. 12).

What is striking is that DC and engagement are also directly tied to food sovereignty. Priority 87 of the UNDRIP Action plan supports Indigenous food sovereignty and self-determination, stating the Crown will (DJC, 2023):

Support Indigenous Peoples’ food security, sovereignty, and sustainability through:

- funding and other program measures

- promoting food-focussed research to better understand the intersection of Indigenous Peoples’ food security, sovereignty, and sustainability
- promoting trade in Indigenous Peoples’ food products and removal of barriers to that trade.

When working with Indigenous People, the work of the Crown and Canadian political institutions needs to be rooted in a relationship that views the partners as equals and not as addressing the needs of their subjects. In turn, DC is critical in changing the relationship between Indigenous People and the federal government. While FPC was developed after the Action Plan and before Bill C-15, the case study presents important forums for considering how the federal government can uphold its promises.

## Development of food policy for Canada: November 2015 – June 2019 Theoretical lens, analytical framework, and methodology

This section contextualizes the development of FPC, ultimately situating positions of power and influence during the policy’s development. Early stages of policy development are presented, demonstrating the tone and approach of the Trudeau Government, and then analysis of FPC demonstrates achievements and shortfalls.

### Early stages of policy framing and internal government activity

On November 12, 2015, a national food policy was prioritized. In his Mandate Letter to the Honourable Lawrence MacCauley, Canada’s Minister of Agriculture, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau called for the development of “a food policy that promotes healthy living and safe food by putting more healthy, high-quality food, produced by Canadian ranchers and

farmers, on the tables of families across the country” (2015, para 14). Trudeau explained in all 2015 mandate letters: “I made a personal commitment to bring new leadership and a new tone to Ottawa.... No relationship is more important to me and to Canada than the one with Indigenous Peoples. It is time for a renewed, nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous Peoples, based on recognition of rights, respect, co-operation, and partnership” (para 7). This direction inspired hope for change and suggested that AAFC would take a different approach to developing a FPC (Andrée et al., 2021).

On December 4, 2015, the Speech from Throne opened the forty-second session of Parliament. While food policy was not mentioned, the approach for Crown-Indigenous relations was: “Because it is both the right thing to do and a certain path to economic growth, the Government will undertake to renew,



nation-to-nation, the relationship between Canada and Indigenous Peoples, one based on recognition of rights, respect, co-operation, and partnership” (Johnston, 2015, p. 6).

The misalignment between the Speech from the Throne and the mandate letter suggested that the national food policy was not a top priority. Nevertheless, the emphasis on improving the relationship between Canada and Indigenous Peoples signified the potential to bring food policy to the fore within reconciliation.

Indigenous consultation was not new to AAFC but remained novel for policy development. In 2020, Tom Rosser Assistant Deputy Minister at AAFC, explained:

“The Liberal Government came to office with a pretty ambitious agenda for Indigenous reconciliation and as a department...we [AAFC] had an off- and on-again kind of role in promoting Indigenous involvement in agriculture.... We didn't, in contrast to departments [e.g., Fisheries and Oceans Canada]...have a lot in the way of legal or Constitutional obligations to reach out to Indigenous groups who didn't have a lot of Indigenous centred programing and it just hadn't been a big focus for us as a department, historically.”

Informant F explained that most of AAFC's stakeholders are farmers and agricultural producers. In turn, while the department intended to understand Indigenous food systems better and engage Indigenous Peoples, the engagement was scoped to agriculture. As food policy appears limited to agricultural commodities, the interconnections of food's social, political, and economic relations must be brought forward. Further, the direction to engage with

Indigenous Peoples through stakeholder consultation did not uphold a nation-to-nation relationship.

Nation-to-nation relations broadly describe how a government interacts with Indigenous Peoples and communities, albeit that approach needs to be clarified in 2015. However, on February 22, 2017, the federal government's approach became more transparent with the establishment of the Working Group of Ministers, a formal body that worked with Indigenous leaders, youth, and experts were responsible for examining (Trudeau, 2017a): “relevant federal laws, policies, and operational practices to help ensure the Crown is meeting its constitutional obligations concerning Aboriginal and treaty rights; adhering to international human rights standards, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; and supporting the implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.”

The working group included six ministers, not including the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-food (Trudeau, 2017b). In 2018, the federal government adopted the working group's Principles Respecting the Government of Canada's Relationship with Indigenous Peoples (DJC, 2018). The principles “reflect a commitment to good faith, the rule of law, democracy, equality, non-discrimination, and respect for human rights” (DJC, 2018, p. 3). In 2021, as outlined in the *Indigenous Knowledge Policy Framework for Project Reviews and Regulatory Decisions*, the Principles guided federal departments and agencies to fulfill their approach to Indigenous relations (Government of Canada, 2021).

## Public consultations: Bilateral and self-led Indigenous engagement

Informant D explained that to carry out public consultations, AAFC's Food Policy Unit (FPU)<sup>8</sup> recognized engagement with Indigenous Peoples would occur with time constraints due to the threat of a potential election and change in government in 2019. Public consultations occurred from June 2017 to November 2017. They took the form of an online survey, town halls, a national food summit, written submissions, community-led engagement sessions hosted by civil society organizations, bilateral and self-led Indigenous engagement sessions, and regional engagement sessions (AAFC, 2018). The findings of the public consultations were published in AAFC's 2018 *What We Heard Report: Consultations for a Food Policy for Canada* (WWH). Indigenous input was collected across these forums. However, engagement was most fruitful within the following bilateral and self-led Indigenous engagement sessions.

### Nishnawbe Aski Food Symposium

The Nishnawbe Aski First Nation Food Symposium was an annual event encouraging the discussion of the growing disparity between Indigenous communities and the rest of Canada (National Indigenous Diabetes Association, n.d). The Symposium occurred between August 22 and 24, 2017 (Green, 2017). Before the Nishnawbe Aski Food Symposium, AAFC's FPU was invited by the Nishnawbe Aski Food Advisory Council to participate in a general meeting. Informant D noted once the relationship was established, AAFC's FPU was invited to participate in the 2017 Nishnawbe Aski Food Symposium. Members of AAFC's FPU spent the day immersed in sessions led by Indigenous People.

Informants C, D, and F (and Rosser (noted that the symposium was significant because space was created for discussions between AAFC's FPU, Indigenous communities, and national Indigenous representatives. Informants C, D, E and F also explained that AAFC presented their work on FPC and received direct feedback from individuals experiencing food insecurity, involved in community-based initiatives (e.g., food banks, community gardens), and wanted to discuss food sovereignty. After the symposium, informants B, C, D, E and F noted that AAFC's FPU continued correspondence with symposium participants.

### Assembly of First Nations

AFN's session brought together knowledge holders and food policy experts in food security, health, environment, and economic development (AAFC, 2018; Levi, 2017a). Senior-level AAFC officials were invited and participated (AAFC, 2018). The session allowed AFN regional representatives to learn about Canada's work on FPC. It allowed AAFC's representatives to engage with AFN representatives and AFN regional representatives (Levi, 2017b). The session also provided space for discussing what a First Nations Food Policy might look like and who would be involved in the development. The latter pointed to the importance of taking stock of existing and proposed research, policies, and programs within the Canadian state (Levi, 2017a).

The session included a presentation by AAFC, three panels, and a wrap-up discussion. Following AFN's engagement session, a draft report was produced by Elisa Levi, an Indigenous consultant and event facilitator (Levi, 2017a). The report situated the forum

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<sup>8</sup> This body lead the development of FPC within AAFC.

as a meeting and not a consultation for First Nations. Some participants were unaware of FPC and stressed needing more time before a report could be generated for AAFC. As an informative resource about the session, key observations stand out.

First, the draft report and panels demonstrated an ongoing cautious approach held by First Nations representatives. Responding to AAFC's presentation, participants noted public consultation demonstrated continued colonial approaches for collecting data from First Nations. Participants felt the federal government's engagement process did not adequately provide a meaningful process for First Nations to participate, and the Yellowknife regional engagement session did not allow input subject matter presented at other engagement sessions (Levi, 2017b). Further, the panel presentations highlighted the importance of title and land rights of First Nations and that a distinction-based approach was missing from AAFC's efforts. From this standpoint, FPC came second to developing a National First Nations Food Policy.

Second, the theme of a systems approach was instilled across First Nations presentations. The draft report emphasized that many First Nations continued to grapple with food issues in their community, yet it was understood that no short-term or singular solution would suffice. In turn, the resurgence and support for reclaiming traditional food systems was identified as a key element for First Nations food systems to revive cultural practices and move towards better overall health for individuals and economies (Levi, 2017b).

Third, many presentations highlighted food insecurity and access issues across scales, indicating that any work on FPC or a First Nations food policy would require ongoing nation-to-nation relations. This prompted questions about how FPC supported reconciliation. Dawn Morrison pointed out that for many First Nations, food sovereignty is problematic

“because of its etymological underpinnings” (Levi, 2017b, p. 5). The term provides a specific policy approach to addressing the underlying issues but does not adequately capture concerns and practices within First Nations food systems. It is a term used by settlers “because they could understand it” (Levi, 2017b, p. 5).

The forum highlighted the continuation of historically embedded oppression and racism. For First Nations participants, this session provided information and indicated a general interest to continue discussions within the Assembly. Informants D and F noted that for AAFC, this session provided new insights about First Nations food systems and important networking. For all participants, food policy—developed by any group—required further critical consideration about framing and implementing a systems approach across scales.

### Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami

From October 17 to 18, 2017, ITK and the Inuit Food Security Working Group organized the National Inuit Engagement Session on A FPC to 1) Develop a shared vision of the Inuit food system in the Inuit regions; 2) identify strengths and challenges experienced within the food system for Inuit; and 3) build on previous work to identify strategies that can improve the food system in Inuit Nunangat (AAFC, 2018; ITK, 2017, 2022). Over two days in Ottawa, more than fifty participants provided input on food security, nutrition and health, conservation policy, harvesting, wildlife institutional management, economic development, and community-based programming (ITK, 2017). The session's findings were captured in *An Inuit Specific Approach for the Canadian Food Policy and submitted to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food* (2017).

The findings situated how Inuit communities and organizations understood Inuit-Crown relations as shaped by colonial practices and indicated where and how policymakers needed to improve. Specifically, the report emphasized a distinctions-based approach when crafting food policy and programs to support Inuit communities. From this perspective, the report was less about actively vying for a Canadian national food policy and instead pushing for better Crown-Inuit relations through the reconciliation activities and institutional mechanisms that would support Inuit food sovereignty. The report highlighted long-lived examples of institutional discrimination imposed by the Canadian federal government, and localized solutions were posited as areas where Crown-Inuit collaboration could support reconciliation efforts. Key recommendations regarding a distinctions-based approach and local food infrastructure outlined in ITK's 2017 report were incorporated directly into WWH (AAFC, 2018) and FPC (AAFC, 2019) (see Table 1).

### Native Women's Association of Canada

The NWAC first engaged with its Board of Directors to determine how best to engage Indigenous women within the scope of FPC (NWAC, 2018). Then, NWAC developed a culturally relevant and gender-specific survey posted online and used during engagement sessions to gather input from Indigenous women and gender-diverse people (AAFC, 2018). *Food Policy The Native Women's Association of Canada Engagement Result* was released in May 2018, arguing that food is integral to Indigenous culture. Like AFN and ITK, the NWAC emphasized the importance of Indigenous Peoples' relationship to food as holistic and sustainably based on mutual respect for the land. However, NWAC called for a food policy that

considered gendered power dynamics because "Indigenous women, their children and families face unique barriers to affordable, nutritious and safe food" (2018, p. 1). Further, NWAC (2018, p. 1) argued that policymakers must consider how "access to healthy and nutritious food differs for urban and rural communities" and the challenges associated with accessing food between northern and remote communities and southern communities. These claims suggested that a one-size-fits-all approach would not work and that community-led initiatives would require attention.

The NWAC based their discussion on AAFC's online survey for the public consultations. Informant A explained that this approach aimed to capture Indigenous women's lived experiences with food not yet heard by AAFC. Aligning with AFN and ITK, NWAC's data emphasized the need for a distinction-based approach in FPC while simultaneously highlighting the importance of attention to gender and family dynamics in food policy development.

### Framing of the final policy document

By 2019, the federal government had begun refining the content of FPC. While this research did not reveal forums where GoC engaged with Indigenous Peoples in 2019 about the final content of FPC, Budget 2019 and FPC revealed the GoC's framing. Budget 2019 presented the first tangible framework of what FPC would look like. Budget 2019 allocated \$134.3 million to FPC with a conditional \$100 million to be redirected from another programming (Finance Canada, 2019); the most funding was allocated to the action area Canadian Food, the Top Choice at Home and Abroad (\$100 million). This was followed by Help Canadian Communities Access Healthy Food (\$99.4 million), Reduce Food Waste (\$26.3 million), and Support Food Security in Northern and Indigenous Communities (\$15 million) (Finance Canada, 2019; see Table 1).

Interestingly, while reconciliation was a high priority for the federal government, the least funding was allocated to supporting Food Security in Northern and Indigenous Communities. Further, when comparing

the two proposed programs, only the Northern Isolated Community Initiatives Fund was financially supported (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** Funding Allocated by Short-Term Action Areas in Budget 2019

Theme Area	Proposed Initiatives	Funding	Total Funding
Help Canadian Communities Access Healthy Food	National School Food Program	\$0	\$99.4 million
	Local Food Infrastructure	\$50 million	
	Buy Canadian Promotion Campaign	\$25 million	
	Tackling Food Fraud	\$24.4 million	
Make Canadian Food The Top Choice at Home and Abroad	Support for Food Processors via Strategic Innovation Fund	\$100 million	\$100 million
	Export Diversification Strategy	\$0	
	Three-year Permanent Residency Pilot Project for Non-seasonal Agricultural Workers	\$0	
Support Food Security in Northern and Indigenous Communities	Northern Isolated Community Initiatives Fund	\$15 million	\$15 million
	Harvester’s Support Grant	\$0	
Reduce Food Waste	Food Waste Reduction Challenge	\$20 million	\$26.3 million
	Federal Leadership in Food Waste Reduction	\$6.3 million	

**Table 2:** Comparing funding and program direction for the short-term action area Supporting Food Security in Northern and Indigenous Communities

Short-term Action Area	Budget 2019			Food Policy for Canada	
	Initiative	Funding Allocated	Description of Initiative	Initiative Referenced	Text Reference of Initiative
Support Food Security in Northern and Indigenous Communities	Northern Isolated Community Initiatives Fund	\$15 million	“...to support community-led projects, with funding for equipment such as community freezers, greenhouses, local food production projects, and skills training for local and Indigenous food producers.” (p. 163)	Indirectly	“Actions will advance efforts towards Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples by strengthening First Nations, Inuit, and Métis food systems, recognizing the importance of food to Indigenous culture and well-being, and, in so doing, supporting Indigenous food self-determination.” (p.9)
	Harvester’s Support Grant	\$0	“Following the 2018 Fall Economic Statement regarding new investments to Nutrition North Canada, this new program aimed “to help lower the costs associated with traditional hunting and harvesting activities, which are an important source of healthy, traditional food” (2019: p. 101, 163).	Indirectly	

Most contentious, funding allocated suggested reinforcement of the colonial approaches of land use acquisition for resource extraction and financial gain. Specifically, the Northern Isolated Community Initiatives Fund supported productive agricultural practices in Indigenous communities (e.g., transforming land for pasture and crop production, processing and storing commodities for sale). Comparatively, the Harvester's Support Grant was designed to "lower the costs associated with traditional hunting and harvesting activities, which are an important source of healthy, traditional food" (Finance Canada, 2019, p. 163). Budget 2019 demonstrated that the government supported initiatives familiar to the agricultural portfolio, reflecting colonialist approaches to resource extraction and land transformation for commodity production, compared to more innovative solutions that would support sustainable and traditional trapping, hunting, and foraging practices. Looking across FPC, references supporting Indigenous Peoples and an approach focussed on reconciliation were present (see Table 3).

Strong Indigenous food systems were a policy priority and supporting food security in northern and Indigenous communities was a short-term action area; however, there was a limited explanation of how the policy intended to support these priorities. Misalignment occurred where FPC did not reference or explain how a distinctions-based approach would be employed and why reconciliation was necessary. Furthermore, Indigenous Peoples nor reconciliation were mentioned in FPC's vision statement but were referenced in different sections of FPC. The vision statement presented broad language that cautioned away from specifying groups: "All people in Canada" and "diverse actors and stakeholders from across the food system" (AAFC, 2019, p. 5). In short, this approach suggested FPC was contradictive because the vision statement was not directly connected to FPC's principle of reconciliation, which specified "a distinctions-based approach to ensure that the unique rights, interests and circumstances of the First Nations, the Metis Nation and Inuit are acknowledged, affirmed, and implemented (AAFC, 2019, p. 10)

**Table 3:** References to Indigenous Food Systems and Reconciliation in Food Policy for Canada

Section of FPC	Reference in FPC
Introduction	The Government of Canada also engaged in a dialogue with Indigenous Peoples and organizations to better understand opportunities and challenges unique to their communities. (p.3)
Why Does Canada Need a Food Policy?	Food systems are interconnected and are integral to the wellbeing of communities, including northern and Indigenous communities, public health, environmental sustainability, and the strength of the economy. (p.3)
Aligning Food System Action	--
What is food Policy?	--
Vision: Setting a Common Direction for the Future of Food	--
Priority Outcomes: Achieving the Vision	4. Strong Indigenous food systems: To be co-developed in partnership with Indigenous communities and organizations. The Food Policy for Canada will help advance the Government of Canada’s commitment to Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, build new relationships based on respect and partnership, and support strong and prosperous First Nations, Inuit and Métis food systems – as defined by communities themselves. (p.7)
Foundational Elements: Supporting Implementation	Canadian Food Policy Advisory Council: The membership of the Council will include individuals with experience and knowledge of food system issues, with backgrounds in the food and agriculture industry, members of academia and civil society, as well as members of Indigenous organizations and communities. (p.8)
Action Areas: Taking Action to Address Key Gaps (2019-2024)	3. Support Food Security in Northern and Indigenous Communities Actions will advance efforts towards Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples by strengthening First Nations, Inuit, and Métis food systems, recognizing the importance of food to Indigenous culture and well-being, and, in so doing, supporting Indigenous food self-determination. (p.9)
Principles: Guiding the Approach	<p><b>Reconciliation</b>—First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities in Canada have distinct food systems that have been nurtured and developed over many generations. Reconciliation begins by acknowledging how historic Government policies have disrupted these food systems, and ensuring that decision-making going forward:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adopts a distinctions-based approach to ensure that the unique rights, interests and circumstances of the First Nations, the Metis Nation and Inuit are acknowledged, affirmed, and implemented.</li> <li>• Supports Indigenous food self-determination, meaning the ability of Indigenous Peoples to define their own food systems.</li> <li>• Takes a holistic approach that acknowledges that food is more than a product. For Indigenous Peoples, it is the medicine that ensures their wellbeing; it is a way of sustaining culture and community; and, it is a way of reconnecting to the land.</li> <li>• Looks (seven) generations ahead to assess the impact of current actions on future generations, and support intergenerational knowledge transfer.</li> <li>• Promotes traditional two-eyed seeing to ensure that Indigenous knowledge and practices are considered alongside other forms of knowledge and evidence. (p. 10-11)</li> </ul>

This was also evident under the section “Aligning Food System Actions.” While the policy noted, “To tackle complex food issues, coordinated and coherent approaches are needed” (AAFC, 2019, p. 4), the different components of the food system(s) requiring alignment were not identified. Interestingly, the section directly before, “Why does Canada need a Food Policy?” identified components and made explicit reference to Indigenous communities (AAFC, 2019): “Food systems, including the way food is produced, processed, distributed, consumed, and disposed of, have direct impacts on the lives of Canadians. Food systems are interconnected and are integral to the wellbeing of communities, including northern and Indigenous communities, public health, environmental sustainability, and the strength of the economy” (p. 3).

Further, by not identifying historic challenges Indigenous Peoples face in the food system(s) in Canada, misalignment suggested the policy would fail in meeting the goals of reconciliation. If systematically embedded oppression and racism in Canada’s agricultural and food systems were not referenced in FPC, then how would the policy address those issues?

Under the section “Targets”, FPC missed further opportunities. Targets were presented as follows (AAFC, 2019): “Specific and measurable targets for each of the long-term outcomes will be developed with input from the Canadian Food Policy Advisory Council.<sup>9</sup> Evidence to measure progress toward the long-term consequences and supporting targets will be addressed with assistance from the Council...[sub-targets] include reduction in the number of food insecure households in Canada, reduction of food losses along the food supply chain, and reduction of food

waste within federal government facilities and operations” (p. 13).

The proposed sub-targets suggested focusing on productivity and commodities, not individual or community choices around food. This did not align with calls for distinction-based targets. WWH (AAFC, 2018, p. 12) explained, “Concerns were raised that the themes do not sufficiently reflect Indigenous-specific issues and considerations—distinct cultural preferences and practices, the importance of country/traditional food, and Indigenous knowledge (including but not limited to traditional ecological knowledge).” In turn, FPC suggested predetermined targets were to be implemented before the Council was created, and proposed targets did not reflect distinctions-based elements.

FPC indicated that targets were to align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs; United Nations, 2023; AAFC, 2019): zero hunger, good health and well-being, responsible production and consumption, and climate action. However, FPC did not reference other SDG goals that would support relations with Indigenous Peoples, for example, quality education, gender equality, reduced inequalities, life on the land, peace, justice and strong institutions, and partnerships for the goals. FPC did not identify how SDGs were relevant to the long-term outcomes, principles, and short-term action areas. For clarity, transparency, and cohesion across FPC, such an explanation would support accountability metrics and provide metrics for measuring the policy’s success.

Finally, FPC referenced one federal commitment beyond SDGs: the Agri-Food Economic Strategy Table (AAFC, 2019). Unfortunately, FPC did not explain the

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<sup>9</sup> Recognizing the need for collaboration to make meaningful progress, the federal government created the Canadian Food Policy Advisory Council as a central piece of FPC. This multi-disciplinary group brings together diverse social, environmental, health and economic perspectives to help address food system challenges and opportunities (AAFC, 2024).



relevance of this effort to FPC. Further, there were many other efforts between 2015 and 2019 that intersected with FPC and Indigenous People and were not mentioned: Poverty Reduction Strategy (2018), Healthy Eating Strategy (2016), Canada Food Guide (2019) (Andrée et al., 2021). The most important oversight related to prioritizing reconciliation in FPC was the fact that the RCAP (Library and Archives Canada, 2016), the *Action Plan on Aboriginal Consultation and Accommodation* (AANDC, 2011) and the *Principles Respecting the Government of Canada's Relationship with Indigenous Peoples* (DJC, 2018) were not referenced. In short, it was unclear how that ongoing work would support the implementation of FPC and reconciliation.

While FPC indicated, “Actions will advance efforts towards Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples by strengthening First Nations, Inuit, and Métis food systems, recognizing the importance of food to Indigenous culture and well-being, and, in so doing, supporting Indigenous food self-determination” (AAFC, 2019, p. 9), this approach was not comprehensive or consistent across FPC. In short, FPC demonstrated important aspirations for reconciliation but did not take the guidance given during public consultations. Coupled with limited funding, the success of the policy was dismal. Altogether, vague language, misalignment of the policy’s content, and the missed opportunity to incorporate information heard during public consultations were underwhelming.

## Discussion and recommendations: Continued colonial framing in food policy development

It was observed that AAFC’s engagement with Indigenous Peoples was fruitful for FPC, and discussions brought consideration of a First Nations Food Policy to the fore. Furthermore, the depth and relevance of the information collected would otherwise not have been captured if AAFC had not taken the approach it did. However, Indigenous voices were “fit” into the process rather than central to the policy’s design and development. Indigenous voices were heard not in nation-to-nation forums but in stakeholders and public forums. These forums emulated Canada’s historical approach to research development and data extraction. Indigenous voices were subjects helping the GoC gather data, rather than Indigenous People helping develop and implement the research in partnership.

Indigenous voices were predominantly advisory, meaning the input could be disregarded. In short, the case study of FPC did not emulate nation-to-nation

partnership because GoC continued to situate Indigenous Peoples as stakeholders and subjects rather than equal partners. In turn, it was observed that Canada was dancing around the concepts of nation-to-nation relations, reconciliation, and DC. In some areas of the policy’s development, the federal government was taking necessary steps forward. However, they took steps back in other examples, reinforcing past practices and ideologies. While FPC demonstrated several challenges for meaningful and respectful nation-to-nation policy making, essential lessons must be learned.

First, the exact meaning of nation-to-nation partnerships was unclear in 2015. However, between 2017 and 2021, significant progress has been made in Canada’s political institutions. Nevertheless, as of 2024, it remains unclear what nation-to-nation relations and DC look like when implementing FPC. It is recommended that the GoC take steps to more clearly define the roles and responsibilities of different actors

and political institutions to meet legal and mandated requirements regarding Indigenous engagement.

For one, the Working Group of Ministers should include the Minister of Agriculture to support horizontal coordination of food policy. Further, the central agencies (Privy Council Office, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat and Department of Finance) must also be involved to ensure the information flows into central guiding documents each year. Second, suppose a similar body for horizontal coordination does not exist within the public service (e.g., led by CIRNAC). In that case, one should be established to ensure that the same flow of information and direction occurs at the ministerial level across actors implementing FPC. Furthermore, there are always vertical challenges in communication between department branches and the minister's office. Incorporating ministerial representation in horizontal coordination at different levels of decision-making will provide clarity and consistency. Finally, while the Canadian Food Policy Advisory Council (2024) includes Indigenous representation, the body is an advisory mechanism, which could be an opportunity or a hindrance for distinction-based approaches in food policy development and implementation.

Increasingly, public servants are reaching out to Indigenous communities to inquire if proposed policy changes will have an impact. While this approach rests on Indigenous voices as advisory, it allows for introductions and information sharing and can evolve into formal consultation. Ministries like AAFC, with less experience or legal obligations, can increase engagement between public servants and Indigenous Peoples to build rapport and relations. This approach is recommended as an interim for raising awareness and knowledge sharing. Further, it could lend to building relationship(s) between those experiencing the impacts of policy and the policy actors carrying out the majority

of policy development and holding regulatory and legislative oversight. While some ministries like CIRNAC are already working towards/implementing reconciliation and DC frameworks, this approach can help other ministries still evolving in their roles, responsibilities and options regarding DC and reconciliation.

Furthermore, it is recommended that the federal government support and encourage opportunities like the Nishnawbe Aski Food Symposium and National Food Summit. For example, an annual national symposium on Indigenous food policy bi-laterally led by Indigenous partners and the Working Group of Ministers. This forum rests on the conceptualization that a breadth of decision-makers would have the opportunity to come together and discuss issues specific to Indigenous food policy. It is also suggested that these efforts occur close to and within Indigenous communities so visitors can experience firsthand the challenges and opportunities at the community level. Such an approach would help reduce siloed policy making and increase collaborative solutions.

Finally, when the Trudeau Government came to office in 2015, they brought an ambitious agenda for Indigenous reconciliation. However, the distribution of funding to AAFC for reconciliation efforts remains unclear. It was observed that when the money ran out for developing FPC, AAFC's FPU moved toward culminating the policy process. Informants A and D explained this included re-focusing work and resources on other mandated priorities outside FPC and away from reconciliation. The re-focussing was not questioned because the networking and reconciliation efforts undertaken by AAFC's FPU were novel. For example, the time and attention towards reconciliation (e.g., Indigenous Engagement Strategy) was not previously part of AAFC's policy design framework. From this perspective, AAFC made great strides with

the little time and money provided between 2016 and 2017. However, asking for more money for reconciliation efforts was not a priority and was unlikely to be supported.

With this in mind, it is essential to consider the succession of policy champions and the turnover of policy knowledge. For new staff coming into AAFC's FPU after 2017, informants D and G explained there was a limited briefing on the FPU's previous efforts. We recommend that to develop strong and meaningful relations with Indigenous Peoples, government staff should be encouraged to pursue different forms of training and education and provided with forums to

## Conclusion

The GoC recognized the need for a national food policy to ensure that all people in Canada have access to healthy and sustainable food. However, developing such a policy is complex and requires research, negotiations and engagement across numerous sectors, peoples, and communities.

With the election of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in 2015 came a stronger rhetoric of reconciliation. In turn, the GoC articulated dedication to working with Indigenous Peoples in the spirit of nation-to-nation, government-to-government, and Inuit-to-Crown relationships. The renewing of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples is part of addressing the ongoing effects of colonialism. While this has translated into direct action on specific issues that impact Indigenous Peoples, such as the Truth and Reconciliation or the adoption of UNDRIP, it has not manifested in the context of food policy and food security. However, this approach has been couched in the language of engaging with stakeholders and loyal

process that knowledge for reconciliation to be genuinely supported.

It is surmised that such an approach will increase policy actors championing reconciliation and other efforts with Indigenous Peoples within federal food policy processes. While it is recognized that such an approach should not replace nation-to-nation relations and that not all Indigenous Peoples will want to engage in such a capacity, it is believed that support for this and the other approaches noted above will have broader positive impacts within and outside the federal government. Specifically, the federal government must lead by example in partnership with Indigenous Peoples.

subjects of Canada rather than engaging with Indigenous Peoples based on partners and equals.

As demonstrated in the case study of FPC, Indigenous voices and perspectives continue to be marginalized when it comes to addressing food security and food policy. Indigenous perspectives and experiences are crucial to the discussions around food policy and security because Indigenous Peoples are more likely to experience food insecurity and food scarcity. This paper demonstrated the clear need for policy to ensure that access to healthy food is available and considers the diverse situations of Canada's populations. It is also clear that the process of incorporating Indigenous voices into policy development at the federal level is uneven; there is still an ongoing risk of marginalization and infantilizing those voices as stakeholders rather than as nations with their citizens and governments. Indigenous Peoples have long advocated for comprehensive work on food support and food policy, but not at the expense of

Indigenous sovereignty. There is an opportunity to continue developing respectful relationships with the

Crown, federal government, and the First Peoples of the land to address this crucial issue we all face.

**Acknowledgements:** This research was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Partnership Grant, Food, Locally Embedded, Globally Engaged (FLEdGE).

**Mary Coulas:** a white, middle-class, cisgender, and neurodivergent individual, holds privilege as a member of Canada's dominant social group (white, English-speaking settler). Their upbringing in rural Ontario, academic success, and professional roles as an elected official and policy analyst inform their understanding of the need for deeper, critical engagement with Canada's agricultural and agri-food systems. In this research, their privilege extends to designing the project, collecting data for their dissertation, and shaping its interpretation. Initially written from a normative perspective, the paper was reconsidered due to concerns that it perpetuated the exploitative practices it critiqued. Committed to reconciliation and equitable collaboration, the first author partnered with the second author to rewrite the work, prioritizing meaningful partnerships with Indigenous Peoples.

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## Appendix

### Glossary of Acronyms

Abbreviation	Definition
AAFC	Agriculture and Agri-Food
AAFC FPU	Agriculture and Agri-Food Food Policy Unit
AFN	Assembly of First Nations
CIRNAC	Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada
DC	Duty-to-Consult
FPC	Food Policy for Canada: Everyone at the Table!
ITK	Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami
NWAC	Native Women's Association of Canada
RCAP	Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples
SDGs	United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
UNDRIP	The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People
WWH	What We Heard Report: Consultations for a Food Policy of Canada