

COVID-19 did not cause food insecurity in Indigenous communities but it will make it worse

By Elisa Levi and Tabitha Robin

IT HAS BEEN JUST OVER one month since the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, calling for urgent and aggressive action to combat the disease and the virus that causes it. Public health responses have focused on flattening the curve to reduce the burden on healthcare systems and reducing transmission rates. Calls for people to self-isolate and practice social/physical distancing have operated alongside demands that we as a society work collectively to protect those who are most vulnerable. These are critically important actions to take.

But unfortunately, these same calls have not been extended to Indigenous peoples and communities who, because of long-term, systemic social and economic inequalities, will be disproportionately affected by COVID-19. It is hard to shelter in place, practice social distancing, self-isolate in a room if symptomatic or regularly wash hands when many Indigenous families live in overcrowded poorly ventilated houses that are often without access to clean water.

Even if the pandemic doesn't breach the borders of most reserves, settlement or village communities, the economic hardship to follow the pandemic will be felt more acutely by Indigenous people.

FOOD INSECURITY IN CANADA

Operating alongside these challenges is food insecurity, which has long been a significant problem in many Indigenous communities and few of the current emergency measures that have been enacted by the federal government will substantively address this long term and ongoing problem. Currently, **1 in every 2 First Nations households** experience food insecurity.

Recently, the University of Toronto's food insecurity research centre PROOF issued a report indicating more than 1 in 8 Canadians (4.4 million Canadians) are currently food insecure, meaning they have inadequate or unstable access to nutritious food due to financial constraints. This represents the highest-ever national estimate for food insecurity. With the pandemic and emergency measures such as the restriction of movement, border closures and food hoarding, which will result in an increase in food costs and unemployment, these numbers will only get worse. Indeed, organizations expected to combat food insecurity are feeling the strain as more and more people seek assistance. Correspondingly, the Prime Minister has declared the work of groups like Food Banks Canada, the Salvation Army and Breakfast Clubs of Canada as "essential" and committed **100 million dollars** to work with partners to meet the urgent food needs of Canadians, including Indigenous peoples and Northern populations.

Unfortunately, once again, these are not Indigenous organizations and most do not serve rural Indigenous communities. Relying on charity to address food insecurity in Indigenous communities is extremely problematic.

WHERE IS THE SUPPORT FOR INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES?

Since #StayingHome has become the new norm, a \$305-million fund established by the federal government was announced to help Indigenous communities address COVID-19. This is welcome, though weak in comparison to the support for Canadians. While all of this funding is “emergency” and “temporary” it also shows how inadequate support for communities truly is. Consider that in 2017 the Parliamentary Budget Officer calculated a minimum cost of \$3.2 billion to bring on-reserve water systems up to the same standards as Canadian communities.

How can the Indigenous vulnerability to this pandemic ever be addressed in substantive ways and for the long-term with such limited investments?

Adding insult to underfunding, one of the allowable expenses under this fund, is “measures to address food insecurity such as food banks or nutritional assistance for community members.” But interested communities and organizations must submit their proposals for vetting in the midst of working and operating in a crisis situation. A minor exception to this model is increased support for the Nutrition North program, with an expanded range of foodstuffs eligible for a federal subsidy. (It is a minor exception because this subsidy is accessed by largely non-Indigenous retailers and supposedly passed on to largely Inuit consumers).

LONG-TERM FOOD SECURITY SOLUTIONS

At the least, this pandemic has exposed how much of a threat is posed to Indigenous communities when there is a public health crisis (or where a public health crisis compounds an existing crisis). And more, how little support there is. We have to look beyond short-term emergency driven solutions to address food insecurity for Indigenous peoples in Canada and for the long-term. That includes addressing infrastructure issues and those that have existed in many Indigenous communities for a long time.

Even in a state of emergency, we can design new models and reinvigorate Indigenous food ways, honouring the resiliency and leadership of Indigenous communities like community centred food kitchens, hunter support programs, goose camps, gardens and initiatives like the Indigenous Food and Freedom School.

It is important to note that emergency food banks have been implemented out of necessity; and these should not be the norm!

Even as we put our minds towards advocating for these kinds of solutions, we do need to proceed with caution when it comes to working with non-Indigenous organizations. For too long, and up to the present, paternalism has ruled these relationships. Indigenous people are not included in developing the solutions, or trusted with implementing them as demonstrated in this case above where it is non-Indigenous organizations tasked with supporting Indigenous people. As much as we require food security in communities, self-determination may be just as important.

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