

A YELLOWHEAD INSTITUTE SPECIAL REPORT

Indigenous Food Sovereignty in Ontario:

A Study of Exclusion at the Ministry of Agriculture, Food & Rural Affairs

by Tabitha Robin, Sarah Rotz & Adrienne Xavier



AUTHORS

Tabitha Robin, Sarah Rotz,
and Adrienne Xavier

EDITOR

Eva Jewell
with support from Hayden King

COPY EDITOR

Jasmyrn Galley

DESIGNER

Yumi Numata

PRODUCTION SUPPORT

Kelsi-Leigh Balaban

COVER PAGE IMAGE CREDITS

- > Ethan Dankert-Lannigan (Métis)
- Tkaronto Plant Life Farm
- > Quinn Meawasige (Anishinaabe)
- Nimkii Youth Collective /
Nimkii Aazibikoong)
- > Taryn Bobiwash (Odawa
and Ojibwe) - Nimkii Youth
Collective / Nimkii Aazibikoong)
- > Ethan Dankert-Lannigan (Métis)
- Tkaronto Plant Life Farm
- > Kaitlin Rizarri (Filipina and
mixed Mi'kmaw/ settler) -
Tkaronto Plant Life Farm

Nimkii Aazibikong is a language community for Anishinaabemowin language revitalization, land based practices, and the arts.

Tkaronto Plant Life is an Indigenous youth-led garden and small-scale farm seeking to further Indigenous and BIPOC food sovereignty in Tkaronto.

ABSTRACT

This report illustrates the ongoing concerns and struggles of Indigenous peoples seeking food sovereignty in Ontario, and the continuity of colonial views and practices in government ministries. We examine these realities through a case study involving the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA), as well as Indigenous community members that engage with OMAFRA and other parts of the agri-food public sector. Our study reveals that, first, Indigenous peoples remain structurally excluded from government decision-making, visioning, strategic and land-use planning, policy, and programming. Second, colonial laws, policies, processes, and practices continue to dominate, while Indigenous laws and points of view are marginalized. It follows that OMAFRA's goals, priorities, and programs have contributed to land contamination and privatization in ways that hinder Indigenous peoples' access to their traditional territories, food, and land-based practices, and infringe on their treaty rights. Third, non-Indigenous people, including many working in government, lack crucial knowledge concerning treaties and Indigenous relationships to land and stewardship. This is an ongoing and significant barrier to reconciliation. Finally, we argue that while Indigenous land and food practices have long been marginalized, they have much to offer in building a sustainable food system across diverse local ecological contexts.

AUTHOR BIOS

Tabitha Robin is a mixed ancestry Métis and Cree researcher, educator, and writer. She is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Land and Food Systems at the University of British Columbia. Her research focuses on Indigenous food systems and the factors that impede Indigenous food sovereignty.

Sarah Rotz is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change at York University. She is a treaty person of settler French, Austrian, and English ancestry. Her research and writing focuses on land and food systems and situates political economic processes – such as agri-food industrialization, financialization, and policy – within a lens of settler colonial patriarchy and racial capitalism. Her work explores the consequences of these processes for land and food sovereignty, environmental justice and anti-colonial movements.

Adrienne Lickers Xavier is an Assistant Professor at McMaster University in the Indigenous Studies and Anthropology Departments. She is an Onondaga (and Mohawk) woman from the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory in Southern Ontario. She has spent years working in her home community focusing on Indigenous food security and sovereignty. Her research and writing now focus on Indigenous food sovereignty, security, and food systems. Adrienne also focuses her teaching and research on Indigenous knowledge, ways of knowing, and community building.



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IMAGE CREDIT

Quinn Meawasige (Anishinaabe) - Nimkii Youth Collective /
Nimkii Aazibikoong)



IMAGE CREDIT

Ethan Dankert-Lannigan (Métis)
- Tkaronto Plant Life Farm

INTRODUCTION

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Food Sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.

-LA VIA CAMPESINA, 1996

FOOD HAS LONG been used as a tool of colonialism in what is now known as Canada. Colonialism separated Indigenous people from their land, a process that continues to have significant implications for Indigenous governance, culture, food, and community. There are growing calls for Indigenous food reclamation and sovereignty as a means to mend colonial ruptures and support processes of land return and restoration. As Yellowhead's 2019 Land Back report shows, colonialism is as much about land as it is about the relationship between settlers and Indigenous peoples. However, there is often a perception that Indigenous Food Sovereignty (IFS) is either an “Indigenous issue” or something that is inherently cultural. This perception erodes the responsibility of non-Indigenous peoples and their governments and institutions to support the process — a significant challenge, given the pervasiveness of colonialism, racism, marginalization, and oppression in Indigenous peoples' daily lives.

Beyond Indigenous Affairs, several government departments and ministries participate in maintaining colonial land and food relations against the backdrop of high rates of food insecurity. Provincial ministries of food and agriculture are mandated to administer, advise, and support economic and land-based activities related to food, agriculture, and rural community development. In Ontario, the Ministry of Agriculture,

Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) provides policy and programming support for the sector's growth, the expansion of agri-food production, processing and value chain activity, as well as production and environmental and economic resources for farmers and food producers. OMAFRA offers a range of funding assistance, community development resources, and agri-food programs for farmers, processors, communities, research institutions, and organizations. They also play an important role in agricultural land-use planning and policy. So, while these ministries are rarely considered when analyzing settler-Indigenous relations in Canada, their mandates have significant implications for Indigenous land and food sovereignty.

This is the focus of our report.

We examine the relationship between the OMAFRA and First Nations communities in Ontario, but the analysis has implications and applications to Indigenous peoples more widely. The report illustrates the ongoing issues and struggles Indigenous peoples face in seeking their food sovereignties. Through this case study, we aim to show readers why the work of Indigenous food sovereignty is so difficult and often feels insurmountable. In this context, the interviews and feedback received serve as a storyboard of the issues that arise when ministries, large organizations, and governmental agencies try to work with Indigenous communities. These findings show how Western and colonial approaches to agricultural land relations and food production are prioritized by the government. Indigenous peoples continue to be excluded from decision-making, and as a result, programming and funding opportunities often force Indigenous applicants into a very limited and inappropriate set of goals, guidelines, and definitions of success. While funding for new projects is often made available, there is little support for ongoing work and programming to be sustained. This study also found that when Indigenous communities seek funding for country, traditional and/or wild game foods, it is often considered to be “outside the scope

of the available funding” by food and agricultural institutions like OMAFRA. And yet, for many Indigenous peoples, their food systems largely consist of ancestral, land-based, and wild foods.

Our report illustrates the central role that paternalism and colonial erasure play in defining the relationship between Indigenous communities and the agri-food public sector in Canada. The “Canadian Food System” is not a unified project, as the term suggests. Indigenous food systems and practices are diverse and distinct from the industrial model forcibly established by settlers.

Many Indigenous communities have visions and pathways for the reclamation of their food systems and well-being, but this knowledge is often ignored by colonial assumptions of what “*our*” Canadian food system ought to look like.

The stories and experiences shared in this study demonstrate how ministerial perceptions and assumptions about Indigenous issues and realities alongside bureaucratic structures and mechanisms continue to erase, exclude, and harm Indigenous communities and their initiatives.

The study finds that, first, there are major concerns about OMAFRA’s understanding and management of agri-food and forest lands (primarily related to land contamination, privatization, and conversion), which is impacting treaty rights as well as Indigenous hunting, food growing, health, and livelihood practices. Second, Indigenous communities must navigate significant programming, jurisdiction, and legislation barriers, which are unique to — and particularly difficult and time-consuming for — First Nations. That said, First Nations receive little to no support or representation within the public sector in overcoming these barriers. Third, there are very few organizational spaces and positions within Indigenous communities dedicated to supporting food provision, security and agriculture.

These findings are presented in four themes:

1. Land, settler contamination, and health;
2. Representation and support for communities;
3. Capacity, consultation, consent (and racism) in programming and development; and
4. Differing needs, visions, and priorities.

With these findings in mind, we make four key recommendations before our conclusion.

Much is already known about the colonial harms perpetuated by settler governments. This report adds to that body of knowledge, but we acknowledge that this is not enough. While studies that reveal colonial harms are an important starting point, such research must also contribute to meaningful change. We hope that the findings and recommendations brought forth in this report are taken up with enough resources and attention to materially advance Indigenous food sovereignty in Ontario and across so-called Canada.

INDIGENOUS FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

THE TERM “FOOD SOVEREIGNTY” was first coined by La Via Campesina in 1996 to articulate the political struggles of food production, particularly in South America. Food sovereignty has been described as:

... the right of peoples to decide and produce their own food. It is a political right to organize ourselves, to decide what to plant, to have control of seeds. Food sovereignty is a very broad concept that includes the right of access to seeds, the right to produce, to trade, to consume one’s own foods. . . . [I]t is a concept that is linked to the autonomy and sovereignty of peoples (Masioli & Nicholson, 2010, p. 34).

From the deliberate decimation of food sources such as the bison, beaver, and salmon, to the enforced hunger and malnutrition of children in residential schools, food (or lack thereof) has been wielded to oppress and subjugate Indigenous peoples. The model

of agriculture via assimilation was considered a gift for Indigenous peoples, even as it overrode pre-existing Indigenous models of farming. Removal from homelands and land-based food practices towards a rigidly controlled landscape in which humans dominated nature was enforced as a kind of salvation for Indigenous communities. Given this colonial history, it is not surprising that Indigenous peoples face disproportionately higher levels of food insecurity than non-Indigenous peoples today. Food insecurity and colonization are social determinants of health, some of the myriad social conditions that impact the spiritual, emotional, physical, and intellectual well-being of Indigenous peoples (Reading & Wien, 2009).

Today there are numerous and overwhelming challenges that prevent good food from making its way to Indigenous tables. Yet Indigenous food sovereignty is a living reality and has been practiced in Indigenous communities since time immemorial.

Food is a healer for Indigenous peoples.
It represents a deep and spiritual connection to land and the nations of animals and plants.
Food connects us to our ancestors, is part of our social and cultural infrastructure, and is important to ceremony.

Food, and food sovereignty, represents a pathway for Indigenous futures, one of working in good relation to the land and where we feed ourselves and our communities well.

CONVERSATIONS WITH OMAFRA: OUR RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

THIS RESEARCH BEGAN with one of the authors, Sarah Rotz, contacting staff at OMAFRA to discuss food sovereignty. It grew out of the work of RAIR: Relational Accountability for Indigenous Rematriation, a collaborative research project that Dr. Rotz is a part of, along with report co-author Dr. Adrienne Xavier and several other academics and activists.

Conversations with OMAFRA staff members began in the spring of 2020. Between March and August of 2021, 27 formal interviews were held with 16 OMAFRA staff members and 11 external contacts who work in and with Indigenous communities on food and agriculture-related issues and who have engaged with OMAFRA over the past several years. OMAFRA staff were contacted based on their role in relation to the research. Further recruitment occurred via snowball sampling.

For external contacts, Rotz reached out to northern and central Ontario food and farming organizations suggested by OMAFRA staff. For Indigenous participant recruitment, she connected with Indigenous colleagues and participants from the 2021 Indigenous Agri-Food Funders Forum located within Ontario and staff in several First Nations communities across central east and north east Ontario. Of the total 11 external interviewees, seven were Indigenous peoples working on food/land issues in their communities; two were non-Indigenous, one

of whom was working for an Indigenous organization on agriculture, and one who was working with several Indigenous communities on food sovereignty; the final two were non-Indigenous people working in northern Ontario food and agriculture organizations. The Indigenous interviewees were from First Nations communities and organizations that spanned northern Ontario, including James Bay Treaty No. 9, the Robinson-Huron Treaties, and the Williams Treaty territories, which encompass the territory of the Anishinaabe.

Each interview lasted between one and two hours. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using discourse and content analysis and then connected to relevant research, literature, and reports, including provincial and ministerial policy and programming

documents, such as Ontario's duty to consult Aboriginal peoples, OMAFRA's Inclusion Strategy (2018), the Northern Livestock Action Plan, the Agricultural Systems Approach, and several provincial anti-racism and inclusion strategies and reports. A draft report was also sent to staff interviewees, external contacts, and community members for feedback and reflection. Several external participants also circulated the draft to colleagues and community members for further insights and feedback.

In 2022, a secondary analysis of the report was undertaken by Dr. Tabitha Robin to incorporate its findings into the larger Indigenous food sovereignty discourse. Rotz, Robin, and Adrienne Xavier all contributed to writing this special report for the Yellowhead Institute.



IMAGE CREDIT

Kaitlin Rizarri (Filipina and mixed Mi'kmaw/ settler) - Tkaronto Plant Life Farm

THEME 1

Land, Settler Contamination, & Health

THE FIRST OF THE four themes discussed here revolves around the limited access to land for Indigenous peoples to engage in their own farming and food provisioning practices (e.g. hunting, foraging, ceremony, as well as agroecology/agroforestry¹). This was a significant concern mentioned by Indigenous interviewees. One interviewee noted that Indigenous people in their community have demonstrated interest in land-based stewardship and agriculture only to find out that “they can’t actually access land.” Another participant explained that their community only recently regained its pre-Confederation harvesting rights, and land accessibility remains a huge issue: “People really want to funnel us into this one space, into this one Provincial Park. To say, ‘this is where you guys hunt.’” Instead, they would prefer to build relationships with farmers and others in food and agriculture, such as OMAFRA. However, they have “no idea where to start because there seems to be almost no relationship. It’s super racist where we live. And I don’t know how to build that relationship.”

Settler ignorance and lack of education around treaty relations and obligations form the crux of these issues.

For instance, an Indigenous respondent highlights Canadian cultural (read: settler colonial) perceptions about “Crown land” or land assumed to be “owned” by the government:

Often people talk about Crown land, when it's anything but Crown land. And the language matters. There's an assumption that if it's Crown land, that there's an

entitlement. And people don't know that we have a nation-to-nation agreement; Treaty 9 is exactly that. There are high levels of ignorance about what that means, and high levels of ignorance about how often the Treaty has been broken, and certainly not by First Nations. So that contributes to land issues and tensions. It's rooted in ignorance, which is rooted in culture, which is rooted in these outdated belief systems that don't serve anybody.

Indigenous interviewees were also concerned about government and industry interests in treaty lands for agricultural development, such as beef production, which do not align with, include, or benefit their communities. OMAFRA projects aimed at land conversion and the privatization of Crown land for agriculture negatively impact First Nations' abilities to practice treaty rights and build food security in their communities. One participant shared, “We have a large traditional area when it comes to people that hunt, and they go hunting in Crown land, they go hunting for the [community]. So, we would have an interest if some of those lands are converted to agriculture.” Another put it this way:

I know that there was, or is, a [government] policy to do with the expansion of farming land in Northern Ontario. Some of our communities had raised an issue about that because it's more treaty land that's being...we weren't sure about the consultation process with how First Nations were going to be linked into that, to be consulted on any land disposition taking place as a result of that policy. So, that one was kind of problematic.

Several participants also described concerns around the safety of the land that they are able to access and the impacts of surrounding agricultural activities, such as pesticide use, on the health of the plant and animal populations they rely on. A participant from a reserve surrounded by large potato farms stated: “I can see how the land is changing, and I can see them working

¹Agroecology and agroforestry center ecological principles and practices in designing and managing agro-ecological systems. Key principles of agroecology include crop and farm scale diversification to promote beneficial biological interactions, synergies, and regeneration of soil. Agroecology encourages careful ecological observation and practices including: complex crop rotations and diversifying plant species over space and time; the cultivation of native seeds; compost and green manure to enhance soil organic matter, biological activity and water retention; recycling nutrients and energy on-farm and minimizing external inputs; integrating crops and livestock and optimizing interactions throughout system (Altieri & Toledo, 2011).

it too; they're depleting the soil." Another participant explained:

It's had an impact on the wild foods and the animals that graze wild foods. There has been an increase in things like measles. In the moose population, the animals are just not well... We could have food security up here if ministries [and industries] quit contaminating the land that we all depend upon... this assumption that as long as you have bush, you have food just isn't true because it's not healthy. There's stuff that's going in our environment that wasn't there previously. You have to own that when you look at the activity that's happening here. So that level of ignorance that's allowed to continue at OMAFRA — at many different levels — I find incredibly frustrating because we're not talking about new research here. This stuff has been on the table for a long time.

This participant is noting how the government's long-standing goals, priorities, and programs have contributed to land and water contamination in ways that hinder Indigenous peoples' access to their traditional territories, food provisioning, and land-based practices, which are affirmed by their treaty rights and support their well-being.

THEME 2

Representation & Support for Communities

INTERVIEWEES NOTED a lack of support to help Indigenous communities navigate programming, jurisdiction, and legislation barriers. Indigenous representation — in terms of Indigenous staff numbers as well as access, positioning, capacity, and leadership — was a consistent gap for Indigenous participants when interacting with OMAFRA. One participant described the following when seeking OMAFRA support for Indigenous food and agriculture:

I get the sense that OMAFRA is just really overwhelmed. The number of times that I speak with [one OMAFRA staff member], I just didn't feel like the frequency of our chats, compared to some of the other ministries — it seems like [they're] totally swamped. I don't get it; it doesn't seem that bad with some of the other ministries that I've

dealt with. I don't know if it's just their department or what it is, but I just get the sense that they have a lot less time to deal with us [Indigenous clients] than some of the other ministries I work with. When I worked with MTO [Ministry of Transportation], they had a whole Indigenous relations unit and also five or six people working just to deal with reps like myself. They don't have that level of capacity within OMAFRA.

None of the Indigenous interviewees were able to connect with or establish a working relationship with an Indigenous staff member at OMAFRA. All local advisors interviewees referred to were non-Indigenous. As one interviewee explained, "she wasn't Indigenous; she didn't have a lot of knowledge about the success of the program in a First Nations community. And I left it there, like, I've got to figure it out on my own, which, I feel like is where we get left a lot." Another participant recalled asking OMAFRA: "Do you have an Indigenous consultant? You know, like an actual Indigenous person that understands the system and understands the needs of First Nations communities?" Even such an explicit request did not lead to contact with an Indigenous representative or support person. The participant continued:

That is a huge barrier for every community; at the government level, we don't have Indigenous representatives. Most of the people that give us our money, or provide us with these funds, are non-Indigenous. It's like trying to negotiate with someone who doesn't really understand the concepts and the real underlying issues aside from what's on paper. A lot of our issues, we can't really quantify. I find it really difficult to communicate with these funders if, for example, they've never even been to an Indigenous community. So, we're looking to these people for support, and they're just providing support based on a checklist or a standard that's the same for all First Nations. But we don't all operate the same; we all have various levels of resources and populations. That's probably one of the biggest things that I noticed in working with the Ministry is that nobody has real Indigenous support. Or, 'Indigenous consultant's are non-Indigenous. I find it gets really tiresome to be an advocate all the time, and then they constantly ask: 'Well, what do you need for?' It kind of feels like it comes down to our word against theirs. And they're the higher power.

Similarly, another participant shared:

One of my questions [for Ministry staff] was, did they have an example of these programs being successful in a First Nations community? As opposed to these big business retention and expansion corporations that come out of municipalities. Because [municipalities] have the manpower and they source the funding, which is a lot different than our funding that we get. A lot of the details of our funding are a lot more stringent and very detailed. It creates issues on our end where we can't necessarily build the tools or resources that we need because we're so busy trying to do it the way that they want it done. And it doesn't necessarily work for us like that.

The participant connected this to how, by whom, and in whose interests programs and projects are designed and implemented: "It still comes back to representation, in the sense where they didn't really have an answer for me in terms of how this applies to a First Nations community. There could be more work done to have programs or streams that are actually built by an Indigenous consultant or Indigenous community." Instead, several respondents described how the Ministry commonly refers them to examples and projects led by municipalities. Participants connected these responses to ongoing conditions of institutional neglect and exclusion for Indigenous communities. One respondent explicitly said that "there's no program that was actually built by us for us," dedicated to, or designed by, Indigenous communities, staff, or advisors.

Another interviewee clearly expressed the nature and impacts of Ministry-directed information and programming, which doesn't reflect or attend to Indigenous contexts, interests, or needs:

[I]nformation and knowledge is — for lack of better words — whitewashed. [W]e need that representation at that government level. Where [it feels] like, 'Okay, I think they are actually on my side; they do actually want to help.' And it's not just another checkbox kind of thing. I definitely felt like it wasn't really built for me.

Another interviewee described their concerns with financial support and how paternalistic approaches to Indigenous funding can impact their work and community: "I find that we're spending a lot of money to go back and fix things that didn't really get done in the first place. So, it just seems redundant at times. If we want to use the funds for something else, then we have to go and ask permission: 'Can we use this for this?' It's not like, 'Okay, you spend it how you need to spend it.'"

Such paternalistic surveillance and oversight dismisses the sovereignty of First Nations' land, treaty rights, and financial resources, and perpetuates the colonial relationship.

Finally, several participants described instances where Indigenous-led food and agricultural project proposals were rejected, or inappropriate, unsuitable, and unattainable project revisions and timelines were proposed by OMAFRA funding review committees. As for OMAFRA employees, only two interviewees stated they had established relationships with Indigenous communities in their work. We want to note here that it is through these kinds of circumstances that the colonial relationship is maintained. Indeed, there continues to be paternalistic oversight that ignores and dismisses the sovereignty of First Nations regarding their own land use and financial resources.

"We could have food security up here if ministries [and industries] quit contaminating the land that we all depend upon...this assumption that as long as you have bush, you have food just isn't true because it's not healthy. There's stuff that's going in our environment that wasn't there previously. You have to own that when you look at the activity that's happening here. So that level of ignorance that's allowed to continue at OMAFRA — at many different levels — I find incredibly frustrating because we're not talking about new research here. This stuff has been on the table for a long time."

- PARTICIPANT // THEME 1: LAND, SETTLER CONTAMINATION, & HEALTH



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- PARTICIPANT // THEME 2: REPRESENTATION & SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITIES

IMAGE CREDIT

Taryn Bobiwash (Odawa and Ojibwe) - Nimkii Youth Collective / Nimkii Aazibikoong)

THEME 3

Capacity, Consultation, Consent (& Racism) in Programming and Development

RELATED TO THE lack of support is a very clear but distinct theme revolving around a lack of participation in virtually all OMAFRA's work that impacts Indigenous people. This is exacerbated by the few organizational spaces and positions in Indigenous communities dedicated to supporting food provision, security, and agriculture. In reference to the Ministry specifically, an interviewee explained:

I don't know if OMAFRA realizes that we need a lot more capacity at the community level to be able to encourage agriculture. It'd be great if we could have a person in each community that was devoted to agriculture, but we just don't have that level of resourcing right now. Even if we had an individual within each tribal council, that would be a start.

Another interviewee said that even if they receive referrals for projects, they are often unable to lead the project because they lack the money, capability, and resources. As a result, "we lose the income effect in the community because we just don't have the proper resources to provide the members with what they really need."

Capacity issues are intensified through bureaucratic policies, expectations and guidelines, making it more difficult for Indigenous communities to compete for funding and program resources, as one interviewee explained: "In terms of obstacles, some of the application processes for the funding, our communities don't have the capacity to be able to even write the level of proposals required or to spend the amount of time that's required." Such constraints are of particular concern when dealing with potential land dispossession due to land conversion and privatization:

Some of our communities in the territory are very small and they don't always have the capacity to respond in a given time frame. And they don't have the resources to

hire legal [services] to look at the impact — if there's archaeological or environmental impact. So capacity is a big issue.

In turn, one participant shared that when "there's a land disposition process for Crown land and our community is supposed to get informed and they have to respond to those notices," it can be challenging for Indigenous communities to respond comprehensively within given timelines. In many cases, OMAFRA may assume adequate consultation had occurred when representatives of Indigenous communities were unable to respond within the timeline or according to institutional requirements, and thus land disposition can proceed.

External participants affirmed that at information sessions, they were presented with programs designed by the Ministry, often created initially to serve municipalities, and then subsequently promoted to Indigenous growers.

As an interviewee states, Indigenous peoples need to be involved "at the very beginning of the first conversation," from the initial conception "of what they want to do. Let's all sit down and pound out some ideas and start developing these things for ourselves. That's always been the challenge, where that is actually straight out refused."

Another participant described the outcome of an "initial meeting" between OMAFRA and their organization (that supports Indigenous agriculture) and the issues they observed with the consultation process:

We saw that call as the beginning of the conversation, but I'm sure by now they've already moved on to finalize their regulation. The timelines are just really not in alignment — each of our communities would have their own individual consultation protocol. And we [organization] can't consult on behalf of all of our member communities. That has to be done at an individual community level.

Another participant recalls,

So often, what happens is that when we first have an initial conversation with a ministry, eventually what they'll do is end up hand picking what Indigenous person they want to develop something.

This interviewee describes further concerns with OMAFRA's consultation and engagement process:

They need to be more involved. But at times, I don't know if they necessarily see it's not just about them asking us questions and then taking that information back and developing their policy. It should be more — we should be working together to develop policy. They're working in isolation from us. It's got to be more collaborative. And I don't know if they understand that to the extent that maybe they should.

Another interviewee shared their experience of the consultation process and how it impacts communities:

Whenever we get these notifications that there's this new funding program available and you can apply, it's a little unfortunate because it feels like every time something comes out, it's like we have to find a way to make it work for our people. There isn't very often that consultation piece beforehand. It's always, 'Well, here's what we have, do what you can with it.' My boss very often gives feedback and says, 'Okay, well, this is why this program isn't going to work for us,' and makes recommendations and stuff like that, but it's not very often that they come back with anything that really opens that up, you know, those barriers — because that's really what they are.

Finally, external interviewees had concerns about the consultation process and implications through which Crown land may be sold off and privatized through programs such as the Northern Livestock Pilot Program (NLP), and the treaty concerns that arise when governments attempt to privatize and convert Crown land. However, Indigenous interviewees had very little information about the consultation and consent process that OMAFRA said it had engaged in with communities and other ministries. According to one participant:

I don't know if we really had much of a discussion with OMAFRA about [Crown land conversion], but, you know, we have raised to them that we would like them to be able to reach out to other ministries on our behalf, where we're not getting the traction that we would like with some other ministries, for them to be able to help us open the door with those other ministries as well.

A number of OMAFRA staff described their own feelings of frustration as well as observations of other colleagues and managers referring to Indigenous consultation as a barrier to program implementation. In reflecting on instances where treaty land rights and archeological sites require consultation, one staff member presented this perspective: "First Nations are very protective of giving up any land that they believe is theirs," and that "those are things that have to be negotiated before you can make Crown land available." The same staff member said that in cases where the government is looking to convert lands to farmland, it can be difficult to engage in consultation if there may be some archaeological value for the First Nation, which makes it "impossible to move forward." One interviewee said they have observed anti-Indigenous racism at OMAFRA first hand. Anti-Indigenous stereotypes have become "normalized in people's minds," which then manifest in unchecked assumptions being made about Indigenous applicants:

I recall very clearly where we were reviewing applications to projects and the project analyst who was presenting the proposal from an Indigenous community said, 'No, we don't need to give them money; they get enough money already from [the] government.'

OMAFRA interviewees noted an increase in voluntary training across the Ontario Public Service, including cultural awareness training and an Indigenous relations community of practice which helped to provide some basic competencies on Indigenous issues.

However, many participants felt that there continue to be "huge barriers with Indigenous participation" and consultation. One participant

observed that many staff members don't "understand [the] duty to consult; they don't understand the basics."

And that too often, "Indigenous consultation is viewed as a barrier." As one interviewee describes,

At this point, I could probably count on two hands the amount of people in the Ministry that have a workable knowledge of the most important issues: one is a lawyer, a couple of them are policy people, [and] the rest are Indigenous. They've always had an Indigenous lens on everything that happens in the Ministry.

And while this interviewee notes that "a great deal of progress" has happened in the Ministry during their time there, at the time of these interviews, we were informed that there was only one dedicated staff position on the Indigenous file at OMAFRA. One participant said that efforts at consultation seemed present at times, "but the accountability isn't there." For instance, they noted that responding to comments and concerns often isn't required. Other interviewees stated that on some Ministry projects, they had seen little to no Indigenous representation or consultation. In other instances, Indigenous representatives and communities were grouped into a larger list of stakeholders, including municipalities, industry, farmer associations, community organizations, and environmental non-governmental organizations, who were all consulted using similar methods. When asked about Indigenous consultation, one interviewee stated that consultation often isn't "meaningful at all. It's superficial. It's not really meaningfully in the interest of the public good." Some staff members called on OMAFRA to shift institutional culture and mentalities in order to advance reconciliation: "the expectation has to be different when it comes to Indigenous peoples. Because of the history of this country, things have to be different."

THEME 4

Differing Needs, Visions & Priorities

MINISTRY AND EXTERNAL INTERVIEWEES alike discussed significant disparities between the Ministry's visions and priorities for agri-food programming and that of many Indigenous communities. Interviewees working on Indigenous food programming said that OMAFRA and other agri-food funders often assessed projects based on their potential to contribute to the regional, provincial, or federal settler economy in order to be perceived and assessed as worthy or viable. As one interviewee describes,

It has to be business. You have to be business-oriented to be able to apply for funding. You have to be operating as a business, and [in] the majority of our communities, if there's an interest in agriculture and they're just getting going, it's more for the community. It's more on a community-based level to — for example — employ people, to produce food sovereignty, to make sure that people have food in the community as a whole... Not for one person to start making a profit off of whatever they're doing. I've tried to really encourage members in our communities: 'Well, why don't you turn this into a business that you can apply for funding?' But a lot of times, there's a reluctance to do that because they just want to provide for their community, or they just want to start small. Everything's very economic-focused and business-focused, as opposed to more targeted for community-level initiatives and grants and things like that. It is a huge barrier.

One interviewee reflected on an example where community members in the region put together a large agri-food proposal that was turned down. They explained that the proposal was very focused on community development: "They had a number of people that do hides, and they wanted to hunt animals and then use [them], and develop the skills to make moccasins." However, "it wasn't a beef farm, it wasn't traditional agriculture."² But it was using food,

² When referring to "traditional agriculture", this speaker seemed to be speaking about conventional, dominant, and/or industrial models of agriculture, the kind heavily supported by OMAFRA and many of the agricultural agencies and associations in Ontario.

using animals from the wild, and using natural foods — and it was totally turned down.” They described how hard the community worked to put together the project: “They worked with their whole region, and had support from all the other communities. It was just kind of sickening to see that they tried so hard to apply for funding, but they were unsuccessful because it didn’t fit the traditional mold of agriculture.”

Another respondent described their community’s goals for agriculture and food: “For our community, we’re trying to grow that sector [agriculture], but it’s more along food security, food sovereignty, food safety, and health.”

Several respondents explained that government programming and policies often restrict Indigenous communities from engaging in Indigenous governance, management models, and food provisioning — such as wild game, fish and other wild foods.

Yet, those who want to participate in livestock, poultry, and dairy farming also feel excluded by the OMAFRA and other dominant agri-food institutions: “Even with the local farmers, there’s quite a few chicken farmers now, but they can’t even get into the system.” Safety regulations also limit opportunities for wild foods:

A lot of it is food safety. A lot of people in the community consume wild game, fish, things like that, but it’s not really known how to incorporate those types of foods into a retail setting. Because they’re not [federally] approved. We’re left using external resources. For fresh fish, we use a local fishery that’s not Indigenous-owned. We have to use theirs because they go through all the testing and the packaging. We have local people who run their own fisheries and sell their own fish privately on the side, but we can’t necessarily put the food in the grocery store, because it’s not tested. It’s the same with wild meat — like deer — we can’t sell it in the grocery store because it’s not tested.

Many interviewees identified a strong need and desire for community-led food projects. One participant said

that “a lot of the initiatives the Lands Department in our community have done are to support and to foster food sovereignty and food security through building capacity for people to grow their own food or harvest locally, like morels, or fiddleheads, or raspberries.” Another added: “I want to try and incorporate Indigenous methodologies of farming in our community; I don’t want people to look at big agriculture and think that’s the way we need to go. We need to do things in a small way.” Many also spoke of the need for projects connecting local employment and well-being with land-based stewardship:

I want to create space to work with the land that’s going to also be available to people who work in addictions and mental health, and that there’s somewhere people can go and be on the land in a healthy way, in a productive way, and learn and connect on the land while they’re healing. I think it is an important thing to create that space. My goal is to create food jobs in the community and connections to land-based jobs in this community for our people. If they’re going to heal, we have to give them another chance.

This interviewee went on to say: “I don’t want to get in the farming game. I want our community to have our own food, to have our own fresh produce. To not have it come from the Ontario Food Terminal.” But in working with OMAFRA and agri-food industry programming, they stated:

I find it’s like, ‘We want to convert you into farmers.’ That’s what we got. Like, ‘Can we colonize you some more this way?’ Or, ‘You have to do it this way,’ and this ‘big ag is the only way to go.’ We don’t need to get into the farming game; we need to feed our nation.

They describe OMAFRA’s approach as,

[A]ssimilating Indigenous folks into that [agri-food] project. We’ve done this game before. We have a history of being amazing farmers with the shittiest implements ever, thrown in the garbage and handed down to us, and then [we] became amazing at it, and we couldn’t compete because we weren’t allowed to sell it. We weren’t allowed to be part of the market.

"They need to be more involved. But at times, I don't know if they necessarily see it's not just about them asking us questions and then taking that information back and developing their policy. It should be more — we should be working together to develop policy. They're working in isolation from us. It's got to be more collaborative. And I don't know if they understand that to the extent that maybe they should."

**- PARTICIPANT // THEME 3: CAPACITY, CONSULTATION, CONSENT
(& RACISM) IN PROGRAMMING AND DEVELOPMENT**



IMAGE CREDIT

Kelsi-Leigh Balaban (Métis/settler) - Revitalizing Our Sustenance Farm / Six Nations of the Grand River



"I want to create space to work with the land that's going to also be available to people who work in addictions and mental health, and that there's somewhere people can go and be on the land in a healthy way, in a productive way, and learn and connect on the land while they're healing. I think it is an important thing to create that space. My goal is to create food jobs in the community and connections to land-based jobs in this community for our people. If they're going to heal, we have to give them another chance."

- PARTICIPANT // THEME 4: DIFFERING NEEDS, VISIONS & PRIORITIES

IMAGE CREDIT

Ethan Dankert-Lannigan (Métis) - Tkaronto Plant Life Farm

Community members spoke of initiatives they were developing, including regenerative gardens and farms, shared smokehouses, Indigenous seed banks, shared harvesting programs, community or cooperative sugar bush production, and a community ice house for fisherpeople and game hunters. There were concerns raised by both OMAFRA and external interviewees that OMAFRA and agri-food funders do not see community-centred projects (that do not replicate conventional models of employment) as a viable agri-food activity. An OMAFRA staff member noted that “community-centred initiatives, like community gardens or volunteer greenhouses, are not a farm and aren’t considered valid. Business development resources are underpinned by a vastly different world view.”

When asked how OMAFRA can support Indigenous food sovereignty, a staff member stated,

A ministry populated by agricultural scientists, like dairy people and crops people and specialists, and stuff like that, what can we do to support traditional food systems? Other than respond the best way that we can if we were asked about something like food safety, right? I mean, we do have production sheets on wild rice and blueberries, and we support maple syrup production and further processing, and honey and honey bees, as well as aquaculture. But at the end of the day, what can we do? I’d say the majority of the effort has to be built upon what we already do as a Ministry, which is transfer knowledge and expand the scope of our support into Indigenous communities.

This quote reveals several built-in assumptions within OMAFRA regarding their role and purpose.

OMAFRA positions itself as the expert through which communities and applicants are expected to receive help, and the institutional culture seems to be premised on the idea that “solutions” must come from OMAFRA. For respondents interested in Indigenous food sovereignty, this approach remains assimilative and limits the kinds of collaborations and projects that are possible for Indigenous peoples. Unfortunately, the current institutional culture and approach tends to pigeonhole Indigenous peoples, and reinforce racist assumptions. Indigenous peoples are seen as inadequate farmers or only interested in certain kinds of farming. However, the history of colonial exclusion, underfunding, and sabotaging of Indigenous farming and agriculture is well documented (Carter, 1990, 2016; Daschuk, 2013).

Indigenous farmers and communities are not monolithic, yet such perspectives permeate bureaucratic decision-making and programming.

Several interviewees noted that the programming guidelines either assumed that they were only interested in berry or maple syrup production or forced them to engage in conventional farming models in order to be supported. Given the legacy of colonialism alongside the growing recognition of our obligations as treaty partners, we have a unique responsibility to support Indigenous food systems, projects and programming *on their own terms* rather than OMAFRA’s.

RECOMMENDATIONS

IT IS CLEAR THAT the relationship between OMAFRA and Indigenous communities is strained, characterized by the Ministry's inability to engage with and understand Indigenous interests, practices, and needs. So how can the relationship be improved? We offer four broad recommendations to begin that work.

1. Redesign decision-making processes

Our study confirms that Indigenous peoples remain structurally excluded from Ministry decision-making, visioning, strategic and land-use planning, policy, and programming.

It is imperative that public institutions such as OMAFRA reflect and act on this exclusion with attention to the *processes* and *practices* used to make decisions and design policy, etc. Hiring Indigenous staff is necessary, but this is not at all sufficient, nor is making rhetorical statements or updating policy language to be more "inclusive." Policy, protocol, and language are all created within a colonial and a racialized construct, so inclusive language can never be a stand-in for supporting and taking direction from community-led initiatives, programs, and policies. Given that Indigenous and racial issues are poorly understood, greater institutional knowledge, awareness, and training is an essential first step, but it is also not sufficient.

Governments and food system actors must direct energy and resources toward establishing comprehensive community-first principles and strategies that provide leadership and staff alike with a clear roadmap for working with communities to support and fund existing projects or to support communities in enacting their own visions.

The roadmap could be established using an Indigenous advisory or council process, but the structure itself should be determined collaboratively with Indigenous partners through ongoing and direct dialogue processes. Plans and agreements can be established with specific strategies to build Indigenous representation and capacity and to determine ways for governments and institutions to support and fund community-driven food development projects effectively. These models take time, energy, and resources, so Indigenous partners must be meaningfully engaged and compensated. This redesign must be prioritized and allocated by governments and food system institutions.

2. Formalize respect for Indigenous laws, policies, and practices

Government paternalism has been a key theme of this report.

Government laws, policies, processes, and practices continue to dominate, while Indigenous laws and points of view are marginalized. Governments impose their models onto Indigenous communities that must comply or risk having funding and resources withdrawn. If governments intend to move away from minimal approval-seeking or paternalistic programming models and toward respectful treaty relationships, non-Indigenous peoples have a responsibility to learn about and value Indigenous laws and processes. Indigenous laws, policies, and practices must be formalized and given equal weight when making decisions, designing new policies or programs, or, for instance, when considering how to move forward with a particular area of land. In fact, no new proposals for land use change should move ahead without such formalization, nor without full and ongoing participation from Indigenous communities.

3. Improve settler understanding and education

Settler ignorance of Indigenous issues as well as the impacts of colonialism is an important contributor to the recurrence of false stereotypes and assumptions about Indigenous peoples and practices.

Discriminatory beliefs that Indigenous people are deficient farmers and agriculturalists, that they receive more public resources than non-Indigenous Canadians, and that they have exceedingly narrow development interests all contribute to a culture of anti-Indigenous racism across the agri-food sector. Many historical accounts and in-depth inquiries have clearly shown these beliefs to be false and instead demonstrated how colonial administrators banned Indigenous nations from practicing their systems of law, governance, land stewardship, food provision, culture, spirituality, family, and kinship (Carter, 1990, 2016; Daschuk, 2013; Deloria, 1998; Yellowhead Institute, 2021).

Agri-food institutions must invest in a range of learning opportunities for non-Indigenous people to educate themselves more deeply on these issues.

Institutions must also address the lack of willingness on the part of some staff to participate meaningfully in Indigenous issues or engage in anti-racism, racial bias, and diversity work more broadly.

4. Invest in Indigenous land and food economies

Indigenous land and food practices have long been marginalized, yet they have much to offer in building a sustainable food system across diverse local ecological contexts.

In the immediate term, OMAFRA ought to create dedicated streams of funding for Indigenous food and agriculture. This funding should recognize Indigenous food sovereignty and First Nations' rights to design and lead the food systems and solutions that work for them, without any requirement that projects also benefit external economies. In effect, Indigenous food systems and sovereignty must be respected in their own right and supported.

IMAGE CREDIT

Ethan Dankert-Lannigan (Métis) - Tkaronto Plant Life Farm



CONCLUSION

THIS STUDY REVEALS significant problems with Indigenous rights, knowledge, and experiences being understood, respected, and prioritized in Ontario's agri-food, land use, policy, and programming. The research and interviews clearly show that Indigenous peoples remain structurally excluded from Ministry decision-making, visioning, strategic and land-use planning, policy, and programming. Moreover, there is a lack of Indigenous representation across the Ministry, especially in leadership and decision-making positions, as well as an absence of Indigenous-led and directed programming, policy design, and advice.

The insights and experiences from this research have informed our recommendations, which ought to drive structural change, meaningful dialogue and relationship building, as well as listening, reflection, and action across the Ministry and the public service more widely.

This work can be undertaken through collaboration and from a place and spirit of curiosity, willingness, respect, and friendship.

There have been many calls to reflection and action that Indigenous nations and people have been patiently and tirelessly offered, including, but not limited to, The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). If done with care, accountability, transparency, and intention, this work can allow institutions and people to stand with and support the sovereignty, well-being and self-determination of Indigenous peoples and practices as we move forward on these lands together.

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