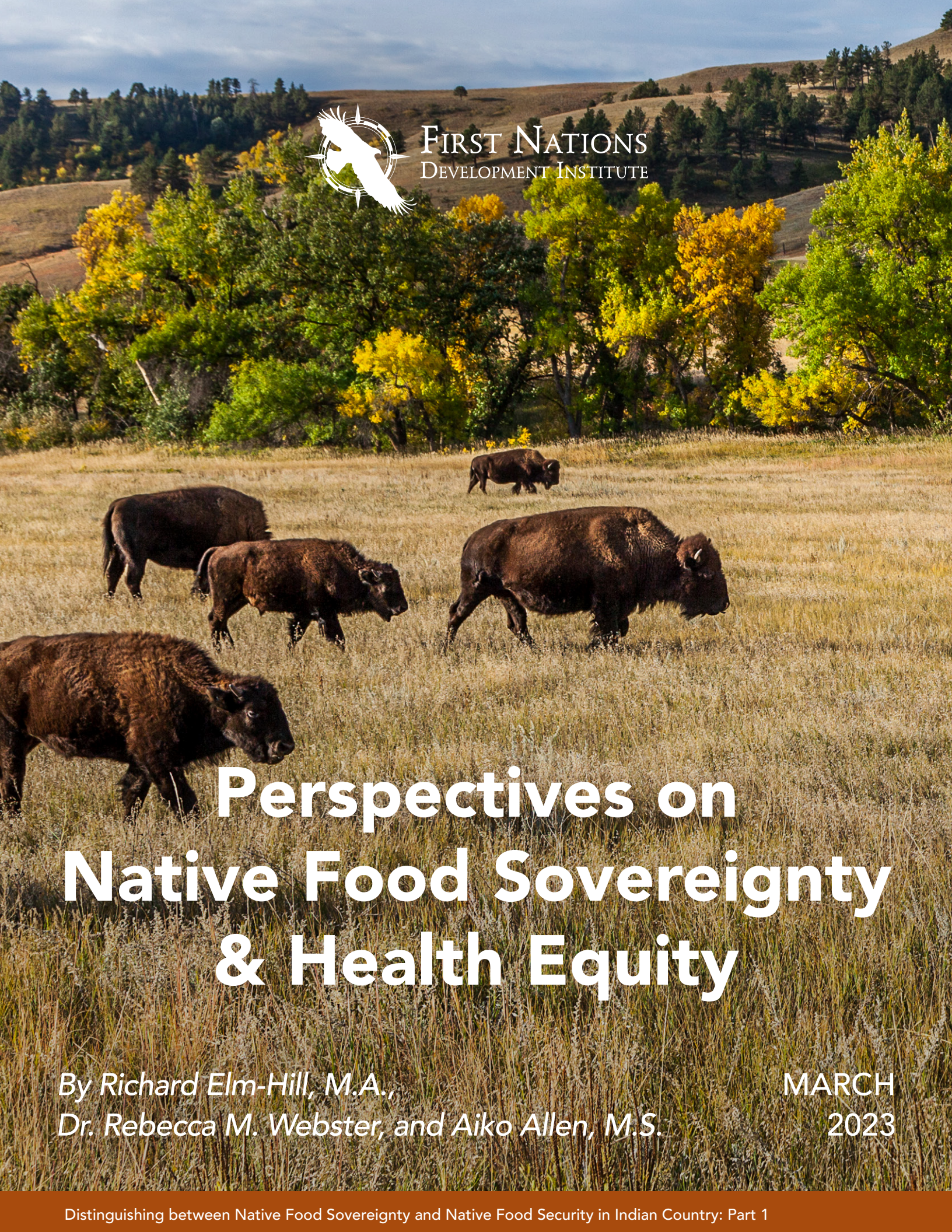


First Nations Development Institute

Perspectives on Native Food Sovereignty & Health Equity

By Richard Elm-Hill, M.A., Dr. Rebecca M. Webster, and Aiko Allen, M.S.

MARCH 2023

Distinguishing between Native Food Sovereignty and Native Food Security in Indian Country: Part 1

Perspectives on Native Food Sovereignty & Health Equity *is supported by a grant from The Health Impact Project, a collaboration of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts, encouraging local, state, and national organizations to include health considerations in policy decisions across multiple sectors. The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Health Impact Project, The Pew Charitable Trusts, or the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.*

Thank you *to Zuni Youth Enrichment Project for their contribution to this series, and to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts for their generous funding.*

INTRODUCTION: NATIVE FOOD SOVEREIGNTY & HEALTH EQUITY

Food sovereignty is the peoples' right to have and sustainably produce food that is safe, nutritious and appropriate. As defined by First Nations Development Institute[1], Native Food Sovereignty is "the right of American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians to produce their own traditional foods on their own lands to sustain themselves, their families, and their communities." Native Food Sovereignty also "defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation."[1]

Native Food Sovereignty requires that we address inequity that exists in relation to health and well-being. In a world where we've achieved health equity [2] all Native people are able to attain their full potential for health and well-being. From an Indigenous viewpoint, physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental health have always been interconnected in terms of well-being and harmony—seated in ancestral lands and lifeways as aspects of cultural, family, and community identity. The practice of cultural foodways is essential for the health and well-being of Native peoples. Practicing cultural foodways is entwined with access to land and control of the growing, processing, and sharing of food in Native communities.

---

[1] Valerie Blue Bird Jernigan, Tara L. Maudrie, Cassandra Jean Nikolaus, Tia Benally, Selisha Johnson, Travis Teague, Melena Mayes, Tvli Jacob, and Tori Taniguchi. "Food Sovereignty Indicators for Indigenous Community Capacity Building and Health." Frontiers. Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems, August 25, 2021. https://doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2021.704750.

[2] "Health Equity." WHO. World Health Organization, Accessed September 30, 2022. https://www.who.int/health-topics/health-equity#tab=tab_1

CULTURAL FOODWAYS ARE ESSENTIAL TO NATIVE HEALTH

In Indigenous communities, cultural foodways are central to Native health and identity. Health has a wider definition among Indigenous tribes and nations than the definition held by Western science and medicine. Not just the absence of disease and illness, health is a multi-dimensional sense of well-being—what it means to live in harmony and balance emotionally, spiritually, mentally, and physically interconnected with a belonging to land, ancestors, and all surrounding sentient beings.

Native foodways are embedded in the cyclical, seasonal, and regional environmental changes and the ways Native communities carry out their responsibilities to the land. Communities participate in maintaining balance with the natural environment through their hunting, fishing, gathering and agricultural practices. Ancestral practices hold kincentric ecological knowledge that supports balance in the food system and recognizes the responsibility in land stewardship.[3] When there is disruption to cultural foodways or the environment that holds the food system, the health of the tribal community is at risk.

The impacts of colonization have compromised Native health for generations. Native people experience far higher rates of disease compared to other populations. Cultural foodways are a necessary practice and an indicator for health in tribal communities. The efficacy of community involvement and collaboration in addressing the root causes of chronic diseases, concomitant mental health, and behavioral health illnesses is long established. Research shows that when Native communities move away from Western foods to a diet that emphasizes traditional foods they experience positive impacts on health and well-being.[4]

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published a landmark article in the journal ***Preventing Chronic Disease: Public Health Research, Practice, and Policy*** entitled, "Integrating Culture and History to Promote Health and Help Prevent Type 2 Diabetes in American Indian/Alaska Native Communities: Traditional Foods Have Become a Way to Talk about Health." Interfacing Western science and Indigenous wisdom, it posits that traditional foods and food sovereignty are important public health topics for chronic disease risk reduction and management based on a project developed and implemented among 17 Indigenous tribes and nations. Qualitative results demonstrated the importance of tribally-driven programs and emphasized the significance of traditional foods in relation to land, identity, food sovereignty, and food security.[5]

---

[3] A-dae Romero-Briones, Dr. Enrique Salmon, Hilary Renick, and Temra Costa. "Recognition and Support of Indigenous California Land Stewards, Practitioners of Kincentric Ecology." First Nations. First Nations Development Institute, Accessed September 30, 2022. https://www.firstnations.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Indigenous-California-Land-Stewards-Practitioners-of-Kincentric-Ecology-Report.pdf.

[4] Article Source: Demographic and cultural correlates of traditional eating among Alaska Native adults at risk for cardiovascular disease Sanders MA, Oppezzo M, Skan J, Benowitz NL, Schnellbaecher M, et al. (2022) Demographic and cultural correlates of traditional eating among Alaska Native adults at risk for cardiovascular disease. PLOS ONE 17(9): e0275445. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0275445

[5] DeBruyn L, Fullerton L, Satterfield D, Frank M. Integrating Culture and History to Promote Health and Help Prevent Type 2 Diabetes in American Indian/Alaska Native Communities: Traditional Foods Have Become a Way to Talk About Health. Prev Chronic Dis 2020; 17:190213. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5888/pcd17.190213

Tribal partner perspectives informed the role of traditional foods among Indigenous nations. Seven themes were identified, relevant in understanding commonalities between four tribal organizations and their aim to achieve identified long-term outcomes for better health and thriving communities into the future. The relevant themes identified are 1) the transmission of traditional knowledge and interactions at the grassroots level; 2) storytelling and the power of oral tradition in skills building; 3) community engagement; 4) knowledge sharing and gratitude; 5) the flexibility to do what works, and 6) program sustainability. The seventh theme, 7) connections to health, makes a case for understanding that chronic disease is "deeply connected to social determinants of health, such as historical trauma, adverse childhood experiences, and loss of traditional foodways." During the virtual peer learning session, one participant commented that part of the motivation for the reclamation of traditional foodways and agricultural systems is rooted in "having everything taken from us."

Part of healing the destruction and disruption of cultural lifeways during colonial and post-colonial eras comes from rebuilding and nurturing a sense of identity and direction for contemporary youth and families centered on food sovereignty. Similarly, partners in the diabetes prevention program stated, "The way to reclaim health… is to reconnect with the land, water, traditional foodways, and all that they mean (DeBruyn et al. 2020, p. 6). [6]

Revitalization of cultural foodways is necessary to overcome inequity and improve the health and well-being of Native people and communities. An increase in the availability of traditional foods to support reclamation of cultural foodways requires access to land.

---

[6] See footnote 5.

LAND RIGHTS ARE ENTWINED WITH CULTURAL FOODWAYS

For Indigenous people to engage in hunting, fishing, trapping, gathering, and agriculture, there needs to be access to land. To increase the amount of traditional foods available in Native communities, there needs to be access to land. Prior to European contact, access to land was not an issue. The expansion of colonial territories in the few centuries after contact led to the displacement of Indigenous peoples through treaties that moved tribes west.

In 1887, Congress passed the General Allotment Act that broke up communal tribal landholdings and gave ownership of land to individual tribal members.[7] Due to tax foreclosures, mortgage foreclosures, and unscrupulous land sales, Indigenous people lost ownership of their land at astonishing rates. Within a single generation, tribal landholdings went from 138 million acres to 48 million acres.[8]

The purposeful displacement would continue through the 1970s with the voluntary urban relocation program that provided financial incentives to move Indigenous people off reservations and into cities.[9] The continual displacement and loss of land made it extremely difficult for Indigenous people to have access to their traditional foods.[10] Colonization continues to have a direct impact on land and food systems.

Many tribes that have secured treaty rights to access off reservation territories are having to stand by while those areas are deforested, developed, or polluted. Complex policy navigation on a government-to-government basis often limits self-determination to manage land conservation, wildlife resources, forestry departments, and plans. To exacerbate the situation, those Indigenous people who are able to care for their traditional foods often face difficulties with the extreme weather patterns and overall changes in climate, which manifest as prolonged periods of drought, wildfires, flooding, hurricanes, and tornadoes.

[7] See footnote 3.

[8] See footnote 7.

[9] Eilis O'Neill. "Unrecognized Tribes Struggle Without Federal Aid During Pandemic." Https://Www.Npr.Org/. NPR, April 17, 2021. https://www.npr.org/2021/04/17/988123599/unrecognized-tribes-struggle-without-federal-aide-during-pandemic.

[10] See footnote 1.

Many communities are now forced to adapt to changes and find ways to cope with the climate crisis. Planting seasons are changing, fish are spawning at different times, trees are ready for maple syrup tapping earlier, and foods stored in ice cellars in Alaska villages are thawing due to increasing temperatures. Juneberries, chokecherries, and buffalo berries—stable foods in traditional diets—are not as abundant some years, as trees and shrubs bud out earlier in the spring. Food sources for some animals are disappearing, such as lichen for reindeer grazing. In the Southwest, extreme drought conditions are challenging to Indigenous farmers and ranchers as they seek to grow crops and manage grazing lands.

As Native communities face the climate crisis, injustices of settler colonialism and Indigenous exploitation continue to be highlighted. Land reclamation supports the revitalization of Native foodways and Native food systems as an act of Native Food Sovereignty, but also racial, cultural, environmental, food, and climate justice.

REVITALIZING NATIVE FOOD SYSTEMS

There are currently 574 federally recognized tribal nations in the United States. There are also state-recognized and unrecognized tribes working on establishing or revitalizing their food systems. Each tribe has a unique history and relationship with Indigenous foods. Kibbe Conti, an Oglala Lakota dietician, writes that "every Native Tribe has a story about what happened to their food system."[11]

"Many Indigenous communities concerned about food insecurity, growing rates of diet-related disease, and inequities present in mainstream food systems, are actively working to restore their food systems through a food sovereignty approach."[12] Approaches across Turtle Island include community building, intergenerational learning, peer learning, tribal partnerships, food policy and practice.

---

[11] "Gather: The Fight to Revitalize Our Native Foodways, Viewing Guide." Https://Www.Ecoliteracy.Org/. Center for EcoLiteracy, (2020). Accessed September 30, 2022. https://www.ecoliteracy.org/sites/default/files/media/ecoliteracy_gather_viewing_guide.pdf, 93.

[12] Anna McNulty. "Native Agriculture Never Went Away. Now It Is on the Rise." & the West: Reporting, Research, Interviews, and Analysis on the Environmental Future of California and Western North America. Stanford University Bill Lane Center for the American West, January 22, 2022. https://andthewest.stanford.edu/.

In a recent virtual peer learning session held in September 2022, Zuni Youth Enrichment Project (Zuni Pueblo), Ukwakhwa (Oneida), Ndée Bikíyaa (The People's Farm, White Mountain Apache Tribe), and Meskawki Food Sovereignty (Meskwaki Nation Sac & Fox Tribe of Mississippi in Iowa), self-defined Native Food Sovereignty to include "raising and sharing traditional foods, growing, harvesting, preserving, and cooking our food on our own terms."

When asked, "How do you know when you have food sovereignty?" responses included "when everyone in the community has access to traditional knowledge about caring for our foods; when we can care for our Indigenous foods without interference from non-Indigenous actors; when we have the ability to share cultural traditions and foods; when someone has a garden, no matter how small…this is a part of food sovereignty."

Regaining control of the food system is a means for Native Americans to address some of the long-term effects of colonization, determine better health outcomes, and strengthen Native Food Sovereignty.

STRENGTHENING NATIVE FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

The Indigenous food sovereignty movement has been gaining momentum.[13] In Guatemala, the Atitlán Declaration of Food Sovereignty defines Indigenous food sovereignty as the "right of Peoples to define their own policies and strategies for the sustainable production, distribution, and consumption of food, with respect for their own cultures and their own systems of managing natural resources and rural areas, and is considered to be a precondition for Food Security."[14] The food sovereignty movement in the United States (and likely in other countries as well) has three main goals.[15] First, Indigenous people should have access to healthy and culturally appropriate food. Second, Indigenous people should be able to engage in sustainable food production. Third, Indigenous people should be able to safeguard their agricultural practices including planting, harvesting, and preservation.

---

[13] Sowerwine, J., Mucioki, M., Sarna-Wojcicki, D. et al. Reframing food security by and for Native American communities: a case study among tribes in the Klamath River basin of Oregon and California. Food Sec. 11, 579–607 (2019). https://doi.org/10.1007/s12571-019-00925-y.

[14] Mucioki, M., Sowerwine, J., and Sarna-Wojcicki, D. (2018). Thinking inside and outside the box: local and national considerations of the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). Journal of Rural Studies, 57:88-98. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.11.002. (https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0743016717304199).

[15] See footnote 14.

A focus on Native Food Sovereignty is rooted in the understanding that Native people have the right to reclaim, determine, and control how food is grown, processed, and shared in tribal communities. Tribal governments, grassroots community organizations, and families can make efforts to strengthen Native Food Sovereignty.

Tribal governments can provide education, funding, and land access to the community for hunting, fishing, trapping, gathering, and agriculture. Tribal food policy can be a safeguard for Native food systems and Native Food Sovereignty. Tribal Nations can lobby on behalf of their constituents for favorable legislation that safeguards Indigenous rights to protect the environment and the land that supports Indigenous foods. Tribal governments can also act as a conduit to filter federal funding to the community to support initiatives that strengthen food sovereignty.

Grassroots organizations like cooperatives or nonprofits can be established or strengthened to take on some of the responsibility to care for and harvest Indigenous foods. Unlike tribal governments, grassroots organizations can be more agile and create community ownership of the need for change through bottom-up decision-making. By organizing at a community level, community support is bolstered to help accomplish food sovereignty goals.

Families returning to caring for traditional foods have the most autonomy and can be flexible with changes. However, families may be the most vulnerable without a strong network to help in times of need. Families can serve in the same capacities as tribal governments and grassroots organizations by sharing their knowledge and being a source for Indigenous foods.

Strengthening Native Food Sovereignty emphasizes the right of Native American people to accomplish these goals for themselves, without interference. A precondition to Food Security, Native Food Sovereignty requires equity in health that remediates power dynamics to support policy and practice that revitalizes cultural foodways, gives access to land, and control of food systems to Native peoples, which in return supports the health and well-being of Native communities and the natural world.

FURTHER READING IN THIS SERIES

Native Food Security from Lack to Abundance
By Richard Elm-Hill, M.A., Dr. Rebecca M. Webster, and Aiko Allen, M.S.

Serving Native Youth: A Dialogue on Native Food Sovereignty and Native Food Security
By Richard Elm-Hill, M.A., Dr. Rebecca M. Webster, and Aiko Allen, M.S.

First Nations Development Institute

Native Food Security from Lack to Abundance

By Richard Elm-Hill, M.A.,
Dr. Rebecca M. Webster, and Aiko Allen, M.S.

MARCH
2023

Distinguishing between Native Food Sovereignty and Native Food Security in Indian Country: Part 2

Native Food Security from Lack to Abundance *is supported by a grant from The Health Impact Project, a collaboration of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and The Pew Charitable Trusts, encouraging local, state, and national organizations to include health considerations in policy decisions across multiple sectors. The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Health Impact Project, The Pew Charitable Trusts, or the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.*

Thank you *to Zuni Youth Enrichment Project for their contribution to this series, and to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and The Pew Charitable Trusts for their generous funding.*

INTRODUCTION

Before there was a need for words like food security, Indigenous peoples stewarded the land through cultural foodways as a means of sustenance in harmony with the natural world. According to global definitions, food security exists "when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life." In juxtaposition, Native Food Security exists when American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians, at all times, have access to an abundance of culturally relevant foods to meet their dietary needs and preferences for a healthy tribal community.

The difference between food security and Native Food Security is cultural. Food security, in general, focuses on the needs of individuals or individual households. Native Food Security concerns both the physical and spiritual nourishment of the family, household, tribe, clan, community, place, land, and the foods themselves. A healthy tribal community fosters intergenerational responsibility through reciprocal relationships with all relations.

FOOD INSECURITY AND FOOD SECURITY

The ways in which food security is framed shapes the kinds of solutions that are proposed.[1] Discourse on food security is largely framed through a deficit lens as "food insecurity" highlighting the lack of access to food for healthy living. This needs-driven perspective is often applied in order to determine the allocation of federal and state resources through grants and programs. However, needs-driven data, over time, for Indigenous populations, on the issues of food and hunger have many gaps and constraints given the lack of measures that are culturally based and unique to each tribe or nation.[2]

Native communities are tasked with measuring the condition of their community to extract arguments of lack in order to gain access to resources. To counter this approach, Native communities have begun to conduct food sovereignty assessments and Indigenous research methodologies that seek to gather information in culturally appropriate ways. The data is positioned to portray more relevant information that expresses strengths, desires, challenges, and needs in context.

From a tribal perspective, Native people are not food secure until their communities are food secure. Restoring Native Food Security depends on Native Food Sovereignty and returning to ancestral foodways that restore balance and harmony to the entire food system. The aims of Native Food Security can only be reached when the story and experience of food shift from lack to steadfast abundance.

Overcoming chronic food insecurity in Native communities requires understanding Native Food Security from both a historical and contemporary perspective.

---

[1] Sowerwine, J., Mucioki, M., Sarna-Wojcicki, D. et al. Reframing food security by and for Native American communities: a case study among tribes in the Klamath River basin of Oregon and California. Food Sec. 11, 579–607 (2019). https://doi.org/10.1007/s12571-019-00925-y.

[2] Valarie Blue Bird Jernigan, Kimberly R. Huyser, Jimmy Valdes, and Vanessa Watts Simonds. 2017. Food Insecurity among American Indian and Alaska Natives: A National Profile using the Current Population Survey—Food Security Supplement in Journal of Hunger Environment Nutrition: 2017; 12(1): 1-10 p. 1.

HISTORY OF NATIVE FOOD INSECURITY

Historically, military action of the United States and subsequent federal policies set a course for the destruction of Indigenous populations by eliminating vital food sources. The removal and relocation of Native American peoples from ancestral homelands severed communities from the food resources necessary for sustenance and healthy societies. By intentionally disrupting traditional foodways and food practices, federal programs have continued to create food insecurity for Native people.[3]

The Indian Removal Act of 1830 removed Native Peoples from their bountiful lands onto infertile land causing the loss of culture, language, and traditions. "This forced relocation remains an underlying issue as tribal nations today are trying to cultivate their lands, learn their environments and adjust to the abrupt transitions. Imagine a thousand-year-old society moved suddenly and is now forced to rebuild," shares A-dae Romero-Briones, Director of Programs for Nourishing Native Foods and Health at First Nations Development Institute.

Stripping Native Peoples of their traditional food systems and food sources is a colonizing strategy used to control and defeat tribes. Fields were burned during the American Revolution to prevent American Indians from replanting their crops. Bison were hunted to near extinction by the U.S. government to promote westward expansion, devastating food sources for Plains Tribes. An estimated 31 million bison were killed between 1868 and 1881 with only hundreds of bison left by the end of the 19th century. Working papers shared by the National Bureau of Economic Research point to the devastating and irreversible impacts of the slaughter of bison on the livelihood of Plains Tribes.[4] The current condition of food insecurity in Native communities can be traced to the deliberate actions to destroy and disrupt Native life and culture through colonial expansion and repeated acts of systemic injustice.

The Dawes Allotment Act of 1887 gave the U.S. president the right to regulate land rights

[3] Sara Usha Maillacheruvu. "The Historical Determinants of Food Insecurity in Native Communities." Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, (2022) /https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/10-4-22fa.pdf.

[4] Donn. L. Feir, Rob Gillezeau, and Maggie E.C. Jones. "The Slaughter of the Bison and the Reversal of Fortunes on the Great Plains." National Bureau of Economic Research NBER Working Paper Series, no. 30368 (2022). Accessed September 30, 2022. https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w30368/w30368.pdf.

on tribal territories. Also known as the General Allotment Act, the federal government effectively stole tribally-held reservation lands. Native Americans were forced to adopt a proprietary relationship with the land as individuals. With the appropriation of 90 million acres of land, kinship systems and traditional practices, including farming, fishing, and migratory seasonal harvesting, were further diminished.

Lauded as a turning point in the treatment of Native Americans by the federal government, the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 ended the practice of allotment and attempted to reframe how American Indians were treated in the aftermath of war and displacement but instilled an unfamiliar way of life that separated children from their community, family, culture, and foodways. Children were placed in boarding schools where they received a diet designed for soldiers in place of their cultural and regional diets. The substitution of culturally appropriate foods continued for decades in the commodity food program where Native families received provisions of dairy, processed wheat, sugars, and meats that were unfamiliar to their preferred diets.

Not only did reorganization not restore what was lost for Indigenous peoples, but the practice was also harmful to Native children, families, and communities. What policymakers label progress has left a devastating legacy of cultural suppression, widespread intergenerational trauma, disease, poverty, and chronic food insecurity. The Relocation Act of 1956, pushed Native Americans off reservation lands into urban areas to acquire vocational skills, continuing efforts of forced assimilation and the resulting loss of relationship with land, culture, and traditional foodways.

Following the civil rights era, the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 was passed allowing for federal agencies to make grants directly to federally recognized Ttribes. The federally funded Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) was established under the Food Stamp Act of 1977. As funding and policy changes shifted to support self-determination, Native American Tribes began coordinating stronger efforts at the community, regional, tribal, and government-to-government levels to reclaim their foods and traditional ways. The Native Farm Bill Coalition was established in 2017 to represent and advance tribal interests in federal food, agriculture and nutrition policy in the quinquennial Farm Bill.[5] Hundreds of years later, amidst progress, Native Americans continue to experience disruption to their foods and food systems. An ongoing crisis exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the inadequate government response[6] to carry out treaty obligations that promised to meet the food security needs of Native communities.

---

[5] "Indian Country's Interest in the Farm Bill - History of the Coalition." Native Farm Bill. Native Farm Bill Coalition, Accessed September 30, 2022. https://www.nativefarmbill.com/coalition.

[6] Toni Stanger-McLaughlin, Sandy Martini, Geri Henchy, Katherine Jacobs, Erin Parker, and Valarie Segrest. "Reimagining Hunger Responses in Times of Crisis: Insights from Case Examples and a Survey of Native Communities' Food Access During COVID-19." Native American Agriculture Fund, Food Research & Action Center, University of Arkansas Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative, (2020). Accessed September 30, 2022. https://nativeamericanagriculturefund.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Reimagining-Hunger-Responses-in-Times-of-Crisis.pdf.

AVAILABILITY OF TRADITIONAL FOODS

Native Food Security means that Native Americans have an abundance of traditional foods available to meet their dietary needs and food preferences at all times.

The food security rate is a relatively new phenomenon considering that until the early 1900s Indigenous people produced nearly all of their own food locally.[7] The availability and access to traditional foods was supported through ancestral foodways, trade routes, and a reciprocal relationship to the land, food, and environment. The continuation of broken treaties with the federal government pushed tribes onto reservations further and further west, constricting the ability of tribal communities to hunt, fish, farm, and gather traditional place-based foods.[8] When we consider the availability of traditional foods, we must consider that there are many tribes with differing cultural, nutritional, ceremonial, and community needs that align with the cultural foodways and food practices of their region. Today, there are 574 Federally recognized Tribes and more than 200 unrecognized tribes.[9] Native Food Security means that there is availability of a variety of traditional foods to meet the needs of many culturally diverse members of different sovereign tribal nations and all Native communities.

The availability of traditional foods considers the place and the food themselves. Is there land and fresh water to support Salmon running? The Yurok[10] are a coastal people located in what is now Northern California, along the Klamath River. The natural environment of the Pacific Ocean, Klamath River, redwoods, marshes, and prairies make up their ancestral territory. Access to traditional Yurok foods like salmon, sturgeon, steelhead, eels, elk, deer, ducks, sea lions, whales, shellfish, acorn, berries, and seaweed is dependent on the health of the natural ecosystem. Samuel Gensaw, a Native youth leader and member of the Yurok, shares, "As Indigenous people, we're part of this environment and salmon are a huge part of our life; we're fishermen and once the salmon are gone, it's the end of the world for us and there's no going back."[11]

---

[7] See footnote 3.

[8] See footnote 7.

[9] Eilis O'Neill. "Unrecognized Tribes Struggle Without Federal Aid During Pandemic." Https://Www.Npr.Org/. NPR, April 17, 2021. https://www.npr.org/2021/04/17/988123599/unrecognized-tribes-struggle-without-federal-aide-during-pandemic.

[10] See footnote 1.

[11] "Gather: The Fight to Revitalize Our Native Foodways, Viewing Guide." Https://Www.Ecoliteracy.Org/. Center for EcoLiteracy, (2020). Accessed September 30, 2022. https://www.ecoliteracy.org/sites/default/files/media/ecoliteracy_gather_viewing_guide.pdf, 93.

The Sioux Nation in South and North Dakota relied on bison for their way of life. Bison provided means for the location, ceremony, subsistence, economy, shelter, and clothing. As the Lakota, Dakota, or Nakota Tribes that make up the Sioux Nation share how important it is to have bison as a preferred food, they also stress the need for their full traditional diet of other large game and wild poultry.

When we consider the availability of traditional foods, we must consider the availability of traditional seeds. Native Food Security includes the right to seed, where seeds can be freely saved, stored, traded, and passed down. While the availability of seeds has been diminished over generations, acts of seed sovereignty like the repatriation of seeds protects the future of the availability of traditional foods.

Today, less than 20% of the food Indigenous people consume is grown locally. And while the number of Native American farmers and agricultural producers is on the rise,[12] there aren't enough traditional foods available to meet the need. The availability and quality of traditional foods is often limited by restrictive laws and habitat degradation.[13] Further, Native foods are threatened by legislation that supports extractive industrial agriculture, negatively impacting the natural environment necessary for the cultivation of traditional foods.

ACCESS TO TRADITIONAL FOODS

Native Food Security means that Native Americans have adequate income, resources, and knowledge to access traditional foods at all times.

ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE

While access to Native foods themselves is a concern, Tribal Peoples also need access to the food practices, protocols, knowledge, and places that are the origins of traditional foods and foodways. When we speak of access to ways of being and knowing, some of the ways belong to tribes and elders in Native communities; therefore they are the only people who can give and share access to members of their communities. Wisdom keepers and knowledge holders carry a responsibility to make sure the communities have access to traditional foods and foodways. Seedkeepers carry the responsibility to ensure traditional seeds are protected. Tribal community members may receive access within their family, clan, tribal economic systems, tribal educational systems, tribal cultural ceremonies, and systems, or tribal relationships. Remember that Native cultures are relearning and remaking traditional foodways in a

---

[12] Anna McNulty. "Native Agriculture Never Went Away. Now It Is on the Rise." & the West: Reporting, Research, Interviews, and Analysis on the Environmental Future of California and Western North America. Stanford University Bill Lane Center for the American West, January 22, 2022. https://andthewest.stanford.edu/.

[13] Sowerwine, J., Mucioki, M., Sarna-Wojcicki, D. et al. Reframing food security by and for Native American communities: a case study among tribes in the Klamath River basin of Oregon and California. Food Sec. 11, 579–607 (2019). https://doi.org/10.1007/s12571-019-00925-y.

contemporary setting, changing in relationship with the land and foods to reclaim a once intact food system.

When assessing the availability of foods for tribal communities, equity is a consideration not only for growing, processing, and preparing to make foods available, but also for the systems, policies, and distribution that determine what foods, of what quality, and in what quantities make it to grocery store shelves, pantries, schools, and communities that become access points for Native peoples.

ACCESS TO "FOOD"

The Federal Government has attempted to solve food insecurity in Native communities to meet treaty obligations by creating paternalistic access points for food through federal nutrition programs. The two largest food assistance programs serving Native Americans are the USDA Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). SNAP eligible participants purchase food from authorized SNAP retailers and grocery stores. The location of the stores often poses a challenge for many rural Indigenous nations. Where SNAP is not feasible, the USDA funds FDPIR. The USDA purchases and ships selected foods to Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) that use warehouses, stores, and other local sites to distribute foods. Historically, distributed foods have been typically canned or packaged, highly processed, and high in fat, sugar, and salt. "The 2008 Farm Bill, included a provision authorizing the establishment of a fund to purchase traditional and locally grown foods for FDPIR, however, it wasn't until 2015 that Congress appropriated funds for the program. For the first time, FDPIR began to offer clients a few traditional foods, including bison, blue cornmeal, salmon, and wild rice, on a more consistent basis." (Mucioki et al. 2017, p.7)[14]

[14] Mucioki, M., Sowerwine, J., and Sarna-Wojcicki, D. (2018). Thinking inside and outside the box: local and national considerations of the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). Journal of Rural Studies, 57:88-98. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.11.002. (https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0743016717304199).

While safety nets might be well intentioned, they aren't sufficient in prioritizing both the availability and access to traditional foods that serve diverse tribes with varying needs for differing traditional foods. In a policy brief on *Integrating Traditional and Local Foods into the Tribal Commodities Program*, it was noted by a respondent that "forcing or even encouraging Native American producers into an industrial food supplier model" was not a viable solution and might create more conflict between tribes.[15] (Mucioki et al. 2017, p.24) Industrial agricultural models dismiss the known benefits garnered from food that is grown locally and regionally in culturally competent ways. It was also noted that the majority of traditional foods distributed were not grown by tribally owned or operated entities, and the extent to which the foods are produced according to Native values is in question. Native Food Security requires that Native communities have control over food in their region and have all the means necessary to provide access to traditional foods for themselves.

Even when food is distributed, Native people experience chronic food insecurity due to the lack of inclusion of culturally appropriate foods. A study from the University of California, Berkeley, determined that 92% of Native American households in the region suffer from food insecurity amongst tribal communities in Northern California and Oregon. This study also revealed that nearly 70% of households surveyed never or rarely get access to the Native foods they want and that households that have better access to Native foods experience higher levels of food security.[16]

ACCESS TO ECONOMIC RESOURCES

Native Americans, whether living in urban settings or on reservations, have inherited a wealth gap caused by displacement and theft of land and resources that has yet to be rectified. By necessity, contemporary Native people hold concurrent views, where wealth is identified as knowledge, family, and communal assets as well as money and resources. In 2018, Native Americans held the highest poverty rate of 25.4% in the United States—more than any other ethnicity. The unemployment rate of 6.1% and the employment-to-population ratio of 57.1% put American Indians among the most economically marginalized groups.[17] In a racial wealth snapshot, Native American wealth is estimated at $5,700 compared to a median of $65,000 for the American population as a whole.[18] In a 2022 poll, 69% of Native Americans said price increases caused them serious financial problems.[19] The increased costs of housing, medical care, childcare, gas, food, and other goods impact food security.

---

[15] See footnote 14.

[16] See footnote 13.

[17] Dedrick Asante-Muhammad, Esha Kamra, Connor Sanchez, Kathy Ramirez, and Rogelio Tec. "Racial Wealth Snapshot: Native Americans." Ncrc.Org. National Community Reinvestment Coalition, February 24, 2022. https://ncrc.org/racial-wealth-snapshot-native-americans

[18] See footnote 17.

[19] NPR, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. "Personal Experiences of U.S. Racial/Ethnic Minorities in Today's Difficult Times." https://legacy.npr.org/assets/pdf/2022/08/NPR-RWJF-Harvard-Poll.pdf.

At the same time, Native Americans receive a disproportionately small amount of total philanthropic funds. Native Americans make up 2.9% of the U.S. population but only receive 0.4% of dollars from the philanthropic sector.[20] Native nations face federal agency requirements that constrain efforts at land stewardship; water, wildlife, and forest resources management; processing, marketing, and sale of local Indigenous foods; and loan programs for small farm and ranch operations.

Improved infrastructure is necessary for Native communities to access traditional foods and foster food security. With the expansion of globalization, daily food increasingly comes from distant sources, and delivery is concentrated in urban areas. American Indians in rural areas are often limited to purchasing food from fast food restaurants and small grocery or convenience stores. Restaurants and stores in rural and remote areas have limited supplies of high-quality produce and low-fat foods, and rarely if ever have a supply of traditional foods available. According to the National Congress of American Indians, transportation infrastructure development is critical to economic development, job creation, and improving living conditions for individuals and families in American Indian/Alaska Native communities, and the millions of Americans who travel through reservations every day.[21] Increasing the amount of philanthropic funds, supporting infrastructure, and Land Back initiatives, and addressing income and wealth inequality all support Native Food Security.

Access to Land and Water

The Indigenous worldview doesn't see land and water as resources to be exploited. For Native people, the Earth is Mother and cares for all living beings on the planet. Land is wealth that is communally-owned and the responsibility of the people is stewardship. Access to land ensures that Native communities can continue to practice their spiritual and cultural foodways. They can continue to hunt, fish, grow, and gather their food on their traditional lands. The relationship Native communities inherited with the land and water is to be taught and passed along to the next generation as a responsibility in relationship with reciprocity that feeds food security.

[20] NAP Staff. "Native Americans Are 2.9% Of U.S. Population But Receive 0.4% Of Philanthropic Dollars." Native Americans in Philanthropy. September 17, 2020. https://nativephilanthropy.org/2020/11/17/native-americans-are-2-of-u-s-population-but-receive-0-4-of-philanthropic-dollars/.

[21] Tribes and Transportation: Policy Challenges and Opportunities." Ncai.org. National Congress of American Indians in Partnership with The Leadership Conference Education Fund. https://www.ncai.org/resources/ncai-publications/NCAI_Tribal_Transportation_Report.pdf.

FOOD IS MORE THAN CONSUMPTION

Native Food Security means that traditional foods are available and accessible for consumption to support the cultural and nutritional needs of Native people in Native communities and anywhere that Indigenous peoples find themselves.

Economic disparities create a variance in Native community health. While poverty is undoubtedly a cause of hunger, lack of adequate and proper nutrition itself is an underlying cause of poverty.[22] Where Native Food Security requires that Native people have access to traditional foods to become food secure, an abundance of traditional foods becomes a potential source of poverty alleviation and improved well-being. When we consider that Native peoples have not had adequate amounts or access to traditional foods for over a century, the threat of undernourishment becomes glaringly apparent. A reality for a lot of tribal communities is that it is challenging to access the food needed to heal from diseases like diabetes and heart disease.[23]

---

[22] Food and Agriculture Organization of United Nations. Food Insecurity Information for Action, "An Introduction to the Basic Concepts of Food Security." https://www.fao.org/hunger/en/. FAO 2008. https://www.fao.org/3/al936e/al936e00.pdf.

[23] Valerie Segrest (Muckleshoot), NMAI Interview. "Foods Still Matter: The Muckleshoot Food Sovereignty Project." Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. Native Knowledge 360, August 2016. https://americanindian.si.edu/NK360.

When compared to the general population, Indigenous people have the lowest health,[24] economic,[25] and food security rates even without consistent comprehensive data.[26] Diabetes prevalence in American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) adults is the highest of any US racial or ethnic group.[27] Native Americans living on reservations face higher rates of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and obesity.[28] Persistent colonial assimilation policies, loss of language and culture, forced dietary changes, health inequity,[29] and reliance on non-Indigenous foods all contribute to the prevalence of diabetes. Studies in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States reveal that returning to an Indigenous diet paired with an active lifestyle can: 1) control type 2 diabetes and prevent medical complications such as limb amputation, 2) reverse heart disease, and 3) reverse obesity. In the report, *The Historical Determinants of Food Insecurity in Native Communities*, discussing the historical factors that underlie the high rates of food insecurity and poverty that Native communities now face, it is noted that Food Sovereignty and "the incorporation of traditional foods are important steps in addressing current rates of food insecurity, as well as diet-related diseases."[30]

Poor health outcomes are not merely a result of poverty, but also of centuries of economic and government policy that targets the right of Native Americans to live in a traditional, environmentally balanced manner.[31] For many Native people, traditional foods are physical, mental, and spiritual medicine. The global perspective on food security oversimplifies the relationship that Native communities have with their cultural foods and foodways in focusing on availability, access, and utilization or consumption.

---

[24] Indian Health Service, The Federal Health Program for American Indians and Alaska Natives, Indian Health Disparities. 2019. https://www.ihs.gov/newsroom/factsheets/disparities/.

[25] Dedrick Asante-Muhammad and Kathy Ramirez, and Rogelio Tec. "The Economic Reality of Native Americans and the Need for Immediate Repair." Ncrc.Org. National Community Reinvestment Coalition, November 26, 2019. https://ncrc.org/the-

[26] See footnote 6.

[27] "Diabetes Still Highest Among AI/AN: American Indians and Alaska Natives Have the Highest Diabetes Prevalence Rates of All Racial and Ethnic Groups in the United States." NICOA. National Indian Council on Aging, January 14, 2019. https://www.nicoa.org/diabetes-still-highest-among-ai-an/.

[28] Piri Ackerman-Barger, PhD, RN. "Social Determinants of Health and Native Peoples." Presentation at University of California Davis, Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing, https://www.Ihs.Gov/California/Tasks/Sites/Default/Assets/File/GPRA/BP2018-SocialDeterminantsofHealth_Ackerman-Barger.Pdf, 2018.

[29] Mary Smith. "Native Americans: A Crisis in Health Equity." Human Rights Magazine 43, no. 3: The State of Healthcare in the United States (2018). Accessed September 30, 2022. https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human_rights_magazine_home/the-state-of-healthcare-in-the-united-states/native-american-crisis-in-health-equity/.

[30] See footnote 3.

[31] See footnote 11.

MITIGATING FOOD INSECURITY THROUGH NATIVE FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

Native Food Security means that the stability of the availability, access, and consumption of traditional foods in Native communities is steadfast and constant.

Chronic food insecurity is something that happened and is happening to Native people. Creating stability in the availability, access, and consumption of traditional foods for Native people means addressing chronic food insecurity as an interrelated issue and actively supporting Native Food Sovereignty.

Native Food Sovereignty looks like reclaiming food security, nutrition, and well-being by revitalizing food systems, livelihoods, knowledge systems, and governance.[32] Without Native Food Sovereignty, strategies for food security fall short. Janie Simms Hipp, the founder of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Office of Tribal Relations in the Office of the Secretary, is quoted sharing, "When Indian Country lost its ability to feed itself, through whatever means, we lost that part of ourselves that supports our ability to thrive. It is only by regaining our foods will we be able to restore our health, our resilience as peoples and secure the stability and diversification within our own communities and local economies."[33]

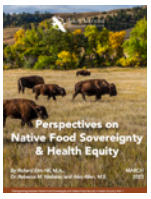
[32] Delormier, Treena et al. "Reclaiming food security in the Mohawk community of Kahnawà:ke through Haudenosaunee responsibilities." Maternal & child nutrition vol. 13 Suppl 3,Suppl 3 (2017): e12556. doi:10.1111/mcn.12556

[33] See footnote 3.

Native Food Security requires support for Native Food Sovereignty in policy and practice to address both current and future threats to food security. Sovereignty in practice continues to be misunderstood or ignored, although provisions at the state and federal levels for meaningful collaboration are more often now included in statutes defining the government-to-government relationships. To actualize the recognition of Tribal Sovereignty, policy funding needs to point to Native-led and Native-controlled solutions where Native and AI/AN communities "freely develop and implement self-determined definitions of food sovereignty; cultivate, access, and secure nutritious, culturally essential food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods; and design and maintain food systems and enact policies that advance tribal priorities for ensuring that tribal citizens have the sustenance they need to thrive physically, mentally, socially, and culturally — not just today, but for the generations to come."[34]

In practice, an Indigenous perspective considers food sovereignty, food security, health equity, environmental justice, climate justice, and food justice—bound together in their examination of laws and policies that impact Native Food Security. Rather than looking for lack, the Indigenous perspective asks, where can we create abundance?

FURTHER READING IN THIS SERIES



Perspectives on Native Food Sovereignty & Health Equity
By Richard Elm-Hill, M.A., Dr. Rebecca M. Webster, and Aiko Allen, M.S.

Serving Native Youth: A Dialogue on Native Food Sovereignty and Native Food Security
By Richard Elm-Hill, M.A., Dr. Rebecca M. Webster, and Aiko Allen, M.S.

[34] "Tribal Food Sovereignty Advancement Initiative (TFSAI)." Ncai.Org. National Congress of American Indians, Accessed September 30, 2022. https://www.ncai.org/initiatives/partnerships-initiatives/food-sovereignty.

First Nations Development Institute

Serving Native Youth: A Dialogue on Native Food Sovereignty and Native Food Security

By Richard Elm-Hill, M.A., Dr. Rebecca M. Webster, and Aiko Allen, M.S.

MARCH 2023

In 2022, four Native American community-based organizations that serve Native youth gathered to give their perspectives on Native Food Security and Native Food Sovereignty. Each organization brought members of their team who support their food and cultural education endeavors and work intimately with Native youth. They learned about each other's programs and quickly realized that they share many similar values, challenges, and dreams.

MESKWAKI FOOD SOVEREIGNTY • Tama, IA

meskwaki.org/mfsi

The Sac & Fox Tribe of the Mississippi established the **Meskwaki Food Sovereignty** to organize local and traditional food initiatives for the Meskwaki community. The agricultural club educates youth about the Meskwaki food system, agriculture, and land stewardship. The initiative also serves as an incubator to learn about traditional foods, growing, harvesting, and job skills through on-the-job training.

NDÉE BIKÍYAA – THE PEOPLE'S FARM • Whiteriver, AZ

facebook.com/ndeebikiyaathepeoplesfarm

Ndée Bikíyaa – The People's Farm, on the White Mountain Apache Reservation, seeks to reconnect the community to its food, traditional lifestyles, and, ultimately, a healthier mindset. The People's Farm is a mentorship organization that is growing young Native American farmers and challenging notions of Native American health.

UKWAKHWA (OUR FOODS) • Oneida, WI

ukwakhwa.com

Ukwakwa, which means "Our foods," is an Oneida-led 501(c)(3) nonprofit that grows traditional, heirloom foods with an emphasis on Haudenosaunee varieties of corn, beans, and squash on the Oneida Reservation in Wisconsin. They bring people together to learn about cultural foodways, seed keeping, traditional toolmaking, and crafts. Ukwakhwa believes every time an Indigenous person plants a seed, it is an act of resistance and an assertion of sovereignty.

ZUNI YOUTH ENRICHMENT PROJECT • Zuni, NM

zyep.org

Zuni Youth Enrichment Project (ZYEP) was formed as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit to ensure that Zuni youth will be healthy and prepared to continue the important traditions of the Zuni culture. ZYEP provides positive role models, enriching programs, and nurturing spaces to strengthen the community and support children in the Zuni Pueblo in what is now western New Mexico. ZYEP's Food Sovereignty program provides mini-grants, family gardens, community gardens, rainwater conservation, in-school education, and agricultural workshops in support of every generation of Zuni youth.

We invite you to learn from a collection of their candid responses because Native communities across Indian Country are working toward an Indigenous food system that travels both ways – a food system that draws from the past, can inform the present, and will be carried forward beyond us. Native communities intuitively know what Native Food Sovereignty and Native Food Security is and isn't. Let's hear it from them, in their own words.

How do you define Native Food Sovereignty?

- *We define food sovereignty as our community's ability to grow, share, and be nourished by our Native foods, contributing to the health of our people and the continuation of our traditions. (ZYEP)*
- *Growing, harvesting, preserving, and cooking our food on our own terms.*

How do you know when you have Native Food Sovereignty?

- *When we can care for our Indigenous foods without interference from non-Indigenous actors.*
- *When we have the ability to share cultural traditions and foods.*
- *When everyone in the community has access to traditional knowledge about caring for our food.*
- *When someone has a garden. No matter how small... This is part of food sovereignty.*

How do you define Native Food Security?

- *Native Food Security is about sustainability. It is a cycle, the source of food.*
- *Growing our own foods and having good quantities throughout the season, year to year.*
- *The USDA says food deserts. I cringe. There is food all around us. We need to find the people who can lead and guide us.*
- *Our elders won't be here long. We have to develop our own ways. It's one of the most difficult things.*

How do you know when you have Native Food Security?

- *When we know about wild foods.*
- *When we know what your Native foods are and where they come from.*
- *When we are prepared. When we are educated enough to educate the young.*
- *When the community comes first, we find those who can carry the knowledge.*
- *When kids taste the food. When they have that experience over and over.*
- *When food is known as medicine.*

What have you learned that would help guide another youth program focused on food work?

- *Develop a curriculum to go along with the youth program. Develop that beforehand so that you have something to follow.*
- *You know your community best. Stay focused on their strengths.*
- *Include the elders in the program.*
- *Serve plant-based and traditional foods at gatherings and meetings.*

If you had to make a promise to your community, what would it be?

- *As Native Americans, we have witnessed and experienced so much trauma. Going forward generations I hope to help build strong individuals who are aware of how special it is to be Native and continue the life morals we all live by.*
- *Continue the knowledge and ways of our ancestors.*
- *Keep doing the work I am doing to empower young Native farmers and teach our language and traditional ways that were taken from us. I promise to never give up.*
- *Protect our water, resources, elders, children, seeds, culture, and foodways.*
- *I promise to ensure that the knowledge of our elders can be shared with our youth.*

Serving Native Youth: A Dialogue on Native Food Sovereignty and Native Food Security is supported by a grant from The Health Impact Project, a collaboration of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts, encouraging local, state, and national organizations to include health considerations in policy decisions across multiple sectors. The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Health Impact Project, The Pew Charitable Trusts, or the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Distinguishing between Native Food Sovereignty and Native Food Security in Indian Country is a three-part series that includes ***Perspectives on Native Food Sovereignty & Health Equity***, ***Native Food Security from Lack to Abundance***, and ***Serving Native Youth: A Dialogue on Native Food Sovereignty and Native Food Security.***