



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

there is an alternative.

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Social Enterprise improves food security in Garden Hill First Nation

Food insecurity is a pressing problem for thousands of Indigenous people living in remote reserves in the North of Manitoba. The new CCPA Manitoba report *Harnessing the Potential of Social Enterprise in Garden Hill First Nation* explores in-depth the themes around food insecurity: people's incomes and spending on food, health issues related to food consumption and traditional food culture. It also suggests ways to increase food accessibility and affordability through local efforts and appropriate public policies. Although the study is community specific, it echoes many problems faced by other northern communities.

Garden Hill First Nation (GHFN) is a remote community located 610 kilometers northeast of Winnipeg, Manitoba. Similar to many northern communities, in GHFN the history of colonialism, assimilation and the legacy of residential schools have shaped the egregious conditions of poverty that many on-reserve residents struggle with every day: notably high rates of unemployment, a housing crisis and high food prices. According to the National Household Survey in 2011 the average total income per person in the community equaled \$12,957, which was almost three times less than the average total income for the province as a whole.

Nutrition North Canada (NNC) estimated that the cost of a nutritious diet for a family of four for one week in GHFN equaled \$401.41 in March 2015. This so-called Revised Northern Food Basket (RNFB) includes 67 standard food items and it is used by NNC to monitor the cost of

healthy eating in isolated northern communities. Taking into account the fact that a couple with two children may receive on average \$2,000 per month in social assistance, the cost of this diet would exhaust 80 percent of a family's monthly income. The household survey in GHFN conducted as part of the CCPA-MB study revealed that even the highest observable spending on food (\$259 per month for one person) was 35 percent below the required level of spending needed in order to maintain the healthy diet as calculated by the RNFB. Moreover, access to the grocery store is inconvenient as it is located on an island off reserve, which requires residents to spend extra on transportation.

Inaction on poverty and food insecurity in GHFN is costly. The lack of employment opportunities is responsible for annual government spending of around \$13.6 million in social assistance. Moreover, as a result of unhealthy eating, a great number of community members suffer from diabetes, high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease. The study estimates that treating diabetes in the community costs the government at least \$2.6 million annually, which includes:

- Diabetes food supplement (\$400,000)
- Non-Insured Health Benefits (NIHB) program costs (\$500,000)

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– Dialysis Unit facility (\$1,700,000)

Moreover, the costs continue to rise each year. There were 360 distinct claimants of NIHB diabetes medication in 2005. Over the past 10 years the number rose steadily up to 589 distinct claimants in 2014 (15 percent of the GHFN population) with an average growth rate of 6 percent per year.

In spite of its devastating effect, food insecurity in the northern First Nations communities in Manitoba remains a largely overlooked problem and relatively ineffective measures have been taken by the government and community businesses to address it. In 2014 the federal government spent around \$1 million in GHFN on the NNC subsidy towards the freight costs of selected imported food items in order to lower the food prices. However, in 2015 the cost of RNFB was only 5.5 percent below the level of March 2011, the year of subsidy implementation. Clearly, this measure is not enough to address the food affordability issue.

Given the lack of opportunities to reduce food prices through the traditional model of importing food from the South, more innovative ways of dealing with the issue have emerged. The new social enterprise Meechim, established by Aki Energy Inc., decided to produce locally at a farm situated on reserve and sell the produce at the local market. Currently, the Meechim Healthy Food Market sells both food grown at the farm and food imported from the South at prices lower than the Northern Store. By organizing the market on reserve, the initiative is also trying to decrease consumers' expenditures on transportation.

To date, there are two initiatives in GHFN that focus on food affordability through localisation of the food systems – the aforementioned Meechim farm and Wabung fish plant, which employ at least 13 local people with the potential to offer more jobs. Even though the new initiatives are confronted with many challenges – the slow pace of community involvement, difficulties in accessing funding and unfavorable social and geographical conditions - there is potential not only to help make food more affordable, but also to bring people together and instill the “we-can-do-it” approach to dealing with issues in the community.

However, social enterprise will find it

extremely difficult to prosper without subsidization, especially at the initial stages of operation. Government should invest wisely and rethink their key policies to support local movements of food sovereignty. The CCPA Manitoba paper suggests some pertinent policy measures:

- a) The diabetes supplement needs to be linked to the healthy food options produced locally, for example through vouchers for Meechim's healthy products;
- b) The farm should be eligible to receive an NNC subsidy that would go into the labour of growing food locally;
- c) Meechim should be able access extra funding for its marketing needs in order to build better communication with community members and increase awareness of its activities.

Despite the positive momentum to localize food production, the potential of Meechim Inc. to provide healthy food for everyone is limited at the moment. Therefore, the community residents will continue to buy food at familiar places such as the Northern Store. Considering this, the government should develop a combination of measures. First, they should support the local movement to strengthen the community's food sovereignty through policy changes such as suggested earlier and, second, improve the traditional model of importing food from the South, for example, by increasing the NNC subsidy for imported goods. Ignoring the problem of food insecurity means the costs to government would only continue to rise and the health of First Nations people decline. At a time when Canada is working to advance reconciliation with Indigenous people, it is imperative that the government attribute to this problem the sense of urgency it deserves.

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References available upon request.