

Putting the Community Back Into Our Food System

Key Messages from Pan-Canadian Food Discussions at Food Secure Canada's National Assembly, October 13 – 16th, 2016

November 8th, 2016



A National Assembly Around Food

Members from the Arctic Institute of Community-Based Research (AICBR) team (*pictured above with Kluane First Nation's Mary Jane Johnson - far right*) just returned home from attending Food Secure Canada's 9th National Assembly in Toronto, with many outcomes to share. There were more than 900 participants from all aspects of the food system, including Indigenous leaders, academics, funders, federal, provincial and territorial government representatives, city planners, policy makers, growers, students, advocates, researchers, community-based food security coordinators, small and large business owners, and youth, among many others from across Canada and beyond. There were plenaries, panels and community tours related to 10 different streams, with topics ranging from innovation within the agriculture sector, to renewable energy and food justice, to aid and global food security.

Food Secure Canada

Food Secure Canada is a pan-Canadian alliance of organizations and individuals working together to advance food security and food sovereignty through their interlocking goals: zero hunger, healthy and safe food, and sustainable food systems.



<http://foodsecurecanada.org>



Canada's National Food Policy

At the outset of the Assembly Greg Meredith, Assistant Deputy Minister of Agriculture Canada (Strategic Policy) and Chair of the parliamentary team leading the National Food Policy development, introduced the pillars for Canada's plan. Food policy was a key theme throughout the four days. What were some of the key takeaways?



NORTHERN FOOD SECURITY AT THE FOREFRONT

An opportunity for Northern – Southern sharing around food security in Canada's North

Northern food security and Indigenous food sovereignty were a key focus throughout the Assembly. AICBR hosted two participatory meetings: a Northern Networking and Information Sharing Gathering and an Open Space discussion on the possibility of a Northern Food Summit. These gatherings welcomed participants either currently living or working in the North or who are interested in northern food security.

Networking Gathering, there was an opportunity for sharing about various food initiatives going on in northern regions across Canada; from that emerged some common strengths and needs for improving food security across the North: Northerners want to have food systems that reflect the local knowledge, skills and diverse ecosystems that are present in the North; Northerners want to apply their own solutions.

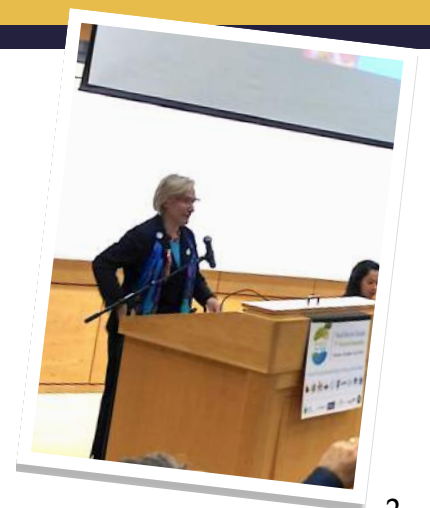
During the Open Space, AICBR discussed the possibility of bringing key Northern leaders together for a Northern Food Summit to advance food security planning on a pan-Northern scale.

The cross-jurisdictional and pan-Canadian sharing that went on at the Assembly was dynamic and many Northern participants said that they will be taking home concrete actions and ideas learned from others that they intend to adapt to their local contexts.

HONOURABLE DR. CAROLYN BENNETT ADDRESSES NORTHERN AND INDIGENOUS FOOD SOVEREIGNTY ISSUES

On the final day, October 16th, we heard from the Honourable Dr. Carolyn Bennett, Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, who recognized in her address the importance of communities finding their own solutions to food security and climate change issues. She highlighted some successful community-based projects in

Nunatsiavut (NiKigijavut Nunatsiavutinni: Our Food in Nunatsiavut Project) and in Yukon (Kluane First Nation's Nourishing Our Future project) and echoed what many other presenters over the Assembly had already stated, that communities know what they need and want to be supported for advancing their own food sovereignty.





A KEYSTONE OPPORTUNITY

FOR CANADIAN VOICES IN POLICY

The federal government, specifically the Ministry of Agriculture and Agri Foods Canada, has been tasked with developing a National Food Policy for Canada. This is a keystone opportunity for all Canadians, as Charles Levkoe, Canada Research Chair in Sustainable Food Systems and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Health Sciences at Lakehead University puts it,

“Food policy offers new pathways forward and can be a way to build a better future. Therefore we, the people, need to have a voice.”

Many speakers emphasized the need to put the 'voice of the people' back in policy and raise the power of citizens and smallholder farmers in the marketplace. The latter is no small feat, considering "51% of the world's largest economies are corporations", says Joan Brady, National Farmers Union/La Via Campesina. Brady pointed out that, "smallholder farms make up 500 million of the world's 570 million farms" and thus should have the opportunity to speak on the issues that most affect them in order for them to be able to continue feeding the world.

KEY MESSAGES AROUND NATIONAL FOOD POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Key takeaways from the policy discussions at the Assembly included:

- 1) **Policy needs to “move back to the local level, where people, food and the land are”** (John Ikerd, Professor Emeritus of Agriculture and Applied Economics at the University of Missouri).
- 2) **Focus needs to be on “identifying processes rather than developing a ‘finished product’”** (Wayne Roberts, Canadian food policy analyst and writer).
- 3) **It is systems change that we need and “systems are a reflection of world views”**; in order to change world views we need to “**focus on values, social and ecological values, and we need to reconstitute words like the ‘social good’ back into the vocabulary of government**” (Ikerd).
- 4) **Central to the discussions around food security is that addressing the issues around food and water can be solutions to solving many other important issues thus policies to address food insecurity need to be holistic.** (Continued...)



“Good food policy is made up of good economic policy, good agriculture policy, good trade policy, good health policy, and good environmental policy”, says TVOntario's Joshna Maharaj, Panelist on the Assembly's Closing Plenary.

Continued...

What was heard loud and clear from multiple perspectives is the need to have a policy that includes and reflects the diverse needs of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, northern and southern, coastal-living and prairie-living, and rural and urban people in Canada. Paramount in the conversations around food is the meaningful inclusion of those with lived experiences of hunger. In one session, four women living under the poverty line shared about how they must survive on less than \$20/week for food for their families, after rent and other costs are taken into account. It is these stories that shed light on the challenging realities facing our society's most food insecure. After receiving the Cathleen Kneen Award, Norma Kassi from AICBR called for more youth, especially Indigenous youth, to be invited to the planning and discussion tables. Particularly for those people living in Northern regions of the country where food insecurity is highest, participation and inclusion in the national plan is vital.

INDIGENOUS FOOD SOVEREIGNTY CRUCIAL TO ADVANCING A MORE JUST, SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEM FOR ALL

Prioritizing Indigenous food sovereignty as an important process to achieve food security was emphasized throughout the Assembly. Many Indigenous speakers identified food security as not just an issue of having enough nutritious and culturally appropriate food to eat, but it is imperative for the self-determination and very survival physically, culturally and spiritually of Indigenous peoples. Food security is really a conversation about the survival of humankind and is a central issue and solution to the challenges we are facing with climate change.



RECONNECTION AS A WAY FOR REVITALIZATION OF OUR FOOD SYSTEM

It was clear that we are at a turning point in our history, where it is recognized that we can no longer make assumptions about our food in the same way. Just as the theme of Reconciliation was interwoven throughout the Assembly, so too evolved the themes of rejuvenation, love, and the need for reconnection to the land, water and our food systems. This fact was echoed across cultures and across sectors, from speakers in the areas of policy development, Indigenous food sovereignty, to rural farming, and food hubs.

During a Women at the Heart of Food Sovereignty session, three inspiring women from diverse backgrounds shared their work: Joan Brady, National Farmers Union/La Via Campesina, Chandra F. Maracle, Kakhwa'on:we/Real People Eat Real Food/Skaronhyaseko:wa Tyohterakentko:wa Tsi Yontaweya'tahkwa/The Everlasting Tree School at Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, and Bidakanne Samamma, Farmer/Seed Saver/Deccan Development

Society, India.

These women, spoke from three different perspectives about food sovereignty: Chandra from an Indigenous perspective speaking in a combination of traditional Haudenosaunee language and English; Brady, in English shared her perspective as a rural family farmer in Ontario; and Samamma, shared her view and insights as a rural woman and farmer in India in her language through an interpreter. The strikingly beautiful thing was that while diverse in geographies, countries and perspectives, they were all speaking the same language, the language of love, connection and having a deep appreciation and respect for their food systems.



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

AICBR would like to acknowledge the incredible work of Food Secure Canada in bringing together such a diverse, knowledgeable and inspiring group of people interested and involved in the food system for this 9th National Assembly. We look forward to working together in order to build a more just and sustainable foods system that works for all.

AICBR would also like to thank the Sprott Foundation, the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation and the Public Health Agency of Canada whose support helped bring Northerners to the table for this Assembly.

"The question of food sovereignty is all about: Can you put the love and the joy back in food?...In the Haudenosaunee language, the words for fire, life-force, and family all have the same root. Within our traditional cultures, women were at the centre of the family and our families ran along the maternal lines...we believe that women's bodies are the soil. We [Women] are the land. Therefore the land is part of us, we are part of the land, and we are central to giving life, sustaining life in the family and in our communities...Everything we need, we can get from the Earth.

She is literally, Our Mother, the Earth."

- Chandra F. Maracle



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