



Arctic and International Relations Series



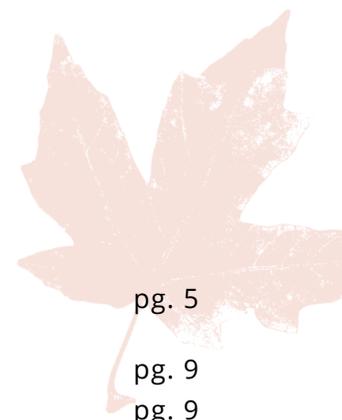
Québec Policy on the Arctic: Challenges and Perspectives



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Ensuring Country Food Access for a Food Secure Future in Nunavik

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SUMMARY

Food insecurity, or inadequate food access, remains prevalent throughout the Canadian Arctic, and Nunavik is no exception. According to a recent study, in one community in Nunavik, fully 41 percent of households are food insecure, with 21 percent of households having very low food security. Food insecurity in Nunavik, as measured by standard survey modules, is closely associated with poverty. However, these standard methods do not adequately account for the importance of traditional wild caught or gathered “country” foods for the well-being of Nunavimmiut (the Inuit of Nunavik), or for the non-monetary determinants of access to traditional foods. Moving towards a solution of this issue will not only require poverty reduction measures but holistic, community-based initiatives that recognize the importance of country food and traditional knowledge in creating Inuit food security.

RÉSUMÉ

L'insécurité alimentaire, soit l'accès inadéquat aux aliments, continue de sévir sur tout le territoire arctique canadien, le Nunavik ne faisant pas exception. Selon une étude récente, l'insécurité alimentaire absolue affecte 41 p. 100 des ménages d'une collectivité du Nunavik et une très faible sécurité alimentaire caractérise 21 p. 100 des ménages. L'insécurité alimentaire au Nunavik, telle que mesurée par des enquêtes de recherche standard, est étroitement liée à la pauvreté. Cependant, ces méthodes ne rendent pas adéquatement compte de l'importance des captures résultant des activités traditionnelles de chasse et de cueillette dans le bien-être des Nunavimmiuts (Inuits du Nunavik) ni des déterminants non monétaires de l'accès aux aliments traditionnels. La recherche d'une solution au problème de l'insécurité alimentaire chez les Inuits exige plus que des mesures de réduction de la pauvreté : il faut aussi mettre en œuvre des initiatives holistiques issues des collectivités qui reconnaissent l'importance des aliments locaux et des savoirs traditionnels.

INTRODUCTION

Food security is defined as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life,” while its corollary, food insecurity, is generally defined as “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in culturally appropriate ways.”¹ This definition of food security, along with a set of survey tools originally designed by the USDA, has been widely used as the basis for cross-cultural assessments of the adequacy of food access, including among Inuit in Nunavik. This report examines the current state of food security in Nunavik, describes distinctive aspects of the problem specific to the region, and offers insights that reflect the regional socioeconomic context.

¹ Gary Bickel et al., *Guide to Measuring Household Food Security, Revised 2000* (Alexandria, VA: United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, 2000), 6.

CURRENT STATE OF FOOD SECURITY IN NUNAVIK

According to the 2004 region-wide Nunavik Health Survey, 24 percent of Nunavimmiut households surveyed did not have enough to eat in the house during the month before the survey.² A more recent study conducted in Kangiqsujuaq in 2013–14 found that 20 percent of Kangiqsujuarmiut households had “low food security,” meaning they had been worried about their ability to access food during the twelve months preceding the survey, while 21 percent of households had “very low food security,” meaning that in at least three or four of the past twelve months, adults in the household had reduced their food intake because they could not obtain the food they needed.³ In comparison, a 2002 survey conducted in Kangiqsujuaq concluded that 33 percent of households had “low food security,” while 7 percent were classified as “very low food security.”⁴ Consequently, while the overall rate of food insecurity in Kangiqsujuaq has not changed substantially over the past decade, the severity of the problem among food insecure households may have increased. The next Nunavik health survey, planned for 2017, will provide information on changes in the prevalence of food security throughout the region over the last decade.

FACTORS AFFECTING FOOD SECURITY IN NUNAVIK

According to the aforementioned studies, food insecurity among Nunavimmiut is associated with lower household income, as well as with larger household size. Single female-headed households tend to have lower food security, and more educated households tend to have higher food security. However, the recent data for Kangiqsujuaq suggest that these trends can be attributed to differences in household income. Improving education and training to enable Nunavimmiut to fill existing local jobs in education, health services, and government should be a priority for poverty reduction.⁵ The high cost of food in Nunavik is another important contributing factor to the prevalence of food insecurity among lower-income Nunavimmiut. A broad range of cost-of-living reduction measures implemented by the Kativik Regional Government in April 2014 may help address this issue, and studies to evaluate their effectiveness are in progress.⁶

However, cost-of-living and income represent only one dimension of food security in Nunavik. Other critical factors affecting the food security of Nunavimmiut may include substance abuse behaviours, which are an important determinant of food security among Inuit in Nunavut.⁷ The role of substance abuse behaviours in affecting food security in Nunavik has been inadequately examined. Limited knowledge of cooking techniques and budgeting skills may also be a barrier to food security for some Inuit families, by making it difficult to choose and prepare affordable foods.⁸

Moreover, food access in Nunavik differs in fundamental ways from southern Québec because of the continued importance of traditional subsistence harvesting in northern settlements.⁹ Traditional or “country” foods represent-

² Carole Blanchet and Louis Rochette, *Nutrition and Food Consumption among the Inuit of Nunavik. Nunavik Inuit Health Survey 2004, Qanuipitaa? How Are We?* (Québec: Institut national de santé publique du Québec and Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services, 2008), 71.

³ Elspeth Ready, unpublished data.

⁴ Judith Lawn and Dan Harvey, *Nutrition and Food Security in Kangiqsujuaq, Nunavik. Baseline Survey for the Food Mail Pilot Project* (Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2004), 23.

⁵ Miaji Pilurttuut, telephone interview with author, September 21, 2015.

⁶ “Nunavik Cost-of-living Reduction Measures,” Kativik Regional Government, accessed September 18, 2015, <http://www.krg.ca/en/cost-of-living-program>; “Update, April–June 2015: Nunivaat – Nunavik Statistics Program,” Kativik Regional Government, accessed September 23, 2015, <http://www.krg.ca/en/news/1699-update-apriljune-2015-nunivaat-nunavik-statistics-program>.

⁷ James D. Ford and Maude Beaumier, “Feeding the Family during Times of Stress: Experience and Determinants of Food Insecurity in an Inuit Community,” *Geographical Journal* 177, no. 1 (2011): 54.

⁸ Léa Laflamme, “La sécurité alimentaire selon la perspective d’Inuit du Nunavik” (master’s thesis, Université Laval, 2014), 68.

⁹ Miriam T. Harder and George W. Wenzel, “Inuit Subsistence, Social Economy and Food Security in Clyde River, Nunavut,” *Arctic* 65, no. 3 (2012): 305.

ed an average of 16 percent of the daily calories consumed by participants in the 2004 Nunavik Health Survey. In 2013–14, 61 percent of Inuit households surveyed in Kangiqsujuaq reported consuming country food at least three times a week, with 20 percent of households reporting that they ate country food daily.¹⁰ However, 52 percent of Kangiqsujuarmit indicated that “the country food they had did not last,” and 53 percent indicated that “they could not get the foods they wanted to eat because they lacked the resources needed to hunt, fish, gather or buy food.”¹¹ Consequently, concern about access to country foods is even more prevalent among Kangiqsujuarmit than concern about access to store foods. Access to country foods is important not only for their significant contribution to Inuit nutrition,¹² but also for their freshness and quality relative to imported foods, and for their social and cultural value.

Despite some assistance from local hunter support programs, country food harvesters in Nunavik are typically not remunerated for their work or for the food they produce, which means that the ability of many harvesters to provide country food is constrained by their need to support themselves financially through employment in the community. Conversely, unemployed harvesters often cannot afford the equipment and supplies necessary for harvesting, such as snowmobiles and gasoline. Providing harvesters with better financial support will be necessary to ensure continued access to country foods for Nunavimmiut. Compensation for harvesters, and the development of harvesting as a viable career path for Nunavimmiut, in fact represents an unfulfilled goal of the James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement (JBNQA).¹³



Crowds of people wait for shares of meat and *mattaq* (whale skin) and help butcher the whales after a beluga hunt in Kangiqsujuaq. Photo: Elspeth Ready, 2012.



Arctic char drying at a summer camp near Kangiqsujuaq. Arctic char, whether fresh, frozen, or dried, is a staple for Inuit families year round. Photo: Elspeth Ready, 2013.

¹⁰ Elspeth Ready, unpublished data.

¹¹ Ready, “Problems in the Assessment of Inuit Food Security.”

¹² Harriet V. Kuhnlein et al., “Unique Patterns of Dietary Adequacy in Three Cultures of Canadian Arctic Indigenous Peoples,” *Public Health Nutrition* 11, no. 4 (2007): 352.

¹³ Adam Gardner, “Inuit Hunting, Fishing and Trapping Support Program. Program Evaluation,” report presented at the Kativik Regional Government Council Meeting, September 2015.

Several non-economic factors also affect country food access. These include environmental variability and unpredictability, the knowledge and skill of hunters, and food sharing networks. Environmental changes affecting country food access, such as changed ice conditions, have been observed by Inuit throughout Nunavik.¹⁴ For example, unusual weather patterns in Kangiqsujuaq resulted in poor berry harvests in 2015.¹⁵ While environmental variability cannot be controlled, knowledgeable harvesters may be more likely to be successful (and to remain safe) even in challenging conditions.¹⁶ However, the demands of formal education and wage labour, the availability of alternative forms of recreation, and changing family life mean that traditional knowledge is eroding among younger generations of Inuit.¹⁷ To ensure continued availability of traditional foods, communities in Nunavik will have to be proactive in helping young Inuit acquire traditional land skills. New cultural programs piloted by the Kativik School Board in Kangiqsujuaq, Quaqtuaq, Akulivik, and Umiujaq in 2014–15 represent an important step forwards in better integrating traditional knowledge into formal schooling. However, more intensive training opportunities for young Nunavimmiut interested in pursuing harvesting as a vocation are also necessary.



A traditional meal of *mattaq* (whale skin), *pitsiq* (dried fish), and *nikku* (dried meat, in this case beluga), accompanied by soy sauce and seasoning salt. While some Inuit families eat these foods regularly, others are only able to have some country foods, particularly beluga, a couple times a year.
Photo: Elspeth Ready, 2013.

UNDERSTANDING NORTHERN FOOD SECURITY

So, what defines food security for Nunavimmiut? Because several diverse factors affect access to store and country food in northern settlements, the experience of food insecurity is not the same for all Nunavimmiut.¹⁸ Nevertheless, country food access represents a critical dimension of food security for Inuit. However, country food access is not measured by standard household food security assessment tools.¹⁹ For Nunavimmiut, food security not only requires adequate financial resources relative to the cost of living, knowledge about store foods, and healthy lifestyles, but it also requires traditional knowledge, social support networks, and the ability to use these physical, human, and social resources to successfully manage the uncertainty of subsistence harvesting. Food security and access to country food are a major focus of the recent *Parnasimautik Consultation Report*, which outlines the development priorities of Nunavimmiut, but do not figure prominently in the 2015–2020 *Plan Nord Action Plan*.²⁰

¹⁴ The Communities of Ivujivik, Puvirnituq and Kangiqsujuaq et al., *Unikkaaqatigiit. Putting the Human Face on Climate Change: Perspectives from Nunavik* (Ottawa: Joint Publications of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, Nasiviik Centre for Inuit Health and Changing Environments at Université Laval and the Ajunnginiq Centre at the National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2005); Martin Tremblay et al., "Climate Change in Northern Quebec: Adaptation Strategies from Community-Based Research," *Arctic* 61, Suppl. 1 (2008): 27–34.

¹⁵ Pierre Philie, email message to author, September 3, 2015; Yaaka Yaaka, telephone interview with author, September 22, 2015.

¹⁶ James D. Ford et al., "Reducing Vulnerability to Climate Change in the Arctic: The Case of Nunavut, Canada," *Arctic* 60, no. 2 (2007): 155–57.

¹⁷ Richard G. Condon, Peter Collings, and George Wenzel, "The Best Part of Life: Subsistence Hunting, Ethnicity, and Economic Adaptation among Young Adult Inuit Males," *Arctic* 48, no. 1 (1995): 31–46; Tristan Pearce et al., "Transmission of Environmental Knowledge and Land Skills among Inuit Men in Ulukhaktok, Northwest Territories, Canada," *Human Ecology* 39 (2011): 271–88.

¹⁸ Laflamme, "Sécurité alimentaire," 86.

¹⁹ Elspeth Ready, unpublished data.

²⁰ Makivik Corporation et al., *Parnasimautik Consultation Report: On the Consultations Carried Out with Nunavik Inuit in 2013*, November 14, 2014, http://www.parnasimautik.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Parnasimautik-consultation-report-v2014_11_14-eng.pdf; Gouvernement du Québec, Secrétariat au *Plan Nord*, The *Plan Nord* toward 2035, 2015–2020 Action Plan, accessed October 3, 2015, http://plannord.gouv.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Synthese_PN_EN_IMP.pdf.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Poverty reduction, through improved training and employment opportunities and cost of living reductions, is a priority for improving access to store food and to hunting equipment and supplies. However, because of the importance of country food for Inuit nutrition and cultural well-being, these economic measures alone will not guarantee a food-secure future for Nunavimmiut. To address this issue, we will first of all require more rigorous, quantitative assessments of access to country foods to better establish a baseline of measurement. Recent research on food security and subsistence assessments by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game may provide practical guidance on this issue.²¹ Improving financial support for hunters, and developing opportunities for young Nunavimmiut to learn traditional harvesting skills, including a more central role for traditional skills in the school curriculum, will be essential for ensuring continued access to country foods in the future. Given the importance of local knowledge and relationships to these issues, community-based initiatives that reflect local priorities and that encourage self-determination may be most likely to meet the needs of Nunavimmiut.

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²¹ James S. Magdanz et al., "Subsistence harvests in Northwest Alaska, Kivalina and Noatak, 2007," technical paper no. 354, Alaska Department of Fish and Game Division of Subsistence, Kotzebue, 2007.