THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FOOD INSECURITY AND FEDERAL GOVERNMENT FOOD POLICIES

Chinonso Ekeanyanwu
Grade 11, Father Bressani Catholic High School, York Catholic District School Board (Vaughan, ON)

ABSTRACT

This research paper focuses on the attempts of the Canadian government to deal with food scarcity in the Indigenous community. Despite the many efforts of the government to make amends with the Indigenous population, they have some of the highest rates of poverty demographically in Canada. Food scarcity is a major topic when talking about Indigenous people because many live in areas where there is no access to healthy affordable food. Many do not have access to traditional food and are unable to exercise their right as Indigenous people to fish and hunt. Within this paper, three pertinent examples are explored: first, the lack of regard for Indigenous food sovereignty; second, the issue of fishing legislations; finally, food security initiatives in the North. Far from meaningfully, addressing food insecurity, nutritional programs designed by the federal government have often exacerbated the issue. This is likely due to the lack of involvement from the Indigenous community and their leaders in decision-making. By incorporating the Indigenous community, food security laws and programs made for Indigenous people have the potential to actually have a positive impact on the Indigenous community.

KEY WORDS

Indigenous populations; Food Security; Food Legislations; Food Sovereignty; Canada.

INTRODUCTION

The Canadian government has pushed the issues of Indigenous people to the back of their agendas and to the back of their minds. The food security crisis that many Indigenous peoples face is even further from the minds of settler society. In a country like Canada, which prides itself on social equality, Indigenous people remain significantly poorer than the rest of the population. (Wilson & Mcdonald, 2010). In 2006, the difference in median income for Indigenous people peoples was $18,962, while the median income for the rest of Canadians was $27,097. (Wilson & Mcdonald, 2010). The disparity between the two categories is only part of the problem which helps contribute to food insecurity. (Wilson & Mcdonald, 2010).
Indigenous peoples have been continuously viewed as outcasts in their own land. (Cuthand, 2015). Colonists have exercised power over Indigenous peoples by not only taking away the core parts of their culture but by restricting access to essentials such as food. (Cuthand, 2015). As a result, food security is one of the largest issues affecting the Indigenous communities in the NORTH. (Food Secure Canada, n.d.). The government’s involvement in Indigenous food insecurity dates back to the violation of Treaty No. 6, where the government refused to give the provisions it promised to the Indigenous people (Beal, n.d.). Instead they starved the Indigenous peoples off of their land, reducing a once strong and healthy population to almost nothing. (Beal, n.d.)

Canada’s government now focuses on attempting to reconcile the horrors of the past and address the generational trauma. (“A long-awaited apology for residential schools - CBC Archives”, 2008). However, the legislations and policies that the Canadian government enforces to benefit Indigenous peoples have not had much success. (The Expert Panel on the State of Knowledge of Food Security in Northern Canada, 2014). Research has been conducted on this topic by the Canadian government, who have put together councils such as the Expert Panel on the State of Knowledge of Food Security and Food Secure Canada to review this crisis. (The Expert Panel on the State of Knowledge of Food Security in Northern Canada, 2014). These reviews have confirmed that despite existing resources, many Indigenous people find these resources inaccessible to them or simply do not want to use them. (The Expert Panel on the State of Knowledge of Food Security in Northern Canada, 2014). Food Secure Canada has confirmed that while resources are targeted towards Indigenous peoples, they are made without the input or concerns of Indigenous people in mind. (Food Secure Canada, n.d.) In these reports, there is often bias from institutions that focus on technical terms. Rather, Indigenous people have a healthy respect for storytelling. This is something that the government, historians, and anthropologists fail to remember when studying the Indigenous community. As a result, the knowledge and facts that these studies produce are not truly representative of the entire Indigenous population. The voices of the Indigenous people are not heard when designing programs and legislations to fit their needs. Canada’s attempt to assist the Indigenous community’s food scarcity has had an adverse effect due to the lack of involvement of Indigenous leaders in decision making.

This review opens up a dialogue on these issues focusing on Indigenous perspectives, which is something that is yet to be explored in depth by the academic community.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Primary sources mainly used for this review include government pages and institutions on programs and initiatives relating to Indigenous food security. The secondary sources used were mainly reviews by various organizations like The Expert Panel on the State of Knowledge of Food Security in Northern Canada, First Nations Wild Salmon Alliance, CTV, CBC, and their views on the effectiveness of these programs. It also included news articles and real life experiences on the impact of these initiatives on the community.

Primary Sources

The primary sources include a summary of the Supreme Court of Canada’s rulings on Indigenous people Fishing Rights. This evidence was used when discussing fishing rights and the government’s inability to enforce laws meant to protect them. Information from the Canadian government’s website on Nutrition North Canada and eligibility rules was also used.

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources include a report by Food Secure Canada on Indigenous Food Sovereignty. This document was used to explain the importance of Indigenous input. Other documents included an assessment by the Expert Panel on the State of Knowledge of Food Security in Northern Canada on Food Insecurity in the North. This document assisted in examining the issues that are present in the North even after the government’s efforts there. Various
media outlets such as CTV news and CBC news articles were also used to hear and understand real cases and opinions on these issues.

RESULTS

Indigenous Food Sovereignty

In the report from Food Secure Canada on Indigenous Food Sovereignty, they address the issue of government aid disregarding food sovereignty: “Many times, international aid and trade is available only if tribal nations accept food that is culturally non-appropriate and genetically modified.” (Food Secure Canada, n.d.) They focus on the importance of food sovereignty and list reasons why society and institutions should remember it when dealing with Indigenous peoples. (Food Secure Canada, n.d.) “Indigenous women who participated in a 2008 study stressed the importance of accessing traditional foods because of the link to culture and its importance for physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual wellbeing.” (Food Secure Canada, n.d.)

Fishing Legislations

The document, Indigenous people fishing rights: Supreme Court decisions, summarized Supreme Court cases that involved Indigenous peoples and their right to fish. (Allain, 1996). The Court concluded that the right of Indigenous peoples to fish for cultural reasons was to be limited, “...future claimants will have to discharge a heavy evidentiary burden in order to show that the exchange of fish for money or other goods, on a commercial basis, formed an integral part of their distinctive culture.” (Allain, 1996).

There was also a report from The First Nations Wild Salmon Alliance who have been advocating for preservation of the Sockeye Salmon in the Fraser River, which were quickly becoming endangered. (First Nations Wild Salmon Alliance, 2014). The document stated that a committee from the government reported on the issue in 2006. (First Nations Wild Salmon Alliance, 2014). However, the government had not yet taken action in 2014, when The First Nations Wild Salmon Alliance wrote their own report. (First Nations Wild Salmon Alliance, 2014). In the report they address their right as Indigenous peoples to fish and sustain a livelihood in a traditional manner: “Indigenous people also possess a unique legal status in relation to Fraser River sockeye, based on section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982...an Indigenous people’s right to fish for food, social and ceremonial purposes, and stated that such a right would be treaty with priority, subject only to conservation.” (First Nations Wild Salmon Alliance, 2014). They also explain the meaning of the law to Indigenous people, “… a responsibility to protect, conserve, and sustain the fishery; a responsibility to other Indigenous people peoples dependent on salmon; a right to fish for all purposes; a right to use all traditional and modern fishing methods; and a right and First Nations Wild Salmon Alliance responsibility to maintain proper relations to the salmon and their ecology.” (First Nations Wild Salmon Alliance, 2014).

Food Sovereignty and Insecurity in the North

Food sovereignty represents the identity of a culture and when it is ignored by the Canadian government, western culture and traditions are forced upon Indigenous peoples. ("What is Food Sovereignty?", n.d.). Food insecurity is “the inability to acquire or consume an adequate diet quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so.” (“Food Insecurity”, 2016). Food Mail was the first program the Canadian government developed in order to provide healthier and cheaper food to the communities in the North run by Canada Post and deal with both the issue of food sovereignty and food insecurity. (Rennie, 2014). In 2011, the Food Mail program was renamed Nutrition North Canada and the contract was taken from Canada Post and given to retailers in an effort to cut costs. (“Canada Post to lose Food Mail Program”, 2010).

“To be eligible for Nutrition North Canada (NNC), a community must: lack year-round surface transportation (for example, no permanent road, rail or marine access) and have used Food Mail, the department’s previous northern transportation subsidy program.” (“Nutrition North Canada”, 2016) An auditor, Michael Ferguson, was also sent to
examine the eligibility requirements. ("Canada Post to lose Food Mail Program", 2010). He compared two remote communities - each the same distance from the nearest town and lacking year round road access. ("Canada Post to lose Food Mail Program", 2010). One community was eligible for $1.60/kg and the other $0.05/kg. ("Canada Post to lose Food Mail Program", 2010). He concluded that Nutrition North Canada was not based on need as one would expect: “… As a result, there may be other isolated northern communities, not benefiting from the subsidy, where access to affordable, nutritious food may be an issue." ("Canada Post to lose Food Mail Program", 2010).

The Minister of Health, along with Health Canada, appointed an Expert Panel to analyze the issues in the North and report their findings. (The Expert Panel on the State of Knowledge of Food Security in Northern Canada, 2014). Among their conclusions, the panel addressed the issue of knowledge gaps, “…a comprehensive review of contributions derived from first-hand experience and knowledge of northern peoples has yet to be conducted.” (The Expert Panel on the State of Knowledge of Food Security in Northern Canada, 2014). The panel calls for the government to use feedback to modify and create programs: “A consistent and relevant understanding of the situation across different communities of Indigenous people peoples, including variables such as region, gender, age, and season, is important in the delivery of evidence-based public policy”. (The Expert Panel on the State of Knowledge of Food Security in Northern Canada, 2014).

DISCUSSION

Indigenous Food Sovereignty

Legislations pertaining to Indigenous peoples have failed to take into account Indigenous food sovereignty. (Food Secure Canada, n.d.) The Canadian government has neglected efforts to incorporate Indigenous people foods into initiatives aimed to alleviate food insecurity. (Food Secure Canada, n.d.) Aid for many Indigenous communities is only offered in the form of Western foods. (Food Secure Canada, n.d.)

Fishing Legislations

Fishing is an important means of obtaining food in many Indigenous communities. Many cases that involved Indigenous peoples and their right to fish have been taken to the Supreme Court and denied such as R. v. Sparrow, R. v. Van Der Peet, R. v. Smokehouse and R. v. Nikal. (Allain, 1996). While future cases will be left for debate the supreme court stressed that, “…future claimants will have to discharge a heavy evidentiary burden in order to show that the exchange of fish for money or other goods, on a commercial basis, formed an integral part of their distinctive culture.” (Allain, 1996). The constant adaptions to the law have made it increasingly difficult for Indigenous people to be able to claim their rights.

One specific example of this issue involves the Indigenous people around the Fraser River in British Colombia where Sockeye Salmon are becoming scarce. The First Nations Wild Salmon Alliance has been advocating for the right to fish as they believe that their right to fish as Indigenous people also includes their right to protect and sustain the fisheries. (First Nations Wild Salmon Alliance, 2014). The Supreme Court recognized Indigenous peoples the right to fish but have not been enforcing the full connotations of the law. The meaning of the law to Indigenous people is something that the Supreme Court is attempting to understand yet they fail to listen to them. (First Nations Wild Salmon Alliance, 2014).

Food Sovereignty and Insecurity in the North

A large majority of the population in the North still do not have access to healthy and affordable food. The disparity between food security with all Canadians vs. different Indigenous groups in the North is severe with fewer food secure households and more households suffering from severe food insecurity. (The Expert Panel on the State of Knowledge of Food Security in Northern Canada, 2014). Food Mail was the first program the Canadian government developed in order to alleviate this issue. (Rennie, 2014). Canada Post ran the operation by setting flat rates with airlines to fly the food in at cheaper rates which meant that retailers had to choose only airlines that had deals
with Canada Post to get the subsidized rates. (Rennie, 2014). In 2011, the Food Mail program was renamed Nutrition North Canada and the contract was taken from Canada Post and given to retailers in an effort to cut costs. (Radio-Canada). However, many have criticized this method, where the retailers are expected to pass the subsidy on to customers at the point of purchase, (the customer will get a reduced rate): “What you’re doing is you’re putting the subsidy in the hands of the businesses...If you’re in business to make a profit, are you going to be that willing to have good will? My problem is you can’t really tell a business what profit they should have, right? So if the market can bear something, usually that’s what people charge." (Rennie, 2014).

Even though Nutrition North was meant to be a more widespread program than its predecessor, the Canadian government failed to expand the number of communities who receive subsidies. (“Canada Post to lose Food Mail Program”, 2010). Nutrition North Canada is only available to people who were eligible under the old program. (“Canada Post to lose Food Mail Program”, 2010). Communities that did not make use of the old program were only eligible for the same amount from Nutrition North Canada regardless of how much a community may be in need. (“Canada Post to lose Food Mail Program”, 2010). Without feedback, the government did not know what aspects to change which could have been the cause for such a minimal effect. (Rennie, 2014).

The Canadian government took notice of the North when many programs and initiatives were not successful so they decided to create a panel to investigate. (The Expert Panel on the State of Knowledge of Food Security in Northern Canada, 2014). Among their conclusions, the panel stated that an issue that could be contributing to the food insecurity is the knowledge gaps in the Indigenous community, “…a rich base of traditional knowledge and grey literature informs the subject, but a comprehensive review of contributions derived from first-hand experience and knowledge of northern peoples has yet to be conducted.” (The Expert Panel on the State of Knowledge of Food Security in Northern Canada, 2014). In their report the panel stated that Institutions are creating programs for people without considering what is needed or wanted. (The Expert Panel on the State of Knowledge of Food Security in Northern Canada, 2014). Public policy needs to be evidence-based to ensure that it is effective and beneficial. Including the Indigenous community in decision-making will go a long way in fighting food insecurity and establishing food sovereignty. As the community shares their ideas, thoughts, and concerns, programs can be tailor made to address the issues.

CONCLUSION

In its effort to help the Indigenous communities address food insecurity, the government of Canada has made little progress and has in fact structurally impeded the realization of Indigenous food sovereignties. By failing to recognize the importance of food sovereignty, the government did not give the Indigenous community the aid that was needed or wanted. (Food Secure Canada, n.d.) Instead, they only regarded the Western approach to food and health which does not benefit the Indigenous population. (Food Secure Canada, n.d.) The Canadian government does not actively help Indigenous peoples exercise their right to fish, instead making it more difficult for Indigenous people to access these rights. (Allain, 1996). Canada’s choice to not include the community in the decision-making made their Nutrition North program ineffective. (Rennie, 2014).

The Indigenous community had ownership of Canada before colonialism and western culture and not only have they been stripped of their voice in national issues but in issues that solely concern themselves. The Canadian government has a responsible ever since they pledged support to the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous people in 2010, which aims to uphold certain rights such as, “exercising their right to self-determination... relating to their internal and local affairs...”. (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2016) (General Assembly of United Nations, n.d.). The government needs to begin to incorporate Indigenous
people views and perspectives into their decisions concerning Indigenous people. Only then will change be made and communities moved forward. There is knowledge of wealth in the Indigenous community that has been suppressed too long. (The Expert Panel on the State of Knowledge of Food Security in Northern Canada, 2014) Indigenous peoples survived and thrived in Canada using their own laws, rules and teachings. The Canadian government cannot keep assuming that they know what is best for Indigenous people peoples. Indigenous peoples deserve a say and freedom to govern themselves to ensure that they grow and prosper like the rest of the country.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the University of Toronto Health Science program for creating outlets in which I can research, mainly through their libraries and online databases. I would also like to thank the Indigenous Health Program run by Jenn Fraser and Sarah Qidwai, the latter of which was my mentor. Their help in directing my research and providing various workshops, really helped with my project.

REFERENCES


