

Nutrition North Canada Program Engagement

Written Submission

Inuit Food Security Working Group

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This written submission was prepared by the Inuit Food Security Working Group. The working group is coordinated by Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), the national representational organization for Inuit in Canada. The Inuit Food Security Working Group includes representatives from the Inuit Land Claims Organizations or a designate – Inuvialuit Regional Corporation, Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Development, Nunatsiavut Government as well as representatives from Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, the National Inuit Youth Council and the Inuit Circumpolar Council - Canada.

Introduction

Canada is one of the wealthiest countries in the world yet Canadian Inuit have the highest prevalence of food insecurity for any indigenous population in a developed country. With up to 69 percent of Inuit households living with food insecurity, the impacts on the health and well-being of the population are severe. Food insecurity is an incredibly complex challenge for Inuit that is rooted in past colonial policies and the persisting social and economic inequities they have contributed to. As a result, no program can be the sole solution for addressing the food insecurity challenges in Inuit Nunangat (the Inuit homeland encompassing the Inuvialuit Settlement Region, Nunavut, Nunavik, and Nunatsiavut). However, current programs such as the Nutrition North Canada (NNC) Program that are intended to address food insecurity in Inuit communities, must be revised in order to have their intended impact.

There is a rights dimension to food security. The right to food is an international human right affirmed by the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. In addition to store-bought foods, Inuit country foods are a necessary component of food security. Indigenous peoples have the right to engage freely in all traditional and other economic activities including the harvesting of country foods, as well as the right to maintain, control, protect and develop cultural heritage and traditional knowledge in relation to country food harvesting, as affirmed by the *U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. The U.N. Special Rapporteur on the right to food highlighted the elevated prevalence of food insecurity among Inuit in his 2013 mission to Canada, and included the observation echoed in this submission that “more needs to be done to improve the effectiveness of Nutrition North Canada”.

Currently, the NNC Program which seeks to “provide Northerners in isolated communities with improved access to perishable nutritious food” is not meeting its objectives and is not meaningfully addressing the food insecurity situation for Inuit. The construct of the program with its market driven model, at its core does not lend itself to reducing social inequity. Revision to the program needs to consider another model or foundational changes to the current structures that are implemented in partnership with Inuit. Below are recommendations to address some of the significant challenges of the current NNC Program.

Program Model

Inherent in the market driven model of the NNC Program is the inability to prioritize Inuit health. The corporate interests of the retailers and suppliers that receive subsidies conflict with the program’s goal of making nutritious food more accessible to Inuit communities. Despite the promised disclosure of program operation costs, there is no guarantee that food will be affordable to community members if profit margins are not capped and if there is no mechanism for penalizing non-compliance. Without major revisions to the NNC Program’s administration, which is described in later sections, the program will be ineffective in addressing food access for Inuit communities and will continue to create antagonism between the retailers and the communities the program is intended to serve.

It is not possible to determine if the NNC Program is having the desired impact with its current program goal and its lack of clear objectives. Furthermore, due to the complexity of factors that lead to food insecurity, the program goal in isolation from a more comprehensive plan to reduce Inuit food insecurity is insufficient to effect change. Recommendations to address current challenges with the program model include:

- Investigate international best-practices that support food access and food insecurity in remote Indigenous communities as potential alternatives to the current market driven model
- Conduct an in-depth study and potential testing of alternative models such as support for social enterprises, community based programming etc. as a new program model
- Revise program goals and objectives so that they are measurable and are associated with relevant indicators that address food insecurity

Program Assessment

The NNC Program is not currently supported by rigorous evaluation methods, in part due to the lack of sufficient program goals and objectives. Current measures including the examination of food prices with the Remote Northern Food Basket and the shipment of subsidized items to communities with freight weights, are not sufficient to determine if the program is improving access to nutritious foods.

Recommendations to address current challenges with the program assessment include:

- Revise price monitoring measures so that they are comparable to southern measures and include foods and items that account for usage and consumption patterns for Inuit communities
- Administer ongoing evaluation of subsidy levels to address the current inequality in the cost of items across different regions and communities
- Oversee ongoing evaluation on additional aspects of accessibility, including the availability, quality and affordability of items in communities, particularly for those that are most vulnerable to food insecurity
- Conduct compliance evaluations of all retailers and suppliers and produce regular reports that are made accessible to the public
- Collaborate with researchers, Inuit organizations, Inuit communities and other experts on an ongoing basis to inform program delivery and revise the program according to findings
- Coordinate evaluation mechanisms with programs that address other aspects of food insecurity and establish indicators to evaluate impacts that include the prevalence of food insecurity among Inuit

Program Budget

The Federal Government has recently committed additional funding to the NNC Program with the inclusion of additional eligible First Nations communities. However, the program budget that is available to communities through the subsidy or educational initiatives has not changed since 2011 despite increases in food costs and population. Without significant investments in policies and programs that address other barriers to food security, such as a guaranteed annual income, the current NNC Program budget is insufficient to increase accessibility to nutritious foods. Recommendations to address current challenges with the program budget include:

- Adjust the program budget to reflect inflation, the growing Inuit population and the changing demographics of Inuit communities

Program Advisory Board

The Advisory Board was created “to provide guidance to the Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada on policies, structures and operations associated with the NNC”. While the Advisory Board has the potential to improve the NNC Program, its current structure and function does not provide Inuit with the opportunity to participate in the governance of the program. Recommendations to address current challenges with the program Advisory Board include:

- Restructure the Advisory Board to ensure equal representation across all Inuit regions including Nunavut that despite being the largest participant in the program, does not have a representative on the Board to voice the unique perspectives from that region
- Revise the selection process of the Board to be more strategic regarding skills and qualification to ensure that Board members can accurately represent the interest of communities
- Provide accessible information on the application process for the Advisory Board including how to apply, required qualifications etc.

Program Educational Initiatives

The health education component of the NNC Program run by Health Canada has been effective for communities. However, there is a need to expand and strengthen this component of the program. Recommendations to address current challenges with the program’s educational initiatives include:

- Develop an inventory of education initiatives conducted under the NNC Program and facilitate sharing between these initiatives
- Support more integration between the NNC Program and other programs such as the Aboriginal Diabetes Initiative and the Canadian Prenatal Nutrition Program

- Offer multi-year funding to ensure continuity and sustainability of programming
- Improve efficiencies in reporting and funding delivery to Inuit regions

Program Subsidies

Country Foods and Country Food Related Items

The current approach to country food subsidization is inadequate and does not recognize the integral role of country food for Inuit. The cost of hunting, fishing and harvesting activities is a major barrier to country food access in communities. While the NNC Program offers subsidization for country food from four federally regulated commercial processing plants, this does not support access to the majority of community members. Supporting access to country food needs to be foundational in any program that addresses food insecurity. Recommendations to address current challenges with the program subsidization of country foods and related items include:

- Work in partnership with regional Inuit organizations to increase investments for country food access beyond the subsidization of federally regulated processing plants which may include the subsidization of equipment for hunting, fishing and harvesting
- Investigate options to introduce a new program with sustainable funding that focuses on increasing access to country foods using strategies best suited to local contexts

Market Foods and Market Food Related Items

The subsidization of market foods and items are out of touch with the needs of Inuit communities. The focus of the program to subsidize high quality, nutritious foods and essential personal and household products is legitimate. However, not enough consideration is given to the dietary habits and preferences of Inuit and there is a lack of collaboration between the government and Inuit to jointly develop the subsidization list.

Personal orders have a positive impact to many participants, particularly those with dietary requirements. However, many people in Inuit communities are not aware of this program opportunity and due to the lack of necessary resources including credit card, internet access and access to a financial institution, it remains inaccessible to those most in need. Recommendations to address current challenges with the program subsidization of market foods and related items include:

- Work in partnership with regional Inuit organizations to revise the subsidy list to include additional personal hygiene and household items that support public health and nutrition, particularly among those most vulnerable to food insecurity
- Implement a price cap measure to items in communities to prevent surge pricing
- Streamline application and reporting process to reduce barriers for retailers and suppliers to enter into the program

- Facilitate outreach to other retailers and suppliers not involved in the program, particularly for smaller stores in communities
- Provide training and information to retailers and suppliers on supply and demand to improve product ordering
- Expand subsidization to include items shipped by sealift
- Invest in community infrastructure that supports food chain management

Program Communication

Within Inuit communities, the NNC Program's communication efforts have not been able to address the continued lack of understanding of the program's mandate and how it functions. This absence of clear communication has perpetuated certain misunderstandings and does a disservice to the program and the communities it intends to serve. Recommendations to address current challenges with the program's communication include:

- Enhance communication efforts at the community level to provide information such as general program information, what items are on the subsidy lists, how to make personal orders etc.
- Set communication standards for retailers providing program information within Inuit communities
- Ensure communications material are always available in the regional dialect of Inuktitut (the Inuit language)
- Provide more educational tools for regional/community organizations that can be adapted for various programs
- Establish a formal communication arrangement between government program representatives and the Inuit Food Security Working Group

Conclusion

There is a need for greater investment to address the food insecurity crisis in Inuit communities. The current NNC Program requires significant improvements if it is going to meaningfully improve access to nutritious foods in Inuit Nunangat. Further, the program needs to be part of a more comprehensive approach to tackle other barriers to Inuit food insecurity. Challenges related to income, physical and mental health, and climate change, among others, directly impact food security status and therefore cannot be excluded from or acted on in isolation from other strategies to improve food security. While the current engagement process to improve and advance the NNC Program is encouraging, program alterations must be premised on the renewed Inuit-to-Crown relationship and embody an inclusive approach to the program's reform. The involvement of Inuit in revitalizing the program and in its management will be essential for its success.