

Urban Indigenous Food Sovereignty: Policy Recommendations

Urban Indigenous populations in Ontario face unique challenges that arise from the disconnect between traditional food systems and the policies governing food access and land use in urban centers. Urban areas with significant Indigenous populations, such as Thunder Bay, Sudbury, Sault Ste. Marie, Timmins, Kitchener, Hamilton, Ottawa, and Toronto, present particular challenges as Indigenous peoples living off-reserve encounter various barriers related to food sovereignty, land access, and cultural relevance in food policy.

According to the 2016 census, about 50% of Ontario's total Indigenous population (roughly 332,000) live in urban areas. This equates to approximately 166,000 urban Indigenous people across Ontario.

The Ontario government's commitment to the [Urban Indigenous Action Plan](#), which was co-designed with Indigenous organizations and the Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, was an important step toward addressing the needs of urban Indigenous populations. This plan, informed by urban Indigenous communities, service providers, and various sectors, was intended to create meaningful and sustained action. It is crucial that the voices of these communities continue to be heard and that the promised outcomes are fully realized.

Provincial policies create barriers to food sovereignty by maintaining jurisdictional silos, often neglecting urban Indigenous communities and failing to support effective food security initiatives. There is a need for policy reforms that facilitate collaboration to support Indigenous food sovereignty. This includes creating policies that specifically address food security challenges in urban Indigenous communities.

Critical areas for policy reform include:

Urban Food Sovereignty and Food Insecurity, Land Access for Growing/Harvesting, Promoting Access to Culturally Significant Foods in Public Institutions and Healthcare Settings, Housing, & Cultural Competency Training for Civil Servants and Health Professionals

About this brief:

This was developed in collaboration with organizations working with Urban Indigenous populations. Meetings of working groups were facilitated by Indigenous leader

Jessica McLaughlin. Writing and research was done by Jade LaFontaine with collaboration and funding from Sustain. This is not a finished product. It is shared based on the election being called. Sustain is sharing out this work widely, educating voters for the Provincial Election 2025, knowing there is more work to do.

Urban Food Sovereignty and Food Insecurity

Key Issues:

- **Need for better support for resurgence of Indigenous food ways in urban Indigenous populations** to ensure food security, cultural connection, belonging and health
- Urban food sovereignty is **complicated by the diversity of Indigenous diets**, requiring tailored solutions.
- **Lack of education and support for Indigenous communities to grow their own food**, including seed gathering and home gardening.
- **Fragmentation of Indigenous food sovereignty initiatives**, often with insufficient, ongoing funding and siloed efforts.
- Aboriginal Health Access Centres (AHACs) and Indigenous Friendship Centres play a crucial role in addressing these issues, **they often lack sufficient, consistent funding to fully scale their efforts** and are not included in policy decisions
- In 2022, **41% of Indigenous children** aged 1 to 14 years (excluding those living on reserve) **were living in food insecure households**
- **Lack of consistent, long-term funding for food security programs** such as food pantries, traditional food initiatives, and community gardens, hindering the sustainability of Indigenous food systems.

Recommendations:

- **Indigenous Food Sovereignty and Food Security Policy:** Develop a comprehensive food sovereignty and security policy to ensure equitable access to nutritious, culturally relevant food for urban Indigenous populations. OMAFRA, Ministry of Indigenous Affairs, Ministry of Health, and Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing should collaborate with Indigenous-led organizations to create a supportive framework. Follow the principles set out in the [Urban Indigenous Action Plan](#)
- **Promote and Fund Indigenous-Led Initiatives:** Fund community gardens, traditional food education, and food distribution models led by Indigenous organizations.

- **Support Sustainable Indigenous Agriculture:** Fund Indigenous-led Urban agriculture projects that integrate traditional ecological knowledge and focus on self-sustaining, culturally relevant, and environmentally sustainable food systems.
- **Partnerships for Local Food Systems:** Leverage partnerships between municipal governments, Indigenous organizations, and the agricultural sector to improve food security in Urban Indigenous populations
- **Develop Inclusive Food Security Programs:** Create food security programs that reflect the diverse traditional diets of urban Indigenous communities in collaboration with AHACs and Indigenous Friendship Centres.
- **Develop Inclusive and Effective Policy Solutions:** Ensure that food security policies are inclusive of urban Indigenous populations and reflect their diverse cultural food practices. This would involve addressing legislative and regulatory barriers that prevent the full participation of Indigenous communities in food sovereignty efforts.
- **Training and Workshops:** Fund workshops and training programs on growing traditional foods, seed gathering, and sustainable agriculture.
- **Ongoing Funding for Health and Food Programs:** Establish dedicated, ongoing funding for AHACs and Indigenous Friendship Centres to support food sovereignty, food security, and health initiatives, including diabetes prevention and traditional food access programs.
- **Streamline and Coordinate Funding:** Streamline funding mechanisms to reduce fragmentation, ensuring that funding supports coordinated and holistic approaches to food security, integrating traditional and modern food systems.
- **Encourage Collaboration Among Stakeholders:** Facilitate partnerships between Indigenous organizations, local governments, and NGOs to coordinate food security programs.

Existing Examples:

- [The Vancouver Urban Food Security Program](#)
- [The Native Seeds/SEARCH Program](#) in Arizona successfully supports Indigenous communities by preserving and sharing seeds for traditional plants, enabling communities to grow their food in urban and rural settings
- [The Northern Food Security Coalition \(NFSC\)](#): Brings together multiple stakeholders, including federal, provincial, and Indigenous organizations, to

address food sovereignty and security challenges in Northern communities, which often include urban Indigenous populations

- **Food Matters Manitoba:** Working with organizations and individuals throughout the province, they are able to conduct policy scans, collate existing research, and commission research and analysis. Their background papers, reports and briefings provide timely information for political leaders, industry and community organizations.

Land Access for Growing/Harvesting

Key Issues:

- **Lack of co-governance models** and policies that center urban Indigenous stakeholders in food and land policy decisions.
- Currently **access to traditional lands and resources is not sufficient** for resilient Indigenous food systems.
- **Barriers to revitalizing Indigenous foodways**, including the inability to fully access and manage traditional food sources, such as wild game and country foods.
- **Pollution and Environmental Barriers:** Issues regarding pollution (gas stations, factories, historic pollution) that prevent growing food on certain lands.

Recommendations:

- **Co-governance and Indigenous Food Policy:** Develop food policies in collaboration with Indigenous stakeholders, prioritizing Indigenous-led initiatives to manage traditional food sources. The Ministry of Indigenous Affairs (MIA) should co-lead these efforts ensuring that Indigenous rights are central to the development of sustainable food systems. Follow the principles set out in the [Urban Indigenous Action Plan](#)
- **Indigenous-Farmer Land Sharing Network:** Create a network similar to Saskatchewan's Treaty Land Sharing Network to facilitate land access and collaboration between Indigenous and settler farmers.
- **Land Access for Indigenous Communities/Revitalize Indigenous Foodways:** Amend the Crown Land Act to prioritize Indigenous communities' access to Crown lands for food sovereignty, including hunting, gathering, and farming.
- **Support Urban Farming Incentives:** Revise policies and provide financial incentives for urban Indigenous communities to engage in traditional food production including growing foods and harvesting maple syrup. Amend zoning

regulations to allow agricultural use of vacant or underused land. Provide training, technical assistance, and funding for sustainable practices that respect traditional ecological knowledge.

- **Environmental Remediation Programs:** Establish programs to remediate polluted lands, focusing on areas culturally significant to Indigenous communities, and offer financial incentives for land restoration

Existing Examples:

- [The Comox Valley Land Trust in British Columbia](#) worked on a project that remediate contaminated land for use by local Indigenous groups for traditional food harvesting.
- [The Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance \(AFSA\)](#) is a farmer-led civil society organisation of people working together towards socially-just and ecologically-sound food and agriculture systems that foster the democratic participation of Indigenous Peoples, smallholders, and local communities in decision making processes.
- [Alaska's Food Security Programs](#) for rural and urban Indigenous communities, focusing on providing sustainable, culturally relevant food options
- [Land Trust Alliance of British Columbia](#) partners with Indigenous communities on land conservation, in protecting significant areas while integrating traditional ecological knowledge

Promoting Access to Culturally Significant Foods in Public Institutions and Healthcare Settings

Key Issues:

- **Urban Indigenous communities don't have consistent access to nutritious, culturally relevant food.** This is amplified in urban centers where many different Indigenous people from various nations live and who might not have access to harvest their traditional foods for example: Mi'kmaq and seafood.
- **Legislative barriers prevent access to country foods in public institutions,** especially for food-insecure or health-challenged populations.
- **Restrictions on sharing country food** between Indigenous communities in northern regions and urban centers.

- **Insufficient space in urban centers for growing traditional foods**

Recommendations:

- **Remove Legislative Barriers for Serving Culturally Relevant Food:** Amend Ontario's Health Protection and Promotion Act to increase access to traditional foods in public institutions, especially for at-risk populations. Collaborate with Indigenous organizations and use models like those in Nunavut.
- **Support Cross-Province Transportation of Traditional Foods:** Create legal frameworks to support the transportation of wild game, fish, and plants across provincial borders, while adhering to public health and cultural standards.
- **Support Indigenous Food Handling Certification:** Develop Indigenous-led food handling certification programs to align public health requirements with cultural traditions. Support these programs with funding from the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs (MIA) and OMAFRA.
- **Integrate Traditional Foods into Healthcare Budget:** Advocate for funding for traditional foods and food sovereignty initiatives within healthcare budgets to promote the health benefits of traditional diets.

Existing Examples:

- [Nunavut Country Food in Public Institutions](#): The government amended health regulations to ensure country foods are available for communities facing food insecurity or health challenges
- [Manitoba's Indigenous Food Sovereignty Program](#): supports community-led gardens, wild food harvesting, and cooking programs
- [British Columbia's First Nations Health Authority](#) integrates traditional healing with modern medicine in a way that ensures holistic care
- [The Yukon's First Nations' Hunting Support Program](#) offers transportation subsidies for hunting groups to travel to remote areas for traditional hunting, covering costs for vehicles, fuel, and logistics.
- [The Vancouver Urban Food Forest](#) has successfully integrated Indigenous foods into urban agriculture

Housing

Key Issues:

- **The Urban Indigenous population in Ontario is growing**, and they face increasingly complex housing challenges.
- Although on-reserve housing is the responsibility of First Nations governments, Ontario's Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing delivers funding programs through bilateral agreements with the Federal government including housing for off-reserve Indigenous populations. See recent [Housing Announcement](#)

Recommendations:

- **Continue to prioritize off-reserve Indigenous housing** in future funding programs within [Federal-Ontario Housing agreements](#)
- **Indigenous-Led Housing Strategy:** Create a strategy led by Indigenous people to find appropriate housing solutions for Indigenous populations in urban areas.
- **Integrate Food Production in Housing:** New housing should incorporate spaces for community or individual food production.
- **Support Indigenous-Led Housing Organizations:** Provide resources and funding to Indigenous organizations focused on urban housing.
- **Build 22,000 subsidized Indigenous-owned housing units** over the next 10 years to address core housing needs in Ontario, at a total cost of \$7.3 billion as outlined by the Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association (ONPHA) Urban and Rural Indigenous Housing Plan for Ontario
- **Engage the private sector through tax incentives** and other opportunities to support Indigenous housing development.
- Create cultural support programs and **foster Indigenous leadership in housing sector** management.

Existing Examples:

- [Mkaana-wii-giwe'aad \(Finding Their Way Home\) Program](#): Focuses on Indigenous housing solutions.
- [Ontario Aboriginal Housing](#): Supports Indigenous housing development and solutions.

Cultural Competency Training for Civil Servants and Health Professionals

Key Issues:

- **Civil servants, especially health professionals and inspectors, lack Indigenous cultural competency**, hindering the integration of Indigenous food sovereignty and cultural safety in policies and practices.
- **Traditional Indigenous foods are not adequately integrated into provincial health education frameworks**, affecting health professionals' ability to support Indigenous communities in their food sovereignty efforts.
- **Insufficient training in health and environmental sectors** on Indigenous food systems and cultural practices.

Recommendations:

- **Develop Cultural Competency Training for Civil Servants:** The Ministry of Indigenous Affairs (MIA), in collaboration with the Ministry of Health (MOH), should create province-wide cultural competency and safety training programs for civil servants, focusing on Indigenous food sovereignty. This training should be Indigenous-led and integrated across all government departments to reflect Indigenous perspectives in policies and services.
- **Support Culturally Safe Health Services:** Provide culturally relevant services for diabetes management, mental health, prenatal care, and youth programming. Collaboration between Indigenous health organizations and provincial health systems will enhance accessibility and service quality. Funding can come from Ontario Health's Indigenous Health Program.
- **Update Educational Curricula to Include Indigenous Food Systems:** The Ministry of Education should update curricula to include Indigenous food sovereignty and cultural safety, focusing on experiential education, particularly in health and environmental studies. This can draw from examples like CPAWS Saskatchewan's initiatives.

Existing Examples:

- [ODPH – Indigenous Foodways and Cultural Humility](#)
- [Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium \(ANTHC\)](#)

- [CPAWS Saskatchewan – Food Sovereignty Initiatives](#)
- [City of Vancouver's "Cultural Competency Training for Government Staff"](#)
- [Nourish Program](#)

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