

Indigenous Food Sovereignty



This knowledge brief will seek to explain Indigenous food sovereignty and decolonization as described in literature, with an emphasis on Indigenous literature. The history of Indigenous food sovereignty, guiding principles and the impacts of colonization on Indigenous food systems are described.

“Dawn Morrison describes four guiding principles for Indigenous food sovereignty implementation (Morrison, 2015a; Cote, 2016)

- Sacredness and divine sovereignty - recognizing that sovereignty comes from the creator.
- Participatory - engaging actively in sustainable Indigenous food activities.
- Self-determination - independent decision making not bound to corporate or policy control. ”

What does literature include about this concept?

Food sovereignty as a movement for Indigenous people worldwide was set in motion in 1996 by a group of peasants called La Via Campesina (Cote, 2016; Grey & Patel, 2016). It aims to give people the chance to culturally define their own food and exercise their right for “healthy and culturally appropriate foods” (Cote, 2016, p. 1). Sovereignty refers to groups of people being able to exert their own decision-making power in the structures that they are moving in (Grey & Patel, 2015). Due to different cultures and people, this looks very different (Grey & Patel, 2015). It is necessary to acknowledge that in colonized nations “peoples’ and countries’ rights are not the same” (Grey & Patel, 2015, p. 432) and Indigenous people are therefore concerned with self-determination and self-governance over a system that was provided to them via colonialism. The problem in Canada is described as being embedded in the structures of Indigenous governance laid out by the federal government (Grey & Patel, 2015). This makes it unlikely “that empowering governance structures forged in the crucible of colonialism” (Grey & Patel, 2015, p. 434) can properly result in self-determination. To address these concerns, the food movement has to go beyond the usual implementations and actions that usually focus on aspects such as production and consumption (Grey & Patel, 2015).

Tuck and Yang (2012) describe how the term decolonization has become an easily applicable term to describe approaches to change such as in society or school systems, often also applied to issues in an attempt to decrease settlers' guilt. This may run the risk of pushing actual issues and concerns, which have arisen as a result of over 200 years of colonization, into the background (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Individuals must also be reminded that decolonization is not a process that can be achieved overnight, it may take generations and only concerns itself with ways to return Indigenous land and way of living to their respective cultures (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

How has it taken up in the “food” movement?

Indigenous food sovereignty challenges the structure of the current corporate, industrial and profit-oriented food system people in Canada move in (Cote, 2016). These structures, which can be seen as forced cultural assimilation, removed cultural lands and got rid of most practices that had been fostered sustainably over many generations (Cote, 2016). This dependence on the system threatens the knowledge that still exists about cultural practices and disconnects communities from their land (Cote, 2016).

The Indigenous worldview concerning food sovereignty does not concern itself with unanimous control over every aspect of food, rather it focuses on the relationship that exists in the system (Morrison, 2015a). These relationships can exist across cultures, between people and the land, plants, and animals that all provide food (Morrison, 2015a). It is a way of living that embraces these relationships and works “with natural systems in ethical and spiritual ways” (Morrison, 2015a, p. 3). The strategies within this food system consist of fishing, hunting, and gathering and are aimed to be respectful with the environment and sustainable to be available to individuals for a long time (Morrison, 2015a).

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- Sacredness and divine sovereignty - recognizing that sovereignty comes from the creator.
- Participatory - engaging actively in sustainable Indigenous food activities.
- Self-determination - independent decision making not bound to corporate or policy control.
- Policy - colonial policies are holding the development of Indigenous food sovereignty back and therefore influencing these policies is required.

Indigenous food perspectives are also different from the colonist perspective that mostly gives only a nutritious value to it. For example, the Indigenous perspective may consider “food as a medicine, food as a teacher and food as a relative” which are described as the three pillars of Indigenous belief in relation to food (Penner, Longboat & Kevany, 2019, p. 2). This highlights the importance of food sovereignty as it is giving people the right to culturally appropriate foods through sustainable methods as well as the ability to produce food their own way (Grey & Patel, 2015).

How does it impact public health?

Through a public health perspective, food sovereignty and food security may be addressed through the social determinants of health (SDOH). Although all SDOH should be considered, for this population, through the public health perspective are income, race, culture. Indigenous communities face higher rates of obesity and health disparities, such as obesity, as a result of the relationship with food and food availability (Kolahdooz, Sadeghirad, Corriveau, & Sharma, 2017; Rotenburg, 2016). In public health, addressing culture as the SDOH is one way to promote Indigenous sovereignty by addressing the nutritional value of traditional indigenous foods compared to commercially bought foods (Welham, 2018,p.64). Traditional food is generally lower in fats, sugars, and is higher in vitamins and minerals. Addressing an unhealthy relationship to food is another approach, highlighting the importance of symbolic values food has with spirituality and cultural identity (Welham, 2018, p64). The healthcare providers should advocate for indigenous communities to practice food sovereignty to address their health disparities and reconnect their relationship with food with its spiritual values. To advocate decolonization of the food system enables the population to harvest their healthy food and engage in physical activities to cultivate their lands. Implementation of physical activity by working to cultivate their lands may reduce the risk of obesity and other health disparities.

Implications of the theory on the work of the KFPC?

The Seven Pillars of food sovereignty were first described by the International Forum for Food Sovereignty and the Indigenous Circle during the People’s Food Policy process added the seventh (Kamloops Food Policy Council, 2019). These pillars are the values that the KFPC is inspired by (Kamloops

Food Policy Council, 2019). With these pillars in mind, the KFPC has participated in community projects as well as workshops to act on these values.

Food sovereignty allows the community to govern over their own foods and is the right for communities to be able to define their cultural needs (Cote, 2016, p,1). Food sovereignty has been acknowledged by KFPC and their partners through projects such as the “Food Hub” which includes initiatives such as the food forest project (Kamloops Food Policy Council, 2019) which contributes to Indigenous food sovereignty. The KFPC has also engaged in co-hosting a 2-day workshop in Vancouver on unpacking white privilege in the food movement, along with the Vancouver Food Policy Council and the Hua Foundation. The learning continued in Kamloops through a series of workshops with Dawn Morrison on the colonial history of agriculture and using a Cross-Cultural Interface Framework to align the vision of the KFPC with the Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty. The KFPC has invested in learning and education of the Board and staff but is at a point where further action needs to be taken that truly addresses Indigenous food sovereignty as allowing Indigenous communities to govern food and define their cultural needs, as Cote (2016) suggests.

As Food Secure Canada (FSC) (2018) describes, food security is the goal while food sovereignty is the action to achieve the goal. FSC (2018) mentioned how “food sovereignty is rooted in the grassroots food movement”. It is recommended to further their reach into the Kamloops community with the Unpacking White Privilege workshops as a step to start the decolonization process in Kamloops. With this step, it may address racism as one of the SODH that may hinder the achievement of true Indigenous food Sovereignty. Decolonization may not be possible without both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people working towards a common goal (Kits, 2019).

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