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Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern
Affairs
Briefing on Food Security in Northern Communities
March 12, 2021

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Human Rights Watch

Background

Human Rights Watch is an independent, international organization conducting research and advocacy in some 100 countries worldwide. In 2020, Human Rights Watch released a report, “[‘My Fear is Losing Everything’: The Climate Crisis and First Nations’ Right to Food in Canada](#),” which documents how climate change impacts—including more extreme weather, thawing permafrost, reduced snow and ice, and more wildfires—are depleting First Nations’ traditional food sources, increasing the danger and difficulty of harvesting, driving up the cost of imported alternatives, and contributing to a growing problem of food poverty and related negative health impacts. With Canada warming at about twice the global average, the worst is yet to come.

This submission outlines Human Rights Watch’s findings on the failure of the Canadian government to address climate change impacts on the realization of the right to food in First Nations and includes recommendations for change. It is based on research conducted from 2018-2020 in the Yukon, northwestern British Columbia, and northern Ontario. While our recommendations are specific to addressing the harmful climate impacts Human Rights Watch documented in First Nations, other Indigenous peoples in Canada have reported [similar impacts](#) and would likely benefit from similar programming support.

I. Climate Change Exacerbating First Nations Food Poverty¹

Across Canada, Indigenous families are much more likely to be “food insecure”—defined by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization as not being able to access food to meet dietary needs and food preferences—largely as a result of historic marginalization and the impacts of colonialism.² Some studies find nearly one in two households in First Nations are food insecure,

¹ Human Rights Watch uses “food poverty” in this brief to describe lack of consistent access to adequate healthy food, or more specifically, decreasing affordability and access to nutritious and traditional food sources for First Nations, and the related impacts on health and culture. “Food security” and “food insecurity” are only used when referring to more formal, systemic measurements of access to food at the individual or household level, which may not reflect additional variables of food poverty, such as whether a household has access to culturally acceptable food.

² Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, “Declaration of the World Summit on Food Security,” November 2009, <http://www.fao.org/tempref/docrep/fao/Meeting/018/k6050e.pdf> (accessed March 8, 2021). Regarding Indigenous food insecurity see, e.g. First Nations Food, Nutrition, and Environment Study, accessed September 18, 2019, <http://www.fnfnes.ca/download> (accessed March 8, 2021).

compared with one out of nine white Canadian households.³ Food poverty now risks reaching increasingly dangerous levels as climate change impacts across the country intensify and accelerate, undermining First Nations' access to food and worsening health outcomes, especially for adults and children with chronic health conditions such as diabetes.⁴

In the three areas where Human Rights Watch conducted research (including in communities not eligible for Nutrition North), residents reported drastic reductions in the quantity of harvestable resources available, and increased difficulty and danger associated with harvesting. They attributed this decline in part to changes in wildlife habitat as a result of climate change, including changing ice and permafrost, wildfires, warming water temperatures, changes in precipitation and water levels, and unpredictable weather. Numerous scientific studies support these observations and warn of further devastating impacts as the climate crisis increasingly threatens the viability of and access to traditional food sources.⁵

With less food to be harvested, households supplement their traditional diet with more purchased food. First Nations in remote locations have a compounded risk of food poverty because, on average, household incomes are lower and higher transportation costs drive food prices higher than elsewhere in the country. A family of four in the northern Ontario community of Peawanuck, for example, would need to spend almost half their monthly budget for food, compared to a family in Toronto who would only have to spend 17.5 percent of their monthly budget. This cost differential has been increasing in part due to climate-related changes in the local environment. For example, shorter, warmer winters mean shorter periods in which winter roads can be used, and such roads enable more cost-effective delivery of supplies from the South.⁶

Healthy foods in particular, such as fruits and vegetables, are often cost-prohibitive in remote grocery stores. As a result, people told Human Rights Watch they tend to eat more affordable, but less nutritious foods, compounding existing health disparities in northern communities tied to historic marginalization and poor access to health care. Academic studies show that increased dependence on processed, high-calorie, store-bought foods—often less expensive and with longer

³ Valerie Tarasuk, Andy Mitchell, and Naomi Dachner, Canadian Institutes of Health Research and Research to Identify Policy Options to Reduce Food Insecurity, Household Food Insecurity in Canada, 2017-2018 (Toronto: PROOF, 2018); First Nations Information Governance Centre, RHS 2008/10: National report on adults, youth, and children living in First Nations communities (Ottawa: FNIGC, 2012); FNIGC, National Report of the First Nations Regional Health Survey: Phase 3, Volume 2, 2018.

⁴ Human Rights Watch, “My Fear is Losing Everything”: The Climate Crisis and First Nations’ Right to Food in Canada, October 21, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/21/canada-climate-crisis-toll-first-nations-food-supply> (accessed March 8, 2021).

⁵ Ibid., pp. 21-64,

⁶ Ibid., pp. 40-44.

shelf-lives—has contributed to serious diet-related health issues among First Nations, such as the growing and disproportionate number of First Nations people affected by obesity and diabetes.⁷

In several of the communities where Human Rights Watch conducted research, teachers and community members said that children come hungry to school. Older people and people with chronic diseases whose health conditions can make a healthy diet all-the-more critical said they find the loss of harvested food impedes their ability to eat healthily. Medical providers told Human Rights Watch that people with chronic diseases cannot afford to follow medically recommended diets due to their inability to obtain food from the land or to afford nutritious foods sold in stores. Some of the older people interviewed for this report said they have cut down on the number of meals they eat per day.⁸

Climate-induced food poverty also adds to an already significant mental health crisis facing many First Nations as a result of historical and intergenerational trauma, discriminatory government policies, enforced separation of children from families and communities, insufficient access to mental health care and psychosocial support.⁹

II. Inadequate Government Response

Canada has a human right obligation to monitor climate change impacts and help communities adapt to climate impacts on their rights, including impacts on food poverty.¹⁰

Across Canada, First Nations are working proactively to address and respond to the impacts of the climate crisis, including impacts on their rights to food, health, and culture. Some maintain strong traditional food sharing networks, while others have created monitoring systems for climate change impacts on their environment. Yet, all these efforts require resources and capacity, which many communities lack. Human Rights Watch research found that the Canadian government has yet to meet its human rights obligation to support First Nations in adapting to current and anticipated impacts of climate change.

Government policies and programs are failing to adequately monitor and address climate impacts on First Nations food and culture. Currently, monitoring of climate change impacts on land and species, and related impacts on traditional food sources largely falls to First Nations. Few have the resources, or authority to divert funding to such monitoring, and so often must seek out additional

⁷ Ibid., pp. 49-54.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 57-61.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 107-114.

funding to support these initiatives. Where funding is available, it is most often for limited, one-off projects, and not sustained monitoring programs.¹¹

Meanwhile, food subsidies and health resources urgently required to respond to current climate impacts are often not available, insufficient, or do not reach the people who need them most. For example, the federal government's Nutrition North Canada (NNC) program—which subsidizes a list of nutritious foods transported from registered southern retailers and is the major means of supplementing inadequate supplies of locally harvested food—has not historically enabled remote, northern communities to secure access to affordable, healthy food, and is not designed to address the escalating toll climate change is taking on First Nations access to food.¹²

NNC has helped maintain food prices in remote and northern communities, but it has not significantly reduced them, resulting in a decrease of only 1.03 percent in communities eligible for the subsidy. Positively, the federal government invested CAD\$25 million in NNC in 2020 to ensure access to nutritious food during Covid-19. According to Minister of Northern Affairs Daniel Vandal, this investment has resulted in more significant, if short-term food cost reductions.¹³

The NNC subsidy is given to retailers who are then responsible for passing on the full subsidy value to consumers, but the program does not regulate retailers' prices, leaving room for significant price variability between communities, stores, and provinces and territories.¹⁴ Although the NNC subsidy is available to individual consumers in eligible communities to directly order subsidized food from registered southern retailers or suppliers, the vast majority of subsidized food is purchased through two retailers: The North West Company and Arctic Co-operatives Limited.¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 63, 67-72.

¹² Ibid., pp. 18-19, 79-85.

¹³ Letter from Minister of Northern Affairs, Daniel Vandal, September 29, 2020.

¹⁴ Nutrition North Canada, "Cost of the Revised Northern Food Basket in 2016-2017," Government of Canada, March 22, 2018, <https://www.nutritionnorthcanada.gc.ca/eng/1519997966920/1519998026166> (accessed March 10, 2021); Tracey Galloway, "Nutrition North Canada update fails to make retailers accountable," Nunatsiaq News, December 12, 2018, <https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/nutrition-north-canada-update-fails-to-make-retailers-accountable/> (accessed March 10, 2021); Tracey Galloway, "Canada's northern food subsidy Nutrition North Canada: a comprehensive program evaluation," *Int J Circumpolar Health*, vol. 76(1) (2017), doi: 10.1080/22423982.2017.1279451.

¹⁵ Nutrition North Canada, "How Nutrition North Canada works," Government of Canada, 2019, www.nutritionnorthcanada.gc.ca/eng/1415538638170/1415538670874 (accessed March 10, 2021); Nutrition North Canada, "Eligible Communities," May 5, 2020, <https://www.nutritionnorthcanada.gc.ca/eng/1415540731169/1415540791407#tpc2> (accessed March 10, 2021). In the fiscal year 2018-19, The North West Company (NWC) received 51 percent of NNC subsidy funds (CAD\$39.58 million), while its closest competitor, Arctic Co-operatives Limited received 17 percent (CAD\$12.91 million). Nutrition North Canada, "2018-2019: Full Fiscal Year," Government of Canada, April 23, 2020, <https://www.nutritionnorthcanada.gc.ca/eng/1583247671449/1583247805997> (accessed March 10, 2021).

Beyond the barrier of cost, ordering subsidized food from retailers in the South often requires a credit card, which can also be a barrier for some low-income families. Program reforms made starting in 2019 have increased payment flexibility at most registered southern retailers, which now accept debit, cheques, or electronic funds transfers, and, in a few locations, cash. However, lack of access to a credit card remains a barrier for some First Nations people.¹⁶

Positively, recognizing that “improving access to food locally is central to food security,” CIRNAC expanded Nutrition North programming to provide support for traditional harvesting through the harvesters’ support grant. The grant provides funding for up to five years but has not been made available to all NNC-eligible communities, much less to communities not eligible for NNC’s transport subsidy.¹⁷

Recommendations for the Federal Government:

- Monitor the efficacy of the Nutrition North Canada subsidy, including impacts of the 2019 reforms, and revise the program to ensure that:
 - Everyone in need can access the subsidies and will be able to afford healthy and nutritious food in community stores or by ordering from the nearest major city.
 - Specific impacts of climate change on food poverty in First Nations are assessed and considered in determination of subsidy levels and subsidy eligibility.
- Take immediate steps, starting with Budget 2021, to ensure Nutrition North can offer comprehensive, holistic, and flexible programming to address food poverty, developing on lessons learned from the implementation of the harvesters’ support grant.
- Consider expanding the Nutrition North subsidy program eligibility criteria to support food banks in remote and northern communities, starting with Budget 2021.
- Ensure consistent, adequate, and long-term funding and support for Indigenous-led programs to monitor climate change impacts, including through investments in First Nations Guardians and support for a national network of First Nations climate coordinators at the community and regional level to facilitate climate adaptation planning.
- Ensure long-term, sufficient, predictable, and sustainable funding to respond to climate change impacts on First Nations’ right to food, including by:

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch, “My Fear is Losing Everything,” pp. 45-46, 84.

¹⁷ Letter from Minister of Northern Affairs, Daniel Vandal, September 29, 2020; Nutrition North Canada, “Harvesters’ Support Grant,” <https://www.nutritionnorthcanada.gc.ca/eng/1586274027728/1586274048849> (accessed March 8, 2021).

- Supporting Indigenous-led food security initiatives such as community freezers and community garden projects.
- Funding and supporting comprehensive (and self-determined) Indigenous climate solutions, including those that relate to upholding their rights to food, water, and health.