

# Inuit and the Right to Food

**Submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food for  
the Official Country Mission to Canada**

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The right to have regular, permanent and free access, either directly or by means of financial purchases, to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and which ensures a physical and mental, individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free of fear.

United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food.

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# Introduction

The right to food is a topic often associated with developing nations and receives less attention in countries such as Canada that are economically wealthy and possess a high standard of living. However, a lack of available, accessible and adequate food does persist in parts of the country. Unfortunately for many Inuit living in northern Canada, it is often an everyday struggle.

Despite rapid changes over the past several decades Inuit remain resilient. However, the current inability for a significant portion of Inuit to access safe, sufficient, nutritionally adequate, and socially acceptable food is undermining the well being of the population and the very integrity of the culture. Although the health of Canadian Aboriginal Peoples has been identified as a pressing issue, action to address the right to food in Inuit communities is insufficient. Immediate intervention is needed through the collaborative engagement of various levels of government, Inuit organizations and communities to develop a resolution if the situation is to be improved.

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) and the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), Canada represent and promote the interests of Inuit regarding various environmental, social, cultural and political challenges. ITK was founded in 1971 and is the national representative organization of Inuit in Canada. The right to food for Inuit is one of ITK's major priorities. Currently, ITK is in the process of forming a National Inuit Food Security Working Group. This group will bring together representatives from the four Inuit Land Claim Regions to foster dialogue and determine a collective course of action to advance programs and policies that will improve the right to food for Inuit in Canada.

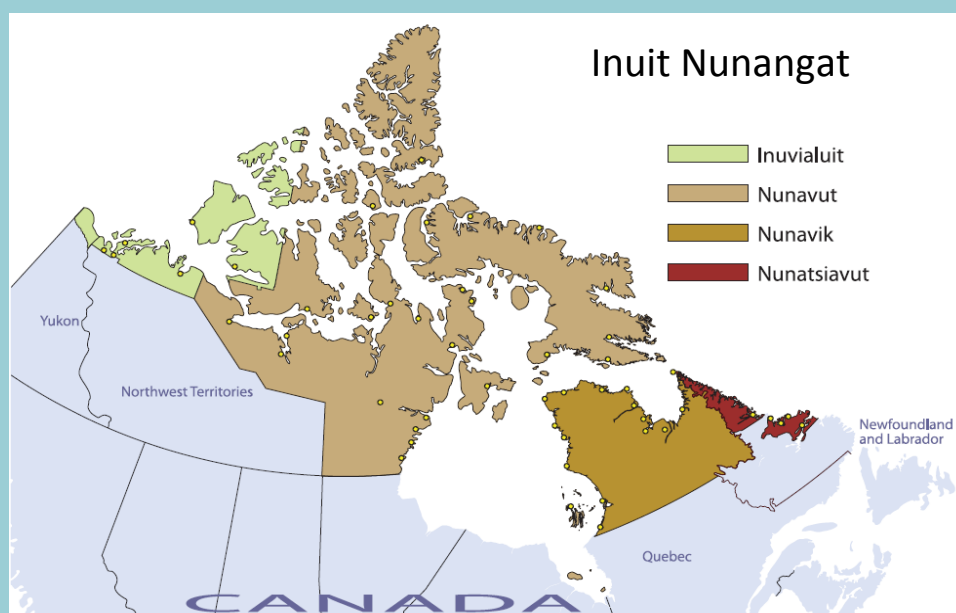
ICC was founded by Inuit leaders in 1977 and is a leading international non-government organization representing Inuit living across the Arctic in Canada, Alaska (US), Greenland, and Chukotka (RU). Inuit speak with a united voice on issues of common concern and combine their energy towards protecting and promoting the Arctic and the Inuit way of life. ICC makes significant contributions in representing Inuit at the international level. Right to food issues are part of ongoing advocacy work for ICC involving the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, United Nations Human Rights Council, Arctic Council, International Whaling Commission and the Food and Agriculture Organization.

# The Inuit Population

In Canada there are over 1 million Aboriginal Peoples belonging to three distinct cultural groups including First Nations, Métis and Inuit (1 & 2). The Inuit population of **50,485** is one of the fastest growing in the country. Between 1996 and 2006 the population increased by **26%** in contrast to the 8% increase observed in the non-Aboriginal population. As a result the Inuit population is very young with a median age of **22 years**, compared to 40 years for the national population (1).

The majority of Inuit reside in the **53** communities that make up Inuit Nunangat, or the Inuit homeland, a vast area that Inuit have inhabited for over 5,000 years (3). Inuit Nunangat is composed of the four Inuit Land Claim Regions in northern Canada: the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (part of the Northwest Territories), Nunavut Territory, Nunavik (Northern Quebec) and Nunatsiavut (Northern Labrador) (1 & 4). Nunavut has the largest Inuit population of 24,635 which accounts for approximately half of the total Canadian Inuit population (5). Together these regions cover approximately **40%** of Canada's landmass, representing a rich part of Canada's geography and biodiversity (6).

Inuit communities are dispersed along Canada's northern coastline and interior. The majority of communities are small and far removed from major centres. Over a third (**38%**) have populations under 500 people. Due to the remoteness of the communities the majority lack road access and can only be reached by air year round and by sea during the summer months (6).



# The Inuit Diet

Over the past several decades Inuit have undergone significant dietary and lifestyle changes.

Traditionally, Inuit relied completely on country foods, recognized as wild animal or plant species from the local environment. Today, Inuit consume both country foods and market foods shipped from the south which make up the majority of the average diet (7). This dietary transition has led to the loss of diet quality as Inuit are consuming more market foods of relatively low nutritional value and less nutrient-dense country foods (7 & 8). Unfortunately, this loss of diet quality is being perpetuated by obstacles to country food provisioning and to obtaining nutritious market foods in the communities.

The majority of market foods consumed by Inuit are of poor nutritional quality, containing high levels of salt, sugar and fat (7 - 10). A research study in Nunavut reported the most frequently consumed store bought foods among Inuit women were: pop, coffee, tea, Tang, white bread, chocolate bars, Kool-Aid, potato chips, oranges, eggs, frozen pizza and onions (9). Concurrent with the consumption of nutrient-poor market foods, the emergence of nutrient inadequacies and chronic diseases are now being observed in many communities (8, 12, 13 & 14).

Despite an increased reliance on market food, country food remains an important contributor to the diet of Inuit. Nutrient-dense country foods include many animals and plants, such as caribou, fish, birds, whales, seal and berries. Country food provides invaluable health benefits due to high levels of antioxidants, omega-3 fatty acids, monounsaturated fatty acids, protein and other micronutrients (11, 15, 16 & 17). In 2006, **65%** of Inuit residing in northern Canada lived in homes where at least half of the meat and fish consumed was country food (5). A study involving Inuit adults found that on days when country food was consumed there was significantly more vitamin A, D, E and B6, riboflavin, iron, zinc, copper, magnesium, manganese, phosphorus, potassium, and selenium in the diet (8). These findings highlight the important relationship between country food access and Inuit health.

## Country Food and Cultural Identity

For Inuit in Canada the right to food extends far beyond economic, nutritional, and physical accessibility to include significant cultural importance. The hunting, harvesting and sharing of country food is integral in providing social cohesion and cultural continuity for Inuit communities. Inuit livelihoods have historically been, and continue to be, defined by a deep relationship to the environment and the resources it provides. Despite the presence of market food in the modern Inuit diet, country food remains at the centre of Inuit identity and well-being (7, 11, 27 & 31).

# Inuit and the Right to Food

Like many other Indigenous groups throughout the world, the right to food for Inuit is a complex phenomenon that reaches beyond the conventional understandings that continue to inform measurements, programs and policies. For Inuit, an available, accessible and adequate food supply incorporates market food, but is also grounded in a relationship to the land, water, ice and their resources. Therefore, for Inuit the ability to harvest country food is also an essential prerequisite in attaining the right to food. Below is a brief portrayal of the prevalence of food insecurity among Inuit and of the unique barriers that challenge the right to food in Inuit communities.

Measures of food insecurity tend to focus on the ability of Inuit to purchase market foods, and overlook experiences around country food and community sharing networks. As a result, these measures do not capture the entire food security experience for Inuit. However, food security findings are still helpful indicators to consider. Research indicates that there is a high prevalence of food insecurity among Inuit living in the Canadian Arctic (9, 10, 18 & 19). The Inuit Health Survey reported that adults living in Nunavut had a very high prevalence of food insecurity at **68.8%** (18). This is **six** times higher than the Canadian national average and represents the highest documented food insecurity prevalence rate for any Aboriginal population residing in a developed country (18 & 20). High rates of food insecurity were also recorded in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (**43.3%**) and the Nunatsiavut Region (**45.7%**); nearly **five** times higher than the Canadian national average. Food insecurity is also too prevalent among Inuit children. The Nunavut Inuit Child Health Survey found that nearly **70%** of Inuit preschoolers resided in food insecure households and **56%** were in households with child food insecurity (25).

## What it means to be Food Insecure

To determine food security status, the Inuit Health Survey used a modified 18-item Food Security Survey Module. Ten questions relate to the status of adults and eight, to children in the household. Among all respondents, **24.5%** confirmed that in the last year, an adult in the house had been hungry but didn't eat because they couldn't afford enough food. **23.1%** indicated that a child in the house had gone hungry when they couldn't afford enough food. When asked 'in the last 12 months, did an adult in the household not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food', **17.6%** indicated that it was true. Furthermore, **13.1%** indicated that a child did not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food. These responses indicate that many Inuit adults and children are going whole days without eating and experiencing hunger (18).

A multitude of barriers may impede a person's ability to access food. These hurdles have been found to be more numerous and heightened for Inuit living in remote northern communities (9, 10, 18, 19, 21, 22 & 23). Factors such as cost of food, lack of availability, variety and quality of foods, low income rates, climate change and environmental contamination among others are negatively impacting the right to food for Inuit.

**Cost of Food** - The cost of food for Inuit living in northern Canada is significantly higher compared to southern areas. A family of four in an isolated community in Nunavut would spend **\$395 to \$460** a week to buy a basic nutritious diet. This equates to spending **\$226** in a southern city such as Ottawa (24). In addition to market food affordability, the cost of harvesting country food has become a barrier for many Inuit. Purchasing gas, ammunition, snowmobiles, boats and motors can be very costly in remote communities and beyond the grasp of many families. In a study of Canadian Aboriginal women, up to **40%** of Inuit indicated fishing was not affordable and up to **42%** indicated hunting was too expensive (26).

**Availability, Variety and Quality** - In addition to the high costs of food, lack of availability, variety and quality of market foods are also barriers for Inuit living in northern communities. Nutritious perishable foods are particularly vulnerable to spoilage and damage when shipped long distances from the South. Conversely, highly processed and packaged foods that are easily transported are more readily available in stores at a fraction of the cost (9, 10, 21 & 27). Weather conditions and cargo prioritization can prevent food shipments from being delivered to communities. A community in Nunavut went without a food shipment for over three weeks in 2011, leaving empty shelves in the local grocery store (28).

**Low Income** - The right to food for Inuit is challenged by low income rates in communities. In 2005, the median income for Inuit was **\$16,970** compared to **\$25,615** for the total population of Canada (5). According to the Inuit Health Survey, 49.6% of adults earned less than **\$20,000** in the past year. When you consider that the average cost of groceries for this population was \$380 per week (\$19,760 a year) or **99%** of their income (18), it is easy to see how the cost of food can be an insurmountable barrier.

**Climate Change** - Although climate change is being felt on a global scale, the Arctic is on the frontlines of environmental change. Animal species such as caribou are facing a variety of climate related changes in their ranges. Reduced quality of food sources, including berries are already being observed. Safety is now a concern for many hunters because of increased accident rates due to sea ice thinning and unpredictable weather patterns. These changes are continuing to adversely impacting Inuit who



depend on country food not only for sustenance and to support the local economy, but also as the basis for cultural and social identity (29 - 32).

**Contaminants** – Climate change is taking place within the context of many other changes in the Inuit regions including the accumulation of contaminants. High levels of organic pollutants, heavy metals and radionuclides have been detected in the Arctic ecosystem (33 & 34). Although these contaminants mainly originate from southern populated areas, it is an irony of nature that they are carried thousands of miles north to pollute the Arctic ecosystem (34 - 37). Many species of plants, fish, birds and mammals are now carriers of contaminants, raising concern for Inuit who depend greatly on these wildlife species (33, 34, 38 & 39). Currently, levels of exposure to some contaminants including mercury exceed recommended safety guidelines among Inuit sub-populations (33, 38, 40 & 41). In the Nunavut Inuit Children’s Health Survey nearly **25%** of children aged 3 – 5 had hair mercury concentrations equal to or higher than 2 µg/g (WHO reference level) (41). Public health messaging around country food, as well as individual decisions made each day by the typical Inuk country food consumer, must weigh the significant health and nutritional benefits with the potential risks from exposure to contaminants.

## The Nutrition North Canada Program

The Nutrition North Canada Program (NNC) is a subsidy program run by the Government of Canada. The program aims to improve access to perishable healthy foods in isolated northern communities. Replacing the Food Mail Program (FM) which provided an air transportation subsidy through Canada Post, NNC is a market-driven program, providing subsidy directly to retailers. Originally scheduled to launch in October 2010 the implementation of NNC was delayed after Northerners expressed concern over the lack of time given to adjust to the new program (42).

Temporary adjustments have been made to the food item eligibility list during the transition phase until the program is fully implemented in October 2012. The new food eligibility list focuses on nutritious perishable foods that must be flown into communities. Higher subsidy levels are now being given to foods such as fruits, vegetables, bread, meat, milk and eggs. Eligible foods with longer shelf-lives including all-purpose flour, crackers and some frozen foods will be subsidized at a lower level. All non-food items and most non-perishable foods have been removed from the eligibility list for most communities, including items such as hunting and fishing equipment, household items, dental care items and infant care products (42).

Concerns have been expressed over the NNC and the realization of nutritious food becoming more accessible and affordable in northern communities. Also, it remains unclear how the prices of non-food items and non-perishable foods may change considering they were covered under FM but will no longer be subsidized by NNC (43). Once NNC is fully implemented a review of the program will be important to gauge its effectiveness for Inuit communities.

# Recommendations

The following are recommendations to enable an environment in which Inuit have the ability to procure adequate food for themselves and their family. Due to the unique context of Inuit in Canada, this cannot be achieved by focusing exclusively on market resources. The harvesting and consumption of country food must foremost be recognized as an essential pillar in the right to food for Inuit.

- 1.** Prioritize sustainable food procurement through increased investment in traditional hunting and fishing activities and the preservation of traditional knowledge.
- 2.** Affirm food subsidy programs are meeting the needs of Inuit communities by securing accessibility to both market and country food.
- 3.** Ensure income support and social programs for Inuit are adequate to attain the right to food.
- 4.** Address inequitable determinants of health such as employment, education, housing and health services in Inuit communities that are preventing the realization of the right to adequate food.
- 5.** Pursue efforts that reduce the impact of industrialization and contaminants on Inuit land, resources and livelihoods.
- 6.** Adoption of a national food policy which outlines the progressive realization of the right to food for Inuit and other Aboriginal Peoples.
- 7.** Development of a national Inuit strategy on the Right to Food
- 8.** Establish accountability mechanisms including clear time frames and benchmarks to remedy the current state of food insecurity among Inuit.

# Conclusion

For Inuit, like many Indigenous groups throughout the world, there has been a long history of social, economic, political and cultural disparities. Unfortunately, many of these inequalities continue to this day. The lack of an available, accessible and adequate food supply is of great concern for Inuit communities. It is posing a serious risk to Inuit well-being not only through its negative impacts on nutrition, physical health, psychological and social functioning but also by impacting the very continuity of Inuit culture. Although the improvement of market food accessibility is necessary, the recognition and support for Inuit to access country food is paramount. Today, the right to food extends beyond morals, values and policies, and exists as a legally binding human rights obligation. The Government of Canada has a responsibility to collaboratively engage Inuit in working towards a resolution. Only through a renewed commitment can the right to food for Inuit be realized.

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