

## FOOD INSECURITY IN MANITOBA: A CASE STUDY OF CROSS LAKE

*Micah Zerbe\**

### **Food insecurity in Manitoba**

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (1996) states that “Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” KIP’s Urban Development and Poverty Reduction Laboratory prepared a touchscreen presentation entitled “Food security in Manitoba, Canada: Local practices bear fruits” for Expo 2015<sup>1</sup> (see also the video presented at Expo in this issue). Visitors at KIP’s pavilion on attractive territories for a sustainable world had the opportunity to learn about Manitoba and the joint efforts of communities and government to fight food insecurity.

In fact, as shown in the presentation, Manitoba has a food insecurity rate of 12.1 percent. Food insecurity can range from worrying about running out of food to going days without eating. As the fifth lowest in Canada, this number may seem comparatively low, but this means that in 2012 around 55,800 Manitoban families (not including First Nations people on reserves) experienced some form of food insecurity. For children, the rate is 17.5 percent, and for First Nations people on reserves the rate is 24 percent (Statistics Canada, 2012). In northern communities, food insecurity is an even more expansive issue. Food insecurity rates are on average 75 percent in northern communities and can range as high as 100 percent (Thompson et al., 2010). Food insecurity is a threat to physical and mental health, and can lead to increased risk of illness, such as depression, diabetes, and heart disease (Tarasuk et al., 2014).

Food insecurity is influenced by a number of barriers to food security, including geographic access to food, transportation, economic access to food, and food literacy. Northern communities in Manitoba are particularly affected by these barriers. They experience issues with geographic access to food due to the high transportation costs of food and gaps in local food production. Many northern communities do not have all-season roads, which makes it more difficult and more expensive to transport food to those communities year-round. Food literacy is also a significant issue... It is not possible to prepare healthy food well if people do not know how to in the first place. Traditional aboriginal food skills have been lost due to community dislocation, changes in wildlife habitat, and the Government of Canada’s residential school program (S. Epp-Koop, personal communication, February 25, 2016), which

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\* *Micah Zerbe* is a graduate from Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Manitoba. From September, 2015 to April, 2016 he worked as a student intern at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Manitoba office.

<sup>1</sup> The video presentation for the KIP Pavilion in Expo was prepared by *Mareike Brunelli*, former René Cassin and Urban Development and Poverty Reduction Laboratory in Winnipeg intern, who is currently working as a researcher in the Manitoba Research Alliance.

was a cultural assimilation program in operation in Manitoba from the late nineteenth century until 1980<sup>2</sup>. Northern communities face economic barriers due to poverty, high unemployment rates, and high food prices. In 2014, the unemployment rate in Manitoba was 5.6 percent, while the unemployment rate in northern Manitoba reached as high as 34.5 percent (Statistics Canada, 2016). Community leaders in northern communities indicate that poverty is a leading social issue (Puxley, 2016). Also contributing to the economic barrier to food security is the high price of food in the north, which is twice as expensive as in the south of the province (Thompson et al., 2010).

After concerns were expressed over the state of food prices in northern Manitoba, the Government of Manitoba's Healthy Child Committee of Cabinet established the Northern Food Prices Project to evaluate the factors contributing to the high cost of food in northern Manitoba. The project ended in 2003 with the submission of the Northern Food Prices Project Report (Northern Food Prices Project Steering Committee, 2003). Following the report, which outlined the nature of the economic and geographic barriers to food in Manitoba, the Northern Healthy Foods Initiative (NHFI) was established to coordinate community-based food security projects in remote, northern Manitoban communities. NHFI focuses on improving food self-sufficiency through projects like community food programs, greenhouses, gardens, and food business development (Manitoba Aboriginal and Northern Affairs, 2012).

### **Case Study: Cross Lake**

Cross Lake (including Pimicikamak Cree Nation) is a remote community in northern Manitoba with a population of around 5,000. The community is connected to the Manitoba highway system by an all-weather road and a bridge. Even with the road, Cross Lake is affected by changes to its traditional food structures. Cross Lake has been chosen as a case study of food insecurity in Manitoba because it is a community that has many barriers to food security, but community-based projects are in place to reduce them. Food Matters Manitoba, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that partners with communities to improve food security and local resilience, works with Cross Lake and has published a report documenting community members' perspectives on the community's food security (Food Matters Manitoba, 2013). Food Matters Manitoba is a partner of NHFI, through which it receives part of its funding. The present case study draws widely on this report.

While people living in Cross Lake used to have access to a healthy traditional diet, affordable healthy food is no longer accessible to many people. One of the reasons for this was the construction of the nearby hydroelectric dam. Hydroelectricity is one of the main forms of energy production in Manitoba. The dam damaged the plant and fish life in the area making it harder for residents to collect their own food. Additionally, the traditional lifestyle of Cross Lake was disrupted by the residential school program. The residential schools severed the connection between the older and the younger generation, and interrupted the transfer of knowledge of traditional practices. As a result, generations of children grew up without

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<sup>2</sup> Residential schools were a network of boarding schools for aboriginal Canadians that were funded by the Canadian government and administered by Christian churches. The goal was to remove aboriginal children from their family and culture, and assimilate them into the dominant Canadian culture. The program began in the mid-nineteenth century, and the last federally operated school closed in 1996.

learning traditional food skills and were unable to harvest, preserve, and prepare traditional foods. Another factor that changed traditional food practices in Cross Lake was the revision of welfare laws. As government social assistance money transfers decreased for households that owned livestock and gardens, fewer people continued those practices in favour of higher welfare allocations. Currently, traditional food is not commonly eaten, and is now more of a supplement or a treat.



Although the traditional practices of Cross Lake residents have been disrupted, the community continues to have many food assets. Elders participate in education programs to pass down their knowledge of traditional food systems. This transfer of knowledge takes place formally within schools as well as informally within families. Land-based education programs in the schools give students an opportunity to experience traditional food skills such as fishing and snaring. There are also education institutions in the area that provide strong assets. The University College of the North has a location at Cross Lake that provides education opportunities for residents. The local high schools also have gardening programs to provide food production skills to the younger generation.

In terms of access to food, Cross Lake is better off than many northern communities. The community has two food stores, one of which is locally owned. While food prices in Cross Lake are 40 percent higher than in Winnipeg, they are lower than in many other northern communities. Duck, goose, beaver, and rabbit are still plentiful in the area for hunting, while

larger game such as moose, caribou, and deer are scarce. The community has smoke houses that are used to preserve meat for the year.

In order to develop better food skills, Cross Lake has undertaken a number of community programs designed to improve food knowledge, preparation, and production. One of these programs is the Cross Lake Chicken Club. While chicken is not a traditional food, families can raise chickens for their own food in order to be less dependent on purchasing expensive food from stores. In the program there are currently nine families that raise chickens.

Though the community of Cross Lake has some food assets, it still faces significant challenges, including environmental, social and health barriers. One of the environmental barriers is pollution. Many residents of Cross Lake are concerned about pollution affecting wild game and fish in the area, especially in Lake Winnipeg. The numbers of whitefish and sturgeon have diminished significantly, largely because the hydroelectric dam has disrupted their spawning grounds, fundamentally changing access to a significant source of traditional food in the area. The hydro dam has also affected access to berries around Cross Lake. Lots of nearby bushes have been cut down in order to build infrastructure, so people have to go farther and farther to find berries. While there has been some effort to create gardening initiatives, the soil in Cross Lake is not useful for agriculture due to its high clay content. Good soil needs to be imported to the community to grow food.



*Residents enjoy fish, potatoes, and soup, all of which are eaten traditionally*

In addition to these environmental factors there are also social and health factors. Cross Lake has a chronic diabetes problem, with a prevalence of 30 percent, which is over three times higher than the provincial rate of 8.3 percent (Manitoba Health, Healthy Living & Seniors, Annual Statistics, 2013-2014). This problem has not always been present. Before the 1950s diabetes was rare in aboriginal communities (Young et al, 2000). Diabetes has a significant social cost for the community as well, as community members often have to be flown out of the community for treatment. The prevalence of diabetes in Cross Lake indicates that there is a need to address food insecurity and poverty, which can be determinants of health problems such as diabetes. Restoring traditional food and lifestyle practices is an important way to do this.

Community members also identified a dependency on social assistance as a barrier to food self-sufficiency. The welfare regulations that required Cross Lake residents to stop owning gardens and livestock so as to receive maximum benefits, created a system of financial dependency. Gardening has become less common with increased access to store-bought foods. In order to create a sense of self-sufficiency, community members have pointed out that there needs to be a greater emphasis on education and skill building, rather than programs that simply give money for food.

The multi-generational disconnect is another social problem. Due to the effects of the residential school system, younger generations are not familiar with traditional food skills, and can dislike traditional hunting and wild game, instead preferring store-bought food. There are also economic challenges associated with taking up traditional activities since practices like hunting, fishing, and gardening all require economic resources in order to start. Government regulations are also not supportive to community understandings of sharing. In Cross Lake, residents with aboriginal status live alongside those who do not have aboriginal status. Due to hunting regulations, status residents are not allowed to share some kinds of meat and fish with non-status residents (S. Epp-Koop, 2016).

Status refers to a legal definition for native peoples who fall under federal jurisdiction according to Canada's *Indian Act*. People who hold aboriginal status have access to certain services that are not available to those without legal status. Non-status refers to people who identify as aboriginal, but are excluded from federal services by an act of choice or by legislative exclusion.

Community members have developed an action plan for the future to continue the improvement of Cross Lake's food resilience and self-sustainability. This plan includes programs to improve social inclusion as well as food security. One of the proposals is a food education program within local schools. Improving food education for young people by introducing them to traditional and healthy foods will allow children to have access to a strong nutritional base and better food literacy. Improved food literacy for young people would also reduce the generational knowledge divide. The best place to implement a food education program like this is in the school system, to make sure that children have access to healthy food knowledge regardless of the socio-economic level of their families. The community also proposed a food

exchange program with nearby northern communities. This would build resilience by allowing communities to share their resources and fulfill food gaps in other communities. An exchange program would also build strong inter-community relationships and systems of cooperation.

Another option outlined by Food Matters Manitoba (2013) is a whitefish hatchery. As stated above, the whitefish population was significantly reduced around Cross Lake because of the construction of the nearby hydroelectric dam. In other northern communities, fish repopulation strategies have been developed to restore this significant traditional food loss. An intercommunity fish hatchery could provide economic options to local fishers and would remove a significant barrier to food security, while promoting interaction and cooperation between northern communities.



*A young hunter removes a fish from a net*

Food security is an issue that does not simply have material causes and effects. The Cross Lake community identified mental health support as an important community need, prompting Food Matters Manitoba to include a proposal to improve mental health resources for Cross Lake in its report. Resources for people suffering from mental health problems would be an important asset for improving the community life of Cross Lake.

## Impacts of food insecurity in Cross Lake

Since Food Matters Manitoba's report was published three years ago, the need for mental health resources in Cross Lake has become strikingly clear. On March 9, 2016, Cross Lake First Nation declared a state of emergency after six suicides in two months and 140 attempts in only the two weeks before the state of emergency was called (Puxley, 2016). The community has been attempting to use every resource that it has available, but it does not have enough resources to adequately respond to this increasing problem. It has become abundantly clear that not enough has been done in Cross Lake to improve the quality of life of its residents, in spite of positive partnerships, such as the NHFI. The problem is tied up with the deep systemic failures of the government to provide the necessary resources for the well-being of the community.

In order to address the suicide epidemic in Cross Lake it is necessary to consider the causes of the problem, including poverty, inadequate housing, and food insecurity, which are in turn influenced by the economic, social, and environmental changes to the Cross Lake area. This problem is endemic to First Nations communities across Canada. It is clear that physical and mental health are strongly connected to social causes. The World Health Organization (2004) states that "The social conditions in which people live powerfully influence their chances to be healthy. Indeed, factors such as poverty, food insecurity, social exclusion and discrimination, poor housing, unhealthy early childhood conditions and low occupational status are important determinants of most of disease, death and health inequalities between and within countries." Access to food specifically has a demonstrable effect on the mental health of children and adults. Chronic food insecurity "leaves [a permanent] mark on children's physical and mental health, manifesting in greater likelihood of such conditions as depression and asthma in adolescence and early adulthood. Adults in food-insecure households have poorer physical and mental health" (Tarasuk, et al., 2014). While poor nutrition leads to many health problems, engaging in traditional food activities can increase self-esteem, self-worth, and awareness of cultural traditions and their importance (Food Matters Manitoba, 2014).

The work that has been done in Cross Lake by Food Matters Manitoba and other organizations through NHFI is an important and necessary step to address mental health and its related inequalities in the community. However, it is not sufficient to solve the problem completely. In order to solve the problem of poverty and social exclusion in northern communities, a comprehensive plan needs to be developed that involves cooperation between the federal government, the provincial government, NGOs, and local communities.

According to Stefan Epp-Koop, the program director for Food Matters Manitoba (2016), there are many food security organizations in Manitoba, but the only major programs in northern Manitoba come through NHFI. Manitoba is often left out of federal food security programs. It is difficult to develop a comprehensive poverty plan for northern Manitoba First Nations without the involvement of the federal government because the federal government has jurisdiction over poverty-related matters on First Nation reserves, and the provincial government has jurisdiction on off-reserve policies. Therefore, cooperation between all levels

of government, NGOs, and community groups is necessary to develop a comprehensive plan to address poverty and food insecurity in northern Manitoba.

### **What can be learned from Cross Lake?**

The case study of Cross Lake demonstrates the need for a food sovereignty model that covers a variety of policies to reduce the negative social impacts of food insecurity and poverty. There is no single policy solution that will address the problem completely in the long term; a comprehensive solution is necessary. The solution will be a mix of policies including food subsidies, local food production programs, food literacy programs, affordable transportation, laws that are conducive to cultures of sharing, housing subsidies, and employment insurance improvements. Connections need to be made between many different policy areas in order to create a resilient community that can withstand external stresses. Shirley Thompson's food sovereignty and sustainable livelihood model shows that the Canadian government's colonial social and environmental policies, such as the residential schools and hydroelectric dams, have created significant vulnerabilities in northern communities. Community economic development (CED) can be an effective way to address the existing vulnerabilities and to create a more resilient economy. Food-related CED practices can be useful to address local food security, and they should be part of a larger CED program to address the regional underdevelopment of northern Manitoba. This includes improving cultural pride through traditional food practices, improving road access, and also addressing structural failures like the environmental damages caused by hydroelectric dams (Thompson et al., 2011).



*Tipis are the traditional homes of indigenous peoples of the North American Plains. Now they are primarily used only for ceremonial purposes.*

While many different policy options are necessary to adequately address food insecurity and poverty in northern Manitoba, any solution that is implemented needs to come from the community itself. If programs are simply implemented in a community that have been developed elsewhere without engaging the community to identify its real needs and potential solutions, they will not gain traction. One of NHFI's objectives is for its projects to "demonstrate clear community benefits and take into account the need for individuals to gain greater knowledge and control of the local food system" (Manitoba Aboriginal and Northern Affairs, 2012).

It is important to recognize that culture is a central factor for the creation of a contextual solution. Individual and community experiences are tied up with the culture in which they are located. Well-being and happiness are influenced by forms of living that are part of a community's narrative and identity. In the case of Cross Lake, this is manifested in the role of traditional food practices. For a culture that has been largely removed from its traditional practices due to assimilation and changes to its environment, a respect for traditional food skills is an important feature for community solutions to social problems.

In order to create local solutions that will produce long-term benefits, initiatives need to be community-driven. If a project does not have the strong support of local individuals who are willing to lead change, long-term solutions will fail. In the case of Cross Lake, community-driven solutions can help empower community members to become engaged in ways to increase food security.

The experience so far in Cross Lake indicates that just and sustainable systems of food production and other kinds of development need to (1) be comprehensive in nature and include a variety of policy options; (2) operate through a process of community participation that allows individuals within the community to voice their needs; (3) involve an understanding of local traditional practices and culture; and (4) foster community-driven initiatives that are locally led. Barriers to positive change are always present, but need to be addressed contextually with solutions that will work in the long-term. Because there is rarely a single easy solution to any given social problem, a comprehensive and realistic array of ideas is necessary to create lasting and complete change. A community-based approach also provides opportunities for northern communities to make connections with each other and create geographic partnerships that empower local residents to improve their own conditions.

However, from the case study of Food Matters Manitoba's work in Cross Lake, it is clear that it is action that is needed, not just systematic analysis.

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