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Thinking inside and outside the box: local and national considerations of the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR)

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ABSTRACT

The Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) provides a monthly box of U.S. Department of Agriculture foods to low-income, rural Native Americans and is a vital component of food security for recipient households. While the origin of government food annuities dates back hundreds of years to treaties between tribes, pueblos, and nations and the United States Government, FDPIR in its current form and function is 40 years old. The FDPIR food package has faced increasing scrutiny in recent years over the quality, nutritional value, and cultural appropriateness of foods included. Using data collected from three Tribes in the Klamath River Basin as well as national institutions that govern FDPIR, we investigate opportunities and challenges of FDPIR to achieve food security for its clientele, and the extent to which integration of traditional foods can enhance Native American food security, food sovereignty and wellbeing. We conclude with a set of policy recommendations on how to improve Native American food security and food sovereignty outcomes for FDPIR clients.

1. Introduction

> "All tribes suffered a loss of their healthy, traditional foods when the white man and the army placed us on these reservations, and the United States War Department took over and we were forced to sign treaties giving up our prime hunting grounds. They promised to feed us, provide health care and other services, and educate us, and you know what happened with that. They broke those treaties immediately by the fact that when they gave out the rations they introduced us to food that we did not traditionally eat. We were hunters; our tribe was hunters, and of course other tribes were fishers, gatherers, or growers" (Charles "Red" Gates, Interview, 10/7/2016).

This quote by Charles "Red" Gates, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Food Distribution Program Manager and member of the national advisory committee to the U.S. Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), succinctly describes the immense cultural and nutritional upheaval experienced by Native Americans[1] during colonization of their territories by the United States government. Over the course of five centuries, Native Americans across what is now the United States suffered great losses under state-sanctioned genocide, disease brought by settlers, forced removal from their lands and systematic cultural assimilation (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). As the United States government continued its expansion westward, a plethora of laws and policies were developed that severely curtailed access to and consumption of traditional foods including restrictions on hunting, fishing and gathering rights (Charlton, 2015; Leonard, 2014).

Still today about 68% of Native Americans continue to live on or near their tribal ancestral territories and 54% of Native Americans live in rural areas (First Nations Development Institute, 2017). Native American rurality is experienced through sustained connection to their ancestral homelands which anchor family and community, traditional foods,[2] traditional knowledge, and Native culture (Ulrich-Schad, 2013). However, the federal processes of control of tribal territories and diminishment of Native American food systems have challenged Native peoples' subsistence in rural areas, prompting government food assistance for low-income Native Americans who can no longer access sustaining volumes of traditional foods from tribal lands – even for those landless tribes whose territory was appropriated without a validating

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[1] In this paper, the term Native American refers to people Indigenous to the United States, including Alaska Natives. We recognize that there are many other terms (e.g. American Indian, Indigenous Peoples, First Peoples) that can be used synonymously to identify Native peoples and acknowledge the role of self-determination in describing Native identity and cultural heritage in a respectful and accurate manner.

[2] The term traditional foods is used throughout this paper to refer to native plants and terrestrial and aquatic animals that Native Americans have consumed for thousands of years. These foods are specific to geography and culture and vary by Tribe (Gurney et al., 2015).

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congressionally ratified treaty. Today the United States government offers food assistance to rural Native communities in the form of tribal commodities or "commods", a monthly food package officially known as Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations[3] that serves over 85% of residents on some Indian reservations (Jernigan et al., 2012). FDPIR is focused on Native Americans residing in rural (and often remote) areas, living considerably further from grocery stores than other people in the United States (Kaufman et al., 2014), and who have limited and varying rights to hunt, fish, and gather traditional foods and manage tribal lands (Charlton, 2015; Leonard, 2014).

Recent efforts by Native American members of the FDPIR advisory board have been advocating for better quality foods and integration of traditional foods into the FDPIR food packages to achieve greater food security for tribal members. We suggest these actions align with a growing Native American food sovereignty movement in the United States, which aims to build on Native American community assets to regain sovereignty over their traditional foods and food systems more broadly (Grey and Patel, 2015). In this paper, we examine the underpinnings of the FDPIR food system and the evolution of foods offered through the program to consider the extent to which FDPIR supports Native American food security[4] and how it might enable Native American food sovereignty.[5] We ground our analysis with data from 1) a case study involving household surveys, focus groups and 1:1 interviews among the Karuk, Yurok and Klamath Tribes in the Klamath River Basin between California and Oregon in the western United States and 2) interviews with people engaged in FDPIR policy and programming at the national and local levels. Together, these data illuminate the challenges, benefits, limitations, and opportunities of the FDPIR program at multiple scales in meeting food security and food sovereignty among Native Americans and in particular California Native Americans.

As we enter into an analysis of the impact of FDPIR on Native American food security and food sovereignty, we acknowledge that true food sovereignty involving the return of lands and rights to govern them to Native people warrants a separate discussion. But given the current FDPIR system, albeit a legacy of colonialism itself, we ask what might the contents of a commodity food box look like if it encapsulated the values and goals of Native American food sovereignty movements? We suggest that integrating healthier and culturally relevant foods into the "commods box" is important but insufficient. Rather, our findings suggest that where, how, and by whom the foods are produced and procured should be considered. Namely, we argue that a more "food sovereign" box would prioritize traditional and local foods that are grown, gathered, and processed according to cultural values and norms and sourced from local businesses or programs owned and operated by Native American individuals, communities or governments.

1.1. History of FDPIR

Precursors of FDPIR have existed in Native American communities for over 200 years, dating back to the earliest days of settler colonialism (1778–1871) (Byker Shanks et al., 2016; Finegold et al., 2009). FDPIR in its current form was developed 40 years ago as an alternative to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in order to reduce rural Native American hunger and food insecurity. However, after providing surplus commodity foods such as canned meats, juices, pasta, processed cheese and flour to Native households, within a generation, the previously identified challenges of malnutrition were replaced with the problems of obesity and diet related chronic disease. Today, Native people familiar with the program have coined the term "commod-bods" to describe the physical consequences of this nutritional transition (Vantrease, 2013). Regardless of recent programmatic efforts to reduce sodium and sugar, and increase whole grains (Hearing to review the Food Distribution Program, 2010), FDPIR food packages continue to fall short of nutritional standards set in 2010 for Dietary Guidelines of Americans (Byker Shanks et al., 2016; USDA and HHS, 2010).

1.2. FDPIR: services and function

FDPIR serves low-income households (all people regardless of tribal membership) in rural areas living on Indian reservations (see First Nations Development Institute, 2017) and low-income households, with at least one person who is a member of a federally recognized tribe, living in an approved area near a reservation or in Oklahoma (USDA, 2015a; USDA, 2016a). In fiscal year (FY) 2016 FDPIR served 93,038 people nationwide on $122.2 million budget (USDA, 2017a, 2017b). The program spends approximately $57 per participant per month on food or about $1.90 per day (FNS, 2016).

Initially, FDPIR provided only surplus U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) commodities to recipients, following the pattern of the previous government mandated ration programs for Native people. In 1977, the first FDPIR food packages included 60 different foods from four basic food groups (meat, vegetable/fruit, dairy, and grain) (USGAO, 1989). It was not until the early 1980s, when nutrition was raised as a national concern, that the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) began to consider the nutritional value of foods offered (USGAO, 1989). Today, FDPIR packages consist of USDA foods purchased specifically for the program and aim to meet the nutritional standards recommended by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (Hearing to review Food Distribution, 2010; USGAO, 1989; USDA and HHS, 2010).

USDA foods are procured by the American Marketing Service (AMS) through competitive bids by USDA approved vendors and distributed via two warehouses in Idaho and Missouri. While the USDA purchases and ships FDPIR foods, it is the responsibility of 102 Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) and three state agencies (serving 276 tribes, pueblos, or nations) to order, store and distribute the food, to determine applicant eligibility, and to provide nutrition related education to FDPIR clients (Hearing to review the Food Distribution Program, 2010; USDA, 2015b). Monthly food boxes are meant to be supplementary to other foods purchased by the recipients, yet many households are completely or very strongly reliant on monthly food boxes from FDPIR for household food security (Hearing to review the Food Distribution Program, 2010; Pindus et al., 2016). For example, a recent national study (Pindus et al., 2016) found that food provided by FDPIR was the sole or primary source of food for 38 percent of households and about 45 percent of households relied on FDPIR food for 41–60 percent of the household's food supply.

1.3. Traditional foods and FDPIR

Native American leaders have been advocating for the inclusion of traditional foods in the package to tailor FDPIR towards the needs and preferences of Native recipients (Hearing to review the Food Distribution Program, 2010). For the first time in 2008, the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act (P.L. 110–246, the 2008 Farm Bill) included a provision which authorized the establishment of a fund to

[3] While FDPIR is the official name of the program many FDPIR clients and Native Americans that grew up around the program refer to it as "commodities" or "commods." Throughout our household survey and focus groups this program was referred to as tribal commodities as this is the most identifiable terminology for users. Thus, much of the discussion around this program by study participants also uses the aforementioned terms. In order to maintain authenticity of our data the terms "commods" and "commodities" are used throughout our results section to refer to FDPIR and the food it provides to clients.

[4] We use the FAO definition of food security to mean: food availability (are there sufficient quantities of quality food in FDPIR food packages?), food access (are FDPIR foods accessible to users?), utilization (are the USDA foods included nutritious and culturally appropriate?), and stability (are the expectations of FDPIR food access and availability met at all times?) (FAO, 2006).

[5] We are guided by the definition of food sovereignty in the Declaration of Nyéléni (2007) which states: "food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems" (p. 1) See Raster and Hill (2017) for application of Native American food sovereignty in practice.