



## Short communication

## Food policy in the Canadian North: Is there a role for country food markets?

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## ABSTRACT

Food insecurity is widely reported to be at a crisis level in the Inuit territory of Nunavut, Canada. Various policies, programs, and initiatives have been proposed to tackle the problem, with increasing interest in developing a system of country food markets (CFMs) similar to Greenland. We examine if CFMs offer a feasible, sustainable, and effective model for strengthening food systems in Nunavut, examining the model of Greenland and drawing on semi-structured interviews with key informants ( $n = 45$ ). The Greenland experience indicates that CFMs can provide access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food on a regular basis, and can diversify locally available foods. These benefits are transferable to Nunavut, although knowledge gaps, regulatory and institutional conditions, and concerns over how CFMs might affect the cultural basis of food systems, underlies apprehension over their development in the territory. We conclude that Nunavut is not currently in the position to develop CFMs, but the role of such markets in potentially strengthening food systems should not be discounted. Future development would need to solicit community input on CFMs, resolve regulatory issues around wildlife management and harvesting, and study how future risks would affect sustainability and effectiveness.

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## 1. Introduction

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 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” (FAO, 2015). To be food secure then, individuals and households must be able to reliably access food, the availability of nutritious food must be sufficient, and it must be of an acceptable quality (Ford, 2009; Gregory et al., 2005). Food insecurity occurs when food is not accessible, available, and/or of sufficient quality, and is a major challenge in the Canadian Arctic, particularly for Inuit communities (Council of Canadian Academies, 2014; Loring and Gerlach, 2015). The Inuit Health Survey (2007–2008), for example, reported that 69% of Inuit households were food insecure in the territory of Nunavut (Egeland et al., 2011a, 2010). Similarly, decision makers, Inuit organizations, and qualitative

studies have documented significant challenges around food insecurity, with wide-ranging health and societal implications (Council of Canadian Academies, 2014).

In Nunavut, where food insecurity has been identified to be at a crisis level, various policy initiatives have been launched (Wakegijig et al., 2013). Between 2009 and 2010, for example, the Government of Nunavut (GN) developed a territorial poverty reduction plan, emphasizing the need to take action on food insecurity and creating the Nunavut Food Security Coalition. The Coalition seeks to make adequate supply of safe, culturally preferable, affordable, and nutritious food widely accessible, and released the Nunavut Food Security Strategy (NFSS) in 2014. A key focus of the NFSS is on finding ways to improve the accessibility, availability, and quality of ‘country foods’; locally harvested wildlife species which form a central component of the food system in Nunavut by which food is produced, processed, distributed, prepared, and consumed (Council of Canadian Academies, 2014). The consumption of country foods—the most common including ringed seal, caribou, arctic char, and beluga—has been linked to higher rates of food security, and enhanced physical and mental well-being, but is being compromised by social, economic, cultural, and environmental

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changes in many regions (Council of Canadian Academies, 2014; Egeland et al., 2011b; Loring and Gerlach, 2015). The NFSS also focuses on store bought foods, which in Nunavut are expensive, tend to be of poor nutritional quality (high sugar, carbohydrates, salt and fat contents), and are often described as lacking variety, accessibility and freshness, with inconsistent and unreliable availability (Mead et al., 2010; Sheehy et al., 2015). The main policy initiative of the Canadian federal government meanwhile, has been to provide a retail subsidy to make nutritious and perishable foods more available and affordable in northern stores through the Nutrition North Canada program (Galloway, 2014).

A key component of the NFSS is to examine whether the development of country food markets (CFMs) within communities offers a means of reducing food insecurity (objective 1.4; for other components of the NFSS see [supplementary materials](#)). This recommendation, in part, stems from Greenland, where country foods have long been commercially exchanged and documented rates of food insecurity are low (Goldhar et al., 2010). Given the similarities between Greenland and Nunavut—both are Inuit regions and have food systems in which country foods play an important role (see [supplementary materials](#))—it has been argued that the Greenlandic experience offers transferable lessons for food policy (Council of Canadian Academies, 2014; Goldhar et al., 2010; NFSC, 2013). Despite interest in the development of CFMs in Nunavut, to our knowledge no studies have assessed what implications commercialization might have for food systems, or evaluated whether the Greenlandic model is transferable. In this paper we ask: do CFMs offer a feasible, sustainable, and effective model for improving the access, availability, and quality of country food in Nunavut? The work informs future priorities for the NFSS, and holds insights for other Inuit regions in Canada considering similar approaches to food policy.

## 2. Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 45 key informants: 6 in Denmark, 18 in Greenland, 20 in Nunavut, and 1 in southern Canada. Interviews in Denmark were mostly conducted with researchers, and reflect the fact that Greenland is an autonomous Danish dependent territory, with many researchers who work in Greenland based in Denmark. A fixed list of questions was avoided, with an interview guide used identifying key themes to cover in interviews. Interview questions sought to examine: i) the *feasibility* of developing CFMs in Nunavut, concerned with the extent to which the territory is capable of implementing a system similar to Greenland's based on existing institutional and management structures, regulatory regimes, resource availability, and public support; ii) the *sustainability* of developing CFMs in Nunavut, which captures the extent to which their development would not place unsustainable pressures on harvested wildlife populations and their ability to provide country foods on a regular basis; and iii), the potential *effectiveness* of CFMs in Nunavut for enhancing food access, availability, and quality. In Denmark and Greenland, interviews sought to document perspectives on feasibility, sustainability and effectiveness of CFMs based on their actual operation, while in Nunavut and southern Canada interviews were hypothetical, structured around the potential development of CFMs in the territory.

We interviewed a diversity of stakeholders in both regions, including high-level decision makers across levels of government (local, regional, national); representatives and leaders of Inuit, civil society, and harvester organizations; university researchers and northern-based scientists; and those employed in the northern food business. The majority of interviews ( $n = 39$ ) were conducted in-person and often at their workplace, the remainder by phone

( $n = 6$ ). In Denmark all in-person interviews were conducted in Copenhagen, in Greenland in Nuuk, in Nunavut in Iqaluit, and in southern Canada in Montreal. While all participants were offered the option of having a translator to conduct interviews in their preferred language, all chose to conduct the interviews in English. Interviews lasted on average one hour. For the majority of the interviews in Denmark and Greenland, two interviewers were present. In Canada, most of the interviews were conducted with one interviewer. Interviews were not audio recorded; rather, very detailed notes were taken by hand during each interview and reviewed immediately following the interview to add in any further detail. In cases where there were two interviewers taking notes, interview notes were compared and combined to ensure that no information was lost. All notes were transcribed following the interview. It is noteworthy that the insights of community members were not solicited in this project, an important gap for future research (see [discussion](#)).

A snowball sampling strategy was used to identify interviewees, whereby existing contacts and collaborators were used to identify relevant individuals to interview, who then suggested others, until saturation was reached. This selection process builds upon the considerable engagement of the project team in northern food policy, as both decision makers and researchers. The work was conducted under REB Certificate 204–1114 from McGill University; given the work was funded by the Government of Nunavut (GN) and was undertaken in-part by GN employees, a Nunavut Research License was not required. Interviews were complemented with a scoping review of the literature on the history of country food commercialization in the two regions (see [supplementary materials](#)).

A total of 132 pages of interview notes were initially analysed by one analyst (58 pages from Denmark and Greenland and 74 pages from Canada), using a constant comparative method where themes between and within interviews were extracted and then compared (Boeije, 2002; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This first involved reviewing all interview notes in which reflective memos made, focussing specifically on documenting perspectives on the feasibility, sustainability and effectiveness of CFMs. Following this, reflective memos were combined into one document of 42 pages that identified major themes and supporting data under each. Following this, a second review of this 42 page document was done to expand and detail lists of descriptive concepts and build concept maps, which were then reviewed among the team, including members of the Nunavut Food Security Coalition who are included as co-authors. The key themes provide the basis for the results presented here, with quotes from interviews incorporated to highlight key points in the interviews own words (and as recorded in interview notes).

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Country food commercialization in Greenland and Nunavut

The sale of country foods has a long history in Greenland, and is tightly regulated. Every hunter and fisherman requires a general hunting license and have to report their annual catch (Sowa, 2015) (see [supplementary materials](#)). There are approximately 2500 'professional hunters' who can sell their catch to processing plants, local institutions, private households, and CFMs (locally known as *kalaalimineerniarfik*). As one government representative from the Ministry of Fishing, Hunting, and Agriculture in Nuuk explained, "The natural economy is [the] income [of professional hunters]." In comparison, there are about 8000 'leisure hunters' who hunt for themselves and family, and can only sell their harvest in some small communities. Professional hunters have access to more species and

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