



Overviews

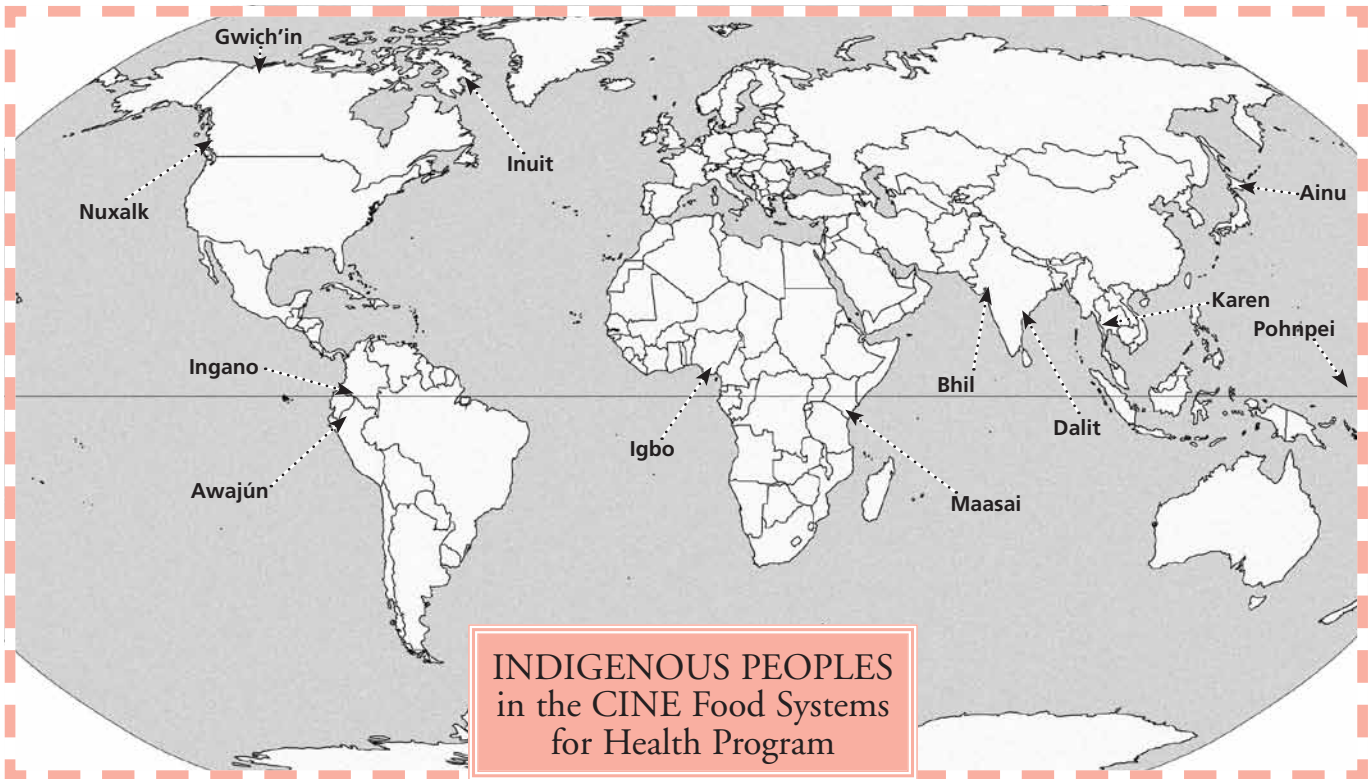




Chapter 1

Why do Indigenous Peoples' food and nutrition interventions for health promotion and policy need special consideration?

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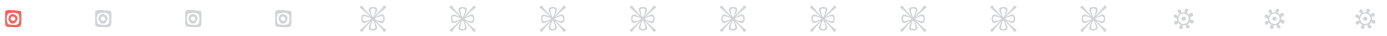


INDIGENOUS PEOPLES
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“Traditional food system work is a reality check; it helps to not forget where you come from and who you are. It makes sense to us.”

Earl Nowgesic, indigenous health leader, Canada

Abstract

This book is about Indigenous Peoples' food systems and how important local knowledge about foods and the ecosystems that provide them can be used to improve health and well-being. The authors describe processes and activities in nine cultures of Indigenous Peoples, where interventions were developed and implemented with local knowledge, and explain how this information can benefit Indigenous Peoples everywhere, and all of humankind.

Food and nutrition insecurity and the burden of high incidence of non-communicable diseases reach all corners of the globe. This “nutrition transition” is driven by changing lifestyles, loss of livelihoods for all those engaged in food production, increasing poverty and urbanization, and sedentary lifestyles with changing dietary patterns. The result is increasing global obesity and non-communicable diseases, including malnutrition in all its forms. The situation is especially critical for Indigenous Peoples, who often experience the most severe financial poverty and health disparities in both developing and developed countries, particularly where they depend on ecosystems under stress to support their needs for food and well-being.

The programme of work that concludes with preparation of this book was developed from the view that Indigenous Peoples with cultural homelands in the most rural areas of developing regions experience common challenges in relation to their traditional food systems, food security and health. The authors' view is that Indigenous Peoples' existing resources and knowledge about their cultures and ecosystems can be used to develop and implement effective health promotion activities.

The programme process and progression

The chapters in this book describe the adventures and findings of more than 40 interdisciplinary collaborators who have researched Indigenous Peoples' food systems and health promotion interventions. It is the third publication from the Indigenous Peoples' Food Systems for Health Program originating from the Centre for Indigenous Peoples' Nutrition and Environment (CINE) and the Task Force on Indigenous Peoples' Food Systems and Nutrition of the International Union of Nutritional Sciences (IUNS). This excellent team of scholars and community leaders has conducted research with communities of Indigenous Peoples for about ten years, creating methodologies, food systems documentation, and unique interventions to improve health by using aspects of local food systems.

In this book, the findings are considered from several interdisciplinary roots by experts in nutrition, epidemiology, anthropology, human rights, nursing and ethnobotany, in partnership with leaders of indigenous communities. Nine unique food system interventions conducted in widely diverse cultures and ecosystems are presented, with overview chapters on the circumstances and challenges rural-dwelling Indigenous Peoples face in health, environment, child nutrition and human rights, and how intervention practices and policies can be developed. The book is

written for readers from a variety of backgrounds, to share this diversity of perspectives from the unique case studies. As much as possible, the writing style and community perspective on intervention activities have been maintained, to enrich the chapters.

Work on traditional food systems is important for Indigenous Peoples. It provides a reality check and assurance that outsiders with diverse expertise value local foods and practices in the social contexts where Indigenous Peoples experience them. It helps people to realize the importance of maintaining their connections with nature and their own cultures, and between heart and mind, to reaffirm identity. Where people identify themselves with their culture and natural environment, knowledge and use of traditional food systems to improve health builds community support and engagement for holistic health and well-being. This affects the many aspects of physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health – for adults, children and elders, individually and in community and cultural collectives – in recognizing continuity from the past, into the present and towards the future.

The stories of the nine interventions presented here show how much the indigenous world has to offer through insights into the mysteries of successful food and nutrition promotion programmes everywhere. They demonstrate how special consideration to building cultural pride, cross-sectoral planning, enthusiastic and energetic advocates, and community goodwill can challenge the obstacles and barriers to knowledge transmission for action, through healthy behaviours for individuals and the community. Special focus has been on children and youth, and on finding ways to make local traditions relevant and useful to them. In fact, all the indigenous communities and leaders represented here recognized the programme's importance for the health of their children today and into the future – hence, the selection of a photo of an indigenous child and his traditional meal for the book's cover.

The journey began in Salaya, Thailand, to create the methodology for documenting the food systems of indigenous cultures. This methodology is now electronically available.¹ After identifying community and academic partners for the case studies, the authors

proceeded to the documentation of 12 international case studies (Map on p. 4). This resource is available through the United Nations bookstore, and also online.² An extensive network of collaborators developed and exchanged information in annual meetings over several years to build the knowledge base resulting in this book.

All the participants remember the beautiful rainbow they saw over Lake Como, Italy during their first meeting in the conference room of The Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center. At that meeting, they recognized the commitment and strength of their collaboration, and how their aspirations, if realized, would benefit Indigenous Peoples everywhere. Participants remember Dr Suttalak Smitasiri's words that their "pot of gold" is the grounding of their nutrition work in the unique cultures in which they work. Several years and much hard work have passed, and the results of that labour are reported in this book, Book 3 in the series. Readers are invited to refer to the acknowledgements section, where the authors thank their teams of collaborators and many supporters.

Context of the interventions

Ways of identifying Indigenous Peoples have been described at length by United Nations agencies³ and in earlier publications.⁴ Throughout the world, there are more than 370 million Indigenous Peoples, speaking more than 4 000 languages and located in more than 90 countries. Those living in their rural homelands depend on traditional food systems rooted in historical continuity in their regions, where food is harvested with traditional knowledge from the natural environment, and prepared and served in local cultural settings. Foods purchased from markets, often through globalized industrial outlets, are also part of Indigenous Peoples' food systems today, and are among the considerations required for interventions to promote healthy diets in communities.

¹ www.mcgill.ca/cine/research/global/

² www.fao.org/docrep/012/i0370e/i0370e00.htm

³ www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/sowip_web.pdf

⁴ www.fao.org/docrep/012/i0370e/i0370e00.htm



Recognition of the vast food biodiversity in indigenous knowledge, and research to identify the composition of nutrients and other properties of this food are at the centre of the knowledge needed to build good nutrition promotion programmes for community members of all ages. This combination of traditional indigenous knowledge with “Western” scientific documentation was welcomed in the case study interventions. Information exchange is at the heart of this work. The reader will find many examples of successful knowledge sharing within communities, which stimulated good dietary patterns and provided the impetus for important evaluations based on food use and dietary quality.

All the programme’s research throughout the last ten years has been greatly enhanced by state-of-the-art participatory processes, with indigenous community and academic colleagues collaborating equally in the decision-making for project activities. Each of the intervention chapters demonstrates how health promotion has been conducted successfully. The chapters present nine very different stories regarding types of intervention, local resources used and evaluation methods. Attention was always given to the right social settings, and to using social capital combined with capacity building. Logistical constraints and the limited availability of funds necessitated work with small population groups, where meaningful control groups do not exist. Intervention effectiveness was usually evaluated through before-and-after measurements and qualitative techniques, and involved active community participation and support. The interventions directed at improving food provisioning were most successfully evaluated through food and dietary measurements, often with qualitative techniques. The reader is directed to the interventions described in Chapters 5 to 13, and to the overview of interventions in Chapter 14.

The aim of this programme has been to build the scientific credibility of local food systems, to use this information to improve the health of the people directly involved, and to share success stories to influence policies at the local, national and international levels. Chapter 16 discusses how policies can be influenced to benefit Indigenous Peoples’ use of their food systems,

particularly by increasing access to the range of biodiversity available. Several of the interventions increased their scope and dimension by scaling up activities to additional communities within the region and – in some cases – more broadly. For example, Chapter 12 notes the requests for and activities of the Pohnpei Go Local! project throughout the Pacific region. Such scaling up is surely the gold standard of a successful health promotion programme.

Common themes in interventions

The nine interventions capture themes that address the challenges Indigenous Peoples face in nutrition and health, access to their ecosystem food resources, and the social contexts in which food is prepared and consumed. The activities and local-level policy implications described are impressively case-specific and diverse. These interventions stress the necessity of working from the bottom up, using the indigenous community’s perspective of what works and how to proceed, with evaluations that are meaningful to the people directly involved. Successful and less successful engagements with government are also described, calling attention to the benefits that government interaction can provide.

Interventions to improve the health circumstances of Indigenous Peoples in rural, often remote, settings can be very different from those for a country’s general population. Activities must be in harmony with the local cultural and social settings, local personnel and local sources of food. There is financial poverty in the rural settings where these interventions were conducted, but communities prefer not to define their success in terms of money. Instead, they measure success through the benefits brought to local social, cultural and ecosystem contexts. For the Karen people in Thailand, for example, “food is a part of happiness” that cannot be measured with money. It is difficult to create behavioural changes to improve people’s obesity or stunting status, but being “short/small” or “big” is not as important as changing the conditions that cause these conditions, with full self-determination for the communities directly involved.

Throughout the book, the text shifts between past and present tenses. This is because most of the interventions are still ongoing, and evaluations were completed at a designated point after their initiation. Although this style is awkward, it also reflects how the state of the case studies changes with time. In the Nuxalk project (Chapter 11), for example, the intervention and initial evaluation were conducted several years ago, while the current chapter refers to a recent revisiting of the project.

Implications for policy

Indigenous Peoples attach profound importance and commitment to protecting their land and access to food resources and promoting the benefits of local food to enhance food and nutrition security. Policies protecting Indigenous Peoples' right to food are centred on access to traditional food system resources and giving Indigenous Peoples priority in their use. Chapters 15 and 16 elaborate on these principles.

Much can be learned from studying the food systems of Indigenous Peoples. To start with, nations must be encouraged to disaggregate population data by culture and geographic location, to explore the circumstances faced by Indigenous Peoples in their home areas. The Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO) has identified the disparities faced by Indigenous Peoples in the Americas,⁵ but other regions are not as diligent in uncovering such disparities for segments of their populations. Only when the extent of the problem is known can reasonable and meaningful action be taken

to promote equality in food and nutrition security and well-being.

Nutrition improvements and health promotion interventions with Indigenous Peoples can be successful when they give full attention to the social context, social support, social capital and local food resources and provisioning. The book offers the perspective that understanding how to use local foods to improve Indigenous Peoples' health benefits them directly, and also gives new insights for nutritional health promotion initiatives in general.

The authors hope that the evidence supplied from this programme and its publications will stimulate others to promote traditional food systems for Indigenous Peoples in their regions, and to contribute to mainstreaming food-based approaches with local resources. In addition to the three major publications from the programme, there are hundreds of peer-reviewed articles from team members, documentary videos⁶ and presentations given at local, national and international meetings. This issues a clear call for nutritionists and their colleagues in leadership roles in indigenous communities to experience the wide variety of unique foods and the social settings in which they are used, and to promote these important elements of local culture and ecosystems for their health benefits and their promise to provide sustainable solutions to food and nutrition security

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⁵ www.unscn.org/layout/modules/resources/files/scnnews37.pdf

⁶ www.indigenousnutrition.org