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Mobilizing Networks and Relationships Through Indigenous Food Sovereignty: The Indigenous Food Circle's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Northwestern Ontario

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This paper explores the Indigenous Food Circle's (IFC) response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Northwestern Ontario, Canada. Established in 2016, the IFC is an informal collaborative network of Indigenous-led and Indigenous-serving organizations that aims to support and develop the capacity of Indigenous Peoples to collaboratively address challenges and opportunities facing food systems and to ensure that food-related programming and policy meets the needs of the all communities. Its primary goals are to reduce Indigenous food insecurity, increase food self-determination, and establish meaningful relationships with the settler population through food. This community case study introduces the IFC and shares the strategies and initiatives that were used during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 to address immediate needs and maintain a broader focus on Indigenous food sovereignty. The food related impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Indigenous People and determining solutions cannot be understood in isolation from settler colonialism and the capitalist food system. Reflecting on the scholarly literature and the experiential learnings that emerged from these efforts, we argue that meaningful and impacting initiatives that aim to address Indigenous food insecurity during an emergency situation must be rooted in a decolonizing framework that centers meaningful relationships and Indigenous leadership.

Keywords: COVID-19, food security, food sovereignty, Indigenous, northwestern ontario, pandemic

INTRODUCTION

The dominant food system is deeply embedded in a legacy of social and ecological injustice (Holt-Giménez, 2017). While profits and other benefits from these developments have been appropriated by the economic and political elite (Clapp and Isakson, 2018), capitalist logics have led to adverse effects for food systems including the lands and watersheds, producers and harvesters, and the many species (human and non-human) that depend on these

interconnected systems for survival. In Canada, this is especially evident for Indigenous Peoples[1] who have been violently removed from their traditional territories and foodways since the establishment of the colonial state (Manuel and Derrickson, 2015). Further, food has been used as a tool of genocide to engender the ongoing theft of land, culture and identity, and traditional knowledge (Daschuk, 2013; Rotz, 2017). While these realities have been in motion for well over 500 years, they have been exacerbated most recently by the COVID-19 pandemic that have severely impacted Indigenous communities that face high levels of economic, health, and social inequity (Levi and Robin, 2020; Power et al., 2020). Despite these challenges, Indigenous Peoples have continued to maintain their traditional food systems through struggles for justice and self-determination (Grey and Patel, 2015; Settee and Shukla, 2020).

In this paper, we describe the Indigenous Food Circle's (IFC) response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Northwestern Ontario. Established in 2016, the IFC is an informal collaborative network of Indigenous-led and Indigenous-serving organizations that aims to support and develop the capacity of Indigenous Peoples to collaboratively address challenges and opportunities facing food systems and to ensure that food-related programming and policy meets the needs of the diverse communities in the region (Levkoe et al., 2019). Its primary goals are to reduce Indigenous food insecurity, increase food self-determination, and establish meaningful relationships with the settler population through food. The ultimate vision of the IFC is to realize Indigenous food sovereignty, an ideal that builds on the right to healthy and culturally appropriate food and to ensure people have the power to determine and control their own food systems (Patel, 2009). Beyond a rights-based discourse and settler conceptions of policy and governance, Indigenous food sovereignty focuses on the sacred connections among land and water-based food systems and the revitalization of traditional ecological knowledge, culture, and self-determination (Morrison 2011; Coté, 2016; Whyte, 2017).

This paper introduces the IFC and shares the strategies and initiatives that were used during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 to address immediate needs and maintain a broader focus on Indigenous food sovereignty. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Indigenous People cannot be understood in isolation from the legacy of settler colonialism and the dominant capitalist food system. Reflecting on the scholarly literature and the experiential learnings that emerged from this work, we argue that meaningful and impacting initiatives that aim to address Indigenous food insecurity during an emergency situation must be rooted in a decolonizing framework that centers meaningful relationships and Indigenous leadership.

We write this account as three individuals engaged with food sovereignty struggles and the work of the IFC. Charles Levkoe is a settler scholar-activist involved in community-based action research embedded in social and environmental justice. He has supported the IFC since its establishment, serving as an administrative team member. Jessica McLaughlin is an Anishinaabe community-based practitioner from Long Lake 58 First Nation and the coordinator of the IFC. She helped to establish the IFC and has played a leadership role since its inception. Courtney Strutt is a settler community-based educator and program development practitioner who contributes to the IFC administrative team. The insights for this paper have emerged directly from our work with First Nations and Indigenous communities in Northwestern Ontario and engagement with IFC members, including Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AS VULNERABLIZED

According to Statistics Canada (2017), Ontario has the largest Indigenous population in Canada with almost 80% living in northern regions of the province. In the city of Thunder Bay, Northern Ontario's largest urban center, the majority of the population are of European and Scandinavian descent with about 13% made up of Indigenous People, the highest proportion of urban Indigenous People in Canada. A community-based research study conducted in 2020 coordinated by Anishnawbe Mushkiki suggested that Thunder Bay's Indigenous population is likely over three times higher than official data indicates (Smylie, 2021). The city is located on the northern shores of Lake Superior on the traditional land of the Anishinaabe people, today represented by Fort William First Nation, signatory to the Robinson Superior Treaty of 1850. The city is a regional center for healthcare, social services and commercial activity. In addition to more than 80 First Nation reserves in Northwestern Ontario, the region includes political representatives of the Anishinabek Nation, Grand Council Treaty #3, the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, the Metis Nation of Ontario and independent First Nations.

Statistics suggest that over 14% of Thunder Bay's population lack access to an adequate diet of sufficient quantity and quality[2], however, these numbers are likely underreported. Across Canada, research has demonstrated that the rate of food insecurity among Indigenous households is over 28%, compared to 11% for White populations (Tarasuk and Mitchell, 2020). Not only are imported foods more expensive and harder to access in the north, but food insecurity has been particularly devastating for Indigenous communities coping with lack of access to potable water and health care, and dealing with intergenerational trauma (Robidoux and Mason, 2017). Today, most Indigenous People are dependent on highly processed, low quality food provided by the dominant

[1]We recognize that the terms Indigenous, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples includes a diversity of cultures, languages, practices, institutions, and relationships with the land. In this paper, we use the term "Indigenous People" to acknowledge and differentiate between the peoples that are the original inhabitants and peoples who have colonized and/or settled those lands.

[2]This statistic was provided by the Thunder Bay District Health Unit based on the 2018 Foundational Standards/Epidemiology Report for Healthy Living Program.

food system and controlled by large corporations driven by the logic of profit maximization.

Food insecurity for Indigenous Peoples in Northwestern Ontario (and beyond) is directly linked to the historic and ongoing violence of settler colonialism. Settler colonialism is rooted in the dispossession of Indigenous land by settler populations (Tuck and Yang, 2012; Coulthard, 2015; Lowman and Barker, 2015). Premised on the imposed legal and political system and doctrine of discovery that institutionalized and legitimized White supremacy (Manuel, 2017), settler colonialism works towards the elimination of Indigenous Peoples through dehumanization and subjugation (Wolfe, 2006; Lowman and Barker, 2015). The settler colonial project is focused on removing Indigenous Peoples from their land in order to exploit resources, but also on eliminating Indigenous culture, identity, and opportunities for self-determination. This has been evident in Thunder Bay, where Indigenous People face ongoing racism and colonial violence (Haiven, 2019; Jago, 2020). Indigenous foodways are inherently bound to place, history, and contemporary socio-political relations and have been significantly impacted by settler colonialism (Daschuk, 2013; Martin and Amos, 2016).

When the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Northwestern Ontario in early 2020, it further complicated an already challenging situation for Indigenous Peoples. Around the world, pandemics have had devastating and disproportionate impacts on Indigenous People and the ability to practice and maintain their cultures and identities (Power et al., 2020). This reinforces the fact that Indigenous People in Canada (and globally) have been vulnerablilized; meaning that vulnerability does not exist outside of historical and social realities (Katz et al., 2020) and that people are not inherently vulnerable, but are made so by the institutions and systems of capitalism, settler-colonialism, and White supremacy. Despite being made vulnerable by unjust social structures in the face of crisis (and beyond), Indigenous peoples and communities should retain the power to choose the most appropriate response for their needs.

When the COVID-19 virus was first detected, there was very little information available, which led to heightened concern and fear along with challenges accessing food. In Northwestern Ontario, many food banks, and support organizations were forced to close their doors, limiting access to emergency food and related services. A number of First Nations responded to the pandemic by physically blockading entry to their reserves and restricting travel in an attempt to protect the health and safety of their communities. Most First Nations did not have the infrastructure or capacity to purchase, transport, and store large amounts of food. Those that could order in bulk struggled to find adequate transportation, especially if they were dependent on flights that had been restricted or canceled. When food was able to be delivered, there were many reports of long delays, incorrect orders, damaged packaging, and rotting produce. In recognition of the imminent crisis, the federal government along with a number of philanthropic organizations committed additional resources for Indigenous communities. While this support was welcomed, concerns were raised that the injection of funding would only deepen the ongoing dependence on the state and the charitable sector without addressing longer-term systemic issues (Levi and Robin, 2020; also see; Riches, 2018). Recognizing the importance of Indigenous-led responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, the IFC worked to address immediate needs in a respectful and culturally appropriate way while also continuing to forefront the longer-term visions of food sovereignty and self-determination as part of this work.

AN INDIGENOUS-LED RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The IFC is made up of Indigenous leaders in the Thunder Bay region, representing the social services, health, education, and community development sectors as well as tribal councils, Elders and Knowledge Keepers (for more details on the IFC's history and background see Levkoe et al., 2019). It also includes settler allies that constitute a direct support network contributing to front-line engagement and wrap-around supports, along with research, education, and other supportive functions. The IFC is coordinated by an administrative team and governed by an Advisory Circle that meets separately from the general membership gatherings. The IFC functions as an informal network to avoid unnecessary bureaucracy and to focus on supporting its members and their communities. One implication of this is that the IFC cannot formally hold funding which makes the network dependent on partnerships with member organizations that are able to hold monies on behalf of the collective. Since its inception, members have contributed to annual gatherings, working groups, and a number of projects developed to build on the diverse knowledge and skills within the network, address gaps in existing services, and advance Indigenous food sovereignty in the region. For example, since 2018, the IFC has collaborated with the Thunder Bay District Health Unit and the Sustainable Food Systems Lab at Lakehead University to coordinate the Understanding Our Food Systems project (see www.understandingourfoodsystems.com/). Working closely with fourteen First Nations, the team supported each community to develop their own Food Sovereignty Vision that articulated longer-term goals. The project also helped participants to develop and build food related infrastructure (e.g., a communal moose hang and culturally appropriate butcher shop, community and household food gardens, and collective kitchens coupled with food-related workshops), co-create a series of educational resources to share learnings (e.g., annual reports, Traditional harvesting, and food preparation videos), and develop education tools (e.g., an interactive Traditional food harvesting poster, community food assessments).

Building on existing relationships and the trust established within Indigenous communities and networks in the Thunder Bay region, the IFC was in a unique position to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The response focused on connecting with its membership and partners in First Nation communities to better understand the challenges people were facing, supporting existing programs to address immediate needs, connecting these efforts to networks and funding opportunities, all while

continuing to work towards the longer-term goal of food sovereignty. In the following subsections we briefly describe the key activities that the IFC supported.

Immediate Food Supports

When the pandemic was first declared, First Nations each developed a unique response in regard to transportation and food access with varying degrees of capacity. To help address immediate needs the IFC worked closely with its partners and mobilized its networks to bring much needed food supports to communities across Northwestern Ontario. This was initiated when the IFC began receiving messages from the communities requesting additional help to ensure there was enough high-quality food available. In response to these requests, the IFC provided support by connecting each community's pandemic response team to regional food suppliers and distributors in order to develop their own relationships for bulk food ordering. In regard to household food security, many communities identified the ability to provide non-perishable items, but the logistics around bulk ordering and delivering fresh food created challenges. From April to June, the IFC partnered with the Good Food Box[3] program to facilitate monthly household fresh food distribution to nine road accessible First Nations, providing a total of 3,265 households boxes. By the summer a number of communities no longer felt that this support was needed. Some communities however, continued the monthly Good Food Box program on their own. For example, Red Rock Indian Band continued to work with the IFC and the Good Food Box program to build internal capacity to run this program themselves. By early 2021, Red Rock was supporting 192 households to receive a regular monthly Good Food Box.

Northern Fruit and Vegetable Program Support

The Northern Fruit and Vegetable Program (NFVP) is a school-based program that aims to increase consumption of fruits and vegetables among elementary school students in Northern Ontario through the distribution of fresh food (Northwestern Health Unit, n.d.). Since 2006, the funding and coordination for the program have been offered through a partnership with the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-term Care, the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association, and the five district health units that serve Northern Ontario, including First Nation communities. When the pandemic was declared and schools were closed, the NFVP was forced to reassess how it would function. Recognizing an increasing need for direct food supports, the IFC worked with the Sudbury Social Planning Council, and other community partners to advocate for the NFVP to continue. The IFC also worked alongside the district health units to get food directly into the households of First Nation community members connected to the program.

To support the NFVP during the pandemic, the IFC used its longstanding relationships to help connect new eligible communities to the program. This was particularly important because many of the program coordinators found it difficult to reach schools in remote Indigenous communities, which meant that those schools were not receiving fresh foods offered by the NFVP. The IFC reached out to new schools and communities to inform them of the support and the opportunity to participate. Prior to the pandemic, 15 First Nations in Northwestern Ontario and 35 in Northeastern Ontario were participating in the NFVP. With the IFC's support, an additional nine communities in Northwestern Ontario and four in Northeastern Ontario were able to access the NFVP during the pandemic and into the following school year. The IFC also supported data collection for the NFVP to help track shipments across First Nation communities. The IFC has continued to work with First Nations to explore opportunities for communities to build their own partnerships, acquire their own funding, and administer these kinds of programs internally.

Advocacy With Remote Indigenous Communities

Beginning in late March, several remote communities across Treaty 9 territories that had a previous relationship with IFC coordinator Jessica McLaughlin, began reaching out to request additional food supports. Some communities requested support for bulk food orders while others, particularly those communities associated with industry projects, were flooded with food donations. While the needs and responses differed between communities, a common theme expressed was a need for support with ordering and coordinating food shipments, along with an additional challenge of the storage and distribution of food once it arrived in the community. For many First Nations, the infrastructure to store large quantities of food was insufficient and there was limited capacity to get food into peoples' homes.

Initially, the IFC's support for remote Indigenous communities was *ad hoc* because there was limited capacity to deal with the influx of requests. Through regional and national connections with broader Indigenous food sovereignty networks, McLaughlin participated in discussions with national level funders and advocated for financially supporting Indigenous communities in a respectful and meaningful way. With the work of directly supporting communities well underway through the IFC, there was a growing understanding of the needs and challenges on the ground as well as relationships that could be mobilized to ensure new financial supports could be distributed directly and equitably. McLaughlin advocated that money be spent not only on immediate food needs, but also on building infrastructure and processes that would support sustainable thinking and action around food system development at a local level beyond the immediate crisis.

Inspired by this approach to crisis related food response, Community Food Centers Canada (CFCC)[4] engaged in a

[3]The Good Food Box is a community-based non-profit organization that offers year-round affordable fresh produce and is administered through the Northwestern Ontario Women's Center in Thunder Bay (https://goodfoodboxtb.org/).

[4]Community Food Centers Canada is a national network that uses food to build health, belonging, and social justice in low-income communities (https://cfccanada.ca).

funding partnership with the IFC to provide direct community support through two pots of emergency food funding. The first pot was a crisis fund that was used to offer direct food supports to communities facing significant struggle (e.g., deaths in the community, forced evacuation); the second was a general pot of food related funding that was used to support remote First Nations, however they deemed most beneficial for their community. Drawing on the existing partnership with the Social Planning Council of Sudbury, the IFC held, coordinated, and distributed the funds to the remote First Nations. In addition to these funds for the communities, the IFC also secured resources to pay a team of coordinators over a six-month period.

Coordination of Funding With Remote Indigenous Communities

Coordination and distribution of the emergency food funding for remote communities was a multifaceted process. The work entailed offering wrap-around supports to facilitate spending the funds, networking with suppliers and other partners throughout the region, connecting communities with each other, and creating a space for critical dialogue with community representatives about food security. Through communication with IFC staff, community representatives were asked what was already being done in respect to emergency food response and what additional supports were needed. This was also a chance to inform each community about opportunities for funding and other supports they might be eligible for. By expanding direct relationships with communities, the IFC team was able to have critical conversations about food security that went beyond short-term measures of immediate food access and led to rich conversations about food sovereignty. Overall, 29 communities benefited from this funding and support, which included immediate food orders as well as three forms of food infrastructure support that varied in scope and scale from community to community.

The first form of support provided increased food storage infrastructure that allowed communities to safely store and distribute greater quantities of food, immediately and in the future. For example, in Kasabonika First Nation, the IFC supported the purchase and transport of an industrial three-pronged fridge and freezer, which breathed new life into an existing community cooking space. It has also led to plans for expanding the cooking space to support and enhance the community's fish purchasing and distribution system.

The second form of food infrastructure support was providing tools to help build self-sufficiency, sustainability thinking, and action around food system development at the community level. For example, Sandy Lake First Nation has been growing food for over 30 years with varying degrees of success. Through the IFC's support, Sandy Lake identified potatoes as a valuable place to start expanding food growing. The IFC supported the community with the purchase of a tractor, a potato harvester, a potato seeder, connection with seed suppliers, and the facilitation of soil testing to inform the community how to improve yields. Moving forward, the hope is to feed their own community as well as the five surrounding communities, contributing to food sovereignty in their region.

The third form of food infrastructure support identified was providing tools and equipment for community members exercising their rights to source Traditional foods through hunting, fishing, and harvesting. For example, in Slate Falls First Nation, the IFC helped to facilitate the purchase of fishing nets, lines and tools to offer equipment to interested community members for all-season fishing and harvesting. In Poplar Hill First Nation, the IFC helped to procure funding for a land-based hunting educational camp held in the fall.

Beyond listening to communities needs and supporting relevant purchases, coordination of the funding for remote communities included distributing the crisis fund. Between April and June, these funds supported twelve communities that identified greater needs. For example, following a devastating multiple suicide in one community, funds were used to supply food to families that were directly impacted. In another First Nation, the community faced multiple tragic losses due to a drowning and a house fire. The funds were able to support the affected families with two weeks' worth of food. Overall, the process of coordinating food funding for remote communities broadened and strengthened the relationships between the IFC with First Nations and contributed to building a better understanding of Indigenous food sovereignty in the region.

Assessment of Emergency Food Support Systems With Urban Indigenous Organizations

In the first few weeks of the pandemic, it became clear that Thunder Bay did not have the infrastructure in place to adequately coordinate emergency food supports. To fill this gap and address the emerging food needs facing vulnerablized populations, a series of *ad hoc* round tables came together to facilitate communication and resource sharing amongst social service organizations. The IFC was invited to participate in a number of these groups but there was a noted lack of Indigenous voices and organizational presence. In response, the IFC conducted an assessment of the experiences of urban Indigenous organizations with emergency food response during the early stages of the pandemic. The assessment aimed to understand the gaps, challenges, needs and opportunities with a specific focus on urban Indigenous Peoples. The IFC conducted informal interviews with representatives from urban Indigenous organizations operating in Thunder Bay to explore experiences of access to services, food support being offered, perspectives on the overall response, and oportunities to enhance collaboration.

This assessment provided a comprehensive picture of emergency food response by urban Indigenous organizations in Thunder Bay in the early months of the pandemic. Overall, participants reported observations of increased food insecurity that affected a wide range of the population, making short-term food access the predominant concern for many agencies. While many individual organizations felt that they were able to support most of those in need during the pandemic, the response at a community level was extremely fragmented. There remained a significantly underserved population with many people facing

accessibility barriers (e.g., transportation, communication). Further, the pressure on organizations to meet the basic needs of their clients while adapting to an evolving crisis situation was taking heavy a toll on staff and volunteers. While new public and private funding for emergency food provisioning was made available, some organizations struggled to access financial support primarily due to internal capacity issues and the burden of reporting requirements. On the whole, collaboration between the existing food access infrastructure and other community organizations remained limited.

The assessment of emergency food support systems for the urban Indigenous population revealed the need for a more integrated and effective approach during times of community-wide crisis in the City of Thunder Bay. Meetings with the participating organizations led to a decision to collaboratively develop a Community Emergency Food Response Plan (CEFRP) with the goal of building stronger relationships and networks across the community, streamlining communication, avoiding duplication, and utilizing resources more efficiently in the face of future crises. Beyond planning for emergencies, the IFC helped to maintain focus on the longer-term systemic changes needed to address food insecurity. In the summer of 2020, the Thunder Bay and Area Food Strategy[5] took on the role of coordinating the CEFRP development. This began with securing funding and establishing a multi-stakeholder advisory committee. The project launched in the fall, with a goal of having the draft plan ready to share with the broader community in 2021. The IFC continues to play a leadership role in this project, with three members of the administrative team sitting on the advisory committee for the project and many IFC members actively engaged in the process.

Advancing Indigenous Food Sovereignty

Beyond the practical work of supporting Indigenous communities and First Nations during the COVID-19 pandemic, the IFC maintained a focus on longer-term goals of food sovereignty and self-determination. While addressing immediate needs is imperative, food insecurity is a symptom of a much deeper problem. In other words, to end food insecurity, it is essential to focus on eliminating poverty, inequity, systemic racism, and settler colonialism. For the IFC, this meant continuing to center Indigenous voices, fostering leadership among IFC members, demanding accountability from those that hold power, building relationships, and expanding networks with other Indigenous Peoples and groups to share stories of struggle and resurgence. These immediate actions (e.g., feeding people, responding to crisis) and longer-term activities (e.g., food sovereignty and self-determination) are deeply interconnected. It is the grassroots level work and human-to-human relationships that inform the vision of what Indigenous food sovereignty actually means. It is through these relationships with people, communities, and organizations that the vision of a more equitable and sustainable food future begins to take shape.

[5]The Thunder Bay and Area Food Strategy is a network of over 50 organizations in the Thunder Bay region that aims to build a healthy, equitable, and sustainable food system (see http://tbfoodstrategy.com/).

There were numerous examples of the ways that responses to the COVID-19 pandemic led to broader engagements in Indigenous food sovereignty. For example, the IFC played an important role advocating for food sovereignty as part of a national Indigenous task force on funding (as described above). This group brought together high-level public and private funders, Indigenous food activists and practitioners, academics, and health workers with the goals of bridging different paradigms, better understanding what was happening within different regions, and agreeing on ways to support vulnerabilized Indigenous communities. A second example is the IFC's lead role in creating the Northwestern Ontario Indigenous Food Sovereignty Collaborative (NOIFSC). Formally established in July 2020, the NOIFSC is an Indigenous-led, grassroots organization working to support Indigenous food sovereignty across Northern Ontario through an innovative and collaborative approach to decolonizing philanthropy and funding. In winter 2021, the NOIFSC's first action was to launch the Sovereign Household Grant Program that provided financial support for activities and equipment to increase the capacity for food security at the household level. The NOIFSC also provides small grants to communities and organizations along with a suite of wrap-around supports that help solidify and reinforce the initiatives. It recognizes food sovereignty work and food system transformation efforts as vehicles for, and accelerators of Indigenous sovereignty and resurgence. The overall goal of the NOIFSC is to advance Indigenous food sovereignty in Northern Ontario and beyond.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating effects on communities across the globe. As we reflect on how to respond and rebuild, there is an opportunity to learn from the evidence and experiences that have illuminated the deep inequities underlying the pandemic's uneven impacts. For Indigenous Peoples in Northwestern Ontario, food insecurity and health were already at crisis levels, and COVID-19 made this even more visible. In this paper, we have argued that responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in a meaningful way entails addressing both short and long-term challenges. From a food systems perspective, it demands supporting the immediate needs of the people and communities that have been vulnerabilized and simultaneously transitioning away from the capitalist food system while building different kinds of food systems rooted in justice and sustainability (James et al., 2021). Moreover, to build Indigenous food sovereignty, this work should be led by Indigenous social movements, organizations and communities with the support of settler allies that can provide direct assistance and wrap-around supports (McMeeking at el., 2020; Power et al., 2020). In our discussion of the IFC's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we have highlighted the way that an Indigenous-led network was able to use food as a tool to mobilize communities and partners to provide emergency response and consider longer-term, underlying systemic issues. Even though the IFC was under-resourced and understaffed, its experiences highlight the importance of relationships built over time and being well positioned and ready to respond when needed.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work. While each author comes from a different training and background, their contributions are collaborative. All authors have approved the article for publication.

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