

Summary | Spring 2022



NFDN EVALUATING SUCCESS, PLANNING THE FUTURE



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Photo: from NFDN Air Creebec Tour 2018

Cover Credit: Ministry of Natural Resources, Far North Branch, 2014

THANK YOU

This research could not have been completed without the openness and sharing of people across Northern Ontario who shared their knowledge and time to support this research. Chi Miigwetch to all the leaders and participants of the Understanding Our Food System project, who have demonstrated new ways of forging plans towards food sovereignty, community building between Indigenous and settler people, and changing the way funding works to adapt to the needs of the people. Merci beaucoup to Professor Charles Levkoe for your substantial research contributions to Canada's academic world of food system development. Your research demonstrates the opportunities for change to a broader audience. And a final thank you to Jen Esposito Springett and Kelleigh Wright for your incredible work on value chain coordination, shaping the future of the work within the Northern Food Distribution Network (NFDN) and beyond.

DISCLOSURE

To be fully transparent, the researcher who undertook this report has a prior history with the Northern Food Distribution Network (NFDN), the Local Food and Farm Co-ops (LFFC), and the agri-food sector. Having previously been contracted by the LFFC, Peggy Baillie was an initial founding member of the NFDN and was later hired to be the first coordinator of the NFDN. Furthermore, Peggy is an agri-food producer engaged in producing and distributing primary foods for direct consumption. The researcher's experiences have influenced their ability to conduct this research successfully. Great care has been taken to ensure that pre-disposed judgments and assumptions be carefully examined and quantified before being included in the study with also objectively looking at the goals set out in this work from outside of prior assumptions to be open to new findings and outcomes.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Northern Food Distribution Network is a multi-sectoral unincorporated organization that has set out to accomplish the monumental task of improving efficiency, resilience, and accessibility of Northern Ontario food value chains. Through the work of numerous stakeholders and meetings, core objectives and strategies were identified to address the challenges within the food value chain to meet this goal. Over the last five years, steps have been taken to work on these challenges. Obstacles such as staff turnover and the COVID 19 pandemic limited the capacity of the network to advance objectives in 2020 and, to some degree, 2021.

Acknowledging that the network was challenged with a large mandate and faced structural obstacles, this research was undertaken to identify the most successful activities of the NFDN and propose actions for the next five years to advance the mission of the network to address food value chain challenges.

To gain conclusions on the successful activities and most impactful next steps, interviews with 25 food system leaders, distributors, and food producers were completed to collect valuable data on the impact of the NFDN, challenges they currently face in their work, and recommendations on how to address said challenges. Supplemental research was undertaken to substantiate the findings from the interviews, and recommendations were composed.

The food distribution system in Northern Ontario is complex. The vast geographic area, dispersed population, climatic considerations, and agricultural capacity play into a functioning but inefficient food system. While there are many food distribution mechanisms, each comes with its challenges. Factors such as the corporate global food economy, lack of food system infrastructure, oppression of Indigenous foodways, and minimal food production capacity contribute to people across Northern Ontario having limited access to the foods they self-determine to be valuable and essential for their sustainability.

Addressing these challenges cannot be done in isolation or by one organization. Bringing together the numerous food system actors and organizations to create a shared plan to classify the work, divide activities to appropriate people and organizations, and collectively learn from each other as the work advances - these are the goals that the NFDN has identified and acted upon to address this complex problem.

The interviews identified that the need for a network such as the NFDN is apparent, as the work needed to address the food value chain problems in Northern Ontario are complex and cannot be done in isolation. Furthermore, through the interviews, the unsolicited recommendation that the network engages in successful networking, education, research, and infrastructure development validated the previously constructed Logic Model. This demonstrated that the proposed activities of the NFDN continued to be relevant.

Building on the collective results of the research, a revised action plan and recommended next steps are outlined to advance the objectives of the NFDN. The proposed action plan builds on existing knowledge. It encourages the development of a sector-wide vision statement of the food system to be constructed and solicitation of new information on the gaps in the food value chain, which can drive future activities, partnership developments, and funding applications.



Air Creebec Plane @ 2018 NFDN facility tour

PROPOSED NFDN ACTION PLAN

Project	Objectives	Outcomes	Results
Pilot Project Oversight	To provide collective oversight of the pilot to assess the project's sustainability.	Participate in 1-3 pilot projects from a co-operative oversight and knowledge transfer	Assess with project oversight through diverse expertise participation.
Value Chain Training	Offer training to support food system actors with the tools to activate change in various ways.	Deliver training at networking events and through online platforms	Have more knowledgeable food system actors
Northern Food Distribution Network Visioning session	To bring together food system actors to create a shared vision of a food system to work towards	Host 1 NFDN facilitated meeting.	Create a clear shared vision of the intent of the work
Networking + Member recruitment	To learn about what work is being done across the North where the gaps are. Build stronger partnerships with other organizations across the North	Host 2- 4 meetings to bring together food system actors to share and collaborate + gain more active members of the network.	Build a more robust network of collaboration and increase knowledge transfer
Database Development	Create a shared database that hosts existing research, data, and information in one easy-to-access location.	Build a website (also in communications plan), and begin aggregating research and data to populate	Have a comprehensive source of data
Gaps Analysis	What are the gaps that need to be addressed based on the vision? How can the NFDN collectively address these gaps?	Gather data from networking meetings to identify gaps in access, data, and infrastructure in Northern Ontario	Identify priority areas of work, projects, and research for future funding.
Communications	Share stories about what is being done in the North to advance food security and sovereignty	Build a more substantial audience and engagement in NFDN	Increase awareness across the food value chain of
Funding	Identify funding priorities based on gaps analysis and networking events. Identify which organizations are best positioned to take on various aspects of the work.	Apply for 2-3 sources of funding to secure funding for 2023-2025	Secure future funding to support the work of the NFDN
NFDN Governance Review	Review core documents to ensure they meet the needs of the NFDN	Review and approve Terms of Reference	Have core governance document

Deeper reflection on the network structure and governance identified core challenges around a lack of clarity around roles, mandate, and how to engage in the work. Interviewees validated these challenges and articulated a lack of capacity to complete all the work needed for the NFDN governance and action plan. These findings resulted in recommendations to build the strength of the network by fostering a more robust environment of collaboration, working to break down silos within the membership, providing fundamental education on value chain coordination, and supporting leaders with the skills and knowledge to keep members engaged and supported as they work together. These recommendations are outlined in conjunction with revised terms of references that address governance challenges around membership and mandate.

Addressing the articulated lack of capacity at the NFDN member level to complete all the tasks of the NFDN, an evaluation of the roles of coordinators and, more specifically, value chain coordinators was undertaken. Based on all the research, it is fully validated that for the NFDN to continue to address the food system challenges, administrative and coordinator capacity is required to support the NFDN members directly while also executing aspects of the action plan. It is unrealistic to expect this work to be completed by members who have already expressed a lack of capacity. To address this, recommendations on building stronger partnerships with organizations across the North and supporting organizations to put the value of the work of the NFDN into work plans of members, therefore increasing their availability and capacity to participate.

To accomplish all this work, the NFDN requires solid visionary leadership, willing to traverse uncharted territory to develop a truly inclusive and collaborative network while breaking down barriers to participation and engagement. There are currently many talented people participating within the NFDN regularly. Supporting these and newly recruited members with the ability to lead well is imperative to the NFDN's success.

The NFDN is the only pan-Northern Ontario network with a mandate specifically on food value chains. It is also uniquely structured to achieve this work through collaboration with other organizations and businesses working in food systems across the region. This mandate and structure position the NFDN to complete strategic activities to address the complex challenges of the food system. This work will not be easy, so celebrating successes as they emerge is essential to keep the perspective of the work moving forward.

This report serves as a guiding document for the NFDN moving forward. Acceptance of the recommendations is at the discretion of the NFDN, but it is hoped that value is found in the research and subsequent outcomes.

CORE HIGHLIGHTS

Networking, Education, Research and Infrastructure Development, Alternative Value Chain Model maintain to be the top priorities of the NFDN

Creating a food system vision with other food system organizations and participants can create more clarity in direction, while providing a greater understanding of the work that needs to be done to achieve the vision

Partnership development is required to increase the capacity of the network and there are several organizations well positioned to partner with the NFDN

NFDN has a responsibility to ensure that Indigenous communities of Northern Ontario are engaged in the design and decision making processes

Supporting NFDN members with value chain training is important to increasing engagement

Executing a communications strategy will foster engagement, while highlighting the successful achievements across the North to build a stronger food system

Acknowledging the limited capacity of members to execute work, the NFDN requires coordination and administrative support to execute its activities

Membership recruitment, along with approving governance documents will strengthen the NFDN capacity

NFDN leadership needs to be courageous in forging a path through uncharted territory of food system development, and foster an environment of collaboration to break down silos while encouraging engagement