

Executive Summary | Winter 2022

BRIDGES & BARRIERS IN NORTHERN ONTARIO

Exploring Food Value Chain Coordination



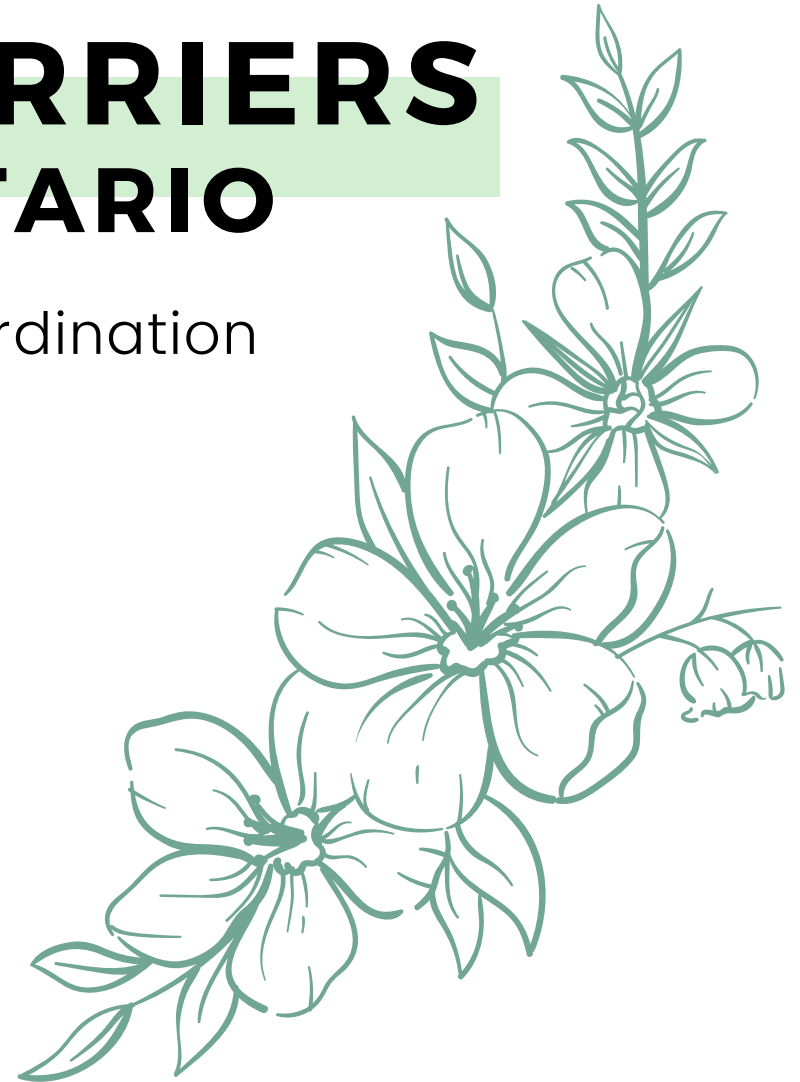
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ABOUT THIS PROJECT



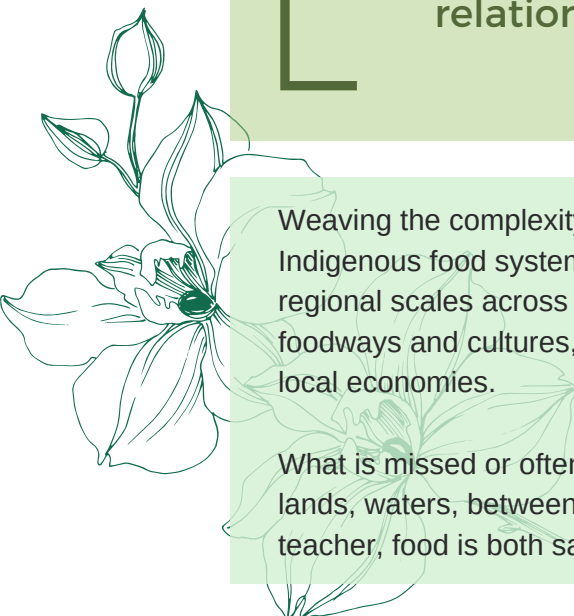
“

Winona LaDuke

Food for us comes from our relatives, whether they have wings or fins or roots. That is how we consider food. Food has a culture. It has a history. It has a story. It has relationships.”

”

The Local Food and Farm Coop (LFFC) and the Northern Food Distribution Network (NFDN) foster relationships across Northern Ontario that respect and retain northern knowledge and values, while catalyzing food system transformation. The LFFC and NFDN received Canadian Agricultural Partnership Funding in 2021, to examine the knowledge gaps in food value chain coordination (FVCC) in Northern Ontario as an attempt to enhance our contributions to Northern Ontario food system development. Assumptions from previous authors of inquiries, strategies, policies, white papers and other bodies of research on northern systems of food, healthcare, agriculture and economics can produce, reproduce and (often unintentionally) privilege Western values and ways of knowing. This in turn entrenches incomplete narratives and biases in the provided ‘solutions’ of these bodies of work.



Weaving the complexity of food systems found in Northern Ontario (forest, agricultural, mainstream imported) with Indigenous food systems and their associated knowledges and perspectives could have positive effects at local, and regional scales across the north. This weaving has the potential to protect food environments, restore Indigenous foodways and cultures, improve food security and accessibility, address food security and sovereignty, and support local economies.

What is missed or often overlooked in these Western processes is the relational and inter-relational aspects of lands, waters, between peoples and food supply chains, and within food systems. Water is life, land is the first teacher, food is both sacred and medicine.

WHAT IS AT STAKE?



A northern vision of a sustainable food system supports food and farming businesses that develop value-based food systems, where power is retained within the hands of Northern Ontario peoples, diversity of culture is respected, our lands are nourished and valued, and economic and social benefits are achieved for all engaged parties.

Our observation of northern food practitioners suggests an adaptive, fluid approach to value chain coordination which is centred on transformative agroecology, with economic prosperity and food sovereignty held in equal value. To advance both transformative agroecology and food sovereignty efforts, people and relationships are needed to connect sectors, cultures, and organizations. These are roles embodied by Food Value Chain Coordinators (FVCC).

A multi-sectoral approach is necessary for effective adaptation and resiliency-building in response to climate change. Stakeholders involved in various sectors play significant roles in the food system without considering their impacts on one another, from transportation to agriculture, from urban planning to social policy and beyond. However, adaptation to climate change cannot be done realistically without addressing rights to sovereignty, land rights, treaty rights, and other environmental injustices. To do all of this requires an emphasis on high-quality relationship building, which will require a shift in mental models.

Instead of relying on our farmers and food producers to bridge these gaps, we considered the role of dedicated professionals who are skilled in relationship building and comprehensive food system development, to enhance efforts to connect sectors and cultures. Our approach to exploring Value Chain Coordination in a northern context looks beyond agri-value food chains to examine how these roles could further an inclusive and holistic approach to northern food system development.

METHODOLOGY



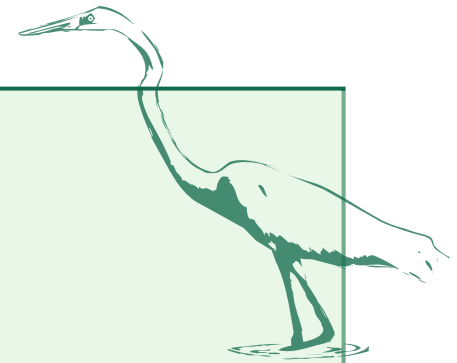
The theoretical framework for the project was based on relational accountability where relationships are powerfully relevant to context, systems thinking, multi-level perspective and a critical social theory perspective. This critical social theory includes aspects of feminism and postcolonialism.

As researchers and northerners who are governed by Treaty 9 and Treaty 3, uninvited guests and settlers on the traditional territories of the Mattagami and Lac Seul First Nations respectively, we watched, listened and learned with and from northern food system respondents. In this way of being, We are not separate from our food systems work, nor will we be impartial because we are in relationship with the ideas presented, with the northern lands, waters and air that sustain us, and with hundreds of people that keep a deeply flawed colonial food system 'working'. With these relationships, living and nonliving, come responsibilities because it is in the spirit of reciprocity that our values reside.

An online survey was shared with over 148 organizations and individuals across Northern Ontario who interact with food. Survey data was collected from 40 value chain participants ranging from food producers, procurement officers, food distributors, food coordinators, and registered dieticians working within Northern Ontario. Organizations included Indigenous, Mennonite, and non-Indigenous communities. Each participant was asked to refer food leaders, who were sent a survey if applicable. The data was verified and enhanced through 20 follow-up interviews, and additional feedback was collected from one focus group of 25 participants (Nourish Gathering, Sioux Lookout, August 25, 2021).

We suggest that community food system practitioners with value chain coordination competencies can play a role in shifting northern food systems to create more self-determined, economically viable, socially and culturally sensitive, place-based solutions that extend from soil to seed to plate and back to soil.

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO LIVE IN NORTHERN ONTARIO?



There is both a stated and implied connection in the north between people and nature as well as to each other. There is also an understanding that living in the north requires different ways of relating to time, weather, seasons and distances between communities. We are as unique, diverse and complex as the northern environments that support us.



THE NORTHERN POPULATION OF 810 000 IS 5.5% OF ONTARIO.

More than half of the population (61%) is concentrated in the north's five largest centres of Greater Sudbury, Thunder Bay, Sault Ste. Marie, North Bay and Timmins. Four of these cities are situated along the Highway 17 corridor.

NORTHERN ONTARIO COVERS 90% OF THE PROVINCIAL LAND MASS

It is divided into two sub-regions - northeast and northwest. The far north is another separate geographical region.

THE FAR NORTH COVERS 42% OF ONTARIO LANDMASS

This area contains the largest wetland complex in North America which makes it globally important. It is home to over 35 000 people and is projected to have a population increase of 30% by 2036.






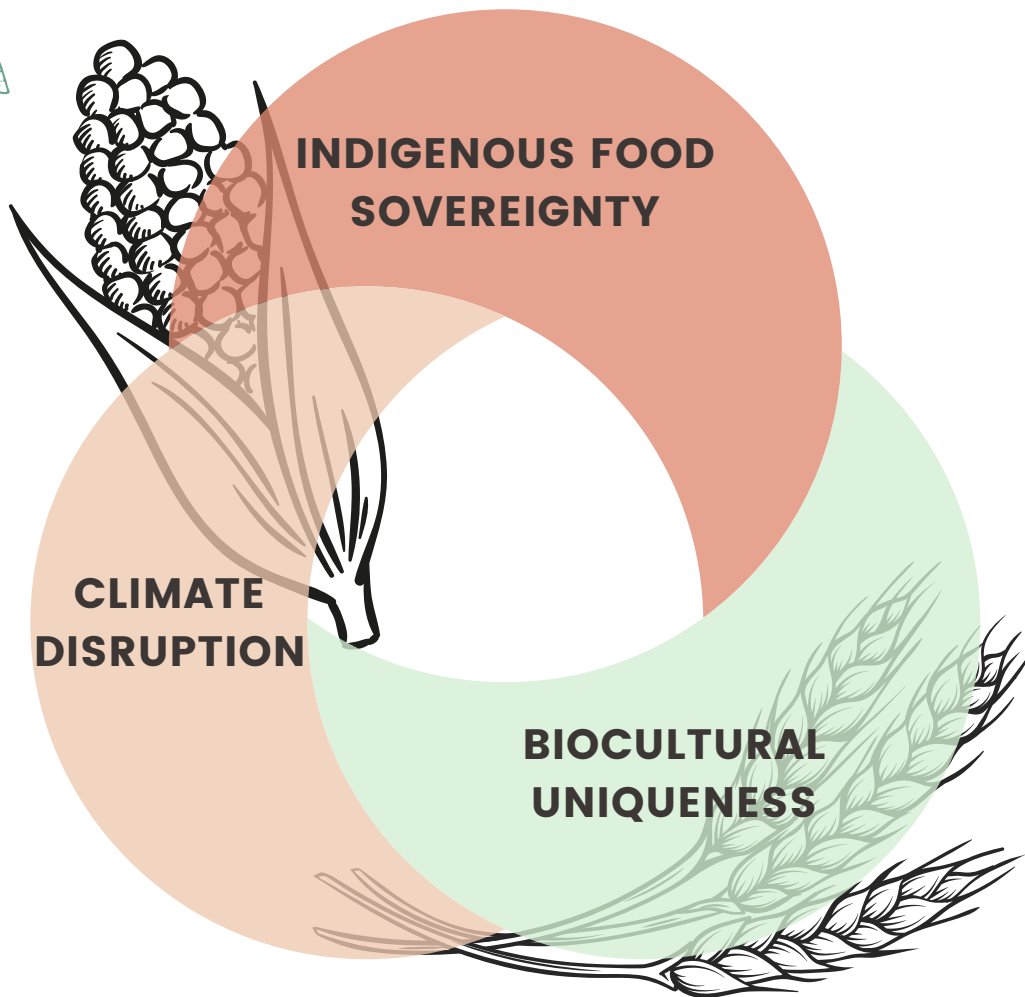
GIVEN ALL OF THE CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES, IT IS IMPORTANT TO SUMMARIZE THE CURRENT REALITY.

AN AVERAGE
FOOD CALORIE
TRAVELS ABOUT
3200 KMS
(EVEN FURTHER
FOR THE FAR
NORTH).

Right now we have a long-distance food system in Northern Ontario. Most calories are nutrient depleted before they hit our dinner plates. Under this model, Northern Ontario is neither food secure nor food sovereign. As a result, we are being forced to question the status quo of our current food system structures and the policies and funding models that uphold their trajectories of importing the vast majority of our food and depending on agricultural exports.



REALITIES OF THE FOOD SYSTEM IN NORTHERN ONTARIO



- Understanding food sovereignty as an anticolonial struggle—and a struggle not merely for the levers of capitalist food policy but for the space to imagine social relations differently—is in keeping with the deepest spirit of food sovereignty.
- Evidence indicates that every component of wild and conventional food systems—production, processing, distribution, preparation and consumption—is climate sensitive and can experience impacts from climate change effects.
- Food has moved from local forests, back yards and fields in the north to a complex knot of supply chains that span the globe that end up at retail outlets -- a radical change in only 80+ years.

TRANSFORMATION TOWARDS COMPREHENSIVE FOOD SYSTEMS



RECONCILIATION AND HONOURING TREATIES

First Nations peoples as rights-holders, not just stakeholders, in land-based discussions.

INTEGRATED UNDERSTANDING

Decision making capacity and quality increases when food system complexity is deeply understood by all parties that act within this system.

PLACE BASED STRATEGIES

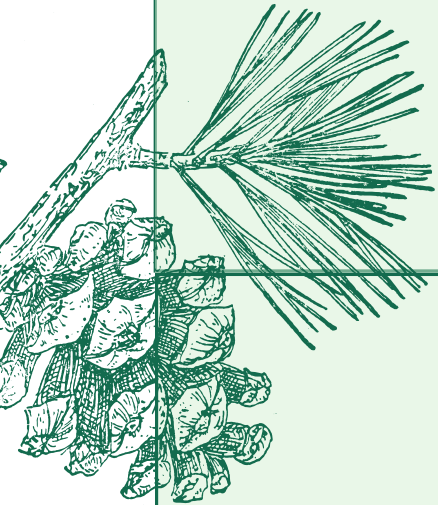
We must stay grounded in current realities, envision the sort of future for food that we desire, and focus on the transformative process to get there.

EMPOWERED FOOD PRACTITIONERS

Critical principles and skill sets can be taught and modelled to regional representatives, who can weave these strategies into food value chains and regional collaborations.

RESOURCE FLOWS

Northern resources and studies need to be centralized and accessible. The desire to innovate can be hindered by a lack of resources and capacity



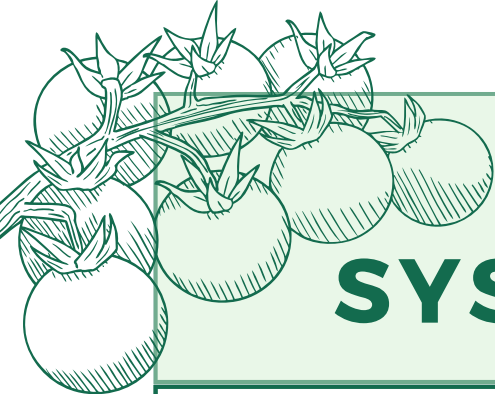
WHAT DOES A COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEMS PRACTITIONER DO?

WE SUGGEST THAT
THE TITLE OF
**COMMUNITY FOOD
SYSTEM PRACTITIONER**
MIGHT BETTER
DESCRIBE THE FOOD
SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT
WORK HAPPENING IN
THE NORTH.

Through experience and training, Community Food Systems Practitioners can be established who are specialized in systems thinking, multi-perspective food systems, and are well versed in best practices and principles for catalyzing transformative food system changes. CFSPs would hold experience and recognized skill sets to foster food system transformation, similar (but not identical) to a Value Chain Coordination Professional (VCCP).

Capabilities and priorities of a CFSP identified through our research are described on the following slides.





COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEM PRACTITIONERS...

UNDERSTAND THAT:

- the original value chain coordinators were First Nations communities, who have been here successfully sustaining themselves since time immemorial.
- people are not tied to the land in the north, they are of the land. Water, in all its forms, is the tie that binds this family of relationships and is considered sacred.
- solutions are place-based.
- transformative food systems need leaders who cultivate strong, trusting, long-term symbiotic relationships with the individuals, organizations, and communities they serve.
- a practitioner might be a leader in one workshop or food project situation, while acting as a learner or follower in another.
- although comforting, an all-encompassing upfront plan for transformation would be an illusion that would not demonstrate respect in reciprocity. These new systems will be out of balance and confusing for a while - especially during the post-Covid years and coming climate change disruptions.

ADVOCATE:

- for strategic alliances, sourcing support to organize and facilitate spaces for cross-disciplinary discussions to build comprehensive food systems and support the growth of trusting collaborative relationships along agri-food value chains
- that other community members show a strong commitment to change, but also demonstrate a willingness to stay open in the face of the unknown.

COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEM PRACTITIONERS...

WORK:

- beyond agri-food chains and encompass northern values, such as land based practices, for securing food.
- to effectively steward local/regional climate change strategies, adaptations and mitigations as these roles relate to food systems but also interrelate with transportation, health, environmental conservation, water/hydrologic systems, urban planning and social programs.
- to establish close strategic relationships with other members of the value chain in order to build stronger, more competitive agri-food systems
- to bridge boundaries between disciplines with flexibility, creativity and self-reflexivity

VALUE:

- farmland and agriculture as part of the cultural landscape, and not just an under-utilized economic resource.
- a close proximity to places and people
- multi-disciplinary leadership collectives that cross boundaries between disciplines, and between academia and society.
- space to document, share, and reflect on food transformation work in various settings can provide critical opportunities to transfer knowledge across sectors, build self-reflection skills, foster trust, and strengthen long-term relationships across the north.



WHERE TO NEXT?

Northern Ontario is challenged by complex issues, and privileged by relationships. Shared realities concern communities and neighbours extending throughout the north, despite the great distances which separate them. These relationships exist between peoples, land, culture, and regions. Marginalized peoples, including First Nations peoples, have known for a long time that big changes are needed.

Community Food System Practitioners should be identified and developed as a means to honour, value and protect not only traditional and northern food practices and networks but also as bridges between local, urban, regional food value chains. Integrated strategies need a few place-based people with the skills, knowledge and relationships to develop and implement such plans. Recognizing the value of these roles, and establishing shared language to describe them, is an important step towards attracting more food leadership and supporting and developing this important work.

The Right to Food (especially for low-income and marginalized populations) must be foundational. Climate crises are changing the northern landscape faster than adaptation and mitigation is being realized at the community and regional levels. Piecemeal approaches and incremental gains can't get northern urban/rural communities to a place of resilience in the face of social, economic and ecological hardships that will be multiplying simultaneously in the coming years/decades. Leveraging resources through mutually reinforcing activities must be better communicated and prioritized. This will not happen 'organically' and needs deliberate coordination with the tools of value chain coordination and the skills of community food system practitioners.

WE'RE CALLING FOR:



- A commitment to establishing a **collective voice** of northern food leaders to maximize our capacity to develop and implement sustainable, value derived, place-based solutions.
- The development and maintenance of a **centralized northern resource library** to improve accessibility of northern based food reports, recommendations, policies, project outcomes, feasibility studies, business plans and other learning materials.
- The realization of the full potential of place-based, relationship centered northern food systems that are in service to values and sustainability through **relevant training and collaborative knowledge sharing** among northern leaders, and mentoring the next generation of northern food leaders.



Being creative
problem solvers

Sensing where
economic
opportunities
will emerge

Acting as
weavers of
many different
ideas and
sectors

Advocating with
cross-sectoral
bodies for
adequate
northern
resources

**Civic leaders
with an
economic
priority focus**

**Indigenous
communities and
organizations**

Upholding food
sovereignty,
food justice, and
food security
rights

Transferring
knowledge of
traditional
systems rooted
in First Nations
values

**Food security and
health focused
organizations**

Food producers

Being a public
face of northern
food

Producing in a
sustainable
manner



**FOOD SYSTEM
LEADERS WILL
MAKE
TRANSFORMATION
POSSIBLE BY...**

NORTHERN FOOD
DISTRIBUTION
NETWORK

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to graciously thank everyone who has made this research, this project and this report possible. We thank the northern communities whose time and efforts have contributed to this work and continue to be the inspiration that keeps us moving forward. Thank you to our survey respondents for sharing their precious time to contribute their experiences. This work would not be possible without our partnerships and supporters, thank you to each of you. We thank the knowledge keepers for sharing your wisdom with us. This work has been spearheaded with countless hours of dedication from our northern Coordination team including our Northern Food Distribution Network Coordinator, Kelleigh Wright and Local Food and Farm Co-ops Northwest Regional Coordinator, Jen Esposito Springett. Thank you to our LFFC team mates for your support in reviewing drafts, editing, and formatting this report to make it legible.

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TAKING BACK OUR FOOD CHAIN



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When I was a child, there was an abundance of many types of fruit and nuts growing along the Sceine River. As children we could spend all day outside and not go hungry. These places were not accidental; they were deliberate places where Anishnaabe used to gather. They were cared for and monitored by members of nearby clans. Traveling throughout the region (Northwestern Ontario) it was not necessary to take food with you. The elders would tell you where to find these clusters of wild plums, berries, nuts. Pockets of wild rice. Places where fish have been trapped to be easily speared. We lived in harmony with the land and it supported us. Manitou Aki-Ehnakonegaywin describes the sacred relationships to all life and our environment, which is a responsibility we held in high regard. Now, our people have been forced to stay within reserves, which caused them to neglect these food areas. I still know people who are afraid to leave their reserve to hunt or gather food. The hydro dams disrupt the waterways. When the gates open, they can wipe out spawning grounds of the fish. The beaver are unable to maintain the water levels where it is optimal for the wild rice to grow, killing it off. Our people were forced to let go of our laws that allowed us to sustain ourselves and adopt western ways of living and being. When I return to the place where I grew up, there is no longer an abundance of food. These pockets have been bulldozed over, neglected, or destroyed. Medicines have been sprayed and killed to build power lines. All without consultation. Everyone in Canada is profiting from stolen land and resources. This has caused deep suffering across the north.

- *Ralph Johnson, Pike clan, Sioux Lookout*

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FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THIS PROJECT, VISIT LOCALFOODANDFARM.COOP/NFDN