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Chair: Mr. Bob Bratina



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• (1835)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.)): We have quorum. Accordingly, I call this meeting of the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs to order. I am in Ottawa today, sitting on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin people.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on October 27, 2020, the committee is continuing its study of food security in northern communities.

To ensure an orderly meeting, remember to speak slowly and listen in the official language of your choice. There is a selector in that globe at the bottom centre of the screen, in which you can select French or English. When speaking, ensure your video is turned on and please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

With us today by video conference for the first 45 minutes are the following witnesses. From First Nations Food, Nutrition and Environment Study, Laurie Chan, Lynn Barwin, Malek Batal, Tonio Sadik and Constantine Tikhonov.

Mr. Chan, let me turn it over to you and you can introduce your speakers. Please go ahead for about six minutes, but a bit longer if you need to.

Dr. Laurie Chan (First Nations Food, Nutrition and Environment Study): Thank you.

Good evening, committee chair and committee members. Thank you for inviting us to present our study results on food security in northern communities to your committee.

My name is Laurie Chan. I'm a professor and Canada research chair in toxicology and environmental health at the University of Ottawa, and one of the principal investigators of the study.

The other co-PIs who are here this evening are Dr. Malek Batal, a professor and Canada research chair in nutrition and health inequalities at the University of Montreal; Dr. Tonio Sadik, senior director of environment, lands and water at the Assembly of the First Nations; and Dr. Constantine Tikhonov, section head of safe food environments at the first nations and Inuit health branch of Indigenous Services Canada. Ms. Lynn Barwin is the project manager of the study and is based at the University of Ottawa.

On behalf of the team, I'm talking about the results of the first nations food, nutrition and environment study. This is the most comprehensive statistically representative study on nutrition and

the environmental health of first nations ever completed in Canada. It is a true partnership between universities, the Assembly of First Nations and the federal government. This 11-year study received over \$12 million in funding from Health Canada and Indigenous Services Canada, and successfully collected data from 6,487 participants from 92 first nations in 11 ecozones and eight Assembly of First Nation regions south of the 60th parallel across Canada.

Out of the 92 communities, 37 were within 50 kilometres of main service centres, 39 were over 50 kilometres away and 17 were fly-in communities. A random sampling strategy developed by Statistics Canada was adopted to ensure that the study assessed and represented the diversity of diets of first nations. We used a standard approach, with identical tools and methodology, so that the results are comparable.

The study is based on a participatory approach and was born out of a need expressed by the first nations. Overarching first nations support was received through a resolution passed by the chiefs-in-assembly in 2007 at the Assembly of First Nations annual general assembly, and the AFN participated as one of the principal investigating partners throughout the study. At the regional level, before implementation of the study, first nations regional organizations were consulted, as were representatives from each participating first nation. Regional chiefs approved the study and provided guidance on approaches to addressing specific local environmental issues or concerns and logistics needs in their respective regions.

All first nations were involved in the planning and implementation of the data collection for the five study components. They included household interviews, through which socio-demographic, nutritional, health and food security information was collected. We also collected tap water samples for metals, surface water samples for pharmaceuticals, hair samples for mercury, and traditional food samples for contaminant metals. We believe this important information collected by the study can be used by first nations, by the risk assessors and by policy-makers like you to develop effective initiatives to promote better health and well-being for first nations.

We have included an executive summary of the study in the package we submitted to you.

Next will be Dr. Batal.

Dr. Malek Batal (First Nations Food, Nutrition and Environment Study): Thank you, Laurie.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, good evening.

We have summarized our findings on food security in the document to you entitled, “The Right to Food: A Coast to Coast Look at Food Security Among First Nations Living on Reserve South of the 60th Parallel”.

In brief, interviews to assess food security in our study were done using the household food security survey module, a tool used by Statistics Canada in the general population, making possible comparisons between first nations data in our study and general Canadian numbers.

We also compared the cost of a weekly basket of food in communities and compared it to the cost of food in a major urban centre in each region using a standard tool, which was Health Canada's national nutritious food basket. In all regions food costs were often two to three times higher in communities more than 50 kilometres away from a major urban centre, and were even higher in fly-in communities.

Prevalence of food insecurity was high in all the surveyed regions and averaged 47.1%, nearly four times higher than the Canadian prevalence of 12.2%. There was a south-north gradient of increasing food insecurity, reaching close to 80% in some remote fly-in communities. Our data on food cost and on food insecurity in remote communities show that existing federal programs have failed to reduce food insecurity in the communities where these programs are present.

Since the food system for first nations includes traditional food, our study used additional questions that addressed the barriers and enablers to obtaining traditional food. Almost half of all participating households worried that traditional foods would not last until they could get more. Issues of food insecurity among first nations are compounded by problems of inadequate access to a healthy diet, leading to high rates of nutrition-related chronic disease and chronic disease risk factors.

For example, rates of obesity are twice as high in first nations on reserve compared to the Canadian population—50% versus 25%. Diabetes is three times as high, at 21% versus 7%. Please note that our diabetes figures are based on self-reports and this could be an underestimation of the true prevalence.

On the other hand, traditional food when available can contribute greatly to the quality of the diet, even when present in small quantities. We showed that diet quality was much better on days when traditional food was consumed. Seventy-seven per cent of first nations adults in our representative sample told us they would like to consume more traditional food, but are prevented from doing so because of government regulations, farming, hydro projects, oil and gas, forestry and mining.

Additional barriers they mentioned included time, resources and knowledge, in addition to concerns over climate change and its impact on traditional food availability.

Thank you. I'll let my colleague Dr. Tonio Sadik from the Assembly of First Nations complete our collective statement.

● (1840)

Mr. Tonio Sadik (First Nations Food, Nutrition and Environment Study): Thank you very much. It's a pleasure to be here this evening.

We appreciate the opportunity to present to this committee on the study.

We ask you to urgently address systemic problems relating to food, nutrition and the environment affecting first nations, and to do so in a manner that supports first nations-led leadership and solutions.

We held a workshop in Ottawa in November 2019 to review the results of this study, which we call FNFNES. Together with the 280 workshop participants, including leaders and technical staff of first nations governments and representatives of 70 of the 92 participating first nations, we developed a set of recommendations. The document “Key Findings and Recommendations for Decision-Makers” is included in the package that was provided to you.

The following recommendations are related to the issue of food security, our main concern this evening. I would like to highlight five recommendations:

First, support communities to make their own informed decisions regarding food security and food sovereignty.

Second, promote the consumption of traditional foods.

Third, incorporate a holistic approach that involves addressing social issues and socio-economic factors, such as poverty, unemployment and education, that contribute to food insecurity.

Fourth, support communities to increase their reliance on traditional food systems and build resilience against threats to food security or sovereignty, including threats such as pandemics—we know what we're talking about there—and extreme climate events or disasters, such as flooding, droughts and wildfires.

Finally, fifth, ensure good drinking water quality and trust in the safety of public water systems.

That's the end of our presentation this evening. I turn it back to you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That was really well done.

I know our questioners will be eager to get to you.

I have, for six minutes in the first round, Eric, Larry, Madam Bérubé and Rachel Blaney.

Eric Melillo, please go ahead, for six minutes.

Mr. Eric Melillo (Kenora, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank all of our witnesses for joining us today. There was a lot of great testimony already, and I'll try to get in as many questions as I can.

One of the things that was mentioned was how important traditional food is for northern and indigenous communities. Whoever wants to speak to this, I'm wondering if you could speak more about the ways that the government can help support indigenous peoples in their ability to harvest traditional foods and have true food security.

Mr. Tonio Sadik: I can perhaps begin. Thank you for the question.

I want to stress that perhaps the most important facet in recognizing the importance of traditional food is the recognition that traditional food is not just about nutrition. Where nutrition is, of course, extremely important and is a factor in numerous ways—and the FNFNES study is focused on that centrally, for sure—there must be a recognition that traditional foods cannot simply be substituted by store-bought foods.

There are a wide variety of reasons that is the case—and perhaps committee members are already well aware—but let me very quickly note that apart from nutritional considerations, which are also a significant factor, the role that traditional food plays for first nations is critical in cultural terms, in terms of the practices of food gathering and in ceremonial terms. Traditional food, in this sense, represents so much more than nutrition. When traditional foods become unavailable or scarce, or if people are worried that there are safety concerns, which in most cases there are not, then we see a sort of breakdown in related social systems. That really underscores the importance of traditional food for nutrition and for so many other reasons.

I'll stop there to see if any of my colleagues want to add to that.

• (1845)

Dr. Malek Batal: I'll just add that, for all the reasons Tonio mentioned, we cannot replace traditional food with market food.

On top of that, the market food that is available in communities, based on our study and many other studies, is of poor quality. This is a combination of issues related to access and financial access at the population level. These are compounding factors that make the alternatives not interesting in many ways, as Dr. Sadik mentioned, but also particularly in terms of nutrition.

As we mentioned in our statement, what we are seeing in terms of chronic disease is major. When we have three times the rate of diabetes, this is very much concerning to all of us.

Mr. Eric Melillo: I would like to get one more question in.

You mentioned, as well, about remote communities and obviously the unique challenges they face. I have many remote and isolated first nation communities in my riding in northwestern Ontario.

Again, whoever would like to speak to it, I am curious whether you can talk more about what sorts of infrastructure and transportation investments you feel should be prioritized by the government to help bridge that gap in terms of getting goods to the remote communities.

Dr. Laurie Chan: Malek, go ahead first.

Dr. Malek Batal: Based on what Tonio mentioned, I think it's not only an issue of getting the food there but also of getting greater access to the traditional food that is available in the environment and making sure that remains available.

We mentioned the barriers in terms of people's access to that very healthy traditional food, so I would start by removing those barriers first. Then, when it comes to providing access to other foods, many communities have their own solutions, and I think those need to be first explored and discussed with them. Some communities have subsidies for traditional food harvesting. Other communities have gardens, and others have their own stores. The answer might lie there, but I think that the government could support these initiatives financially much more than it does now.

In terms of subsidies, as we mentioned, in communities where nutrition north is present, the prices are not much lower than in places where it's not present. I think those programs need to be thought over, and perhaps subsidies increased so that access to healthy food can be improved.

The Chair: You have about 20 seconds, Eric.

Mr. Eric Melillo: I'll cede that to you, Mr. Chair. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

My speaking order now shows Marcus Powlowski.

Go ahead, please, for six minutes.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I was really interested in the recommendations that came out of this study and in some things that weren't on the list. We heard from one of the chiefs from NAN on northern communities, fly-in communities in northern Ontario, and he certainly talked about the high price of food and the fact that in many places there was just one store, giving a kind of monopoly to one provider.

Do you not think that one factor in food insecurity in these communities is the fact that there isn't any competition, that there is only one provider with basically a monopoly on the sale of food?

That's for Mr. Batal, maybe, but I don't know if someone else can better answer it.

• (1850)

Dr. Malek Batal: Sure. I was just letting others speak if they wanted to.

I think this is a very valid point. Often in communities competition is non-existent. However, as I mentioned earlier, this is but one aspect of the problem. For example, we found in our analysis that it really also depends on the household and their ability to access the food. In households where people are on social assistance or are unemployed, it's much harder for these people to access healthy food. We found a clear association between those instances and food insecurity.

On the other hand—this might be an interesting observation—in households where there was an elder, a person who was on the old age pension, food insecurity was lower. There are issues that are not just at the store level. Definitely these are problems and subsidies could help with that, but there are also social issues and poverty issues that are at the community level and the household level that contribute to the problem by limiting financial access to healthy food.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: That's probably a good segue into my second question.

You mentioned that there is twice the incidence of obesity and three times the incidence of diabetes in first nation communities. Having been a doctor who has worked in such communities and lived in such communities and knows the cost of things, is not one of the problems the fact that the affordable foods, such as pop, chips and canned stuff, are often not the healthiest foods? In terms of solutions, do we perhaps not give enough subsidies for good kinds of foods, which would address their long dietary problems leading to health problems?

Dr. Malek Batal: Absolutely. Many of us have been to many communities, and the more remote the community, often the smaller the store and the more it looks like a convenience store more than anything else. I think that's a problem of food environment. You choose to consume from what is available to you. That's a major issue in many communities.

Regardless of people's knowledge about food and capacity, there is also the problem of the availability of the options. There probably should be more subsidies for healthy food and perhaps greater competition, if that is the answer, but often in small communities there is no room for more than one store in terms of the population size. Would that always be an obstacle to better prices? I don't know.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Another thing that I noticed wasn't in the recommendations but was one of the things you stated coming out of the study was that half the people thought that the traditional foods they had wouldn't last until they got more. That suggested to me, unless I got this wrong, that the problem is with storage and re-

frigeration. Ought we do more in terms of communal refrigeration and storage to address that particular problem?

I think some places have in fact done that. They have been quite successful in having freezers where people bring a moose that's for the whole community.

Dr. Laurie Chan: I can answer that. We've seen many communities that have their own solutions. One common solution is to have a communal freezer with a communal harvest program. The elders take the young kids out for hunting, and then place the slaughtered food in the communal freezer. That way they can share with whomever needs it in the community.

We emphasize that many of the solutions can come from the communities, but oftentimes they don't have the resources to implement them. A couple of programs that can eventually support local solutions would probably be the most effective solutions.

• (1855)

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Are there presently resources that would allow communities to acquire freezers for that kind of thing?

Dr. Laurie Chan: There are some programs available. Each community has to apply for them themselves. Sometimes the challenge is that they spend a lot of time putting proposals together, and some communities may not have the capacity to implement those proposals.

Capacity building is also another challenge we need to look at. When we roll out programs, we need to consider that some communities may need more help in accessing those programs than others.

The Chair: Ms. Bérubé, for six minutes, please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good day to you. I represent the residents, including the Cree and Anishinabe peoples, of the vast riding of Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, in Quebec.

Your study on food systems and traditional foods has shown that both cost and transportation are issues.

What recommendations do you think we should make to improve food quality for residents?

[*English*]

Dr. Malek Batal: That's an interesting question.

[*Translation*]

I thank you for your question.

[English]

We found that traditional food was higher in nutritional quality than market food. Greater access to traditional food would be a step toward greater nutritional quality in the diet. There are also issues of access to healthy food within the communities.

As described earlier, many communities have one store that doesn't always carry the healthiest food. When the food is there, let's say fruits and vegetables—and that's anecdotal as we didn't measure that in the study, but we saw it as we went back to the communities to report results and do the study—they do not stay fresh for long. The quality is often very compromised, so you don't want to buy those fruits and vegetables at the prices they are.

Even if they were much cheaper, there's a problem of transportation, or whatever it is, a problem of logistics, that makes it very hard for those foods to arrive in sufficiently acceptable quality for people to want to consume them and pay the high price to do so.

[Translation]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: A number of communities have expressed their dissatisfaction with nutrition north Canada. What do you think about this?

[English]

Dr. Malek Batal: If there is no one else, I'll take this one too.

We are not the first ones to mention nutrition north and to mention that it doesn't seem to be working well for communities where it is implemented.

There are many reports that started coming out. I can mention the UN rapporteur report in 2013, and then lately in 2019 there was a study also that looked at nutrition north. What seems to be clear is that we don't know how the subsidies are trickling down to the consumer. I think this is the main issue.

When we look at things such as the “Feeding My Family” Facebook page, for example, which was happening in Nunavut and in other places, in many instances nutrition north was present in communities, and people were posting very high prices for milk and meat and other essential foods. There are issues with the subsidy program, clearly.

● (1900)

[Translation]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: My next question is about the women, children, elders and handicapped persons living in the communities.

These residents are even more vulnerable when it comes to insecurity in the Canadian north. What are your observations on their situation?

[English]

Dr. Malek Batal: I would just say that local solutions are the appropriate response to not only that question and that challenge but all of those that have been raised. The idea that we need to look externally at how to get other foods into communities, how to reduce those costs and to make sure that there are foods that are attractive to people living in those communities is only a small part of the challenge.

My sense of what we have come to understand as a result of the study that we've been involved in is that by focusing on traditional foods and access to those foods and good information about them, we deal with a bigger suite of issues than simply those we hear quite commonly in northern, rural and remote communities that relate to getting food in there and the cost of pop versus other foods or beverages.

I think local solutions are such an effective way of trying to answer these questions.

The Chair: That's all our time.

Madam Bérubé, thank you.

Ms. Blaney, go ahead for six minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you so much, Chair.

I want to thank everybody so much for their testimony today. It was very informative.

My first question I'll leave open to any of you. I know you're the experts on this.

One of the first questions I have is around nutrition north. I've heard from other testimony the concerns about transparency, the reality that the connection to what's happening in the communities is not there to the degree it needs to be. President Obed, from ITK, talked about what he thought would be an important transition, moving it from a subsidy program into more of a social program so that the resources that are going out to the communities are more reflective of the needs.

He talked very clearly about some folks having more resources and others having less, and there being an uneven playing field, which really leads to a lot of low-income people not being able to access appropriate food.

I'm just wondering if you could provide any thoughts you have, or any witness testimony that you heard through your research, that may reflect those particular challenges, and if you heard anything similar.

Dr. Laurie Chan: I can add to that.

We have heard a lot of concerns from the communities that the decision for what food is stocked in the local store is not transparent. It's often made by the supplier, or even a store manager who is not from the community. A lot of times they voiced the concern that the food they stock is primarily based on profit, and not other decisions.

I think the point is to keep emphasizing that the governance is the issue. Who is making decisions on how to spend the subsidy? Make the subsidy transparent so that people know the subsidy is well spent for the needs of the community.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I've heard concerns that [*Technical Difficulty—Editor*] monopoly for these stores and that's not really reflective of the need.

Mr. Batal, I'm sorry to interrupt you. I saw you were about to answer.

Dr. Malek Batal: I just wanted to give a quick answer. I apologize for having to leave because I have another commitment.

My answer has to do with something you alluded to in your question about the ability to purchase the food. I think that's probably where our attention should go rather than subsidizing something that the people do not have control over. Perhaps it's aiding families to actually be able to afford food whatever the food costs. I think that's where subsidies would make more sense because that gives back freedom to people to choose the food that they like, that is in harmony with their beliefs and that is what they want to consume.

That's a big debate. I'm sorry I have to leave as I say this, but I think that's where the government could be switching the financial contributions—from stores to actual families. That's what we saw. We saw that families who were on social assistance were having the hardest time being food secure. Families with children have a hard time being food secure even though parents shield their children from food insecurity. The children are not food insecure themselves, but the parents of children are more food insecure than people who are not parents.

I think the major issues are with families being able to afford the food, no matter what the food costs.

• (1905)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I found it quite startling in your testimony when you talked about families who have somebody with an old age pension having more food security. I don't think that's often what people think of.

Thank you so much for your time. I'm really sorry to see you leave.

Dr. Malek Batal: Thank you all.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: The next question is around climate change and the impact on [*Technical Difficulty—Editor*] to traditional food.

We've heard a lot of testimony from people talking about how they used to be able to harvest different types of food, but the changes in the climate, the reality that the ice isn't staying as long and it's not as strong, are really providing challenges. They're not able to get that.

I think about the high cost of food, plus now not being able to hunt and gather the way that they used to. Nutrition north used to have provisions for people to be able to buy things like bullets to go hunting. Now that is completely off of the table. I'm just wondering if you heard anything about that in your study. What are your thoughts on climate change and the impacts?

Dr. Laurie Chan: We did ask the participants what the barriers are for them to get more traditional food. The majority of them mentioned that they would like to get more traditional food but cannot. Climate change has been mentioned as one of the top five. Another is government regulations. They cannot fish or hunt because of government regulations. Also, industrial pollution has been mentioned as well—chemical pollution.

One of the other things, certainly, is the perception of the quality of the food. When people see that the food doesn't look or taste the same as the food they had before, they will refrain from eating it. Support on education to address some of these local concerns can help to change their perception, or try to resolve the problems to sustain or maintain the quality of the food so that people have confidence eating the food.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thanks, Ms. Blaney.

Panel, we're coming up to time. I'm going to ask each of the parties if we can limit it to one question each from Mr. Schmale, Mr. van Koeverden, Madam Bérubé and Ms. Blaney. That might get us close to the time that we need to end.

Jamie, would it be okay with you to ask one question rather than have five minutes, which would pretty much take up the whole time?

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Yes, I'm okay with that.

The Chair: Okay, go ahead.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: We heard a lot about quality. We heard a lot about access. We heard a lot about problems with the subsidy program: It works, it doesn't work or there are problems.

Have there been any organizations or any discussions around the actual growing of produce? Obviously with the temperature, you can't without warehouses. I've seen massive greenhouses in different climates that work in cold or in warm. That way you don't lose the nutrition that it takes for the shipping, the time, the short shelf life and all of that. It might also create jobs in the agriculture sector of wherever we're talking about. I know we have people from all over the north.

That's my question. Are we talking about actually growing it there and allowing people the freedom to have the foods they want?

Dr. Laurie Chan: Yes. When we reported the results back to communities in Saskatchewan, we heard that they have a very successful program helping local communities to set up greenhouses to grow home produce. That has been very successful. Of course, in other communities, where the climate allows them to grow their own produce, they are quite successful as well.

We were asked to test some of the local soil, for example, to make sure the homegrown produce is safe to support the vegetables they harvest locally. If it's identified as one of the potential local solutions, it's definitely worth supporting.

• (1910)

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Then you don't have to worry about all those other issues like climate change and everything. You have it there.

I'm sorry, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Jamie.

Mr. van Koeverden.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden (Milton, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses. It's been extremely interesting today, and I appreciate the insight.

My question also concerns climate change, as well as the potential contamination from Arctic oil drilling. I know that we're talking about maybe some more southern jurisdictions, but when we talk about the potential for contamination, we're talking about living off the land and living off fragile ecosystems. Arctic and subarctic ecosystems, it has been shown, are more susceptible to climate change, and they might also be more susceptible to contamination from Arctic and subarctic oil drilling.

Have these things been taken into consideration much?

Dr. Laurie Chan: Yes. I think that both climate change and chemical pollution from industry are similar issues of environmental degradation. Some of them are close by and some of them are more long-range issues and are happening elsewhere. We cannot let the local people suffer because of our irresponsibility in handling chemicals, etc.

When we make decisions in allowing industry to go ahead or not, the whole issue of food security or the way of life of people, the well-being of people, definitely needs to be considered and to weigh heavily in those decisions.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Adam, thank you for that question.

Madam Bérubé, we will have your question, please.

[Translation]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have the following question.

Given all the factors, which ones do you believe are especially relevant in terms of food security?

[English]

Dr. Laurie Chan: When we keep emphasizing the food security issues, it's not just about buying market food or not. The inability or the lack of capacity to get safe, nutritious traditional food locally is more important. Ways that we can actually help them to access more local traditional food or find solutions so that they can store or share traditional food will be a more effective solution than subsidizing imported food to go into communities. That's our thought, in general.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Blaney, go ahead with your question.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: My last question is around the government regulations. You talked about that being one of the challenges. Can you speak a bit more about specifically what those barriers are?

Dr. Laurie Chan: There's the lobster industry, for example. Remember that incident in Nova Scotia...? There are similar seasons of harvest, etc., that may be in conflict with people's traditional practices and quotas set up for different fish or sea mammals, etc. Sometimes the policies developed by government and DFO, etc., may not agree with the traditional knowledge or the local observations. Those are some of the issues that we heard about and that are quite common.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Thanks to all of our panellists. This was brilliant. We have your submissions, of course, which we're enjoying going through, but due to the time constraints, especially for tonight's meeting, I apologize for not allowing us to go on. It has been so interesting and such a great panel. We have another one coming up as well.

We will now suspend for a few minutes to get our second panel prepared.

Once again, thanks to all of you for a wonderful presentation.

• (1910)

(Pause)

• (1920)

The Chair: Welcome back.

Unfortunately, we are unable to hear Ms. Nellie Cournoyea's testimony at this time. We cannot have a meeting without interpretation, and the interpreters are having difficulty with the sound quality.

Ms. Cournoyea, it's not about you. It's about everything in between you and here. Please give us a written submission, and we will get in touch with you with regard to the possibility of another opportunity. I really apologize for that.

We have with us today Carrie Verishagen, who is the director at Eat Well Saskatchewan; and Gérard Duhaime, a professor at Université Laval, who is appearing as an individual.

Carrie, go ahead, please, for six minutes.

Ms. Carrie Verishagen (Director, Eat Well Saskatchewan): Thank you for the opportunity to present today.

I acknowledge that I am presenting to you from Treaty No. 6 territory and the homeland of the Métis.

My name is Carrie Verishagen and I am a registered dietitian and the director of the Eat Well Saskatchewan program, which is a service that operates out of the college of pharmacy and nutrition at the University of Saskatchewan.

What foods are safe to feed my baby? Our child has just been diagnosed with celiac disease, there is a three-month wait-list to see a dietitian and we don't know what to do. I just found out I have diabetes and I don't know what to eat; I am so lost. I can't afford to feed my family; what can I do? These are real examples of questions we receive every day.

Among all the harmful misinformation that fills the Internet and the fad diets that are heavily promoted by the diet industry, there is one thing for certain: Canadians are confused about what to eat and many lack the skills needed to meet their basic dietary needs. On top of that, many Canadians, even more so those living in the north and remote communities, face further barriers that ultimately affect their ability to access safe, affordable and nutritious food.

If I told you that you had to spend \$18 to purchase one pepper or \$20 to buy a four-litre jug of milk, would you buy it? Now imagine you're on income assistance of \$155 a month to cover food and expenses for your family. These are the realities of people living in northern Saskatchewan when food costs 30% higher than the provincial average, and 70% higher in the far north where income is also substantially less.

There is no denying why people spend their food budget on the more lower-cost processed foods that are full of excess sugar, fat and salt. They are affordable, they are accessible, and although nutritionally inadequate, they meet immediate hunger needs.

People cannot access the proper foods they need to nourish their families, and as a result, experience higher rates of chronic disease such as heart disease, diabetes, obesity and depression.

A recent study estimated that the economic burden of not meeting food recommendations in Canada was \$13.8 billion. As the only regulated food and nutrition professionals in Canada, registered dietitians are the most qualified health care professionals to help people meet their nutrition needs. Unfortunately, access to dietitians in rural and remote communities in Saskatchewan and other parts of Canada is often extremely limited or non-existent.

Here is where Eat Well Saskatchewan comes in. We cannot change the burden of high-cost foods for families and we cannot change income. Government policies are needed to address food affordability and availability, but what we can do is support families to make their food dollar go further in three ways.

First, we can educate people on lower-cost, nutritious food to eat healthy on a budget. Secondly, we can support initiatives that encourage more traditional food practices to grow and access more food. Thirdly, we can help develop necessary food skills to help people cook and prepare nutritious meals to meet their basic needs.

Eat Well Saskatchewan allows people access to timely, accessible and free nutrition advice from anywhere in the province by use of a telephone or an email. We provide people with general advice. We can link them to community services and provide credible resources. It doesn't matter if you're in a remote location or a city centre, if you have transportation or child care. We have eliminated these barriers.

At a critical time when people have been isolated due to COVID-19, when health professionals have been deployed and many essential services cut, Eat Well Saskatchewan has stepped up. We have remained accessible and filled a big gap.

Our current funding allows for one dietitian to provide services from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., four days per week. Despite the limited hours and dietitian time, we have responded to over 1,100 calls and emails from the public in more than 100 rural, remote and indigenous communities in Saskatchewan since our launch in 2019.

We are more than just a contact centre. We are a centralized nutrition information hub for the entire province. We can teach thousands of people basic food skills, food budgeting and meal planning ideas with the click of a button by using our social media channels, on which we have already reached over 400,000 people. We creatively have utilized indigenous storytelling to engage an indigenous audience across the province and have motivated people to make positive change. We have collected and shared local success stories to help residents cope with the food security challenges of the pandemic. Collectively, we have launched campaigns that have reached over 200,000 people.

● (1925)

I want to leave you with this. In two short years, Eat Well Saskatchewan has made a difference to thousands of lives. We are changing the way communities think about food. We are building trust within the medical community and we are filling a need. Every day I hear from people from across Saskatchewan who talk about the benefits of having this service.

We are helping residents to develop food skills, to manage chronic conditions and to eat within their means the best they can to feed their families. We have made and continue to make important indigenous connections. Our reach to indigenous, new immigrant and remote communities continues to grow. The potential for this service is way beyond our current funding capabilities. As a service that has managed to reach thousands of people with one dietician, on limited funding and limited hours, imagine the possibilities of what we could do with more.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks very much, Ms. Verishagen.

We now have Monsieur Gérard Duhaime from the Université Laval. He will be speaking as an individual.

Please go ahead for six minutes, Monsieur Duhaime.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gérard Duhaime (Professor, Université Laval, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am a professor of sociology at Laval University. I directed an ambitious multi-year research project on food security in the Arctic, the Canadian north, Alaska, Greenland, Scandinavian countries and the Russian Federation.

We used the same definition for our study that your committees are using now for their work. I will refer to this definition when I give the main conclusions on the factors behind food insecurity in the north. Obviously, these conclusions are based on my observations in Canada's north.

There are three main factors. They are not to be considered individually, but rather cumulatively.

The first factor is access to resources.

As my colleague Laurie Chan and his team pointed out, climate change and pollution are threatening people's ability to access food resources on the land, and sometimes even the stores' ability to restock.

Food security and safety are threatened by pollution brought by air and ocean currents to the north, which our team was able to prove for the first time.

Furthermore, competition with other land uses is another big problem in terms of access to resources. For example, in most northern regions, there is recreational and commercial hunting and fishing by non-indigenous people, and these sporting and recreational activities can sometimes limit indigenous peoples' access to their resources, which very often brings about hardship.

Extractive industries such as hydroelectricity production, mining and other resource extraction also greatly hamper the ability of indigenous households to hunt and produce their own food. These problems are extremely widespread and we see them almost everywhere.

The second major factor is the market.

We saw that the market up there is not working, despite the fact that we make out that it is functioning normally. There is indeed

competition, the information is flowing, and so on, but things are not working.

First of all, the market is limited in many communities by the absence of roads. Even in communities when there is road access, the market does not function any better because of the limited number of businesses and especially because these stores are there to make money.

Marine transportation along the Canadian northern coast is unreliable, whereas everywhere else, even in Alaska and in Greenland, every small village has a deepwater port.

Finally, all these communities count on air links to replenish their supplies for a good part of the year. These communities are living dangerously because very often, they depend on a single company and it takes just one major breakdown for their supplies to be threatened.

The third major factor, which comes on top of all the others, is economic access to food resources. This factor is directly linked to poverty and to the average salary in all of the regions.

In the Canadian north, we have established a poverty rate that takes into account the cost of food. We calculated this for indigenous regions, i.e., Nunavut and the Inuit regions of the Northwest Territories, Nunatsiavut, Labrador and Nunavik, in Quebec.

● (1930)

Official statistics indicate a poverty rate of 15 to 20% which doesn't take into account the cost of food. When the cost of food is factored in, however, the rate jumps to 30 to 40%, even hitting 45%.

At the time of our study, the census average was 37.5% for Inuit households living below the low-income cut-off.

This widespread poverty obviously creates major difficulties for households when it comes to purchasing food. For example, store food prices are sometimes 150 or even 200% times higher, as stated by Mr. Chan and his team.

Finally, this makes food self-sufficiency in terms of hunting and fishing very difficult.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Duhaime, we're out of time there. We'll pick up some things through the questions.

Mr. Vidal, you're up for six minutes.

Mr. Gary Vidal (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank both witnesses for attending tonight and for their valued testimony.

I'm going to have a few questions for Ms. Verishagen tonight. I want to congratulate you on the great work you are doing. My colleagues and I were actually just exchanging some messages about people taking new approaches and not just talking about failed programs and some of the frustrations. Obviously, your organization has done that and is doing it effectively, from the information you shared.

I read your brief. Could you expand a bit on your Eat Well COVID-19 campaign, or your #EatWellChampion campaign? You've obviously been doing some great work in northern Saskatchewan and Saskatchewan in general. One of the consistent messages we hear on this study is the difficulty in accessing northern and remote communities. Obviously, you overcame that in some unique ways.

I want to let you expand for a minute on how you have overcome some of those barriers. Could you speak a bit more about overcoming some of those barriers of accessing northern and remote communities?

• (1935)

Ms. Carrie Verishagen: Sure.

One of the big benefits of this program is that we are accessible from anywhere. One of the things that we have done to expand to different communities is, as you mentioned, the #EatWellChampion campaign. In this we featured different indigenous champions from communities across the province who tell their own stories. It's by indigenous, for indigenous. We let them tell their story about how nutrition has impacted them. Those have been really popular throughout the indigenous communities and they have been shared a ton through social media by indigenous communities, indigenous organizations. They have really helped to build trust within this population. That is one thing we have used.

Unfortunately with COVID, we were gaining some momentum there, but we did have to put a little bit of a halt to that. We were also attending different health care professional workshops working with health care professionals. That is another really important part of this service. It's not just for the public. We often field calls from health care professionals as well. Some of these northern communities might only have a dietician who travels out there once or twice a month, but many of them have nurses who are in the community every day. For some of these clients who might have nutrition questions, the nurses or the physicians can call us directly. We have broken down barriers like that, as well.

With more funding and more time.... We're still new, but we are getting calls from the north and a variety of communities from the north that are hard to access, so I think that's great. With more time and more exposure, because a lot of people still don't know about us, if we had more funding so that we could have more dietician time to actually go build some of those relationships and build some of that trust, then I think there's a huge potential for expanding in some of these northern communities.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you.

My next question was going about the opportunity to expand your program if that opportunity arose and what that might look like. I think I want to expand my question a little bit beyond just

what that looks like in Saskatchewan, so that you and I aren't just looking after our own territory, so to speak.

Do you see the work you're doing being able to be replicated in other provinces and other places across the country? Is the success you're having easily replicable, so to speak?

Mrs. Carrie Verishagen: I think absolutely it is. I think it's important to note that some other provinces do have a dietician call centre already. I think Manitoba has a dial-a-dietician. B.C. has one, and there's one on the east coast, but they're a little bit different. They are completely funded by the provincial health regions. Ours is unique in that we do have funding coming from Indigenous Services Canada and the university.

Regardless of how it's set up, I think this is definitely a service that can be replicated in other provinces. With COVID we are seeing a big trend towards more virtual care. It is breaking down barriers. We can access a lot more people in a day.

I also think there is a lot of resistance for people to access services because they don't have the transportation to get there, or they don't have the child care, when you have eight or nine kids at home. We can offer services quite easily and it's a lot more cost-effective for the government as well. I'm one dietician who is providing this service.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you.

You serve all of Saskatchewan. You serve all of the southern components of Saskatchewan all the way up into my riding from border to border, and all the way to the north border.

I want you to speak a little about the differences between the services and the opportunities you have serving people in the southern communities and those in what we would call northern communities, or up in my area. Then maybe you could speak specifically about the fly-in or the ones we don't even have road access for. Maybe you could lay out some of the differences in your experience in those three examples.

The Chair: Can you do it in 30 seconds, Ms. Verishagen?

Mrs. Carrie Verishagen: I'll try.

A big part of our service is also linking people to community resources. If somebody calls and they're having trouble feeding their family, we can link them to food banks, to community gardens and to community kitchens that are going on. There's definitely a lot more services available in the south, so there's a bit of a disparity there.

I do find it a little bit more challenging sometimes with the northern communities. People do call and they want to talk about how to eat better on a budget, but sometimes there's just not those options available when it is \$16 for a red pepper and you're living on a minimal income. Those are some challenges that are definitely a lot different in the far north.

• (1940)

The Chair: Thanks very much. I appreciate that.

Mr. Bagnell, go ahead for six minutes.

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My riding is in the Yukon, the far north. I'm calling from the traditional territory of the Kwanlin Dūn First Nation and the Ta'an Kwāch'ān Council. Because of the north this is very important to me, so I thank the committee members for allowing me to visit. It's a really productive, positive committee, and it's great.

Professor Duhaime, the committee is convinced that country foods are a great bonus when they can be provided. Years ago we heard that recommendation. In fact, we put in a new program a couple of years ago that supplies costs to get country foods. People are preaching to the converted, but the conundrum I have is that there's a balance between eradicating a species and having enough country foods.

I'm just wondering if you could tell us some examples from the Arctic around the world, where indigenous people have come up with creative ways of enhancing or making sure there's enough or more country foods, whether it's plants or animals, to get the supply up, because everyone thinks that having as much as they can is beneficial.

[Translation]

Mr. Gérard Duhaime: Thank you for your question.

My answer is a simple one. We have to give the communities the resources they need so that they can make their own decisions on resource allocation or hunting and fishing quotas, for example.

This is done elsewhere. There are terrific examples of this in some areas of the country and abroad. These are success stories. For decades, local people have been kept out of wildlife management, such as establishing quotas for hunting beluga whales. When we bring in the people who know the animals as well as or even better than biologists, they are able to ensure resource sustainability.

[English]

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Thank you.

Could you tell us some examples from Russia or Scandinavia that we might not be aware of in Canada of some good practices with country foods, or types of country foods or of indigenous people using country foods?

[Translation]

Mr. Gérard Duhaime: In Scandinavian countries and in Russia, there is hunting, a lot of fishing and also herding, including reindeer herding. The herding is based on traditional models. The peo-

ple have the knowledge they need to manage hundreds and thousands of animals, and their economic model is perfectly sustainable.

I can give you a few examples. In the far east corner of Russia, for example, in the Anadyr region of Tchukotka, herding is very common and is entirely managed by local communities. I could give you other examples of fishing communities in northern Norway, where the people have taken control of decisions regarding the fishing season, fishing quotas, fishing waters and so on.

These models work just as well or even better than those drawn up by biologists from central governments. Not only are these models successful, but the people are proud to have their knowledge validated.

[English]

Hon. Larry Bagnell: What barriers do you see we could overcome in the harvest of country foods in Canada? I guess you're suggesting that one would be to allow the indigenous communities to do the regulations such as hunting quotas in their own areas.

• (1945)

[Translation]

Mr. Gérard Duhaime: Yes, that is what I'm saying.

Obviously, this brings about many problems, because currently there are not enough people who can ensure food security in the territories allocated to indigenous peoples by the Canadian system. In order for that to happen, other regions would have to be involved. This is particularly true of regions where there is competition for access to resources, such as the forestry industry. When you cut down trees, the moose leave.

[English]

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Do you have any comments on whales in the Arctic being used for food? I know they are in Alaska.

[Translation]

Mr. Gérard Duhaime: Absolutely. These hunts have been banned for a long time. However, the hunts have been taking place for a while in Alaska, perhaps 20 years or so. In Hudson Bay and in Ungava Bay in the north-east, beluga whale hunting is still commonly practised.

Other species of whales are now being hunted with very few quotas. People are very proud and happy, because a single whale can feed a village for a long time. This also allows the people to rediscover traditional skills. They are proving that they are perfectly capable of feeding themselves with healthy food, even if that food does not come from the store.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now Madam Bérubé, you have six minutes, please.

[Translation]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Duhaime, I have a question for you. How can we secure food resources in the north?

Mr. Gérard Duhaime: There are many ways it could be done. In the short to medium term, the solution would be to secure indigenous peoples' rights to hunting, fishing and other practices, including gathering.

The way to go about it is to apply simple principles, such as the precautionary principle. Obviously, other users might not be thrilled. For example, each time that a decision has to be made as to allocation of land and developments rights for mining, you would have to apply the precautionary principle. If you do not know what the repercussions will be in terms of food security and resources, you would have to apply that principle before giving authorizations or *carte blanche* for development.

The same thing could be done with the principle that residents' food security takes precedence over other interests. That's a possibility. These principles are already included in certain treaties and could be applied.

Long term, it's a different ball game. If you really want to secure residents' long-term access to food resources on the land, if you really want to establish a dialogue between nations, then you will have to think about developing something like a third level of government in Canada. It could be a similar set-up to that of the territories, with the authority to manage natural resources.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Can you tell us more about the extent and depth of poverty?

Mr. Gérard Duhaime: I talked about it briefly with my colleagues just a little while ago. I checked the official statistics and the measures used by research institutes and statistical agencies in the regions.

When you use consumer prices that have been established by the department, and not those that we measured in our studies, the poverty rate average is 37.5% in the northern territories, as I stated earlier. I think the lowest rate is 27%, but it goes up to 44% in Nunavut. That means that half the population lives below the poverty line. Obviously, those that are living above the poverty line by \$10, \$100 or \$1,000 are not considered rich by any stretch of the imagination. This is a huge factor which has a major impact on households.

A few years ago, 45 households participated in a study to see what impact prices had on their budget. You will find that study in one of the documents I sent to the committee. It states that for low-income households, 50% of their budget is spent on food. When you factor in housing, 70% of the budget is used, and that is for only two budgetary items.

It's an extremely tight situation. There are a few ways to fight poverty. I could talk about them if you wish.

• (1950)

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Yes, what can we do to fight poverty?

Mr. Gérard Duhaime: Actually, there are a few ways. First of all, we would have to factor in the high cost of food when paying local employees. That is part of the inequality that we see in every study that we do. Locally hired employees do not enjoy the same conditions or benefits than those who are brought in, who receive an allowance for food shipping, for example.

The same thing applies to transfer payments made to households. All the social programs use payment scales that have been established for households in urban centres like Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver. The scales are the same up north, whereas the food basket costs from 50 to 100% more.

There's also the question of tax credits. The Government of Quebec, under pressure from Nunavik authorities, applied certain measures such as tax credits for residents to take into account consumer prices, and these have worked extremely well.

In the northern regions, one of the major factors that increase poverty is the housing crisis. This housing crisis has unfortunately been made worse by the departure of the federal government, who withdrew from social housing programs for many years. We have to put an end to this. The housing crisis in the North has been going on for a long time and we have the means to fix it, but nothing is done.

Finally, local production by and for communities would have to be supported in a big way, and not only on a commercial basis. In fact, a commercial model is not necessarily what the communities want. When we surveyed people in all the regions that we visited, they said that they were ready to commercialize some things, but not at any cost. The people wanted to use certain species first and foremost as food for residents, with a view to selling any surplus if the money could then be used to finance their operations.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Duhaime.

Ms. Blaney, you will close it off. Go ahead for six minutes, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses, as well, for presenting to us today on this very important subject.

I'm going to go to you first, Professor Duhaime.

You talked a lot about poverty and the impacts of poverty on people's access to food.

One thing I've heard several times is around the nutrition north program and the fact that it's not very transparent. There may be a better idea of moving it from a subsidy program into more of a social program, so that the resources are reflective of people's incomes and it puts more resources in the pockets of the people who are in those high levels of poverty.

I'm wondering if you have anything to say about that from the work you've done.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gérard Duhaime: That would be a very useful avenue to explore. As to nutrition north Canada, this program was poorly received in all the regions where I worked. People saw it at a form of abandonment.

The price of certain foods deemed healthy according to the program was indeed lowered.

When the program was set up, local authorities in many places, and I witness this myself, said that the federal government wanted to change the Inuit into rabbits. But the Inuit do not eat carrots. Foods chosen by the Canadian government because of their healthy or nutritional value were not necessarily the foods favoured by the local population.

There is a hint of neocolonialism in the lists of items that were deemed healthy and subsidized by nutrition north Canada and that were forced onto the communities, telling them what defines healthy eating. Many people would be thrilled to see the lists disappear.

There should be transportation subsidies for all items that can be bought in stores. As you know, these general stores sell everything, including hunting and fishing equipment, but the government prefers to subsidize fresh fruits and vegetables which, as many witnesses have said, are not necessarily fresh by the time they are on the shelves. Why not subsidize hunting and fishing gear which would allow local people to get the healthy foods they prefer?

Budgetary limits imposed at the start of the program have created an untenable situation for local community representatives. The representatives understood that they were made members of the nutrition north Canada Advisory Board to be part of the decision-making process and take food items off the list, but this was not what they wanted. I don't know if this is still the case, but it has happened that representatives from northern communities left the room because they felt that they were legitimizing the program in a way.

The program should be extended. Just because you have road access does not mean that prices are necessarily lower. I surveyed prices in communities accessible by rail and the prices there were 57% higher than in urban areas. Prices in communities that are an eight-hour drive from the city of Québec via a forestry road were 40% higher than those in the closest town.

All these communities are ineligible because of reasons linked to the history of the program, which to my mind is unfair.

• (1955)

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much.

My last question for you is around food storage infrastructure. We heard again and again from other testimony that local food storage infrastructure is a challenge, but also for stores, there's just not enough storage space for food. There were discussions about food being sent and then largely wasted because they didn't have the ap-

propriate storage quickly enough in those very cold temperatures and food was lost.

I'm wondering, in the work you've done, what you heard about food storage, and if people proposed to you any particularly unique or interesting solutions.

That's my last question, Chair. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gérard Duhaime: Absolutely. There are possibilities, as long as you stop seeing storage infrastructure as a business subsidy or as something other than a port, for example. What is the difference between building a port so that boats can unload their cargo securely, and building a warehouse nearby? Every port in the world has this set-up.

[*English*]

The Chair: I appreciate that. Thank you very much.

Thank you to both of our witnesses, and my apologies once again to Nellie Cournoyea.

I would ask the committee if her presentation could be adopted as.... Perhaps it has not been in translation, and I'm sorry about that, but would we accept that or shall we wait for a further opportunity to have Ms. Cournoyea's submission? Are there any thoughts on that?

• (2000)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Mr. Chair, if we get an opportunity to have her in person, I think that would be great. Maybe as a secondary step...?

That's just my thought.

The Chair: Okay. We'll go with that.

Marcus.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Chair, I think as a procedural item, given the fact that operating virtually is pretty new, it would seem to me a pretty fundamental denial of her democratic right to participate in the democratic process if people like her, who come from places that happen to have poor Internet, are not allowed to participate in things like this because of the lack of ability to have simultaneous translation.

As a procedural thing, we ought to look at alternatives in this kind of situation—for example, allowing her to testify and afterwards providing the translation in French.

The Chair: That would be accepting the speaking notes. We'll leave that there, because that's a discussion we need to have.

Once again, that was brilliant testimony. Thank you so much to Monsieur Duhaime and Ms. Verishagen.

We now need to leave the meeting and come back for the in camera portion.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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