Indigenous Peoples’ food systems, nutrition and gender: conceptual and methodological considerations

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“Integrating Western [...] approaches with an Indigenous, place-based, relationship-driven framework may be an effective approach to fundamentally altering our patterns of consumption [...] this approach has the potential to transform the physical [...] and spiritual quality of our lives.” (Kealiikanakaoleohaililani and Giardina 2016:65)

Abstract (250 words)

Indigenous Peoples, especially women and children, are affected disproportionately by malnutrition and diet-related health problems. Addressing this requires an investigation of the structural conditions that underlie unequal access to resources and loss of traditional lifestyles, and necessitates inclusive approaches that shed light onto these issues and provide strategies to leverage change.

Indigenous Peoples’ food systems are inextricably connected to land, which in turn is interwoven with issues of self-determination, livelihoods, health, cultural and spiritual heritage, and gender. Ongoing loss of land and the dominant agri-food model further threaten Indigenous Peoples’ food systems. Continuing gender-based discrimination undermines the self-determination and rights of women, and negatively impacts on their health, nutritional status, and overall wellbeing, as well as on the wellbeing of households and communities. We suggest that feminist political ecology and modern matriarchal studies provide holistic interlinking frameworks for investigating underlying issues of power and inequality. We further argue that a focus on the principles of respect, responsibility, and
relationships, and an openness to different worldviews, can facilitate a bridging of Indigenous and Western approaches in research and community action conducted in partnership with Indigenous Peoples. This can contribute to creating new ways of knowing regarding Indigenous Peoples’ food systems, equally valuing both knowledge systems.

Indigenous Peoples’ rights, right to food, and food sovereignty are frames that, despite some tensions, have the common goal of self-determination. Through their ability to inform, empower, and mobilize, they provide tools for social movements and communities to challenge existing structural inequalities and leverage social change.

Keywords:

Indigenous Peoples, food systems, food and nutrition security, bridging Indigenous and Western approaches, structural conditions, gender
Introduction

For thousands of years, the wellbeing of Indigenous Peoples\(^1\) has been sustained by their food systems and their balanced relationship with the natural environment. It is troubling that Indigenous Peoples are now disproportionately affected by hunger and malnutrition, with women and girls suffering the greatest burden. The causes are rooted in structural inequalities, characterised by lack of access to land and other resources, and threats to Indigenous Peoples’ food systems and nutrition which undermine the resilience of individuals and communities, including environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity, competing demands for land for production of food or fuel, unsustainable and unhealthy consumption patterns and lifestyles, and centralization of power in market structures.

In order to understand food and nutrition disparities, and to design appropriate and holistic programs that can address food security and nutrition in a sustainable manner, there is a need to analyze these underlying structural inequalities. Food systems, and the social relations that shape them, provide an entry point for exploring structural issues such as access to land and other resources needed to grow, collect, or hunt food; the traditions and cultural practices of growing, preparing, and eating food; and the relationships and power dynamics between various actors and institutions involved in the production, processing, and consumption of food. Food also plays an important role in wellbeing, in Indigenous, non-Indigenous, and urban contexts, and as such there is renewed attention on revitalizing local food systems, alternative agricultural practices and local, traditional, and Indigenous knowledge systems.

The aim of this paper is three-fold. First, we provide insights into the structural conditions that result in social injustice and inequality, and show how these threaten Indigenous Peoples’ food systems and diets. This includes an analysis of gender-based discrimination as a key

\(^1\) The term Indigenous Peoples emerged in the 1970s out of the American Indian Movement and the Canadian Indian Brotherhood. Among other meanings it has been “an umbrella enabling communities and peoples to come together, transcending their own colonised contexts and experiences, in order to learn, share, plan, organise and struggle collectively for self-determination on the global and local stages” (Smith 2012:7).
structural determinant of inequality, and critical reflection on how the concepts of gender and
gender equality are being understood among Indigenous Peoples. We further reflect on the
concept of matriarchy, and present the interlinking frameworks of feminist political ecology
and modern matriarchal studies, as they offer holistic and differentiated approaches for
analyzing underlying structural issues of power and inequality.

Second, we explore methodological considerations for research, and share different
perspectives on ways of coming to know, analyze, and understand the underlying structural
issues relating to Indigenous Peoples’ food systems and nutrition. We provide an overview of
alternative ways of knowledge production in the context of Indigenous Peoples’ food
systems, and discuss what they mean for engagement and partnership with Indigenous
Peoples and Indigenous researchers in support of these systems. It is our intent to describe
how research can be guided to meaningfully study Indigenous Peoples’ food systems,
nutrition, and gender and to lead community action to improve food security and wellbeing
within communities of Indigenous Peoples.

Third, we outline some recent initiatives that promote sustainable and just food systems,
namely Indigenous Peoples’ rights, the right to food, and food sovereignty.

Indigenous Peoples’ food systems, nutrition and gender: underlying structural
conditions

Food insecurity and malnutrition: a result of loss of land and traditional ways of life

Globally, we observe increasing and overlapping levels of malnutrition, including under- and
overnutrition, and related non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Worldwide, 795 million
people are not able to meet their minimum dietary energy needs (FAO 2015a), 2 billion
people lack essential minerals and vitamins (FAO 2013), and over 2 billion people are
overweight or obese (WHO 2015). Indigenous Peoples are affected disproportionately by
these trends, and experience significant health disparities compared to non-Indigenous
peoples with regard to undernutrition (stunting and wasting) and overweight (obesity and related chronic diseases) (Anderson et al. 2016; Kuhnlein et al. 2013:285), diabetes (World Diabetes Foundation 2012) and other NCDs.

Evidence from around the world paints a devastating picture. Some First Nations peoples in Canada suffer from extreme deprivation and Aboriginal people are more likely to be food insecure (Elliott et al. 2012; Riches & Tarasuk 2014:44-45). The Maori in New Zealand are disproportionately affected by poverty and widening income gaps, and low-income households are more likely to buy less nutritious, highly processed, poor quality, and calorie-dense food because it is cheaper and more filling, resulting in inadequate and inconsistent diets that contribute to higher rates of obesity and risk of nutrition-related diseases (O’Brien 2014:106-107). In Guatemala, stunting figures are almost twice as high among Indigenous children under five years of age (65.9%) compared to non-Indigenous children (36.2%) (Fukuda-Parr 2016:86). In Australia, compared with the general population, five times as many Indigenous Australians ran out of food in the previous twelve months (Booth 2014:17, citing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework 2008 report).

In the USA, food insecurity among Native Americans is two to three times higher than for non-Native American households (Poppendieck 2014:180, citing Gundersen 2008).

Widening income gaps and persistent and growing poverty, changing livelihoods, and the impact of climate change and degradation of natural resources disproportionately affect Indigenous populations (Silvasti & Riches 2014:195; O’Brien 2014:103), as do barriers to education and health care (World Diabetes Forum 2012). Access to traditional foods is limited, with the resulting nutrition transition, prevalence of food deserts, and high food prices in rural and remote communities compromising food security even further (Silvasti & Riches 2014:195).

The reasons for these stark disparities are multifaceted and are embedded in histories of colonization and land dispossession that have disconnected Indigenous Peoples from their land and systems of knowledge transmitted through generations. The livelihoods, food and
nutrition security, health, and cultural and spiritual heritage of many Indigenous Peoples are tied to their relationship with land. Access to land and other natural resources therefore has been, and is, the central issue for Indigenous Peoples, yet interference by state and corporate actors continues to dispossess Indigenous Peoples of their lands and self-determination, violating their right to adequate food and nutrition (Bellows & Jenderedjian 2016:129; see also Damman et al. 2013:267ff). An example that received broader public attention is the case of the Indigenous Guarani-Kaiowá of Mato Grosso do Sul (MS) in Brazil, comprising approximately 30,000 people who have been deprived of their ancestral lands since the 1970s when soy and sugarcane monocultures were planted. An agreement was signed between the Federal Public Ministry (MPF) and FUNAI (the National Foundation for the Support of the Indigenous Peoples) in 2007, with the Government committing to demarcate 36 lands of the Guarani-Kaiowá by 2009. However, this was not put into action yet, and the Guarani-Kaiowá continue to be threatened with eviction, and their rights - including health, food and nutrition, access to water, education, safety, equality, and social security - are violated (FIAN International 2016).

We illustrate three common misperceptions and related violations of rights with regard to development, land use, and women in agriculture.

a) Loss of land is often concealed under the veil of “development”

The New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition in Africa (NAFSN) is a large public-private partnership (PPP) launched in 2012, aimed at leveraging private investment in agriculture to improve food security and nutrition in Sub-Saharan Africa. One of the key activities supported under NAFSN is land titling. However, this often does not lead to tenure security for local communities. Instead it puts small-scale food producers and Indigenous Peoples, especially women, at even greater risk of vulnerability and insecurity, since these groups often lack legal recognition over their land rights. Placing the focus on land titling (or certification of land) to address tenure rights, without taking into account customary or communal tenure systems, results in “inadequate land deals, expropriation without consent
or lack of fair compensation, especially in the context of poor governance and incomplete land reform” (European Parliament 2016:22).

b) Ownership of land is male-biased

Gender rights typically conflict with traditional authority and customary laws that treat women as minors. This results in gender-based disparities in property rights (Quisumbing 2010), with women being less likely to have formal land titles (Deere et al. 2013). Land titling programs can therefore decrease women’s tenure security if they fail to acknowledge the different rights of women and men under customary systems (Meinzen-Dick et al. 2014, citing Lastarria-Cornhiel 1997 and Mwangi 2007). Furthermore, as Daley & Pallas (2014) argue, securing women’s rights through robust legislation and enforcement is important, but these measures alone will not be sufficient to guarantee that corporations and elites will restrain themselves from violating rights, or from persisting exploitative, environmentally harmful practices. As women lose access to land through land deals, food insecurities of women and their families may worsen, as was shown by Bezner Kerr (2005) in the case of Malawi. This potentially disempowers women, increasing their risk of being exposed to gender-based violence (Bellows and Jenderedjian 2016).

c) So-called “underutilized” land serves investors’ interests

Investors and local elites seeking to legitimize large-scale land grabs for industrial agriculture or biofuel production ignore or conceal the use of land by Indigenous Peoples, pastoralists, or small-scale farmers for purposes that are often highly productive and promote a variety of crops, plants, animals, insects, and birds (African Biodiversity Network & The Gaia Foundation, 2015:19). Women in particular depend on land seen as “marginal” for alternative and supplementary livelihood activities, such as growing or gathering food, or collecting firewood or building material (Doss et al. 2014). As Tsikata & Yaro (2014) show in research on land deals in Northern Ghana, women were not compensated for loss of access to land they had used for farming, fuel wood, shea and other trees, exacerbating gender inequalities
in land tenure and agrarian production systems, with severe impacts on households and the
local economy.

Land is thus an often-unrecognized resource issue that has a gendered dimension, underpinning food, environmental, and migration-related insecurities (De Schutter 2011). In the following sections, we outline gender-based discrimination in the context of food and nutrition insecurity, and link it to the discourse on gender, emerging feminist approaches, and matriarchal studies.

**Gender inequality: a key structural determinant of food and nutrition insecurity**

Globally women are disproportionally affected by hunger, representing 60% of those who are undernourished (ECOSOC 2007, para. 14) and 70% of those living in poverty (World Bank/FAO/IFAD 2009). The reasons are rooted in structural conditions. Women have less access than men to resources such as land, agricultural inputs, credit, education, extension, and other services. They are largely responsible for the gender-determined labor- and time-intensive chores of collecting water, firewood or other fuels, cooking, and taking care of children and sick people, and they increasingly carry the workload of agricultural tasks with men migrating for work (FAO 2016:xii). These structural conditions refer to two types of discrimination or violence: *structural violence*, a process aligned with social injustice that “is built into [social] structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances” (Galtung 1969:171), and *cultural violence*, defined by those aspects of structural or direct violence that are legitimised under the terms of cultural practice, tradition and institution (Galtung 1990:291).

Gender inequality intersects with ethnic and geographical divides (Fukuda-Parr 2016), and Indigenous women in diverse rural and urban contexts are often exposed to one or more types of violence or discrimination. According to Goettner-Abendroth (2012:xxii), “patriarchal colonisation of indigenous peoples has ignored and made invisible the significance of indigenous women in general”. Kuhnlein et al. (2013) provide evidence from case studies on
Indigenous Peoples’ food systems and wellbeing showing that Indigenous women are disproportionately affected by health disparities. Fukuda-Parr (2016:86) reports that Indigenous women in Guatemala are three times more likely to die during pregnancy and childbirth than non-Indigenous women, and only 14% of Indigenous girls in rural areas complete primary school compared to 36% of non-Indigenous girls. This negatively affects both the women and the wider community, and impacts food and nutrition security, health, income, and livelihood outcomes in general, in a process of “horizontal oppression” (Grey 2004:13, citing Martin-Hill, 2003:108), or “trickle-down patriarchy” (Grey 2004:13, citing Jaimes Guerrero, 2003:58). Women’s nutritional health is closely linked “to the health of the social collectivities around them, both through the biology of reproduction and lactation and through their sociocultural-based labours on behalf of the food and nutritional well-being of families and communities” (Bellows & Jenderedjian 2016:128).

These structural conditions severely compromise women’s self-determination and human rights. While it is crucial that women achieve equal participation at all levels, it should be recognized that this often comes at the cost of overburdening women, adding to their already high workloads. Women might further face violence and discrimination from their partner, families and social communities, a fact that is often hidden, hardly acknowledged, or adequately planned for in programs geared at women’s empowerment (Bellows & Jenderedjian 2016). Women’s empowerment requires the empowerment of men as well, with conceptualizations of gender still being biased towards “being about women”. Failing to address issues of masculinity and changing male roles will perpetuate gender stereotypes (Lemke & Bellows 2016). We further caution not to romanticize Indigenous and traditional societies, as this perpetuates existing injustices and human rights violations being justified as part of “culture” or “tradition”.

The following section will address different understandings of concepts such as gender equality, in the context of past and emerging feminist approaches and modern matriarchal studies.
Analyzing power and inequality: feminist approaches and matriarchal studies

Among Indigenous Peoples gender terminology is controversial. Grey (2004) affirms that the concept of “gender harmony” (p. 13) is being used instead of gender equality to mean gender balance and a complementarity between men and women who engage in mutual partnerships. Feminist approaches have been criticized by Indigenous Peoples for generalizing that all women share universal characteristics, and that all women everywhere and in all times have been oppressed (Carlassare 1994; Smith 2012:168) despite evidence that Indigenous societies were not “oppressively patriarchal prior to the experience of colonialism” (Grey 2004:11). As feminism originated and continued largely in the predominantly white feminists’ movement, Indigenous women have expressed that this feminism does not represent them or their struggles and histories of colonialism. It is striking, as Grey (2004:16) notes, that issues such as “Native sovereignty, land rights and reparations […] for massive dispossessions; displacements; and acts of violence, abuse and ethnocide” have been missing on the feminist agenda. Monture-Okanee (1992) cautions against the full acceptance of mainstream feminism or analysis because it raises barriers to the “scope of social change that is defined as desirable” (p.253) to Aboriginal women, meaning the self-determination and empowerment they experienced within their intact societies prior to colonization.

A more nuanced perspective is offered by the analytical frame of intersectionality that originates from feminist sociological theory and was first established by Crenshaw (1989). Intersectionality illuminates intersecting relations of power and inequality and pays attention to diverse and interlocking processes of differentiation such as race, class, and gender, as well as other axes of difference and social hierarchy such as sexual orientation, age, and socioeconomic status. These diverse forms of oppression are part of an overarching matrix of domination, a term coined by Black feminist scholar Collins (2000). Collins further claimed that Black women’s experiences of multiple overlapping or intersecting systems of
oppression provide insights also for other social groups and individuals. However, intersectionality has been criticized for not paying enough attention to the ways gender intersects with race, with calls for “a postcolonial intersectional approach that situates patriarchy and racialization as entangled in postcolonial genealogies of nation building and development” (Sundberg 2016, citing Mollett & Faria, 2013, no page).

A subfield that has emerged from and advanced earlier feminist approaches is feminist political ecology (FPE), a discipline that draws on intersectionality as a primary method. FPE integrates feminist analysis with ecological issues, arguing that they must be understood and analyzed in relation to the political economy (Sundberg 2016). Rocheleau et al. (1996) proposed FPE as an integrative conceptual framework that avoids essentialist (i.e., one-dimensional and universalizing) constructions of women found in some ecofeminist work. While FPE focuses on everyday experiences and practices of women as actors whose labor takes place in social spheres that historically have been excluded from analysis, revealing gendered environmental risks, rights, and responsibilities, FPE also connects with other levels such as the nation or global political economy (Sundberg 2016). FPE endeavors to overcome the limitations of previous feminist approaches, as it expands the perspective to include a political economy approach, which is crucial if one wants to get to the root causes of inequality and uncover power relations.

A framework that overlaps with feminist approaches, and that developed in the 1970s within a Western feminist context, is modern matriarchal studies (Goettner-Abendroth 2012:33). Goettner-Abendroth holds that modern matriarchal studies provide “a change of perspective so radical that research on matriarchy […] could be labelled a new socio-cultural science, one which includes a new paradigm” (2012:34). It was hampered by poor methodological approaches that led to many misperceptions about matriarchy that still exist today. Matriarchy is not the converse of patriarchy, where men control and hold the power. Quite differently, according to Goettner-Abendroth (2012:xv), “[m]atriarchies are true gender-equalitarian societies; this applies to the social contribution of both sexes - and even though women are at the centre, this principle governs the social functioning and freedom of both
sexes.” This conceptualization of gender resonates with Indigenous interpretations (Grey 2004).

Goettner-Abendroth provides the following definition of matriarchal societies, differentiating four structural levels (2012:xxv):

1) **economic**: balanced economy; women distribute goods; economic mutuality; similar characteristics to a gift economy (*societies of economic mutuality, based on the circulation of gifts*);

2) **social**: matrilinear kinship; characteristics are matrilinearity and matrilocality within a framework of gender equality (*non-hierarchical, horizontal societies of matrilineal kinship*);

3) **political**: based on consensus; the clan house is the basis of decision-making locally and regionally; represented by an (often) male delegate; strict consensus process gives rise to gender equality and equality in the entire society (*egalitarian societies of consensus*); and

4) **spiritual and cultural**: based on an all-permeating spiritual attitude that regards the whole world as divine, originating in the Feminine Divine (*sacred societies and cultures of the Feminine Divine*).

As Goettner-Abendroth confirms, matriarchal societies have gone through many changes and “these cultures are threatened with disappearance in our times” (2012:xxii). It therefore has to be explored carefully whether the inherent principles of matriarchal societies still exist in specific contexts, and how they might have changed due to political, economic, social, cultural and environmental transitions. Goettner-Abendroth lays out the following vision: “[M]odern Matriarchal Studies [...] form a critical and liberating research process with a respectful, healing and educational potential [and this could] empower feminist women and alternative men in western societies, as well as indigenous peoples on every continent, to
engage fully in effective political alliances against local and global patriarchal domination” (2012:xxiii).

The above elaborations show that the interlinking frameworks of feminist political ecology and modern matriarchal studies provide a differentiated and holistic perspective that takes into account and reveals complex and interconnected economic, social, cultural, environmental, and political processes and relations, and the underlying issues of power and inequality within these societal structures.

In the following section, we offer a reflection on methodological approaches that enable us to analyze, understand and challenge the structural inequalities that were laid out here. We draw on examples that bridge different worldviews and diverse research approaches, illustrating engagement and partnership with Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous researchers in support of their food systems and to promote their wellbeing.

**Methodological considerations for research on Indigenous Peoples’ food systems**

**Challenging power structures and mainstream scientific knowledge production**

From an Indigenous perspective, research has historically brought few if any benefits to Indigenous Peoples but has subjected them to multiple harms. This is reflected in the frequently quoted statement by Smith (2012, p.1), “[t]he word itself, ‘research’, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful.”

In order to address the role research has played in past and present injustices, a growing body of literature on decolonizing and Indigenous methodologies has emerged, challenging existing power structures and ways of knowledge production. Decolonizing methodologies focus on building the self-determination of communities, involving research that values
Indigenous knowledge and methodologies. Tuck & Yang (2012:1) emphasize that decolonization means “repatriation of Indigenous land and life; it is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools”. They further caution that decolonization cannot be easily added onto or adopted by other frameworks, “even if they are critical […] anti-racist […] justice frameworks” (p.3), but decolonization “offers a different perspective to human and civil rights based approaches to justice, an unsettling one, rather than a complementary one” (Tuck & Yang, 2012:36).

Calls to challenge and transform the dominant knowledge system in academia - one based on a positivist worldview, framed as independent and neutral, but largely excluding those who are marginalized - are not new. Participatory action research (PAR), having emerged from the 1970s onwards mainly in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, has been based on the Freirean theme (Freire 1970; Freire 1974) that “poor and exploited people can and should be enabled to analyze their own reality” and seek to induce social and economic change (Chambers 1997:106). Chambers (1997:205) cautions that while Indigenous knowledge has been undervalued and neglected and should therefore be privileged and empowered this “should not lead to an opposite neglect of scientific knowledge […]. The key is to know whether, where and how the two knowledges can be combined, with modern science as servant not master, and serving not those who are central, rich and powerful, but those who are peripheral, poor and weak, so that all gain.”

More recently, Pimbert (2006:16-17) has called for transforming knowledge and ways of knowing: “[w]e must actively develop more autonomous and participatory ways of knowing to produce knowledge that is ecologically literate, socially just and relevant to context. The whole process should lead to the democratization of research, diverse forms of co-inquiry based on specialist and non-specialist knowledge, an expansion of horizontal networks for autonomous learning and action, and more transparent oversight.” The landmark International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development report (2009) clearly stated that a paradigm shift is needed, not only with
regard to our current conventional model of agricultural production that fails to address hunger and food insecurity, but also with regard to current research approaches that focus mainly on technological solutions, calling for more participatory research approaches and for more strongly integrating local and Indigenous knowledges.

However, despite calls for this paradigm shift, there are obstacles in the path. Anderson & McLachlan (2015) acknowledge that building and strengthening "the transformative research paradigm through power-equalizing knowledge mobilization processes that give voice to actors typically marginalized in knowledge transfer processes" remains a huge challenge (2015:2). It requires critical reflection about "the way we might be […] complicit and subversive of these hierarchies [and further requires us] to act collectively and politically to challenge the institutions and discourses that limit the potential for social transformation" (19). Here Anderson and McLachlan are referring among other issues to current academic practices of impact evaluation, and its link to resource allocation, funding, and promotion.

Similarly, Bellows & Lemke (2016) remark that the collaboration with communities and social movement actors necessitates that academia reconsider its role in the production of knowledge, and they ask: “Who actually has knowledge? Who needs funds for the research programme? How should the knowledge be interpreted? How should it be used for social justice? Where should it be disseminated? Who should share in the credit and royalties of publication?” (28). Or, as Sundberg (2016:no page) states, we should “undertake research […] from a position of affinity as opposed to identity [which entails] situating ourselves and research participants in webs of power and identifying research questions on the basis of issues of shared concern, such as neoliberalization, environmental degradation, and imaginative geographies of distance and difference […] towards research that is accountable to the many ways in which scholars are entangled in and complicit with the very webs of power, privilege, and oppression they seek to analyze.”
Bridging Indigenous and Western approaches in food, health, and sustainability research

There are examples of good practice in bridging Indigenous and Western approaches in research on food systems, nutrition, and health. This good practice has been documented in previous research conducted by members of this IUNS Task Force on Traditional, Indigenous, and Cultural Food and Nutrition (Kuhnlein et al. 2013:286), and is evident from the case studies presented in this Special Issue, which show how knowledge sharing and collaborative decision-making can be achieved in participatory processes with Indigenous communities and academic staff. In all research carried out by this Task Force, guidelines on conducting research with Indigenous Peoples in a collaborative and ethically appropriate manner were applied, and key principles for participatory research management adopted (Sims & Kuhnlein 2003; see also Council of Canadian Academies 2014:xx-xxi).

Fundamental to respectful research are relationships. As Fyre Jean Graveline states (1998:52, quoted by Kovach, 2009:14), “we learn in relationship to others”, and “knowing is a process of self-in-relation”. We offer the principles of respect, responsibility, and relationships to guide Indigenous and Western researchers in food studies and nutrition. These values are emphasised by Kovach (2009:129): “[…] we have to find a way back to core values of what is responsible, respectful and kind […]”. Although this statement is situated in the context of Indigenous Inquiry and “tribal knowledges”, it equally applies to Western “knowledge seekers” who engage with their research partners driven by a greater vision to achieve wellbeing for all and social justice.

We highlight two Indigenous theoretical concepts that have emerged in recent years: “two-eyed seeing” and “ethical space”. These have the following key characteristics: (a) they are based on the core principles of respect, responsibility and relationships; and (b) they provide a progressive way forward and a vision to overcome divides between different worldviews, enabling the building of relationships among researchers and Indigenous Peoples for the benefit of all.
Vukic et al. (2012) show how these concepts can shape the conduct of research and enable the co-creation of knowledge, by involving and honoring Western and Indigenous ways of knowing. The concept of two-eyed seeing was introduced by Hatcher, Bartlett, Marshall & Marshall (2009) and Iwama, Marshall, Marshall & Bartlett (2009). It refers to “the ability to see with one eye the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing and with the other eye the strengths of Euro-Western ways of knowing, and using both of these eyes together” (Vukic et al. 2012:148), and is grounded in the assumption that there is a need for relationships of trust and respect (149). This concept was co-created by and is based on the experiences of Albert Marshall of the Mi’kmaq Nation, who was forced to spend most of his childhood and youth in an Indian Residential School, an experience that influenced him in his “lifelong quest to connect with and understand both the world he was removed from and the world he was forced into” (Vukic et al. 2012:148, referring to Hatcher et al. 2009). “Ethical space” is a concept developed by Willie Ermine, a Cree member of the faculty at First Nations University of Canada. Similar to the concept of two-eyed seeing, it means “creating space for dialogue and discussion between people holding different worldviews […] inclusive of the dominant society and local contextual Indigenous knowledge systems, in order to move forward with actions that promote Aboriginal health and reduce disparities” (Vukic et al. 2012:149).

In a concrete example, Vukic et al. (2012) show in the context of Aboriginal health research in Canada how a two-eyed seeing (TES) approach “acknowledges the entrenched power imbalances” (149) within the dominant health care system, which “has historically suppressed Indigenous worldviews and practice” (149). TES established “relationships based on mutuality and different understandings” (149) between nurse researchers and Indigenous groups with a primary focus on Aboriginal peoples’ priorities regarding health issues in their communities. Vukic et al. (2012:148) further illustrate how community-based participatory research and the principles of ownership, control, access, and possession provide methodological approaches that correspond with Indigenous knowledge systems.
In research on traditional food access and food security in urban Vancouver, British Columbia, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal partners engaged in culturally appropriate and respectful collaboration, showing how traditional knowledge and ways of knowing can be bridged into food security research (Elliot et al. 2012:2). The authors selected the story/dialogue method stemming from narrative inquiry in qualitative research methods, as it relates closely to practices and ways of knowing in many Aboriginal cultures. This method follows the structure established by Labonte and Feather (1996): 1) participants share a story from their personal experience in a small group; 2) the group then asks and discusses four categories of questions: “what”; “why”; “so what”; “now what”; 3) key discussion points are captured for each set of questions, and are then organized into categories or themes; 4) a summary statement (“theory note”) is created for each category; and 5) a comprehensive summary statement (“composite theory note”) links all themes. After review by the Advisory Committee the story/dialogue method was adapted to become less structured and academic. Trained facilitators guided the discussion to deeper levels of analysis (Elliot et al. 2012:3). The authors conclude that building respectful relationships and creating the space for Aboriginal perspectives in the research design, implementation, and analysis were conditions for the success of the project that brought to the fore the interconnectedness of local and global factors impacting on access to traditional food and food security, and revealed challenges and possible solutions to improve the food security of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. The research led to various concrete initiatives by participants to promote traditional foods (Elliot et al. 2012:7-8).

Even though Indigenous worldviews and knowledge are gaining recognition, the dominant Eurocentric education system perpetuates oppression (Hart 2010:4-5). As Smith (2012:5) states, “[m]any indigenous researchers have struggled individually to engage with the disconnections that are apparent between the demands of research, on one side, and the realities they encounter amongst their own and other indigenous communities, with whom they share lifelong relationships, on the other side.” Hart (2010:1) reflects on this struggle: “[w]hile at one time, we, as Indigenous peoples, were faced with leaving our indigeneity at
the door when we entered the academic world, several of us are now actively working to
eNSure our research is not only respectful, or ‘culturally sensitive’, but is also based in
approaches and processes that are parts of our cultures.”

As Johnson et al. (2016:3) write in a recent special issue of *Sustainability Sciences*:
“Learning to listen to each other’s concerns and proposals with respect, and openness to
change is an important element of the dialogue between sustainability science and
Indigenous science.” Reflecting on a workshop with Indigenous academics, community
scholars, and non-Indigenous academics entitled “Weaving Indigenous and Sustainability
Sciences to Diversify our Methods”, they caution that power differences mean that the
“integration” of knowledge systems often results in “mining” Indigenous knowledges for the
purpose of Western science, without a deeper understanding of their context and meaning
(Johnson et al. 2016:6). They suggest using instead the term “bridging” knowledge systems
to respect the integrity of each knowledge system, and emphasize that an understanding of
both the local context, as well as broader frameworks and theories are important. As Kovach
(2009:29) puts it, “how we make room to privilege both, while also bridging the epistemic
differences, is not going to be easy”.

With regard to potential future alliances in possible strategic partnerships between non-
Indigenous and Indigenous women, and a possible bridge across the divide of the two
emancipatory political movements, namely feminism and decolonization, Grey (2004:19)
concludes that this “will depend on whether or not non-Native feminists are truly prepared to
equally value Native perspectives, prioritize Indigenous issues and work in these areas […] It
will also depend on an ongoing evaluation of the applicability of feminist theory and practice
in the service of Aboriginal goals”.

**Initiatives advocating social change: indigenous peoples’ rights, right to food,**
**food sovereignty**

In the face of incredible challenges, Indigenous Peoples are resilient and finding ways to
adapt to changing conditions, and to ensure the vitality of their food systems and the health
of future generations. Many Indigenous Peoples are engaged in work to revitalize food
sovereignty in their traditional territories. In recent years, several global initiatives were
started and reports produced, in collaboration across sectors and disciplines, engaging in
wide-ranging consultations with governments, academia, civil society and other actors (see
for example IAASTD 2009; HRC 2010; HRC 2011; 2030 Agenda for Sustainable
Development, IPES-Food 2016). Most of these reports highlight the importance of local and
Indigenous knowledge, agroecology, and women’s contributions for the necessary shift in
direction of our agriculture and food systems, toward more environmentally sustainable and
socially just modes of production and consumption. There is further a call for stronger
governance and human rights in programming and policy at both national and international
levels.

Human rights law is an important tool for work on Indigenous People’s food systems. The
right to food is recognized in international human rights law, as enshrined in the 1966
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR 1966), and the
General Comment 12 to the ICESCR (CESCR 1999). The right to food entails that (a) food is
available at national and regional level; (b) individuals have sufficient access to food,
meaning that they have the means and resources to either produce or buy their own food, or,
in cases of illness, conflict, natural disaster or other forces that prevent people from feeding
themselves, that the State provides food through social assistance; and (c) food is adequate,
which means that it has to entail all nutrients required for a healthy and active life at all
stages of the life cycle; that it is safe for human consumption and free from adverse
substances; and culturally appropriate (CESCR 1999).

For Indigenous Peoples, the human right to food is inextricably linked to access to land.
Damman et al. (2013) provide a comprehensive overview of human rights implications of
Indigenous Peoples’ food systems in the previous volume published by this IUNS Task
Force, with Indigenous Peoples’ collective rights being reflected in the United Nations
Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007), ILO 169 (1989) on
Indigenous and Tribal People, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
(ICCPR 1966) article 27 and its General Comment 23 (OHCHR, 1994). These rights include the collective right to own and use their land, territories and resources, their right to self-determination on their land and territories, and their right to prior consultation and to free, prior and informed consent in matters that may affect them. The right to food is contextualized within Indigenous Peoples’ relationship to land, and is further formulated as a collective instead of an individual right. If access to land is denied and therefore to the food from that land, Indigenous Peoples’ culture will dissolve (Damman et al. 2013:263). This is articulated in the preamble of the Declaration of Atitlán (IITC, 2002):

“In agreement that the content of the Right to Food of Indigenous Peoples is a collective right based on our special spiritual relationship with Mother Earth, our lands and territories, environment, and natural resources that provide our traditional nutrition; underscoring that the means of subsistence of Indigenous Peoples nourishes our cultures, languages, social life, worldview, and especially our relationship with Mother Earth; emphasizing that the denial of the Right to Food for Indigenous Peoples not only denies us our social organization, our cultures, traditions, languages, spirituality, sovereignty, and total identity; it is a denial of our collective indigenous existence…”

The food sovereignty movement promotes the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems (Forum for Food Sovereignty 2007). However, as Desmarais & Whittman (2014) point out, current interpretations of food sovereignty that largely focus on agriculture-based local food systems as an alternative to globalised industrial agriculture are being questioned by Indigenous food sovereignty activists, as these interpretations are rooted in a Western context and do not fully encapsulate the perspective of Indigenous Peoples. Faced with the ongoing pressures of colonization, and the resulting huge and disproportionate challenges with regard to food insecurity and diet-related health issues among Indigenous Peoples, special attention has to be placed on their traditional food practices, including fishing, hunting and gathering, and
networks, and these have to be honored, valued and protected (Desmarais & Whittman 2014:1165; see also Grey & Patel 2015). Further, tensions arose between proponents of the right to food sovereignty and the right to food among actors who are often engaged together in the global food movement, questioning current political, economic and social structures, challenging the politics and power structures of the dominant agri-food model, and foregrounding self-determination (Claeys 2015:89-90), a core concept of Indigenous Peoples’ rights, the right to food sovereignty, and the right to food. The main reason for these tensions is the critique by the food sovereignty movement of a top-down approach (“from above master frame”) seen in the right to food movement, as opposed to a bottom-up approach (“from below master frame”). Claeys terms the latter “reclaiming control”, resembling core values of Indigenous Peoples, such as grounding food production and consumption in the local, social, cultural, and historical context; autonomy of production and consumption; and control over land and territories and natural resources (Claeys 2015:87). While it is useful to apply a human rights framework to Indigenous Peoples’ food systems, there are conceptual limitations. Human rights instruments are social constructs and therefore reflect social conflicts, including the use and abuse of power, and this prevents them fully addressing the structural root causes of hunger and malnutrition, resulting in reductionist solutions that only address symptoms (Valente, Suárez-Franco & Córdova Montes 2016:344). We join Valente, Suárez-Franco & Córdova Montes in calling for an expanded concept of the human right to food and nutrition, which, in order to be understood and fully utilized, must be connected to other human rights, such as the right to health and the right to access to natural resources (2016:356), and must pay specific attention to groups (e.g., women, children, and Indigenous Peoples) that face discrimination that compromises their universal human rights. Similarly, in the context of gender equality and sustainable development Leach et al. (2015:7) argue that achieving gender equality will require the realization of all human rights, and this further requires challenging dominant institutions and forms of knowledge, wherein social mobilization and collective action play a crucial role.
Recent developments at legal and political levels have led to more direct participation of civil society actors in global food debates. The Committee on World Food Security (CFS) aims to be the “most inclusive international and intergovernmental platform for all stakeholders to work together in a coordinated way to ensure food security and nutrition for all” (CFS, n.d.).

As Lambek & Claeys (2016:783-784) note, the valuable contributions from civil society during the FAO-facilitated drafting of the Voluntary Guidelines for the progressive realization of the right to adequate food in the context of national food security contributed to the reform of the CFS in 2009. Additionally, it led to greater civil society participation and inclusion of other stakeholders, through the Civil Society Mechanism (CSM) representing eleven constituencies: smallholder family farmers; artisanal fisherfolk; herders and pastoralists; landless people; urban poor; agricultural and food workers; women; youth; Indigenous Peoples; consumers; and NGOs. An initiative that is indirectly linked to these broader developments was a meeting hosted by FAO in 2015 with representatives of Indigenous Peoples on “Indigenous food systems, agroecology and the Voluntary Guidelines on tenure”, as part of FAO’s recently adopted strategy toward approaches that include key stakeholders from academia, civil society, cooperatives and the private sector. Among the outcomes was the agreement to pursue the joint implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries, and Forests in the Context of National Food Security; to create an FAO working group on Indigenous food systems that includes Indigenous Peoples; and to pursue joint development and application of indicators relevant to Indigenous Peoples (FAO 2015b:7).

These recent developments provide hope. As Valente and Córdova Montes (2016:10) state: “The human rights framework clearly provides a set of tools for social movements and communities to hold governments to account on their human rights obligations and the need for these to be translated into a coherent set of public policies and programs. However, it is only through the continued demands and struggles by the people and their movements and organizations that this will happen”.
Conclusion

Research on Indigenous Peoples' food systems requires an analysis of the root causes of disparities experienced by Indigenous Peoples, through in-depth explorations of the respective historical, political, social, cultural, economic, and environmental contexts, and based on methodologically sound research and systematic definitions. Further, we have to critically reflect on our own interpretations of female and male roles within communities, as, according to Goettner-Abendroth (2012:xxix), we might see and judge them through the lens of patriarchy, which can easily lead to misinterpretations. It is therefore critical to understand how Indigenous Peoples themselves define their societies and the gender relations within them. The interlinking frameworks of feminist political ecology and modern matriarchal studies are of high relevance in research concerning Indigenous Peoples' food systems, as they offer a perspective that sheds light on underlying structural causes of inequality and power relations. Bridging Indigenous and Western research approaches, and collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, can create new ways of knowing to address the challenges posed to our food systems, and can guide Indigenous and Western researchers in food studies and nutrition.

Where do we move from here, in our attempt to bridge disciplinary and sectoral boundaries, to stay engaged in research and ask the "right" questions, and to work toward a greater vision of wellbeing for all? We return to the concepts of respect, responsibility, and relationship. Research has to value and respect the rights, worldviews, and everyday realities of our research partners. Research has to be responsible, first and foremost having meaning and purpose for the people we engage with in research. Research is built on relationships of trust, which can only be established over time. We as researchers should reveal our worldviews and motives for research, while acknowledging that part of the requirement and pressure of academic life is to generate funds and ultimately publish research. We should therefore prioritize the co-creation of knowledge and collaborative publication with our research partners. Keeping to these principles, and daring to be
challenged, we might be able to move forward and, in a humble way, contribute to transforming ways of knowing. Whether it is possible to bridge Indigenous and Western knowledge systems will always depend on individuals and their willingness to embrace this new trajectory.

**Key messages** (98 words)

- Meaningful research and community action for Indigenous Peoples’ food systems and wellbeing must be based on an understanding of both the broader historical, political, social, economic, cultural, and environmental conditions, and the local context.

- Respect, responsibility, and relationships are core values that should apply to all research and collaborations between Indigenous and Western researchers.

- Indigenous methodologies should receive equal weight in research. This requires critical reflection on conventional scientific knowledge production.

- Indigenous Peoples’ rights, right to food, and food sovereignty are progressive global frames that enable mobilization for more sustainable and just food systems.

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