



# HUNGER IN NUNAVUT

Local Food for Healthier Communities

Northern





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## **Executive Summary**

In Nunavut, a kilo of celery can cost \$10. Nearly 70 per cent of all households in Nunavut have trouble accessing enough affordable, nutritious food, and the number of families that have difficulty accessing food is nearly six times higher than for Canada as a whole.

In short, there is a serious problem in Nunavut that threatens individual and community health. While the situation is complex, one positive change can be made today. Helping the people of Nunavut access more local food is one way to tackle this problem in a way that is both nutritionally beneficial and culturally appropriate. Contrary to popular belief, a diet based on food harvested locally in Nunavut is nutritionally complete and has significant health benefits.

The consumption of local food in Nunavut can be increased by improving hunting capacity, food processing and distribution, and by increasing awareness about local foods. In consultation with Northern individuals and organizations, this Task Force report makes recommendations to help achieve these goals and ultimately improve food security in Nunavut.



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## Introduction

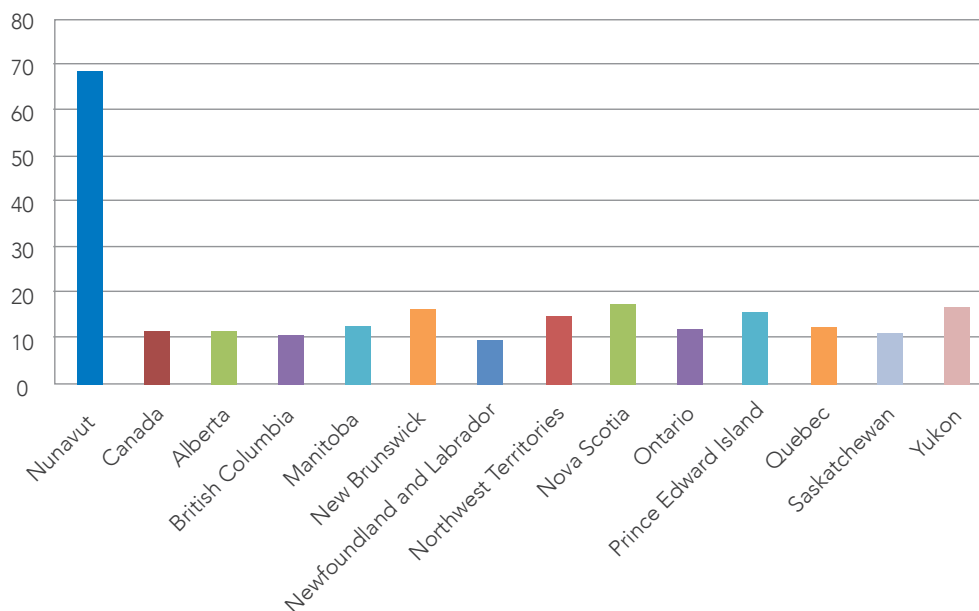
Food. It is a basic human need, a cultural touchstone, and an essential building block in the development of every stable, resilient and productive society.

Canada is a G8 country that ranks among one of the most livable in the world. But within its borders there is a serious problem of which most Canadians are unaware. Nearly seventy percent of all households in Nunavut do not have ready access to affordable, high-quality food—that is, they suffer from moderate to severe *food insecurity*.<sup>1</sup>

Even more troubling is the fact that according to the Inuit Health Survey, 70 per cent of Inuit preschoolers live in food insecure households.<sup>3</sup> In short, over two-thirds of people in Nunavut have trouble finding enough affordable, nutritious food. This is not acceptable.

The situation in Nunavut is in stark contrast to the rest of Canada:

### Household Food Insecurity in Canada by Province and Territory



Source: Statistics Canada, Community Health Survey 2011 and the Inuit Health Survey, 2007-2008.

While the reasons for food insecurity in Nunavut are complex - and the solutions equally complex - one positive change can be made today.

Improving access to local food sources will address the challenge of food insecurity in a way that is both nutritionally beneficial and culturally appropriate.

**Food security is defined as having physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.<sup>2</sup>**

**Local food, more commonly called country food by Nunavummiut, encompasses food sources native to Nunavut, such as artic char, caribou and muskox.**

*An important disclaimer:* none of the authors of this report is Nunavummiut. We have, however, consulted with community organizations, local, territorial and federal government agencies, nutritionists, public health and other experts (see Appendix 2) about the place of local food in addressing the vital issue of food security in Nunavut. We recognize that the people who are directly impacted by this complex issue have their own voices and a much more nuanced analysis; our purpose is simply to help amplify those voices and support key stakeholders working towards long-term solutions.

## Background

For centuries, Inuit survived in some of the harshest conditions on earth, living off the land and sharing food among their extended families. Showing one's children to follow the animals, to shoot a harpoon, to sew warm, waterproof clothes from sealskin meant the difference between life and death.

With the arrival first of explorers then of fur traders, Inuit and Europeans began to trade and influence one another. Inuit adopted guns and tools, while Europeans learned that Inuit clothing and hunting knowledge were the best ways to survive in an unforgiving climate. Dramatically different cultures coexisted, minimally troubling the other until the Cold War turned southern Canadian and American sights north for reasons of defence and sovereignty. Also in the 1950s, missionaries and conservationists became increasingly interested in the Arctic: the first, to convert and educate Inuit and the second to protect and preserve wildlife and natural resources.

Southern interest in the North had a devastating impact on Inuit culture, including the ability of Inuit to feed themselves: residential schools removed children from their families, erasing traditional knowledge; relocations into permanent communities sometimes thousands of kilometres away from familiar animal migration patterns marooned hunters; expectation of a sedentary lifestyle coupled with a lack of wage-based labour encouraged idleness, often leading to alcohol and other abuses.



One consequence of this history is that hunting is no longer an ordinary and expected part of every Inuk's life. As a result, Inuit today rely mainly on store-bought food, much of it high in salt, sugar, and unhealthy fats, shipped north at an astronomically high cost.

**The term Nunavummiut refers to all people - Inuit and not - inhabiting the territory of Nunavut. Of the 33,697 people living in Nunavut in 2012, 28,251 or 84 per cent were Inuit.**

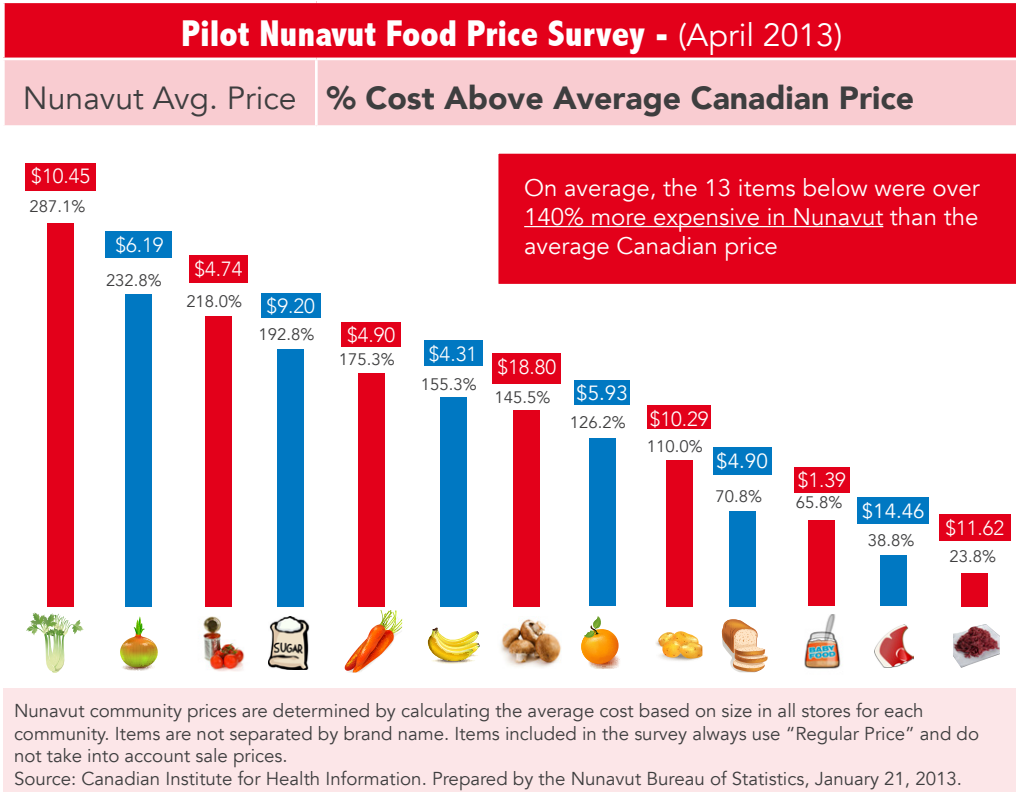
**“Even as a college student here in Iqaluit, surviving off the little money I make is hard when having to buy your own groceries.”**

— Feeding My Family Testimonial

A 2013 food price survey conducted by the Nunavut Bureau of Statistics found that, on average, food prices were over 140 per cent higher in Nunavut than in the rest of Canada.

What's more, most southern fruits and vegetables are foreign to Inuit culture and cuisine—and at times arrive in such poor quality in northern stores that they are often inedible.

One woman tells a heart-wrenching story of children eating at the dump: “My heart broke into pieces when I saw them eating at the dump [ , ] took them home and fed them good, told them next time when yr hungry come to my place...kid had tears and said thank-you softly.” – Feeding My Family Testimonial



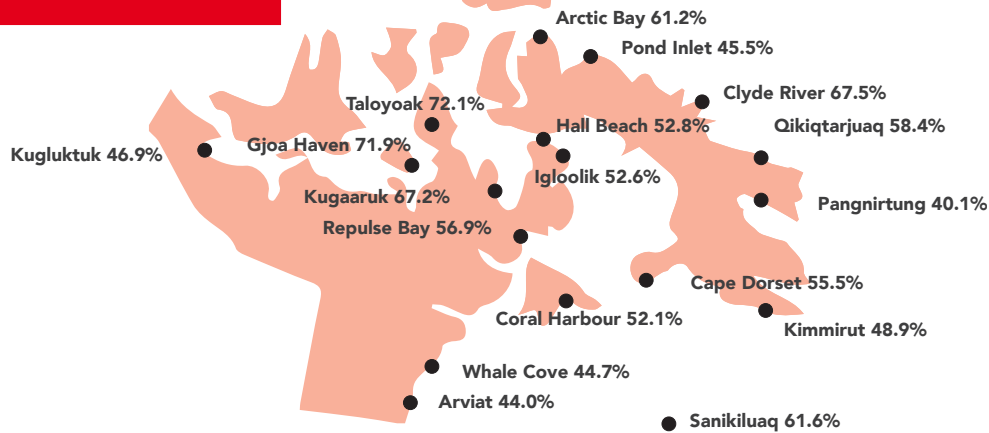
Many Nunavummiut are also living in poverty. Those most vulnerable to hunger are the poor (single mothers, large families, families on income-assistance), families without a hunter, people with addiction problems (gambling or substance abuse), and elders with limited pensions.<sup>4</sup>



## Social Assistance in Nunavut

Nunavut Communities with over 40 per cent of Residents Receiving Social Assistance (2011)

Over 40% of residents in 18 of Nunavut's 25 communities depend on Social Assistance



Social Assistance or income support is a program of last resort for Nunavummiut who, because of inability to obtain employment, loss of the principal family provider, illness, disability, age or any other cause cannot provide adequately for themselves and their dependents.

Source: Income Support Division, Department of Education, Government of Nunavut and Statistics Canada, Demography Division. Prepared by the Nunavut Bureau of Statistics, September 12, 2012.

Efforts to address food insecurity have been underway for decades, and both the federal and territorial governments have an important role to play in improving food security in Nunavut. Hunter support programs have been successfully written into the James Bay and Nunavik settlements, although attempts to include such a program in the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement failed.<sup>5</sup>

More recently, the federal Nutrition North program, which replaced the Food Mail program in 2011, aims to provide healthy grocery store foods in Nunavut communities, at lower cost. The program does little, however, to address the issue of access to local foods, an issue that has been taken up by the Nunavut Food Security Coalition.

Uniting territorial government departments, Inuit organizations, professional associations, and private companies, the Coalition will soon release an action plan that looks at various ways to end hunger in Nunavut.

The issue of food security also relates indirectly to Canada's sovereignty over Arctic lands and resources. While sovereignty has been traditionally understood in terms of a country's capability to defend its territory, it can also encompass a country's capacity to ensure healthy, viable communities within that territory. How can Canada maintain its sovereignty over the Arctic if Nunavummiut themselves are chronically hungry, with a multitude of negative health, social, and economic costs that impede the full development of northern communities?<sup>6</sup>

**“I haven’t had caribou meat in quite a while,” says Alexandra Ungalaq, an otherwise shy 25-year-old dishwasher from Igloolik, slipping another sliver of crimson caribou between her lips. “It makes me feel whole again.”** – Ian Brown, *"Magnetic North,"* The Globe and Mail, January 14, 2014



## Nutrition and Local Foods

The *Canada Food Guide* is commonly viewed as a definitive source of information on nutrition.<sup>7</sup> The guide encourages the consumption of grains, fruits, vegetables and dairy products as part of a nutritionally balanced daily diet. Yet these are all foods that have been historically scarce and are currently very expensive in the North.

Following the *Canada Food Guide* to the letter, Northern diets based on local foods appear to be nutritionally deficient, a premise that has been proven wrong.<sup>8</sup>

Historically, Northern people maintained a nutritionally viable lifestyle by consuming traditional, locally available food. Research has established that a diet based exclusively on local food sources can provide adequate levels of vitamins and nutrients, and is an excellent source of protein, healthy fat, and energy.<sup>9</sup>

Consuming even small amounts of local food has significant nutritional benefits and research has shown that those who consume traditional food have higher nutritional levels.

It is not surprising that the Government of Nunavut has written its own Food Guide, which recommends consumption of local foods and includes the statement, "All Country Food is Healthy."<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, the benefits of local food extend far beyond nutrition. Outdoor exercise, community-building and inter-generational knowledge transfer are all positive elements of traditional food harvesting.<sup>11</sup> Food sharing is a common practice in smaller Inuit communities and reflects historical and cultural norms while also helping to reduce chronic hunger.<sup>12</sup>



An increase in disease is often directly related to diet.<sup>13</sup> Among Nunavummiut, problems of mental health, obesity, diabetes, and dental health are at strikingly higher levels than in the general Canadian population.<sup>14</sup> A lack of essential nutrients are believed to play an important role in reducing resistance against disorders such as suicide, depression, attention deficit disorder, anxiety, and learning difficulties. Unhealthy foods, such as soda, chips and other so-called "junk food" have been associated with poor behavior in schools and may also decrease resistance against other diseases.

**One woman's view on hunger and school:  
"Kids going to sleep hungry wake up being hungry, and that becomes a habit and [they] start to miss out with the school, because they rather eat at a relative['s] then go to school, so they get left behind and start to feel hopeless...when they get so left behind they would drop out.**

— Feeding My Family Testimonial

In Nunavut, the most nutrient-dense food source is, without question, locally harvested food. In this report we are not advocating the removal of all southern foods from the Northern diet: historical changes in the Northern lifestyle and local food harvesting mean that southern food will remain. However, increasing the proportion of local food in the Northern diet will make Nunavummiut healthier and less hungry.<sup>15</sup>

## Barriers to Local Foods



Numerous barriers hinder access to local food in Nunavut communities including animal migratory patterns, changing environmental conditions, the time of year, and contaminants affecting the health of wildlife.

For example, hunters in Cambridge Bay cancelled last year's muskox hunt because the animals had traveled too far from the community, an uncontrollable occurrence that limited the availability of Muskox for both the community and for commercial sale.<sup>16</sup>

Notwithstanding these many challenges, other factors that currently limit access to local food are within community control. These relate to a community's capacity to hunt, process, and distribute local food.

### 1. Hunting Capacity

Hunting capacity in Nunavut communities depends on the number of hunters and the ability of those hunters to obtain the skills and equipment required to hunt successfully.

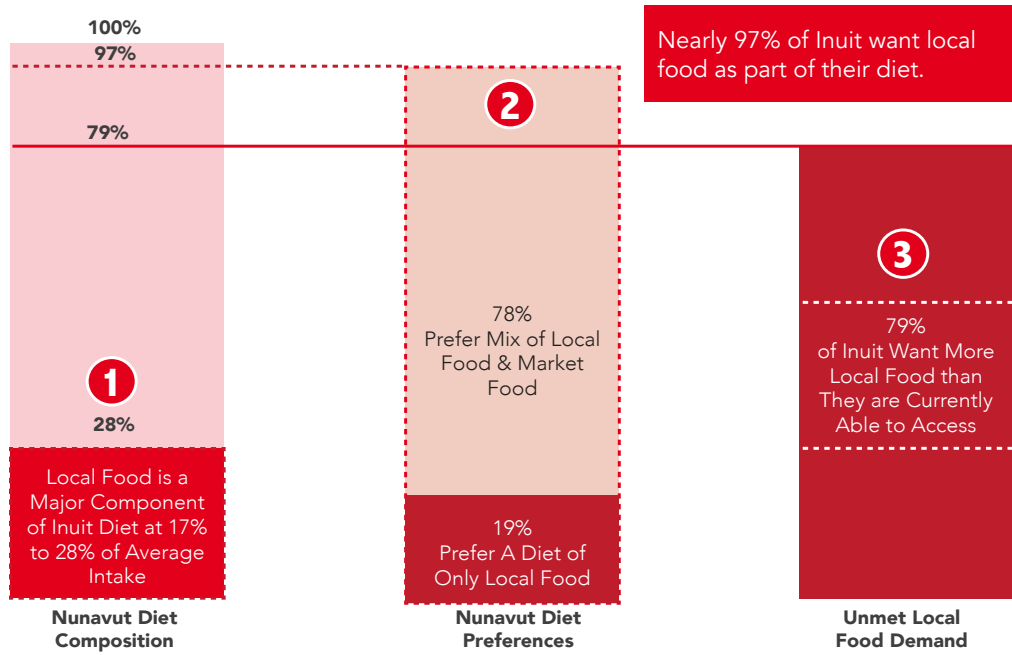
Most households (79 per cent) would prefer to eat more local food, which is unlikely unless one has a hunter at home. Not having an active hunter in the family increases the likelihood of hunger: of the 35 per cent of Nunavut households without an active hunter, 75 per cent were food insecure.<sup>17</sup>

**One Inuk illustrates the daily struggle: “... we now have a choice to either buy children’s needs or hunting equipment and supplies to hunt for food, today because of high cost of living even housing rent furniture etc..all income is [spent] on food... [We] sacrifice to go hungry for the baby” – Feeding My Family Testimonial**



Not only do hunters help their own families, they also help to reduce hunger elsewhere in their community: 74 per cent of households with extra local food share with family and friends who need it the most.<sup>18</sup>

## There is Demand for Local Food

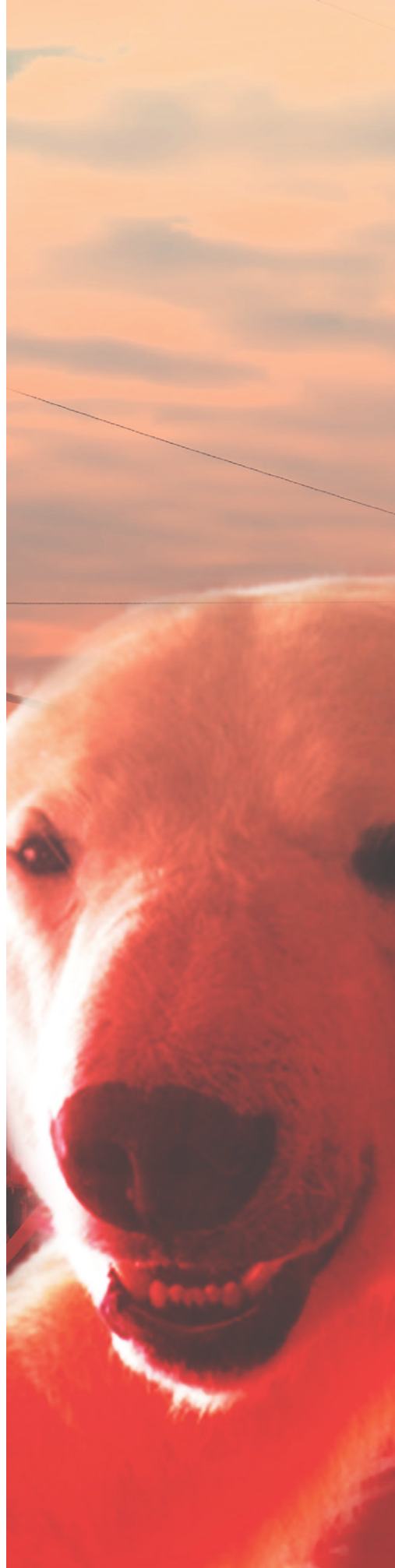


Note: Based on a survey of 1,038 households of self-reported Inuit in of the Kivalliq and Qikiqtaaluk in the summers of 2007 and 2008  
 Source: Renata Rosol, "Evaluating Food Security in Nunavut: Preliminary Results from the Inuit Health Survey," Master of Public Health Thesis, Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University, 2009.

Today, hunting is often only a part-time or weekend activity. As a result, hunters cannot travel far distances in search of game and they have fewer opportunities to hone their hunting skills. Younger generations lack the knowledge of their grandparents and have fewer learning opportunities.

In addition, the high price of shipping in the North and the fact that Nunavut is spread out over 25 fly-in communities means that hunting gear is expensive and often difficult to obtain.<sup>19</sup> An all-season hunting outfit can cost upwards of \$55,000—more than twice the average annual income in Nunavut. Notably, 87 per cent of food insecure households in Nunavut cited "not having enough money" as the primary reason for not being able to get local food.<sup>20</sup>

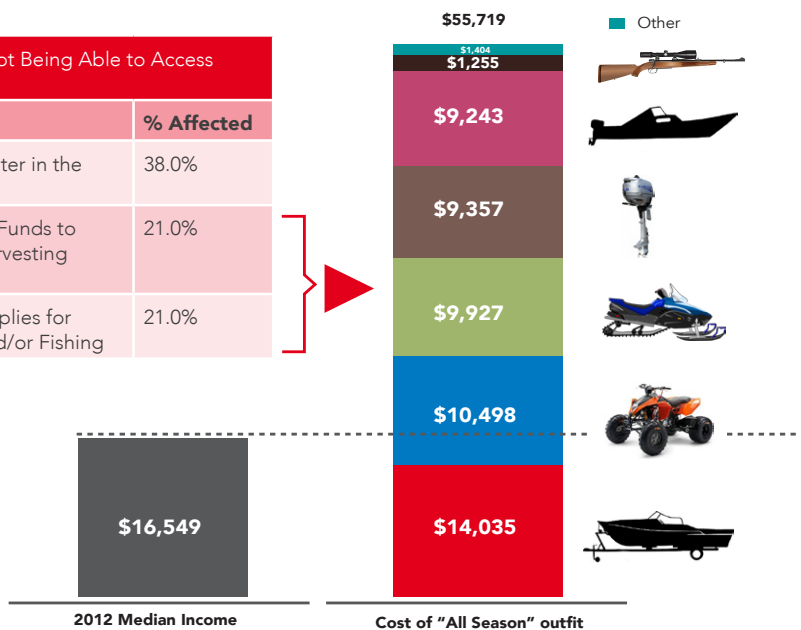
While there are many organizations that provide subsidies to hunters, the cost of obtaining hunting equipment remains high. Furthermore, restrictions on subsidized items under Nutrition North have actually increased the importation costs of equipment for northern hunters.<sup>21</sup>



## Barriers to Local Food - The Cost of Hunting & Harvesting

### Main Reasons for Not Being Able to Access Local Food

Rank	Reason	% Affected
X	Lack of Hunter in the Household	38.0%
X	Insufficient Funds to Finance Harvesting Activities	21.0%
X	Lack of Supplies for Hunting and/or Fishing	21.0%



Note: Illustrative analysis based on 2012 median income and cost of a hunting outfit in Clyde River, Nunavut. Source: Statistics Canada, Consumer Price Index CANSIM Table 326-0020. Prepared by the Nunavut Bureau of Statistics, January 25, 2013; Aarluk Consulting, "Review of Intersettlement Trade Opportunities for Arctic Food Products in Nunavut - Final Report", 2005.

## 2. Processing and Distribution of Food

Limited processing and distribution capacity in Nunavut limits the ability of households without an active hunter to access local foods.

There are currently only three major processing facilities in Nunavut: Kitikmeot Foods in Cambridge Bay, Kivalliq Arctic Foods in Rankin Inlet, and Pangnirtung Fisheries Ltd. in Pangnirtung.

The shipment of commercially produced local foods from these facilities is subsidized by Nutrition North; however, the subsidy is reportedly underutilized, due in part to weak linkages between processors and retailers in Nunavut, which in turn limits the availability of local foods in stores.

In many communities, inadequate storage capacity also hinders both trade between communities and the commercial sale of local food. In 2010-2011, only 15 Nunavut towns had functioning community freezers, used to store meat a hunter wishes to share with neighbours.<sup>22</sup>

While the Country Food Distribution Program, administered by Nunavut's Department of Economic Development and Transportation, supports the establishment or upgrading of community freezers and the operation of local fresh-kill markets for food sharing between communities, the program needs to be more effectively utilized to ensure communities have the infrastructure required to process and distribute local foods.<sup>23</sup>



## Recommendations

There is no doubt that better access to local foods will help Nunavummiut better feed their families.

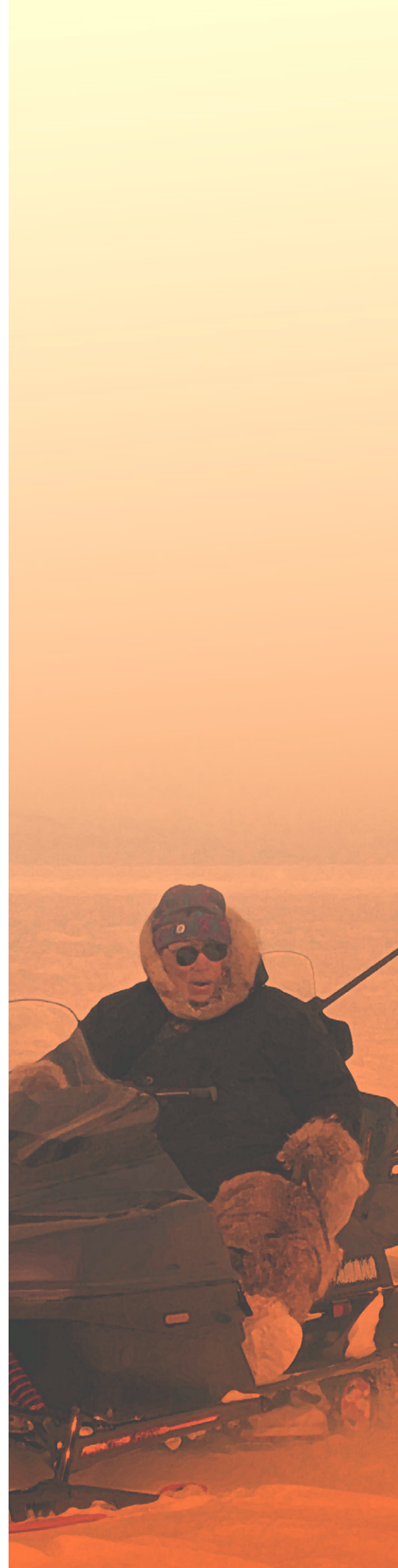
This can be achieved by improving the supply chain from hunting to processing and distribution, all while increasing awareness of local food.

### 1. Improve Hunting Capacity

- a. Increase and better target subsidies for hunters to ensure they have the capital equipment required to hunt. The Capital Equipment Support program could more effectively increase hunting capacity in Nunavut communities if the subsidized equipment were targeted toward hunters with the financial capacity to use their equipment to hunt more often. This could be done without increasing overall costs by removing the maximum income eligibility criteria for the program. Going further, subsidized equipment could make the biggest difference if directed on a merit basis toward full-time hunters.
- b. Train youth in traditional hunting skills through programs at Arctic colleges and Inuit organizations, and through apprenticeships. The Atugaksait Program could more effectively support the transfer of hunting skills if it were redirected toward youth training programs through widely accessible institutions like the Arctic colleges and apprenticeships administered by Inuit organizations.

### 2. Improve Processing and Distribution Capacity

- a. Invest in community infrastructure and examine handling guidelines to support the appropriate inspection, processing and distribution of local foods. Ensure that communities have the infrastructure necessary to process and distribute local food in the community. Existing inspection and handling guidelines should also be examined to ensure that local foods are available for purchase.
- b. Create stronger linkages among local processors, hunters, and retail outlets in order to increase the availability of local food in stores. Northern retail outlets should investigate ways to partner with local processors and hunters to make local foods readily available in stores at affordable prices.
- c. Extend funding for the Nunavut Food Security Coalition. The Nunavut Food Security Coalition is developing a territorial action plan on food security to be released in 2014. The work of the Coalition will be critical to addressing food insecurity in Nunavut and encompasses increased access to local food. Ending food insecurity is a long-term project that requires long-term funding.



- d. Review the federal government’s Nutrition North local food subsidy.**  
The Nutrition North subsidy for local foods should be examined to ensure that local foods for commercial sale are priced at rates comparable to food shipped from the South.

### **3. Improve Awareness About Local Foods**

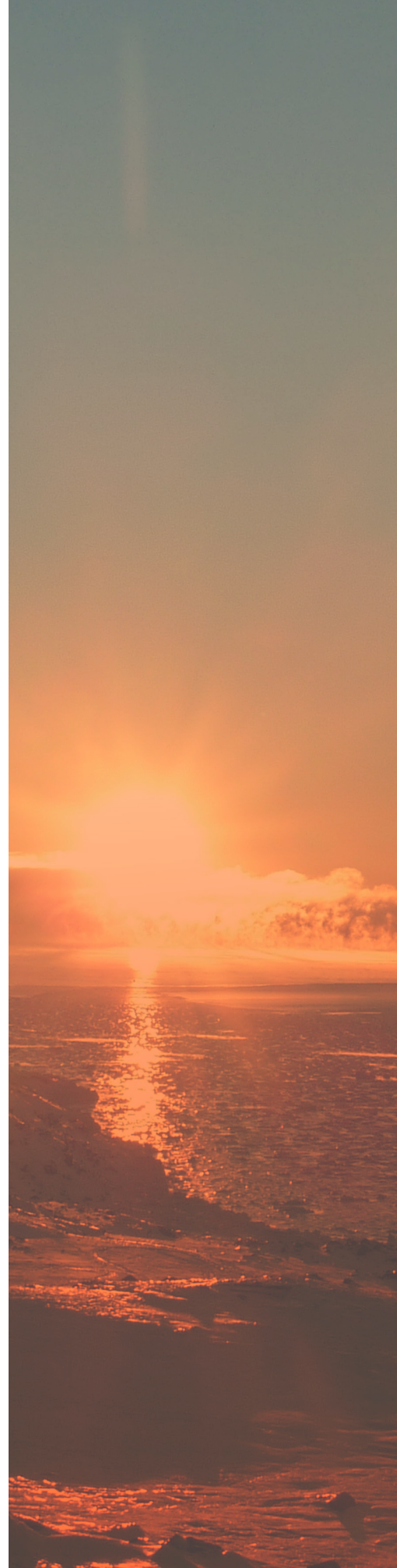
- a. Promote the marketing of local foods in northern communities.**  
Launch a marketing campaign based upon the Nunavut Food Guide and promote local foods in schools, northern stores, and country food markets. Use a variety of “selling-points” to advocate for local foods, including their nutritional benefits and the importance of supporting local hunters and maintaining Inuit culture.
- b. Invest in programs that provide local food exposure at an early age, such as programs that serve local food in day care facilities.**  
Community projects that encourage hunters to provide local foods to daycare facilities have successfully helped young Nunavummiut develop a taste for these foods. Such arrangements, with funding or sharing agreements between individual day care facilities and hunters, should be encouraged.

## **Conclusion**

Food insecurity in Nunavut is a significant threat to individual and community health, affecting over two-thirds of the population. Better access to local food is one part of a complex solution that will not only make people less hungry—it will also improve nutrition, decrease disease, and foster cultural pride.

To increase access to local food, Inuit organizations, companies, individuals, and the federal and territorial governments must work together to improve hunting, processing, and distribution capacities, all while raising awareness about local food.

The time to end hunger among Nunavummiut is now. Not only is this challenge a matter of social justice, it is a moral imperative that concerns all Canadians and the country we call home.



## Appendix 1

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The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Fellows' employers.

## Appendix 2

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### Endnotes

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