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Native Agriculture
& Food Systems Initiative

A Program of First Nations Development Institute



FOOD *as* ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT *in Native Communities*

A Project Outcome Report
February 2017



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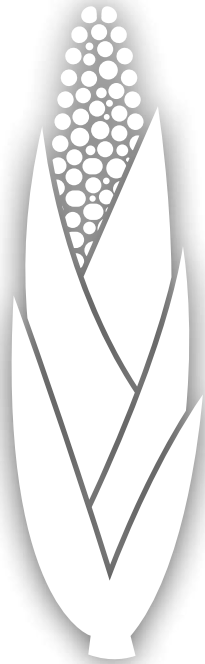
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Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to share outcomes resulting from the *Food as Economic Development in Native Communities* project conducted by First Nations Development Institute (First Nations) over the period of 2014-2016 and to highlight emerging models and best practices observed during the implementation of the project. The authors' goal in disseminating and sharing this information is to:

1

Showcase strategies that augment existing tribal efforts to increase economic development opportunities while regaining control of local food systems in a manner relevant to the challenges often observed in Native communities with respect to access to capital, geographic isolation, and limited infrastructure.

2

Provide “outside the box” methods trending in Native communities in their efforts to regain control of local food systems and generate economic opportunities.

3

Present outcomes, lessons learned and observed during the implementation of the project in order to reduce the “reinvention of the wheel” scenario and expand the linkages between Native communities.





Background

In Native (and many other) communities, the way foods are produced, distributed and consumed has direct implications for community members' health, preservation and celebration of Native cultures, community development and the health of the local economy. The health of the local food systems has significant implications for Native communities' development, economic development, culture and health.

Native communities struggle to build linkages within their food systems as a result, non-Indian-owned businesses or the federal government provide the majority of food available in Native communities because there are little to no service and product suppliers for individuals, businesses and tribes to purchase from on the reservation. This "leaks" Native dollars into the non-Native economy, diminishes tribal purchasing power, and the opportunity for Native communities to regain control of their local food economies.

By purchasing the smallest amount of food goods and services on the reservation, Native communities can retain some purchasing power. Creating successful local businesses and more locally-available services and products keeps community dollars in the community. Production and consumption of locally-produced goods and services can also increase economic independence, as a reliance on externally-produced goods and services is reduced.



In 2001 First Nation Development Institute (First Nations) began the Nourishing Native Foods and Health program to support tribes and Native communities in building sustainable food systems that improve health and nutrition, strengthen food security, alleviate elder hunger, and increase control over Native agriculture and food systems. Since that time, First Nations has become the recognized leader in Native American food systems work in efforts to reclaim control of Native food systems.

With support from the Otto Bremer Trust, First Nations continued its work in 2015 by initiating the *Food as Economic Development in Native Communities* project, with an overall goal of increasing tribal and urban support to American Indian communities located in Minnesota in their efforts to develop food systems for economic growth and participation. The project builds on a previous First Nations' Native Asset-Building Partnership Project (NABPP) conducted in 2012-2014, which studied the tribe-to-tribe mentoring process as a viable and replicable asset-building strategy with the intent of using the mentorship process to help the mentee tribes regain control, or manage tribal assets while promoting tribal sovereignty and sustainable economic development within their communities. The project proved that peer mentoring among Native groups and tribes serves as an excellent vehicle for proliferating asset building strategies in Native communities with unique circumstances, tribal policies and needs as it develops partnerships and best practices for communities without reinventing the wheel.





In partnership with three Minnesota tribal organizations located within Otto Bremer's geographic service area, the First Nations' *Food as Economic Development in Native Communities* project provided financial support, coordinated mentorships, and facilitated a regional convening for all tribes located in Minnesota with the goal of increasing access to resources, knowledge, and networking opportunities that would spur economic opportunities and expand local food systems in tribal communities.

The three participating organizations consisted of:

- Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College
- Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians
- White Earth Reservation Tribal Council

Each participating organization was selected based on their ongoing efforts to regain control of local food systems, existing agri-business initiatives, community and leadership commitment and readiness to advance to the next level through experiential learning, technical assistance, and guidance through the mentee/mentor partnerships.

Combined, the three tribal communities hold approximately 1.78 million acres of reservation land that includes approximately 371,360 acres of water base, 20.9 percent of the reservation and are currently engaged in economic development initiatives, that include but are not limited, to the production and distribution of wild rice, syrup, and produce, through farmers markets, online sales, and local markets.

At a quick glance Minnesota tribes hold an approximate combined reservation base of 2.65 million acres¹, 5.2 percent of the state's 50.95 million acres and serve as home to five of Minnesota's largest lakes for a combined tribal water area of approximately 612,000 acres (13 percent) of Minnesota's 4.7 million acres² of total water area. At the tribal level, the reservations combined have approximately 23 percent water area that serve as the richest wild rice beds in the United States and traditional food source of the Chippewa, Ojibwe and Sioux tribes of Minnesota.



1 Tiller, V. (2005). *Tiller's Guide to Indian Country*, Albuquerque, NM: BowArrow Publishing Company

2 State of Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. www.dnr.state.mn.us.



Project Overview

The project was launched in July 2015 with a three-day regional convening in Prior Lake, Minnesota for all 11 Minnesota tribes for approximately 60 tribal representatives from numerous Native nonprofit organizations with food-related programs, and Reservation-Based Nonprofit Development Organizations (RNDOs; including Community Development Corporations, Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs), Native credit unions, Native micro-loan funds, Individual Development Account programs, etc.) that build their communities' ability to improve management of and access to (primarily financial) assets.



In February 2016, three participating organizations selected to participate in the mentorship process and award a grant for use toward strengthening existing programmatic and organizational capacity. The mentee/mentor partnership was facilitated by First Nations by strategically partnering the appropriate mentor from another Native organization or tribal department with the expertise and background needed to contribute to the success of the participating organization's project.

The three participating organizations consisted of:

- Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College
- Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians
- White Earth Band of Chippewa



Each participating partner identified specific food system related goals for the mentor/mentee partnership that intended to:

- 1 Increase the number of community members interested in pursuing agriculture as an economically viable career.
- 2 Create a local food economy by leveraging existing land, human and traditional knowledge resources that will encourage entrepreneurial producers to engage in commercial food production.
- 3 Develop a long-range vision and strategic business plan to control food production and availability, thus further extending tribal sovereignty and its inherent responsibilities to community members.
- 4 Create a new tribal food system.



- 5 Utilize an approach that involves tribal planning and development assets, with an emphasis on youth and elder roles in the system developed.
- 6 Increase youth and elder participation in defining and expanding the local food system.
- 7 Leverage regional tribal (Minnesota) expertise.

Two Native organizations served as mentors to provide technical assistance, guidance, and site visit support, they consisted of:

Choctaw Fresh Produce, a tribally-owned business of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians located in Choctaw, Mississippi. Launched in 2012, the goal of the ag-business was to provide fresh fruits and vegetables to the community while creating economic opportunities for the reservation. Today, Choctaw Fresh Produce operates 15 high tunnels located on five separate farm sites in the tribal communities of Bogue Chitto, Conehatta, Pearl River, Red Water and Tucker, manages a CSA program, provides educational programs that inform community members on agriculture, and serves as a produce vendor to Whole Foods and other small markets in the Jackson, Mississippi area.

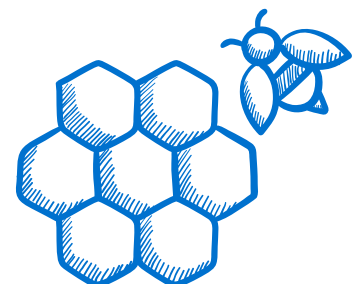


Wozupi Tribal Gardens, owned and operated by the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community in Prior Lake, Minnesota. Launched in 2010, the three-acre vegetable garden yields the majority of Wozupi's produce. Multiple smaller gardens, such as a Medicine Garden is tended by tribal members, and are used primarily for education and wellness programs for the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community. Today, Wozupi Tribal Gardens provides educational programs, and a farmers market, serves as produce and honey vendor to markets within the Twin Cities area.



Outcomes from the mentor/mentee partnerships that contributed to increasing economic opportunities through the development of local food systems included:

- Development of a customized **strategic plans** to expand tribal local food economy.
- Addition of **three full-time staff** to support Local Food Initiatives.
- Creation of a Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) focused on providing **financial support** to the local food economy.





Mentor/Mentee Partnerships

On a local level, each mentee organization received technical assistance through the provision of resources, expert and business knowledge, onsite visits, and regional networking opportunities at the regional convening for all Minnesota tribes.

It was during the onsite visits that mentees were able to develop and advance their tribal food systems initiatives as facilitated by the mentor organizations.

Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians

❖ Mentor: Wozupi Tribal Gardens

Through their participation in the project the Red Lake Tribal Council's efforts resulted in following:

- Convened a two-day Strategic Planning session with +/-25 stakeholders
- Developed a five-year Strategic Plan
- Developed a 12-month Action Plan
- Established a Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) with a focus on financing Local Food Enterprises
- Installed a greenhouse to increase local food production
- Conducted an intensive two-day Project Management training session for all Local Foods staff and key stakeholders
- Hired a full-time Local Food Coordinator and Assistant

Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College

❖ Mentor: Choctaw Fresh Produce

Through their participation in the project the Fond du Lac community efforts resulted in following:

- Convened a two-day Strategic Planning Session with +/-30 stakeholders
- Developed a Logic Model for the Local Food Initiative
- Developed a Vision Statement

White Earth Reservation

❖ Mentor: Choctaw Fresh Produce

Through their participation in the project the White Earth community efforts resulted in following:

- Convened a two-day Strategic Planning Session with +/-15 stakeholders
- Developed a five-year Strategic Plan
- Developed a 12-month Action Plan
- Hired a full-time Local Food Coordinator



Project Outcomes



| IMPACT METRICS | RESULTS |
|--|---------|
| Number Strategic Plans developed to rebuild tribal food systems | 3 |
| Number of full-time staff hired dedicated to tribal food initiatives | 3 |
| Number of mentor/mentee partnerships facilitated under the project | 3 |
| Number of Community Development Financial Institutes (CDFI) initiated with a focus on providing technical assistance and financing for tribal food enterprises | 1 |



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Tribal Convening

First Nations hosted a three-day convening July 8-10, 2015 in Prior Lake, Minnesota at the Shakopee Reservation. The title for the event was “Food as Economic Development.” All 11 Minnesota tribes were invited to participate and 60 representatives working in and with tribal food systems and programs, attended the event.

The three-day agenda covered a wide- range of topics by several subject matter experts including attorneys, non-profit directors, finance experts, cultural preservation groups, and tribal elected officials. Several tribal executives also shared case studies of the local food initiatives in their communities. The agenda covered the following subjects:

- 1. Macroeconomics:** A presentation by the Intertribal Agriculture Council sharing facts and statistics about the size of the Native American food market nationwide.
- 2. Legal:** A presentation by an attorney discussing the legal risks associated with growing and selling food on tribal lands, as well as offering advice on how to protect tribes.
- 3. Policy:** A presentation from a tribal official sharing a case study on how tribal government policies can have a positive (or negative) impact on the local food system.
- 4. Value added products:** A case study on how creating value added products can increase the financial sustainability of a tribal food enterprise.
- 5. Business Planning:** A case study from a tribally-owned fresh produce enterprise on how to plan and develop a successful tribal food enterprise.
- 6. Workforce Training:** A case study was presented by a tribal program that is successfully integrating their youth into the tribe’s local food system and preparing them for job opportunities.
- 7. Integrated System:** A case study was presented by a tribal program that has been pursuing food sovereignty for 20 years, along with lessons learned and best practices.
- 8. Funding Opportunities:** Several officials from financial institutions shared their thoughts and recommendations on how to fund local food enterprises through existing grants, loans, and loan guarantee programs.
- 9. Garden Tours:** The host tribe provided tours of their organic vegetable operation to provide a hands-on learning opportunity.



The agenda was intended to generate awareness of the wide variety of tribal considerations when pursuing a local foods strategy as part of their economic development initiatives. The convening proved to be very successful based on the positive attendee feedback received upon conclusion of the convening.

An attendee evaluation survey distributed at the end of the convening revealed the following levels of satisfaction:



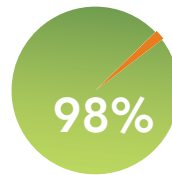
How satisfied were you with the **materials**? 89% were **SATISFIED** or **VERY SATISFIED**



The Content was **appropriate & informative**: 97% **AGREE** or **STRONGLY AGREE**



How satisfied were you with the **speakers**? 92% were **SATISFIED** or **VERY SATISFIED**



The Content was **well-organized**: 98% **AGREE** or **STRONGLY AGREE**

Examples of attendee feedback regarding the regional convening included:

- Presenters and speakers were well equipped with the knowledge and expertise of the subject they were presenting.
- The opportunity to network with peers from other tribes was very beneficial.
- The wide variety of topics covered was well received.
- Attendees would like to see forums conducted in other regions, particularly the southwest.
- Attendees would like more opportunity to engage with potential funders.



Lessons Learned

Mentor/mentee partnerships serve as an excellent approach to advancing food systems in tribal communities. It allows the mentee organization to learn from implementation challenges experienced by the mentors and steps taken to overcome those challenges, thereby preventing them from experiencing similar potential setbacks and/or recreating the wheel. However, time and commitment is essential on the part of each partner. One challenge experienced on the project was conducting the site visits at a time when the mentor operation was in full swing.



While this allows for a full tour and experience, this is also the time when the farm is at its operational peak taking staff time that is much needed on the farm. This has also been experienced in other First Nations' food systems projects. A remedy, suggested by a mentee, is to conduct the onsite visit to the mentee site during the winter, if possible, and conduct a shorter site visit to the mentor location during full operation.

Secondly, the tribal regional convening was three full days which proved to be somewhat extensive for some attendees, resulting in early departures on the third day and reduced attendance during the presentations. It is recommended that future regional convenings be limited to two-full-days.

While the focus of the project revolved around developing economic opportunities through tribal food systems, a specific area of technical assistance that consistently emerged was the need for business planning and project management. Project mentors were able to share their knowledge and experience, but as tribes embark on their expansion of food systems related enterprises, business planning and project management should be integrated into the strategy for key stakeholders including individual producers.

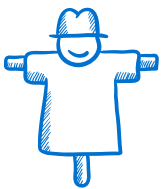
Increasing Tribal Economic Opportunities through Food Systems

As the food movement has been gaining momentum in recent years on a national level, Native communities have been working to regain control of the assets they own – be they land, human potential, cultural heritage or natural resources – and to establish new assets for ensuring the long-term vitality of Native communities. Under the First Nations' *Nourishing Native Foods and Health* program, investment in tribal food systems has shown economic impact through job creation at both the administrative and operational levels. This accomplishment is especially impressive given that Native Americans endure very high levels of unemployment and poverty. Furthermore, it suggests that these small homegrown solutions have the potential to improve not only physical health and well-being but also spur economic development.³

Such homegrown solutions and concepts have emerged in the form of partnerships, policy, community buy-in/benefits, strategic planning, and leadership commitment in a collective manner.

As noted, White Earth, Red Lake, and Fond du Lac community organizations were selected based on their ongoing efforts to regain control of local food systems, existing agri-business initiatives, community and leadership commitment and readiness to advance to the next level. To that end, the common thread of dialog during onsite visits and visioning sessions with mentors often surrounded the five areas of partnerships, policy, community benefits/buy-in, strategic planning and leadership commitment. The groups explored potential regional partnerships, revisited and/or initiated discussion on current policies and how current policies are hindering and/or could be generating economic opportunities through food systems, reflected on existing community food systems and lastly, began to identify strategies to engage community members, identify benefits to the community, and increase leadership commitment to advancing existing efforts to the next level.

3 First Nations Development Institute. *Highlighting Outcomes under the Native Agriculture & Food Systems Initiative 2012-2014*. Longmont, Colorado: First Nations Development Institute, (2015)





Partnerships

An inside look into the success of the mentor organizations (Wozupi Tribal Gardens and Choctaw Fresh Produce) reveals extensive partnerships were crucial in building foods systems to spur economic development. Through partnerships they have been able to expand into new markets, develop educational programs, increase outreach, and create jobs.

Through the mentor/mentee partnerships, the three participating organizations had the opportunity to explore, develop and share goals along with their intended impact with key community stakeholders that included but not limited to other tribal programs, community members, schools, colleges, tribal council, and local nonprofits. Gathering to discuss the state of the local food system and how to restore, proved to be important dialog to community members as they remembered the importance and abundance of farms, traditional foods, and traditional farming and harvesting practices.



Community Buy-In/Benefits

Increasing economies through local food systems involves a collective community approach that harnesses the capability and energy of everybody. It involves a shift from individual consumer participation in local food systems to collective action. As a result, people who live and work in a place, and others who care about its future, are best positioned to identify solutions, implement them and participate.⁴

A first step in generating community buy-in is through a community food assessment, a participative process that explores the range of community food assets to inform social and economic change and begin the change to regain control of tribal food systems.⁵ Community participation in the process provides community input into the design of local food systems and can spark motivation and inspiration to participate.

Policy

In the publication, *Roots of Change: Food Policy in Native Communities*, the authors provide excellent insight into the development of tribal food policy in Native communities⁶. As noted in the report, Native nations are increasingly looking for ways to exercise their inherent sovereign powers and create tribal food policies. Conservatively, more than 108 Native nations have enacted some form of policy that relates to food, land management, gathering, traditional food access, and business development of food retailers. The food policies of Native nations empower tribes to protect their food (traditional or otherwise), land and natural resources from federal, state and corporate systems that attempt to claim control and jurisdiction over these Native assets.

Tribal food policies serve as an important tool for tribal communities to communicate and express their desires to start controlling their economic resources to outside agencies such as local, state and federal actors, to preempt local, state and federal intrusion into the tribal food space.

4 Ward, Bernie and Julie Lewis. 2002, *Plugging the Leaks*. New Economics Foundation, United Kingdom

5 First Nations Development Institute. *Food Sovereignty Assessment Tool (2nd Edition)*. Longmont, Colorado: First Nations Development Institute, (2014).

6 First Nations Development Institute. *Roots of Change: Food Policy in Native Communities*. Longmont, Colorado: First Nations Development Institute, (2016).



Leadership Commitment

Maintaining momentum of community supported initiatives like local food systems is often fueled by a select community groups who recognize and are passionate about the benefits and willing to lend their voice to unify the community. When the voice becomes loud enough and leadership becomes engaged, it catalyzes the movement to the next level. At this point, maintaining leadership commitment should be strategically managed through development of a well defined communications plan to:

- Inform all levels of leadership.
- Reinforce ongoing messages about the initiative.
- Provide ongoing education about the benefits and how community members can participate.

As observed in many Native communities, high turnover rates in tribal leadership and the implementation of immediate community needs such as lack of housing can detract attention from food system initiatives. Therefore, engaging and maintaining leadership commitment is crucial to impact change⁷.

Strategic Planning

As tribes forge ahead in regaining control of local food systems and harnessing economic development opportunities, collective strategic planning should be on the forefront of the to-do list. The plan should consist at a minimum of the following:

- Description of the current state of the local food system and how it contributes to the local economy.
- Documentation of the intended impact/benefit(s) to the community.
- List of goals and milestones.
- Potential challenges and strategies to overcome those challenges.
- A communication strategy.

These elements can serve as first step in formalizing and/or advancing existing food systems. It should also serve a living document with periodic reflect with partners, leadership, and the community.

As shared by mentor organizations, their current success did not occur overnight it required thoughtful planning, community engagement, ongoing commitment and in some instances, policy change. Foresight that began one or two decades ago.



⁷ Roadmap for Successful Sugary Drink Tax Campaigns. Action for Health Food, October 2015.



Conclusions

Outcomes achieved and activities conducted under the First Nations' *Food as Economic Development in Native Communities* project contributed to increasing tribal and urban support to American Indian communities located in Minnesota in their efforts to develop food systems for economic growth and participation.

Providing opportunities for peer-to-peer learning to occur, like the mentor/mentee partnerships, proved to be a very effective means of increasing knowledge, resources and decreasing potential project setbacks for tribes embarking on regaining control of local food systems that spur economic opportunities.

Mentor organizations provided crucial knowledge and dialog that identified five common elements needed to regain control of local food systems. They include:

- 1 Partnerships
- 2 Policy
- 3 Community Buy-in/Benefits
- 4 Leadership Commitment
- 5 Strategic Planning

In addition to identifying key elements to building sustainable tribal initiatives, the Minnesota tribal organizations working in the communities of Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians, White Earth Reservation, and Fond du Lac Indian Reservation, were able to expand their efforts by:

- Developing strategic plans to expand and/or regain control of tribal food systems.
- Initiating one Community Development Financial Institution to provide technical assistance and financing for tribal food enterprises.
- Convening community stakeholders in order to educate and engage them in the tribal food system initiative.
- Accessing the knowledge and experience of seasoned/mature tribal food enterprises to learn about potential pitfalls and develop solutions to overcome them with the support of the mentor organization.
- Hiring full-time staff to spearhead the tribal food initiative.

Overall, the project proved to be a success at expanding the foundation for Minnesota tribes to pursue a local food strategy to strengthen their economic development efforts.

Lessons learned from the project and considerations for future efforts is to expand the mentor/mentee approach to the other eight tribes in Minnesota with the possibility of the current mentees stepping into the mentor role and to strengthen the current mentee with the provision of project management and business planning workshops.





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