



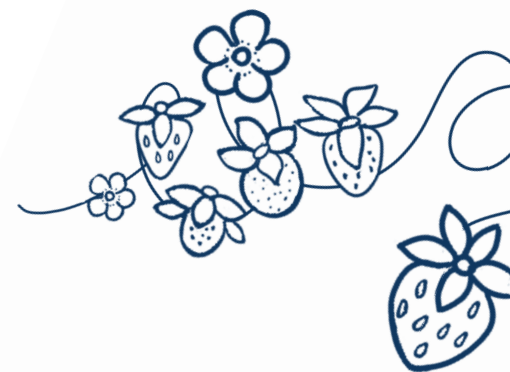
RECLAIMING MI'KMAW FOOD SYSTEMS IN NOVA SCOTIA:

A Foundation for Collective Action and Decision-Making



UNION OF
NOVA
SCOTIA
MI'KMAQ

Union of Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq,
Department of Health | May 2026



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The L'nu'k Food Bundle Project, led by the Union of Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq (UNSM), engaged communities across Nova Scotia to better understand the current landscape of Mi'kmaq food systems and identify shared values, strengths, and priorities to help guide future food systems work across Mi'kmaq communities and organizations. Through community workshops, land-based gatherings, and engagement with community leaders and partners, the project highlighted both the strength of existing Mi'kmaq food systems and the need for more coordinated, long-term approaches to support them.

The findings point to a clear opportunity to move beyond **fragmented and reactive approaches** toward stronger **Mi'kmaq-led coordination, leadership, and governance** across food systems initiatives. Across communities, food systems were recognized as deeply connected to **health and wellbeing, culture, land stewardship, education, community care, and local economic participation**.

Existing food systems are already sustained by a wide network of community assets and leaders, including **caterers, harvesters, Elders, cooks, Knowledge Holders, gardens, kitchens, and community food initiatives**. However, much of this work remains dispersed across sectors, reliant on informal leadership or short-term funding, and embedded within broader mandates that limit coordination and long-term sustainability.

This work highlights the importance of investing in food systems as a **coordinated area of regional development and governance**. Key opportunities include strengthening cross-sector alignment, investing in a dedicated food systems workforce, supporting sustainable infrastructure, advancing **Mi'kmaq-led governance and decision-making**, and ensuring funding approaches retain social, cultural, and economic value locally.

As provincial and national investments in areas such as school food continue to grow, Mi'kmaq communities are well-positioned to help shape regional models of **Indigenous-led food systems development grounded in self-determination and community priorities**. Aligning emerging investments within broader food systems priorities will be critical to supporting sustainable, long-term outcomes for communities across the region.





Dedication



*In dedication and loving memory of
Elder Sutik (Judy) Googoo.*



*Tracy Marshall (Project Coordinator) and Elder Sutik (Judy)
Bernard-Googoo (2022)*

Sutik was a champion of food sovereignty and an example of the strengths of Mi'kmaw communities. Sutik cared deeply and passionately for Mi'kmaw food systems. She was especially passionate about Mi'kmaw youth being connected to safe, culturally grounded, and healthy food. She dedicated much of her work and life to sharing knowledge and inviting youth into her garden. Sutik supported our project team with care and respect. With a strong understanding for Mi'kmaw food values and practices, Sutik shared the importance and value of being a lifelong learner with our team, and for all those around her. Today, Sutik's spirit continues to guide our work as we learn, understand, and share the knowledge and values of Mi'kmaw food systems.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would first like to acknowledge the community facilitators and liaisons, Elders, Knowledge Holders, and project committee whose leadership and guidance made this work possible. We also extend our thanks to community health directors and partners who supported connections with communities and engagement throughout the project.

This work was supported through funding from the Wabanaki-Labrador Indigenous Research Network (WLN), Indigenous Services Canada (ISC), and Young Soaring Eagle Consulting. WLN funds, provided through the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, supported increasing our research capacity and community-driven research priorities. Additional funding from Young Soaring Eagle Consulting, provided through the Government of Canada under the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership contributed to the training of community-based facilitators. Core Health Research and Engagement funding at the Union of Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq (UNSM) from Indigenous Services Canada supported overall coordination and delivery of the project.

We would also like to offer thanks to Emily Pictou-Roberts (*Millbrook, First Nation*) for creating graphic elements for our project and report materials, and to Natalie Mike, for supporting graphic design of our report. Also, we are grateful for the dynamic photography provided by Chelsey Purdy (*Wasoqopa'q, First Nation*).

We offer special wela'liek to the community-based facilitators who supported this project, and who are important food leaders within their communities and whose contributions were central to this work.



PROJECT LEADERSHIP, GOVERNANCE, AND RELATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

This project was led by the **Department of Health at the Union of Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq (UNSM)**, with a **governance** approach grounded in Mi'kmaw leadership and relational accountability. **Chelsey Purdy** (*Wasoqopa'q, First Nation*) led the overall design and implementation of the project in her role overseeing the provincial Dietetic Services Program at UNSM. **Tracy Marshall** (*Potlotek, First Nation*) supported project coordination, administration, and communications.

The project was further supported through a project committee including **Kara Paul** (*Eskasoni, First Nation*), Director of Health, UNSM; **Dr. Tabitha Robin** (*St. Peter's, Métis and Cree*), Faculty of Land and Food Systems, University of British Columbia; and **Muin Ji'j Bernard** (*Eskasoni, First Nation*), Special Projects Coordinator, Mawkim, UNSM. This structure brought together leadership across Mi'kmaw health, food systems research, and data governance to support project direction.

The project maintained direct accountability to Mi'kmaw leadership through regular reporting to Health Directors from the 13 Mi'kmaw communities in Nova Scotia. This provided ongoing opportunities for guidance, validation of approaches, and input from those overseeing health portfolios in Mi'kmaw communities in Nova Scotia. Additional community representatives were engaged based on recommendation, including directors in social and community development roles who were more directly connected to overseeing food related work in their communities. Together, this **governance** approach ensured the project was not only informed by communities, but accountable to them, grounded in Mi'kmaw leadership and aligned with principles of **self-determination**.

Beyond structured governance, we wanted this work to be grounded in relational accountability. Relationships to family, community, and land shape how food, health, and responsibility are understood, and informed how this work was approached. This commitment to relational accountability was also supported through land-based gatherings. Four small and two large gatherings focused on building connections within the Mi'kmaw food community were held between 2023-2025. Guided by *kilu'nal na no'kmaq* (food is our relations), these gatherings focused on bringing together individuals engaged in food-related work in Mi'kmaw communities together to strengthen relationships, build connections, and exchange knowledge. Relationship-building was treated as a core to these events. Four intimate weekend retreats of 15-20 community members involved in food related work across Mi'kmaw communities in Nova Scotia were held at the Mersey River Chalets, and two larger land-based weekend gatherings were held at Kejimikujik National Park, where community members camped and engaged in land-based food related activities. Gatherings at Kejimikujik National Park were supported by strong leadership and collaboration from **Ursula Johnson** (*Parks Canada*), **Anthony King** (*Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq*), and the **Nuji Kelo'toqatijik Earth Keepers** (known nationally as Land Guardians). Their hard work and dedication to land and food made these gatherings possible.

UNDERSTANDING MI'KMAW FOOD SYSTEMS AND WHAT THIS REPORT COVERS

In this report, we understand food systems as a complex web of ecological and social relationships that shape how communities feed themselves. While common definitions describe food systems as



a sequence of activities (production, processing, distribution, consumption, and disposal) (*Food and Agriculture Organization, 2018*), in practice these approaches have often been shaped by production, efficiency, and market priorities, which can leave out the relational, cultural, political, and ecological dimensions of food systems (High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition, 2017). In response to these limitations, this report draws on Mi'kmaq perspectives to understand **food systems as inseparable from land, water, kinship, governance, ceremony, and responsibility** (*McMillan & Prosper, 2016*). Rather than emphasizing control and efficiency, an Indigenous understanding

of food systems centre reciprocity, interdependence, and care. These values are captured in concepts such as *Msit No'kmaq* ("all my relations"), reflecting a commitment to a relational worldview, and *Netukulimk*, which emphasizes taking only what is needed to sustain well-being while protecting the long-term health of lands, waters, and all living beings (*Prosper et al., 2011*). Together, these concepts shape how Mi'kmaq food systems are understood throughout this report.



At the same time, the ability to uphold these values in shaping Mi'kmaq food systems has been significantly impacted by colonial systems and policies. Mi'kmaq food systems have been deeply shaped by collective historical experiences such as the residential school system, the reserve system, centralization policy, nutritional experimentation, environmental racism, the criminalization of food practices, and how treaty rights have been translated and implemented over time (*Grewal, 2024; Benjamin, 2014; Malli et al., 2023; Battiste, 2016; Mosby, 2013; Roache, 2025; Waldron, 2018; Wicken, 2012*). Impacts of this history continue to be felt and shape present-day realities, including through ecosystem decline, restricted access to traditional food practices, high cost of living (including engagement in traditional food activities), and influence from transnational food corporations. We recognize the depth and complexity of these impacts, including the grief and loss carried within communities.

We also recognize the depth of collective experiences and impacts that have gone unrecognized and unnamed. However, this report does not seek to document or analyze colonial histories and impacts. Mi'kmaw communities already live with and understand these realities. Instead, this work focuses on the ways communities continue to uphold and rebuild food systems, and paths for strengthening these systems. This approach reflects a commitment to supporting healing and renewal without requiring the extraction of community trauma to justify community needs. Readers who are unfamiliar with colonial history and treaty history in the region are encouraged to seek additional context as an important foundation for understanding the present-day realities of Mi'kmaw food systems.

PURPOSE FOR THIS WORK

Mi'kmaw food systems have been shaped by both historical and ongoing colonial impacts, resulting in a fragmented landscape of policies, programs, roles, and infrastructure across communities. At the same time, communities continue to sustain strong food-related knowledge, values, and practices through both formal and community-led initiatives. In the absence of a coordinated, Mi'kmaw-led governing structure to guiding direction and decision-making, many food initiatives have developed in isolated or stand-alone ways, limiting opportunities for alignment, shared learning, long-term sustainability, and sustainable funding.

This report provides a community-informed understanding of the current Mi'kmaw food systems landscape in Nova Scotia, including strengths, shared values, and paths forward. Grounded in a strengths-based and relational approach, it establishes a foundation to support more coordinated decision-making, alignment across initiatives and sectors, and sustained investment in community-led food systems.

“Food systems governance is inseparable from Mi'kmaw self-determination.”



OUR APPROACH

THE MEDICINE BUNDLE AS A GUIDE TO ENGAGEMENT

This project drew on the concept of the medicine bundle as a way of engaging with communities. In many Indigenous contexts, a medicine bundle is understood as a collection of sacred, symbolic, or meaningful items that represent teachings, stories, or lived experience. They may also be connected to ceremonies or practices and are held within specific context, with sharing guided by community or nation-specific protocols. For some, a bundle is also understood as something carried in the heart and mind, not limited to physical objects. While bundles are used and understood differently across Nations and individuals, they are often connected to both personal and collective knowledge or knowing. In this project, we learned some of these different perspectives with community, helping us to re-build our shared understanding of the medicine bundle and different ways it is understood.

Drawing on this understanding, we centered the project on making and learning about medicine bundles as a way for participants to reflect on food systems through their own experiences, relationships, and values. Community members were encouraged to collect physical items, photographs, artwork, or other forms of expression that captured past, present, or future access to food for Mi'kmaq. Rather than treating knowledge captured in bundles as something to be extracted or recorded for research, the bundle was used as a tool for guided reflection, conversations, and connection. Community members determined what was included in their bundle, what it meant, and whether it was shared in community spaces. This approach supported collective reflection and discussion. These discussions were not recorded for analysis, but used as a tool for building relationships, trust, and shared reflection on systems within the community. This methodology was informed by Indigenous-informed arts-based approaches. Further discussion of the theory that helped to inform this approach can be found in Purdy and Joy (2026), included in the reference list at the end of this report.



MAPPING MI'KMAW FOOD SYSTEM STRENGTHS

To understand the landscape of Mi'kmaq food systems, the project drew on a strengths- and asset-based approach, recognizing that communities already hold knowledge, relationships, skills, and cultural teachings. Rather than focusing on gaps or deficiencies, this approach centered existing strengths as the foundation for change. Throughout this work, assets were defined by communities themselves. A flexible framework was used to guide discussion across different areas where assets might be identified, while allowing communities to shape what was captured. This approach differs from traditional needs assessments that focus primarily on gaps or what is lacking. While needs and gaps are acknowledged in this report, the overall framing remains grounded in community strengths.



COMMUNITY-LED WORKSHOPS

Community-based facilitators were key to this project. Facilitators were recruited in each Mi'kmaq community through local health directors, who helped us identify individuals with interest in supporting the project. Facilitators received training, resources, and an honorarium to support the delivery of workshops in their communities, including guidance on facilitation, logistics, and cultural considerations. Each community hosted two or more workshops, either led by community facilitators, or with the project team (project lead and project coordinator). The first workshop introduced the project and the concept of the medicine bundle, inviting participants to begin creating their own bundles as a way of reflecting on food access in the past, present, and future. The second workshop brought participants back together to share reflections from their bundles and engage in discussions about food in their communities. Sessions also included community asset mapping, where participants identified strengths, resources, and key contributors related to food.

COMMUNITY-LED ADAPTATION

Our approach placed trust in facilitators to lead workshops in ways that were appropriate for their communities. As a result, methods were adapted based on local context, including how discussions were facilitated, how participants chose to engage, and how expectations for engagement were met in each community. In some communities, workshops were adjusted due to competing community priorities, capacity constraints, or crisis. These adaptations reflect the realities of working within communities experiencing ongoing pressures, including competing responsibilities, and crisis response. Maintaining flexibility and responsiveness to the realities of communities was essential to supporting meaningful participation that considers lived realities. The project team was available to support follow up sessions, meetings, and co-facilitation on an as needed basis, to ensure communities felt represented.





COMING TOGETHER FOR SHARED REFLECTION

Following the completion of community workshops, facilitators were invited to participate in a retreat. This gathering provided space for facilitators from across communities to reflect on their experiences, share insights, and reconnect after leading workshops in their communities. A key part of this retreat was also to encourage rest and relationship among facilitators. As part of this process, facilitators engaged in a discussion and reflection exercise using items or photos that were gifted to them from community members who created

bundles. This was done by displaying collected photos or items from workshops and asking facilitators to choose an item or photo that represented a value or idea most important to accessing food for Mi'kmaw communities. A process of elimination and consensus building was then used to identify the photos or items that best represented shared values and ideas. This supported drafting of key ideas and shared values, which were then refined later through discussion with further community stakeholders involved in food related work. A focus group was also held with project facilitators to evaluate the project approach, to gain further insight on unanticipated risks, benefits, or challenges with methods. Those findings are not described here.

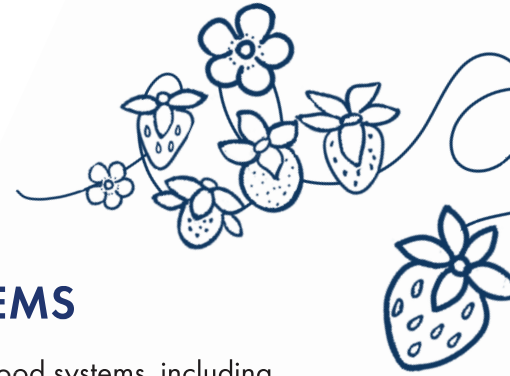
GETTING FINAL COMMUNITY INPUT

Following the retreat, assets identified through community workshops were compiled and shared back with community health directors to help confirm accuracy and fill gaps in information collected. Strategic values were also reviewed with health directors, and, where recommended, additional community representatives. Input was also gathered from relevant Mi'kmaw committees to support broader alignment. This supported updates to assets identified in each community and also helped to refine strategic values.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This project was reviewed and approved by Mi'kmaw Ethics Watch. Ethical considerations focused on respecting community knowledge, ensuring appropriate consent, and supporting community member well-being through the research process. Information shared through bundle-making and discussion was not recorded or attributed to individuals. Where photos or materials from personal bundles were shared with the project team, they were handled with care and only kept or shared with appropriate permissions. Facilitators were supported to maintain confidentiality and to approach discussions with care, recognizing that topics related to food systems may connect to experiences of loss or trauma.

WHAT WE LEARNED: OUR FINDINGS



THE LANDSCAPE OF MI'KMAW FOOD SYSTEMS

Findings are presented to reflect key aspects of the landscape of Mi'kmaq food systems, including their relational and cultural foundations, the people who sustain them, how food-related work is structured across sectors, and how food access is currently supported within communities.

Food as a Social and Cultural Connector

Food-related social and cultural activities were identified as a core strength across all communities. Each community described initiatives that bring people together through sharing of food. Commonly this was through community meals. This included for example, community dinners for Holidays, community breakfasts, or Treaty Day meals. In addition, many communities host larger gatherings centered on traditional foods and food practices, including harvest feasts, mid-winter feasts, cultural food showcases, and pow wows, where food is shared, sold, or offered freely as part of cultural exchange and connection. Community meals also play a key role in cultural practices such as salites, where food is prepared and shared alongside auctions to fundraise in support of families after a death.

Across communities, shared meals were consistently described as both a practical and culturally meaningful component of gathering, including workshops, meetings, and community events. In many cases, meals were described as prepared or catered by community members, reinforcing local economic participation and networks of care in communities. Many community meals, such as community breakfasts or other large meals were often described as being supported by volunteers or informal community leaders, with women frequently identified as playing a central role in organizing and preparing food, sometimes on a volunteer basis, or as an effort of collective sharing. Examples of households known to feed multiple generations or children within the community were also described.

Together, these findings highlight food service and shared meals as a critical place of social connection and care within Mi'kmaq communities. Much of this work is sustained through informal leadership and sometimes volunteer efforts, with women often playing a central role in preparing food and feeding communities. **This foundation not only supports access to food within communities but presents an opportunity to contribute to local economies and improved opportunities for economic participation of local cooks and caterers supporting community meals.** Identifying opportunities to strengthen and resource those already doing the work to feed communities presents a key opportunity to support community-led food systems, promote their sustainability over time, contribute to the local economy, and the health of the community.

Community Food Warriors

People in communities were consistently identified as a foundational strength of Mi'kmaw food systems. Communities named a wide range of individuals who hold important knowledge, skills, experience, and roles related to food, highlighting the central role of people as both knowledge holders and service providers within local food systems. Here, we refer to these individuals as “food warriors” borrowing a term used by Clifford Paul (Moose Management Coordinator with the Unama'kik Institute of Natural Resources) to describe community members who support food-related work, particularly on the land and water.



Caterers were among the most identified roles across communities. Caterers and cooks in communities, often (but not only) women, prepare, sell, or organize meals from their homes or community spaces and are frequently relied upon for community events, gatherings, and home cooked meals for community members. Their work supports access to home-cooked food while also contributing to local economies and strengthening community connection and wellbeing.

Land-based knowledge holders were also consistently identified as essential across communities.

This includes Elders, harvesters, and knowledge keepers who maintain and share intergenerational knowledge related to hunting, fishing, harvesting, and traditional food practices. These community members play a critical role in sustaining cultural teachings, language, and values connected to food systems, while also directly supporting food access through sharing of the foods they harvest, particularly with Elders and families within their communities.

Many were also recognized for their role in supporting community hunts and land-based learning, especially with youth. However, it was noted that opportunities for these activities have been impacted in recent years, including through the moratorium on moose hunts. This has disrupted important pathways for intergenerational knowledge sharing and the transmission of food-related practices, especially for youth. These shifts highlight the importance of identifying and supporting alternative pathways for land-based learning and harvesting, to ensure that knowledge, practices, and relationships connected to food systems continue to be carried forward across generations.



The Nuji Kelo'toqatijik Earth Keepers (known nationally as Land Guardians) were also identified as playing a critical role in supporting land-based programs and activities, many of which overlap with food systems work through hunting and harvesting. While these are currently funded positions, they are largely supported through program-based funding, creating potential risks to continuity and long-term capacity to support land stewardship and land-based food initiatives.

While these important food related roles are present across communities, paid positions related to Mi'kmaw food systems remain varied and often fragmented across communities. Responsibilities for food-related work such as food security initiatives, nutrition education and guidance, greenhouses, and gardens are frequently distributed across multiple positions, including health, social, cultural, and recreation roles. While some communities have dedicated positions (e.g., dietitians, food security coordinators, garden coordinators), others experience gaps in staffing, resulting in uneven capacity across communities. In the absence of a coordinated structure, this often leads to a reactive, gap-filling approach, with tribal councils stepping in to temporarily support capacity when needed. It also creates an overreliance on volunteers, who are described as being relied on in many communities to support gardens, greenhouses, and various other food initiatives.

This reflects a food systems workforce that is distributed across roles and sectors, and sustained through a combination of formal, informal, volunteer, and time-limited positions.

While this demonstrates strong community leadership and commitment to finding ways to support food access, it highlights the need for more coordinated roles and sustained resourcing to strengthen capacity and support long-term sustainability.



Food System Infrastructure

Food systems infrastructure was identified as an important component of Mi'kmaw food systems across communities. This includes physical spaces such as kitchens, greenhouses, gardens, fisheries, fridge and freezer storage, community centers, and beyond. These spaces play a key role in enabling a wide range of food-related activities, from community meals and food sharing to land-based harvesting and food education.

The presence and condition of this infrastructure varies across communities, contributing to uneven capacity to support food-related work. In many cases, infrastructure has been developed through short-term or project-based funding and is frequently maintained through collective community effort. As a result, while some communities have access to well-developed spaces and equipment, others face limitations in the infrastructure available to support food systems activities.

Infrastructure is closely connected to the broader structure of food systems, including the people, roles, and coordination required to sustain its use. In many communities, the use and maintenance of food infrastructure is supported by the same individuals identified as key food leaders, often as part of already distributed roles, and as part of non-food specific mandates. Without dedicated staffing, coordination, and operational resources, infrastructure is often underutilized or difficult to sustain over time.

While infrastructure plays a critical role in enabling food systems work, it is often not supported by long-term operational funding, or leadership positions with dedicated food systems mandates, and is instead spread between roles related to health, social development, culture, and economic development. **This can result in infrastructure being developed without the sustained and coordinated resources needed to fully support its use, limiting its potential impact.**

Strengthening and sustaining community food systems infrastructure represents a key opportunity to support more coordinated food systems. This includes investing not only in physical spaces, but also in the ongoing coordination, staffing, and resources needed to ensure their long-term use and impact.

Food as a Foundation for Connection Across Sectors

Food was consistently identified as a point of connection and importance across multiple sectors, including health, environment and conservation, education, social services, early years, culture and heritage, and community economic development. Rather than existing as a standalone area of programming, food-related activities were often embedded across a wide range of initiatives and settings. As a result, **food-related work was frequently carried within other mandates and treated as a secondary priority within those mandates.** Across communities, this included for example, community health nurses supporting gardens and nutrition education; social departments organizing food pantries through short-term or grant-based funding; parks and recreation departments managing greenhouses; and community members leading backyard community gardens, food education, and community meals, often as volunteers or alongside their primary roles. While this reflects a strong community-level commitment to food and adaptability, it also demonstrates a reliance on broadly distributed and collective efforts, rather than dedicated and coordinated efforts and roles.

This also means that food and nutrition related guidance, policy, and support across sectors is developed in isolation, resulting in duplicated efforts and misalignment. While provincial policies and guidelines for food and nutrition exist, they do not always reflect the realities of Mi'kmaw communities or support the day-to-day work of Mi'kmaw food systems across sectors. This reflects the central role of Mi'kmaw self-determination in guiding food systems, where community knowledge, practices, and priorities shape how food and nutrition are understood and applied. It also highlights ongoing challenges in aligning external policy frameworks with community need and culture, and the need for coordination that is grounded in and accountable to Mi'kmaw governance.

These findings position food as a critical cross-sector connector within Mi'kmaw communities. Strengthening coordination around food-related work represents a key opportunity to build more integrated, community-led systems with cross-sector impact. This presents a clear opportunity to advance health and wellbeing by investing in food systems that strengthen cultural food practices, healthy eating, and economic participation across sectors, rather than food related work becoming a secondary priority spread across various mandates.



Food Sharing and Distribution

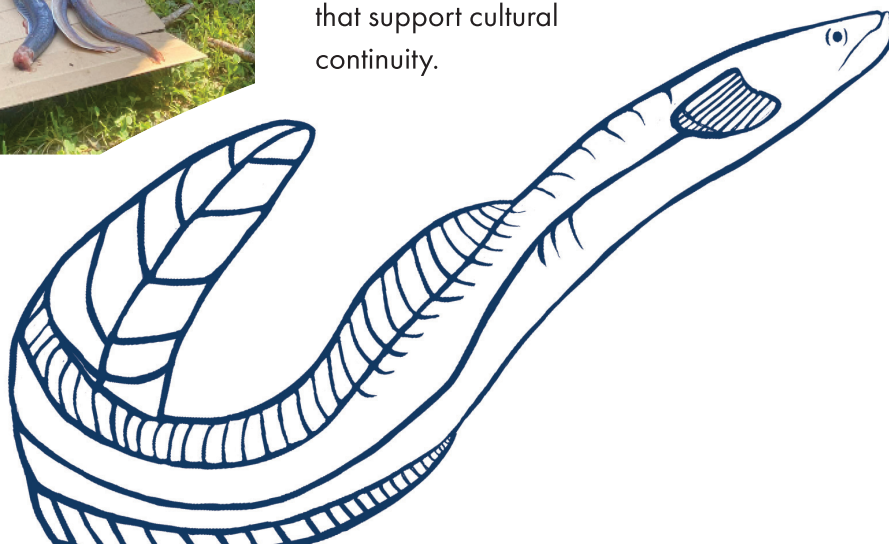
Many communities described using food-sharing and distribution to support access to food. In most communities, this includes the annual distribution of lobster to community members, sometimes through community-owned fisheries. Other common approaches include distributing turkeys during holidays or food hampers, sometimes supported by donations from local farmers, or as an initiative paid for by band councils. Activities, such as meat bingo where large cuts of meat are offered as prizes were also described. Some communities also noted the presence of community-led food pantries or nearby food banks, as well as the use of grocery gift cards to support individuals and families during times of crisis or need.

These approaches reflect strong traditions of sharing, care, and mutual support within Mi'kmaw communities. At the same time, many of these efforts are relied upon to meet immediate needs in the absence of more coordinated and sustained systems to support access to healthy food and food programs. As a result, communities often depend on a mix of short-term initiatives, and emergency responses to support access to food. **While the need for these kinds of food distribution practices is real and culturally grounded in practices of sharing and care, they are also driven by rising costs of living** and limited

access to grocery stores for some communities, and often function as gap-filling measures rather than long-term structural solutions.



This highlights the need to strengthen coordination of food systems and address structural drivers such as income and affordability to reduce reliance on emergency supports. It also highlights an opportunity to invest beyond emergency food support and into local food systems that support economic participation, alongside cultural food sharing and care-based practices that support cultural continuity.



Creating Shared Mi'kmaw Food System Values

The findings presented above highlight both the strengths and pressures shaping Mi'kmaw food systems. Across communities, common patterns emerged, including strong community leadership, reliance on stretched and informal roles, and ongoing challenges related to capacity, and coordinated access to food. Through reflection with facilitators and feedback from community stakeholders, these patterns informed the development of a shared set of strategic values to help guide food systems initiatives. **These values reflect what communities are already doing to sustain food systems, while also pointing to areas where greater alignment, coordination, and investment are needed.** They provide a foundation for guiding future decision-making, partnerships, and investments in ways that are grounded in community strengths and priorities. Building on asset mapping findings, a set of shared strategic values were created with stakeholders to guide Mi'kmaw food systems moving forward.

VALUES TO GUIDE DECISION-MAKING IN MI'KMAW FOOD SYSTEMS

The following strategic values were identified through community engagements and are offered as a foundation to guide food systems initiatives.

1.

Stewardship of Land, Water, and Local Food Systems

Caring for lands and waters while supporting local food harvesting, growing, and distribution, grounded in responsibility to future generations.

2.

Reclamation and Revitalization of Mi'kmaw Food Systems

Reclaiming and strengthening traditional food practices, knowledge, and relationships to land, water, and each other.

3.

Food as Care, Connection, and Community Wellbeing

Food as a way of expressing care, building relationships, and supporting wholistic physical, emotional, cultural, and spiritual wellbeing.

4.

Intergenerational Food Knowledge Sharing

Supporting the transfer of food knowledge, skills, and teachings across generations, with a focus on ensuring they are passed to youth.

5.

Coordinated and Inclusive Food Systems

Building food systems that are inclusive, safe, community-led, and better coordinated across sectors and settings, including schools as key sites for impact.

Together, these values provide a foundation for aligning investments, partnerships, and programs in ways that reflect community priorities.



MOVING FORWARD: WHAT THIS MEANS

This work highlights both the strengths of Mi'kmaw food systems and the structural conditions that shape how they are currently supported. Communities are already sustaining aspects of food systems through strong leadership, relationships, and practices grounded in care, connection, and cultural knowledge as they have always done. At the same time, food-related work is often fragmented, under-resourced, and reliant on informal, short-term approaches, and leadership spread across mandates.

Grounded in the strategic values and assets identified through this work, the following areas represent key opportunities to strengthen local and regional food systems moving forward. This work is important not only for supporting access to healthy and nutritious food, but also for strengthening local economies, cultural connection, community wellbeing, and stewardship of land and water. The findings also highlight opportunities to improve coordination, governance, and long-term investment across food-related initiatives and sectors, helping build more sustainable and self-determined food systems for future generations.

“Food is not a standalone program area — it is a cross-sector system.”



Strengthen coordination across food systems

Support alignment of food-related programs, services, and initiatives across sectors, roles, and settings. This includes strengthening coordination between existing community and organizational efforts through clearer food-focused mandates, shared priorities, and collaborative approaches. It also includes supporting Mi'kmaw-led governance and decision-making structures that can guide coordination, accountability, and long-term planning across food systems initiatives. Strengthening coordination and governance can help position food systems work as a core area of community wellbeing and development, rather than a secondary or fragmented responsibility. Opportunity for this is timely, with new investment in school food.

Invest in community-led food systems workforce and leadership

Support the people already sustaining food systems through dedicated roles, training opportunities, and long-term resourcing, while also creating new positions to help guide, coordinate, and lead food-related initiatives in sustainable ways that reduce burnout among key community leaders. This may include consideration of dedicated leadership or governance structures to support Mi'kmaw food systems at regional or provincial levels, alongside community-based roles that strengthen local coordination, food access, education, harvesting, production, and community engagement.



Support sustainable food systems infrastructure

Invest in both physical infrastructure such as community kitchens, and the coordination, staffing, and operational supports needed to ensure long-term use and impact.

Shift from emergency responses to long-term systems approaches

Reduce reliance on food distribution and emergency supports by strengthening aligned and coordinated food systems at regional and national levels and addressing underlying structural drivers such as income and affordability.

Strengthen local food systems and community-based economic participation

Align food-related investments, including school food funding, to support local production, harvesting, preparation, and distribution, ensuring that investment and resources contribute to community economies rather than flowing outside of them.

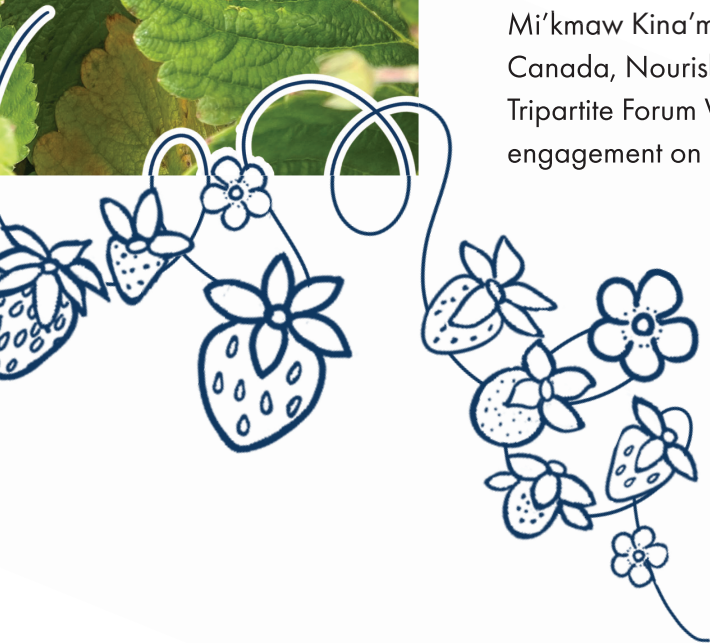
Align policy and funding with community-led approaches

Strengthen opportunities for community-led policies and decision making structures in support of Mi'kmaw-led food systems in ways that respect and uphold self-determination and reflect the realities of communities. Without dedicated coordination and staffing, current and future investments, including school food funding, will remain fragmented and unable to respond effectively to increasing cost and access pressures.



ALIGNING SCHOOL FOOD INVESTMENTS WITH MI'KMAW FOOD SYSTEMS

Across Canada, there is growing investment and attention toward food systems as a driver of health, economic development, and community wellbeing. Most notably, the federal government has committed \$1 billion over five years to a National School Food Program, including approximately \$227 million dedicated to First Nations communities. In Nova Scotia, this is complemented by a provincial commitment of approximately \$18.8 million over three years to expand school food programming in the province. **Together, these investments create a significant and time-sensitive opportunity.** Additional engagement with the Mi'kmaw school food community in Nova Scotia is being led to support planning for investments with collaboration and support from Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey, Nova Scotia Health, Indigenous Services Canada, Nourish Nova Scotia, and the Mi'kmaw-Nova Scotia- Canada Tripartite Forum Working Committee on Health, feeding into this broader engagement on Mi'kmaw food systems.



“School food is not only a meal program - it is part of a broader food systems conversation.”



School food represents more than a nutrition program. It is a stable and predictable source of economic demand for food through long-term investment that can support local food production, harvesting, preparation, and distribution, health, and cultural well-being, while creating employment and strengthening community economies. Schools can also serve as key sites for connecting food systems across health, education, culture, and economic development, and emergency preparedness. At the same time, without dedicated

coordination, leadership, and infrastructure, new investments risk reinforcing existing fragmentation, and limiting long term impact. There is a clear need to align emerging funding with long-term, community-led food systems approaches and priorities.

At this moment the findings presented throughout, offer a unique opportunity to:

- **Position leadership federally and regionally to help guide and coordinate school food linking it with broader food systems transformation efforts across communities and sectors, including health, education, and economic development.**
- **Align new and existing investments with coordinated, community-led food systems approaches, ensuring that funding supports long-term system development rather than short-term or fragmented initiatives.**
- **Leverage school food as a stable and predictable source of investment to strengthen local food production, harvesting, preparation, and supply chains, contributing to community economies.**
- **Invest in the governance, dedicated roles, infrastructure, and coordination needed to support scalable, sustainable, and self-determined food systems over time.**

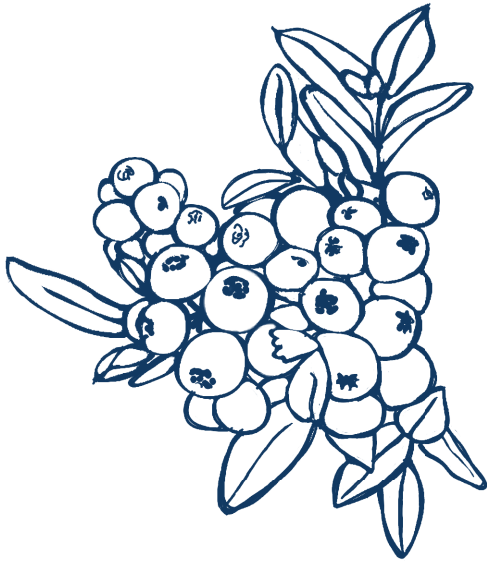


CLOSING REFLECTIONS

This work reflects what Mi'kmaw communities are already doing to sustain and rebuild their food systems. Across communities, food continues to connect land, culture, health, and local economies, and is carried forward through local leadership, relationships, and shared responsibility. At the same time, this work highlights the need for greater coordination, sustained investment, and decision-making structures that support food systems as a core area of focus, rather than a secondary responsibility spread across sectors.

The current policy and funding landscape presents a unique moment. **With new investments emerging, including in school food, there is an opportunity to shape how food systems are structured, supported, and governed in ways that reflect community values, priorities, and lived realities.** Decisions made at this stage will influence whether these investments contribute to long-term, community-led systems, or continue patterns of patchwork, fragmentation, and reactive programming that do not meet community needs, or that miss opportunities for resources to stay within communities. This report is intended to offer an understanding of the current regional landscape, grounded in community strengths and values, and identifies pathways for alignment, coordination, and sustained impact. Moving forward, continued collaboration across communities, leadership, and partners will be essential to ensuring that food systems are supported in ways that are coordinated, resourced, and self-determined.

***“This is not only a funding moment.
It is a system design moment.”***



The opportunity ahead is not only to invest in food security and access to nutritious food, but to invest in the systems, leadership, and relationships that sustain communities, economies, and the lands and waters that support us all. This includes investments in health and wellbeing, cultural continuity, and community resilience, alongside strengthening local economies, workforce development, and more stable and sustainable food supply chains. Strong, locally grounded food systems also play a critical role in emergency preparedness and response, supporting communities to respond to and withstand disruptions related to climate events, supply chain instability, and rising costs of

living. At the same time, there is opportunity to contribute to planetary health by supporting stewardship of lands and waters and reducing reliance on industrial food systems that place pressure on ecosystems. This work is also directly connected to the implementation of Mi'kmaw treaty rights. It presents a clear opportunity to align investments in school food with local harvesting and harvesting economies, supporting Mi'kmaw harvesters and producers while shifting demand from export-oriented supply chains toward local markets within communities.

Aligning investments with these broader considerations creates the conditions for long-term, coordinated, and cross-sector impact that extends beyond individual programs and supports the continued strengthening of community self-determination. Decisions made now will shape whether current investments lead to fragmented programming or contribute to improving coordinated, self-determined food systems. This is not only a funding moment. It is a system design moment.

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