

COMMENTARY**Using food systems to foster Indigenous youth leadership in global health**

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Submitted July 12, 2025 / Published online July 19, 2025

Citation: Wardman, Y. (2025). Using food systems to foster Indigenous youth leadership in global health [Commentary]. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 14(3), 9–11.

<https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2025.143.039>

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In October 2023, I was very fortunate to have been invited to attend a Global Indigenous Youth Forum where Indigenous youth from all over the world gathered. At the forum, there was a large focus on environmentalism, Indigenous youth advocacy, and protecting cultural diets and Indigenous food systems through combining traditional and Western science. Cultural diets are the traditional diets of Indigenous peoples, and are “derived from the land” (Native Women’s Association of Canada, 2012, p. 10). These were all incredibly important discussions, and it was inspirational to see Indigenous youth from all over the world advocate for one another despite speaking different

languages and having different backgrounds. But I also noticed that the connection between Indigenous food systems and health was glossed over. As a Cree-Saulteaux Indigenous youth, I grew up hearing that food is an important aspect of health, and the dietary decisions we make affect our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual wellness. Especially given that many diseases within Indigenous communities, including my own, are diet-related, I was inspired to write this commentary to advocate for the link between Indigenous food systems and health, and to advocate for global Indigenous youth leadership within global health.

It is acknowledged that consuming culturally

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Author Note

The author does identify as an Indigenous youth, but does not have any conflicts or interests to declare. The author did not receive any special funding to complete this commentary.

Acknowledgments

This commentary reflects the personal voice of Yazmeen Wardman. Dr. Carol Zavaleta-Cortijo, faculty of public health and administration, Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia (Peru), provided support in the initial development and structuring of the piece. Dr. Keith Williams, Athabasca University (Canada), also supported the further development of this article.

significant foods and medicines is correlated with improved physiological health outcomes (Sarkar et al., 2019). In many Indigenous cultures, food can be medicines and medicines can be food (Robin et al., 2019). For example, the *Inonotus obliquus*, otherwise known as chaga, is a basidiomycete pathogen that sexually reproduces through external spores (ScienceDirect, n.d.). It grows in northern boreal climates, including in Northern Canada, and is part of the pharmacopoeia of many Indigenous cultures. This fungus has been shown not only to be nutritious for a healthy diet, but also anti-inflammatory; it has been suggested to be used in anti-inflammatory medications (Brown, 2023; Wagle et al., 2024). From my community, I have had an older male family member consume *Inonotus obliquus* tea, which our culture believes may have contributed to his recovery from prostate cancer, and he currently lives cancer-free. Potential traditional therapies should further be investigated. Several of these physiological benefits have been seen through community-based initiatives that aim to increase the consumption of cultural diets (Ka'ula et al., 2023). Traditional Indigenous food systems promote several positive health outcomes, such as the potential anticancer effects of chaga, which extend beyond physiological health. But cultural diets have not been properly utilized to prevent diet-related diseases and promote wellness in global health.

Cultural diets are also linked to improved mental health and wellness. As seen through the process of gathering berries and other traditional foods by Elders in the Northern Plains, this helps Indigenous people feel connected to nature and promotes mental health and wellness (Colby et al., 2012). I have even seen this from my own family as my cousins go hunting for deer during hunting season. Not only do they enjoy hunting because they can provide healthy and nonprocessed food for their families, but they also feel good and emotionally connected to our traditions. This improvement in mental health and wellness is vital as many Indigenous communities face barriers, including structural factors, stigma, and “mistrust toward mainstream [healthcare] services” (American Psychiatric Association, 2022, para. 7). By drawing on the strength of cultural diets, global health ini-

tiatives can help overcome some of these barriers and support the mental health and wellness outcomes of Indigenous communities.


As mentioned from my previous points, using culture to improve physical health and well-being is important. Global health initiatives need to better support Indigenous food systems in order to support holistic health outcomes for Indigenous communities. For global health agencies and programs to do this, one of the first things we need to do is include Indigenous youth. Indigenous youth are highly valued within Indigenous communities, as they are seen as those who will make sustainable choices for future generations (Greenwood & Jones, 2015). Including Indigenous youth is not only important to increase our numbers in initiatives, but the age hierarchy within many Indigenous cultures is not the same as in Western cultures. Indigenous youth hold more social power than youth in Western cultures, so youth are integrally involved in our communities (Greenwood & Jones, 2015; Tate & Copas, 2003).

If consultations are a democratic process and food systems are to be revitalized, then Indigenous youth need to be included in the food systems and decision-making processes. It is fundamental for Indigenous youth globally to participate in this work because regional differences in food systems require different policies and decision-making processes (Indigenous Youth Caucus, 2023). To ensure meaningful input in the democratic process that is best for regional food system revitalization, global health initiatives need to ensure participation from global Indigenous youth communities. To achieve this, multistakeholder collaborations with Indigenous communities are needed at all levels. Here, Indigenous youth can actively participate in decision-making to create innovative and sustainable global health interventions. A few ways to ensure Indigenous youth participation are through paid global health internship opportunities, opportunities for Indigenous youth to conduct global health research and contribute to manuscripts with appropriate acknowledgment, and increased representation on global health committees. These improvements can guarantee that our decisions to promote positive health outcomes through food systems in

the global health community are sustainable for future generations.

Given worsening health outcomes and various transnational and cross-border threats to Indigenous food systems, such as climate change, there has never been a more critical time to draw on global, collective Indigenous expertise to maximize the vast array of health outcomes

from Indigenous food systems. By increasing the presence of Indigenous youth in global health leadership, working with Indigenous communities to help inform local interventions, and providing opportunities that empower and train Indigenous youth to become future leaders, global health disparities among Indigenous communities can be ameliorated.



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