

## Briefing Note

To: Mr. Olivier De Schutter, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food

From: Sarah McGregor, Garden River First Nation, Ontario; Indigenous Circle for Food Secure Canada; former employee of a National Aboriginal Organization

Date: 07 May 2011

Subject: Federal Budget cuts to National Aboriginal Organizations and the right to food

### Current Budget cuts

To date the following organizations have been impacted by the federal budget cuts:

- Assembly of First Nations - 40% Health Budget
- Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami - 40% Health Budget
- Métis National Council - 100% Health Budget
- Congress of Aboriginal Peoples - 100% Health Budget
- Native Women's Association of Canada - 100% Health Budget
- National Aboriginal Health Organization - 100%
- Pauktutit Inuit Women of Canada - 100% Health Budget
- First Nations Statistical Institute - 50% in 2012; 100% in 2013
- National First Nations Governance Centre - 100%
- National Healing Foundation - 100% (prebudget decision)

These organizations are National Aboriginal Organizations (NAOs) and national non-profit organizations. It should be noted that the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch of Health Canada received drastic cuts to their funding as well.

### Context

On April 1, 2012, the Federal government of Canada, a conservative majority led by Prime Minister Stephen Harper, announced sweeping budget cuts to NAOs<sup>1</sup>. Overall, most received a forty percent budget cut, while other health and non-health related aboriginal organizations were notified that they would no longer be funded.

The federal government has rationalized its budget changes by stating it is preserving the front line services and making cuts only to indirect health services, NAOs fit this criteria. However, NAOs were created to bring a strong united voice for their distinct

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<sup>1</sup> A National Aboriginal Organization is an organization that represents its constituents on the National level (First Nations, Inuit, Métis, non-status Indian or women). There are regional, provincial and local branches of most of the NAOs who work in collaboration with the National level. Those regional governance bodies represent individual communities that will have leadership such as a Chief (First

turn, each NAOs leadership advocates at the national level for their People and subsequently the front line service workers at the grassroots level. By cutting NAOs budgets it undermines health programs that are critical for the sustenance of imperative front line work within Aboriginal communities.<sup>2</sup>

Nationally, NAOs bring a powerful voice to issues such as health, housing, economic development, social development, etc., they advocate for Aboriginal peoples and strengthen the voice of the regional governments to ensure Aboriginal and treaty rights are honoured.<sup>3</sup> Each NAO works closely with its regional organizations and communities and receives their mandates from these levels. Essentially, NAOs serve their constituents through the development of policy at the national level that will result in change for the Aboriginal public. NAOs represent the needs of their distinct communities.

*What does this mean for Aboriginal peoples and food security?*

NAOs, that were already stretched to capacity, will no longer have the ability or manpower through administration to work with federal government to provide policy advice when policy and programs are developed. Often researchers turn to NAOs to ensure they are responding to the needs to the Aboriginal communities they are hoping to work with and seek guidance on ensuring they are complying to OCAP (Ownership, Control, Access and Possession) Principles.<sup>4</sup> Due to funding cuts, NAOs will not have the same capacity to advocate for the needs of their peoples and this change was immediate. NAOs play a coordination and facilitation role for First Nations, Inuit and Métis leadership, their regional organizations, and also provide outreach to non-aboriginal organizations to work towards achieving common goals.

NAOs play a critical role in food policy by providing policy advice, analysis, and guidance to government and non-government organizations such as Food Secure Canada. Without the capacity and expertise at the national level, First Nations, Inuit and Métis right to food will only get worse.

Though these funding cuts may not affect Aboriginal peoples immediately, the trickle-down effect will result in the deterioration of the social determinants of health. As stated in a letter written by grassroots Indigenous peoples involved in Indigenous health across Canada:

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<sup>2</sup> “Denial of Indigenous Health and Self Determination” Written by grassroots Indigenous peoples involved in Indigenous health across Canada. Montreal. April 22, 2012. <http://www.shamelessmag.com/blog/2012/04/denial-of-indigenous-health-and-self-determinatio/>

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that First Nations, Inuit and Metis have different rights under the constitution.

<sup>4</sup> OCAP Principles are mainly used by First Nation communities, however the other Aboriginal groups have similar principles when working with their communities. See <http://www.fnigo.ca/> for more

Indigenous peoples is not made a priority. As Indigenous communities our family networks extend beyond our immediate kin... Our National Aboriginal Organizations who are involved in health are one example of this kinship circle..."<sup>5</sup>

NAOs, while not direct service providers, do advocate for First Nations, Inuit and Métis populations. By cutting back funding, organizations who already lack adequate capacity to do the work they are mandated to do, their abilities are further impeded. Support at the national level for First Nations, Inuit and Métis is important so they may advocate changes to policies that perpetuate food insecurity in these populations. Food insecurity can not be combated solely by a community or by its regional governance bodies alone. A united voice that is strong in its objectives is needed. By cutting NAOs you're hindering that united voice.

Pauktuutit, a national non-profit organization representing all Inuit women in Canada stated in a press release regarding the 100% health funding cut they received said:

"Considering the ongoing health issues faced by Inuit women and their families and the demographic implications for effective public policy and health service delivery, these budget cuts will have a direct and negative impact on achieving progress towards equitable health and wellness status for Inuit comparable to other Canadians."<sup>6</sup>

This statement is easily transferable to any of the other NAOs health funding. For many, the work to advocate for better support for food security work, there will need to be an evolution towards a new way of working and ensuring that all objectives are met under the newly strained infrastructure. In many instances, however, just like a person who has to choose between food and rent, food seems like the more flexible option.

Overall, the Aboriginal population in Canada has disproportionately higher rates of poverty than any other group. One in four First Nations children live in poverty, compared to one in six for non-Aboriginal children and approximately forty percent of off-reserve Aboriginal children live in poverty as well.<sup>7</sup> As hunger is a direct result of poverty it is not surprising to find that Aboriginal peoples are approximately four times more likely to experience hunger as a direct result of poverty.<sup>8</sup> The following statistics are not exhaustive, it should also be noted that there are a lack of statistics for First Nations, Inuit and Métis populations:

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5 <http://www.shamelessmag.com/blog/2012/04/denial-of-indigenous-health-and-self-determinatio/>

6 Pauktuutit. Press Release. April 2012. <http://pauktuutit.ca/assets/press-release-april-2012-FINAL1.pdf>

7 Campaign 2000, Oh Canada! too many children in poverty for too long: 2006 Report card on child and family poverty in Canada [http://www.campaign2000.ca/rc/rc06/06\\_C2000NationalReportCard.pdf](http://www.campaign2000.ca/rc/rc06/06_C2000NationalReportCard.pdf)

8 McIntyre, J., Connor, S., & Worrain, J. (1998). A glimpse of child hunger in Canada. Ottawa, ON: Applied

17.8% of First Nations adults (age 25-39) and 16.1% of First Nations adults (age 40-54) reported being hungry but didn't eat due to lack of money for food (in the past 12 months). Comparably, only 7.7% of Canadian households were food insecure during 2007-2008.<sup>9</sup>

- Results showed a high level of food insecurity among Inuit adults in the Canadian Arctic, particularly those residing in Nunavut (68.8%).<sup>10</sup>
- According to the Aboriginal Peoples Survey, 7% of Métis children and youth (ages 6-14) were reported by their parents or caregivers to have experienced being hungry because the family had run out of food or money to buy food.<sup>11</sup>

Cuts to the NAOs are not the only federal budget cuts that will affect Aboriginal peoples right to food, but the policies that protect traditional ways are being undermined by this federal government. Changes have been introduced to the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act (CEAA) that will unfairly favour the proponent and not the community. Under the current act, Aboriginal communities must be consulted, however in the act that will replace CEAA, it will allow proponents to push projects through with little regard to environmental damage. The federal government argues that the changes are being made in order to streamline the process, however it also stands to gravely impact the traditional lands of Aboriginal peoples. Where Aboriginal communities would advocate for the precautionary principle, the proposed changes to CEAA would eliminate assessments in large numbers for very significant projects. The changes will also allow for tighter timelines that will not accommodate Aboriginal communities' lack of capacity to review project proposals and respond in an appropriate manner. This will result in allowing the company to carry out its work that could potentially impact traditional lands negatively. NAOs fight for the rights of their distinct Peoples and to have these rights recognized and with less staff and fewer resources, this will be much harder to protect. The most obvious example are the tar sands. There are communities within this country that are unable to eat off their traditional land for fear of consuming toxins that will accumulate in their bodies causing irreparable damage to their health.

### **Recommendations:**

1. The Canadian government restore funding to National Aboriginal Organizations and other non-profit organizations that serve First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.
2. Development and implementation of a National Food Policy that takes into consideration the distinct needs and priorities of each of the First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

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<sup>9</sup> First Nations Regional Longitudinal Health Survey (RHS) can be found: <http://www.rhs-ers.ca/>

<sup>10</sup> Prevalence of Affirmative Responses to Questions of Food Insecurity: International Polar Year Inuit Health Survey, 2007-2008. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22005728>

<sup>11</sup> The Nutritional Habits of Métis Children and Youth in Canada: A Preliminary Examination. <http://www.nccsh.ca/dec/food%20facts/child%20and%20youth/Nutritional%20Habits%20Metic>

security is treated as a Public Health issue. Food considered when developing new policies or programs that directly impact the traditional ways of food procurement, consumption, etc. of Aboriginal peoples.

4. The Canadian government guarantee that human rights are as defined in the United Nations Declarations on the rights of Indigenous Peoples and the UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
5. Impacts of the human rights of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples are examined prior to any future budget cuts.