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Exploring settler-Indigenous engagement in food systems governance

Catherine Littlefield[1] · Molly Stollmeyer[1] · Peter Andrée[2] · Patricia Ballamingie[3] · Charles Z. Levkoe[4]

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Abstract

Within food systems governance spaces, civil society organizations (CSOs) play important roles in addressing power structures and shaping decisions. In Canada, CSO food systems actors increasingly understand the importance of building relationships among settler and Indigenous peoples in their work. Efforts to make food systems more sustainable and just necessarily mean confronting the realities that most of what is known as Canada is unceded Indigenous territory, stolen land, land acquired through coercive means, and/or land bound by treaty between specific Indigenous groups and the Crown. CSOs that aim to build more equitable food systems must thus engage with the ongoing impacts of settler colonialism, learn/unlearn colonial histories, and build meaningful relationships with Indigenous peoples. This paper explores how settler-led CSOs engage with Indigenous communities and organizations in their food systems governance work. The research draws on 71 semi-structured interviews with CSO leaders engaged in food systems work from across Canada. Our analysis presents an illustrative snapshot of the complex and ongoing processes of settler-Indigenous engagement, where many settler-led CSOs aim to work more closely with Indigenous communities and organizations. However, participants also recognize that most existing engagements remain insufficient. We share CSOs' practices, tensions, and lessons learned as reflections for scholars and practitioners interested in the continuous journey of building settler-Indigenous partnerships and reimagining more just and sustainable food systems, work which requires iterative and critically reflexive learning.

Keywords Food systems · Governance · Civil society · Indigenous-settler relations · Justice · Indigenous self-determination

✉ Catherine Littlefield
catherinelittlefield@cmail.carleton.ca

Molly Stollmeyer
mollystollmeyer@cmail.carleton.ca

Peter Andrée
PeterAndree@carleton.ca

Patricia Ballamingie
patricia.ballamingie@carleton.ca

Charles Z. Levkoe
clevkoe@lakeheadu.ca

[1] Institute of Political Economy, Carleton University, 1125 Colonel by Drive, Ottawa, ON K1S 5B6, Canada

[2] Department of Political Science, Carleton University, 1125 Colonel by Drive, Ottawa, ON K1S 5B6, Canada

[3] Department of Geography & Environmental Studies, Carleton University, 1125 Colonel by Drive, Ottawa, ON K1S 5B6, Canada

[4] Department of Health Sciences, Canadian Research Chair in Equitable and Sustainable Food Systems, Lakehead University, 955 Oliver Rd., Thunder Bay, ON P7B 5E1, Canada

Introduction

Food systems are the interactive and interdependent processes that bring food from watersheds and fields to our plates (e.g., production, processing, marketing, distribution, consumption, and disposal of waste) along with the drivers and outcomes of those processes including the environment, economy, health, society and politics (Bhunnoo and Poppy 2020). Understanding food as part of a system demands an interrogation of governance, that is the norms, laws, policies, regulations and guidelines that shape and influence the nature and orientation of our food systems, as well as the power dynamics (both inside and outside formal 'decision-making' contexts) that impact decisions and outcomes. Within food systems governance spaces, civil society organizations (CSOs) play important roles in addressing power structures and informing decisions in various sectors and across multiple scales, often with the aim of achieving more just and sustainable food system outcomes (Andrée et al. 2019; Koc et al. 2008; Desmarais et al. 2017). We draw on Andrée et al.'s (2019) conception of CSOs as a "multiplicity

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of formal and informal associations, religious organizations, and social groups—as distinct from governments and businesses—that work for what they understand to be the collective interests of society" (p. 7), which can include food movement organizations. Food movements are networks geared toward change or transformation of food systems, often advocating for more just, sustainable, or healthy food futures by promoting and/or exploring alternatives to the dominant industrial and corporate-controlled approaches (Levkoe 2014; Clark et al. 2021).

In Canada, CSO food systems actors increasingly understand that they must consider the relationships among settler populations and Indigenous peoples[1] in their work. Efforts to make food systems more sustainable and just necessarily mean confronting the realities that the land of what is known as Canada is unceded Indigenous territory, stolen land, land acquired through coercive means, and/or land bound by treaty between specific Indigenous groups and the Crown. As a result, we argue that CSOs that aim to build more equitable and sustainable food systems must engage with the ongoing impacts of settler colonialism, learn/unlearn colonial histories, and build meaningful relationships with Indigenous peoples.

Research can play an important role in exploring what it means to build more just and sustainable food systems on Indigenous lands. Levkoe et al. (2023) elucidate CSO priorities, and identify the ongoing context of settler colonialism across Canada and the need to build meaningful settler-Indigenous relationships for collaborative food governance as significant themes not yet fully explored in the literature. This paper uses that previous research as a springboard to identify interviewees, with a view to filling that gap. It explores how settler-led CSOs engage with Indigenous communities and organizations in their food systems governance work. This paper draws on 65 interviews with current or past settler-led CSO leaders of a larger sample of 71 semi-structured interviews (conducted between 2020 and 2022) with CSO leaders from across Canada. This paper presents an illustrative snapshot of the complex and ongoing processes of settler-Indigenous engagement around food system governance by sharing and critically reflecting on lessons learned.

This research found that many settler-led CSOs wished to work more closely with Indigenous communities and organizations to develop more equitable and sustainable food systems. It highlights efforts to engage, reflect, and act meaningfully and substantively. However, participants also recognized that most existing engagements remain insufficient. Despite their best intentions, settler-led CSOs must continue to reflect on how to do this work well, while operating within the broader constructs of settler-colonial logics, along with its inherent power dynamics, institutional structures, and contentions. We bring these findings into conversation with literature on decolonization and Indigenous food sovereignty along with normative perspectives on settler roles and responsibilities in this work. Our findings highlight CSOs' practices, tensions, and lessons learned—to inform scholars and practitioners involved in this critical work.

As a team of settler scholars and practitioners, this inquiry focuses on settler relations, actions, and responsibilities as part of our collective and continuous learning journeys. We feel this work is an essential part of our own ongoing efforts towards understanding and building more just and sustainable food futures within the context of settler colonialism in Canada.

Literature review

As part of the exploration of settler-Indigenous engagement in food systems governance, this inquiry is premised within the relationships between Indigenous and settler food systems. There are myriad ways of representing these food systems, and their interrelations have shifted over time and space. Food directly connects people to the land and to each other, and is about much more than just sustenance. For both Indigenous and settler peoples, food connects to histories, identities, and cultures. In addition, power relations that underpin food systems lead to tensions in the relationships between different food systems. For example, settler food systems may depend on stolen Indigenous land, where access and use of resources remain contested. We situate this research within broader Indigenous-settler relations in Canada (both to the state, and settler society) that underpin many food governance issues. Our attention to food sovereignty literature allows us to explore the power imbalances in these relations. This literature review draws on scholarly insights about ways that settlers and their organizations remain complicit in the structures of settler-colonialism, and explores the tensions and challenges that arise in their efforts to engage Indigenous partners. We also consider the roles settler CSOs *might* play, alongside Indigenous peoples, communities, and organizations, in food sovereignty and food system governance work.

Food governance and food sovereignties in the Canadian settler state

Scholars chronicle how settler state governance has displaced and disrupted Indigenous food systems by way of

[1] Indigenous peoples of Canada include a diversity of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples with unique histories, cultural practices, languages, and lands.

social, political, cultural, economic, and ecological injustices (Walters 2012; Daschuk 2013; Burnett et al. 2016; Robin et al. 2022). Interrelated colonial processes of dispossession, assimilation, socio-economic marginalization, cultural and political oppression (e.g., Indian Act policies of forced relocation to reserves, pass systems restricting movement, imposed band council structures), and environmental degradation have led to significant food injustices. The direct harms to Indigenous food systems by settler state policies are numerous, and what Timler and Sandy (2020) characterize as *culinary imperialism.* They identify examples ranging from "colonial land theft" to the "regulation of subsistence practices'' and "forced dietary changes in residential schools" (p. 1). Burnett et al. (2016) explain that food was deployed "as an assimilatory and disciplinary tool" by the settler colonial state, making "Indigeneity an impossibility through its erasure, elimination and absorption" (para. 3). The depth of impact of settler colonialism across Canada on Indigenous cultural practices and governance as they relate to food warrants its own exploration beyond the scope of this paper (see for instance: Morrison 2011; Ray et al. 2019; Sumner et al. 2019; Price et al. 2022). While this paper focuses on the efforts of civil society, the role of the state remains particularly relevant given its hold on underlying power structures. Further, settler CSOs tend to direct their demands at the state and even mimic its colonial relationship to Indigenous communities in their approach to food systems governance (Choudry 2010; Choudry and Kapoor 2013).

Critical scholars have demanded an interrogation of the relationships involved in governing settler-dominated food systems. For example, Laforge and McLachlan (2018) offer an historical account of how the state shaped white settler-farmer subjectivities in the Canadian Prairies. While settler-farmers may not have been *directly* involved in the dispossession of land from Indigenous peoples, that very dispossession "allowed farming identities to be developed" in relation to immigrant recruitment policies and private property regimes (among other forces), and the settlement patterns they produced directly conflicting with Indigenous claims to land (p. 360). Moreover, the state simultaneously shaped the identities of settler-farmers and Indigenous peoples to "foster attitudes and behaviours that would ensure the long-term management of agricultural resources" to serve the purposes of settler-colonialism (Laforge and McLachlan 2018, p. 365; see also Rotz 2017; Desmarais and Wittman 2017; Kepkiewicz and Dale 2019).

These authors challenge such settler-subjectivities, but also document new relations between settlers and the state, noting that "more civil society and grassroots coalitions are building networks of community-based economies to oppose corporate influences" (Laforge and McLachlan 2018, p. 274). These shifting dynamics present opportunities to align settlers and Indigenous peoples in food governance work. Noting such efforts, Daigle (2017) considers: "what are the points of connection that are bringing Indigenous peoples and settler food actors into dialogue, negotiation and solidarity building?" (p. 16). However, she also calls upon settler actors to reflect critically on their own positionality and intentions in this work:

> How are such connections and affinities complicated by the power asymmetries that continue to shape Indigenous–settler relations in North America?... [And] how might well-intentioned settler food activists impede Indigenous efforts for land reclamation and self-determination? (Daigle 2017, p. 16)

We revisit Daigle's (2017) seminal work on Indigenous food sovereignties, including several other calls to settler food actors. Together, they ask us to think more deeply about the complex and contested relations between Indigenous and settler subjects in food systems governance.

Contemporary experiences of settler-Indigenous relations in food systems governance must also be contextualized within the growing literature on the articulation and (re)establishment of Indigenous autonomy and self-determination with respect to food—notably, the work of furthering Indigenous food sovereignty (Morrison 2011, 2020; Daigle 2017). The concept of food sovereignty was brought forth at the 1996 World Food Summit by La Via Campasina as a response to neoliberal globalization, grave inequities across the food system, and dominance of profit motives over environmental sustainability and feeding the world's populations (Desmarais 2007; Chaifetz and Jagger 2014). Its definition was refined at the 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty in Sélingué, Mali by food producers, harvesters and advocates as "the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems" (Declaration of Nyéléni 2007, para. 3). While food sovereignty is regarded as an anti-colonial struggle across the globe, there is a growing concern regarding its potential for cooptation (Navin and Dieterle 2018). For example, interpretations of the term "sovereignty" have become a sticking point for food movements working in various contexts (Agarwal 2014; Edelman et al. 2014). Furthermore, scholars have expressed concern that mainstream food initiatives (e.g., fair trade) using the term food sovereignty are distracting from the core elements like land reform and capitalist relations (Fairbairn 2012; Kepkiewicz and Rotz 2018).

For many Indigenous communities in North America, food sovereignty has been adopted to emphasize cultural autonomy and self determination along with ongoing struggles against settler colonialism (Coté 2016; Martens et al. 2016; Whyte 2016). According to Brant et al. (2023), "Indigenous food sovereignty is an approach to understanding how

the regeneration of Indigenous food systems and practices contributes to decolonizing efforts, resisting state power, and achieving self-determination" (pp. 144–145). "(Re)asserting Indigenous food sovereignty," Grey and Patel (2015) argue, is "part of the long, unbroken historical transit of anti-colonialism in Settler states" (p. 442).

Working within the Canadian settler-colonial context, Morrison (2011) argues that Indigenous food sovereignty not only "provides a framework for a specific policy approach to addressing the underlying issues impacting long-term food security in Indigenous communities", but also supports "efforts to uphold our sacred responsibilities to nurture relationships with our land, culture, spirituality and future generations" (p.111). However, she rejects a "universal" definition of sovereignty for "one that respects the sovereign rights and power of each distinct nation to identify the characteristics of our cultures and what it means to be Indigenous" (Morrison 2011, p. 98). Coté (2016) expands further on *indigenizing* sovereignty by "reframing it within Indigenous peoples' struggles for autonomy, self-sufficiency, and self-determination rather than within assertions of domination, control, and authority over ancestral homelands" (p. 9). Daigle (2017) builds on these critiques by enacting sovereignty in the plural—sovereignties—arguing that Indigenous food sovereignties are multiple and contested. She presents these multiple sovereignties as not only,

> …lived across diverse Indigenous landscapes, from one nation to another, from one clan to another, from one community to another, but also the multiple sources of authority within each of these nations, clans and communities, which have been systematically excluded from settler colonial and neoliberal spaces. (Daigle 2017, p. 5)

Daigle is responding to the emergent attention by food scholars to Indigenous food sovereignty by foregrounding the significance of Indigenous political and legal orders in shaping foodways. Our attention to critical food sovereignty discourses, and Daigle's framing of contested food sovereignties, is due to what they teach us about the relations between different food systems and peoples. Furthering Indigenous food sovereignties, therefore necessitates a very different relationship between Indigenous nations and the Canadian settler state (e.g. Grey and Patel 2015; Daigle 2017; Settee and Shukla 2020). It also requires settler CSOs to engage meaningfully with Indigenous peoples in the latter's food systems governance work.

Tensions and challenges in settler-Indigenous collaborations

Tensions and challenges within food governance spaces arise from attempts to incorporate Indigenous issues and approaches into existing food systems initiatives without meaningful engagement and critical reflexivity. Elliott et al.'s (2021) analysis of a CSO's attempts to incorporate Indigenous food sovereignty within a settler colonial framework finds that even organizations earnestly seeking to advance food sovereignty and food justice may still fail to adequately and substantially address settler colonial realities. Similarly, Kepkiewicz and Rotz (2018) point to many instances when food movement actors reify and even perpetuate colonial relations in their efforts to integrate Indigenous values into food policy and governance efforts. They argue that such efforts can inadvertently reinforce underlying settler colonial logics, such as supremacy of the Canadian state and prohibitory laws and regulations that limit Indigenous foodways.

Daigle (2017) argues that settler CSOs need to "interrogate the legitimacy of legal frameworks that colonial governments and capitalist industry continue to mobilize to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their food harvesting grounds" (p. 15). Otherwise, the state's possession of lands now known as Canada remain uncontested, and by extension, so does settler access to and understanding of land as private property. Laforge and McLachlan (2018) concur: "the concept of 'settler common sense' has allowed settler communities to be complacent about their own exploitative place in the colonialism of Canada, while the discursive strategies of past state policies of assimilation continue to manifest in the present" (p. 378).

Kepkiewicz and Rotz (2018) note that this entitlement stems from settler colonial logics that lead settlers to "feel 'at home'" and have a "rightful claim to land and resources," based on the perceived legitimacy of the Canadian state (p. 19). Elliott (2020) explains that uncritical food systems work led by settlers can create narratives that naturalize and "reinforce settler claims to land and render illegible Indigenous assertions of territorial sovereignty" (p. 55). Scholars argue that settler colonial occupation and control of land directly impact Indigenous food systems (also see, Kepkiewicz and Dale 2019; McMichael 2015; Rotz and Kepkiewicz 2018) and thwart the 'redistribution' of land necessary for strengthening Indigenous food sovereignty. Tensions between settler CSOs and Indigenous people's claims become especially evident when CSOs also use the term 'food sovereignty' to explain or justify their efforts (Bowness and Wittman 2020). The literature offers further cautions for settler-Indigenous engagement in food systems governance related efforts.

First, critical scholars remain wary of approaches that rely primarily on Indigenous "inclusion" because they often assume that simply adding diverse voices to existing processes will lead to change (Grey and Newman 2018; Kepkiewicz and Rotz 2018; Dawson 2020; Rotz et al. 2023). Instead, Rotz et al. (2023) call for shifts to "organizational governance and decision-making, strategic planning, funding, vision and mission," alongside Indigenous-inclusion

into settler systems and institutions (p. 106). Anything short of such structural changes limits potential for meaningful impacts and risks bringing additional undue harms to the affected communities.

Further, some scholars critique engagement approaches that simply treat Indigenous peoples as one of many marginalized groups within Canadian settler society, as opposed to being distinct nations (Grey and Newman 2018; Kepkiewicz and Rotz 2018; Elliott 2020). Such 'multicultural inclusion,' Grey and Newman (2018) argue, is "ill-positioned to deal with Indigenous groups, *who demand not better inclusion* in the Settler state, society, and market, but affirmative distinction from these configurations" [emphasis added] (p. 719). Elliott (2020) distinguishes race-based oppression from settler colonialism, stating that "conceiving of Indigenous peoples as simply one more racial minority can function to render illegible their specific calls for self-determination as nations" (p. 53). Notwithstanding the essential role of anti-racism within food systems work, these efforts are not the same as challenging settler colonialism (Levkoe 2021). Tuck and Yang (2012) call for an "ethic of incommensurability," (p. 28) whereby opportunities for working together in solidarity should be based on what is different, or incomparable, rather than what is similar or common. Building on these ideas, Kepkiewicz (2017) argues for recognizing settler colonialism as "a distinct but intersecting structure of oppression" (p. 175).

Scholars also caution against settler CSOs making "presumptive solutions" to the challenges facing Indigenous communities. Many CSOs in Canada aim to address food systems problems by introducing grassroots alternatives such as community gardens or greenhouse projects. While these interventions may be welcome, they are often brought to northern or remote Indigenous communities with little critical evaluation of their impact or efficacy for Indigenous-led food systems governance. Timler and Sandy (2020) argue that such efforts "have flattened and simplified the complex relationality fundamental to many Indigenous foodways, resulting in an often-narrow focus on growing fruits and vegetables as a means to support food security, without addressing the wider holism called for across Indigenous health and food systems" (p. 3).

Settler responsibilities and opportunities in settler-Indigenous relations

Given the concerns expressed by scholars and practitioners about existing approaches to aligning Indigenous food sovereignty with food systems governance work, the literature suggests opportunities for ameliorating settler-Indigenous collaboration and settlers' roles in this work. Several scholars suggest particular responsibilities for settlers to consider. For example, Matties (2016) suggests settlers "recognize [our] complicity in colonialism, center Indigenous perspectives and narratives," (para 3), "reconsider our conceptions of land, [and] examine colonized spaces in the food movement" (para 23). As settlers educate themselves (and each other) on their ongoing and historical, privileged access to resources, Timler and Sandy (2020) caution that engaging with Indigenous communities must not be extractive. It is the work for "settlers—the white people of Canada—to come to relationships in humble and informed ways" (p. 10). Bowness and Wittman (2020) recognize how the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has "charged settlers with the responsibility to act", as should Canada's adoption of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (p. 1158). Both, they argue, demand that settlers not only "respect, but… also protect, traditional food systems, traditional foodlands and ecological systems that provide for traditional foods" (p. 18). Accountability is a key element of Daigle's (2017) calls to settler food activists and scholars where she asks,

> What do everyday practices of responsibility and accountability look like for settler food actors as they live and work on contested and occupied Indigenous lands? Further, how can relations of accountability and solidarity contend with logics of white supremacy while refusing to re-center white fragility and, simultaneously, complicate the category of settler?...How might food sovereignty scholarship and activism be more accountable to the Indigenous laws and political orders that are increasingly being foregrounded in analyses of Indigenous foodways? What will the movement, and its supporters, lobbyers and activists, do to be accountable to Indigenous movements for decolonization and self-determination? (p. 16)

Kepkiewicz and Rotz (2018) call for the deconstruction of existing policy development processes wherein CSOs demand top-down policy changes from the state. Instead, they suggest an approach to Canadian food policy that is both "together but separate" from Indigenous nations' food systems efforts—or a more regional approach, where "multiple regional policies are developed by different Indigenous nations" (p. 21). In the context of urban agriculture in Vancouver, Bowness and Wittman (2020) urge urban agrarians to reflect on their "responsibility to the land," while bearing in mind that "not all urban people have the same right to it." (p. 1143). Considering that settler urban agrarians "continue to benefit from the dispossession and commodification of Indigenous land, these authors encourage a "relational" approach, one that works "between urban Indigenous peoples and traditional territories, both urban and distant, and between urban Indigenous and settler members of the broader food movement" (p. 18). Todd (2014) emphasizes the importance of "working across difference

where possible," in her research on human-fish relations in northern fisheries (p. 224). "Rather than accept the incommensurability of Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge," the relational framing she proposes asks that "all parties…acknowledge different cosmologies, worldviews, legal orders, and experiences while also contending with the colonial logics and power relations of the Canadian State" (Todd 2014, p. 224). These scholars, along with others, gesture towards collaborative approaches that are more relational, responsible, and/or accountable to Indigenous peoples. With these critiques, considerations and queries to guide our analysis, we turn to explain the methods employed in this research.

Methods

Our research explored the ways that settler-led CSOs engage with Indigenous communities and organizations in their food systems governance work. Our research team conducted a total of 71 interviews (58 in English and 13 in French). 71.83% (n = 51) of interviewees represented a specific organization and several (n = 20) shared their knowledge and perspectives as individual leaders in food systems governance spaces. Specifically, these individuals identified as academics (n = 8), independent consultants (n = 10), and Elders, grandfolk, and knowledge keepers (n = 18) with extensive and diverse experiences working in civil society, primarily with food movement organizations. Some respondents agreed to their organizations being named, while others requested confidentiality. 65 of these interviews are drawn on in this paper. Of those representing organizations, 94.18% (n = 48) represented non-profit organizations, networks or coalitions of nonprofits (hence: CSOs), while 5.82% (n = 3) represented public sector organizations, thus excluding them from the sample drawn on here. Twenty-nine percent (n = 15) of these CSOs work primarily at the local/municipal level, 29% (n = 15) at the provincial/territorial level, 23% (n = 12) at the national level, 2% (n = 1) at the international level, and 10% (n = 5) work across multiple scales.

We define settler-led CSOs as organizations that are not directed by a board of Indigenous directors or have primarily Indigenous people serving in executive positions. We collected anonymous demographic information about our participants through a short survey which had a response rate of 70% (n = 50) and found that 4% (n = 2) of respondents identified as Indigenous. When analyzing our data for this paper, we deliberately excluded cases (n = 3) where interviewees stated that they worked for an Indigenous-led organization or spoke as Indigenous knowledge keepers. Still, it is possible that our data included some perspectives of Indigenous people, as Indigenous interviewees (like everyone else) were asked to speak on behalf of the organization they worked for, and not as a representative of their community or First Nation.

We recruited participants from a list of respondents to a national food systems governance survey we conducted between November 2019 to March 2020 (see Levkoe et al. 2023) as well as individuals named by survey participants who were known to have been actively involved in the development of food systems governance initiatives in Canada. We also used snowball sampling, aiming to include a diverse representation across geographies, scales of work, and organizational types. Individuals were invited to participate in the interviews if they identified as playing a leadership role in a CSO actively involved in food systems governance work. While focused on food systems governance issues more broadly, the interviews invited participants to discuss partnership efforts between Indigenous and settler organizations regarding food systems governance, going into these issues in more depth only if interviewees chose to. Interviews averaged sixty minutes in length and used a semi-structured interview guide. We then recorded, transcribed and coded thematically all interviews using Nvivo software on a virtual collaborative platform.

Findings

Before we describe how settler-led CSOs are engaged on these issues, it is important to note that when asked about partnership efforts between Indigenous and settler peoples, fully one quarter of interviewees (n = 16) said they were not involved in such efforts. However, this group also emphasized their aspirations, proving they were aware of this limitation. Many CSOs were in a process of thinking through settler-Indigenous engagement relating to food systems governance: engaging in preliminary, internal or stand-alone efforts toward relationship building and acknowledging there is more work to be done.

The vast majority of our interviewees (n = 49) articulated a desire for greater engagement with Indigenous communities. This is evidenced in the following quote from the director of a national food charity: "we're trying to do a lot more work around Indigenous awareness sensitivity training and around supporting Indigenous communities better." While most CSOs were in the initial stages of engagement, some respondents demonstrated movement toward deeper relationship building. A program manager from an international social justice CSO observed this movement as follows: "organizations are changing and becoming way more diverse and anti-racist and working in solidarity with Indigenous people." In sum, almost every respondent demonstrated interest in settler responsibilities and Indigenous relations, and many shared examples of working towards meaningful and collaborative partnerships as core to governance of

equitable and sustainable food systems, as the following subsections illustrate.

This section presents research findings on how settler-led CSOs considered, explored, and engaged with Indigenous communities/organizations and issues in their governance-related work. It includes four interrelated subsections, beginning with the inner work that individuals or organizations do to learn and unlearn the ongoing impacts of settler colonialism. The next subsection explores how CSOs attempt to engage in this work through internal organizational governance, and the following subsection explores external relationship building efforts. The the fourth focuses on the tensions, challenges and lessons learned from these efforts.

Inner work

Our findings reveal the inner work that accompanies personal learning to be an important first step in settler-Indigenous engagement in food systems governance, and a stage where several CSOs currently remain. Inner work refers to personal efforts to learn and unlearn, as well as encouraging others in their networks to do the same. For example, the director of a provincial food non-profit emphasized "learning about treaties and covenants and exploring in a personal way how that informs [not only] how I live, but also my work."

Several CSOs encouraged learning and training for settlers within and outside of their organizations to work towards critical education and foundational understanding of settler colonialism and Indigenous priorities. Some took on learning and training initiatives as a first step toward relationship building, while others did not indicate the intention to move toward partnerships, focusing more generally on awareness building and perspective shifting. One regional food policy council hosted public awareness meetings to help settler peoples better "understand Indigenous thinking"—facilitating engagement and dialogue through book readings, film screenings, and public talks. Rather than building relations, this food policy council's efforts aimed to "amplify the voices of Indigenous people through the channels that are available to us" and to "appreciate what these [Indigenous] projects are about." The council offered settlers opportunities to learn about Indigenous knowledge(s) and priorities and to reflect on ways they might support Indigenous-led food systems in their own work. Building upon similar inner learning efforts, some CSOs then moved this work to the organizational level, moving to amend structures based on personal and interpersonal learnings.

Internal organizational governance

When asked about involvement in settler-Indigenous partnerships for food systems governance, several participants discussed internal organizational governance-related initiatives and processes such as Indigenous representation on boards and advisory councils and progress on equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) policies. Oftentimes these processes extended from or coincided with the inner work described above.

A participant from the Canada-based international social justice organization Inter Pares reflected on how organizational governance is critical to prefigurative change work—recreating what you want to see in the world internally. This representative shared how their organization considered the Truth and Reconciliation Commission[2] (TRC) Calls to Action as building blocks to creating an Indigenous Rights Action Plan.[3] They explained, their CSO had generated a particular list of actions to advance reconciliation, noting that the Calls to Action were "often directed to the government" and "don't tell all Canadian citizens, as people, what can we do?"

Oftentimes, participants viewed changes in internal organizational structures and processes as an important start to building settler-Indigenous relations. The executive director of a provincial farmers' organization stated, "I think one of the first steps is having representation on our Board." Several respondents indicated that their CSOs hired (or sought to hire) Indigenous peoples, either to generally increase representation, or to fill specific roles such as an advisor, honorary speaker, member, or coordinator. The director of a food network in Eastern Canada noted: "we've increased our steering committee membership and diversified it significantly in many ways. That also means bringing on folks who are Indigenous." The director posited that diversifying their membership led to more connecting and collaborating with Indigenous members on the best ways to reach out, build relations, and distribute funding to communities. A member of a regional food policy council explained how an Indigenous advisor liaised and guided their food policy engagement, making "connections and introductions

[2] The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada was constituted and created in 2007 following the 2006 Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, the largest class action settlement in Canadian history in recognition of the damage from the violence and trauma of the residential school system for Indigenous peoples (CIRNAC 2022). The TRC concluded in 2015 after hearings with residential school survivors and families across Canada. The Final Report (TRC 2015a) included 94 Calls to Action (TRC 2015b) for all levels of government, corporate, and civic sectors (churches, social justice groups, and educational institutions in particular) to "redress the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of Canadian reconciliation" (TRC 2015b, p. 1).

[3] In 2018–2019, a team from Inter Pares worked collaboratively with organization staff, the board of directors, and Indigenous allies to develop the initial Action Plan for Working in Solidarity with Indigenous Peoples in Canada (Inter Pares 2021). Following the first implementation phase in 2019–2021, Inter Pares welcomed feedback to renew the action plan.

to communities." One CSO manager noted their recent hire of an Indigenous lead, but acknowledged that this step "was very, very much scratching the surface."

Participants commonly noted EDI efforts, frameworks, policies, and training as examples of their involvement in settler-Indigenous partnerships. However, this is not the same as engaging in partnerships, which a few interviewees pointed out. A provincial agricultural association leader noted that they "started working towards conversations and training on diversity, equity, and inclusion," but concluded that this remained at the "infancy" stage. The director of one provincial organization explained that they formed an ad hoc committee of their board and reflected on how despite being a small organization, "we also know that we have to be doing more in this realm." A retired CSO leader emphasized the need for more efforts to specifically address Indigenous exclusion and marginalization in food systems governance, questioning whether diversity initiatives would ever be enough given that they occur within settler colonial structures.

A few participants expressed their discomfort in doing Indigenous food systems work as non-Indigenous people, which in at least one case led the organization to look into hiring Indigenous staff members. A member of a food policy group working on a food action plan noted the importance of "trying to figure out how we engage with a number of different groups in ways in which they want to be engaged, at the time and place in which they want to be engaged." This particular group hired an Indigenous advisor to guide a process of reflecting Indigenous principles and engagement in their planning. A director of a charitable organization working in Indigenous communities across Canada wished to build up their Indigenous team to work directly with communities—with non-Indigenous staff serving in more supportive roles.

FoodShare, a Toronto-based food justice organization, established an Indigenous Advisory Circle with representatives from local Indigenous communities to routinely meet with the executive director to provide guidance on organizational decision-making, particularly efforts toward Indigenous engagement in their food work. The Indigenous Advisory Circle led to internal and relational outcomes, including public-facing solidarity statements, an organization-specific land acknowledgement, an Indigenous Food Action Coordinator, and the channeling of resources to support Indigenous-led organizations. FoodShare's internal relationship-building efforts cultivated openings for learning and taking action through a space to ask questions such as: "Are we on the right track? What are we missing? What do we need to be doing?" The Indigenous Advisory Circle facilitated interactive and iterative change within the organization and their relations. FoodShare took into careful consideration the TRC's Calls to Action as guidance for navigating their position in the food system as a predominantly settler-led CSO.

Solidarity efforts are one way organizations aspired toward bridging internal efforts with external actions. Representatives from the National Farmers Union (NFU) reflected on their organization's engagement with Indigenous peoples and priorities as part of their work in food systems governance. Since the 1970s, the NFU has used their voice and presence to stand in solidarity with Indigenous land defenders and activists. Although the NFU had already been interested in and taken action around settler-Indigenous engagement, a representative noted that the organization was more recently "taking the Truth and Reconciliation recommendations to heart" in their operations "and doing history" through their conventions. They explained how the NFU encouraged their membership to learn about the realities of settler colonialism and work towards reconciliation as individuals, organizations, and a broader farming network.

External governance relationships

This subsection highlights settler-led CSO's engagement with Indigenous communities and priorities beyond their particular organizations. Responses ranged from descriptions of relationship building efforts such as establishing networks to examples of settler-Indigenous partnerships in food governance-related work including resource and knowledge sharing and co-creation.

CSOs engaged in external efforts as network building—as connectors and facilitators supporting Indigenous and settler actors. A director of a global philanthropic network explained their work connecting actors from the private, public, and civic sectors, including Indigenous peoples, noting they felt privileged to have access to such a wide breadth of individuals interested in exploring partnerships. Recognizing this position, they took on a facilitative role to use their connections to build capacity to support Indigenous priorities. A food systems scholar similarly reflected on how they are "more of a facilitator than anything else" in their efforts to create and build partnerships. A representative from an international food charity noted the importance of networking across food systems organizations to "reduce competition and find ways to work together, where we can support each other," to reach more people and ensure greater impact.

Several respondents shared examples of resourcing relationships, where their CSOs provided funds, resources, or other capacities to Indigenous-led and/or Indigenous-serving organizations or to Indigenous communities to support food systems policy, planning, and projects. The director of a food security foundation described this as building alongside Indigenous organizations and communities, doing change work in a collaborative way and supporting existing efforts to build programs rather than creating new ones on their own. A Canada-wide organization focused on regional food

systems partnerships "supported a few learning circles" to bring together two Indigenous communities and community decision-makers, who developed a food sovereignty plan. A manager from Community Food Centres Canada (CFCC) explained how they took a flexible and needs-based approach to partnership work and emphasized intentional learning. As a national organization, they had the financial ability to offer support and resources to local Indigenous communities to build food systems assets from the ground up in place-based and culturally rooted ways. They described this approach as coming "from a place of learning"—embodying an ethos of "we're here to help you do what you want to do"—prioritizing community-based food, values, and desires in creating a flexible community food centre model that can be adapted to different contexts. In another example, a national social justice organization provided core support to Indigenous organizations as "flexible money that they can use to strengthen organizations and their movements." Further, a national food charity adopted a similarly flexible approach in their commitment to "all the work with [Indigenous] partners being community-led". As a charitable organization that is not a foundation, they noted their organizational struggles with regulatory frameworks and fundraising, but that they try not to pass that on to partner communities (e.g., by taking on administrative burdens such as reporting).

Interviewees also mentioned joint funding applications, advocacy efforts, knowledge-sharing events, community engagement, and statements or actions of solidarity as part of working with other settler-led and Indigenous-led CSOs. A food systems consultant working with CSOs stressed the potential of community engagement in this work: "if we can do more community engagement as a form of governance (or to inform governance) we would have a much better world." This individual described facilitating an Indigenous-led and community-engaged regional food action plan and reflected on how critical it was to get "folks involved who are on the ground or at least working with the grassroots in these conversations" rather than "a bunch of people in suits making decisions about northern Indigenous food security." The consultant shared excitement about the potential of Indigenous protected areas, guardian programs, and resource management boards as moves toward Indigenous sovereignty, "which is super intertwined with land and food sovereignty."

Relationship building is not a quick or easy process, but rather, one that demands time and care. A director of a national farming non-profit stated that building settler-Indigenous relationships is a core element "of utmost importance to our organization, and that is very much a long-term kind of journey to be on." Putting time and care into relationship building is critical, as the executive director of a food justice CSO reflected: "no matter how time-sensitive something is, if the relationship really isn't there, it can be difficult if not impossible to generate the ability to work together even if an issue is shared."

An interesting and encouraging project shared as an exemplary partnership effort was the Earth to Tables Legacies that began in 2015 as "an intergenerational and intercultural exchange of food sovereignty activists... a process of reconnecting the relationships that have been lost through industrial agriculture and a corporate global food system that treats food as a commodity in the market" (Earth to Tables Legacies, n.d.). Earth to Tables Legacies centered on sharing food to share knowledge, experience, conversation, and connection. Five years of exchange across diverse Indigenous and settler food actors informed the creation of short story vignettes, photo essays and videos which can be explored online as well as through a book (Barndt et al. 2023). One contributor described the project as "bringing together Indigenous and settler collaborators to think through our relationship in a more intimate way." A CSO leader who helped to facilitate the project reflected on its promising focus on collaboration and knowledge exchange, learning from one of the Indigenous organizers that "good food is a requisite for good governance."

The Coalition for Healthy School Food also demonstrated encouraging examples of working toward settler-Indigenous engagement through their network and governance. With over 100 member organizations, a number of which are Indigenous-led, the Coalition includes Indigenous food sovereignty as one of the core principles members agree to, emphasizing "listening to Indigenous voices separately." The Coalition aspires toward long-term engagement and collaboratively governed partnerships. A representative noted they were considering a "Wampum Belt[4]-style solution, where there may be a separate organization that we stand with, rather than joining us" to acknowledge the importance of Indigenous self-determination in collaboration. A participant whose organization is a member of the Coalition reflected on their efforts to ensure "consistent advocacy" across the network "that also includes funding for Indigenous nations" and the elevation of "Indigenous voices in the discussion."

Two senior food systems leaders pointed to the United Nations Committee on World Food Security's (CFS) Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples Mechanism (CSIPM) engagement efforts. Open to CSOs working on food security

[4] Wampum belts are a mnemonic technology and intellectual tradition in Haudenosaunee nations used to record important information such as histories, teachings, laws, or agreements between nations and others. In this case, the reference is to the "Two-Row Wampum", a belt of two purple lines of beads separated by white ones, created to commemorate an agreement between the Haudenosaunee and early European visitors to their lands: "In one row is a ship with our White Brothers' ways; in the other a canoe with our ways. Each will travel down the river of life side by side. Neither will attempt to steer the other's vessel" (Onandaga Nation, n.d.).

and nutrition, the CSIPM is a collaborative space for participants to discuss and generate advisory feedback for the CFS. Previously known as the Civil Society Mechanism, the CSIPM changed its name to refer explicitly to one of its eleven constituencies, Indigenous Peoples. As a member of the CSIPM Coordination Committee explained, this was done "to acknowledge that there are levels of injustice and racism there that need to be addressed." They shared that beyond acknowledgement "there is a way of looking at policy and engaging in policy making [that] is mightily enhanced by including the truth that Indigenous peoples' experience and their insights speak." This respondent emphasized that Indigenous peoples' insights are not only key for food policy and governance work, but also for confronting climate and ecological crises, where Indigenous perspectives help to challenge and change worldviews. Another participant described the change as "a very clear indicator of how strong this sentiment is and how seriously it's being taken by a slice of civil society." The change demonstrated the foregrounding of settler-Indigenous relations and reconciliation by institutions aiming to shape and influence food systems governance.

Tensions and learnings from settler-Indigenous relations in food systems governance

Respondents identified various tensions and challenges with respect to engaging meaningfully with Indigenous communities and organizations in their food systems governance work. Tensions most often related to capacity and timing, uncertainty, and organizations operating within settler-colonial institutions and systems. Of the participants not engaged in any partnership efforts, several expressed interest in engaging but perceived barriers to appropriate engagement, whether these were personal, organizational or systemic.

Participants commonly identified time constraints and limited capacity as challenges to relationship building. One participant spoke about their experience working at a national food CSO and reflected on a settler-Indigenous food systems partnership which fell apart, as "people didn't have the time and the space to keep it alive, because they've got a million other things to worry about in their daily lives." Limited time and capacity proved common constraints for all involved (i.e., CSO employees and Indigenous partners), and even reasons why participants who responded "no" had not yet engaged in partnership efforts. A city manager working on a local food strategy shared that building networks and connections with Indigenous peoples and organizations in food systems governance work "is so urgent and so important" but feels beyond individual capacity. This touched on the potential concern of feeling like an organization or individual cannot make a difference in issues that are (seemingly) too big. The participant similarly pointed to the importance of dialogue and network building, reflecting on how "it is about networking ourselves, having these kinds of conversations more strategically and learning from each other."

The uncertainty of how to best engage with Indigenous communities and organizations proved another common tension. As the executive director of a provincial farmers' association at the "initial stages of just trying to start with relationship building" questioned: "how do I do this so I'm not draining resources and not just asking you to sign on to some grant or something… How do we build the relationships so we're supporting the work that you're doing, and not just taking, or trying to check boxes?" The respondent expressed a desire to learn from other organizations and studies on effective and meaningful practices for relationship building in "an authentic way so that it's not tokenistic."

A representative from a national charity CSO shared the challenge of separating out Indigenous issues and how their organization learned from it:

> It poses a challenge to have an Indigenous program or Indigenous relations dedicated team in an organization. It creates a silo that you don't necessarily want to have. Our aspirations were to have a broader awareness in the organization, an understanding of Indigenous realities, and also our priorities regarding that population. So, we decided to send our Indigenous staff members into the different teams and to the regional teams internally to make sure that it was a widespread preoccupation and approach.

A participant from a food justice CSO highlighted the challenge of authenticity in working toward partnerships:

> There's a lot of work in settler communities to learn and to understand how to integrate language and activity that shows the genuine intent to transform settler colonial relations, and even those are always going to be called out as insufficient, I think, because nothing is in and of itself sufficient.

The complexity and diversity among and within Indigenous communities and their food systems governance work proved another challenge. One municipal food strategy actor noted that not all Indigenous communities are united, resulting in differences and tensions within that can complicate community-engaged work: "There are these layers upon layers of engagement that are quite sobering and you need to be constantly mindful of. It's really long-term complicated work for sure." When working with a particular representative or leader, one cannot assume they hold the same perspective as the rest of the community, risking tension in how participatory a project or partnership is. Moreover, two CSO representatives noted there can be challenges around settler-Indigenous partnerships

due to the impacts and conditions Indigenous communities face from historic and ongoing colonialism: “It’s been a very challenging moment to try to go ‘okay, now, let’s talk about food sovereignty’ when communities are grieving and organizing around that [past and ongoing trauma].” “The [Indigenous] communities [we seek to partner with] are just facing very basic food security problems, and taking care of these is challenging enough.”

Participants noted funding for settler-Indigenous partnership efforts as another challenge, particularly when “the evidence base is very narrowly defined” for indicators in food systems work. A senior leader and participant in the food movement challenged the view that “scientific knowledge is only that which is produced by a certain range of academics, doing a certain kind of work, answering a certain kind of question” and “that scientific evidence is the whole of the knowledge that’s needed for food policy.” They further detailed the need to address this issue by denouncing the dismissal of Indigenous knowledges as anecdotal or not evidence-based in food policy discourse, when these knowledges “are in fact seminal to changing the food policy in a way which speaks to all of this language of sustainability.” The director of an international CSO similarly reflected on how their agroecology work is “prefaced by an understanding of how power relates to science and knowledge […] Whose knowledge counts? And whose knowledge matters? Different ways of knowing are really central to the future of food and to resilient, equitable food systems.” They acknowledged the myriad ways power operates in food systems governance, including through “structural barriers” such as institutional lock-ins (e.g., social conventions positioning Western scientific knowledge as the dominant structure and related limitations in legislation and contracts) and the use of narrow metrics (encouraging a move beyond e.g., agricultural yield metrics to “more of the human and social metrics, [e.g.,] women’s empowerment, access to resources, access to land, access to seeds, and farmers rights”).

A few participants noted mistakes or pitfalls their organizations had made in past settler-Indigenous engagement efforts. A leader from a municipal food policy council reflected on their struggles to form relationships, noting the council inadvertently treated the Indigenous community like research subjects and ultimately learned that was disrespectful on their part. A representative from a provincial public health association similarly reflected on the criticisms they received in developing a food-related strategy without “real representation”: “We had an engagement with one First Nation community, but not a lot of First Nations people.” In discussing tensions, several respondents shared how they have learned from challenges and complications. The executive director of a national food security organization reflected on their recent funding agreement with an Indigenous-led organization, and how they “didn’t just follow the Western protocols, we followed the Indigenous protocols, and that was seen as kind of a positive step forward.”

Discussion

This research provides a broad, descriptive understanding of ways that settler-led CSOs in Canada engage with Indigenous people and organizations in their food governance work, and the tensions and challenges faced in doing so. Our findings illustrate that CSO representatives put their responsibilities at the fore as they attempt to thoughtfully consider and engage with Indigenous communities, organizations and ideas. At times, respondents offered insights into why they (or their organizations) engaged in the unlearning, learning, confronting, and connecting involved in building settler-Indigenous relationships. Multiple participants referred to Truth and Reconciliation in general, and the TRC Calls to Action in particular, as motivation for their organizations, or for themselves personally, to engage and aspire towards more meaningful relationships. As one participant observed: “since the TRC recommendations came out, Canadians in general, are more aware and sympathetic and looking for opportunities to collaborate with Indigenous folks.” They reflected that there can be uncertainty between the *intent* and the *doing* of reconciliation and collaboration, but that they perceived that there would continue to be more momentum in that direction and more appetite for meaningful action.

There clearly exists a growing desire from within settler-led CSOs to take reconciliation further—beyond acknowledgement into deeper processes of personal learning, organizational change, collaboration and relationship building. We also find an intent to move from the discursive realm of acknowledging structural problems and settler responsibilities into the material realm of relational action—engaging in dialogue, building joint projects, and creating co-governance structures. This relates to discussions in the literature about Indigenous food sovereignty that speak to imbalances in power and decision making over food systems, but also cultural autonomy, self determination and struggles against settler colonialism (e.g. Morrison 2011; Daigle 2017). The evidence presented in this paper suggests this shift requires more inquiry and support for dedicated time and capacity—implicating CSOs, Indigenous organizations and communities, academics and philanthropic and government funders. The evidence demonstrates that uncertainty and limited capacity also pose barriers to more substantive engagement. Further, dominant colonial structures (e.g., inability to see beyond the blinders of capitalism, privileging of Western epistemologies, differentiations of power, etc.) make this work difficult and create real constraints. Dismantling those structures is essential. However, that does not discount the need for incremental change through ongoing individual

Table 1 Indigenous engagement by settler-led CSOs

Type of engagement	Examples of the ethos underpinning the engagement
Inner work—Personal learning and unlearning	Look within; learn about Canada's colonial legacy and ongoing settler colonialism; recognize we are all embedded within colonial structures; learn about Indigenous Nations and communities
Internal organizational work—Collective learning and unlearning; representation within formal governance structures and/or hiring Indigenous peoples to serve in an advisory/facilitative role	Work collectively to critically and self-reflexively examine organizational governance, programming, etc. with a view to improving representation in decision making
External organizational work—Supportive activities aimed at scaling impact up and out	Leverage position of relative privilege to benefit (and foreground) the struggles of others

and relational efforts. This research shows a growing desire within CSOs to continue this work—both internally (providing opportunities for staff and members to unlearn/learn as an important initial step), and externally (engaging in collaborative efforts, critical conversation, solidarity building, knowledge sharing, and equitable partnerships).

Table 1 offers a synthesis of the different forms of engagement expressed by interviewees in the form of a preliminary typology. Settlers—as individuals and organizations—explained that they often begin with inner work, move to amend the organizational structure and programming of individual CSOs, and then extend that work to extra-organizational activities that aim to support and benefit Indigenous peoples. While these three types of activities often occur on a parallel and ongoing basis, this is the pattern we heard regularly in our interviews. In the remainder of this section, we reflect on how such efforts might be framed to encourage settler-led CSOs to take action and form coalitions among diverse subjectivities—considering the ethical tensions at each turn.

Inner work

Proponents of settler-Indigenous engagement in food systems governance argued that inner work (the challenge of unlearning colonial logics and reconciling relations) serves as an essential starting point to support external engagement towards systemic change. This echoes Timler and Sandy's (2020) call to settlers to be humble and informed. One participant emphasized reflexivity in thinking through settler-Indigenous relations, noting the need to think "about our obligations and responsibilities in Canada in general, and where I live more specifically." They shared how learning about treaties, for example, can inform both how we live personally and how we relate professionally.

The National Farmers Union (NFU) facilitated inner work through a series of webinars for non-Indigenous members "to self-educate and expand knowledge"—encouraging settler peoples to take responsibility for learning about truth and reconciliation, critical so as to not overburden Indigenous peoples with the task of consistently being responsible for educating others. As the executive director of a food justice CSO stated: "there's a real challenge right now for Indigenous experts in the field because they are being called upon [at] a major rate." Seeking out appropriate and applicable information from Indigenous resources already available in order to listen, (un)learn, discuss, and build awareness is an important step in embracing relational responsibility and moving toward meaningful partnership efforts. The inner work referred to here is both personal and relational—the individual efforts one makes to transform and expand their own understandings to relate with others in a good way. Morrison (Morrison and Brynne 2016) describes the goal of a responsible, relational understanding in this context as teaching generations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples about "upholding our sacred responsibilities to one another, and the land, plants and animals that provide us with our food" (p. 3). Building foundational understandings of settler colonialism, Indigenous priorities, and relational responsibility can serve as common ground for partnership building in food systems governance work.

Internal organizational work

Either concurrently or sequentially, respondents sought to ensure Indigenous peoples were better represented in CSO leadership and programming. Forays into Indigenous inclusion involved representation on formal governance structures (e.g., boards of directors, Foodshare's Indigenous Advisory Circle) or hiring of Indigenous peoples to serve in an advisory/facilitative role. Some CSO representatives recognized they must remain vigilant to ensure that such involvement proves substantive and not tokenistic, and does not preclude the deeper, internal work to confront how their projects, processes and organizations have benefitted from and reinforced settler colonialism. As noted in the literature review, 'inclusion' alone remains an insufficient response to settler-colonialism (Elliott 2020; Rotz and Kepkiewicz 2018). Rotz et al. (2023) argue that "greater inclusion is a step toward creating conditions for Indigenous leadership and direction," only insofar as it is "accompanied by significant shifts in Institutional structure," otherwise, "it will

likely lead to internal racism, burnout, and distress" (p. 106). Some of our respondents acknowledged that representation alone would be insufficient. It was a common sentiment that CSOs cannot simply hire an Indigenous person and continue with business as usual.

Indigenous representation often emerged within the context of broader equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives, and while complementary and overlapping, they should be neither mutually exclusive nor sufficient in and of themselves. Indigenous versus broader representation are not *either/or* propositions, but rather *both/and*—intersecting through their potential to redistribute power. A few interviewees noted that engaging with EDI is not the same as engaging in settler-Indigenous partnerships. This caution echoes warnings from the literature around the risks of conflating and subsuming Indigenous priorities and issues with other social issues (Elliott 2020; Levkoe 2021). But the complex social terrain here raises legitimate challenges about how to operationalize greater inclusion amidst multiple structures of oppression. Settler-led CSOs must pay particular attention to colonial and Indigenous issues as unique, albeit diverse and complex. The specific constellation of actors needed in any given setting—including whether Indigenous engagement should be privileged and/or meshed with other EDI axes—will be determined by context. And limited capacity to tackle such challenges poses a real problem for all parties involved.

An internal critique of organizational efforts is important—the idea that people are not just going through the motions but doing the work and being critically reflexive in the process. But the desire by CSOs to do this work does not result in the overall barriers disappearing. As Rotz et al. (2023) and others note, there are broader structures at play that make this work challenging and removing those structures is essential. Capacity building within Indigenous communities should be considered an important goal (e.g., skills building among youth). However, while such barriers prove legitimate challenges, they cannot simply become excuses for inaction.

Capacity building or reorganizing within settler-led CSOs is critical for deepening meaningful relations—an issue that crosses internal and external efforts. One participant noted difficulties in finding the "right people" to connect with Indigenous communities—folks who have the right contacts, and the capacity to make and sustain relations—otherwise, the reflex is to continue to work separately. A representative from a migrant workers' justice CSO expressed how lack of capacity limited their ability to engage in settler-Indigenous partnerships "in a concerted manner, the way we should be." Rather, they felt they were constantly "putting out fires", describing much of their work as "immediate, in the now, because of whatever emergency that's happening." Many CSOs operate reactively and lack the capacity to engage in proactive, time- and energy-intensive work such as relationship building. The issue of CSO capacity implicates governments, funders, organizations, and researchers, as there is a need to assess, support, and actualize capacity for meaningful relationship work. This may involve reorganizing/reprioritizing CSO efforts, although in many cases, the capacity of civil society actors is already stretched too thin. Building and maintaining capacity for working together is critical for equitable, sustainable, and relational food systems governance, suggesting the need for wider support, further inquiry, and more diverse metrics for qualifying relational progress to communicate its importance.

External organizational work

Respondents noted various extra-organizational activities they engage in with Indigenous peoples, including: connecting and partnering; supporting and sharing resources; facilitating access to networks; adapting projects to address the settler colonial context; standing in solidarity through statements and actions; collaborating through good food; and sometimes creating separate organizations for partnered work. These efforts move beyond tokenism by scaling engagement to be more beneficial and impactful. They illustrate a growing recognition among CSOs of the importance of collaboration for working across differences (Todd 2014). For example, Regroupement des Cuisines Collectives du Québec (RCCQ) developed relationships with a Cree community in their region by responding to the community's request for training and searching for funding to support collaborative food project development. A representative of RCCQ reflected on how much they learned from community collaboration, leading to a more participatory journey of co-learning and sharing best practices. RCCQ reached out to form contacts with more communities through the Native Friendship Centres and the Commission Premieres Nations Quebec Labrador. RCCQ has since developed a specific project stream for First Nations and Inuit community kitchens, intended to build significant partnerships with communities based in mutual aid, collaboration, and solidarity, and to adapt their training programs accordingly (RCCQ 2022).

While sensitivity and care must be taken in building settler-Indigenous relations, uncertainty around doing things "right" should not hold settlers back. CSOs should take personal, internal, and external action while acknowledging that learning and unlearning are an essential, complicated and iterative process in relationship building and partnership work. If settler-led CSOs were to abstain from engaging in this realm of relational work, it would only push the responsibilities for action further onto the shoulders of Indigenous peoples, organizations, and communities, exacerbating power imbalances in efforts to create more equitable and sustainable food systems governance.

Pathways towards relationship building

The need to devote the necessary time and care for meaningful relationship building proved a common theme across our findings. Building any relationship of trust, much less relationships within the context of ongoing settler colonialism, is not a quick or easy process. This reality has implications for CSOs (who must carve out resources from already constrained operations), and for funders (both governmental and philanthropic, who must fund this relationship building to move it beyond a rhetorical priority). It also has implications for capacity-strapped, Indigenous-led organizations and communities. The Northern Manitoba Food, Culture and Community Collaborative (NMFCCC) offers an example of how funders might ethically grapple with how to engage Indigenous communities directly with a focus on Indigenous food sovereignty. The NMFCCC brings philanthropic resources to Indigenous communities while simultaneously helping the philanthropic community to learn and unlearn about what it takes to be ethical and responsible partners. The collaborative pools funding from a group of philanthropic funders for community-led Indigenous food sovereignty projects, while requiring funder collaborators to participate in strategic planning sessions and learning and unlearning opportunities with their community-based Northern Advisors. Collaborators also agree to share with others "about how their involvement has influenced their ways of working and ability to be better partners in community-led work" (NMFCCC 2022a, p. 5). While slow and incremental work, the collaborative is growing both in its regional scope and in the number of funders engaged as collaborators (NMFCCC 2022a). Furthermore, it is growing in its influence within the philanthropic realm and on governments, as the NMFCCC also recognizes there remain important "colonial barriers to food sovereignty" including ongoing loss of cultural knowledge and skills due to residential schools," colonial impacts on diets leading to health issues, and colonial laws of certification for hunting and food preparation, to name just three (NMFCCC 2022b, p. 13). Canadian philanthropic funders can learn from the NMFCCC to better support the CSOs they fund. If truth and reconciliation are indeed societal priorities, as they ought to be, the work requires adequate time and capacity and funders must resource this kind of CSO work.

The settler colonial state and all food systems in Canada are undergirded through Indigenous dispossession from the land and therefore dispossession from lifeways that emerge from a relationality with the land, including food systems governance. Settler-CSOs interested in building meaningful relationships must consider how their work fits into and benefits from settler colonial structures to confront and challenge these structures, support Indigenous food sovereignty efforts, and work toward transformative ways of relating and governing food systems.

Conclusion

This paper has illustrated that settler-Indigenous engagement in food systems governance work requires iterative and critically reflexive learning—more of a circular than linear process, through which CSOs continuously engage in *both* internal and external work. This research identified key themes, contributed encouraging examples, gleaned lessons learned, and considered pitfalls and gaps. In response to calls like Daigle's (2017) to settler food actors with regards to Indigenous food sovereignty work, it demonstrated a growing desire from within settler-led organizations to take settler-Indigenous engagement seriously and move it forward—beyond acknowledgement into deeper reflection as well as processes of collaboration and relationship building. However, uncertainty and limited capacity pose as barriers to more substantive engagement. Despite intentions commensurate with reconciliation, both CSOs and Indigenous peoples still operate within the broader constructs of settler-colonial society. The tensions and barriers that this presents should not hold CSOs back from relationship-building efforts. Rather, this research shows that many CSOs are well aware of the realities and challenges of this work, and proceed nonetheless, even if that engagement proves paradoxical.

Settlers aspiring toward meaningful and collaborative partnerships with Indigenous communities and organizations must engage with care and consideration. There is no one clear way forward, but lessons gleaned from this research suggest that relationships are best formed contextually, recognizing the diversity among Indigenous peoples, groups and communities, food systems contexts, and settler-led CSOs. Our findings, analyses, and conclusions are limited to the data we have and the perspectives we bring as authors. This research is part of an ongoing and exploratory journey for us as scholars, a sentiment also expressed by research participants. And, of course, Canada is only one place where settler-Indigenous partnerships have emerged of late, and it would be worthwhile comparing progress (or lack thereof) with other settler-colonial contexts (such as Australia, the United States, and Aotearoa/New Zealand).

Rather than presenting definitive conclusions, this paper aimed to engage in and build upon the continuous learning journey involved in strengthening settler-Indigenous relationships as essential to food systems governance. We share CSOs' motivations, practices, tensions, and learnings from this work as reflections for scholars and practitioners interested in building settler-Indigenous partnerships and reimagining more equitable and sustainable food systems,

with a key focus on Indigenous food sovereignty. Some examples suggest better practices through critical learning and meaningful relationship building, encouraging settlers to keep making these efforts. While progress has been made, much more still needs to be done, raising critical questions for deeper reflection on meaningful engagement. Future research in this area is critical to further understanding and awareness of meaningful settler-Indigenous engagement, including, importantly, research exploring the perspectives of Indigenous-led organizations and Indigenous communities on pathways and barriers toward Indigenous food sovereignty through collaborative food systems governance.

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Declarations

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Catherine Littlefield is an MA student at the Institute of Political Economy, Carleton University. Her community-engaged research with the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun and the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun Development Corporation focuses on customary food practices and community economies. Her research interests include food systems, land relations, governance, and socioecological well-being.

Molly Stollmeyer completed her MA at the Institute of Political Economy, Carleton University. Through community-academic partnerships, Molly supported various local food efforts in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. Drawing on decolonial and settler colonial studies, Indigenous resurgence, and political ontology, her research examined colonialism in northern food systems research.

Peter Andrée is a Professor at Carleton University, cross-appointed in the Political Science Department, the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, and the Institute of Political Economy. His research focuses on the political economy/ecology of agriculture and food, Canadian and international environmental politics, and civil society and industry participation in governance mechanisms.

Patricia Ballamingie is a Professor at Carleton University, cross-appointed in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies and the Institute of Political Economy. She is a community-engaged scholar whose current research focuses on food policy and food systems governance. For a fuller list of her affiliations, publications, and supervisions, click here https://carleton.ca/geography/people/ballamingie-patricia/.

Charles Z. Levkoe is the Canada Research Chair in Equitable and Sustainable Food Systems, a member of the College of New Scholars, Artists and Scientists of the Royal Society of Canada, and an Associate Professor in the Department of Health Sciences at Lakehead University. His community-engaged research uses a food systems lens to better understand the importance of, and connections between social justice, ecological regeneration, regional economies and active democratic engagement.