

UNION OF NOVA SCOTIA MI'KMAQ



Strengthening Mi'kmaw Food Systems through School Food Investment

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*Graphics created by Emily Pictou-Roberts (Millbrook First Nation)
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Investment in School Food

In Nova Scotia, First Nations have received:

- **\$1.6 million** — Federal investment
- **\$3.6 million** — Provincial investment

Why this moment matters

- Decisions being made now will shape how:
 - funding and resources flow
 - governance and leadership are structured
 - partnerships and accountability develop
 - long-term opportunities are created for communities

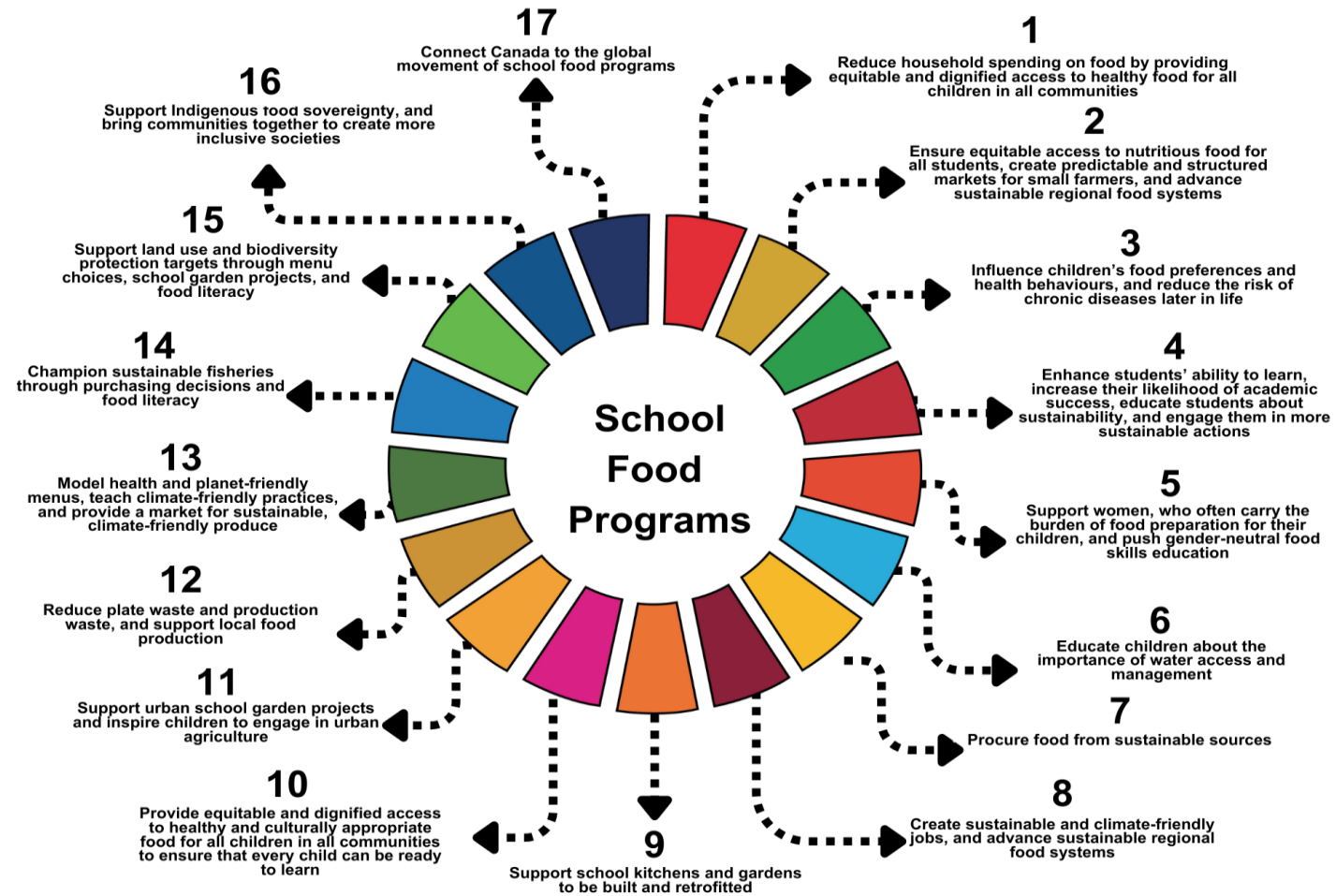


This investment is about more than feeding students

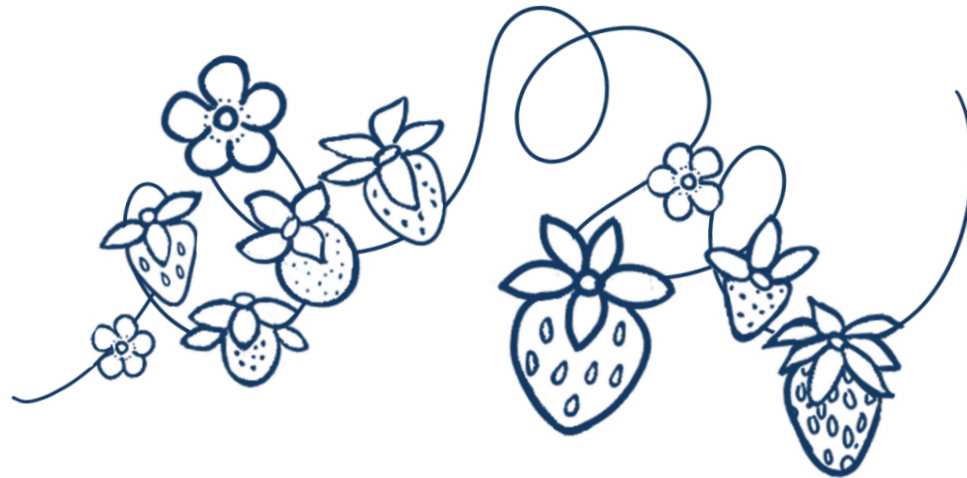
- School food investments also create opportunities to strengthen:
 - Indigenous food systems
 - Local food economies and procurement
 - Community leadership and workforce capacity
 - Cultural knowledge and intergenerational learning
 - Long-term community wellbeing and self-determination



Universal healthy school food programs designed with the SDGs in mind have great potential to:



School food is not only a meal program.
It is part of a broader food system.





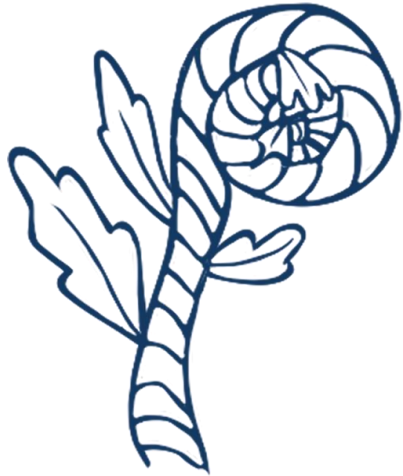
Understanding Food Systems

How we define food systems shapes:

- Where funding flows
- Who holds decision-making power
- What outcomes are prioritized
- What kinds of work is prioritized
- What kinds of relationships are strengthened or lost
- Whether investments strengthen communities or reinforce dependence

What is a food system?

Dominant food systems approaches often focus on:



- Food production
- Processing and distribution
- Supply chains and markets
- Efficiency and economic outputs

These approaches treat food as a *commodity* or *service*.

Dominant Food Systems

Today's dominant food system is often shaped by:

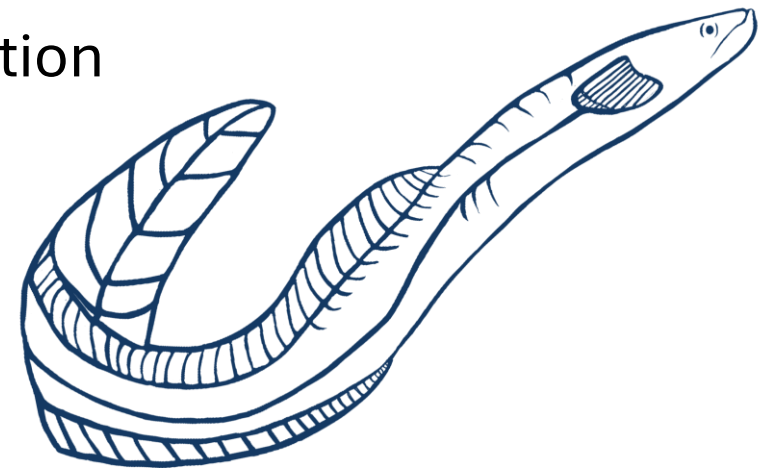
- Large corporations controlling food production, processing, and distribution
- Long supply chains that move food far from where it is grown or harvested
- Heavy focus on efficiency, profit, and economic growth
- Increasing dependence on packaged and highly processed foods
- Decision-making that is often disconnected from communities and local realities



Food Systems as a Colonial Tool

Dominant systems contribute to:

- Loss of local food knowledge and food sovereignty
- Reduced connection between people and land
- Limited local control over food systems
- Growing food insecurity despite abundance of food
- Environmental degradation and unsustainable extraction



Mi'kmaw Food Systems Lens

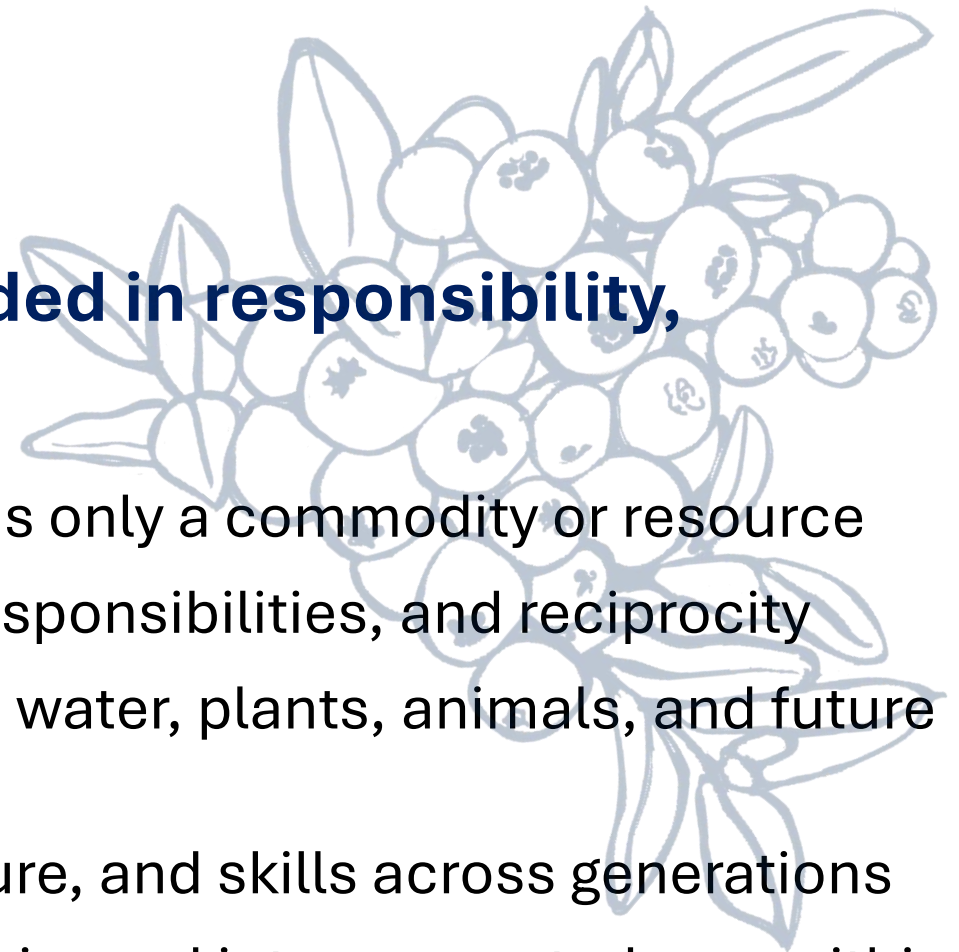
- Food as relationship and responsibility, not commodity
- Place-based systems of harvesting, sharing, caregiving, and mutual support
- Language, ceremony, story, and cultural teachings
- Intergenerational knowledge sharing
- Community care and collective well-being



Msit No'kmaq

Mi'kmaw relational worldview grounded in responsibility, reciprocity, respect, and balance.

- *Msit No'kmaq* challenges the idea that food is only a commodity or resource
- Food is understood through relationships, responsibilities, and reciprocity
- Centres relationships between people, land, water, plants, animals, and future generations
- Encourages sharing of food knowledge, culture, and skills across generations
- Emphasizes collective well-being, stewardship, and interconnectedness within food systems





How We Define Food Systems Shapes What Gets Built

- In dominant systems, access to food is often treated as automatic: something delivered through external systems, supply chains, and institutions like schools that communities have little control over.
- ***As a result, school food can become narrowly focused on:***
 - Meal delivery
 - Efficiency
 - Procurement
 - Standardized nutrition targets
 - Lowest-cost food

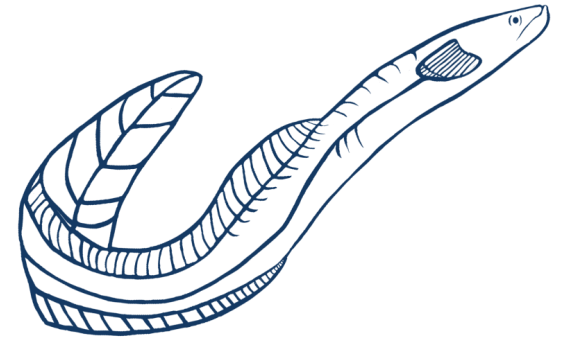


Changing how we think about food

School food becomes more than a meal program; it becomes part of rebuilding Indigenous food systems.

This includes rebuilding:

- Local food economies and procurement systems
- Pathways for intergenerational knowledge sharing
- Relationships between schools, communities, harvesters, and food leaders
- Community infrastructure and workforce capacity
- Indigenous-led governance and decision-making around food systems



External Dominant System

Funding → external suppliers → food distributors → funding leaves community

Community-led System

Funding → community leaders → local cooks → harvesters → local fisheries → local farms & gardens → local processors
youth programs → funding supports local economies

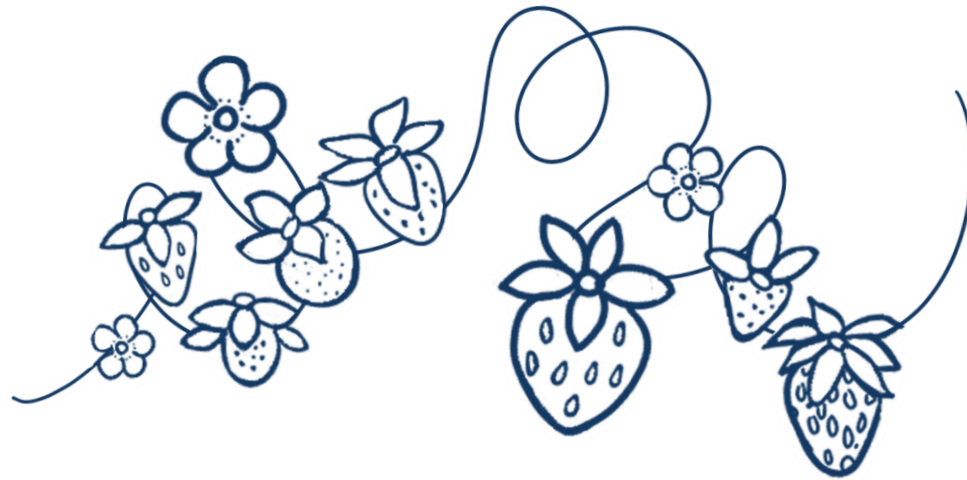


School Food is an Opportunity for Reclamation and Self-Determination

Food is relationship, knowledge, governance, identity, and connection to land.



Who is responsible for leading Mi'kmaw School Food Programs?



Indigenous School Food Landscape in Nova Scotia

Conversations are happening across various groups, sectors, organizations, and communities

- **Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey (MK) – Educational Body**
- Union of Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq (UNSM) – Tribal Council
- First Nation schools
- Nova Scotia Health (NSH)
- Non-profit organizations (Nourish Nova Scotia)
- Federal and provincial partners
- Mi'kmaw-Nova Scotia-Canada Tripartite Forum (Health Committee)
- 13 First Nations in Nova Scotia



No structure currently exists to support coordination between various groups and sectors

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School Food Engagement

- Funding is flowing but clear picture of needs, opportunities, and overall landscape of Mi'kmaw school food unknown
- Engagement with the Mi'kmaw School Food Community held **May 23, 2026**
- Invited participation from school cooks, principles, teachers, Knowledge Holders, community cooks
- Survey to understand current landscape of school food programming
- Breakout discussions to support visioning and identifying needs



Mi'kmaw School Food



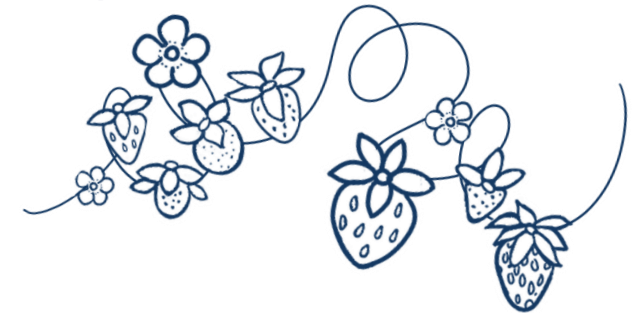
Existing efforts are often fragmented and under-supported, but communities have identified clear values and priorities to guide stronger Mi'kmaw-led food systems

- Programs are frequently operating in isolation from one another, with limited support
- Funding, guidance, and decision-making are spread across multiple organizations and systems
- Communities are often navigating limited staffing capacity and inconsistent support
- Existing provincial food policies and standards do not reflect First Nation realities, priorities, or approaches to food systems
- Communities strongly value the importance of centering Mi'kmaw worldview – land, story, language, identity, and relationships as central to food programs. Many already do this.

Indigenous-led School Food Governance

There is growing need for:

- Coordinated First Nations-led planning and decision-making
- Shared approaches grounded in community priorities and values
- Governance structures that support long-term sustainability, accountability, and self-determination
- Structure that helps align investments with community priorities and long-term food systems goals
- **Connections and coordination with the broader local food system**



Connecting School Food to Mi'kmaw Food Systems Goals

Over the past several years, engagement and asset mapping work has taken place across First Nation communities in Nova Scotia focused on food systems.

The project focused on understanding:

- Existing food programs, roles, and infrastructure
- Community strengths and needs
- Values connected to food and well-being



Our Approach

- Engagements took place across communities in Nova Scotia between 2023–2025
- Included land-based gatherings, community workshops, and meetings with community leadership and partners
- The approach centered relational accountability, community strengths, and shared reflection
- Drew on the concept of the medicine bundle as a guide for reflection, relationship-building, and discussion about food systems



Methods

Participatory Approach

- Workshops delivered by trained community-based facilitators in each community

L'nu'k informed Arts-Based Methods

- Guided by the concept of medicine bundle
- Community members collected photos and items representing food access
- Used to create personal medicine bundles; select photos or items were shared with the project, many stayed with participants.

Asset Mapping

- Documented food-related assets (kitchens, programs, equipment, champions, etc.)



Facilitator Retreat (July 2025)

- Gathered information about assets from facilitators
- Held talking circles for group reflection on community workshops
- Led a consensus building process to identify shared values
- Facilitators brought any photos or items gifted to them
- Photos and items were displayed, and the group asked to choose those that represented ideas most important to the future of food for the Nation
- Through a process of elimination, consensus around photos representing values most important were identified
- Those were then used to draft guiding principles that were then brought to health directors and other community stakeholders to get feedback and support consensus building

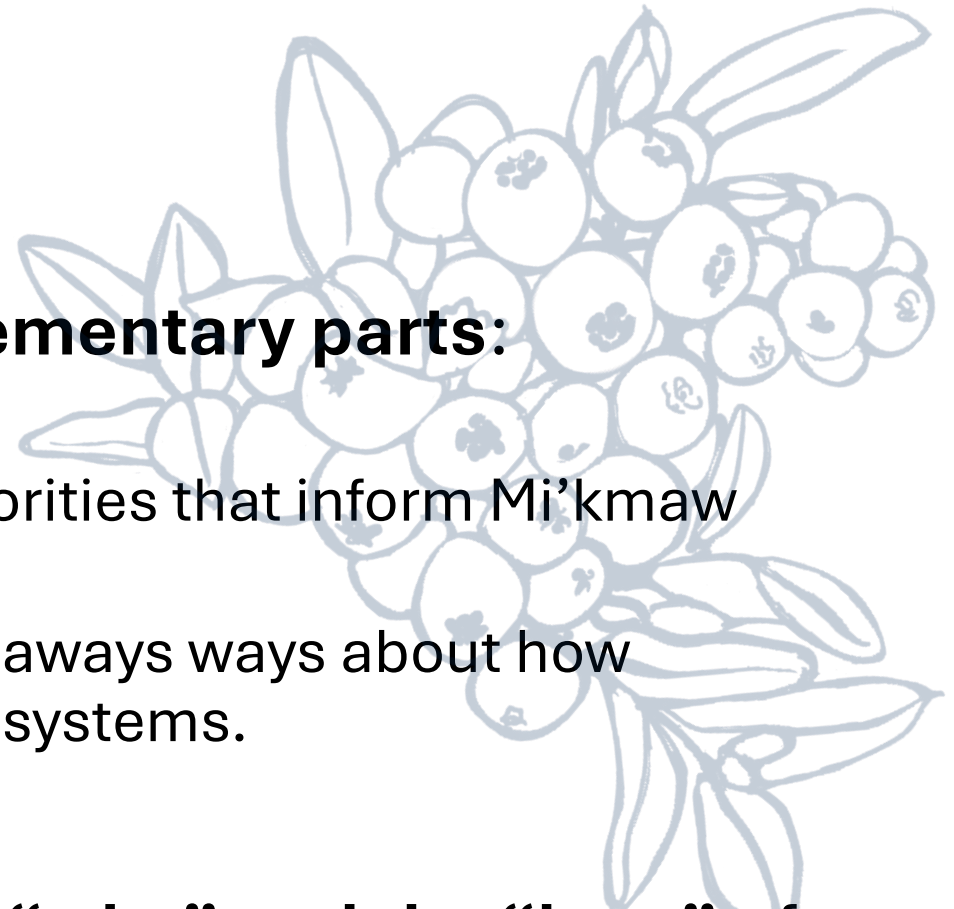
What we found

Findings are organized into **two complementary parts:**

- **Guiding Values** — the principles and priorities that inform Mi'kmaw food systems
- **Themes from Asset Mapping** — the key ways ways about how communities sustain and build on these systems.

Together, these sections show both the “**why**” and the “**how**” of community-led food initiatives.

Help to inform recommendations and next steps



Guiding Principles

1. Stewardship of Land, Water, and Local Food Systems

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

2. Reclamation and Revitalization of Mi'kmaw Food Systems

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

3. Food as Care, Connection, and Community Wellbeing

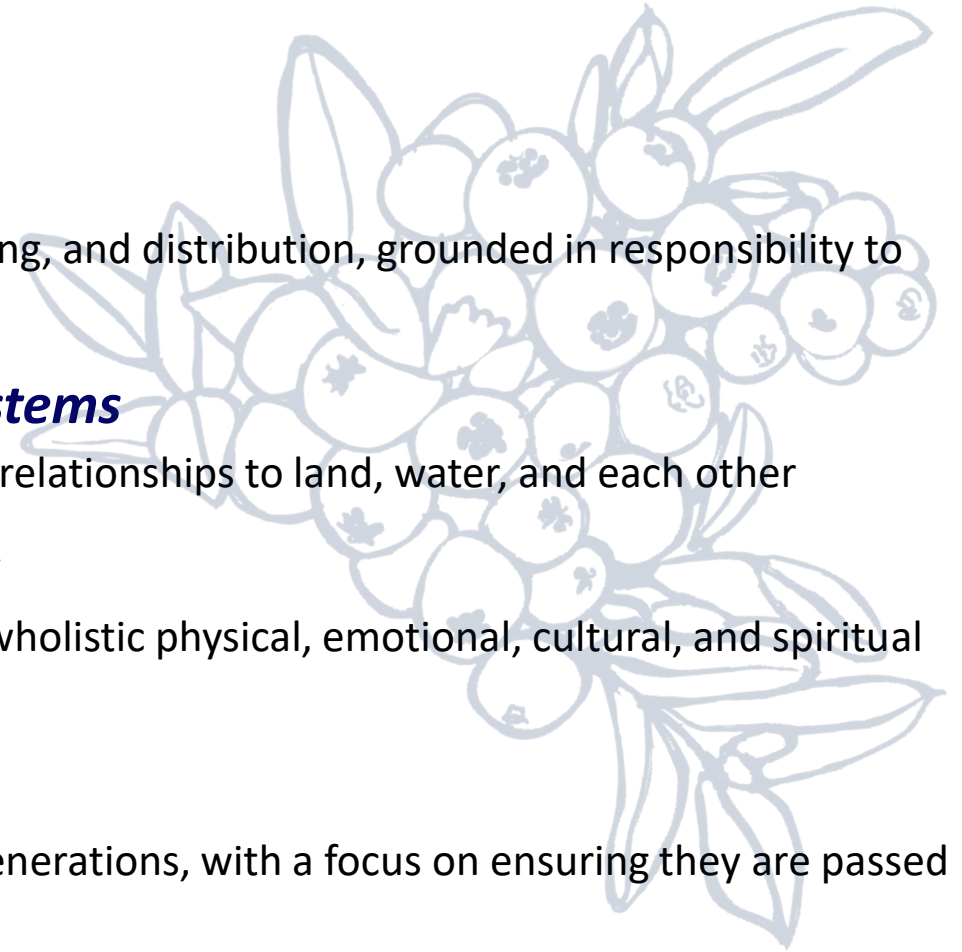
Food as a way of expressing care, building relationships, and supporting wholistic physical, emotional, cultural, and spiritual wellbeing

4. Intergenerational Food Knowledge Sharing

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

5. Coordinated and Inclusive Food Systems

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



Food as a Social and Cultural Connector

Shared meals and food-based gatherings are central to social and cultural life in all First Nation communities in Nova Scotia

- Community-led and volunteer-driven
- Cultural, social, and economic impact
- **Examples** include holiday meals, Treaty Day meals, harvest feasts, pow wows, salites, community breakfasts, etc

***Key opportunity:** Use school food investment to strengthen local food initiatives rooted in community relationships and culture, not just meal delivery.*



Community Food Leadership

Community leaders are central to Mi'kmaw food systems.

- **Diverse roles** including caterers, cooks, Elders, harvesters, knowledge keepers, youth, and Land Guardians.
- Paid positions are fragmented; responsibilities often distributed across multiple roles, sectors, and volunteers, leading to workforce challenges

***Key Opportunity:** Make investments into those already doing the work to feed their communities*



Food Systems Infrastructure

Quality and presence of Infrastructure varies across communities, affecting ability to support food systems work

- Over-reliance on communal effort to support use and maintenance
- Effective use depends on dedicated staff, operational resources, and coordination across sectors.

Key Opportunity: Use school food investments to strengthen and connect existing community food systems infrastructure to school food initiatives



Food Sharing, Distribution, and Community Care



Communities described strong traditions of food sharing and mutual support

- **Examples** included lobster distribution, holiday food hampers, meat bingos, community pantries, and grocery gift cards, households feeding multiple generations and community members
- Initiatives reflect cultural continuity, care, and community leadership
- **Over reliance on Emergency Food**

Key Opportunity: School food investment should reflect and strengthen practices of community care, while reducing reliance on emergency food initiatives

Food as a Foundation for Connection Across Sectors

Food initiatives were identified in health, education, environment, social services, culture, and economic development.

- Often embedded across various mandates, but not prioritized
- Self-determined food policies and guidance are emerging across sectors but lack dedicated support and coordination

Key Opportunity: Use school food investment as a foundation for building stronger coordination across Indigenous food systems initiatives, sectors, and organizations.

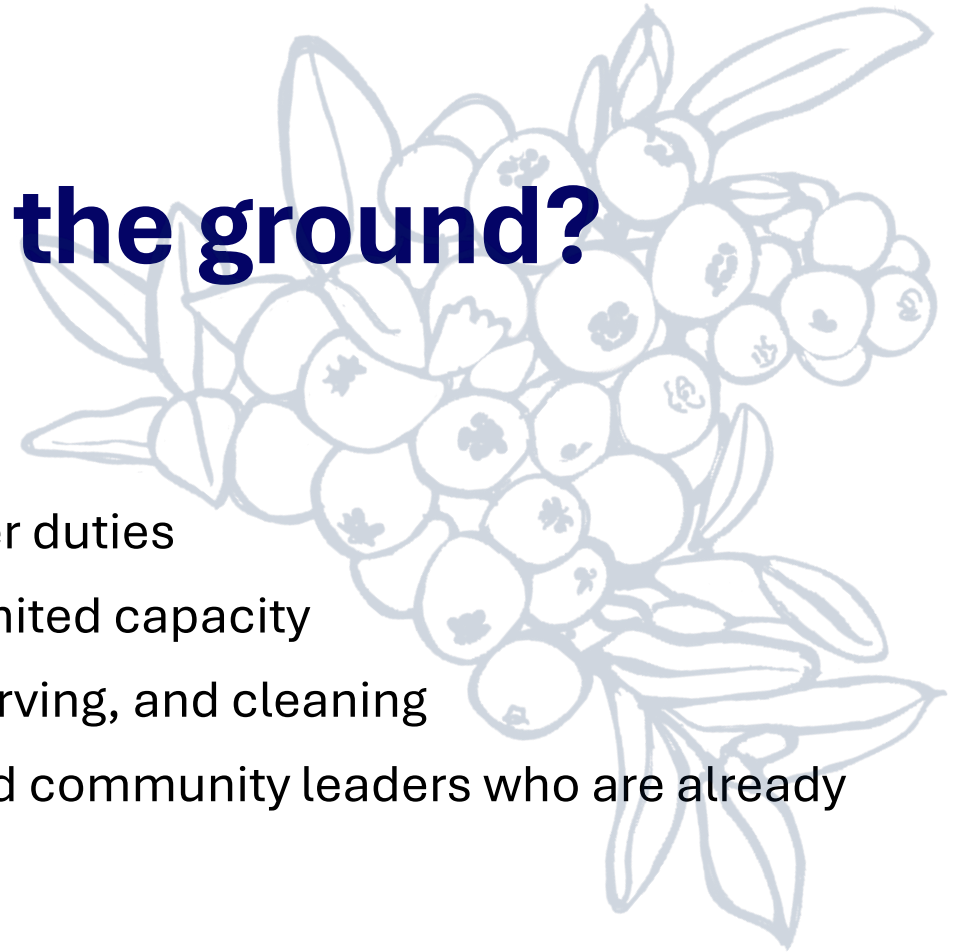


What does this look like on the ground?

- Greenhouses exist, but lack operational supports
- Volunteers organize community meals and food sharing
- Recreation departments oversee gardens alongside other duties
- Health and social departments run food pantries with limited capacity
- School cooks manage menus, procurement, cooking, serving, and cleaning
- Land-based learning depends on Knowledge Holders and community leaders who are already stretched

Key Point

Communities are already doing the work — but the systems around them are under-supported



Key Takeaways from the Findings

Food Systems Work is Fragmented

- Food-related work is spread across health, education, recreation, social services, and community development
- Funding is often short-term, project-based, and tied to separate programs and mandates
- Many food initiatives rely on volunteers or staff already carrying multiple responsibilities
- Infrastructure exists, but operational support and coordination are often limited
- Policies and guidance are frequently developed outside of Mi'kmaw communities and systems
- No dedicated Mi'kmaw-led structure currently exists to coordinate food systems work across sectors and organizations

Key Point

Communities are not lacking leadership or food systems activity. The challenge is that the systems surrounding this work remain disconnected, under-supported, and difficult to sustain long-term.

Key Recommendations

1. Strengthen Coordination

Align food-related work currently spread across sectors and mandates

2. Invest in Leadership & Workforce

Support community food leaders, cooks, harvesters, and dedicated roles

3. Support Sustainable Infrastructure

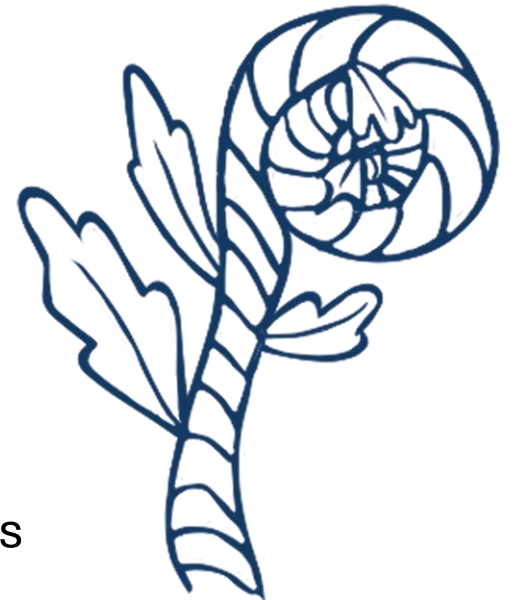
Pair kitchens, gardens, and greenhouses with operational funding

4. Strengthen Local Food Economies

Connect school food investments with local harvesters, producers, and caterers

5. Align Policy & Governance

Develop community-led approaches grounded in Mi'kmaw realities and priorities



Conclusion: This Is a System Design Moment

Mi'kmaw communities are already sustaining food systems through:

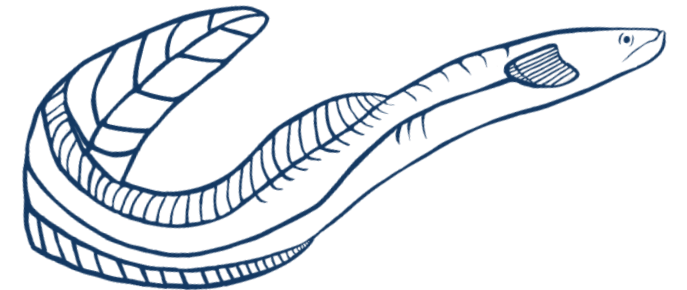
- Community leadership and care
- Harvesting, cooking, and food sharing
- Cultural knowledge and intergenerational learning

At the same time, food systems work remains fragmented, under-supported, and reliant on short-term approaches.

The Opportunity Ahead

School food investment can help:

- Strengthen Indigenous-led governance
- Build coordinated community food systems
- Support local food economies and workforce capacity
- Invest in long-term infrastructure, leadership, and self-determination



Wela'liek

Scan the QR code to read the full report or visit:
unsm.org



RECLAIMING MI'KMAW FOOD SYSTEMS IN NOVA SCOTIA: *A Foundation for Collective Action and Decision-Making*



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

