Article: Nunavut's hunger problem: 'We can't pretend it doesn't exist anymore'
Nutrition North only the latest proposed solution to stumble under mismanagement

By Steve Rennie, The Canadian Press

Israel Mablick opens the door of his refrigerator and takes stock of its meagre offerings.

"This is all we have for food," he says, gesturing to the mostly empty shelves.

There is a small pot of leftover seal meat on the second shelf, next to a tub of margarine and a couple of slices of bread. There's juice, a bag of milk, some water and a carton of eggs, plus condiments and a small bag of shredded cheese.

In his freezer, there are a few bags of frozen vegetables next to a carton of Chapman's ice cream. Two cereal boxes — Corn Pops and Corn Flakes — are the only items in one of his cupboards.

"That's all we have," Mablick says, "and there's six kids."

The 36-year-old Inuit man shares a small, two-bedroom Iqaluit apartment with his wife and their five kids, his mother, his sister and his young nephew. His is the face of hunger in Nunavut, the bare cupboards and empty fridge emblematic of a long-standing problem that even today's government programs don't address.

The federal government's $60-million food subsidy, Nutrition North, is only the latest of the proposed solutions that has stumbled under mismanagement and the enormity of the hunger problem.

A history of starvation
Whether a solution can be found is anyone's guess. After all, food shortages are nothing new to the Inuit.

"There's always been incidents of starvation," said Frank Tester, an Arctic historian at the University of British Columbia.

One of the worst episodes occurred in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when a shift in caribou migration patterns caused widespread starvation in the southern interior of the Kivalliq Region to the west of Hudson Bay.

The collapse of the fox fur trade after the Second World War was devastating to the Inuit, who relied on it as a source of income to buy flour, tea, sugar, hunting traps, rifles and ammunition.

"Economically, Inuit were now in really serious trouble," Tester said.
In some cases, Inuit were relocated to other parts of the North with more abundant natural resources.

"Inuit were moved around. The attitude was, 'Well, you know, what the hell? They can survive any place there's snow and caribou and foxes to be had,'" said Tester, who has studied and written about the relocations.

But such relocations proved controversial. There was a royal commission in the 1990s. Ottawa eventually agreed to pay $10 million into a trust fund to compensate the families of the Inuit who, in the 1950s, were moved 2,000 kilometres from Inukjuak in northern Quebec to what is now Resolute and Grise Fiord, the two most northerly communities in Canada.

**Government apologized in 2010**

In 2010, then-aboriginal affairs minister John Duncan apologized on the government's behalf for the Inukjuak relocations.

But having Canadian civilians in an otherwise unoccupied area bolstered Canadian sovereignty at a time when other nations — especially the United States — were expressing increasing interest in the Arctic as a possible front in the Cold War with the Soviet Union.

To monitor the continent's northern frontier, Canada and the United States built 63 radar stations across the Arctic, stretching from Alaska to Baffin Island. The Distant Early Warning Line sites had a major impact on northern society. The stations — and the southerners who staffed them — were sometimes the first contact Inuit people had with the outside world.

A change in government policy in the 1950s and 1960s led to an upheaval of the traditional Inuit way of life, Tester said.

"By the mid-1950s, the government sort of saw what they thought was the handwriting on the wall," he said, "that Inuit were going to have to be modernized instead of kept in their traditional lifestyle."

Thus began the sweeping change from a traditional Inuit way of life. Having a job meant there was now pressure on Inuit workers to maintain a steady income to support their families. That made it difficult to hunt, since people now had to travel long distances from their communities to find game.

Not being able to hunt meant Inuit had to buy their own food, either from stores or local hunters.

**Food has always been expensive**

Food has always been expensive in the North. The population is relatively small and scattered across a vast region far from the major transportation hubs. Shipping costs are exorbitant — particularly in Nunavut, where there aren't any roads to connect the territory's communities to the rest of Canada.

The high cost of shipping food to the North put some items beyond the reach of many people.
In an effort to make food more affordable, the federal government started the Northern Air Stage Program — better known as Food Mail — in the 1960s to subsidize shipping costs.

The subsidy shifted to retailers when Nutrition North replaced Food Mail in 2011. The new program gives retailers a subsidy based on the weight of eligible foods shipped to eligible communities.

But Auditor General Michael Ferguson recently found the Aboriginal Affairs Department did not choose eligible communities based on need. Instead, communities were chosen based on whether they had year-round road access and if they had used the old Food Mail program.

Those that made very little use of the program are only eligible for a partial subsidy, while those that did not use it aren't eligible at all.

"Consequently, community eligibility is based on past usage instead of current need," the audit says.

"As a result, there may be other isolated northern communities, not benefiting from the subsidy, where access to affordable, nutritious food may be an issue."

Aboriginal Affairs told Ferguson's team it has looked at expanding the full subsidy to around 50 fly-in northern communities, but doing so would increase the cost of the program by $7 million a year.

Before the audit was released in late November, the Conservative government announced it would spend another $11.3 million on the program over the next year.

But many northerners are skeptical that businesses are actually passing on the full subsidy to customers.

Aboriginal Affairs has not required merchants to report their profit margins, which over time would indicate whether the full subsidy is being passed on. Ferguson’s report said such a measure would help quell skepticism about whether consumers are actually getting the full benefit of the subsidy.

The department now says that as of April 1, retailers will have to provide information on their current and long-term profit margins.

**Frustration on Facebook**

The cost of food has contributed to a palpable and growing sense of frustration across Nunavut.

The catalyst for much of the angst was a Facebook group called "Feeding My Family." People started posting photos of shocking price tags in grocery stores. That grew into street protests — a rare show of Inuit defiance.

"Bringing something as private as poverty and the fact that you’re hungry and you’re food insecure, that’s very different," former Iqaluit mayor Madeleine Redfern said last month in Iqaluit.
"I think people are saying, "This is not a hidden problem. We can't pretend it doesn't exist anymore."

Overwhelmingly, Redfern said, those going hungry are Inuit. "There is a disparity — not only ethnically, but also the social classes."

As of this past December, Nunavut's labour force stood at 14,000 people, 9,500 of whom are Inuit. But a closer look at the statistics shows some 8,500 working-age Inuit who are not part of the labour force, compared to only 600 non-Inuit people.
A price tag lists the price of a jug of orange juice at a grocery store in Iqaluit, Nunavut in December. (Sean Kilpatrick/Canadian Press)

The participation rate — that is, the number of people either employed or are actively looking for a job — was also much lower among Inuit. The Inuit participation rate was 52.7 per cent, compared to 88 per cent among non-Inuit.

The unemployment rate for Inuit people in Nunavut was 17.9 per cent during the last three months of 2014 (the territory reports its statistics using a three-month moving average). By comparison, the jobless rate across the rest of Canada in December was 6.6 per cent.

The most recent figures released by the territory’s statistics bureau show the number of people in Nunavut on social assistance was 14,578 in 2013.

**Using tea to stave off hunger**

Back in his cramped Iqaluit apartment, Mablick sips from a mug of lukewarm tea brewed with a tea bag he has already used a few times. He reuses tea bags to save money.

He hasn’t eaten in a week and he turns to tea to stave off hunger pangs. He gives what little food he has to his five children, who are between the ages of one-and-a-half and 11.

Mablick, clad in a torn white Qikiqtani Inuit Association T-shirt, says he’s been out of work since October.

Social assistance trickles in, but it’s not enough to feed the entire household. So Mablick has been forced to sell most of his possessions to put food on the table. Parting with his snowmobile was especially difficult, he said.

"Pretty much everything that we can sell — jewellery or carvings, whatever," he said.

"I mean, I'll go to my shack, which is outside, I'll carve something and sell something, but it's been a while since I carved. I started working on a cribbage board but it's been so cold that my toes are freezing so I can't really carve anything right now."

Like many hungry people in Nunavut, Mablick also turns to friends and family for food, but knows they face their own struggles.

Traditional Inuit fare — so-called "country food" that consists of caribou, seal and whale meat — offers one option to address the food problem.

A key recommendation of the Nunavut Food Security Coalition — a group made up of representatives from the territorial government, Inuit organizations, industry and social justice groups — was to encourage people to hunt.

Former Edmonton native Will Hyndman started a hunter and trapper’s market in Iqaluit, and invited hunters, most of whom struggle to buy ammunition and fuel, to sell their meat in town.

"The goal was really to change the conversation about how we deal with country food here in Iqaluit," Hyndman said, icicles forming on the tips of his moustache, as he stood with his dog on the frozen shores of Koojesse Inlet.
"When you go hunting, you can't take your fish and stuff it back down your gas tank. You can't take your seal and turn it into more bullets, whereas traditionally everything came from the animals that you were hunting.

"So now we need to something else to close that loop of sustainability, and the market was one way to do that."

**Soup kitchen stretched thin**

People in Iqaluit also cope by turning to the city's soup kitchen or to the food bank on the two days a month that it's open.

There's clearly a demand for these services. Stephen Wallick, chairman of the board of the Niqinik Nuatsivik Food Bank, said it started out in 2001 serving about 30 families. Today, he said, as many as 120 families come looking for food and supplies every two weeks.

Iqaluit's soup kitchen, which makes enough for 200 servings a day, is also stretched to its limit — and sometimes past it.

Stephen Wallick, chair of the board of the Niqinik Nuatsivik Nunavut Food Bank, shows a two-week supply of food at the Iqaluit food bank. (Sean Kilpatrick/Canadian Press)

"It goes in the red every now and then," volunteer Cathy Sawer said during a recent visit. "Your funding sources maybe get behind, and then occasionally there's maybe extra expenses."

Case in point: Sawer said one of the elements on her stove just stopped working, so she's going to need an electrician. "Prices for that are pretty high up here."

The most desperate — as seen in television footage that emerged after Ferguson released his report — even forage in local dumps for scraps of food.

So, what can be done?

Tester, the Arctic historian, said the territory needs to focus on online opportunities.

"They need to develop a northern economy, and as far as I'm concerned, a northern economy is online," he said.

"In other words, a web-based economy is what young people are interested in, and what has real possibility for Nunavut. Very little has been done to explore this and develop it. Instead, they're pouring tens of millions of dollars into training programs to turn people into miners."

Nunavut has slower, more expensive and more limited internet access than most of the country — a big obstacle to developing a web-based economy. Major investments need to be undertaken to bring high-speed internet access to the North.
The federal government is spending $305 million over five years to develop Canadian broadband in rural and remote communities — including approximately 12,000 households in Nunavut and the Nunavik region of northern Quebec.

"The basic infrastructure is there," said Tester. "It just needs to be upgraded — big time."

**Support for hunters?**
Others have suggested that the federal government run a program similar to the Nunavut Hunters Income Support Trust, which provided around $2 million a year to hunters so they could buy equipment to hunt, fish and trap.

A similar program for the Inuit of northern Quebec is fully funded through the 1975 James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement.

Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., which administers the Nunavut land claim, ran the harvesters support program. The program was shut down for 2014 so Nunavut Tunngavik could spend the rest of the year reviewing it.

Nunavut Tunngavik president Cathy Towtongie said the federal government should help offset the cost of hunting equipment in the same way it helps subsidize farmers in the rest of Canada.

"So if we can subsidize at least some of the cost, like bullets, then I believe we should have a program that’s designed for hunters, so they can provide for the community and their families."

None of this matters much to Mablick, for whom it is a daily struggle to find his family’s next meal.

"I make sure that they are fed and that there’s something for them to eat instead of me, because being a parent, I make more sacrifices," he says.

"What's the point of sacrificing my kids? They're my everything. I've got to sacrifice myself for them. And that's what I do."