

Nutrition North Canada

A Case Study on Government of Canada Public Engagement

Overview:

Nutrition North Canada (NNC) initiated a broad public engagement process in May 2016 to canvass the views of Northerners, Indigenous organizations, and other key stakeholders on how to further improve the program's transparency, cost-effectiveness, and cultural appropriateness in the communities it serves. NNC's engagement process was designed to offer Northerners ample opportunities to provide input, including face-to-face community meetings, stakeholder interviews, written submissions, and follow-up surveys. In total, over 3,500 comments were received and the results were published in a What We Heard report. The engagement approach supported federal reconciliation efforts by recognizing and demonstrating respect for the unique cultural, linguistic, and economic circumstances of northern communities.

1 History

1.1 Introduction

The high cost of food is a persistent and urgent issue in isolated northern communities. Limited infrastructure, vast distances, and climate make the cost of living and doing business in the North up to ten times higher than in the rest of Canada. Launched in April 2011, NNC replaced the former Food Mail program. NNC is a Government of Canada retail-based food subsidy program that helps to make nutritious food more accessible to over 103, 000 people living in 117 isolated communities. As a national program of general application, it serves all residents in isolated communities across six provinces and three territories. This includes Inuit, First Nations, Métis, and other Northerners.

1.2 Why Engage?

The NNC consultations were based upon the following themes: Program Sustainability and Cost Effectiveness, Capacity and Efficiency, Fairness and Consistency, Transparency, Communications, and Innovation.

2 People and Context

2.1 Who Was Engaged

The target audience for the engagement included residents of isolated northern communities, in particular: Indigenous peoples and community groups; provincial, territorial, and municipal governments; registered retailers and suppliers; and other interested parties and experts involved in areas such as food security, northern transportation and northern infrastructure.

2.2 Methodology

To enhance transparency and openness, the Department contracted a third party to conduct an independent engagement process on its behalf. Participants were given an opportunity to propose ideas about the process itself to ensure the engagement welcomed a wide range of new input, even if it was outside of NNC’s current scope. The engagement approach was structured, but also adaptable to allow a broad range of input. As a priority, all reasonable means were taken to make engagement sessions accessible to as many participants as possible.

3 Goals and Objectives (Policy)

The NNC engagement focused on two key areas: (i) how to improve the program to make it more transparent, accountable and culturally appropriate; and (ii) how to ensure the long-term financial sustainability of the program should it be updated and expanded (e.g. subsidy rates adjustments, whether seasonal rates for food items should be considered, and adjustments to the list of eligible foods).

4 Methods

NNC chose to focus primarily on community site visits and face-to-face meetings in a subset of isolated northern communities. Because NNC serves isolated communities with limited access and infrastructure, this approach enabled participants to interact directly with the contracted NNC representatives to express their views on the program. To complement this approach, surveys were mailed to retailers and local government offices in isolated communities to invite supplementary feedback. For stakeholders who were not located in the communities that were visited, consultants conducted additional interviews (by phone and in-person) and invited written comments to be submitted via email or regular mail. Throughout the engagement process, summaries of community meetings were posted on the NNC website. After the engagement process had concluded, a summative What We Heard report was posted on the NNC website. Hard copies of the report were distributed to local governments of communities where public meetings had been held, in order to communicate the results, once validated.

Methods:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public community meetings. Participants in these events included community leaders, health officers, and residents of isolated northern communities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surveys. An online survey was available on the NNC website, and hard copy surveys were made available to all isolated northern communities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews. Face-to face and phone interviews were conducted. The audience for these interviews included airlines, governments, and Indigenous organizations.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written submissions. Governments, organizations, and individuals provided written submissions to the program.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media. Canadians were invited to participate in the engagement by posting on Facebook or Twitter with #NNCMySay

5 Engagement

The NNC engagement was national in scope and covered all regions served by the program. Responses were gathered from 19 community meetings, 4 additional meetings with community leadership, 63 key stakeholder interviews, 23 written submissions, and 269 online and hard copy surveys, as well as numerous tweets using the hashtag #NNCMySay.

The objective of the program, and information about how the program currently works, were provided at the beginning of each public meeting. The program chose to visit communities that had never been visited by the NNC Advisory Board or by other NNC officials and that represented a range of sizes and regions to hear from a broad cross-section of people. This provided NNC with the opportunity to receive feedback from members of communities with unique challenges related to isolation, size and climate. Consultants and officials encountered several location-based challenges common to this region, including difficult weather and the high cost of operations in the North.

6 Result

The NNC engagement produced a total of 3,500 comments collected from participant interventions and submissions. The NNC Advisory Board deliberated on the engagement findings in the What We Heard report, and subsequently provided a formal response, posted on the NNC website. A stakeholder meeting with Indigenous organizations, northern retailers and airlines, provincial and territorial governments and other federal government departments was held in early May 2017 to discuss the feedback received during the public engagement process and address key areas where the NNC Advisory Board identified divergent views. To help establish a path forward, participants collaborated through a series of facilitated group discussions to prioritize ways the program can be more responsive to the needs of Northerners.

7 Lessons learned:

1. During the engagement, NNC provided refreshments (country/traditional food when possible) at community meetings, which showed respect and appreciation for participation, and encouraged attendance, particularly by families with young children. The provision of local food also supported a local hunter or business, building trust and relationships with the community.
2. NNC provided translation of meeting materials and interpretation for community meetings, out of respect for Elders and local culture. It allowed for increased participation from unilingual speakers who may not have otherwise been able to participate or provide

feedback on the unique challenges experienced by elders in northern communities. Additionally, it supported a local translation/interpretation business.

3. Where possible, NNC partnered with venues that had simultaneous interpretation technology in order to maintain the pace of the meeting.
4. Both hard copy and online surveys were readily available. Given that online surveys could limit participation for Northerners who may have little or no Internet access, NNC conducted hard-copy surveys, which were distributed through retailers and local government offices.

8 Analysis

All submissions were analyzed by the consulting firm, and the results of the analysis are reflected in the What We Heard report posted online. The results provide fundamental insight on what residents of isolated communities would like to see subsidized, and possible trade-offs to support the program sustainability. Main topics included what foods should be subsidized, how to better support smaller retailers, and how to increase subsidy rates, as well as broader insights into food-related issues in northern, isolated communities (e.g. nutrition, food security).

9 Communicating back

The final report, entitled, [Nutrition North Canada Engagement 2016: Final report of what we heard](#), was published online in April 2017. Copies of the report were sent to the stakeholders and communities visited.

The executive summary of the What We Heard report was translated and made available in some of the Indigenous languages spoken by participants:

- Inuinnaqtun
- Inuvialuktun
- Inuktitut (South Baffin, Nunavik, Nunatsiavut)
- Plains Cree
- Woods/Rocky Cree
- Oji-Cree
- Tlicho
- Gwitchin
- Chipewyan

10 Post Engagement activities

Building on the public engagement process, the Government of Canada is taking additional actions to address the high cost of food in isolated northern communities. NNC continues to explore solutions developed by Northerners, for Northerners, and has co-developed a suite of updates to NNC with partners.

NNC launched an Indigenous Working Group (IWG) on May 2, 2017, to consider the feedback received from NNC's public engagement process and to co-develop policy options to update NNC so that it works better for the communities it serves, while remaining cost-effective. The IWG consists of working-level representatives from Indigenous organizations and federal departments, and provides practical, community-level insight and guidance for improving NNC.

The Indigenous Working Group meets every six weeks by teleconference, or more often as required, and held two face-to-face meetings in Ottawa in July 2018.

11 Next steps

Food security is a complex issue shaped by diverse factors. No single government or organization has the mandate, resources or capacity required to address it alone. The Government of Canada is committed to working with provincial, territorial and regional partners, including Indigenous organizations, to address northern food security and work towards a sustainable food system in the North.

Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada is committed to updating and expanding the program through co-development with Northerners. Building on what we heard during the engagement and more recent post-engagement work, the program is taking action to make the subsidy more relevant to northern residents. Specifically, it is updating the eligible food list, increasing subsidy rates, expanding the list of suppliers, providing financial support to smaller retailers, providing temporary assistance to communities that become completely isolated, and increasing transparency through easy-to-access information on the program.