



## Food Sovereignty for Indigenous Groups

In 1947, community leaders in Northwestern Alaska came together to form the Alaska Native Industries Cooperative Association (ANICA) to reduce their communities' reliance on the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) for basic grocery items. Shortages after World War II made BIA shipments unreliable, and these communities came to realize that working cooperatively with each other would keep their villages well-supplied. This break from colonial influence was an early example of food sovereignty.

The Declaration of Nyéléni defines food sovereignty as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced by ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems”<sup>i</sup> at the first global forum on food sovereignty in Mali in 2007. For Indigenous groups, food sovereignty is particularly important as groups move towards reestablishing traditional food and medicine practices while combating the disastrously high prices of groceries on reservations.

In 2020, Montana Cooperative Development Center partnered with the Native American Development Corporation to create a food distribution study. The study found that some reservation residents drive over 100 miles to reach the nearest chain grocery store, and that grocery stores closer to reservations have prices nearly three times as expensive as grocery stores in areas like Billings and Kalispell.<sup>ii</sup> Because these reservations are often in such rural areas, major food distributors either won't deliver to the reservations at all or will charge astronomical prices for delivery. As a result, reservation residents struggle to get access to affordable, fresh produce, let alone culturally appropriate items.

While addressing these issues is a challenge, the cooperative model can help communities achieve food sovereignty. ANICA is a great example—by involving over 30 villages, they pooled their resources to bring food to their members. Today, cooperatives can follow in ANICA's footsteps by creating their own food distribution networks, driving down costs of food delivery. Because cooperatives have perpetual membership, grocery stores can stay open even if the founders decide to retire or move away. Communities can also create cooperatives to farm and collect food themselves and market their goods both in and beyond their borders.

In the Blackfeet nation, community members are forming the Pikuni Cooperative, a group of producers growing and marketing tea made of traditional ingredients. The cooperative model allows the producers to share space to store their goods, grocery stores to purchase the tea in bulk to save money, and consumers to purchase the tea at a lower price. This supports the whole community in growing, producing, and accessing traditional medicine.

Communities worldwide have a long history of working together to supply goods and services to their members. In Montana, food sovereignty is especially relevant to Indigenous groups tackling the unique challenges they face. While there is no one solution to such a complex problem, the cooperative model emphasizes independence, collaboration, and concern for community, which all make it uniquely suited to improve access to healthy, affordable, and culturally relevant food.



---

<sup>i</sup> Declaration of Nyéléni, 2007. <https://nyeleni.org/IMG/pdf/DeclNyeleni-en.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> Montana Food Distribution Study, 2020. Montana Cooperative Development Center, Native American Development Corporation, and National Center for Appropriate Technology. <https://www.mcdc.coop/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/MCDC-Food-Distribution-Study-Final.pdf>

# MONTANA Cooperative DEVELOPMENT CENTER