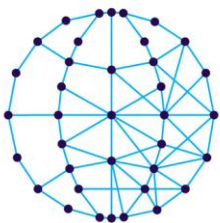


*Cooperatives : The Power to Act*  
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# THE COOPERATIVE MODEL ADVANCES INDIGENOUS DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY OF THE NEECHI CO-OPERATIVES LIMITED

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## Abstract

Cooperative development is an effective channel for development and empowerment within the indigenous communities. It is a model that espouses self-governance, self-determination, self-help, self-development and ownership with an aim towards sustainable community development. A Cooperative is a complementary approach to community development because it is community-inclusive with a goal to mobilize local resources in a bid to attain sustainable development (Fairbairn et al.1991; Wilkinson and Quarter 1996). This paper examines the cooperative strategy of community empowerment through the case study of Indigenous community development through a social enterprise in the form of an award-winning food cooperative in Northern Winnipeg, in the Canadian province of Manitoba, Neechi Foods Co-op Ltd., popularly known as Neechi Commons. Through the use of secondary data, this article will analyze the impacts of the cooperative business model in advancing Indigenous development.

## Résumé

Le développement coopératif est un moyen efficace de soutenir le développement et l'encapacitation des communautés autochtones. Orienté vers le développement durable des communautés, le modèle coopératif épouse l'auto-gouvernance, l'auto-détermination, l'autonomie, l'auto-développement et la propriété. Il complète le développement communautaire durable en étant inclusif de la communauté et en mobilisant les ressources locales dans un but de développement durable (Fairbairn et al.1991; Wilkinson and Quarter 1996). Ce papier s'intéresse aux stratégies coopératives d'encapacitation des communautés sur la base d'une étude de cas de développement communautaire autochtone via l'entreprise sociale, sous la forme d'une coopérative alimentaire autochtone primée située dans le nord de Winnipeg, dans la province canadienne du Manitoba, NeechiFoodsCo-op Ltd., appelée localement Neechi Commons. Il analyse les données secondaires pour déterminer les impacts du modèle d'affaires coopératif dans une perspective du développement autochtone.

## Resumen

El desarrollo cooperativo es un canal eficaz para el desarrollo y el empoderamiento dentro de las comunidades indígenas. Se trata de un modelo que combina la autogobernanza, la autodeterminación, la autoayuda, el autodesarrollo y la propiedad, con el objetivo de lograr que la comunidad progrese de manera sostenible. Una cooperativa es un enfoque complementario del desarrollo comunitario porque incluye a la comunidad con el fin de movilizar los recursos locales y con la intención de alcanzar un desarrollo sostenible (Fairbairn et al., 1991; Wilkinson and Quarter, 1996). Este artículo analiza la estrategia cooperativa del empoderamiento comunitario a través del caso de estudio del desarrollo de una comunidad indígena en una empresa social bajo la forma de una cooperativa alimentaria en Winnipeg, en la provincia del Manitoba en Canadá. NeechiFoods Co-op Ltd., más conocida como NeechiCommons, es una galardonada cooperativa alimentaria indígena ubicada en la parte norte de la ciudad de Winnipeg. Mediante el uso de datos secundarios, este documento analizará el impacto del modelo de negocios cooperativo en el avance del desarrollo indígena.

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## Problem Statement

The substantial research on Indigenous populations has provided a solid background to this issue but the connection between indigenous communities and social enterprise from the social economy standpoint is under-researched (Wuttunee, 2009). The purpose of this article is to contribute to this gap in social enterprise research by analyzing the social enterprise strategy within the cooperative model of the Indigenous Foods Co-op known as Neechi Commons.

The International Co-operative Association (1995) defined cooperative “as an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, as well as cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise.” The dual role of cooperatives in indigenous communities as a tool for economic revitalization and social empowerment cannot be over emphasized. The “quadruple bottom line” approach is prominent within the Indigenous cooperative models demonstrating their financial, social, environmental and cultural goals towards a sustainable livelihood (Sengupta, 2015). Infact, Indigenous communities exemplify cooperative models since before the mainstream cooperatives were presented by the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers in 1844.

However, even with Indigenous people’s historical relationship with cooperation, they cannot isolate themselves from the broader societal context. Cooperative development needs to take up both the Indigenous and Western knowledge in order to be effective in changing community development paradigms. The importance of Indigenous enterprise is poorly represented in the educational world much like the social economy is disproportionately presented in the formal educational curriculum when considering its size (McMurtry, 2009). It is this lack of representation of both the social economy and Indigenous social enterprises that this paper illustrates as a case study on Neechi Commons, which is representative of both a social enterprise and an Indigenous cooperative. The Neechi Common’s case study will add to the broader landscape of social enterprise and Indigenous cooperative literature. There is a distinct need for the literature that outlines an inclusive paradigm for both Indigenous and Western knowledge of social enterprises in Canada. As Battiste and Henderson (2000: 86) highlight, there is a lack of Indigenous knowledge in education; they assert that Indigenous knowledge would be beneficial to the Western world considering its importance in the survival of life and nature prior to the advent of Western knowledge. This paper will therefore present Neechi Commons as a case study of an Indigenous food cooperative and a prominent Indigenous social enterprise.

## The NeechiFood Cooperative Ltd.

Neechi Foods Cooperative Limited is a multi-stakeholder owned business, which transitioned from a worker-owned cooperative to allow workers, producers and consumers to come together (Winnipeg Freepress, 2015). Neechi took its name from a common word in the Ojibway and Cree languages which means friend/sister/brother.. It has been in operation for approximately 25 years and has expanded to two operating locations within the city. It promotes community economic development, cultural resilience, social empowerment and environmental sustainability. The first location operates as a grocer/catering service and acts as an outlet to the public while the newest location, Neechi Commons, is a 50,000 square foot business complex, which houses a neighbourhood supermarket, a

restaurant, a produce courtyard, a bakery and an Aboriginal arts store (Neechi Commons, 2015). The cooperative offers healthy, affordable food to the community as well as citywide delivery across Winnipeg. The cooperative's membership structure is strongly community-based and Aboriginal families based in the North End, Point Douglas and Lord Selkirk Park communities are given first preference in the hiring process. In this way, profits are reinvested back into the community and Neechi Commons fulfills one of its social enterprise mandates to act as a community development enterprise for Aboriginal people residing in Winnipeg.

### **Indigenous Food Security and Sovereignty**

Neechi foods cooperative model demonstrates the intersections between the cooperative business model and Indigenous knowledge. Indigenous knowledge places land and food at the centre of what it means to be Indigenous (Food Secure Canada, 2012). Despite this, very little literature has focused on what Indigenous food security and sovereignty looks like within cities, specifically, using the cooperative business model. Neechi Commons represents a unique entity acting as a cooperative business, social enterprise and Indigenous community centre. Considering that food is a central tenet of Indigenous culture and inner city Winnipeg has been becoming a food desert, it is understandable why Neechi Commons developed as a food cooperative and social enterprise.

On the one hand, food security according to the World Health Organization (1996) is defined as existing 'when all peoples at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active lifestyle.' On the other hand, food sovereignty speaks to the ability of people to control their own food systems. The food deserts developing in Winnipeg's downtown show that inner city residents are incapable of maintaining their food sovereignty (CBC, 2015).

The focus of food sovereignty initially stemmed from a focus on food insecurity in rural areas (Watson, 2013). What the literature demonstrates is that urban centers also experience their fair share of food insecurity. In this context, Sinclair (1997) indicates that urban Indigenous populations (especially those in inner cities) experience food insecurity in the form of lack of access to traditional foods as well as pricing barriers given that supermarkets are largely driven by market demand. The literature lends credence to the assertion that Indigenous peoples, with their long history of marginalization, poverty and disproportionate access to resources, often find themselves food insecure.

A Vancouver-based study looking at Aboriginal healthy eating and food security revealed that urban Indigenous food insecurity is significantly impacted by the loss of food-related skills, increase in the cost of living, transportation costs, and low availability of traditional foods (Provincial Health Services Authority, 2011). Due to their limited access to the resources needed to acquire basic necessities such as shelter, warmth, and food, the urban Indigenous population find themselves forced to compromise their traditional food traditions and resort to cheap, unhealthy processed foods from convenience stores (CBC, 2015). This forced food choice invariably impacts the four pillars of food security: access, availability, supply, and utilization. In a study conducted by Che and Chen (2001), it was shown that the prevalence of food insecurity was higher among Aboriginal people living off-reserve, with 27% reporting at least some form of food insecurity and 24% experiencing a compromised diet.

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Cidro (2015) argues that in recent years, food sovereignty is not only being used as an intervention to challenge food insecurity but also, as a larger attempt to regain control over food systems and health. Culture cannot be divorced from the discourse around Indigenous food security and sovereignty seeing that food represents much more than simple sustenance in the Indigenous culture. Cultural food insecurity is an additional layer of Indigenous food security felt by Indigenous inner-city residents (Power, 2008).

Morrison (2011) identifies four components of Indigenous food sovereignty that show the unique nature of food within the Indigenous culture:

1. The recognition that food is sacred
2. Participation in food systems
3. Self-determination
4. Supportive legislation and policy

Given Canada's history of colonization and Indigenous peoples' determination to reclaim their cultural identity, the cooperative model serves as an ideal framework for achieving Indigenous food security and sovereignty. It is a question, however, of which cooperative model should be used in an Aboriginal firm; Western, Aboriginal or combination of the two.

Culturally appropriate locally determined food systems could enhance community independence (Socha et al, 2012). The cooperative business model allows for the expression of Indigenous self-determination through the democratic principles embedded in the business model. Cooperatives could be used as channels to express Aboriginal freedoms, celebrate Aboriginal culture and strengthen collective identity and integrity. In the case of Neechi Commons, the urban Indigenous community (food producers, cooking staff and consumers) are the owners and participants of their food system through the multi-stakeholder cooperative. This structure affirms Watson's (2013) assertion that true food security can only be attained through the addition of a localized control system. Neechi Commons' food service delivery goes beyond making available culturally important, healthy and affordable foods to the community. As a multi-stakeholder cooperative, the business model includes the empowerment of aboriginal people through the democratic principles and allows the community to take control of their lives through job creation and healthy lifestyle education.

The cooperative business model also makes provisions for the Indigenous principle of respect for their land and environment through the Concern for the Community principle. Neechi Commons takes the Concern for the Community principle one step further by creating a Community Economic Development (CED) principle. Neechi Commons' CED principle ensures the procurement of local foods to help in building the local economy. Neechi Commons supports multiple urban and rural farmers through its seasonal farmers market by sourcing food products between Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario (Neechi Commons, 2015). This promotes not only food sovereignty, but environmental sustainability as well by reducing the carbon footprint from store purchases. Neechi Commons' main focus, however, is in establishing a closer relationship between production and consumption to build a stronger, more resilient Indigenous inner-city community.



According to Cidro (2015), food is a conduit to culture and concomitantly, to Indigenous identity. The provision of culturally important foods, especially in urban cities, helps to reduce food insecurity and is instrumental in the cultural reclamation of Indigenous peoples' identity, given their long history of colonial repression. Morrison (2011) adds that the availability and access to cultural food is a means of reconnecting people to their traditional food systems. Neechi Commons is known for its oven-fresh bannock, wild blueberries, wild rice, and Manitoba fish. These culturally specific foods help build community and community relationships and places Neechi Commons in the role of a social enterprise.

Neechi Commons' network of local producers provides a means of obtaining culturally appropriate foods. Without culturally appropriate foods, food security is not possible. Food security is a prerequisite for broader health (WHO, 1986). Food security plays a role in malnutrition, poor cognitive development, developmental delays and other health conditions that affect a community (Barton, Anderson and Thommasen, 2005). While poor lifestyle choices have been blamed on poor nutrition, it is just as easy to blame food access or food security. It is also important to note that food insecurity is directly related to low-income groups and thus food access is directly affected (Power, 2005), hence, people can only afford what is within their financial abilities. Neechi Commons makes an effort to support Winnipeg's Indigenous population through its local outreach programs, and promoting healthy eating habits and lifestyle choices (Neechi Commons, 2015). They provide a subsidized fruit basket for neighbourhood children to improve children's nutritional status (Neechi Commons, 2012). Neechi Commons encourages cultural diversity through its specialty foods, which are ethnically diverse and locally sourced (Neechi Commons, 2015).

### Relationship, Empowerment, and Market Externalities

Neechi Commons is utilizing the cooperative business model, which helps with 'connectedness' between its members and society as a whole (Simmons, Birchall, 2008). The cooperative model helps Neechi Commons minimize negative market externalities within its community such as diabetes from poor food availability. These health externalities are the reason why Neechi Commons was created. Neechi Commons utilizes the cooperative model to empower its community while taking into consideration the Indigenous cooperative quadruple bottom line: integrating financial, social, environmental and cultural values (Sengupta, 2015).

The North End has a large Indigenous community, which Neechi Commons serves. The North End community has a high rate of unemployment, is in food desert and is underdeveloped (Dobchuk-Land, Toews, and Silver, 2010). According to Neechi Commons' president, "The problem is underdevelopment. The money is not being circulated here and that underdevelopment is being created with the expansion of the suburbs and the big markets out there" (Story, 2015). This underdevelopment represents a gap in the market and is related to the needs of the Indigenous community. The founding members of the Neechi Commons saw a market opportunity after large retail stores left the region (RDI working report, 2015). Within cities where the types of products available for consumption are not culturally specific to Indigenous communities, the lack of store choice becomes a cultural issue. The lack of development of the food market to include culturally specific foods pushes Aboriginal community members further away from the community where they reside.

The negative market externality specific to Aboriginal groups within cities is the indirect third-party suffering from the “proliferation of strictly economic organizations that divorced themselves from social, environmental or cultural goals.”(Sengupta, 2015). The current trends in the grocery sector to move to a big box format that provides universally acceptable products can be seen as a cultural negative externality within the food system (Hicks, Keil and Spector, 2012). Neechi Commons is an excellent example of an Indigenous entrepreneurial response to this separation of organizational functions and includes a more holistic reintegration and innovative combinations of social, environmental and cultural goals with economic goals, which can be exemplary for other social economy organizations (Beavon, Voyageur and Newhouse, 2005).

Sengupta (2015) suggests that the cooperative model is optimal for Indigenous communities as outlined by his research of Indigenous cooperatives in Canada. To further demonstrate how the Indigenous-led cooperative model lessens the economic and social struggles imposed upon Indigenous communities, the model seeks to “ensure that cooperative solutions to complex problems are deeply aware of and examined through the lenses of oppression, including class, race, and gender, in order to ensure that a cooperative solution to a problem for one group of people does not adversely impact another group of people” (Sengupta, 2015,). For Neechi Commons, the Concern for Community principle results in a communal minimization of the negative market externalities inflicted on its community through the delivery of culturally appropriate food products. “A cooperative can therefore provide a hub for organising particular local and economic interests and/or protecting common pool resources” (Simmons and Birch, 2008, page 2132) which is what Neechi Commons accomplished through its products and services for the Indigenous inner-city community in Winnipeg.

Empowering the community is an important performance measure for Neechi Commons and a better indicator of success than profit or market share (Neechi Commons, 2015). The current president, Ms. Champagne, of Neechi Commons stated, “What’s significant to me is when you walk into this place, you see all these Aboriginal people running it. That [has] a huge impact on people’s perception. I don’t think there’s any other urban business in Winnipeg, and perhaps the entire country, [where] you can see a business complex run by Aboriginal people. I think that’s a big deal” (Story, 2015).

As Neechi Commons is a multi-stakeholder cooperative it takes on characteristics of a community within a community. As an organization, Neechi Commons seeks to meet one of its community’s needs in the form of culturally acceptable food and as such, are able to “express community values in an entrepreneurial form” (Sengupta, 2015, page 128). What makes the Indigenous entrepreneurship expressed in Neechi Commons an excellent example of what cooperatives can do for the community they serve is the “multiple goals in addition to economic self-sufficiency, including land ownership and use, and strengthening socio-economic circumstances and revitalization of traditional culture. This relates directly to the use of cooperatives for local, Indigenous development or subjugation; as an organizational structure, co-ops can either suppress local forms of entrepreneurship if they are imposed through top-down government policy”(Sengupta, 2015). Some of Neechi Commons’ concrete evidence of fighting off these negative externalities to create an empowered community is seen in the promotion of culture through art, culturally specific food, and local Indigenous employment

Neechi Commons’ states that it is Winnipeg’s largest commercial employer of First Nations and Métis people (Neechi Commons, 2015). This employment includes the 50 new jobs have been created at

Neechi Commons' main location in the inner-city of Winnipeg. In addition, the arts store, Neechi Niche, is supporting the livelihoods of over 200 artisans and authors ("What's so special about Neechi Commons"). It is not just the numbers that empower the community; there should also be a greater focus on their methodology. This focus should begin with the "community based ownership wherebyneighbourhood families are effectively represented in the control of the enterprise" ("What's so special about Neechi Commons") which, in turn, makes every business decision effectively represent the community. Neechi Commons also exercises the importance of the cooperative principles of education, training and information (ICA 2015) into their hiring and stable employment initiative, which is key to the overall development of their community.

Staff at Neechi are often seizing an opportunity for secure employment that might otherwise be unavailable to them...Neechi does most of its own on-the-job training, through community partners have contributed financially and provide consultation... The business complex, located at 865 Main St., is deliberately positioned in a community that faces tough socioeconomic problems and barriers of employment to offer them opportunities.(Coates, 2014)

An obvious benefit to using the cooperative business structure is that the entire model is built off of the 'one person, one vote' mentality that comes with being a multi-stakeholder owner/worker in a cooperative. Therefore, "employees have the opportunity to become business owners and entrepreneurs; an opportunity that most of them otherwise would never get" ("What's so special about Neechi Commons").

They do not only create employment but they make an effort to support other local enterprises, such as a "variety of urban and rural farmers or gardeners through a seasonal farmers market. Some of the urban gardeners are neighbourhood youth, organized and trained through 'Food for Folks'" ("What's so special about Neechi Commons").To help its community even further, "Neechi Commons also is home to the Aboriginal Chamber of Commerce and to the Momentum Centre, which helps to transition Aboriginal youth and new Canadians aged 18 to 30 years off of Employment and Income Assistance into careers of their choice" ("What's so special about Neechi Commons"). Through the commitment to the multi-stakeholder cooperative model, Neechi Commons has gained awareness of cooperatives as a community development tool. This awareness has generated funding from the Governments of Canada and Manitoba as well as Winnipeg to help financially with this social enterprise.

The analysis of the community impact of this social enterprise's food and art distribution system focuses on intent and action. Neechi Commons seeks to, "to support Aboriginal-produced products and [it] also want[s] to support locally produced products. We want to be a regional food and arts centre that creates a market for locally produced products," said Louise Champagne, president of Neechi Foods Co-op Ltd(Story, 2015). NeechiCommons is acting as a cultural distributor, which makes it possible for everyone in the community to have easy access to this culturally specific store.

Neechi Commons' grocery store is excellent example of a cooperative food distributor as, "they buy locally produced goods at higher prices to ensure food safety, local development and other goals (Harvey, 2003; Novkovic and Power, 2005), they sell at reduced prices in low income communities, and offer many other examples of internalization of community concerns into a cooperative business" (Novkovic, 2008). Recently, they have extended their business to include artin order to address the



concern of the community over the loss of Indigenous culture. Art is an excellent way to express and represent Indigenous culture. According to Ms. Champagne, Neechi Commons “reflects the artists in the neighbourhood. They’re generally living within a 14-block radius of the store, so here we are supporting products that are being produced in the neighbourhood and creating a market for that kind of production” (Story, 2015). Neechi Commons enacted the cooperative model due to the very definition of a cooperative, which ensures expression of a community: “cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise.” (ICA, 1995).

If we take the cooperative definition further to include Indigenous views, it is possible to look to the description of sustainable self-determination by Cornassel (2008). “Cornassel (2008) describes “sustainable self-determination” as the holistic integration of cultural and environmental values and how economic, social, cultural and environmental values are not separable from a holistic worldview for Indigenous communities”(Sengupta,2015). If these values cannot be separated from the Indigenous worldview, how can they be separated from the economic actions of Indigenous firms such as cooperatives?

### Sustainable Development

Self-determination as a holistic, Indigenous value leads us to the concept of sustainable development. There are three prominent domains for the concept of sustainable development: environment sustainability, social sustainability and economic sustainability. The question becomes how does Neechi Commons fit into the sustainable development paradigm? Neechi Commons improves the growth in gross domestic product within its domiciled community. This directly translates into an improved quality of life for the Indigenous and non-Indigenous residence of the community. While Neechi Commons focuses on improving Indigenous residents’ quality of life, it is evident that their products and services positively affect the community in which they reside. This positive externality represents a spill-over into Western culture and represents the intermixing of Western and Indigenous understandings of environmental, social and economic sustainability.

In view of Neechi Commons’ environmentally sustainable goals, which promote environmentally-friendly practices through the installation of geothermal heating and cooling system, natural skylights, natural lighting with fibre optics and much more. Neechi Commons was awarded the Green Globes Certification for its efforts in environmental sustainability proving its focus on environmental issues (Neechi brochure, 2012). It encourages cycling to work by providing its employees with showers rooms and lockers to clean off after the bike ride as a means to encourage more environmentally-friendly, local transportation.

The social goals Neechi Commons promotes include healthy diets and ways of life by providing subsidized fruit baskets to neighbourhood children since its inception 24 years ago. It is known as the first grocery store in Winnipeg to ban the sale of cigarettes as a statement for healthier living. It has been honoured at the local and national level for its work in diabetes prevention by promoting healthy foods. It encourages cultural diversity through its specialty foods component, which features ethnically diverse foods and local specialty foods suppliers (Neechi Commons, 2015). All of these activities seek to promote a healthier and more culturally acceptable Indigenous food cooperative that provides service to its community.

The economic goals held by Neechi Commons include Community Economic Development (CED). Neechi Commons' guidelines for CED have been so successful that the Province of Manitoba has adopted its CED principles as part of the provincial CED policy framework (CED Manitoba, 2001). Neechi Commons' CED principles have been widely adopted as a benchmarking tool for other CED organizations (Charron, 2010). In 2013, Neechi Commons was awarded the Excellence in Aboriginal leadership from the Asper school of Business, University of Manitoba. These awards and uptake of Neechi Commons' economic policies and procedures shows that the cooperative includes an economic focus to its operations along with the environmental, social and cultural components that make-up a true Indigenous cooperative enterprise.

## Conclusion

The cooperative model has principles and values that are synergistic to positive economic and social growth, which make it ideal for Neechi Commons to revitalize its community. The revitalization of an Indigenous inner-city community requires the incorporation of self-determination and cultural inclusion into a business entity that empowers community members. The self-determination or autonomy provided by the cooperative model has facilitated its control over cultural revitalization, economic actions and control over environmental development that takes into account location and food – the main tenets of the Indigenous culture. Within the cooperative structure, control over cultural revitalization through self-governance is encouraged. Community participation is required within the cooperative model and leads to a reclaiming of cultural identity not offered by investor-owned firms. Autonomy also includes economic control to increase the well-being of the community by advancing commerce revitalization using the cooperative business model. A focus on sustainable development provides a level of control, which ensures the organization's long-term control over cultural values and the functionality of livelihood within a Western environment.

According to Sengupta (2015), the history of Indigenous cooperatives in Canada is argued to have a direct correlation with Canada's historical colonization policies. Hence, a history of systemic socio-cultural and economic oppression becomes the catalyst and anchor for Indigenous self-determination towards cultural independence and socio-economic empowerment/revitalization. It is, therefore, suggestive to say that the colonial impacts threatening the traditional and local food system of Indigenous peoples are, in part, a motivating factor for creating an Indigenous-led food system like Neechi Commons. An additional motivating factor needs to be considered, however, and that is the access to affordable, culturally-appropriate food within an inner-city community. Food deserts might be the impetus to consider the food security of Indigenous communities in inner cities. The cooperative business model provides the autonomy and concern for the community that promotes cultural inclusion within the food system thus providing access to culturally appropriate foods. Improving access to culturally acceptable foods means greater food security and sovereignty for Indigenous communities.

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## Recommendations

Further research is needed to understand how the cooperative business model can be a productive and useful tool for the advancement of Indigenous community development. More specifically, how does the cooperative model aid in the advancement of Indigenous economic, environmental and social development in urban communities?

Neechi Commons is currently a benchmark for current Indigenous entrepreneurship because of its community empowerment via resource distribution and employment. This cooperative-led distribution system is able to provide its community with solutions for market externalities, food sovereignty/security and sustainable development. More research is needed to examine the possibilities for cooperatives within the context of culturally acceptable food systems.

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