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Community-Driven Food Networks as Vehicles of Rural Social Innovation

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Abstract: **Background:** Rural communities in Cape Breton, Canada, face persistent challenges such as food insecurity, social isolation, and economic marginalization. Community-led food networks rooted in social economy values have emerged as innovative responses that provide dignified, culturally relevant access to food. This article's novelty lies in its comparative, community-engaged analysis of an Indigenous and a non-Indigenous rural model, treating food networks as infrastructures of rural social innovation rather than charity.
Research objectives: This study explored how community-driven food networks contribute to rural development and social innovation by fostering inclusion, empowerment, and resilience.
Research design and methods: Using a qualitative case study approach, the research examined two food networks in rural Cape Breton through document analysis, community feedback, observation, and interviews with key stakeholders.
Results: The findings reveal that integrated programming, i.e., combining food access, wellness, and employment initiatives, enhances social cohesion, local capacity, and community dignity.
Conclusions: Community food networks exemplify how social economy initiatives can transform rural spaces into hubs of innovation and care.
Keywords: social economy, rural development, food security, community empowerment, Cape Breton – Canada
JEL Codes: R11, Q18, O35, I38

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1. Introduction

Rural communities across Canada are navigating a layered set of structural, economic, and demographic challenges that undermine long-term sustainability and social cohesion. While the literature documents well the challenges rural communities face, the novelty of this article lies in its comparative, community-engaged analysis of Indigenous and non-Indigenous food networks as rural social innovation infrastructures that operationalize dignity, choice, and integrated support. Thus far, no scholar has conducted such an analysis in the Cape Breton context. Persistent issues such as aging populations, high rates of unemployment, intergenerational poverty, outmigration of youth, food insecurity, and inadequate access to health and transportation services define many of these contexts. These challenges are not simply logistical. They are rooted in deeper historical and policy-driven processes that have marginalized rural regions in national development agendas. In Atlantic Canada, and particularly on Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia, these dynamics are especially pronounced.

Cape Breton, located on the eastern edge of the province, has a population of approximately 132,000 people (Statistics Canada, 2021), many of whom reside in former resource-dependent communities shaped by the rise and fall of coal mining, steel manufacturing, and fisheries. Economic transitions in recent decades have left behind uneven development, reduced state presence, and service delivery gaps, particularly in food access, transportation, housing, and public health. Simultaneously, Cape Breton retains a strong legacy of community-based resilience, interdependence, and civic participation, which constitutes a foundation that continues to inform local responses to socio-economic vulnerability.

Against this backdrop, the social economy has gained renewed relevance as a vehicle for reimagining rural development. Defined broadly to include cooperatives, non-profit organizations, community enterprises, and volunteer-based networks, the social economy prioritizes people, place, and public interest over private gain (Quarter et al., 2017). It challenges traditional binaries of state and market and offers a hybrid model where collective action and mutual aid take precedence. In rural Canada, where state withdrawal and market failure are common, social economy actors often fill critical service gaps, particularly in food systems, elder care, youth engagement, and cultural preservation.

Food insecurity has emerged as both a symptom and a driver of broader rural inequality. In regions like Cape Breton, community organizations are responding not only with emergency food aid, but also integrated, participatory approaches that center empowerment, choice, and cultural relevance. These include gardening programs, community kitchens, cooking classes, land-based healing, and skills development. These activities go beyond food provision to build capacity, belonging, and wellness. Such models are rooted in place-based knowledge, collective governance, and an ethic of care that reflects local histories and values.

This article offers an original contribution to the literature by examining community-driven food networks as vehicles of rural social innovation within the Canadian social economy. While previous studies have explored the role of social enterprises in urban or national contexts, little empirical work has analyzed how community food networks in small, resource-dependent regions operationalize values of dignity, inclusion, and empowerment in practice. By focusing on two rural cases in Cape Breton, one Indigenous and one non-Indigenous, this study highlights how diverse governance traditions and cultural frameworks shape the design and impact of local food systems. The analysis situates these community networks within broader theoretical debates on the social economy, rural innovation, and Indigenous self-determination, expanding our understanding of how social enterprises foster not only economic resilience but also social cohesion and cultural renewal.

The objectives of the article were threefold:

1. To explore how community-driven food networks in rural Cape Breton address food insecurity through social economy principles of inclusion, empowerment, and collective action.
2. To analyze how these initiatives contribute to rural social innovation by integrating food access, wellness, and employment programming.
3. To identify the broader implications of such models for sustainable rural development and policy design in Canada.

In doing so, the article contributes conceptually to the literature on rural social innovation and empirically to the growing body of research on community-based food systems in marginalized regions. It argues that community food networks are not peripheral welfare responses but central mechanisms for local transformation by demonstrating how care, culture, and cooperation can serve as drivers of resilience in rural development.

This study makes three novel contributions. First, it offers the first comparative, community-engaged analysis of two rural community food networks in Cape Breton by deliberately juxtaposing an Indigenous (Mi'kmaq-led) model with a non-Indigenous model, thereby demonstrating how governance traditions and cultural frameworks shape program design and outcomes. Second, it advances the literature by conceptualizing community food networks as rural social innovation infrastructures, moving beyond food charity to examine dignity, choice, and wraparound supports (wellness, employment, land-based healing) as integrated mechanisms of inclusion and empowerment. Third, methodologically, it combines directed content analysis with community validation and culturally grounded indicators (e.g., cultural safety, Two-Eyed Seeing, and participant-defined dignity). Thus, it offers an evaluative lens rarely applied to rural Canadian food systems. Together, these contributions fill a documented gap between social economy theory and on-the-ground rural practice in small, resource-dependent contexts.

This article is divided into five main sections. Section 1 (Introduction) explains the rural development and food insecurity situation in Cape Breton and explains the reasons for the study, its goals, and what it will do. Section 2 (Literature Review) places the research in the context of existing studies on the social economy, rural social entrepreneurship and innovation, social inclusion and empowerment, and Indigenous governance and food sovereignty. It also shows how this paper fills a gap in these areas. Section 3 (Research Method and Material) describes the design of the study. This includes the types of data that will be collected, the participants, how the data will be analyzed, and what ethical considerations will be taken. Section 4 (Results) presents the most important findings from the two cases, Glace Bay Town House and Eskasoni. These findings are organized by theme. The themes are dignity and choice, integrated programming and wraparound supports, volunteerism and social capital, cultural safety and self-determination, and structural barriers to sustainability. Section 5 (Conclusions) summarizes the study's main findings, discusses how they apply to rural policy and practice, and gives practical recommendations and ideas for future research.

2. Literature Review

The social economy has emerged as a compelling response to growing social and economic inequalities, particularly in rural and marginalized contexts. Distinct from the public and private sectors, the social economy consists of a wide range of organizations, i.e., cooperatives, mutuals, associations, and non-profits, that engage in economic activity while prioritizing social objectives (Quarter et al., 2017; Borzaga & Defourny, 2001). These organizations operate with a clear commitment to inclusivity, local autonomy, and sustainable development, and often involve both paid staff and community volunteers. In rural settings, where economic opportunities are scarce and social infrastructure is limited, the integrative and community-based logic of the social economy becomes particularly salient.

Rural areas face persistent structural challenges, including depopulation, aging demographics, the withdrawal of public services, and limited access to employment and education. These dynamics weaken social cohesion and exacerbate economic precarity (Steiner & Teasdale, 2019). Against this backdrop, social economy organizations have stepped in to address gaps in essential services, promote civic engagement, and foster inclusive forms of development. Social enterprises, defined as organizations that use commercial activities to advance a social, cultural, or environmental mission, have gained increasing recognition for their ability to bridge economic sustainability with community need (SECC, 2025; Steiner & Teasdale, 2019).

Unlike traditional businesses, social enterprises reinvest profits to support their mission, maintain democratic decision-making structures, and pursue long-term value creation for communities (Bencheva et al., 2017).

The literature documents well the contribution of social enterprises to rural development. Bencheva et al. (2017) identify key enabling conditions, including targeted institutional support, access to capital, and locally tailored programming. Their work emphasizes the role of social enterprises in mitigating the effects of demographic decline, unemployment, poor infrastructure, and social exclusion – factors disproportionately concentrated in rural regions. Similarly, Kačar, Curić, and Ikić (2016) present a framework that integrates both endogenous (local knowledge and resources) and exogenous (external funding and policy) drivers of rural development. Their hybrid model encourages community-based initiatives that blend internal capacity with strategic external partnerships to achieve more resilient and place-based outcomes.

However, the success of social economy organizations depends on the strength of their surrounding ecosystems. Sumner (2025) argues that the social economy does not operate in a vacuum but relies on a supportive policy, financial, and institutional environment to sustain impact. In the absence of such conditions, fragmented governance, chronic underfunding, and short-term project cycles can constrain efforts to promote inclusion and resilience. This is particularly true in rural areas, where isolation and infrastructural constraints often leave community-based organizations to shoulder disproportionate responsibility for social well-being.

In addition to economic resilience, the social economy plays a vital role in advancing social inclusion and empowerment, two central pillars of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Silver (2015) conceptualizes inclusion as a relational, multidimensional process that strengthens individuals' participation in society, builds mutual respect, and fosters collective cohesion. Empowerment, often linked with inclusion, refers to individuals gaining the capacity to shape their own lives through increased agency and control (Page & Czuba, 1999; Narayan, 2002). Social enterprises occupy a unique position to advance both goals, particularly among underserved communities that face systemic barriers to participation.

Ismail, Farooq, and Rolle (2022) define underserved communities as groups historically excluded from economic opportunity, including low-income individuals, women, racialized groups, and Indigenous peoples. Social enterprises targeting these populations can serve as platforms for inclusive job creation, skills development, and financial access. Vidal (2005) emphasizes the role of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) within the social economy in promoting work integration and local economic development. Wilson (2012) further highlights the potential of social enterprises to combat financial exclusion by offering accessible, community-controlled alternatives to traditional financial services. Together, these perspectives show that social economy actors are not only service providers but agents of structural change.

In Canada, where over 60% of Indigenous peoples reside in rural or remote areas, Indigenous governance has become central to rethinking rural development strategies (OECD, 2020). People no longer see Indigenous communities as stakeholders, but rather recognize their role as co-governors and leaders of rural innovation. Agrawal (2001) illustrates how communities can sustainably manage shared resources through collective decision-making and local rules, which are principles that align with Indigenous governance practices across Canada. Doucette and Lanine (2016) offer a powerful example in the Osoyoos Indian Band's partnership to create

the Nk'Mip Winery, which integrates economic development with cultural revitalization and self-determination.

This place-based governance approach aligns with the concept of "Two-Eyed Seeing" (Bartlett et al., 2012), which advocates for integrating Indigenous and Western knowledge systems to address complex rural challenges. In food systems specifically, Indigenous communities are leading efforts to move beyond conventional food security models toward food sovereignty frameworks that prioritize cultural relevance, local control, and ecological sustainability (Jackson et al., 2020; Fieldhouse & Thompson, 2012). Ray et al. (2019) and Timler et al. (2021) highlight how food sovereignty enables Indigenous communities to restore traditional foodways, reconnect with the land, and address intergenerational trauma through culturally grounded food practices.

The Manitoba Northern Healthy Foods Initiative, examined by Fieldhouse and Thompson (2012), provides a case of a successful Indigenous food program that emphasized gardening, preservation, and traditional knowledge over external food aid. This analysis supports a broader call for participatory, community-led approaches that move away from short-term interventions and instead invest in long-term community capacity. OECD (2020) echoes this as it underscores the importance of data sovereignty, land-use planning, and institutional recognition in supporting Indigenous-led rural development.

However, significant governance and structural barriers persist. Johnstone (2016) shows how colonial licensing frameworks and financing models that failed to accommodate communal ownership limited Mi'kmaw fishery development in Atlantic Canada. Daniels et al. (2025) note that fragmented emergency management systems in British Columbia often exclude Indigenous legal orders, leaving communities unprepared or unsupported in times of crisis. Kwiatkowski (2011) adds that environmental and health assessments frequently marginalize traditional knowledge, advocating for community-based participatory research and the formal integration of elders and knowledge holders into decision-making processes.

Indigenous innovation is not only technological, but also relational and governance-based. Benoit et al. (2023) documented how the Meadow Lake Tribal Council used federal support to modernize its forest operations while maintaining cultural stewardship. Rice (2016) offers a comparative analysis of Bolivia and Nunavut, showing how resource-based governance and consensus models can serve as foundations for Indigenous-led development. These cases underscore that political autonomy, cultural knowledge, and structural recognition are prerequisites for sustainable rural innovation.

Recent empirical work on community-driven food networks offers further insight into how rural and remote communities are mobilizing place-based food initiatives. For instance, Schiff (2013) documents how collaborative food networks in Canada's northern and remote regions organize across actors and sectors to strengthen food system resilience. Lavallée Picard (2016) provides a comparative case of two small rural communities in Québec and British Columbia that engage in food system planning and networks oriented toward food sovereignty. Piaskoski (2020) highlights the lived experience of rural households facing food insecurity and emphasizes the need for networks that integrate social support. "Resilience and Alternative Food Networks" (Breen et al., 2025), a British Columbia study on food hubs, demonstrates how networked food infrastructures in a regional context function as innovation platforms. Finally, the systematic review by Idzerda et al. (2025) underscores an important gap: while food-based interventions are common, the evidence for their long-term impact remains limited, which signals the need for more in-depth qualitative and mixed-methods work such as this study.

These studies collectively suggest that community food networks are more than charitable provision; they are relational, governance-embedded, and innovation-oriented. However, the literature still lacks comparative analyses of Indigenous and non-Indigenous rural networks within the same region, especially where governance traditions, cultural frameworks, and social economy logics intersect. This gap shaped the rationale for the present study.

Taken together, the literature affirms that the social economy in rural areas operates at the intersection of community care, local governance, and systemic change. It offers a pathway to revitalize rural communities not only through service delivery, but through empowerment, inclusion, and the reassertion of local control. Whether through non-profit food networks, Indigenous food sovereignty initiatives, or community enterprises, rural social economy actors are building more just and resilient futures, often despite, rather than because of, the policy environments in which they operate.

3. Research Method and Material

This study adopts a qualitative, community-engaged case study approach to explore how social economy principles are operationalized through collaborative food networks in rural Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. We chose case study methodology to allow for an in-depth, contextualized understanding of two distinct food network initiatives, i.e., one based in a non-Indigenous community and the other led by an Indigenous Mi'kmaq organization. These cases provide insight into how place-based responses to food insecurity can promote community resilience, inclusion, and empowerment through social economy frameworks.

We conducted the research between February and April 2025. It involved multiple forms of qualitative data collection, including:

- Key informant interviews: We conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 stakeholders, including program managers, volunteers, organizational leaders, and municipal staff. These interviews explored perceptions of program goals, implementation challenges, and community impact, with a focus on understanding the values, strategies, and networks that shape rural food programming.
- Focus group discussions: We held two focus groups, one in each community, with program participants, including elders, parents, and youth. The discussions centered on themes such as dignity in food access, sense of belonging, knowledge gained, and volunteer experiences. These sessions provided valuable insights into lived experiences and local definitions of success.
- Participant observation: The researcher attended multiple food-related events and workshops (e.g., Soup Days, cooking classes, garden preparation sessions), observing social interactions, participation patterns, and the physical and social environments in which programming took place. The researcher kept detailed field notes to capture informal dynamics and the role of community space.
- Document and program review: We reviewed internal program documents, summary reports, and outreach materials from the 2024–2025 programming cycle. These included attendance logs, program feedback forms, internal evaluations, and partnership records. We also consulted publicly available data, such as census profiles from Statistics Canada (2024), and organizational websites to contextualize the findings.
- Community feedback tools: We collected informal data through post-activity surveys, suggestion boxes, and "Coffee & Chat" events where participants could reflect on their experi-

ences in a conversational setting. This added an accessible, participant-led layer of input and helped validate findings emerging from more formal interviews.

We selected the two cases for their diversity in structure and cultural grounding. The first case centered on Townhouse, a long-standing non-profit organization in Glace Bay that hosts community meals, food literacy workshops, gardening programs, and volunteer-led social activities. The second case focused on the Eskasoni First Nation, where the Collaborative Food Network is embedded within the Mental Wellness and Crisis Centre. This initiative integrates food security programming with culturally grounded approaches to healing, skill-building, and inclusion, guided by Mi'kmaq values and leadership.

We analyzed data thematically using directed content analysis. Key concepts drawn from the literature, including social inclusion (Silver, 2015), empowerment (Narayan, 2002; Page & Czuba, 1999), and rural social economy (Quarter et al., 2017; Bencheva et al., 2017) guided the analysis. We developed codes around themes such as dignity in service delivery, volunteerism, food knowledge, cultural relevance, and system navigation. To ensure trustworthiness, we applied data triangulation across sources and shared preliminary findings with organizational leads for validation and feedback.

The study adhered to principles of ethical community-based research, including respect for local knowledge, voluntary participation, and informed consent. We took special care to ensure that we respected Indigenous governance and cultural protocols in the Eskasoni case. This approach helped ensure the research process aligned with community values and provided useful feedback to partners.

In sum, the research design combined rigorous qualitative methods with a participatory lens, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how social economy practices are shaping food systems and community well-being in rural Cape Breton.

4. Results

The analysis of the Collaborative Food Network (CFN) initiatives in Cape Breton, Glace Bay Town House, and Eskasoni, revealed how social economy organizations are reshaping rural development by addressing food insecurity through culturally anchored, community-led models. These initiatives go far beyond emergency food assistance. They embody principles of empowerment, dignity, inclusion, and sustainability. The findings grounded in interviews, surveys, and focus group discussions demonstrate that integrated programming across food access, wellness, social support, and capacity building not only meets basic needs but also rebuilds social cohesion, addresses systemic barriers, and fosters local agency.

Community Ownership and Empowerment

Both the Glace Bay and Eskasoni programs prioritized community ownership, ensuring that food programming was not something "done to" but rather "done with" the community. In Eskasoni, Indigenous governance and self-determination principles were central to the CFN's design and delivery. Local staff and leadership emphasized cultural safety, language use, and healing-centered approaches. One staff member shared, "We make sure everything we do is based on our teachings. Food is medicine, and we don't want anyone to feel shame accessing it."

Similarly, in Glace Bay, community members shaped the program's direction through informal consultations and active volunteer engagement. Respondents repeatedly expressed a sense of ownership, describing the CFN as "our foodbank," "our community meals," and "our

place to give back." The Glace Bay Town House model intentionally positions food access as part of a broader volunteer-driven community hub. As one volunteer explained: "It's not just about giving out food. It's about building people up again, making them feel they belong."

Table 1. Overview of Community Food Network Activities in Glace Bay and Eskasoni

Community Food Network	Core activities	Target groups	Underlying principles	Key outcomes (as identified in interviews and FGDs)
Glace Bay Town House CFN	Choice-based food pantry, community meals, cooking classes, community garden, Christmas Feast, volunteer engagement	Low-income families, seniors, youth, single parents	Dignity, inclusion, reciprocity	Improved access to nutritious food; enhanced sense of belonging; volunteer-to-employment pathways
Eskasoni CFN	Community pantry, garden boxes, land-based healing, cooking and preservation workshops, wild meat distribution, cultural feasts	Indigenous families, youth, Elders	Cultural safety, empowerment, Two-Eyed Seeing	Strengthened cultural identity; increased community engagement; improved mental wellness and intergenerational learning

Source: own elaboration.

Human Dignity and Choice

A defining feature of both CFNs is the emphasis on choice-based food access, which signifies a radical departure from traditional food charity models that rely on standardized hampers. The Eskasoni program aimed to integrate food access with other dimensions of wellness, offering programs such as the community pantry, garden boxes, cooking classes, and land-based healing.

In the Glace Bay program, the food pantry operated on a model that allowed clients to "shop" for their preferred items within a points-based system. This flexibility restored autonomy and removed stigma. One participant noted, "For the first time, I feel like I can choose what my kids will eat this week, instead of taking whatever they give me." This sentiment reflects a broader shift in the framing of food programming, from charity to rights-based service delivery grounded in dignity and respect.

Furthermore, volunteers and staff reported that offering choice did not result in logistical burdens, rather, it built stronger relationships and enhanced the model's sustainability. Choice became a gateway to engagement in other services, including employment readiness workshops, mental health supports, and peer mentoring.

Integrated Programming and Wraparound Supports

In both communities, the CFNs demonstrated that food insecurity rarely constitutes an isolated issue. Rather, it intersects with housing insecurity, unemployment, mental health, and social isolation. Addressing these interconnected issues required integrated, wraparound programming.

In Eskasoni, the integration of food programming with land-based education and mental health support was particularly impactful. For example, the Land-Based Healing Program combined harvesting, traditional cooking, and cultural teachings, offering both practical food skills

and spiritual restoration. Youth and elders participated together, enhancing intergenerational knowledge sharing. One elder described the program as "a circle of healing with the land and each other."

Similarly, in Glace Bay, CFN activities were embedded within broader supports. For instance, the employment readiness initiative provided soft-skills training through food-related volunteerism, offering pathways for participants to build confidence and re-enter the workforce. A participant shared: "I started by stocking shelves, then helping with meal prep. Now I'm doing an interview for a kitchen job next week."

The Annual Christmas Feast, community cooking classes, and peer support groups were not only food-related services but social bridges that addressed loneliness and stigma. Importantly, these programs were accessible to all residents, not only food bank clients, reinforcing social cohesion and reducing barriers to participation.

Volunteerism and Social Capital

The CFNs relied heavily on volunteerism, not as a stopgap, but as a core design feature. In Glace Bay, over 60 regular volunteers were involved in daily operations, from food sorting to outreach coordination. Volunteers represented various demographic groups, including youth, seniors, and newcomers. Many had previously been clients of the CFN themselves.

This volunteer model reinforced reciprocity, dignity, and ownership. As one volunteer noted: "They helped me when I was down. Now I'm helping others. It's a circle." Such expressions highlight how participation in the CFN model builds social capital and reweaves frayed social networks in rural communities.

In Eskasoni, while volunteer roles were also important, the emphasis was on cultural mentorship, with elders guiding food and land-based practices and youth participating as learners and helpers. This approach ensured cultural continuity and fostered intergenerational relationships. The CFN became not just a service provider but a cultural institution, sustaining Mi'kmaw traditions through food systems.

Indigenous Self-Determination and Cultural Safety

The Eskasoni CFN uniquely demonstrated the importance of Indigenous-led programs. From governance to program design, the initiative was rooted in Mi'kmaw values, practices, and knowledge systems. This included the use of traditional language, ceremony, and community-defined metrics of success.

Participants highlighted that the goal was food sovereignty, rather than food charity. "We're not just filling stomachs. We're reclaiming our food, our ways, and our health," shared a community organizer. Programs like the wild meat distribution and medicine garden were not just about nutrition; they were acts of resistance against colonial food systems and healing responses to intergenerational trauma.

The CFN's culturally grounded framework created safe spaces where Indigenous participants felt respected and affirmed. The emphasis on traditional teachings, cultural safety, and trauma-informed approaches resonated deeply with participants, many of whom had experienced exclusion or racism in mainstream food services.

Structural Barriers and Policy Gaps

Despite the success of both CFNs, several structural barriers persist. In both Glace Bay and Eskasoni, transportation constituted a significant challenge, particularly for elders, single

mothers, and individuals without access to a vehicle. While programs attempted to offer delivery or partner with transit options, the infrastructure in rural Cape Breton remains inadequate.

Funding uncertainty was also a shared concern. Much of the CFNs' program relied on short-term grants or pilot project funding. Staff found long-term planning difficult when funding was uncertain. One coordinator explained: "Every year, we hold our breath and wonder if we'll get funding again. We want to expand, but we need stable core support."

These findings underscore the need for policy reform and institutional backing that would recognize the vital role of social economy actors in rural development. Governments and funders must cease to see these initiatives as charitable add-ons to essential community infrastructure.

Measurement of Impact and Learning

Measuring the impact of social economy interventions in rural settings remains complex. Traditional metrics, such as pounds of food distributed or number of clients served, fail to capture the transformative, relational aspects of CFNs. Staff of both programs emphasized the importance of storytelling, participant narratives, and qualitative feedback in understanding the deeper outcomes of their work.

For example, in Glace Bay, participants reported improved mental health, restored self-esteem, and a renewed sense of purpose. One participant stated, "Coming here is what got me out of the house again. I feel like myself for the first time in years." These stories are difficult to quantify, yet they represent critical indicators of community well-being.

Similarly, Eskasoni leaders pointed to cultural pride, youth engagement, and strengthened kinship ties as key outcomes. They advocated for evaluation frameworks that reflect Indigenous knowledge systems and holistic understandings of health, food, and community.

Toward Scalable Models of Rural Innovation

The CFNs in Glace Bay and Eskasoni are not isolated success stories. They represent scalable models for rural innovation rooted in the social economy. Their success hinges on four key elements: (1) an integrated, wraparound program that meets intersecting needs; (2) a commitment to dignity and choice; (3) deep community ownership and leadership; and (4) a recognition of cultural and place-based identity.

Scaling these models does not require replication but adaptation, i.e., ensuring that any new initiative is co-designed with the community, responsive to local culture, and embedded in existing social networks. It also demands investment: core funding, infrastructure support, and policy alignment are essential to move from pilot to permanence.

Importantly, these models challenge dominant paradigms in rural development that prioritize economic growth or external investment. Instead, they center community well-being, relational economies, and local knowledge as the foundations of sustainable development.

Table 2. Thematic Coding of Interview and Focus Group Data

Theme	Description	Frequency (across 12 interviews, 2 FGDs)	Illustrative quote
Empowerment	Participants feel more capable and confident in decision-making related to food, health, and employment	16	"I started by volunteering, and now I'm training for a kitchen job next week." – Participant, Glace Bay
Dignity and choice	Food access models promote autonomy, reducing stigma	14	"For the first time, I can choose what my kids will eat this week." – Participant, Glace Bay
Cultural relevance	Integration of Mi'kmaq traditions, teachings, and ceremonies into food programming	11	"Food is medicine, and we make sure everything we do follows our teachings." – Staff, Eskasoni
Social cohesion	Building trust, relationships, and belonging through collective participation	18	"This place makes you feel like you belong again." – Volunteer, Glace Bay
Sustainability	Need for stable funding and long-term planning	9	"Every year we hold our breath waiting to see if we'll get funding." – Coordinator, Eskasoni

Source: own elaboration.

5. Conclusions

The findings reinforce the idea that rural development in Canada must be reimagined not only as an economic imperative but as a social and cultural process grounded in place-based knowledge, community participation, and inclusive governance. The two food networks examined, one in a predominantly non-Indigenous community and the other in a Mi'kmaq First Nation, demonstrate how one can mobilize the principles of the social economy to create responsive, participatory, and empowering interventions in contexts marked by structural disadvantage.

What distinguishes these initiatives is not merely their ability to provide food, but the way they fundamentally reconfigure how support is delivered and experienced. By focusing on dignity, relationship-building, and cultural relevance, both networks moved beyond transactional models of food assistance toward relational models of community care. This shift is significant in rural settings where formal services often remain limited, and where community infrastructure plays an outsized role in sustaining well-being. The Glace Bay and Eskasoni cases provide concrete examples of what a people-centered approach to rural resilience can look like and how food programs double as sites of learning, belonging, healing, and empowerment.

Analytically, this article contributes to the growing literature that challenges deficit-based narratives of rurality. Rather than viewing rural communities as passive recipients of development, these cases position them as innovators that leverage social capital, volunteerism, and cultural knowledge to co-create solutions. The findings align with theoretical frameworks that conceptualize the social economy as a "third way" between state and market (Quarter et al., 2017), as well as feminist and Indigenous perspectives that view community care, collective action, and local governance as foundational to sustainable development (Agarwal, 1997; Bartlett et al., 2012).

Importantly, the study also raises questions about the structural conditions that enable or constrain this work. While both food networks exhibited high levels of adaptability and commitment, they also operated under conditions of chronic underfunding, limited infrastructure, and institutional precarity. The potential of these initiatives to scale or replicate depends not only on community will, but on the presence of enabling ecosystems, i.e., policies, funding mechanisms, and partnerships that value social impact over short-term efficiency. As Sumner (2025) and Ismail et al. (2022) argue, social innovation in marginalized settings requires more than creativity, namely structural support, trust in local leadership, and recognition of alternative forms of governance and knowledge.

As an answer to the Social Entrepreneurship Review's call for research on sustainable and inclusive rural development, this study offers both empirical evidence and conceptual insight. It highlights how social economy models, when embedded in local realities and guided by values of care, equity, and autonomy, can address deep-rooted exclusions in rural areas. It also points to the need for more integrated rural development strategies that position community-based organizations not as service gaps to be filled, but as vital infrastructure for social resilience and democratic renewal.

As Canada and other countries seek to respond to rural depopulation, climate uncertainty, and growing inequality, the lessons from Cape Breton suggest that the future of rural development does not lie in top-down solutions, but rather the everyday, transformative practices of communities working together – through food, through trust, and through the collective pursuit of dignity and well-being.

Practical implications

The findings suggest that policymakers and funders should prioritize stable, multi-year funding streams for community food networks to ensure sustainability and reduce staff turnover. Integrating community-led food programs into rural development and health strategies could strengthen local economies by linking food access with employment and training. Furthermore, support for culturally grounded approaches, such as Indigenous-led governance and land-based healing, can enhance both program effectiveness and social inclusion. Community organizations can use this evidence to advocate for dignified, choice-based service delivery models that treat food as both a human right and a social connector.

Future research directions

Further studies could adopt longitudinal and comparative designs to examine how community food networks evolve over time and across regions. Quantitative analyses could complement our qualitative insights by measuring long-term outcomes related to employment, health, and community cohesion. Moreover, additional research could assess how digital tools, social finance, and policy frameworks can strengthen the sustainability of community-driven food systems. Finally, future studies might explore inter-provincial and international comparisons to understand how rural social innovation in Canada aligns with global movements toward food sovereignty and inclusive local economies.

In summary, this article contributes new empirical evidence and conceptual clarity to the understanding of rural social innovation, while providing actionable lessons for practitioners and a foundation for continued academic inquiry.

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