



## Introduction

# Indigenous Food systems: a Gathering of Voices and Foods

By Rodrigo Yáñez,<sup>3</sup> Camila Migueletto<sup>4</sup> and Diego Milos<sup>5</sup>

This book is the final expression of an exchange of experiences and knowledge among members of the Asháninka, Aymara, Kayambi, Cree, Inuit, Náhuatl, Maya Q'eqchi', Métis, Misak, and Wolastoqey peoples and nations, spanning the American continent from northern Canada to the Amazon. They gathered for the first time in May 2024 in the cloud forests of Yunguilla, Ecuador, at the meeting titled "Transformation of Food Systems: Perspectives from Peoples and Nations of the Americas."<sup>6</sup> It began as a conversation about the transformation of Indigenous food systems in the region, which continued to be enriched over time through individual or group interviews, the exchange of ideas via social networks, conversations about traditional dishes with various community members, and other forms of collective reflection.

With funding from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and coordination by Rimisp – Latin American Center for Rural Development, this book seeks to highlight the elements that characterize contemporary Indigenous food systems, their potentialities and the challenges they face, what they mean for each people, the spaces of adaptation and rediscovery that are emerging, the historical changes in the production and gathering of their foods, and the flavors that shape a great diversity of cultures.

These issues are framed within a line of work linked to the transformations of food systems, strongly marked by processes of industrialization and the impacts of climate change. In this context, Indigenous peoples inhabiting rural territories are highly vulnerable, as evidenced by rates of poverty, exclusion, and food insecurity. However, in a context where global food systems are threatened in terms of productivity and sustainability, Indigenous food practices and knowledge are increasingly recognized, documented, and valued on a global scale, although they are not always fully understood.

Indigenous knowledge proposes another relationship with nature, one that directly questions the standardized practices promoted by numerous agricultural extension centers across the American continent as a legacy of the Green Revolution.

Through various formats—interviews, speeches, recipes, and analyses of perspectives on the past, present, and future—this book gives voice to Indigenous peoples so that they may convey their perspective to the reader. What distinguishes their food systems from an industrialized or fully open one? In what ways do they make selective and moderate use of new technologies in their productive processes? And how can these diverse practices, which might commonly be viewed as “backward,” shed light today on how to adapt food systems to the major transformations they are undergoing because of the climate crisis, biodiversity loss, and pollution?

Indigenous food systems are still here. The book demonstrates in various ways their vitality, their central role in articulating Indigenous cultures, and that, despite centuries of transformations, there has been no assimilation, nor overcoming, nor definitive replacement by other productive, marketing, and consumption practices. Perhaps—and this is suggested throughout the different texts—what Indigenous food systems contribute to the world is their diversity, achieved in coexistence with other food systems, sometimes with difficulties, not without tensions, but whose persistence over time is a clear sign of strength.

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<sup>6</sup> Following the meeting, the document Agenda for the Transformation of Food Systems: Perspectives and Actions of Indigenous Peoples and Nations of the Americas (Marreros et al., 2024) was published.



Rimisp, in its nearly 40-year history, has defended the territorial approach as its interpretive framework for supporting rural localities. One of the central pillars of this approach is that territorial actors themselves should lead processes of social, economic, and institutional transformation to achieve better living standards. From this perspective, the book takes as its starting point the voice and reality of the actors, which prevails throughout all the chapters. We set out to write a book collectively, where the testimonies would narrate the history of food systems, without prioritizing a legal, political, agricultural, or culturalist perspective. Taking a stand from one of these viewpoints would have entailed interpreting the recorded material differently, perhaps standardizing processes that are rich in their diversity. Thus, and drawing on a beautiful approach by Vinciane Despret,<sup>7</sup> the aim of showcasing so much life was precisely to multiply worlds, and thereby reveal the various ways in which food is being thought about and experienced on our American continent.

The Indigenous situation in Canada is not the same as in Latin America. There are significant material and institutional differences between the peoples of the North and those of the South. Dialogue and negotiation with the Canadian state have been established at the federal level, through direct treaties between the peoples and the provinces. In contrast, among Indigenous peoples of Latin American countries, Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization (ILO) is the main legal safeguard for promoting the rights of peoples to maintain their ways of life and their institutions.

Multiple similarities can be observed among the various peoples and nations of the continent, and they are reflected in the chapters of the book. Dispossession, historical exclusion, and an unresolved debt with the States are also manifested in productive and food-related practices. A concept that appears in various forms is that of food sovereignty, which encapsulates the right of a society to define its own policies and strategies for food production and consumption. One of the questions posed by the protagonists of this book is: traditional Indigenous foodways still exist, but are they still sovereign?

Thus, sowing, cultivating, harvesting, gathering, hunting, cooking, and sharing a meal, throughout the pages, are forged as a space of resistance, of cultural affirmation in a fast-paced and open world, where Indigenous communities are losing certain anchor points, but are also finding and recovering others. Producing what is eaten, eating in the way of the ancestors, is a way of being and belonging, and it is this that can offer a perspective for the future.

The book is structured as follows:

*Chapter 1*  
Traditions and Food  
Sovereignty: Agricultural  
Practices of Resistance  
among Indigenous Peoples

Addresses the concept of food sovereignty and how certain protective measures, such as Indigenous laws, have aided the preservation of Indigenous peoples' lifeways. The authors argue that this type of tool can contribute to the transformation of food systems that is required to confront the challenges posed by the demographic explosion of recent decades, as well as the transformations in the environment, which affect rural agricultural sectors, but also urban groups of food consumers.

*Chapter 2*  
Elements for Understanding  
the Transformation of  
Indigenous Food Systems

Is a synthesis of a series of interviews conducted with the protagonists of this book. From the north to the south of the Americas, we discuss what the traditional foods and preparations are and what they consist of, the culinary objects and utensils used by each people, the causes they perceive as most significant in the transformation of their food systems, how these transformations connect with current Indigenous diets, the impacts of climate change, and the strategies they are implementing to ensure the sustainability of Indigenous foodways. Finally, we address why they consider it important to continue discussing Indigenous food systems.

*Chapter 3*  
Sowing, Diversifying, and  
Reflecting Collectively to  
Adapt to Climate Change

Presents the discourse of Alejandro Marreros, a representative of the Nahuatl people, who addresses a community regarding the impoverishment and loss of ancestral knowledge and customs in many communities of Puebla, Mexico. Marreros emphasizes the importance of conversation and collective reflection to confront symbolic violence and to reclaim a way of life based on food self-sufficiency. Life projects are the strategy for this, and entail a collective reflection on what it means to cultivate and harvest when the climate has changed so drastically. The only way to resist and adapt is through dialogue, developing a shared collective intelligence.

<sup>7</sup> Despret, V. (2022). Living like a bird. Ways of doing and thinking about territories. Cactus.

**Chapter 4**

Ken Paul, a Wolastoqey representative: *“If we do not maintain our natural food systems, we will not have a habitat in which to live”.*

Drawing on various experiences, Ken Paul delves into the cultural and nutritional significance of traditional foods for his community, such as potatoes, moose meat, fiddlehead ferns, salmon, and lobster. Through the relationship with these resources and seasonal cycles, he highlights the importance of the well-being of both the communities and the territory, which is constantly threatened by industrial agriculture, dam construction, pollution, and the legacy of colonization. The interview also addresses global sustainability challenges and the role of Indigenous knowledge systems, whose long-term perspective, rooted in ancestral pasts, possesses a potential that can contribute to the sustainability of food systems on a global scale.

**Chapter 5**

Agenda for the Transformation of Food Systems: Perspectives and Actions of Indigenous Peoples and Nations of the Americas

Synthesizes the dialogues and reflections of the Indigenous peoples and nations of the Americas who participated in the Yunguilla, Ecuador, meeting in 2024, developing a joint agenda on Indigenous food systems. The text highlights the value of ancestral knowledge and practices present in Indigenous foodways in the face of the challenges they encounter. The agenda is structured around four cross-cutting themes: interdependence between culture and biodiversity; health and cultural nutrition; rights and political advocacy; and challenges and opportunities in a globalized context. It concludes with a proposal for strategies and opportunities for strengthening Indigenous food systems, prioritizing collaboration among diverse actors and Indigenous leadership to preserve their biocultural diversity.

**Chapter 6**

Recipes

Includes a set of Recipes of culinary dishes representative of Indigenous peoples. These traditional Indigenous dishes constitute a brief repertoire selected by various peoples who participated in the creation of the book and showcase the richness and flavors of Indigenous cuisine. The recipes detail ingredients, preparation, and modes of consumption, many of which may seem unusual to those living in cities or in other regions. The diversity of their components and the importance of their social dimension are highlighted. These are forms of knowledge transmitted through practice, enjoyed in community and during celebrations. Each dish is a testament to the cultural heritage of some Latin American Indigenous peoples.



**Finally, on behalf of Rimisp, we would like to thank the protagonists of this book for sharing their stories with us and future readers. Each chapter presents only an excerpt from multiple conversations that touched on many intimate topics. Our thanks to Alejandro Marreros, Andrés Tombé, Aurora Panoso, Atilio Chauca López, Brenda Xol, Eleodoro Baldiviezo, Ernesto Tzi Chub, Kelly Ulcuango, Ken Paul, Lynn Blackwood, María Quispe, Marisol Lerdo, Mario Siquic, Marisol Shariva Pérez, Modesta Acarapi, Nicolás Marreros, Priscilla Settee, and Shannon Udy.**