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Community Food Security: Promoting Food Security and Building Healthy Food Systems

Executive Summary

Community food security (CFS) is a relatively new food security-promoting strategy that considers all the factors within a region or community's food system that influence the availability, cost, and quality of food to area households, particularly those in lower income communities.

Since CFS focuses on regional and local food systems, it is concerned with the full range of food chain events including agriculture, the availability of supermarkets and other affordable outlets for quality food, the involvement of the wider citizenry and local and state governments in seeking solutions to food insecurity, and the services and environments that encourage healthy food choices including schools, nutrition service providers, and commercial food operations.

While officially a movement since only 1994, CFS is now practiced by hundreds of organizations and communities across North America. These practitioners have engaged countless numbers of groups, volunteers, government and non-government representatives, and lower income people in projects and activities that have improved their communities' capacity to meet their own food needs. Projects and activities include farmers' markets, federal food assistance program outreach, community gardens, youth food and agriculture programs, farmland preservation and farm viability projects, food system planning and food policy councils, nutrition education and health promotion strategies, transportation projects, farm-to-school projects, economic development activities, and a range of public education and awareness campaigns.

Introduction

Community food security (CFS) is as much an anti-hunger as it is a community development strategy. It addresses multiple needs and problems within a local food system. CFS is both a goal and a method that embraces the full range of food chain activities – natural resources and agriculture, processing and distribution, nutrition and health, public policy – and promotes a systems approach to food problems. While the goal of CFS is the same as other approaches – to end hunger and food insecurity – its method is decidedly different. CFS, in its fullest expression, draws on a range of

community food system resources, invites the participation of many individuals and sectors, and promotes solutions that reduce food insecurity and build the health and well being of the wider community.

This paper will define CFS and describe its conceptual and philosophical framework. Programs and “best practices” typically associated with CFS will be reviewed and, finally, the paper will consider the opportunities for growth and development in the CFS field. But let’s begin the discussion with what CFS is, what it isn’t, and how it compares to other anti-hunger strategies.

What is Community Food Security?

Community food security is an extension of food security, which occurs when all households have available to them nutritionally adequate and safe food, or the ability to acquire food in socially acceptable ways. CFS places the concept of individual or household food security directly in a community context, which implicitly recognizes the important role that the larger food system must play to ensure food security. The most commonly used definition of community food security is a “condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance, social justice, and democratic decision-making (Hamm and Bellows, 2002).”

For CFS, the community is the unit of analysis. This is why CFS assigns such importance to developing community-based resources that improve access to quality, affordable food, particularly in lower income neighborhoods. CFS addresses a broad range of problems such as inadequately funded and staffed food assistance programs (food stamps, WIC), lack of quality, affordable food outlets, especially in urban and rural areas, loss of small and medium size family farms and the farmland base needed to support food production, diet-related health problems including the local food environments (prevalence of healthy versus unhealthy food choices), and the overall vitality of the local food economy and its ability to generate additional community wealth.

Three other components of the CFS definition – sustainability, social justice, and democratic decision-making – need brief explanations. Since CFS is concerned with the viability of the natural resource base that produces our food as well as the food system’s current dependence on non-renewable energy sources (e.g. fossil fuels), it promotes sustainable farming practices. Likewise, CFS supports strong marketing channels between consumers and farmers that are in the same region to decrease the distance that food must travel (food travels an average of 1,500 miles before it reaches its final destination). Social justice refers, of course, to the injustice of hunger and food insecurity in a country as affluent as the U.S., but it also refers to the adequacy of wages and working conditions for all who earn their livelihoods from the food system. This includes farmers, farm workers, food processing workers, and food service workers. Democratic decision-making, a key principle of the community food security movement,

means that all participants in the food system have the right to participate in decisions that affect the availability, cost, price, quality, and attributes of their food.

In contrast to anti-hunger approaches that primarily focus on federal food assistance programs or emergency food distribution, CFS encourages progressive planning that addresses the underlying causes of hunger and food insecurity. Planning itself encourages community-based problem-solving strategies and promotes collaborative, multi-sectoral processes. And finally, while CFS embraces all approaches, even if they only provide short-term hunger relief, it places special emphasis on finding long-term, system-based solutions.

With most domestic anti-hunger models, the key indicators of food security/insecurity are the size of the need (usually defined by the area's poverty statistics and pool of eligible federal food program participants), and the number of program participants as a percentage of those who are eligible. For emergency food providers, the primary indicator is the number of people who request food and the units of food distributed.

If one were to operate under a CFS model, a broader set of indicators would be examined to determine the relative food insecurity/security of a given community or region. For example, a typical community food assessment – a common planning tool of CFS – might evaluate the following indicators:

- The number and accessibility of affordable retail food stores that carry a wide range of healthy food choices in or near lower-income neighborhoods
- Public transportation systems and their ability to easily connect residents of lower-income communities to affordable, high quality food stores and farmers' markets
- Rates of diet-related health problems including obesity and diabetes as well as infant mortality, low-birth weight babies, and iron-deficient anemia.
- The prevalence, adequacy of funding, and the coordination between public health and nutrition education efforts that are designed to address the above conditions
- The amount of time that a school system devotes to nutrition education in their standard curriculum; and the degree to which the school system promotes healthy eating through the food choices in their cafeteria and vending machines
- The adequacy of funding and staff to do outreach for food assistance programs
- The viability of the local and regional agriculture sector, use of sustainable farming practices, and the availability of distribution channels to make local and regional farm products available to all residents, businesses, and public institutions
- The average age of farmers, the loss of prime farmland, and other measures of farm viability
- The size of emergency food providers relative to demand, and progress toward downsizing food banks as demand declines and lower income families have the means to secure food through normal channels
- The existence of active venues for local and state food system planning, such as food policy councils, comprised of public agencies and private sector representatives.

Philosophical and Social Perspectives on Community Food Security

Before turning to some concrete examples of CFS, I will discuss three underpinnings of CFS that grow out of philosophical and social analyses. They are the role of compassion in contemporary American society and how it shapes public response to hunger issues; the manner in which social networks and citizen participation influence local food security; and the application of systems theory to hunger and food insecurity.

One can argue that if sufficient compassion for the hungry and impoverished existed today among even a significant minority of the American public, that it would create the political will and public resources necessary to effectively eliminate these problems. Such is not the case. Local and state hunger news stories that use to run on page one of daily newspapers 10 years ago barely rate back page coverage today. In spite of the evidence that hunger and food insecurity are continuing (and growing), the public's sympathy for the fate or condition of those less fortunate appears to be waning. According to the food bank community, demand at most emergency food sites is growing and frequently surpasses supply. But without a continual drumbeat of public concern, few politicians will advocate for the hungry (*The Nation*, Aug. 18, 2003). While changes in national political leadership and the economy influence the availability of federal food assistance funds, it is perhaps more telling to ask why the electorate cannot muster or sustain the degree of compassion and passion to make domestic hunger a major public policy issue.

While “donor fatigue” and the public's frustration with approaches that always fall short may be factors, I believe that a good part of the problem lies in a diminished capacity to experience empathy for others in need, or to imagine the possibility that similar circumstances could befall us. Related to these emotional and psychological factors is a collective disinterest in a more cognitive and deliberate exploration of the circumstances that spawn poverty and hunger. If we readily accept the position that one's condition, i.e. food insecure, is that person's fault, or assume that the condition can be addressed with a one-time hand out of food, then we will not devote adequate time to probe more deeply into the social, political, or economic forces that shape the lives of people and their communities. The philosopher and ethicist Martha Nussbaum says, “only when we can imagine the good or ill of another can we extend to that other our moral concern (*Upheavals of Thought*, 2001).” Without that moral concern, viable and sustained public policy remedies are not likely to follow.

It may be that our social welfare system has become so institutionalized and effectively removed from the sight of most Americans, that we can no longer connect in our minds and hearts the problem with the solution. The reader of Steinbeck's *Grape of Wrath* can not help but feel compassion for the hungry, the homeless, and even the plight of rural America. But lacking such imaginative mediums or other more direct ways of experiencing poverty, we either abdicate our responsibility for solving these problems to the so-called welfare bureaucracy, or we cultivate an indifference to the suffering of others. Either way, when the public is not constructively engaged in social welfare debates, the result is the gradual erosion of safety net programs like food stamps.

We also need to understand why human participation contributes to better social outcomes. Research from the community development field provides ample support for community participation as a central component of urban problem solving strategies. When community development corporations connect neighborhood people to each other and to the programs that are trying to better their community, there is a higher rate of lasting community improvement (*From Neighborhoods to Community: Evidence on the Social Effects of CDCs*, Briggs and Mueller, 1997).

The importance of community participation is reinforced by the growing body of literature on social capital – how social networks contribute to a community’s health and well-being (*Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam). In the field of community food security, research on the relationship between food security and social capital by Dr. Katie Martin found correlations between low-income households’ ability to secure sufficient food and their connection to neighbors, friends, and helping services (*Food Security and Community: Putting the Pieces Together*, Katie S. Martin, Hartford Food System, May 2001). The study, which took place in Hartford, Connecticut, had three major findings:

- Low-income families were more likely to be food secure if their social capital, i.e. connections to local social networks, was high
- A high percentage of food insecure families do not participate in food programs (45% did not receive food stamps, 67% did not use food pantries, and 37% who were eligible for the WIC Program did not participate in it)
- Lack of access to large supermarkets and/or transportation to get to large supermarkets was significantly associated with food insecurity (55% of the respondents did not have a car)

The study also found that lower fruit and vegetable consumption was associated with limited access to supermarkets and transportation. This finding corresponds with a large study (data on food intake from 10,600 participants in the Atherosclerosis Risk in Communities survey from four states) by Dr. Kimberly Morland who correlated the dietary recall data with the participants’ census tracts, proximity to supermarkets, race, and income. She found that there are four times more supermarkets located in white neighborhoods compared to black neighborhoods, three time more supermarkets in higher-income neighborhoods compared to lower income neighborhoods, and that the further the distance to a supermarket, the lower the resident’s intake of fresh fruits and vegetables (*American Journal of Public Health*, 2002;92, *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 2002;22, Dr. Kimberly Morland).

Systems theory tells us that a single intervention designed to address a specific problem, is not likely to produce satisfactory results in the long term (*The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge, 1994). The primary anti-hunger strategies in the U.S. fall into this category. Food assistance programs and food banks have mitigated the worst effects of poverty, i.e. hunger, yet the need only grows and the programs never have enough funding or food. Additionally, the burden for ending hunger has been shifted to the intervenor, namely the federal government and private food banks. The larger community and with it, a larger

range of solutions and interrelationships, do not participate. While conventional anti-hunger interventions have provided important and necessary relief for needy people, they have not substantially reduced the need because they rely on a linear cause-effect approach. An unintended consequence of this approach is that the recipients too often become dependent on the providers.

We need to look to the larger system, particularly those interrelationships within the food system, to find longer term and more comprehensive solutions. Systems theory, drawing as it does on our growing understanding of ecology and natural systems, recognizes that each of us has an impact on the world around us. Therefore, each of us shares responsibility for problems generated by the system. While it may take longer, a systems approach to food insecurity will ultimately be more effective. A systems approach will take the time to rebuild a spirit of compassion among the general public, a compassion that may generate a stronger national consensus for food assistance programs. It will recognize the importance of social networks and community participation in problem solving. And, in the words of the natural resource expert and writer, Donella Meadows, “strengthen the ability of the system to shoulder its own burden.”

Community Food Security In Action

Let’s now consider some examples of CFS that are drawn from projects and communities across the country. We will briefly examine Hartford, Connecticut, the state of Oregon, and Chicago and Illinois.

Hartford is Connecticut’s capital city with a population of 120,000. Almost 31% of the residents live below the poverty level making Hartford the second poorest city in the U.S. Under the leadership of the Hartford Food System (HFS), a private non-profit organization formed in 1978, the city developed numerous food projects and public policy initiatives. These include a Second Harvest food bank, farmers’ markets, community gardens, a community supported agriculture farm (CSA), new supermarkets (the city lost 11 supermarkets since the early 1970s), new bus routes that connect low-income neighborhood residents to suburban supermarkets, a state anti-hunger coalition, farm to school programs, farmland protection programs, diet and health initiatives (city residents suffer from obesity and diabetes rates that are twice as high as the state average), improvements in federal food assistance programs, a City of Hartford Food Policy Commission, and a State of Connecticut Food Policy Council.

HFS took a system approach from the very beginning because it saw that the food problems facing city residents were complex, deep, and often interrelated. For instance, small and medium size farmers in the region were going out of business because they could not get a good price for their products. Low-income city residents could not find affordable retail outlets where quality, fresh food could be purchased. HFS opened the state’s first farmers’ market in 1978 in downtown Hartford, which gave farmers a retail outlet and consumers, an affordable and accessible place to purchase healthy food. To encourage farmers to sell in low-income neighborhoods across the state, HFS combined on-the-ground project organizing work with a policy initiative (an approach that it would

often repeat) that established the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program. The FMNP provides federal and state funding for vouchers that low-income mothers and senior citizens use to purchase produce at farmers' markets. Today, there are 65 farmers' markets across the state serving nearly 200 Connecticut farmers and almost 60,000 low-income individuals (and hundreds of thousands of non-low-income residents).

With regard to food assistance programs, HFS saw that more needed to be done at the local and state levels to deliver those services more effectively. While advocating for more national funding was necessary, the responsibility for actually delivering the services to Connecticut residents rested with the Connecticut Dept. of Social Services (food stamp program), the City of Hartford Health Dept. (WIC Program), the City of Hartford Recreation Dept. (Summer Meals), and the City of Hartford School Dept. (school breakfast and school lunch). In all cases, the quality of these services was severely compromised by poor management, local and state governments' indifference, and public apathy. To address these barriers, HFS took the lead in establishing the City of Hartford Food Policy Commission, which is comprised of representatives from government and non-government sectors. Not only did the Commission let the general public know that there were program deficiencies adversely affecting the food security of city residents, they let the City Manager, Mayor, and City Council know as well. They convinced the appropriate city authorities and agencies to accept responsibility for the problems and engaged them in processes to find solutions. As a result of these processes and the subsequent improvements in program delivery, the quality of and participation in all these programs increased significantly (*Report of the City of Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy, 2002*).

Oregon routinely ranks among the five states with the highest rates of food insecurity and hunger (USDA). In spite of three decades of work on the part of advocates and food banks, the problem remained stubbornly persistent. According to Sharon Thornberry of the Oregon Food Bank, the goals and language of community food security helped all the stakeholders reframe the issues. Simply using the term "food security" rather than "hunger" made the problem more real to more Oregonians because they understood that people are not actually starving, but are often unable to stretch their dollars far enough to secure adequate food on a regular basis.

Three years ago, over 30 diverse organizations with an interest in the food system came together in Tillamook County. Together they started a farmers' market, expanded community gardens, developed entrepreneurial food projects (producing, selling, or processing food for commercial sale), and began a strategic planning process. The Oregon Food Bank is a member of the newly formed City of Portland/County of Multnomah Food Policy Council. This body is grappling with a wide range of food system issues including food insecurity in low-income communities, farmland preservation, urban gardening, improvements in the Summer Meals Program, and the development of farmers' markets. Perhaps their most important achievement in their short two-year history is making food system planning a part of government's routine work. Thornberry credits this progress for bringing "together many diverse partners from

both the public and private sector [who are] talking, compromising, planning, and collaborating.”

The terms of debate have also changed in Chicago and throughout Illinois. According to Rodger Cooley, Midwest Regional Director for Heifer International, there has been a definite shift to food security and community food security as the guiding principles of their work and other regional food system stakeholders. While conventional emergency food distributions continue at high levels to “feed the hungry”, more food system stakeholders are now saying that the goal is to improve access to good, affordable food, especially for low-income families. There has been a growth in community gardens, farmers’ markets, and CSAs that assist low-income communities. Overall, an informal alliance between sustainable agriculture and food security advocates has emerged that shows promise of helping both the poor and small and medium-size farmers.

Evidence of these developments was obvious at the Third Annual Illinois Food Summit, funded entirely by the Chicago Community Trust, and attended by over 200 participants from farming, urban agriculture, food banking, nutrition and health, and anti-hunger advocacy. Together, they grappled with an array of food system issues. The outcomes from this new spirit of collaboration and food system planning are more joint projects, more awareness on the part of different interest groups and sectors about each other’s needs and issues, and planning for a City of Chicago Food Policy Council and an Illinois Food System Council. The latter two efforts, still in their development stage, would embed food system planning and thinking into the regular processes of local and state governments.

Conclusion and Opportunities for Growing the CFS Movement

The common threads that tie these three examples together – as well as hundreds of other similar efforts across the country – are that they:

- Address the food and nutrition needs of low income households and communities
- Synthesize two or more fields, e.g. food production and nutrition education
- Unite rural and urban concerns as well as producer and consumer concerns
- Achieve multiple benefits, e.g. create new supermarkets in low-income areas and provide job opportunities for neighborhood residents
- Incorporate community food system assessment, research, and planning into their work
- Take a systems approach to food system problems
- Create a broader constituency for food system issues

Almost 600 people attended the Community Food Security Coalition’s (CFSC) Seventh Annual Conference in Boston, MA in November 2003. Attendance at these conferences has increased by an average of 20% each year. The 300-member national organization, founded to promote community food security, has experienced steady growth in interest, participation, and funding from across North America since its inception in 1994. This growth is the direct result of food and agriculture organizations and the communities they

serve recognizing that food insecurity cannot be remedied with a single-focus approach. These groups believe that the larger influences of the local, state, national, and even global food systems must be considered. As communities come together to form food policy councils, coalitions, or just broader networks of food interest groups, they are discovering that there are more options available to them. They are finding that the concept of planning is not anathema to food and agriculture systems, and that democratic forms of participation in the food system are often more effective than abdicating all responsibility to institutions, agencies, and even the market place.

Another factor that has fueled the growth in CFS is frankly, money. During the 1996 Farm Bill debate, the CFSC successfully advocated for the development of a small competitive grant program to support the work of communities who are trying to become more food secure. The 2002 Farm Bill re-authorized and expanded funding for this program, the Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program, which has provided over \$20 million to about 120 non-profit organizations across the country. Private sector funding from local (e.g. the Chicago Community Trust) and national foundations (Jessie Smith Noyes, W.K. Kellogg) have added millions of more dollars to these community-based, multi-partner efforts to build the capacity of communities to meet a greater a greater share of their own needs while strengthening the fabric of their social and economic networks.

Community food security is now a significant trend in the United States. It is promoting greater compassion for the food insecure, expanding awareness of local food systems and the range of options available to build local food security, and engaging the talents, resources, and wisdom of more participants than ever before to end food insecurity and hunger .

Biographical Sketch

Mark Winne

From 1979 to 2003, Mark Winne was the Executive Director of the Hartford Food System, a private non-profit agency that works on food and hunger issues in the Hartford, Connecticut area. During his tenure with HFS, Mark organized community self-help food projects that assisted the city's lower income and elderly residents. Mark's work with the Food System included the development of a commercial hydroponic greenhouse, Connecticut's Farmers' Market Nutrition Program, several farmers' markets, a 20-acre community supported agriculture farm, food and nutrition education programs, and a neighborhood supermarket.

Mark is a co-founder of a number of food and agriculture policy groups including the City of Hartford Food Policy Commission, the Connecticut Food Policy Council, End Hunger Connecticut!, and the national Community Food Security Coalition, whose board of directors he continues to serve on. He was an organizer and chairman of the Working Lands Alliance, a statewide 140-member coalition working to preserve Connecticut's farmland and is a founder of the Connecticut Farmland Trust. Mark was a member of the United States Delegation to the 2000 World Conference on Food Security in Rome and is a 2001 recipient of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary's Plow Honor Award.

Mark holds a bachelor degree from Bates College, a master degree from Southern New Hampshire College, and is currently a Food and Society Policy Fellow, which is supported by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Through his fellowship, Mark writes and speaks extensively on community food system issues including hunger and food insecurity, local and regional agriculture, and food policy. His essays and opinion pieces have appeared in the Hartford Courant, the Boston Globe, and numerous organizational and professional newsletters and journals across the country. As one of the Community Food Security Coalition's designated trainers, Mark conducts training workshops to food security and food system organizations all over the U.S.

Having recently moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, Mark now serves on the New Mexico Governors Anti-Hunger Task Force Steering Committee and is a member of the New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council.

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