CHAPTER 1

Communities and Food

In communities across the nation, advocates and organizations are working hard to develop solutions to food system problems and create innovative models that meet community needs. They are providing nutritious food to the hungry, creating community-based food businesses, organizing food policy councils, developing community gardens in inner-city neighborhoods, and linking consumers with local farmers through farmers’ markets, along with many other initiatives. These efforts are necessarily diverse; they represent local solutions to local manifestations of larger problems. However, they often share common goals, such as making nutritious food more accessible, revitalizing and empowering communities, and supporting local and sustainable food production and distribution.

As advocates seek to address a range of interconnected food system problems, many find that building partnerships and coordinating efforts is essential to developing effective and lasting solutions. They also find that gathering information about conditions in the food system and publicizing that information is valuable, both to help inform their own work to create positive change, as well as to build broader awareness of and support for their efforts. For these and other reasons, advocates across the country have become increasingly interested in Community Food Assessments.

This publication offers guidance and resources for conducting a Community Food Assessment. The following chapters define the elements of an assessment; provide selected examples of assessments that have been done; and outline the process for planning an assessment, conducting the research, and using the results to promote food system change.

This chapter briefly sets the context of our current food system; describes efforts underway to promote community food security, and introduces Community Food Assessments as a tool for this work. It is organized in the following sections:

1. What’s Wrong With the Current Food System?
2. The Community Food Security Movement
3. Community Food Assessments as a Tool for Community Food Security
4. Overview of the Contents of This Guide

1. What’s Wrong With the Current Food System?

In recent years, our food systems have become truly global in scope and structure. In the United States, we import and export hundreds of billions of dollars worth of food every year. Supermarket shelves abound with a dazzling array of foods, with more and more fresh items available year round. In the period from 1980 through 2000, US per capita food consumption grew from about 1800 pounds per year to 2000 pounds per year.1 "What exactly is the problem?" an observer of this picture of the abundant and productive food system may be tempted to ask.

Yet, despite the apparent glut in our supermarkets, both urban and rural communities face numerous problems with respect to food production, distribution, and consumption. The following are only a few illustrations of the great cause for concern about current and future food security.
Millions of Americans are food insecure.

- The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) reports, based on a national Census Bureau survey, that in 1999, ten percent of all US households, representing 19 million adults and 12 million children, were “food insecure.”

- Of these, five million adults and 2.7 million children suffered from food insecurity that was so severe that they were classified as “hungry.”

- In a recent national survey of emergency food programs, America’s Second Harvest found that their network served 23 million people in a year (nine percent more than in 1997), including over nine million children.

Diet-related health problems are on the rise.

- One-third of all cancer deaths are linked to diet, according to the National Cancer Institute.

- An estimated 300,000 deaths per year may be attributable to obesity.

- Just seven diet-related health conditions cost the United States $80 billion annually in medical costs and productivity losses, according to the latest Economic Research Service estimates.

- An estimated 76 million persons contract food-borne illnesses each year in the United States. The high incidence of food-borne diseases in children, especially infants, are a major concern.

The US food industry aggressively promotes unhealthy foods.

- The US food industry spent $7 billion in advertising in 1997. Most of this advertising focused on highly processed and packaged foods. Advertising for fruits, vegetables, and other healthful foods is negligible in comparison.

- In 1997, food manufacturers accounted for almost two-thirds of food system advertising. Another 28 percent was covered by fast food outlets (up from about 5% in 1980).

The food industry is becoming more concentrated.

- A handful of huge multinational corporations control an increasing share of production, processing, and distribution of food products, squeezing out local and regional businesses.

- Today, the top five firms account for 42% of retail sales, whereas in 1997, they accounted for only 24% of the market.

- Four companies control 84% of the US cereal market.

The US farm sector is declining.

- Thirty-two percent of the best quality farmland in the US has already irretrievably been lost to development; as much as 70% of the remaining prime farmland is threatened by sprawl.

- The number of farms has declined dramatically since its peak in 1935, dropping from 6.8 million in 1935 to only 1.9 million in 1997.

- Market forces have squeezed US farmers to the point that it is extremely difficult to make a living producing food. In 1998 farmers earned an average of only $7,000 per year from their farming operations.

- The conventional food system has significant negative impacts on air, water, soil, and biodiversity.

- The 1998 National Water Quality Inventory reports that agricultural non-point source pollution is the leading source of water quality impacts to surveyed rivers and lakes and a major contributor to contamination of the ocean.
Conventional agricultural production also pollutes the air and soil and damages wildlife habitat. Long-distance transportation of food, now mostly by truck, creates air pollution and contributes to global warming. Thus, despite appearances that our food supply is safe, abundant, and affordable, serious food-related problems affect most of the population, and there are grave threats to the long-term security and sustainability of the food system.

2. The Community Food Security Movement

The good news is that, as mentioned in the introduction, all across the country, people are working together to develop innovative solutions to the significant problems in our current food system. Many pioneering groups are working to develop ways to produce and distribute food that meet human needs, strengthen communities, and conserve natural resources. While most of these efforts are small-scale, they represent the seeds of creative and lasting solutions to food system problems.

Many of these organizations and individuals are linking efforts under an umbrella that is called the community food security movement. Like this movement, the definition of community food security reflects many different voices and continues to evolve. The following definition captures many elements on which there is broad agreement.

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 and social justice.

Community food security strives to link and integrate diverse fields, including community economic development, anti-hunger, social justice, local and sustainable agriculture, public health, nutrition, and environmentalism. The movement encompasses a broad range of participants working on many different issues. While they may not agree on every issue, increasingly they are working toward similar goals:

- To support access to food as a basic human right for all
- To eliminate hunger and food insecurity
- To build more local and regional food self-reliance, and thriving local economies
- To create a more democratic food system that gives communities a greater role in deciding how their food is produced and distributed
- To make the food system more equitable and socially just
- To develop environmentally sustainable food production and distribution systems
- To teach young people skills in food production and preparation, and to connect them to other community issues through food
- To preserve and celebrate diverse cultures through food

Conventional “food security” programs generally focus on the individual or household level of need, mostly as food assistance and social welfare programs. There is less emphasis on the infrastructure of food access, where the food comes from, how it is produced, or the effects of current food production and distribution. In contrast, community food security advocates stress improved access to and availability of food at the community level; for example by advocating for more full-service food stores in low-income neighborhoods, and for direct links between local farms and consumers. Many also focus on increasing the availability of locally, organically, or sustainably produced food. They also consider the issue of who controls the food system, and support the right of local communities to have a say about how their food is produced and distributed.
In contrast to more traditional top-down or single-issue organizational strategies, community food security encourages integrated, community-focused strategies that emphasize the following elements:

- **Progressive planning**
  - Getting at the underlying causes of problems and designing preventive approaches
  - Encouraging community-based visioning about the future of the food system
- **Increased collaboration**
  - Bringing together a broad range of players to work together toward common goals
  - Transcending top-down or expert-based decision-making and program delivery
- **Community responsiveness and ownership**
  - Taking the broad needs of the community into account in developing programs
  - Expanding awareness and promoting a greater sense of ownership of food system issues
  - Developing responses and strategies that are inclusive and that increase community access to information
- **Multi-sectoral strategies**
  - Incorporating diverse sectors of society in developing solutions and alternatives, including the private, public, and nonprofit sectors
  - Incorporating sustainable development strategies that integrate environment, public health and nutrition, urban economic development, and other quality of life needs

The publisher of the Guide, the Community Food Security Coalition, plays an important role in building and supporting this growing movement. Founded in 1994 by advocates working on a range of food and farming issues, the Coalition has grown to a network of over 250 organizational members. The organization provides a broad range of training, networking, and advocacy programs that further the efforts of grassroots groups to create effective food system solutions from the ground up. For more information about the Coalition and its activities, go to www.foodsecurity.org.

### 3. Community Food Assessments as a Tool for Community Food Security

As the work of those in the community food security movement continues to evolve, new approaches and strategies emerge. In recent years, there has been increased interest in strategies that go far beyond the level of a single project to involve a range of stakeholders in developing integrated approaches to a range of food and farming issues. These strategies include food policy councils, local and regional food marketing programs, and conducting systematic, community-focused studies of the food system through Community Food Assessments. Such integrated approaches offer exciting potential to develop broad-based, long-term solutions to persistent problems in the food system.

The Community Food Assessment approach reflects many fundamental aspects of the community food security movement, and contributes to it in important ways. It is integrative, and takes a systems approach. It involves collaboration between diverse stakeholders. It is solution-oriented, looking at assets and resources as well as problems. Community food assessments promote community food security by increasing knowledge about food-related needs and resources, by building collaboration and capacity, by promoting long-term planning, and by facilitating a variety of change actions including policy advocacy and program development.

By emphasizing participatory research that directly helps generate change actions, the Community Food Assessment approach distinguishes itself from more traditional research conducted by universities and private consultants. Community Food Assessments can be of, by, and for communities and their members. This participatory approach is consistent with the general emphasis in the community food security movement on promoting more community participation in and control of the food system.
Figure 1-1. Community Food Security Goals and Community Food Assessment

Figure 1-1 illustrates the connection between community food security goals and Community Food Assessment. An individual, community organization, public agency, or private sector organization could form a coalition to initiate the Community Food Assessment. Based on the information generated, actions could be developed to affect particular community or food system activities directly, in order to improve community food security. In this diagram, community food security stands at the intersection of food system activities and community goals such as preventing hunger, enhancing community health, conserving natural resources, and promoting social justice.
Movements do not necessarily need to conduct systematic community-based assessments to bring about significant change. However, the knowledge gained from such assessments can be a powerful resource for helping organizations to be more effective, to maintain momentum, to gain new allies, to build new knowledge and support in the community, and to bring about new policies and practices. Community Food Assessments can help achieve these objectives on community food system issues.

4. Overview of the Contents of This Guide

The Community Food Security Coalition has created this Guide to help readers learn about what Community Food Assessments are, how they are organized, and what benefits they can offer. We hope it will help you to decide whether an assessment is right for you, and help you to organize a successful assessment if you decide to initiate one.

Here is a chapter-by-chapter overview of contents of this Guide:

Chapter 1 provides context for the emerging field of Community Food Assessment through an overview of the state of the US food system and the community food security approach.

Chapter 2 defines Community Food Assessments, describes key elements of assessments, and outlines the potential benefits from conducting an assessment.

Chapter 3 includes brief case studies of nine Community Food Assessments from around the country, focusing on their goals, methods, collaborators, and outcomes.

Chapter 4 provides an overview of the process of planning and organizing an assessment, including recruiting collaborators, setting goals, identifying resources, and preparing for follow-up actions.

Chapter 5 delves into the specifics of the assessment research, providing guidance on developing research goals and questions, and selecting indicators and research methods.

Chapter 6 considers how to effectively put your assessment to work by disseminating the results and developing strategies and actions to create positive change in the community.

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