CHAPTER 2

Defining Community Food Assessment: Elements and Purposes

Chapter 1 introduced Community Food Assessments as a tool for groups to highlight and take action on the many connections between their communities and the food system. These assessments enable groups to systematically explore a wide range of food-related issues, and to build momentum and support for positive changes in their communities.

Community Food Assessment integrates activities in community organizing, planning, research, and implementing change actions. It is a relatively new approach and still lacks well-established definitions and practices. So far, it has been defined primarily by what has been done in the field by pioneering organizers. These assessments have varied greatly in their scale, methods, and level of community involvement. Various terms have been used to describe them, including: community food security assessment, food security assessment, and food system assessment.

The editors of this Guide use the term Community Food Assessment for two reasons: first, to allow flexibility for an assessment to focus on a range of food-related issues and goals; and second to emphasize the focus on the community level and on community participation in conducting the assessment. We have developed the following definition for this term.

A Community Food Assessment is a collaborative and participatory process that systematically examines a broad range of community food issues and assets, so as to inform change actions to make the community more food secure.

This chapter explores what a Community Food Assessment is, and the potential benefits of conducting an assessment. It is divided into two major sections:

1. Key Elements of a Community Food Assessment
2. Why Do a Community Food Assessment?

1. Key Elements of a Community Food Assessment

Community Food Assessment is not a distinct field of study with its own methods, concepts, and issues. It builds on other kinds of assessments, including those from the fields of community planning (asset mapping), social work (needs assessment), public health (nutrition assessment), environmental studies (environmental assessment), and international development (participatory rural assessment). This mix of frameworks and methods can make the Community Food Assessment process seem difficult to pin down, but they also give it flexibility and strength.

In doing program planning or evaluation, you may have completed a needs assessment. The needs assessment is designed to describe conditions, identify problems and desired improvements, and to develop strategies to address them. It is an important and popular category of assessment, and many Community Food Assessments include one. However, Community Food Assessments also seek to overcome some of the typical limitations of needs assessments:

- Needs assessments usually focus on a community’s problems rather than its assets. This tends to lead to programs that focus on bringing in outside experts and resources, rather than building from a community’s existing assets.
- Programmatic needs assessments generally address pre-defined needs through the continuation, expansion, or modification of existing approaches. They tend to reinforce existing relationships and structures, rather
than considering broader or more fundamental solutions.

Organizational needs assessments also tend to be top-down, reflecting the existing management structure. They generally do not include broad participation in decision-making by staff, clients, and community interests. In fact, outside consultants sometimes contribute significantly more to the process than do many people who are part of the organization.

A Community Food Assessment is a flexible and multi-faceted approach that has been applied in many different ways, as the case studies in Chapter 3 illustrate. Still, there are some key elements that characterize most Community Food Assessments that take an approach similar to that promoted in this Guide, which calls for exploring a range of food system issues, involving significant community participation, and focusing on creating positive change. The following elements are both descriptive and prescriptive. They are descriptive in that they are based on the case studies profiled here, and prescriptive in that they emphasize qualities that we believe will help make future assessments effective.

Key elements of a Community Food Assessment

1. A Community Food Assessment examines a range of food issues, and the links between these issues and community goals.

Conducting an assessment is a way to explore and understand the many ways that food is connected (or not) to your community, and their implications for quality of life, food security, social justice, and other community values. It helps you examine the various ways community members participate in the food system, how it impacts their lives, and how well they are served by it. An assessment helps promote broader dialogue about how to develop a food system that will reflect shared values and meet community goals and needs.

Community Food Assessments also help highlight the connections between various kinds of food system activities, such as production, processing, distribution, and consumption. These linkages are often the areas in which new programs, policies, and innovations emerge, and understanding these linkages helps inform changes that are systemic and long-lasting. Assessments should therefore examine more than one issue or sector of the food system—not just hunger or the plight of family farmers, but multiple issues or sectors and the linkages between them.

In addition to highlighting specific needs and resources, an assessment can promote understanding of the broader context in which they exist. Individual programs can be examined in the context of social, economic, and environmental systems that operate not just at the local level, but regionally, nationally, and internationally. For example, the vast majority of the food consumed in most communities comes from hundreds or even thousands of miles away. The availability and quality of this food is driven by complex forces and processes operating from the community to the global levels. By promoting understanding of these contexts and how they affect the community, an assessment can help that community gain greater participation in or control over its food system.

2. A Community Food Assessment is designed to inform and build support for practical actions to enhance community food security.

A Community Food Assessment is a practical tool with practical applications, to develop recommendations and support for concrete actions to improve the food system and enhance community food security. This is different from more conventional research conducted in universities or private firms, in which there are few direct links to specific actions. Actions supported by assessments may be targeted at public policy agencies, private firms, civil society organizations, or the community at large. You may need to consider these potential targets carefully when designing your assessment process and its products.

Community Food Assessments work best when the research planning and action planning are conducted by the same set of actors and in an integrated way. It is important to plan ahead for an implementation or follow-up phase, including raising funds for this phase well before the report is released.
3. A Community Food Assessment is a planned and systematic process of gathering information about and analyzing community food issues.

The scope of possible questions and research in an assessment is so broad that it takes some thoughtful planning to clearly define the research goals and questions and to plan the process. This requires having clear overall goals for the assessment and follow-up actions. The research process generally involves a blend of collecting information from scratch and compiling information that already exists through previous research or other published material.

For the assessment findings to be credible and persuasive, it is important that the research methods are reasonable and appropriate, and defensible against charges of bias. It is important to design your research so that the findings are not biased by your expectations, and to allow the emergence of new and unexpected information. Chapters 4 and 5 detail the assessment planning and the research processes.

4. A Community Food Assessment addresses both needs and assets.

Community food security work is grounded in an asset-based approach to community development. This is in contrast with the conventional need- or problem-based approaches that typically drive policies and services in historically disadvantaged neighborhoods. The Community Food Assessment is an integral component of such an asset-based approach, as it identifies local resources that can be used to increase food self-reliance and to build other community capacities.

In general, three main rationales support an asset-based approach to Community Food Assessment.

- It is more effective. By building on existing resources, it avoids unnecessary duplication and uses limited funds and resources more effectively.
- It is a more positive and respectful. It is based on the concept that even the most impoverished organizations and individuals are agents and resources for themselves and their communities. It recognizes the right and capacity of all people to have a say in decisions that affect them.
- It is more sustainable. Because it taps into a community's experience and culture, it can be absorbed into these experiences and become a resource for addressing future issues. Its emphasis on building local capacity and social capital, rather than simply gathering data about community needs or problems, also enhances its sustainability.

**Implications of an asset-based approach to Community Food Assessment:**

The planning process should involve groups and individuals in low-income and minority communities in decisions about the assessment goals and process. For example, these communities could be represented in the assessment team, while community meetings could be held to invite broader input. This helps ensure that the assessment is broadly representative of the concerns and resources in the community.

The research should include compiling inventories of relevant community assets and resources. For example, an ethnic minority community that is concerned about the influx of fast food and the loss of traditional cultural practices might want to inventory plants that are part of traditional diets; compile traditional recipes; and include oral histories from local elders about other cultural practices related to food.

The research activities can be designed to involve participants from the community. For example, young people could be trained to interview seniors about food access issues and coping strategies. This would have multiple benefits, including building intergenerational ties, developing youth capacities, and encouraging youth involvement in community concerns.

Community members and resources need to be part of the assessment follow-up actions. For example, in a program to encourage more nutritious diets in an African-American community, people who are part of and trusted by that community would likely be more effective at conducting outreach.
5. A Community Food Assessment focuses on a geographically defined place.

As discussed in Chapter 1, numerous efforts are underway to promote community food security and to build local food systems that provide viable alternatives to the current global food system. Place is central to these efforts because it links people, culture, and resources. Assessments usually focus on a geographically defined place, from a neighborhood to a city to a larger region. Identifying such a place-based community also provides practical benefits: it outlines the scope of the project and makes it manageable, as well as providing a clear link to various stakeholders and their activities. It also has implications for decision-making and follow-up actions, as policies and programs usually are developed for geographically defined areas.

All Community Food Assessments will need to identify geographic boundaries that are relevant for their research questions and for the follow-up actions to be supported by the assessment. They can include different geographic areas for different types of research (for example, the Madison Food System Project profiled in Chapter 3 did some Dane county analyses, some Madison city analyses, and then focused on one low-income area of the city).

6. A Community Food Assessment involves a broad spectrum of actors from the community.

Both communities and food systems are complex and multi-faceted, with expertise related to different aspects of each spread out among various disciplines, individuals, and organizations. It is valuable to cast a wide net in identifying potential collaborators, to include individuals, organizations, and coalitions from the private, non-profit, and public sectors. Stakeholders not traditionally associated with food or agriculture-related activities, such as local government and community development corporations, can be valuable partners.

Direct participation by community residents, especially from those groups whose situation the assessment is seeking to improve, is extremely important. Agency representatives and other organizational professionals, for all their strengths, usually are limited in their ability to address all community interests. Community residents can contribute valuable knowledge, skills, and perspectives. Their participation helps foster trust, community links, and shared ownership of the process and outcomes. Thus, the assessment can help increase community participation in addressing local issues, and contribute to empowerment of traditionally disenfranchised constituencies. (See Chapter 4 for more on recruiting participants and community involvement.)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Case Study</th>
<th>Foundations</th>
<th>Government Agencies</th>
<th>Universities, Institutes, Education Centers</th>
<th>Non-Profit Organizations</th>
<th>Businesses</th>
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This information was derived from surveys completed by case study contacts.
“Community” can be defined in a variety of ways. In general, community as used here is defined by place, or by relationships among people based on their identity, social situation, or interests and values. We use “community participation” to refer to participation by residents representing grassroots issues and interests, often including disenfranchised groups. This is in contrast to participants who represent an organization or institution and participate in the assessment as part of their regular paid work. Of course, this distinction is not always clear-cut.

7. A Community Food Assessment emphasizes collaboration among participants.

Community Food Assessment is based on a collaborative approach, with participants working as a team to make decisions and implement actions. Such a collaborative approach can be more challenging and time-consuming than a top-down approach, but it also can convey important and long-lasting benefits. It brings in a range of perspectives that help ensure that the assessment reflects the community and is appropriately broad and integrated in its scope. It pools expertise, contacts, and resources from a variety of sources. It also helps build ownership of and accountability to the process, and thereby builds broader support for the assessment and its recommendations. Collaboration also builds new relationships that will be valuable to participants in their work, as well as giving them a chance to develop their skills in working with a diverse group. And last but certainly not least, collaboration builds a foundation for effective actions to create long-term change in the community.

In practical terms, participants will vary in the amount of time and resources they can commit to an assessment. Thus, most assessments develop a clearly-defined core group that takes on additional responsibilities not held by all team members.

8. A Community Food Assessment requires significant time and resources to plan and implement.

There is no set time frame for an assessment; depending on the scale or scope, it could take just a few months or two or more years to complete. Assessments do need to be completed in a reasonable time frame to inform and support actions and to maintain group participation and momentum. Some assessments may need to be completed more quickly to inform a pending decision or to help implement an urgently needed program. Follow-up actions also may take significant time to implement.

A Community Food Assessment also requires substantial resources, to bring people together, encourage community participation, design and implement the research, disseminate the results, and organize follow-up actions. If it is small in scope, an assessment can be done with very few resources, but many may ultimately require tens of thousands of dollars to complete. Most assessments rely on substantial in-kind resources, and many start with limited funding and raise additional funds as they move forward. The key is designing your assessment to match the resources that will be available. (See Chapter 4 for more information on funding and resources for an assessment.)

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**Elements of a Quality Assessment**

Community Food Assessments vary greatly in their scope, form, and outcomes, so successful assessments may differ from each other in many ways. The following are broadly-defined elements of a quality assessment:

- It examines a **range of food system issues**, and the connections between food and community goals.
- It involves a **broad range of actors** from the community, including individuals and organizations, and the public, private, and nonprofit sectors.
- It involves **community residents** in significant and meaningful ways, and builds community capacity for future actions.
- It uses **participatory and collaborative processes** that generate results, build new partnerships, and leave participants feeling satisfied with the process.
- It focuses on **community food assets as well as problems**.
- The **research is rigorous**, and the methods used are consistent with the overall goals of the assessment.
- It makes **effective use of cash and in-kind resources** available, and is completed in a **reasonable time-frame**.
- It fosters **broader awareness and understanding** of the community and its food system.
- It contributes to **tangible actions** to bring about positive change in the community’s food system.
2. Why Do a Community Food Assessment?

Many activists working to improve their community's food system may be reluctant to conduct a Community Food Assessment. They may feel like they already know what is happening in their community, and that they do not need to do a study to reinforce that knowledge. They may be reluctant to take on what seems to be a cumbersome research process, when so many studies have wound up collecting dust while the problems they examined worsened. They would rather roll up their sleeves and work for practical improvements and solutions.

These concerns are certainly understandable, and Community Food Assessments are not right for every situation. Yet they can be a powerful tool for activists seeking to create lasting change. The information gathered can lead to more strategic and effective action, and can highlight issues and build broader support and pressure for change. And a Community Food Assessment is much more than an information-gathering process. It also is an organizing and planning process that involves coalition building, priority setting, advocacy, and developing capacities in the community. All these processes can generate multiple benefits, such as more community involvement, increased collaboration, and better integration between programs. Ultimately, an assessment can lead to important changes in the community's food system, such as better food access for low-income people, local economic development, and improved public health.

<table>
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<th>Possible Benefits of Community Food Assessments</th>
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<td>- Improved program development and coordination</td>
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<td>- Positive changes in public policy affecting the food system</td>
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<td>- Broader awareness and understanding of food-related issues</td>
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<td>- Development of new and stronger networks and coalitions</td>
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<td>- Increased community participation in shaping the food system</td>
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<td>- Greater community capacity to create positive change</td>
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Community Food Assessments can provide a range of benefits that make them well worth the effort. Some of these benefits are accrued to participants through the process of planning, implementing, and using an assessment. These are called process benefits and are valuable to building various skills, shared understandings, confidence, and a sense of ownership. Outcome benefits are more tangible products or changes in the larger community that result from the assessment. These could include reports, media coverage, and policies or programs created in response to the assessment.

Outcome Benefits

Community Food Assessments generate valuable information that allows participants to better understand the well-being of community residents, and their needs and resources related to access to nutritious, affordable food. While assessment participants will likely already have a good understanding of local issues, gathering and analyzing more detailed information on local conditions can be extremely valuable. This information can increase awareness and understanding of local food system issues, and inform the development of more appropriate strategies to address these issues. Such strategies can include program development, policy advocacy, and public education.

1. Program development

Assessments can be a valuable tool in program design, development, and improvement. They can provide a more complete picture of how individuals interact with their food system, the needs and resources available, and the potential for building or improving linkages between community organizations and other insti-
tions. By doing so, assessments can inform the improvement of existing programs, increase coordination between programs, or give rise to creation of new programs or policies.

Assessments often result in more comprehensive and integrated approaches to addressing the community’s food needs. The food system focus and collaborative nature of the assessment process make it possible for participants to develop programs outside their usual institutional parameters to address the broader needs of the community. The assessment process can allow for integrating multiple perspectives, fostering innovative approaches, and developing more sustainable projects by leveraging resources and commitments from diverse interests. This integrated approach can in turn give rise to strategies to address complex issues such as: dealing with the links between poverty, hunger, food access, and diet-related diseases; and addressing the long-term sustainability of the mainstream food system.

For example, the Seeds of Change study documented the trouble low-income community residents in Los Angeles had with access to affordable, nutritious food. It highlighted the importance of community-based programs such as farmers’ markets in addressing this problem. As a result, the study’s client, the Interfaith Hunger Coalition, which previously had been focused on federal food programs, decided to dedicate staff to create new community gardens and farmers’ markets as part of its AmeriCorps program. Similarly, the food assessment study in Milwaukee led the Hunger Task Force of Milwaukee, a food bank and anti-hunger agency, into the economic development realm through sponsoring the Fondy Food Center, a market and kitchen incubator project.

2. Policy advocacy

Governments at all levels make decisions that profoundly shape the way food is produced, distributed, accessed, and consumed. (See Getting Food on the Table: An Action Guide to Local Food Policy, for a fuller description of the role of local policy and opportunities to shape it.) Changing public policy is an important goal of many assessments.

Assessment reports can be an important tool in the policy advocacy process. Reports provide documentation and publicity for conditions that may be well known to advocates and community members, but unrecognized by government officials and other decision-makers. They can provide compelling evidence of community needs, clearly articulate policy opportunities to promote community food security, and help mobilize the community to advocate for policy change. The role of the assessment report in policy advocacy can be greatly strengthened by effective publicity and media outreach.

Austin’s Sustainable Food Center published the results of their food access study in a report titled Access Denied: An Analysis of Problems Facing East Austin Residents in Their Attempts to Obtain Affordable, Nutritious Food. One of their key recommendations, which was implemented by local government, was to create a food policy council to address local issues. One of the first actions of this council was to recommend a new bus line directly connecting low income neighborhoods and supermarkets in outlying neighborhoods. They collaborated with the local transit authority to establish it, and the “Grocery Bus” soon became quite popular with transit-dependent residents in East Austin.

3. Visibility and awareness

Community Food Assessments offer an opportunity to raise awareness of food system problems and opportunities, which is key to building support for long-term change. As noted above, assessments can raise the profile of issues that have not received adequate attention from policy makers, businesses, media, and others. The information gathered, the needs identified, the solutions proposed, and sometimes even the process itself can all provide good opportunities for media coverage. Assessments also can provide visibility for participants and sponsors and their ongoing work, helping them gain additional support, funding, and legitimacy.
Media exposure of issues and programs is useful for educating the community and building greater understanding of local concerns and assets. It also is important in policy advocacy efforts, as policy makers often pay close attention to compelling media stories. For example, the Seeds of Change study in Los Angeles gained significant media coverage in the form of a front-page article and an editorial in the Los Angeles Times, as well as numerous radio and television news stories. This media attention was instrumental in pressuring policy makers to develop a hunger policy for the city.

**Process Benefits**

In addition to practical outcomes generated by an assessment, the process itself also can provide important benefits to participants. It can help them develop new skills and capacities, as well as new contacts and partnerships. These benefits can enhance participants’ work beyond the scope and duration of the assessment, and in turn lead to additional outcomes. Such process benefits are one of the ways Community Food Assessment is different from a more conventional top-down research process. Some types of process benefits are summarized below.

1. **Development of networks and coalitions**

   Community Food Assessments are collaborative efforts, typically involving participation by many stakeholders. They facilitate new and improved working relationships, which can in turn provide new resources and support to participants. They may lead to better coordination of existing efforts, collaboration on specific projects, or valuable political support. Assessments also provide an opportunity for participants to strengthen their skills in collaborating with diverse partners, which increases their capacity to work together to create change.

   After the study is completed, assessment partners may choose to form a coalition or collaboration to pursue implementation of the report’s recommendations. For example, the assessment process in Madison, Wisconsin, helped bring together an advisory group of community food stakeholders, many of whom had never worked in such a wide-ranging group before. As a result of this participation, this informal network coalesced (with new members) into the Madison-Dane County food policy council. Even if an ongoing coalition is not formed, it is likely that the assessment will lead to partnerships that continue beyond the duration of the assessment.

2. **Community participation and collaboration**

   Because everyone eats, everyone is a food system stakeholder with some knowledge about community food issues. The Community Food Assessment process provides an opportunity to promote broad representation of residents and other stakeholders (including the disenfranchised) in determining priorities, rather than leaving most decision-making to business owners, politicians, and others in positions of power. Thus, assessments can help mobilize and empower residents to take charge of their food system.

   Community members can play key roles in overall planning, recruiting participants, gathering information, identifying and prioritizing needs, and choosing and implementing follow-up actions. They can help ensure that the assessment is accountable to residents’ needs and concerns, and that the changes resulting from it are effective and long-lasting.

   Collaboration among community residents and professionals helps build shared understanding and trust, and can serve as a resource to create many kinds of actions in the community. For example, the Detroit Food Security Council planning process brought together resident leaders of the Gratiot-McDougall neighborhood and professionals in nutrition, anti-hunger, community economic development, and urban planning. This collaboration led to joint efforts to write grant proposals to bring food-related community development into the neighborhood. (See Chapter 4 for more information on community participation in assessments.)

3. **Capacity development**

   A Community Food Assessment can provide informal training to its participants in a variety of areas, including planning, process facilitation, research, analytical, and implementation skills. Many of these skills
will likely prove useful in other areas of their work. Building such individual capacities helps develop organizational capacities, which in turn increases the community's potential to create positive change.

Assessments have helped people leading them to develop expertise in areas besides those in which they were trained or had experience. For example, participating in an assessment has helped nutritionists speak to food access issues more effectively; community organizers to advocate for improved food policies; and graduate students learn to facilitate meetings.

**When a Community Food Assessment may not be right for you**

A Community Food Assessment is a valuable and flexible tool, but it will not be right for every community or situation. For example, if your group needs to respond to an urgent issue such as the pending closure of your local supermarket, then you may not have the time to conduct a Community Food Assessment. In this case, organizing your community and pressuring local officials to take action would be more appropriate.

Similarly, your situation may call for particular kinds of research that are different from a Community Food Assessment. For example, your organization may have an opportunity to influence the content of meals in local school cafeterias. You may want to commission an independent, scientific analysis of the nutritional content of the meals without taking the time to organize a participatory process or evaluate other contextual issues.

Finally, if your community has few organizations working on local food issues, then you may want to undertake an assessment yourself, rather than organizing a broader, collaborative process. You may want to use the results of your assessment to recruit others and develop broader collaboration.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, we defined Community Food Assessment and described its key elements. We outlined some of the possible purposes for an assessment, and the direct and indirect benefits that can result from an assessment. We hope that this and future chapters will help your group decide whether a Community Food Assessment is right for you, and help guide you through the process if you decide to go ahead.

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