Planning Your Community Food Assessment

There is no master plan for implementing a Community Food Assessment—each one is unique. Still, there are some basic steps to consider in planning an assessment to ensure that it incorporates key features such as a food system focus, collaboration among stakeholders, community involvement, and an action orientation. This chapter is organized into sections that describe the major areas of work in planning an assessment:

1. Getting Your Assessment Team Together
2. Clarifying Assessment Goals, Interests, and Decision Processes
3. Planning the Assessment Budget and Mobilizing Resources
4. Planning the Assessment Research
5. Planning for the Use and Evaluation of Your Assessment

We offer this overview of the assessment planning work in order to highlight key areas of decision-making and the players and activities associated with these areas, and to help you map out and anticipate the process before you start. While these areas of work are presented sequentially in this chapter, in practice they often will overlap. For example, you may find the need to include new members as you think through your research questions and methods, and to start planning for the use of your assessment before you begin your research. Such adjustments and changes are an appropriate part of an organizing process, and it is important to strike a balance between making clear decisions and remaining flexible, so that you make progress while also maintaining buy-in and support.

1. Getting Your Assessment Team Together

Organizing the core assessment team is one of the most important aspects of the process. This team will determine the shape of the assessment and its outcomes, decide whom to invite to be part of the process, and be responsible for implementing the assessment and follow-up actions.

Assessments can get started in many different ways, with varying levels of community participation. One or several groups could take the lead and invite others to join later. A coalition of organizations that has already worked together might decide to conduct an assessment. Or an assessment could begin with a broad community organizing process that involves a range of stakeholders in deciding whether to conduct an assessment and what the focus should be. All of these are valid approaches that can result in successful assessments and follow-up actions. Yet the way an assessment starts, and who is at the table when it gets started, will have lasting implications for the process and its impact in the community. The editors of this guide encourage an approach that involves collaboration between diverse organizations and meaningful participation by community members.

Potential assessment participants

Who might want to or should be involved in an assessment? It is valuable to start with a broad pool. Everyone has a stake in the food system, and valuable players can come from almost anywhere in the community. All the assessments presented in Chapter 3 involved partnerships among organizations active on various community food issues. Many had representatives from universities, public agencies, private sector firms, the nonprofit sector, and community-based organizations. Ideally, such representatives should have both an individual and organizational interest in participating, and their institution should support the assessment with their staff time and other resources.
1. **Organizational representatives**

   In many assessments, organizational representatives are the primary participants. They often bring to the process extensive knowledge of the local community and its food system, contacts with other stakeholders and community members, and experience with organizing and group process. Organizations focused on food and agriculture issues such as anti-hunger, sustainable agriculture, urban gardening, public health, and nutrition are clear candidates. Groups working on related issues may be natural allies; these may include environment, community development, housing, social service, and civic groups.

2. **Colleges and universities**

   Academic institutions can bring important research skills to the table, and contribute their and students’ time to conduct and analyze research. They also have access to resources that community organizations may lack, including computers, data, and computer mapping capability. (See sidebar on next page.)

3. **Public officials and agencies**

   Public agency staff often collect data about the food system and related issues, and may conduct assessments to inform policy making. They also communicate with decision-makers in other government agencies. Involving public officials and agency representatives in the assessment planning process, even those who do not work directly on food issues, can facilitate access to information and increase the chance that the assessment’s findings will lead to policy changes.

4. **Private sector firms**

   The private sector, including farmers, grocery stores, food processors, and distributors, plays an important role in the food system. Many business leaders are interested in contributing to the community. They also may be visible, influential, and well connected. Involving them as partners can facilitate linkages to community economic development, encourage private sector involvement in improving the food system, and potentially bring in tangible resources such as money, facilities, and databases.

5. **Community residents**

   This category refers to participants who live in the community, but do not directly represent an organization (although they may be involved with local groups). Resident participation is essential to ensure that the assessment addresses the needs and interests of the community. They can best understand and represent the interests of ordinary households, and provide an important balance to the views of organizational representatives.

**Criteria for identifying assessment participants**

Participating in an assessment, especially as a core member, can involve a significant commitment of time and energy. It is important to take the time to recruit a diverse group of capable and dedicated participants. Below are some criteria to consider as you identify potential participants.

1. **Community representation**

   Those who live and work in a community are vital to the assessment process. Seek out people who are involved in their communities, respected as community leaders, and have a stake in the outcomes.

2. **Diversity**

   Representation from diverse stakeholder and population groups helps make an assessment effective, by bringing in different perspectives, helping the group to think creatively, and building the buy-in and support that foster successful follow-up actions.

3. **Expertise and experience**

   A broad range of knowledge and skills among assessment participants will increase the group's resourcefulness and its capacity to move forward. This expertise can include understanding of the community or food issues,
5. Capacity for decision-making

In order for the assessment team to move forward effectively, it is important that organizational representatives are empowered to make decisions on behalf of their organization in the context of the assessment process, or have a way to efficiently get input or approval from others in their group as needed.

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**Benefits and Limitations of Universities as Assessment Partners**

Including university- or college-based researchers in assessment partnerships has many benefits. Faculty members bring expertise in their subject areas, such as health, social work, urban planning, or nutrition. They also bring extensive knowledge of and skills in research approaches and methods, and many care about applying their knowledge to serve their community and create positive change. Involving university-based researchers also conveys valuable credibility to the assessment research, which can be especially important if the results are likely to be controversial.

Additionally, university involvement typically contributes the brain and labor power of students in ways that are beneficial to both the community and the students. Communities gain through the ideas and efforts that students contribute through service learning, volunteer work, internships, and class projects designed in collaboration with the assessment team, with little or no direct cost to the assessment organizers. Communities also gain when a new generation of students learns skills related to community partnerships and collaborative processes. Students gain an education in research and community work, while contributing to real world decisions and actions.

In addition to contributing their time, university faculty also may bring in funding and in-kind resources to assessments that can be quite significant. Most of the cases described in the Chapter 3 have involved grant funding sought by university faculty members from public or foundation sources. Universities also can contribute in-kind resources through providing classrooms for meetings, computer lab access, copying and mailing, and dissemination of assessment findings through university channels.

Finally, through such partnerships universities are made more accountable to their communities and challenged to think creatively about how public investments in higher education return direct benefits to the local community. More and more universities are devising policies for community engagement and partnerships, following a long history of benign neglect if not active conflict with surrounding communities. For all these reasons, you may want to involve faculty from a nearby university in your assessment team.

However, university involvement can also bring with it certain limitations, which are important to recognize and address up front. University faculty often are subject to pressures that make community partnerships more difficult: universities usually reward leadership and not collaboration; they demand new and widely-generalizable theories and questions rather than local theories, community knowledge, and local testing of theories; they demand quick results and tend to be impatient with the time and effort community processes need; and finally, university bureaucracies often seek to control processes and outcomes rather than sharing widely. We urge university and community participants to clearly identify personal, professional, and organizational/institutional interests in participation and to engage in a dialogue about how the assessment can or cannot serve these interests.
Facilitating and implementing a Community Food Assessment requires a variety of skills in organizing, research, and process facilitation. Providing training in these skills can be very valuable to build the capacity of assessment team members, both for the assessment process itself and other work in the future. For example, the Youth Envision assessment in San Francisco trained young people to conduct a survey and analyze and report on its results. The Austin assessment trained community members to use an instrument to survey which neighborhood stores had food products that could be used to prepare balanced meals.

Training sessions for process facilitation might include topics such as: facilitating discussions, building group consensus, creatively resolving conflicts, and planning with groups. Training in research methods might include topics such as survey administration, use of mapping software, data sampling, management, analysis, and presentation. Finally, training could also cover designing and implementing change actions, with topics like coalition building, community outreach and organizing, policy advocacy, and media outreach.

**Encouraging community participation**

Community Food Assessment is by definition a participatory process. Yet depending on who organizes the process and how, the breadth of participation can vary widely. The editors of this guide support an approach that emphasizes significant community participation. Such participation helps ensure that the assessment will reflect community concerns and goals, generate meaningful results, and lead to positive and lasting changes.

This discussion of community participation may suggest that we are assuming that the assessment organizers and community members are separate groups who are not yet working together. This is not the case; we merely want to highlight how to encourage community participation. We expect that assessment organizers already will have some connections and working relationships with community members; indeed we hope those links will be strong.

Community members can play a valuable role not only in gathering and providing information, but also in shaping key decisions about the assessment and follow-up activities, and in helping implement these decisions. Involving community partners from the start fosters trust, inclusiveness, and shared ownership of the process. It can make the assessment a vehicle for empowering traditionally disenfranchised constituencies, and for increasing community capacity to create positive change. Like other assessment team members, community residents can be involved at different levels. Some may attend a focus group or respond to a survey; others may serve on the steering committee or work part-time to do community outreach.

The extent of community participation in an assessment should be clarified early on by the assessment team, as it will have a major impact on many aspects of the process. It will be important to build outreach plans and opportunities for participation into the overall assessment plan. Here are some key principles to keep in mind when designing your assessment process to obtain meaningful community participation:

- Effective participation requires a planned process in which the key interests in your group agree on the level of participation that is appropriate.
- Participation involves developing agreements on both what is to be achieved (the outcomes) and how it is to be done (the methods).
- Participation is a process of learning and development for all concerned. It takes time.
- People will only be involved if they understand each other, have the confidence to participate, and can see some point to it.
- The use of short-term methods and techniques for participation requires understanding of the overall process, and skilled application. There are no quick fixes.

The process of organizing community participation in an assessment can take many forms, ranging from one-on-one outreach to facilitating a rapid Community Food Assessment. (See sidebar in section 4 below.) It should include communicating both the goals of the assessment process and the benefits of participation, as well as seeking to understand community members’ issues and interests related to the assessment. It is important
for those involved in outreach to see their role as facilitating two-way communication between the communities and the assessment team, rather than just getting information out to the community. For example, simply publicizing a meeting or inviting people to participate may not be enough. It may take significant time and effort to build trust and get people interested, and it is important to do a lot of listening and demonstrate genuine interest in their concerns and ideas.

Community members who might participate in an assessment could include diverse neighborhood residents; workers in food production, distribution, and sales; clients of food assistance programs; farmers; and others. They should include people of diverse ages, ethnicities, and income levels. It is valuable to work with a group of organizers who are multi-ethnic and multi-lingual, in order to reach out to various types of communities effectively. Conducting outreach and organizing at multiple sites also is important to reach a broad range of community members. These sites might include workplaces, social service centers, neighborhood centers, churches and other places of worship, and meetings of community-based organizations. You may want to consider returning to the same sites later to request additional feedback or share results.

Community Mapping: A Creative Approach to Food System Change

In 1999, innovative community mapping projects were conducted in three cities in Great Britain, to enable local people to analyze their food economies and work with others to develop sustainable solutions to the problems they faced in eating a healthy diet. The projects were led by Sustain: The Alliance for Better Food and Farming, in partnership with Oxfam. The projects and the community mapping process are documented in a report titled: Reaching the Parts. Community mapping: Working together to tackle social exclusion and food poverty. Color photographs and charts provide testimony to a creative, community-based process. To order the report, go to Sustain’s website at http://www.sustainweb.org/pub_poverty.asp.

To effectively foster community participation, it is important to address constraints to this participation. These range from practical issues such as not owning a car or needing child care, to cultural and political issues such as not feeling part of the dominant culture of the assessment group, or negative past experiences with organizers coming in to a community.

The composition and leadership of the assessment group, decision-making process, meeting times and places, interpreter assistance, and providing expense reimbursements and childcare all are important to consider in creating an inclusive process. For example, in planning meetings you may want to consider the following:

- Is the time convenient for those who want to be involved?
- Is the location convenient and accessible by public transit? Will anyone need a ride?
- Is the site comfortable and welcoming for community members?
- Will interpreters be needed, and for what languages?
- Will participants need childcare?

Finally, since assessment planning can be time-consuming, it's important to consider reimbursing community participants for their time, out-of-pocket expenses, and possible foregone income. This can be extremely important to encourage substantial participation by people whose time spent on assessment activities isn't supported by their organizations.

**Techniques for participatory information-gathering**

A variety of techniques can be used to facilitate broad community participation in an assessment. It generally is a good idea to use more than one, to ensure a range of diverse responses. Anyone who is using such a technique should be sensitive to the social and cultural environment in which it is to be implemented. In choosing a technique, the following criteria should be considered:

- The objectives for community participation (e.g., providing input or decision-making)
- Who will be involved in these sessions (e.g. youth, elderly, farm workers)?
- The social relationships that already exist in the community (including tensions)
- Whether the participants have previous experience with involvement in similar projects

Commonly used techniques for gaining significant community input include:

- Meetings in which information is sought and given
- Community committees that can meet to provide feedback as needed
- Participatory data-gathering

Participatory data-gathering is discussed in greater detail in Appendix 1, in a summary of various techniques as they relate to conducting a Community Food Assessment.

**2. Clarifying Assessment Goals, Interests, and Decision Processes**

The Community Food Assessment is created from the ground up by its participants, based on their goals and interests and the resources they are able to mobilize. People will come to the process with a wide range of interests and expectations. Therefore, it is very important to clarify participants’ goals and interests, identify shared goals, and develop clear agreement on the assessment goals and decision-making processes.

**Clarifying goals and interests**

Once you’ve assembled your initial group, invite members to identify their goals and interests related to the
### Basic steps of an assessment

This checklist provides an overview of the steps typically involved in planning and implementing an assessment. These steps may not all be needed in each situation, and they won’t necessarily occur in this sequence.

#### Get some background on Community Food Assessments
- Read reports from previous assessments and related resources
- Talk to people who have conducted assessments to learn about their experiences

#### Recruit participants
- Identify a group of key stakeholders and organize an initial meeting
- Determine the group’s interest in conducting an assessment
- Identify and recruit other participants, representing diverse interests and skills

#### Determine assessment purposes and goals
- Identify participants’ goals and interests
- Clarify and prioritize initial goals for assessment
- Revisit and refine goals later as needed

#### Develop a planning and decision-making process
- Clarify who will make decisions and how
- Clarify the roles of participants, defining various levels of participation
- Develop a plan for meaningful community participation

#### Define the community
- Define geographic boundaries for the assessment
- Decide whether to focus on specific population groups

#### Identify funds and other resources
- Develop overall budget
- Secure grants or other funding
- Identify in-kind resources and a project sponsor
- Recruit and train staff and volunteers as needed

#### Plan and conduct research
- Develop assessment questions and indicators
- Identify existing data and information needed
- Determine appropriate research methods
- Collect data from existing and original sources
- Process and analyze data
- Summarize assessment findings

#### Present and disseminate assessment findings
- Identify audiences for assessment and appropriate ways to reach them
- Compile assessment findings into a report and/or other materials
- Disseminate findings through materials, meetings, and media outreach

#### Evaluate and celebrate
- Review assessment process and outcomes
- Celebrate! Thank and honor participants

#### Implement follow-up actions
- Develop goals and action plan based on the assessment results
- Mobilize additional resources and participants if needed
- Consider whether to implement another assessment phase

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Community's food system. Examples of goals might include: more farmland saved; more economic opportunity; greater access to fresh produce in low-income neighborhoods; and building healthful eating among youth. As you review participants’ goals, it is valuable to step back to see if other important goals may need to be included, and to consider whether there are others who can address these missing goals who should be invited to participate.

Once you have identified participants' goals, it is important to use a clear process to prioritize these and agree upon a limited number of shared goals for the assessment team. As you prioritize the goals, you may want to consider criteria such as the breadth of support among the participants for the goals, the relative difficulty or ease of realizing the goals, resources the group may expect to mobilize, and the urgency with which particular goals are sought. You also may want a mix of short-term goals that can be achieved relatively easily, and longer-term goals. As you examine further issues of scope, resources, and capacity to do the research, you may
need to revise this list somewhat. But you will be well on your way to having addressed the fundamental planning question of identifying the goals for you assessment.

In addition to identifying participants’ goals, you may wish to explicitly identify interests. The key question is: “What are we hoping to gain for ourselves and our organizations by participating in the Community Food Assessment process?” Often, these are the same as the goals identified above. Examples of interests might include: organizations might want to gain visibility or support for their work; a local official might want to improve her standing in the neighborhood; retailers would want to improve their sales and profits; and university faculty might want to get a paper published from the research.

In a group process characterized by familiar and close ties, past collaborative successes, and professional respect, these personal and organizational interests would likely be easily voiced and mutually supported in the group. However, in a group that is coming together for the first time or where significant mistrust or conflict exists, many interests might remain unspoken.

Some interests may well emerge as the planning team members build trust and recognize shared interests. However, unspoken interests may continue to affect the process, and in some cases may be at odds with the assessment goals. Therefore, it is very important to create an environment in which personal and organizational interests can be openly articulated. If some participants’ interests are different from the goals that emerge from the process above, it will be important to consider whether or not it is appropriate to incorporate these interests into the assessment goals.

Clarifying the decision-making structure and process

As a collaborative process, Community Food Assessment involves a great deal of group planning and decision-making. It is important to develop decision-making structures and processes that the group understands and supports, and that allow the group to move forward efficiently. These will go a long way to helping ensure that the assessment meets its goals and builds capacity for further collaboration and action. And they will make the journey easier and more enjoyable!

As you pull together your team and start planning for your assessment, it will become clear that different people have varying degrees of enthusiasm and ability to attend to the details of planning and implementing the assessment. You may need to identify a smaller group that can handle more day-to-day decision-making and implementation of broad group directions. Many assessments develop three basic tiers of involvement in assessment planning:

1. A steering committee decides overall directions for the assessment, provides some assistance in carrying out the research, identifies and helps to access resources, and helps to design action strategies based on the assessment findings. Committee members usually are linked to networks of formal or informal power and influence in the community, and should include community residents.

   The size of the steering committee depends on the structure of the assessment, length of the process, resources available, and other considerations, but in general is around 15 or 20 people. The group needs enough members to provide diverse representation, but should not be so large as to be unwieldy. Such a group might meet once a month or so.

2. A smaller core group and/or coordinator usually makes and carries out day-to-day decisions that follow from the broad directives of the steering committee. This group or individual coordinates the planning process, gives shape to the final assessment design, brings questions to the steering committee for decisions, raises funds, and carries out the research. This smaller group includes people who can commit significant time to the process and who have specific skills needed for the assessment. They may conduct the research or hire outside researchers.

3. Community hearings or meetings often are held at key points in the planning and implementation process. These meetings provide opportunities to gain broad community input into planning, to update
the community on the progress of the assessment as it proceeds, and to report on the assessment findings after it is completed. Such meetings can be a valuable way to gain community input to and participation in the assessment planning and research. More importantly, they are central to building a broad base of community support for actions resulting from the assessment, and can encourage accountability from decision-makers and greater community control of decisions related to the food system. The success of these community meetings will depend greatly on the relationships and trust that have been developed between assessment organizers and community members, and the extent to which the community has an opportunity to shape the process.

Documenting the assessment planning process and decisions
As your assessment group starts to work together, you will need to develop ways to document the process and share this information with participants and others. This documentation can serve several purposes, including:

- Providing a memory of people, decisions, and resources
- Keeping participants updated and promoting accountability
- Helping tell your assessment's story
- Capturing information that can be used to evaluate the assessment process and outcomes

Some elements of this record keeping are standard for any group process; others may be more specific to your assessment. Some of this information should be provided to participants; some can be kept in a central location. Here is a sample list:

- A participant contact list
- Agendas for meetings
- Minutes of meetings, with decisions, action steps and responsible individuals, and timelines highlighted
- A periodically updated schedule of activities
- Files with information on relevant community food issues, such as newspaper clippings and academic studies
- Lists or files of resources that you may need for your assessment, including sources of funding or in-kind support, data sources, research tools, and media and presentation outlets

Clarifying who will do what
Deciding who will do what is a key part of planning an assessment. It is important to have clear agreements about roles and expectations, based on a shared commitment to the assessment as a collaborative project. Maintaining a sense of teamwork, appreciating people for their work, and keeping up a sense of momentum all are important to keep people motivated to participate actively.

Basic project management tools are helpful to keep people on track, especially when you are working with a team of busy people with multiple commitments. It is helpful to have clear timelines for completion of tasks and systems for checking in, perhaps at regular planning meetings. A formal agreement or Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) also can be valuable in clarifying roles. An assessment coordinator can play a key role in helping ensure coordination and accountability.

In dividing labor, consider which partners can do which types of work most effectively. It is helpful to start identifying each partner's skills and roles early on; this also will become clearer as the assessment moves forward and people get to know each other. Examples of assessment work that require particular skills include:

- Planning and facilitating the meetings and group process
- Inviting and organizing community participation
- Raising funds and identifying other resources
Designing and implementing research activities
Producing reports and other materials for distribution

Representatives of organizations that have an interest in the assessment and provide some staff time or other support will likely do the bulk of work on an assessment. Yet significant participation by community residents in shaping and implementing the assessment is valuable to ensure that it generates real change in the community, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Such community residents will likely have more limited time to contribute, and probably will be available only outside their regular work hours.

3. Planning the Assessment Budget and Mobilizing Resources

How much funding will you need to conduct your assessment? That depends, as discussed above, on the scope and scale of your assessment, as well as the amount of in-kind resources you can gather. Consider that resources will be needed to organize the team, to plan for the assessment, and to carry it out, as well as to support follow-up actions. Below is a list of major categories of expenses associated with assessments.

Categories of assessment expenses

- Planning meetings (organizing, materials, record-keeping, site, refreshments)
- Community outreach and participation (organizing, translation, payment for participation, reimbursement for expenses)
- Coordination or support staff
- Research personnel (research administration, instrument development, data-gathering, and data analysis)
- Infrastructure (office space, equipment, phone line, copying)
- Fundraising
- Developing materials (writing, graphics, layout)
- Dissemination (printing/copying, mailing, advertisements)
- Evaluation
- Follow-up actions

All the above items could be provided in-kind depending on the assessment partners and their ability to commit these resources. However, in most of the case studies, salaries for research and production staff and the direct costs of administration were funded by grants raised specifically for the assessment.

Possible funding sources for assessments

Federal funding may be difficult to obtain for this purpose, although the Community Food and Nutrition Program has funded assessments in the past. The Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program also sometimes funds assessments if they are part of a broader program development process, and in the future may provide planning grants that can be used specifically for assessments. Community development block grants and food stamp nutrition education funds are two other potential sources. VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) volunteers can provide staffing. At the local level, government agencies that address nutrition, health, community development, or other relevant areas may be potential funding sources.

Community foundations can be a fruitful source of funds for assessments, given their planning and community involvement functions. While your local community foundation might not be interested in community food security, consider framing your assessment in other terms that match their interests, such as community economic development, public health and nutrition, leadership development, and/or democratic participation. Other private foundations with similar interests also may be a good source.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Study</th>
<th>Funding Sources</th>
<th>Cash Value</th>
<th>In-kind Sources</th>
<th>In-kind Estimated Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austin, 1994</td>
<td>Sustainable Food Center; AmeriCorps; VISTA</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
<td>City of Austin; Travis County; Worldwide Design</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berkeley, 1998-2001</td>
<td>San Francisco Foundation; California Urban Environmental Research and Education Center</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
<td>San Francisco State University; Northern California Food Systems Alliance; community advisors</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Detroit, 1999-2001</td>
<td>Wayne State University</td>
<td>$12,000</td>
<td>Wayne State University; Hunger Action Coalition of Michigan</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles, 1992</td>
<td>UCLA Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning</td>
<td>Unavailable</td>
<td>UCLA; Non-profit groups; community members</td>
<td>$125,000–$150,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madison/Dane County, 1997</td>
<td>W.K. Kellogg Foundation; Madison Food System Project</td>
<td>$3,700 + printing costs</td>
<td>Madison Food System Project; U. Wisconsin–Madison Dept. of Urban &amp; Regional Planning</td>
<td>$41,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milwaukee, 1995-2000</td>
<td>Wisconsin Food System Partnership; Kraft Foods Inc.</td>
<td>$15,000</td>
<td>Center for Urban Initiatives and Research, U of Wisconsin–Milwaukee; printing businesses.</td>
<td>$5000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The North Country, 1996-1998</td>
<td>USDA and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention</td>
<td>Tuition and stipend for graduate student; $184,000 over two-year period</td>
<td>New York State Community Action Association Cornell Cooperative Extension</td>
<td>$24,000 (approx. $4000 per county)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco, 2001</td>
<td>San Francisco Department of Public Health</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
<td>Department of Public Health; San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners</td>
<td>$40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somerville, 1999</td>
<td>Health and Human Services/Community Food and Nutrition Program Grant</td>
<td>$49,000</td>
<td>Steering committee participants</td>
<td>Unavailable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This information was derived from surveys completed by case study contacts.
Other funding sources can include:

- **Faith-based funders:** Churches and religious or faith-based organizations often have programs that deal with the issues addressed by assessments, and can be a good source of funding and other support.

- **Other community organizations:** Partner organizations or other supporters may have funds accessible for the assessment.

- **Fundraising events:** It can be hard to raise money directly for an assessment through such an event, but partners may be willing to agree to set aside a percentage of the proceeds from their fundraising events.

- **Special funds from legal settlements:** In recent years, legal settlements with corporations (e.g., tobacco, oil, anti-trust suits) have made funding available for community initiatives. These funds often are not well publicized, and may be housed in relatively unlikely domains such as the Attorney General’s Office or a county agency.

**In-kind resources**

Non-cash or in-kind resources are a staple of Community Food Assessments. They can significantly reduce overall cash costs while reinforcing the collaborative nature of the assessment process. Following are some common types of in-kind contributions:

- Participation in the assessment coordinating body and/or other decision-making committees or meetings
- Personnel time from participating organizations to perform assessment-related tasks
- Student and faculty time for research assistance
- Access to other academic resources in the form of databases, computer mapping, and library resources
- Access to office-related support, such as desk space, copying, supplies, telephone, and Internet
- Administrative time and expertise in the form of financial management, fiscal sponsorship, event hosting, and program planning

Sources of in-kind support can be found throughout the community. They include assessment partners, community members and businesses, and volunteer organizations such as AmeriCorps and VISTA, which can provide substantial help with data collection and community organizing. Colleges and universities can be excellent partners, with both academic professionals and students involved in carrying out components of the assessment. For example, the influential Seeds of Change study in Los Angeles and Fertile Ground in Madison were conducted primarily by graduate students. (See sidebar in section 1 of this chapter.)

**4. Planning the Assessment Research**

The assessment goals your group identified earlier will provide the foundation for your research plan. You also will need to decide what questions your research will address, what kind of data you will collect, and what methods you will use. This process will be shaped by practical considerations of time and resources. Data take time to collect, assemble, and analyze, and some data may require intensive effort to obtain. You’ll need to decide how to focus the information-gathering to get the most mileage toward your goals. As the research options become clearer, you may need to revisit your goals.

Your assessment research plan should answer the following questions:

- What questions or indicators emerge from the goals identified for your assessment? (The breadth of your questions will suggest the scope of your research.)
- What geographic boundaries make sense for each question or indicator you wish to investigate?
- What is the scale of your research project? Will it be relatively small, involving simply compilation and analysis of existing data? Or will it include collection and analysis of original information?
- What research skills and other resources are available or can be mobilized?
This section will explore these issues briefly. Chapter 5 will discuss research questions, methods, and data sources in greater depth. We encourage you to acquire the USDA’s Community Food Assessment Toolkit for more information on some kinds of assessment methods. Early on in the research planning, you may want to review previous assessments done in other communities, or other relevant research on your community’s food system. The case studies in this guide provide a good starting point; additional assessment reports are listed in the Resource List in Appendix 6.

Deciding the scope of your assessment: what topics to research

One of the first decisions you’ll need to make as you formulate your research plan is what areas of the food system you will examine. Will the scope of your research be relatively broad, covering a diverse range of community food issues, or will it focus on one or two specific issues? These decisions will emerge from the clarification of goals and interests by your team, and will become more concrete as you discuss resource and time availability and access to information.

For example, your assessment questions may focus on evaluating food access in a low-income neighborhood and identifying existing and potential sources of fresh, nutritious food in this area. This would involve a fairly focused scope of questions touching on mostly food distribution and consumption issues. However, if your group decides to gather information on many more aspects of the food system and their links to various community objectives (such as health, environmental sustainability, equity), the scope will be much broader. In addition to food-related topics, you probably will want to assemble and present some background information on your community’s population, economy, and resources.

As you start discussing the details of your research plan, your group may need to consider bringing in additional members who have knowledge and skills that you will need. As additional members enter the process, you may have to revisit the goals and research plan in order to bring new members up to speed and enable them to contribute ideas.

### Sample List of Basic Community Indicators That May be Addressed by Your Assessment

- Community and household demographics
- Labor statistics (unemployment and under-employment, wage-levels, types of jobs)
- Local/regional agriculture (amounts and value of crops, sustainability, farmland loss)
- Community food assets/resources (grocery stores, food processing facilities, community gardens)
- Local employment and sales, in food retail, manufacture, and wholesale
- Community-based organizations involved in food issues
- Food and nutrition resources and services
- Incidence of hunger and food insecurity
- Incidence of diet-related illnesses, and resulting mortality and costs
- Local policies related to food issues (preserving agricultural land, promoting small businesses, attracting supermarkets)

Defining the boundaries of your assessment community

As we saw in Chapter 3, focusing on a specific geographical area is a fundamental element of the Community Food Assessment. What are the appropriate physical boundaries for an assessment? Geographically, a “community” can mean any grouping of people who live and/or work together in the same physical area such as a neighborhood or city.

In practice, an assessment can be carried out in any community or combination of communities, a neighborhood, town or city, metropolitan area or county, or multi-county region. It can use more practical boundaries
Case Study Communities

In the assessments profiled in Chapter 3, the targeted communities range broadly:

- A particular combination of census tracts or zip codes chosen for their relevance to food access, nutrition, etc. (Detroit)
- A part of a city with a predominantly low-income population (East Austin, West and South Berkeley, South Central Los Angeles, Madison’s near north and near south sides, San Francisco’s Bayview Hunters Point)
- Entire cities (Detroit, Los Angeles, Madison, Somerville)
- Entire counties (Dane County, Milwaukee County)
- A combination of counties or a region (North Country, Southeastern Michigan)

such as census tracts or zip codes. It may also focus on specific populations within a defined area, e.g. low-income seniors or families with young children. Depending on the questions you research and the availability of data sources, you may even draw different geographic boundaries for different questions.

Community boundaries can be classified in four ways: political, service, cultural or social, and environmental. Most of the assessments described in Chapter 3 include more than one of these categories.

1. Political or jurisdictional boundaries

   This is probably the most common type of designation used in Community Food Assessments, and offers clear benefits. Most data are gathered and reported based on political boundaries such as a neighborhood, city, or county. Such boundaries also provide a defined framework for policy advocacy.

2. Service designations

   There also are many types of service designations for geographic areas, including school districts, voting precincts, census tracts, and enterprise zones. These boundaries lend themselves to the collection of certain kinds of data, but may make it more difficult to collect other data or to advocate for broader policy changes.

3. Ethnic/cultural/social boundaries

   Often neighborhoods have cultural boundaries that are not officially designated, but are widely recognized by community residents. They can be based on the ethnic heritage of the residents, as with Chinatown or the French Quarter. Such boundaries may help encourage community involvement, but they probably will not match with data collection boundaries or with political jurisdictions.

4. Environmental boundaries

   Environmental landmarks can make for appropriate community boundaries, especially when residents recognize them as such. These landmarks could be a river, a mountain range, or in urban settings a freeway. Foodsheds, watersheds, and bioregions also can provide boundaries for assessments or for food system planning. However, environmental boundaries tend not to match with data collection boundaries or with political jurisdictions.

Considerations in Choosing Community Boundaries

- What boundaries are suggested by your assessment purposes, goals, and questions?
- What kinds of data do you anticipate being central to your study, and what boundaries are associated with those data?
- What’s the appropriate scale of study area to encourage community participation, and where is there good potential for such participation?
- Do you want to focus on particular ethnic and socio-economic groups, or a mix of groups?
- How does the community define its own boundaries? Is there a cohesive community sense within certain boundaries?
- Where do you expect to conduct follow-up activities once the assessment is completed?
- Is the community representative of larger trends in the region?
Defining the scale of your research

Among the first questions assessment organizers tend to ask are: how big does the study have to be, and how much time and money will it require? The answer is: it depends on the scope and scale of your project, and the skills and resources your group is able to mobilize. We discussed issues of scope previously in this section. Assessments can be implemented on a wide variety of scales, from a comprehensive study involving dozens of graduate student researchers and a $200,000 in-kind budget, to a much more modest analysis of food access in a small neighborhood. In general, covering a broad range of community food issues, conducting significant original research, and/or facilitating extensive community participation all will tend to increase the scale of the project.

A key factor that will determine the scale of the research will be how much of your assessment is based on existing data sources and how much original data-gathering you do. Most assessments will contain some combination of original (primary) and existing (secondary) data analysis. The characteristics and advantages and disadvantages of each are discussed in Appendix 4. In general, the more primary data-gathering in your assessment, the longer it will take, and the more skills and resources will be needed for planning and conducting data-gathering, analysis, and presentation.

Additionally, assessments that involve extensive community participation in planning and implementation also tend to require more time and resources. This participation also can bring many benefits, as discussed in section 1 of this chapter.

No one has unlimited time and resources, and Community Food Assessments are action-oriented, so you will need to find a balance between doing a study that is appropriately comprehensive in scope and broad in its scale, while staying within resource constraints and moving the process forward to generate recommendations and action. Finding this balance is one of the central challenges in conducting an assessment. Fortunately, it is quite possible to conduct an assessment that is relatively small-scale and low-budget, but still generates important results. For example, the East Austin assessment (described in Chapter 3) was conducted in only eight months and with fairly modest resources, yet it generated impressive outcomes, including complete renovation of a grocery store in the neighborhood, a new bus route from the Eastside to the two biggest supermarkets, and establishment of a food policy council with in-kind support from the city and county.

The scale of your assessment also may depend on how quickly you need to produce results, and the commitment of your group to do an in-depth, longer-term assessment. One

Rapid Community Food Assessment

This process is designed to gather community input on a limited set of questions fairly quickly, and can be used as a basis for organizing change actions. It is important to carefully frame questions that are broad enough to capture a range of responses, but also specific in their language and purpose. With some advance planning, rapid assessments can generate data, analysis, and action recommendations in one collective exercise.

For example, you could organize three or four sessions to be held at a local school, community center, food pantry, and/or a farmers’ market. Each session could ask a few questions that capture a range of community concerns, which would be explored through a facilitated dialogue. For example, the questions might be:

- What do community members do to get food, if they do not have adequate and dignified access to healthful foods at all times?
- What barriers prevent community members from having adequate and dignified access to healthful foods at all times?
- What resources currently exist to help community members have adequate and dignified access to healthful choices of food at all times?
- Who should do what to improve access to healthful food for all residents?

Based on a discussion of these questions, your group may identify specific actions for change in your community food system targeted at various sectors, including local government, community-based organizations, or the private sector. A rapid assessment also could generate products that include a brief report compiling the key points emerging from the dialogue; visual material such as photographs and videos; and other material that could be used in organizing actions, such as a petition or a list of skills in the group. It may be used to build interest in conducting a more comprehensive Community Food Assessment.
strategy for those with fairly limited resources and time is to approach the assessment process in stages. A preliminary assessment could focus on gathering data to help identify needs, bring in more people and resources, and build commitment to go forward. It could compile readily-available data such as: basic demographics, poverty and car ownership rates, statistics on participation in food assistance programs, mapping of grocery stores, mortality and morbidity statistics, and so on. Once initial findings are assembled into a report, you could distribute it to local media outlets, policy makers, and community organizations. If there is sufficient interest and support, you could organize a coalition to develop a larger assessment and mobilize resources for it.

5. Planning for the Use and Evaluation of Your Assessment

Planning for the use of your assessment results

In Chapter 2, we outlined possible purposes and outcomes for Community Food Assessments. Earlier in this chapter, we discussed the importance of defining clear goals for your assessment. After you plan your assessment research, you may wish to revisit the issue of how you plan to use your assessment results to generate change actions. This issue is discussed at greater length in Chapter 6, but it is mentioned at this stage of the planning process for four main reasons.

One, it keeps your assessment research planning on track and tied to your group’s goals. Brainstorming about research can generate a wide range of topics and questions that pique participants’ curiosity. Many of these questions are intriguing and can seem central to solving community food system problems. However, when the question, “How are we going to use the answers to this question to accomplish our goals?” is asked, some research topics can seem less urgent.

Two, it is possible that as you discussed your assessment goals and research topics, other audiences or uses for your assessment may have surfaced. For example, if one of your group’s questions was to study the extent to which institutional food purchasers bought from local food producers or manufacturers, you may then want to consider representatives of these institutions as another audience for the findings.

Three, based on your discussion of fundraising and the need to garner in-kind resources, you may want to include new partners who might suggest additional uses for the assessment. For example, as you engage in discussions with a local foundation, you may be requested to distribute the assessment report to all their grantees.

Four, discussing the many audiences for the assessment results and the forms it will take will give you a better sense of the funding and support you will need for dissemination. Costs of developing materials, printing and copying, and video or audio production can add up quickly. Planning and fundraising for these costs in advance will help ensure that you can successfully get the word out about your assessment results.

Planning for evaluation of your assessment

Incorporating evaluation plans into your overall assessment plan is important to ensure that you will have the information you need to assess and learn from your efforts. Evaluation of your assessment is valuable for many reasons. It can:

- Help you assess whether or not your assessment delivered the desired outcomes
- Help you make your assessment more effective, by providing feedback about both content and process along the way
- Help you track impacts of your assessment, or the effects of change actions carried out as a result of your assessment

Your evaluation can help you assess outcomes related to:

- How timely your assessment was; whether major activities took place in the time frame scheduled
- How relevant to participating stakeholders and community members were the decisions made in the
assessment (goals, questions, methods, change actions, etc.)

- How efficient your assessment was in the use of money and other in-kind resources
- Whether your assessment met your targets for dissemination of results

Evaluation of your assessment process may include:
- Participation of stakeholders and community members (and their satisfaction with the opportunities for and impact of their participation)
- A sense of ownership and investment in the process
- Individual and organizational capacities that were developed as a result of doing the assessment (such as leadership in representing community food interests, facilitation of groups, technical skills in gathering and analyzing data)

**Impact** evaluation studies the changes in the community as a result of doing and implementing the assessment. These might include:
- Increased knowledge of community food issues among community residents
- Program development or improvement, or expanded participation in programs
- Policy changes put into place as a result of the assessment
- New coalitions or partnerships
- Community development or food security improvement (e.g., improved access to food through grocery store or community garden development)

Measuring impact is a longer-term activity, because creating change takes time and effort and it can take years for the effects to become apparent. However, your group may want to identify ways to monitor progress on particular issues of impact.

**Categories of information to collect for evaluation**

Systematic data from the following sources can be valuable for assessing the process, outcomes, and impacts of the assessment:
- Collection of demographic and other information about participants
- Surveys, interviews, or focus groups of participants about their perceptions of their contributions to the assessment and the benefits of their participation
- Review of documents produced during the assessment process, such as collaborative agreements, publicity materials, the research plan, and the assessment report
- Observation of assessment activities to assess the quality of the participation of assessment members, decision-making processes, collaborative work, and use of time and resources
- Measurement of progress toward intended outcomes, including information gathered, constituencies involved, and findings disseminated
- Review of change actions put into place following the assessment
- Impacts on the community's food system as a result of these change actions, to the extent that these can be documented
- Collection of demographic and other information about community members affected by change actions resulting from the assessment
Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the major activities involved in planning for a Community Food Assessment. It emphasized issues related to: pulling together a broad team of committed participants, involving community members in the process, clarifying participants’ goals and interests, identifying sources for funding and other resources, and keeping a focus on the intended uses of the assessment. This chapter underscores the importance of investing time in planning in order to build a sense of shared purpose and mutual trust, and to facilitate activities that contribute to lasting and meaningful change.

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