CHAPTER 6

Putting Your Community Food Assessment to Work

Once you’ve completed your assessment research, two key steps remain: disseminating the assessment results and organizing change actions based on your findings. These steps are crucial to achieving your goals and to making your assessment an effective tool for change in your community. Yet even before you take these steps, it is likely that your assessment organizing and research work already will have attracted significant interest and built momentum for creating positive change in your community.

Other assessment follow-up activities may include conducting an evaluation of your process and outcomes (see Chapter 4), and considering whether you want to do some additional data-gathering. And last, but not least, don’t forget to celebrate your accomplishments and thank all those who contributed!

This chapter is organized in two sections:
1. Disseminating Your Assessment’s Findings
2. Putting Your Assessment to Work

1. Disseminating Your Assessment’s Findings

Wide dissemination of the assessment results is important for building a shared understanding of food-related needs and assets, and to foster broad-based support for change actions. There are a range of potential audiences, types of content, and forms for your assessment reports and materials. These are outlined below, along with tips for producing effective materials. Your team may want to develop several pieces that present the results at varying levels of detail and for different audiences.

The audiences for your report

Who is going to read the assessment report? It is important to consider who your audiences are, what information will interest them, and what forms will be persuasive to them. They may want a brief summary of results, technical detail, and/or an analysis of the implications of your findings for policy and program development. Hopefully, you already identified your audiences in the assessment planning process. New audiences also may have emerged during and after the research process. Audiences may include the following groups:

1. Assessment partners, stakeholders, and participants
   Those involved in the assessment process—core members, stakeholders, residents, and others who provided input—will likely be interested in hearing about how the effort proceeded, and what came out of it. You may want to distribute report brochures or other publicity material to anyone who ever attended meetings. A list can be compiled from meeting sign-up sheets.

2. Other community-based or non-profit organizations
   A host of groups working in the community may be interested in the assessment results. Even if they do not work directly on food issues, the assessment may build their interest in collaborating on food-related issues, using the results to advance their community work, or perhaps conducting an assessment of their own. A list of these groups could be generated from suggestions of assessment participants, local resource guides, and requests from the groups themselves as news of the Community Food Assessment spreads.

3. The community at large
   Community residents may be very interested in the assessment results and action recommendations, especially if they already are concerned about the issues addressed by the assessment. Reaching the broader com-
munity is an important way to build support for actions and advocacy. It requires identifying how different sectors of the community get their information, which may include local newspapers, radio and television outlets (including community cable stations), special interest or neighborhood newsletters, schools, city agencies, and local libraries. It may be important to develop materials in several different languages.

4. Policy makers within and outside the community

Policy makers are an important audience for assessments, and should be targeted for dissemination whether or not they were involved in the process. Such outreach will draw attention to your assessment findings and may help you identify valuable new allies. Materials sent to policy makers should be brief and to the point, probably no longer than two to three pages, with information about where to obtain the full report. (See sidebar.)

Consider sending this brief document to all the elected officials in your area, including representatives at the county, state, and federal levels. You also may want to include leaders and appointed officials in government agencies such as planning, parks, and transit commissions. Key staff in these offices may merit additional contacts before and after you send along your assessment materials.

5. Academic and professional organizations

Faculty and students working in various fields that are related to community or food issues, such as social work, community development, nutrition, and agriculture, may be interested in your research results. A list of faculty to target may be generated by university players on your assessment team, or by working with the local university’s community relations office. If faculty and students were not involved in the assessment, seeing the results and learning about the process may motivate them to pursue similar projects or to incorporate the assessment into their teaching and research activities. Professional associations organized at the state or national levels may also be interested in the assessment process and results.

6. Private sector food system actors and businesses

Owners or managers of restaurants and grocery stores, chefs, farmers, representatives of trade associations, and others in the private sector may find your assessment results useful. The results might help them gain support for community-spirited actions they want to put into place, such as buying locally produced foods or composting food wastes. You may wish to write a letter briefly summarizing key findings and send it to such individuals, especially those who you think may be sympathetic to your goals.

7. Funders

As with any project, funders usually request reports on the progress and results of activities they have supported. You will need to send a report to organizations that funded your assessment or provided in-kind

Tips for Communicating With Local Policy Makers

- Identify the issue clearly, and state briefly why you’re concerned. Your experience and the assessment will lend supporting evidence. Explain how you think the issue will affect your community, neighborhood, or family.
- If the policy maker has supported your cause or idea in previous decisions, let him or her know that you and others appreciate his or her past leadership on the issue.
- If you want the official to take actions, clearly (but politely) ask for these actions. Volunteer your services as an information resource or researcher.
- If your assessment issue has received media coverage, include copies with your correspondence. If it hasn’t, it might be useful to focus on getting coverage before approaching policy makers.
- Restrict yourself to one topic in a letter or other communication. Summarize your arguments and make your recommendations on one page. Use your own words and avoid technical terms.
- You may find it useful to consider potential arguments against your position and provide responses to them.
- Communicate with lawmakers as a constituent, not as a self-appointed neighborhood, community, or professional spokesperson. However, if you are truly representing a particular group, mention it.
## Checklist: Key Principles of Effective Print Materials

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Source: Gatson and Daniels, 1988
resources. It may be a good idea to send brief material to other, similar funders as well, to educate them and help build support for Community Food Assessments and related work. This may help you to raise money for future assessments or for activities that results from the assessment.

The above groups are the most common types of audiences for assessment findings. Others may include: food writers in the media, national non-profits associated with community food issues, and scholarly publications that deal with community food or assessment issues.

The contents of the assessment report

Whoever your audiences may be, it will be important to develop a well-organized, readable, persuasive, and affordable document that clearly communicates what the assessment is about and why it is important to them. Every Community Food Assessment has at least one major “story” in it. Sometimes the story centers around a specific research finding or comparisons between different locations or across time. Telling this story persuasively is important to build support for change actions.

Like other aspects of the assessment, the contents of the report should be derived from your broader goals. Given how much information your assessment has generated, it may be a challenge to decide what to highlight. You will need to step back from all the details and try to view your research findings from your audience’s perspective. This task will likely be easier if you have discussed the findings with a range of stakeholders at various points in the assessment process.

In developing materials, it is important to consider what your audience wants and needs, as well as factors that may affect their ability to read, understand, and use your report. These might include time constraints, lack of knowledge of the issues, low levels of literacy, or cultural differences. The accompanying sidebar discusses principles for effective print materials. It was developed for low-literacy audiences, but most of it is applicable to general audiences.

The contents of your report will likely include the following major elements:

1. An overview of your community and its food system
   This typically is a compilation of secondary data on the community’s basic socio-economic and demographic indicators, economic base, and food system activities. It also may provide general context for the study and comparisons to nearby or similar communities or to the state or nation as a whole.

2. The story of your Community Food Assessment process
   This includes the elements of who was involved, how decisions were made, what outcomes were desired, what key questions were posed, how research was conducted, the resources that supported the process, and when the assessment was conducted.

3. Highlights and discussion of the key research findings
   This should include the key research questions and a brief description of research methods and indicators. The narrative may contain quotes, vignettes, human interest details, photographs, and other features to increase readability and appeal to broad audiences.

4. Recommendations for change actions
   This is a very important section, because it explicitly links your research findings to proposed actions, and identifies who needs to do what to make these actions happen. Often these links need to be spelled out because they may not be obvious to people who are not directly involved with community food issues. Clearly explaining the recommendations should make it easier for you to implement action strategies and rally community support.
**Forms your assessment report may take**

Reporting on your Community Food Assessment process and findings can take many different forms, depending on the target audiences and the resources available. Generally, the most basic forms are written reports and media or policy briefs. If you have more resources, you may want to consider producing video documentaries, posters, comics, or study guides. Whatever format you use, it is important to allocate sufficient time and resources to generate the report, reproduce copies, and distribute them. Retain your originals in case heavy demand or additional resources prompt you to print additional copies. Below are brief descriptions of some of the most common formats.

1. **Written report**
   A report allows you to convey the assessment goals, process, findings, and recommendations in some depth, and provides flexibility to include a wide range of narrative information and graphics. It is useful to have an executive summary at the beginning to summarize key points and provide a quick overview of the contents of the report. Additional copies of the executive summary can be published for distribution to audiences who may want more concise materials, and to keep dissemination costs down.

2. **Newsletter articles**
   Organizational newsletters that cover food-related and community issues—especially of organizations involved in the assessment process—may be very interested in an article on your assessment process and findings. Their readers may already be engaged and active, and may be able to support your action recommendations. Newsletters may print what you write with little or no modification.

3. **Media briefs**
   Written briefs produced for the media need to be concise, well crafted, and easy for a general readership to understand. Larger regional or national news media might adapt your piece to a more general article and interview key people for quotes and opinions. A similar media piece could be produced for radio and television, including interviews with key players about the assessment findings and their implications. News coverage can help you get the attention of policy makers and build public and policy support for proposed changes.

4. **Policy briefs**
   Policies affecting community food issues are made at every level, from local to international, and policy makers can be a key target audience for your assessment. Policy briefs are designed to influence public officials, agency staff and leaders, or other institutional leaders to take or support actions that you recommend. In addition to government bodies, businesses, private non-profits, and other types of organizations also make policy that affects the food system. Policy briefs need to be brief and to the point—no more than two to three pages in length.

5. **Research and professional papers**
   Research and professional papers usually are shorter in length than a full assessment report but contain all the same elements, as well as some discussion of the study in the context of existing literature on the topic. They are targeted to the research and professional community, in order to build their awareness of Community Food Assessments and how they compare with other kinds of assessments.

6. **Resource guides or databases**
   Much of the information gathered by Community Food Assessments is in the form of data summarizing conditions in the food system, such as the numbers of farms or the percentage of the population that is food insecure. Another outcome may be a list of community food assets, such as food pantries, ethnic food stores, community gardens, and nutrition education programs, along with information on location, hours, costs, and services available. Such guides or databases may be distributed to agencies that are in direct contact with the public, especially those providing referrals to people in need. Examples might include emergency assistance providers, churches, resale shops, and health and human service agencies.
7. Internet

The Internet can be an inexpensive and efficient way to disseminate information about an assessment. Besides reducing the cost of printing and mailing hard copy documents, it makes it easy to include photographs and links to other sites (resources, organizations, etc.), and to provide regular updates. In addition to websites, there are many listserves focused on related issues that would be appropriate places to post a summary of the assessment.

8. Community presentations

Presentations to diverse audiences are a common form for disseminating Community Food Assessment results and encouraging follow-up actions. Presentations can briefly discuss the assessment goals, process, findings, and action implications. An oral presentation is generally more effective if it is supported by visual information in the form of slides, handouts, poster-boards, or transparencies that illustrate or summarize key points. A diverse team of presenters can reach different audiences effectively (e.g. youth, seniors, members of ethnic groups). Remember to leave enough time to answer questions and discussion, and if appropriate to encourage participants to brainstorm about follow-up actions. This type of meeting is a good way to brainstorm and prioritize actions, build support, divide follow-up work, and/or gather more data and input.

9. Study guides

A study guide for students or community members is another way to promote learning and action based on the assessment. Such a guide organizes assessment findings by issue, accompanied by general questions about what other kinds of information are needed to understand the issue better, and what kinds of actions should be put into place. The same kind of instrument could be used in a condensed form to engage community members in a dialogue in small groups or in a community hearing.

2. Putting Your Assessment to Work

The ultimate purpose of an assessment is to create positive changes in the community and its food system. These changes could take a wide variety of forms, including improvements in individuals’ diets and health, new or improved programs, better policies at the local level, and increased community participation and collaboration.

We recommend a planning process for developing actions that is similar to the one for planning the Community Food Assessment. If your group has a process in place with periodic meetings for major decisions related to the assessment, then planning for actions likely will represent a continuation of this process. In this case, the transition from the study to disseminating the results and implementing actions will be easier.

However, if your group has not met since the initial planning, it may be a good idea to reconvene and develop a plan for the change actions to build on the assessment results. Planning and implementing change actions will involve stakeholders and community residents in brainstorming potential actions, prioritizing selected actions, identifying and gathering resources for implementation, and allocating responsibilities related to implementation. Hopefully, the assessment planning and research will already have built significant interest in and support for proposed change actions. This will be more likely if your assessment used participatory methods that involved a broad range of stakeholders.

Types of change actions

A wide variety of action strategies may emerge from a Community Food Assessment. It is beyond the scope of this publication to provide detailed guidance on these, but a brief overview of broad categories of change actions is included below.
1. Community mobilization or organizing

Your assessment may uncover information that could provide the basis for mobilizing the community on a broad scale. For example, you may have found that only a small percentage of households qualified for federal food assistance programs are actually enrolled in them, or that supermarkets in poor neighborhoods charge higher prices than those located in wealthier neighborhoods.

The forms mobilization could take could include door-to-door canvassing, community meetings, petition and letter-writing drives, tabling in public places, rallies and sit-ins, and media alerts. Working with a broad range of community residents and people directly affected by the findings will help you reach diverse sectors of your community and build support for your cause.

2. Community education

Community education can involve different types of public dissemination of a message, including community meetings, local media coverage, public service announcements, photo novellas or comics, videos, or materials for specific audiences (such as brochures in different languages).

Materials and messages should be designed for broad public appeal and interest.

They may contain various elements:
- Information on topics of general interest (e.g., “did you know that…?”)
- Recommendations for changes in behavior to improve individual or community outcomes in health and well-being
- Information about existing or recommended policies and programs, with an eye toward building support for future advocacy efforts
- Encouraging public debate about issues of cultural, economic, or social importance (for example, buying locally produced food to support local farms and jobs)

3. Public policy or legal advocacy

Public policy and laws profoundly affect the food system, and may be significantly shaped by advocacy efforts. Advocacy may focus on the creation of new laws and policies, better implementation of existing policies, or the resolution of public disputes that relate to laws and policies.

For example, based on an assessment of retail grocery stores in Hartford, Connecticut, the Hartford Food System advised the State of Connecticut's Attorney General's office not to permit the proposed merger of two grocery chains. The merger would have greatly reduced the number of stores in Hartford, causing significant hardship to area residents. The Attorney General opposed the merger as a result of this advice.

Advocacy may be aimed at politicians (including candidates running for office), government agency officials and staff, or the courts. Advocacy also can target private entities like corporations and businesses to change their policies. For example, a major fast food corporation decided require its suppliers to produce chicken and beef more humanely in response to pressure from advocacy organizations.

One innovative model for policy advocacy is the food policy council. These councils have been organized in recent years to track food issues, provide recommendations to policy makers, and monitor the effects of policy decisions. They can provide an effective forum for broad-based dialogue and action on local food issues. Food policy councils may be organized at the city, county, or state level, and can vary quite a bit in their mandates, structures, and functions, and in their relationship to local government. (See Resource List in Appendix 6.)

4. Program or activity development

Your assessment might recommend new programs or improvement of existing programs to address unmet needs or to harness existing resources more effectively. These programs can take many forms, including:
Physical resource development (such as incubator kitchens for job training in food processing, or grocery stores or farm stands in underserved neighborhoods)

Social services development (such as nutrition education for young mothers or targeting food stamp enrollment efforts)

Linking existing resources or services (getting school cafeterias to buy from local farmers; training public housing youth to work in community-based food enterprises)

Modifying existing programs to make them more effective (changing the hours of operation of food pantries to reflect the schedules of clients; or changing nutrition education materials to reflect culturally appropriate diets)

The Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program of the USDA has funded a wide range of projects seeking to enhance community food security. Brief project descriptions are available from USDA's Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service website: http://www.reeusda.gov/crgam/cfp/community.htm.

Prioritizing actions

As you identify possible actions that are suggested by your assessment, you may want to use the same prioritizing process used for your assessment goals (see Chapter 4). The following questions are provided to help your group identify criteria for ranking possible actions. This list is just a starting point; your team may identify other criteria as you discuss possible actions.

1. What is the extent of the problem or need?
   Your assessment research may have helped highlight the most pressing food-related needs in your community, based on factors such as the number of people affected and level of impact.

2. What is the level of concern and support?
   A high level of concern among assessment stakeholders and the community as a whole will make it easier to mobilize action, as will support from other key interests or decision-makers. Similarly, consider whether there is broad agreement on the need for change, or whether taking action may be divisive.

3. What will it take to make these actions happen?
   Every action you undertake will require time, effort, and resources. It's important to evaluate the time and resources required for various actions in comparison to what is available. Also, consider whether someone is willing to take the lead in coordinating the action, and if others are willing to support their efforts.

4. What will these actions accomplish and who will benefit?
   It is valuable to reflect on the potential impacts of proposed change actions and who the likely beneficiaries might be. This will help ensure that change actions are well thought out and appropriately targeted.

5. Will the actions facilitate collaboration?
   Actions will likely be more effective in creating change if they provide opportunities for collaboration between diverse individuals and organizations. Building working relationships and identifying common goals will help build a foundation for continued collaboration in the future.

6. Will the actions foster long-term change?
   It is valuable to consider whether a possible action will help you meet your long-term goals for creating positive change. In some cases, actions that are somewhat more challenging to implement in the short term may go farther toward addressing your long-term goals.
Planning for a follow-up assessment

Your assessment may have generated a great deal of interest, excitement, and momentum in your assessment team and in the community. As you plan and build support for change actions, you may find new questions and resources emerging. This may be a good time to start sketching out a plan for another phase of assessment work.

Follow-up assessments may be easier to implement because there already will be a structure and processes in place. It will be important to get clear agreement from the assessment team to move forward, and to give participants who are not able to extend their participation an opportunity to step down, as well as giving new stakeholders a chance to join the group.

Conclusion

In this Guide, we laid out and discussed a broad set of concepts and activities related to understanding and implementing a Community Food Assessment. To conclude, here's a brief review. We started out with a brief discussion of the current food system and the community food security concept, and introduced Community Food Assessment as a tool to help achieve community food security. We then focused on the Community Food Assessment approach itself, moving from its definition and characteristics, to specific case studies, and then to the process of planning and implementing an assessment. Finally, we ended with a discussion of how to disseminate findings and put your assessment to work.

Our intent has been to offer clear information about how to plan and implement a Community Food Assessment, which we hope will prove useful in your work. We have attempted to strike a balance between offering specific guidance and providing information that is flexible enough to accommodate a broad range of goals, interests, players, and approaches. We realize that any single publication cannot provide all the information and guidance needed to conduct an assessment. Some of that can be gained from the resources listed at the end of this Guide, and some only through experience.

We hope that you found this Guide useful in learning about and perhaps conducting an assessment. We wish you well in your efforts to enhance your community’s food security, whether or not these efforts include a Community Food Assessment. We encourage you to contact the Community Food Security Coalition to let us know about your work—we would love to hear from you!

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