

## Community Food Systems: Visions of a Different Food System

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Food is unlike any other good that is bought and sold in our society because it is a necessity that is needed on a daily basis. In the United States, we have an incredibly complex system that delivers food to well-stocked supermarkets that are open 24-hours a day, 365 days a year – at least in some places. Many citizens have no idea where their daily sustenance comes from; thus, they do not actively participate in making decisions about who grew and processed the food they eat, where and when that food was produced, how it got to them, or who among their neighbors gets to eat it. Citizen-eaters have little knowledge in this arena because our food system is both *globalized* and *industrialized*, and the answers to many of these questions are extremely difficult to find. In the globalized food system, we have placed most decisions about food in the hands of policymakers and giant agribusiness corporations that operate around the globe.

The decisions about food made by these actors do not always translate into positive impacts at the community level for farmers, eaters, small business people, farm workers, school children and the environment. Those who feel left out of or uncomfortable with the dominant food system are visioning alternatives and putting their visions into action through a multitude of food system alternatives across the country and the world. Here we focus on those that are community-based – or *localized*, *personalized* food systems where personal relationships embedded in community interaction are at the heart of producing and consuming food.

### *Defining a Community Food System*

It's difficult to define what a community food system is because there exist so many visions and projects that are creating community food systems. In *Growing a Community Food System*, Steven Garrett and Gail Feenstra offer this definition:

A 'community food system' is one in which sustainable food production, processing, distribution and consumption are integrated to enhance the environmental, economic, social and nutritional health of a particular place. It is a long-term goal toward which many communities are striving.<sup>1</sup>

Building from the idea that we are all interconnected in multiple ways and that our food system should reflect this, activists in Kansas City developed a Food Circle concept. The goal of a Food Circle is to develop a community-based, sustainable food system by reshaping the relationships surrounding food. In the past, we have created food systems that are linear and hierarchical, firmly separating farmers and eaters from each other. However, within a Food Circle, farmers are as important as eaters, grocers, chefs and processors because all are involved in the creation and consumption of food. Thus, everyone enters the

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Garrett and Gail Feenstra. 1999. *Growing a Community Food System*. Pullman, WA: Western Rural Development Center

circle at one point and maintains connections to other food system actors through the circle.

In a slightly different twist, the Community Food Security Coalition uses the idea of community food security to express the notion of community food systems. Community food security is a holistic approach to the food system that advocates seeking comprehensive solutions to solve the nation's food and farming crises. The five basic concepts on which community food security rests are:

- To meet the food needs of low-income communities through job training, business skill development, urban greening, farmland preservation and community revitalization.
- To focus on building up the community's food resources to meet its own needs.
- To develop self-reliance/empowerment by enhancing individuals' abilities to provide for their own food needs.
- To protect local agriculture by building better links between farmers and consumers.
- To take a food systems approach that incorporates collaborations between multiple agencies, groups and households and the linking together of all aspects of the food system.<sup>2</sup>

### **Attributes of a Community Food System**

Rather than defining what a community food system is, many of us tend to describe attributes of the kind of food system we want, and then work towards making sure they exist in our own community's food system. The important thing to remember is that community food systems continually evolve. A community food system is:

- *Community-centered:* A community food system should be focused on meeting the cultural, physical, social, economic and environmental needs of all members of the community.
- *Relational:* A community food system should encourage the development of just, sustainable relationships between the people who grow the food, process the food and eat the food.
- *Place-based:* While community can exist in many forms, the production and consumption of food should be linked to people in a particular place and time. Some farmers express this as "food that grown by a farmer whose face you can see and whose farm you can visit." In this context, seasonal changes in the food system provide new opportunities for farmers and eaters and do not act as constraints. In other words, "Food is grown, harvested, processed, marketed, sold, [and] consumed as close to home as possible."<sup>3</sup>
- *Participatory:* It is important that *all members* – from the poorest to the richest, from the youngest to the oldest – of the community are involved in all aspects of growing

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Fisher, Andy. 1997. "What is community food security?" *Urban Ecologist* 2:3-4.

<sup>3</sup> Kloppenbrug, Jack Jr., Sharon Lexberg, kathryn DeMaster, George W. Stevenson and John Hendrickson. 2000. "Tasting food, tasting sustainability: defining attributes of an alternative food system with competent ordinary people." *Human Organization* Vol. 59(2):177-185.

and eating food. In a nutshell, all of us should make decisions about what food is grown—where, how and by whom – and how food is distributed.

- *Healthy:* Community food systems should ensure that food production and consumption is healthful for people, farms and places.
- *Includes citizen-eaters:* Food production and consumption is embedded in the community. All members of the community have access to food when and where they need it.
- *Supportive of the local economy:* Community food systems are part of community-based economics; producing, processing and eating food where it is grown keeps benefits in the local community to be shared among all its members.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Making Community Food Systems Work***

Community food systems don't happen overnight. They evolve over time and require the efforts of many different people from all parts of the food system. Community food systems take incredible ***knowledge***: how to grow, process, market, distribute and cook food that is connected to people in a particular place and time. In addition, community food system advocates must know how the food system that serves their community is currently structured. Community food systems also require the rebuilding and creation of ***infrastructure***. This includes everything from land, equipment, trucks, storage, and retail spaces to regulations, policies and education.

Community food systems are created from the ground up, one step at a time. Numerous community food projects exist throughout the country and the world, but every journey is unique. That's what makes the notion of community systems so vital and wonderful.

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<sup>4</sup> Adapted from the attributes described by Kloppenburg *et al.* 2000.