
TRANSFORMING AMERICAN FOOD SYSTEMS

The path to Food Sovereignty

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Part II: Towards Food Sovereignty

The concept of food sovereignty is a useful guide on the route towards food justice for historically marginalized communities. Food sovereignty begins by establishing the universal right to healthy, community-appropriate food for all income levels. The concept transcends the issue of access by promoting equity in local food systems, and advancing a community's ability to create sustainable, equitable, profitable, and dignified relationships with the food they eat and the land that it comes from. In essence, communities should not only be given the resources they need to nourish themselves, but they should also have a say in how their local food system evolves as well as an ability profit from its growth.¹

Programs and policies that seek to advance food sovereignty could utilize the following levers:

- 1) Food-sector business and skills training programs
- 2) Low/no interest loans for local food-sector businesses, as well as for farmland purchases and farm business enterprises
- 3) Local food councils that serve as a conduit for Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP) funding
- 4) Programs specifically tailored to advancing food systems for communities of color who have been historically excluded from the advancement of the food industry

Much of this progress can be made through the vehicle of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), one of the largest anti-poverty programs in the country. In 2017,

¹ Clendenning, Jessica, Wolfram H. Dressler, and Carol Richards. "Food Justice or Food Sovereignty? Understanding the Rise of Urban Food Movements in the USA." *Agriculture and Human Values* 33, no. 1 (March 1, 2016): 165–77. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-015-9625-8>.

SNAP served over 40 million individuals with in-kind food benefits that valued over \$60 billion.² SNAP is a crucial policy lever to utilize in an effort to transform American food systems, firstly because of its immense scale and scope, and secondly because it provides a important pillar of support for ethnic and racial minorities in the U.S. (over 40% of SNAP participants are racial/ethnic minorities).³

Proponents of SNAP highlight its' ability to buffer the economy against economic downturns and tend to prize its administrative efficiency. In 2017, 93% of SNAP funds went directly to participants, the rest was spent in a mix of administrative costs and project funding. While the program's efficiency is impressive, SNAP underinvests in its administrative capacity, particularly at the local level, hindering its ability to assist the individuals it aims to serve. In 2015, only 70% of eligible individuals from low-income families actually received SNAP benefits.⁴ That leaves over 17 million eligible participants who did not receive benefits. Bolstering the administrative capacity of SNAP—and distributing the funds across preexisting SNAP offices—could ensure that *all* low-income families receive the assistance they need.

Government Funds for Community Organizing

The boost in SNAP funding at the local level could also be used to create an essential new unit at SNAP offices: the SNAP community outreach team. The unit could bolster the overall goals of the program by determining local obstacles to SNAP adoption and working with local grocers and other food distributors to increase the availability of community-appropriate,

² “SNAP Data Tables | USDA-FNS.” Accessed May 8, 2019. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>.

³ Grummon, Anna H., and Lindsey Smith Taillie. “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation and Racial/Ethnic Disparities in Food and Beverage Purchases.” *Public Health Nutrition* 21, no. 18 (December 2018): 3377–85.

⁴ “Policy Basics: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, January 7, 2009. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/policy-basics-the-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>.

nutritionally rich foods. Ideally, it should be composed of local community members with demonstrated community organizing abilities. The team should work with community-based organizations and food banks to disseminate information about SNAP eligibility, SNAP-ED nutritional education, and SNAP “double-up” programs that incentivize healthy eating.⁵

Perhaps most importantly, SNAP community liaison units should be charged with the task of organizing Local Food Councils, often referred to as Food Policy Councils (FPC). FPCs are cross-sectoral community-based coalitions aimed at improving access to healthy food, the consumption of healthy food, and community economic development initiatives rooted in food-sector jobs and businesses.⁶ Members on the council may include: local government officials, leaders of community-based organizations, farmers, farm workers, business owners, faith leaders, food security professionals, agricultural extension personnel, academics, restaurateurs, teachers, and otherwise engaged community members. To augment the political power of the council, FPCs should include higher-level public officials, such as a city councilmember or a head of a county agency. Close ties to local government, strong leadership, and a commitment to policy engagement are three critical elements of an effective FPC.⁷

Once convened, governments should support LFCs by providing meeting spaces, information, and direct compensation for the time of council members. However, it is important that LFCs maintain structural autonomy from the government in order to navigate the fine line

⁵ “Double Up Food Bucks Expands to Grocery Stores.” Accessed May 12, 2019.

<https://www.usda.gov/media/blog/2013/07/24/double-food-bucks-expands-grocery-stores>.

⁶ Duitsman, Pam, L. Moore, and D. Mehrle. “Building Local Food Councils to Improve Community Food Security.” *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, SNEB 2016 Annual Conference Proceedings, 48, no. 7, Supplement (July 1, 2016): S43.

⁷ Gupta, Clare, Dave Campbell, Kate Munden-Dixon, Jennifer Sowerwine, Shosha Capps, Gail Feenstra, and Julia Van Soelen Kim. “Food Policy Councils and Local Governments: Creating Effective Collaboration for Food Systems Change.” *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* 8, no. B (October 17, 2018): 11–28.

between governmental goals and community interests. This distance enables FPCs to effectively advocate on behalf of its constituents for locally appropriate food policy changes, such as: minimum wage increases for farmworkers, expanding the amount of city-managed properties used for community garden and farming, community-appropriate nutrition incentive bills, or “good food” purchasing policies for local businesses.

Furthermore, LFCs should serve a conduit for USDA grant funding through the Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP). The LFPP is a USDA program that provides grant funds to launch, develop, and expand local and regional food business enterprises. Once organized, LFCs could serve as the organizing agent that requests proposals for community food initiatives, such as the creation of local food processing and distribution centers (food hubs)⁸, kitchen business incubators, farm-to-school supply chains, or economic development programs that advance food-sector needs specific to their community.

Advancing Economic Self-Sufficiency through Food-Sector Development

Communities of color, many of which have historically generated enormous profits for owners of agricultural enterprises, should have more than just a say in how their local food system gets developed. They should be afforded the ability to own, and benefit from, key elements of their food system such as grocery stores, restaurants, food processing, and food distribution and packaging businesses. FPCs should be tasked with the objective to develop food-sector training and businesses development programs in conjunction with local business

⁸Cleveland, David A., Nora M. Müller, Alexander C. Tranovich, D. Niki Mazaroli, and Kai Hinson. “Local Food Hubs for Alternative Food Systems: A Case Study from Santa Barbara County, California.” *Journal of Rural Studies* 35 (July 1, 2014): 26–36.

development organizations, such as community development corporations (CDCs) or Business Improvement Districts (BIDs).

Crucially, any employment or business training courses should be taught by people who are of the community and speak the language of the community. Upon completion of an entrepreneurship course, the program should guide participants through the process of applying for food-sector specific funding programs. Any loan program formed to advance equitable food systems must not disqualify people who lack collateral or the credit history to qualify for traditional loans. Able entrepreneurs of color are too often excluded from opportunities to earn income based on their credit score, indirectly benefiting wealthier entrepreneurs who have inherited sufficient collateral.⁹

The food sector is ripe for economic coordination between businesses and skill development programs, as agri-food is one segment of the economy that is clearly poised for continued growth and expansion.¹⁰ Furthermore, there is growing awareness of the potential for food-related jobs to provide a form of therapy for people recovering from drug addiction, and even serve as a crucial lifeline for the formerly incarcerated.¹¹ Working in the restaurant industry is one of the few avenues that individuals with a criminal record have to achieve gainful employment, as background checks and formal educational experience are seldom required. While the restaurant industry has a reputation for engaging in excessive alcohol and substance abuse, kitchen training programs that prepare formerly incarcerated individuals for restaurant

⁹ Coco, Giuseppe, and Giuseppe Pignataro. "The Poor Are Twice Cursed: Wealth Inequality and Inefficient Credit Market." *Journal of Banking & Finance* 49 (December 1, 2014): 149–59.

¹⁰ Freudenberg, Nicholas, and Emma Tsui. "Training New Community Health, Food Service, And Environmental Protection Workers Could Boost Health, Jobs, And Growth." *Health Affairs; Chevy Chase* 30, no. 11 (November 2011): 2098–2106.

¹¹ Krishna, Priya. "A Restaurant Takes On the Opioid Crisis, One Worker at a Time." *The New York Times*, July 11, 2018, sec. Food. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/10/dining/addiction-recovery-restaurant-dv8-kitchen-kentucky.html>.

work have demonstrated successful outcomes for both restaurant businesses and the formerly incarcerated. In this way, food-sector training programs can be used as a tool to promote economic self-sufficiency, reduce recidivism, and redress some of the damages that the criminal justice system has levied against minority communities.

Furthermore, all communities should be granted the opportunity to grow their own food. Local FPCs may align with others in the region to cultivate a purview that spans across urban, suburban, and rural divides, ultimately guiding city and county efforts to acquire abandoned or blighted properties to be repurposed as sites for food production. Governments should create a land bank program for these urban, suburban, or rural sites that could be leased out or sold to eager food entrepreneurs, such as those successfully completing a business training program, or other organized community-based food producing entities. The creation of a revolving loan fund for the land leases and acquisition loans would allow the program to move at a pace that is consistent with its success.

Conclusion

The ingredient that links SNAP-funded community organizing efforts, food policy councils, food-sector employment and business programs, and community-led agricultural land banks, is an emphasis on local determinism. In order to redress the historic injustices of food production in the United States, diverse neighborhoods must be enabled to create food systems that suit their diverse needs. Only by honoring a community's sovereignty in the process—and advancing local ownership over many steps in the local food supply chain—can federal funding flow into a community in a way that is congruous with its specific needs and preferences.