V. GENERAL STRATEGIES FOR PLANNING AND ORGANIZING [F-10, F-11, & F-12]

This section begins with ways to assess the larger resource impact of your region and your local food system. This is followed by two short pieces that lay out basic planning and strategic sequences and elements. How to involve community groups in local food system visioning and discussion is outlined next. Finally, three detailed examples of community food system assessments are included.

A. The larger context [F-10]

1. Sustainability and urban impacts: "How Big is Our Ecological Footprint?" Mathis Wackernagel with The Task Force on Planning Healthy & Sustainable Communities, University of British Columbia, November 1993.


C. Preliminary Planning and Strategizing: [F-11]

   1. “Developing and implementing your own local plans.” Ken Dahlberg and Tom Hemingway, 1995


C. Engaging other people and groups through visioning processes: [F-12]


D. Examples of detailed community food system assessments: The "Food Files" series. [F-12]


ASSESSING YOUR LOCAL FOOD SYSTEM
by Tom Hemingway

Introduction

This section is designed to help structure an exploration of your local food system. The section is organized according to various domains, such as ecology, food production, economics, and so on. Each domain includes a set of questions to get you thinking. Your food system will probably look very different from other local food systems around the country, so a "one size fits all" essay won't stimulate your thinking as well as some open-ended questions. You may choose only one or two of these questions to pursue as you look at your local system, or you may come up with your own questions.

Each section begins with a brief discussion of the topic area, followed by questions. The first questions deal with basic information about the topic area that can help you determine whether your community faces a particular problem in that area. The final set of questions deals with a few of the specific policy issues you may choose to address in your local action group.

The questions are intended to "prime the pump", that is, get you thinking in new ways about the relationships between different activities and institutions. It isn't necessary to answer any of the questions at this point. Look at them instead to guide discussions at preliminary planning meetings and visioning events, or just to gauge how much you know now about your food system and the resources that are available to you.
General Socioeconomic Structures and Trends

The food system is much broader than one or two industries or communities. The following questions are designed to expand your thinking about food in relation to your community's social organization and economics. Use these questions to get the big picture: what are the local resources, and what are the local needs? What are the major social problems in the area? How do these problems relate to food system problems?

Population & Demographics

1. What is the population of the area, population density, variations in density.
2. What categories were used in census? (Socioeconomic status, ethnicity, etc.). How are these groups distributed?
3. Draw an age pyramid for the community (this may have already been done by the Census Bureau).
4. How many residents own their home? How many rent?

Economics

5. What are the major economic activities of the area? Who are the major employers? In what sectors? (e.g. raw material extraction, agriculture, processing, manufacturing, service sector, other sectors, such as government employees)
6. What is the distribution of incomes?
7. What is the unemployment rate? Does unemployment have seasonal variations? How much has unemployment changed over the last few years?
8. How many people are on public assistance? WIC? Food stamps?

Government

9. How much is the local (city, county) budget for this year? Where does the money come from?
10. How much of the budget is for social services? How much for other uses?

Social action

11. Do any businesses contribute to food banks, or otherwise respond to local social needs?
12. What volunteer organizations assist poor (e.g. churches)? Are they organized into coalitions?
13. What other charitable organizations operate in the area? Where do they get their money?

Policy issues

14. What is the political climate for promoting social issues? Is there much precedent for local public funding of innovative programs?
15. What are the key policy issues identified by city and county government? by local newspapers? by others?
16. What type of development projects are sponsored?

Some suggested resources...
* Start at the local Chamber of Commerce.
* Census data is available at your local library.
* Interview public administrators, directors of social service programs, charities, churches, United Way. Check with the state Department of Human Services or Department of Economic Security.
Ecological Factors

The first set of questions is to get you thinking about the local ecosystem and to help you identify some of the natural resources of your area and how they interrelate. The next set of questions is to help you understand the impact of human settlements on the environment including those of native Americans prior to the arrival of Europeans. The last set of questions brings us back to the issue of food systems: how does the environment affect what you eat, and how does what you eat affect the environment?

The Local Ecosystem.

1. Describe the local watershed. How much area does it cover? What are the water sources? What are the patterns for surface water and underground water, annual and seasonal precipitation.
2. Describe local soil types, the depth of the topsoil, porosity, rock formations.
3. Describe the local climate, temperature. Don't forget seasonal variations.
4. Describe the local flora. Forests, ground cover. Geographic distribution. Changes over time in vegetation (more or less forest, desertification, etc.).
5. Describe the local fauna. Distribution of habitats. Changes over time in populations of local species.
6. Describe the bioregion that you are in.

Interaction between humans and ecosystem.

7. Who were original inhabitants of the area? What were their settlement patterns? What plant and animal species did they consume? What was their impact on the environment? (e.g. agriculture, herding, clearings, earth works, trails, stream diversions, dams, introduction of new species, or depletion of species, etc.)
8. What were subsequent settlement patterns over time? How has human occupation affected the environment? e.g.:
   - level of water table, dams, wells, irrigation, or other water diversion
   - soil degradation, overfarming, addition of chemicals
   - air and water pollution
   - introduction of new plant and animal species. Domestic species, new pests.
   - depletion of indigenous plant and animal species

Ecology and the food system.

9. What can you infer about the sustainability of current land use from an historical perspective on the environment?
10. How has the environment influenced what people in your area eat? To start with, compare local cuisine with that of other parts of the state or country, and ask how much the ecology has to do with those differences.
11. How does what you eat impact the environment? Is local food production hurting or sustaining the ecosystem? What about the "externalities" (unintended impacts) of agriculture, food processing & packaging, population growth, urbanization, etc.?

Some suggested resources...

* Interview older rural residents, meteorologists, local historians, archaeologists, anthropologists. Visit local museums. Look at old plat books, census data, since European occupation, if your library has them.
Agriculture

Urban residents, and even rural residents who work in the city, are often completely unaware of the agricultural activities in their area. Stereotypes from the 1940s and 1950s still determine much of the non-farmer's perception of farming. But since World War II, the percentage of Americans engaged in farming has dropped from 10% or 15% to less than half of one percent. Family farms are now being farmed by what may be the last generation of family farmers. Farms are more specialized and mechanized, and produce far less for home or local consumption than even one generation ago. Farming decisions now are driven by federal funding policies, world market prices, the availability of capital, and other forces that originate in Washington, Wall Street, or beyond.

1. How many farmers do you know? How many urban residents that you know have ever met a farmer, or visited a farm? How many farms in your area?
2. What is the average age of farm owners in the area? How did they enter farming? What agricultural education did they receive (e.g. high school ag, FFA, university programs, etc.)?
3. What agricultural products are produced in the area?
   - fruit & vegetable crops
   - commodities (soybeans, corn, oil seeds)
   - livestock & dairy
   - hybrid seeds or nursery plants sold to other farmers
   - specialty crops (e.g. herbs, medicinals, "luxury" food items?)
   - non-food agriculture (agricultural inputs, fibers, lumber, ornamental plants, sod, tobacco)
4. Where do these products go for processing? After processing, where are they distributed?
5. How much produce is already produced locally for local consumption? Has this changed over the years? Why?
6. Do small farms produce different types of crops from large farms? How do they differ?
7. How is farm labor utilized? When are the labor peaks and troughs? What are the sources for farm labor? Do the farmers themselves hold other jobs, or do they work year-round on the farm? Which crops are the most labor intensive?
9. What growers' associations are in the area? Besides the Farm Bureau, there are often associations for each type of product, e.g. apple growers' association. What activities do they engage in? What is their role in setting prices?
10. Do area high schools have a chapter of the Future Farmers of America? 4-H? Ecology Club? What are their primary activities? Can linkages be created between these youth organizations and some local food issue?
11. Is any farm land available to rent to gardeners? Are U-pick operations common? Or gleaning?
12. Is there a local homesteading movement? Or a movement of urban residents occupying old farms? Or a land trust movement? How well do these movements relate to established farmers?
13. What is the history of farming in the area? How has agricultural production changed over time, viz technology, crops, geographic distribution of farms? Have there been changes in the last few decades in land ownership, or land use? How much farm land been converted to residential, industrial, or other commercial use?

Policy Issues

14. What are the major economic and legal issues that concern farmers?
15. How is local farming affected by subsidies, export policies, or trade agreements?
16. What do politicians do to "get the farm vote"?

17. What are the goals and objectives of local agricultural extension programs? Who determines those goals?

18. What efforts to preserve local farm land are in place? How knowledgeable are the local citizens about farm land preservation? What types of zoning laws control development?

19. Are there Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms in the area? How many people subscribe?

Some suggested resources:

- Talk with farmers personally at farmers' markets and at roadside stands.
- Visit with people at the Farm Bureau, and the feed stores and hardware stores in rural communities.
- Meet the local agriculture extension agent, and representatives of local growers' associations.
- Get a tour of a few local processing and packing plants, and find out who their suppliers are, and where their products go.
- Get plat maps of the county from the County Courthouse, to look for patterns of land ownership. Compare them with plat maps of twenty and thirty years ago to see how things are changing.
- Visit the local employment office to learn about the changes in the demand for labor, the sources of that labor, and what exactly that work is.
Gardening

John Jeavons says that, using environmentally sound, low-input techniques, a family of four can grow enough produce for a year in a garden of only 800 square feet. Gardening provides plenty of cheap food, exercise, and release from stress. There are many easy-to-learn techniques that control pests, fertilize the soil, and save water without using chemicals or high-tech machinery, allowing gardening to be a very efficient and environmentally friendly way to produce food. Since even growing just a little food is part of the solution, community gardens are a popular and visible response to food needs (and social needs) in urban areas.

1. How many households have gardens? How many household gardens produce food crops? Are there any patterns in who gardens, e.g. certain neighborhoods, social classes, ethnic groups that seem to have more gardens than others? Can you find out why some groups are more likely to garden than others?

2. Are there community gardens? How many? How are they organized? If they are no longer in use, why not?

3. Does anyone have rooftop gardens, such as on top of high-rises? Even if there aren't any gardens of this type, are there good locations for rooftop gardening? How about other innovative gardening techniques, such as intensive or raised bed gardening, or container gardening?

4. What happens to garden surplus (e.g. if someone grows too many zucchinis)? Garden waste (weeds, discarded plant parts)?

5. Are there local garden clubs? Do they have a special section for food plants and for ornamental plants? Are there seed saver clubs for heirloom and landrace varieties?

6. Are there public organizations that encourage people to grow food (or discourage them?) These might be schools, social services, agricultural extension services, etc.

7. Is there a network of gardeners who practice xeriscaping, low input gardening, or integrated pest management?

8. Is local farmland or fallow land available for rental to garden groups? Is it close enough to be practical? Is there technical help available for novices?

Policy Issues

9. Is city land available for community gardens that is not being used? Who administers the use of this land?

10. What policies affect the creation or maintenance of community gardens and open spaces?

Suggested resources

* Visit local nurseries, garden supply stores, and nature centers to find out about gardening clubs.
A community food co-op may have information about community supported agriculture, or community gardens.

Food Processing

The price of the food is determined not so much by the grower, but by those who process, repackage, distribute, and retail the final product. The more stages of processing, the higher the price at the store. Those who sell food try to gauge the varying budgets and tastes of their customers, and may or may not be on target. Diets have changed greatly in the United States since World War 11, as we became more interested in ethnically diverse cuisines. Also, as both husband and wife entered the job market, we have demanded foods that are packaged more conveniently, and that are easier to prepare. Concern about nutrition has grown, so now foodsellers compete to sell food that is packaged in individual servings for the microwave, that are fat free, and still look "international" But there are other unintended impacts: more energy consumption, more consumption of paper and plastic, more fuel for transportation, and more pollution. Low-tech and small scale processing can include canning (in tins or jars), freezing, milling, curing, or drying separate products (tomatoes, pickles, meat, flour), or mixed products (saucers, seasonings).

1. Where do local agricultural products go for processing? Are unprocessed goods shipped out of the area for processing? Are there any value adding activities that could be done locally?
2. Are products brought from elsewhere for processing? Distribution centers?
3. Do local products make a "round trip" from local producers, to a regional processing, repackaging, or distribution point, and then back to your community grocery store? How much of the price reflects this?
4. Do food co-ops engage in small scale food processing?
5. Are there community canning centers, or other facility for people to do their own food processing? e.g. church kitchens, gardening clubs?
6. Where can people learn small scale processing?
7. Do specialty grocery stores sell the products of small-scale, low-tech, or cottage industry processors? Where do these products come from?
8. Do local fruit and vegetable processors (if there are any) allow the public to salvage discarded produce? For example, crooked carrots, cracked cabbages, blemished tomatoes?

Policy issues

9. What are the obstacles than hinder the development of local value-adding activities? Do local development agencies encourage activity in the food sector?

10. What are the commerce and food safety laws that may discourage small scale food processing enterprises?

11. Are there health regulations concerning the salvage or recycling of irregular food products?

Some suggested resources...

- Food co-ops.
- Farmers' markets.
- Gardening associations.
- Local processing plants.
- Small business associations.
Local Food Markets

Once foods are ready for consumption, they may be sold and consumed locally or shipped across the world. Or they may be sold to regional distributors, who return them to the original community via local grocery store chains. Our local grocery store in Kalamazoo carries snow peas that were grown in Central America, then shipped to a town on the Canadian border for redistribution in the Midwest! In addition to mapping the travels of food, market issues include decisions about what will be sold where, when, and for what price.

1. Are local farmers organized into growers' associations? What are the goals of these associations? How are product prices established? How much of the retail price goes to the farmer? What are the rights and obligations of members?
2. Do local farmers participate in farmers' markets, co-ops, or other alternative markets?
3. Locate on a map the different types of grocery stores. Perhaps identify them for size, or specialty (e.g. co-ops, delis, Middle Eastern shops, cheese & wine shops, etc.) or local versus nonlocal ownership.
4. How many stores are located on bus routes? Are the bus schedules adequate for shoppers without cars?
5. How much do stores buy locally? Do the stores vary in their buying patterns?
6. How much do prices vary for the same items from store to store? What are the reasons for this variation?
7. Sometimes local growers are dissatisfied with their dealings with local grocers. Is that the case in your area? Ask local growers associations about their local buyers.
8. What are the food sources for institutions such as hospitals and schools? Where do local restaurants get their food? Are there linkages between these institutions and local producers? Fast food restaurant chains may be particularly prone to the "round trip food" syndrome if they buy from a central source.

Policy issues

9. Is there competition between local producers and food imports? What are laws or trade practices that address that competition?

10. How do merchants decide what to put on their shelves? Are there trade practices that favor large corporations over smaller, local companies? Ask both grocers and local producers to get both sides of this issue.

Suggested sources of information

- Talk to a local agricultural extension agent about where unprocessed foods come and go.
- Find out about local growers associations, and meet their representatives.
- Meet grocery store managers and find out who their suppliers are.
- Choose a few popular products, and try to trace them all the way back to their source.
Health, Nutrition, & Food Safety

People know that if they don't eat enough, they will become malnourished. Now people are more aware that just being filled isn't enough; we have to eat the right kinds of foods in the right proportions to stay healthy. The connection between food and health is obvious.... or is it? Even people who know what they should eat and how much they should exercise, don't behave according to that knowledge. Diets lean toward bacon cheeseburgers and stuffed crust pizzas, and away from fruits and vegetables. Eating is affected by one's lifestyle as well as one's budget. Eating well depends on how you use your time, and even whether you know how to cook! Since a homemade salad is more work than microwave popcorn, people too often opt for the easier, but less nutritious choice.

1. Have there been local problems related to food safety? E.g. illness due to contaminated fish or other wild game, or due to the poor preparation or storage of food?
2. Is food inspected for pesticide residues or illegal veterinary drugs?
3. Who inspects unprepared food sold in the area? Who inspects grocery stores & restaurants?
4. Are there particular nutrition problems in the area? What groups do they affect? (which ethnic groups, age groups, income levels).
5. Is there a Meals-on-Wheels program in the area? What do they observe about the nutrition status of people with limited mobility?
6. How do people learn about nutrition? Is this effective? Are there other ways to motivate people to better nutrition?
7. Do WIC or food stamp recipients receive adequate instruction about nutrition?
8. Are there special programs to address eating disorders?

Policy issues

11. What are local issues regarding welfare and food stamp recipients? Is there evidence of hunger in the community?

11. What are local regulations concerning the safe preparation and storage of food (e.g. restaurants, local processing plants, delicatessens, salad bars)?

Some suggested resources ...

- Sources of information about nutrition, and the frequency of malnutrition include the local WIC and Food Stamps offices, community health centers, food banks, and the local health department. These organizations frequently have dietitians and nutritionists on staff who are in constant contact with special populations. Ask them about the problems they see in the community, and what they'd do about them.

- The public health department can also tell you about the inspection process for farms, grocery stores and restaurants. Health inspectors are often very aware of the deficiencies of government policies, and could give you a few ideas.
Waste occurs at all stages in the food cycle: production, processing, packaging, distribution, preparation, and consumption. This waste impacts the efficiency of production, the price you pay, and the ability of the environment to sustain the food system. Families with kitchen gardens have long used kitchen waste for composting to invest in next year's garden, but this type of recycling is not so common in large scale production. There is growing demand for recyclable packaging, but there is also a demand for more elaborate presentations that increase the amount of packaging per ounce of food: individual servings, heat-and-serve soups, frozen dinners, all-in-one-package pizza kits & pre-packed school lunches. Even when we do try to be more waste conscious, we still can't decide between "paper or plastic". The questions below are to stimulate your thinking about the disposal of waste and how it relates to other food security issues.

1. How are food and agricultural waste managed? Where does it come from? Where does it go? How is food waste handled differently from other solid waste? Are there special regulations intended to control disease?
2. What are the most common types of household waste?
3. Is there community-wide recycling? How is it organized? What items are recycled? What is the recycled output? Is the output also recyclable?
4. Do any stores give discounts if you bring your own container, basket, bags, etc.? What kinds of products can you buy at wholesale price with your own container? e.g. honey, produce, grains, etc.
5. Does the community have neighborhood or municipal composting? How well is it managed?
6. Does the local government have particular problems related to waste management or specifically to food waste? What public health ordinances are related to these issues?
8. Do local farmers permit gleaning? Is gleaning practiced in the community? By whom? How much of the crop surplus is recovered?
9. Are some growers and grocers more interested in waste and recycling issues than others? Do grocery stores live up to their publicized positions on recycling

Policy issues

10. How are decisions made concerning what materials will be collected for recycling, and to whom those materials are sold?
11. Are there laws in your state that discourage litter and waste? How does it work? Has the program been evaluated? If so, how was the evaluation used?
12. How do grocery stores make decisions about discarding waste and recycling? Are the decisions made locally (store by store) or centrally (at company headquarters)?

Sources for more information....

- Talk to the people who collect garbage for the city (they know some things that city hall doesn't!).
- Look at the municipal or state ordinances and other policy on sanitation and recycling.
- Identify some of the leading industries in the area and find out how they manage waste. Visit local waste collection sites, landfills, recycling centers.
This section was developed by Ken Dahlberg, with the help of Thomas Hemingway, a graduate student at Western Michigan University at the time. The attached detailed outline and figure give an overview of how to develop an overall planning process. Obviously, it needs to be adapted to your local conditions, something that the above materials on doing a preliminary assessment of your local food system should help you with. Clearly, this is only one of a number of different ways to develop your own local plans and is meant to help you make sure that you have included most of the relevant factors and developed a planning strategy.

A. Phase 1: The Creation Phase. This is where a small group develops the background and strategy needed to create a new organization or to transform and broaden an existing organization.

1. Develop an initial vision and set of goals based on a broad concept of local food systems [see graphic below as well as F-15 through F-19]
   a. Identify and bring together a small core group to help identify resources, challenges, and opportunities.
   b. Discuss your long-term goals and objectives.
   c. Consider doing a vision exercise [See F-12]

2. Do a preliminary assessment of your food system. This involves the identification of resources, challenges, and opportunities by doing an initial inventory of resources related to your local food system. Briefly consider the following to identify the main issues, actors, challenges, and opportunities. For more detailed questions and suggestions, see section V.B. above.

   a. Identify key stakeholders--existing and potential; which are politically and economically important now?; which are needed in the longer term to build a healthier system?
   b. Arrange a meeting of these key stakeholders to see if they are willing to participate in an effort to create a food policy organization.

B. Phase II: Implementing Your Organizing Strategy. This is where your larger group goes through the same process as above, but in greater depth and with more specific focus on policy needs and opportunities.

1. For this larger group, develop an initial vision and set of goals based on a broad concept of local food systems.
   a. Discuss Long-term goals and objectives.
   b. Consider doing a vision exercise. [See F-12]
2. Develop a deeper understanding of the resources, challenges, and opportunities of your particular food system by going beyond your preliminary inventory to a more in-depth assessment. Again, consider the main issues, actors, challenges, and opportunities relating to the items in section V.B. above. In addition, have each participating group prepare a brief history of food policy issues of importance to them and then jointly discuss the longer-term policy needs of your community.

3. Determine what type of organization or network you are going to be.

   a. Discuss your organizational strategy: what will work best for you? A network a forum, a coalition, a clearing-house type organization, or an action organization or network?

4. Build your organization/network. This includes getting your organization formally established (by-laws; tax-exempt status; officers, etc.) and launching it - hopefully with lots of attendant publicity. During this process also start organizing for the longer-term as well, by planning how to:

   a. Obtain funding and staff support
   b. Structure your committees and/or taskforces
   c. Structure an annual cycle--meetings, workloads; retreats, etc.
   d. Develop procedures for running meetings which include both mechanics (place, minutes, etc.) and group dynamics
   e. Develop a resource base - data, research, reports, a history of your efforts, etc.
   f. Create and distribute publicity

5. Develop policy goals, policy targets, and specific policy campaigns. This includes:

   a. Examining the interactions between long- medium- and short-term policy goals and objectives to come up with realistic policy targets by (1) Assessing bureaucratic feasibility (2) Assessing political feasibility
   b. Developing specific policy campaigns

6. Establish an ongoing set of procedures for operation and evaluation. The above cycles of goal-setting, research and analysis, and policy action can be repeated as the organization as well as conditions change. It is important to build into your annual cycle a formal time to assess successes and failures in order to guide planning for the future. An annual report and retreat is useful here. Also, some sort of outside evaluation can be very helpful.
A STRATEGY FOR CREATING AND OPERATING A LFPO

VISION & GOALS
Discuss/Review at Regular Intervals

INITIAL VISION & GOALS

THE CREATION PHASE [I]

UNDERSTANDING YOUR FOOD SYSTEM
Initial Inventory

ORGANIZE AND TAKE ACTION
Bring Key Stakeholders Together

THE OPERATING PHASE [II]

UNDERSTANDING YOUR FOOD SYSTEM
Assessments of Resources Challenges Opportunities

ORGANIZE AND TAKE ACTION
Create LFPO Specific Policy Goals Policy Campaigns
Eight Elements Critical to the Success of Food System Councils

Prepared by Kate Clancy, June 1988*

(1) Official sanction- necessary legitimation, but not sufficient without ongoing support from local political entities.

(2) Staff- paid for a significant amount of time per week. Accomplishments of all-volunteer councils likely to be minimal.

(3) Funding- for staffing and projects. Councils trying to function with only in-kind support have trouble.

(4) External legitimacy- as measured by (a) representativeness of the council; (b) council's identity (how perceived); and (c) council's function in the community (catalyst? program initiator? convener? other?).

(5) Knowledge base- how much information exists about the local food system, and what members know about sectors of the system other than their own. Requires much time for education.

(6) Power-sharing- constant need to recognize the "creative tension" that exists as attempts are made to allow powersharing and planning in areas in which they have never occurred.

(7) Vision- what system might look like in future is obscure and alien to most people. In the most successful councils, several participants share and express the vision.

(8) Leadership- has been most important element to this point. Leaders must have vision, personalities that encourage sharing and community building, major management skills, significant time commitment, and incredible patience.

* Part of a speech titled "Local Food Councils: A New Tool for Community Health". Presented at Cornell Nutrition Update

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