

A Primer on Community Food Systems:

Linking Food, Nutrition and Agriculture

Introduction

The term "food system" is used frequently in discussions about nutrition, food, health, community economic development and agriculture. The food system includes all processes involved in keeping us fed: growing, harvesting, processing (or transforming or changing), packaging, transporting, marketing, consuming and disposing of food and food packages. It also includes the inputs needed and outputs generated at each step. The food system operates within and is influenced by social, political, economic and natural environments. Each step is also dependent on human resources that provide labor, research and education.

Community Food Systems

Several qualifying terms have been used to describe the food system: simple, complex, local, global and regional. A *community* food system is a food system in which food production, processing, distribution and consumption are integrated to enhance the environmental, economic, social and nutritional health of a particular place. A community food system can refer to a relatively small area, such as a neighborhood, or progressively larger areas – towns, cities, counties, regions, or bioregions. The concept of community food systems is sometimes used interchangeably with "local" or "regional" food systems, but by including the word "community" there is an emphasis on strengthening existing (or developing new) relationships between all components of the food system. This reflects a prescriptive approach to building a food system, one that holds sustainability – economic, environmental and social – as a long-term goal toward which a community strives.

Four aspects distinguish community food systems from the globalized food system that typifies the source of most food Americans eat: food security, proximity, self-reliance and sustainability.

- Food security is a key goal of community food systems. While food security traditionally focuses on individual and household food needs, community food security addresses food access within a community context, especially for low-income households. It has a simultaneous goal of developing local food systems.

- Proximity refers to the distance between various components of the food system. In community food systems such distances are generally shorter than those in the dominant or global food system. This proximity increases the likelihood that enduring relationships will form between different stakeholders in the food system – farmers, processors, retailers, restaurateurs, consumers, etc.
- Self-reliance refers to the degree to which a community meets its own food needs. While the aim of community food systems is not total self-sufficiency (where all food is produced, processed, marketed and consumed within a defined boundary), increasing the degree of self-reliance for food, to be determined by a community partnership, is an important aspect of a community food system.
- Sustainability refers to following agricultural and food system practices that do not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their food needs. Sustainability includes environmental protection, profitability, ethical treatment of food system workers, and community development. Sustainability of the food and agriculture system is increased when a diversified agriculture exists near strong and thriving markets, when non-renewable inputs required for every step in the food system are reduced, when farming systems rely less on agri-chemical fertilization and pest control, and when citizen participation in food system decision-making is enhanced.

Goals of Community Food Systems

Building a community food system requires comprehensive or holistic approaches to meeting the food needs of people living in a particular place. Efforts to develop community food systems address multiple goals simultaneously:

- Optimized health, reduced risk of diet-related chronic diseases, and increased enjoyment of food among community members.
- Dietary change that complements the seasonal availability of foods produced and processed by the local food and agriculture system.
- Improved access for all community members to an adequate, affordable, nutritious diet.
- A stable (or in some cases, expanding) base of family farms that use integrated production practices to enhance environmental quality,
- Marketing channels and processing facilities that create more direct links between farmers and consumers, and, by shortening the distance between these partners, conserve resources needed for transporting food.
- Food and agriculture-related businesses, resulting in stronger community economies through job creation, and re-circulating financial capital in the community. Such businesses could include food processing, or value-adding processing to expand opportunities for locally produced food to be consumed locally.

- Increased public participation in food and agriculture policies that promote local food production, access to local retail and processing markets, and institutional procurement of local agricultural commodities.

Elements of Community Food Systems

There are several well-recognized elements of a community food system:

- Farmers' markets provide the opportunity for eaters to meet and talk directly with the people who grow the food they are buying. By the same token, farmers can learn more, in a direct way, about what their customers want and need to know about the food from their farms. By decreasing the amount of fuel used to move food around, this proximity to food sources increases the environmental sustainability of the system.
- Community and school gardens are recognized as an important source of fresh produce, particularly for underserved populations in low-income neighborhoods, thereby increasing dietary quality and food security. They provide spaces for community interaction, decision-making, problem-solving, creativity and celebration. Community gardens also provide opportunities to learn about food production, develop job skills, increase agriculture literacy, generate food-related businesses, and create links to nearby restaurants and soup kitchens.
- Community supported agriculture (CSA) farms are arrangements whereby a group of people buy shares into the eventual harvest of a farm before the crops are planted. In exchange for their investment into the farm, shareholders receive fresh fruits and vegetables (and sometimes, other products such as local cheeses, fresh flowers, eggs and meats), on a weekly basis throughout the harvest season. By making this investment, CSA members accept part of the financial risks associated with farming. Further, the farmer receives a portion of the cost of production at a time when it is most needed. Many CSA farmers also market through local farmers' markets, which can increase farm profitability and stability.
- U-Pick operations and roadside farm stands provide access to fresh produce direct from the farmer who grew it. Through a U-Pick, the price paid to the farmer is reduced substantially in exchange for harvest labor. In the process, eaters come in contact with farmers, experience another aspect of the food system, and increase their intake of fresh and processed local produce (if some of what they harvest is preserved through freezing or canning, for example).
- Community kitchens are facilities where locally produced, gleaned or recovered foods can be further processed or preserved for members of a community. Food product development often takes place at these

facilities, thereby creating income generating opportunities and products with local identity.

- Small-scale food processing and decentralized root cellars provide infrastructure and technical expertise necessary to launch new food-based businesses. Much of the food we eat is processed in some way and in areas with relatively short growing seasons, such as the Northeast. The use of canned, frozen and stored fruits and vegetables when produce is "out of season" is another way to develop community food systems.

Externalities

The word externality is an economic term used to describe costs or benefits generated by an agent (say a farmer, or a truck driver) that do not register as a cost or benefit to that agent or end-user. The pollution generated by transporting food is not paid for by the trucking company in the price of the fuel, or by the consumer in the price of the food. The external environmental and social costs related to food production, processing, storage, and distribution are seldom accounted for in the price we pay for food at the grocery store register. Community food systems, by narrowing the distance between producers, processors and consumers, have a greater chance of "internalizing" any externalities in the food system and actually reducing many. For example, since the distance food is transported in a community food system is shorter, less fossil fuel is burned, less pollution generated and less wear and tear on trucks and roadways results from the transportation of food. Likewise, because more of the steps in the food system are carried out locally, the loss of food system-related jobs is minimized.

Actions to Create a Community Food Systems

As individuals, consumers can do a lot to support and collectively strengthen community food systems:

- choose a diet rich in locally grown and processed foods. Regional food guides, such as the Northeast Regional Food Guide, provide guidelines to help consumers choose healthful local and seasonal diets.
- ask food stores to buy from local growers and processors.
- ask where items on restaurant menus came from and express interest in eating locally produced and processed foods.
- shop at farmers' markets and food co-ops (which are more likely to offer local, in season, and often organic choices).
- buy a share in a CSA farm or sponsor someone else's share.
- participate in a community or school garden or start a home vegetable garden and share excess with neighbors, a community kitchen or local soup kitchen.
- cook from scratch.

- support policies that favor local farms and other elements of community food systems, join or create a food policy council to assess community assets with respect to the local food system, identify areas of need, and develop strategies collectively to meet those needs.

In order to support local community food systems in their food choices, consumers need:

- access to local foods,
- ways to identify local alternatives,
- ways to learn meal planning and preparation skills,
- an understanding of seasonal variation,
- knowledge of the local food and agriculture system, and
- an appreciation of the benefits of eating seasonally and locally.

Nutrition practitioners can do a lot through their professions to support community food systems as well, such as:

- include considerations about seasonal availability of locally produced foods when providing dietary advice to clients,
- substitute non-local foods in meal plans with foods that are nutritionally equivalent and are produced locally,
- create seasonally varied institutional food service menus that reflect local agricultural production. This might include, for example, the use of root vegetables in the winter in northern climates,
- shift procurement strategies in food service operations toward local food sources, and include information about the sources of foods at the point of purchase.

Conclusion

We all can benefit from learning more about our own food system, and participating in its development. Community food systems offer an alternative to our current approach to meeting our daily food and nutrition needs and promises several social, environmental and economic benefits. As individual stakeholders, we all have a role to play in shaping the future of our community food systems.

References

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