

COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEMS

Toward a Common Language For Building Productive Partnerships^{1,2}

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Interest in food systems and family food decision-making has grown rapidly. That more researchers and educators are addressing issues of family and community food decision-making suggests the topic's importance, and the interdisciplinary diversity of their perspectives suggests the breadth of both the interest and the scope of the problem. The implications of the major ongoing shifts in our food system, including concentration in production, processing, and distribution of foods and globalization in the food system, make collaborating across disciplinary boundaries and among people in universities and communities even more important.

¹This paper is the first of a series on Families, Community Food Systems and Agriculture to support the work of Cooperative Extension in Building Productive Partnerships. We welcome your comments and suggestions. Please address comments to AHG2@Cornell.Edu.

² We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of students enrolled in Rural Sociology 340 during 1998-2000 toward better defining the food system.

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As we have talked with Extension Educators and community members about what we needed for cross-disciplinary approaches to family and community food decision-making, one message is clear. We need a common understanding of the core concepts. These include food system, community, community food system, food security, family, family food decision-making. In response to these requests, we articulate definitions that we hope will facilitate communication by providing a common ground for discussion and allowing people of different perspectives a basis for working toward consensus. We recognize that particular programs and educators have other definitions that reflect their own beliefs, experiences, values, and goals. We draw upon our perspectives from agriculture, sociology, community nutrition, education, communication, and community development. Our perspectives are also no doubt influenced by our childhood experiences growing up on farms in Iowa. Through our research and education projects, we have learned with families, small scale food processors, farmers market managers and vendors, farmers, community gardeners, researchers, and educators and, as a result, our conceptualizations of these concepts have broadened and we have developed a more integrated framework. We recognize that our views too are limited by our own values, goals, and experiences. As part of our work to support CCE as a learning organization, we invite you to join a learning cluster to broaden the discussion of the meanings connected to Families and Community Food Systems and their implications for CCE programming.

Food System

We define the food system broadly to include the foundations for food production, the social aspects of consumption, and relevant government and other policies, as well as the actual growing, processing, and distributing of substances that results in foods that people consume.

Unfortunately, a simple definition cannot capture the complexity of the food system. Therefore, more abstractly, a food system is the set of complicated, interrelated, and often tangled biophysical and social structures,³ processes, and materials that yields plant,

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³**Structure** is a shorthand way of referring the highly complex set of possibilities and constraints that causes, shapes, or otherwise influences the actions and characteristics of things (e.g., trees, ecosystems, people, societies). As we are defining it, structure is not such things themselves, nor their manifested actions, but is the invisible something behind these that leads to these things, their conditions, and their actions. Biophysical structure includes the biological and physical laws that govern ecosystems, living organisms, elements, and

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animal, mineral, and synthetic substances that people define as consumable for sustenance or pleasure.⁴ These structures, processes, and materials include any involved in:

- the agricultural or food manufacturing biophysical base, including land, water, solar energy, and germplasm;
- the social base pertaining to food, including skills, beliefs, knowledge, values, rules, and groups.
- producing, through biological or industrial processes, inputs for agriculture, food processing, or distribution;
- growing plants, animals, bacteria, fungi, or other materials that people eat in natural or processed states, or producing synthetic food components;
- transporting, processing, marketing, and distributing these foods or food components;
- acquiring, preparing, serving, or consuming foods at home or elsewhere;
- dealing with waste or by-products in any part of the system; and
- enacting or implementing public or private policies affecting any aspect of the food system.

Some of aspects of the food system will be carried out commercially and some non-commercially. Although broader than most conceptualizations of the food system, we believe that all of these interrelated components are either a necessary part of the food system or shape it in important ways and, therefore, are important to family and community food decision-making.

Community

Community is a term whose meanings have changed and multiplied with changes in society. As little as 100 years ago it aptly described geographically-situated settings in which people lived and worked together to satisfy their needs for food, clothing, shelter, recreation, and other things. A community's members saw themselves as members of the community and could identify the other people who were also part of it. Community members shared culture, i.e., they shared beliefs and values, had knowledge about each other, and generally agreed upon the rules for appropriate behavior by people of particular ages, genders, and occupations. They had social relationships with each other; relationships which developed through interacting with each other as they collaborated to satisfy their needs and solve their problems (for example, Harper and

inanimate objects. Social structure is mental templates or schema (see Sewell 1992) that people carry in their minds and that shapes their social activities and leads to what we know as society.

⁴ For other perspectives on defining the food system, see (Kloppenborg, Hendrickson, and Stevenson 1996; Sobal, Khan, and Bisogni 1998)

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Lyson 1995). In these relationships, they felt both loyalty to other members of the community and obligations to them. Even then, however, sub-communities based on family, gender, occupation, or other shared experiences existed. Nonetheless, in many ways a community's members depended upon each other and generally were supported by others in times of need. Their mental maps marking their community's geographic boundaries would have been remarkably similar. Except in larger cities, much of the food consumed within a community would have been produced and processed within the geographic area of the community and other nearby communities.

Today, community means different things. Sometimes community is used to refer to geographic areas where people live. This has been labeled community of place. In some such communities, inhabitants may exhibit very few or even none of the other properties embodied in the classical sense of community. Their food and other needs are met by anonymous people far from the locality. Sometimes community is used to refer to social groups formed around particular shared interests or concerns, but without a specific geographic base. This type has been labeled community of interest. Such communities are possible because modern transportation and communication technologies allow social interaction among people who do not live near each other. Most of the time when someone uses the term community, their intended meaning likely is akin to the classical meaning in incorporating elements of both community of place and of interest, yet is not the same.

Senses of Community

Classical
Community of place
Community of interest
Modern

The modern meaning differs from the classical definition because increasing numbers of people, social differentiation, industrialization and globalization clearly have changed the character of mutual interdependence within localities.⁵ The sheer number of people in larger communities implies decreasing proportions of face-to-face relationships among members. In addition, residents of localities have also become more diverse with increasing differentiation of occupations and access to wealth, not to mention ethnic diversity. With increasing industrialization and globalization, exchanges of labor and locally-produced goods have given way to goods produced and services rendered by people unconnected with the people who will use them. Not only are the producers not known first-hand, but often producing the goods and services involves processes about which the community residents are unfamiliar. Knowing neither the producers as people nor the processes of production inhibits empathy and identification with the producers. Therefore, goods and services have become commodities disconnected from producers. Producers and consumers are connected only indirectly through

⁵For a summary of the basic ideas in the changing character of community, see Horace Miner's (1968) review of theories about the differences between rural and urban communities.

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transactions involving money. Therefore the mutual dependence of people in any given locality tends to be much lower than in communities in the classical sense.

Because of the variations across communities, learning what a particular community is like is important for understanding its family decision-making processes, discerning its needs, and for devising ways to effectively meeting those needs. Similarly, what the members of that community want their community to be like is also important for working with them. McKnight (1995:168) describes community vision as understand[ing] the community as the basic context for enabling people to contribute their many gifts. Thomas Moore (1996:46) characterizes a community in which he would like to live as one that judged itself on the happiness of its children rather than on the unhindered flow of its mechanical inventions. He envisions hospitals as being run more like homes than body repair shops and schools being both where children learn how to be persons in community rather than skilled units stuffed with information and where they eat excellent food.

Community Food System

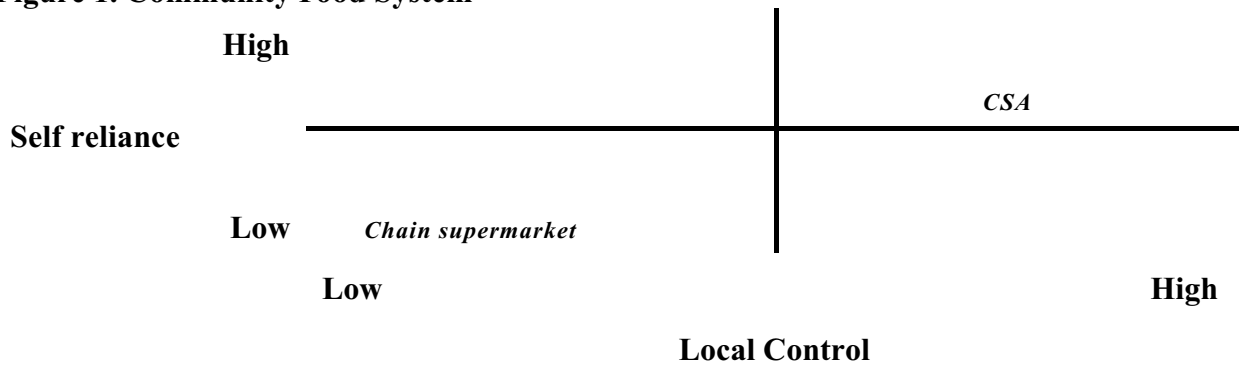
A community food system is that part of the larger food system that is geographically located in a community. Obviously, in most communities in the U.S. today, very few community food systems will be highly self-sufficient and independent of the larger food system. Community food systems can vary from being almost entirely self-reliant to ones in which all food is imported. At the same time, community food systems may vary from being controlled by members of a community to being controlled by outsiders. These two dimensions form a typology with four quadrants as shown in Figure 1. Subsystems within the same community food system might be quite independent of each other and fit into different quadrants. For example, local CSA s might be highly self-reliant and controlled by community members while, the same time, supermarkets could be entirely based on imports and controlled by outsiders.

<p>Community food system: that part of the larger food system that is geographically located in a community.</p>

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Figure 1. Community Food System



Besides self-reliance and local control, other interrelated properties of a community food system include accessibility, healthfulness, safety, sustainability and resilience. Accessibility refers to community members being able to obtain culturally-acceptable foods regularly and reasonably considering their particular constraints of time, resources, and transportation. Healthfulness refers to the available foods containing appropriate nutrients in proper amounts to enable community members to eat balanced diets that include ample amounts of fiber and other substances important for health. Safety refers to the provided foods being free of harmful levels of pathogens, toxic natural materials, and man-made chemical contamination.

Sustainability refers to the capability of the food system to continue to produce indefinitely. That is, produce food while not depleting renewable resources, not using nonrenewable resources at levels beyond which renewables can be substituted, and not generating pollution at rates greater than can be processed by the ecosystem into harmless substances (Daly 1990). Obviously, the community food system sustainability is related to and affected by other systems within the community and larger social and biophysical contexts.

Resilience pertains to the capacity of the food system to continue to supply food in the face of unusual weather, social upheavals, or other disturbances. A resilient food system would be based on many different kinds of substances defined as food, high biodiversity in staple crops and livestock, social arrangements resistant to disruption by conflict, and social flexibility in food preparation skills and food preferences. Resilience is not the same as sustainability because a system could be sustainable in the long term, yet be susceptible to short term disruptions.

Food security is another important property of community food systems that is affected by the previously discussed properties. The Community Food Security Coalition (2000:2) defines food security as all persons obtaining at all times a culturally acceptable nutritionally adequate diet through local non-emergency sources. The Coalition also emphasizes community

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| <p>Community Food System Properties:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-reliance Control Accessibility Healthfulness Safety Sustainability Resilience Food security |
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development for the long-term achievement of food security in addition to meeting the short-term food needs of individuals. From our perspective, food security would be most attainable by a community food system that was moderately self-reliant and high in local control, accessibility, healthfulness, safety, sustainability, and resilience.

How these properties of a community food system are valued depends upon people's perspectives on lifestyle, health, the environment, self-reliance, community and food itself. Thus, different people will define them differently depending on their values, experiences, and stakes in the food system. For some collaborations, negotiating common definitions may be most important. For others, focusing on common values and goals may be most important. For still others, just getting on with the work may be best.

Family Food Decision-Making

We have defined family inclusively as any configuration of people who regularly eat together, or from the same household food resources, and who mutually influence decisions about food. Thus, our definition of family as a food decision-making unit includes different family forms: single parent families, two-parent families, multi-generational, and unconventional households. Thus, most people are members of families most of their lives.

Family:
any configuration of people who regularly eat together, or from the same household food resources, and who mutually influence decisions about food.

Family food decision-making⁶ is the process whereby families seek to meet the nutritional, social, and taste preference needs of their members by simultaneously:

considering and choosing from the foods they understand to be practically available, considering limits on family resources (e.g. time, money, skills, equipment) developing strategies for mobilizing family resources to acquire the foods, choosing where to acquire the selected foods, deciding who will acquire, prepare, and serve the foods, and who will clean up afterwards, choosing the quantity and quality of particular foods to purchase, prepare, and serve, determining how to prepare the foods (including purchasing them already prepared), determining how the foods will be presented and the rules for eating them.

⁶Individuals living alone make food decisions using the same principles, but without the necessity of coordinating with other family members and taking their desires into account.

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Not all of these issues are negotiated at any particular time. Through interacting with each other over food decisions, members come to agree, or at least acquiesce, to certain accepted practices that we call family food policies. Family food decisions are socially-situated in being affected by the larger social contexts in which they are made. For example, few children are unaffected by advertising and their peers about fast food. Similarly, ants tend not to be a commercially-available food in the U.S.

Family food decision-making:
the process whereby families seek to meet the nutritional, social, and taste preference needs of their members

Although families, and others at the consumption end of the food system tend to be defined as being only consumers, they are also producers in important ways. Not only do they process and serve food, but 19 percent of inner city families in one study reported growing some of their own food (Gillespie, Bokaer-Smith, and Gillespie Jr. 1999). They are also citizens of their communities. Their multiple roles make their engagement in community food decision-making especially important.

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