



March 2014

THE FOOD SYSTEM

Introduction to the Food System

Hunger, food insecurity, nutrition-related chronic disease, the health of our region's lands and waterways, wages, and equal opportunity in the food economy – all of these issues converge in our food system. While the food system can be local, regional, national, and/or global in scale, communities across the country are increasingly focused on strengthening regional systems to promote greater sustainability and resilience, improved health outcomes, economic development, and community building.

What is the Food System?

Sometimes captured by the phrase “from farm to table,” the food system is the interconnected activities that move food from where it is grown to everyone's plates, and finally to appropriately handled waste. Every food system, regardless of scale, typically involves five key phases: production, processing, distribution, consumption, and disposal.

PRODUCTION is the growing, raising, and harvesting of food closer to home. In our region, that may be a farmer in Montgomery County raising vegetables, a producer raising cattle in Loudoun County, a fisherman on the Chesapeake Bay, or an urban gardener in Washington, D.C.

PROCESSING is preparing the food that is grown, caught, or raised. Examples include washing, slicing, or freezing fruits and vegetables to be served as such or used in other preparations, butchering a small flock of chickens on the farm, or turning milk into cheese.

DISTRIBUTION is transporting the food to the marketplace and selling (or donating) it. A farmer may sell a truck of vegetables at the Columbia Heights Farmer's Market, or if they're large enough, they may take a larger truck to a grocer's distribution center where it will be sent to some number of stores. Products from the region are also taken to food hubs, traditional food distributors, and food banks for further distribution to stores, restaurants, service providers, and other venues.

CONSUMPTION is the phase where everyone participates: eating! It is well known that there isn't equal access to good food, so in thinking about the regional food system, there are a number of key issues: how healthy and culturally appropriate the food is, who has access to it and the knowledge to prepare it, and what the food's health impacts will be.

DISPOSAL is handling excess and leftover food. In our region, some of this food is recovered for distribution to those who need it. Some of it, unfit for human consumption, is fed to animals back on the farm. There is some composting taking place to build soils, but a good deal of food waste is simply going into trash bags.

What is a Food Hub?

The USDA defines a regional food hub as a “business or organization that actively manages the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of source-identified food products primarily from local and regional producers to strengthen their ability to satisfy wholesale, retail, and institutional demand.” Food hubs play an important role in aggregating food from small and medium-sized producers who don't have the capacity to serve wholesale and institutional markets on their own.

Why does the regional food system need attention?

Increased demand at our region's food banks, malnutrition, high rates of obesity, farmland loss, and depleted fisheries in the Chesapeake Bay are just a few indicators that our food system is not functioning as it should. However, there are a number of positive programs throughout the Greater Washington region that provide food to those who need it, train the next generation of farmers, and educate residents on how to eat healthfully.

At the same time, there is a distinct lack of regional collaboration, coupled with poor infrastructure, to process and distribute locally grown food. What the region needs is an integrated, transparent, and holistic approach to thinking about food and making investments and policy changes to grow healthier communities.

What Funders Can Do

Funders can most effectively support broad improvements in the food system by considering opportunities to support programming which addresses multiple issues at once. Look for those committed to doing one or more of the following to remove barriers to good food:

- Improving food security while decreasing nutrition-related chronic disease
- Providing universal access to good food
- Increasing investment in the local and sustainable food economy
- Making investments that promote equity in the food system

There are a number of good examples from around the region of nonprofits that are using integrated approaches to reduce food insecurity, improve health and well-being, and build capacity, in service delivery, advocacy, and education. But there is no overall regional framework for collaboration and action which would promote more efficient use of resources.

Our region needs to be strategic in the way that it approaches its food system. We need a multi-sector, regional plan that identifies clear goals for production and consumption, health, equitable participation, and much more. This sort of plan would be an essential tool for raising awareness, identifying problems, and embracing opportunities.

Establishing accurate baseline measurements to benchmark progress in building a more equitable food system in the Greater Washington region is also needed. Although some discussions are taking place on the need for coordinated data collection at the regional level, more support is needed before we can answer questions like:

- Is access to locally produced good food equitable and how is this food priced compared to food from outside the region?
- Has local fresh food access contributed to better public health?
- Who has access to entrepreneurial and employment opportunities in the food system?
- What kind of productive capacity can we expect from our farms and waterways to plan for long-term, regional food security?

What do we mean by good food?

Good food is:

Affordable to and accessible by everyone.

Healthy and nourishing to enable people to thrive.

Fair with no one exploited by its creation.

Environmentally **sustainable**.

Source: Adapted from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation www.wkcf.org/what-we-do/healthy-kids/food-and-community

What Would an Ideal Regional Food System Look Like?

It can start with a vision for removing barriers to good food and strategies for how to achieve this. The six states of New England, for example, are developing a dynamic vision for regional food systems that is grounded in the belief that food is a powerful determinant of all aspects of quality of life, including justice and racial equity. They are contemplating how to locally produce at least 50 percent of their food by 2060. Called Food Solutions New England, this is a multi-phase project involving network development, convening, communication, study, and analysis of several scenarios for a regional food system that produces more of its own food. This highly collaborative effort is spearheaded by nonprofits, universities, and philanthropy. It features annual summits where local, state, and regional delegations comprised of representatives from across the food system convene to build upon ongoing regional efforts and align around priorities and action items that they can undertake most effectively together. For more information on the work of this group, visit www.foodsolutionsne.org.