Policy Brief

Moving Past Security—Cultivating Food Sovereignty: Considerations for Research, Policy, and Practice

Food Security refers to having enough food to lead a healthy life, which includes the availability of food, access to food, and the stability of these factors over time

Food Sovereignty is based on the principle that communities should have agency over the ways in which the food they consume is produced and distributed, allowing for localized and sustainable food systems that promote health and well-being

A food desert is a geographic area in which it is difficult to find and purchase nutritious, fresh food

Why Does This Matter?

Food sovereignty represents an opportunity to confront the way we think about food and food systems by prioritizing food as a human right. Prevailing approaches to addressing hunger are frequently limited to food security, emphasizing that individuals should have enough food, yet more is needed to achieve population well-being. Food sovereignty expands upon this concept, positing that communities have the right to access food that is nutritious, culturally appropriate, and sustainably produced. This means recognizing the necessity of food to promote health and well-being, valuing local food economies and community food practices, and acknowledging the historical and political factors that shape access to food. Lacking access to safe, affordable, and nutritious food is associated with many physical and mental health concerns, such as higher risk for chronic disease, greater levels of stress, depression, and anxiety, as well as poor quality of life. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the continuing climate crisis have only exacerbated existing challenges in local and global food systems.

Implications

The ability to access, prepare, and consume food that is balanced, nutritious, and culturally relevant is foundational to well-being. This ability rests upon supporting food systems that are embedded within and driven by communities in meaningful and sustainable ways. To create such environments, the following implications for research, policy, and practice must be considered:

Implications for Research:

- Elaborate on existing research and measurement of food security to develop more holistic assessment through standardized food sovereignty frameworks and measures
- Gather clear evidence on how food sovereignty improves health outcomes and well-being, economic efficiency, and climate resilience
- Conduct community-based participatory research to understand local needs to guide food sovereignty development

- Distinguish between local food producers and food corporations and assess differential control and involvement in the food market
- Research downstream benefits of food sovereignty efforts for healthcare systems, schools, and other community institutions

Implications for Policymakers:

- In the short-term:
  - Prioritize legislation focusing on food recovery, allowing for the retrieval, repurposing, and redistribution of food that would otherwise be wasted
  - Incentivize and expand access to food assistance programming, such as universal meal programs in schools, and efforts to include nutritious foods in food assistance programs, like double up food bucks
  - Require that large food corporations, manufacturers, and distributors are more equitable and transparent in their employment, sourcing, and distribution practices
  - Establish planning requirements that incorporate space and infrastructure for local food production, such as community gardens and urban farms
- In the long-term:
  - Engage in ongoing partnerships with community representatives and organizations to better understand dynamic and diverse food needs
  - Ground policies in community and local needs, rather than corporate interests, large scale producers, and global supply chains for food
  - Integrate greater consideration of food sovereignty into the Farm Bill through localization of funds, management, and recovery/conservation efforts
  - Require that food corporations adopt environmentally and socially sustainable practices informed by research and community needs

Implications for Planning and Practice:

- Food corporations should:
  - Partner with community food leaders, small-scale food producers and distributors, and local governments to invest in localized food markets
  - Prioritize food production for local markets that maintain fair compensation for local food producers and promote accessible pricing of food products
  - Plan to create greater food access and availability in areas that are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity, using community-driven approaches
- Communities should:
  - Develop food policy councils that foster conversations around community food needs and systems
  - Consider how governing bodies can integrate food justice and health equity into their policies, practices, and the built environment
  - Support community agriculture and local food producers and distributors by purchasing food items directly from local vendors when possible
  - Implement programming that provides nutrition education and knowledge about how to prepare and utilize local food in meaningful ways

Facts at a Glance

- 12.8% of the U.S. population live in areas without access to healthy, affordable food.
- Communities without consistent access to nutritious food are disproportionately impacted by metabolic and diet-related diseases such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and cancer, as a result of stress and poor diet over time

What the Research Says

- Food sovereignty initiatives that promote accessibility and affordability of a variety of foods have been shown to improve nutrition and food security
- Food sovereignty promotes health equity and better health outcomes through reducing disparities in obesity and metabolic disease while increasing access to nutritious food and revival of traditional food producer livelihoods

- Marginalized and vulnerable communities, including racialized communities, children, elderly, and individuals living with disabilities are at greater risk for food insecurity
- Since the beginning of COVID-19, rates of food insecurity have increased, with 15% of families with children classified as food insecure by the USDA
- Climate change is expected to reduce global and local food security by disrupting food availability and access, and making utilization more difficult
- Varied, nutrient rich diets are about $1.50 more expensive per day than diets high in processed and refined foods.
- Each year, 108 billion pounds of food are wasted in the U.S.

- Local and sustainable food production practices lead to climate resilience, including greater biodiversity and carbon sequestration
- Efforts to promote food sovereignty in communities have increased economic opportunities at local levels; a community-based market in Grand Rapids, Michigan generated $31 million in economic activity and supported 764 jobs
- Food sovereignty initiatives have been shown to lessen economic loss in food production
- Collaboration between people and families, food producers and distributors, researchers, policymakers, and local governments that is grounded in community culture and participation are necessary to promote food sovereignty