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Kameshwari Pothukuchi

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# Community Food Assessment

## A First Step in Planning for Community Food Security

*Kameshwari Pothukuchi*

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### Abstract

Community food assessments (CFAs) constitute a first step in planning for community food security. Community food security is a situation in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that also maximizes community self-reliance and social justice. Through a study of nine CFAs, this article discusses their common threads to planning, how a planning approach might strengthen CFAs, and what planners might learn from them. Four CFAs led by professionals with planning backgrounds employed spatial mapping techniques to analyze a variety of issues, explored more and diverse community-food linkages, used multiple sources and methods, envisioned a key role for community planning agencies, distributed their findings widely to a local and national audience of professional planners, and helped place planners in leadership positions of the national community food security movement. Implications of this study for planning education, research, and practice are discussed.

**Keywords:** *food security; community food systems; community food assessment*

*Kameshwari Pothukuchi* is an assistant professor of urban planning at Wayne State University. Her research interests include community food security, citizen participation and collaborative processes, and gender and community development.

Community assessments are activities to systematically collect and disseminate information on selected community characteristics so that community leaders and agencies may devise appropriate strategies to improve their localities. Assessments have informed traditional activities in comprehensive, land-use, and sectoral planning, as well as more recent efforts to promote sustainable and healthy communities in the form of indicators projects (Ammons 1996; Hatry et al. 1992; Sawicki and Flynn 1996). This article discusses community food assessments as a novel manifestation of a traditional planning activity, one that has the potential to both inform traditional planning practice and improve community food planning. Through a study of nine cases of community food assessment (CFA) in communities nationwide (see appendix), this article discusses CFAs as planning tools, the strengths of a planning approach to assessments, and lessons for planners and others in conducting CFAs. This article builds on previous work that urges greater planning attention to food issues in communities (Pothukuchi and Kaufman 2000, 1999; Gottlieb and Fisher 1996).

The article is organized in four main sections. The first discusses major streams through which food flows to and within communities: the dominant, market-oriented food system; the charitable food assistance system; the federal food safety net; and community food systems. Underlying the nascent community food security movement is the belief that community food systems strengthen localities and regions in diverse ways and provide viable alternatives to the other streams. This section introduces CFAs as a tool for enhancing community food security. Nine CFAs are analyzed in a second section by comparing those conducted by urban planners and those without educational or professional backgrounds in planning. A third section discusses how a planning approach may strengthen CFAs, while the fourth identifies lessons from CFAs for improving community food security planning. A concluding section discusses the implications of this article for planning, education, and practice.

### ► Community Food Security

In recent decades, the U.S. food system has made available on supermarket shelves an abundant supply of cheap and diverse food products. Between 1980 and 2000, U.S.

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per capita food consumption grew from about 1,800 pounds to 2,000 pounds per year (Jerardo 2002). Nutritional deficiencies seen in the early 1900s, in children and adults, have all but disappeared. In pockets where hunger and lack of access prevail, government-based and charitable food assistance programs help overcome shortages and malnutrition. This is a story of the great success of American enterprise, technology, and to some extent, social policy.

Four major streams of food flow into communities today. Three of these are tied to the dominant, now global, system of food production and distribution and differ mainly in the channels that make products available to community residents and the rationales and conditions of their operation:

- the mainstream, market-oriented food system currently dominated by large corporations;
- the charitable food assistance network made up of food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens; and
- the federal nutrition safety net with programs targeted at poor children and adults, pregnant women and nursing mothers, and seniors.

All three streams have contributed to communities in numerous and significant ways (Schlebecker 1975; Food Research and Action Center 1991; Gilbert 1982; Poppendieck 1998). All have also posed numerous problems for them. A fourth stream consists of community food systems characterized by closer regional connections between producers, processors, and consumers. Table 1 provides a comparative overview of each stream from the perspective of community economy, health, environment, and local communities' ability to influence each stream. Proponents of the nascent community food security movement (discussed below) believe that community food systems, developed systematically with the guiding framework of community food security, can strengthen localities and regions in multiple ways, alleviate the problems posed by the three dominant streams, and enhance possibilities for community planning—including community food planning.

Community food security provides both a critique of and an alternative approach to food systems compared with the three streams described above. Three principal features characterize this framework: one, it seeks goals associated with progressive planning—equity, health, and sustainability; two, it is comprehensive in its view of food systems and their connections to people, natural resources, and place; and three, it holds community as an indispensable unit of solution to food problems. While consensus has yet to be developed on a definition across its many adherents, here is one that is widely used:

Community food security (CFS) is defined as a situation in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally

acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice. (Hamm and Bellows 2003, 37)

Table 1 summarizes the strengths and weaknesses of the mainstream food system and its three channels of food distribution to communities. In brief, the critiques of the three streams of food by the community food security movement include the following:

- Food sources and related processes are becoming more distant so that consumers have scant knowledge of where their food comes from, how it is produced, and under what conditions, resulting in a lack of interest in the consequences for communities of their consumption choices and an inability of communities to plan (Kloppenborg, Hendrickson, and Stevenson 1995).
- Concerns are mounting about related social and environmental impacts of energy intensive nature of food production, processing, and distribution; the degradation of natural resources; increased production of greenhouse gases; habitat loss; the global exploitation of food workers; and so on. All of society bears the costs of such externalities produced by the current food system.
- Yet another externality relates to the health costs arising from poor dietary choices consumers make in the current context in which the vast majority (94 percent in 1997) of food-advertising dollars are spent on processed and convenience foods, in contrast to fresh fruit, vegetables, or other healthful choices (Nestle 2002; Gallo 1999). An estimated 300,000 deaths per year may be attributable to obesity (Allison et al. 1999); one-third of all cancer deaths are linked to diet (Doll and Peto 1981); and just seven diet-related health conditions cost \$80 billion annually in medical costs and productivity losses (USDA Economic Research Service, n.d., 1).
- The trend toward greater concentration and vertical integration in the global food system places enormous power and resources in the hands of few large, multinational corporations that control activities from farm to fork. Today, the top five grocery firms, for example, account for 42 percent of national retail sales, up from 24 percent in 1997 (Hendrickson et al. 2001). Four companies control 84 percent of the U.S. cereal market (Krebs 1994). The reduction of competition is a prime illustration of the movement toward market failure of the food economy.
- Despite the productivity of the U.S. food system, incidence of hunger and food insecurity<sup>1</sup> is increasing. The USDA reports that in 1999, 10 percent of all U.S. households, representing 19 million adults and 12 million children, were "food insecure." Of these, 5 million adults and 2.7 million children suffered from food insecurity that was so severe that they were classified as "hungry" (Food Research and Action Center 2000). In 2002, the U.S. Conference of Mayors reported that over half of the twenty-five cities surveyed were unable to provide adequate quantities of food to those in need and that nearly two-thirds had to decrease the amount of food provided and/or the number of times people could come in for assistance (U.S. Conference of May-

**Table 1.**  
**A comparative overview of four streams linking food and communities.**

| <i>Issue</i>  | <i>Conventional Market Sector</i>   | <i>Charitable/Voluntary Sector</i>   | <i>Government Sector in Nutrition</i>   | <i>Community Food Systems (informed by community food security framework)</i>   |
|---|---|--|---|---|
| Primary rationales for activities in communities                              | (a) Maximizing sales/profits<br>(b) Increasing efficiency, reducing costs   | (a) Helping individuals and families<br>(b) Contributing to/serving local community (for volunteers, employees)  | (a) Propping commodity prices<br>(b) Preventing hunger, malnutrition among those without access, ability to pay   | (a) Promoting local planning for food systems<br>(b) Promoting links between food and community objectives<br>(c) Creating more localized food systems as alternative to global systems   |
| Units of decision making relative to consumption                              | (a) Individual/family/household<br>(b) Firms, including multinational corporations  | (a) Individual/family/household<br>(b) Nonprofit organizations, charities  | (a) Individual/family<br>(b) Federal agencies   | (a) Individual/family/household<br>(b) Communities of place and/or people (including local government and nonprofits)<br>(c) Local firms  |
| Determinants of individuals' eligibility or capacity to participate in stream | (a) Ability to pay<br>(b) Spatial/cultural access   | (a) Means testing (informal)<br>(b) Referral by central community agency<br>(c) Spatial/cultural access  | (a) Means testing<br>(b) Vulnerability status (children, seniors, disabled, etc.)<br>(c) Spatial/cultural access  | (a) Same as market, government, charity<br>(b) Membership in spatial/cultural community<br>(c) Community decision-making authority or leadership  |
| Benefits or advantages to individuals and households                          | (a) Conventional link to food economy<br>(b) Freedom from stigma<br>(c) Prices, products are competitive<br>(d) Convenience<br>(e) Jobs, business opportunities   | (a) Convenient, expedient source of food for recipients, possibly in addition to government sources<br>(b) Avoidance of government bureaucracy, associated hassles for recipients<br>(c) Ability to divert cash to other necessities such as rent, utilities, etc., by recipients<br>(d) Fostering of spirit of community service for volunteers, employees                | (a) Food safety net in crisis or chronic poverty situations<br>(b) Foods selected for nutrition value<br>(c) Widespread (national) availability   | (a) Greater knowledge of, connection to local food sources and system parts<br>(b) Greater say in local food systems, planning<br>(c) More opportunities for jobs, participation in food system and community-food links<br>(d) Greater possibilities for social accountability, stewardship of local sources, sinks                            |
| Benefits to communities, society  | (a) Stream contributes to local economies—taxes, jobs, sales, value-added, multiplier effects<br>(b) Grocery stores, markets contribute to neighborhood quality of life<br>(c) Can support local food systems depending on type and scale of activities | (a) Prevents crises posed by hunger and food insecurity<br>(b) Food that might have gone to waste is gleaned<br>(c) Creates opportunities for institutions (e.g., churches) to contribute, serve communities<br>(d) Raises community awareness of hunger, food insecurity<br>(e) Builds local capacity for addressing local problems<br>(f) Links to other social services | (a) Stream supports notion of food as an entitlement <sup>1</sup><br>(b) Contributes to local economy in jobs, food sales, etc.<br>(c) Supports farmers, farm communities by channeling surplus to needy, poor populations, while supporting commodity prices | (a) Allows greater community participation in and possibilities for local food planning<br>(b) Fosters greater connection between food and community goals<br>(c) Delivers positive outcomes, reduced costs to some segments of society as a result of localization; benefits to society as a whole due to greater sustainability of activities |

|   |  |  |   |
|---|--|--|---|
| <p>Food problems created, unsolved for individuals and households</p>               | <p>(a) Many cannot afford to pay<br/>(b) Many do not have spatial or cultural access<br/>(c) Many experience confusion about nutrition advice (and resulting ill health) as a result of industry influence on nutrition research, advice, and regulation; lose knowledge and skills due to dependence on processed and convenience foods<br/>(d) Small farmers, processors suffer due to reduced local sourcing as a result of global concentration and vertical integration</p>   | <p>(a) Creates "us-them" mentality among community residents<br/>(b) Inefficient, inadequate for recipients<br/>(c) Time, food quantity limits imposed on recipients<br/>(d) Clients may not be able to maintain nutritious or culturally specific diets because of a reliance on donations<br/>(e) Clients may not obtain fresh fruit, vegetables, dairy, and meat, because their perishable nature poses storage and distribution problems for food pantries<br/>(f) Intractability of problem leads to burnout, "blame-the-victim" dynamics among volunteers, staff</p> | <p>(a) Many eligible families are not enrolled<br/>(b) Many needy are not eligible due to recent restrictions<br/>(c) Reduced benefits due to cutbacks on duration or amount of benefits<br/>(d) Rigid bureaucratic rules may encourage cheating when families may be temporarily better off<br/>(e) Recipients may experience insults from welfare staff, store clerks; indignity from welfare dependence<br/>(f) Recipients spend much time, effort to gain benefits, resulting in inefficiencies</p> |
| <p>Food problems created by stream or unresolved for communities despite stream</p> | <p>(a) Marketing imperatives trump community interests in nutrition, equity, or sustainability<br/>(b) Current food retail processes may create food deserts in some regions<br/>(c) Regions as a whole may lose out in competition among communities for stores, food industries<br/>(d) Concentration poses risk of market failure due to loss of competition<br/>(e) Negative equity, sustainability, health outcomes due to current practices<br/>(f) Some spatial and/or ethnic communities worse off than others</p> | <p>(a) Charity may distract donors and recipients from advocacy for better social policies<br/>(b) It may threaten entitlement benefits (when policy makers offer charity as a preferred response to social problems)<br/>(c) Has not made an impact on the roots of the problem: poverty, exclusion<br/>(d) Food sources continue to be distant, environmentally unsustainable</p>  | <p>(a) Dependence on distant bureaucracies allows scant local adaptability or planning based on local assets and needs<br/>(b) Food sources continue to be distant, concentrated, unsustainable<br/>(c) Has not changed root causes of the problem of hunger and food insecurity: low wages, unemployment, discrimination, lack of health care, child care, etc.</p>  |
| <p>Involvement of local government, institutions in processes</p>                   | <p>(a) Location decisions<br/>(b) Financial support for social services<br/>(c) Community data from public agencies for organizational, program planning<br/>(d) Resident/church participation in fund raising, program planning, management, etc.<br/>(e) Stream can support advocacy for better policies, entitlement programs, increased services</p>   | <p>(a) Location decisions<br/>(b) Community data from public agencies to inform program planning, food distribution<br/>(c) Increasing information of, enrollment in federal and state food programs</p>   | <p>(a) Community role is central in fostering local links among food system activities and between food and community activities and goals<br/>(b) Public, private, and nonprofit involvement in above links<br/>(c) Change actions can involve many actors and take many forms</p>   |

a. An entitlement is not the same as a right. Internationally, the United States holds the position that food is a matter of production and economic development and not a matter of human rights or fundamental freedoms. In several international human rights conventions, the United States has consistently refused to recognize a human right to food.



ors 2002). An average of 16 percent of the demand for food assistance is estimated to have gone unmet.

- Resolving problems of hunger and food insecurity requires more complex solutions than simply providing food to the needy. Community food security advocates complain that notwithstanding the sincerity and goodwill of volunteers, charity diverts legitimate attention from broad policy reform to obtain living wages, better jobs, education, and health and child care and supports political ideologies upholding volunteerism as the preferred model for solving problems faced by poor communities. Poppendieck (1998) argues that charity satisfies the needs of the donors of food and labor more than those sought to be helped.

Specific actions to enhance community food security can take many forms, emanate from different starting points, and can address different constituencies or audiences. They are necessarily multidisciplinary because of a focus on the linkages among food system activities (production, processing, and distribution) and between food and community goals (such as health, economic vitality, neighborhood improvement, etc.). For example, in communities across the United States, grass-roots organizations are teaching low-income households vegetable gardening to improve diets, creating community-based food businesses, developing community gardens in inner-city neighborhoods, linking consumers with local farmers through farmers markets and other direct marketing models, and organizing food policy councils, along with many other initiatives. These efforts represent local solutions to local manifestations of larger problems.

It must be noted that community food security cannot be expected to solve all the ills emerging from the current global food system. For better or worse, the corporate-dominated market food system is here to stay for the foreseeable future. Moreover, community food security is scarcely intended as a replacement for federal entitlement programs aimed at poor and vulnerable residents. Rather, it is an approach that seeks to increase community influence on these systems, to offer an integrated view of the links within the food system and between food and communities, and to provide more sustainable alternatives to current streams. Community food security advocates are finding that building partnerships with relevant public agencies and community-based organizations and coordinating efforts is essential to developing effective and lasting solutions. They also find that gathering information about conditions in their community's food system and publicizing that information is valuable, both to help inform their own work to create positive change and to build broader awareness of and support for their efforts. For these and other reasons, CFAs have garnered great interest among community food security proponents.

## CFA: A Tool for Integrating Food into Planning

There are good reasons for planners to be interested in CFAs as well. Pothukuchi and Kaufman (1999) suggest reasons why planners might want to pay more systematic attention to food. First, food is a basic human need; planning has a deep interest in making places better serve the needs of people. Second, food systems are interconnected with communities' economies, vitality, health, and natural environments; attention to interconnections among communities' social, economic, physical, and environmental dimensions is yet another essential theme in planning's professional identity.

Pothukuchi and Kaufman (1999) explore institutional arrangements that could play the following important roles<sup>2</sup> vis-à-vis community-food linkages:

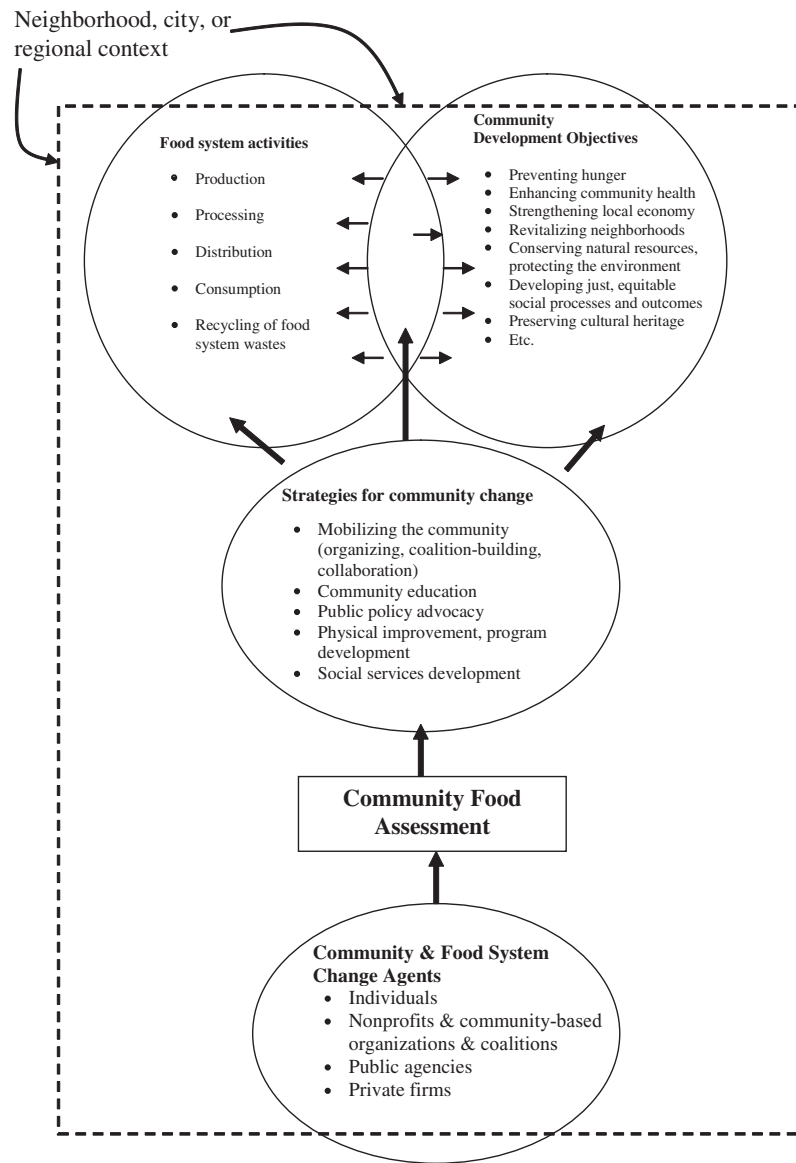
- a *central intelligence function*, to facilitate local operations of different food system functions through regular issuance of appropriate local analyses;
- a *pulse-taking function*, to alert the community through periodic reports to danger signs in the local community that may impact food access, hunger and nutrition, diet-related disease, population, and food-business movements;
- a *policy clarification function*, to help frame and regularly revise food system functions of local government;
- a *community food security strategic plan function*, to phase specific private and public programs toward enhancing community food security for a period of ten to twenty years; and
- a *feedback review function*, to analyze through careful research the consequences of program and project activities as a guide to future action.

The arrangements performing these functions conceivably could be a combination of public-, private-, and community-sector organizations and actors, although ideally with an institutional connection to public decision making. The functions described above will need to be supported by systematic and periodic data collection in relevant categories. Community food security planning, regardless of its source or impetus, will have strategic information needs that CFAs can provide. Figure 1 maps the flow of activities connecting CFAs and strategies for promoting community food security.

At least seven rationales suggest why planners' involvement in CFAs can help strengthen planning for community food security:

1. Urban planners are trained about communities; their social, political, economic, and environmental functions; and their processes and policies. They understand communities—distinct from individuals, families, and households—as units of analysis and their implications for actions and policies. Increasingly, food professionals (such as nutritionists), who traditionally have served individuals

- and families, are targeting the community as a unit of planning in their advocacy efforts, infrastructure development, and delivery of services. Planners can contribute much to these efforts.
2. Planners are able to analyze the spatial dimensions of community needs, concerns, resources, and goals and translate these into spatial and land-use policies. Issues such as lack of access to supermarkets, the loss of farmland, location of food processing, and wholesale activities all have important spatial components that planners can decipher and to which they can offer expertise for improved outcomes.
  3. Planners are trained to conceptualize, collect, organize, and disseminate information about communities and related indicators to both inform policies and evaluate their outcomes (e.g., Ammons 1996; Crane and Daniere 1996; Hatry et al. 1992; Quercia 1999). They are expected to understand the role of rhetoric in communicating evidence and proofs and to decode and moderate the politics of information (Throgmorton 1996; Forester 1988). Much like other community systems, the food system has multiple, competing interests, values, and players who have differential access to power and resources. Gathering information about and engaging in communication among and between these is inherently political.
  4. Planners are linked to decision makers and decision arenas in public, private, and nonprofit sectors. They are in positions to mediate processes by which lists of potential issues, preferences, conflicts, and decisions that could be addressed by decision makers are transformed into those that are (Bryson and Crosby 1996), and are able to recommend policies and plans based on the strategic information they gather. Community food activities (such as community gardens) are routinely influenced by zoning, land use, and neighborhood policies; planners can recommend to decision makers appropriate policies and plans that deliver preferred outcomes.
  5. Planners are trained to lead, facilitate, and manage community-based group processes involving stakeholders, organizational partners, and community residents (Innes 1996; Forester 1999). Planners learn about and routinely use methods in consensus development, negotiation, and



**Figure 1.** The role of community food assessments in the design of strategies for change.

Note: Community food security calls for greater local integration of food system links and envisions food as a tool for achieving community objectives in health, economic development, equity, and sustainability. Individual members of a community, community-based organizations, public agencies, and the private sector all have roles to play in enhancing a community's food security.

- conflict resolution that are useful for such processes. CFAs benefit from such facilitation, given the diversity of stakeholders and interests that need to be involved to obtain effective assessments that contribute to plans and programs that have broad support.
6. Planners bring interdisciplinary perspectives and have the capacity to identify and analyze new community concerns at the intersection of multiple disciplines and to incorpo-

rate them into planning. The history of community planning is replete with such examples: community policing (e.g., Rohe, Adams, and Arcury 2000) and AIDS-related planning (Takahashi and Smutny 1998; Wallace, Wallace, and Andrews 1997) are but two examples of such emerging concerns that planners have addressed.

7. Planners are concerned with such overarching and normative goals as healthy communities, sustainable communities, or community quality of life (Berke 2002; Jepson 2001; Lucy 1994). Much planning literature has been devoted to understanding their predictors and correlates and to the design of appropriate strategies to obtain these goals (see Sawicki and Flynn 1996, e.g., for a review of neighborhood indicators projects). Food is linked to these objectives in multiple ways that need greater attention from planners (Pothukuchi and Kaufman 2000, 1999).

### ► Nine CFAs: Common Threads to Planning

This section discusses nine CFAs conducted since 1993 and identifies characteristics that are common to planning. It also compares assessments led by planners with those by nonplanners in a range of categories, including issues, methods, and outcomes. Table 2 provides a brief overview of the assessments' goals, issues, methods, products, and outcomes.

The analysis is based on the findings of a survey conducted of leaders or representatives of organizational sponsors of nine CFAs in a range of categories, including objectives, questions or issues addressed, methods of data collection and analysis, geographic scope, funding, people and groups involved, type and extent of community participation, outcomes and follow-up actions, and documentation and dissemination.<sup>3</sup> Outputs such as reports, journal articles, links to Web sites, and other relevant information were also collected whenever possible.<sup>4</sup> Finally, brief case summaries, based on findings from the survey and follow-up interviews, written for another publication (Pothukuchi et al. 2002), with feedback from assessment leaders or organizational representatives, offered yet another source of data for this article.

Four assessments were led by faculty in academic departments of urban planning (Los Angeles, Madison, Milwaukee, and Detroit). All four involved students of urban planning in the planning, implementation, and dissemination of the research. This group of assessments will be referred to, for convenience, as "planning-related CFAs."<sup>5</sup> See Tables 3, 4, and 5, as well, for summary information in other categories. A review of tabulations of findings from the survey in the categories mentioned above surfaced differences among planning-related CFAs and others, which were then examined more closely for their content and possible explanations. These are discussed in subsequent paragraphs. What follows is a general description of the assessments and common characteristics.

Assessments ranged from a focus on a single neighborhood (San Francisco) or small area (Austin) to regions comprising multiple counties (North Country) and studies that encompassed multiple geographic scales depending on the issues examined (Detroit, Los Angeles, Madison, Milwaukee). Goals for assessments embraced a variety of aspirations: understanding (and resolving) problems faced by residents in gaining access to nutritious foods, creating university-community partnerships, improving access to locally produced and healthful choices of food while strengthening regional agriculture, and devising community food policy councils.

Besides the expected fact of food's linkage to various community facets, all studies shared five important characteristics. These characteristics are familiar planning interests and therefore constitute common threads to planning, as follows.

*Needs of low-income residents.* All studies focused on the needs of low-income residents and shared a concern for the problems they faced with respect to obtaining culturally appropriate choices of nutritious foods in their neighborhoods. All commented on the equity and social justice implications of the poverty of food choices in low-income neighborhoods in terms of costs incurred and opportunities forgone by families who live there. All studies discussed specific difficulties faced by low-income families in obtaining nutritious food from a variety of market, government, and nonprofit sources and the strategies families adopted to cope with these difficulties. Seven of these documented low-income families' options in or experiences with obtaining food from federal food programs (Women, Infants, and Children—WIC, food stamps, summer nutrition programs for children, etc.) or area food-assistance sources, such as difficulties encountered in enrolling in programs or obtaining adequate food from them. Recommendations from the CFAs ranged from the institution of a new bus route connecting low-income neighborhoods to larger grocery stores (Austin), to better coordination of food assistance efforts across the community (North Country and Somerville), to the development of a year-round farmers market that also provided educational and entrepreneurial opportunities (Milwaukee).

Concerns related to equity and meeting the needs of poor and vulnerable segments of society are shared by most, if not all, planners, who try to devise alternative systems to meet basic needs of residents who are unable to pay for them. The need to redress distribution problems caused by the normal operation of markets and their failure and to provide a voice for those excluded in decisions due to poverty or other sources of vulnerability are two important rationales for planning. This

*(text continues on p. 366)*



**Table 2.**  
**Overview of nine community food assessments.**

|              | <i>Goals of Assessment</i>  | <i>Issues Examined</i>  | <i>Data Sources, Methods</i>   | <i>Forms of Dissemination</i>   | <i>Outcomes</i>   |
|--------------|---|---|--|---|---|
| Austin, TX   | Raise awareness of community needs, problems<br>Inform systematic action on community food problems   | Food access problems in central Austin, coping strategies<br>Quality of food available in poor neighborhood   | Informal interviews with residents, key informants<br>Census<br>Price comparison   | Report<br>Press releases<br>Community, conference presentations   | New "grocery" bus route<br>Legislation allowing public lands for community gardens, farmers markets<br>Grocery store renovation<br>Awareness of food access<br>Food policy council established<br>Formalized collaboration between Berkeley Food Policy Council and area producers, retailers, and community-based nonprofits (including youth)<br>Links between local producers and Berkeley school cafeterias<br>Dissemination of study tools nationally<br>Collaboration by nonprofit organizations in nutrition, social services, greening, community development, etc., to develop community food projects<br>Greater public, nonprofit, private, university collaboration on community food issues<br>National dissemination of study tools, findings<br>Production, dissemination of <i>Detroit Food Handbook</i> for local planning |
| Berkeley, CA | Enhance community knowledge, awareness of local food systems<br>Study feasibility of new ways to link farmers markets and communities   | Local food production: farms and urban gardens<br>Food retail<br>Role of educational institutions<br>Public policies related to above issues  | Local organizational, agency data<br>Surveys of business owners, school children, farmers, market coordinators, and emergency food system staff  | Report<br>Press release<br>Community, coalition presentations   |   |
| Detroit, MI  | Support community food security planning, actions<br>Create university-community partnerships on community food issues<br>Nutrition, food insecurity<br>Neighborhood improvement, including community gardens<br>Regional agriculture | Food in local economy (including contributions to local economy; grocery store location; food access, availability in poor neighborhoods)<br>Mapping of community characteristics, food resources<br>Newspaper articles<br>Small area food availability inventory (stores, restaurants) | Censuses of population, economy<br>Institutional, organizational data (Michigan Department of Agriculture, Detroit Public Schools, etc.)<br>Mapping of community characteristics, food resources<br>Newspaper articles<br>Small area food availability inventory (stores, restaurants) | Reports<br>Newspaper interviews<br>Community, professional presentations<br>Public agency presentations |   |

(continued)

**Table 2.**  
**Overview of nine community food assessments.**

| <i>Goals of Assessment</i>  | <i>Issues Examined</i>   | <i>Data Sources, Methods</i>  | <i>Forms of Dissemination</i>   | <i>Outcomes</i>  |
|---|--|---|---|--|
| <p>Los Angeles, CA</p> <p>Assess food insecurity in inner city, following 1993 unrest, adequacy of federal food programs, and role of food industry in inner city community based strategies for change</p> <p>Propose framework for community food security planning</p> | <p>Community food access, availability, prices</p> <p>Hunger and food insecurity</p> <p>Food retail structure</p> <p>Sustainable production, distribution models</p> <p>Current food policies; alternative approaches</p>  | <p>Population and economic censuses</p> <p>Demographic, land use, spatial analyses</p> <p>Telephone, in person, business, surveys</p> <p>Price comparisons</p> <p>Local policy, program analysis</p> <p>Case studies of food policy councils</p>                      | <p>Report</p> <p>Press releases</p> <p>Community, professional presentations</p> <p>Professional journal papers</p>                                   | <p>Formation of Los Angeles Community Food Security Network, Los Angeles food policy council</p> <p>Growth of community gardens, farmers markets, food stamp outreach</p> <p>Food assessments in other communities</p> <p>Catalyst for community food security movement in the United States</p>   |
| <p>Madison, WI</p> <p>Increase knowledge, understanding of local food system</p> <p>Inform strategies for improving food security</p> <p>Establish university, community partnerships</p>   | <p>Conventional food system (production, processing, wholesale, retail) and its impacts on environment, food access, availability</p> <p>Antihunger resources</p> <p>Coping strategies of low-income residents</p> <p>Alternatives to conventional system</p> <p>Policies helping, hurting community food security</p> | <p>Spatial mapping of food resources</p> <p>Food retail pricing, availability</p> <p>Resident, business, nonprofit and public agency surveys, interviews</p> <p>Focus groups</p> <p>Policy analysis</p> <p>Case studies of alternative sources, policy approaches</p> | <p>Report</p> <p>Media releases, interviews</p> <p>Community, professional presentations</p> <p>Policy reports</p> <p>Professional journal papers</p> | <p>Development of Dane County REAP (Research, Education, Action, and Policy) Food Group</p> <p>Greater visibility of food issues in Madison</p> <p>Increased networking, collaboration among individuals and organizations around food issues</p> <p>Madison Food System Working Paper series</p> <p>National dissemination of assessment tools</p>  |
| <p>Milwaukee, WI</p> <p>Examine the root causes of hunger</p> <p>Develop partnerships to promote food security and systemic change in Milwaukee Co.</p>   | <p>Population characteristics</p> <p>Food access and transportation</p> <p>Food retail: location, availability, prices</p> <p>Antihunger, and alternative food sources</p> <p>Perceptions and experiences of poor individuals and families</p>   | <p>Population and economic censuses</p> <p>Telephone and in-person surveys</p> <p>Focus groups</p> <p>Spatial mapping of stores, food resources, community conditions</p>   | <p>Four reports</p> <p>Media releases</p> <p>Community, professional presentations</p>  | <p>Formation of Milwaukee Farmers' Market Association</p> <p>Development of Fondy Food Center Project (market, kitchen incubator, information center)</p> <p>Overhaul of emergency pantry network, community meal program coalition, and inclusion of new types of technical assistance and guidelines</p> <p>Expansion of WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program to all farmers markets</p> <p>Increased university-community partnerships</p> <p>National dissemination of study tools, finding</p> |

|                          |   |  |  |   |  |
|--------------------------|---|--|--|---|--|
| North Country Region, NY | Mobilize and engage a broad network of country residents<br>Improve access to healthful, locally produced foods while strengthening economic viability of regional agricultures | Demographics, health, economy, agriculture, food availability<br>Sources of food, eating patterns<br>Ways to build a stronger community through alternative management of local food resources<br>Visions for how local food system should look and work in five years<br>Visions for twenty years | Secondary sources related to population, health, economy, food production and retail<br>Search conference method to engage participants in analysis and visioning in each county over a two-day period | Reports<br>Media releases<br>Community, professional presentations<br>Professional journal articles | Development of an Extension staff position to continue work<br>Increased networks among community, agency members<br>Creation of a fellowship kitchen to serve all community members, including needy and vulnerable households in Essex County<br>Program to provide donations of venison and beef to local food pantries in Lewis and St. Lawrence counties<br>Establishment of weekly farmers market in Jefferson County<br>Improved food distribution networks between the community action programs of Jefferson and Franklin Counties. |
| San Francisco, CA        | Identify and promote strategies to improve food access to nutritious foods in Bayview Hunters Point neighborhood<br>Provide job training for neighborhood youth                 | Food sources for residents, barriers to access, consumption<br>Preferred alternatives for food procurement   | Resident surveys conducted via a participatory action research model to empower youth to plan, implement, and disseminate assessment   | Report<br>Media releases<br>Community, professional presentations                                   | Increased storage and trucking facilities through joint efforts of a food security committee<br>Creation of a new Bayview Community Farmers Market<br>Commitments on the part of corner store owners to stock fresh produce<br>Transit authority agreement to provide transit shuttles to food sources<br>Skills development, empowerment of neighborhood youth<br>Publication of an extensive community food and nutrition guide<br>Cooking classes for low-income residents  |
| Somerville, MA           | Strengthen planning and policy for community-based food and nutrition resources for low-income residents  | Food and nutrition needs, resources  | Census of population, institutional data<br>Key informant, stakeholder interviews  | Report<br>Media contacts<br>Community, professional presentations                                   | Implementation of a Community Kitchen Task Force to examine the feasibility of commercial kitchen facilities<br>Formation of a Public Health Nutrition Task Force to conduct community food and nutrition strategic planning   |

**Table 3.**  
**Communities addressed by community food assessments.**

| <i>Case Study</i>              | <i>Assessment Area</i>   | <i>Total Population</i>                               |
|--------------------------------|--|---|
| Austin                         | East Austin, TX  | East Austin: 24,000                                   |
| Berkeley                       | West and South Berkeley, CA  | West and South Berkeley: approximately 35,000         |
| Detroit                        | Selected zip codes for pilot studies, City of Detroit,<br>Southeastern Michigan region, consisting of six counties | Detroit: 950,000; Southeastern Michigan:<br>4,740,000 |
| Los Angeles                    | South Central Los Angeles, Los Angeles region, CA  | South Central Los Angeles: 53,000                     |
| Madison/Dane County            | City of Madison and surrounding area   | City of Madison: 207,000; County: 400,000             |
| Milwaukee                      | Milwaukee County; near-north and near-south sides of the<br>city of Milwaukee                                      | City of Milwaukee: 959,275                            |
| New York, The North<br>Country | Jefferson, Lewis, St. Lawrence, Franklin, Clinton, and Essex<br>Counties of New York state                         | North Country: approximately 431,000                  |
| San Francisco                  | Southeast San Francisco, CA—Bayview Hunters Point<br>neighborhood  | Bayview Hunters Point: 34,000                         |
| Somerville                     | Somerville, MA   | Somerville: 77,500                                    |

Source: Table 3 was prepared by Hannah Burton.

concern for low-income residents who are excluded from the dominant food system, and are unable to meet a very basic need, therefore constitutes a strong thread to planning.

*Sustainability of the food system.* All studies shared a concern about the sustainability of the food system, or specific components relevant to their communities, and displayed a commitment to developing sustainable solutions to the types of problems discussed in an earlier section. Sustainability, as expressed in these CFAs included notions related to creating spatially closer links among two or more food system activities (production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste disposal); making specific food system practices more environmentally sensitive; including previously excluded players such as small farmers and low-income consumers; and educating community residents about their participation in food systems and ways to enhance sustainability.

Sustainability is a common enough refrain in planning academic and practitioner circles, even as debate continues on the content of strategies and their implementation for preferred outcomes. Many planners have embraced the social, ecological, and economic aspects of sustainability suggested above and continue to offer sustainable development as a goal and guide for community planning activities (Berke 2002; Jepson 2001; Beatley and Manning 1997; Haughton and Hunter 1994). Planners and community food security advocates therefore bring shared understandings on sustainability that can be put to mutually productive use.

*Community as a unit of solution to food system problems.* All recognized community as a unit of solution to food system problems. All studies were conducted with the objective of

designing community-based solutions to problems that were studied. Thus, these CFAs stand in contrast to large—and more typical—bodies of research on food systems that tend to call for changes in personal behavior, industry practices, or federal or state policies. In all assessments, communities were generally defined in terms of geographic areas for operational and political reasons but also included group membership in their definition (low-income, racial, and ethnic minority demographic groups, such as youth or seniors, or occupational groups, such as farmers and processors). Recommendations were targeted for action by local community action agencies, nonprofit organizations or coalitions, and local governments. In their understanding of community, many also identified specific groups of people who should be involved in and benefit from the design and implementation of the CFA research itself, thus building or enhancing the definition of community during CFA implementation. For example, interviews with food shoppers in the San Francisco study were conducted by youth living in public housing, who then disseminated results and recommended solutions in various forums. Building youth capacity was an important objective of this research.

The idea of community is resonant in planning literature for pragmatic, idealistic, and critical reasons (Altshuler 1970; Medoff and Sklar 1994; Baum 1997; Talen 2000; Kretzmann and McKnight 1993; Turner 1995; Rubin 2000). Planners understand that is in local communities where residents experience opportunities or constraints even if the sources of these lie outside. Community planning as an activity is premised on the notion that communities are able to meet needs and solve problems that neither individuals or families on one hand nor state or federal governments on the other hand are able to or have jurisdiction over. Spatial community is yet another

common thread to planning: planners are familiar with the problems associated with spatial mismatch and the segregation of land uses and people, even if they may be unfamiliar with their food-related aspects or outcomes. Many planners are also in positions to design and recommend spatial policies that contribute to preferred outcomes.

*Focus on assets.* A focus on assets in addition to problems was yet another characteristic of the CFAs. CFAs wished to make better use of existing resources to meet the food needs of low-income residents (Somerville, Austin); use and connect existing resources in innovative ways (Berkeley, Detroit, Madison, Los Angeles, North Country); identify resources to match funds raised from outside sources for proposed programs (Detroit); modify or improve current resources (Berkeley, Milwaukee); and involve community members and enhance individual and organizational capacity (San Francisco, North Country). Assets included land, existing land uses and infrastructure that could be programmed for community food purposes; organizations working on issues connected to food and related community systems; organizational capacity; policy frameworks and plans; and existing programs and institutions that could be enlisted in efforts to foster community food security. The involvement of community members in the CFA was also sought to varying degrees by different assessments to enhance the accuracy, validity, and legitimacy of research; community participation in the assessment was seen as central to identifying effective strategies and building support for actions.

Asset-based community development has, over the last decade especially, gained significant currency in planning thought and practice (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993), even if the notion of engaging local resources to solve local problems is not entirely a new concept to planners. Traditional comprehensive planning has always included activities for inventorying assets and employing them to further community goals. Asset-based approaches to planning have, nonetheless, contributed important insights to which planners now attend: that communities—especially those that experience various forms of disadvantage—contain not just deficits to eliminate but also resources in the form of local residents and their networks and organizations; that people who experience problems can be fruitfully engaged in solving problems; that asset-based approaches have the capacity to be more effective, efficient, meaningful, and sustainable; and that such approaches strengthen planning by building local capacity and enhancing support for making and implementing decisions.

*Variety of categories and multiple sources.* Data gathered in a variety of categories and from multiple sources represented yet

**Table 4.**  
**Sponsoring organizations for  
community food assessments.**

| <i>Community<br/>Food Assessment<br/>Location</i> | <i>Sponsoring Organizations</i>   |
|---|---|
| Austin  | Sustainable Food Center   |
| Berkeley  | San Francisco State University<br>Northern California Food Systems Alliance   |
| Detroit   | Department of Urban Planning,<br>Wayne State University<br>Hunger Action Coalition of Michigan  |
| Los Angeles                                       | Department of Urban Planning,<br>University of California, Los Angeles<br>The Southern California Interfaith<br>Hunger Coalition  |
| Madison/<br>Dane<br>County                        | Department of Urban and Regional Planning,<br>University of Wisconsin–Madison<br>Madison Food System Project  |
| Milwaukee   | Center for Urban Initiatives and Research,<br>University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee<br>Hunger Task Force of Milwaukee<br>Wisconsin Food System Partnership                      |
| New York,<br>The North<br>Country                 | Division of Nutritional Sciences,<br>Cornell University<br>The New York Department of State<br>New York State Community Action Association<br>Cornell Cooperative Extension |
| San Francisco                                     | San Francisco Department of Public Health<br>San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners<br>(SLUG)<br>Center for Literacy for Environmental Justice<br>(LEJ)                    |
| Somerville  | Friedman School of Nutrition Science and<br>Policy, Tufts University<br>University of Massachusetts/Amherst<br>Community-based Food and Nutrition Service<br>Providers      |

Source: Table 4 was prepared by Hannah Burton.

another shared feature of the assessments. Typically, these included social, economic, demographic, and health data from censuses; other institutional databases or surveys; community directories; and primary modes such as surveys and interviews, conducted specifically for the assessment. Substantive categories in which food-related data were collected varied among CFAs and included elements related to agriculture, food access, food's connection to the local economy, health, nutrition, and environment. Several studies also systematically collected "visioning" information, in which residents and stakeholders articulated preferred futures in one or more categories of their area's food system. The North Country



**Table 5.**  
**Categories of information gathered by community food assessments.**

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|  |
|--|
| Community, population characteristics  |
| Community spatial, natural resource, and economic base descriptions  |
| Population characteristics: race/ethnicity, age, single-parent status, income, poverty status, etc., including spatial organization of population groups   |
| Socioeconomic makeup   |
| Incomes, employment, vehicle ownership   |
| Participation in government welfare programs, etc.   |
| Hunger/food insecurity status  |
| Spatial distribution of characteristics  |
| Community-based antihunger resources/services  |
| Emergency food assistance availability, characteristics; mapping   |
| Government food assistance programs/services, eligibility, enrollment, etc.  |
| Other antihunger services/outreach   |
| Community health and nutrition   |
| Diet-related disease incidence (mortality and morbidity)   |
| Community public health programs and resources   |
| Access to and availability of culturally suitable, nutritious diets  |
| Quality of diets/nutritional status of households  |
| Coping strategies in food deserts: hunting/fishing and neighborhood production, scavenging, pantry/soup kitchen dependence   |
| Other health risk factors: smoking, exercise, stress, lifestyle factors  |
| Health/nutrition outreach/referral services  |
| Food/nutrition related projects  |
| Conventional food system   |
| Broad food system characteristics: production, processing, distribution activities   |
| Retail food sector data: employees, sales, wages, types of stores/eating and drinking places, etc.; price comparisons; availability, types of food resources; mapping of grocery stores; analysis of food retail structure |
| Wholesale: employees, sales, wages, types of firms, etc.   |
| Manufacturing: employees, value-added, types, etc.   |
| Institutional food service: hospitals, schools, senior centers, etc.   |
| Community-based and/or local food systems  |
| Local/regional agriculture status (numbers, acres of farms; products; scale of agriculture, etc.)  |
| Local/regional agriculture links to community (e.g., community supported agriculture farms—or other forms of subscription farming—farmers markets, locally sourced restaurants, institutions)                              |
| Community-based food production, processing (e.g., gardens)  |
| Infrastructure/transportation  |
| Public transportation/paratransit access, routes (connection to grocery stores), schedules   |
| Vehicle access   |
| Community organizations/institutions   |
| Community institutional resources (universities, hospitals, foundations, unions, large employers, consumer organizations, environmental organizations, etc.)   |
| Community leadership and power (local politics, food related coalitions and organizations)   |
| Community development/economic   |
| Food system related (entrepreneurial urban agriculture, food processing, entrepreneurship and business development, youth activities)  |
| Food activities integrated into other community development activities (affordable housing development, parks and recreation, food-related transportation, etc.)   |
| Environmental (food system–related issues)   |
| Waste disposal/recycle/compost   |
| Water quality  |
| Air quality impacts of long-distance trucking of food products   |
| Land contamination/hazardous waste   |
| Open space/land use or access  |

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(continued)

**Policy**

Legislation/funding/regulations at state and national levels

Analysis of local plan documents (comprehensive, land use, neighborhood, sectoral plans) from a food security perspective  
Food policy councils

**Media**

Coverage of national and local food issues, analysis of food advertisements, community-food planning editorials/opinions

**Any other data**

Hunting, fishing, and trapping licenses/game deer take  
Physical activity resources

Source: Table 5 was prepared by Hannah Burton.

assessment is especially notable for including a visioning component among its participants.

Planners' research typically poses questions in multiple categories, uses theory to build questions, uses a variety of data sources and methods to connect patterns, and achieves a realistic picture of community conditions through triangulation. Planners also routinely seek a pragmatic middle ground between convenience and responsiveness of data sources and attempt to overcome data and other operational constraints. For example, although census data are a widely available and useful in a range of categories, their usefulness toward the end of the decennial period declines, and planners have to make decisions about going with census data or local estimates derived from more recent surveys. This is especially critical if they are collecting trend information. Planners also routinely combine measures of social welfare and those of institutional performance in their community assessments (Sawicki and Flynn 1996). This suggests yet another common thread between community assessments in general and CFAs.

In sum, these characteristics suggest that CFAs, whatever their impetus, source of sponsorship, goals, or particular issues studied, have common elements among themselves that are also shared with community assessments and other activities led by planners. Given these common threads, CFAs of the kind presented in this study should find a sympathetic audience among most community planners.

### ► How a Planning Approach Can Strengthen CFAs

Despite common threads between the CFAs studied and planning, differences exist between those initiated and implemented by urban planners and others. These differences became apparent through a content analysis of survey

responses and brief case summaries reported in Pothukuchi et al. (2002) and a review of reports and other materials made available by assessment leaders or sponsors. In cases where reports or publications were unavailable (Berkeley and San Francisco), I relied solely on participant self-reports in the surveys and amendments to case reports.

Seven CFAs (including all planning-related assessments) were also closely linked academic institutions. The differences emanate from the special contributions that planners are in a position to make, rather than necessarily derived from external causes such as funding, time, stakeholder participation, or audiences. Comparisons also suggest insights from nonplanning CFAs that planners might integrate into research, pedagogy, and practice for greater effectiveness in food-related planning and perhaps planning on other topics as well. These are discussed in the next section. It is worth repeating here that CFAs conducted by actors without an educational or professional background in community planning are nonetheless exercises in community planning; these comparisons are not designed to present a narrative of planning's inherent superiority. Still, the substantive and operational differences between them and the ones involving planners are real and nontrivial. They have implications for informing community assessments and planning in general on one hand and effective community food security practice on the other. Six major differences are noted below.

### Incorporation of Space in Complex Ways, Including Mapping Community-Food Links

Planning-related CFAs, such as those in Los Angeles, Madison, Milwaukee, and Detroit, examined multiple geographic scales at which different community-food links or problems manifest and included neighborhood, small area, city, or

county boundaries as appropriate. The others tended to focus on particular geographic areas—generally neighborhoods—as in the case of the Austin and San Francisco studies, particular cities (Berkeley, Somerville), or counties (North Country) because of the relevance of these spatial entities for the exploration of concerns or questions raised in their assessments. Planning-related CFAs also tended to use Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology to map the location of current or potential food resources and population groups. Only one nonplanning CFA used GIS as a tool to map the location of diverse food assets (Somerville).

Mapping served many purposes in these projects: to document the number, density, and location of particular resources; to examine the spatial relationships among different types of food activities or between resources and populations in need (e.g., mapping food assistance sites and low-income populations); to suggest locations for resources and programs; and to explore possible programmatic connections among spatially proximal but unconnected food resources (such as possible sales outlets for gardens in particular neighborhoods). The outputs of such computerized mapping techniques are powerful tools for exploratory, community-organizing, or policy-advocacy purposes. GIS technology tends to be available to a greater degree to academic planning departments or public planning agencies than community-based nonprofits that may sponsor or implement studies of this kind. Partnerships with academic planning departments or public agencies and planners familiar with this technology may contribute valuable analytic and policy insights to CFAs.

### Community Planning and Local Government as Sources of Solution

Planning-related CFAs tended to provide a greater focus on local government and consider multiple functions, especially public agencies, other than those related to health or County Cooperative Extension (the latter have traditional connections, respectively, to community-based, antihunger activities and local agriculture). Planning CFAs examined both the positive and the negative roles of local governments in a variety of community-food categories, including land use, transportation, open space, health, environment, and equity. These studies were premised on the need for and ability of local government to act on these issues and discussed specific policies, such as parks and neighborhood policies for community gardens; initiatives to attract supermarkets to underserved areas; transit; and actions for public health departments.

To be fair, a couple of nonplanning CFAs also examined the roles of local government functions. However, they tended to

limit themselves to the particular issues under consideration and their natural city government connections, such as, for example, the lack of direct transit connections to low-mobility communities underserved by grocery options (Austin) or the extent to which public school cafeterias were and could be supplied by local sources (Berkeley). Nonplanning CFAs also tended to examine food-assistance or market issues with less attention to their local planning connections. Thus, their recommendations attended to the need to, for example, increase the enrollment of qualified families in food programs, improve the coordination of social services offered by area nonprofits, or devise innovative means to help neighborhood stores stock fresh produce from local farms with little involvement suggested of local government. Planning-related CFAs were far more extensive in their examination of links to local government. For example, Madison's CFA studied and analyzed city policies (from comprehensive, neighborhood, and functional plan documents) that facilitated or hampered residents' access to healthful food choices.

### More and Broader Links to Community Concerns

All CFAs were somewhat exploratory in nature, with community-capacity objectives included in the implementation of several assessments. The nature of the exploration, however, differed among the two groups of assessments. Those involving planning identified and explored a broad range of possible connections between food and communities, while others focused on particular issues or questions in their exploration. A review of assessment goals (Table 2) supports this reading. Planning-related CFAs (with the exception of Los Angeles) differed from nonplanning CFAs (with the exception of the Austin assessment) by offering community-process or broad food system objectives, such as creating university-community and other community-based partnerships (Madison, Detroit, Milwaukee), raising awareness of community food needs and problems (Madison, Austin), informing strategies for improving community food security (Madison, Detroit, Milwaukee, Austin), or examining the root causes of hunger (Milwaukee). On the other hand, nonplanning CFAs (and the Los Angeles assessment) had specific community-food objectives in mind, such as examining the feasibility of linking farmers markets and communities (Berkeley); studying inner-city food retail in the wake of the 1992 civil unrest, along with many other issues (Los Angeles); strengthening the economic viability of regional agriculture (North Country); promoting access to nutritious foods in Bayview Hunter's Point neighborhood (San Francisco); and strengthening planning for community-based

food resources for low-income residents (Somerville). These communities instituted assessments as a way to gain knowledge relevant for particular concerns or actions.

Planning-related CFAs tended to be interested in uncovering the planning implications of food's varied linkages to communities: in land use, economic development, natural environment, food assistance, and health. The Detroit CFA, for example, identified five sets of linkages: food in community economic development, food in neighborhood revitalization, food in community health, hunger and food insecurity, and regional agriculture. These assessments offer a broad base of knowledge that can help promote a more comprehensive approach to community-food issues.

### A Broader Range of Research Methods

Relatedly, planning CFAs adopted a broader range of methods to explore the variety of issues they considered. Table 2 identifies these methods. For example, the Madison and Milwaukee CFAs conducted focus groups of different groups of residents including youth, conducted interviews with key informants in public agencies and community-based organizations and with residents, mapped resources, analyzed policy documents, conducted economic analyses from data derived from the economic censuses, conducted price comparisons, and implemented small-area studies. On the other hand, the Austin study involved an examination of socioeconomic and demographic statistics derived from secondary sources, combined with interviews with community leaders and residents and food inventories at local stores, while the Somerville assessment analyzed census and institutional data and conducted interviews of key informants.

### Wider Distribution of Studies among Planners

Unsurprisingly, planning-related studies were widely distributed among local planners and decision makers and to a national audience of planners and food system professionals. For example, the Los Angeles and Madison CFAs were disseminated among planners through a variety of means, including presentations at local (e.g., Wisconsin American Planning Association) and national American Planning Association conferences (Seattle, Washington, 1999; a session that was attended by sixty participants), the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning conference (Fort Lauderdale, Florida), and an article in the *Journal of the American Planning Association* (Pothukuchi and Kaufman 2000). Two planning CFAs were also published in *Agriculture and Human Values*, a journal read

by those with an interest in promoting local food systems (Pothukuchi and Kaufman 1999; Gottlieb and Fisher 1996). Only one nonplanning study, the North Country assessment, was also reported in this journal (Pelletier et al. 1999, 2000). Educating planners about community-food links and the importance of these links to community goals and values can be important to building local food systems. While all studies sought and got coverage in the local media and were able to raise the awareness of the local citizenry as well as leadership, targeting local government agencies, officials, and planners is an important step (not the only one, of course) in initiating actions and building support for them.

### CFAs Help Catapult Planners into Leadership Roles on Community Food Issues

All planning-related studies involved students either in the classroom or outside and contributed to their training in substantive and methodological topics related to community food systems. The Los Angeles and Madison CFAs were classroom projects, the former undertaken as a result of student initiative, and the latter offered as a mandatory capstone professional seminar to students completing their graduate studies in planning. Milwaukee's CFA also involved students of urban planning, while the Detroit study employed five students as research assistants. Significant outcomes have resulted from this involvement of planning students and faculty. The Milwaukee CFA resulted in a range of outcomes, including a year-round farmers market called the Fondy Food Center to provide a sales outlet for local farmers; a source of fresh food for the city's residents, especially in nearby low-income neighborhoods; a food-business incubator and community kitchen; opportunities for education in nutrition and healthful cooking; and a central information source for community food issues. Tim Locke, a student of urban planning, went on to become its first director. Andy Fisher, a key participant in the Los Angeles CFA, became the founding executive director of the Community Food Security Coalition, a national organization with a mission in policy-advocacy, education, technical assistance, and research in community food security; with a staff of ten persons; and with an annual budget of three-quarters of \$1 million. Three planning faculty—Jerry Kaufman, Bob Gottlieb, and Kami Pothukuchi—have served on its governing board (as well as the boards of other related local and regional organizations). Other planning students in these CFAs have also become sensitive to community food concerns as evidenced by reports of their personal contacts following graduation to planning faculty who led these CFAs. In short, the incorporation of planning approaches has not only

strengthened CFAs in important ways but also catapulted planning students and faculty into leadership roles in the national community food security movement.

### ► What Community Planners Might Learn from CFAs

Planners might also benefit by incorporating practices more central to nonplanning CFAs. These lessons, listed below, are not entirely new exhortations to planners. They are being presented here more because they received lower levels of attention in planning-related CFAs, and because community food planning could benefit from greater consideration to these issues, than necessarily because these characteristics were shared by all nonplanning CFAs.

*A more systematic incorporation of the health impacts of community-food linkages.* Somerville and North Country assessments, especially, incorporated concerns related to the nutrition and the health implications of food insecurity and current food-consumption patterns. Evidence is increasing on the positive health implications of neighborhood proximity to supermarkets (Morland, Wing, and Roux 2002; Whelan et al. 2002) and of involvement in backyard- and community-garden activities (Feenstra, McGrew, and Campbell 1999; Blair, Giesecke, and Sherman 1991). These health impacts are direct, through healthful consumption and increased physical activity, and indirect, through improved quality of neighborhood life, environment, and social networks. This emphasis on the connections between land-use and neighborhood planning on one hand and health issues related to food access and physical activity on the other needs greater and more systematic attention from planners. Planners have special contributions to make in this regard; the medical field has traditionally concentrated on individuals and families as units of analysis and only recently started paying attention to community factors such as access, proximity, food availability, and the quality of community infrastructure (Glanz et al. 1995; Cheadle et al. 1995, 1991). Planners' focus on community would be a valuable contribution to positive health outcomes from the framework of community food security.

*Relocalizing food systems as an approach to community planning.* An earlier section reported that all CFAs discussed concerns related to sustainability problems posed by the dominant food system and planners' expertise in framing and addressing these concerns. CFAs (planning and nonplanning) advocating relocalization of food systems simultaneously addressed problems faced by central-city and rural areas and sought to reduce

social and environmental costs currently externalized in the dominant food system, while also conceptualizing community roles in planning for these urban-rural links. These CFAs provided visions and models not just for community food planning but for planning in general, in the regional interdependency they see and advocate and in their vision of regional self-reliance in food as a tool for sustainable development.

In addition to attending to the environmental consequences of sprawl and current farming practices, planners might attend to the air-quality and energy impacts of the long-distance travel of food and related (and other) products. They might devise more localized food systems in addition to advocating for more sustainable practices in production, including more direct links between producers and consumers, through farmers markets, urban vegetable gardens, and grocery stores in low-income areas that are locally sourced whenever possible. They might also help public institutions such as schools, universities, hospitals, and prisons better fulfill their missions in education, health, and rehabilitation by supporting food production on their lands and the participation of their constituencies in these processes. Finally, planners might pay greater attention to the social and economic dimensions of sustainability related to food systems in terms of wages, working conditions, spatial distribution, neighborhood quality, and the health and environmental costs that are currently externalized from food prices.

*Building skills in and implementing participatory action research methods.* Although most planners are exposed to the importance of participatory planning processes (cf. Forester 1999; Arnstein 1969), only a few are trained intensively in these processes. Most CFAs studied for this article, including those led by planners, had some form of an advisory committee of individuals who were also food system stakeholders. In Somerville, these members represented nonprofit food assistance organizations, government food and nutrition programs, and health providers and included nutritionists. Many CFAs involved stakeholders in the assessment planning stages as key informants or data sources and for dissemination purposes. This kind of consultation is, indeed, a valid form of community involvement in planning (Arnstein 1969). However, generally speaking, planners used students or planning professionals in the actual planning and implementation of the CFA, with few community members directly involved in these activities. This suggests that although the research was informed by community involvement and was disseminated widely to stakeholders, few capacities in actually doing research—formulating specific questions, collecting data, analyzing, and compiling and disseminating results—were built among community residents. Indeed, while mapping Detroit's food resources, the CFA



coordinator was approached by a representative of a community nonprofit who wished to learn the technique to advance his organization's activities. However, lack of easy access to the technology on his part and lack of affordable access to university-based training stymied his quest.

Arguably, involving community members in CFAs designed as participatory action research would have been difficult to accomplish while fulfilling educational or planning research goals; possibly, community members themselves may not have been able to be involved in a timely basis without training and compensation. However, studies such as those involving youth as in the San Francisco CFA, community members in Austin, or a variety of stakeholders in a seamless process of visioning, analysis, strategy development, and implementation of actions (North Country, Somerville) build community skills in facilitation, coordination, research-design and implementation, and managing complex group processes and help build support for actions. Planners need this kind of involvement, skills, and leadership, and communities themselves would benefit from them in multiple ways (Greenwood and Levin 1998).

*Community visioning as a means to develop shared understandings related to community food security.* Visioning is a fundamental part of any process that deserves to be called planning. Planners are familiar with ideas related to visionary planning and to visions as products and processes (Shipley and Newkirk 1998). In recent times, the process elements of visioning, especially those in which futures are imagined and articulated by community members as guides for planning activities, have gained currency. Community food planning is a relatively new field; few shared understandings exist among community members of concepts, analytic frameworks, current states, preferred goals, and conceptions of future states of entire systems. CFAs can be an effective vehicle to help elicit these understandings among community residents and use group processes to develop shared understandings that can form the basis for planning.

Planning-related CFAs tended to use models of research that were somewhat traditional, possibly because many planning researchers tend to see visioning, goal formulation, strategy-design, and actions as distinct steps. Experienced community practitioners, however, understand the advantages of designing processes in which visioning, planning, and action occur in more integrated patterns. It is possible that professional planners might be in a position to implement community-visioning processes more effectively than academic planners; CFAs in general would be well served to embrace visioning for the opportunities for dialogue and mutual learning that such processes generate. Of all CFAs in this study, the North Country assessment especially exemplified this process.

*Linking local planning concerns with state and federal policy.*

Nonplanning CFAs linked local food-planning concerns to state and federal policy and programs, especially in the areas of agriculture, social welfare, and nutrition. Such links could be greater and more systematic and could benefit all communities doing CFAs not just those involving planners. This lesson is not so much a critique of those CFAs that did not incorporate such links to external policy contexts, because, after all, the point of doing CFAs was to focus attention precisely on local food issues and their local policy and action implications. Nonetheless, as noted in Table 1, community food conditions are tied to a larger market and policy environment, and local efforts need to be supported by larger policy contexts. Several policy initiatives informed by community food security have recently been introduced at the federal level and present unprecedented opportunities for enabling such links. These include the Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program,<sup>6</sup> Farmers Market Nutrition Programs (for Seniors and low-income families with young children), and Farm-to-School initiatives that support school districts' efforts to increase the consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables by children while enhancing markets for local farmers. CFAs could help identify broad directions for policy or specific initiatives at state and federal levels. Legislation enabling the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, for example, to design "food empowerment zones" to introduce food production, processing, and retailing in vacant industrial areas and community block grant funding for food-related planning are two such possibilities. As more and more CFAs are done and disseminated widely, national organizations and coalitions can help develop policies and programs at state and federal levels that are sympathetic to and foster community food security actions at the local level. These advocacy efforts, to be successful, will need more systematic support from local planners and leaders.

## ► Conclusion

This article reported on nine CFAs around the country, identified shared elements among them that also constitute common threads to planning, and discussed both strengths contributed by a planning approach to CFAs and lessons from them that planners might incorporate in mainstream practice. CFAs are, at their root, planning activities. Regardless of the background of CFA implementers, planners could serve as able partners in CFAs and in the actions that follow from assessments. Indeed, this article discusses reasons why planners may want to become involved in—or even lead—CFAs. The CFAs reported here are at the cutting edge of community food

practice but represent baby steps in community food planning. This study is, therefore, inherently exploratory, and the conclusions are presented to identify broad new directions for planning research and practice.

All planning CFAs were conducted from within university settings, while such is less the case with the nonplanning ones. Possibly, CFAs led by practicing planners may be limited by lower access to resources, unsupportive political or organizational contexts, and increased pressures on planners' time and attention. It is also possible that those conducted by professional planners might be superior in some respects, and their experiences in encouraging community participation, stakeholder group management, and other community processes could result in a CFA that is more participatory than the planner-led CFAs reported in this article. In their ongoing efforts to resolve particular problems faced by their communities, such as stemming farmland loss, attracting supermarkets to underserved areas, or making more land available for community gardens for residents to grow their own food, some planners may also bring valuable experiences to their communities' food assessments that could result in outcomes far more powerful than those from university-based models.

This study has multiple implications for planning education, research, and practice. Faculty colleagues might conduct CFA workshops, such as those in Los Angeles, Madison, and Milwaukee, and thereby greatly increase planning knowledge—generally and with implications for particular communities and regions. Departments might offer courses on community food security or incorporate relevant material in more traditional courses such as community economic development planning, environmental planning, sustainable development, and land-use planning.

Community food planning could benefit from research that examines community strategies informed by assessments and outcomes of strategies and that extends these CFAs substantively and methodologically. Future assessments might delve deeper into causal relationships moving beyond the simpler descriptions and correlations of most described here. Particular community food topics might benefit especially from greater planning attention: food deserts and spatial access to food for low-income residents, policies supporting urban agriculture, food policy councils, and means to sustain food production in metropolitan areas.

Planning practitioners are in a position to make significant contributions to community food issues. Many already may be pursuing related actions, albeit unconsciously and without enhancing community food security such as devising efforts to save farmland, but not necessarily for food production; instituting procedures for community gardens, but only as recreational options in senior housing complexes rather than as a

comprehensive community strategy for food security; or pursuing national supermarket operators to open stores in particular low-income neighborhoods rather than devising a more competitive, citywide strategy with multiple locations and incentives. Planners especially need to become more aware of the possible negative impacts of routine planning decisions on community food security. One example of this might be the land-use planner who advises against the location of a food pantry near a mixed-income neighborhood for fear that it might attract "the criminal element."<sup>7</sup>

On a more sober note, it is possible to be too sanguine about planners' interest and capacity to become involved in CFAs wholesale. Planners are, after all, scarcely a unitary group, with unitary interests, inclinations, and political contexts of their work. Not all planners may see themselves or their day-to-day practice reflected in the previous discussion on "common threads"; more basically, not all planners may be persuaded of the usefulness of CFAs for their communities. Yet another fear is that community food security advocates themselves may see cities' planning agencies as the enemy because of a history of planning decisions that may have produced outcomes antithetical to community food security. Hopefully, rather than the realization of these fears, it will be the leadership provided by some planners to the community food security movement that will be the model for planners' future involvement in community food issues.

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## ► Appendix Community Food Assessment Reports

### Austin, TX

Sustainable Food Center. 1996. *Access denied*. Austin, TX: Author. [http://www.main.org/sfc/access\\_denied/](http://www.main.org/sfc/access_denied/).

### Berkeley, CA

Pinderhughes, R., and J. Miner. 2001. *Good farming, healthy communities: Strengthening sustainable agriculture sectors and local food systems*. San Francisco: San Francisco State University, Urban and Environmental Studies Program.

### Detroit, MI

Pothukuchi, K. 2003. *Detroit food system: A handbook for community planners*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University.

### Los Angeles, CA

Ashman, L., M. Dohan, J. De la Vega, A. Fisher, R. Hippler, and B. Romain. 1993. *Seeds of change: Strategies for food security for the inner city*. Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles,

Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning. <http://www.foodsecurity.org/pubs.html/>.

#### Madison, WI

University of Wisconsin Department of Urban and Regional Planning. 1997. *Fertile ground: A study of the Madison/Dane County food system*. Madison: Author. <http://www.wisc.edu/mfsp/pubsf/pub.html/>.

#### Milwaukee, WI (all reports published by University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, Center for Urban Initiatives and Research)

Varela, O. J. 1996. *Socio-spatial relationships and food programs in Milwaukee's food system*.

Johnson, K., S. Percy, and E. Wagner. 1996. *Comparative study of food pricing and availability in Milwaukee*.

Varela, O. J., D. P. Haider-Markel, and S. L. Percy. 1998. *Perceptions and experiences of consumer access to food in Milwaukee's inner-city neighborhoods*.

Varela, O. J., K. Johnson, and S. Percy. 1998. *Food insecurity in Milwaukee: A qualitative study of food pantry and meal program users*.

#### North Country Region, NY

Pelletier, D. L., V. Kraak, C. McCullum, and U. Uusitalo. 2000. Values, public policy and community food security. *Agriculture and Human Values* 17 (1): 75-93.

Pelletier, D. L., V. Kraak, C. McCullum, U. Uusitalo, and R. Rich. 1999. Community food security: Salience and participation at community level. *Agriculture and Human Values* 16:401-19.

#### San Francisco, CA

Bhatia, Rajiv, Cory Calandra, Laura Brainin-Rodriguez, and Paula Jones. 2001. *Food access study of the Bayview Hunters Point*. San Francisco: San Francisco Department of Public Health; San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners.

#### Somerville, MA

<http://nutrition.tufts.edu/consumer/somerville.html/>.

Planning" (1956), which addressed the role of city planning agencies.

3. The survey was led by Hugh Joseph, Gerald J. and Dorothy R. Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Tufts University, with research assistance from Hannah Burton (currently with The Food Trust, Philadelphia). Surveys consisting of a combination of open- and closed-ended questions were initially distributed electronically in 2000, with several follow-ups (by Burton) by e-mail and phone to urge return of surveys and to seek clarifications and elaborations on responses. Responses from a total of ten assessment leaders (or representatives of organizations sponsoring assessments, if assessment leaders were unavailable) were assembled over the next two years. Of these, one was dropped from the final analysis because it was a more traditional university-sponsored research project in nutritional and food security assessment, without community-based partners in planning or implementation. Case summaries for Pothukuchi et al. (2002) were prepared by Hannah Burton, with significant input from Kai Siedenburger and Kami Pothukuchi.

4. In two cases, reports were unavailable to the author: San Francisco and Berkeley, California. However, informal interviews in phone and person with assessment leaders helped fill gaps in knowledge, in addition to case summaries prepared for Pothukuchi et al. (2002).

5. These are separated for analytic reasons discussed in following sections. On no account does this separation of "planning-related" and "other" community food assessments imply that the latter fall outside community planning, broadly defined. In fact, a basic thesis of this article is that community food assessments are, indeed, a form of planning activity.

6. This program funds community-based projects that offer creative, community-based solutions to hunger, nutrition, farming, and food system problems, while also meeting the food needs of low-income residents. For more information, browse <http://www.reeusda.gov/crgam/cfp/community.htm>.

7. Pothukuchi and Kaufman (2000) interviewed a planner who gave this example. The response was to a question that sought planners' perceptions of the effects of planning activities on community food security.

## ► Notes

1. Food insecurity occurs when individuals or families face limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways. The concept of food insecurity was developed to reflect more accurately conditions faced by U.S. populations. Extreme food insecurity can cause hunger, which is the painful sensation caused by a lack of food, and may produce malnutrition over time. The opposite of food insecurity is food security. Survey data on food insecurity are typically collected at the individual and household levels. By contrast, *community food security* is a much broader conception and incorporates, in addition to household food security, notions related to social equity, environmental sustainability, and local and regional self-reliance.

2. These functions were adapted from an article by Martin Meyerson, "Building the Middle Range Bridge for Comprehensive

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