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Local Matters! Community-Based Organizations, Changemaking, and the Food System

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Local Matters! Community-Based Organizations, Changemaking, and the Food System

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Abstract

This paper begins by discussing and distinguishing the various food movements: food security, food justice, and food sovereignty. Utilizing social capital theory and the principles of food sovereignty, this paper brings attention to the power of community-based organizations (CBOs) and highlights their unique positioning within the food system. This paper analyzes a sample of community-based organizations working within the food system in the United States of America. Drawing upon original data collected through interviews with nine individuals associated with different CBOs working within the food system, this research finds that CBOs are uniquely suited to make change in their local food systems because of their community ties and sense of responsibility to their neighbors. This study also presents findings that support the value of the food sovereignty movement to CBOs and to overall food system reform. These concepts are demonstrated in analyzing CBOs' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper concludes by offering a way forward to ensure a better food future, guided by local organizations and food sovereignty.

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Introduction

The food system has evolved, fueled by neoliberal policies and coordinated capitalist globalization, to favor corporations at the expense of people and the planet. While forces of global capitalism underlie all systems, the forces of the capitalist machine have manifested particularly adversely in the food system. The current corporate food regime has forced original peoples off their land in transfers to corporations, encouraged exploitative environmental practices, and altered global production to disproportionately export to wealthy countries (Rossett, 2011). This system sees people's health and nutrition as a tradable commodity, leaving millions of people hungry and displaced (Nyéléni, 2007).

Many events have disrupted the food system, but perhaps none so drastically in modern history as the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The onset of the pandemic resulted in approximately one-third of the world's population going on lockdown; this disruption to daily life had many implications on the food system (Galanakis, 2020). Restaurants and institutions were shut down, people could not go to work and lost their jobs, unemployment and food insecurity rates skyrocketed. Nearly one in four individuals in the United States has experienced food insecurity during the pandemic, a rate that is double the pre-COVID average; and families with children and people of color were disproportionately impacted (Silva, 2020). While many people went hungry, farmers were forced to throw out entire fields of crops because they were not able to switch markets from food service to retail (Parks et al., 2020). The food supply chain has been shockingly disrupted on both ends, "demand-side shocks include panic buying and changes in food purchasing patterns" and supply-side disruptions include "labor shortages and disruptions to transportation and supply networks" (Hobbs, 2020, p. 173). The crises experienced because of the breakdown of the food system due to the COVID-19 pandemic represent the

fragility of the system. The pandemic forced people of varying status and geography to confront the realities of a defective food supply chain and elucidated the issues food system-change advocates have been researching and rallying around for decades. The pandemic presented a shock to the food system, and we can expect similar scenarios to occur more frequently as the impacts of climate change become a reality. While our uncertain future offers no certain solace of stability, glimmers of hope exist in the many movements working to reform the food system and in the community organizations fighting for a more just food future.

The food sovereignty movement offers inspiration and principles that present an alternative way forward and a potential guide for envisioning a sustainable and just food system worldwide, while community-based organizations (CBOs) work to transform local food systems. Noting the successes of the food sovereignty movement and the notable change-making power of community-based organizations, this study was originally designed to identify intersections between community organizations and the food sovereignty movement, and to see how community organizations are working to achieve food sovereignty. Very shortly into my study, I realized that individuals and groups working on the front lines- delivering food, operating pantries, growing food- were not concerned with the etymological differences between food security, food justice, and food sovereignty. Their time is spent more appropriately addressing the pressing needs in their communities than debating if they more closely identify with the concept of food justice or gravitate more toward the pillars of food sovereignty. However, many community organizations are working toward realizing the principles of food sovereignty, without necessarily naming them as such.

Based on my work experience at- and research with an organization (Boston Area Gleaners) that is implicitly part of the food sovereignty movement, I believe that local food

organizations are agents of change in their communities and moreover are best suited to be because of their high levels of social capital and strong sense of community. I argue that community organizations that focus on food sovereignty are most effective in ensuring a local, sustainable food system, as demonstrated by community organizations' responses during the pandemic. However, they remain limited by a lack of resources and bureaucracies within current political systems. Furthermore, their long-term goals are often restricted by the pressing needs of their community that they must prioritize. To analyze the validity and applicability of these claims, I completed interviews with representatives from organizations working within the food system from across the United States of America. There is abundant research analyzing various segments of the food system, but focus is lacking on the variations between local food organizations and the value of food movements to them particularly in weathering shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, little has been studied in regards to the value of social capital to community-based organizations. This paper presents the findings of initial research on the topic, and seeks to answer the following questions: How are local food organizations acting as agents of change? How do these organizations fit into or further the food movements? Does the food sovereignty movement offer value to community organizations? And, what limitations do they face in achieving their mission?

To answer these questions, I will first provide background on the relevant food movements: defining and distinguishing food sovereignty, food security, and food justice. Next, I will review the relevant literature to provide background on the history of the domestic food system, the rise of charity, and the proliferation of community-based organizations in the food system. Then, I will establish my theoretical framework citing social capital theory, sense of community, and food sovereignty principles. Next, I will present the findings of my original

research that highlights the successes of CBOs with attention to the importance of social capital and the pillars of food sovereignty, using their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study of sorts. Finally, I will offer implications for the future.

Background

The Food Sovereignty Movement

The globalization of the food system and subsequent corporate land grabbing caused the destruction of peasant communities and rural farming practices throughout the developing world (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010). With the slogan, “we will not be disappeared”, a movement of small landholding peasants and rural farmers converged across countries. This group of farmers grew into “La Via Campesina”, an international farmers movement and network, rooted in the belief of food sovereignty. La Via Campesina brought forward the concept of food sovereignty for the first time at the World Food Summit in 1996, presenting it as an alternative to the neoliberal policies and trade practices threatening their livelihood. In 2007, at the first global forum on food sovereignty, food sovereignty was officially defined in the Declaration of Nyéléni:

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation. It offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers and users.

Food sovereignty prioritises local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal - fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability. Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just incomes to all peoples as well as the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to use and manage lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations. (Nyéléni, 2007)

Food sovereignty demands comprehensive change; agrarian reform will benefit all of society, ensuring access to healthy and culturally appropriate food while focusing on social justice and poverty elimination (McMichael, 2014). The food sovereignty movement's goal is to transform the food system; the movement has grown over time and is now linked to efforts fighting against hunger and food insecurity, and strategizing for sustainability, maintaining environmental integrity, and rural development (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010). The six pillars of food sovereignty, defined in 2007 at Nyéléni, are a guide and reference point for discussion and implementation. The pillars are “the right to food (rejecting the framework of food as commodity), a respect for food providers, support for local food systems, support for local control over land, water, seeds, and other inputs (rejecting privatization of those resources), the building of local knowledge and skills, and working with nature through the use of agroecological strategies” (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010, p. 117).

Food Security and Food Justice

The distinctly holistic food sovereignty movement presented a sharp contrast to the existing push for “food security”. Food security, a concept put forth originally by the United Nations in the 1970s, was defined as, “the availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices” (United Nations, 1975; Patel, 2009). This discussion of food security, focusing on the sheer volume of food produced, disregards the conditions of food production and consumption, any other implications of agricultural practices and cultural appropriateness, and ignores the issues of accessibility and freedom. It disregards the social complexities of the food system and avoids the issues of social control and power. Operating under these terms of food security means that people can be food secure if they are imprisoned or living under a dictatorship, which means the definition of food security disregards the issues of agency and justice (Patel, 2009). Food security is not enough and should not be the end goal. In sharp contrast, the food sovereignty movement is distinctly political. Proponents of food sovereignty believe that the realization of food security, democracy, and environmental justice will never be realized within the current food regime (McMichael, 2014).

The food justice movement can be regarded as more progressive than food security, but not as radical as food sovereignty. Giménez and Shattuck (2011) differentiate between the various food movements, discussing each movement’s focus; food security’s orientation is development and aid, whereas food justice is empowerment, and food sovereignty is entitlement and redistribution. Food justice aspires to fix the injustices embedded in the current food system. Examples include trying to alleviate food insecurity in underserved communities or improve labor conditions for farmworkers (Nyéléni, 2007). The main distinction between food justice and

food sovereignty is that food justice seeks to reform the system while food sovereignty seeks to dismantle the system and allow individual communities the freedom to rebuild appropriately.

Another contrast between food sovereignty and food security or justice is the variability of food sovereignty. The name food sovereignty demands that the food system will vary between localities because people have the freedom to do what they feel is best in their communities. To have true freedom over one's cultural and productive capacity means that agriculture will naturally differ from community to community. Individual regions will do what is best under their unique circumstances. Food sovereign communities have full freedom to live and produce in alignment with their particular needs, values, and culture. This strategy that emphasizes the appropriateness of sustenance practices is a strength of the food sovereignty movement; a one size fits all approach will simply not work on the issue of a food system, because the food system is far too complex to be fixed by a single answer (McMichael, 2014). The varying appearances of the application of food sovereignty also offers a distinct counter to the food system that is a product of free trade and dominated by transnational corporations, where identical products are produced and sold worldwide.

While the movements of food security, justice, and sovereignty intersect, they feature distinct narratives and each approach the topic of the food system through a different lens and submit a different focus. Placing food-focused institutions in their appropriate movement can demonstrate the difference between them; Feeding America and most food banks focus on food security, Fair Trade certifications exemplify prioritizing food justice, and food sovereignty is best exemplified by La Via Campesina and other agrarian-based farmers' movements (Giménez & Shattuck, 2011). The various food movements interact and often, their efforts overlap, but their origins and overall goals are decisively different.

Food Sovereignty in the USA

The US Food Sovereignty Alliance (USFSA), is a network of grassroots organizations working toward food justice and food sovereignty in the United States. Born out of concern following the 2008 global food crisis, this group advocated for “a stronger policy agenda that included fair prices for farmers and consumers; equity in the food system; sustainable agriculture; workers’ rights, and the right to food” (Nyéléni, 2007). This group acknowledges the lack of justice in the United States, both in the establishment of it and current operation. Their mission echoes that of La Via Campesina and includes principles of food justice and seeks food security for the country, it reads:

The US Food Sovereignty Alliance (USFSA) works to end poverty, rebuild local food economies, and assert democratic control over the food system. We believe all people have the right to healthy, culturally appropriate food, produced in an ecologically sound manner. As a US-based alliance of food justice, anti-hunger, labor, environmental, faith-based, and food producer groups, we uphold the right to food as a basic human right and work to connect our local and national struggles to the international movement for food sovereignty. (USFSA, 2020)

The organization has pushed back against the privatization of seeds, advocated for indigenous sovereignty, and fought for justice for all workers in the food system including food chain workers. As an iteration of the original, this group embodies the principles of food sovereignty. There is a consensus among scholars studying the state of food sovereignty in the US that the movement will have to speak to consumers in order to really take off, particularly in regards to accessibility to low-income consumers (Brent et al., 2015).

An analysis of the United States food system and investigation into its reformation must pay particular attention to the racist history of its formulation. Food justice scholar Zoe Brent writes, “The US food system had been anything but just, as it had been built on the exploitation of Indigenous peoples, slaves and others, and continued to function through exploitation and oppression” (Brent, et al., 2015, p. 619).

Though oppression and injustice have been embedded in the country’s food system since its inception, resistance has always persisted. Leah Penniman details an instance of original resistance in her book *Farming While Black*,

Our great great grandmothers in Dahomey, West Africa, witnessed the kidnapping and disappearance of members of their community and experienced a rising unease about their own safety. As insurance for an uncertain future, they began the practice of braiding rice, okra, and millet seeds into their hair. While there were no “report backs” from the otherside of the transAtlantic slave trade and rumors abounded that white people were capturing Africans to eat us, they still had the audacity of hope to imagine a future on soil. Once sequestered in the bowels of the slave ships, they continued the practice of seed smuggling, picking up grains from the threshing floor and hiding the precious kernels in their braids. (Penniman, 2018)

Because the food system has been built on stolen labor, land, and forced displacement, today, white landowners control 98% of farmland in the United States (Gilbert, et al., 2002). Many groups continue to organize and push for change. Groups such as Soul Fire Farm and the National Black Food And Justice Alliance are working to further Black and Indigenous food sovereignty and end racism in the food system.

Historically rooted resistance efforts have converged with other food movements, yet amongst the broader food related dialogue in the country, there is great variation. Brent (2015, p. 620) iterates this variability, “While there is a tendency among both activists and scholars to refer to a ‘US food movement’, what exists in reality is a patchwork of different, contrasting, even competing efforts.”

Literature Review

The body of existing literature focused on the food system is vast. Researchers have studied the evolution of the food system in the United States with attention to the different players and dynamics. The various food movements have been well documented, and the multitude of community organizations and groups have been well cataloged. Recently, studies have emerged documenting the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects of the government’s response. This study seeks to fill a gap in the literature, attempting to connect the many silos of research on specific sectors of the food system by analyzing intersections between community organizations and the food movements specifically evaluating valuable strategies used in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many studies have documented the evolution of the food and agriculture focused bureaucracy in the United States government. These works detail the origins of food and agriculture government agencies and programs, beginning with the establishment of the United States Department of Agriculture in 1862 and the creation of the Farm Bill during the Great Depression (Zizza, 2015; Miller et al., 2019). Another set of works draws attention to the complications and possible corruption involved in the intimate relationship between the government and corporations (Mead & Stokes, 2016; Ken, 2014).

Another subset of works focuses on the neoliberal policies that ultimately led to the rise of hunger-relief charities and CBOs. Daponte and Bade (2006) place emphasis on the inception of The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) as an impetus for food charity growth. Through TEFAP, the government purchases commodities for hunger relief and distributes them through private distribution networks. This program institutionalized the food bank network throughout the country. Sean Parson (2014) explained how the 1970 tax code changes and enactment of Good Samaritan Laws created a new “charity food market” that allowed food producers “to dump their surplus products”. Essentially, these statutory changes allowed producers to donate unused food for tax breaks, offering a bailout for corporations and bolstering the charity food market. Parson (2014) further explained how the Reagan era welfare cuts added to the rise of charity food markets, citing the cuts to federal programs such as food stamps and the subsequent increase in federal support for food banks and soup kitchens - again ultimately supporting corporations through the secondary food market.

Many studies have evaluated the effectiveness of public and private sources of food assistance. Several works have focused specifically on the efficacy of the food stamps program, with studies ranging from economic impacts to nutritional standards (Senauer & Young, 1986; Daponte et al., 2004). Findings between studies have been mixed in determining if food stamps have a statistically significant impact on food insecurity (Borjas, 2001; Cohen et al., 1999; Rose et al., 1998; Yu et al., 2010). The theory and practice of Food Banks have been studied extensively. In 1998, Janet Poppendieck released her seminal book, *Sweet Charity? Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement*, which offers a powerful critique of the free food distribution charity system. Poppendieck explains that food banks are “band aid” solutions and are

counterproductive as they lessen the pressure and distract from government responsibility (Stuttaford et al., 1998).

Many works have furthered the evaluation of food banks. Handforth, Schwartz, and Hennink (2013) focused on the effectiveness of food bank nutrition programs, while other scholars have documented the problems of long-term dependence on food banks (Paynter et al., 2011). A subset of food bank literature draws attention to the institutional power and bureaucratic limitations associated with the rise of commercialized food banks (Warshawsky 2010; Riches 2011). Many scholars agree with Poppendieck's assessment that the food bank system distracts from the real issue of poverty, and their proliferation is inhibiting lasting solutions (Tarasuk and Eakin 2005; McIntyre et al. 2016). Brent (2015) discusses the issue of food nonprofit funding structures. He argues that nonprofits can serve as "important mobilizing structures for resistance", but the issue of reliance on external funding can jeopardize their potential. He explains, "The political agenda of funders and the autonomy given to grantees are therefore key questions in understanding the extent to which channelling resistance through nonprofits can depoliticise food movements in the USA" (Brent, 2015, p. 625). He explains that many food justice organizations have been criticized for accepting funding from the Walmart Foundation, an organization who stands "at the center of the nation's cheap food structure" and arguably represents the flawed food system". He presents an important point to grapple with as he questions how nonprofits can act in resistance to the current food regime when they are bound by the political agendas of their funders, and funders tend to be institutions with motivation to uphold the current regime.

While food banks remain ubiquitous, other models of aid have arisen in communities throughout the country. Vitiello (2015) reported on the ways food banks were connecting with

local agriculture, including gleaning and gardening programs. Many works document the progress of food movements in the United States, spotlighting groups that are working toward food justice through innovative programs such as place-based approaches to food growing or Community Supported Agriculture (Alkon and Norgaard, 2009; Kato, 2013). Beyond these works, few studies have worked to evaluate the status of food movements integration into food-based community organizations and nonprofits. Clendenning and colleagues (2016) conducted research in Oakland and New Orleans to evaluate the extent to which food sovereignty has been embedded as a “concept, strategy and practice”. They found that the food justice movement resonates more in these places, but “the motives behind urban food activism are similar across movements as local actors draw on elements of each in practice” (p. 165). Several works have concluded that implementing food sovereignty in the USA will require resistance to the constraints of neoliberalism (Fairbairn, 2012; Alkon and Mares, 2012).

The existing literature thoroughly evaluates the structure of the domestic food system and documents the status of food movements, but a connection between food movements and community organizations is poorly studied. In a time where issues of food insecurity and worker’s rights have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, more attention must be paid to the groups working to better these issues in their communities. This study brings a critical and timely focus to the work of community-based organizations, and evaluates the ways in which principles from the food movements are valuable to their success. This study expands the literature on community organizations, delving deeper into the variation between them, their successes and limitations, while evaluating the particular value of the principles of food sovereignty to these organizations as they encountered the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theoretical Framework

Local community-based organizations are the best agents to make change in their communities because of their social capital and sense of community. Furthermore, community-based organizations are best suited to push their communities toward food sovereignty, transforming the local food system and creating lasting, positive change in their communities. Local CBOs that focus on food sovereignty are able to create sustainable local food systems that are strong, stable, and capable of weathering catastrophic disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Local CBOs have established resources unique to their communities that outside agencies do not and cannot have. Perhaps the most valuable resource a CBO has is social capital. While there are many different understandings of social capital, most definitions at their core hold that social capital is, “social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity” (Mattessich, 2009, p. 49 citing Clark, 2004).

Overtime, the study of social capital has extended from a focus on the individual to a community level. In 1986, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu presented a definition of social capital very much focused on benefits to the individual. He wrote,

Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition- or in other words, to membership in a group- which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital... (p. 21)

In 1988, James Coleman offered another definition of social capital still focused on individuals, but drawing attention to the action space between them.

Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity, but a variety of different entities with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structure, and they facilitate certain actions of actors within the structure...Unlike other forms of capital, social capital inheres in the structure of relations between actors and among actors. It is not lodged either in the actors themselves or in physical implements of production. (p. 98)

Robert Putnam asserted a similar definition in 1993, he wrote, “social capital refers to the features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (p. 103). He argued that social capital enhances the benefits of physical and human capital and is essential to democracy. According to Putnam, established networks create trust and reciprocity, two important aspects of social capital. And he noted that in regions he studied that were successful with high social capital, networks were organized horizontally, not hierarchically. Putnam argues that the existence of social capital lends to increases in other forms of capital, leading to more resources for individuals and collective success in achieving goals.

This theory extends itself to community development and the success of community-based organizations. CBOs have high social capital because of their composition of community members and their organizational relationships with other local groups. Staff members bring to the organization their own social capital that the organization can utilize, but the organization itself establishes trust and reciprocity through its partnerships and relationships, further acquiring social capital. This social capital allows them to better leverage and acquire other forms of capital, and more effectively reach their goals.

CBOs rarely operate in a silo. They are often strapped for resources, and collaborate with other organizations to ensure optimal operations in their community. West explains the various reasons that networks of organizations are formed,

A network is formed when two or more organizations collaborate to achieve common goals; to solve problems or issues too large to face independently; to leverage the power of numbers in exercising influence or flexing political muscle; to maximize limited financial and human resources of a community by reducing duplication of organizations; or to operate more efficiently in concert with others. (West, 2009, p.110)

She argues that these networks can be very consequential in deciding organizations' fate. The strength, diversity, and types of relationships among this network determine the level of success experienced within the community. In other words, the amount of social capital held amongst local CBOs determines their collective success.

Local CBOs staff members are typically community members. They live, shop, play, raise families, etc., in the community they serve at work. They may have established connections to individuals through work, such as volunteers and donors, but they also have extensive personal networks established locally from all the other aspects of their lives. Their individual social capital adds to the organization, and their personal investment in the community, their sense of community, also leads to a more successful CBO.

McMillan and Chavis (1986) define a sense of community as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 8). When an organization is composed of local individuals with a strong sense of community, they feel a greater responsibility to take care of their neighbors.

For CBOs, their social linkages are an invaluable resource. Their social capital and sense of community make them a stronger, more powerful agent than an outside agency. Locally based community organizations have social capital that organizations based outside of the community do not have. These CBOs are inherently better equipped to make change in their communities.

The importance of being local is echoed in the pillars of food sovereignty. Three of the six pillars of food sovereignty explicitly use the word local: “support for local food systems, support for local control over land, water, seeds, and other inputs, and the building of local knowledge and skills” (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010, p.117). Local CBOs are best suited to implement these pillars, as they have the social ties and relationships necessary to connect the community around local food, build power to take control over local resources, and establish networks to consolidate knowledge and skills. To transform a community into one that is food sovereign, it will take people and organizations with enough social capital to mobilize the masses to redistribute resources and reallocate power.

When local CBOs are rooted in the principles of food sovereignty, they are stronger and more powerful than others that are not. Proponents of food sovereignty are fighting for empowered societies that organize themselves in a way that “transcends the neoliberal vision of a world of commodities, markets and selfish economic actors” (Anderson, 2018, p.1). The principles of food sovereignty lend themselves to a strong community; food sovereignty is about solidarity and fairness. If an organization holds food sovereignty close to their mission, they are working toward system change. They will prioritize fairness and justice for their neighbors and the planet. Food sovereignty is not a prescription but rather a strategy of thought and organization.

Organizations working toward food sovereignty will do more for their communities than those focusing solely on food security or justice. Food sovereignty moves the needle further in bringing justice to the many atrocities embedded in the food system. Nettie Wiebe, an activist from Canada explains the origin of food sovereignty in opposition to food security.

The conventional term of “food security” was inadequate. This was about more than producing more food or distributing it more efficiently. We were grappling with fundamental questions of power and democracy: Who controls food producing resources such as land, water, seeds and genetics and for what purposes? Who gets to decide what is grown, how and where it is grown and for whom? We needed to have language that expressed the political dimensions of our struggle... Food Sovereignty...provokes the necessary discourse about power, freedom, democracy, equality, justice, sustainability and culture. Food is taken out of the realm of being primarily a market commodity and re-embedded in the social, ecological, cultural and local contexts as a source of nutrition, livelihood, meaning and relationships. (Wiebe, 2017, p. 6)

Food sovereignty also emphasizes the importance of collaboration and partnerships, another point that is in total alignment with community-based organizations. Successful CBOs support each other, realizing their respective roles while coordinating to fill gaps. La Via Campesina explains, “The struggle for Food Sovereignty is a collective struggle, and cannot be achieved by one single social group. Building and developing alliances at a local, regional and international level is fundamental in order to build a movement working towards shared goals” (Anderson, 2018, p. 13). In times of crisis, such as a global pandemic, it takes diverse groups of people working together to take care of their communities. Organizations in alignment with food sovereignty practice this cross-sector collaboration.

Researcher Positionality

During the height of the pandemic, I was working with a non-profit organization operating at the center of the food system. The organization, Boston Area Gleaners (BAG), serves eastern Massachusetts with a mission of supporting an equitable, just, and sustainable local food system. Working at BAG throughout the pandemic allowed me to witness the effects of the pandemic, particularly on the food system, in a devastating yet enlightening way. Many of BAG's food pantry and hunger relief partners saw an 80% rise in use of their services as Massachusetts saw the greatest percent increase in rates of food insecurity in the country (Feeding America, 2021). BAG and the many other nonprofits and organizations serving the region worked courageously to meet the increased needs. These efforts were greatly complicated by unpredictable, inconsistent federal aid and disrupted supply chains.

Simultaneous to witnessing the food system effectively crumble in real time, I was completing research on the various movements that have risen out of discontent with the current food regime. While studying the food sovereignty movement, I realized that the organization I was working for was working toward food sovereignty and that BAG's success in pandemic relief was a product of the organization's holistic mission. I saw, firsthand, how successful CBOs can be at supporting their communities and making positive changes in the food system. This experience prompted this study.

To gain a deeper understanding of the success and limitations of community organizations, I researched and identified non-profits operating within the food system in the United States. I sought to answer the following research questions: How do these organizations fit into or further the food movements? Are local food organizations acting as agents of change

in their communities? If so, how, and are they best suited to be? Does the food sovereignty movement offer value to community organizations? How and why are they innovating and designing different models? And, what limitations do they face in achieving their mission?

Research Methodology

This research project began with the intent to analyze how community organizations are working toward food sovereignty, however, I quickly realized that individuals in these organizations do not have the time or the need to deliberate which food movement they most closely identify with, they just do the work. This is not to say that individuals operating in the food-centered space do not think about food movements or the collective impact of the work they are contributing to, but rather they do not necessarily revisit the definitions of food security, justice, and sovereignty during their strategic planning sessions to assign percentages to how they aspire to align with each.

Ultimately, I realized my first interviewees were getting hung up on the definitions of the language I was using, so instead of asking explicitly how they were working toward food sovereignty, I asked how they were working to change the food system.

I completed interviews with individuals associated with organizations working within the food system in the United States of America. I identified these organizations through online searches, beginning with organizations in the network of The US Food Sovereignty Alliance (USFSA). Through my initial interviews, I received recommendations of contacts at other relevant organizations. I also found a couple of organizations through personal connections and previous work.

I conducted nine interviews in total, with nine unique organizations. Of the nine interviewees, six were executive/ program directors or the equivalent, two were communications/ outreach staff, and one was a general program staff member. Interviews ranged from 15 to 55 minutes in length, were conducted over the phone, and participants answered questions about their organizations, the food system, and food movements. The interview instrument included the following questions in Table 1:

Table 1. Interview Questions

Describe your organization's mission and the work they do.
Do you believe your organization is working toward food security, food justice, or food sovereignty?
Do you believe that realizing the principles of food sovereignty is possible in your community?
What do you think are the most important things individuals or organizations can do to reform the food system?
Do you believe your organization and like organizations have a role in reforming the food system toward food sovereignty? If so, what is that role? What are your limitations?
How did your organization alter your programs or respond to the increased needs in your communities onset by COVID-19?

I also included information from Boston Area Gleaners, based on my experience with the organization, but not necessarily representing the viewpoint of the organization. This study was approved by the Illinois State University Institutional Review Board. A summary of the organizations is below:

Table 2. Researched Organizations' Basic Details

Organization	Location	Mission	Main Services
Duluth Community Garden Program	Duluth, Minnesota	Cultivate healthy neighborhoods by providing access to land, resources, and	Manage 21 community gardens, including gardens with individually

		community.	managed plots, group managed gardens, and “giving gardens”.
Agrarian Trust	Operate nationally	Support land access for the next generation of farmers.	Agrarian Trust - “commons based” land trust program.
Food Corps	Operate nationally	Together with communities, FoodCorps serves to connect kids to healthy food in school.	Garden and nutrition lessons, celebrate healthy eating in schools.
Bread for Life Co-op, a program of Home Sweet Home Ministries	Bloomington, Illinois	Demonstrate Christ's love through innovative approaches that instill hope, restore lives, and build community.	Sweat equity food co-op.
Lift Urban Portland	Portland, Oregon	Reduce hunger and improve the lives of low-income residents of Northwest and downtown Portland.	Food pantry, Adopt a Building - delivered food boxes, supper club, and emergency food closets.
Food Bank Network of the San Luis Valley	San Luis Valley, Colorado	Combat food insecurity in the San Luis Valley by providing access to nutritious food.	Network of 15 food pantries.
Food Recovery Network	Operate nationally	Committed to fighting food waste and ending hunger.	Empower college students to rescue food for hunger-fighting non-profits.
Salt and Light Ministry	Champaign and Urbana, Illinois	Share the love of God by fighting poverty with opportunities that empower people for lasting change.	Nonprofit grocery store, open to the public, with participant-based payment option (sweat equity model).
Food Not Bombs	Operate	When a billion people	Vegan or vegetarian

	internationally	go hungry each day, how can we spend another dollar on war?	food, free to anyone rich or poor, stoned or sober. No leaders. Not a charity, dedicated to non-violent, direct action so that no one has to be hungry or homeless.
Boston Area Gleaners	Acton, Massachusetts	Committed to supporting an equitable, just, and sustainable local food system.	Gleaning surplus produce for hunger relief and a surplus-focused local food hub.

Every organization interviewed works within the food system, but their focus and specific missions vary. When I asked the question, “Do you believe your organization is working toward food security, food justice, or food sovereignty?” all interviewees, nine out of nine, answered yes. Each representative felt that their organization is working toward food security, justice, or sovereignty, though their mission and services dictate which movement they are most closely aligned with. Based on the information I discovered through research and interviews, I have placed each organization into the movement in which they fit.

Table 3. Categorizing Organizations Based on Food Movement Association on a Scale of Food Security → Food Sovereignty

Organization	Food Movement	Rationale
Duluth Community Garden Program	Food Security/ Food Justice	Focused on improving access to food, specifically targeting disadvantaged areas.
Agrarian Trust	Food Sovereignty	Primary focus on equitable land access, power within the food system.
Food Corps	Food Justice	Focus on educating youth about the food system and bringing opportunity to disadvantaged areas.

Bread for Life Co-op, a program of Home Sweet Home Ministries	Food Justice	Sweat- equity model that improves food security in a strategic way.
Lift Urban Portland	Food Security	Various food distributions to combat hunger and food insecurity.
Food Bank Network of the San Luis Valley	Food Security	Free food distribution to community members to combat food insecurity.
Food Recovery Network	Food Insecurity	Rescue surplus food for hunger-relief distribution.
Salt and Light Ministry	Food Justice	Sweat- equity model that improves food security in a dignified, sustainable way.
Food Not Bombs	Food Sovereignty	Anti-capitalist, community-based aid. Distinctly political and human rights based.
Boston Area Gleaners	Food Sovereignty	Programs increase food security but also focus on reorganizing the food system to make it more just and local. Support farmers.

The Agrarian Trust focuses on land - tenure, equity, and access - operating under the belief that land is the foundation of independence, autonomy, and equity. This prioritization of land rights is very much in line with the food sovereignty movement. La Via Campesina argues that land distribution must be subjected to the criteria that those who work and depend on the land must be the ones with access, that it cannot be commercialized. Agrarian Trust's work is in alignment with these criteria as they work to bring justice to land ownership. The interviewee from Agrarian Trust explained, "Any lasting and permanent sovereignty must have a foundation of land justice manifesting through ownership, tenure, and equity."

Several of these organizations aspire to combat hunger and make their communities healthier, but they work toward this goal in distinct ways. Food Recovery Network works toward

this goal through food recovery on college campuses. Lift Urban Portland (Lift UP) and the Food Bank Network of the San Luis Valley are two organizations focused on increasing immediate food security in their regions.

The Food Bank Network operates 15 pantries throughout the San Luis Valley region, an area of southern Colorado that spans 8,000 square miles. In this region, many communities lack access to substantive food in general, with many towns stocked with only a gas station and miles away from an actual grocery store. The San Luis Valley faces such unique problems—geographical isolation, a lack of public transportation, and persistent generational poverty—the Food Bank Network is an institution of the food system in the region, on average serving 1 in 4 people living in the Valley at some point during the year. Although the Food Bank Network operates a more traditional food pantry style model, they are innovating. Whenever possible, they operate under a client choice model, where patrons of the pantry are able to shop around the food bank and personally select their food items. The Food Bank Network also tries to purchase local produce when possible, depending on grant funding, etc.

Lift Urban Portland also operates a conventional food pantry, as well as many other services focused on increasing local food security. Their other programs include an adopt a building program, that ensures individuals in low-income housing receive food even when they may not be able to physically access a pantry, and a supper club, that builds community in these buildings while ensuring people have a nutritious meal. Lift UP and the Food Bank Network are focused on food security and food justice; they are consumed by their communities' immediate needs, and less so focused on the principles of food sovereignty explicitly.

Duluth Community Garden Program works to cultivate healthy neighborhoods in the Duluth area by operating community gardens and providing access to land, resources, and

community. Through their community gardens, they improve neighborhood access to local, nutritious food, increasing food security. They also have incorporated programs with a focus on food justice, including offering sliding-scale payments for community garden plots.

Both Salt and Light Ministry and the Bread for Life Co-op offer grocery stores/ food co-ops with sweat equity models that allow their community members to access food without money. Both organizations originally began as emergency food pantries, but overtime, shifted their models to better address their missions and offer a more sustainable solution to food insecurity and poverty. These organizations are increasing food security and their model does address food justice to a certain extent as they are enabling access to high quality food that people may not otherwise have. However, such a model does not further food sovereignty. A model that utilizes sweat equity operates under the assumption that there must be something exchanged for a person to receive food. Whereas under food sovereignty, the right to food is recognized as a human right.

Boston Area Gleaners (BAG) works to increase food security by rescuing on farm surplus produce and providing it to food pantries. BAG supplies local, fresh, produce to people that otherwise may not have it, directly improving food security in their community. Additionally, an argument can be made that BAG improves food justice and food sovereignty as well as they increase healthy food access while advocating for broader system change. BAG's produce is high quality, nutritious, and fresh, which is not typically true of most food in the emergency food distribution system. Boston Area Gleaners also supports local farmers and provides infrastructure to improve local food security, in alignment with food sovereignty pillars.

Food Not Bombs is a very unique all-volunteer movement that has been organizing across the world for nearly 40 years. Food Not Bombs operates in over 1,000 cities across the

world, recovering food that would have been discarded and sharing it with community members for free in public places, as a way of protesting war and poverty. According to their website (2021),

Food Not Bombs provides more than free, healthy vegan and vegetarian food. We provide an opportunity for everyone to participate in solving the most important problems facing our world. We empower the public to take action and resist corporate domination and exploitation. We also provide food and logistical support to often marginalized people and social movements by feeding striking workers and their families, people participating at protests, and organizing community projects.

Food Not Bombs is absolutely working toward food sovereignty as they offer a decentralized model of mutual aid, while fighting against corporate domination and corrupt government.

Food Corps is a national service program that utilizes AmeriCorps members to connect kids to healthy food in schools through garden and nutrition programs. According to the individual I interviewed who served two years with FoodCorps at an elementary school in East Palo Alto, CA, the efficacy of FoodCorps differs heavily from location to location and depending on the service member. When asked if FoodCorps is working toward food sovereignty, food justice, or food security, the interviewee responded, “Everyone at the school I was working at already received free lunch, but FoodCorps does create the platform for people going in (like me) to build off that.” It seems that the immediate food security of school aged children, while at school, is already taken care of by the school, but FoodCorps works to teach students about their food and nutrition, working more towards food justice. However, their impact is limited, as this interviewee explained they felt school was the biggest factor influencing the student’s healthy food access, so the opportunity to engage those students in nutrition and food education is a big

deal. As far as tangible impacts to local food sovereignty, this interviewee said, “The most I could do was send a kid home with a bag of spinach.”

Results

Through my research, I found support for my hypothesis that local community-based organizations are changemakers in their communities, and are best suited to be because of their social capital. I discovered several themes between organizations. First, local CBOs develop diverse strategies and adapt their programs based on their unique community needs. Second, they evolve and innovate appropriately based on constant interaction with their constituents and feedback through their networks. Third, local organizations, because of their social ties and strong sense of community, felt responsible to their neighbors through the pandemic, and provided for their communities when outside agencies did not. Most interviewees also expressed that while they feel the government should take responsibility in the food system, they feel they must be responsible to make change at the community level. Finally, I present some of the limitations that CBOs face in realizing their goals.

Diverse Strategies and Innovations

While these CBOs have similar missions, their strategies and programs are quite distinct. Most interviewees expressed that their organization has changed over time as they learn and grow with their communities. Many of these organizations have been around for decades and have developed deep relationships with the communities of people that they serve. Just like people, organizations learn over time. They receive feedback through their networks, collaborate with partner organizations, take note of successes and challenges and adjust accordingly. This

opportunity to grow with their community, fueled by social capital and time, is invaluable and makes local CBOs much stronger than outside agencies.

Both Salt and Light Ministry and the Bread for Life Co-op began as emergency food pantries but evolved to their current models over time to more innovatively fight poverty and serve people in need. The interviewee from Salt and Light described their journey from pantry to grocery store:

Overtime, we started to have some real dissatisfaction with the emergency food pantry model. For one thing, our idea of fighting poverty began to change a little bit; instead of seeing poverty as primarily about not having money or not having stuff, our view of the problem of poverty shifted a bit. We started thinking about poverty as a more whole person kind of concept and how both the causes and effects of poverty are about more than just economic factors; there are mental, social, spiritual, and emotional factors involved in both causes and effects, and that includes both at an individual and systemic level. And so, for us, fighting poverty has come to mean something very different than ‘let’s just get these poor people some material resources’.

We now feel that it means addressing the lack of dignity and standing, and the lack of power and autonomy, and personal resources (spiritual, emotional, mental health) that people living in poverty are experiencing. And if you draw out that definition, then people living in poverty is a pretty broad category, which basically includes everyone. Because you can have all the money and stuff in the world and still be living a pretty impoverished experience in all of those ways. When we shifted and started to think about things differently like that, then we started to think, ‘maybe a weekly mass distribution of what usually ends up being low quality resources is not the most effective way of

addressing all of those different aspects of poverty.’ In other words, the emergency food pantry is good for what it's good for, which is getting some stuff immediately into people’s hands. It's’ not too picky about the quality of the stuff, it’s also not too picky about the mechanism that is used to connect the people with the stuff, so both of those things have some far-reaching impacts in the messages they communicate to people about themselves, their value, their place in a community, and all those other aspects of poverty mentioned. One of the things I often say when I’m talking in churches and public groups to try and conceptualize this a little bit is that I think you never feel more poor than when you’re standing in the handout line at the emergency food pantry.

So for us, if we’re supposed to be about alleviating poverty, then somehow now we’re creating an experience that intensifies the experience of poverty, rather than alleviating it. So at some point, we questioned how can we move to a model that actually does what our mission statement does- allows people the opportunity to feel loved and cared for by God, an opportunity to feel empowered, to use their own capacity to believe that they have capacity, and have something of value to contribute, to experience a life change that is positive and lasting beyond something that is consumable in the moment and that is shifting them away from an impoverished life experience, along all of these lines.

We shifted to the model we use now, a nonprofit grocery and thrift store. The stores are open to the public. The idea behind that is what if everybody could shop at the same store as their friends, neighbors, and community members, and have access to the same high-quality food as everyone and make food choices for their families? Instead of saying, ‘well you’re going to go to a special place that’s just for poor people essentially

to get leftover stuff that nobody else wants.’ The store operates on a participant-based payment option, so people struggling financially can open a participant payment account that allows them to use volunteer time in the store to earn store credit, up to 5 hours a week, that spends like any other form of payment in the stores. So when you go through the cash register, you can use cash, credit/debit, SNAP benefits, or your volunteer credit. (Salt and Light interview)

This model is innovative and more holistic than many other programs’ attempts at increasing food security and is working toward food justice more so than typical pantries or food banks. The interviewee from Salt and Light pointed out that emergency food distribution relies primarily on donated food or inexpensive, shelf-stable bulk purchasing. If a family is reliant on food pantry food, they are consistently eating less desirable food. A person’s health may not suffer seriously from eating tuna helper or low-grade meat for a few weeks but eating that food for an extended period will undoubtedly have health impacts. The Salt and Light interviewee explained one of their concerns about justice, “This food is being pumped into the community from food banks to low-income families, often families of color. What is the impact of eating a diet of this food, how are we forcing people to sacrifice their family’s health and child development?” By creating a system where people can come into their grocery stores and buy “organic produce and almond milk” no matter what their income is, they feel they are changing that equation. The evolution of Salt and Light is an excellent example of the value of social capital. The staff at Salt and Light received feedback from their clients over years because they had developed trusting relationships. Because of their ties to their community, they adapted and shifted their services to best serve their people.

Lift Urban Portland (Lift UP) operates a traditional food pantry but has expanded their programming beyond the original pantry to more strategically target food insecurity. They know their community and they know the people that they serve, so they adapted to serve them better. Through their adopt a building program, they deliver food boxes to residents living in low-income housing. Additionally, they stock emergency food closets in these buildings that are free for residents to access in case they need supplemental food. These programs were developed because they knew many of their clients were not able to physically come to their pantry but relied on their food. Lift UP also runs a “Supper Club” in these buildings, where they regularly create dinners with a group of residents, incorporating education, basic culinary skills, and community building, ultimately growing that social capital that they know is so important to their work.

The interviewee from Duluth Community Gardens (DCG) explained that their organization continues to try to adapt to better address the barriers keeping people from accessing healthy food. They said,

We continue to try and create other ways for people to engage with the gardens besides just having their own plot, because we realize that even if we are providing a free garden space there are still a lot of other barriers to someone being able to garden, like not everyone has the time or other financial resources for plants, etc., so we’re trying to make our gardens even more accessible. (DCG interview)

Some of these strategies include implementing what they call “giving gardens”, which are managed by a staff member and open to the public for free taking. DCG is also intentionally locating gardens in low-income, neighborhoods of color, with lower life expectancies to try and increase access to free, healthy food.

Boston Area Gleaners (BAG) has been organizing volunteers to glean surplus produce for hunger-relief agencies for over 15 years. This model was very successful and recognized nationally as an innovative way to fight hunger and reduce food waste. However, the gleaning model was limited by its reactive nature and its reliance on farmers to donate their crops, essentially subsidizing the hunger-relief sector. After years of working closely with farmers, leaders at BAG designed a new Food Hub program that would be a proactive arm of the organization that would financially support farmers, increase local food access, and create revenue to support the hunger-relief gleaning program. The Food Hub acts as an intermediary between farmers and customers, aggregating, marketing, and selling farmers' surplus products at reasonable costs to food banks, co-ops, and other local food businesses. The Food Hub is a true innovation as it is a win-win for everyone in the food system. It supports farmers, increases access to local food, and maintains BAG's ability to donate high quality, local produce to regional hunger-relief agencies. This organizational evolution was in part due to craftful, strategic thinking by BAG's leaders, but it would not have been possible without the close relationships with farmers and frontline workers.

The Food Bank Network of the San Luis Valley prioritizes local solutions, partly because they have to, given their remote geography, but also because they recognize that it is often the case that "local knows best". The Food Bank Network operates 15 satellite pantries in different towns throughout the San Luis Valley. Each pantry is unique to its community, from the volunteers to the food contents. In this way, each pantry is informed by community members and best suited to meet their unique needs. The Food Bank Network runs on social capital. Every satellite pantry is run solely by volunteers, identified by other community members and word of mouth.

Food Not Bombs by nature only operates locally. While the movement operates all across the world, it is decentralized as all chapters are started and run by individuals in their own communities. There are no leaders in Food Not Bombs (FNB), decision making is consensus based, and resources to start a chapter are available online.

Community Organizations and Food Sovereignty Strategies in the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic illuminated the fragility of the food system. Successful responses were dependent on preexisting community connections and established social capital. The strategies that proved successful in the time of this intense crisis were ones in alignment with the principles of food sovereignty. Lift Urban Portland continued to deliver food to their adopt-a-building participants, because they believe everyone has a right to food and they have established a strong community. The Food Bank Network of the San Luis Valley continued to operate with modifications throughout the pandemic, because they too, believe in the right to food.

Food Not Bombs has been feeding community members every day, because of their local models and established local knowledge, they were not faced with disruptions because of a reliance on resources far away. According to a FNB cofounder I interviewed, their decentralized model is essential to success in times of crisis. He said,

The philosophical ideology of Food Not Bombs of being decentralized, locally based, in direct interaction with the community without restrictions, is really ultimately going to be the solution... we're seeing what is broadly being called mutual aid, being the solution to upcoming and even current crises. (Food Not Bombs Interview)

The cofounder detailed some of the efforts at a chapter in Santa Cruz, California, explaining that they usually cook and feed people community meals once a week, but since the pandemic

started, they have been serving food every day. The Santa Cruz chapter is made up of several teams: a food recovery team, a delivery and cooking team, a compost team, a team focused on getting groceries to undocumented families, and a team focused on aiding people facing evictions.

Working at Boston Area Gleaners during the height of the pandemic, I witnessed firsthand the power and impact of local hunger-relief agencies collaborating to take care of their neighbors. Rates of food insecurity skyrocketed at the onset of the pandemic in early spring 2020, this timing coincided with what is typically BAG's off season. However, BAG staff jumped into action, hiring supplemental staff and working around the clock to get food delivered to community members in need. In the face of extreme uncertainty, BAG mobilized for their community. The government did offer funding for emergency food distribution through the USDA, but it was dependent on the knowledge and infrastructure of local groups on the ground. BAG was awarded funding through the USDA's Farmers to Families Food Box Program that allowed them to distribute food boxes across the region. The funding came from the federal government; however, this distribution was only successful because of BAG's established social networks with farmers, produce markets, and hunger-relief agencies. The USDA, or any outside agency, could not solely handle the coordination involved with the food distribution because they do not have the necessary social capital and community knowledge to set up a successful network. The government has now left these communities they were supporting through COVID relief, but the communities are not recovered. BAG and other CBOs have come together to fill the gaps left by the government's abandonment.

A system that embodies food sovereignty will emphasize the right to food, respect food providers, be localized, and respect nature and local peoples and their knowledge. If these

principles are realized, many of the problems seen during the COVID-19 crisis would be prevented or lessened. For example, a region with a prosperous local food system would not be faced with uncertainty if a crisis occurs on the other side of the world. Well-endowed local food systems provide stability for those that work in agriculture, distribution, and all those that can be nourished by the production. A local food system is much more resilient than one dependent on the actions, climate, and trade relations of actors on different continents.

A food system based on food sovereignty would treat people as human-beings and not commodities or worker machines. The health and wellness of food workers has not been prioritized in the current food regime, the working conditions onset by the pandemic revealed a general lack of concern for their livelihood. Most food system workers did not enter their profession planning to serve as “front-line” workers in the pandemic. They were not prepared with sufficient information or equipment to ensure their safety nor were they compensated for weathering dangerous conditions (Parks et al., 2020).

Advocacy

Every organization I spoke with believed that they have a role in reforming or changing the food system. There was an emphasis on education, and the responsibility of individuals working intimately with the food system to share their knowledge and information so that more people understand the system. Many respondents emphasized the importance of land justice, arguing that land is the foundation of autonomy and the basis of equity in the food system. Many interviewees also mentioned that their organization is engaging or plans to engage in advocacy work, advocating for their clients and communities, attempting to influence policy.

When asked where the responsibility of reforming or changing the food system lies, the answers were unique depending on the community the organization represents. However, there

was a consensus that the government is deeply responsible in creating this unjust system, through racist USDA policies, unjust labor laws, and corporate influence, but we cannot rely on that same government to fix things. It is the responsibility of “the people who are in control, in power, and control how food flows”, according to the interviewee from Bread For Life Ministries. “We’re a single provider, and we are responsible for how we provide food assistance, but there are larger players.” they explained. This sentiment, that there is responsibility at the individual, community, and federal level, was expressed by most other organizations as well. The interviewee from Salt and Light explained that it seems there are two opposing schools of thought on this issue, one is that the responsibility is held within a community and can only be solved by neighbors coming together to address their specific issues, and two is that we need state and federal policies to address things like housing inequality, etc. They believe it will take both, “Communities know themselves best”, and any solutions need to be tailored to specific places, but they also need to be supported by a network of policies. This interviewee also emphasized that affordable housing affects everything else. They explained that if you are working full time and cannot afford to pay rent, then you cannot afford anything else (e.g., food), and this issue of affordable housing cannot be fixed by the community alone without policy support.

The respondent from Food Corps expressed, “I would love to think the government would take some responsibility, but what I see is the most change happens on a community level.” The Agrarian Trust interviewee said, “Any kind of systematic changes will require all levels and scale of people and place to be involved”. The interviewee from Duluth Community Gardens emphasized that the food system is a systematic political thing, and therefore grassroots organizations will need to act politically to change it.

Food Not Bombs takes a more decisive stance, the interviewee explained that one of the most important things communities can do to work toward food sovereignty is to get rid of your local government and its impediments, depending on where you are. They explained that the government will work to avoid food sovereignty because the people they work for have no interest in food sovereignty. They explained there was a farmer's market in their community with co-ops organizing out of it, and the city got rid of it to put in high rise, luxury apartments, an issue, of course, of financial power and influence.

It appears community organizations and movements feel they cannot depend on the government to make change happen, but the government is depending on them. The interviewee from the Food Recovery Network pointed out that "Yes, the EPA has a goal of cutting food waste in half, [but] they even say on their website they can't do it alone."

Limitations

Every non-profit I interviewed mentioned funding as one of their major limitations. The interviewee from Duluth Community Gardens explained that communities that struggle the most typically have the least resources, and they want to redirect resources to leaders in those communities, but they also have limited resources. Many interviewees mentioned the complicated funding models of their non-profits, and how they must cater to many different funder audiences to ensure they can do their work. Placating corporate funders or family philanthropists is not part of any mission I read or heard, but it is a significant part of the nonprofit world. One of my colleagues from Boston Area Gleaners recently pointed out the preposterous amount of time and energy we spend writing and rewriting grants depending on the nuances of the particular applications and questions. Time spent appealing to foundations and groveling to corporations could be better spent providing services aligned with our mission. The

interviewee from Home Sweet Home Ministries also explained that the federal commodity system, that supports many food banks throughout the country, does not allow for participatory models like theirs. So, the government, through its funding channels, is pushing back against innovation in hunger-relief and community food systems.

The magnitude of issues was also mentioned multiple times. The Agrarian Trust interviewee explained that one of the biggest limitations to changing the system and achieving food sovereignty is “the history of unequal and completely unjust ownership to many aspects of land and food”, they wondered, “where to begin to address that?”. The interviewee from Salt and Light explained that the system itself is a limitation. They explained one issue is that it seems the rest of our culture has an instant gratification problem in solving these issues. They have an annual event where they give away a thousand turkeys at Thanksgiving, and people always want to volunteer for this event because it leaves them feeling warm and fuzzy, but what does an event like that really do to help long term or actually fight poverty or food insecurity? The issues of poverty and food insecurity are wrapped up with other complicated systematic issues, and they are big, depressing issues. The interviewee explained that in the face of this, they can understand how people would rather just give a turkey.

Several interviewees expressed that their organizations wish to implement bigger projects and more holistic programs, but their resources are consumed by the services they already provide. For many of these groups, their day-to-day operations entail feeding people who may not otherwise be fed, so they will not forgo their usual programming to think about the bigger picture or how they can further implement principles of food sovereignty. It is not that these nonprofits and movements do not think about the food system as a whole or how they can collaborate with partners to further abdicate injustices in their communities, they are

underfunded and short-staffed, fully consumed with doing everything they do and trying to keep doing it. Their long-term goals are often restricted by the immediate pressing needs they must prioritize.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic presented one of the biggest disruptions to the status quo in modern times. This global crisis prompted pause as many people, for the first time, faced the grim reality of our food system. Even before the pandemic inspired chaos, the food system was greatly flawed. In the face of such devastating issues of hunger, poverty, and environmental degradation, it is hard to believe in a better future. However, we can find collective hope and motivation in the many movements and groups that are pushing for a better food regime.

The push for food security illuminated the cause of hunger and food justice work highlights issues of equity in accessing food. The food sovereignty movement presents an entirely alternative food regime that prioritizes people and the environment rather than corporations and money. Meanwhile, community-based organizations mobilize in all circumstances to support their neighbors and create a better food future. Their aggregated social capital and local positioning make them well suited to make change in their communities and further the movement toward food sovereignty.

In the face of a future plagued with uncertainty, from pandemics to climate change, the food system must be strong and stable. Reimagining the domestic food system to implement the six pillars of food sovereignty will result in a more sustainable, healthier, and resilient food system; a community with food sovereignty will have an active, local food economy, it will be secure and able to withstand the future's impending crises. Community organizations have been

shouldering great responsibility in ensuring people are fed and sustained in their neighborhoods, but given their limitations, they cannot transform the food system within the current regime. The principles of food sovereignty present a way forward and a guide for community organizations; a future with a reformed system, adapted to best fit the needs of individual communities, is the only option to ensure the sustainability of the food system and the health and well-being of humanity.

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