



Food Systems Planning, Assessments & Consulting

When we talk about a food system, we are referring to the channels and interconnected activities that include the production, processing, marketing, distribution, and sale/provision of food to consumers (households, hospitals, schools, etc.). Simply stated, a food system includes all of the components required for food to reach the table. A food system can be global, national, regional, or statewide in scope. However, it can also be narrowed to a given food shed, county, township, or neighborhood.

Strengthening your local food system involves hard work, planning, collaboration, and strategy, but the economic development and public health benefits are worth the effort!

Historically, food systems were primarily local. From its earliest days, the cultivation of healthy food has been the lifeblood of any community. In the Midwest, for example, Native Americans grew squash, pumpkins, turnips, cabbage, and multiple varieties of corn and beans. European settlers added wheat, oats, potatoes, barley, rye, and buckwheat. They fished the winding waterways and hunted across vast bluffs and forests. Despite being challenged by occasional harsh winters, the food system was abundant and balanced. As settlements grew and prospered, farmers brought their crops, livestock, and even canned foods to town to trade and sell. Up until about the 1900s, two out of every five adults in the U.S. lived and worked on a farm. Most farms were small and relied on local channels to distribute offerings. As a result, the larger community was very familiar with aspects of agriculture and their food's origin. Many families had personal knowledge and experience harvesting or producing food, even if they themselves were not farmers. Very few foods were processed or packaged. However, by the 1950s, many food systems transitioned from local to national or global in nature. In great part, the shift was due to technological advances (such as refrigerated units on trucks, railcars, and ships), optimal climate, and the consolidation of farms and resources, which also led to specialization rather than crop diversity. Today, most families do not hunt, fish, grow, smoke, or can their own food. And less than 1% of the U.S. population currently lives on a farm. Society has become less familiar with the nature of food production and our food's origin.

Whether you are seasoned in food systems or just getting started, we can help.

Here are examples of our areas of expertise and how we contribute:

- **Conduct food systems inventory and planning**
- **Identify food system advantages and challenges and develop a long-term master plan to help your community, city, county, or entire state address them**
- **Short-term action plans**
 - Strategy development
 - Written plan
 - Team work plans
 - Benchmarks / baselines / accountability
 - Metrics
 - Facilitation with partners and community
- **Sharpen your specific food systems contribution, whether it's ...**
 - Ending hunger
 - Increasing food flow through pantries

- School, hospital, and/or other institutional food programs
 - Economic development opportunities and job creation
 - Improving public health
 - Increasing local, healthy food production
 - Improving retail grocery channels
 - Training community members
 - Or other opportunities – food systems have many diverse components!
- **Food hub assessment**
 - **Warehouse and fulfillment centers**
 - **CSAs / community-focused farms / community gardens / farmers markets**
 - **Additional solutions**
 - A grocery site that went dark
 - Food programs
 - Corner store improvements
 - Branded food kiosks placed / managed within:
 - Convenience stores
 - Hospitals
 - Churches
 - Schools
 - Large employer
 - Another location
 - **Support programs**
 - SNAP / Double Your Bucks
 - Employment & training
 - Health & wellness
 - Community engagement strategies
 - **Impact analysis**
 - On food access
 - Improving corner stores
 - Food system channels including food hub as key driver
 - Reducing the food desert
 - Public health
 - Economic development / the economy / jobs
 - Workforce solutions
 - Re-entry into the workforce / new skills for the hard-to-employ
 - **Very detailed market analysis** report of food systems opportunities with a lengthy series of custom data, maps, analysis, and action plan – typically 50 to 80 pages
 - **Shorter food systems assessment summary**, addressing key points with maps
 - **Food systems snapshots and scorecards**
 - **Grocer basket projections** by geographic market or customer segment to support new social or for-profit enterprises that anchor your food system

- **Strategy / development / project coaching**
- **Survey of current or prospective food systems users** – For example, could be a very detailed survey and codebook (80 or more pages) with results mapped at the block level of a particular trade area or across a city or even multiple states. Or could be shorter but still on point, abbreviated assessment. We conduct many different types of surveys, including online, planned face-to-face, and surprise intercepts.
- **Focus groups** that help identify customer perceptions, attitudes, current practices, and intentions. They provide nuance and clarity. They can help you identify language that speaks to customers, the community, and other influential stakeholders. They plant important seeds for new product and service offerings. What are your customers saying about you? How can you sharpen your competitive edge? Find out – live – behind our one-way window at one of our insightful focus groups. Or watch the video on your phone as you peddle the stationary bike at the gym. Focus group design, recruitment, moderation, and results – it’s an art and a science. **In some rural areas, where everyone knows everyone else, focus groups might not be the best option** to keep respondent information protected. We also conduct **face-to-face confidential interviews** that provide this type of very detailed information.
- **Mystery shopping:** visiting food programs or charitable/retail food outlets as a “normal customer” and reporting back on the level of service, pricing, quality of food products, merchandising, and need for improvements. Whether you engage us to assess your own program or those of a competitor or one that you simply admire – or both with comparisons – the information is invaluable. **For example, if your food program is offering fresh, organic produce, but sales are low, what is the experience, perception, and expectations of customers shopping for produce at a nearby supermarket?** What is your competitive advantage and how can you communicate it? Are they even aware of your offerings? We can help revise your business plan.
- **Community segmentation strategies.** Many communities are diverse in terms of income, age, household composition, ethnicity, culture, food preferences, and other factors. We help identify, engage, and address each customer type. This includes developing behind the scenes data and strategy, implementing solutions, and facilitating meetings with the public, elected officials, local community organizations, and others to invite their valuable feedback and participation.
- **A professional opinion** that blends a number of different data and analysis into the deliverable. This is often ideal when the promoter or developer of a food hub (as one example) has a need for information that engages many different types of community, government, and market actors (board of directors, financial institutions, local leadership, foundation, investors, policy makers, elected officials, etc.).
- **Facilitated sessions**
 - Agenda / goals
 - Facilitation
 - Written plan
 - Broader needs assessment incorporated into the plan
 - Board debriefing
 - Staff coaching

- **Executive briefings** – we provide special presentations and event keynotes to board and team leadership on:
 - Millennials: what they mean to the Good Food movement
 - Good Food: what it is and isn't
 - How to conduct a food assessment
 - Food: past, present, and future
 - Food Deserts, Food Balance, and health outcomes
 - The rise of meal kits, delivered straight from the warehouse to the home kitchen: new opportunities for your food program?
 - Other topics
- **Food equity planning and impact** – many food system organizers that we work with sometimes feel frustrated that it takes so long to do a single project. Some have also voiced concern that it's hard to compete with large retailers who have the immediate resources to scale up quickly. We can help you identify highest impact projects, how to connect them, and how to make their collective impact more than the sum of the parts.
- **Food system and other community training and workshops**
- **Communications** – effective ways to present data and food system plans, tell your story, and engage partners, foundations, other for-profit and nonprofit market actors, and the larger community.

Reach out today.

**There's no time
like the present to
assess and
strengthen your
food system.**

Questions?

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