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Placing the food system on the urban agenda: The role of municipal institutions in food systems planning

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Abstract. Food issues are generally regarded as agricultural and rural issues. The urban food system is less visible than such other systems as transportation, housing, employment, or even the environment. The reasons for its low visibility include the historic process by which issues and policies came to be defined as urban; the spread of processing, refrigeration, and transportation technology together with cheap, abundant energy that rendered invisible the loss of farmland around older cities; and the continuing institutional separation of urban and rural policy. Despite its low visibility, the urban food system nonetheless contributes significantly to community health and welfare; to metropolitan economies; connects to other urban systems such as housing, transportation, land use, and economic development; and impacts the urban environment. We examine existing or potential city institutions that could offer a more comprehensive look at the urban food system. These include the city department of food, the food policy council, and the city-planning department.

Key words: Food systems, Municipal policy, Urban planning

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Mention of the food system readily conjures up images of fields laden with crops ready to be harvested, the sounds of cows and chickens, and perhaps, in a negative vein, the smells of hogs and slaughter house. Images of abundance, efficiency, and technological ingenuity, these are mostly rural images. In the urban context, the images become less sharp. Well-stocked and clean supermarkets abundant with colorfully packaged foods may come to mind, especially in the United States and Europe. So may the ubiquitous fast food places. For the less fortunate, the picture may be of food pantries, soup kitchens, and food handouts. But food issues are thought of mostly as agricultural issues grounded in rural settings.

There are reasons why the food system is less visible and has taken a back seat to other urban systems like housing, transportation, employment, and the environment. And there are reasons why the food

system is indeed a significant urban system. We will discuss the case for both these contentions in this paper. We will also discuss ways that food issues in the urban context can be made more visible through planning efforts. As urban and regional planners, we are struck by the piecemeal approach to planning for the food system at the urban level. We think the urban food system needs to be looked at more comprehensively, and we will suggest ways this can be done through different institutional arrangements, particularly through the assistance of the local planning agency.

In our view, four factors are most significant in understanding why the food system has low visibility among urban policy officials and city residents. These are elaborated in a following section. First, urbanites generally take the food system for granted; few see serious problems related to food access, availability,

or affordability. Second, the historical development of cities led to the definition of specific issues and problems as urban predominantly in opposition to or in contrast with rural or agricultural – a definition that, for the most part, continues until today. Food is not perceived as an urban issue in the same magnitude as are housing, crime, or transportation. Third, the technologies of the industrial revolution that mechanized farming, transportation, refrigeration, and food processing in industrial countries ensured that even when suburbs and exurbs swept through previously rural terrain, the loss of local farmland that historically served cities, went unnoticed in local grocery stores. Food was always “there,” unproblematic, even if no longer local. The fourth factor, particularly in the United States, relates to the persistent dichotomy in public policy between urban and rural policy. Cities respond to initiatives emanating from several federal agencies led by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which only rarely addresses food system issues. At the same time, they remain generally unaffected by policies formulated in the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) which pertain mostly to farms and agriculture – our *de facto* food policies. Yet, USDA policies significantly impact cities.

A second purpose of this paper is to highlight the widespread and pervasive significance of the urban food system to the quality of life in localities. In addition to the health of individuals and households, the food system is implicated in the health of the local economy; to local land use and transportation; preservation of agricultural land; to solid waste problems of cities; and to the quality of local water, air, and soil. The impact of the urban food system on poorer households is especially critical, for they may pay a higher proportion of their incomes for food, and have fewer choices due to lower ownership rates of automobiles and the paucity of supermarkets in inner-city areas.

A third purpose of this paper is to examine and discuss existing or potential city institutions that could offer more comprehensive action on the urban food system than currently exists. We suggest three institutional forms: two currently exist in diverse communities, and one has the potential to be created if and when the urban food system becomes enough of a priority with national or local decision-makers. These are the city department of food – currently non-existent; the local food policy council (FPC) – about 15 are currently active in North America; and the city planning agency.

A note on regional scope is warranted here: we write predominantly of the United States context of urban food system issues with which we have the greatest personal familiarity. Broadly similar food

system trends have been reported of the United Kingdom (Raven et al., 1995; Lang, 1996; Lang and Raven, 1994; Lang et al., 1997) and Europe (Hobbs et al., 1997; Deelstra et al., 1991). The effects of globalization on food systems in poorer countries has also been documented (for example, Walton and Seddon, 1994). In the Third World context, David Drakakis-Smith (1997) has made a similar call to conceptualize and analyze the urban food system as a first step towards more effective management.

Why the food system is a less visible urban system

Four reasons stand out in explaining why the food system is less visible as an urban system. The first relates to the fact that the average urban resident undoubtedly takes food for granted. And why not? More and more supermarkets are open all hours of the day. If she has a yen to eat out, there are usually a wide variety of restaurants and fast food places to choose from. If she thinks about hunger at all, she may be comforted to know that a “hunger safety net” exists in her community to keep the needy from falling into the clutches of hunger. Food pantries, free meal sites, and food banks are there along with food stamps, school breakfast and lunch programs, and meal programs for the elderly and for mothers with young children. And for the increasing number of people, who want to eat healthier, nutritious, organically, and locally grown food, they have an increasing number of alternatives to choose from, e.g., farmers’ markets, organic and health food stores, even community gardens, where one can grow one’s own food.

There are problems with the above scenario. For one thing, it gives an incomplete picture of the city’s food system. It does not tell us if all community residents have access at all times to nutritious, culturally appropriate food through conventional channels – channels that are not related to emergency assistance or charity. Urban residents are lulled into a false sense of security; from their perspective, there is little cause for concern, since the food system basically works and works fine. It fails to convey the problematic nature of the conventional food system from economic and environmental standpoints. It offers no sense of the many linkages that exist between the parts of the food system and between food and other systems. Above all, it fails to outline the food system as an important urban system.

The second reason has to do with the historic process of urbanization in the United States and elsewhere, a process that led to the definition of certain issues as quintessentially urban. The earliest cities grew against the firm backdrop of a rural, agricultural

hinterland that provisioned them with food. Urban land uses and occupations were the exceptions to the rule of rural and agricultural uses (Fischer, 1984; Davis, 1973; Smailes, 1966; Mumford, 1961; among others). While widespread agreement exists that food surpluses enabled the creation of cities, urban historian Arnold Toynbee goes so far as to define cities entirely in terms of their inability to produce sufficient food: "A city is a human settlement whose inhabitants cannot produce, within the city limits, all of the food that they need for keeping them alive" (Toynbee, 1970: 8). "Urban" thus came to be defined in early twentieth century texts as non-agricultural, thereby conceptually distancing food as an urban issue. Housing, health, pollution, jobs, and crime came to be identified as important urban issues in the 20th Century; food was not among them.

Few early texts on cities discuss urban food system issues, such as access, nutrition, supply, food preparation, and disposal of wastes. Food supply failure was usually understood as farm failure, rather than failure in distribution, given the proximity of production to urban areas and low rates of urbanization. This is not to suggest that poverty or distance or other barriers to food access did not exist in cities in the past, nor that burdens of agricultural catastrophes were distributed evenly among the populace. Food shortages, famines, and household and community strategies for the creative use of scarce food resources were certainly realities. Our objective here though is to trace the process through which issues and problems came to be defined as urban. This process of definition and the issues that came to be perceived as urban are intricately linked with the process of urbanization itself – a process whose definition emerged in opposition to rural issues and products.

There are exceptions to this relative lack of attention to urban food issues. Early 20th century economists, geographers, designers, and sociologists have devoted some thought to urban food systems as relevant to their fields. For example, in the US in 1929, Walter P. Hedden, then chief of the Bureau of Commerce of the Port of New York Authority, published an important work on how food is distributed in New York City, "How Great Cities are Fed." He foresaw that "the physical and hence the economic task of city food distribution will only become heavier rather than lighter," as city "apartments multiply, skyscrapers increase their height, and city facilities for rapid transit are improved (p. v)." His analysis, which was the first to use the term "foodshed," points to an array of issues related to the food distribution system at that time, including a significant problem of food spoilage, the need for municipal food terminals, the costs to the consumer of transporting food over long

distances, and the anachronistic problem, for today, of having too many small grocery stores.

British utopian planner Ebenezer Howard proposed a "garden city" as an alternative to the hellish industrial city of his time (Howard, 1960). The garden city was to be a marriage of town and country and was designed to have five thousand acres of agricultural land in the form of a green belt, and dairy farms, fruit farms, and crop farms appropriately located so as to be efficiently served by rail and to avoid overcrowding. This arrangement he claimed, would be mutually beneficial to both farmer and city dweller, reducing the cost of transportation of food and allowing for the recycling of city waste to increase the fertility of agricultural land. Twentieth century geographers also developed theories to describe the linkages they saw between product characteristics, markets, and town forms (see, for example, Losch, 1954; Isard, 1956; Berry and Pred, 1961). In these formulations, agricultural activity was ruled out in more central locations, losing to urban uses that could bid higher rents. Dairy and poultry farming and crop farming were thus located in the periphery. These works and others emerging from disciplines like economics and archaeology thus did consider issues related to food production and distribution, and their linkages to other community functions. But they did so from the frameworks and needs of their own disciplines rather than out of a need for a holistic view of the food system, or from such normative notions as equal access to food, adequate nutrition, and so on. They also tended to reinforce the association of food with rural. Thus, in the conceptualization of urban and in resulting policies, food was largely absent in the early histories of American cities.

The third reason accounting for the low visibility of the urban food system can be attributed to the technological changes in transportation and food preservation and processing. By the 1930s, population in the United States and the industrialized world was more urban than rural. As highways snaked through the countryside, development began to burgeon, spreading rapidly away from the boundaries of older cities and eating up farms in its path. Maps may have registered this rapid disappearance of farmland, but grocery stores did not. The average city resident, who had little use for the spatial arrangement of farmland, would have sprung to attention if food were missing from her shelf. As local farms disappeared, food simply came from more distant places, and from farms that were more intensively cultivated by increasingly corporate players (Lerza and Jacobson, 1975; Senauer et al., 1991).

Transportation, refrigeration, and highly sophisticated processing techniques and the resulting mass commercialization of food ensured that these shifts in

how cities were provisioned with food went unnoticed by urban residents even as they embraced the new brands and types of food. As a result while the system of provisioning urban places with fresh food has been radically restructured in this century, the “thereness” of food in cities for the majority of urban residents has not changed. Just as women’s domestic work in shopping for and preparing food was taken for granted because it was always expected to be present, so did the ready availability of food for most metropolitan residents render invisible to all but the keenest observers, the how and why of its availability and distribution. Thus, the technology of transportation, refrigeration, and processing together with abundant and cheap energy made up for the loss of local agricultural land as cities grew. As long as food flowed into the suburbs, where more and more Americans were beginning to live, and central city food stores were well stocked, food was not a problematic issue. The urban food system was still taken for granted. It was a low visibility system in the urban context.

This again is not to suggest that hunger was absent or that access to food (whether due to poverty or spatial mismatch) was not a problem. It is to highlight that when something is not formulated as a problem – as housing was – or if it is not perceived to be a crisis, it is less visible, as are its connections to other things that are more visible. There is historic evidence of policies and programs being put into place to address urban food crises around the world. During World War II in the United States, for example, the State of New York instituted an Emergency Food Commission to study how to support the war effort and to feed cities with scarce food supplies (Genung, 1951). Measures related to the use of cereals to feed humans rather than to animals for meat production were put into place. New foods, such as soybeans and alternatives to butter, were introduced in New York City. In 1943, over 20 million “victory gardens” were producing 8 million tons of food in cities across the US (The Produce Exchange, 1996). Around the world, similar crises led to the institution of welfare and relief measures to placate deprived groups and prevent urban food riots (Drakakis-Smith, 1997). However, these efforts were exceptions, and again, did not convey the message that the food system was a vital urban system.

A fourth reason why the urban food system garners little attention from urban policy officials has to do with the dichotomization of public policy into urban and rural. To the average person and even to most planners – as is becoming evident in a currently ongoing study – food issues are generally seen as falling within the purview of rural policy, applying mainly to farmers.¹ Rural policy issues in the United States might address setting farm subsidies and farm prices,

helping small farmers survive, developing revitalization programs for small towns serving their agricultural hinterlands, fostering soil conservation practices, and promoting more sustainable agriculture. Historically, rural policy has been seen as falling almost exclusively under the domain of the Department of Agriculture at the federal level.

When people think of urban policy, however, food issues are hardly given a second thought.² Instead, they think of such issues as the loss of manufacturing jobs, rising crime rates, downtown revitalization, maintaining the viability of aging neighborhoods, and coping with rising city government expenditures in the face of declining revenues.³ In the US, the Department of Housing and Urban Development at the federal level is the principal “city” agency, although the US Departments of Transportation, Health and Human Services, Labor, and Education are also heavily involved in urban policy. For the past several decades, urban policy has been extended to cover issues at the metropolitan scale such as improving growth management, containing suburban sprawl, coping with suburban traffic congestion, and preserving environmental resources.

There is some evidence of past and current HUD support for community gardens. Until recent Reagan-era budget cuts, USDA funded urban community gardens in many cities. More recently, CDBG (Community Development Block Grant) funds in many communities are being channeled to community gardens as part of a larger community development agenda (University of Wisconsin, Department of Urban and Regional Planning, 1997). Such support, however is discretionary on the part of the local agency disbursing the funds, and is not spelled out in urban policy. Furthermore, community gardens typically have low priority even where they do receive public support, often losing out to affordable housing or job creation programs.⁴

A related point that is less understood is that USDA policies *do* impact cities. For example, food price controls that came into being during World War II continue to hold down the cost of living across the country, including metropolitan areas that are the most dependent on outside sources of food. Food stamps distributed to needy households and surplus USDA commodities distributed to food assistance programs in the nation’s cities make food more accessible to low income, urban residents. USDA inspections of facilities handling meat and meat products also ensure food safety for food consumers, the vast majority of whom are metropolitan.

Why food is a significant urban system

The relegation of food issues to the lower end of the urban agenda means that the varied and complex ways that food issues are embedded in our lives are not well understood by city residents. The same holds true for most urban policy officials who fail to comprehend the importance of the urban food system for the quality of urban life. *In fact, food is very much an urban issue, affecting the local economy, the environment, public health, and quality of neighborhoods.* Consider the following:

- Food sector establishments like restaurants, fast food places, supermarkets, specialty food stores, taverns, and food wholesaling are an important part of any city's economy. For example, in 1992, retail and wholesale sales for food sector activities accounted for approximately 25% and 24% respectively of all retail and wholesale sales in Dane County, WI, with much of this activity concentrated in and around Madison, its largest city (Census of Retail Trade, 1992; Census of Wholesale Trade, 1992).
- Many city residents are employed in the food sector. Of all retail jobs in Madison, Wisconsin,⁵ 53 percent were food sector jobs in 1992, with 13,000 positions (Census of Retail Trade, 1992). About a fifth (19.53 percent) of wholesale employment is in the food sector (Census of Wholesale Trade, 1992). A little over a fifth (22.14 percent) of all Madison's manufacturing jobs are related to food and kindred products (Census of Manufactures, 1992). A higher percentage of lower income residents in cities also depend on lower paying jobs in food stores and eating places for their livelihood.
- Depending on income level, city households will spend from 10 to 40 percent of their income after taxes on food purchases in the home and when they eat outside the home, with richer households spending smaller proportions (Senauer et al., 1991).
- The preservation of agricultural land is increasingly becoming a priority regional issue with cities being asked to take responsibility in reducing sprawl. In Dane County, Wisconsin, for example, 63,032 acres or 491 farms have been lost between 1982 and 1992, which gives it the distinction of having the second highest rate of loss of agricultural land in the United States.
- Food waste is a significant portion of the household, commercial, and institutional wastebasket. Including food packaging, food wastes make up close to a third of the total waste that ends up in many city landfills (University of Wisconsin, Department of Urban and Regional Planning, 1997).
- City water pollution problems are exacerbated when chemical fertilizers and pesticides used on farms in the city's region find their way into local water systems. Dairy farming in the Madison area, for example, contributes to high nitrate and atrazine concentrations in the area's drinking water. High phosphorous concentrations cause eutrophication of area lakes (University of Wisconsin, Department of Urban and Regional Planning, 1997).
- Food related health problems – whether due to inadequate or unbalanced diet or excessive intake – are the cause of many illnesses. Racial and ethnic minority communities that are often concentrated in urban areas face a higher than average risk of diet-related health problems. For example, African American and Latino diets are characterized by a higher fat content, contributing to higher rates of chronic disease in these communities (Sigman-Grant and Suter, 1994). Among older Americans, malnutrition has reached epidemic proportions. A 1993 national sample of physicians, nurses, and administrators estimated one-fourth to one-half of elderly patients suffer from malnutrition. Nutrition screening programs in a wide variety of institutional and community settings have reported elder malnutrition risk rates ranging from 25% to 85% (Wellman et al., 1996).
- Household and individual trips to grocery stores and other food outlets contribute a significant portion to urban transportation volume. San Franciscans, for example, made approximately 4 million trips to shop for food and non-food items in 1990 (23 percent of all trips), the bulk of them in private automobiles (approximately 86 percent) (Purvis, 1994).
- Because the poor have fewer cars, the quality of a city's transit system becomes a major factor affecting their ability to access affordable food stores. Car ownership rates in central cities often can be 3 to 4 times lower than the averages for the metropolitan area (UCLA Department of Urban and Regional Planning, 1994)
- When affordable housing is in short supply in a city, poorer residents may be at greater risk of hunger, due to the graver short-term consequences of rent default over food intake reduction. Housing payments get priority over food purchases and food is also more easily obtained from other sources than shelter (Pothukuchi, forthcoming).

- A sizable number of lower income city residents depend on emergency sources of food available in food pantries, soup kitchens, and food banks that are largely invisible to middle and upper income residents. Contrary to popular myth, a 29-city survey found that 37 percent of adults requesting emergency food assistance were employed (US Conference of Mayors, 1996). Estimates also indicate that the use of the emergency food system is on the rise because of the effects of welfare reform. After remaining stable for several years, the number of people visiting food pantries in Milwaukee rose 14 percent in 1996, to 42,000 a month. And the number of people receiving hot meals rose 20 percent (DeParle, 1997).⁶

Although public knowledge about the myriad of food system issues that affect city life may be limited, there are, of course, a number of organizations in any city – public, non-profit, and private – that are involved in aspects of the city's food system. Local government agencies have responsibilities for such programs as nutrition education, food stamps, WIC, food health and safety regulation, and school breakfast and lunch programs. Non-profit organizations like Second Harvest, agencies that dispense USDA food commodities, and church and neighborhood center-run food pantries typify organizations that keep the emergency food network functioning. Some private sector firms regularly donate food to food banks and provide funds in support of area-wide programs targeted to the needy.

The conventional food system provides food in food stores and in restaurants and fast food places for city residents to eat away from home. Food cooperatives, farmers markets, community garden groups, and food buying clubs, along with shareholders in community supported agriculture farms represent components of an alternative food system in the urban setting. These groups generally favor more direct connections between local farmers and city consumers, more environmentally sustainable food production, and a greater local and community self-reliance in which people can grow their own food or derive it from local sources.

Although a number of dedicated organizations are involved in any city's food system, one gets the feeling that the approach is decidedly piecemeal, with organizations basically pursuing their separate paths. Knowledge about the city's food system is like the proverbial elephant and the six blind men – each describes the whole by the part they know best. Hunger prevention organizations may see hunger as the key issue. The city's public health department may see raising public consciousness about nutri-

tion and diet as most important. Groups involved in promoting an alternative food system may see the conventional food system as the chief stumbling block to a more sustainable food system. And the food store and restaurant owners may wonder why there is concern about the present food system since most of them probably believe that the conventional food sector provides sufficiently affordable, accessible, and adequately nutritious food.

A counterweight to the piecemeal approach to a city's food system is the recent emergence of the community food security movement. Community Food Security (CFS) aims to ensure affordable, appropriate, nutritious, accessible food for all residents at all times, through conventional (rather than charitable or welfare) channels, and by means that are sustainable. Advocates of CFS attempt to bridge existing food sector communities – especially the hunger prevention and sustainable agriculture communities (UCLA Department of Urban and Regional Planning, 1993).

How the urban food system can be more comprehensively addressed

The current piecemeal approach fails to recognize the linkages among food subsystems and between food systems and other community systems like housing, transportation, land use, and economic development. How local government policies affect and are affected by the food system is also unclear. Consequently, we do not know enough to help us plan more comprehensively for the urban food system to enhance community food security. What's needed is a focal point at the local level for looking at the urban food system. There are three potential places where the responsibility for creating a more holistic understanding of a city's food system can rest, in our judgment.

The department of food

One is a city department of food, currently nonexistent in the United States. We have parallel city units dedicated to issues such as transportation, housing and community development, parks and recreation, and health and human services. Why not a department of food?⁷ Such a department might offer a new focal point for local food issues and perform multiple functions associated with outreach and community education, regulation, capital programming, and food-related services development and administration.

Thinking more broadly, a municipal Department of Food (DOF) could offer the following functions:

- a. *A central intelligence function*, to facilitate market operations for different food system functions – from production to consumption to disposal of wastes – through regular issuance of market analyses;
- b. *A pulse-taking function*, to alert the community through periodic reports to danger signs in the economy that may impact food access, hunger and nutrition, population and food business movements;
- c. *A policy clarification function*, to help frame and regularly revise food system functions of local government;
- d. *A community food security strategic plan function*, to phase specific private and public programs as part of a comprehensive course of action towards enhancing community food security for a period of 10 to 20 years;
- e. *A feedback review function*, to analyze through careful research the consequences of program and project activities as a guide to future action.⁸

The above functions are interrelated and roughly parallel other local and national government functions. Some of these functions, such as the administration of federal food programs, the regulation of local food businesses, and the oversight of farmers markets, are currently performed by city or county departments. The DOF's market analysis function acknowledges the importance of the private food sector and offers accurate and timely information to local businesses and consumers to make rational decisions. It potentially can also level the playing field for especially the smaller and more local businesses, which may otherwise be unable to afford the costs of this information.

At the same time, markets frequently malfunction or fail to deliver community food security ends. Hence the Department could not only alert the community to trouble spots, but could also offer remedies in the form of policy recommendations and in the formulation of specific programs. These policies also need to relate short term measures dealing with current problems with long range proposals to attain community goals for local food security and to connect food security with other urban functions such as housing, transportation, and land use. This highlights the need for the longer-range strategic planning function. Finally, the consequences of programs and plans need to be evaluated in order to guide future action.

The current rhetoric of devolution and community-constructed solutions may provide the impetus for the serious consideration of a local department of food. However, establishing a new department in local government will also entail costs and increase the scope of governmental responsibility, both of which

pose difficult political problems in a time of downsizing and social welfare cutbacks. Finding appropriately trained and competent staff for such a department will be yet another problem. Moreover, convincing ordinary people and city leadership of the need for systematic and comprehensive involvement by local government in the food system may not even be possible as long as food is seen predominantly as a rural issue, or as well covered by the private sector.

The food policy council

About 15 communities in the United States and Canada have established local food policy councils. The first one was created in Knoxville, Tennessee in 1981. Most were established since 1990, typically emerging out of informal coalitions of activists in hunger prevention, sustainable agriculture, and community development. These cities are as diverse as Hartford, Connecticut; Austin, Texas; St. Paul, Minnesota; Los Angeles, California; and Toronto, Canada. Several have been systematically studied for their regional and local contexts, their organizational structures, their accomplishments and the challenges they face (Dahlberg, 1995, 1994, 1993a,b, 1992; Clancy, 1996).

Food policy councils, sanctioned by local governments, are usually comprised of representatives of different segments of the food system community, e.g., members of farm, hunger prevention, retail food, nutritional education, and sustainable agriculture organizations – as well as some government officials. Central points for considering a wide range of food issues at the local level, they vary in their structures, functions, and resources. Almost all try to monitor their city's food system and work to get various rips and tears in that system mended. Some have been more successful than others in pushing their communities to address food policy in a more comprehensive way (Dahlberg, 1994). Most of them pursue the goals of a more equitable, effective, and ecologically sustainable food system, akin to the nascent community food security movement.

Food Policy Councils (FPCs) typically exist outside government structures, and as the name suggests, function in an advisory capacity. The Toronto Food Policy Council is an exception. It currently operates as a sub-committee of the Board of Health, but is unique among city sub-committees in that it has a degree of independence that most do not have. FPCs operate with minimal resources and often have very little or no staff support. Despite these challenges, FPCs have taken on a range of actions in their communities. These fall under broad categories of research and analysis, community education, policy advocacy, community

development through a food system focus, and food related service delivery.

Specific projects include:

- analyzing the impact of the private food industry on low-income communities;
- improving the access of low-income residents to food stores by improving transportation or influencing grocery store location decisions;
- establishing community gardens for affordable and fresh produce; facilitating food related employment and entrepreneurship;
- educating residents and leaders on issues related to nutrition, food shopping, gardening, and preparation; encouraging environmentally sustainable food production and distribution;
- strengthening urban-rural links by connecting local farmers with local consumers; and devising innovative hunger-prevention programs.

Some of the more active FPCs have provided leadership in the development of community food security provisions and the incorporation of these provisions into federal agriculture policies.

While food policy councils are exceptional in their efforts to put food on the community agenda, they are often project-oriented, resource poor, dependent on charismatic personalities for visibility, and vulnerable to political winds. Partly as a result, few have conducted more probing studies of their local food systems, analyzed internal connections and contradictions in the system, or looked closely at linkages between the food system and other urban systems.⁹ Dahlberg (1994) found that a strong emphasis on hunger issues has negatively affected the long term success of food policy councils and their ability to take on issues related to systemic change. Anti-hunger efforts have been unsuccessful in mobilizing a broad constituency or involving diverse food system stakeholders, and tend to capitalize on charitable impulses of citizens and businesses. Food policy councils represent the closest thing to a centering of attention for food related concerns at the local level. They have promising potential in their ability to take on all or most of the functions suggested for a department of food. But, given their resource limitations, most have not shown as yet the capacity to deliver a more comprehensive understanding of the urban food system, its intricacies, limitations, and interrelationships.

The city planning agency: A potential partner

One place in city government where a more holistic understanding of the food system could occur is within the planning agency. The planning agency could play

this role as a complement to a food policy council in communities where such an entity exists, or even to a department of food. There are limits in its ability to perform, as it is typically structured, all of the functions that a department of food might, as outlined in an earlier section. We offer it as starting point as it were, to insert urban food system concerns more systematically and as integrated with other urban systems. Planning agencies are very much oriented in principle to taking a more comprehensive look at what is going on in cities, on how a myriad of issues confronting cities could be dealt with, and on planning for a city's future. No local government planning agency in the United States, however, has ever undertaken a comprehensive study of its city's or county's food system. This is a curious finding since the planning field has laid claim over the years to being the discipline that takes the most comprehensive look at communities and how their parts interconnect (So et al., 1979; Levy, 1988; Catanese and Snyder, 1988).

Despite the lack of attention given to food issues by urban planners, there are both normative and practical reasons why they should devote more attention to the food system.

Recently, a committee of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning issued a report "Anchor Points for Planning's Identification" (ACSP, 1997). They identified six generic themes that anchored planning's identity as a discipline. Two of these are relevant to this discussion:

- "a focus on improvement of human settlements ... with emphasis on making places better serve the needs of people," and
- "a focus on interconnections among distinct community facets, incorporating linkages among physical, economic, natural, and social dimensions, linkages among sectors, e.g., transportation and land use, housing and economic development etc., and public and private enterprises."

It is difficult to conceive that planners who take seriously these espoused beliefs could disregard the urban food system. Air, water, and food are the three essentials of life. Clearly, it would be extraordinarily difficult to have high quality human settlements without high quality air, water, and food. Planners have been heavily involved in efforts to improve the quality of air and water through air and water pollution control programs. But the third leg of the life essential stool, food, has been virtually ignored by planners. If planners are truly concerned about improving human settlements, they need to incorporate food issues into their working models.

The second theme highlights the claim that planning's special identity comes about from planners paying particular attention to linkages – linkages among functional sectors, linkages between the public and the private sector, and linkages among multiple perspectives on community life. The food system is, though, omitted from the planners' linkage concern in each of these three categories. It is not one of the functional sectors to which planning has historically paid attention. Linkages between the public sector, for which planners work, and the private food sector, are meager. Planning education has neglected the urban food system as an area of specialization for future professionals, as evident in a survey of planning curricula (Fisher and Contant, 1996). Yet, the food system is certainly a "distinct community facet" that needs to be interconnected to other sectors. Planners can play an important role in helping to construct the bridge.

The practical reason for planning agencies getting more involved in the food system relates largely to the "hidden" significance of the food system to the quality of community life. We say, "hidden," because although people may be aware of a few reasons why the food system is important, most are unaware of its widespread and pervasive significance. In other words, from a practical standpoint, the food system is too important for planners to avoid.

Conclusion

We have tried to show in this paper that the food system has a great bearing on the quality of urban life. We believe that its significance needs to be understood more fully for its impact on the city's economy, public health, environment, land use, and other community systems. We explored contemporary and historical contexts of cities and provided an analysis of the low visibility of the urban food system.

A planning perspective can be used to better understand the local food system and address community food security objectives. We considered a department of food and the food policy council as two promising institutional responses to food issues at the local level. Despite its conspicuous absence in contributions to urban food system analysis, we believe that the local planning agency can play an important role in planning for an improved food system, and have suggested why it should become a more important player in it. Given the political and technical difficulties in instituting a municipal agency with a focus on food, it may be more reasonable to expect local government attention on food issues, at least in the short term, to be driven by forces external to it. These may take the form of

food policy councils or coalitions of interests in the anti-hunger, health, sustainable agriculture, and social justice and consumer movements.

The local planning agency may have an important role to play in communities in providing a comprehensive focus on food system issues in addition to or despite the absence of these community-based food coalitions. Planning agencies currently perform functions in market analyses, data-collection for vital community indicators, policy and program analysis and formulation, and evaluation on a vast range of community concerns. This infrastructure may effectively be mobilized for the analysis and management of important aspects of the food system and its linkages to other vital community systems. Incorporating food into planning, however, needs political will, creativity, and above all, acknowledgment of the food system as a vital urban system.

This paper discussed institutional responses to food system issues predominantly at the local level. Such responses, however, need to be bolstered by planning and policy initiatives at regional, national, and even global levels. Regional and national food security policy initiatives have been formulated in the US and elsewhere (New York State Food Policy Council, 1981, 1987; Minnesota Food Forum, 1995; State of Connecticut General Assembly's Planning and Development Committee, 1996; Klepp and Forster, 1985; OECD, 1981). These, however, are scattered and need to be explicitly linked to local food system initiatives.

Although we are optimistic about the increasing awareness of local food system issues, and are encouraged by related policy actions around the country, we are not sanguine about systematic local government attention to food issues. As in other issues, political leadership responds to the needs and concerns of middle class segments that do not yet perceive a crisis related to food. Food was more visible in earlier decades than it is now. In the 1960s and 70s, Carson's *Silent Spring*; Lerza and Jacobson's *Food or People, Not for Profit*; and Lappe's *Diet for a Small Planet* riveted people's attention. The oil embargo of the early 1970s warned of the dangers of dependence on distant sources for basic human needs. Urban gardens were rediscovered as a source of cheap, local, fresh produce. Today, however, the price of gas is at an all time low and in too many instances is development threatening to replace urban gardens as a higher and better use. Will it take another crisis or is there enough of a ground tilled as a result of local food policy councils, community food security proponents, and sustainable agriculture advocates to get urban policy officials to take notice that the food system is too important to avoid?

Notes

1. Research conducted by the authors to study planner's activities in and perspectives on urban food system issues is currently in progress. Surveys of urban planners in communities across the US that are active in addressing community food system issues have found that planners typically do not see the urban food system as an important one for them to address. Many responded to open-ended questions asking why planners' involvement in the food system was low with statements such as "ours is not a rural area;" or "where farm issues are important, planners are involved in sustainable agriculture."
2. This is evident from a reading of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development's *The State of the Cities Report* (June, 1997). In this 69 page report issued by the federal government's lead urban agency, not one mention of any food system issue or policy is made, e.g., hunger, inner city vacant land, and its potential for urban agriculture, the effect of poor diets on the health of inner city residents, community gardens, or loss of supermarkets in inner-city areas. In contrast, HUD's report touched on a wide range of other important systems – housing, economic development, fiscal issues, crime, education, environment, jobs, and transportation.
3. It is interesting to note that the "poverty index," so central to determining and assessing urban social distress, is an indicator that was based on the cost of *food*. In 1963, Mollie Orshansky, a research analyst at the Social Security Administration, determined that the cost of food made up one-third of the total budget for an average family of four. She set the poverty line at three times the cost of the minimal food budget. By 1990, food was one-sixth of the average budget, but the poverty line continued to be calculated as three times, rather than six, the food budget (Schwartz and Volgy, 1992). Unfortunately, this calculation of the poverty line has grave repercussions for nutrition and health among those "officially" poor as meager household resources are disproportionately diverted to such other vital needs as shelter and heat, leaving little for food.
4. The USDA has been involved in programs – most notably in the form of empowerment zones and enterprise communities in collaboration with HUD – "to promote economic opportunity, sustainable community development, community partnerships, and positive social change in areas experiencing poverty and economic downturn" (USDA and HUD, 1994). On the surface, this "collaboration" seems to contradict our claims of the "urban-rural" dichotomy. On closer examination, however, this linkage is more formal than substantive and has little to do with food. A substantive collaboration might involve, for instance, the use of urban agriculture as a community development strategy in inner cities, or initiatives to link rural producers with urban consumers. Beginning in 1996, however, many urban communities have benefited from USDA funding under the Community Food Security Act. This act allowed the appropriation of US\$2.5 million annually to fund community food security projects nationwide, that integrate activities in food production and distribution and economic and community development in poorer communities. The community food security concept is described later in the paper.
5. A number of statistics in this listing are derived from a graduate student workshop conducted by the authors in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning. The workshop focused on the Madison-Dane County food system.
6. Although most of the above findings were derived from the graduate student report on the community food system in and around Madison, Wisconsin, other studies have documented similar findings for North America (UCLA Department of Urban and Regional Planning, 1994); and the UK and Europe (Raven et al., 1995; Deelstra et al., 1991). Studies in the Third World too indicate the importance of the food system for the local economy, land use, environment, and health and welfare of urban residents. For example, Azami et al. (1996) found that food processing accounts for 17 percent of informal sector businesses in Bangladesh, generating employment opportunities for women that otherwise may not exist (Tinker, 1997).
7. We are not the first to suggest a department of food. Among the most recent recommendations comes from the UCLA Department of Urban and Regional Planning Report (1994), which calls for the reconstitution of the US Department of Agriculture into that of Food and Agriculture, thus placing food issues generally, rather than simply production, at the center of policy. USDA's counterpart in the United Kingdom is the Ministry of Food, Fish, and Agriculture (MAFF), with a broader distribution of its purpose and reach. Our suggestion for a local department of food is inspired by the possibility of a federal department of food. A local department might be a local implementer of policies and mandates emanating from the federal department (such as on issues related to transportation, housing, health and human welfare, and the environment), or be a bottom-up precursor that begins to define a sharper federal role in food.
8. These functions were adapted from a paper by Martin Meyerson, "Building the middle range for comprehensive planning" (1956), which addressed the role of city planning agencies.
9. A notable exception is the Toronto Food Policy Council established in 1990. With a small staff, it has produced a steady stream of insightful reports about important food system issues in the Toronto area. Among them are: *Reducing Urban Hunger in Ontario: Policy Responses to Support the Transition from Food Charity to Local Food Security*; *Food Retail Structure and Food Security*; *Contaminants in Food, Micro Food Enterprises and Implications for Economic Development and Food Retail Access*; and *Food Security for Toronto's Low Income Citizens*.

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