UF UNIVERSITY *of* FLORIDA
IFAS Extension

Defining Community Food Security[1]

Lutz, A.E., Swisher, M.E., and Brennan, M.A. [2]

Introduction

Communities and extension are increasingly concerned with issues such as hunger, nutrition, food safety, and sustainable methods of addressing these problems. Community food security is a concept that suggests entities such as the Cooperative Extension Service and community development organizations should use a more holistic way of addressing these issues. The purpose of this paper is to provide some background and history of the concept of community food security.

How Community Food Security Evolved

Community food security partially evolved out of the concept of food security. Researchers first defined food security in the early 1970s as "the ability to meet aggregate food needs in a consistent way" (Anderson & Cook, 1999, p. 142). Food security was originally a response to two key factors associated with growing world hunger in the 1960s and 1970s.

The first factor was the high population growth rates in many countries. The World Food Conference in 1974 focused on food production as a way to avert increasing hunger and famine in the world (Anderson & Cook, 1999). They brought the right-to-food concept to the forefront for both international and domestic development. The attendees of the conference set a goal that "every man, woman and child [should have] the inalienable right to be free from hunger and malnutrition in order to develop their physical and mental faculties" (Foreign, Agricultural Service, 1995, para. 2).

The second factor was changes in food production technology and goals. In 1950, scientists began to develop varieties of necessary crops such as corn and rice to deal with hunger problems in developing countries in Asia and Latin America. The media and others were referring to these efforts success as the "Green Revolution." The Green Revolution included hybridized forms of wheat and other grains that were resistant to disease and drought in order to increase food access and increase per capita income for farmers in these areas.

The increase in food production and a focus on vertical integration contributed to a "food first" way of solving hunger problems. The need for greater yields to meet demands led people to think

that the solution to hunger issues was an increase in the production of food around the world.

The World Bank, an organization that provides financial and other types of assistance to developing countries, became involved in the food security movement in 1984. They identified food security as a vital issue for developing countries and for lower socioeconomic populations in the United States. The World Bank developed what is the most commonly accepted definition of food security: "access by all people at all times to enough food for an active healthy life" (Anderson & Cook, 1999, p. 142).

At this time, the United States government worked to strengthen assistance programs such as Women Infants Children (WIC) and Food Stamps. The government designed these programs to assist unemployed, ill, or otherwise unable people in the United States in obtaining food. However, the world population was growing very quickly and there was not enough time to match agricultural production with the growing need. This made for slow progress in dealing with hunger issues in developing countries and the United States (Evenson & Gollin, 2003). In addition, people were still going hungry even when there was food available. The world was discovering that an adequate food supply did not ensure adequate food access for hungry people.

Although people agreed that world hunger was an issue, many groups had different positions about how to address hunger. The food assistance programs and the increase in food production in the world helped address these issues. However, some food security methods had unforeseen effects. Vertical integration was putting smaller farms out of business. There was also an increase in the use of fossil fuels for transportation and production purposes. The demand for yields resulted in increased land use, pesticide use, and other environmentally degrading effects. Researchers realized that hunger issues needed more than just a simple increase in food production. Holben (2002) revisited the concept of food security adding that access to food "includes the ready availability of nutritionally adequate safe foods and the assured ability to acquire them in socially acceptable ways" (p. 156). Yet, some argued that this concept was still not broad enough to address all of the social and environmental issues associated with food security methods.

Hamm and Bellows (2003) proposed a new definition for a concept that was coming to be known as community food security. This definition is "a situation in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice" (Hamm & Bellows, 2003, p. 37). In other words, while food security focused on hunger and an increase in food production and availability, community food security encouraged a look at all aspects of the food system, so that problems could be addressed in a holistic way.

What is community food security?

There are seven concepts that are represented in the definition of community food security: food access, food safety, nutrition, sustainable agriculture (food production), local food systems (community self-reliance), culturally acceptable food, and social justice.

Food Access

Holben (2002) defines food access as "the ready availability of nutritionally adequate safe foods and the assured ability to acquire them in socially acceptable ways" (p. 156). Food access includes the ability of a household to acquire enough food to support life, health, and activity. Characteristics such as the distance one must travel to a supermarket or the availability of transportation to food outlets can be factors in adequate food access.

Food Safety

The definition of food safety includes both the safety of foods being sold and the knowledge of community members on how to safely prepare foods so as to avoid food borne illness.

Nutrition

One can assess the level of community nutrition by looking at "rates of diet-related health problems, including obesity and diabetes as well as infant mortality, low-birth weight babies, and iron-deficient anemia" (Winne, n.d., p. 1). The concept of

nutrition also includes a balanced diet of foods that are healthy and wholesome.

Sustainable Agriculture

Sustainable agriculture refers to the provision of a more profitable income for farmers and producers while promoting responsible environmental management. Sustainable agriculture can also be described as agricultural methods that are more beneficial to the environment and more community members than traditional methods (Feenstra, 2000). The USDA's official definition of sustainable agriculture is "an integrated system of plant and animal production practices having site-specific application" (USDA, 2004).

Community Food Systems

Local or community food systems are collaborative efforts to build locally based food economies that emphasize social health, environmentally sustainable practices, and economic strength through their food production and processing practices. Community self-reliance is integral to the concept of local food systems because community residents are engaged in all phases of planning, evaluation and implementation.

Culturally Acceptable Foods

The concept of culturally acceptable foods refers to both the type of food consumed and the manner in which the food was obtained. For example, in some cultures, it is unacceptable to eat animals such as cats and dogs. A major indicator for food insecurity would be eating culturally unacceptable animals.

Social Justice

The concept of social justice has many definitions. In the context of community food security, social justice is "the injustice of hunger and food insecurity" as well as "the adequacy of wages and working conditions for all those who earn their livelihoods from the food system" (Winne, n.d., p. 2).

Putting the "community" in community food security

Many researchers reference the fact that there is no common definition for community. It is a concept that holds many points of contention and disagreement for researchers, sociologists, and community developers.

Some researchers argue that a community needs to have a social component, where community members care about and respect one another. Etzioni (1997) argues that people are naturally members of a community; they cannot be seen as individuals, but rather as parts of society. He also suggests that community is defined by social characteristics such as a shared set of values or culture rather than as a physical place (Etzioni, 1997).

Sarason (1974) provided a different idea of community. He suggested that community can be defined by community members sense of belonging, commitment to caring for one another, and the fulfillment of their needs through the community. He called this the psychological sense of community.

However, other researchers argue that community is less a sense of shared values or belonging, and more defined by geographic location. Many community organizers use the geographic definition of community for the purposes of sustainable community development (Rubin & Rubin, 2001).

The concept of community is fundamental to community food security. However, there is no accepted definition of this concept in community food security literature. "Local CFS projects distinguish themselves by their attention to community infrastructure and their local food system approach to achieving food security" (Hamm and Bellows, 2003, p. 38). Some researchers say that the attributes that make a community food system functional or effective can be different in the case of each community. It is not just the physical boundaries of a community and the food system that is of importance, but also the action and efforts of the community to address and meet community members needs.

Conclusion

The evolution of community food security is a response to growing problems in many food systems in the world. Community food security addresses several key issues facing modern food systems, both on a local and global level. The concept of community food security is unique in its intention to examine the complex relationships between crucial characteristics and components of food systems. This holistic approach involves issues from community members ability to obtain food, to the social welfare of the workers and participants in the food system. While some of the individual components of this view of food systems are still in the development stage, the overall idea of a "big picture" approach to food systems problem solving and management is a positive addition to food security efforts around the world.

References

Anderson, M. D., & Cook, J. T. (1999). Community food security: Practice in need of theory? *Agriculture and Human Values, 16*, 141–150.

Etzioni, A. (1997). *The new golden rule: Community and morality in a democratic society.* New York: Basic Books.

Evenson, R. E., & Gollin, D. (2003). Assessing the impact of the green revolution, 1960 to 2000. *Science, 300*(5620), 758–762.

Feenstra, G. (2002). Creating space for sustainable food systems: Lessons from the field. *Agriculture and Human Values, 19*, 99–106.

Foreign Agricultural Service. (1995, November). *World Food* Summit: Basic information. Retrieved September 20, 2005, from http://www.fas.usda.gov/icd/summit/basic.html

Hamm, M. W., & Bellows, A. C. (2003). Community food security and nutrition educators. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior, 35*(1), 37–43.

Holben, D. H. (2002). An overview of food security and its measurement. *Nutrition Today, 37*(4), 156–162.

Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2001). *Community organizing and development* (3rd ed.). Needham Heights: Allyn and Bacon: A Pearson Education Company.

Sarason, S. B. (1974). *The psychological sense of community: Prospects for a community psychology.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

United States Department of Agriculture (2004, November). Food security in the United States: Community food security. *Economic Research Service.* Retrieved December 27, 2005, from http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/FoodSecurity/community/

Winne, M. (n.d.). *Community food security: Promoting food security and building healthy food systems.* Venice, CA: Community Food Security Coalition.