A Regional Report on Community Food Security
Final Report
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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This report caps five years of the Appalachian Foodshed Project (AFP), focused on improving community food security in central Appalachia. We have written this document as both an internal memo to those who are aligned with the AFP, as well as to those who might be engaging in similar work in other regions. We write this report as a harvest of some of our best learnings, but more so, we view it is a potential seed for future work in the region and beyond.

The Appalachian Foodshed Project was funded by a five-year USDA NIFA-AFRI grant (Award number: 2011-68004-30079). The funding came through three Land-Grant Universities - Virginia Tech, West Virginia University, and North Carolina State University - but the resources and the direction of the project were focused and driven by organizations and communities in West Virginia and the Appalachian parts of Virginia and North Carolina. Early in the process, the AFP formally adopted a community food security approach for addressing regional food injustices and inequities. Community food security acknowledges that hunger and household food insecurity are symptoms of a larger ecology of issues, like a lack of affordable, culturally appropriate food, disproportionate income spent on housing expenses, racism, insufficient public transportation, and limited employment options. From a community food security perspective, an equitable, resilient, and fair food system will only result by addressing these, and other, larger, issues.

The project had several pre-defined deliverables: state-level community food security assessments, graduate curriculum, a systems dynamic food systems model, mini-grants, and a national extension community of practice. These deliverables were to be community-driven, shaped and built in partnership with regional non-profits, agencies, and individuals. Over the past five years, this network development effort has evolved in a number of productive directions, culminating in the 2016 transition of the Appalachian Foodshed Project to the Appalachian Foodshed Partnership. This partnership of organizations and institutions is currently developing structures that will guide its on-going efforts to collectively improve the equity and resilience of our regional food systems. This report is an attempt to distill some of our most salient learnings from this work in a way that is useful and accessible for future efforts.

The Structure of the Report

Over the past five years, as the AFP, we have experimented in a regional community/university effort to create the conditions for a more systemic, sustainable food security in central Appalachia. This experience has profoundly changed and impacted our collective approach to addressing community food security. In this report, we document this learning and current evolution in three different ways, via:

1. **Concepts** that have shaped, and are being shaped by, the work of the AFP. These are concepts that are both a product of the AFProject, as well as a conceptual seed for the emerging AFPartnership. The concepts were initially developed in a two-day summative workshop in June 2015. Participants (most of whom were long-time collaborators) were asked to articulate the learnings that were most critical for on-going and future work. These learnings have been modified in conjunction with literature on complexity, self-organization, and anti-essentialist politics. The three primary concepts are as follow:
   a. In food security work, **complexity is certain**,
   b. Food systems **change is multi-directional**, not linear, and
   c. We create **conditions and spaces for emergent transformations**.

2. **On-going Experiments** that are in play, on-the-ground, in the three initial AFP states. In this section, we focus on the four networks that have evolved with the AFP. Each network is distinct, but common threads and directions tie them all together. We will cover some of the key results of the
community food security assessments (CFSA) that were conducted in West Virginia, North Carolina, and Virginia. Each CFSA resulted in new experimental directions that are currently in various stages of implementation and development.

- Appalachian Foodshed Partnership
- Appalachian Virginia Food Systems Network
- Western North Carolina Food Security Advisory Council
- Nourishing Networks of West Virginia

3. Tangible **project products** that were accomplished as the AFP evolved. Several of these products were grant deliverables; others, like the practitioner profiles, emerged from the AFP development process. Each of these products are connected to a much larger body of work that is beyond the scope of this document. For each product, we provide information on accessing full versions.

- Practitioner Profiles
- Carrying Capacity Model
- Graduate Curriculum
- Community, Local and Regional Food Systems Extension Community of Practice

**HISTORY OF THE APPALACHIAN FOODSHED PROJECT**

The Appalachian Foodshed Project (AFP) originated in 2011 as a grant funded through the USDA’s Agriculture, Food and Research Initiative (AFRI) grants program (Award Number: 2011-68004-30079). Virginia Tech served as the lead academic institution, partnering with North Carolina State University and West Virginia University for a five-year endeavor to address community food security in western North Carolina, southwest Virginia, and West Virginia. The project was initially managed by an interdisciplinary team of 5 co-directors, a project coordinator, and numerous graduate students from across the three academic institutions.

**The grant had four major objectives:**

1. Create a place-based foodshed model with special emphasis on food accessibility and affordability;
2. Design and implement participatory community food security assessments;
3. Develop, implement, and expand food system/food security programs and curriculum; and
4. Implement a comprehensive, community-based evaluation of “Foodshed Security”.

In October, 2011, the AFP hosted a Capacity Building Forum in Blacksburg, Virginia, bringing together 45 nutritionists, producers, academics, extension agents, community organizers, activists, and emergency food providers from across the central Appalachian region. Participants learned from one another through structured dialogue, sharing stories of their successes and opportunities for future work. The Search Conference (March 2012 in Mountain Lake, Virginia) built on those relationships and that dialogue to identify specific action in each of the three states and across the region. The *Whole Measures for Community Food Systems* was used as a framework for understanding community food security and as a means of exploring what and who should be included in work moving forward.

A loose network began to form across the three state region, though it became clear that each state had its own momentum, based on their own assets and the degree to which statewide or local networks were already in place. While the AFP had initially planned to create a community food security assessment (CFSA) tool and implement it at specific sites across the three state region to allow for a comparative analysis, it was soon evident that a one-size-fits-all approach would not be useful or effective at this scale. Thanks to a grant from the Virginia Cooperative Extension Community Viability endowment fund, the AFP hosted a Community Food Security Assessment workshop at Claytor Lake, Virginia.
in May of 2013. During this process, the AFP shifted its efforts to a dispersed approach that was guided by the needs, assets, and actors specific to each state. The results of the CFSA’s can be found in the executive summaries included in this document.

In tandem to this process, the AFP continued to develop the foodshed model, build a graduate course, and focus on capacity building with community partners. In August of 2012, the AFP sent the project coordinator, a graduate student, and four community partners to a two-day workshop on Dynamic Governance (Circle Forward). That small group continued to meet, and proposed that the AFP adopt a new management structure that utilized Dynamic Governance and included community partners in the direct management of the grant. Working with Tracy Kunkler (Circle Forward) and John Buck (Governance Alive), the project coordinator was transitioned into a deputy director and the AFP implemented a consent-based governance system (October 2013) that included the five project directors, deputy director, graduate students, and two community representatives from each state.

The new structure was a turning point in the AFP. Circle Forward enabled the project to be more transparent and fulfill its commitment to participatory processes. Having community partners as active, vocal, and equal decision-makers created spaces for new strategies to emerge, and, arguably, made the AFP more effective at a regional level.

In 2014, the AFP awarded 9 community enhancement grants to organizations across the three state region. A second round of grants was awarded in 2015. During this time, the AFP was also conducting a series of interviews with practitioners across the region to create the Practitioner Profiles (http://blogs.lt.vt.edu/niewolny). These stories of practice and perspective are discussed in the report document that follows.

The AFP was awarded another grant from Virginia Cooperative Extension Community Viability endowment fund in 2015. This grant was used to fund the Central Appalachian Foodshed Conference, in partnership with the Central Appalachian Network (CAN), the Appalachia Funders Network, and the West Virginia Food and Farm Coalition. The conference included participants from the original AFP region (western North Carolina, southwest Virginia, and West Virginia), but also included practitioners from the extended region served by CAN: eastern Tennessee, eastern Kentucky, and southern Ohio. Practitioners, funders, academics, and policymakers participated in the gathering, delving into the complexities of the work, and seeking new ways to move forward collectively. The conference addressed the need for an information sharing platform, and explored LocalWiki and the Peer-to-Peer Ethos as a means of creating and supporting transparent collaboration.

The AFP community food security assessments were completed and results disseminated in early 2016, wrapping up most of the work under the Appalachian Foodshed Project. This report explores the implication of the body of work that emerged from within and around the AFP. Countless organizations, practitioners, producers, business people, educators, academics, policymakers, and activists continue to work for food systems change in central Appalachia. The Appalachia Foodshed Project is exploring its next phase as the Appalachian Foodshed Partnership, in conjunction with community partners from across the region. Meanwhile, the community food security assessments have born their own fruit in each of the three states: in North Carolina, Community Food Strategies is providing leadership for collaboration across western North Carolina; in southwest Virginia, the Appalachian Virginia Food Systems Network is serving as a connector for regional efforts; and in West Virginia, the Food Justice Lab continues to map and connect the emergency food system and alternative food system efforts across the state.

This report wraps up the work of the Appalachian Foodshed Project. It has been an honor and a privilege to work with the many creative, inspirational, and dedicated organizations and individuals in our region. We hope
that this work is useful and meaningful to the ongoing efforts in Appalachia, and that we can continue to find new, emergent opportunities to work together for a more just, equitable food system for all people in our region.

List of Community Partners

*We acknowledges the many community partners who contributed and shaped the AFP work.*

AARP, VA; [www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org)

Alderson Community Food Hub, Alderson, WV; [www.aldersontfoodhub.org](http://www.aldersontfoodhub.org)

Alderson Green Grocer, Alderson, WV; [www.aldersontfoodhub.org](http://www.aldersontfoodhub.org)

Appalachia Funders Network, [www.appalachiafunders.org](http://www.appalachiafunders.org)

Appalachian Harvest, Duffield, VA; [asdevelop.org](http://asdevelop.org)

Appalachian RC&D Council; [arcd.org](http://arcd.org)

Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP), Asheville, VA; [asapconnections.org](http://asapconnections.org)

Appalachian Sustainable Development, Abingdon, VA; [asdevelop.org](http://asdevelop.org)

Appalachian Virginia Food Systems Network; [www.facebook.com/appalachianvirginiafoodsystemcouncil](http://www.facebook.com/appalachianvirginiafoodsystemcouncil)

Ashville-Buncombe Food Policy Council; [www.abfoodpolicy.org](http://www.abfoodpolicy.org)

Be Active NC, Morrisville, NC; [www.beactivekids.org](http://www.beactivekids.org)

Blacksburg Farmer's Market, Blacksburg, VA; [blacksburgfarmersmarket.com](http://blacksburgfarmersmarket.com)

Blue Ridge Food Ventures, Candler, NC; [www.blueridgefoodventures.org](http://www.blueridgefoodventures.org)

Blue Ridge Women In Agriculture, Boone, NC; [www.brwia.org](http://www.brwia.org)

Bountiful Cities Project, Asheville, NC; [www.bountifulcities.org](http://www.bountifulcities.org)

Carolina Farm Stewardship Association, Pittsboro, NC; [www.carolinafarmstewards.org](http://www.carolinafarmstewards.org)

Center for Environmental Farming Systems, NC; [cefs.ncsu.edu](http://cefs.ncsu.edu)

Central Appalachian Network; [www.cannetwork.org](http://www.cannetwork.org)

Charleston Area Alliance, Charleston, WV; [charlestonareaalliance.org](http://charlestonareaalliance.org)

Circle Forward, Asheville, NC; [www.socialprofitstrategies.net/circle-forward](http://www.socialprofitstrategies.net/circle-forward)

Community Food Strategies Community Food Strategies, [communityfoodstrategies.com](http://communityfoodstrategies.com)

Community Foundation of Western NC, Asheville, NC; [www.cfwnc.org](http://www.cfwnc.org)

Community Ventures, Lexington, KY; [www.cvky.org](http://www.cvky.org)

Dig In! Yancey Community Garden, Burnsville, NC; [diginyancey.org](http://diginyancey.org)

Feeding America Southwest Virginia, Salem, VA; [www.faswva.org](http://www.faswva.org)

Grayson LandCare, Independence, VA; [graysonlandcare.org](http://graysonlandcare.org)

Growing Minds Farm to School, Asheville, NC; [growing-minds.org](http://growing-minds.org)

Heart and Hand, Philippi, WV; [www.heartandhandhouse.org](http://www.heartandhandhouse.org)

High Country Local First, Boone, NC; [www.highcountrylocalfirst.org](http://www.highcountrylocalfirst.org)

HOPE (Helping Overcome Poverty's Existence), Wytheville, VA; [www.wythehope.org](http://www.wythehope.org)

Independence Farmers Market, Independence, VA; [independencefarmersmarket.org](http://independencefarmersmarket.org)

Land of Sky Regional Council, Asheville, NC; [www.landofsky.org](http://www.landofsky.org)

Manna FoodBank, Asheville, NC; [www.mannafoodbank.org](http://www.mannafoodbank.org)

Manna Meal Inc., Charleston, WV; [www.mannameal.org](http://www.mannameal.org)

Mid-Ohio Valley Growers Cooperative, Inc., Spencer WV; [www.localfoodmarketplace.com](http://www.localfoodmarketplace.com)

Mingo County Diabetes Coalition, Williamson, WV; [www.healthyinthehills.com](http://www.healthyinthehills.com)

Monongalia County Family Resource Center, Morgantown, WV; [www.moncountyfrc.com](http://www.moncountyfrc.com)

MountainWise, Franklin, NC; [mountainwise.org](http://mountainwise.org)

New River Valley Community Kitchen, Blacksburg, VA; [localwiki.org/bburg/New_River_Valley_Community_Kitchen](http://localwiki.org/bburg/New_River_Valley_Community_Kitchen)

New River Health Department WIC Farmacy Garden, Christiansburg, VA; [www.vdh.virginia.gov/LHD/newriver](http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/LHD/newriver)

NC Cooperative Extension; [www.ces.ncsu.edu](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu)

North Fork Farm, Boone, NC; [northforkfarmbeef.com](http://northforkfarmbeef.com)
Panorama at the Peak, Berkeley Springs, WV; panoramaatthepeak.com

Plenty!, Floyd, VA; www.plentylocal.org

Pulaski Grow, Draper, VA; www.pulaskigrow.org

Region VII Planning and Development Council, Buckhannon, WV; www.regionvii.com

Rural Support Partners; Asheville, NC; www.ruralsupportpartners.com

Rutherford-Polk-McDowell District Health District, NC; www.rpmhd.org

SO Fresh!, Southwest VA; www.swafresh.org

SustainFloyd, Floyd, VA; sustainfloyd.org

Southwest Virginia Health Districts; www.vdh.virginia.gov/mrc/swvamrc

The Community Table, Dillsboro, NC; communitytable.org

The Shack Neighborhood House, Pursglove, WV; www.the-shack.org

The Wild Ramp, Huntington, WV; wildramp.org

Toe River Food Security Network, Yancey and Mitchell Counties, NC

Value Chain Cluster Initiative, Shepherdstown, WV; vc2.org

Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition Program; www.vabeginningfarmer.alce.vt.edu/index.html

Virginia Cooperative Extension; www.ext.vt.edu

Virginia Cooperative Extension -Family Nutrition Program; http://ext.vt.edu/food-health/family-nutrition-program.html

Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumers Services, Richmond, VA; www.vdacs.virginia.gov

Virginia Department of Health, Richmond, VA; www.vdh.virginia.gov

Virginia Farmer's Market Association; Richmond, VA www.vafma.org

Virginia Food Systems Council; virginiafoodsystemcouncil.org

Watauga County Farmers Market, Boone, NC; www.wataugacountyfarmersmarket.org

Western North Carolina Food Policy Council(WNCFPC), Cullowhee, NC; www.facebook.com/wncfpc

West Virginia Community Development Hub, Fairmont, WV; wvhub.org/
Concepts

7 - Community Food Systems are Complex

9 - Food Systems Change is Multi-Directional, Not Linear

11 - We Create Conditions and Spaces for Emergent Transformation
CONCEPTS THAT SHAPE AND ARE BEING SHAPED BY THE AFP

1. COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEMS ARE COMPLEX

For those working on issues around food insecurity, it is likely clear that the issues at play are exceedingly complex. There is no apparent singular “cause” of food insecurity and also no singular solution. Our communities, and the factors that make our region food insecure, are dynamic and contextual. An approach that works in one part of a community might not work across town, but it might work two states away. Though state or regional policy change might impact local work, top-down decision-making can produce unintended negative consequences.

*How do we approach this complexity without attempting to overcome it by simplifying the issues at hand?*

As a result of this dynamic complexity, toolboxes of “best practices” alone do not create the conditions for long-term food security. Though these approaches have impact, in our experiences, they do not necessarily keep up with the complexity of food insecurity. A best practice might solve one small issue, while exacerbating another. For example, a new farmers market facility built in a gentrified section of town might improve the income of farmers, but it might also create a space that is culturally exclusive to nearby communities who are experiencing poverty.

Dave Snowden, a researcher in the field of knowledge management, developed the Cynefin Framework (Snowden & Boone, 2007) as a sense-making tool for leaders (Diagram 1). The framework defines four different contexts that each call for different leadership capacities and problem solving strategies. We have found this decision-making framework to be a useful tool for thinking about the dynamic nature of community food security work and how certain structures and processes might be more or less conducive to effecting transformational change.

The framework describes four contexts in which a leader might find her/him/themselves:

1. **Obvious** - A clear relationship can be established between cause and effect
2. **Complicated** - Determining a relationship between cause and effect requires expert analysis
3. **Complex** - There is no ordered relationship between cause and effect, it can only be perceived after the fact, but is not replicable due to a multiplicity of fluid variables
4. **Chaotic** - There is no recognizable relationship between cause and effect

The contexts on the right side of the grid are ordered. When the relationship between cause and effect is knowable, as in the obvious and complicated realms, best and good practices can resolve an issue. The contexts on the left side are not ordered. In the complex

![Diagram 1: Cynefin Framework](image)
realm (and in the chaotic), the issues at play are dynamic and unpredictable, so best and good practices fail to achieve sustainable solutions. Though best and good practices have a role to play in solving food insecurity in a given community, the Cynefin framework suggests that we need to be focusing more of our collective energies on the development of conditions and approaches for emergent learning, action, and change.

A challenge of complexity is that it is not going to be out-maneuvered by strong top-down decision-making. Such force can only be implemented by over-simplifying the issue. Rather, we suggest that engaging complexity is much more like a dance, where the partner is able to nimbly respond to changing leads and new trajectories. Rather than being imposed from the outside, solutions emerge from the particular context. This means approaching food insecurity with the understanding that there is uncertainty, which calls for an openness to change, new directions, and new ideas. As authors and members of the AFP, our approach has gravitated toward the idea of experimentation. Though we cannot exactly know how our actions might impact overall community food security, we can set up processes to learn and share from our experiments and re-tool accordingly. We delve into this more deeply in the following two sections on multi-directional change and conditions and spaces for emergent transformations.

AFP LEARNINGS: IN FOOD SECURITY WORK, COMPLEXITY IS CERTAIN

In this section, we have turned some of our collective AFP learnings into a series of propositions for community food security work in central Appalachia.

PROPOSITION 1. Build a diversity of voices and perspectives
As the AFP evolved over five years, so has our commitment to the inclusion of diverse, boundary-spanning voices. Early on in the work, the project adopted the Whole Measures for Community Food Security as a framework for actively including a diversity of perspectives. In addition to the fields most readily associated with food systems work, like Vibrant Farms, Thriving Local Economies, and Sustainable Ecosystems, we have made an on-going commitment to including voices that represent Justice and Fairness, Strong Communities, and Healthy People. Even in the early stages of boundary-spanning diversity, these additional perspectives have pushed AFP work into new directions. For example, a team tasked with planning the long-term work of the Project determined that a key indicator of long-term community food security would be an equitable distribution of regional wealth. Holding inclusive space for individuals and organizations that represent issues of racial and class injustice was an important foundation for adopting this long-term indicator.

PROPOSITION 2. Establish Consent instead of Consensus
The AFP adopted a governance process called Circle Forward, which comes out of sociocracy. The process focuses on gathering and soliciting a diversity of voices and then focusing on spaces of resonance, rather than total agreement. Participants are not asked to agree with the totality of ideas, but to consent to action that is within their “range of tolerance.”

This process has shaped the current state of the AFP in two ways:

1. It has allowed non-majority perspectives to have an equal voice in decision-making.
2. It has enabled us to try new ideas more quickly. There is an understanding that decisions may not be perfect, rather that they be “Good enough to try, and safe enough to fail.” This has made project decision-making
possible, even when outcomes are understood to be unpredictable.

Focusing on consent has allowed the AFP to more quickly make decisions that reflect a diversity of voices, while also keeping view of the less knowable, emergent nature of the complex domain.

**PROPOSITION 3. Experiment >> Evaluate >> Re-tool**

The complexity of food insecurity does not mean that we, as practitioners, must either reductively simplify the issue or unsystematically probe for solutions. Snowden and Boone (2007) suggested that the complex domain might be navigated by adopting processes of “probe-sense-respond.” For the purposes of collective social change work, like community food security, several AFP partners (D’Adamo-Damery, Ziegler, and D’Adamo-Damery, 2015) have re-coined this as a cyclical process of Experiment>>Evaluate>>Re-tool. This process allows for the emergence of novel solutions, while also systematizing evaluation for higher impact learning, sharing, and re-tooling.

Combining these three propositions, we propose that we can move with (rather than against) the complexity of food insecurity by creating spaces (physical and dialogue-based) where a diversity of perspectives can have equitable voices, where decision-making allows for our most creative thinking to move nimbly forward, and where we can effectively learn from, and then re-tool, our experimental approaches.

**2. FOOD SYSTEMS CHANGE IS MULTI-DIRECTIONAL, NOT LINEAR**

The original AFP remit was to enhance community food security in West Virginia, and the Appalachian regions of North Carolina and Virginia. Five years into this effort, what can we say about what it means to have a food system that is more community food secure? We could potentially crunch some of the numbers on food insecurity and compare them to similar numbers from 2011. What would this tell us? Given the complexity of food insecurity, perhaps very little.

Because of the complexity of the issues, food systems change does not happen in a linear fashion, it is instead multi-directional. At certain points we might experience linear change, maybe a particular collaboration led to a particular outcome at the community level, but these linear moments obscure the ways that our interactions, as partners and collaborators, are producing less predictable change. As we work together and collaborate, our interactions are not only changing our respective institutions (grassroots and grasstops), but they are also shifting our individual perspectives, political imaginations, and ideas about the futures that might be possible—and this change is neither uni-directional or predictable.

We think of food systems change as being rhizomal rather than tree-like. A tree springs linearly from a single seed, putting down roots and growing branches, both of which are limited by the origin of the seed upon emergence. In contrast, a rhizome spreads its stems beneath the surface of the soil—it grows in many directions and can give rise to above-ground plants in any variety of unexpected places. Our work as the AFP supports this assertion. Change did not emanate from one point, the universities or the grassroots organizations. It has been an iterative process of evolving together, in growing our understanding of community food security and our ideas of the possible.

How do we create the conditions to self-organize for change that is multi-directional, rhizomal, and non-linear?

In this report we draw upon the concept of anti-essentialism, to suggest a possible way forward. Anti-essentialism is the idea that things (be it people, ideas, worldviews) do not have stable essences. They are at any moment in time results of an ecology or web of ideas.
and things. At any one time, we are only seeing and making sense of the tip of an iceberg, when most of the substance lies below.

For example, we have seen the tensions between ideas and groups that have been put into oppositional/binary relationships.

Food security vs. local food
Alternative food systems vs. the emergency food system
Food security vs. farm security
Faith-based vs. Secular
Organic vs. Conventional

Rather than seeking complete alignment or consensus between concepts in these relationships, anti-essentialism teaches us to look for resonances—for spaces where the relationships can be productive. This might mean setting aside some of our particularly fixed understandings of these seemingly diametric concepts and attempting to find points of deeper alignment and commonality. This means being a little less certain that we, as institutions, organizations, and individuals, hold the right solutions and approaches.

From complexity theorists and organismal biologists, we also learn that the border areas between differences are often the most fertile areas for creativity and responsiveness to new stimuli. As food system change practitioners, we can nurture these productive spaces between pre-conceived differences: between grass tops and grassroots, between economic development and social justice, but it might require us to refocus some of our perceptions and energies.

**PROPOSITION 4. Expect Emergence**

In the complex domain, we cannot predict outcomes. Instead of focusing on the limited factors that can be controlled, we propose that we cultivate an expectation of emergence. This requires that we further develop organizational structures and governance frameworks that are dynamic and responsive. When we are expecting emergence, we align ourselves with others so that we can nimbly group around pertinent issues as they develop. We need to be able to keep the big picture in mind, but allow new ideas and directions to continue to blossom and unfold, without a fixed understanding of predictable outcomes. In the AFP, our initial focus was on delivering several products, as required by our grant. But the most impactful aspect of our work was the act of bringing people together around community food security, which led to the creation of new networks and alliances that have developed beyond the initial scope of the AFP grant.

**PROPOSITION 5. Make Experimental Alliances**

Over the past five years, we have become well aware of tensions between different ways of seeing food systems and different expectations for food systems change. In our project work, we have used the Whole Measures for Community Food Systems as a tool for maintaining a focus on some of the core values we bring to food systems work. Drawing on theories of complexity, we propose that it is critical to seek new alliances that cut across our conceptions of food system change. In North Carolina, we have seen food security alliances form across diverse faith communities, and in West Virginia our partners at the Food Justice Lab are actively building resonances between faith-based emergency food workers and non-religious organizations working on local and regional food system supply chains. We believe that the conditions that give rise to experimental alliances are also spaces that are

**AFP LEARNINGS: FOOD SYSTEMS CHANGE IS MULTI-DIRECTIONAL, NOT LINEAR (RELATIONAL)**

*In this section, we have turned some of our collective AFP learnings into a series of propositions for community food security work in central Appalachia.*
conducive to disrupting our patterned ways of seeing the world, giving way to emergent and creative new solutions.

**PROPOSITION 6. Expect to Change Others AND Yourself**

The current systems of growing, processing, and distributing food are unjust. As has been well documented, these systems result in human inequities that are borne out along racial, class, and gendered lines. While drastic changes to these systems are in order, we believe that barring a major catastrophe, these changes will not happen overnight. We draw on second-wave feminism for inspiration (Gibson-Graham, 2006) regarding how transformation could occur. Second-wave feminists sought to change the world by changing themselves and their communities. These activists engaged in person-to-person consciousness-raising efforts. The change was more rhizomal than tree-like, and has not diminished, but resulted in on-going movement towards greater social equity.

Over five years of AFP work, we have seen our collective approaches evolve and shift—these changes have been the result of both sharing our experiences and learnings, but also by being open to being changed by our learnings from others. We believe that this expectation of personal and communal change is of critical importance for food systems transformation. This disposition allows us to experiment with new partnerships, ideas, and actions, to learn and re-tool our approaches in light of our changing understandings of the problem of food insecurity.

**3. WE CREATE CONDITIONS AND SPACES FOR EMERGENT TRANSFORMATIONS**

Because of the complexity, there is no one right way to approach community food security work. There is not a perfect solution, or even series of solutions, that can be brought in and implemented. The change that we are seeing is not linear, it does not emanate from one point, and it is not reliably predictable from the outset. Though this opens up new realms of uncertainty, it also comes with new freedom. A) There is less impetus to understand the dysfunction of current systems in order to shed light on buried solutions. In complexity, those good and best solutions do not exist. But as a result, B) we can transition some of our energies from reactively creating solutions to actively creating the conditions and spaces for emergence. Through the collective work of a variety of individuals, organizations, networks, and institutions in central Appalachia we are already creating these conditions and spaces for emergence.

We have found the concept of network to be useful in understanding how we might create conditions for self-organizing around emergent issues. For the purposes of this report we use the term network to refer to the idea that food systems change is an effect or product of the people, ideas, and places that are brought together around an issue. We are less using it to refer to the ways that people are currently connected to one another and more to refer to ways that people, ideas, and places could be productively connected to one another. This can be partially explained via the diagram of three network types developed by Paul Baran (1964) (Diagram 2).
In a centralized network (A) all communication and collaboration moves through a single hub. This kind of network could be correlated with the obvious domain in the Cynefin framework, where one entity holds all of the good practice knowledge needed to solve the given issue. The decentralized network (B) is clustered around multiple nodes. This type network has greater flexibility, and could be used to efficiently solve problems in the complicated domain, where best practices might be developed by clusters of experts. We suggest the distributed network (C) as the corollary of the complex domain. In a distributed network, new people and ideas are all connected. In this case, clustering around emergent issues is a question of coordination and communication, and less of sleuthing the right people and ideas.

Authors with Network Impact and the Center for Evaluation Innovation (2014) have described the promise of a distributed-type network as threefold. “They can:

- Assemble and disassemble capacity with relative ease.
- Adapt to emerging opportunities and challenges in their environment.
- Bring together novel combinations of talent and resources to support innovation” (p. 2).

The decision to act in this type of distributed network runs in tandem with Proposition 2: Establish Consent instead of Consensus. David de Ugarte (nd) has described it like this:

Within [a distributed network], decision making is not binary. It’s not a matter of ‘yes’ or ‘no’. It’s a matter of ‘to a greater or lesser degree.’ Someone makes a proposal and everyone who wishes to join in can do so. The range of the action in question will depend on the degree to which the proposal is accepted (pg. none).

In a distributed network, the decision to cluster around an emergent issue does not have to be vetted or coordinated by a centralized or decentralized hub, rather, action can emanate from any point within the network.

Due to digital technology, networked processes like these are already more possible than in any previous era. At this time of writing, those connected with the Appalachian Foodshed Partnership are actively engaged in an on-going process of exploring, developing, and maintaining the conditions for this type of network. As points in a budding distributed network, we can cluster around the idea of a distributed network and strengthen these conditions for emergent food system transformation.

In this section, we have turned some of our collective AFP learnings into a series of propositions for community food security work in central Appalachia.

PROPOSITION 7. Cultivate a Network Mindset and nurture network processes

Working in the complex domain requires new tools and perspectives in addition to those that we might be accustomed to using in the obvious and complicated domains.

Network Mindset: Working and moving with complexity means developing our capacities to be with uncertainty, and the humility to acknowledge that we do not have all of the answers necessary for food systems transformation.

Network Processes: A distributed network would be unthinkable without communications technology and, more specifically, digital technology. Technology has the capability of lowering the participation cost for networked collaboration. As the AFP, we are currently in various stages of experimentation with four different types of technology:

LocalWiki: An open-source place-based wiki—for information sharing and for documenting the base of the distributed network. Who are the regional practitioners and what work are they doing?

Kumu: A web-based relationship mapping tool—for understanding
current and potential relationships between practitioners.

**GoogleDocs:** A tool for transparent collaboration, note-taking, and project-based information-sharing.

**Teem:** A web-based application for the management of emergent projects. It includes workspace and chat features.

We are proposing that a network mindset is complemented by the network processes and vice-versa.

**PROPOSITION 8. Utilize Open Systems for Transparent Information-Sharing**

Nimbleness and agility in our collaboration requires the ability to quickly come up to speed on an issue or new partner. It also means being able to easily learn from the successes and failures of other projects and organizations. Throughout the course of the AFProject, we have repeatedly heard and experienced the need for systems for sharing information related to community food security. We think it is critical that the systems allow for the multi-directional flow of information. No one organization should be tasked with entering and updating the information. Not only would this be an onerous and expensive duty, but the information at play is too dynamic and time-sensitive to be slowed down by a centralized human aggregator. Instead, we see a role for an organization or institution that takes on the facilitation of the technology and long-term curation strategy.

**PROPOSITION 9. Adopt a Peer-to-peer ethos**

A distributed network is peer-to-peer. Using technology, any part of the network can be connected to another part, at any time, without an intermediary, hub, or representative. Open-source software developers have used this sort of distributed arrangement to collaboratively produce a vast amount of software, including Linux, the operating system that runs the internet. The P2P Foundation has developed an ethos for peer production that we have modified to be more applicable to a distributed social change networks. (See below, modified from the P2P Foundation.)

**A Peer-to-Peer Ethos**

1. **Anti-Credentialism:** Any one can collaborate. We care more about your willingness and ability to contribute than your credentials or resume. (≠ credentialism).

2. **Anti-Rivalry:** collaborating does not diminish the value of the work, it actually enhances it (≠ rivalry).

3. **Communal Validation:** We don’t worry about getting things right the first time. The benefit of collaborating is that we can improve things together as we go along. (≠ hierarchical control).

4. **Distribution of Tasks:** there are no roles and jobs to be performed, only specific tasks to be carried out (≠ division of labor).

5. **Equipotentiality:** people are judged on the particular aspects of their being that is involved in the execution of a particular task (≠ people ranking).

6. **For Benefit:** The work that we’re doing should have an equitable and fair social benefit. (≠ for-profit).

7. **Forking:** the freedom to copy and modify includes the possibility to take the project into a different direction (≠ one authorized version).

8. **Granularity:** refers to the effort to create the smallest possible modules (see Modularity infra), so that the threshold of participation for carrying out tasks is lowered to the lowest possible extent.

9. **Holoptism:** transparency is the default state of information about the project; all additions can be seen and verified and are sourced (≠ panoptism).

10. **Modularity:** tasks, products and services are organized as modules that fit with other modules in a puzzle that

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7Modified from the P2P Foundation (n.d.).
is continuously re-assembled; anybody can contribute to any module.

11. **Negotiated Coordination:** conflicts are resolved through an ongoing and mediated dialogue, not by decree and top-down decisions (*≠* centralized and hierarchical decision-making).

12. **Permissionlessness:** one does not need permission to contribute to the commons (*≠* permission culture).

13. **Produsage:** there is no strict separation between production and consumption, and users can produce solutions (*≠* production for consumption).

14. **Stigmergy:** there is a signaling language that permits system needs to be broadcast and matched to contributions.
On-going Experiments

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APPALACHIAN FOODSHED PARTNERSHIP

The Appalachian Foodshed Partnership is the current evolution of the Appalachian Foodshed Project. As USDA-funding and grant deliverables concluded, the multi-organizational, multi-institutional team decided to continue the most salient aspects of the projects. The AFPartnership is expanding its regional boundaries to include all six central Appalachian states.

In this report, we represent a quick snapshot of the partnership potential by including the summary from a regional (six-state) gathering hosted in Fall 2015—the Central Appalachian Foodshed Conference.

STATE-LEVEL NETWORKS AND COALITIONS

Each of the three Appalachian Foodshed Project states have developed or refined collaborative food systems efforts in their region. Each of these state-level groups conducted Community Food Security Assessments. The executive summaries of each assessment provide some shape to the evolving work in each state.

Central Appalachian Conference Summary

Authors: Nikki D’Adamo-Damery, Appalachian Foodshed Project
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The Central Appalachian Foodshed Conference was made possible by a generous grant from the Virginia Cooperative Extension Community Viability endowment fund.

Overview

The Central Appalachian Foodshed Conference was September 23-25, 2015 in Marion, Virginia, organized by the Appalachian Foodshed Project, in partnership with the Central Appalachian Network, the Appalachia Funders Network, and the West Virginia Food and Farm Coalition.

The conference was a gathering of key practitioners, funders, academics, and policymakers from North Carolina, Virginia, West

Figure 1: Map of participating organizations, created from LocalWiki.
Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Ohio. Together, we explored some of the most pressing issues and exciting opportunities facing regional food systems and food security efforts in central Appalachia.

Appalachia has a strong food movement with great work established or emerging in the fields of research, community engagement, food security, and economic development. As this movement grows, new partners beyond local food system actors are recognizing the economic, environmental, health, and cultural importance of strengthening our region’s food system. The result is an increasing variety of perspectives, roles, interests, and potential contributions within this broader movement.

Leveraging and interweaving these interests will require an open-minded, collaborative approach that embraces peer exchange and emergent practice. This conference put those principles into action by using an Open Space format. Participants self-organized around the conversations they wanted to have and, without any of the usual “top-down” dynamics, created spaces for deep and honest exchange. They expressed feelings of rejuvenation. The conference sessions produced new connections and relationships, insights into shared challenges, and promising pathways to strengthen this work.

The Conference aimed to create a space for peer-to-peer learning and engagement with the following objectives:

**Leadership in large-scale food system change efforts will come together with peers to:**

- a. share what’s working, what’s being learned, the complexities of the work, and what we are still figuring out;
- b. engage in creative dialogue about how to aggregate and synthesize the most promising directions and strategies, with the recognition that the local context drives the work on the ground;
- c. explore the potential of an information-sharing platform for ongoing regional alignment, collaboration, and movement building across political boundaries.

**Key learning from the Conference included:**

- The need to create spaces to **fail fast and frequently**, and the means to reassess, respond, and retool. We experience many of the same issues and challenges across Central Appalachia. As food systems
work matures and deepens in our region, we need to be able to take risks, share results and failures openly, and learn together. Funders need to fund experiments, practitioners need safe spaces to innovate, and everyone needs the opportunity to learn from what works and (especially) what doesn’t work.

- **Transparency** is vital to support collaborative, innovative efforts to address complexity and create food systems change. This requires a shift in culture and mindset, as well as development of technologies and tools that facilitate effective and transparent communication.

- Food systems work in Central Appalachia is increasingly viewed as a tool for economic development. While this is a positive reflection on the work so far, the reality on the ground is complex and there are no silver bullets for impacting economically distressed and food insecure communities. The economic impacts of local food systems are deeply interconnected with the other impacts of a localized food system for the people of Appalachia, including health and wellness, culture, and food access. This will involve bringing in new partners, especially from the health sector.

- We need focus on **democratizing the work**, by identifying barriers to participation and creating cultures of inclusion, especially with low resource communities.

### Session Topics

(Links and notes from the sessions can be found on LocalWiki: [https://localwiki.org/centralappalachia/Central_Appalachian_Foodshed_Conference](https://localwiki.org/centralappalachia/Central_Appalachian_Foodshed_Conference).)

- Connecting Food & Place: Community Revitalization Efforts
- Forest Farming
- Challenging the Profit Paradigm
- Food Policy from the Grassroots
- Best Practices for Fostering Collaboration and Cooperation
- Alternative vs Conventional Supply Chains
- Tired of Working in the Supply Side? Can we work with consumers and behavior?
- Farm Transition Programs/ Growing Tomorrow’s Farmers
- Asset Mapping
- Food Education/Farm-to-School
- Regional Network Building
- Are You Addressing Issues of Race/Class Around Food Systems in Your Community?
- Viability in West Virginia
- Supply
- Severance & Land Reform
- How to Lift Localism as a Regional Policy Incentive
- Rules and Regulations
- Financial Models

### The Role of Multi-State Networks

Food systems work is inherently place-based, but is also embedded in large-scale cultural, economic, social, and biological systems. Food systems do not always fit within political boundaries, and work that is connected across county and state lines benefits from access to innovative strategies, effective tools, and useful resources.

Organizations and networks like the Appalachian Foodshed Project, the Central Appalachian Network, and the Appalachian Funders Network help to make connections across communities, organizations, and regions. They help to identify trends, lift up emergent or best practices, and hold the big picture perspective that includes the organizations that are engaged deeply on the ground. They also provide a venue for exploring larger strategies, for brokering new connections, and for creating opportunities for collaboration and shared work. Multi-state networks help to connect the movement, providing communications spaces and gatherings where ongoing dialogues about vision and values can take place. These networks create important spaces for relationship building, peer learning, and identifying shared priorities. They also are
able to leverage resources, including access to research and funding for shared strategies.

**LocalWiki: a Platform for Information Sharing**

Context is hugely important to food systems work, and approaches across the region are constantly evolving to meet emerging needs and opportunities. We need nimble ways to connect to one another, to aggregate existing information, share tools and resources, and exchange knowledge about what is working, what is not working, who is doing what, and where there are spaces for new action.

In order to efficiently move food systems work in Central Appalachia forward, we need effective tools to archive information and share resources. LocalWiki is an online platform for open, transparent information sharing. It allows us to create a digital commons, where together we are the collective owners, creators, and users of the information that is most relevant to our work. It is a place for local knowledge, but also has the capacity to connect across multiple localities. Information can be easily mapped and categorized using a tagging system. Contributing and editing is simple and easy to navigate, even for people who are only used to writing emails.

LocalWiki allows us to explore the work that is happening in our region—both inside and peripheral to the food system. In the near future, a LocalWiki page for Central Appalachia can function as a hub for discovering organizations, learning more about specific localities, exploring specific food system topics or issues, and sharing information about resources, events, or opportunities. This tool has the potential to facilitate the free exchange of information, regional connections, and new partnerships necessary for broader impacts and more innovative and emergent work in our region’s food system.

**The Road Forward**

There is a strong desire and need to create more spaces for peer-to-peer engagement for food systems practitioners, funders, academics, and policy makers in Central Appalachia. This can continue to happen through in-person gatherings, as well as through online connections. We need to be strategic about finding the funding, capacity, and structure for facilitating coordinated change in our complex system. For those of us interested in creating real, lasting food systems change, this will require us to invest our energies in developing LocalWiki as an information-sharing tool, and building our knowledge, and the food movement, together.
**Special thanks to the Central Appalachian Foodshed Conference Planning Team for all of their thoughtful contributions to the event and this document.**

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**Western North Carolina Food Security Coalition**

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**Community Food Security Assessment Executive Summary**

The Appalachian Foodshed Project (AFP) is a multi-state collaboration of researchers and community partners in the Appalachian regions of Western North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia. In Western North Carolina (WNC), the project was designed to engage organizational leaders working within the community food system to create a common agenda to better understand and address food security in the 27-county region. This WNC Food Security Advisory Committee, in collaboration with a research team from North Carolina State University, designed a community food security assessment (CFSA) to systematically examine community food issues and assets to inform actions that make the region more food secure. The purpose of this report is to summarize key findings from the WNC CFSA.

Full report can be found at: [http://appalachianfoodshedproject.org/documents/AFP_WNC%20CFSA_Final.pdf](http://appalachianfoodshedproject.org/documents/AFP_WNC%20CFSA_Final.pdf)

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**Community Food Security Assessment Design**

The purpose of the WNC CFSA is to establish the scope of the problem, identify extant barriers to and assets for improving food security, and clarify key questions for communities to consider as they make long-term strides to creating a more just and equitable food system. To accomplish these goals, the WNC Food Security Advisory
Committee designed the assessment with two key components that together aid understandings of food security in the region:

1. Quantitative data were gathered to systematically define the scope of the problem and provide baseline data about the food system in all of WNC.

2. Qualitative data from three representative counties (Buncombe, Mitchell, and Yancey) were collected to provide an in-depth account of key challenges and questions related to healthy food access and food security from a community perspective. This included:
   a. Key informant interviews with 24 organizational leaders that work in some capacity to address food security in their communities, including church-based, non-profit, and government service providers.
   b. Five focus groups with resource-limited community members (58 participants) conducted in partnership with local service providers.

By applying this mixed-method approach, the CFSA contributes both regional indicators related to food security and in-depth responses to pertinent questions about the topic from practitioners working to improve community food security and community members who are possibly food insecure themselves. The result is a clearer picture of the scope of the problem, how practitioners and individuals experience food security “on the ground,” and potential paths to improving access to healthy foods in WNC.

**Guiding Framework: Whole Measures to Community Food Systems**

The Whole Measures for Community Food Systems is a framework to help communities evaluate, plan, and create dialogue to inform community-based change within the food system. The framework centers on six “fields of practice” that represent fundamental values of a food system that meets the needs of whole communities: Justice and Fairness, Strong Communities, Vibrant Farms, Healthy People, Sustainable Ecosystems and Thriving Local Economies. In sum, these six “fields” describe a community-based food system that reveals and dismantles injustice in the food system; improves equity and responds to community food needs; supports local, sustainable farms; provides healthy food for all people; sustains a healthy environment and community ecosystem; and stimulates the local food system economy. In this project, the Whole Measures are used to describe current understandings of the community food system in WNC, opportunities for organizations to work together to improve the food system, and potential next steps to better address food security challenges in WNC.

**Community Food Security Assessment: Quantitative Indicators**

The AFP partnered with the National Environmental Modeling and Analysis Center (NEMAC) at the University of North Carolina at Asheville to provide new information about food security in the region in summary and map form. Additionally, the research added other secondary data measures through incorporating Whole Measures concepts. These include: income and poverty, nutritional health, and agricultural data in WNC. Several key findings from the quantitative measures include:

**Food Security**

- In 2012, 16.3% of households in WNC were food insecure, a rate higher than the national average (14.5%), but slightly below the state rate (17%).
- 44 census tracts (of 320 total) are classified as food deserts in the region, ranging from densely populated areas around metropolitan areas—such as Asheville, Hendersonville, Lenoir, Morganton, and Shelby—to rural, sparsely populated places
in Ashe, Cleveland, Jackson, Madison, Mitchell, Rutherford, and Wilkes counties.

- In 2013, 14% of households in WNC received aid from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), ranging from under 9% in Watauga to almost 22% in Rutherford County.

**Income and Poverty**

- Median household income in WNC was $37,190 in 2010, almost 18% and 30% less than the state and nation respectively.
- The region’s unemployment rate has also been consistently above state and national averages, and overall, approximately 17% of WNC residents live below the poverty line.

**Health**

- Obesity rates in WNC are below both state and national levels, averaging over 28% of the adult population in 2012, but this rate has been increasing over time.
- Diabetes rates in WNC are slightly higher than the state as a whole, ranging from 8.5% to 14.4%, and these rates are also increasing over time.
- Rates of physical inactivity are lower in WNC than the state as a whole, ranging from 20% of adults physically inactive in Buncombe County to 31% in Wilkes County.

**Agriculture and Food Systems**

- In 2012, WNC accounted for only 7% of the state’s total farm income, down from 10% in 2007.
- Between 2002 and 2012, the total number of farms in WNC has declined in 21 of 27 counties.
- Despite aggregate farm losses, the number of farms selling directly to consumers increased 39% between 2007 and 2012, much higher than the state and national rates.

**Community Food Security Assessment: Qualitative Analysis**

The qualitative component of the research yielded several key findings about food security in WNC. These are categorized into four sections: framing the problem of food security, barriers to healthy food access and food security, current assets to address food security, and ideas to improve access to healthy food and food security. These results combine findings from the 24 participant interviews and five community focus groups.

**Framing the Problem: Food Insecurity and Healthy Food Availability**

- Food security was defined as access to healthy food specifically, as well as having the necessary resources to acquire healthy food.
- Evidence of food insecurity was described based on observed increasing demand for food assistance services.
- Healthy food was defined in terms of specific food items (such as fruits and vegetables and meat), “whole foods” that are not processed, growing and production practices, and how food is prepared.
- Healthy food availability was not cited as a problem; instead, access to this available healthy food was a key constraint.

**Barriers to Food Security and Healthy Food Access**

- Systemic poverty was noted as the “core” problem, particularly as a chronic, not temporary condition. Poverty affects household-level resources to acquire healthy food and creates trade-offs between food and other daily needs.
- Healthy food affordability was described as a barrier with many respondents asserting that healthy food is more expensive than unhealthy alternatives, although several interviewees thought that this was only a perception.
- Insufficiencies of subsidized food programs and assistance were described, including shortfalls in public assistance such that a growing number of community members rely upon the emergency food system on a regular basis.
- Organizational capacity and resource limitations to meet growing demand...
for emergency food services were noted as a barrier among emergency food service providers.

- Cultural barriers and stigma, mostly around class and race issues, were described as barriers to accessing the local food system.
- Transportation limitations were a barrier to accessing available healthy foods, including challenges posed by public transportation services.
- Knowledge gaps were the most commonly cited barrier among practitioner interviewees, including knowledge about how to shop for and prepare healthy food, while focus group respondents stressed affordability and transportation foremost.

Current Assets: Organizations, Programs, and Policies

- Respondents highlighted several successful collaborations aimed at alleviating food insecurity among non-profit organizations, churches, and government agencies, and they desired platforms to increase these partnerships.
- Many projects and programs were described as helping to improve food security in the community, most commonly a) emergency food programs deemed “vital” for addressing federal supplemental food assistance shortfalls and b) community gardens that help community members produce their own food.
- Policies to address food security were mentioned only sparingly, with some respondents noting this as an area they would like to learn more about.

Ideas for Improving Food Security and Access to Healthy Food

- General ideas such as community and economic development were noted by respondents, but specific ideas about these concepts were not offered.

Conclusion: Linking to Whole Measures and next steps

In the conclusion to the WNC community food security assessment, we return to the Whole Measures to summarize the findings and highlight next steps in the form of key questions for communities to engage and potential recommendations to consider.

Justice and Fairness

Food insecurity rates are higher than the national average in WNC and demand for food assistance continues to grow in the region. At its core, systemic poverty challenges the justice and fairness of the food system, and resource-limited community members note affordability and transportation as primary barriers to healthy food access, which are ultimately linked to poverty. Efforts to extend local food systems to all community members are positive steps, but cultural barriers and stigma related to race and class create challenges that must also be addressed to create welcome environments for all community members.

Strong Communities

Despite challenges to creating a just and fair food system, strong communities in WNC help to address some of these concerns. In each focus group, respondents asserted that they live in communities where they are cared for and have support to help meet their food needs. A strong base of organizations with a willingness to collaborate is also a sign of strong communities, although organizational capacity is an ongoing challenge. Although an idealized community food system would not require emergency food services like food pantries, in WNC, these services are viewed positively as responses to pressing community food needs among a growing proportion of the population that is food insecure.
Vibrant Farms
Despite overall declines in the number of farms across the region, the last decade has shown remarkable growth of farms that sell directly to consumers, both in number of farms and revenue of these sales. Demand for food from local farms is high in the region, and respondents asserted the importance of supporting the viability of local farms. However, questions were raised about the ability of “alternative” food systems to align with the need for subsidized, affordable healthy foods demanded by the emergency food system, including concerns about the ability of resource-limited community members to access local food options, particularly when these food items may cost more or require alternate transportation to access.

Healthy People
Healthy food is a cornerstone of a community of healthy people. Our research suggested that demand for healthy food among food insecure community members is high, and respondents asserted that healthy foods were available where they lived. However, availability does not connote accessibility, and key barriers to healthy food access include the real (or perceived) higher price of healthy food and transportation limitations that make accessing stores, markets, and emergency food programs a challenge. Practitioner interviewees expressed that there is a great need for education about healthy food, although this viewpoint was less common among resource-limited community members, who instead emphasized affordability and other barriers. Emphasizing healthy food education is one important facet of creating healthy people, but innovative ideas that go beyond education to address other healthy food access barriers are also encouraged.

Sustainable Ecosystems
In pursuit of environmental sustainability, preservation and viability of farms benefits the protection of open space. This research did not emphasize the relationship between food security and sustainable agriculture and natural resource protection, although interviewee and focus group participants asserted a desire to source foods produced without hormones, antibiotics, and synthetic inputs, principles central to sustainable agriculture (although their rationale was largely health, not environmentally motivated). While there are a number of organizations throughout WNC working to promote sustainable agriculture and environmental stewardship, questions remain in making the direct connection between community food security and sustainable agricultural and natural resource management.

Thriving local economies
Systemic poverty was a key barrier to food security discussed in the qualitative interviews, as community members without sustainable incomes are apt to require emergency food systems to meet their nutritional needs. Several respondents described the importance of spending money locally to support economic development, and several local programs are aimed at developing skills to help expand the local workforce to include more community members. A focus on local economic development policy and other food system policies, which was not prioritized by respondents in the research, may help create local economies and food systems that benefit community members of all classes.

Next steps: Considerations moving forward
The implications of these findings can be articulated in two overlapping ways to guide community-based efforts to improve food security moving forward—key questions for continued, impactful work and specific recommendations for action.

Key questions for enhanced efforts to alleviate food security
- Given the “gap” between federal food assistance and adequate access to healthy food at the end of the month, what realistic changes can be pursued to bridge this gap? How does this gap affect the capacity of emergency food providers?
- What supply models are feasible to increase the availability of in-demand fresh
produce, meats, and other perishable items for food insecure community members?

- How do we reconcile the tensions between emergency and local food systems, particularly in terms of access, affordability, and cultural dynamics?
- How do we foster healthy food venues and programs culturally appropriate for everyone?
- In addition to educational programs, what specific projects and policies can the community pursue to overcome substantial barriers to food security?
- What specific structures are needed to bolster the collaborative potential of food security stakeholders and, importantly, how can we sustain those networks moving forward?
- How can organizations access funding to implement new programs and services to better serve food insecure community members?
- How do we sustain subsidized healthy food programs that are often grant dependent?
- How do we identify, understand, and approach power dynamics among organizations within our community who share an overlapping interest in addressing food security?

**Recommendations**

The following list of projects and policies provides potential starting points for community stakeholders to engage efforts to alleviate food insecurity in their communities. **Recommendations such as these are only useful when stakeholders support them and are invested in their outcomes, requiring not only community input but also strategic leadership and collaboration.**

- Inform practitioners of pertinent policy issues related to food security, and provide training on ways to advocate at the local and other policy levels.
- Strengthen relationships with local government and planning departments, particularly focused on transportation needs of food insecure community members, to identify workable solutions to better connect individuals to healthy food venues.
- Engage in open discussions about ways to approach race and class barriers at food venues, particularly farmers markets and other sites commonly associated with local food networks.
- Continue to prioritize food-based education and outreach, particularly targeted in key areas of food shopping, preparation, and home-growing, so long as demand for these efforts is affirmed by community members.
- Increase efforts to expand key healthy food assistance programs that “get food to where people are,” including mobile markets, backpack programs, and community garden distribution models.
- Increase the availability of EBT machines at farmers markets and other local food venues to accept EBT. Expand marketing and outreach efforts to promote these programs to food insecure community members.
Appalachian Virginia Food Systems Network

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Appalachian Virginia Community Food Security Assessment Executive Summary

The Southwest Virginia Community Food Security Assessment was conducted as a partnership between the Appalachian Foodshed Project (AFP) and the Appalachian Virginia Food Systems Network (AVFSN). The goal of the assessment is to support the on-going work of southwest Virginia community food security practitioners.

To this end, the research was conducted to enhance the strategy and development of the AVFSN as a vehicle for facilitating communication and collaboration related to regional community food security.

Across southwest Virginia, there are many organizations and individuals working on issues related to community food security. There is a lot of energy around vibrant farms, agriculture, and economic development, but there is also a strong culture around having a food system that allows all southwest Virginians to eat nutritious, safe, and culturally appropriate foods. In this report we present several recommendations for moving these energies and assets forward. Like our most resilient agricultural systems, this report is intended to be both a harvest and a seed.

Full report can be found at: http://www.appalachianfoodshedproject.org/documents/VACFSAReportprint3-21-16.pdf

Approach

To conduct the assessment, a team of community and university partners developed a process that included key informant interviews and three regional community work sessions. The overall aim of the assessment was to develop practical strategies for furthering community food security work in southwest Virginia.

The assessment team used the Whole Measures for Community Food Systems and the Community Capitals to structure their analysis. The Whole Measures was used to holistically understand values that regional practitioners are bringing to their work. The Community Capitals were used to understand the assets that support (and might support) those values.

The analyzed data was then synthesized with a conceptual framework provided by thought on complexity, emergence, and network. The four Synergies and the three recommendations are products of this multi-layered analysis.

Key Synergies in SW VA Food Systems Work

A synergy is understood to occur when two or more things are brought together and produce an effect that is greater than the sum of the parts.

Synergy A: Financial capital and the value of vibrant farms and thriving local economies.
Agriculture as economic development is a dominant point of synergy in food systems work in southwest Virginia. A large number of organizations and individuals are focused on connecting financial capital
with the agricultural supply chain, whether that is through local processing and cost-savings to local farmers, or through access to capital for new agricultural ventures

Particularly relative to the other Whole Measures, the communities involved in the assessment have been successful in securing funding to support vibrant farms and thriving local economies. This is potentially a result of both the interests of funding organizations and agencies, as well as the presence of social capital around vibrant farms.

**Synergy B: Vibrant Farms and Social Capital**

In southwest Virginia there is a great deal of social capital connected to the value of vibrant farms. A significant portion of the individuals and organizations working within the realm of community food security in southwest Virginia are doing so in a way that is directly connected to building the vibrancy of local farms.

Research on the community capitals has indicated that social capital is a requisite foundation for building capital in other areas (Emery & Flora, 2006). To achieve systemic food security impact, we see a need for using this existent social capital (around farming) to expand social capital into other areas of the Whole Measures for Community Food Systems—i.e. to organizations representing areas like justice and fairness, healthy people, and strong communities.

**Synergy C: Cultural Capital and Justice & Fairness and Strong Communities**

The community work sessions demonstrated cultural capital around ideas of justice and fairness and strong communities. This synergy is playing a critical role holding together various aspects of the community food work in southwest Virginia. It has a strong effect on the way regional practitioners are imagining a desirable food system.

This cultural capital could be an avenue for connecting with other non-food/agriculture partners who hold similar values. For example, this could mean connecting with those working on affordable housing, drinking water quality, mountaintop removal, livable wages, and equitable access to education. Novel collaborations like these could open new possibilities for systemic impact.

**Synergy D: Human Capital across the Whole Measures**

Across southwest Virginia there is a vast wealth of human capital (i.e. people, knowledge, skills) related to food systems and the six Whole Measures. But a lot of the energy is unconnected and, consequently, this asset is underutilized. Through the assessment process it was apparent that we (as potential partners) understand the need to collaborate across sectors and issues. Effective collaboration needs facilitation and strategy, and that requires financial and human resources.

**Recommendations**

1. **Strengthen Existing Synergies by Connecting Regional Human Capital**
   - Though there is a great deal of human capital related to the Whole Measures, it is underutilized. We recommend prioritizing the facilitation of opportunities and spaces for connecting this human capital. As possible points of action, we recommend:
     - Seek funding opportunities for coordinated regional convening with the primary objective of developing a learning network and building relationships and trust.
     - Develop and utilize digital platforms for increased open access information sharing. Platforms like LocalWiki can be used to share organizational information and organizational/network learning.
     - Establish a culture of open information-sharing and information transparency.

2. **Develop and Strengthen Relationships with Organizations that Share Similar Cultural Commitments to Strong Communities and Justice & Fairness**

Synergy C highlights the values that are connected to the community food work in
southwest Virginia. These values, of justice and fairness and strong communities, are shared by many additional individuals and organizations that are more loosely tied to food security. We suggest that developing these potential “unlikely” relationships might strengthen our ability to systemically address food insecurity in the region. As possible points of action, we recommend:

- Explore possibilities for collaboration with partners working on issues like affordable housing; sustainable jobs; anti-racism; fair wage; access to safe drinking water
- Develop and sustain places for having cross-sector dialogue with “unlikely” partners. Explore the conditions that might make our conversations more inclusive of “unlikely” partners.

3. Monitor and Evaluate Recommendations One and Two

The synergies identified in this report are strong and well-developed across the region. Building and expanding these synergies could be aided by implementing an on-going evaluation process. As possible points of action, we recommend:

- Institute a planning and evaluation framework that prioritizes local and regional commitments to Strong Communities and Justice & Fairness.

Concluding Thoughts

The Appalachian Virginia Food Systems Network (AVFSN) emerged and developed alongside this assessment. It has become a vehicle for holding and facilitating space for community food security learning and strategy in southwest Virginia. Through the assessment, it has become evident that we need better ways to connect to other individuals, organizations, and ideas. We advocate for a focused effort on network building as a means of increasing our capacity to do more collaborative, higher-impact community food work.

There are many factors influencing the potential success of our recommendations. At this point in 2016, it is clear that human and financial resources are necessary to facilitate the next steps of the AVFSN. As the network continues to develop, this assessment can help frame the conversation and efforts to address community food security in southwest Virginia.
Nourishing Networks of West Virginia

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West Virginia Community Food Security Assessment—Executive Summary

The West Virginia Community Food Security Assessment (WV CFSA) identifies the various community strategies to improve food access for low-income communities in West Virginia. Over the course of the project we interviewed more than two hundred key informants and surveyed thousands of commercial food retailers, public food assistance programs, anti-hunger charities and emergent alternative food networks. Our objective is to use social science research to foster a more expansive discussion of the opportunities for enhancing community food security, to communicate various forms of knowledge about disparities in the food system, and to create user friendly tools like interactive maps and county-level profiles to consolidate different data and analysis about barriers to food access and strategies to improve access in West Virginia. Rather than a focus on a single actor or institution, or a single method or tool, our study seeks to cross-pollinate our collective understanding of community food security through a diverse analysis of state, market, charitable and other community-based initiatives. While these initiatives are often treated separately, it is our hope that by bringing them into conversation, we can promote greater understanding and collaboration across coalitions of vulnerable families, anti-hunger advocates, local food advocates and policymakers. Our intended outcome with the WV CFSA is to provide vital research assistance to emergent coalitions at the local, regional and state scale that enables these groups to effectively speak across their differences, to jointly assess food access problems, and to continue to collectively develop community food strategies that promote a more inclusive and just food system.

The findings are divided into four sections which closely mirror our understanding of the problem of food access and community food strategies to address the problem.

The first explores market access, the primary mechanism through which the vast majority of us source our food. Market access informs the foods available to us, and the price and quality of those foods. In this section we outline some of the wider structural causes producing food disparities in West Virginia and propose a different approach to mapping food access gaps in the state. The second section introduces state interventions that seek to expand market access for low-income households and reduce food access gaps through our public schools and private charities. An overview of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Child Nutrition Programs in our public schools, including the effects of the recent Feed to Achieve Act and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) which provides commodities to the state’s two food banks for distribution to their network of affiliates. The third section is a summary of our findings from research within the emergency food network a loose consortium of charities affiliated with a regional food bank that include food pantries, hot meal programs, meal delivery programs, backpack programs, shelters that serve a population with very low food access. The final section explores alternative food initiatives and their contribution toward reducing food access gaps in the state. These programs envision alternative food futures. They are important to our analysis because they broaden the stakeholders involved in addressing local food insecurity, envision hybrid initiatives which might include state and private funding, entrepreneurial innovators and charitable impulses, and provide opportunities for people to expand food access “from below.”
Full report can be found at: http://www.appalachianfoodshedproject.org/documents/NOURISHING NETWORKS_REPORT_FINAL_2016.pdf

Logic/Rationale

As the only state whose 55 counties are all within the Appalachian Region, West Virginia (AFP-WV) enjoyed the benefits and burdens of attempting to conduct a community food security analysis across scales from individual counties to the entire state. To complete our work we drew upon strong partnerships with existing statewide organizations to develop our analysis of existing community food strategies. Critical among these organizations were the West Virginia Food and Farm Coalition and the state’s two food banks, Facing Hunger in Huntington, WV and Mountaineer in Gassaway, WV. We also worked closely with a number of other coalitions such as the Perishable Food and Medicine project, the West Virginia Council of Churches, the West Virginia Community Development HUB, the West Virginia Economic Justice Project, the West Virginia Healthy Kids and Families Coalition and the West Virginia Farmers Market Association. AFP-WV also sought perspectives and gathered data from public officials working in the WV Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR), Department of Agriculture (DOA) and Department of Education (DOE), each of which have operated public programs aimed at alleviating household food insecurity for decades.

One of the key barriers to coalescing community food initiatives stems from a dearth of locally relevant and effectively communicated research on issues of food access at the local, state and regional scales. In West Virginia, like many states, community food advocates struggle to locate and analyze data collected across different programs from farmers markets to food pantries and federal assistance programs. Differences in research orientation from charitable food assistance, to state assistance to food marketing make it hard for everyday citizens and community groups to synthesize this information and make use of it for meaningful participatory planning. To that end one of the tangible research outputs from AFP-WV was the launch of WV FOODLINK (foodlink.wvu.edu) through a partnership with the Food Justice Laboratory in the Geography Program at West Virginia University. WV FOODLINK carries out publicly available research to spotlight food resources in local communities and to explain the dynamics and institutions that enhance food access among low-income families in West Virginia. FOODLINK publishes an interactive online map identifying both emergency food resources for low income households, and places where they can apply for and use their state benefits. It also developed a WV food security atlas which draws on a vast database to explain and reveal the metrics relevant to food security in the state, including a Food Access map at the census block group level. Each Appalachian county is unique and has different socio-economic and political dynamics influencing how people access food. To that end, WV FOODLINK also developed 55 county food security profiles from which local stakeholders might begin to consider the multiple factors contributing to food access gaps in their communities. In 2015 these county profiles have become the starting point for participatory action research and coalition building across the state.

At the local scale we also worked extensively with individuals and place-based organizations from small farmers to food pantry directors, cooperatively owned food businesses and social service organizations working to tackle endemic poverty in their communities. Nine enhancement grants were allocated to a number of these partners who each took very different approaches to reducing food insecurity. Some were small businesses and others charities. Some sought to educate and increase the capacity of existing food production while others worked to reduce spatial friction through innovative food delivery systems. These enhancement grants helped us evaluate how local, often grassroots organizations, engage with the opportunities and barriers involved in the many different pieces of the food access puzzle within different social and geographic contexts. We conducted focus groups with anti-hunger coalitions in Monongalia, Preston,
Taylor, Logan, Wood and Cabell counties to understand who was at the table and driving conversations in different places. Engaging with organizations involved in the day to day activities of reducing food access gaps in the state was a critical component of this study as it served to calibrate our questions and understand the knowledge gaps within and among groups that might draw on our findings to expand conversations and explain the wider framework they are working in.

**Methodology**

AFP-WV research process followed two distinct yet complimentary entry points. The first was the WV Food and Farm Coalition. Early participation by members of its food access working group whose mission is to increase the availability and affordability of local foods for West Virginian households provided key contacts and a basic understanding of the existing resources and groups working on the issues that the project would be researching over the coming years. The second entry point was the emergency food network anchored by relationship building with the Facing Hunger and Mountaineer Food Bank directors and their staff. Concurrently we reached out to state level agencies to conduct qualitative interviews about the translation of federally funded food assistance programs at the state level and collect quantitative data about participation and financial disbursement rates. Finally we conducted focus groups with anti-hunger coalitions to understand who was at the table when it came to conversations about household food insecurity and receive feedback from these groups on our assessment activities and whether the tools we were developing would be useful to their work.

Our participatory research also began with two separate entry points reflecting the locality of the researchers based in Morgantown, West Virginia. The first was the execution of a pilot Community Food Security Assessment (CFSA) for Monongalia County following the blueprint recommendations set forth by the USDA in its CFSA toolkit. The second was the Monongalia County Food and Hunger Committee, a group of charitable food assistance agency directors and their allies. We regularly attended monthly meetings to observe the work of organizing food drives, pooling resources and communicating with donors. We conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the 13 agency directors to understand their individual agency's food sourcing strategies, the challenges each faces operating a hunger relief agency and their personal perceptions of the drivers of food insecurity. At the end of the process we brought the two research activities together by presenting the CFSA to the Food and Hunger Committee and discussing significant findings. Informed by the CFSA methodology and calibrated by our action research with the Food and Hunger Committee, we gradually scaled up our study to include the state’s two regional food banks and the 55 WV counties that they collectively serve. We began with the 11 southern counties in the Facing Hunger Food Bank (FHFB) service area in 2014 before moving on to work with the much larger Mountaineer Food Bank (MFB) in 2015 to complete a statewide assessment that includes CFSA’s for each county.

We located and surveyed every emergency food assistance provider affiliated with a food bank to assess their capacity, the number of people they serve, their service areas and hours of operation. We also confirmed the location of every food retailer accepting SNAP and WIC benefits across the state and asked whether they carried fresh produce or not. We classified these retailers into five categories based on the types of foods and products on offer there. Farmers Markets received special attention. We interviewed 72 farmers market managers to understand their perception of food insecurity, their market's engagement with federal food assistance programs, and how they envisioned their work contributing


10Every FHFB agency survey was conducted by telephone and included qualitative data. Agencies in the MFB area completed an online survey informed by the previous phone survey.
to community food security, especially partnerships with emergency food agencies. In 2015 we also surveyed and conducted key informant interviews with some 50 alternative food programs such as school gardens, community gardens, mobile markets, Food Hubs, CSAs and Food Cooperatives to understand their engagement with food access and quality concerns and strategies to address it.

As in every study there are some significant limits to this undertaking. First, a significant lacuna is the paucity of data on charitable food delivery programs. While we have identified and mapped them, these organizations, unlike most other food assistance charities, do not source food from one of the regional food banks. As such we have not yet collected data on their role and capacity toward filling food access gaps, especially for seniors and other populations with limited mobility. This is a major gap in a state with an ageing population, one we hope to fill in the coming years. Second, is assessing the role of individual and community self-provisioning and the myriad of local production activities taking place across such a rural state. Homesteading, gardening, hunting and foraging significantly contribute to household food supplies in West Virginia but these are not reflected quantitatively in this study. A master’s thesis project whose research was partially funded by WV-AFP focused on identifying some of the dynamics underway in the production and marketing of local foods. It drew on the extensive local networks of the Food and Farm Coalition and WVU Extension agents to determine how feasible it would be to increase local food production in West Virginia, particularly with non-commercial producers and the many challenges involved in linking these producers to market opportunities. An undergraduate thesis also examined ‘alternative emergency food’ programs that connect locally sourced foods to emergency food networks. While these studies helped assess the number of food producers in the state and the various distribution outlets they are using, a more complete assessment of non-conventional food production and distribution is still a few years away as part of an ongoing effort in partnership with the WV Food and Farm Coalition.

Summary of Key Findings

Market Access

The past few decades have seen major changes in retail food markets in West Virginia. Market concentration and economies of scale market concentration is especially prevalent among big box and small box stores, while grocers and convenience stores still have many independent owners. Our findings indicate that many low income West Virginia residents confront significant barriers to accessing nutritious food through food markets. Out of 1592 total census block groups surveyed, we found that residents living in 42% (665 census block groups) have low or very low access to a grocery store. The disappearance of retailers offering fresh and higher quality foods is a real problem for rural communities seeking regular access to nutritious food. Communities faced with a reduction in food choices across the state have responded by creating alternatives to agro-industrial supply chains through farmers markets, mobile markets, CSAs and food cooperatives. These initiatives are limited in terms of sales and volume when compared to West Virginia’s overall commercial food landscape. Food costs at these markets also tend to be higher than what can be found in more traditional outlets and many alternative retail locations tend to hold variable even seasonal hours. Many farmers markets are beginning to accept SNAP and WIC payments to reduce the access gap but like any other form of money, low income households seek to make their dollars stretch as far as possible. Markets that offer two-for-one SNAP benefits and WIC and Senior vouchers are often keenly aware of the income gaps and are actively seeking to make locally sourced foods available to everyone. Still, last year saw just 1% of WV’s population shop at a farmers market.

An average census block group comprises 1,500 residents.
State Interventions

The emergency food network is comprised of 650 agencies distributing free food. Monetary and food donations are in constant flux and the conditions to access services often vary from place to place. No one food charity resembles another, yet combined they supplement the food needs of 300,000 West Virginians every month, 16% of the state's population. They collectively raise around $9,000,000 in private funds to run programs, pay staff and logistics costs as well as purchase food to supplement food drives, and those federal and privately donated foods that can be accessed through the state's two food banks. These are both Feeding America affiliates which provides access to corporate food donations, yet also requires agencies to pick up and report these donations at each participating retail location. As the central nodes of a vast network, the food banks cost share with food pantries to distribute food, although USDA foods are still delivered free of charge. Over 7,000 volunteers contribute for what amounts to hundreds of thousands of hours of labor on a yearly basis in the state to keep the emergency food network operating. The number of people accessing food through these channels is on the rise and 35% of food charities in the state began operating after 2008. Food charities are very well positioned to understand the critical food needs in their communities, and common to all local food charities is a deep sense of commitment to alleviating hunger in the present. Most charities are so focused on filling this immediate need that they do not have the resources nor the time to question the context within the wider food system in which their work takes place, but many are open to experimentation within their communities if provided the resources to do so. The emergency food network is often seen as a critical infrastructure for a vast array of programs which are built or envisioned on top of it. However, the capacity of an ageing community to maintain this network afloat in terms of both labor and funding is the basis for many tensions within the network as they are asked to do ever more with ever fewer resources at their disposal.

Alternative Food Networks

Grassroots attempts to close the food access gap around the state are broad, innovative and varied. Their commonality lies in the fact that they are working to envision alternative food futures in the context of existing food system inequalities. These entities do not stand alone, they work with local and Americorps volunteers, are subsidized by community foundations, public grants, and private donors. Some lean more heavily toward market logics, while others are driven by charitable impulse, but the two often blend into a hybrid that fits neither. Their work often centers on strengthening communities, making new linkages and re-envisioning how we might create a more just food system. What is emergent about many of the local food initiatives that we encountered across West Virginia is that they are broadening the stakeholders involved in traditional food access work, making links between local agricultural production, novel markets, and those now essential state-based and charitable responses to improving food access. Their activities re-imagine who food producers are and where they can market their products, challenge charitable food assistance networks to think about the future, change public institution expectations, and educate volunteers concerned about food justice. A significant limit to the movement however is that there are pressures to make them function profitably by pure market logics, whereas they are competing within a conventional food system that is highly subsidized. This creates frustration for producers who can only reach a particular niche market and for program development officers who feel they need to constantly reinvent their organizations to fit the demands of funder networks that usually expect self-sufficiency through profit.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

We sincerely hope this report spurs conversations across the state and region about the complexities involved in providing access to safe, culturally appropriate and nutritious foods to everyone, and opens up new questions and ideas around the myriad of local
planning meetings that take place on a regular basis around the state. Achieving a more just food system in our region is possible, but it won’t be quick, nor easy. We often grapple for immediate solutions to immediate problems. Food access is of course a growing problem, one whose roots run deep. But it has not sprung up overnight nor will it be fixed by a single magic bullet policy. Instead we must continue to work to understand strategies that engender greater equity and justice and those strategies (or lack thereof) which reinforce divides between those who have the privilege of food choice and those who do not. West Virginia’s economic dependence on extractive industries deepens existing vulnerabilities and as coal jobs disappear from layoffs or reduced hours in the sporadic natural gas industry, food insecurity is likely to increase and the challenges escalate. According to the US bureau of labor statistics, over 19,000 jobs were lost in FY 2014 alone, and West Virginia was the only state recording negative job growth in FY 2015. It currently has the country’s highest unemployment rate at 6.9% and the $41,195 median household income is the second lowest. The latest census data reports 18.5% of people living below poverty and the Food and Research Action Council estimates a 24.2% food hardship rate, meaning that at least once over a twelve month period nearly a quarter of households did not have enough resources to provide food for themselves. In a context where fewer people are able to earn sufficient wages to adequately access food markets and supplementary public assistance is no longer sufficient, the emergency food network is coming under increasing pressures to provide hunger relief even as its donor base shrinks and state based resources become increasingly difficult to access. The alternative food networks across the state are nowhere near sufficient to supplement the gap, and will never be if they are expected to compete with conventional food system prices and to operate on a purely profit-motive logic. In light of this we see opportunities for the emergence of a hybrid food economy in West Virginia that 1) engages with and lobbies for more novel forms of public assistance 2) mobilizes the massive volunteer base within the emergency food networks and local food advocacy organizations and, 3) leverages the energies currently distributing low quality foods through West Virginia to support the production and distribution of higher quality, nutritious foods that rebuild regional economies. In turn we would ask the funders and supporters of alternative food movements to consider shifting some of their focus onto reimagining the role of the emergency food network that serves so many more people than farmers markets and food hubs yet is never provided funding opportunities to innovate as the local food movement does. We might also collectively question why the large food consortiums that have played a major large role erasing farmers and grocers from our landscapes are now reaping tax benefits and reduced waste disposal fees for donating their excess food, rather than proactively financially supporting the emergency food network that does so much work for them. These are of course very difficult political questions, because building alternative food futures is a political practice. The process will be difficult and contentious, but only by including unconventional allies to expand this conversation and identify those opportunities that exist within an unjust food system might we begin to change it.
AFP Products

37 – Enhancement Grants
37 – Practitioner Profiles
41 - Carrying Capacity Model
41 - Graduate Curriculum on Community Food Security
43 - Community, Local, and Regional Food Systems Community of Practice
PRODUCTS FROM THE APPALACHIAN FOODSHED PROJECT

ENHANCEMENT GRANTS

As part of the USDA grant, the AFP project generated a call for two rounds of small, experimental community food security grants in each state. Summaries of these enhancement grants can be found online, by following these links:

West Virginia: http://bit.ly/2bnkN0m
Virginia: http://bit.ly/2bNHngQ

PRACTITIONER PROFILES

Learning for Community Food Work through Story: Possibilities for Hope and Transformation

When facing a complex problem like food insecurity, “seeing” the system “better” means reading a multiplicity of realities and generating new ways to engage them...

One of the Appalachian Foodshed Project’s (AFP) aims was to help build community capacity and organizational cohesion across the food system in the region. This work was addressed in a number of ways. In spring 2013, an initiative was launched to create and share narratives or “stories” that illustrate the lived experiences of activists, educators, farmers, and practitioners who are involved in a variety of Appalachian organizations and groups that are connected to the broader issues of food system change in the region. The impetus for creating a regional narrative of food system work comes from the practitioners themselves who were eager to create a regional network yet continue to struggle with the formative process of crafting and weaving their stories and actions together. The narratives were therefore crafted to be spaces for learning for all who read them and the extent of their use and meaning go as far as our imaginations can take them. They also generate opportunity for us to narrate our own stories of change—helping to humanize the “wicked problem” of food insecurity while creating new possibilities in our everyday work of resistance and learning.

Since 2013, we have generated over 30 narratives, or “practice stories,” from regional activists, educators, and practitioners who operate in what we are referring to as community food work (Slocum, 2007). We embrace this term “community food work” due to its politicized and inclusive meaning that embraces several interconnected domains and processes that constitute alternative food system efforts, those that focus on: 1) farm sustainability – related to connecting small-scale farmers to markets; 2) nutrition education – with emphases on the prevention of diet-related illnesses; 3) environmental sustainability – related to the development and support of more ecologically sound agricultural production; and 4) social justice – which consists of a bifurcated approach—producer/worker rights and hunger/food insecurity. From the perspective of Slocum’s concept of community food work, the narrative actors have been involved in a variety of organizations focusing on farm, food and community connected to the complex issues of food system change. The stories include exciting projects, such as the creation of a CSA-food pantry partnership, the establishment of new food hubs, the impact of school and community gardens, and the development of novel structures for organizing for change. Above all, these narratives are a personal testament to the triumphs and challenges of community food work in the region. They are meant to be spaces for learning for all who read them, and the extent of their use and meaning go as far as our imaginations can take them. They also generate opportunities for us to narrate our own stories of community food work.
Our general approach to crafting the practice stories is in the realm of narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 2005). We use the definition of “narrative” to mean both a process and a product in this particular design and approach (Richmond, 2002). This includes treating the stories as both a process of reflexivity through storytelling and the products of engaging, activity and performativity, with everyday knowledge that inform community food work practice. In terms of community involvement in this effort, we followed action research principles (Greenwood & Levin, 2007) with regional practitioners participating in the initial design of storytelling prompts, questions, and locations to conduct the narratives. This approach allowed the practitioners to tell their own stories of community food work through a series of “prompting” questions to emphasize their personal meanings and histories. The in-depth interview process took approximately two hours and was oriented for practitioners to share: 1) her/his/their past experiences in the community and/or community food work, 2) a current illustration of community food work that is significantly meaningful, and 3) future hopes, aspirations, and intentions for their community food work. Following our university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) processes, each narrative was consented to, audio-recorded, transcribed, re-transcribed with editing, and configured as a public “narrative” through a co-reading and framing process with the interviewers and practitioners. This co-authoring process included careful attention to practitioner responses and consent for public use. The stories were therefore co-created to emphasize the voice of the storyteller in the journey of her/his/their community food work, experiences in that work, and words of reflection and hope for the future. Community food work, in this way, is a collective journey, and these narratives, we hope, can further bind the region and the work together.

Excerpt: Corner Store

I think that this corner store project really shows that this work has to be benefitting all of the key players. The store-owner has to be making money off of it; it has to be at a price that the people are willing and able to pay for it, and then it needs to be reliable.... I think food systems work is very segregated, like “We’re doing it for obesity,” and “Well we’re doing it for farmers’ rights.” And then, “Well we’re doing it for animal rights.” And it’s like “No, no, we’re all doing the same thing.” If we could just find some common language and start breaking down some of those barriers. Like who doesn’t want healthy corner store options that the owner is making money off of? The more money she makes the more healthy food she can buy. The more healthy food she can buy the more farmers get to produce them. It’s like there’s a whole cycle of people who are being affected, but because we so often only think of like “You...
only care about it being low calorie, you only care about it being local, and you only care…” It’s like, “We’re all working towards the same thing. Our partners can really look like anything as long as that common goal is shared.

**Excerpt: Perspective**

I’ve found most people coming at farm-to-school come from a health perspective, so they’re not thinking about the farmer, and they’re not thinking about the economic piece of the work. Because when we actually started this farm-to-school work, our first question was, “Is this a market that’s good for farmers? Can farmers make money?” Access to other more lucrative markets would make farm-to-school less appealing to farmers, as it should. Farmers, bottom line, have to make money. We’ve really come around to thinking that the educational components are what are needed. The elephant in the room around school food is that schools just don’t have enough money to spend on food. After they pay everything they have to pay; their salaries, their equipment costs, their indirect costs, they have about a dollar left over per meal. That’s just not sufficient, not to do all the things we want it to do. And it’s not their fault. And so until we address the basic funding issue we’re not going to see it. We can grant support things all day in different parts of the country in different schools, but that’s not a long-term solution. So we’d rather focus on the educational components: the school gardens, the cooking, the cafeteria taste tests, and the farm field trips. Even if you drastically change that plate, if there’s not the education to go with it, why would the kids respond to it? It’s just unknown.

**Excerpt: Moving Forward**

I am looking forward to not being so mad about decisions that are made for me instead of with me. I’m excited about that. I really do want to live in a world where we are more valued; especially these huge populations of people who are suffering from these systems that we’ve created. You can’t put blame on a person who is operating in a system that’s holding them down. And so whether that’s ageism or poverty or racism. I’m looking forward to those things being a little less heavy on everything that we’re doing. I mean we already do value people, we just do it wrong. The wrong people are getting paid the wrong amount of money for the wrong things. And not everyone. There are a lot of people out there making good dollars, and they should continue making it, but where do we place value? We aren’t giving people the skills they need, and then we’re mad that they are not able to produce anything. And I’m like “This was your system. They went through your public health care, your public school system, who do you have to blame for that?” I totally believe in those programs. I just believe that it’s too little too late. It needed to be done when they were six months old with health care and education and job training for their parents. We are constantly looking for the next policy or environment we can try to change. The youth are the ones telling us, especially because they’re the ones living it. And some of its funding. Right now we can get money to do food security work because the need is there. And so, in 10 years, wherever that funding need is, is where the need is, and hopefully it will be more of a holistic view.

**Why Narratives?**

It is important to note that the narratives have a number of intersections with learning and social change in the region and beyond. This includes the personal and reflexive experiences of the interviewers and practitioners as narrative authors. It also comprises newly crafted knowledge and realities of community food work from across our Appalachian communities through the dissemination of the stories. The narratives also have purpose in generating creativity and idea-making capacity within our university classrooms and public settings in the reading and (re)telling of these stories of cultural work. Lastly, building on previous points, we suggest that the generative quality of the narratives actually craft productive, “life affirming” possibilities and strategies in our learning of community food work, thus moving the needle towards “better” food security in our communities.
In conclusion, aims for this work are threefold that stretch across the practical to the theoretical to somewhere in between. First, we illustrate the role of narratives as one way to critically navigate, inspire, and create new possibilities for learning and action with emphasis localized sites and processes of community food work. Second, the narratives of the AFP in central Appalachia provide a space to engage with a particular methodology and the voices and realities this work embodies. Third, we argue that the collecting, editing, and disseminating of these narratives is not an apolitical fact of empirical documentation; rather it is cultural and ontological work—a generative process for emergent and transformative community food work. To this point, as noted many times over, the material and corporeal effects of our food system are a maddening and wicked problem. We argue that such wickedness, including food insecurity, hunger, and ecological unsustainability, are complex problems that intersect with larger systems of oppression and injustice that will not be “solved” by technical and rational “best practices” to be applied across time and space. Instead, we need to engage and embrace with new systems of knowing, coordination, and experimentation that both build upon, (de)construct, and de-territorialize our historical approaches to community food work—enabling new possibilities for life-affirming change in our systems and communities. We are hopeful that the creating, telling, and sharing of narratives provides us with these kinds of change-making spaces that move us toward a less maddening food system.

- The stories are available on the Stories of Community Food Work website (http://blogs.lt.vt.edu/niewolny/). For more information, please contact: Kim Niewolny; Associate Professor, Department of Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education; Virginia Tech; niewolny@vt.edu

References:


Notes:
1Much of this text was adapted from the forthcoming chapter: Niewolny, K. & D’Adamo-Damery, P. (In Press). Learning through story as political praxis: The role of narratives in community food work. In Sumner, J. (Ed.), Learning, food, and sustainability: Sites for resistance and change. New York: Palgrave/Macmillan.

2Students from the AFP pilot graduate course, Food Security & Resilient Communities: Food Systems Theory & Praxis, at Virginia Tech completed the first round of interviews. The transcripts were then used to create narratives, which were co-edited by the practitioners themselves. A second round of
narratives was completed with students from the spring 2015 AFP graduate course.

Acknowledgements: A special thank you goes to each of the story tellers and interviewers for their generosity and creativity. We are also thankful for the narrative insights and editorial expertise of Becca Ligrani, Shreya Mitra, and Garland Mason at Virginia Tech. A special nod goes to Becca Ligrani for providing ample guidance in collecting, transcribing, and editing many of the narratives. Lastly, many thanks goes to Phil D’Adamo-Damery and Nikki D’Adamo-Damery for their intellectual contributions to the project.

CARRYING CAPACITY MODEL

One of the deliverables of the USDA grant project was a systems dynamic model that represented the complexity and potential of community food security in central Appalachia. The model team created a modified version of the Peters et al Foodshed assessment, focused on the AFP Counties. This is a region with limited agricultural endowments, other than for grazing. We assessed the capacity of counties in this region, and region wide, to provide their populations with food based on both the existing and total potential (carrying capacity) agricultural land bases.

More information about the carrying capacity systems dynamic model can be found at this link: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-pMBEWqP2AlgD4AgghdNq_4CVBZdlkgdR_OjFQv5f4/edit?usp=sharing

GRADUATE CURRICULUM ON COMMUNITY FOOD SECURITY

One objective of the tristate Appalachian Foodshed Project was to create and offer graduate-level coursework focusing on the conceptual and programmatic approaches to understanding and addressing the complexity of community food security and food systems change. Over the course of a year, the AFP curriculum team developed a community-student-centered graduate course that involved graduate students and faculty from Virginia Tech, North Carolina State University, and community stakeholders that participated in the AFP across both states. Course objectives, content, assessment, and community engagement aims were developed through a multi-year action research course design process that included insights learned from a national literature review of community food systems curricula, meetings with community

Food Security & Resilient Communities: Food Systems Theory & Practice

ALCE 5984, Special Study
Spring 2017
CRN 19642

Course Overview
This graduate-level course is a critical and interdisciplinary exploration of current issues related to food security and the emerging field of food systems. This course will focus on the concepts of food security, community food security, food sovereignty, resilience, food justice, and agricultural sustainability from local, regional, and international perspectives. Topics include but are not limited to: conceptual approaches to framing/addressing food security, frameworks for developing food system assessments, and the role of university-community partnerships to enhance food system change and resiliency in communities. The Appalachian Foodshed Project and the Stories of Community Food Work in Appalachia initiative will provide course participants with a theoretical and practical backdrop for class discussions, narrative research and storytelling, and engagement with food, farming, and community scholar/practitioners in the region. Participatory learning and asset-based community development are core course themes and approaches. Graduate student standing (3H, 3C).

Schedule
Thursday 4-7 PM
Location: Litton Reaves 244
Instructor: Dr. Kim L. Niewolny
Dept. of Agricultural, Leadership, & Community Education
282 Litton Reaves Hall (0543)
Email: niewolny@vt.edu

Course Context
A major component of this course is to explore the learnings from the Appalachian Foodshed Project (AFP), a USDA-NIFA, AFRI grant project. For over 5 years, AFP partners have worked together to address the critical issue of community food security in West Virginia and the Appalachian areas of North Carolina and Virginia through a regional research, outreach, and educational effort.

As part of the AFP, the Stories of Community Food Work in Appalachia initiative was launched to create and share narratives or “stories” that express the diverse experiences of people working for food system change, and include the voices of practitioners from across this region related to community and economic development; farming systems; health and nutrition; environmental advocacy; and social justice. The stories are co-created to highlight individual and collective voices in the journey of his/her/their work. The stories include projects, such as the creation of a CSA-food pantry partnership, the development of novel structures for community organizing, the establishment of new food hubs, youth and senior advocacy for food access, and the impact of school and community gardens. In this course, we will continue this work by reading and learning from these narratives while collaborating with community stakeholders to create new ones. To learn more, please visit the Stories of Community Food Work in Appalachia site: http://blogs.lt.vt.edu/niewolny/.
stakeholders, four focus groups with graduate students across both institutions, and the students who elected to take the course.

In spring 2015, Virginia Tech offered “Food Security & Resilient Communities: Food Systems Theory & Praxis” to a class of 12 graduate students who represented several departments across 3 different colleges at Virginia Tech. This course was offered as an interdisciplinary, student-faculty-community research initiative between Virginia Tech and North Carolina State University. Once completed, the course was positioned as a critical and interdisciplinary exploration of current issues related to food security and food systems change. The course focused on the concepts of food security, community food security, food sovereignty, resiliency, and agricultural sustainability from local, regional, and international perspectives. Topics included but were not limited to the conceptual and programmatic approaches to addressing food security, food security policy, food system assessment, and the role of university-community partnerships to enhance food security and resiliency in communities. To this end, students were asked to identify, analyze and address the inter-connectedness of food systems from a number of sociopolitical and ecological perspectives. We specifically explored “food security” as a wicked problem—particularly committed to understating the relationship between food system praxis and food justice. Educational, engagement, and community development agendas were therefore at the heart of this dialogue. The Appalachian Foodshed Project also provided students with a theoretical and practical backdrop for class discussion and coursework, including engaging with AFP scholar/practitioners through discussions and a narrative inquiry research project. The course also involved e-collaborating with North Carolina State University through faculty lectures and discussions.

To view more about the Appalachian Foodshed Project graduate course “Food Security and Resilient Communities: Food Systems Theory and Praxis” course visit http://www.appalachianfoodshedproject.org/events.html to view:

- Archived webinar
- Download the presentation slides
- Course syllabus
- Student selected readings and facilitation assignment
- Research poster on student focus groups
- For more information about the Virginia Tech graduate course, “Food Security and Resilient Communities: Food Systems Theory and Praxis,” contact Kim Niewolny at niewolny@vt.edu.
- For more information about course work at North Carolina State University, please contact Michelle Schroeder-Moreno at msschroe@ncsu.edu.
COMMUNITY, LOCAL AND REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

In our region and elsewhere, community, local and regional food systems (CLRFS) are increasingly important spaces for individuals, families, and communities to make a positive and long-lasting. As a grant-funded goal of the Appalachian Foodshed Project, we collaborated with the CLRFS eXtension Community of Practice (eCoP) as a dynamic resource designed to provide information and networking opportunities for educators, community-based practitioners, policy makers, farmers/growers, families, and those individuals involved in building equitable, health-promoting, resilient, and economically balanced food systems. As a community of practice, this national effort aims to: a) create new content; b) compile and summarize information published by our member organizations; c) and make it a goal to offer a unique, online meeting place for diverse groups and interests to share information and learn from one another.

This eXtension CoP includes partners who are positioned to provide new or synthesized information that support successful food systems. The CoP also offers a unique, online meeting place for these diverse groups and interests to share information and learn from one another. Examples of resources available include:

- CLFRS webinar series
- Feature articles
- Resource articles and links
- Meet the CLRFS members through eXtension’s “Bios”
- Social media, including Facebook and an eCoP listserv (local-foods@lists.extension.org)
- Partnership with the North American Food systems Network (NASFN) http://foodsysteemsnetwork.org/

Topics our materials and resources included but are not limited to the CLRFS eCoP:

- Beginning farmer & rancher
- Niche production and value chain producers
- Urban agriculture
- Food processing
- Institutional food preparation
- Marketing, markets, and scale
- Distribution & aggregation
- Consumer food preparation
- Nutrition & health
- Resource & waste recovery
- Food & agriculture policy
- Food security
- Food justice & food sovereignty
- Economic development
- Tools for evaluation and program planning

The CLRFS eCoP is comprised of over 300 members who comprise extension educators/specialists, university researchers, and food systems practitioners. The community leadership team meets online and via conference calls to create and mobilize initiatives, including CoP webinars and special conference events, such as the 2014 Food Security Conference held in Cleveland, Ohio, funded by a USDA AFRI conference grant.

Visit the CLRFS eCoP at: http://articles.extension.org/community_and_regional_food_systems

AFP CLRFS eCoP contacts: Kim Niewolny (niewolny@vt.edu) & Phil D’Adamo-Damery (pdadamer@vt.edu).
References
REFERENCES


