

CULTIVATING JUST FOOD: EXPLORING INCLUSION AND INEQUALITY IN  
COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEMS

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## ABSTRACT

### CULTIVATING JUST FOOD: EXPLORING INCLUSION AND INEQUALITY IN COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEMS

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In the United States, an increasing number of community-based food projects are emerging as people attempt to reclaim food sovereignty by modeling just and sustainable alternatives to the dominant, industrialized food system. Despite good intentions, researchers have found that many alternative food networks reproduce existing power relations by privileging middle class and elite interests over those of structurally marginalized groups. Such networks struggle to recognize broader mechanisms of inequality that contribute to disparities in access to food and thus face challenges in building truly inclusive, equitable and transformative food systems. In Poughkeepsie, New York, a community-based food network is evolving comprised of a constellation of groups working to improve access to healthy food for area residents, and to revitalize the city's local food system. The purpose of this research project is to explore selected community food efforts on the ground in Poughkeepsie, and to examine how they engage with issues of justice and equity in the food system there. I use the concept of food justice as a frame to guide my inquiry into the successes and challenges these groups face in their work.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the United States, an increasing number of localized and community-based food projects are emerging as people attempt to reclaim food sovereignty by modeling just and sustainable alternatives to the dominant paradigm of corporate industrial food production. Motivations for participation in such “alternative” food networks have included support of family farms and the farming way of life, ecological stewardship, support of the local economy, and improved access to fresh, local, healthy food grown without pesticides. Despite these good intentions, researchers have found that many alternative food networks reproduce existing power relations by privileging middle class and elite interests over those of structurally marginalized groups such as ethnic minorities and the poor (DuPuis and Goodman 2005; Hinrichs 2000; Hinrichs and Kremer 2002; Ostrom 2007). Further, these networks often struggle to recognize or address broader structural mechanisms of inequality that contribute to disparities in access to food. Such networks thus face challenges in building truly inclusive, equitable and transformative food systems.

In response to these and other factors, a fresh cohort of food activists and projects has coalesced into what some activists and academics call the Food Justice movement. Combining perspectives from the Community Food Security and Environmental Justice movements, food justice efforts focus explicit attention on issues of (in)equity in the food system, interrogating at multiple scales the material and social inequities that shape differential access to food at the local

level. Food justice advocates view food as a basic human right and work within communities to help them build capacity and find solutions to problems with food access such as supermarket redlining and food deserts, advocating for change both within the food system and in society at large. Because food justice initiatives are by design socially situated and locally specific, they take many different forms based on the particular set of circumstances and dynamics at work in the locales that give rise to them.

In Poughkeepsie, New York, many city residents face ongoing challenges with hunger and access to healthy food, despite a recent resurgence of local agriculture and a burgeoning local food scene in the surrounding area. Further, these challenges are differentially experienced, and those in the community who are most vulnerable suffer disproportionately. To address food system problems such as these, a loose, community-based food network is evolving comprised of a constellation of small farm projects, community organizations, social service agencies, regional and local institutions and individuals. These organizations and groups are forming connections with one another, working to improve access to healthy food for people in the community, and to revitalize the city's local food system. These network participants represent different perspectives within the local food system, coming together and collaborating across sectors to grapple with issues of food security and hunger, farm viability, nutrition and health, among others. Through partnership meetings, advisory councils, collaborative

programming and other avenues, groups work together on common agendas while furthering their own missions.

In some ways, the work of these organizations mirrors the kinds of projects and topics commonly included in the food justice frame. However there are also inherent tensions within the work of organizations in this network that are helpful to examine. Within this food network, a variety of motivations, priorities and goals become apparent. These dynamics fall along a spectrum, with some groups focusing more centrally on issues of equity and social justice than others. Organizations such as the Poughkeepsie Farm Project (PFP) explicitly engage in food justice work, responding to the failures of the current dominant industrial food system by piloting alternatives to help build a more just and sustainable food system. Such organizations recognize that many food system problems, including food insecurity, are shaped by forces working at multiple, often broader scales. These groups also acknowledge that we need to consider who can or cannot participate and whose interests are being served by local community food system efforts. As Allen (2010, 1) asks, how do inherited material and discursive asymmetries shape differential access and how are these asymmetries considered in food system localization? Not all groups in this food network are oriented along these same lines however; rather, there are a multitude of approaches and specialties in food system change work and so the interest lies in how these different actors work together to create a more viable and equitable food system in Poughkeepsie, New York.

The purpose of this research project is to explore selected community food efforts on the ground in Poughkeepsie, New York, and to examine how they engage with issues of justice and equity in the food system there. I use the framing of food justice to guide my inquiry into the successes and challenges these groups face in their work. In the chapters that follow, I review the literature, developing the food justice framework and discussing the issues with which it grapples. Following a brief discussion on research methods, I then describe the research context, illustrating how the current foodscape shapes food access and insecurity on a local level. Next, I explore in some detail the selected efforts of community organizations involved with food security work, and discuss the successes, challenges and internal tensions they face in their efforts to revitalize Poughkeepsie's urban food system. Finally, I discuss the implications of their orientations, the lessons we can learn, and explore possible future directions.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I trace the development of the food justice framework, describing how it arose in response to conventional framings of food security, inheriting elements from the Community Food Security and Environmental Justice movements along the way. I argue that food justice provides a useful lens for examining equity and justice in community food efforts, discussing race and class dynamics commonly present in such work.

The dominant agribusiness model of agriculture and food provisioning was one of the later achievements of the industrialization process in the United States, and although it has been remarkably successful by many measures,

it has completely changed the social and economic relationships surrounding the production and consumption of food. In reducing farmers to sources of farm products, farm workers to labor costs, and the purchasers and eaters of food to consumers, it has ensured that the real people who populate our food systems will interact only through the medium of money, in a system organized to meet the demands of capital and little else (Gliessman 2007, 327).

The casualties that result from this food system model are both social and ecological, ranging from water pollution and loss of biodiversity to the decline of small farms and rural livelihoods to food insecurity and declining public health. As stated in *Ripe for Change: Rethinking California's Food Economy*,

it is clear that the global food system is a poor provider of real food security: it is too centralized in the hands of profit-driven corporations; it is highly dependent on fossil fuels and other unsustainable inputs; it rests upon a genetic base that is far too narrow, and at the same time creates artificial scarcity by homogenizing people's tastes and food preferences;

and it systematically pulls farmers off the land, thereby eliminating the knowledge on which a diverse and sustainable food supply depends (Mamen et al. 2004, 63).

The American Planning Association (no year) also remarks on the way in which distorted food pricing and subsidies affect not only farmers, but the health of consumers, linking the increased use of High Fructose Corn Syrup in processed foods to the obesity issue. To compound the issue, the commodification of food has meant that those without money cannot access food on the marketplace, marginalizing already vulnerable populations and contributing to “market failures” such as food deserts, where residents do not have access to fresh healthy food for lack of a retail outlet.

In response, groups in various localities are working to create new food system models and projects to address specific food needs in their communities. Although food projects vary widely in focus and scope, Allen et al. (2003, 61) note that most share a common political goal in opposing the global food system and creating alternatives that are environmentally sustainable, economically viable and socially just. Indeed, Allen (2004) points out that sustainable agriculture ideology has historically encompassed joint goals of environmentalism and social justice (cf. Gliessman 2007; Ikerd 2009). However, she observes that the movement’s justice priorities have faded over time, with more attention to other interests, to the extent that many current sustainable agriculture advocates see little connection between sustainable agriculture and issues of hunger (Allen 2004, 199).

Some food activists however acknowledge these gaps and are working to implement food projects that reach across lines of difference and integrate the perspectives of multiple food system stakeholders. As Guthman et al. (2006) point out, the anti-hunger and sustainable agriculture movements have made a “strategic alliance” to combine the goals of both farm security and food security through more comprehensive, local food system approaches such as those based in the Community Food Security (CFS) movement. Maretzki and Tuckermanty (2007) describe the Community Food Security vision as extending conventional anti-hunger efforts to recognize the necessary part that localized, small-scale agriculture has in building food secure communities. And yet, despite such efforts to reshape food systems along more equitable lines, many alternative food advocates still accept dominant institutional structures and social relations of current food and economic systems and struggle to envision a truly new way forward (Allen et al. 2003).

More recently, the concept of *food justice* has emerged as an organizing principle in food system change work. The food justice framework draws on insights from the sustainable agriculture and food security frames of the community food security movement as well as incorporating environmental justice perspectives (Alkon and Norgaard 2009; McClintock 2008; Tattenham 2006). Indeed, Alkon and Norgaard (2009, 289) remark on the ability of food justice to serve as a theoretical and political bridge between existing scholarship on these topics. Food justice provides a helpful framework for examining issues of equity and justice by situating the politics of food systems and

food security within larger structures of inequality like race and class. Acknowledging that larger systemic barriers and inequalities shape food insecurity, food justice organizations strive to create equitable access to healthy food in marginalized communities through the creation of new community-based food distribution models and education programs. Such initiatives often integrate community and economic development components with food access and education components to address broader issues of economic and political efficacy and equity (Ahmadi 2007; McClintock 2008). In this way, “reframing food security as food justice is more than a name change... The food justice frame highlights the focus on systemic change and the necessity for engaging in political and policy processes as well as consciously addressing issues of movement mobilization and strategies” (Wekerle 2004, 379).

### A Genealogy of the Food Justice Framework

As mentioned above, scholars have remarked that the Food Justice framework combines perspectives from the fields of food security, sustainable agriculture and environmental justice. I will discuss those influences briefly before moving on to common power-privilege dynamics in community food system work.

In reviewing the history of the concept of “food security” in U.S. parlance, it becomes clear that the term has operated primarily as a policy concept, applicable at many scales and subject to contestation and redefinition according to the interests of who defines it and prevailing political winds. Its definition has changed over the years to reflect new knowledge about hunger and the conditions that affect food access. One of

the more recent definitions is offered by Mechlem (2004, 637), quoting the Food and Agriculture Organization: “Food security... is achieved when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” Ostensibly, food security is about ensuring that people have enough to eat. However, the term still leaves considerable room for interpretation, allowing for its cooptation by other interests. Indeed, some scholars have illustrated the ways in which “food security” has been used as a political weapon and tactic to promote U.S. trade interests both domestically and abroad (cf. McMichael 2003; Patel 2007).

Neoliberal market-based approaches to food security and the commodification of food have contributed significantly to these relations. With the 1994 Uruguay round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), agricultural products that had previously been excluded became included in free trade terms, shifting the status of food and allowing for the “subordination of food to capital” where food provisioning is no longer socially or politically guaranteed as a public necessity, but rather is accessed privately through the market by those with control over enough capital (McMichael 2003, 173). A consequence of this condition is that although food might be physically available on the shelves of local stores, it is not truly accessible if people cannot afford to buy it, in effect excluding people already marginalized by trade liberalization. The contradiction in these ‘free’-market based approaches is that they exacerbate food insecurity and inequality, particularly among the most vulnerable (McMichael 2003, 169). Following these lines, Fred Magdoff (2008, 15) remarks, “the present availability of food to people

reflects very unequal economic and political power relationships within and between countries. A sustainable and secure food system requires a different and much more equitable relationship among people.”

To counter market-based approaches to food security, some scholars return to the “Right to Food” perspective, framing food access as a basic, individual human right for which the state can be held legally accountable (Mechlem 2004). Allen (1999, 126) follows this line to argue that if we accept food as a basic human right, and it cannot be guaranteed by the market, then it is the duty of the state to fulfill it. However she warns we must work to promote self-sufficient solutions rather than fall into negative patterns associated with entitlements approaches. This right to food approach has contributed significantly to the food justice framework, which works from a rights-based premise.

Another counterpoint to the common food security discourse is that of *food sovereignty*, which posits that the commodification of food is incompatible with true food security (La Via Campesina, 1998). Holt-Giménez (2009, 146) defines food sovereignty as “literally, people’s self-government of the food system,” involving democratic control over all its constituent parts, “from production and processing, to distribution, marketing and consumption.” Patel (2007, 303; 310-11) remarks that reclaiming control of the food system requires both individual and collective effort, a commitment to equality and democratic deliberation where everyone has a voice, and “the empowerment of society’s poorest members to be able to afford to eat differently.” He states that food sovereignty is a political call to action to fight the poverty caused by corporate control of the food system at both ends (production and consumption), arguing that “what happens in the

fields and the cities is intimately connected and is part of the same problem, one that requires a political solution” (Patel 2007, 316; 317).

In the United States, food sovereignty work takes the shape of the community food security movement, sharing many common visionary elements (cf. Power 1999). Patricia Allen (1999) notes that the movement arose from a need for a more comprehensive approach to food security and so community food security seeks to relink production and consumption by emphasizing local and regional food systems, and the needs of low-income people. Community food security incorporates six principles: low income food needs; broad goals to address a range of problems including increasing poverty and hunger, loss of family farms, supermarket redlining, suburban sprawl, and other issues; a focus on community-oriented self-sufficiency; asset-building and empowerment; local agriculture; and systems-oriented, interdisciplinary approaches (Community Food Security Coalition 2009). Community food security assumes food insecurity is a function of people’s lack of control over their food system and thus emphasizes community self-reliance through the evaluation of community and personal resources rather than the implementation of more conventional entitlements-based approaches like food stamps (Allen 1999). And yet, Allen notes how in the United States, the joint objectives of viable regional agriculture and prioritizing the needs of low-income people may be contradictory and the question exists of where to place the emphasis of the movement (Allen 1999, 117).

To grapple with this question, it is helpful to consider how Environmental Justice perspectives can contribute to Food Justice theory and practice. Alkon and Norgaard

(2009) argue along with Allen (2004), that the ‘justice’ component of sustainability has often been ignored by proponents of sustainable agriculture. Similarly, as noted by Brahm Ahmadi, an activist with People’s Grocery in Oakland, “most definitions of food security fail to articulate an analysis of power or to place the concern for human rights and social justice at the center of their analysis” (Ahmadi 2007, n.p.). And yet, if food insecurity is not the result of a lack of food, but rather a lack of *access* to food caused by various inequalities across scales, then attention to these inequalities is essential to effect change.

The environmental justice frame provides such a systemic view of social relations and environmental outcomes, helping to highlight the ways in which impoverished communities and communities of color disproportionately experience environmental burdens such as pollution and environmental degradation, or in this case, restricted access to food. Scholars have noted previously that racial and ethnic minorities carry a disproportionate burden of food insecurity and hunger (American Planning Association, no date, 5). Indeed, Williams (2005) specifically describes food access as an environmental justice issue, citing a pair of 2002 studies conducted by Kimberly Moreland that link higher disease rates with lack of access to quality food and noting a general shortage of healthy food outlets in African American communities. Such environmental justice approaches teach us that such conditions are “not random or the result of ‘neutral’ decisions, but a product of the same social and economic structures which had produced de jure and de facto segregation and other racial oppression” (Cole and Foster 2001, 21).

Alkon and Norgaard (2009) include this perspective in their understanding of food justice, linking food insecurity specifically to institutionalized racism and racialized geographies. Food deserts resulting from supermarket redlining for example illustrate how supermarkets choose to abandon poor and minority neighborhoods in favor of more affluent suburbs and neighborhoods, reducing access to food and jobs, and leaving little but junkfood retailers behind (Mamen et al. 2004, 57; Eisenhauer 2001, 129).

On a broader level however, they argue that the food justice framework links food access to wider questions of power and political efficacy (Alkon and Norgaard 2009, 300). Similarly, the position of the People's Grocery is that "in order to discuss issues of hunger, one must also discuss the underlining issues of racial and class disparity and the inequities in the food system that correlate to inequities in economic and political power" (Ahmadi 2007, n.p.). This is an important point of attention, because the assumption among many community food system advocates is that such initiatives are open to anyone, and that participation is a matter of choice. However, food justice advocates argue that "access to healthy food is shaped not only by economic ability to purchase it, but also by historical processes through which race has come to affect who lives where and has access to what services," and so food justice in this context can show how "choice" is circumscribed, highlighting the race and class privilege invisibilized by most alternative agrifood projects (Alkon and Norgaard 2009, 300).

Another important contributing element of the environmental justice frame is the mandate for democratic participation in the community decision-making process, or what Bellows and Hamm (2001) call 'procedural equity'. In this context, Cole and Foster

(2001, 16) define meaningful participation as “substantive dialogue with opportunities for affected communities to influence the process,” and they argue that such an approach is predicated on a power sharing process in which the government is one of many stakeholders in the final agreement. As Bellows and Hamm (2001, 279) state, “It is the measure of equity in distribution and the inclusion of diverse community voices in community decision-making procedures that is a representation of equity and democracy – in other words, economic and political rights – locally.”

Given the above context, we can better understand the description of Food Justice offered by People’s Grocery:

Food justice asserts that no one should live without enough food because of economic constraints or social inequalities. Food justice reframes the lack of healthy food sources in poor communities as a human rights issue... The food justice movement is a different approach to a community’s needs that seeks to truly advance self reliance and social justice by placing communities in leadership of their own solutions and providing them with the tools to address the disparities within our food systems and within society at large (Ahmadi 2007, n.p.).

This perspective can thus help to prevent the reification of systems of inequality within alternative agrifood networks and at broader levels through recognition of the fact that while “food insecurity may manifest at the local level, [it is] rooted in larger, often global political economic structures” (Allen 1999, 121). However, as Rachel Slocum (2006, 343) notes, “this view of the big picture—absent an understanding of the intersections of race, class and gender—represents a more general limitation of the anti-corporate, environmentalist and local empowerment movements. Without attention to

social relations, community food and similar movements will remain limited in scope no matter how welcoming or inclusive they aim to be”.

#### Common race and class dynamics in community food work

The food system is a locus of intersection for many issues, including race, class and gender relations. Rachel Slocum (2006, 339) notes how these relations “intertwine in the food system in different places that have different histories of racialization, gender relations and class struggle,” forming what Allen (2010) refers to as inherited asymmetries of power. The food justice lens of analysis highlights these dynamics and brings attention to the ways in which they may reiterate existing power relations and contribute to inequitable access to food. By naming such dynamics of inequality, they become more visible, opening dialogue around their transformation.

As mentioned earlier, the assumption that everyone can participate in alternative agrifood initiatives, let alone equally, is an illusion (Allen 1999). For example, Allen (1999) remarks that people’s voices are mediated by cultural power relations, while Slocum (2007) discusses various ways in which alternative food knowledge and shopping capacity are classed and raced. Further, an emphasis on specifically localized efforts can be problematic for those traditionally marginalized, as local politics are not enough to overcome the imbalances in power that engender material inequality (Allen 2004, 121). Indeed Allen (1999, 120) notes how the concept of a localized ‘community’ is idealized and reified rather than seen as “a contingent and ideological construction that provides opportunities for some and constrains those for others,” while also detracting attention

from broader structural dynamics. In order to move toward a more just food system, Allen (2004) calls for reflection on the embedded assumptions and ideological formations in agrifood movements that may prove problematic.

Some of the most prominent of such ideologies are those of *individualism* and *self-reliance*, which focus agency at the individual level, detracting attention from systemic problems and the need for fundamental change, and contributing to ‘blaming the victim’ (Allen 2004). Further, such an emphasis on individualism obscures the extent to which individual *choice* is circumscribed by our circumstances and forces of which we may be unaware (Patel 2007). Allen (2004, 125) remarks for example that “desperate economic need is a form of coercion, not choice”. Similarly, Patel (2007, 266) notes that “where we live and work shapes what and how we eat and drink”. For example, people of color and the poor have systematically less access to affordable healthy food than wealthier whites (Patel 2007; Shields 1995). And yet, obesity is commonly seen as a personal failing, rather than a result of “a systemic lack of control over our spaces and lives” (Patel 2007, 273).

Julie Guthman (2008) argues that justice on these issues can only be achieved through substantial participation in defining the terms of engagement. Or as Allen (2004, 163) put it, people don’t just want to be included in an existing framework, they want to be full participants in creating that framework; however people cannot have a voice if they are not a part of the discussion. Not only do imbalances of power lend unequal weight and validity to different voices, but it is often the most disadvantaged and impoverished that face barriers to participating in social movements altogether, as they

are stretched thin trying to make ends meet and may not have the time or resources to contribute to such efforts (Allen 2004, 162). As previous studies have shown (cf. Allen 2004; DuPuis and Goodman 2005; Hinrichs 2000; Hinrichs and Kremer 2002; Ostrom 2007), participants in the alternative agrifood movement are disproportionately white and affluent, and the movement needs to examine its hidden assumptions and power imbalances if it is to create more truly inclusive and sustainable food systems (Allen 2004; Slocum 2006).

There are a number of factors that limit the ability of people to participate in alternative agrifood initiatives to the same extent, and one of these is socioeconomic status. And yet, Hinrichs and Kremer (2002, 69) echo Patricia Allen in reflecting on ideological constructions that shape participation in these initiatives, noting that the “national ideology of unobstructed economic opportunity and social mobility works against acknowledging that class might structure different social experience and outcomes”.

Transportation is a prime example, as access to a vehicle or reliable public transportation is often necessary for participation in alternative agrifood initiatives. As another example, Guthman et al. (2006) illustrate how many consumers depend on cheap food to make ends meet, yet proponents of the movement argue that food should not be cheap but instead should reflect real costs of production. However, without public support such as subsidies for more agroecological production, they argue that the ‘real cost’ is put on consumers, effectively limiting the ability of low-income people to participate in such initiatives. When the options are a single bunch of kale for four dollars at the farmers market, or a big bag of kale for much less from Wal-Mart, there is no real

“choice” for people whose food budgets are severely restricted. Fred Magdoff (2008, 7) notes that poor people in the U.S. tend to first pay their rent and utilities, leaving food as one of the few “flexible” budget items. As a result, people often rely on the emergency food system to meet their basic needs, including food pantries and soup kitchens, but these are operating at maximum capacity with fewer and fewer resources as funding support is cut (Berg 2008; Magdoff 2008). Thus, as Eisenhower (2001, 125) so aptly states,

assumptions of unrestricted choice – including access to healthy foods and recreational opportunities – ignore the ways reduction or elimination of urban amenities (including public transportation and large-scale supermarkets) and limited resources (income, transportation, healthcare) place constraints on the urban poor. It is limited access to the things that promote health that diminished the potential for health in the inner city.

Given this context, it seems unconscionable that the alternative agrifood movement is not more inclusive. Hinrichs and Kremer (2002, 67) note how most alternative agriculture markets operate in ways that privilege elite interests over those of the poor. Indeed, Allen et al. (2003) argue in their study of food networks in California that class issues are underrepresented in the concerns of most alternative food movement leaders. For these leaders, “changing the food system means increasing the diversity of alternative markets such that consumers have more choice, rather than making deep structural changes that could reconfigure who gets to make which kinds of food choices” (Allen et al. 2003, 72).

For example, Guthman et al. (2006) study the perceptions of CSA and farmers market managers regarding the participation of low-income people in such initiatives,

finding the common perception among managers that low-income people do not participate because they're less educated, and less concerned about food quality and health than they "should" be. Managers tend to view participation as a matter of personal choice, resulting from different values and priorities, rather than from larger structures of inequality that constrain choices. In addition, the study found a class bias among managers who were concerned that the inclusion of low-income people might discourage the high-end customers such markets target, which Guthman et al. (2006) argue belies a deeper reluctance to weigh the needs of farmers and low-income people equally.

In a similar vein, Tattenham (2006, 27) problematizes the "seemingly simple choice between *good* and *bad* food," where good food is equated with good health and bad food with poor health, illustrating how the discursive emphasis on the individual underplays the complexity of food choices and obscures the inequities in access to resources that constrict those choices.

In light of findings such as these, Hinrichs and Kremer argue that "to achieve substantive social inclusion, projects need to work explicitly on developing the resources and capacities of specific disadvantaged groups and individuals within the community so they can participate pro-actively and effectively *on their own terms* (2002, 68, my emphasis).

Alkon and Norgaard (2009) argue that many black and indigenous communities are prevented from acquiring the quality of food they once produced due to contemporary racialized geographies that restrict geographic and economic access to such food. Further, Guthman (2008a, 388) argues that within alternative agrifood projects, dominant

discourse calls on a white subject and codes its spaces as white, which has a “chilling” effect on people of color and acts as an exclusionary practice within the alternative agrifood movement. Thus, Rachel Slocum (2007, 521) states that the desire for good food and thriving economies is not white, but that it becomes white through the actions of white bodies that create whitened cultural spaces. Yet instead of addressing structural inequalities and racialized discourses embedded in alternative food projects, efforts to include traditionally marginalized populations tend to focus on food itself with programs directed toward donations, growing and selling produce in food deserts, and educating residents about their food choices (Guthman 2008b). In a survey of a number of alternative agrifood initiatives in California, Allen et al. (2003, 68) note how these initiatives as a whole, many of which once included civil rights interests in their work, “withdrew from direct opposition to powerful political and economic structures” as dominant social discourse shifted from a focus on civil rights to “neo-liberal arguments about individual responsibility”. As a result, they found that that market-based and entrepreneurial approaches were far more common than a focus on structural change and advocating entitlements (Allen et al. 2003). Indeed, Slocum (2006) and Allen et al. (2003) have remarked on the tendency for the alternative agrifood movement to emphasize access to food and education about food choices rather than confronting deeper issues of rights and power, which has serious implications for the inclusivity and future viability of the movement.

Guthman (2007, 434) observes that a marker of whiteness is its own invisibility, and remarks on the subtle and unconscious ways that whiteness shapes social relations in

alternative food practice. In this vein, Slocum (2006, 330) notes that many community food organizations are unaware of or do not attend to the way that racism works in the food system and alternative food movement, including the dichotomy between white staff and leadership and those who experience food insecurity who are disproportionately lower income and people of color. Instead, the whiteness of the movement is “seen as a diversity problem rather than as a relational process embedded in society” (Slocum 2006, 331). However, both Guthman (2008a) and Slocum (2006) argue that the issue is not rectified by the mere presence of people of color. Guthman (2008a, 389) argues that no space is race neutral, and so the concern lies in how spaces are coded to create discomfort and exclusion.

Many alternative food proponents see the spaces in which they work as being ‘colorblind,’ that is, having no racial distinctions, but Guthman (2008a) notes how such colorblindness, rather than being non-racist, instead invisibilizes white privilege and reiterates the whiteness of alternative food spaces. As Allen et al. (2003) suggest, Guthman (2008a, 393) interrogates the discourses backing ideological formations of alternative agrifood practice that reflect its white history, including common turns of phrase such as ‘paying the full cost,’ and ‘getting your hands dirty in the soil’. These expressions obscure the history of white privilege in U.S. agricultural land and labor relations, including the displacement of indigenous people and the enslavement of people of color (Allen 1999; Allen 2004; Guthman 2008a; Guthman 2008b). Indeed, even the aesthetic of *alternative* food practice is raced, insensitive to “a social history where many

African Americans came to prefer the anonymous supermarkets because they were not a site of racist practices” (Guthman 2008b, 436).

The perceptions of leaders within the alternative agrifood movement regarding participation by people of color, as with low income people, also serves as an exclusionary element in alternative agrifood practice. As with issues of class, participation was attributed to lifestyle choices, education, concern for food quality and having more time (Guthman 2008a). In contrast, Guthman (2008a, 394) argues that lower rates of participation are likely attributable to exclusionary practices including white privilege, lack of cultural competency and the pervasive use of the idioms described above. Again it becomes clear that within alternative food discourse the emphasis is placed on individual agency rather than systemic factors in concerns about participation.

This difference in perceptions regarding participation in alternative food projects is partly rooted in *universalism*, “the assumption that values held primarily by whites are normal and widely shared” (Guthman 2008a, 391). Guthman argues that such a perspective obscures the experiences, aesthetics and ideals of others, marginalizing those who do not conform. Further, universalism fosters the belief that people who do not subscribe to common ideals don’t know any better and need to be educated, leading to what Guthman (2008a, 391) calls the “missionary impulse” that “works to reinscribe difference”. Indeed, many food advocates see a lack of knowledge as the main barrier to sustainable food systems, failing to recognize that current activism “reflects white desires more than those of the communities they supposedly serve” (Guthman 2008b, 431; Guthman 2008a). For example, Guthman (2008b) recounts an experience of one of her

students working in a community garden with youth of color who were compelled to ‘volunteer’ there. Guthman’s student found that the youth resented having to work without compensation for a white farmer, when they just wanted a Safeway in their neighborhood like everyone else (Guthman 2008b, 440). However, since most alternative agrifood projects are constructed as white spaces, “whites continue to define the rhetoric, spaces and broader projects of agrifood transformation” (Guthman 2008a, 395).

To challenge these circumstances Guthman (2008b) argues, as does People’s Grocery, that the focus of food activism should move from food itself to attend to the power imbalances and structural inequalities shaping differences in access to food. Efforts to address structural problems could include the elimination of redlining, promoting living wages, expanding entitlement programs and working to improve the quality of the mainstream food supply rather than solely focusing on alternatives (Guthman 2008b, 443). Attention should also be given to the ways in which whiteness obscures alternative, potentially more anti-racist food politics (Guthman 2008b, 443). Other scholars have similarly argued that the failure of white liberals to recognize the existence and prevalence of racism poses a significant barrier to antiracist alliances in alternative food projects (Slocum 2006, 341). She advocates for heterogeneity and the celebration of differences rather than homogenizing consensus and articulates an antiracist practice that shifts the power balance toward historically oppressed communities to identify problems and leadership solutions (Slocum 2006, 340). To do so requires analyzing oppression in the food system, and asking such questions as “who will take control?,” “who is building power?,” and “do the solutions we are developing speak

to the issues that low-income communities and communities of color have identified as crucial?” (Slocum 2006, 340-1). Still, alternative agrifood initiatives largely struggle to be racially inclusive, with no broad agreement on what anti-racist politics looks like. However as Guthman (2008b) points out, shifting the balance of power requires that white advocates watch and listen rather than lead, and sometimes calls for the absence of white participation altogether.

There still remains a conflict between the affordability of food and decent wages for farmers without public support (Allen 1999). And yet, the industrial food system was effective at reducing class differences in food consumption, while alternative agrifood networks threaten to stratify consumption patterns once again along class lines, the irony of which was pointed out by Allen (1999, 126). Part of the problem is the emphasis on markets in building alternatives and achieving food security (Allen 1999). While markets can sometimes offer economic opportunities to mediate changes in funding and government support, they are unable to step in when people have nothing, as markets can only reflect the interests of those who can afford to participate in them (Allen 1999; Magdoff 2008, 10). Thus, Allen (2004, 204) argues that in the long run, market-oriented solutions are unlikely to be able to rectify issues rooted in fundamental social, economic and political inequities.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

The food justice perspective outlined above lends itself to a political ecological framework of analysis, incorporating elements of constructivist and feminist standpoint approaches to knowledge creation. Constructivism can be described as a specific research approach that acknowledges the subjective meaning of experiences, and that these meanings are negotiated socially and historically (Creswell 2003; Denzin and Lincoln 2005). From a feminist standpoint perspective, truth and knowledge is partial, situated, subjective, power-imbued and relational (Hesse-Biber, Leavy and Yaiser 2004). Further, researchers subscribing to a feminist standpoint framework generally agree that research is inherently value laden and interpretive, and social value systems are inextricably linked to the issue of social change (Denzin and Lincoln 2005; Grinnell 1997; Hesse-Biber, Leavy, Yaiser 2004). Similarly, within political ecological approaches “emphasis is placed on a critical perspective toward modernist notions of objectivity and rationality, on interrogating the relationship between power and scientific knowledge, and the recognition of the existence of multiple, culturally constructed ideas of the environment and environmental problems” (Neumann 2005, 7). Given these characteristics, it is important to acknowledge that the questions we ask of the empirical world frame what we know of it (Charmaz 2005), and as a researcher, I strive to be reflexive and transparent regarding the values, assumptions and power-dynamics I bring to this research project so as to not reiterate existing power relations but rather help to create a space for egalitarian, participatory and transformative research.

The field of political ecology “combines concerns of ecology and a broadly defined political economy; together this encompasses the constantly shifting dialectic between society and land-based resources” (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987, 17). As a subfield, urban political ecology has more recently emerged, asking questions “about who produces what kind of socio-ecological configurations for whom” (Heynen et al. 2006, 2). Or, rephrased in the context of my research, who produces what kind of food system configurations for whom? A central component in such analyses is the incorporation of multiple scales of analysis or what Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) call a “chain of explanation” (Neumann 2005). Consequently, a number of different methodologies—usually several at once—have commonly been employed in political ecological research (Neumann 2005). These include political economic analysis, historical analysis, ethnography, discourse analysis and ecological field studies among others.

In addition to this multi-layered approach, a political ecological perspective broadens the conventional understanding of ecology and environments to include urban neighborhoods, sprawling suburbs and other places. As Neumann argues, “urban environments are products of the intermingling of social and ecological forces, resulting in a hybrid form” (Neumann 2005, 155). Certainly this statement can be applied to agriculture and food systems as well. Neumann continues: “Exposures to environmental hazards and access to environmental amenities in urban settings are products of political, economic and ecological processes that produce a geographic pattern of uneven

development and a corresponding social pattern of winners and losers” (Neumann 2005, 155).

Here the similarities become clear between political ecological approaches and the food justice framework discussed above. In the context of my research, food deserts and junk food outlets can be framed as environmental hazards. Conversely, quality food outlets such as markets, farms and community gardens can be framed as environmental amenities. The case has already been made that communities of color and the poor carry a disproportionate burden of food insecurity, lacking access to the kinds of healthier food outlets other groups are accustomed to. For these reasons, a methodology drawing on political ecological perspectives is appropriate in the examination of food justice efforts on the ground in Poughkeepsie, New York. To be sure, researchers have already applied political ecological perspectives to food system studies (cf. Heynen et al. 2006; McClintock 2008; Qazi and Selfa 2005). Such an approach allows researchers to “integrate a focus on broader structural forces with an examination of regionally distinctive social histories, natural environment, and institutions, that helps to explain the local emergence of agro-food networks” (Qazi and Selfa 2005, 48).

My research methodology is also informed by *grounded theory*, which involves grounding a general theory of a process of action in the views and realities of the participants (Creswell 2003, 14). Charmaz (2005, 510) notes that a constructivist grounded theory “offers...a systematic approach to social justice inquiry that fosters integrating subjective experience with social conditions in our analysis.” This strategy of inquiry requires a continual relationship between research and analysis, and is

“continually reiterative” (Charmaz 2005, 508), requiring refinement of categories of information (Creswell 2003) and encouraging the pursuit of emergent questions. Charmaz (2005) also advocates for collection of rich empirical observation in a transparent manner, the pursuit of emergent questions that arise from research, and analysis based on the juxtaposition of participants’ definitions with those of the academic and sociological worlds.

This research project was conducted between March 2009 and March 2011. I chose to conduct research in my hometown of Poughkeepsie, New York, for a number of reasons. As a long-time resident, I had an existing knowledge of the area and current academic debates in food system studies have been very relevant to the work going on there. Through previous experiences working with some of the community members and organizations included in my research, I was already a participant and had the connections and groundwork to get started. Further, I feel a sense of connection and obligation to that community and their efforts. I am therefore invested in their ongoing work as well as the outcomes of this project.

Interviews with local food system participants were of primary importance in my research process, providing the bulk of my data. I began by identifying key informants based on my previous work and relationships in the community. Using a snowball sampling method, I interviewed farm project workers, cooperative extension employees, government employees, farmers market participants, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shareholders, emergency food providers and other community members. I used a predominantly semi-standardized interview format incorporating both predetermined and

emergent questions. Semi-standardization offers a systematic, consistent approach to information gathering, as well as the ability to pursue emergent themes, approaching the world from the perspective of the participant (Berg 2004). This approach was particularly useful given the variety of community members I interviewed. Participants offered multiple perspectives, being positioned differently from one another in relation to my topic, and so some called for different questions than others. Such a wide array of perspectives helped me to better understand the broader picture of food access and insecurity in Poughkeepsie and to contextualize within it the efforts being made to revitalize Poughkeepsie's food system. I recorded and later transcribed the interviews, coding the transcriptions to analyze emergent themes and comparing my findings with extant literature to help ground the analysis.

Participant observation is another method I used in my research. I attended Poughkeepsie Farm Project's Main Street Farmers Market and CSA distribution days, as well as Nutrition Advisory Council coalition meetings, community garden meetings and other venues. These observations helped in understanding the broader context and dynamics of food system work in Poughkeepsie, while guiding the research process.

To analyze the data, I asked myself guiding questions rooted in the food justice frame described above. These include: Who is and isn't participating in these efforts? In what ways are they participating and why? Whose interests are being served by this work? What are the different perspectives around this topic? These questions helped me to operationalize and thus grapple with ideas of justice in this context, to better understand the successes and challenges community-based food organizations face.

## CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH CONTEXT

About 75 miles north of New York City, situated on the eastern shore of the Hudson River, lays the City of Poughkeepsie. With an aggregate population of about 74,000 people, Poughkeepsie is the political seat and economic center of Dutchess County, one of the fastest growing counties in the state due to its proximity to and economic links with the New York metropolitan area. Dutchess is a patchwork of mixed rural and urban areas, with agricultural uses more prevalent in the north and west of the county, and larger population centers situated mainly in the eastern and southern portions. Although commonly perceived as one entity, Poughkeepsie itself is actually made up of two separate municipalities: the more central City of Poughkeepsie and the surrounding, sprawling Town, with populations of 29,813 and 44,133 respectively (U.S. Census Bureau). While this city-town split is largely a formality, it has undoubtedly contributed to the patterns of development and disinvestment that characterize Poughkeepsie, as well as the unique challenges it faces in becoming a healthy, resilient, and livable city for everyone.

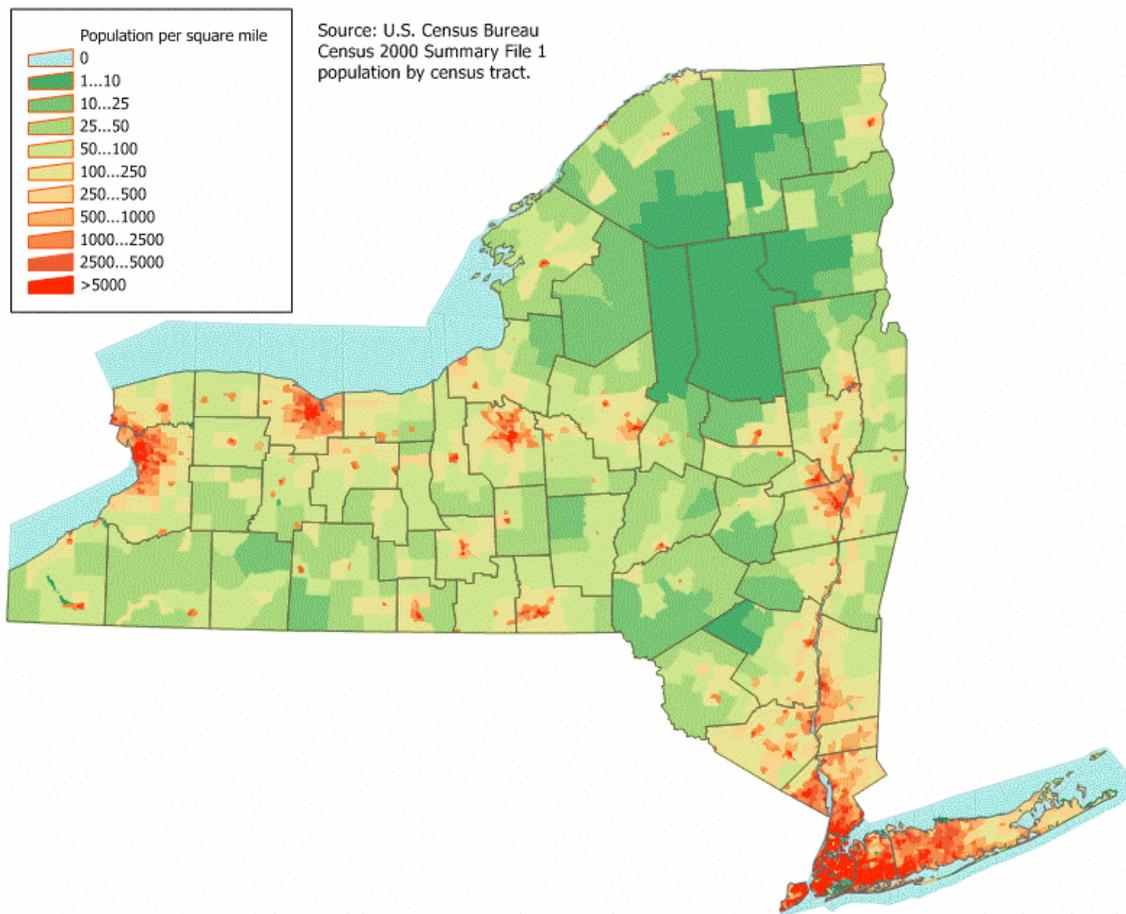


Figure 1. New York State Population Map (Times Union Website)

Poughkeepsie has been shaped in part by economic and social flows common to many American post-industrial cities, experiencing uneven patterns of development and blight that follow lines of race and class (see McClintock 2008). Despite repeated efforts at ‘urban renewal,’ the city continues to experience high rates of poverty and crime and is characterized by extreme racial and economic disparities. These disparities are the result of a complex series of social and geographic legacies (Flad and Griffen 2009; Johnson

2003; Mano and Greenow 2006) that have contributed to the uneven development of Poughkeepsie, and are also reflected in the local foodscape, where outlets for fresh healthy food are severely limited.

In order to discuss issues of equity and justice within localized community food efforts in this context, it is important to understand how these current material and social formations are the result of particular political and economic processes. Such historical processes have structured differential experiences of our environments, shaping access to food along race and class lines. In this section, I describe the current configuration of Poughkeepsie's foodscape, and illustrate how insufficient food access is connected to historical patterns of poverty, racial segregation and discrimination. Following the food justice frame, I argue that an understanding of these dynamics is fundamental to building inclusive, just, transformative and long-term solutions for Poughkeepsie's residents.

As the seat of Dutchess County, Poughkeepsie is situated within the broader Hudson Valley, a region with a rich agricultural history and identity, as well as a checkered past of uneven urbanization and development. Agriculture has historically been, and still remains, one of Dutchess County's primary industries, behind manufacturing and computer technology, and tourism (Dutchess County Department of Planning and Development). Indeed, the area boasts a burgeoning local food scene, opening new opportunities for viable regional agriculture. Several CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) farms are located in Dutchess County, along with farmers markets, roadside farm stands and other agricultural projects such as Hudson Valley Fresh, the local dairy cooperative. Despite the growing number of localized healthy food

outlets, basic food access is still a serious issue for many area residents, with access to healthy foods particularly constricted.

The Poughkeepsie Farm Project describes the challenges to food security for City of Poughkeepsie residents on their website, citing a March 2009 Community Health Survey of Dutchess County, which reported 26% of Poughkeepsie City respondents had difficulty buying healthy foods, compared to 9-11% of other communities in the county (Poughkeepsie Farm Project, no date). Lack of access to such foods was attributed to the fact that they were too expensive, not available where respondents shopped, or were too far away. These findings are consistent with my own research and illustrate some of the underlying structural factors that contribute to food insecurity on a local level.

To begin with, Poughkeepsie exhibits extreme social stratification among its residents, ranging from the tremendously wealthy to the utterly destitute. This stratification maps onto the city-town split mentioned earlier, with wealthier residents tending to live in the Town and poorer residents in the City. Indeed, 22% of individuals in the City fall below the poverty level, compared to just 7% of Town residents. (New York State Community Action Association 2010; U.S. Census Bureau, 2005-2009 American Community Survey). These figures do not include residents considered the ‘working poor’—what Poughkeepsie’s 2008-2012 Consolidated Plan terms residents whose income level puts them above the poverty line, but below the self-sufficiency standard (a measure of ability for people to meet their cost of living). Such residents are thus ineligible for most services and fall into a gap in the social safety net (County of Dutchess and City of Poughkeepsie, 2008-2012 Consolidated Plan). Thus, as the

Poughkeepsie Farm Project points out, income level can be a challenge to food security for low-income folks and others who rely on various assistance programs to make ends meet. Still, this reality is difficult for some to understand, given that poverty and hunger are invisible to many in Poughkeepsie.

Such blatant disparities in access between City and Town residents are also linked to race and ethnic relations. As with poverty rates, there are significant disparities in racial make up between the two municipalities, reflecting a history of racism, white flight and resultant racialization of neighborhoods. Of the Town population, 80% are white, 8% black or African American and 8 % Latino or Hispanic. In contrast, the City population is 48% white, 35% black or African American and 17% Hispanic or Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005-2009 American Community Survey). Further, racial segregation is still apparent within the City itself, with predominantly white neighborhoods located on the south side of the City and more ethnically diverse neighborhoods on the north (Flad and Griffen 2009). Poughkeepsie's black residents are also disproportionately poorer than whites, with 26% of black or African American residents in poverty, compared with 18% of whites (Flad and Griffen 2009; New York State Community Action Association 2010). As a result of this segregation, the City's black residents have developed a parallel social structure, with churches operating as major social centers (Flad and Griffen 2009, 93). Indeed, this faith-based safety net and social network is one of the strongest assets of the community, connecting City residents and providing support to those underserved by other assistance programs.

Location is another barrier to healthy food access for City of Poughkeepsie residents, as most nearby food retail outlets do not carry fresh produce. The exceptions are two ethnic grocers, Casa Latina and Spicy Peppers, which do not necessarily carry items sufficient to meet everyone's food needs. Indeed there are no supermarkets at all within City limits; they are all located in the outlying Town and require a vehicle to reach them. Such a foodscape is the result of processes including supermarket redlining noted earlier. Flad and Griffen (2009) describe how supermarkets abandoned the city for the town, setting up shop along highways as the city declined and profit margins shrank. Yet almost a quarter of City residents have no access to a vehicle, compared with just 6% of Town residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005-2009 American Community Survey) and consequently, such residents are inhibited from accessing food that requires driving to reach it, supermarket or otherwise.

To exacerbate this issue, the local public transportation system is abysmally insufficient, with infrequent and irregular bus service, leaving residents without access to a vehicle in a difficult position. As one research participant from Cornell Cooperative Extension described it, "there's the condos, the apartments and everything around Poughkeepsie where all there is, is bodegas and that's the real breakdown here I think. And we've noticed it's a really, really big issue. If you head down Route 9, wonderful, but you're on the LOOP bus for an hour and you have to carry your groceries back to your house and it's a half an hour back. It's very problematic there." As a result, according to a number of participants, many City residents buy their groceries at local gas stations and bodegas, as they are the only food retail outlets within walking distance.

However, food prices at these outlets are often inflated, and many such stores do not accept EBT cards for SNAP (formerly Food Stamps) or WIC checks, further straining residents' food budgets.



Figure 2. A typical bodega or corner market in Poughkeepsie

Reliance on these kinds of outlets also constricts available food choices and affects the community's health outcomes. Along these same lines, McClintock (2008) describes the development of Oakland's foodscape within ongoing patterns of urban disinvestment, noting how supermarkets and other food retailers disappear as they become less profitable, followed by a consequent influx of junk food and fast food outlets. "As

entitlements slowly evaporated in the flatlands and food retail capital dried up, trans fats and high-fructose corn syrup flowed in. Junk food outlets cropped up to take advantage of the changing economic climate, transforming not only the food retail landscape, but also the culture of food” (McClintock 2008, 37).

The process described above has been similar in Poughkeepsie, with fast food and junk food retailers dominating the foodscape in the wake of Downtown’s decline and subsequent supermarket departures (Flad and Griffen 2009). One interview participant at the Main Street Farmers Market expressed concern that the only food accessible in Poughkeepsie is “junk” and when food outlets do pop up, “it’s McDonald’s.” He noted that people know they’re supposed to eat vegetables, but all they’re eating is grease, and it is “not a question of if you know.” Through the course of our conversation, this resident went on to make direct connections between the kinds of food available in Poughkeepsie, its health impacts on people in the community and the inability of residents to afford sufficient health care or pay their ensuing medical bills. He stated that “one program leads to the next, it’s set up to take you to the next level. It’s not an accident, it’s on purpose. It’s about the dollar, and it’s about racism.... it’s not about color, it’s between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots.’”

Another dynamic affecting food security in Poughkeepsie is the lack of decent, affordable housing. As the director of Dutchess County Community Action Agency, Maureen Lashlee points out, housing issues often eclipse food issues because food is considered a “flexible” budget item whereas rent and utilities are not. In addition, many former neighborhoods, particularly neighborhoods of color, were demolished to make

way for roadways as part of the City's urban renewal programs, but the promised housing never came about, contributing to the current housing shortage and illustrating a preference for revitalizing the business district over the needs of the poor (Flad and Griffen 2009, 223). More recently, many middle class residents have lost their homes to foreclosure and have consequently moved into housing formerly available to low-income people. Lashlee states, "we can't even literally find the housing to put them in, let alone at a price that's affordable, unless it's so deficit that you don't want to put them in it."

These circumstances described above highlight some of the structural factors that make meeting basic needs the most pressing concern for area residents (County of Dutchess and City of Poughkeepsie, 2008-2012 Consolidated Plan). 'Basic needs' are defined in the Consolidated Plan as issues that if not immediately addressed can result in harm. Basic needs thus include things like food, shelter and medical care (County of Dutchess and City of Poughkeepsie, 2008-2012 Consolidated Plan). And yet, the only recommendation the Consolidated Plan gives for improving access to food is increasing the stock in emergency food supplies so that no one in need should be turned away.

As a result of this orientation, extra strain is put on the emergency food system, which has been put in the position of serving more people with fewer resources. Lashlee explains the local emergency food distribution system, noting two sources of emergency food for local food pantries: government funding, which fluctuates at the will of elected officials; and donations, which are currently the bulk of available resources. In her words, "we're meeting basic needs to keep people from starving to death," but the quality of food is nutritionally insufficient at best, "and in some cases does harm."

In addition to food pantries, soup kitchens are another emergency food source, many of which are affiliated with local churches. Dutchess Outreach, a local non-profit social services organization, provides midday meals for those in need with no eligibility requirements through their soup kitchen, the Lunchbox. The director there, Brian Riddell, points out that there is very little county money for food, and SNAP benefits last most people a maximum of three weeks if they are good at stretching their food dollars. As a result, many residents have come to rely on the services provided by the Lunchbox and others. As an employee of the County Health Department explained, people regularly tell her that all of their noontime meals are consumed at local soup kitchens because of lack of income.

Despite these resources, Lashlee points out a generally common and problematic mentality rooted in ideologies of individualism, self-reliance and choice described earlier: “if you need my charity then there must be something wrong with you. And so therefore, beggars can’t be choosers. Whatever it is that I give to you, you should be grateful just because I gave it to you.” Ultimately, these emergency food resources are based on a “disempowering delivery mechanism,” which she argues is about power and maintaining control, and precludes the ability to overcome larger issues rooted in broader society.

In addition to the conditions described above, the director of the Poughkeepsie Farm Project, Susan Grove, remarks that there is not an effective food distribution system in place to ensure locally-produced food stays local. She points out that Spicy Peppers market sources their produce from the Bronx despite being situated in the middle of a rich agricultural region. On the other hand, a small farmer advocate from Cornell

Cooperative Extension explains that many local farms skip over local markets in favor of more profitable markets of New York City, and although some local farmers markets survive through food stamps, most must capture some outside funding to bring resources back to the local economy. Thus the Poughkeepsie Farm Project believes that the overarching barrier to food security in Poughkeepsie is an “urban food system not yet organized to provide convenient access for all to fresh, affordable and healthy food, regardless of where one lives or their level of income” (Poughkeepsie Farm Project). In the next chapter I will discuss the efforts and orientations of the Poughkeepsie Farm Project and other community organizations working to revitalize Poughkeepsie’s food system, keeping these local dynamics in mind.

## CHAPTER 5: DESCRIBING SELECTED EFFORTS TO REVITALIZE POUGHKEEPSIE'S FOOD SYSTEM

Several local organizations have become increasingly involved in some of the issues related to food and food access described above in Poughkeepsie, and Dutchess County more broadly. From local small-scale agriculture initiatives, to youth enrichment programs; from health and nutrition advocacy, to community gardening; from social service agencies to schools and more, these organizations have their own unique interests and perspectives on food issues impacting their communities. Still, many groups partner with one another to achieve common goals, drawing on each others' resources, perspectives and audiences to facilitate joint programming, coalition meetings and other collaborative projects.

The number and scope of stakeholder groups working on food issues in Poughkeepsie and the surrounding area is thus very broad and could not be sufficiently covered within the scope of this research project. Although much of the work of these organizations covers a broader area than the City of Poughkeepsie, for the purposes of my analysis it is most appropriate to focus on a limited number of those that work, both independently and collaboratively, explicitly on food system and food access issues in Poughkeepsie. These include: community-based agriculture efforts like those of the Poughkeepsie Farm Project; nutrition education and outreach programs through Cornell Cooperative Extension; Social service agencies; and governmental initiatives. Of these, I will describe in some detail those organizations and initiatives that illustrate the major axes of perspectives on food security and food justice issues in Poughkeepsie, and how

their positioning shapes the work they do in the community. I will then explore how these orientations relate to the Food Justice frame described earlier and discuss implications for Poughkeepsie's food system.

#### The Poughkeepsie Farm Project: working to build a just, sustainable food system

The Poughkeepsie Farm Project (PFP) is a non-profit CSA and educational farm situated within Poughkeepsie City limits on property leased from Vassar College. Their mission is to build a just and sustainable food system. According to Executive Director Susan Grove, a *just* food system provides access to healthy food to everybody no matter what their level of income or where they live, and a *sustainable* food system pays careful attention to the health that accompanies the production, distribution and consumption of food, health for the people who grow it, health for the environment, and health for the communities who consume it. According to the PFP's website, such a position "means we are responding to issues in the food system by modeling alternatives, changing the food environment and providing education" about food and farming.

Grove states that the operation of the member-supported farm itself is a substantial way to accomplish these goals and is the foundation of the Farm Project, upon which its other programs are built. Indeed, in addition to the CSA base, the PFP is responding directly to some of the food security barriers described in the previous chapter, "improving access to healthy, locally-grown food for our low-income neighbors by offering a three-pronged, immediate response." As one strategy, the farm project manages Poughkeepsie's downtown *farmers' market*, a non-emergency source of

produce in the City that leverages public entitlement programs such as SNAP, WIC checks and Farmers Market Nutrition Programs. Another strategy is the *Food Share* program, which offers season-long produce shares at a sliding-scale, subsidized rate to qualifying families who want to participate. The third strategy involves *donating produce* weekly through partners such as soup kitchens, pantries and shelters who serve the neediest in the community, supplying meals to 500-700 people each week (Poughkeepsie Farm Project, no date). In this manner approximately 25% of PFP's total output of fresh produce, sixty tons a year, is distributed to low-income families.

To supplement these approaches, PFP offers a number of educational programs for different audiences as well. *Farming for the City* involves vocational training for young adults who want to become farmers, farm educators and community food organizers. *Seeds of the Food System* provides learning opportunities for “at-risk” youth in the City of Poughkeepsie and elsewhere through partnerships with other groups such as Poughkeepsie High School and Cornell Cooperative Extension’s Green Teen program, described in more detail below. The *Community Seed Project* combines these programs to produce and distribute regionally-adapted and open-pollinated seeds throughout the community. In addition, PFP offers extensive community education including farm tours, a discussion series on the politics of food and farming, as well as several workshops, skill-shares and other events. According to Grove, these programs are “really about investing in the future. If we’re going to say everything we’re about is about food access, what we mean is that by providing education today, we’re ensuring access to healthy and locally-grown and good, sustainable food for the future.”

Along these lines, Grove points out that this educational component is an important part of a just food system that ensures access not only to healthy food, but also *information* about food, how to grow it, prepare it and enjoy its benefits. According to Grove, none of us can make healthy choices about food if we haven't had positive, supportive experiences around healthy food in our past. She argues that there are people who do not have access to food because they are not equipped to make healthy choices about food; they haven't had experiences identifying it, cooking it, figuring out how to incorporate it into their lives and culture. So, part of food access is about providing opportunities to gain those experiences.

While Grove's perspective is accurate in many ways, it is still important to be mindful of points that others have made regarding "taking into account ways in which people's notions of 'right living' and especially 'right eating,' are wrapped up in these possessive investments in race, class and gender" (DuPuis and Goodman 2005, 362). Consequently, it is important to ask the question of whose idea of "healthy" we are considering (Tattenham 2006). Certainly, health is a serious issue, and as noted earlier, low-income folks and people of color are disproportionately affected by environmental stressors and unhealthy foodscapes. Still, as Lashlee points out, most everyone in the United States could benefit from lessons in healthier eating, not just low-income folks. An emphasis on making healthy choices absent a broader understanding of large-scale factors that constrict choices may threaten to reinforce existing power relations, so it is important to examine how this positioning shapes the work of the organization and its framing of problems and solutions (DuPuis and Goodman 2005).

A relevant question pertaining to these issues thus becomes apparent: who is participating in the work described and in what capacity? As noted earlier, the Farm Project's foundation is the CSA and, with approximately 350 families, the CSA shareholders are largely considered PFP's "base community." Because of its relationship with Vassar College, the Vassar community makes up about twenty percent of these shareholders. IBM families also make up a large portion, with IBM as one of the major employers in the area. Other participants include middle-class families of employees from local schools, businesses and organizations, most living within ten miles. According to one of the farm Co-Managers, there is growing diversity among the CSA membership however, as the CSA concept becomes more and more mainstream and less privileged. She notes that shareholders are also comprised of senior citizens and fixed income folks, low income folks, large families and people of different racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds.

Indeed, PFP's subsidized share program Food Share has been successful, with approximately 30 subsidized shares representing 70-90 individuals in the 2010 season, increasing the socio-economic diversity of shareholders. Participants qualify if they already receive some form of public assistance, and/or if they make less than 200% of the Federal poverty level. PFP facilitates inclusivity by offering a sliding-scale payment model, accepting payment plans and SNAP benefits (formerly Food Stamps), as well as allowing families to pick up their share at the more central farmers market rather than the farm because it is often more convenient for them. One of the Co-Managers notes that these shares have also been a particularly good fit with Latino households because of a

strong fresh food culture. In addition, PFP solicits feedback from shareholders regarding their experiences to see what they could do differently and what experiences their shareholders value. Responses from participants have been glowing according to Grove, with comments about how the share changed their life, that it was the best thing about their week, and how they appreciate the dignity of being treated just like everybody else. So as Grove states, “there’s no real easy way to describe that [CSA member] community, but they’re coming with this common interest and supporting a local farm and being part of a local farm, and valuing eating fresh and healthy food I guess is the common denominator.”

A contrasting view is offered by an outside educator from Cornell Cooperative Extension’s Green Teen program, one of the Farm Project’s educational partners. She remarks on the attendance at one of the CSA distribution days, comparing it to that of the farmers market: “most everyone you’re going to see there represents the south side of the city, which is the more affluent part of the city, the white side of the city, and we’re really not reaching out to the people we want to reach in the CSA. At the Farmers Market we’ve done a great job of really making that an accessible and relied-upon food resource for a lot of people here in the community.”

Indeed, the Poughkeepsie Farmers’ Market is part of the PFP’s commitment to make the CSA and farm in general accessible to more people, as well as providing a non-emergency source of food in the city, being one of the only outlets for fresh produce nearby. The market has grown significantly each year and now accepts SNAP/EBT (Electronic Benefits Transfer) cards, WIC fruit and vegetable checks and Farmers Market

Nutrition Program checks throughout the market in addition to cash and credit cards.

Depending on the day, 30-40% of sales come from low-income shoppers participating in these programs (Poughkeepsie Farm Project).



Figure 3. The Poughkeepsie Main Street Farmers Market

The market boasts several local vendors including a farm focusing on Mexican specialties, as well as various ethnic food vendors like Janet's Jerk Shop, Molé Molé and Twisted Soul. Poughkeepsie Farm Project also offers their produce, with more affordable prices than markets elsewhere in the county as part of its commitment to making healthy food more accessible. In addition to farm interns, the PFP stand has often been staffed by Cornell Cooperative Extension's Green Teen program members who have used the venue

to conduct community food surveys, education and outreach, as well as marketing the salsa they create as part of the Green Teen program.

The market also hosts live music and performances, cooking demonstrations and several themed days. Performances by the local high school step dancers and other neighborhood groups bring community members who might not otherwise attend to the market. As a farm Co-Manager remarks, the market is one of the few places she goes where it really serves a diverse group of people, bringing people together who do not usually come together. Market shoppers include government, non-profit and private employees, local City residents, seniors, families, tourists and others. Although the Poughkeepsie Farmers' Market has become a relied-upon food source for many in the community, one Green Teen educator notes that there are still large numbers of people who are not familiar with the market or the work of PFP, so the need to connect with more communities is still apparent.

For the upcoming season, the Poughkeepsie Farmers Market will be partnering with new groups and changing quite a bit, moving from one location on Main Street to two locations at Pulaski Park and the Walkway Over the Hudson State Historic Park, as well as changing hours from midday Fridays to Friday evenings. New partnerships and support include the Walkway Over the Hudson non-profit organization, the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, as well as increased support from the City of Poughkeepsie. The change is bittersweet however. Some feel that the departure from Main Street could be problematic for some customers, indicating a change in priorities and direction under new management that may once again undercut the

interests and needs of historically marginalized community members. On the other hand, the new location offers better access to public transportation and will foster greater partnership and community involvement from multiple stakeholders, and the Farm Project sees this as a positive opportunity to insert their perspective into the mix.

Ultimately, the Farm Project envisions a role for itself as the go-to organization for food and farming in the City of Poughkeepsie, a potential model of how to catalyze a revitalized urban food system that can be replicated in every city across the country.

“Well, in every *small* city maybe,” says Grove.

In order to revitalize the urban food system in the City of Poughkeepsie, we will need to rely on the community food resources or assets that the whole city has to bring to bear, and it takes everybody coming together to make this happen. We want to be inclusive in that aspect as well... The thing is, it's not really about bringing communities into the PFP fold, it's more about the PFP making itself relevant to what different communities are interested in, because we can't offer any more shares and that kind of base community piece of people coming and interacting on the farm, it's not something, we don't have enough land to do. So it's like springboarding off our community and the many different communities that are represented and trying to find other groups and ways that we can support their efforts to improve their food access.

To this end, PFP has partnered with a number of Poughkeepsie organizations including Vassar College and Middle Main Revitalization to initiate a Community Food Assessment project called Building Bridges to a Hunger-Free Poughkeepsie. The concept is a community mapping and engagement process that utilizes innovative and participatory research methods to generate collective insights and raise awareness about local food resources, as well as opportunities to improve Poughkeepsie's food system, with the end goal of ensuring convenient access to healthy food for all. According to

Grove, “we have a really good advisory team that’s connected to lots of different communities in Poughkeepsie,” with community leaders and non-profit and government agencies mostly represented.

In the fall of 2010, Building Bridges developed a survey as a first step in the process, to “understand how Poughkeepsie’s food systems operate; how residents access nutritious food; how they make decisions about what to eat; and what constrains those choices” (Middle Main Revitalization). The goal is to survey 375 randomly selected households to establish a statistically significant, citywide baseline assessment of these issues, a project the likes of which has not been undertaken in Poughkeepsie up to this point.

At this time, Building Bridges is approximately halfway through the initial survey process, but Grove notes that the data received so far is sobering. Close to a quarter of respondents have indicated that they do not have enough food for whatever reason. In addition, surveys appear to be over-counting seniors and undercounting Latinos. Aside from such challenges, the survey will provide some much-needed information “as a first step toward developing a plan for a hunger-free Poughkeepsie” (Middle Main Revitalization). Future community-engagement plans also include the use of focus groups and community forums. Grove remarks that even after the assessment process is over, “in a sense, that reflection and community engagement should continue on an ongoing basis forever until we’re no longer needed, and that’s the idea, that these things are institutionalized in society and the nonprofit disappears because food justice is a fact.”

Along these lines, when queried about attention to racial dynamics and coding of spaces, Grove responded that “the race issues too is [*sic*] something that I don’t have that good of a grasp on. They’re real and I’m eager to actively engage more, to expand our engagement with communities around Poughkeepsie. I’m eager to be challenged and influenced by what people would like this food security movement to look like and act like and not have a certain cultural—maybe it’s not even white, maybe it’s middle class or higher education influence, but it’s important to me. But I don’t have any answers.”

She continues:

There’s roles for people like me in this. Yes, it would be the best scenario to foster leadership among other communities that are equal [to] or even ahead of where the PFP is at, [but] I think there’s roles for everybody to play... So it’s not about turning our back on some people in favor of others; it’s about looking at all of us and our common condition, and I’m not satisfied with the food system in Poughkeepsie, and neither is the person who doesn’t have a car and shops at the corner bodega and the limited amount of fresh food that comes through there. We have a common dissatisfaction and can work together to change it.

It is clear that the Poughkeepsie Farm Project is doing positive and transformative work to improve equitable access to food in the City, and to engage the community to revitalize Poughkeepsie’s food system. They have been successful in responding to the growing demand for fresh local produce with a long waiting list of would-be shareholders. The PFP’s work also aligns with the food justice frame in several ways, viewing food as a human right, and prioritizing the needs of low-income and other under-served communities. In addition, PFP implements youth empowerment and development programs, building community capacity not only through education, but also through active partnerships with other organizations and communities. Further, the organization

recognizes some of the structural forces that shape food access and works to level the playing field so that everyone may participate. Still, it appears much of the emphasis of the PFP's work is on immediate issues of access and education, rather than broader structural issues of poverty and racism, with limited awareness of cultural dynamics embedded in the values and perceptions related to "good food". Grove expresses an understanding of the dynamics working at larger scales, but acknowledges that PFP's efforts are situated within the dominant system they are trying to change and so their work is constricted by current status quo. Even so, the PFP is largely aware of power dynamics and is reflexively engaged, continually working to include more community voices, build capacity and work toward a just and sustainable food system.

#### Cornell Cooperative Extension: Food, Nutrition and Wellness Education

Cornell University Cooperative Extension (CCE) is a land grant school with county offices throughout New York, working to connect communities to University research-based resources and education, in order to "help people help themselves" (Cornell Cooperative Extension Dutchess County). In Dutchess County, CCE works in four main program areas: Agriculture and Horticulture; Environment and Energy; Family and Consumer Education; and 4-H Youth Development. Within the area of Family and Consumer education, CCE also offers a series of programs focusing on Food, Nutrition and Wellness. Several of these programs work directly on community food security issues in Poughkeepsie including the Community Food Security and Nutrition Information Programs, Plant a Row for the Hungry and the Nutrition Advisory Council,

among others. CCE also runs the Green Teen Community Gardening Program under the auspices of 4-H Youth Development. In the pages that follow, I will describe selected highlights from these programs, as well as some of the implications of their orientations on food security issues in Dutchess County.

### Green Teen Community Gardening Program

The Green Teen Community Gardening Program is a job skills and life skills training program for urban youth, using food and agriculture as a vehicle for nutrition education and capacity building. According to a former educator there, the program is a visible way for people to see that Cornell is making connections in urban communities as well as rural. Program participants learn basic food and nutrition skills such as label-reading, how to cook on a budget, and where to access healthy foods, as well as working in their on-site community garden to grow vegetables for themselves and others in the community, as well as donating a portion of what they harvest to the Lunchbox, the soup kitchen run by Dutchess Outreach. The program also partners with the Poughkeepsie Farm Project and other local farms, where teens learn what it takes to grow food for the community through participation in planting, weeding and harvesting activities at the farm, as well as selling produce at the Poughkeepsie Farmers' Market. Another piece of the program is an entrepreneurial component where participants produce and market a salsa from their own recipe using local ingredients, many of which they grew themselves. The salsa is sold at the Poughkeepsie Farmers' Market and local grocery stores.

In addition, the Green Teen program has a social action element where teens discuss food system and food security issues, including a food justice workshop where they learn about redlining. As one former educator put it, “I think for most of the young people in our program that this is their first exposure to even having a discussion about food access and food security. Even though there are no grocery stores in the city of Poughkeepsie where they live, a lot of them haven’t even thought about that, what impact that means, how it affects them on a daily basis, so a lot of the work we do is to get them to think more about their community and what changes could be made to make it a better place for them and their families.”

Historically the program has also paid its participants, which has been a crucial element to the program not only in terms of building capacity, but also because many students contribute to their households financially. As one former educator and Poughkeepsie native describes, “typically the students we hire are not connected to any other youth programs, really are not engaged in a lot of things at school, so we’re looking for an opportunity to bring them into a program to let them see that there are adults out there who care about them and that there are opportunities here in their own community for them to be involved and to give back.” She notes that the Green Teen program helps participants to develop a sense of efficacy and empowerment in this regard, describing how her students are “constantly talking about ways the community can improve, especially how people can access healthy foods, having more community gardens, encouraging their families to start gardens at their own home.” Similarly, another former educator described how a participant “borrowed shovels and went home and started a

garden in her back yard with little kids from the neighborhood,” so she sent her home with little tomato and pepper plants. Another teen drilled holes in the bottom of an ice-cube tray to start seedlings and grow tomatoes and cucumbers in his back yard. In this way Green Teens have literally taken the learning home, with the “idea that gardening’s not *that* weird for a teen.”



Figure 4. The Green Teen Community Garden at the Family Partnership Center

When asked about their understandings of food security and food justice, Green Teen educators had varied responses, but all referred to issues of supermarket redlining, health disparities and other related topics. One educator describes food justice as,

having the freedom and ability and access to be able to purchase food that you feel good about, that's healthy for you, that's produced in a good, sustainable, socially-just way, but I don't have a clear, one-sentence thing. I keep tripping up on what's needed to have food justice versus what do I think food justice is, and it's like, people need to have education to know about these things. Being informed about what these decisions are and then also being able to do something about being able to make decisions.

She continues on to tie food access to larger issues such as affordability, minimum wage, and housing, but returns to education as the fundamental element.

Another former educator also cited larger-scale dynamics in her response, describing for example her efforts to encourage people in the community to support candidates in local elections who advocate for affordable housing. She states that she feels “very passionately about working above all to make this a program that reflects the needs and motivations of our community,” commenting that she would love to make the program one that employs members from the Poughkeepsie community who reflect that community. She states, “Green Teen historically has been a program run in the black community—black and white community—run by white women from somewhere else.” Other staff are also aware of this dynamic, and only one Green Teen educator so far has been a native Poughkeepsie resident.

Still, most Green Teen educators maintain that they are not trying to impose their values on the youth in the program but rather are there to ask them what their values are and then incorporate the work they do into those values. One former educator states,

it's really about making it apply. I think that's something that's missing so much. I'm not trying to take my kids and tell them why their mom should buy an organic tomato in the grocery store; they don't even do their own food shopping. I'm just trying to show them how this affects them and their lives and the absolutely accessible, concrete choices that they

have to affect the way that they eat and the food they put in their body and where their food comes from.

For example, some Green Teens made calls to government officials to request their support for funding healthy school lunches. However, when asked about other kinds of advocacy work the program engages in, one educator pointed out that Cornell Cooperative Extension is an *educational* rather than *advocacy* organization,

so technically we don't do any advocacy; we just educate. But there are ways. Education and advocacy is a very fine line so ... it's the same thing sometimes. So we're like, 'yeah guys, you can go out and do this. These are the things that are unfair. What would you want to do about it?' asking youth what they want to change, 'what do you think is important?'

Still, this positioning belies a greater reluctance on the part of the organization to directly challenge broader structural inequalities that contribute to problems in the community. The perspective of the organization does not necessarily translate to the perspective of the Green Teen educators on the front line, who *do* recognize and acknowledge issues of rights and power. According to one former educator, "we're also talking about food access and food justice in terms of, 'you have the right to be educated about you're putting in you body,'" referring to education as a way to build power. She continues,

I want them to understand that this movement belongs to them and it belongs to them because it affects them, and it doesn't have to wear overalls and eat tempeh for lunch, that it can live on North Hamilton Street in Poughkeepsie and wear really nice sneakers and listen to Lil Wayne. It doesn't belong to any of us and when we start to understand that, we can have power to affect the way that we eat and feed ourselves and that we're able to fight for the things we deserve, and we're able to have a voice in our access to healthy food.

From this perspective, a focus on access, information and education can simultaneously feed into issues of rights and power, a topic to be discussed in the next chapter.

A number of circumstances changed for the Green Teen program through the course of my research. In addition to substantial staff turnover, funding for the program was deeply slashed twice, due to the poor economy. With the Green Teen program already operating on a shoestring budget and being “stretched absolutely as far as we could stretch,” the initial cuts meant that Cornell had to make some tough decisions. The decision was made to close the Poughkeepsie branch but keep the Beacon site, cutting Beacon staff from two to one. With the second round of cuts, Green Teen lost 100% of its County appropriated funds, now operating solely on grant funding and severely reducing its program capacity (Cornell Cooperative Extension Dutchess County). The future of Green Teen is uncertain although the program continues to run in the meantime. In the wake of these cuts, some program elements such as those in Poughkeepsie have been taken over and expanded by the Poughkeepsie Farm Project, but much has also been lost.

The Green Teen program mirrors other food justice efforts in its multi-pronged approach emphasizing education, skills training and capacity building. The program builds real skills and offers information and opportunities for its participants. Program educators are passionate about food issues and the youth they work with, striving to address the needs of the community they serve. Front-line educators tend to recognize the complexity of people’s food choices, understanding to some extent the structural factors that affect the lives of teens and their families in the community. As such, some

educators can try to foster political empowerment in their students, but only to an extent due to the organization's political position. There is an overall emphasis on nutrition and wellness education through market-based and entrepreneurial program models, highlighting the role of individual choice, but downplaying systemic issues such as poverty and racism. In addition, Green Teen staff are largely white while the communities they serve in Poughkeepsie are largely people of color, illustrating an inherent tension between the needs and interests of the community and the positioning of the organization. These tensions would benefit from an open dialogue with residents, social service providers and community advocates.

#### Community Nutrition Education and Community Food Security

Another important component of Cornell Cooperative Extension's food security work in Dutchess County includes the Community Food Security and Community Nutrition Education programs within the area of Food, Nutrition and Wellness. The Community Food Security program encompasses three initiatives: the local branch of the national Plant-a-Row for the Hungry campaign; Food Rescue, a gleaning program to harvest crops donated by local farmers to distribute to the hungry; and a large, on-site experimental and educational garden that provides fresh vegetables to low income families and participants of the Nutrition Information Program (Cornell Cooperative Extension).

In addition to these efforts, Community Nutrition Educators are assigned to work with specific populations in different parts of the county, including groups such as

women, emancipated youth, Spanish-speakers and others, with particular emphasis on “high-risk audiences.” The education program is voluntary and participants are recruited through outreach and partnerships such as those with local churches that receive donated produce. One educator remarks that the churches are very tight knit and that “working with the interfaith council is very important to us, because if the pastor buys in, everyone else will buy in.”

Educators focus on low-income families, “because we find [food insecurity] is related to their economic status, so we play that card, and plus, we are here to serve underserved populations,” says one Community Nutrition Educator responsible for food insecurity and hunger. She states that educators are “internally crusading for the low income family,” noting that cooking techniques are a big gap there. In addition, educators talk about healthier eating and lifestyles, and stretching food dollars using local foods as a way to save money. As an example, one educator explains that when the garden has a lot of zucchini, educators take it to low income families, show them how to use the fresh local produce, and talk to them about where they can get it locally, or how they can grow it themselves. As she puts it, “we’re empowering people in the community to know what is available... What’s the foods list... What can I get for really inexpensive.”

When asked about her understanding of food security and food justice issues locally, this educator equated food security with the access and ability to eat a nutrient dense diet, to afford it, to know how to prepare it, to know what nutrients can be found in it, and to know the short- and long-term effects of eating it. In terms of food justice, she makes connections to poverty and how it has changed in the last fifty years, as well as the

corruption of the conventional food system. “Yes, they might be able to go hit the dollar menu and have dinner on the table every night but there’s no justice there.” She touches on an important point here regarding junk food outlets and the ideology of cheap food described earlier, linking the disproportionate impact of junk food on low-income people to justice.

To bridge the gap between low income families and healthy food, this nutrition educator refers to active gleaning programs, where a local producer might have fifty bushels of food-safe peaches they are unable to sell because of a cosmetic blemish, so she explains, that is “where we come in and bring justice where it needs to go.” She tells a story of another educator bringing a load of apples from a local orchard into Poughkeepsie and opening up her car to a crowd of people who came to get them. “It’s a beautiful thing to be able to bring that and say, ‘this is Cooperative Extension, we can help you. Please call us if this is ever an issue and you’re hungry, we can get you the resources you need. We can refer you to the people who can help you from hour one.’” She explains that educators can direct people to Dutchess Outreach or Community Action but are unable to call them directly. “But when we go out and educate and take our show on the road, we’re asking people what they need. That’s the biggest thing for us, ‘what do you need, what can Extension do for you in term of food, nutrition and wellness?’”

These programs have certainly contributed positively to Community Food Security efforts in the area, making connections and offering necessary nutrition and information resources for the most vulnerable communities. Efforts in this arena are understandably focused on the nutrition component of food security rather than questions

of power and efficacy, though educators express some acknowledgement of structural issues shaping food insecurity, including the nature of poverty and the corruption of the dominant food system. One educator describes a vision of food justice as redistribution, but as noted previously, emphasis falls on the individual and educating them to make better choices within the given system, rather than changing the system. In addition, race is entirely absent from the discussion, except in terms of identifying populations to serve. Redistribution absent structural change will not fix food problems or change inequitable social relations. Part of this is bringing more voices into the decision-making process, which is something CCEDC's Nutrition Advisory Committee has worked to achieve.

#### Nutrition Advisory Committee

Another important component of food system change work in Poughkeepsie is the Nutrition Advisory Committee, a different program of Cornell Cooperative Extension Dutchess County. Several food-related organizations in Poughkeepsie are members, including the Poughkeepsie Farm Project. The committee

is a forum for developing strategies for the more effective delivery of food, nutrition education and wellness services by each of the represented organizations, and by nutrition education and food organizations as a collaborative whole, in Dutchess County.... Through NAC, community food security issues are discussed and changes in the food, nutrition and wellness environment is [sic] initiated" (Cornell Cooperative Extension Dutchess County).

Goals of NAC include improving environments to support healthy lifestyles; identifying gaps in food and nutrition education services; developing supports to remove those gaps and break down barriers to obtaining such education; inserting hunger and food security

perspectives into the agricultural community; and developing linkages and funding (Nutrition Advisory Council, March 18, 2010).

At one meeting I attended, committee members present included representatives from Cornell Cooperative Extension, the Dutchess County Department of Health, Dutchess County Office of the Aging, Beulah Baptist Church, Astor Head Start, the Childcare Council of Dutchess County and the Poughkeepsie Farm Project. Other partners include the local school districts, the Department of Social Services, Hudson River Healthcare, and community centers to name a few. Through these channels, the committee represents a great diversity of interests, and has good access to the broader community.

According to one member, the community is very organic, and the membership changes based on what hot topics are being discussed. For example, the local dairy cooperative, Hudson Valley Fresh, participated to help write a business plan for a particular initiative. In addition, local consumers and community members, including low-income residents, have been invited to join the process at various points. Indeed, the committee strives to be as inclusive as possible, utilizing assessment tools to determine areas of need. In one assessment, the committee scored highly on indices of participation and flexibility, but low on membership diversity. As such, they are soliciting community and youth representatives, diverse populations, elected officials, the planning departments and others.

When asked about the barriers to food access in Poughkeepsie, CCE's Food, Nutrition and Wellness Program Director responded that money was the most pressing

issue. She went on to argue that it is possible to eat healthier on any budget, but that the issue is just education. Consequently, the focus of the committee's work is educating people in the community, not advocating or counseling as noted earlier. Rather, committee members bring relevant information to the whole committee which then has the power to make changes, build opportunities, develop resources and bring them back to homes in the community. In this manner, school vending machines were updated to offer healthier choices, locally produced foods were brought into local institutions, and the Mid-Hudson Addiction Recovery Centers completely overhauled their food practices. In addition, NAC was also instrumental in joining with Dutchess Outreach to bring summer food programs into Poughkeepsie.

The changes accomplished thus far have indeed been impressive and speak to the effectiveness of NAC. In line with the food justice frame, the committee fosters broad collaboration to include a variety of voices in the process. In this vein, Hassanein remarks, "building coalitions to work on particular issues increases citizen power and enables organizations to effect change that they could not achieve on their own (Hassanein 2003, 82). The committee works together on issues in the interests of the whole community, prioritizing initiatives to assist low-income groups and other vulnerable groups like children and the elderly. However, the focus of their work seems to fall mainly on issues of health, nutrition and education rather than engaging directly with issues of equity and the structural factors that contribute to food insecurity. The committee also has few members representing people of color and so are not necessarily as inclusive of community stakeholders as they could be. Such a positioning may be politically

necessary for the sake of collaboration and immediate action, but it certainly limits the scope and transformative potential of the group, threatening to reiterate current inequitable social and power relations.

Community-based advocates and social service providers: Dutchess Outreach and Dutchess County Community Action Partnership

Two other important actors in community food security efforts locally include the emergency food providers mentioned in the previous chapter—Dutchess Outreach and Dutchess County Community Action Partnership. Perhaps not surprisingly, these organizations have a fundamentally different orientation than the organizations and groups described above, focusing their attention centrally on structural issues that create challenges for people in the community, particularly poverty.

The Executive Director of Dutchess Outreach, Brian Riddell is also on the board of the Hunger Action Network of New York State, “a statewide anti-hunger coalition that combines grassroots organizing at the local level with state level research, education and advocacy to address the root causes of hunger, including poverty” (Hunger Action Network). In addition to the work described earlier, raising the level of nutrition in food banks is currently a priority for the agency, but their work with the garden and farm movement is “pretty peripheral.” Farms like the Poughkeepsie Farm Project, as well as Green Teen and Hudson Valley Fresh donate their surplus, and the Lunchbox is where most of that food is accepted. But as Riddell states, “you have to be more than a giver-out of food. You have to connect it to something so perhaps there’s change or reform.” He

remarks on the need to work on policy issues and that the “organizing piece of the community has always been the toughest part.” Still, Riddell has been able to build up trust with people in the community, who know that he will go to bat for them to fight for their rights and the entitlements they deserve. Riddell observes that some nonprofit groups receive governmental funding for social services and so avoid challenging governmental decisions, whereas Dutchess Outreach receives their funding, but recently overturned two decisions denying clients benefits. In addition to such advocacy, Dutchess Outreach has worked hard on other important community issues such as building up housing and developing programs for people with HIV/AIDs. Riddell has also worked to develop an Afro-centric community library for, by and about the African community across the diaspora.

The Dutchess Community Action Partnership has similarly built up trust in the low-income community. Community Actions are created through federal bloc grants, and their purpose is to produce whatever it is the community needs. As Executive Director Maureen Lashlee points out, Community Action tries to cultivate a power-with dynamic, including their participants, rather than the power-over dynamic of places like the Department of Social Services. Lashlee explains that Community Actions were started politically, but were brought alive by rebellion within communities, who demanded control over the way public funds were used to help their communities. Lashlee recalls, “those were the best days. But the more we took on the look of the government the less effective we became.” She argues that if people are disgusted enough with the way

things are and take up a rebellious, revolutionary attitude then things will change. She continues:

If this economic crisis hasn't done anything else, it's forced people who previously have believed that either low income people deserve to be poor because their personal attributes don't support the American Dream, or that there really isn't poverty, they're recognizing for the first time that that is not true, nothing could be further from the truth. And what I pray and what we will work very hard to do is to make sure that it stays in everyone's memory when the economy is back on track again. And that will happen when we stop blaming the victim, who is the poor person, and we start blaming the villain, which is poverty, and the systems that perpetuate poverty.

Lashlee describes a paternalistic perspective common to many entitlements approaches which she argues contributes to the problem. "The dynamic that perpetuates a poverty mentality is the dynamic of, 'don't worry if you can't take care of yourself, we'll take care of you, we're good people, and if we're good people, what does that mean you are?'" She argues this dynamic plays into a general belief that people need to be rescued because of their behavior, which the dominant system has created or allowed, undermining the success of food security and antipoverty efforts. She calls for a different approach to assistance that empowers people to meet their own needs.

The organizations described above have exhibited an impressive array of strategies and efforts toward improving food issues in Poughkeepsie, with many successes. Production and distribution of food locally have increased through venues such as farms, community gardens and downtown farmers markets. New educational programs have been developed to inform people about food and agriculture systems, health and nutrition, and food politics issues, while building community capacity and

skills. Efforts have also included reaching out and organizing community members from various sectors to come together on some of these issues, offering education and resources to vulnerable populations, and collaborating with partners to help eliminate barriers to food security in Poughkeepsie.

However, the organizations represented also illustrate different orientations toward issues of food access, food security and food justice that seem to fall along a spectrum. While all groups involved are working toward positive change in the food system, some focus more centrally on systemic issues that shape access to food such as food deserts, poverty and unequal political power. These groups work to include a diversity of community perspectives in the decision-making process and framing of issues, recognizing the need for community organizing across lines of difference, and engaging in advocacy and policy work to varying degrees. Other groups work on more immediate projects, operating within the current status-quo, preferring to “remain neutral” and not question market-oriented program models or current power structures. Such organizations tend to couch their work in terms of redistribution of food-related resources, rather than confronting inequalities in political and economic power, such as structural racism, that contribute to uneven distribution in the first place. In such contexts, the focus seems to fall on changing the individual rather than the system.

The organizations represented also illustrate varying levels of self-reflexivity regarding the ways in which their framings and perspectives are embedded in particular socio-political ideologies and assumptions that structure the nature and outcomes of their work. Some groups are more aware of and willing to acknowledge their weaknesses and

limitations, reflecting on a broader vision of justice than others. For example, staff at the Poughkeepsie Farm Project are aware of certain power differentials and dynamics within their community, noting their eagerness to connect with communities with whom they are not yet engaged, who might have different ideals and cultures than their current membership. PFP recognizes that such inclusion of diversity is critical in building community and food system solutions that work for everyone, reflecting the needs and desires of Poughkeepsie residents. Other groups such as Cornell Cooperative Extension struggle on this front, meaning well, but failing to think outside of the educational framework that emphasizes the individual and homogenizes difference.

The differentiation between food justice and food security orientations, or systemic versus individual emphases is in some ways arbitrary however. No organization described here falls entirely on one end of the spectrum or the other, but rather somewhere in between, displaying elements of both. All groups are constrained by the practical necessity of working within our current economic, political and social systems, and thus tend to focus their efforts on particular aspects of the problem in order to be effective. To be sure, many of these projects still adhere to a largely market-oriented model of change, emphasizing access and education rather than rights and power, as noted previously. In addition, issues surrounding racial and ethnic differences seem largely invisible in food system work and discourse in Poughkeepsie, taking a back seat to socioeconomic inequalities in all cases. Still it is helpful to examine the different organizational perspectives of groups involved in food system work, and their

implications for building a revitalized, just and sustainable food system in Poughkeepsie.

I will discuss some of these themes in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

In this chapter I describe selected themes and points of interest that emerged in the research process and discuss how they illustrate many focuses and challenges of food justice work described in previous chapters. Themes include the emphasis on education and its implications; the inherent tensions brought about by education initiatives in community food work; structural factors and cultural differences that shape food choices; and the need for more concerted community organizing efforts to include a broad array of community voices and perspectives.

Throughout the research process, education was repeatedly cited by a number of community members as one of the primary necessities to improve food security for area residents. The emphasis on education is important from a number of perspectives: overcoming a lack of basic food skills and knowledge; offering a non-controversial, practical, and fundable program orientation; and fostering political empowerment and social change. Each of these positions has its own implications for Poughkeepsie's local food system.

First and foremost, a *lack of basic food skills and knowledge* is seen by many community members as one of the primary impediments to improving food access in the area. Education is thus necessary to give people the basic skills and knowledge they need to make “healthy” food choices. Interviewees mentioned cooking from scratch, label reading, experience following recipes and familiarity

with fresh foods, as well as knowledge of resources and where to obtain foods as the most common challenges. One interviewee mentioned that many people don't know what they should be eating or how much, in part because they did not grow up with healthy food choices. Similarly, as Grove argues, access to healthy food is in part dependent on a history of positive experiences with those foods, and so part of improving access is providing opportunities to gain those experiences. In addition to education for consumers, some respondents also mentioned the need for education for the *providers* of emergency food services, such as those that serve hot meals at local soup kitchens, or pantry providers who rely on carbohydrates and fats to prevent hunger for the people they serve.

Although these challenges are undoubtedly problematic and contribute to food insecurity in Poughkeepsie, their framing in many cases seems to feed into an overall belief that people do not know what they need to know or *should* know in order to make “healthier” or “better” decisions. This belief echoes a perspective described in the literature review above, where alternative food project managers attributed non-participation by low income people and people of color to their lack of education and concern about food quality and health. Along these lines, one interviewee comments in the context of understanding problems with food access, that it can sometimes be a stretch for people to understand access to *good* food. By “good,” she means fresh, nutritious food grown without chemicals in an environmentally sustainable manner. However, as other researchers have pointed out (DuPuis and Goodman 2005; Guthman 2008b;

Tattenham 2006), this framing of “good food” can potentially be problematic when people have different ideas of what “good” means, revealing “the ways in which people’s notions of ‘right living,’ and especially ‘right eating,’ are wrapped up in these possessive investments in race, class and gender” (DuPuis and Goodman 2005, 362). Similarly, as Slocum (2006) points out, the desire for good food does not inherently reflect one particular set of cultural values, but can be made to do so when it is framed to include or exclude certain perspectives.

Further, this framing of education focuses attention on the individual and their choices rather than the systematic forces that constrain those choices, contributing to a dynamic of ‘blaming the victim’ (Allen 2004; Patel 2007). Food choices for Poughkeepsie residents have been shown to be constrained by a number of other factors as described in previous chapters. For example, as pointed out by Magdoff (2008), and illustrated within my own research, food expenses are often the first to be cut when money is tight, as food is one of the only ‘flexible’ budget items for many Poughkeepsie residents. In contrast, housing and utilities are fixed costs, and with the shortage of affordable housing in Poughkeepsie, concerns about housing often overshadow food issues.

An absence of supermarkets has also been shown to be a major constraining structural factor. One Green Teen educator, Karmen Smallwood remarks on her experience with families who want to eat healthier, and says she believes they could if they were given information on how and where to access those things. Smallwood acknowledges that “kids need more education about the

types of foods they're eating," but argues, "if there were more places for them to get healthier food and to get those things, I think they would make healthier choices. But sometimes they're like, 'this is what's available to me, there's a convenience store right next to my house, it's cheaper.'" She continues to describe the systemic and environmental factors that constrict food choices for area residents: "a lot of families don't have cars so they have to rely on the LOOP bus system which is often very difficult," so residents must "make a choice: spend extra money on a cab to travel somewhere else where they can access fresh fruits and vegetables or walk down the street to the corner store."

Despite these apparent environmental factors, an emphasis on educating the individual remains in most circles, in part for political reasons. As noted earlier, organizations like Cornell Cooperative Extension do not participate in advocacy because they are designated as an educational organization. As such, one extension employee remarks, "we walk a fine line about what we can say and can't say from a Cornell Cooperative Extension standpoint. We have to remain completely neutral because we are an educational organization, we can't show any bias." Another representative from CCE notes, "there's a certain level of sensitivity to being political in any way because of our role as Cornell Cooperative Extension Dutchess County." However, despite CCE's claims of neutrality, education is not a value-neutral endeavor and is necessarily rooted in a pre-existing framework of norms and values. Indeed, CCE's positioning illustrates a point discussed earlier regarding the general withdrawal of food

projects “from direct opposition to powerful political and economic structures,” favoring instead *alternative* market-based and entrepreneurial approaches in line with current neoliberal ideologies (Allen et al 2003, 68).

To be sure, much of this positioning is about establishing *a practical, fundable program orientation* that is not politically controversial and does not challenge existing power structures. Thus the work that Cornell currently engages in is crucial in an acute, immediate sense, but is likely only a short-term solution that does not address more fundamental problems like poverty and racism. As Elaine Power states,

food solutions will not solve the problem of poverty. Without social justice for the poor in larger society (that is, a guarantee of an adequate and dignified level of material resources to allow every citizen the stability and security to participate fully in society), programs aimed at improving the food problems of the poor will only reinforce individualistic solutions to structural problems, no matter what the intentions of the programmers (Power 1999, 35).

This last point brings up another perspective on the importance of education in potentially *fostering political empowerment and social change*. As described by one Green Teen educator earlier, education is also about the right to know, the right to participate in decisions that affect our communities and health, and the right to make choices and fight for what we deserve. Similarly, a representative from CCE points out that education is critical at all levels to create a movement and effect change. A representative from PFP describes how education ties into advocacy by raising awareness of constituents at a local level

regarding issues of food politics, so they can support efforts at broader levels such as federal policy. In this framing, education can tie into political advocacy, offering a more emancipatory tone when its proponents reflexively engage with broader issues of rights, participation and inequities in economic and political power.

Still, when discussing the effectiveness of educational efforts such as the Green Teen program, inherent tensions emerge. One educator acknowledges that although there is a connection for her students that gets stronger every day, it is not as strong as she would like it to be, because there are so many other influences that affect their lives. She describes how these influences can lead to internal conflict and feeling like an outsider.

So it's still a struggle and I think in time it will get better, but I think they're in a really difficult position because there's not a lot of people in their neighborhoods who are immersed in this type of work the way they are, and are so interested in learning about food access issues and food security and healthy eating. So they often feel like they are in a battle, they're struggling. For example, this Thursday we're going to be doing a family meal with the interns from the Poughkeepsie Farm Project. And the meal is going to be totally vegetarian, it was going to be using vegetables from the garden, and immediately the kids were like, 'my family's not coming, not coming to that. If you don't have meat they will not come.' And we were like, 'well this is an opportunity to expose them to great wonderful tasty dishes that do not involve meat,' and they're just like, 'well they won't come to anything like that.' So it's kind of hard because they were excited to show their families the work that they've been doing and to treat them to a great meal but will their families not come, just because the meal was going to be very different than what they would eat at home?

This scenario further illustrates the difference in perspectives surrounding ideas of “good food” mentioned earlier, as well as the ways in which various “spaces are coded to create discomfort and exclusion” (Guthman 2008a, 389). A representative from the Department of Health describes the significance of meat in the food culture of many Poughkeepsie residents that may go a long way toward explaining the issue:

Even with people being hungry, years and years and years ago, the idea [was] that if you didn't have an animal protein, like a beef, chicken or pork at a mealtime, you were poor. So people still try to have meat dishes at each meal as opposed to buying into the fact that you can have a vegetarian meal, like rice and beans as a substitute instead of having beef, chicken or fish. So certainly, it is this idea ‘I have to have this.’ You don't want to *feel* poor.

In this context, the reluctance of students' families to participate in a vegetarian farm dinner could be attributed to the discomfort caused by an unfamiliar environment and a lack of cultural reflexivity on the part of the conveners, rather than the result of a lack of necessary education and interest in “good food” on the part of the would-be participants. This perspective therefore problematizes the “universalism” surrounding ideals of fresh, local, healthy food, illustrating how the perspectives of others are obscured by such framing (Guthman 2008). Indeed, one interviewee comments that the PFP is a very different environment than most Poughkeepsie residents are used to. Another says that local farmers markets tend to be “a little boutique-y for people.” Yet another respondent remarks that people who participate in CSA are a subculture to begin with, and that “the whole thing is a bit speculative, to tell low income people you don't know what you're going

to get.” These issues illustrate the variety of considerations, beyond the issue of education, that affect whether or not people choose to participate in such initiatives. As a representative from the Department of Health points out,

sometimes even with education, people are unwilling to change. Even with exposures—because Cornell has been at [farmers] markets doing food demonstrations—so even with the presence of an educator there, delivering a healthy message, showing how the foods can be utilized and giving recipes, it may not be well received.



Figure 5. Community Meal with the Green Teens at Poughkeepsie Farm Project (Poughkeepsie Farm Project Website)

In order to overcome these challenges and promote healthier eating habits and lifestyles then, one Green Teen educator argues,

this type of information needs to be infused in many different sectors; it can't get to them through one means. It has to come through faith-based organizations, it has to come through the schools, the healthcare system. If everybody's giving them the same message they're bound to begin to change that. But if they're only hearing it from non-profit organizations, it's like who cares, who cares?

In response, more connections need to be made between different organizations and stakeholders on these issues. As Lashlee from Community Action argues, everyone needs to sit down together at the table and find a common solution to the City's food issues rather than competing for resources. As it stands, Poughkeepsie Farm Project and Cornell Cooperative Extension work together through the Green Teen program and Nutrition Advisory Committee. Dutchess Outreach has also been peripherally involved with these groups, receiving food donations and volunteer support. But there still remains an overall disconnect between organizations engaged in anti-poverty work and meeting basic needs, versus those that focus solely on food issues. Indeed, there is hardly any interaction between Dutchess County Community Action Partnership and other food activist groups in the area, revealing a weakness in the network of partnerships, and thwarting the equal incorporation of diverse voices and perspectives into community decision-making processes.

Along these lines, Lashlee notes that Cornell does a good job for middle-income people in terms of connecting them to the services they offer, but

struggles in its efforts to serve the low-income community effectively.

Community Action in contrast has built up substantial trust with the low-income community, who feel safe coming to them for help. In retrospect, she remarks, Community Action should have leveraged their trust within the communities they serve to share resources and bring Cornell Cooperative Extension in to do food education. Now, she states, they need to break old habits and form new ones.

Broad community organizing efforts will be central in this process of creating new relationships and habits. As one representative from the Department of Health argues, it is very important to go to the community about these issues. “Because certainly for us in the African American community, it’s about health disparities, it’s about chronic diseases that impact us, and making people aware of problems that impact the community.” When asked what changes are necessary to address these health disparities, she named a supermarket with a good produce section, transportation between low income housing areas and the supermarket, and education to encourage people to buy healthy choices.

Another part of the big picture, she argues, is “showing yourself—having someone with you that looks like people in the community, and trying to pull them in to say this is a good thing, this is what we need to do. [...] I think that’s always good, for people who want to do things, but don’t actually look like people that are representative for the majority in the community, they need someone with them to help sell their message.” This perspective aligns with a point made by Macias (2008, 1099), “that garnering the support of those most negatively

affected by inequality is essential to the vitality and durability of movements seeking progressive social change.”

A representative from PFP elaborates on the need for community organizing and reaching out to a broad diversity of communities in Poughkeepsie.

When we talk about ‘the community’ we always get really stuck. There isn’t ‘*the* community,’ there are *communities*. We have *a* community, and it’s diverse and we would like to see it be more diverse even, but there are lots of communities in Poughkeepsie, and we think that the next step would be really to try to identify who’s out there, and of different ethnic background and different socioeconomic backgrounds, that is already a challenge for the work that we do and we don’t know them. How can we get to know them, and through knowing them, interact with their community? So it’s really a community-organizing step that needs to happen, where we can be in a closer dialogue with different communities to understand how *they* view a just and sustainable food system and what those elements would be. [...] if we’re going to focus on planting the right seed at the right time in the right place so that we can bear fruit, we need to be in closer dialogue with these communities and have them more directly influencing the decisions that we make.

This focus on community organizing and partnerships is a crucial element in broader efforts to build a just and sustainable food system in Poughkeepsie. To be sure, several authors have commented on the necessary role of partnerships and collaborations in food system change work (DuPuis and Goodman 2005; Hassanein 2003; Macias 2008; Maretzki and Tuckermanty 2007). For example, Cole and Foster (2001, 15) argue, “the transformation of environmental justice participants, and their local communities, ultimately lies in the forging of coalitions and the networking of grassroots organizations across substantive area.” Similarly, “whether organizations are urban or rural, all find it necessary and

desirable to form partnerships with other organizations and agencies in order to address local food, farm and nutrition issues comprehensively” (Maretzki and Tuckermanty 2007, 338). Some argue that such partnerships “not only increase citizen power to effect change on a particular issues, but also serve as important mechanisms by which groups can learn about one another and facilitate the broadening of participation of larger numbers of people (Hassanein 2003, 82).

As demonstrated above, several actors in Poughkeepsie’s local food system are heeding this advice and working to expand their partnerships, namely through the Community Food Assessment process spearheaded by the Poughkeepsie Farm Project, as well as through Cornell Cooperative Extension’s Nutrition Advisory Committee. While these initiatives are actively engaging multiple food system stakeholders, it appears they could do more to ally with others in the community by leveraging the established trust factor of certain community members and organizations who represent the interests of underserved groups, including representatives from Dutchess Outreach, Community Actions, the Department of Health, and the local churches. As it stands, the dynamic at work in a majority of these organizations is that of predominantly white leadership serving audiences of color, through efforts at education. In this context, issues of race and ethnicity are all but invisible, illustrating elements of colorblindness and white universalism described by Guthman (2008a). As noted earlier, building a more just food system will require “shifting the balance of power toward historically oppressed communities to identify problems and

leaderships solutions,” while continually reflecting on questions of who will take control, who is building power, and whether the solutions being developing are relevant to the issues that such communities have identified as crucial (Slocum 2006, 340-1).

Shifting the balance of power will not be easy however. As described in the previous chapter, organizations working on food security issues in Poughkeepsie seem to fall along a spectrum, with differing notions of justice that shape the framing of their work. As Grove points out, not every organization has the luxury or orientation to focus on issues of justice, especially if they are focusing on meeting basic needs, or keeping the organization afloat. Another interviewee remarks that some people do not buy into social justice as an issue at all to begin with, arguing that an orientation toward justice requires much more intention in order to address underlying issues of inequality. It is not enough to say an initiative is open to everyone and then expect that everyone will participate; rather, concerted efforts are required to make the community accessible and welcoming to people, not just financially but culturally as well. Grove echoes the need for intention in prioritizing justice issues, “because we’re working within the dominant system that we’re criticizing.” She explains,

it’s hard to say to the college and the restaurants who want to buy from us, ‘no,’ because our priority is to make sure that a good, healthy percentage of this [produce] is available to the low-income community here, because it would be so much easier to just sell more shares to folks who could afford it. We would have no problem selling our food and then some to people who can afford it easily. And we put a lot of work and effort into these other areas

because we want them to be an example of working on issues of justice, and we feel that it's very important that food access is for everyone, not just those who can afford it. But at the same time, without the funding partners and other partners, the system would just force us in the other direction, the way that's easy and that's less labor intensive.

Grove's comment brings up a point made earlier regarding the general acceptance of dominant economic structures and social relations that circumscribe current food system work. Despite concerted attention to issues of equity and justice by some community food actors, most of the organizations and projects described above still operate within a market-oriented model, emphasizing education and access over rights and power, as has been found in previous studies (Allen et al. 2003; Jarosz 2008; Slocum 2006). To be sure, localized markets and other food projects have commonly been positioned as *alternatives* to conventional, mainstream market relations. Such localized markets can strengthen the local economy, potentially fostering economic empowerment for community members who have access to those markets (Why Hunger 2010). However, as Guthman et al. (2006) point out, the current configuration of market relations pits producers against consumers economically. Thus, alternative markets may still exclude those who cannot afford to participate, reiterating certain power relations and obscuring attention from other forms of power. Indeed, several authors have argued that 'alternative' market approaches are unable to address structural inequities, threatening to reiterate existing power relations (Allen 1999; Allen 2004; Allen 2010; Magdoff 2008; Jarosz 2008). To this end,

Grove argues that in order to change the overarching system, education and public policy have a role to play. “Everything we do is small and local but we do what we can to make a difference. [...] Policy and public perception play off each other, they’re mutually reinforcing, and you have to interrupt the status quo at different points to make a difference.”

In this chapter I have described prominent themes that emerged in the research process in Poughkeepsie, discussing the ways in which my findings exemplify many of the focuses and challenges of food justice work described in previous chapters. The emphasis on education as a food security strategy and vehicle for personal change has many implications, threatening to echo the “missionary impulse” described by Guthman (2008a). Such approaches to education focus attention on the individual and their behavior, encouraging the idea that people need to be educated because they simply do not know any better, for whatever reason. The focus on the individual engendered by such an education approach detracts attention from the systemic inequalities that contribute to current conditions in the first place. This is not to say however that there is not a genuine need, community- and even nation-wide, for information about healthy food, where to access it and how to prepare it. Rather, attention needs to be paid to the ways in which current unequal power dynamics are reiterated in these education efforts, and whose perspectives and values are prioritized. Echoing DuPuis and Goodman (2005) and Tattenham (2006), we must ask ourselves how ideas of good food and health are tied to socio-cultural and political discourses of

health and wellness, and how these discourses may marginalize the values of others with whom we attempt to engage. We must also recognize and interrogate racial and ethnic disparities in economic and political power and work to disrupt them by privileging the voices and efforts of people in the community who have previously been excluded from the discussion and decision-making process.

Differences in perspectives and interests, such as the need for improving mainstream food resources versus creating alternatives to the mainstream, need to be balanced. Concerted community organizing efforts should include a broad array of voices and perspectives, working to put power back into the hands of those who have been robbed of such power. As one educator noted, current projects need to reach out to the networks that are already strong in their communities, opening up to the ways in which people are already connected to make themselves a part of that. Ultimately, connections between all sectors will be important in building a revitalized food system, as groups share their strengths and resources, working together to help communities determine their own food system solutions.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

In the chapters above, I have explored the concept of food justice, arguing that it provides a useful framework for examining issues of equity and justice in community food work by situating the politics of food systems and food security within larger structures of inequality like race and class. I described the local food environment in Poughkeepsie, New York, explaining how its configuration constrains food access and choices for area residents. I then discussed the efforts of several community-based food organizations working to improve healthy food access for Poughkeepsie residents, and compared highlights of their work with elements of the food justice frame. I observed that in the context of community food work in Poughkeepsie, New York, most projects seems to fall along a spectrum of orientations, with some organizations focusing more centrally on issues of justice and equity than others. While all groups are working to improve food access, with particular attention to the needs of low-income residents, their work is circumscribed by various political orientations as well as dominant social and economic power structures. Socioeconomic issues and barriers receive some attention in these circles, but the lack of discussion and reflexivity around racial and ethnic issues in food systems is striking. In addition, most community food projects observed demonstrated an adherence to market-oriented organizational models, emphasizing access and education about food choices over rights and building power.

Acknowledging that larger systemic barriers and inequalities shape food insecurity, and that organizations are working from within the system they are trying to

change, Grove posed a thought-provoking question, the meaning of which she says she has no way to grapple with in the context of her work: “why are communities asked to solve problems that don’t originate in the community?” She argues that the basic issue is the status of food in most of the world—that food is not understood as a basic human right, but rather a commodity on the marketplace, and that the lack of food is something to be addressed with a charitable response.

Lashlee echoes this sentiment: “we need to have a community conversation; what do we believe are people’s rights?” She posits that food, shelter and healthcare are all basic human rights, but a dynamic of ‘blaming the victim’ prevents these rights from being met. She continues to explain that the main obstacle is the system of poverty and recognizing that poverty has a place, calling for community advocates “who are not afraid to confront people who are entrenched in their ways.” As Guthman (2008b, 443) suggests, “efforts to address structural problems could include the elimination of redlining, promoting living wages, expanding entitlement programs and working to improve the quality of the mainstream food supply,” as Dutchess Outreach tries to do.

Along these lines, Grove calls for “economic support for the type of food system we value,” that supports both growers and eaters, or “a society that’s willing to accept a different notion of the marketplace.” Indeed, current economic market relations contribute to the ongoing disconnect between localized agricultural efforts and food security efforts. As Ostrom (2007) points out, despite critiques that alternative food projects are prohibitively expensive for some people, their economic model still fails to provide a sustainable livelihood for many farm workers. In response, Grove envisions a

public subsidy arrangement with government support, where some things on the market would be priced according to the ability to pay. Perhaps there would be a certain percentage of one's income that would go toward the basic human rights of food or housing, so that a farm like the Poughkeepsie Farm Project could easily supply food to everybody at a cost they could afford.

Grove cites as inspiration a Food Security Programme undertaken by the Brazilian city of Belo Horizonte, where the government decided that food was a basic human right and consequently put in place policy incentives that radically changed the foodscape there. These policies included incentives for farmers to sell on city street corners, the availability of basic health foods at subsidized rates, the assurance that every house could be sold at the market rate, and putting in popular restaurants with meals that were tasty, fresh, and cheap. According to Grove, this model illustrates a scenario in which the public sector plays a strong-handed role that leads to positive outcomes for both consumers and producers. Such a food system model seems to truly re-envision market-oriented economic relations we are so accustomed to as Americans, and points to the need for a different tack.

Thus, local community food projects can be one possible locus of action, but they are by no means the only one. In addition to participating in local community-based efforts and interrogating power-privilege relations at that level, action needs to be taken at larger political scales as well, by informing ourselves, holding our elected representatives accountable and advocating policy that helps to dismantle systems of inequality. Riddell shares strategies implemented by Dutchess Outreach in advocating for

the people they serve. He describes sitting in on the Commissioner's advisory council, in order to "be in their face all the time," ensuring that local authorities are aware of policy activity at the State level affecting poor people and other structurally marginalized groups. Dutchess Outreach also holds several community forums to "keep it real, keep it out there."

Allen (2004, 211) remarks that developing an environmentally sound and socially just agrifood system—in short, developing food justice—requires moving past existing race and class arrangements, arguing that future leadership of the movement will likely rest with people and communities who have traditionally been marginalized in food security and alternative agrifood discourse and practice. Indeed, food justice seeks to empower communities to determine their own solutions and address inequities within the food system and society at multiple levels (Ahmadi 2007).

In this paper, I have explored the food environment and selected community food efforts in Poughkeepsie, New York through the lens of food justice. By situating the work of these organizations within systems of power and inequality, I have shown how they simultaneously reiterate and challenge existing political, economic and social relations, displaying both a difficulty in envisioning a truly new way forward, yet a burgeoning potential for transforming the local food system. While food system change efforts in Poughkeepsie illustrate a number of issues and challenges common to other food security and food justice initiatives, they also demonstrate great creativity and commitment towards bettering the community, building new models to improve food access, community health and development. As these food initiatives and networks mature and

evolve, a balance must be struck between a focus on the individual versus larger social, economic and political structures. As noted earlier, attention to justice must be continuously explicit and intentional, including diverse voices in the dialogue and decision process, rather than assuming justice will emerge as an inherent quality or result of any one particular approach or viewpoint. As Just Food in New York City argues, food justice is an action—a verb, not a noun. Such an understanding underlines the fact that the concept is fluid and dynamic rather than static, requiring social and democratic engagement and reflexivity. Ahmadi (no date) remarks that while more traditional policy change approaches are useful, they can be slow to affect structural barriers, arguing that it is only through concerted political and social action that disparities in power can be corrected. He calls for solidarity between communities, arguing that, “it’s only through that broader kind of political picture—mass public turn-out where people are showing up as allies and in solidarity with others for these causes, that we’ll see politicians respond in a meaningful way” (Ahmadi, n.d., n.p). In moving forward, food justice advocates must attend to dynamics of power and inequality, and reach across disciplinary, institutional and social lines of difference to build a truly more inclusive, just and resilient movement.

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## APPENDIX A

### Interview Guide

Tell me a little bit about yourself.

What is your role at your organization? How did you become involved there?

What programs does your organization run as part of its mission?  
What is their purpose? Who participates?

Why is your involvement in these projects important?  
What do you hope to accomplish through your work?  
What are the benefits and challenges of your work?

What organizations/institutions, if any, do you interact with on a regular basis?  
How do you work together?

Does your organization have any special programs to reach out to underrepresented groups?  
How many people involved are below the poverty line?  
How many people of color?

How do you define food security? Food justice?  
Are they different?

What do you think contributes to food insecurity locally?

What social and economic inequities have you seen locally?

In your opinion, what are barriers to equitable access to food?

What are challenges to improving food security locally?  
How might these challenges be overcome?

What are strategies for working toward food justice?  
How and why have they been successful?

What work do you think still needs to be done?

What role do you think places like the Poughkeepsie Farm Project play in improving food security locally?

Is there anything else you think I should know?

Is there anything you want to know about me?

Thank you for sharing with me.