

## Social enterprise, food justice, and food sovereignty: Strange bedfellows or systemic supports?

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### Abstract

There is a debate in the literature about whether one can address food system problems with market-based approaches while seeking food justice or food sovereignty. However, as part of a team of researchers and community leaders, we have found that this debate is less relevant in practice. The concepts are interrelated within real-world food systems. As such, we were motivated to ask, how do social enterprises (SEs) interact with food jus-

tice and food sovereignty movements and their visions in order to realize more democratic and equitable local food systems in communities? To answer this question, we conducted a systematic review at the intersection of SE, food sovereignty, and food justice literature. Analyzing nine articles, which included 17 food-related SEs, we found evidence of potential interactions between food SEs, food justice, and food sovereignty that are compatible (e.g., create employment) and incompatible

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(e.g., limited ability to address issues like community employability and green gentrification). The literature includes at least three important characteristics that inform how food-related SEs may interact with food justice and sovereignty, including employee and ownership demographics, the enterprise business model, and aspects of the food system targeted by the enterprise via market activities. If we consider a systems perspective, we can envision the ways in which the aspects are embedded and interdependent in a neoliberal society. SEs, as market-based agents for social change, exist in the same system as justice and sovereignty.

### Keywords

food justice, food sovereignty, social enterprise, United States, urban food movement, community, literature review, neoliberal

### Abbreviations

FJ: Food justice

FS: Food sovereignty

PAR: Participatory action research

SE: Social enterprise

### Introduction

The conventional food system functions within inequitable societal structures, creating and reinforcing inequities. Whether the negative impacts are obesity and metabolic diseases, lack of access to fresh and healthy foods, environmental degradation, barriers to farm ownership, or dangerous low-wage food system jobs, the impacts are disproportionately experienced by racialized groups (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; CDC, 2022, 2020; Walker et al., 2010). There have been calls for food system change to address inequities (see, for example: Alattar, 2021; Alkon, 2014; Allen, 2008), but despite the implementation of many food system initiatives, interventions in the food system have insufficiently addressed these underlying inequities. This has happened, at least in part, because of limited awareness of the food system as a “system” (Cohen & Ilieva, 2021).

In a project called foodNEST 2.0, a team of community leaders and researchers in Cleveland, Ohio, set out to understand what levers could be used to change the food system in historically red-

lined neighborhoods to realize justice and equity goals. Cleveland has a long history of innovation and investment in food, and this project builds upon that foundation. Before diving into the research, the team took a step back to examine the systemic forces that both structure the rules of the game and impact the foods we put on our collective tables. Together, we used a deliberative and situated systems approach to map out the complex web of forces that shape food security; access to affordable, fresh, and healthy foods; and economic opportunity. Our approach meant democratizing research via relationship building, extensive dialogue, co-learning situated in lived experiences, and ultimately generating knowledge to transform the food system to achieve justice (Freedman et al., 2021).

The results of foodNEST 2.0 motivated this review. While developing dynamic systems models in the project, SEs arose as a mechanism for food system change (Freedman et al., 2021; *Modeling the Future of Food in Your Neighborhood Collaborative*, 2020). We embedded SEs within our model in a set of systems relationships, including a domain of feedback that the team hypothesized would catalyze community empowerment and sovereignty, ultimately bringing forth equity and, as a result, food justice. Many scholars make a clear distinction between two of the concepts that became central to the foodNEST 2.0 project—food sovereignty and food justice (Holt-Giménez, 2010; McEntee & Naumova, 2012)—but a clear distinction did not seem relevant to our practice. This is not to say that these terms meant the same thing to team members, but the mechanisms to achieve these twin goals were inextricably linked. Further, while there is debate in the literature about addressing symptoms of food system problems with market-based approaches, like SEs (for example, see Holt-Giménez, 2010), these activities are interrelated in local food systems, as understood by our community–university team.

In response to this work, the authors asked a question: how do SEs interact with food justice and food sovereignty movements and their visions to realize more democratic and equitable local food systems in communities? Further, what does the literature have to say about these concepts? Are they

strange bedfellows, or can SEs bring about justice and sovereignty? We looked to existing literature to answer our question, and we found that little published research has focused on the specific interaction in our research question. SEs have been extensively studied, and food justice and food sovereignty have extensive bodies of research, but few authors have analyzed how SEs (a market-based strategy) interact with the goals of these food movements.

Driven by our practice-oriented need, we conducted a systematic literature review to answer this question, attending to the Cleveland, Ohio, context. As such, we limited the review of literature to comparable neoliberal contexts. We begin by reviewing the basic concepts of SE, food justice, and food sovereignty. Then we describe, in detail, the systematic literature review methods used to answer our research question. We present the results and then discuss the findings. We conclude by offering some future directions for research. We believe the insights from our systematic review are valuable not only to our foodNEST 2.0 team, but also to owners of SEs, entities funding social enterprises, policymakers, and others who are interested in market-based approaches to further equity in the food system.

### **Understanding Social Enterprise, Food Justice, and Food Sovereignty**

Social enterprises (SEs) are generally understood as organizations that use business-like strategies to address social issues, such as homelessness, racial inequity, unemployment, or health disparities. Many SEs value the participation of beneficiaries (the individuals a SE seeks to help) as customers, suppliers, employees, managers, and owners (Defourny & Nyssens, 2010). According to Defourny and Nyssens (2010), SEs also value their autonomy and prioritize experimental approaches in addressing social issues.

SEs may be contrasted with nonprofit organizations. Whereas nonprofits tend to rely solely on nonmarket sources of income (such as grants and donations), SEs mobilize income from both market activities and nonmarket sources (Defourny et al., 2020). This empowers SEs to be more self-sufficient than nonprofit organizations (Luke &

Chu, 2013). For this reason, SEs often coexist in sectors traditionally dominated by nonprofits, especially those sectors in which basic human needs are not met by mainstream political, economic, and social institutions (Laidlaw & Magee, 2016; Luke & Chu, 2013). The food sector fits this criterion: food is a basic human need, many individuals in the U.S. do not have economic or physical access to adequate food, and nonprofits like food banks and soup kitchens are primary actors in the charitable food sector. Charitable food-sector nonprofits often have goals in common with food-focused SEs (such as increasing food security), but they do not have the same emphasis on market activities to generate income that is seen with SEs.

Alter (2007) writes about a food-focused SE called *Cepicafé*, an association of small coffee-producing organizations that seeks to improve the living standards of rural communities in Peru by increasing incomes and providing educational opportunities for coffee farmers. *Cepicafé* promotes fair trade for small rural farmers who do not receive sufficient income from selling their crops in international markets. Low commodity prices take advantage of producers in inequitable trade relationships, as small farmers have little power to negotiate higher commodity prices with international buyers. To increase incomes of farmers, *Cepicafé* takes a business-like approach, acting as an intermediary between Peruvian producers and importers overseas. The rural farming organizations that *Cepicafé* helps are democratically involved in *Cepicafé*'s decision-making. In addition, *Cepicafé* receives income from fees paid by its producer organizations (market income) and from grants (nonmarket income, such as a grant from the European Commission), which allow the organization to offer educational programs and invest in rural crop infrastructure.

In this example, *Cepicafé* helps rural Peruvian coffee farmers receive higher incomes, but it does not seek to overturn the neoliberal international trade system that drives low coffee commodity prices and inequitable trade relationships. Although many issues addressed by SEs are rooted in socioeconomic forces that are seen as consequences of neoliberally influenced economies, SEs do not generally seek to overhaul entire economic systems.

Rather, they push against high market reliance, or high “marketness,” in economies or specific economic sectors. Block (1990) conceptualized the continuum of “marketness” to describe the degree to which actors in a market rely on price signals when deciding whether to buy or sell products. High marketness implies that price is the only signal considered by market actors, whereas low marketness describes a market wherein actors consider other factors (such as a product’s social or environmental impacts) in addition to price when making business decisions. Many businesses in neoliberal economies demonstrate high marketness, making business decisions primarily based on price and profit, and they often do not prioritize the social or environmental consequences of their actions (Thornburg, 2013). For SEs, on the other hand, at least some priority is given to social or environmental interests when making business decisions; profit-maximization through price decisions is not the main goal of SEs (Defourny & Nyssens, 2010). In this way, SEs display low marketness, and they push back against high marketness to motivate social change. SEs demonstrate resistance from *within* neoliberal economic systems.

Food justice (FJ) emphasizes the goal of addressing inequities in the food system and society that lead to disparities in health, economic, and environmental outcomes along the lines of race, class, gender, ethnicity, ability, and citizenship (Hislop, 2014, as cited in Smith, 2019; Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, 2012, as cited in Bain et al., 2021). These inequities build barriers that prevent low-income individuals and people of color from accessing adequate sources of affordable, healthy foods, including local and organic foods, both as producers and as consumers (Alkon, 2014). FJ activists generally support the use of food entrepreneurship activities (often in the form of SEs) to address these barriers. Scholars often view FJ as a direct response to historic and current state-sanctioned discriminatory policies, such as neighborhood redlining or funding discrimination against Black farmers by the U.S. Department of

Agriculture (USDA; Alkon, 2014; Alkon & Norgaard, 2009, as cited in Smith, 2019).

Food sovereignty (FS), in contrast with the FJ movement, overtly opposes the corporate food regime and neoliberal ideology that dominate national and international food systems (Carney, 2012; McEntee & Naumova, 2012). The FS movement was popularized in the 1990s by the La Via Campesina peasant movement of the Global South (Brent et al., 2015), which seeks to secure the right of communities around the world “to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems” (Via Campesina, 2007, para. 3). FS activists envision regionally based food systems in which producers receive fair prices, farming communities are not reliant upon international trade, and activists engage in policy advocacy and protests to push for their visions (Desmarais, 2007; Holt-Giménez, 2006; McMichael, 2005, as cited in Alkon & Mares, 2012; Wittman, 2009). The U.S. has a growing FS movement inspired by the political objectives and visions for democratic food systems seen in the FS movement associated with La Via Campesina (Alkon & Mares, 2012; Brent et al., 2015). The U.S. FS movement draws upon the country’s complex history of class and racial justice inequities, especially involving Black Americans. Therefore, its priorities do not completely align with the priorities of the FS movements seen in the Global South (Brent et al., 2015).<sup>1</sup> The framework of racial justice in American FS activism contributes to the convergence of the FS and FJ movements in the U.S. context. The idea that America’s food system inequities are inextricably intertwined with racial and socioeconomic inequities is a foundational motivation of the FJ movement (Alkon, 2014).

The theoretical difference in the literature between FS and FJ movements primarily relates to their view on how to best effect change. FJ is seen as a progressive movement that resists but also coexists with the neoliberally minded corporate

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note there is also a push for FS among Native American communities that seeks to restore their rightful land occupancy and resist the assimilatory pressures they face and have faced from the American government (Norgaard et al., 2011). However, the Native American FS movement is not the focus of this review.

food system, whereas FS is seen as a radical movement whose ideology seeks to overturn neoliberal economic systems (Alkon & Mares, 2012; Holt-Giménez, 2010). While this theoretical distinction can be made in academia, it seems less relevant in practice to food activists in the literature and those on our foodNEST 2.0 team. Clendenning et al. (2016) interviewed food activists, academics, farmers, and other individuals involved in food movements in the U.S. (specifically New Orleans, Louisiana, and Oakland, California) to investigate how FJ and FS theory compares to practical applications. They found that urban U.S. food movements had ideologies aligning with both FJ and FS: FJ ideologies were seen more in the short-term goals of urban food movements (such as building community wealth), and FS ideologies were seen more in their long-term goals (such as addressing political and economic structures that exert substantial influence over the food regime).

## Methods

We conducted a systematic review to answer the research question: how do SEs interact with food justice and food sovereignty movements and their visions in order to realize more democratic and equitable local food systems in communities? This question was practically motivated by the community–university project foodNEST 2.0 and the debate in the literature (and lack of debate within the project team) surrounding the concepts of FJ and FS and the use of market-based solutions like social enterprises to address food system problems. As such, we decided to begin our research with a systematic review. A systematic review allows researchers to identify, analyze, and summarize existing research and is useful to map out areas of uncertainty and areas for new research (Petticrew

& Roberts, 2008). This review involved four stages: (1) developing a search strategy, (2) screening initial results, (3) screening full-text documents of selected literature, and (4) extracting data for analysis from selected literature. Methods were modeled on the preferred reporting items for systematic review and meta-analysis protocols (PRISMA-P), as explained by Shamseer et al. (2015).

To address the potential for bias, we designed a clear research question, developed clear search concepts and transparent inclusion and exclusion criteria, utilized standard search engines identified with the assistance of a university librarian, and included multiple reviewers on our team. We present our procedures in an easy-to-read flow chart in this section (Figure 1) and list the stages below. The first author was the lead researcher for all stages of the literature review. The second and third author co-developed the protocol (Stage 1), and then jointly reviewed the results at Stages 2–4. Decisions on eligibility were made via consensus.

### *Stage 1: Developing a Search Strategy*

The target body of literature for our research question included the specific overlap of SE, FS, and FJ literature. The inclusion criteria for the search included: (1) empirical research on how SEs have been used in the food system *and* (2) analysis of how the SEs studied contributed to the visions of the FS or FJ movement. Information sources included in the review were databases and search engines: Web of Science, ProQuest, and Google Scholar. These sources were selected through consultation with a university librarian.

The search terms we developed for use in these databases and search engines were based on four concepts, shown in Table 1. The first concept was the goal or outcome being studied: influence

**Table 1. Four Concepts Used to Develop Search Terms**

| Concept 1: Goal?       | Concept 2: How?                                   | Concept 3: Who? | Concept 4: Where?                     |
|------------------------|---|-----------------|---------------------------------------|
| Food sovereignty       | Social enterprise                                 | Community       | United States                         |
| Food justice           | Social entrepreneur                               | Local           | Global North                          |
| Democratic food system | Social economy<br>Social business<br>Third sector | Urban           | Neoliberal-leaning capitalist economy |

on the FS and FJ movements. The second concept characterized the means by which the outcome or goal was being approached: through SE, also known as “social entrepreneurship,” the “social economy,” or the “third sector.” The third concept included who does the work to achieve the outcome and the scale on which the work is done: the community, on a local level, especially in urban neighborhoods and neighborhoods of color. The fourth concept was the geographic context in which the interaction between social enterprise and food sovereignty was occurring: in the U.S., the Global North, and in a capitalist-leaning economy. Context is important to the outcomes and goals of social enterprises and the food sovereignty movement, and geographic location plays a large role in determining political, economic, and social context.

The final set of search terms used in ProQuest and Web of Science is included in Table 2. This set of terms included three of the four concepts described in Table 1; location (Concept 4 in Table 1) was omitted from search terms. We screened results by hand for location criteria because the inclusion of location phrases in search terms over-limited search results. We limited the “goal” and “how” concepts to abstracts (“AB=”), while the “who” concept was a topic search of the whole article and abstract (“TS=”). We did not use the above set of search terms in Google Scholar due to limitations in the Google Scholar Advanced Search Engine, which does not process Boolean operators and lacks specificity for complex searches. Instead, we used a hand-searching strategy in Google Scholar with the search terms listed in the third row of Table 2.

### *Stage 2: Screening Initial Results*

We conducted the searches in March and April 2021, placing no limitations on the searches for discipline of literature, date of publication, or location of publication. Our inclusion criteria included both peer-reviewed literature and non-peer-reviewed dissertations. We identified a total of 24 records in initial searches of the databases and Google Scholar, including five duplicates. Therefore, we checked 19 abstracts for applicability to the research question (Figure 1). We included records in the next stage of the systematic review only if the research focused on the U.S. or similar contexts (such as Australia, Canada, and European countries) and they were original research. Based on this selection criteria, we omitted six records and moved forward with 13 records for full-text analysis. The “Stage” labels in Figure 1 correspond to the stages described in Methods. While we acknowledge the inclusion of publication bias could be present because we did not include gray literature sources, the purpose of this search was to understand the conversation in the peer-reviewed literature.

### *Stage 3: Screening Full Texts of Selected Results*

In the full-text screening stage, our selection criteria consisted of original research, focus on the U.S. or similar contexts (such as Australia, Canada, and European countries), and focus on SE, FJ, and/or FS movements. After obtaining and reviewing full texts for applicability to the research question, we omitted four more records. Three of these were not original research, and one article focused on a food movement other than FS or FJ. Therefore, we systematically analyzed nine articles for this review.

**Table 2. Search Engines and Search Terms**

| Search Engine or Database | Search Terms   |
|---------------------------|--|
| Web of Science            | AB=(“food sovereignty” OR “food justice”) AND AB=(“social enterprise*” OR “social economy” OR “social entrepreneur*” OR “social business*” OR “third sector”) AND TS=(urban OR local OR community) |
| ProQuest                  | AB=(“food sovereignty” OR “food justice”) AND AB=(“social enterprise*” OR “social economy” OR “social entrepreneur*” OR “social business*” OR “third sector”) AND TS=(urban OR local OR community) |
| Google Scholar            | Hand-searched: food AND social AND enterprise AND (“food sovereignty” OR “food justice”) AND (sovereign OR justice OR urban OR local)  |

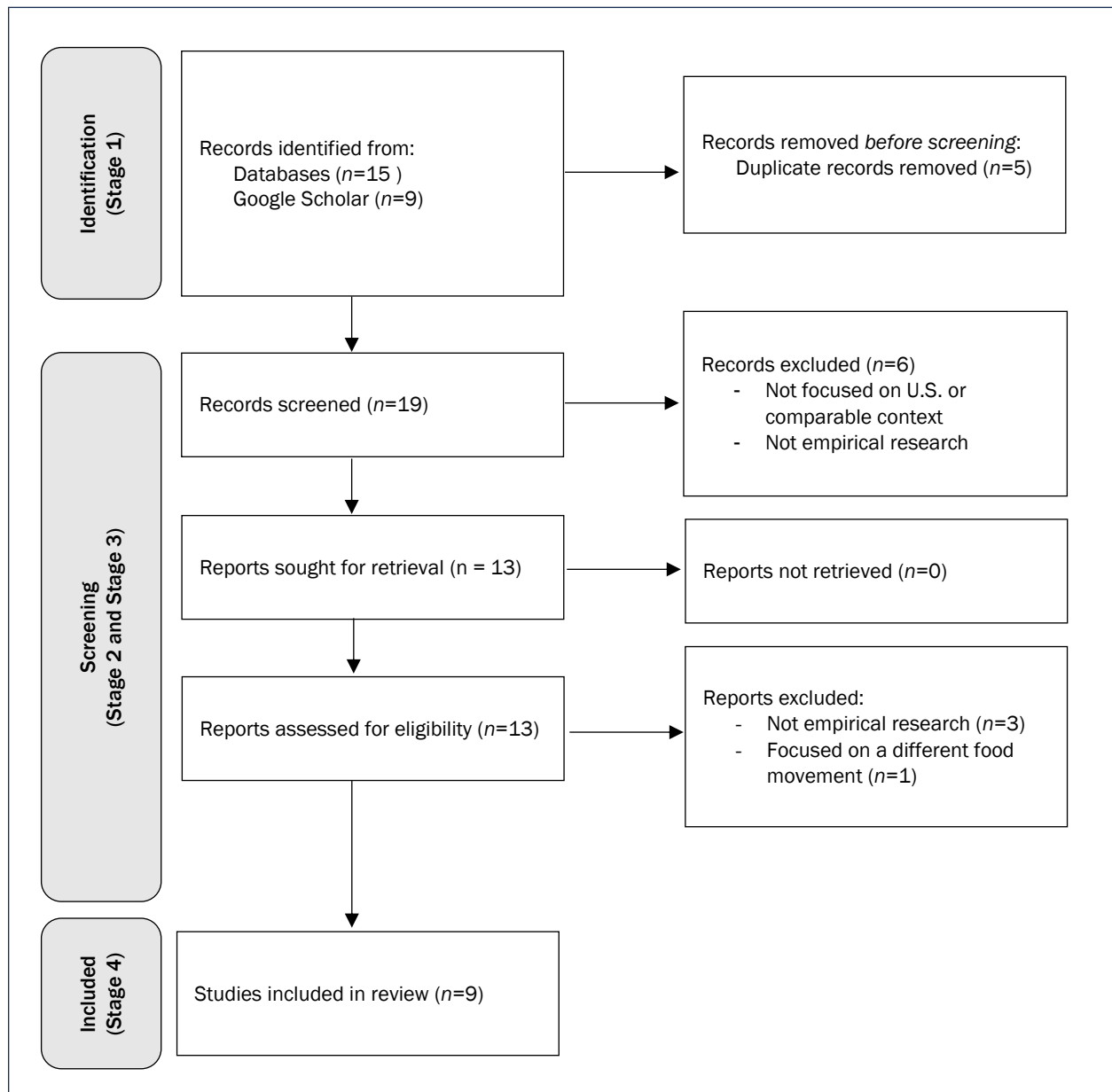
*Stage 4: Process of Data Extraction and Synthesis*

The data collection process for full-text records included an initial surface-level data extraction, followed by an in-depth coding process to record our outcomes of interest. The data was managed using Microsoft Excel.

The goal of the initial data extraction was to record basic information about the study and general characteristics of the SE(s) and food move-

ment(s) studied. We identified nine relevant criteria for this: keywords, geographical area of focus, methods for the study, type of SE in the study (based on business model, market activity, and other factors), how the SE was implemented in the food system, impact of the study, challenges for SE/FS/FJ, visions for FS/FJ held by subjects in the SE examples studied, and notable findings of the study. We recorded the number of SE exam-

**Figure 1. PRISMA Diagram Based on Guidelines from Page et al. (2021), Showing Article Selection Process**



The labels on the left correspond to stages of the search process in Methods.

ples provided in each article. Additionally, we recorded the definitions of FS/FJ and SE (or a comparable term, such as “food entrepreneurship”) as stated by authors in the articles, with an emphasis on common characteristics between article definitions.

Then, we used an in-depth coding process to record the specific characteristics of the SEs implemented in the food sector, as well as the tensions and contradictions between SE and FS/FJ that arose in the study. These were our outcomes of interest. We created two domains of codes for this process: Domain 1 for specific characteristics of SEs in the food sector, and Domain 2 for the tensions and contradictions recorded in the article between SE and FS/FJ. The codes in each domain had subcodes where applicable for further categorization of data. We sorted the codes into Domain 1 and Domain 2 based on how they were developed. Domain 1 codes were characteristics we identified as relevant before beginning the coding process, whereas Domain 2 codes were inductively determined as we read through articles (we did not identify these codes before starting the data extraction process). Additionally, Domains 1 and 2 differed in how they were measured—the frequency of codes was recorded for Domain 1 but not for Domain 2.

As explained previously, Domain 1 codes included empirical information about SE in practice, and they were established before beginning data extraction. The Domain 1 codes were explicit goals of the SE, business model of the SE, market activities of the SE, and challenges for the SE, as well as who runs the SE, who is employed by the SE, and who are the consumers or target audience of the SE. Because Domain 1 involved empirical characteristics of food-related SEs from the literature, such as the market activities of SEs, the frequency of Domain 1 subcodes occurring in articles was relevant to the analysis of SEs that have been implemented in the food system to further goals of the FS and FJ movements. We defined a “data point” as the presence of a subcode in an article; this subcode was attached to the specific SE example with which it was discussed. Each article focused on specific SE examples in practice. Some articles had up to six empirical SE examples, while others were case studies of one SE. If an article

discussed multiple SEs, then we identified the same subcode for different SEs and recorded multiple data points, when applicable. However, we did not double-count multiple subcode appearances for the same SE.

Unlike Domain 1, Domain 2 coding was inductively determined during the data extraction process. Domain 2 codes reflected on the tensions, contradictions, and important considerations that were identified throughout the systematic review. These codes included interactions between the intentions of an SE and its results, as well as theories of SE, FJ, and FS versus their practical results. Analysis for Domain 2 codes differed from those of Domain 1 due to the nature of the Domain 2 codes. Not all Domain 2 codes had subcodes beneath them, as further categorization of codes was not always applicable. Additionally, we did not tabulate data point frequencies for the Domain 2 codes, because the counts were not relevant for Domain 2 in the way they were for Domain 1. The appearance of a tension in only one article, for example, did not make that tension less relevant than a tension mentioned in multiple articles. Therefore, the synthesis of Domain 2 codes included noting tensions and contradictions that were present in the articles and analyzing how these interacted with other Domain 2 codes.

The process of coding for Domain 1 allowed us to explore patterns in the characteristics and goals of food-focused SEs studied in the literature, and Domain 2 coded how these SEs interacted with FS and FJ movements. We analyzed the relationship between Domain 1 codes and Domain 2 codes to understand how SEs in the food system favorably or unfavorably interact with FS and FJ movements—for example, how do the goals of the social enterprise (Domain 1) compare to their effect on the community (Domain 2)?

## Results

The nine articles systematically reviewed included 17 examples of SEs. Two articles, Alkon (2018) and Alkon et al. (2019), analyzed the same four SE examples from Oakland, California. We did not double-count these SE examples in the total number of SE examples stated above or in any coding processes, since the SEs had matching characteri-



zations in the Alkon articles. Geographic regions of study in the articles reviewed represented three countries, as shown in Table 3. Six articles included SE examples from the U.S. in Oakland, California; New Orleans, Louisiana; Burlington, Vermont; and Portland, Oregon. There were three articles with SE examples from Melbourne, Australia. One article focused on SE examples from France, specifically in Lyon. As a note, one article focused on SEs in both the U.S. and Australia, making the total number of articles listed with geographic locations greater than nine.

Table 3 also shows details about the SE examples in each article, including the name of the SE, its market activity, and its location. The total number of SE examples in each article is indicated next to the author's name.

Four articles provided a definition of FJ, two

articles provided a definition of FS, and three articles did not explicitly define FJ or FS. Common characteristics in FJ definitions included seeking social justice in health and food access disparities ( $n=3$ ); creating economic opportunity and local capital ( $n=2$ ); empowering local producers, food system actors, and marginalized voices ( $n=2$ ); providing an alternative to the conventional food system and/or the charitable food sector ( $n=2$ ); and increasing affordability and access to healthy food ( $n=2$ ). Common characteristics of FS definitions included bringing consumers and producers closer together ( $n=2$ ) and providing an alternative to the conventional food system ( $n=2$ ).

Eight articles defined SE or a term deemed comparable to SE, such as “food entrepreneur” or “entrepreneurial urban cultivation.” One article did not define SE explicitly. Common characteristics of

**Table 3. Descriptions of the Social Enterprise Examples in Each Article Included in the Systematic Review**

| Author ( $n$ =# of social enterprises) | Social Enterprise   | Market Activity  | Location                     |
|--|---|--|------------------------------|
| Alkon, 2018 ( $n=4$ )                  | Mandela Co-op   | Grocery store  | Oakland, California, U.S.    |
|  | Planting Justice  | Landscaping service  | Oakland, California, U.S.    |
|  | Red Bay Coffee  | Coffee shop (restaurant)   | Oakland, California, U.S.    |
|  | Town Kitchen  | Food delivery and catering service                                 | Oakland, California, U.S.    |
| Ballantyne-Brodie, 2020 ( $n=1$ )      | Peach 'n' Pear  | Distribution of local produce to consumers through produce boxes   | Melbourne, Australia         |
| Kato, 2020 ( $n=1$ )                   | 50 entrepreneurial urban cultivation growers                      | Producers selling produce to consumers and restaurants             | New Orleans, Louisiana, U.S. |
| Laidlaw and Magee, 2016 ( $n=2$ )      | Sweetwater Organization (SWO)                                     | Producers selling produce to restaurants                           | Milwaukee, Wisconsin, U.S.   |
|  | Centre for Education and Research in Environmental Strategies     | Producers selling produce to consumers (food box delivery service) | Melbourne, Australia         |
| Lanciano et al., 2019 ( $n=6$ )        | A 2 prés de chez vous   | Distribution of fruit and vegetable boxes to consumers             | Lyon, France                 |
|  | Arbralégumes  | Distribution of fruit and vegetable boxes to consumers             | Lyon, France                 |
|  | Passerelle d'Eau de Robec   | Grocery store  | Lyon, France                 |
|  | Marmite urbaine   | Catering service   | Lyon, France                 |
|  | VRAC  | Distribution as a buying group for organic products                | Lyon, France                 |
| Légumerie                              |   | Cooking workshops  | Lyon, France                 |
|  |   |  |                              |
| Macias, 2008 ( $n=1$ )                 | 4 organic market farmers associated with the Intervale Foundation | Producers selling produce to consumers at farmers markets          | Burlington, Vermont, U.S.    |
| McKay et al., 2018 ( $n=1$ )           | Food Justice Truck  | Grocery store  | Melbourne, Australia         |
| Waddell, 2016 ( $n=1$ )                | Village Market  | Grocery store  | Portland, Oregon, U.S.       |

SE definitions between articles included prioritizing community employment and building local capital ( $n=3$ ), prioritizing social needs over profit maximization ( $n=3$ ), decreasing or omitting reliance on grants and donations to fund the business ( $n=2$ ), the importance of using different measures of success than traditional economic efficiency ( $n=2$ ), and combining economic and social value creation ( $n=1$ ).

Table 4 summarizes the results of Domain 1 coding. Because each data point is attributed to one empirical SE example, the number of data points for a subcode can be greater than the number of articles. The table indicates when multiple data points of a subcode came from different SE examples within the same article (indicated by the number in parentheses next to an author's name).

The Domain 1 characteristics of SE examples provide insight into how SEs have been implemented in the food system with goals that further FS or FJ (Table 4). The most common and explicitly stated objective of SEs was facilitating community education and engagement ( $n=11$ ). Other goals included increasing community access to a diversity of fresh, healthy foods ( $n=9$ ); providing community employment opportunities ( $n=5$ ); furthering racial justice ( $n=4$ ); providing an alternative to the charitable food sector due to stigmas, lack of choice, and limitations of the model ( $n=3$ ); addressing basic human needs not met by market and public sectors ( $n=1$ ); and contributing to a positive environmental impact ( $n=1$ ). Most SEs were affiliated with larger existing organizations, often a nonprofit ( $n=6$ ), as opposed to standalone SEs, which were not affiliated with larger organizations ( $n=3$ ). Affiliation with a larger organization had both negative and positive consequences for the SEs.

SEs pursued a wide range of market activities related to the food system. Some SEs consisted of producers who distributed produce directly to consumers and local businesses like restaurants ( $n=4$ ), while other SEs acted as an intermediary between local producers and local consumers ( $n=4$ ). Equally common market activities of SEs included grocery stores ( $n=4$ ) and educational workshops, such as cooking classes ( $n=4$ ). Other less-common activities of SEs included catering and hosting events

( $n=3$ ); running a restaurant ( $n=1$ ); and landscaping ( $n=1$ ).

Ownership and employment were important characteristics in pursuing FS and FJ because SE owners and workers have the potential to benefit economically, socially, and politically from the business. Workers and owners were either beneficiaries or nonbeneficiaries (Lanciano et al., 2019). Only three of the 17 SEs were owned and operated by beneficiaries. One of these SE examples, in Alkon et al. (2019), was worker owned. More SEs ( $n=5$ ) prioritized the employment of beneficiaries and marginalized community members, but four of these examples came from Alkon (2018), in an article that emphasized how SEs in the food system can combat gentrifying neighborhoods and prevent displacement of long-term community members. Two SE examples were *explicitly* not owned by or staffed with beneficiaries. Notably, two articles with seven SE examples between them had no direct information about ownership or employee demographics.

The target consumer base of SEs included beneficiaries, nonbeneficiaries, or a mix of both. This was a relevant code to track, because consumers provide SEs with their market income and affect their financial sustainability, as well as their social goals. Five SE examples sought to increase the affordability of their products or services for lower-income consumers. Thirteen SE examples, on the other hand, targeted higher-income consumers who were able to pay higher prices for goods and services. This business model constituted an important pattern of SEs relying on higher-income consumers to fund their operations, while often seeking social goals such as helping people of lower-income demographics. Seven SE examples had price variation depending on the income level of the consumer, with higher-paying consumers allowing them to provide reduced or free prices for lower-income consumers.

SE is a business model that comes with challenges, both endogenous (within the control of the SE) and exogenous (outside the control of the SE). Endogenous challenges faced by the SE included business model confusion or inefficiency ( $n=4$ ); financial sustainability issues ( $n=3$ ), which were especially seen in SEs with for-profit and not-for-

**Table 4. Coding Results for Domain 1**

| Domain 1 Categories <sup>a</sup> |  | Codes (n=number of social enterprises)   |   |  |   |  |   |
|----------------------------------|--|--|---|--|---|--|---|
| <b>Explicit goals</b>            | Facilitate community education and engagement (n=11)   | Increase community access to fresh, healthy foods (n=9)                                      | Provide community employment opportunities (n=5)  | Promote racial justice, racial equity (n=4)                        | Provide alternative to the charitable food sector (n=3) | Address basic human needs not met by market and public sectors (n=1) | Contribute to a positive environmental impact (n=1) |
| <i>Citations</i>                 | <i>Alkon (2); Ballantyne-Brodie; Kato; Laidlaw and Magee (2); Lanciano et al. (2); Macias; McKay et al.; Waddell</i> | <i>Alkon; Ballantyne-Brodie; Laidlaw and Magee (2); Lanciano et al. (3); Macias; Waddell</i> | <i>Alkon (4); Waddell</i>   | <i>Alkon (4)</i>   | <i>Kato; Lanciano et al.; McKay et al.</i>              | <i>Laidlaw and Magee</i>   | <i>Laidlaw and Magee</i>                            |
| <b>Business model</b>            | Affiliated with larger nonprofit/existing organization (n=6)   | Standalone SE (n=3)  | Worker ownership (n=1)  |  |   |  |   |
| <i>Citations</i>                 | <i>Alkon (2); Laidlaw and Magee; Macias; McKay et al.; Waddell</i>   | <i>Alkon (2); Laidlaw and Magee</i>  | <i>Alkon</i>  |  |   |  |   |
| <b>Market activities</b>         | Producer distributing produce directly to consumers or local businesses (n=4)  | Grocery (n=4)  | Partner with producers to help with distribution to consumers and local businesses (n=4)              | Education (n=4)  | Catering and hosting events (n=3)                       | Restaurant (n=1)   | Landscape service (n=1)                             |
| <i>Citations</i>                 | <i>Kato; Laidlaw and Magee (2); Macias</i>   | <i>Alkon; Lanciano et al.; McKay et al.; Waddell</i>   | <i>Ballantyne-Brodie; Lanciano et al. (3)</i>   | <i>Lanciano et al. (4; for 2 this was a minor market activity)</i> | <i>Alkon; Kato; Lanciano et al.</i>                     | <i>Alkon</i>   | <i>Alkon</i>  |
| <b>Ownership and employees</b>   | Prioritize employing community members and beneficiaries, especially marginalized (n=5)                              | Owned and operated by people with a direct stake in equitable change (beneficiaries; n=3)    | Not owned by community members with direct stake; no preference for employing community members (n=2) | No data for SE employee or owner demographics (n=7)                |   |  |   |

**Table 4, continued.**

| Domain 1                         |   | Codes (n=number of social enterprises)  |   |   |
|----------------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| Categories                       |   |   |   |   |
| <b>Ownership and employees</b>   | Prioritize employing community members and beneficiaries, especially marginalized (n=5) | Owned and operated by people with a direct stake in equitable change (beneficiaries; n=3) | Not owned by community members with direct stake; no preference for employing community members (n=2) | No data for SE employee or owner demographics (n=7) |
| <i>Citations</i>                 | <i>Alkon (4); Waddell</i>   | <i>Alkon; Kato; Waddell</i>   | <i>Laidlaw and Magee; McKay et al.; Ballantyne-Brodie</i>   | <i>Macias, Lanciano et al. (6)</i>                  |
| <b>Consumers/target audience</b> | Higher-class consumers, willing to pay higher prices (n=13)                             | Different prices for some consumers based on income (n=7)                                 | Lower-income consumers, seeking to increase affordability/access (n=5)                                |   |
| <i>Citations</i>                 | <i>Alkon (4); Ballantyne-Brodie; Kato; Lanciano et al. (6); Macias</i>                  | <i>Alkon; Kato; Lanciano et al. (3); Macias; McKay et al.</i>                             | <i>Lanciano et al. (3); Macias; Waddell</i>   |   |
| <b>Challenges—Exogenous</b>      | Business model inefficiency (n=4)   | Financial sustainability (n=3)  | Balancing social and financial missions (n=2)   | Community perception of the SE (n=1)                |
| <i>Citations</i>                 | <i>Ballantyne-Brodie; Laidlaw and Magee; McKay et al.; Waddell</i>                      | <i>Ballantyne-Brodie; Lanciano et al.; McKay et al.</i>                                   | <i>Lanciano et al.; Waddell</i>   | <i>Waddell</i>                                      |
| <b>Challenges—Endogenous</b>     | Gentrification (n=4)  | Market entry and competition, threatening financial sustainability (n=3)                  | Unsupportive local/state/federal government policy (n=1)  |   |
| <i>Citations</i>                 | <i>Alkon (4)</i>  | <i>Laidlaw and Magee; Macias; Waddell</i>   | <i>Laidlaw and Magee</i>  |   |

<sup>a</sup> The number of articles in a code is indicated by “n=,” with the author’s names specified below each code. Numbers next to author names indicate that multiple SE examples in the article fit the code.

profit model overlaps; balancing social and financial missions of the SE ( $n=2$ ); and poor community perception of the SE due to misjudgments and insensitive actions by the SE or its employees ( $n=1$ ). Exogenous challenges included gentrifying forces in the communities SE sought to help ( $n=4$ ); market entry and competition struggles, which threatened financial sustainability ( $n=3$ ); and unsupportive local, state, or federal government policy contexts ( $n=1$ ).

Moving to Domain 2, this systematic review showed that the intentions of SEs are not always realized in their outcomes. An example is green gentrification, in which “green” SEs (those that are environmentally conscious, promote healthy foods and lifestyles, use organic and local terminology, etc.) contribute to trendy “green” food cultures in cities, which have been shown to raise property values and drive displacement of long-time community residents (Alkon et al., 2019). Alkon et al. (2019) recorded green gentrification tensions for four SEs located in communities battling rising living costs and real estate values. This tension contradicts the social goals of SEs, which seek to prevent displacement of employees by providing living wages and educational support. Alkon et al. (2019) argues that the SEs in Oakland, California, themselves may have contributed to the green gentrification forces seen there.

Another recorded tension explains a reason why green SEs may be associated with green gentrification: assumptions about consumer food preferences based on income, class, and race. Green SEs may signal that a neighborhood is ready for real estate investment by attracting wealthier clientele who did not previously frequent the area, according to the assumption that local and organic foods are purchased more often by higher-income consumer bases. Several articles discussed this assumption (Alkon, 2018; Kato, 2020; Lanciano et al., 2019; Waddell, 2016). Targeting wealthy clientele with local or artisan products allowed the SEs to generate more market income in most of these examples (Alkon, 2018; Kato, 2020; Lanciano et al., 2019; Waddell, 2016). SEs in other articles sought to challenge this income-based assumption regarding consumer preferences, as they based their business models on providing local and organic foods

at affordable and reduced prices for low-income consumers (Lanciano et al., 2019; Macias, 2008; McKay et al., 2018).

A few articles discuss the effectiveness of SE as a market-based approach to address food system inequities. Some of the SE examples in Alkon (2018) were unable to prevent the displacement of their employees from the community, despite providing living wages. A few authors argue this does not render SEs ineffective, though. Alkon (2018) proposes that SEs as market-based activities can motivate change on a scale larger than themselves, such as by raising the profile of marginalized groups participating in the local food system. Another perspective in Ballantyne-Brodie (2020) argues that an extensive network of small-scale SEs can together create a movement that pushes larger-scale change. Although SEs having some potential to motivate larger-scale change, many articles concluded that market-based activities are limited in furthering the goals of the FS and FJ movements (Alkon, 2018; Kato, 2020; Macias, 2008; Waddell, 2016). Alkon et al. (2019) also emphasized advocacy as a necessary complement so SEs can effect change in the current food system.

## Discussion

As mentioned in the introduction, foodNEST 2.0, our community-based systems dynamic project, identified social enterprises as a potential lever to catalyze community empowerment and sovereignty, to bring equity and, ultimately, food justice. In the face of theoretical contradictions and gaps in the ideologies of FS and FJ (FS is based on the rejection of neoliberalism, whereas FJ supports entrepreneurship and market-based initiatives to further food system equity), our review sought to explore interrelations between SE, FS, and FJ and explain how they may be compatible in facilitating more democratic and equitable local food systems in U.S. communities. We find evidence that there is potential for the interactions between food SE and FS/FJ movements to be both compatible and incompatible. Compatible interactions may include increasing community employment, building community wealth, and raising marginalized voices; incompatible interactions may include the limited ability of SE to address issues like community

employability, the perpetuation of stigmas against marginalized groups, and the threat of green gentrification.

Beginning with theory, this review finds commonalities between the definitions of FS/FJ movements and SE. Generally, FS/FJ and SE support community agency and self-determination in addressing local issues, rather than relying on prescriptive solutions from external, noncommunity powers (such as the federal government). Further, SE and FJ definitions both include building local capital and prioritizing community employment to create local economic opportunity as goals. The potential alignment in these goals may be a mechanism through which SE can further the goals of the FJ movement. Both FS and FJ definitions have a common goal of providing an alternative to the conventional, mostly market-based food system.

We identified at least four important empirical characteristics of SEs that inform how they may interact with FS and FJ movements: (1) SE ownership and employee demographics, (2) the business model of the SE (degree of self-sustainability), (3) aspects of the food system targeted by the SE via market activities, and (4) target consumer base.

In terms of SE ownership demographics, the most notable finding of this review is that a substantial proportion of the articles (two articles accounting for seven out of 17 SE examples) do not mention the demographics of SE owners. Owners of SEs are particularly important in deciding how profits of the SE are reinvested and who it employs, in addition to its business model—all factors that play a primary role in determining the SE's interaction with FJ and FS movements. Additionally, when a SE owner comes from a marginalized group, they may be better able to raise the voices of other marginalized individuals in the community. As the concepts of ownership and agency are central themes in FS and FJ movements, the lack of data on SE ownership shows that this is an area calling for more scholarship to understand how a SE can interact with FJ/FS.

The employment of community members is one strategy a SE can use to build local capital—a priority which aligns with the goals of FJ. There are other ways to build local capital, such as through the development of community education and

engagement programs. The SEs in this review were more likely to use the latter approach to building local capital than to prioritize community member employment, according to the “explicit goal” code of Domain 1. While we know both strategies can be effective, this finding raises the question of the relative impact of each strategy: for an organization with limited resources, what approach should they focus on to maximize their community impact and their business efficiency? More research is needed to answer this question.

Although community employment may be particularly effective in furthering FJ, there were varying levels of success for SEs in this review that used this strategy. For example, Alkon (2018) described the Town Kitchen SE, which employed community members and provided support to employees in getting a college education by providing letters of recommendation, mentorship, and a living wage. Town Kitchen helped employees develop real-world skills to increase their qualifications for future jobs, showing how community employment can be a form of education and training for community members (in addition to a source of income). Town Kitchen was the only SE in this review that explicitly sought to provide educational opportunities for its employees to further enhance their individual capital. Other SEs found it difficult to employ community members, which they attributed to a lack of qualifications. In Waddell (2016), the “Village Market” SE sought to employ community members when possible, but it had to pull workers from outside the community when there was difficulty finding residents with appropriate skills and motivation to serve its mission. This demonstrates that there are other systemic issues regarding worker education and training that may hinder an SE's ability to hire from the community, as SEs alone cannot deliver or facilitate all necessary training and education needed to pull employees from the community. Other initiatives to improve worker education and training must coexist in marginalized communities to help SEs further FJ through community employment (such as government-funded training and education initiatives).

The next empirical characteristic of SE that informs how it interacts with FJ and FS move-

ments is its business model. Two important aspects of business models that should be considered are the self-sustainability of a SE and its target consumer base. Self-sustaining SEs include those in which most income comes from market activities or is otherwise self-generated. A non-self-sustaining SE relies more on grants and charitable contributions than a self-sustaining SE. As such, these SEs may find their dependence on external resources impacts their organizational and management decisions to align with external objectives, perhaps counter to the goals of FJ and FS movements (Malatesta & Smith, 2014). Since a major goal of FJ is community empowerment, self-sustaining SEs may more effectively empower communities than non-self-sustaining ones. A self-sustaining business model may also allow a SE to provide an alternative to the charitable food sector, which was a goal of three SEs in this review based on the “explicit goal of SE” Code (from Domain 1).

The third empirical characteristic of SE we identified as important for understanding how the SE interacts with food movements is the market activity of the SE. Market activities can be classified based on how they engage with the food system (for example, as a grocery store or a restaurant). Some modes of engagement with the food system in this review had high barriers to entry, hindering SEs’ ability to be competitive and sustainable. Ideally, SEs should be competitive with other businesses in the area so they can stay open and further FS/FJ. Grocery SEs struggled with competitiveness. The Village Market in Waddell (2016), a grocery SE, had difficulty keeping prices of items low enough to be competitive with large supermarkets. To target lower-income community members, prices and quality had to be comparable to those of other grocers because there is often little product differentiation between items from a grocery SE and a supermarket. Another difficult aspect of the food system targeted by SEs was producers distributing produce directly to consumers or local businesses. In Macias (2008), organic market farmers struggled to enter the local produce market because many local businesses already had contracts with well-established producers and distributors. SEs may still have market activities in the

grocery and direct-to-consumer distribution sectors and be successful, but SE owners should be aware of and address potential challenges that may arise due to the nature of the food system aspect targeted.

The last empirical characteristic of SEs identified as important were the target consumer base. SEs were more likely to target higher-income consumers that could pay higher prices, rather than lower-income consumers by trying to increase affordability of the SEs’ products or services ( $n=13$  versus  $n=5$ ). For many SEs, if income is a primary goal, setting prices may involve a choice between self-sustainability and improving affordability for community members, because targeting higher-income consumers generates more income for the SE than targeting lower-paying consumers. A potential strategy to address this choice may be for SEs to offer different prices based on consumer income. In McKay et al. (2018), Food Justice Truck attracted a mix of customers, with some paying full price and others receiving a discount based on their level of need. Income from full-paying customers allowed the Food Justice Truck to offer discounted prices to customers with lower income (asylum seekers, in this case). A consideration for price discrimination is the stigma that may come with it in practice. At the Food Justice Truck, lower-income consumers were required to ask employees about price reductions, since these were not listed on shelves, which many customers reported as embarrassing. Another approach that allows SEs to target lower-income customers without compromising self-sustainability is government coupons. For the organic market farmers in Macias (2008), state-sponsored coupons offered discounted prices for low-income consumers, and customers not using the coupons paid full price. Lastly, because price discrimination allows a SE to target high-income consumers, green gentrification must be considered as an unintended consequence. SEs may signal a rise in property values in an area due to an impending influx of higher-income consumers in the neighborhood, which potentially hinders the SE’s ability to help the people it seeks to empower. To resist green gentrification most effectively, Alkon (2018) argues that SEs must be owned by or employ community members vulnerable to dis-

placement and provide a living wage.

With these findings about SEs and their interactions with FS and FJ, we now return to the FoodNEST 2.0 project to understand how these concepts fit food systems models. A core modeling team of about 10 researchers and 20 community members, including nutrition and agriculture educators, grassroots food justice advocates, community leaders living in historically redlined neighborhoods, nonprofit leaders, emergency food assistance providers, public health practitioners, and local government staff. The team used a “deliberative, situated approach” to create a systems model that reinforces nutrition equity (Glickman et al., 2022; Freedman et al., 2021). At its foundation, a deliberative, situated approach is participatory action research (PAR) that aims to share power and translate knowledge into action. PAR is coupled with a deliberative and inclusive process and systems thinking situated in lived experience. Through a three-year process, the team determined nutrition equity as an aspirational goal for local food systems, defined as “freedom, agency, and dignity in food traditions resulting in people and communities healthy in mind, body, and spirit” (Freedman et al., 2021, p. 8).

A model built on systems thinking enabled the team to see the components, the relationship between components, and the feedback in the food system, all of which give rise to nutrition equity. In this way, we can picture the ways that SE, FS, and FJ are embedded and interdependent in a neoliberal society. Given the purpose of the systems model, we can also see the levers that create change throughout the system.

The system dynamics model of nutrition equity had three major feedback domains: (1) meeting basic food needs (such as through emergency food provisioning or government assistance) with dignity, (2) providing supply and demand for fresh and healthy foods (through market mechanisms), and (3) supporting community empowerment and food sovereignty (Freedman et al., 2021). Connecting meeting basic food needs with these three domains suggests a need for “both/and” thinking, attending to feedback in systems by simultaneously meeting today’s needs, attending to market-based changes (at least in the neoliberal context), and

facilitating empowerment. Both/and thinking suggests that solutions might need to simultaneously address food insecurity by providing food today (short-term), while attending to increasing wages (longer-term) and still aiming for an ultimate goal of self-determination (systems change). Only focusing on today’s needs will not solve the problem, and only focusing on market solutions does not feed people today, nor does it change systems of oppression. In the FoodNEST 2.0, this focus on longer-term and systems-change outcomes was reinforced by inclusion of community power building as a feedback mechanism related to community empowerment and food sovereignty as well as the other two domains of feedback. Furthermore, the FoodNEST 2.0 team identified voter engagement as an exogenous factor that would accelerate or delay nutrition equity.

In “both/and” thinking, it is critical to emphasize that the third domain, community empowerment and food sovereignty, has the potential to be a countervailing force to structures of racism embedded in the first two. As such, it becomes a leverage point for changing the dynamics of both emergency feeding and retail markets. Therefore, SEs alone are unlikely to shift communities into a state of FS or FJ, although they may contribute to more democratic and equitable food systems. In addition, reflecting on the literature review, a SE must attend to key design questions—for whom, with whom, and by whom. SEs centering community assets and leadership may be more likely to transform the food system.

This literature review is limited by the fact that we chose to review only dissertations and peer-reviewed, published literature to understand how SEs have been implemented and systematically documented in the food system. It is likely that SEs have been implemented that aim for FJ or FS and are documented elsewhere, such as government reports.

## Conclusion

Market-based solutions are often counterposed to movements for justice and sovereignty, but this distinction appears to be irrelevant in the U.S., given our experience in practice. Indeed, our university–community group spent three years




developing a food systems model that illustrated the relationships between the two. Examining this relationship, our systematic review of the literature finds that SEs come in many forms and engage in many different markets, but they have some common goals, such as facilitating community education and engagement, increasing access to healthy foods, and providing community employment opportunities. Further, we find that intersections of SE, FS, and FJ are about supporting community agency and self-determination. In order to do this, attention must be paid to who creates and owns an SE and who benefits from the business model, while simultaneously contending with market-based realities that can impact the ability to pursue FS and FJ goals.

Examining the relationship between SEs and FJ and FS, we are reminded that food systems change requires systems thinking. In a neoliberal context, this means that markets exist within the same sets of relationships as justice and sovereignty, suggesting that SEs can be a lever for change. Because SEs are based within the food system, it is important to be cognizant of unintended consequences (such as green gentrification and reinforcing elitism). However, systems thinking also reminds us that changing only a single variable (such as an individual enterprise) or set of relationships in a larger system will not create systems change. Instead, we must continue to leverage

entire domains to counteract historical forces of racism embedded within the system. We build on a call by Allen (1999) for a “both/and” approach to systems change: market-based solutions AND emergency feeding AND community empowerment, with attention to modulating current factors in the system that can accelerate equity for communities and their members, while maintaining a long-view focus on changing the rules that perpetuate inequities in the food system over time.

This review points to at least three areas for future research. First, further empirical exploration of the relationships between FS/FJ and SE such as community agency, self-determination, and building local capital is needed. We suggest focusing on the potentially important characteristics of SEs, such as ownership and employee demographics, the business model of the SE, aspects of the food system targeted by the SE, and the target consumer base. A community-based participatory systems modeling approach could be taken as was done in foodNEST 2.0. Second, to take this further, one could go about validating the underlying assumptions of these relationships via techniques such as stock-and-flow modeling. Finally, funding support from the Foundation of Food and Agriculture Research (FFAR) was critical to the development of foodNEST 2.0. Future research could examine how different funders conceptualize and support research and practice focus on the FS/FJ movements and SEs.



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