

Setting tables for community food sovereignty: Building a food sovereignty toolkit

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Submitted July 5, 2024 / Revised September 30, December 6, and December 16, 2024 /
Accepted December 16, 2024 / Published online April 14, 2025


Citation: Schanbacher, W., Bumbaca, D., Jones, L., Vidal, A., Barros-Adwell, C., Olivieri, A., & Kue, J. (2025).
Setting tables for community food sovereignty: Building a food sovereignty toolkit. *Journal of Agriculture, Food
Systems, and Community Development*, 14(2), 367–382. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2025.142.019>


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Abstract


This reflective essay outlines the collaboration between a university and community partners to develop a community-based food sovereignty assessment (CFSA) and toolkit, and the challenges and key insights that were gained. Our core research question was to explore how we could develop and deploy the concept of food sov-

erignty in an industrialized, urban environment. Using community-based research (CBR) methods that included photo elicitation, field observation, community meals, focus groups, and GIS mapping workshops, we worked with two underserved, food-insecure communities in Tampa, Florida, to develop an understanding of their assets and needs. All partners in the research team have worked with


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Competing Interests

The authors do not have any conflicts of interests.

Funding Disclosure

The study was funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (NR223A750001G052).

the two communities for over four years, and reflect on the successes and challenges of community-based research on food sovereignty. Community insights helped identify gaps in urban agriculture education, which helped craft a community-centered curriculum around urban agriculture that ultimately resulted in the creation of a food sovereignty toolkit.

Keywords

food sovereignty, community-based research, partnership, empowerment, food security, photo elicitation

Introduction

Officially coined in 1996 by La Via Campesina, an international peasant movement that began in the Global South, the concept and the social movement of food sovereignty took the global stage in 2007 at the Conference of Nyéléni, in Mali (Desmarais, 2007; Desmarais et al., 2010; Holt-Giménez, 2018). Composed of small-scale farmers, landless and Indigenous peoples, fisherfolk and pastoralists, the Conference asserted that food sovereignty is the “right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems” (Forum for Food Sovereignty, 2007, p. 1). In the Global North, food sovereignty movements are enacting projects that are “appropriate to the diverse social and ecological contexts” (Weiler et al. 2015, p. 1080) of urban and rural environments (García-Sempere et al., 2018; Resler & Hagolani-Albov, 2021), and that focus on enriching agro-ecological knowledge and building context-specific local action. Based on principles of local food production, knowledge sharing, respect for the natural environment, and the sacred value of the land and its agricultural gifts, food sovereignty presents a vision and a practice for creating a more healthy and equitable food system (Desmarais, 2015). Food sovereignty recognizes the systemic and pervasive influences of corporate, political, and gendered power dynamics that negatively affect food systems. Food sovereignty thus frequently incorporates food justice ideals that inspire innovative research into better understanding where food

comes from, under what labor conditions it is produced, and whether healthy, environmentally sustainable, and culturally meaningful food is accessible to all (García-Sempere et al., 2019; Schanbacher, 2019).

Food sovereignty research provides an alternative way to think about the problem of food insecurity (Schanbacher & Fung Uy, 2023). Food security is defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) as “when all people at all times have physical, social and economic access to food, which is safe and consumed in sufficient quantity and quality to meet their dietary needs and food preferences...allowing for a healthy and active life” (2012, p. 9). Although food security has been well researched nationally and globally (Carney, 2012; Clapp, 2014; FAO, 2023; Hopma & Woods, 2014; Rabbitt et al., 2023; Weiler et al., 2015), the food sovereignty concept challenges top-down solutions to food security that do not adequately take into account local and Indigenous knowledges (Schanbacher, 2010). In particular, food sovereignty provides a path for local communities to challenge the pervasive influence of corporate agriculture and food production and engage in action-oriented projects in local food systems. These initiatives are not only influencing national and state agricultural and food production policies, such as Florida Senate Bill 82 (Florida Senate Community Affairs Committee, 2019), which prohibits local government from regulating vegetable gardens on residential properties, but are also encouraging community-centered solutions. Communities with the capacity and vested interest in changing their food system are better equipped to share knowledge and experience about food related activities, such as regional gardening techniques, regenerative agricultural practices, favorite recipes, as well as local physical and individual resources.

In the U.S., small-scale farms, urban farms, and community and home gardens are joining together to implement food sovereignty practices (Méndez et al., 2013). Food sovereignty initiatives have only recently taken root in organizations such as the US Food Sovereignty Alliance, which aims to promote the original, international mission of food sovereignty in the U.S. The alliance brings together

“food justice, anti-hunger, labor, environmental, faith-based, and food producer groups” to promote the human right to food (U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance, n.d.). As the Alliance rightly notes, building food sovereignty in the U.S. must take into account its unique historical forms of marginalization of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) groups, as well as the relationship between those urban and rural populations that face the highest rates of food insecurity.

This reflective essay provides an overview of the processes of implementing a community-based research (CBR) project to investigate food sovereignty in underserved communities in Tampa, Florida, U.S., and the lessons learned.¹ In order to build an urban food sovereignty initiative in our community, we developed a systems-thinking approach that examined existing federal, state, and local nutritional programming, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Women, Infants and Children program (WIC), as well as grassroots organizations. These programs address food insecurity—specifically, gaps in food access—to improve health outcomes in low-income populations. SNAP and WIC coverage rates vary by state; in Florida, an estimated 418,000 individuals were covered by WIC in 2023. Federal interventions, such as the pairing of Fresh Access Bucks (FAB), a statewide nutrition incentive program in Florida that increases the purchasing power of SNAP recipients to buy fresh fruits and vegetables (feedingflorida.org, 2024), presented an opportunity to explore ways in which local programming could promote these goals. Furthermore, federal interventions largely supported urban agriculture and other food initiatives that contributed to mitigating food insecurity and improving healthy food access based on the pillars of food sovereignty.

The Project: WellFed Community—A Culture-Centered Approach to Incorporating Food Sovereignty in Food Security Solutions
Systemic problems contributing to food insecurity motivated two organizations in the greater Tampa Bay area to develop a partnership to analyze cur-

rent food sovereignty work and identify creative solutions for addressing food insecurity. The University of South Florida’s Food Sovereignty Initiative (FSI), and WellFed Community, a not-for-profit organization, came together to strategize ways to build community food sovereignty, improve the food security of individuals and households, and bolster health equity through a CBR approach. The project aimed to a) assess the gaps and strengths in urban agriculture education; b) develop a toolkit for assessing a community’s understanding of food sovereignty, and c) create a strategic plan for successful and sustainable implementation of food sovereignty programming that could drive conversation in public policy related to food access and health equity.

Our project focused on four zip codes (33604, 33605, 33612, and 33613) outside the urban core of Tampa. The 33604 and 33605 zip codes are referred to as the East Tampa Area Community (ETAC) and the 33612 and 33613 codes are referred to as the University Area Community (UAC). These zip codes represent a diverse community across racial, ethnic, and economic dimensions, offering a rich opportunity to learn from varied perspectives. The U.S. Census Bureau in 2022 reported that these zip codes had a total population of 144,545 in 2022 (2023b). The median household incomes in the zip codes—33604 (\$73,739); 33605 (\$48,829); 33612 (\$54,952); and 33613 (\$66,882)—are on average 31% lower than the Florida median household income of \$96,992 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023a). While these incomes are a community average, those with slightly higher incomes would generally be considered more among the ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) population. The ALICE population, more commonly known as those who live paycheck to paycheck, are constantly balancing the high cost of living, including housing, childcare, and transportation costs, with other needs to subsist in a precarious balance that can easily turn unstable by unforeseen deleterious employment, health, or other events, including natural disasters or other unforeseen disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic. As of 2022, 46% of Florida households were below

¹ The University of South Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB 005039) approved this study.

the ALICE threshold (United for ALICE, 2023). However, in Hillsborough County, where Tampa is located, there are major economic differences within neighborhoods that might not be completely captured by the ALICE figures. Our target zip code, 33605, includes a larger percentage of African Americans (52%) than the national average (12.5%), and the 33612 and 33613 zip codes have diverse racial compositions, with larger Hispanic or Latino populations of 41.2% and 33.8%, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023b).

Community Partners

This project was made possible by a grant from the U. S. Department of Agriculture. The design and implementation of the project was led by WellFed Community, a program of a local nonprofit with support from the University of South Florida's FSI, FHEED LLC, and community stakeholders.

The Well Incorporated. This partnership was intentionally composed of community organizations and academic institutions to ensure commitment to values of dignity and reciprocal relationships while also ensuring project outcomes. The Well Incorporated (the Well), a nonprofit organization and the project lead community organization, was established in 2014 with the mission to address questions and solutions related to health inequity, food insecurity and improved nutrition. The organization operates weekly food distributions through their mobile food pantry that collaborates with local community gardens, food banks and other food distribution agencies to provide free food to underserved communities. It conducts food education programs and cooking classes that incorporate recipes from community suggestions as process to build direct relationships with the people they serve. It's model for the mobile pantry is grounded in the food sovereignty notion of bringing a more dignified experience to food distribution programs (De Souza, 2019; Martin, 2021).

The FSI was established in 2019 as a transdisciplinary research group that draws on different disciplinary perspectives to build creative solutions to food insecurity. Rooted in the core principles of food sovereignty and agroecology, the FSI includes three focus areas: research, community engagement, and curriculum development. The FSI

includes faculty from across the three University of South Florida (USF) campuses (Tampa, St. Petersburg, and Sarasota) and from the departments of Sociology, Religious Studies, Anthropology, History, the College of Public Health, the College of Nursing, the School of Public Affairs, and the Patel College of Global Sustainability. Having an academic arm of this partnership enabled due process and credibility of findings.

FHEED LLC and Anthony Olivieri, MURP.

Founded in 2011 by Anthony Olivieri, FHEED LLC (Food Health Environment Economic Development) is a consultancy dedicated to promoting food sovereignty and health justice through innovative community food systems planning, geographic information system (GIS) analysis, and policy advocacy (FHEED LLC, n.d.). FHEED champions the right of communities to govern their food systems democratically, working with local government agencies and community organizations to develop policies that foster sustainable, equitable food systems and enhance health equity. Their efforts focus on creating systemic changes that support environmental sustainability and community well-being.

Community Stakeholders. The success of the project is a testament to the collaboration of diverse organizations and communities, each playing a vital role in its realization. In addition to The Well and the FSI, this project was made possible through collaboration by the University Area Community Development Corporation Inc. (UACDC), Cornerstone Family Ministries, the Coalition of Community Gardens, The Dream Center, Hillsborough County Extension Office, Uptown Eagles, and other departments of USF. These partners bring a wealth of knowledge, resources, and community connections to the table, amplifying our collective efforts towards achieving food security and fostering sustainable community development in Hillsborough County.

Methods

The FSI and WellFed Community's commitment to the food sovereignty principal of local knowledge sharing, and their plan to develop a food sovereignty toolkit that would be applicable for our communities, made community-based

research the most appropriate research model to employ. The following section outlines our process and context specific application of community-engaged research.

Community-Based Research

We implemented a CBR framework, which offers a more inclusive learning environment and the potential for sustained community engagement that is necessary for building social capital and empowering citizens to have a voice in decisions that affect their livelihoods (Carney et al., 2011; Pine & de Souza, 2013). With its emphasis on community engagement, CBR was the ideal framework for this project as it allowed us to explore and develop food sovereignty values and pillars in our community (Sánchez et al., 2021). Moreover, CBR would help us better understand the locally specific knowledge necessary for including agroecology in food sovereignty research (Méndez et al., 2013). Agroecology is a holistic approach to agriculture that incorporates ecological and social concepts and principles in the design and management of agriculture and food systems. It “seeks to optimize the interactions between plants, animals, humans and the environment while also addressing the need for socially equitable food systems within which people can exercise choice over what they eat and how and where it is produced” (FAO, n.d., par. 1). CBR emphasizes balancing power dynamics between researchers and participants, reducing skepticism towards researchers and encouraging more reflexive, respectful, and culturally sensitive research practices, consistent with the core principles of agroecology. The ability to share context-specific knowledge, particularly with respect to food-related activities such as community gardening and cooking demonstrations, served as another method to integrate community voices and perspectives (Flicker et al., 2007). Our commitment to CBR led to an evolving project plan as we incorporated community input. For example, as more community members engaged in our programming activities, they offered insights that provided a nuanced understanding of community dynamics that, in turn, proved helpful for developing an adaptive program design. Our previous research experience highlights the importance of engaging

community members in project planning in order to recognize local wisdom, knowledge, and points of view that may be different from those of the research team (Sabir et al., 2009). Acknowledging community needs and preferences is critical for tailoring a project to a specific community and fostering collaborative partnerships to produce locally rooted solutions (Wallerstein et al., 2019). From this process, we produced our food sovereignty toolkit (www.foodsovereigntytoolkit.com).

Focus Groups

Initially, the intention was to host four focus groups with community stakeholders in each of the two identified zip codes, for a total of eight meetings. The focus groups design included: (a) a Local Community Champions Focus Group to engage participants from organizations who lived in the community (Posner, 2015; Worthy et al., 2016), such as the football coach, employees of the community center, and engaged parents; (b) an Art Based Focus Group, utilizing an Arts Based Research (ABR) approach, which would help participants to convey truths or bring about awareness of everyday experiences with food, and help them to express their ideas related to community food programming (Gerber et al., 2018); (c) an Asset Mapping Focus Group which would utilize community input to develop a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of food, nutrition, and health-related community resources; (d) a Cultural Foods Focus Group that would provide a hands-on exercise that would aid participants in identifying the cultural nuances of their relationship with food by sharing their understanding of different foods that are grown and used across cultures.

While these focus groups were great in theory, low attendance required our team to pivot and think of new ways to utilize the principles of CBR more inclusively and engagingly. Conducting focus groups in underserved areas presented several persistent challenges. Logistics such as transportation, time constraints, and competing responsibilities were reasons we heard from community members for barriers to participation. People often expressed distrust of formal research processes due to past experiences of being excluded from decision making or research efforts. Cultural and lin-

guistic differences, along with varying levels of health and research literacy, further complicated engagement, leading participants to feel uncomfortable or disconnected from the research process (Aldridge, 2019; Bonevski et al., 2014).

As a result, the research team decided to host community meals that would create intentional conversation around food. To prepare, WellFed Community hired two members of the University Area neighborhood, one of whom was Spanish-speaking, to design flyers and help promote the event to neighbors. Hiring community representatives also helped us better align our project with the food sovereignty themes of giving voice to local knowledge and uplifting culturally relevant foods. The community representatives more accurately reflected the ethnic, racial, and linguistic backgrounds of the community. Under the guidance of the onboarded representatives, we arrived at the innovative model of hosting, in each neighborhood, three community meals (expanded on below in the Lessons Learned section), followed by an intensive asset mapping workshop, and simultaneously conducting program evaluations of existing food sovereignty interventions.

Community Meals

In part, our community meals were designed by community feedback in which people expressed how they enjoyed sharing recipes from their cultural background, appreciated home-cooked meals, and felt a sense of dignity when they could share food over a common table with their neighbors. Drawing from these community insights, the project team planned and facilitated further meals to foster relationships with and between our community members and the organizations working in our research zip codes.

Our team hosted a total of four meals in our target community over the project period of 18 months. Depending on the neighborhood where the meal was hosted, the dishes were home-cooked and included seasonal local produce, health-conscious options, and culturally inspired dishes. We hosted our first community meal at the Harvest Hope Community Garden located centrally in the University Area Community (UAC). More than a dozen neighbors attended the event with a propor-

tional representation of the African American and Latino/a communities. Families also brought their children, which proved both informative and challenging, in a positive way. Children's perspectives offered new insights with which to think about how our program was received in the community; they also produced chatter, laughter, and loud voices that made it challenging to record conversations and take detailed field notes. At our subsequent community meals, we planned for onsite childcare that encouraged participation for those with families, while also engaging youth. Furthermore, the project team was dispersed throughout the group to better observe and engage in intimate conversations.

During meals we used various data collection methods, including notetaking and facilitator feedback forms (WellFed Community, 2024a), photo and video elicitation (Shannon et al., 2020; Wang & Burris, 1997), and focus group discussion questions to acquire quantitative and qualitative data to supplement the valuable input of the participants (see the Appendix). In alignment with the innate values of CBR methods, our facilitator feedback form not only focused on the demographics and outputs of the event, but concluded with a reflective exercise with questions inspired by the cookbook *Cooking with Five Senses* by Rita Bumbaca (1990).

To conceptualize food sovereignty in specific local terms, our team decided to utilize story telling through photographs as a way to convey food sovereignty themes of respecting human dignity, sharing diverse local knowledges of our community members, and identifying culturally significant stories about food. In our design, we elicited photographs by asking participants upon arrival to take one or two pictures of something they saw at an event that reminded them of a personal story about food, or an experience with food (WellFed Community, 2024a). We then recorded short audio segments asking participants to explain why they chose the pictures. After the event, we asked the same participants to reflect on their original statements and how their involvement at the community meal had impacted their relationship with food. We also utilized video elicitation by showing a bilingual video we created, *What is Food Sover-*

eignty? (WellFed Community, 2024b), that used footage from the community and represented its cultural groups. Neighbors who attended the community meal watched the video as a group and then were asked about their understanding of food sovereignty and the emotions and thoughts the video provoked. The project team took notes of participant responses and completed a facilitator feedback form immediately following the event that standardized the data collected. In this way, we made the participant experience enjoyable and natural while placing the onus on the project team to collect the data that would gauge the effectiveness of the community meal. Team leaders coached our graduate assistants to ensure that notetaking was inconspicuous and did not interrupt the meals. Our emphasis on centering the food sovereignty ideals of culturally appropriate foods and human dignity was recognized by the community. Furthermore, these meals served as a recruitment method for the subsequent asset mapping workshop that was part of our original research plan.

Food Sovereignty GIS Mapping Workshop

Having strengthened relationships with the target communities, we carried out our original plan to conduct an asset mapping workshop. Asset mapping provides a baseline for determining how to design food delivery and nutrition education, and provide overall well-being (Villanueva et al., 2016). Researchers across various disciplines use asset mapping as a useful tool for building community capacity and community development (Lightfoot et al., 2014; Sharpe et al., 2000). Food asset mapping has been identified by the American Planning Association in the *Policy Guide on Community and Regional Food Planning* (American Planning Association, 2007), and has been utilized to bolster the representation of Black and Indigenous populations (Soma et al., 2022). In partnership with a national consultant with Food for Health, the Environment, Economy, and Democracy (FHEED), we created a Food Sovereignty Mapping Workshop with the goal of geo-visualizing the principles of food sovereignty, integrating community assets, and addressing the social determinants of health (SDOH) that shape community agency (National Institute on Minority Health and Health

Disparities, 2024). Recognizing the impact of SDOH, such as economic stability, education access and quality, and health access, we aimed to visualize how these factors influence ability to make healthy food choices and actively participate in local food systems. This approach aligns with findings that food systems profoundly impact community health outcomes, including diabetes—a condition intricately linked to diet and affected by access to healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food (Neff et al., 2009).

Ultimately, food insecurity is not a result of a lack of supply but rather how social and economic conditions (SDOH) constrain a person's ability to make food choices and participate in their local food system. The relationship between diet, and SDOH factors such as economic insecurity, and chronic disease has been well documented, with early research establishing that inequitable food access contributes to rising rates of obesity and type 2 diabetes, particularly among low-income populations (Drewnowski, 2009). For this reason, we specifically chose to focus on diabetes because it has a well-established relationship with social and economic drivers of health. Diabetes, a metabolic disorder, is one of the clearest health outcomes linked to the condition that shape dietary choices and community economic conditions (Hill-Briggs et al., 2021). Because of its strong association with food access and the availability of public health data from sources such as the CDC, diabetes was selected as a representative outcome to map disparities in food-related health across areas with high social vulnerability.

To ensure our approach aligned with state health priorities, we consulted the health equity advisor at our Department of Health (DOH) to confirm that including diabetes as a geographic health outcome of food insecurity would be consistent with the DOH's community health needs assessment framework. This allowed us to link our food sovereignty interventions to an official population health measure. For example, Hillsborough County's 2019 Community Health Assessment identified diabetes as one of the top five health issues facing the community, alongside exercise, nutrition, and weight. In its analysis, it situates diabetes at the intersection of food insecurity and

poverty (Florida Department of Health in Hillsborough County, 2020).

We conducted two- to three-hour mapping workshops with 10 to 20 participants at the ETAC and UAC zip code locations. These workshops were held during community meals, and the relationships formed through these gatherings played a crucial role in their success. Participants were provided with strategy worksheets and handouts from the *WellFed Community Food Sovereignty Toolkit* (2024a) to guide discussion around approximately twenty land-based community assets that could be repurposed for food growing, storing, distribution, marketing, consumption, or recycling. Examples of assets included houses of worship (for gardens or food pantries), public libraries (for seed storage), community centers (for cooking classes), vacant land, greenways, food pantries, and farmers markets.

In addition to identifying community assets, the paper maps used by participants in the workshops showed areas of “high need,” defined as census tracts with both (1) an above-county-average diabetes rate and (2) an above-county-average Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) score, based on datasets from the CDC PLACES and CDC SVI. The SVI served as a composite measure for SDOH, since it includes factors such as socioeconomic status, race, and household composition among others. These two indicators, diabetes and SVI, were chosen to visualize and target areas with overlapping social and health vulnerabilities. This pairing is supported by national research showing that higher social vulnerability, especially the socioeconomic and household factors, is significantly associated with increased incidence of diagnosed diabetes (Varghese et al., 2024). The asset mapping workshops contributed to the development of an ArcGIS map that was later integrated into the *Food Sovereignty Explorer*, an online tool created for both organizational planning and community use.²

Program Evaluations

To complement the collecting of forward-aiming data, we simultaneously captured a baseline of existing food security programs by employing a

new tool aimed at measuring their relation to food sovereignty. This evaluation form was created by the project team and used to analyze WellFed Community’s existing programs (WellFed Community, 2024a). This assessment tool incorporated the pillars of food sovereignty and definitions provided by international food sovereignty leaders (García-Sempere et. al., 2019; Levkoe & Blay-Palmer, 2018).

Discussion and Results

The aim of this project was to work with our two communities to develop a food sovereignty toolkit that could be adapted by other community organizations to fit a broad range of needs and programs (WellFed Community, 2024a). At the start of the project, we knew that knowledge of the concept of food sovereignty was limited, but we did not realize to the full extent how limited community members’ understanding of the dynamics of the food system were. In fact, we realized early in our conversations that the term “food system” itself was academic jargon. At our first community meal, we observed people expressing occasional bewilderment when asked questions that included reference to the “food system.” We realized that people were equating “food system” to a government or bureaucratic system, rather than thinking in terms of different areas of the food cycle such as production, processing, distribution, marketing, consumption, and resource management. Therefore, defining community food and agriculture systems or promoting one’s right to healthy and culturally appropriate food did not have as much meaning for our participants as it does in communities such as those of small-scale, landless and peasant farmers who are more intimately connected to the production system. To address this challenge, we created and refined a short video that defined and illustrated food sovereignty within the context of the food cycle, or food supply chain—from growing food, to harvesting and transporting food to stores, and ultimately consuming it. Replacing “food system” with examples from the food cycle or food supply chain proved to be a more effective way of communicating our lived experiences with

² This map can be viewed at <https://www.foodsovereigntytoolkit.com>

food. A participant remarked on the video and community meal: “I got a better understanding of food sovereignty, and it was nice to come together with other members of the community and answer prompt questions about the food supply and how food affects my health.”

Part of the co-education, or the knowledge-sharing pillar of food sovereignty, that both the project team and community members experienced during our planning and execution of the community meals illuminated a different perspective on food sovereignty. The video and subsequent conversations prompted people to talk more about their food consumption choices as well as make connections to how conventional grocery stores and fast-food outlets contribute to limited access to healthy fruits and vegetables and eventually unhealthy eating behaviors. As one participant commented after a community meal event: “[I] learned about the different foods and how they prepared without meat and everything was very delicious and some of it was homegrown and it tasted so healthy, much better than what you buy from the restaurants and grocery stores.”

The community meals provided an opportunity for people to share knowledge and engage in co-education as they shared stories about family meals, special holiday celebrations, and different recipes. A participant remarked: “I’ve learned that I’m not as much of a picky eater as I thought, and vegetables are actually delicious. I can’t wait to learn new recipes and establish and build on some of the ones I have now with what I’ve learned today.” At the community meals, we also integrated nutrition education in an informal, commenting sort of way as we described the types of food Well-Fed cooked. By integrating casual conversations with healthy food knowledge, we were further able to learn about how the community felt about their local food environment. As another community member commented with respect to a conversation she had during the community meal: “It really gave me an insight, especially with the cereal thing. It’s like things that I thought was healthy or a lil healthy were not because the reason why they could stay on the shelf was because they are unhealthy.” These meals provided opportune moments for gaining insight about how commu-

nity members thought about their health in relation to food access, the built environment, and the industrial food system.

In practicing CBR in marginalized communities, the most important takeaway lesson was the importance of creating a dignified experience for neighbors and promoting reciprocal relationships in order to engage individuals around concepts of food sovereignty and subsequently to identify best practices. This was done in the smallest of details, yet was clearly visible to participants. First, and foremost, placing the responsibility for providing data on the project team rather than the participants, through note taking and facilitator feedback forms, removed the awkward and academic nature of most research practices that survey participants. By completing the feedback form after each event, the facilitators were able to enjoy their time engaging with the community, which yielded more substantive field notes. However, this practice is somewhat cumbersome for facilitators, and future research could explore how to streamline this process and still obtain data. Employing techniques like photo elicitation and video elicitation in the areas of programming where participant input is essential can be equally as effective in gauging community attitudes, beliefs, and impact. Second, by literally setting a table with real dishware, glassware, and silverware, we created a welcoming, dignified and hospitable environment in which community members felt truly cared for. One said: “You really put in a lot of work for this for us. . . . I don’t know the last time I ate off a real plate.” Finally, in investigating a field like food sovereignty, it is pivotal that the research team embodies the values and practices elements of cultural knowledge, sharing food, and leveraging local food resources.

The reality of the current state of food sovereignty in urban areas is that conversations around food are not happening at the level that they are in the academic community. Thus the first step in assessing and building community food sovereignty is creating spaces and opportunities for people to intentionally convene around the pillars of food sovereignty. By hosting community meals and onboarding community members to the team, this project was able to embody the pillars. We focused

on “food for the people” by ensuring a nutritious and culturally appropriate meal was provided, in a dignified experience that emphasized a tangible connection with food. We built knowledge and skills by blending academic literature with community knowledge, through guided questions about food experiences, behaviors, and more. We “worked with nature” by hosting events outdoors in places like community gardens. We “valued food providers” by incorporating local food organizations and resources. We practiced “localizing food systems” by incorporating food from local food banks and preparing the food ourselves. We “put control locally” by holding events in the community we were serving and promoting community members to places of leadership. Finally, we honored “food as sacred” by dignifying the research experience and focusing on food as a gift that bonds communities, and that through building relationships conversations and concrete practices can begin to address injustice in the food system.

Strengths and Limitations

Our research and programming contained limitations that are worth noting. It took us a couple months to realize that our original strategy of traditional focus groups would not work in our community, so our shift to community meals prevented us from spending as much time engaged with the community as we would have had if we arranged these meals from the beginning. Time constraints also surfaced for community members. In our study zip codes, many people work multiple jobs and are responsible for childcare work, limiting the participation to those with more available time.

The successes of our project—the community meals and the asset mapping exercises—can be attributed, in part, to our existing work and established relationships in the community. This was a strength of our team and project, but it should also be noted as a reminder that building trust, friendships, and overall social capital within communities is essential for implementing a food sovereignty initiative. Our bilingual video explained food sovereignty in a more relatable and jargon-free way, making it an effective method for communicating the concept to people unfamiliar with it. By showing it at the community dinner and holding discus-

sions after the video we were able to make additional edits to the video as well as gauge whether people gained a deeper understanding of food sovereignty.

Our community meals were unique due to their inherent incorporation of food sovereignty. The idea of human dignity and the human right to food is a core feature of food sovereignty. From the set-up of the physical tables, with physical plates, silverware, cloth napkins, glassware, and table decorations such as flowers, fruits and gourds, we tried to establish a sense of dignity for all guests. In addition, project members served the food to the guests, explained where the food came from and, when possible, used home-grown ingredients or ingredients that could be grown in our climate. By creating a comfortable and inclusive space where participants share meals and experiences, these gatherings allow community members to express their challenges and aspirations regarding food access, production, and cultural practices. This approach provides richer, more authentic qualitative data that captures the lived realities and nuanced understandings of food sovereignty.

The food sovereignty notions of agroecological growing methods and the localization of food production and distribution were reinforced through these activities. Communities hoping to replicate this framework can collaborate with community partners and members to determine how the pillars of food sovereignty can best be incorporated into community meals and the discussions that ensue. By adapting our methods to fit the community culture, we have been able to represent better their needs and perspectives.

Conclusion

In this reflective essay, we hope that readers can gain some insight for future community-engaged food sovereignty projects. Specifically, the CBR approach proved to be an effective method for conducting research and collecting data in a dignified, respectful, and mutually beneficial manner for both researchers and the community. At the same time, the CBR approach presented us with unforeseen challenges inherent to dedicated community-based work. We learned that flexibility, adaptability and openness to new ideas are essential to the pro-

cess. The collaboration between the FSI faculty members provided a helpful approach that leveraged different skill sets from the College of Public Health, the Departments of Communication, and Religious Studies. By applying different research methods ranging from public health to the humanities, we were able to gather and analyze data from different perspectives from recent Latin American immigrants (largely from the Chiapas region of Mexico, Guatemala, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic), Black and Caribbean Americans, and organizational representatives that serve these communities, thus enriching our final analysis and the food sovereignty toolkit. Another successful tool was our bilingual video on food sovereignty. The community meals proved to be an extremely illuminating and special time for building social capital, friendships, and connections with other organizations in the community. We felt that this success was due in large part because we are committed to the food sovereignty ideal of the human right to food and centering human dignity in all our events.

For organizations wishing to build a food sovereignty initiative in their community, our open access online toolkit includes activities and research and evaluation templates for universities, nongovernmental organizations, religious institutions, and food aid organizations seeking to implement food sovereignty principles in their programs and activities. The toolkit includes a Food Sovereignty Index based on the core pillars of food sovereignty that quantitatively measure the degree to which food sovereignty is incorporated into programs and outreach. These metrics include locality, food production, access, working with nature, knowledge sharing, and the sacred quality of food.

Our community meals were held at a

nondenominational religious site that provided a venue for participation from members of the religious communities in one of our neighborhoods. Exploring how food sovereignty's notion of the sacred, as developed by groups such as the First Nations Development Institute, might provide new avenues for research and community engagement that incorporate religious and spiritual dimensions in our (and other) food sovereignty toolkit. (First Nations Development Institute, 2014; Kimmerer, 2013).

We also recommend using the food sovereignty toolkit to build educational programs at colleges and universities that can engage faculty, graduate and undergraduate students, and courses with the wider community. The toolkit includes a template for hiring a food sovereignty fellow (i.e., an undergraduate or graduate student). We modified this hiring template to build fellowship descriptions for our Honors College, College of Arts and Sciences, and School of Geosciences to solicit assistance from those specific areas of expertise. Other universities utilizing the toolkit can use the hiring template based on their assessment of what types of programs their school offers and what would best fit with their community's strengths and weaknesses.

We did hire two graduate students, but realized that building stronger ties to the community best occurred when we hired two members of the community as well, one of which was bilingual. This hiring marked a decisive moment of shifting to a more community-based participatory (CBRP) model of research. Looking back, we found this to be an enriching and important decision, and communities might consider incorporating a mixed-methods CBR and CBPR approach in their research design from the beginning.

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Appendix. Focus Group Discussion Questions

If you were a food, what food would you be and why?
Si fueras un alimento, ¿qué alimento serías y por qué?

What foods do you like that are NOT available in your community?
¿Hay alimentos que ha escuchado que las personas de su comunidad quieren, y a los que no pueden acceder?

Who do you think decides what foods are available in your community (at the grocery, delivered by food programs, etc.)?
¿Quién crees que decide qué alimentos están disponibles en su comunidad (los supermercados, lo entregado por programas alimentos, etc.)?

What is your understanding of a community food system?
¿Cuál es su comprensión de un sistema alimentario comunitario?

Do you know what the term “food system” means?
¿Conoce el término “food system” si es así descríbalos?

What does “food security” mean?
¿Sabe qué significa “food security”, si es así descríbalos?

What does “food sovereignty” mean?
¿Sabes qué significa “food sovereignty”?

Who in your community provides food for others?
¿Quién en su comunidad proporciona alimentos para otros?

What do people in your community like to eat?
¿Qué le gusta comer a la gente de su comunidad?

Do you think that community gardening programming in the community is necessary/effective? Explain.
¿Cree que la programación actual de huertos comunitarios en la comunidad es efectiva? Explicar.

Do you think that community cooking programming in the community is necessary/effective? Explain.
¿Cree que la programación actual de clases de cocina en la comunidad es efectiva? Explicar.

Do you think that nutrition programming in the community is necessary/effective?
¿Cree que la programación actual de programas de nutrición en la comunidad es efectiva? Explicar.

Do you think eating healthy foods is important in your community?
¿Crees que comer alimentos saludables es importante en tu comunidad?

What stops people from eating healthy?
¿Qué detiene a la gente?

What encourages people to eat healthy?
¿Qué anima a la gente?

Name a health benefit of a food at the table?
¿Cuáles son los beneficios para la salud de estos alimentos, si los conoces?

If you were a food, what food would you be and why?
Si fueras un alimento, ¿qué alimento serías y por qué?

What was your favorite food growing up?
¿Cuál era tu comida favorita mientras crecías?

What are your favorite foods now?
¿Cuáles son tus comidas favoritas ahora?

Do you like gardening? If so, what do you like to grow?
¿Te gusta la jardinería? Si es así, ¿qué te gusta cultivar?

Do you participate in community gardening?
¿Participa en la jardinería comunitaria?