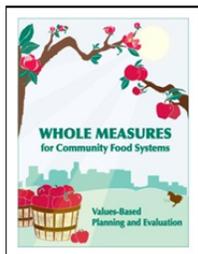


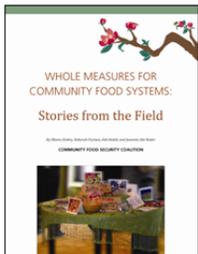
Whole Measures only partially measures up

Book reviews by Bethann Garramon Merkle



Whole Measures for Community Food Systems: Values-Based Planning and Evaluation

Abi-Nader, J., Ayson, A., Harris, K., Herrera, H., Eddins, D., Habib, D., Hanna, J., Paterson, C., Sutton, K., & Villanueva, L. (2009). *Whole measures for community food systems: Values-based planning and evaluation*. Portland, Oregon: Community Food Security Coalition.



Whole Measures for Community Food Systems: Stories from the Field

Embry, O., Fryman, D., Habib, D., & Abi-Nader, J. (2012). *Whole measures for community food systems: Stories from the field*. Portland, Oregon: Community Food Security Coalition.

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Whole Measures for Community Food Systems, published in 2009 by the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC), proposes one approach planners and organizers may find useful in concert with other tools and resources. A companion publication, *Whole Measures for Community Food Systems: Stories from the Field*, was published in 2012. (See “Case studies supplement to WM CFS published recently” sidebar for a review of *Stories from the Field*.) PDFs of both guides may be downloaded for free at <http://foodsecurity.org/publications/>.

“Food can be a common and unifying force socially, culturally, and spiritually,” write the authors of *Whole Measures for Community Food Systems (WM CFS)*, a truth with which I heartily agree. In the past decade, I have been a teacher, student, organizer, dreamer, schemer, more recently a gardener, and always an eater. Much of my personal and professional energy is directed toward food-related initiatives. Particularly in multicultural and

multilingual environments, food has proven a common language, providing fertile soil in which these efforts are cultivated.

When I began this work, as a naïve and passionate university student, I needed all the information, insight and tools available. I needed to learn about the complexities of the food system and the nuances of community organizing that go beyond small-town 4-H and Key Club projects. I needed to

study and come to understand the importance of planning and evaluation that involve a diverse group of stakeholders. Some of this I gained through university courses, but most of it I learned elbow-deep in the nitty gritty of community initiatives that contributed to food system stability.

As a result, I looked forward to what *WM CFS* might offer. The authors present it as a tool for planning and evaluating community food systems-related projects, programs, and initiatives, which sounds like just the right thing for beginning food systems practitioners. It is also appealing to me because this kind of work, just like our communities, is dynamic and not entirely predictable.

Synopsis

WM CFS provides a framework for how to evaluate a community food system by considering what the document refers to as *values-based fields*: Justice and Fairness; Strong Communities; Vibrant Farms; Healthy People; Sustainable Ecosystems; and Thriving Local Economies. As the authors write, “*WM CFS* is a values-based, community-oriented tool for evaluation, planning, and dialogue geared toward organizational and community change.” They continue, “*WM CFS* is designed to give organizations and communities a collaborative process for defining and expressing their complex stories and the multiple outcomes that emerge from their work.”

The authors emphasize their vision that the tool offers communities a catalyst for dialog and learning. As most food systems practitioners can attest, our work is complex, and the people involved can prove astonishingly diverse. *WM CFS* is meant to address this diversity by enabling organizations, facilitators, individuals, and communities to discuss and evaluate hard-to-measure aspects of food systems work. In fact, the authors affirm that “these practices were developed with input from dozens of community food projects and represent common qualities they strive for as they seek to create healthier, whole communities.”

The document itself is divided into several sections that elaborate on these objectives. It begins by providing background on how the tool was developed, presents clarification of the terms used within the document, a glossary of key con-

cepts, fields, and terms, and concludes with discussion prompts and rubrics for evaluation of several essential aspects of a community food system.

Commentary

Thanks to previous and current responsibilities including program development, management, fundraising, and outreach, I found the vocabulary, processes, and references to group facilitation familiar and plainly accessible.

Of particular use are the glossary and the identification and definition of the six values-based fields. When included in group discussions at any point in a food system project, these concepts will likely have two influences. First, these resources should encourage those gathered at the table to consider the depth and breadth of the factors influencing a food system. Second, in a word, this aspect of *WM CFS* can ensure that diverse stakeholders are communicating with a common vocabulary.

Additionally, the rubrics assess possible activities and outcomes that may influence the state of the six values-based fields. These rubrics, in the hands of individuals new to food systems work, can offer a great deal of food for thought, jumping-off points for discussions, and inquiry into their applicability to a specific community initiative. When applied by more experienced practitioners and facilitators, the rubrics could streamline evaluation at various points in an initiative’s planning, implementation, and review.

For inexperienced facilitators, the “evaluation team discussion guides” may prove invaluable. They outline how to facilitate several aspects of an initiative. Though not formatted as such on the page, these guides effectively present five checklists with brief explanations for each step in the *WM CFS* process. These include distinguishing between process and outcomes; setting goals and reaching a common understanding of objectives; evaluation; and debriefing and reflection.

Finally, I can envision how some of the admonitions regarding inclusion, diversity, and thinking about the big picture would be valuable to my past and current projects. Some points in particular can and should inform facilitators’ ap-

proaches. Early in my career, knowing that “groups of six to twelve people may offer the greatest opportunities for dialogue, learning, and guiding the evaluation process” would have been helpful for making decisions about how many people to include in focus groups and steering committees.

To this day, it is beneficial to be reminded that “it is useful for an evaluation team to consider any potentially negative impacts of their work.” Equally, *WM CFS* notes that focusing discussions on consensus can limit dialogue and potential for deep understanding of a community’s needs. For all passionate community members and food systems practitioners, a final admonition to “Inspire action, don’t demand it” could mean the difference between an inclusive versus exclusive initiative.

On the other hand, looking at *WM CFS* through the eyes of a newcomer to food systems work, I found some elements lacking. The authors offer no suggestions for how to actually assess the relevance of their tool to one’s own circumstances. This is despite their writing, “while the authors have strived to make the language as applicable and representative as possible for a wide range of projects and contexts, it will not be equally relevant or appropriate for all groups.”

The current publication does not include any real world examples of how this process has been implemented. Knowing how it was applied, whether the facilitators using the tool were experienced or novices, and what the outcomes were, would enhance the value of *WM CFS* substantially. Supplemental material, particularly in the form of case studies, is a welcome addition (see sidebar “Case studies supplement to *WM CFS* published recently.”)

Perhaps most telling is a quote from page 12, where the authors write, “the most important consideration is that the process is designed to promote learning.” It appears the learning process intended by this tool is aimed at community- or organization-level learning guided by experienced facilitators. This not the first resource I would recommend for beginners seeking professional development.

Conclusion

Granted, *WM CFS* lacks case studies and other practical examples that would help food systems initiatives more directly relate its principles to their own needs (see sidebar). At the same time, certain elements of the tool clearly offer value. Future users of the tool will hopefully benefit from access to explicit examples of how community-based initiatives have applied *WM CFS* as a planning and evaluation method.

As food systems practitioners increasingly recognize, diversity in value systems, priorities, and cultural constructs can dramatically influence a community’s food-related experiences. Resources that assist communities to take these factors into consideration will continue to be in high demand. *WM CFS*, as written and any ensuing supplements, contributes to this body of resources. 

Case studies supplement to *WM CFS* published recently

In 2012, the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC) published digital and hard copy versions of a supplement to *WM CFS*. Entitled *Whole Measures for Community Food Systems: Stories from the Field (SF)*, this publication provides some of what I found lacking in the original document. In addition to the case studies and clear presentation of the challenges and lessons learned, *SF* includes a glossary of key terms and several supplements developed by the pilot projects.

The scenarios presented in *SF* represent community-level, regional, and national initiatives, and range from entirely rural to completely urban. All organizations were based in the United States, but were widely dispersed across the country. Of the eight initiatives and organizations featured in *SF*, each adapted *WM CFS* to suit. For some, translating the document, both from “academic” language to plain language and from English to Spanish and other languages, was a key consideration. For others, a great deal of advance planning was required to ensure facilitators were on the same page before community consultations began. In other situations, organizations used *WM*

CFS as a launching point for internal assessments as well as strategic planning and visioning.

I found CFSC's support offered to these eight pilot projects particularly interesting. Each one was connected with a mentor who possessed extensive experience in community-based food systems work. The mentoring phase lasted 18 months and required a solid commitment on the part of all stakeholders. Judging by the "lessons learned" sections of *SF*, having access to this level of insight and guidance was fundamental to how much these organizations were able to engage with, and gain from, the *WM CFS*. However, no mention is made of an ongoing forum for organizations currently using the framework.

As the authors of *Stories from the Field* write, this new publication features examples of "community partners who have used *WM CFS* in innovative ways." I strongly recommend reading both for a more complete understanding of how *WM CFS* may suit specific community-based food system initiatives.

—BGM

Bethann Garramon Merkle is a consultant, educator, writer, and artist whose work emphasizes community-based ecology and sustainable lifestyle initiatives. She has worked with sustainability and conservation organizations such as the Boone and Crockett Club, The Nature Conservancy, National Parks Conservation Association, and the Wilderness Institute, as well as community-level organizations. Her writing and artwork have been published in Mother Earth News, edible-MISSOULA, Camas, and Fair Chase, among other publications. She is presently occupied with a multi-lingual community garden, a sustainability initiative catalyzed by a contraband urban donkey at an Anglican cathedral, and serves as a [consulting editor for JAFSCD](#) and independent authors.