

The food system should unite us, not divide us

COMMENTARY ON RACE AND
ETHNICITY IN FOOD SYSTEMS

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Abstract

The U.S. agrifood system was built upon land redistribution, enslavement, and labor exploitation. This system encompasses economic, social, and biophysical components deployed under a set of policies that negatively affect Native Americans, African Americans, and Hispanics. Researchers have studied the problematic issues affecting

marginalized groups and published their analyses, while leaving intact the issues they document and research. Researchers have the responsibility to redress the exploitative premise of the agrifood system for communities whose circumstances have helped advance academic careers. Marginalized communities can be essential partners in practical and intellectual innovation and improvement of the agrifood system. The most effective way to redirect our system is to redefine the purpose of that system. Nations that invest their public resources equitably produce greater overall well-being for people of all incomes. The purpose of public investment in our food system should be to nourish and maximize overall health and well-being. We should establish an overarching national policy to create norms leading to equitable outcomes.

Keywords

equity, food, health disparities, policy

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The Food System Divides Us

The United States' agrifood system was built upon appropriation of the means of production by European colonists, involving land-grabbing, enslavement, and labor exploitation. Securing our nation's land base required a genocidal program and displacement of tens of thousands of Native Americans (Chalk & Jonassohn, 1990). Making that land base agriculturally productive then required relegating millions of African Americans and Hispanics to the role of base laborers whose costs were to be minimized. Because of that, we have been left with an agrifood system that divides us, with skin color and ethnicity as a clear marker for that division. This system encompasses economic, social, and biophysical components that have been deployed under a set of policies that benefit many, but also harm many. These policies have produced an inequitable outcome. This is manifested in a number of ways, primarily in disproportionately high hunger and poverty rates among Native Americans, African Americans, and Hispanics—more than twice that of whites (Coleman-Jensen, Gregory, & Singh, 2014).

While much social progress was achieved between the Civil War and the civil rights era, much more is needed to secure social equity in opportunity, employment, income, and food security for marginalized generations now and in the future. Currently, the probability that a child born to parents in the bottom fifth of income distribution reaches the top fifth is only 7.5 percent (Chetty, Hendren, Kline & Saez, 2014). If that child were born in Canada, his or her social mobility would be twice as high (Chetty et al., 2014). In the past 50 years, African American median household income in comparison to White household income has barely improved, from 55 to 59 percent (Pew Research Center, 2013). African Americans without a high school diploma are twice as likely to be unemployed than Whites without a high school diploma (Lee, 2008). In 2013, African Americans were nearly three times more likely than whites to live in poverty (27.3 percent compared to 9.7 percent) and Hispanics were two and half times more likely (23.7 percent) (Kaiser Family Foundation, n.d.). Food insecurity rates track poverty rates; in 2013 approximately 11 percent of Whites were

food insecure, compared to 26 percent of African Americans and 24 percent of Hispanics (Coleman-Jensen, 2014).

How Can the Food System Unite Us?

The interests of communities of color have often been repressed in the policy-making process, resulting in policies that clearly (and often intentionally) affect those communities' transportation, housing, jobs, and schools, reinforcing the nation's discriminatory history along lines of ethnicity and color. With the 2013 repeal of the 1965 Voting Rights Act the political franchise of African Americans has been further undermined (Dinan, 2013). In the academic world, researchers have often studied the problematic issues affecting marginalized groups and published their analyses, while leaving intact the very issues they document and research.

The futility of such a cycle in addressing the practical interests of communities of color can lead understandably to those communities dismissing collaborations with researchers. While not all researchers are guilty of this system of benefitting professionally and personally while their "subjects" experience no shift in their circumstances, it is the responsibility of researchers who have relevant knowledge and the social standing to intervene to do so. This is all the more so because the scientific community has served as de facto intelligentsia for the industrializing power structure that has implemented the present agrifood system. Researchers have the responsibility to redress the exploitative premise of the agrifood system, and to relate equitably with communities whose circumstances have helped advance their academic careers.

In this task, marginalized communities can be essential partners in practical and intellectual innovation and improvement of the agrifood system. Action-based research bolstered by appropriate methodologies for capturing complex community knowledge and worldviews can provide a vehicle for academics and community members to collaborate for effective and equitable food system improvement (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001; Patton, 1990). Our current agrifood system serves some of us well, but greater and


more equitable collaboration among all sectors of society can make it work well for everyone.

A Systemic Approach to the Food System

Reshaping the structure of the agrifood system away from exploitation of people and the environment requires a systemic approach. Researchers, policymakers, community members, and advocates must recognize that many complex interactions are embedded in the structure of our agrifood system. These interactions have socioeconomic and biophysical components. Several analytical frameworks exist to guide the work of researchers collaborating with communities in such complex milieus. Examples are soft systems analysis (Checkland & Poulter, 2006) and the business sector's "wicked problem" approach (Nelson & Stroink, 2014). Public health's socio-ecological framework (SEF) suggests that health and health behaviors are affected by different levels of influence: individual, interpersonal, community, and societal (public policies and systems) (Sallis, Owen, & Fisher, 2008). The SEF highlights that individuals both shape and are shaped by their environment, and are also influenced by public policies and systems affecting the distribution of power and resources.

To shape local, state, and federal policies that redistribute power and resources equitably it would be helpful to follow Meadows' (1999) observation that the most effective way to redirect a system is to redefine the purpose of that system. Our nation is a complex system. It was established on the aspirational premise that all its citizens are equal and "endowed with certain unalienable rights," according to the preamble of the Declaration of Independence (although at the time of its inception these rights were extended to White land-owning males only). Therefore we advocate nothing radical, but simply the actual fulfillment of this nation's founding vision: the right of everyone to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Comprehensive socioeconomic research demonstrates that communities and nations that invest their public resources equitably produce greater overall well-being for people of all incomes (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011). The purpose of our food system should not be exclusively to maximize output and

profit, but to nourish and maximize overall health and well-being.

Our food system is an amalgam of public and private investment. Because it is intertwined with so many sectors of our economy—labor, transportation, education, health care—the aim of public investment should be a system that benefits us all. We should establish overarching national policies and principles that create norms leading to equitable outcomes (Bittman, Pollan, Salvador, & De Schutter, 2015). Policy-makers at the local, state, and federal levels should lay the foundation for a better agrifood system by implementing democratic, science-based policies to protect the environment with sustainable farming practices, support the research and marketing needs of all farmers, build the economic standing of food system workers through fair wages, and build a healthy food environment where good food is accessible and affordable for everyone. Our food system should unite us, not divide us. 

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