

# Use of a participatory planning process as a way to build community food security

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the multiple meanings of community food security among stakeholders with diverse interests and to assess the degree to which these stakeholders could find common ground around community food security during a participatory planning process called a search conference. The conceptual framework of citizen politics guided all aspects of the research design. In-depth, qualitative interviews were conducted with 44 participants purposefully recruited to attend a 2½-day search conference. Open-ended questionnaires were distributed to all participants during the search conference, and a document review was performed. Prior to the search conference, 4 community food security groups emerged: anti-hunger advocates (n=12), agricultural visionaries (n=12), food traditionalists (n=10), and agricultural entrepreneurs (n=8). Participants were able to find common ground around 6 community food security action agendas: distribution of surplus food, education, family and community values, food processing and marketing, legislative initiatives and action, and new agriculture. Other salient community food security issues emerged, but they were not included on any of the action agendas. Formal training in facilitation, negotiation, conflict resolution, and how to influence the public policy-making process will enable dietetics professionals to effectively collaborate with community-based groups that have a stake in food security issues. *J Am Diet Assoc.* 2002;102:962-967.

According to The American Dietetic Association, aggressive action is needed to bring an end to domestic hunger and achieve food and nutrition security. Dietetics professionals can play a key role in achieving this goal through developing innovative programs that increase the food security of the US population (1). Increasingly, state and local efforts to alleviate food insecurity have emphasized sustainable food system-wide approaches for ensuring community food security (1-3). The recent emergence of a community food security movement has also sought to increase community-based solutions to hunger and food insecurity while advocating for federal-level food and nutrition assistance programs as a crucial basis for building food security (3-4).

The goal of community food security is to develop communities that are food secure, which has been defined as "all persons in a community having access to a culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through local, non-emergency sources" (4). Community food security addresses a broad range of food system issues: environmental concerns related to agriculture and food production, disappearing farmland and inner city supermarkets, food safety, poverty and hunger, and diet-related health problems. As an analytical framework, community food security has 3 basic components: process, projects, and policy. The process of building participation through community planning and collaboration can be accomplished by defining the community to be served, conducting a community-based needs assessment, building links with diverse groups, developing comprehensive strategies, incorporating a long-term strategic design, and building entrepreneur-

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ship. Projects such as community gardens, farmers' markets, and food-related enterprise development are designed to meet multiple objectives—for example, increase the production and marketing of locally grown foods and expand lower-income persons' access to high-quality, healthful foods. Finally, government policies need to be assessed to determine if they act as barriers or enablers to community food security projects (4).

An important first step in building community food security is to understand how this terminology is conceptualized among diverse stakeholders—that is, individuals or groups who have a “stake” in, or are directly affected by, an issue. Power and colleagues (5) surveyed Canadian dietitians to assess their understanding of the term “food security” and found that food safety, food as a human right, adequate food to maintain health, sustainable agricultural systems, and affordability of food were the most commonly reported components of food security. Fewer dietitians included charitable food sources and individual choice of personally acceptable foods in their definition of food security. Using Q methodology, Pelletier et al (6) examined participants' conceptualization of the term “community food security” and found that 3 distinct groups emerged: social justice advocates, pragmatists, and visionaries. Each group placed a differing level of importance across 4 aspects of community food security—social justice, economic viability of agriculture, healthfulness of the food supply, and environmental sustainability. To our knowledge, however, little research has investigated whether stakeholders with diverse interests can find common ground around these different aspects of community food security. The purpose of this research was twofold: to determine the multiple meanings of community food security among stakeholders with diverse interests using qualitative methods and to assess the degree to which stakeholders with diverse interests were able to find common ground around different aspects of community food security. A major strength of qualitative research is the ability to explore context-dependent meanings of complex issues, such as community food security, from the participant's point of view (7,8).

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The research-based conceptual framework of citizen politics guided all aspects of the study design and data collection. Citizen politics is based on 3 core concepts: diverse interests, public, and power (9-11). “Diverse interests” refers to the variety of life experiences, viewpoints, and knowledge that persons bring to the table. “Public” refers to the public sphere where persons use their collective power to act on their own self-interests and to solve common problems through critical thinking. Public problem solving and governance are carried out through mediating institutions (eg, the workplace, organizations, schools, churches), which connect people to larger public arenas and issues (10). “Power” in this context is conceptualized as dynamic, interactive, and relational, and is seen as being created through building relationships among diverse interests and taking action on shared problems and goals (9-11).

## METHODS

### Research Setting

This research was embedded within a broader university-community partnership collectively referred to as the North Country Food and Economic Security project, which used a

### Opening and Introductions

Overview of the search conference process/warm-up exercise

### Shared History

“What forces and events have brought us together to our current situation?”

### Expectations

“What is the main reason for your participation in the search conference?”

### Ideal Future

“What should our local community food system look like by the year 2005?”

### Probable Future

“Without substantial changes being made, what will our local community food system look like by the year 2005?”

### Keep, Drop, and Create

“To move closer to the ideal future, what should we keep doing, what should we stop doing, and what new things do we need to create?”

### Action Planning: Self-Selection

Participants self-select into an action-planning group

### Action Planning: Definitions

“What is our group's main purpose (goal) and what specific changes do we want to address?”

### Action Planning: Force Field Analysis

“What forces are out there now that are driving toward or restraining the changes we want to make?”

### Action Planning: Workflow Diagramming

“What actions do we need to take and in what order?”

### Action Planning: Templates and Next Steps

Outline rationale for each objective, implementation scenario, and next steps, including the person(s) responsible for carrying out each task and the date by which this will be done.

### Personal Commitments

Each action-planning group designates a specific date, time, and place it will meet after the search conference.

*FIG 1. Overview of the 2½-day community food security search conference process.*

search conference model for the initiation of community-based food security planning processes in 6 upstate New York counties. A search conference brings people together to search for a desirable, common future. More specifically, a search conference is a 2½-day strategic planning process where 35 to 50 diverse stakeholders are brought together to engage in problem solving and decision-making around a specific issue of concern (12). This type of planning and decision making places citizens side by side with formal decision makers to define social problems and goals, develop alternatives, and initiate action plans to pursue identified alternatives. Figure 1 highlights the specific stages of the 2½-day community food security search conference where our research was conducted. A more detailed description of the North Country Food and Economic Security project methodology is available elsewhere (13).

### Participants

Participants from one county in upstate New York were purposefully recruited to attend a 2½-day search conference on community food security. The peer reference system, a snowball sampling technique used to identify local opinion leaders and people directly affected by an issue of concern, determined which persons from the community were eligible to participate. In this study, “community” was defined as a specific geographical location (ie, county). Identified search conference participants were asked to place themselves into 1 of 8 food system categories: farmland protection/natural resources conservation, agricultural production, food processing, food distribution and transportation, wholesale marketing, retail marketing, consumers, or “other.” After 3 iterations of the peer reference system, 204 potential search conference participants were identified. An 11-member advisory committee selected a final list of 50 persons, of whom 44 agreed to participate in the community food security search conference.

### Data Collection

An in-depth, semistructured interview was conducted with each of the 44 participants before the search conference. The interview guide provided a focus on predetermined concepts but allowed for flexibility to probe into other emergent themes. Topics included demographics, volunteer- and work-related experiences, food system issues perceived as salient to community food security, and perceived barriers and enablers to achieving community food security. Field notes were recorded directly after each interview to gain further insight into the discussed topics and to assess the quality of each interview. All interviews took place in the office of a community-based organization and were conducted by a trained interviewer. Procedures for informed consent and confidentiality were applied throughout the duration of the study. Tape-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim.

An open-ended questionnaire was distributed to participants during the search conference to assess viewpoints around the different aspects of community food security; comfort level in expressing their viewpoints; and perceptions as to whether their views were taken seriously by the group and if any of the group sessions were dominated by a few participants. Questions developed for use in the open-ended questionnaire were based on theoretical considerations of group behavior and power dynamics (14). Documents produced during the 2½-day search conference were reviewed to determine the degree to which participants were able to find common ground around

different aspects of community food security. Document review is considered useful in portraying the values, beliefs, and viewpoints expressed by participants in a particular setting and can provide valuable insights when used in combination with other methods (7).

### Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using preconference interview transcripts (verbatim), search conference documents, questionnaires, and field notes. The first step involved an open coding process where initial categories/themes about the subject under study (community food security) were created (7,8). Relevant themes were identified through the use of certain key words and phrases and the context in which they were used. Patterns of themes associated with participants' viewpoints on community food security were explored (15,16). Areas of divergence and convergence around different aspects of community food security were assessed using all data sources. A more detailed description of this method has been described elsewhere (17).

## RESULTS

### Interview Findings

Four different community food security groups emerged before the search conference: anti-hunger advocates, agricultural visionaries, food traditionalists, and agricultural entrepreneurs. For descriptive purposes, Table 1 highlights selected demographic characteristics and the food system sectors represented across the 4 groups. A defining pattern of themes that emerged for each group is described below.

**Anti-hunger advocates** Anti-hunger advocates (n=12) were concerned about hunger in their community and the perceived negative consequences of welfare reform because of lack of income and jobs. A 54-year-old lower-income consumer reflected: “I think welfare reform is going to hurt a lot of people. There are some people, like the elderly and small children, who just can't go out and get a job.” They also expressed concern that lower-income persons were limited to shopping in a few stores with higher food prices and lacked access to high-quality, healthful food. Anti-hunger advocates believed that pride, particularly among men and older adults, made the hunger problem worse. Perceived underlying causes of hunger were poverty and powerlessness. Lack of trust among certain groups in the community and discrimination experienced by food- and nutrition-assistance program recipients were perceived barriers to achieving community food security. Anti-hunger advocates believed they had a civic responsibility to help people who were hungry. A 53-year-old farmer explained, “I'm concerned about those who are hungry—not just as a producer, but as a citizen it's part of my responsibility.” Mentoring programs, local food recovery efforts, and federal-level food- and nutrition-assistance programs were perceived as solutions needed to achieve community food security.

**Agricultural visionaries** Agricultural visionaries (n=12) identified a broad range of food system issues they perceived as salient to community food security—for example, the decline of local agriculture as well as concerns about the environment, food safety, trade policy, and diet-related health problems. Achieving balance or harmony among these different components was perceived as a key element. “The whole system

**Table 1**  
Selected demographics and food system sector representation of 4 community food security groups (n=42)<sup>a</sup>

| Demographics                                       | Community food security groups |                                 |                             |                                  |
|--|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|
|  | Antihunger advocates (n=12)    | Agricultural visionaries (n=12) | Food traditionalists (n=10) | Agricultural entrepreneurs (n=8) |
|  | ← n (%) →                      |                                 |                             |                                  |
| Gender   |                                |                                 |                             |                                  |
| Men  | 3 (25)                         | 7 (58)                          | 1 (10)                      | 6 (75)                           |
| Women  | 9 (75)                         | 5 (42)                          | 9 (90)                      | 2 (25)                           |
| Education  |                                |                                 |                             |                                  |
| <High school                                       | 0 (0)                          | 0 (0)                           | 1 (10)                      | 0 (0)                            |
| High school  | 5 (42)                         | 1 (8)                           | 3 (30)                      | 1 (12)                           |
| Associate degree/some college                      | 4 (33)                         | 5 (42)                          | 3 (30)                      | 2 (25)                           |
| Bachelor's degree                                  | 1 (8)                          | 4 (33)                          | 1 (10)                      | 3 (38)                           |
| Professional degree                                | 0 (0)                          | 1 (8)                           | 0 (0)                       | 1 (12)                           |
| Advanced degree                                    | 2 (17)                         | 1 (8)                           | 2 (20)                      | 1 (12)                           |
| Age  |                                |                                 |                             |                                  |
| 26-34  | 1 (8)                          | 1 (8)                           | 0 (0)                       | 1 (12)                           |
| 35-43  | 2 (17)                         | 3 (25)                          | 1 (10)                      | 2 (25)                           |
| 44-52  | 5 (41)                         | 6 (50)                          | 2 (20)                      | 2 (25)                           |
| 53-61  | 2 (17)                         | 2 (17)                          | 4 (40)                      | 2 (25)                           |
| 62 and over  | 2 (17)                         | 0 (0)                           | 3 (30)                      | 1 (12)                           |
| Food system sectors                                |                                |                                 |                             |                                  |
| Farmland protection/natural resources conservation | 0 (0)                          | 4 (33)                          | 0 (0)                       | 0 (0)                            |
| Agricultural production                            | 1 (8)                          | 2 (17)                          | 0 (0)                       | 4 (50)                           |
| Food processing                                    | 0 (0)                          | 3 (25)                          | 0 (0)                       | 0 (0)                            |
| Food distribution/transportation                   | 2 (17)                         | 0 (0)                           | 2 (20)                      | 0 (0)                            |
| Wholesale marketing                                | 0 (0)                          | 1 (8)                           | 0 (0)                       | 0 (0)                            |
| Retail marketing                                   | 0 (0)                          | 0 (0)                           | 0 (0)                       | 4 (50)                           |
| Consumer   | 5 (42)                         | 0 (0)                           | 4 (40)                      | 0 (0)                            |
| Other <sup>b</sup>                                 | 4 (33)                         | 2 (17)                          | 4 (40)                      | 0 (0)                            |

<sup>a</sup>The sample size reported here does not include 2 negative cases that were not included in any group.

<sup>b</sup>The "other" category includes a nutrition teaching assistant with the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program, a Community Action agency director, a food stamp administrator, an associate director for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, a culinary arts instructor, a professor, a legislator, a foodservice supervisor, and 2 educators.

needs to be balanced. If you lose in any one area, it will create a downward spiral on all of them," said a 34-year-old food cooperative president. Agricultural visionaries were future-oriented and perceived a loss of local knowledge around agriculture in rural communities as a barrier to achieving community food security. A 53-year-old agricultural producer commented, "I think a lot of rural communities are losing the knowledge they have. Some time in the future, we may need it again." Diversified agricultural production, increased marketing of locally produced foods, local economic development, community investment, and enhanced leadership were strategies seen as necessary to achieve community food security.

**Food traditionalists** The primary concern among food traditionalists (n=10) was the issue of welfare reform and its relationship to hunger in the community. Food traditionalists believed welfare reform was a positive change that would reduce hunger and enable food- and nutrition-assistance program recipients to become more self-sufficient. Perceived barriers to achieving community food security included lack of knowledge, lack of motivation, and lack of appreciation among

food- and nutrition-assistance program recipients. Lack of trust between food- and nutrition-assistance program recipients and other community members was also perceived as a barrier to achieving community food security. Food traditionalists believed that "expert knowledge" in food budgeting, food preparation, nutrition, and family values were the key elements needed to achieve community food security. "I think the key is getting knowledge to the people who need it, teaching them how cook, how to balance their budget, and learning to take responsibility for feeding themselves and their families," a 59-year-old schoolteacher said.

**Agricultural entrepreneurs** Agricultural entrepreneurs (n=8) were primarily concerned about the decline of local agriculture, including the loss of farmers and farmland in their community. Perceived barriers to achieving community food security were "unnecessary government regulations" and that consumers neither trusted nor appreciated farmers. They stressed the importance of "expert knowledge" as it applied to agricultural production practices and believed that consumers needed to realize that "farmers would not be using pesticides if they were not safe," as one 33-year-old agriculture educator

| Action Agendas                     | Goals   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Distribution of Surplus Food       | To strengthen a distribution network for surplus and leftover food  |
| Education                          | To raise awareness of consumers to the food and fiber system and related life skills through education              |
| Family and Community Values        | To encourage and nurture a commitment to personal responsibility and wider relationships through building community |
| Food Processing and Marketing      | To give the North Country <sup>a</sup> food producers outlets for their products                                    |
| Legislative Initiatives and Action | To develop a plan to bring positive change to issues brought up at the search conference                            |
| New Agriculture                    | To explore agricultural economic opportunities in the North Country   |

*FIG 2. Action agendas and goals that emerged from a community's 2½-day food security planning process.  
<sup>a</sup>North Country Food and Economic Security project is a 6-county project in upstate New York that used a search conference model for the initiation of community-based food security planning process.*

stated. Expert knowledge also tied into their perception that in order for local agriculture to be more competitive: “It is important to accept change” was the viewpoint of a 53-year-old agricultural banker. Key strategies perceived as needed to achieve community food security included increased self-sufficiency, local economic development, and processing and marketing of locally produced foods.

**Search Conference Findings**

Figure 2 illustrates the 6 final action agendas and corresponding goals that emerged from the search conference. Table 2 highlights each of the action-planning groups’ membership by gender. Salient community food security issues that emerged during the search conference but were not incorporated into any of the action agendas included high food prices in lower-income neighborhoods; food safety; lack of access to high quality, healthful food; lack of income and jobs; and environmental concerns related to the food system. Aspects of community food security that generated divergent or conflicting viewpoints included the government’s role in food security, agricultural pesticide use, recombinant bovine somatotropin (rBST) use, and “supersized” supermarkets. Among participants, 25 of 44 (57%) reported that they were not comfortable discussing issues that generated conflict; 17 of 44 participants (39%) reported that a few people dominated the large group discussions at least some of the time; and 15 of 44 participants (34%) reported that their viewpoints were either ignored or downplayed during the search conference.

**DISCUSSION**

Participants in this research had very different perceptions as to the underlying causes of hunger and food insecurity as well as the solutions needed to achieve community food security.

Certain aspects of community food security identified during the search conference—such as the government’s role in food security (eg, welfare reform), agricultural pesticide use, and rBST use—resulted in conflicting or divergent viewpoints. The majority of participants attending the search conference

also reported that they were not comfortable discussing controversial issues, and close to half of all participants believed that the large group discussions were dominated by a few people at least some of the time. Furthermore, one third of all participants reported that their viewpoints related to community food security were either ignored or downplayed during the search conference.

Despite a difference in viewpoints, stakeholders were able to find convergence—that is, common ground—around certain aspects of community food security during the search conference, including the need for distribution of surplus food, education, family and community values, processing and marketing of locally produced food products, legislative initiatives and action, and new agriculture. Women were more likely than men to be concerned with food consumption issues whereas men were more likely than women to be concerned with agricultural production and food retail-marketing issues. Gender differences were also noted within several of the action planning groups that emerged from the search conference. These observations support previously reported gender-related divisions of labor within the agricultural food system (18-19).

A basic premise of citizen politics is that when persons with diverse interests come together to reframe and clarify an issue or concern they are better able to build a shared understanding of a problem and envision workable solutions (9-11). Various authors have emphasized the importance of building collaborations among community-based planners and grassroots and professional organizations skilled in interpersonal, group, and cross-cultural dynamics to effectively deal with nutrition, food security, and welfare reform (20-23). Such collaboration efforts consist of engaging in problem solving that requires diverse stakeholders to discuss their collective assumptions about each other and what the problem is; include leaders from all affected groups; and allow themselves to be influenced by, as well as to influence, those who are at the table (21)—however, differences in interests, attitudes, and values (6,24); lack of trust among stakeholders; and varying distributions of

**Table 2**  
Action-planning community food security group membership (n=44) by gender

| Action-planning groups <sup>a</sup> | Men<br>(n=19) | Women<br>(n=25) |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|-----------------|
|                                     | ← n (%) →     |                 |
| Distribution of surplus food        | 2 (25)        | 6 (75)          |
| Education                           | 2 (25)        | 6 (75)          |
| Family and community values         | 1 (12)        | 7 (88)          |
| Food processing and marketing       | 5 (83)        | 1 (17)          |
| Legislative initiatives and action  | 4 (50)        | 4 (50)          |
| New agriculture                     | 5 (83)        | 1 (17)          |

<sup>a</sup>Participants self-selected on which action-planning group they would serve. These groups represent the 6 final action agendas that emerged during the 2½-day search conference.

power and resources (17,25) are all factors that may constrain finding common ground around certain aspects of community food security. Addressing such challenges should be a priority for dietetics professionals working in their own communities to build food security.

One limitation of this research is the homogeneity of the sample. All participants were white and resided in one county in upstate New York. It is likely that differences in interests may exist in other more diverse communities. Therefore, these findings cannot be generalized to other groups.



## APPLICATIONS

- Dietetics professionals can play a key role in the development, evaluation, and dissemination of innovative approaches aimed at building community food security (1).
- Future research that assesses food and nutrition professionals' viewpoints on community food security is needed if they are to take an active role in shaping community food security policies and programs.
- Formal training in facilitation, negotiation, conflict resolution, and how to influence the public policy-making process at multiple levels (eg, local, state, national) will enable dietetics professionals to successfully collaborate with community-based groups that have a stake in food security issues.

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