



The Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group

P.O. BOX 608, BELCHERTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS 01007 • PHONE 413/323-4531 • FAX 413/323-9594 • NESAWG@smallfarm.org

Redefining Community Food Security

Hugh M. Joseph

School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Tufts University

What is Community Food Security (CFS)?

It is quickly becoming a familiar term. Dozens of organizations now include it in their titles or their missions statements. There are national, statewide and local CFS coalitions. A new USDA Office of Community Food Security has been proposed. Do these entities share a common understanding-of the concept, and are the varied approaches -that are represented by community food security sufficiently consistent to fit under this umbrella term and the definition we have provided for it?

Community food security is a term of recent origin, to be distinguished from "food security" as commonly used here and abroad. The idea is described in publications (guides, newsletters, conference proceedings, etc.) of the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC), local community food organizations, and some academics. But a well-developed theoretical or conceptual model of community food security does not exist. In a sense, it is primarily an articulation of principles that reflect activities and policies of community-oriented food and agriculture groups.

The operative definition for community food security is "all people in a community obtaining a culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through non-emergency (or conventional) food

sources at all times". This definition, agreed to by some of the founders of the CFSC, inserts "in a community" to a more common definition for food security (e.g., by the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C. and the 1990 Select Committee on Hunger). While the intent of the CFSC was to focus on programs and policies at the community level, there apparently was no real conviction to use "food security" in the term or in name of the CFSC, nor much debate about an appropriate definition¹.

By contrast, literature put out by the CFSC and others shows considerably greater effort made to explain CFS in concept and in practice. For example, the CFSC publication "Community Food Security, A Guide to Concept, Design and Implementation" includes the following as characteristics of community food security:

- Addresses a broad range of problems affecting the food system, economic opportunity, community development, and the environment, such as the diminishing food safety net; disappearing farmland and inner-city

¹ I say "apparently" because there isn't even agreement about how the term and definition were derived. This alone would justify a re-examination of the definition and the concepts behind it.

supermarkets; increasing poverty and hunger; failing family farms; rural community disintegration; inadequate green space; and diet-related health problems;

- Synthesizes many disparate fields, including community economic development, environmentalism, community gardening, sustainable agriculture, nutrition/public health, and anti-hunger to develop and promote solutions to food system deficiencies that are integrative and holistic;
- Embraces a systems approach to help identify underlying socio-economic and political structures that influence the distribution of food and other resources in a community and contribute to hunger and poor nutrition, and similarly supports structural changes necessary to solve these problems.

It clear from the these descriptions, as well as from programs and policies considered to represent CFS, that the operative definition does not encapsulate the breadth of CFS in concept or practice. Does this matter? Yes! There are important implications to having an appropriate definition. As the term enters the lexicons of organizational mission statements and government agencies, there is considerable risk for confusion, misinterpretation, and misuse of the concept. The definition may be inappropriate or too loose to undergird the overall notion of community food security and how it subsequently translates into policy and action. If proponents see CFS as an emerging movement, there is need to be clear from the outset what it stands for, and what it doesn't support. Already one sees broad and diffuse programs, policies, and practices characterized under the label of CFS, and proponents run the risk of losing the essence of what CFS is striving to achieve. If CFS is to evolve some consistency in practice, it should be in the

context of fulfilling a vision, of moving toward some idealized objectives. The definition of community food security should represent the bridge between vision, concepts, and practice.

"Community food security" and "food security":

Community food security has somewhat unique elements as an approach to addressing food insecurity. But since the term and definition evolved from "food security" per se, some comparison of these approaches helps clarify the distinguishing characteristics.

In the US, "food security" is somewhat a step-child of the hunger relief model, and anti-hunger advocates have generally shaped food security rhetoric and policies. Responses to food insecurity usually focus on the individual/ household level, generally through food assistance and/or social welfare programs. It doesn't focus as much on food access or availability, such as whether people have decent, affordable food choices in their neighborhoods. By comparison, CFS emphasizes access to, and availability of food at the community level (e.g., advocating programs that bring supermarkets in the inner city, linking communities to local farms products, and encouraging residents to grow their own food).

While some anti-hunger programs now advocate such strategies, others use the term community food security in the context of anti-hunger models, without this shift in emphasis, which adds confusion to the meaning and application of the term. Some groups consider gleaning and other donations of locally-grown food to the emergency food system as part of CFS. Whether this is consistent with CFS principles or the definition - "obtaining a culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through non-emergency (or conventional) food sources at all times" - needs clarification.

Qualitative aspects of food:

Conventional anti-hunger / food security programs have not emphasized qualitative aspects of diet - such as the nutritional content and the cultural appropriateness of food. An adequate amount of food is a more routine measure of food security - which tends to commodify food by emphasizing quantitative factors. For example, USDA's recently approved 18-item scale for measuring food insecurity primarily assesses whether households get enough food. The module explains that these questions do not capture other relevant dimensions of food security including food safety and the nutritional quality of the diet. Likewise, food stamps until recently ignored nutrition altogether, and the emergency food system often measures success (or need) by "pounds of food distributed", and not by what is in that food.

CFS programs and policies place greater attention to qualitative elements of food security. Many programs support access to fresh, nutritious foods through gardening, farmers' markets, CSAs, improved school meal programs, etc. However, there are few formally-stated links to dietary objectives such as those articulated by various dietary guidelines. Using a better definition of food security, such as that issued by LSRO/FASEB, might help emphasize qualitative aspects of food security. It includes: "Access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life and includes at a minimum: a) the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, and b) the assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways...". But CFS broadens qualitative factors by incorporating sustainable food systems models into its approach.

Food security within a continuum:

Ideally, food security is a comprehensive strategy that describes a country's or region's capability to feed itself. It should address not only individual food needs but also access to, and availability of food along a continuum from the household through community, regional, national and even global levels. Neither conventional anti-hunger/food security nor CFS models really address food security this comprehensively. Each has carved -"niches" to the relative neglect of other dimensions of food security within such a continuum. For CFS, this limits its potential for overall impact on food security, as well as the ability to build connections with a broader base.

Addressing poverty and other non-food aspects of food insecurity:

Progressive anti-hunger strategies (i.e., those that address root causes of hunger (or food insecurity) generally focus on various social welfare efforts, support for wage increases, and other policies to reduce (the effects of) poverty and/or increase household resources available for food. Some of this focus is at the state and national levels. Community food security groups (other than the anti-hunger constituency) have not put much attention to such policies, favoring community-based approaches, primarily within the food system. Examples include skills development and employment opportunities through community-centered food production or processing or through food-related entrepreneurial activities.

Community level action has important, yet limited potential to address broad social and economic conditions and policies that shape them. Focusing only on food issues similarly limits the potential to address broader based factors that influence not only how the food system operates, but the many

other sectors that influence social and economic wellbeing. With a few exceptions, interrelationships of either constituency with global food security efforts is also limited or lacking. Internationally, support is increasing for the notion of food security as a fundamental human right, but few have embraced such a goal in this country. This could tie this into a social justice framework for CFS.

Community food security and the food system:

In countries where hunger is more widespread and much of the population is directly involved in food production, issues such as land and labor conditions, food aid and trade, food markets, and food prices directly impact the production and availability of food for most of the population.. Agriculture and food systems are therefore more fundamental to food security analysis and policy in poorer countries.

But in the U.S., where the farm population is relatively small while food is plentiful, anti-hunger and food security policies have focused little on agriculture and the overall food system and mostly on resources (such as food prices and household incomes) to obtain adequate food from whatever sources that are available. Food assistance programs, be it food stamps or food banks, don't really focus on the food system and its relationship to food security, and emergency food largely circumvents it except as a source of food donations.

CFS is more focused on food system issues in a community as a means to improve food access and availability. Sometimes this means promoting more supermarkets or better access to them, but more often CFS-related projects try to circumvent the conventional system and support alternative, locally based food production and distribution strategies. Such objectives also support community empowerment through greater control over and

participation in many levels of the food system, from food production and distribution to consumption and disposition of waste.

Sustainable food systems:

Where food comes from and how it is produced is important to many CFS advocates. Programs that favor community-based food production (e.g., community gardening) and linking low-income communities to local/regional agriculture (e.g.; farmers' markets, CSAs) are frequently cited as examples of community food security. These also exemplify sustainable food system activity at the local or community level.

However, CFS lacks a consistent perspective on sustainability. Preference for sustainable production methods in local food production is not explicit. For some communities, access to food means bringing in or retaining supermarkets in low-income areas, and thus buying even more into the (unsustainable) conventional - food system. This reflects the limits of a local food systems approach to address food insecurity; i.e., providing sufficient access to and availability of culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate foods. Given that most of the food in any US community come from outside its immediate and proximate boundaries, CFS cannot have much influence on it unless it builds strategies that address global food system problems rather than just trying to work around them.

The rationale for connecting CFS to sustainable food systems has been described by some, and builds on international perspectives that explicitly link food system and food security programs and policies. Clearly, food system practices that negatively effect the long-term sustainability of our food supply threaten domestic and global food security. For example, a low-cost food policy may help improve food security domestically but it

expands poverty and food insecurity abroad when it entails displacement of subsistence agriculture and replaces it with low-paying environmentally hazardous production for export.

Sustaining communities:

Just as the food system does not operate in isolation from broader social, economic and political systems, CFS can contribute to broader community revitalization -economically, socially, culturally, and environmentally. Sustainable community development principles incorporate such objectives, and CFS could be better represented within this approach.

Toward a Re-definition of Community Food Security:

A redefinition of community food security should incorporate many of the concepts its proponents advocate. These include (1) CFS as both process and outcome oriented; (2) focusing on community in the context of a food security continuum; (3) incorporating qualitative aspects of food and food security; (4) emphasizing local/regional food systems within a sustainable global continuum; (5) integrating sustainable community objectives, and (6) incorporating social justice and other empowerment objectives. Following is a first take at a redefinition of CFS that integrates these principles:

- Definition - Community food security represents comprehensive community-centered approaches to providing adequate resources and access for all people at all times to a readily-available, nutritionally adequate, safe and sustainably produced food supply. Community food security supports sustainable community development and greater involvement in and control over all aspects of the food system by residents and

community-based institutions. It also promotes greater food self-reliance in the context of the right to food for all people within a globally-sustainable food system.

- Beyond definitions - While a broader definition can help focus and strengthen CFS, it does not supplant the need to develop overall theoretical or conceptual base. Ultimately, the best definition should emerge from that process. And any definition is at best a concise representation of principles and concepts and says little about how these should be implemented. It is in the application of CFS that inconsistencies and contradictions can be resolved and that real success will be measured.