

PART I The Language of
Food (In)security



Figure 1. The Warnersville Farmers Market. Local farmer Rhonda Ingram (left) and Hannah Harris (right) swap recipes for zucchini at the Warnersville Farmers Market in August 2011. Photo credit: Chris English.

1 Navigating the Language of Food Systems

Everybody eats. To most of you reading this book, that probably sounds like a simple and obvious enough idea. Every one of us must eat to live, and we have no real way around that basic need. Not only do our hunger impulses remind us daily of our need to eat, but we also see food as a foundational concept across our social systems—when food is used as a classic example of a physiological need in Maslow’s hierarchy, for example. We also see it in our cultures—when groups of people develop their identities around cuisines, recipes, and how food is passed down from generation to generation. And we see it in our communities—when neighbors organize social events and activities around food. We are beings made of energy, and we require energy to survive.

At the same time, societies need frequent reminders that processes, resources, and practices related to everyday eating do not always operate in just and equitable ways. The World Health Organization estimates that more than 815 million people or 11 percent of the global population experience some level of hunger or food insecurity.¹ In the United States, one in eight people qualify as food insecure.² And in 2017, the American food system was labeled for the first time as deteriorating.³ Communities experience disparities in access to food and health-related resources;

the commercial food sector routinely makes choices that privilege corporate shareholders over community needs; researchers often lack the data, funding, and overall capacity to help make sense of how to improve our food system from a socially just perspective.⁴

With this chapter, we frame food as a systems issue and begin building a case for communication as a way to construct various paths toward food justice. Although everyday eating is certainly an issue of global concern, our approach focuses more on communication and community-level interventions. Identifying and dismantling structures that make inequity possible requires some level of community participation, either through grassroots mobilizing or eventual changes in everyday eating practices. Also, principles of food justice and food sovereignty stress the rights of individuals and communities to construct their own food systems, cultures, and practices.⁵ Yet, even the community food efforts that seem the most secure are not immune to the tensions of keeping their advocacy and activism going. The year 2017 saw the end of Growing Power—a model program established by Will Allen in 1993 to promote community development, urban agriculture, and local food systems. The program focused on community food systems and social justice through an urban farm in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Allen sought to improve the lives of fellow Black men in his community, while also providing hands-on training about growing food and local food systems. At the height of its operation, Growing Power routinely provided food to over ten thousand low-income people and contracted with numerous local restaurants. The program was hailed as innovative, particularly because of how it incorporated a community focus and holistic feedback loops; Allen even received a MacArthur Fellowship (i.e., the “genius” grant) in 2008 to expand his approach. However, mounting financial concerns and a disconnect between Allen and his board of directors led to the dissolution of Growing Power in late 2017. Although Allen has plans to continue working the farm itself, the public and online presence about the organization and its model has virtually disappeared.

For many food advocates and activists, the end of Growing Power became a shocking reminder of the fragility of our food systems and the efforts to promote equity across them.⁶ Organizing eating involves complex processes of getting food to people and getting people to food. Those

processes include the integration of many people, places, motives and interests, material resources, and communication practices. Before we can offer our perspective on communication and food justice organizing, we must first provide readers with a way to navigate the complexities related to organizing eating; we do so by emphasizing food as a systems issue and the language of food (in)security.

FOOD AS A SYSTEMS ISSUE

Although everyday eating is one of our most basic activities, the process of meeting the food needs of more than seven billion people across the globe has grown increasingly complex. Everyday eating involves an intricate relationship between global, national, regional, and local food systems—all of which intersect to ensure that food gets to people. For example, the average American eats about the same amount of apples and bananas; they are two of our favorite fruits.⁷ While thirty-nine of the fifty states can grow apples commercially,⁸ barely sixteen states can grow bananas. Only Hawaii and certain corners of Florida can support even moderate-scale commercial farming of bananas, and they specialize primarily in cooking bananas and—coincidentally—a variety called the apple banana.⁹ Most of the apples we eat come from either the United States or Canada, while most of the bananas we eat come from Guatemala, Ecuador, and Costa Rica.¹⁰ Just this one example, of two of the most consumed foods in the United States, illustrates how we depend upon local and global producers in order to meet our everyday food needs.

For many of us, food is so readily available that we forget about the complex practices of production and consumption that enable and constrain how we eat. Data from the US Department of Agriculture, last updated in 2014, shows that the average American consumes almost two thousand pounds of food annually.¹¹ That number translates to a series of intricate relationships between food producers, processors, retailers, consumers, and waste managers. Before readers can fully appreciate the connections between communication and food justice activism, we must outline some of the realities—including opportunities and limitations—regarding how food operates from a systems perspective. In other words, people meet

their daily food needs “through a complex set of interdependent processes from seed to table and back again.”¹² From a communication perspective, how we organize eating demonstrates many classic features of a system, in that food is:

- **Material and social:** At its core, food is a natural resource with material and social consequences. People interact with natural and agricultural systems, including growing seasons and climate zones, in order to grow food; therefore, our participation in the food system hinges upon a set of material resources, timetables, and realities that people do not completely control. At the same time, we frequently work in creative and innovative ways to manipulate those material constraints to reflect our social tastes and desires. Consumers select food based on culture, tradition, and routine; producers develop greenhouses and hydroponic systems to extend growing seasons; food scientists and chefs look for new ways to blend different practices and cuisines to keep people engaged with their eating; food writers, marketers, and advertisers persuade us to think about food in particular ways. We generate a good deal of discourse around food, making it inherently social alongside the material.
- **Interdependent:** Food also involves an intricate network of processes and stakeholders that must work together in order to get food to people.¹³ Figure 2 provides an illustration of the many features that influence how food gets created and consumed from a systems perspective. Producers must generate ingredients—either by growing them on a farm or garden or creating them in a lab. Those ingredients must be transported, transformed, and packaged into products that retailers and marketers can persuade consumers to purchase, prepare, and eat. Finally, systems generate waste, which in the case of food, can frequently be incorporated back into the production process. The interdependent features of our food system require a significant amount of coordination and communication among individuals and organizations, and changes in one part of the system lead to direct and indirect changes across the remaining moving parts.
- **Enabled and constrained:** As part of his theory of structuration, Giddens argued that social systems are simultaneously made possible *and* restricted by the various ways in which human agents interact with structural rules and resources.¹⁴ Applied to food systems, this way of thinking reveals how food is enabled and constrained by the material and social realities of growing food, choosing what to eat, and managing

the consequences of our choices. Perhaps most importantly, recognizing this interplay between action and structure also focuses attention on how we communicate about food, particularly how food systems are enabled and constrained by discourse and policy, media, and everyday talk about what we eat.

- **Paradoxical:** The complexities of how food systems function inevitably lead to tensions, particularly in the form of paradoxes.¹⁵ A paradox often refers to a systemic tension that illustrates the general discomfort that arises when competing perspectives clash.¹⁶ It is where two seemingly incompatible ideas exist at the same time, where the pursuit of seemingly compatible goals begin to undermine each other, or where the pursuit of one goal seems antithetical to its end. Food systems often encounter structural paradoxes, such as the prevalence of both hunger and obesity within a single system.
- **Sensemaking activities:** Food is also systemic in that we make sense of and learn by enacting the moving parts of a food system and retain that knowledge for future activity in the system. At the same time, our knowledge is always filtered through selected interpretations of how food systems best operate. In many cases, we learn by doing, and this systemic feature of food systems involves a connection to Weick's systems theory of sensemaking.¹⁷ For example, a fledgling gardener might fail their first year at growing tomatoes. Of the many reasons for that failure—including too much direct sun, poor soil quality, inconsistent watering, and countless other reasons—the gardener selects too much direct sun and decides to plant in a different location next year. The enactment of growing (or failing to grow) tomatoes, as well as subsequent choices to move the plant, frames future knowledge about food and the systems that support it. As these kinds of sensemaking practices occur across smaller and larger scales, our food system becomes a space where multiple stakeholders make sense of how to best organize a complicated set of resources.

Taken together, the idea that food systems are material and social, interdependent, enabled and constrained, paradoxical sensemaking activities highlights the complexity of concepts with which we are working. Indeed, these concepts emerged in various presentations, dialogues, and news stories that shaped how food security was framed in Greensboro, North Carolina, when community members began facing high rates of food hardship and food insecurity. For example, much of the foundation

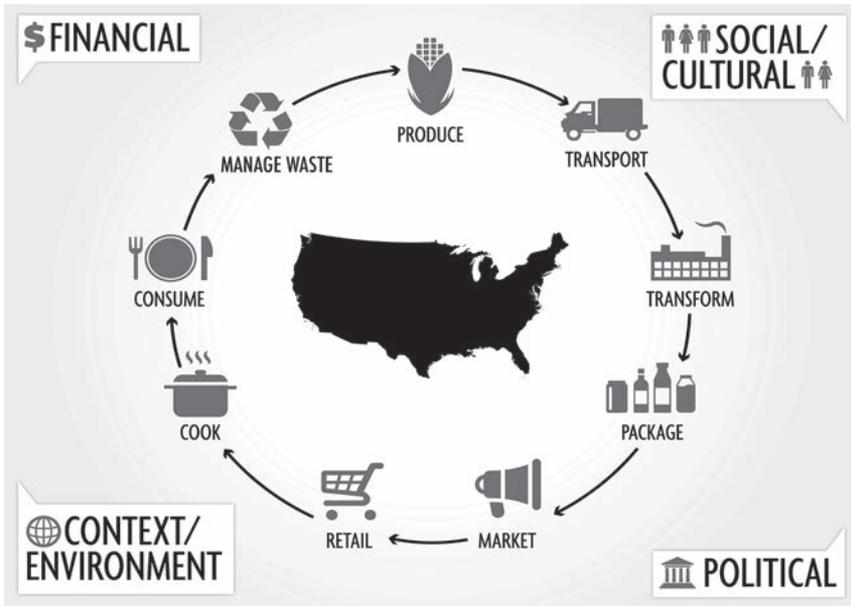


Figure 2. Food as a systems issue. The illustration demonstrates the interdependencies between different communities, voices, and stakeholders in most modern food systems. Image credit: Elizabeth Dam-Regier.

for the concepts outlined in Figure 2 was influenced heavily by a presentation that Christy Shi-Day gave in October 2012 for more than eighty-five Greensboro residents who were interested in starting a local food council.

Alongside the core components of food systems outlined in Figure 2 are reminders of other systemic features that deserve consideration. As both a construct and consequence of how food systems operate, they are also social and cultural; therefore, any intervention into food systems—from local to global—must attend to the social and cultural needs of the people eating within that system.¹⁸ They are political, in that people, communities, organizations, and institutions compete for resources in ways that privilege certain interests over others.¹⁹ Food systems are tied to context and environment, particularly when certain regions have easier access to water, good soil, and moderate temperatures or when centers of agriculture experience unexpected droughts. Finally, food systems are also

financial in numerous ways, including fluctuations in the cost of food, as well as a common way people earn wages. When food systems are optimized, these features come together to remind us that food is life.

THE LANGUAGE OF FOOD (IN)SECURITY

Inherent within a framework of food as a systems issue is the notion that food systems can be either secure or insecure, sometimes both. Food security often refers to the complex integration of many features of our food system to ensure that food gets to people, while food insecurity regularly focuses more specifically on individual-level factors including income and the ability for people to get to food. This relationship between food security and insecurity provides a crucial framing for how communities might pursue food justice, a term which frequently emphasizes racial and economic equity alongside cultural and structural barriers that communities face as they participate in local food systems and conversations about how everybody eats.

Around the terms *food systems*, *food security*, and *food justice* has emerged an intricate language of food (in)security, which we see evident in policy texts, public health documents and movements, cultural metaphors, and everyday talk about food. From hunger to food deserts to food hardship, the language of food (in)security relies on a dense web of metaphors, discourses, and definitions that both enables and constrains participation in food systems and food justice activism. That language matters in how we use it to construct our talk through food, about food, around food, and as food.²⁰

Navigating food (in)security regularly means negotiating some confusing terrain. In what follows, we offer some definitions and conceptual development to equip readers with a basic knowledge of food security and its related terms including insecurity, hardship, and food justice. Throughout, we use the term *food (in)security* to focus on how these terms come together to form a language system that enables and constrains our food system. Food (in)security operates discursively, suggesting that our understanding of what it means to be food secure is both constructed through and a consequence of discourse. At its core, discourse simply means talk and texts. Communication and critical discourse scholars have developed

the definition of discourse to focus on the sophisticated process of how we make things (like food) meaningful by talking and writing about them. People talk about food with friends and family, in meetings, at social events, through online and social media, and public speeches. We also encounter a variety of texts about food including advertisements, policies, news articles, blog posts and websites, cookbooks and family recipes, and research reports. Discourse is a relevant and vital part of food justice activism, and we offer this initial definition as a way to consider how individuals, organizations, and communities work through the complex languages around food (in)security.

Some of the most direct and accessible global definitions of food security are available through the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations. The FAO includes both the Committee on World Food Security and the World Food Programme. Their definition of food security goes back to the 1996 World Food Summit, which states, “Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”²¹ The FAO’s approach highlights food as a systems issue by focusing on what they call four pillars of food security: availability, access, utilization, and stability. The concepts of availability and access concentrate on those central processes of getting food to people and getting people to food. While availability addresses the presence or absence of food (i.e., can your local climate and economy support its own local food system or do you need to import food from another region or country?), access focuses on the more precarious concept of whether or not people have the resources (e.g., money and transportation) to secure the food they need.

Further, utilization and stability focus respectively on how people use resources once they are made available and accessible, as well as how the system maintains the availability and accessibility of those resources. These two concepts frequently address questions of affordability, especially when one considers the volatility of food as a resource. Between 2007 and 2017, the basic costs of feeding a family of four in the United States rose 20 percent—from about \$124 to about \$148 per week.²² During that time, median wages stayed largely flat, and only in the last three years did wages begin to catch up to the rising cost of food.²³ These changes in the