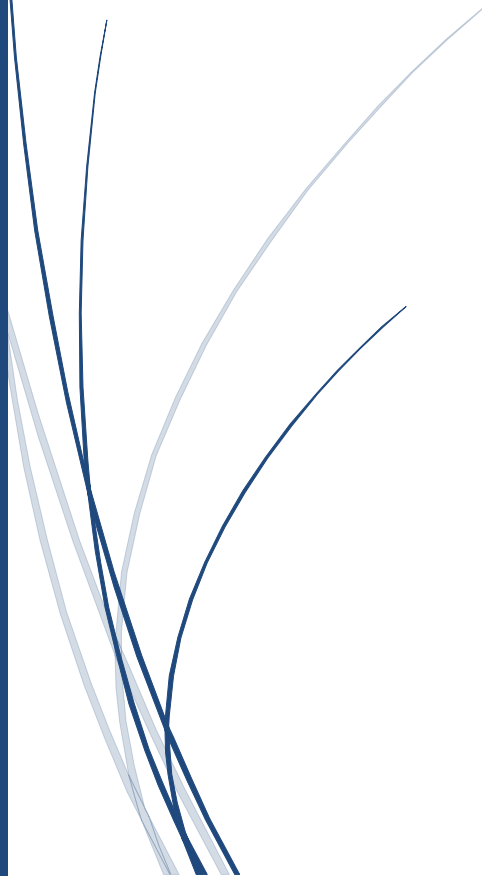




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From Farm to Table:

A guide to community food
assessments for Georgia



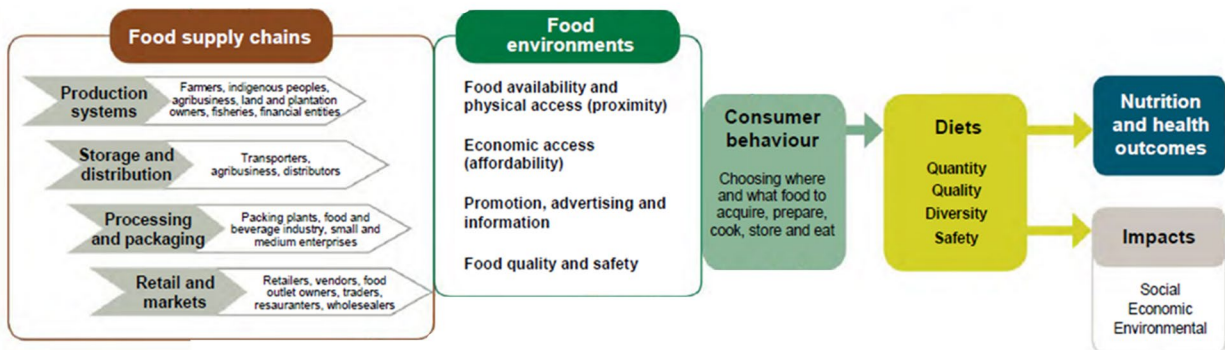
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SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS INITIATIVE

County level food system assessment

There are various reasons why you would want to complete a food system assessment, including creating a baseline set of conditions for planning, identification of opportunities, identification of risks, generating community interest in agriculture, improving community health, and creating a narrative for your community to support an activity or program. Data collection requires identifying information from a variety of sources, some of which are readily available from agency databases while other data will require having conversations and conducting surveys with local participants.

In its simplest form, a food system is defined by the connection between food production and food consumption, often visualized through the food supply chain. In reality it is more complex, because the food system includes the food supply chain, and the food environment, where consumers make decisions that lead to their nutrition and health outcomes. See, Figure 1. While food systems can be global in scale, community food systems often have a smaller geographic footprint that is defined by local and regional activities. The goal of a community food system assessment (CFSA) is to understand and strengthen local and regional connections of the food system within a community by developing a set of benchmarks to evaluate changes to health and nutrition outcomes and community sustainability.

Figure 1. Basic elements of the food system



Source: (UN HLPE on Food Security and Nutrition, Committee on World Food Security, 2017)

A CFSA is the first step to understanding the local food system by identifying opportunities for strengthening and enhancing the local food system. CFSA's provide baseline information to support new programming including understanding of: benefits to local food producers; benefits to the local economy; reducing energy consumption, improving access to fresh and nutritional content food; re-establishing a personal connection between consumers and food producers; and creating positive changes in eating behaviors.

The scope and content of a CFSA is driven by your community’s needs and goals, and thus, each assessment must be tailored to your community. There are some general ideas that apply to most assessments:

- The assessment should provide a systems-level perspective which considers the movement of food into, through and out of the community.
- The assessment should include multiple data sources and methods of data collection
- Involvement of stakeholders and members of the community is essential.
- The process should be driven by local community members and tailored to the community needs.

The process:



Here is some guidance for each step of the process.

Scope

The scope of your assessment is the footprint for which you will be collecting data. There are many ways of conducting a CFSA, so your scope may be more comprehensive than others and will encompass the entire food system in your county, while others may choose to focus on specific components. The scope will influence the following steps in your assessment.

Stakeholders

After the scope of the assessment is determined, the key stakeholders of the food system should be identified. This would be all entities that contribute to one of the basic elements of a food system: production, process, distribution, consumption, and waste. Most commonly, we would think of the producers, consumers, and all key members of the supply chain that exist within the county.

Indicators

Next, appropriate indicators for measurement in the assessment need to be identified. These indicators may be different for each element of the food system. For the consumption element, it may be you are measuring the ease of access to healthy food in the county, or the price paid by consumers. If it is the production element of the food system, a possible indicator might be profit or yield of a particular food item. Many indicators for each of the elements within the food system might already be collected by various agencies or organizations, and it will be up to the community to select the indicator they feel will best provide tracking of the desired outcomes.

The list below provides many examples of recommended indicators to measure in the CFSA. This list is not exhaustive, but rather represents examples that can be used to start the discussion.

- **Food production capacity:**
 - Number of farms
 - Land area in farms
 - Zoning restrictions
 - Water sources (groundwater, surface water)
 - Labor availability
 - Farm/farmland ownership
- **Food production:**
 - Farmgate and volumes
 - Direct sales (farmers markets, CSA)
 - Community gardens
 - School gardens
- **Food processing and distribution capacity:**
 - Existing food processing businesses
 - Existing food distribution or warehouse facilities
 - Availability of commercial kitchens
 - Meat slaughter and processing facilities
- **Retail food environment:**
 - Number and locations of grocery stores, specialty stores, restaurants, fast food, and convenience stores
 - Identified food deserts
 - Retail that accepts SNAP or WIC
 - Availability of “healthy” options
 - Variability of food prices
 - Locations of farmers markets and hours
- **Food Insecurity:**
 - Overall rates of food insecurity
 - Rates of insecurity among children
 - Participation rates in food assistance programs
 - School lunch
 - SNAP/WIC
 - Meals on wheels
- **Food consumption and behaviors:**
 - Fruit and vegetable consumption
 - Total food expenditure
 - Expenditures on various food types
 - Food eaten in the home versus food eaten out of the home

- **Nutrition-related health conditions:**
 - Rates of hypertension or cardiovascular disease
 - Rates of diabetes
 - Rates of obesity and overweight
- **Food waste:**
 - Plate waste in school lunchrooms
 - Restaurant waste
 - Retail waste
- **Economic impact of local food system:**
 - Total food expenditures within the community
 - Direct sales of locally produced foods, compared to total food expenditure
 - SNAP dollars spent in the community
 - Employment/jobs in food sector businesses
- **Community perspectives:**
 - Access to healthy food options
 - Satisfaction with current situation
 - Barriers to healthy eating
 - Ideas for improvement
 - Community readiness to support change
 - Who needs to be in the room
- **Community Demographics**
 - Age structure
 - Poverty rates
 - Race
 - Access to transportation
 - Housing
 - employment

Data Collection

For each of the identified indicators, the community will need to determine the best way to collect and share these results. Data comes in many shapes and forms, all of which have pros and cons for use. Survey data is great for collecting information on indicators that may otherwise be hard to measure. However, survey data is also known to include biases that survey respondents include in their answers. For example, if you wanted to measure farm profitability, it has long been known that farmers tend to overstate profitability when asked in a survey as they want to make their farm appear more profitable.

The following are links to common data sources that could be used to gather indicator data:

Community Commons <https://www.communitycommons.org/>

Feeding America <http://map.feedingamerica.org/>

USDA Agricultural Census <http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/>

USDA Food Environment Atlas <http://tinyurl.com/foodatlas>

USDA Food Access Research Atlas <http://tinyurl.com/lwvbxwb>

Center for Agribusiness <http://caes2.caes.uga.edu/center/caed/>

Natural Resources Spatial Analysis Laboratory <http://narsal.uga.edu>

Reporting and Dissemination

Finally, the community will need to have a plan to analyze the data, create a set of recommendations and disseminate their findings to key stakeholders in the food system. The report should summarize the assessment findings in an objective manner that will enable the reader to understand the relevance of the measures that are included, how the data was collected and what the results mean. Finally, the report should highlight goals and recommendations for the community to implement.

The links below provide examples of and strategies for next steps in food system planning.

Harvard Food Law and Policy Clinic <https://www.chlpi.org/food-law-and-policy/about/>

The Healthy Food Access Portal <http://www.healthyfoodaccess.org/>

The Wallace Center <http://www.wallacecenter.org/>

Measuring and Describing the Health and Wellness of Your County

Food Production

What food is produced in your county?

Look at how many food producing farms, community gardens and school gardens are in your county.

Recommended Sources:

USDA Agriculture Census data, Farm Gate surveys, farmer's markets, food distributors, local/specialty grocery stores

Food Environment

Where do people get their food? (access)

Where is food sold or distributed from? Grocery stores, gas stations, dollar stores, CSA's, farmer's markets, restaurants, fast food, food pantry's/food banks, etc.

Recommended Sources:

Local phone books, shopper's guides, Google searches, USDA
Food Environment Atlas: <http://tinyurl.com/foodatlas>

How do people get their food? (equity)

How many residents receive some sort of food and nutrition assistance? (SNAP, WIC, free or reduced lunch)

Recommended Sources:

USDA Food and Nutrition Service:
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/get-involved/access-data>

Overall Health and Wellness

What does your community's health and wellness look like?

Now that you have taken account of the production, access, and equity of food in your county, you can begin to understand how these factors impact overall health and wellness in your county by looking at consumer behaviors, which are reflected in diets. The overall health and wellness will serve as a baseline for you to measure community improvement over time.

Recommended Sources:

Community Commons: <https://www.communitycommons.org/>
Feeding America: <http://map.feedingamerica.org/>
USDA Food Environment Atlas: <http://tinyurl.com/foodatlas>
USDA Food Access Research Atlas: <http://tinyurl.com/lwvbxwb>

