



## HEALTH & THE FOOD SYSTEM

The industrial food system in the United States is incredibly complex.

While on the one hand it provides plentiful, relatively affordable food, much of it is produced in a way that's wreaking havoc on the environment and, by extension, our collective health.

Meanwhile, a movement is afoot to promote food sovereignty – a model that places those who produce, distribute, and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies (Change for Children, 2016).

Different from food security, which neither distinguishes where food comes from nor the conditions under which it is produced and distributed, food sovereignty is “the right of all people to [access] healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods and to define their own food and agriculture systems” (Salerno, 2021).

Creating a vibrant, sustainable, and holistic food system is not only needed but is also within reach. Read on to learn how.

### KEY CHALLENGES

#### *Corporate Food Regime*

The fact that our food system is largely dependent upon factory farms and monoculture to feed the masses comes at a huge cost to the planet and our collective well-being (American Public Health Association, 2022). The concentration of corporate power in the current food system has effectively spurred a contemporary health crisis – as evidenced by the chronic hunger experienced by 1 in 8 individuals worldwide to negative health impacts of widespread pesticide use in crops on individuals and communities (Brisbois, Hergesheimer, Spiegel, Weiler, Wittman, & Yassi, 2014).

#### *Climate Crisis and Racism*

The complexity surrounding the American food system cannot be understood without taking a closer look at the ongoing climate crisis and systemic racism in this country (Salerno, 2021). Throughout history, “Europeans’ genocide of Native Americans and enslavement of Africans



cleared land to grow cash crops and depleted soil health across the country.” Generations later, communities everywhere continue to suffer the residual consequences.

## PROMISING IDEAS

A focus on food sovereignty, and bringing its principles to the forefront of research, stands to have a transformative effect in realizing health equity through the food system (Brisbois, Hergesheimer, Spiegel, Weiler, Wittman, & Yassi, 2014).

### *Invest in Shared Equity Ownership*

Affordable farmland remains out-of-reach for many farmers in this country, among them a disproportionate number of whom identify as Black and/or Indigenous (Salerno, 2021). Shared equity ownership models, such as community land trusts (which arose from the Civil Rights movement), are a means of keeping land affordable: Nonprofit organizations purchase land outright, and lease it to farmers on a long-term basis, as a means of increasing access and narrowing the wealth gap. Not only do CLTs increasingly serve BIPOC farmers, but they also tend to employ sustainable land management practices poised to mitigate climate change — making this approach a win-win for all involved (Salerno, 2021).

### *Support Local Farmers*

Sourcing food directly from local farms — especially those owned by BIPOC farmers — has the power to transform the regional food system. In fact, it’s the first step toward equalizing power in the food system (Brisbois, Hergesheimer, Spiegel, Weiler, Wittman, & Yassi, 2014). While this is true of individual consumers, the positive effects are multiplied when community stakeholders with purchasing power (like schools, hospitals, and large companies) interact with local food growers and businesses. In other words, when institutions model healthy purchasing and sales, they are offering a pair of just food system interventions from which the entire community stands to learn and benefit (Change Lab Solutions, 2023).

## COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

Right here in our region, [Hudson Valley Food System Coalition](#) is gathering networks of food systems partners — from producers to consumers — in an effort to influence changes within the food system as a means of improving it.

“It’s really about how the food gets from the ground to the people,” says Sarah Salem, co-founder and current director of the coalition,





*Picture from the 2023 Climate Solutions Accelerator Summit, Sarah Salem, Director of the Hudson Valley Food System, who participated on a panel at the summit, entitled: Transformative Social Innovation and the Power of Regional Networks and Leadership.*

*Photo courtesy of Sarah Salem.*

one that (since March 2019) has been mission-driven to realize a more equitable and regenerative Hudson Valley food system by connecting food production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste management practices while encouraging the use of our region's food resources to ensure the long-term health and sustainability of our community.

“[Myriad entities] have their hands in this work,” Salem said, underscoring the overarching goal: “To strengthen the network and amplify any resources that already exist or could exist in the future.”

At present, a majority of the coalition’s work lies in ensuring those organizations working to address food security and food access are considering the food sovereignty movement – one Salem defines as, “a dignified way to access food that is healthy, culturally appropriate, follows regenerative growing practices, and is economically accessible to [all] people.”

From Salem’s perspective, it’s about investing in the community in a way that extends beyond nourishing folks and invites them to participate in the food system in a way that feels good.

“With engagement comes empowerment [which] puts the food system back into the hands of the people.”



*A look at the Hudson Valley Food Systems Coalition’s Exploratory Scenario Planning workshop hosted at Glynwood Center for Regional Food and Farming in partnership with Food Systems Foresight.*

*Photo courtesy of Sarah Salem.*



## COMING UP

Over the past 12 months, we have just begun to scratch the surface when it comes to the many issues intersecting with and contributing to the overall health of the region. Got an idea for an upcoming topic? E-mail Natashea Winters at Foundation for Community Health today: [natashea@fchealth.org](mailto:natashea@fchealth.org).



## References

American Public Health Association (2022). Creating The Healthiest Nation: Food Justice.

[https://www.apha.org/-/media/Files/PDF/advocacy/CHN\\_Food\\_Justice.ashx](https://www.apha.org/-/media/Files/PDF/advocacy/CHN_Food_Justice.ashx)

Brisbois, B., Hergesheimer, C., Spiegel, J., Weiler, A., Wittman, H., & Yassi, A. (2014). Food Sovereignty, Food Security, and Health Equity: A Meta-Narrative Mapping Exercise.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4559116/>

Change for Children (2016). Food Security vs Food Sovereignty, What's the Difference?.

<https://changeformchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Food-Security-vs-Food-Sovereignty.pdf>

Change Lab Solutions (2023). Legal & Policy Strategies for Health Care & Food System Partners.

[https://www.changelabsolutions.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/Legal-Policy-Strategies-Health-Care-Food-System-Partners\\_Full-Guide\\_FINAL\\_20210525A.pdf](https://www.changelabsolutions.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/Legal-Policy-Strategies-Health-Care-Food-System-Partners_Full-Guide_FINAL_20210525A.pdf)

Salerno, C. (2021). Food Sovereignty Can Advance Racial Equity and Climate Resilience.

<https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/food-sovereignty-can-advance-racial-equity-and-climate-resilience>

