Creating a Common Language

AFT graphic

A common language improves communication and lays the groundwork for a community-based process. Thus, we are starting by defining terms you will find throughout this guide. In general, we take a broad view of key terms including *agriculture* and *food production*, *food security*, and *public policy*.

Agriculture and Food Production

Agriculture is the practice of cultivating the soil to produce crops and raising poultry and livestock. Over time and in different places, the definition has expanded to include raising fish (aquaculture), on-farm education and recreation (agritourism), or growing plants in water using mineral nutrients (hydroponics). Some states specifically include bees or horses—or things like Christmas trees, maple syrup, and forestry; some specify products that have a domestic or foreign market. Agriculture also can encompass activities related to the preparation of farm products for market or direct sale. These include cooling, storing, grading, packing, packaging, processing, marketing, and distributing agricultural products.

Food production includes a significant market component but also incorporates other activities to grow, raise, and harvest crops; fish, hunt, or raise animals; or forage food for human consumption that may or may not be market-oriented. While some of these activities are recreational, they also can make significant contributions to family and community food security.

Farm

The term ***farm*** has many definitions, including those determined by government agencies for various policy and tax purposes. Some places have broad definitions while others' are very specific. Generally, farms include field crops; orchards and nurseries; dairy, poultry and livestock; and on-farm infrastructure like milking parlors, greenhouses, hoop houses, and structures used for the raising and sale of agricultural or horticultural commodities.

Lexington–Fayette, Kentucky Municipal Code Definitions

Active farm shall mean a parcel of land which is currently being used for agricultural production.

Agricultural production shall mean the production for commercial purposes of crops, livestock and livestock products, and nursery and greenhouse products, including the processing or retail marketing of these crops, livestock and livestock products, and nursery and greenhouse products, if more than fifty (50) percent of those processed or merchandised products are produced by the farm operator, and the raising and stabling of horses for commercial purposes, and shall also include any of the following: dairying, pasturage, growing crops, bee keeping, horticulture, floriculture, orchards, plant nurseries, viticulture, silviculture, aquaculture and animal and plant husbandry; the breeding, raising, training and general care of livestock for uses other than food, such as sport or show purposes; and construction and maintenance of barns, silos and other similar structures, the use of farm machinery, the primary processing of agricultural products and the sale of agricultural products produced on the land where the sales are made.[1]

Foodshed

A ***foodshed*** is a concept that describes the spatial relationships between where food is produced and is consumed. It describes a geographic relationship, similar to a watershed, encompassing flow from origin to destination.[2]

Food System

A ***food system*** encompasses the entire life cycle of food, connecting production, processing, distribution, acquisition, consumption, and disposal of waste. A ***sustainable food system*** is a soil-to-soil system that enhances natural resources and supports the physical infrastructure, people and relationships, markets, technologies, policies, regulations, and all the other activities that shape and influence how food moves through the system—from field to fork to compost pile and back again.

The idea of a food system grows out of the larger field of systems-thinking, which is based on the understanding of how individual elements influence each other within a whole environment or organization.[3] Most people living in the United States benefit from plentiful food and year-round availability of even out-of-season products due to multiple food systems nested together like Matryoshka dolls, including global, domestic, regional, and community-based systems.

Community food systems leverage regional assets and integrate the life cycle of food to enhance the environmental, economic, social, and public health of a particular place and its people. While they operate within the context of other food systems, community food systems focus on the needs of and opportunities for community members.

Food Security

According to ERS, ***food security*** is defined as access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. The definition is applicable at varying levels including individuals, communities, regional, and national.[4] The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations states that the food security of a nation or a region means it produces enough food to feed itself in the event of crop failure or import shortfalls.[5] For the purposes of this guide, food security includes the availability of safe and nutritionally adequate foods without reliance on emergency food systems or resorting to scavenging, stealing, or other strategies that undermine human dignity.

Community food security is the state in which all community members have adequate access to healthy, affordable, and culturally acceptable food. Food security and food access are closely linked. Some communities have established visions, charters, or resolutions that define and support community food security.

Former San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom issued an executive directive on "Healthy and Sustainable Food," stating the city's commitment to eliminating hunger and ensuring access to healthy and nutritious food for all residents, regardless of economic means. The mayor declared that **"Access to safe, nutritious, and culturally acceptable food is a basic human right and is essential to both human health and ecological sustainability...."**[6]

Food insecurity means that people have limited or uncertain availability of safe and nutritionally adequate foods. In 2006, USDA introduced new language to describe the different ranges of severity of food insecurity including:

- Very low food security reflects reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake;
- Low food security includes reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet, but with little or no indication of reduced food intake.[7]

Local Food

Local food is a term of art that conjures a sense of place and values, promoting food and farm identities and relationships between producers and consumers. Sometimes "local" refers to food that is produced within a state or geographic area (e.g., from 40 to 400 miles). It can also mean food with certain characteristics including short supply chains and/or marketing arrangements, such as farmers selling directly to consumers through farmers markets, farm stands, or CSA farms or to institutions such as schools or hospitals.

Multiple food systems, nested like Matryoshka dolls, allow many of us in the United States to enjoy plentiful food from farms both local and distant.
dontree / Adobe Stock photo

Planning

Planning is a dynamic public process to envision and prepare for the future. Most local governments, many states, and some regions employ both public and private planning bodies to address a wide range of community needs from transportation to affordable housing, economic development, and the environment. Planning also is a component of public policy development, especially at the local level.

While every state has legislation to allow local government planning, authority and activities vary widely across the country. Most states provide a framework either to encourage or require planning at the county or municipal level. As a result, planners work in every state to create desirable communities to live, work, and play. Urban communities tend to have paid planning professionals as part of their local government structure, while rural communities often have volunteer planning boards and commissions. Planners also work in academia, consulting firms, nonprofits, and real estate development companies.

Food systems planning, as defined by APA's Food Systems Planning Interest Group, works to improve the well-being of people and their communities by building more sustainable, just, equitable, self-reliant, and resilient community and regional food systems. It emphasizes, strengthens, and makes visible the interdependent and inseparable relationships between individual sectors from production to waste management. Food systems planning offers solutions to critical policy and planning issues by seeing and leveraging connections to other health, social, economic, and environmental concerns.[8]

A ***food systems planner*** typically works for a local, regional, or state government; a private consulting business; or a nonprofit organization. Regardless of scale and place of work, a food systems planner is a professional planner who engages in food systems planning work, either full- or part-time.

Food systems planners:

- Are well versed in "systems thinking";
- Understand the complexities of how food systems function;
- Play an important role of convener, facilitator, and connector among allied professions and in communities;
- Advise communities to take future steps to strengthen their food systems and in so doing:
  - Recognize that food systems planning is linked to other planning disciplines so should not be addressed in isolation; and
  - Acknowledge that systemic inequities in agriculture, economic development, housing, public health, transportation, and other systems also are present in the food system and must be addressed.[10]

Food Systems Planning

According to APA's Food Systems Planning Interest Group, food systems planning involves:

- Meaningful engagement in planning and policy making processes and decisions of all community stakeholders from farmers and residents to government representatives, civic organizations, food systems advocates, and allied professionals;
- Development, implementation, and evaluation of food system elements of community plans;
- Identification, tracking, and analysis of a community's food system needs and opportunities;
- A common language and a shared vision for the future;
- Achievable goals and objectives;
- Adoption, implementation, and evaluation of policies; and
- Integration of food systems planning with land use, transportation, economic development, parks and recreation, housing, and other areas of urban and regional planning practice.[9]

Plans

Local governments and planning departments produce many different kinds of ***plans***, including comprehensive plans, functional plans, general plans, master plans, and strategic plans. Depending on location, some of these terms may be used interchangeably, but some states have clear jurisdictional definitions. Food and agriculture can be integrated into all aspects of the community planning process.

- ***Comprehensive, general, or master plans*** apply to an entire community and may address many areas ranging from housing and economic development to land use and transportation. They generally are updated every 10 to 15 years, consistent with state-mandated requirements. These plans set a community's long-range planning direction and can play a key role in advancing food system planning—laying the groundwork for implementing food system initiatives through regulations, incentives, and capital investments.

- ***Strategic plans*** typically focus on high-priority problems or opportunities such as health and safety.
- ***Agriculture and farmland protection plans*** guide communities to support the local farm economy and protect agricultural land for farming and ranching.
- ***Urban agriculture plans*** focus on programs and policies associated with food systems in urban environments.
- ***Transportation plans*** define policies and programs to move people, properties, and goods from place to place.
- ***Economic development, emergency management, food systems, health, open space, sustainability, and resiliency plans*** address specific issues, expand elements of comprehensive plans from community or economic development to addressing climate change, or fill a gap by addressing emerging planning issues, such as health and emergency management.

Trenton, New Jersey, developed an explicit health and food systems element to its master plan to specifically plan for improving the city's food system and overall resident health. This element provides a policy framework for the city to expand access to and uptake of healthy foods, increase opportunities for physical activity, and improve health literacy.

Public Policy

Broadly defined, ***public policy*** includes all government actions and *inactions* that respond to public problems. These include: plans; binding and non-binding policies; laws, ordinances, and regulations; public investment, programs, and projects. Taking this broad view of policy making, many public actions can be taken to advance community food systems including:

- Farm and food friendly land use policies and zoning;
- Personnel dedicated to food system issues;
- Utilities provided for free or reduced rates;
- Public education programs;
- Public investments, through grants and incentives; and
- Tax relief and reductions or waivers in fees for licenses, permits, etc.

Policies take many forms including:

- ***Nonbinding policies: charters, declarations, proclamations, resolutions, and guidelines.*** Typically, non-binding policies establish commitment to a principle or set of principles but do not specify a course of action. They may set guidelines for the entire community, protocols for a specific government department or function, or establish a governance process. Community residents can draft and propose a non-binding proposal, but government officials must vote for it to become a policy. Nonbinding policies also affect how decisions are made within the community. Examples include food charters and food policy councils.
- ***Regulations and laws: statutes, regulations, ordinances, administrative orders, and standards*** that may determine administrative protocols or regulate what citizens are or are not allowed to do. Regulations and laws are legally binding and generally put forth by government agencies or bodies, although residents can lobby to address a particular problem and can suggest content. Local laws and regulations are voted on by local officials, but unlike non-binding policies, they have specified protocols for implementation. Examples include zoning, staple food ordinances, and right-to-farm laws.
- ***Programs*** often rely on local government resources, but local government also may partner with community organizations to deliver programs and services. Typically, local officials decide whether to allocate funds rather than determine program content. Examples include community health programs, economic development efforts, healthy retail initiatives, or starting a farmers market.
- ***Physical projects: infrastructure, community facilities, or demonstration sites.*** These projects may be wholly supported by local governments but often are supported by public–private partnerships where the local government provides resources, such as land or funding, and private organizations manage the project. Examples include food hubs and shared-use kitchens.
- ***Public investments*** include financial investments and indirect incentives from appropriations or bonds, or indirect incentives such as differential licensing, permitting, development, and payment in lieu of taxes. Examples include purchase of agricultural conservation easement programs and healthy retail incentives.

See the Implementation Toolbox section for more detail.