



PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES FOR PLANNING AND POLICY MAKING



Dan Bruell / USDA photo

Across the country, community residents, local governments, public agencies, civic organizations, and private sector partners are using multiple strategies to strengthen their food systems. These are wide-ranging: from farmland protection to urban agriculture, from farmers markets and food hubs to healthy retail policies, from beginning farmer training to nutrition education, from economic development to emergency food programs.

These food system activities are strengthened and sustained when they are supported by plans and policies. In turn, plans and policies are strengthened and sustained when they are guided by sound principles and practices to ensure they are responsive, inclusive, equitable, and informed so that the resulting policies and programs achieve their intended goals.

Principles

Fundamentally, *food system planning requires a systems approach*. The economic and policy forces that affect agriculture, food production, food access, and food security are systems issues, not individual sector issues. In other words, where various parts of the economy share the same or related products and services. The food system is interconnected and complex, and the various sectors need to be addressed together, preferably in conjunction with other community planning efforts.

The first underlying principle is to *recognize and engage all community residents*—from the farmers and ranchers who grow our food to people living in places with limited access to healthy food. From the outset, the planning process must be designed to involve the people most affected by the policy decisions at hand. The people spearheading food planning efforts must go out of their way to identify and reach out to residents they do not know and design public meetings to be

welcoming in terms of when and where they are held, what kind of food is served, whether childcare is provided, and so on.

We live and work in increasingly diverse communities, so a second principle is *to establish a common language* among residents, planners, local policy makers, and others to foster constructive dialogue. This includes defining terms clearly and using accessible language that the entire community is comfortable with and understands. In communities with populations who are not native English speakers, translators can help them understand issues and participate in discussion. A common language builds trust and improves communication but also influences laws, regulations, and taxes.

"Civic engagement is essential for developing an informed and cohesive shared vision for regions while also building a constituency to support the planning process and proactively push for plan implementation."

Kip Holley, Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity

A third principle is to *identify, celebrate, and build on community assets*, including residents, the culture and history of the community, business and community assets, natural resources, and physical infrastructure. This requires formal and informal research and engagement with local organizations, associations, and networks embedded in the community. These organizations, associations, and networks can help identify assets and move plans and policies forward in a way that is both community-centered and community-led. This fosters a more participatory approach that is effective and empowering.

Building off assets, but recognizing constraints, helps *address issues in a comprehensive way and across multiple sectors*



from field to fork and including disposal of waste. Balancing these can be tricky, which is why good planning involves innovative as well as tried-and-true methods and strategies to improve conditions at a community scale.

Lastly, **plan with implementation in mind**. This leads to the development, enactment, and execution of appropriate policies, programs, and public investments that leverage existing assets, and helps to ensure that plans serve as guidance documents and do not just sit on a shelf.

Practices

Planning practices are embedded in the policy making process and include key steps such as community engagement, visioning, collecting and assessing data, and implementing recommendations. While there is a basic trajectory to the process, the steps do not necessarily follow a specified order. Planning, like life, is messy. For example, collecting data is important to informing shared goals, but once goals are set, it is important to collect more data to inform priorities and recommendations. The iterative nature of the planning process is especially important when engaging community members.

Public participation should not be an isolated event but integrated throughout the entire planning and policy development, implementation, and evaluation process. It takes time and effort to build trust and relationships, which is vital to bring people together to solve community problems.



Iterative Community Planning Process

The process is more spiral than linear, and it is possible to enter at many points and return to the beginning when adjustments need to be made to get where you want to go.

1. Engage community members *Who sets the table? Who is at the table?*

Even good policies can have unintended consequences. This is why it is so important to engage the people affected by policies in the planning and policy making process. To do this well requires more than consulting and informing community members, which is usually the first step in a planning process. Fully engaging starts with building respect and trust, and both welcoming and being welcomed by all sectors of your community. This means meeting people where they are, both figuratively and literally. It also means reflecting on one's own bias and being sensitive to the diverse cultures in the community.

It is essential to recognize who sets the table, who is invited, and who might have been left out. The key to this process is reflecting on the: who, what, when, where, and how of community engagement activities so that diverse residents are empowered to participate.

Community engagement uses tools such as public surveys, hearings, community meetings, visioning exercises, and other ways to gather input about community needs and goals. These approaches are useful to solicit input and relay information but rarely fully engage people in the planning and policy process. Deeper forms of participation include citizen assemblies, participatory budgeting, planning charrettes, study circles, sustained dialogue, and the World Café method. [Other creative approaches](#) explore community values and delve more deeply into community needs. Often they include visual techniques and storytelling, and require going out into the community instead of inviting the community to come to you.

2. Envision a desired future; set goals and objectives to achieve it *Where do we want to be? What are shared priorities?*

Another crucial—and often early—step in the planning process is for the community to work together to create an aspirational vision of the future. Visioning brings diverse community members together to develop a shared ideal of what they want and where they want their food system to be in a designated time period—usually between five and 50 years. This leads to creating shared goals and objectives to achieve the community vision.

Many methods are available to help with this. Brainstorming works well in small groups. Another way is to have participants in a public session write down on a piece of paper their visions and—usually in a separate exercise—their goals and objectives,



and then share with the group. Sharing can occur in many ways as well, such as posting on a wall, reading out loud, discussing in small groups, or compiling a written document that is brought back to the group. Appreciative inquiry is grounded in the belief that the best way to create positive change is through the process of positive, affirming inquiry with others. Whatever the approach, it can help to start with a worksheet with a list of key questions to focus attention.

Where visioning is big picture, goal setting is more specific and down to earth.

Writing down goals during an interactive process helps create agreement between community members to ensure the goals are shared. However, it is possible to have too many goals, so another important piece of the process is to identify big, overarching goals and more concrete objectives. Communities often strive to set “SMART” goals that are: Specific, Measurable, Acceptable, Realistic and Time-bound.

GOALS	
1. INCREASE INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT (INCL. TRANSPORT)	3
2. PASS THE ZONING ORDINANCE FOR URBAN AG	4
3. ENGAGE ALL FOOD SYSTEM STAKEHOLDERS (INCL. COMMUNITY, LOCAL GOVT, FNDNS, ETC.)	5
4. MAKE FOOD SYSTEM MORE UNDERSTANDABLE TO GENERAL POPULATION + DECISION-MAKERS	9
5. INCREASE EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES ABOUT THE FOOD SYSTEM + ALL THAT IT ENTAILS	5
6. STREAMLINE FARM SUCCESSION	1

GOALS CONT.	
11. ADAPT TO THE CHANGING FOOD SYSTEM THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS OF ACHIEVING GOALS TO KEEP EFFORTS DYNAMIC	1
12. INCREASE THE AMOUNT OF LOCAL FOOD PURCHASES BY INSTITUTIONAL BUYERS	7
13. INCREASE ACCESSIBILITY TO HEALTHY, LOCAL FOOD THROUGHOUT THE COUNTY	2
14. INCREASE LOCALLY FINANCED PRODUCTION + PROCESSING TO LOCAL MARKETS	1
15. ESTABLISH A MECHANISM FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT FINANCIAL LENDING	1

Setting shared goals and objectives to achieve the community vision / AFT photos

3. Assess trends and current conditions Where have we been?

Before proposing recommendations, it is important to collect and analyze reliable data to understand community assets. Assets can include history, culture, people, natural resources (soils, water, and climate), and physical and financial resources. Assets also include “social capital” or the relationships between the people who live and work together in the community.¹ Good quality data illuminate assets and opportunities, as well as major challenges facing a community’s food system, such as food insecurity, lack of infrastructure for food processing or distribution, water availability, or development pressure on farmland.

Assessments can be completed at varying scales ranging from small neighborhoods to state- and regionwide. A variety of assessment tools are available for communities, including community food assessments, economic impact analyses, farm inventories, and farmer surveys. Asset mapping, for example, identifies and depicts community resources. It is a valuable tool for making projections about growth patterns; identifying the location of farms, food retail, and waste disposal; and analyzing conditions at various levels of granularity—state, county, and Census tract.

Data collection is essential but can be expensive. Thus, it is important to prioritize needs based on budget. It is equally important to collect information from and learn from community members, stakeholders, and advisors during the process. If there is a college or university nearby, explore options to engage students through internships, independent study, a studio, or planning practicum.

**Doña Ana, New Mexico
Vision Statement**

“Our region has a thriving and inclusive food system that:

1. Provides affordable and abundant healthy food for our families and communities;
2. Provides a competitive financial return and esteem for our farmers, and generates sustainable employment and small business opportunities that promote a vibrant and equitable economy;
3. Protects and regenerates the health of our farmlands and natural resources.”

It helps to assign an individual or small group to pull together all this information into a draft of a shared statement, which must then be well vetted before it is finalized. In the end, it is important to set and prioritize goals and objectives that can be achieved in the time frame proposed by your plan. The important thing is to ensure everyone’s voice is heard and then, based on this engagement, to identify common themes to move the community forward.



USDA recently developed a web-based resource that guides users through various kinds of assessments: [The Economics of Local Food Systems: A Toolkit to Guide Community Discussions, Assessments and Choices](#). Released in 2016, *The Toolkit* is comprised of seven modules that address stages of food system planning, assessment, and evaluation.

When conducting assessments, ensure that your data are:

- Credible** – regularly available and trustworthy
- Relevant** – the right data are used for the task
- Valid** – assumptions behind data collection and analysis are sound

4. Generate community choices and make recommendations *How do we make it happen?*

Once goals are established and assessments completed, it is time to propose solutions, generate options, and make recommendations. While engaging community members is important throughout the whole planning process, it is especially important here to ensure proposed policies, programs, and public investment will have intended consequences and to build a base of public support for implementation. It is useful to tie final recommendations to specific goals and objectives, so each solution proposed is a step toward achieving desired community change. Considerations to keep in mind include the urgency, cost, and public support needed for each action proposed.

Recommendations can include “low hanging fruit,” short-term strategies and easy wins, as well as more complex long-term strategies and policy changes. Recommendations are more likely to be implemented if there is a timeline and clearly defined roles and responsibilities—for example, assigning lead organizations or agencies to carry them forward. Depending on the plan’s scale and scope, the timeline may span months, years, or even decades. Along with responsibilities, consider dependencies. For example, implementing a farm-to-school program depends on certifying a large number of farmers in Good Agricultural Practices (GAP). It makes sense to identify farmers to participate and train them in GAP well before the school year.

Partnerships can be essential to achieving recommendations, particularly where funding for implementation is limited. In Chittenden County, Vermont, the Onion River Co-op (now City

Market Onion River Co-op) entered into an agreement with the City of Burlington to open a grocery store on vacant city-owned land. This allowed the store to expand from 6,000 to 16,000 square feet and introduce more affordable pricing for Burlington’s lower income residents.²

5. Develop policies and solutions Implement! *What strategies and policies are needed? Whose support do you need to move them forward?*

This is often the most difficult step. Once the plan has been approved and adopted, recommendations must be transformed into action by people through programs, partnerships, policies, and public investment. As part of this process, it is important to identify roles and responsibilities across the community and local government to ensure the appropriate community members are involved and pushing the process forward.

It is helpful to look at promising practices from communities that have addressed similar challenges. However, there are no one-size-fits-all models, and a policy or program that works well in one community likely will require some adjustments to work in another. GFC has created a [series of briefs and case studies](#) that may be of use.

Healthy Carts Program

The Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Department of Public Health worked with government and community partners to develop a city-wide [Healthy Carts Program](#). Carts sell fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy, and whole grains and can accept SNAP benefits, offering a way to increase healthy food access for low-income residents. The pilot program ran from 2011 to 2012 with carts now being managed by partner organizations.



Willie B. Thomas / iStock photo



6. Assess trends, establish metrics, and modify tactics
How do we know it is working?

Based on goals established and data collected, you can create metrics to measure progress. Metrics can be evaluated and data collected throughout the planning process—both to set goals and to gauge whether you are achieving them, guiding decisions on how to modify strategies and tactics to get where you want to go. This can result in new partners, plans, policies, or an amendment to the existing plan, but it also may result in removing policies or programs that impede progress or do not achieve their intended purpose.

Food system metrics can be based on a wide-range of topics and indicators such as public health, farm profitability, food access, and food procurement. They can be specific and require communities to collect very targeted quantitative data. Seattle, Washington, assessed the number of community gardens per 2,500 households in the city’s [Healthy Living Assessment](#), and the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission evaluated the number of farms reporting net gains in the [Greater Philadelphia Food System Plan](#).

Metrics can also be more qualitatively based such as the goals established in the Vermont Farm to Plate 20-year strategic plan. Communities determine the most applicable metrics based on their needs.

Healthy Food Ordinance

In its 2009 comprehensive plan update, Minneapolis, Minnesota, established a goal to protect and improve individual, community, and environmental health through nutrition. Its strategies focused on ensuring access to healthy foods for all.

Guided by this goal, in 2014 the city amended a 2008 [Staple Healthy Foods ordinance](#) to require Minneapolis stores that hold a grocery store license to stock a certain number of healthy food items including milk and milk alternatives, cheese, eggs, canned fish, and meat or vegetable proteins, nut butter, 30 pounds or 50 items of fresh and/or frozen foods with no added ingredients — seven varieties must be offered and of those five must be fresh, 100% juice, whole grains including whole grain cereals, canned beans, and dried peas, beans, and lentils.

For some examples of measurement tools, see:

- ▶ [The Economics of Local Food Systems](#)
- ▶ [Results Based Accountability: Fiscal Policy Studies Institute](#)
- ▶ [You Get What You Measure: Yellowwood Associates](#)
- ▶ [Whole Measures: Center for Whole Communities](#)

3.4: Food Processing and Manufacturing	4.1: Food Security in Vermont
Goal 11: Vermont’s food processing and manufacturing capacity will expand to meet the needs of a growing food system.	Goal 15: All Vermonters will have access to fresh, nutritionally balanced food that they can afford.
3.5: Wholesale Distribution and Storage	4.2: Food System Education
Goal 12: A sufficient supply of all scales and types of on-farm and commercial storage, aggregation, telecommunications, and distribution services will be available to meet the needs of increasing year-round food production and consumer demand.	Goal 16: Vermont K-12 schools, Career and Technical Education Centers, and institutions of higher education will offer a wide range of curricula, certificate and degree programs, and conduct research aimed at meeting the needs of Vermont’s food system.
3.6: Retail Distribution and Market Outlets	4.3: Food System Labor and Workforce Development
Goal 13: Local food will be available at all Vermont market outlets and increasingly available at regional, national, and international market outlets.	Goal 17: The number of locally owned and operated food system businesses in Vermont is expanding.
3.7: Nutrient Management	Goal 18: Vermont’s food system establishments will provide safe and welcoming working conditions, livable wages, and have access to a skilled, reliable workforce.
Goal 14: Organic materials from farms (e.g., livestock manure) and food scraps will be diverted from landfills and waterways and used to produce compost, fertilizer, animal feed, feedstock for anaerobic digesters, and other agricultural products.	4.3: Food System Business Planning and Technical Assistance
	Goal 19: Business planning and technical assistance services will be highly coordinated, strategic, and accessible to Vermont’s food system businesses.

A sample of goals from the [Vermont Farm to Plate](#) strategic plan. Used with permission.