

# **Community Politics and Leadership in Food In/Security: actors and public action in Albany County, Wyoming, North Park, Colorado and Tompkins County, New York**

*Final Report for Kettering Foundation by*

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In December 2011 our team submitted a report that tackled the first set of questions posed by Kettering Foundation in the Community Politics and Leadership series in health. That report answered Kettering's questions, which were: "What did we learn about the existing political discourse about the health concern of interest? a. What is the health problem that concerns you? How is it described in the media or other sources of information? As you talk with unaffiliated people in your community, how do they talk about the problem? b. What are the organizations currently involved in addressing this concern?"

This report builds on that work. Woodsum and Sequeira share what each learned about the public's food security and justice work in their communities. Porter concludes with implications for the roles land grant universities could and should play to support that work, drawing particularly from the lessons Woodsum and Sequeira share.

All three authors reference a project we are part of called Food Dignity. Food Dignity involves 34 key people in 5 community organizations, 3 universities and 1 "action-think tank". Our core research is case stories of each community organization plus one study of the collaboration itself. We have \$5 million for our 5 years, which started in April 2011. Each community has \$300,000 in community organizing and research support in that time.

## **Public Acting and Innovation in Albany County, Wyoming & North Park, Colorado – Gayle M. Woodsum**

### **A Note on Process**

Participating in Kettering Foundation’s Community Politics and Leadership series in health, was a rich and meaningful experience — both personally and professionally. It was also my own small but strenuous exercise in “this bridge called my back” (borrowing from the title of the revolutionary and influential 1980s anthology<sup>1</sup>).

In this instance, I offered up my own experiential expertise in order to carry inquiries and responses back and forth between the Kettering quest and my local communities of people considering the issue of food security in their lives and the lives of others. In order to accomplish the shuttling with an eye toward depth and any hope of truth in reporting, it was necessary for me to run the framework, the questions (in particular the verbiage used in formulating them) and their goals through a wringer, and sometimes a shredder, of translation. Deconstruct them, as it were, and figure out how to have them make sense on the other side of the bridge. In order to do that, I needed to use a translation process that would take into consideration the realities of food justice (security) in my communities as experienced through many other realities of people’s lives such as race, gender, class, culture, backlife.

For the most part, it was actually easier to translate from Kettering to community than the other way around. Which makes sense. It’s what I do — or try to do. I search for the heart and soul in the language of privilege and offer it up in a different construct that makes sense where the vast majority of the world’s people dwell. Metaphorically speaking. At any rate, it turns out that the vast majority of the world’s people are generally more adept at understanding the goals of privileged paths (such as engagement in the democratic process), than are the individuals and institutions of privilege at comprehending the complexity of life when all elements of the human condition begin to weigh in.

There’s one particular memory I have of a Kettering workshop meeting that stands out in my mind as exemplary of this unscientific conclusion of mine. We were nearing the close of the workshop, offering answers to the final questions posed to us for consideration before arriving on the Foundation’s campus. The academics among us spent time citing media coverage of various health issues, the development of advisory councils, the results of formal surveys.

I remember telling a few community based stories of individual struggle and attempted solutions in regard to personal food insecurity. They were mostly stories that came from chats in gardens, at the farmers market, in the local feed store, at the counter of the corner convenience store, at the café in the bowling alley. They were great stories that cut to the chase in regard to the individual struggle for food access and that same individual’s articulation of how to fix the problem.

When I was done telling my stories, one of the academics turned to me with a decided gleam in

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<sup>1</sup> Moraga, Cherrí and Anzaldúa, Gloria. *This Bridge Called My Back*. Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1981.

her eye and whiff of triumph in her voice and said, “But you didn’t answer the question!”

The bottom line is that I don’t know how to bring truth to the table without using the language and leadership style of the individuals who are telling that truth. If we really want to find ways of increasing community engagement in the democratic process, we’d better be prepared to make adjustments to that process. I believe it will be well worth the effort.

And so, at the risk of being accused of “not answering the question,” my contribution to this final paper comes in the context, framework and vernacular of the communities who have done the work (and continue to do the work) to educate me.

## **Leadership and Alignment and Practice with Convening**

### **What did we learn about the Public’s Work in your Community?**

We learned that the bulk of the public’s work is steeped in tradition yet bright with innovation, long on hours and unglamorous labor, short on financial support and respect, deep with personal pride when removed from hierarchical, chauvinistic, patriarchal judgment.

### **What are the main concerns the public describes?**

That good food seems to be all around them, but without apparent reason is more likely to drive right on by than stop in their community or neighborhood. That the best food is not affordable even when it is available. That to admit to a need for help in accessing high quality, fresh food is to accept a fate of humiliation and deeply entrenched messages of worthlessness, willingness to accept leftovers rather than the best of what’s available, adopting skill sets akin to justification, bargaining, begging and manipulation.

### **What do they think should be done about it?**

Access to high quality fresh food should be a right, not a privilege. Wide distribution of fresh food should be considering sharing, not donating. There should be broad community support in terms of all necessary resources for the means to produce and distribute fresh food locally – as individuals as well as businesses.

### **What are they willing to give up to get what they want?**

They are willing to give up the world’s view of them as “victims who think they are deserving of entitlement.”

They are willing to give up the enforced notion that they should be grateful for what they get.

They are willing to let go of the idea that formal education is the most valuable or most legitimate path to knowledge and wisdom.

### **Who does the public think should act on this problem?**

Their sleeves are rolled up. They’re ready to go. But they think there is an impenetrable wall between them and keepers of the purse (to which the public fully understands that it contributes substantially). Therefore, they feel limited in their ability to actualize their own vision of what

food justice and security would look like.

### **Where and How Information Was Obtained**

For Feeding Laramie Valley and its mother organization, Action Resources International, forums were held in a variety of ways that matched the personality and design of the particular community-within-the-community from which information was being sought. They were never called forums. Occasionally they were called meetings, for groups of people familiar with that terminology and organizational construct. Meetings were typically held over lunch or beverage sharing at a local restaurant or coffee shop. Other “forums” occurred less formally as cited above – in private and community gardens while gardening; in pre-arranged conversations in people’s homes, on their porches, leaning against a rancher’s fence, in their places of business including convenience stores, feed stores, the bowling alley, the grocery store.

Deliberation was best accessed through conversation that was fully controlled by the person or people I interviewed. My questions were broad and easily adjusted for language familiarity. One interviewee (a convenience store clerk with whom I arranged to spend an hour during a slow time at the store) specifically noted how much she loved our discussion time together.

She told me she really liked how I let her talk about whatever she wanted to talk about on the subject at hand. How she hated when people showed up with a survey or a list of questions that seemed to actually prevent her from saying what she was really thinking.

By gathering information this way, I found that the “deliberative public” drew very deeply from the primary source of their personal experiences: what they grew up with, what they were taught as children, what they themselves observe or think they are witnessing, what their immediate personal contacts (friends, co-workers, immediate community associations) conclude from *their* perceived observations, and conclusions from the combination of these things. The conclusions are invariably coated in the culture, language and bias of each individual’s social and moral compass.

When community members shift their observations and conclusions onto a path of solution-seeking, I found that most of them are eager to consider framing a solution and finding a way to be part of it if given free rein to imagine all possibilities, and are made to feel confident their contribution will truly be incorporated into the adopted solution. (Success is invariably linked to the way in which the entire process begins – whatever tone and style is sought at the beginning typically predicts the outcome.)

## **What the “Deliberative Public” Had to Say about the Issue**

### **The Problems**

Specific to food (in)security issues, the combined communities are aligned in a recognition that Albany County, Wyoming and North Park, Colorado (both high elevation, rural, isolated communities designated as health challenged) are seriously to severely affected by a lack of secure, high quality, affordable food access. Across the board, they agree this food insecurity is

a combination of 1. an extremely challenged food production environment; 2. extremely challenged distribution mechanisms for moving food; and 3. (with less understanding of how this works) a cruelly unequal distribution of wealth that makes access to food an issue of privilege. How these issues are understood, observed and recounted by community members are as follows:

1. *Local Food Production.* At an elevation range of 7200' (Laramie, Wyoming) to 8200' (Walden, Colorado) to upwards of 12,000 (the surrounding mountain ranges and ranchlands), and growing seasons ranging from 26 days (high North Park and Snowy Range) to 56 days (Laramie), growing produce is limited to short and cold season crops unless season extension growing methods are employed.

Semi-arid conditions prevail in both Laramie Valley and the basin of North Park, with drought conditions an increasingly frequent occurrence. Water shortages have an across the board impact on ranching, gardening and personal economics as well as basic viability for any and all local food production.

In regard to the major industries of cattle and sheep ranching in both communities, the lack of local meat inspectors and no local slaughterhouses means that local meat does not feed the local communities, but is rather shipped elsewhere.

Although historically Laramie produced large quantities of leafy green vegetables, potatoes, and massively successful victory gardens during World War II, in the latter part of the last century and first part of the current one, there has become a widespread prevailing myth that "you can't grow vegetables or fruit here."

2. *Food Distribution.* The vast majority of food for the Albany County and North Park communities at large is trucked in, primarily from the largest distribution centers in Denver (with some coming directly from the eastern plain farming and ranching zones of Eastern Wyoming and Colorado). Food from Denver is regularly collected from places as far flung as California, the East Coast of the United States, South America and Australia/New Zealand.

Transporting food into both Laramie Valley and North Park from Denver is a 3+ hour driving trip along isolated highways that negotiate high mountain passes and cross high plains that are frequently riddled by deadly winds year round and blizzard conditions upwards of nine months out of the year. Roads are closed sometimes for days at a time and on a regular basis from September through April. Beginning in 2010, wildfires as the result of persistent drought and the death of forests due to beetle kill has begun contributing to road closure on a more frequent basis. It is not uncommon for these two communities to be cut off from food and supply delivery.

It is universally understood by the local population that obtaining food in this manner makes the food less fresh and more expensive, and difficult to rely on. Among groups more widely exposed to and accepting of global influences, it is also viewed that reliance on distant food sources is more damaging to the environment, another danger to food security from a big picture view.

3. *Economic Inequities.* Public observation and discussion of this matter draws on a spectrum of understanding, experience and reaction, but it all boils down to one common conclusion: The more money you have, the better food you get. In other words, the consensus is that capitalism is alive and well where basic sustenance is concerned.

## **The Reaction**

Depending on an individual's personal circumstances, the attitude toward all these realities ranges from frustration (from people of means who would like to see their community be self-sufficient); to resentment (from people who are limited to food access as it's offered to them, based then on what they can afford to buy) to desperation (from people who are not able to access or afford enough food to sustain themselves and their families).

## **What Should be Done About It**

For individual community members to grapple with solutions to these food security problems, they had to find a way to connect to a sense of their own power as glimpsed through being sought out for input. From that singular base, they were able to point to, or at least ask about local, personally manageable suggestions for solutions. Those suggestions included:

1. Every day, we see trucks and trains passing through our community with the best possible food for wealthy communities like ski resorts. Why can they stop here on their way and give us some of the good stuff? Why do we have to wait for the smaller trucks that bring lower quality, less fresh food?
2. We know a lot more vegetables and fruit can be grown right here. We need land made available, zoning laws changed, and local support in the form of materials and mentoring, and we could be growing many times more gardens than we are now.
  - a. The local master gardener from Laramie Rivers Conservation District estimates every citizen of Laramie, with the right support, could supplement a minimum of one-third of their annual fresh produce budget with personal grown vegetables.
  - b. A pilot research project called Team G.R.O.W., conducted by a collaborative effort of Feeding Laramie Valley and the University of Wyoming through the Food Dignity research grant, suggests that local garden production is an economically viable means of providing individuals and families with a significant portion of their food needs.
  - c. A recently funded pilot health research project will begin to explore the direct health benefits of local gardening on the individuals growing and consuming them.
3. Local ranchers across the board are ready and willing to fulfill community meat desires if local policies and access to processing are changed in a way that makes it not only profitable, but literally possible.
4. Backyard farmers and local restaurants are willing and able to fulfill egg desires through local means, but are blocked by policies that make the cost of things like grading and licensing prohibitive to individual efforts.
5. Through Feeding Laramie Valley's pilot project for providing individual minigrants for local community food projects (as funded through its community partner involvement with the Food Dignity research project), strong indicators are rising that point to the ability of individuals and families to make substantial, sustainable changes in their own food security situations that subsequently have a measurable impact on the entire local food system. Early projects include water extension in backyard farming; local gardening education to the general public through

community gardening exposure; development of indoor-outdoor greenhouse gardening on wheels; neighborhood community gardening development, expansion and maintenance; neighborhood assistance with accessible backyard garden development for elders and people with disabilities; alternative meat production and distribution.

## **Sharing Findings With the Community**

Numerous local community gatherings were held throughout the course of the last two-three years of exploring this issue. These included Feeding Laramie Valley participation at events sponsored by other groups, as well as FLV-sponsored gatherings, meetings and events. As with collecting information, they were designed with a variety of audiences and community connections in mind, and included the following:

Wyoming Sustainability Summit (2010)  
Local Gardening and Food Security Public Gathering (2010)  
Laramie Local Foods Annual Gathering (2010, 2011, 2012)  
Multiple, Multidisciplinary U.W. Class Presentations (2010, 2011, 2012)  
Community Gardening Gatherings (2010, 2011, 2012)  
Farmers Markets Educational/Outreach booths (2010, 2011, at two market locations in 2012)  
Public Gardening Mentoring Workshop  
Laramie Senior Housing Community Meetings (2010, 2011, 2012)  
University of Wyoming Sustainability Class Project (2011)  
Community Sustainability Forum, University of Wyoming (2011, 2012)  
FLV Founding Advisory Council Response Meeting (2012)  
FLV Laramie Valley Food Chronicles Team Gatherings (2011, 2012)  
Wyoming Public Health Association Conference (2012)  
Feeding Laramie Valley:  
    A public photo exhibit exploring and celebrating our local food system (2012)  
    Team G.R.O.W. Community Led Pilot Research Team Meetings (2012)  
    Individual, Neighborhood, Business Informal Follow-Up (2011, 2012)

## **Shifting Attitudes as a Result of Deliberation**

Tracking the course of change as the result of this organized process involved ongoing follow-up in terms of reporting back to community members in all the ways listed above, most regularly through the informal exchanges during community engagement that occurred in everyday lives in these small, rural communities that are well connected on a daily basis.

It also included regular conversations that occurred in the course of ongoing collaborative actions efforts that resulted, such as:

- Food Chronicles story and photo contributions to describing the local food system
- creation and maintenance of multiple new individual and community gardens
- creation and maintenance of increased backyard farming ventures
- design and implementation of local migrant projects  
(see #5 under *What should be done about it*, above)

- Team G.R.O.W. pilot research responses  
(see #2.b. under *What should be done about it*, above)

The primary noted shift in every instance had to do with increased recognition that individuals, despite noted barriers, could create, act on and see positive results in addressing local food security issues (both positive and negative).

The secondary noted shift has just come recently, about halfway through 2012 (the third year of Feeding Laramie Valley's existence). As individuals form increasing personal and organized coalitions to take action against food insecurity, they have begun asking about barriers they run up against that are beyond their ability to fix by themselves. While the language isn't there in these terms, the communities are beginning to ask about policy. Not only are they asking about what it is and how it works, they are asking if Feeding Laramie Valley and their individual communities of definition can do something about those policies to increase food access and security.

Among traditional top-down food distribution organizations (soup kitchen and food banks) a new collaboration has been formed with Feeding Laramie Valley to begin making inroads with food recipients to create long term, sustainable food security solutions to the gravest of food insecurity situations, through agency gardening (recipient guided and worked); and community and personal gardening mentoring and resourcing for agency recipients.

### **Overview of Public Involvement in Naming the Problem and Solving It**

The members of the Laramie Valley (Albany County) and North Park communities are eager to and highly capable of naming all manner of problems with food security here. As a whole, they see themselves as willing and committed to being part of the solution not just for themselves, but for each as well. However, these conditions only exist and come to light when community members are met on their own doorstep, spoken with in their own language, and given the respect of recognizing their right and ability to lead the deliberations as they see fit.

### **Observations of Feeding Laramie Valley Community Organizer**

There are biases that serve as barriers to achieving solutions, even those the community members themselves identify. These biases are inevitably steeped in racism, classism and a lack of understanding of and respect for cultural diversity and the reality of lives fundamentally different from their own.

These are poor communities, existing on the outskirts of a tiny kingdom of privilege in the form of the University of Wyoming, where substantial resources and wealth are carefully guarded and withheld from the community in which it exists.

The belief of this community organizer is that these are not insurmountable barriers, if adequate resources for community based leadership development are made available for the building of pathways through and bridges between classic human divides, and if those resources and the design for change are placed in the hands of individuals and organizations committed to and highly experienced in social change with diversity at its core.

## **Sources**

### **Albany County, Wyoming**

Laramie Local Foods  
C & A Pet Food and Livestock Supply  
Night Heron Books and Café  
Sweet Melissa's Vegetarian Restaurant  
Great Wall Chinese Restaurant  
Big Hollow Food Co-op  
Laramie Senior Housing community members  
Lincoln Community Center  
Montessori Public School  
Interfaith Good Samaritan Food Bank  
Laramie Soup Kitchen  
Salvation Army  
Laramie Rivers Conservation District  
Head Start  
Developmental Preschool  
LOCO Farmers Market management and multiple vendors  
Downtown Laramie Farmers Market and multiple vendors  
Centennial Farmers Market and several vendors  
Our Laramie Garden Community Gardens  
LaBonte Park Community Gardeners  
Greenhill Cemetery Community Gardeners  
First United Methodist Community Gardeners  
Rock River High School  
Elementary Schools: Slade, Spring Creek, Linford, Beitel, Indian Paintbrush  
(students, teachers, parents)  
Laramie Junior High School students and advisors  
Laramie High School students  
Stockyard Ranch  
Tronstad Ranch  
Sheila Bird Farms  
Windmill Hill Greenhouse  
Quality Inn Hotel staff  
City of Laramie – Parks and Rec  
City of Laramie – Council Members  
Albany County Commissioners  
Albany County Sheriff  
Local citizenry – food insecure families/individuals, local gardeners, community elders  
University of Wyoming students, volunteers and staff  
Food Dignity Research Project - local staff and team members  
Feeding Laramie Valley staff, interns, volunteers

### **North Park, Colorado**

Convenience store staff

Bowling Alley/Cafe owners and staff  
Bella's Supermarket staff  
Local citizenry – food insecure families, local gardeners, park gardening staff  
Social service agency counselor  
North Park Women's Club  
Spicer Club

## **Public Acting and Innovation in Tompkins County, New York**

**– E. Jemila Sequeira**

### **1. What did we learn about the Public's work in your community?**

We learned that Tompkins County has a broad range of stakeholders, who are representative of traditional institutions to "grassroots " community driven groups. These individuals work both independently and in partnership with others to address concerns in the local food system. The work of the public focus extends beyond affordable food access but also access to all aspects of the food system such as production, nutrition, policy planning, employment and business development to deal with the underlying problem of poverty which for most is responsible for food insecurity. A systems approach identifies complicated issues as experienced by the diverse identity of what is here referenced as the public.

### **2. What are the main concerns the Public describes?**

The main concern is that affordable and healthy food is not assessable to many low-income households of individuals and families in Tompkins County. Those who experience food insecurity express frustrations with the conflicting messages to eat better, while little attention is focused on addressing their lack of resources to afford healthy food. When directly asked what is the main concern that must be resolved to address food insecurity, in almost all situations the public identifies access to affordable healthy food, countywide employment or business opportunities and a lack of understanding amongst the public about food systems and their function as their concerns. The role of the food system in the overall economy is rarely mentioned in media discussions on local budgets, policies [with the exception of farm bills and the recent attention to Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO).] In contrast, the educational and health care systems operate with complex boards, regulations, committees and distinct budgets.

A robust food system can be a powerful economic engine and add to the quality of life for a community. A recurring message shared by the public (representing self-identified food insecure) can be summarized as “people need livable income opportunities to afford to eat healthy”, as shared by a 32-year-old father, the sole provider for his wife and their two twin boys.

Those conversations focused on identifying public concerns, revealed an interest and need for a deeper understanding of food systems and information on current national efforts, especially those led by people who themselves have experienced food insecurity. Conversations often expressed peoples' frustrations with being unaware of what is being done to address their daily challenges to consistently feed themselves and/or families healthy food. One young woman explained to me how unfair the choices are for most people, she commented “left without any way to change your situation, and as a parent you want to be a responsible, the way things are sets people up to be viewed a failure. When you feed your family what you can afford or the crappy food at some pantries, people feel judged as bad parents, when what it is just us poor parents doing our best to not let our children go hungry.” She added “we want to be a part of part of the solutions, but we don't see any opportunities to do so.”

Individuals employed within the existing food system, offer their professional assessment of concerns while also speaking on behalf of the experiences they encounter working with the food insecure. When naming the concerns within the context a collective “public”, there is an overall understanding that within the food system, issues of access to affordable healthy food is an urgent concern.

Those familiar with navigating the food system and other institutional systems see possible answers for resolving food access issues. This subgroup of the general public has access to the resources that can contribute to effectively ending food insecurity. Tompkins County with its vast agricultural resources and wealth of knowledge at Cornell University, Ithaca College and Tompkins Cortland Community College has an exhaustive and organized system which can be instrumental in addressing issues within the food system, including many aspects relevant to improving food access. These resources are not easy to access however, there are many within the county who can leverage their access to work with changing the concerns of food insecurity.

### **3. What do they think should be done about it?**

People are interested in making real change and seem to enjoy conversations that are less structured. Most people suggest a convening people who express interest, can offer support, resources and guidance to address the problem of affordable food access. People have clearly indicated that action be focused not only on addressing issues of food insecurity with safety net efforts. There is interest in learning how people who are under resourced can improve access and create jobs within the food system.

Some suggestions include hosted community events, gatherings (formal or informal) with opportunities to learn more about the food system. Those who can offer resources should consider provision of funds for guest speakers, attendance at conferences and workshops. Funding should be allocated to the leadership of those most negatively impacted by the problem. Those funding entities can negotiate the terms of use while reserving leadership planning and decisions to be developed by people familiar with the problems complexities.

### **4. What are they willing to give up to get what they want?**

They are willing and ready to give up their participation in traditional programming and structured gatherings, where the objectives are to "teach" skills to improve healthy food consumption, with neglect to the fundamental problem of access to resources needed to translate their learning to daily lifestyle practices. While these programs and events hold value, allowing opportunities to learn about nutrition, food safety, and network with new people, they are not sustainable if participants cannot afford to eat healthy when the program ends. More innovative ways to either create certification for programming to provide participants, especially those from low income households to use the learned knowledge for continued education, training or as recognized credentials in the employment market.

### **Who does the public think should act on this problem?**

Throughout my participation in the Kettering Foundation’s Community Politics and Leadership series, community discussions were mainly informal conversations. There were some deliberate

planning meetings, less attended by the food insecure. At these formal settings all attendees expressed interest and willingness to collectively address the problem of access within the food system. Tompkins County creates a unique environment with many opportunities to implement changes within the food system. In solution focused discussions, stakeholders regardless of residence or affiliation to private non-profit organizations, Cornell University and Ithaca College perceive that a skilled knowledge of how to navigate through the food system is necessary to influence change. Those who are self-identified as food insecure consistently share their understanding that the difficulties of access is because the resources are protected by gatekeepers and serve the special interests of those with resources. *(Please note the above is a summary of public feedback is written using my common working language.)*

Consequently, the responsibility to identify and effectively address problems within the food system is viewed as a collective effort of the public. It is important to note, there are different understandings, definitions and interpretations of the problem(s), what the process involves, and who are the key players and what are their roles in the collective effort. This paper focuses on the problems as identified by those most impacted and within the context that they bring valuable knowledge and are entitled to equal participation in the food system, regardless of their economic status.

### **Where and How Information Was Obtained**

The Whole Community Project facilitates the process of collaborative work amongst the public to address concerns within the local food system. The efforts to convene the public for discussion and information gathering were more successful when the non-professional constituency of public was given opportunity to determine where and how to share information. In essence, when the public is encouraged to engage in the democratic process of change, respect to “*process*” is critical. Formalized meetings were often seen as unnecessary by individuals who were interested in sharing their concerns and ideas, yet were reluctant to meet formally until there was convincing evidence that the meetings would be respectful, of honest intent and actually result in action that resulted in positive change in their lived experiences.

In 2010 Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County (CCETC) was awarded a USDA Community Food Assessment (CFA) grant, to determine the pervasiveness of food insecurity amongst individuals and families in Tompkins county. The process involved in the scope of work and implementation of the CFA was instrumental in shaping the Whole Community Project’s revised mission statement<sup>2</sup>. The Whole Community Project coordinator saw opportunity within the CFA’s scope of work to leverage the asset of its diverse public networks to facilitate collaborative efforts to address food insecurity. The USDA outline of the food assessment specified that those who were food insecure be involved in the assessment and compensated for their input and participation. The co-directors worked with graduate and undergraduates students, professional service providers, grassroots community activists, people who self-identify as food insecure, food pantries organizers and faith based groups. This collaborative work involved the design, distribution of assessments, data synthesis and a summary of findings report (in process, upon completion it will be distributed publically upon request).

In the following year the Whole Community Project became involved in a five-year USDA

AFRI-funded Food Dignity project. The Food Dignity project and earlier work of the Community Food Assessment provided a platform for additional public discussions to convene around food insecurity, encouraging public input on the possible changes that could effectively address the problems.

Public discourse on issues concerning food insecurity are ongoing, and since 2011, the Food Dignity project has served to be a useful platform from which to generate and support public interest and be a catalyst for collaborative participation in the community food system. The effectiveness of a collaborative process varies amongst groups, reflecting upon, and acting in response to individual and institutional values, and experiences.

The Whole Community Project recognized a need to provide the public, especially people with little or no knowledge of food systems opportunities to become active citizens in the democratic processes for creating change. Leveraging private local and USDA AFRI funding, WCP organized capacity building tours to national conferences<sup>1</sup>, allowing extended time for conversations amongst local residents and with other people throughout the country. These Food System/Policy tours provided focused informal conversations to emerge within a space that did not have the imposed time restraints of typical agendas. These opportunities cultivated honest dialogue while developing a sense of trust, shared values, and unity of vision.

I was recently approached by a young single mother, Luna (pseudonym) who had just returned from one of the tours, with an idea to promote community awareness on issues related to food insecurity. Articulated and with a well thought out plan, she inquired what the process would be to bring Charity Hicks, a key Detroit-based leader she met at the conference, to Ithaca. As an “informal community leader”, she proceeded to offer a most compelling argument, identifying the potential value for public, to hear from Ms. Hicks on food system issues. Luna was specifically concerned that those people, who like her, has little or no knowledge about possibilities for them to be a part of efforts to address food insecurity. She and another young woman have expressed their appreciation of the opportunity to attend these tours and are scheduling a brown bag discussion at Cornell Extension to provide the employees and some non-employees the experiences and some of the relevant information learned at these tours. The forum will be a panel and Q&A venue.

Luna’s was an excellent demonstration of the public’s capacity to conceptualize answers to problems on civic issues like food insecurity. We were fortunate to secure Ms. Hicks as keynote speaker for a locally sponsored 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Food Justice Summit 2012 event. In preparation for this event, I worked closely with Luna and others who had traveled on the food policy tours. We invited people to work on the itinerary and agenda for the key note speaker and summit events, hosted two activities for public discourse on food justice the local concerns, challenges and opportunities for Tompkins County. In November of this year, this young lady also attended a second tour in Baltimore MD, accompanying Luna was a young parent, Fabienne (pseudonym) whose interest in food security and the food system was sparked at the local Food Justice Summit. Upon return from Baltimore, both young women held a deeper understanding of how they can support WCP’s efforts to convene community conversations on the local food system work, specifically food insecurity.

The process I found to be most useful in my approach of inquiry, was to adapt the language to create respectful dialogue. I gave careful attention to acknowledge and respect the lived experiences of those marginalized in our society, with the intent to gain better understanding of how language can welcome or discourage public participation. The questions used were not laden with technical vocabulary and were open-ended allowing for the discussion to be led by the interests of the public. Honest and engaging discussions were fostered across time, as relationships developed.

In institutional settings, where professionals convened discussions, the meetings were usually well organized, punctual, with a facilitator and note taker. The discussions were approached within a framework of solving problems through the delivery channels of programs, designed to administer services related to food insecurity. It is worth noting that some participants found the relatively small size of Tompkins County and abundance of service agencies problematic, creating an atmosphere of competitiveness, fueled by the reliance of most service providing non-profits to seek local public and private funding. At some discussions, professionals have commented that agency programs can at times evolve in response to available funding. Programming created on the basis of available funding can be successful, however, these programs are at risk of being driven by funding restraints and can be limited in reaching potential effectiveness. Measuring or reporting for the impact on the lives of those served often does not capture the fullness of the problems associated with food insecurity. Public discussions that include for those most impacted by food insecurity are needed to define and provide sustainable answers to the problems.

Within the past ten years, Tompkins County has experienced a relatively consistent increase in food access efforts, some of these efforts were launched by of diverse groups of the public (farmers, social activists, graduate students, single mothers/fathers) and focused on addressing inequity within the food system, specifically access to affordable food<sup>3</sup>. As the public dialogues continue, intentionally bringing greater cultural and economic representation, there is added awareness amongst the public of the both the challenges and opportunities for solutions to concerns, specifically food in/security.

How effective are these discussions towards public knowledge and agency to address the problem of food in/security? For many of those who cannot afford the average food outlet prices for local and/or organic non-processed foods, the public discussions has fostered a greater awareness of how this problem is affecting others. The discussions have allowed people to have a deeper understanding of the scope of the problem and has served to be a catalyst for active public citizenship, thus expanded the possible solutions to food insecurity. Several of the grassroots programs are primarily supported through public volunteerism.

### **What the “Deliberative Public” Had to Say about the Issue**

There is a wide range of activity and discussion across the county focusing on agriculture, local food business promotion, and food access in Tomkins County. The problem of food insecurity or food access is a significant issue discussed. These discussions occur in many settings and present differing perspectives from which to define the problem, the process and the solution. In this paper, the focus of our discussion reveals some of the complexities that arise when community public is brought into the democratic process for addressing food insecurity.

Regardless of affiliation, cultural, or class identity, the majority of the people discussing the issue of food insecurity, all can agree that the Tompkins County has not escaped the trend that food insecurity is impacting greater numbers of households today than in the past two decades. As convener of several of these discussions, there appears to be an unspoken agreement that the problem of food insecurity is complex and at times steeped in history, politics and inherent with differing values, and consequently many people stated that they feel “powerless” to effectively able to bring about any real changes (this was especially true for those with limited resources.

**Sources included:**

Whole Community Project  
Ithaca Community Harvest  
Groundswell  
GreenStar Community Projects  
Gardens 4 Humanity  
Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Snack Program at BJM  
Youth Farm and Market Project  
ICH- Market Box project  
Healthy Food for All  
Congo Square Market  
Farmer’s Markets, Ithaca Farmers’ Market  
Crop Mob  
Ithacan  
Harvestation  
Food Pantries  
Feed My Starving Children  
Community gardens (Dryden Community Garden)  
Dryden Preservation Corps  
Friendship Donation Network  
Food Dignity Project  
Get Your GreenBack Tompkins

## **How public universities might act so that the public can do its work: Implications for Cornell University and University of Wyoming**

**– Christine M. Porter**

“The people hold thousands of solutions in their hands,” notes the Via Campesina declaration on December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2010. Or, as I understand Luna in Tompkins County put it in a WCP-Cornell meeting related to Food Dignity (as a 2<sup>nd</sup> hand report, this is unlikely to be a direct quote, but it is what was repeated to me by someone there), “It's about damn time that you all figured out that we have the solutions. It's about damn time you have come around to ask the question.”

### **Asking “the public”**

Gayle's and Jemila's essays and research above provide some guidance on how to ask “the public” for solutions:

She told me she really liked how I let her talk about whatever she wanted to talk about on the subject at hand. How she hated when people showed up with a survey or a list of questions that seemed to actually prevent her from saying what she was really thinking. – Gayle

When community members shift their observations and conclusions onto a path of solution-seeking, I found that most of them are eager to consider framing a solution and finding a way to be part of it if given free rein to imagine all possibilities, and are made to feel confident their contribution will truly be incorporated into the adopted solution. (Success is invariably linked to the way in which the entire process begins – whatever tone and style is sought at the beginning typically predicts the outcome.) –Gayle

People are interested in making real change and seem to enjoy conversations that are less structured. –Jemila

In research language, to the extent to which this translates at all, this means more open-ended interviews – or simply conversations, rather than surveys or structured interviews. Open “focus groups” might also work, especially if working as much as consciousness raising (in the self-directed 60s women's movement sense) and brainstorming efforts as answering research questions. Their points also point to when to do have these conversations – as the starting point for any action research, not the middle, or end, once academics have done the framing. It must also matter who is asking the questions – in the case of this Kettering work it was community organizers, not academics.

### **Supporting “the public's” solutions with university resources**

Another key piece Jemila and Gayle each note is the resources – largely financial, though also political – that Universities have and do not share, but should and must to enable citizen solutions:

In solution focused discussions, stakeholders regardless of residence or affiliation to private non-profit organizations, Cornell University and Ithaca College perceive that a skilled knowledge of how to navigate through the food system is necessary to influence change. Those who are self-identified as food insecure consistently share their

understanding that the difficulties of access is because the resources are protected by gatekeepers and serve the special interests of those with resources. – Jemila

These are poor communities, existing on the outskirts of a tiny kingdom of privilege in the form of the University of Wyoming, where substantial resources and wealth are carefully guarded and withheld from the community in which it exists. –Gayle

Funding should be allocated to the leadership of those most negatively impacted by the problem. Those funding entities can negotiate the terms of use while reserving leadership planning and decisions to be developed by people familiar with the problems complexities.  
- Jemila

In the short term, this looks like universities investing in more resource sharing, though ultimately this is about a fundamental redistribution of resources. The cliché but powerful bumper sticker about “when the military has to hold a bake sale to buy a bomber” holds equally true for the disparities between how our society resources universities vs. community-based organizations.

### Reframing university action research work

The shifts above will, for starters, require reframing how and largely also why academics work. The two tables below, one on research and one on action/extension, describe some of the movement needed.

|                   | From a dominant research narrative...                         | ...to a collaborative one.  |
|-------------------|---|---|
| <i>Expertise:</i> | Knowledge. Professionals, academics, institutions. Via study. | Wisdom. Also citizens, communities, associations. Via experience.                           |
| <i>Ethics:</i>    | Last: to apply knowledge gained about truth                   | First: to decide what we want to know or understand, and how                                |
| <i>Research:</i>  | - Written<br>- Generalizable<br>- Scientific method           | - Also oral, visual<br>- Contextual, maybe transferrable<br>- Also stories                  |
|                   | From service action...  | ...to dignity action  |
| <i>Goal:</i>      | To fix problems, or people                                    | To build democratic power, agency, equity and dignity                                       |
| <i>People as:</i> | Consumers, targets, audiences, clients                        | Citizens, actors, local experts   |
| <i>Motive:</i>    | Altruism  | Self-interest   |
| <i>Method:</i>    | Technocracy: programs, interventions                          | Democracy and public work: leadership, program and policy development; community organizing |
| <i>Site:</i>      | Departments   | Public spaces   |

### **Acknowledging academic troubles**

Most of the CU partners in Food Dignity feel and think of themselves as “fringe” – in their disciplines, in their departments, and/or in the university. Many have long histories and sometimes painful stories of struggling to be taken seriously, in any of the ways we count in academia (tenure, publishing, presentations, grants, office space, voice in department decisions). Working on the right-hand side of the tables above make this marginalization worse.

Gayle’s “you didn’t answer the question” story reminded me of a meeting of authors who were to contribute to the Oxford *Handbook of Food, Politics and Society* in the Fall of 2009 that I was invited to witness as a PhD student. In a discussion of ethical and sustainable food production, Robert Paarlberg (at Wellesley College and Harvard) commanded Phil McMichael (the most senior of FD academic partners) to “stop dancing around the question,” on a topic I had felt Phil had just addressed completely and eloquently. Phil’s draft paper under discussion was entitled, “Movements for Reinserting Defensible Values into Global Food Systems.” Phil’s views on the ideal future of food systems differed sharply from many others in the room and they attacked him almost non-stop until he left the meeting. In the end Phil – and the defensible values for food systems he was bringing in from La Via Campesina– eventually withdrew from that entire project.

As junior faculty some of the academics now on the team have been threatened, including via anonymous notes in their mailboxes, with having their careers blockaded or ended. Some are not tenure track academics at all (students, adjunct lecturers, extension staff), but are just as rejected and mistrusted by community partners as those who enjoy the privileges of that track. Many feel like they don’t belong anywhere; working, as one put it, “in this no man’s land between community and academia.”

Up against the life and death threats faced in daily life by many community partners, all of these academic troubles pale in comparison. But these challenges are real and threatening to the academic partners and they feel it constrains their work. This means for us to work together, and to foster the movements outlined in the tables above, these challenges must be acknowledged and ultimately addressed or this kind of collaborative work will remain, at best, fringe and partial. That task, of course, is one for academics to address with one another. It is one of the key roles I aim to play in FD.

### **Homemaking in *El Mundo Zurdo*: This Bridge We Call Home**

Gayle references the revolutionary anthology “This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color,” published in 1981. I’m one of the many thousands their work influenced - I would say it changed the course of my life and life work. In that book, Gloria Anzaldua invokes *El Mundo Zurdo (the Left-Handed World)*, where “I with my own affinities and my people with theirs can live together and transform the planet” (in “La Prieta, p209). Now, 21 years later Anzaldua, working with AnaLouise Keating, has offered us a tribute and extension to *This Bridge*. They and their many authors show the ways forward to such a planet with their work *This Bridge We Call Home*. The places and the paths have been mapped. The academics in Food Dignity and beyond need to muster the courage, love, and humility to use them. Some of the approaches we are using in Food Dignity for academics to follow community partner leadership, including moving to the right-hand side of the tables above are:

- Pushing academics to work from their hearts and souls, not just from their heads:

- “If research doesn’t change you as a person, then you aren’t doing it right.” - in *Research is Ceremony* Wilson 2008: 83
- “Dignity is something that does not reside in one’s head. Dignity walks in the heart.” - *Zapatista leadership declaration*, 1995
- Spending time together in annual meetings nationally and via local gatherings.
- Coauthoring, copresenting, and codesigning the research.
- Sharing the FD grant resources, even if not equitably.
- Leveraging project support to participate in and even co-lead national work in this arena, particularly the Community-Campus Partnerships for Health Community Partner Forum work.
- Supporting “bridge people.” Not to colonize. Not on people’s backs. To meet:
  - Dignity is a bridge.*
  - It needs two sides that, being different, distinct and distant become one in the bridge*
  - without ceasing to be different and distinct, but ceasing already to be distant.*
  - *Zapatista March of Dignity, Puebla, Feb 2nd, 2001*