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2. Overview of the Assessment Process: Steps for Getting Started

2.1 What is a community food security assessment?

What is Community Assessment?

Have you ever wondered how to solve a problem in your community? What could be done to build a stronger, healthier community? A community assessment helps community members to address their needs by using their own resources in a systematic way to identify resources, needs, and specific challenges or problems. The word "community" is key to the process. It is a process led and implemented by community members, to achieve a community goal. Typically, the community will gain not only from the information collected but also from the assessment process. By integrating people from different parts of the community into the team and developing a joint agenda and a resulting action plan, the community's bonds are tightened.

The goal of the assessment is to collect information to identify gaps and needs in the community and the resources, services, and systems that could be used to fill the gaps and meet the needs of residents. To accomplish this, you will gather information that helps you understand the following:

- Status of community residents
- Availability of community resources
- Capacity of community resources

This information can be collated and presented to inform community residents and business, civic, and government leaders of the need for changes and how they can be accomplished. The information will provide the basis for a well-constructed action plan that reflects the community's goals, resources, and needs.

What is a Community Food Security Assessment?

A community food security (CFS) assessment is a unique type of community assessment. It includes the collection of various types of data to provide answers to questions about the ability of existing community resources to provide sufficient and nutritionally sound amounts of culturally acceptable foods to households in the community. The result of the assessment is the generation of a community profile that may highlight the negative and positive components of the community's efforts to satisfy households' food needs.

According to the Community Food Security Coalition, components of CFS needs assessments include information on access to food; hunger, nutrition, and local agriculture data; an inventory of community food resources; and policy perspectives (H. Joseph, ed. *Community Food Security: A Guide to Concept, Design, and Implementation*, 1997).

These components can include factors such as the following:

- Effectiveness of local infrastructure for delivering Federal food assistance programs.
- Adequacy of supermarkets, barriers to food shopping, modes of transportation, selection and price, and local markets.
- Income levels and number of persons in poverty, use of the emergency food system, and Federal food assistance programs.
- Loss of farmland, farm startups, use of sustainable production methods, and availability of locally grown food in local stores.

- Number of community gardens, home gardens, farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture programs; food co-ops or other alternative food production/distribution arrangements; and open space available for food production.
- Scope of food policies affecting the community and evidence of integration of food-related issues into the local planning process.

2.2 Why conduct a community food security assessment?

Although the Federal nutrition safety net and agricultural policies play a key role in household and community food security, many decisions that affect a community's food security are made at the local level, such as funding allocations, types of programs or outreach, who to target, and so on.

Although still a small part of the decision-making process, increasing emphasis is being placed on the importance of objective, data-based information as a basis for policy or programming decisions. With tight budgets and many competing priorities, programs increasingly are being required to document the needs to which they are responding and the extent to which they are effective in addressing those needs.

This means that local professionals and other community members may have an important role to play in supporting effective policy and programming decisions regarding food security issues in their community. (See box 2.)

The key to community food security assessment is that it integrates information from a variety of sources about food security issues in a community. In an ideal assessment, information about individual components of community food security

would be coordinated into a comprehensive picture of the food security situation in a community for local decision-makers.

Box 2
Community Food Security
Decision-Making

Examples of decisions by local policymakers that may affect a community's food security:

- ❖ Whether the local school district should participate in the Federal School Breakfast Program
- ❖ Expanding office hours for Federal food assistance programs such as food stamps and WIC
- ❖ Zoning or allocating space for community gardens
- ❖ Developing noise and nuisance ordinances that do not unnecessarily discourage local agricultural production

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A community food assessment will help you to (1) understand local food systems, (2) inform the setting of goals to improve these local food systems, (3) inform decision-making about policies and actions to improve community food security; and (4) establish a long-term monitoring system with a clear set of indicators. This last point is important if as a Nation we will ever decide to compare communities with respect to food security. The indicators included in this toolkit represent a first attempt at defining a unified set of indicators that could be used across communities.

We suggest that as users of the toolkit, you adapt the instruments to include the indicators most relevant for your community with additions or deletions of specific indicators or assessment tools.

2.3 Determining your community's information needs

The purpose of community food security assessment is to facilitate decision-making about programs and policies that affect food security in your community, not simply to collect data. The process of data collection can be very costly and time intensive. It needs to be based on a plan that focuses on the efficient use of personnel and other resources and should be driven by a clear conception of how the information will be used. Therefore, before embarking on data collection, it is important to identify key questions, to determine the types of information and analysis needed to answer those questions, and to identify potential users of your findings. You may want to answer the following potential key questions:

- What are the geographic boundaries of the community that you are planning to study?
- Is household food insecurity a problem within the community, and who is at highest risk?
- How many people use Federal food assistance programs?
- Does the community have the necessary infrastructure to effectively deliver Federal food assistance programs at the local level?
- Do all people in the community have reasonable access to retail food outlets?
- Are there sufficient resources available to meet the needs of people who need emergency or supplemental food?
- What types of agricultural resources exist in the community?
- Are locally grown foods available in the community's retail food stores or food service outlets?
- Are there local policies and ordinances that affect the community's food

security (e.g., policies regarding the use of municipally owned land for community gardens)?

To help answer these and other questions that may be unique to your community and to plan a timely and cost-efficient community food security assessment, it will be necessary to form a diverse team of community members to plan and oversee assessment activities. The next section provides some guidelines to be used in selecting the team members and in developing an assessment plan.

For additional insight into the planning and team development process needed for a community food security assessment, you can consult the Community Food Security Coalition's *Getting Food on the Table: An Action Guide to Local Food Policy* by Dawn Biehler, Andy Fisher, Kai Siedenburg, Mark Winne, and Jill Zachary and *Community Food Security: A Guide to Concept, Design, and Implementation* by Hugh Joseph.

2.4 Creating a community food security assessment team

One of the features that distinguishes a community food security assessment from other research done on a community is that a community food security assessment is envisioned, planned, conducted, and used by people living and working in the community.

Diverse representation in the planning process is key to a successful outcome. The involvement of individuals from different parts of the community may increase access to data; for example, a representative from the local food pantry may have unique knowledge of and access to data on emergency food use in the community.

Once involved in the planning phase, people will be more likely to involve their constituencies in the assessment process itself and also will better understand and use the

results to inform policies and programs related to community food security issues.

A diverse team of 8 to 12 people is ideal for planning and implementing a comprehensive community food security assessment. Ideally, the team should consist of professionals and others in the community who have a common interest in community food security and who have different areas of expertise. The team also should include community residents who have direct experience with food security issues. Here are some examples of people to recruit for the assessment team:

- Local government representatives
- Representatives from community-based organizations (religious organizations, emergency food providers, social/neighborhood groups)
- Health, education, and nutrition providers
- Food retailers and manufacturers
- Community residents
- Farmers

In addition, it would be helpful to have members who are

- People with strong leadership and planning skills
- Local research resources familiar with data collection and analysis (universities, businesses, or nonprofit organizations that are involved in assessment activities)
- People with good oral and written communication skills

The team-building process may be facilitated by identifying key members of each of the desired participating sectors and gaining their trust and buy-in initially. These are the people who are most likely to participate willingly and who can involve other groups of people in the process as well.

Although the initiators of the assessment process may be very enthusiastic about the project, others may need to be convinced to participate. When recruiting potential team members, be prepared to describe the following factors:

- The importance of the assessment to the community and its members
- How each member can contribute to the process regardless of his or her research skills or food security knowledge
- What the planning team will be doing to conduct the assessment and the time commitment involved
- How the results could be used throughout the community

2.5 The planning process

Once an initial assessment team is assembled, the first meeting should be used to outline the initiative and explain possible roles for team members. This first meeting also should be used to determine the need for additional members and a recruitment strategy.

It is important to keep in mind that although you want to present the overall goal of the assessment, be sure not to have the entire process, or all of the goals and objectives, firmly established before this first planning meeting. Remember that the most successful effort will be achieved by involving all team members in the development of goals and objectives. Your role is to facilitate the team through the assessment process, ensuring that it gains "ownership" of the final product.

Some factors to think about include the following:

- Key food security issues in your community
- Key policies that may affect community food security
- Programming or policy decisions that may be needed on these issues

- Key local leaders who make policy and programming decisions
- Data and information needed to inform programming and policy decisions
- Deadline for completion of the food security assessment
- Methods to disseminate the information

Since it will not be possible to include all key community members on the assessment team, the team may find it useful to gather together a group of key community informants to explore the main issues and perceptions regarding food security in your community. The key informant discussion guide in appendix B provides guidance for conducting a group discussion.