THE ROLE OF FOOD BANKS IN LOCAL FOOD MOVEMENTS:
ADVOCATING ACCESS FOR LOW-INCOME POPULATIONS AND PROMOTING POLICY CHANGE

by

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ABSTRACT

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The professed economic benefits of local food systems for communities and small farmers, along with mounting recognition of the contribution of current food production practices to global climate changes has sparked growing excitement around local foods. Additionally, the growth of industrial food systems and government subsidization of corn and soy in the United States has made highly processed, energy-dense foods readily available and inexpensive. Growing awareness of the impacts of a diet of highly processed foods on health, including increasing diabetes and obesity rates, along with recent food safety scares, have encouraged an increased popularity of eating “fresh, local” food in the last two decades. Local food is also becoming seen as a way to increase access to healthy foods for low-income populations. As a result of these drivers, a new wave of social activism surrounding food issues has emerged. Social food movements advocating for improved community access to locally produced, healthful foods and the ideas of food justice and community food sovereignty have grown in recent years, however, low-income populations are often left out of these movements.

This paper aims to understand involvement of food banks in Idaho, Oregon, and Washington in local food movements and the barriers to participation, as well as to examine if and how food banks are connecting and collaborating with other organizations and government agencies to support local food initiatives, promote policy change, and bring the benefits of local food to low-income populations. It concludes that food banks are a crucial part of the larger food system and efforts to create a more equitable food system through taking care of immediate needs and lending support to local food movements through policy advocacy.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many researchers argue that the current food system cannot provide just and equitable access to healthy foods and that alternative food systems and policy changes are necessary to eliminate inequality—a key component of food justice movements. However, turning completely from the current food system is not a realistic option for food banks that take on the important role of providing food to those in need when they need it. Scale and price are barriers for food banks in fully participating in local food markets. While local food and food justice movements provide opportunities for food banks to engage in promoting structural changes to the food system and further their missions of ending hunger, these movements also present challenges in how to best approach organizational goals.

The interviews included in this study provide insight into the role food banks play in local food movements—while directly taking on the promotion of local food was not in the realm of these organizations, they are still active in promoting local production and access of local food for low-income populations through other means, such as policy advocacy and educational outreach. Based on interview data, food banks work in tandem with government assistance programs and strive to fill holes left in the social safety net while advocating continued funding and support of those programs as a base of support for vulnerable citizens. Some researchers argue that emergency food distribution is a “band-aid approach” to larger food access problems, however, interview data presented here demonstrates that food banks are part of a larger network working to end food insecurity and play a very specific role within that network. Partnerships with government agencies and other nonprofit organizations are important for food banks to ensure their involvement in discussions and policy decisions around government assistance programs, agricultural policies, nutrition
policies, and community food access, without losing focus on their distinct mission and essential function. Ties between food banks and other public and private organizations allow food banks to amplify their reach, have access to additional resources and knowledge, and provide a variety of top-down structural and policy approaches and bottom-up, direct service approaches to ending food insecurity.

While local food production and consumption is a positive step toward challenging the increasingly inequitable and unsustainable industrial food system, it is not a practical solution to immediate hunger needs, and therefore, cannot be the major focus of food bank organizations at present. Advancement of current policies and programs that support the production and sale of local food within local and regional markets will continue to create positive change for local farmers and communities, and expansion of these programs will also benefit food banks through increasing the scale of local food markets, leading to greater local production levels and lower prices, making local food more accessible and more practical in meeting the needs of food banks. In the interim, the goal of a viable food system must focus on creating food security through efforts specifically aimed at removing barriers that create or perpetuate disparities and altering food environments to support agricultural sustainability, access, and affordability, without losing focus of those who need assistance now. These efforts necessitate a wide range of solutions, and must involve organizations, businesses, and agencies with varying perspectives, resources, and goals.
1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, the United States has seen an increased popularity of eating “local” and “organic” foods. Growing recognition of the negative health implications of the American diet and food environment has aided in this popularity, and local food is often promoted for the health benefits of eating fresh, organic produce (Onozaka et al. 2010). Recent food safety scares have also advanced a popular discourse on the virtues of local food and have encouraged farmers’ market attendance and support of community-supported agriculture projects nationwide (Janssen 2010). Excitement around local food production also stems from the professed economic benefits for small-scale farmers and local communities (Onozaka et al. 2010), with food increasingly seen as a sector with great potential for economic development on a regional scale (Friedmann 2006). Additionally, the growing recognition of the contribution of current food practices to global climate change and the increasing disparities in food access amid growing food production (Alkon and Mares 2012; Koc and Dahlberg 1999) has led to increased interest in more sustainable food environments and a new wave of social activism in food issues (Koc et al. 2008). The increased public demand for equitable access to organic, fresh, natural, local, and sustainably produced foods has sparked local and regional food movements across the country (Nonini 2013).

Local food markets are also becoming seen as an “integral way to contribute to food security and increase access to fresh and local food for low-income residents” (Amunda 2010). Food access is an issue of growing concern in the United States. In 2012, 49 million people in the U.S.—14.5 percent of the population—experienced food insecurity, or inadequate or unsure access to nutritional foods (“Hunger in America” 2012; Kirkpatrick 2012; Koc et al 2008). Since the 1980’s, the emergency food network has worked to
distribute prepared meals or groceries to those in need through soup kitchens and food
pantries (Poppendieck 1994), but is only recently beginning to focus on accessibility of fresh
produce and more healthful foods. While the historic focus of food banks has primarily been
the immediate provision of food to the hungry, anti-hunger advocacy organizations and food
banks have become increasingly present in the discourse of local food movements, working
to make healthy, fresh foods more accessible to low-income populations through advocating
for policy responses to hunger and health issues (“About the Hub” 2014). While much
existing research has focused on the advocacy of anti-hunger nonprofits and how these
organizations collaborate with state agencies and other community groups on hunger issues,
little research has looked at how food banks are involved specifically in local food
movements or the barriers to participating in such movements. Few studies have attempted to
understand how these organizations balance a dependence on the current global food system
to maintain the necessary food quantity to meet immediate need with advocacy for policies
that support local food systems and the economic, environmental, and health benefits that are
associated with local food movements. The purpose of this study is to empirically examine if
and how food banks in Idaho, Oregon, and Washington participate in or support local and
regional food movements. Utilizing a network framework approach provides an
understanding of the function food banks serve in local food movements within the larger
anti-hunger network. Therefore, this study also examines how these organizations connect
and collaborate with other organizations, coalitions, and government agencies to support
local food initiatives, promote policy changes, and bring the benefits of local food
movements to low-income populations while working to provide food and end hunger in
their communities.
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Through a network framework approach, political scientists examine policymaking in policy-specific subsystems that involve both public and private actors, such as nonprofit anti-hunger organizations, food banks and government agencies. Through regular communication and information exchange, actors from food banks, food policy councils, state agencies, and other anti-hunger organizations are able to coordinate mutual interests and formulate policy approaches to solve hunger and food-related issues. The network approach analyzes the composition of actors within a social network and the capabilities of those actors, in addition to the structural relationships between actors and the power structure of the subsystem to understand how networks and sub-governments create policy ideas and agendas (Adam and Kriesi 2007). The application of this theoretical framework allows a better understanding of the role food banks play in local and regional food movements within the larger food system and the anti-hunger network by examining how food banks interact with other network players.

In keeping with pluralist theory, policy networks are not exclusively structured by formal institutional arrangements, but rather “policy networks constitute a new form of governance characterized by the predominance of informal, decentralized, and horizontal relationships” (Adam and Kriesi 2007). Such collaborative relationships are increasingly being seen between anti-hunger organizations and state agencies (Edwards 2012). In addition, local and regional food movements are comprised of formal and informal, governmental and non-governmental organizations that share resources, information, and coordinate policy responses to hunger and food-related issues through collaborative relationships (Alkon and...
Mares 2012). The network approach sums up policy change as “a function of exogenous and endogenous factors” reliant on the distribution of power and the relationships between formal and informal policy actors (Adam and Kriesi 2007).

While food systems and anti-hunger networks operate at national and international levels, according to Nonini (2013), there is no national local food movement. The Community Food Security Coalition (CSFC), established in 1994, acted as the national organizational center of a “loosely structured alliance” of more than 400 nonprofit organizations, including farmers’ organizations, food banks, environmental justice groups, churches, city and county governments, food workers unions, and activists until 2012 when it ceased operations. However, local and regional networks have organized similarly to the CFSC, but the levels to which networks are formally structured and the strength of alliances vary from region to region (Nonini 2013). These networks aim to influence food policies, markets, and food growing practices within the larger food system, including all the processes and infrastructure involved in the growing, harvesting, processing, packaging, transporting, marketing, consuming, and disposing of food and food related products and all of the inputs and outputs generated through the process (“About Local Food Systems” 2013). Concurrently, the emergency food network works to increase food access for low-income families through the provision of emergency food boxes and the operation of soup kitchens and other feeding programs, as well as advocacy and lobbying for state and federal nutrition programs (Edwards 2012). Both local food movements and the emergency food network aim to influence pieces of the larger food system, and make up a large part of a food-specific policy network. Both work toward changes in policies and programs regarding food production and access, and these networks are intricate webs of public and private actors that
work together (Friedmann 2006). Although network approaches have been criticized for their shaky theoretical basis, they are useful in questions relating to political change and to the impact policy networks have on outcomes and processes that involve a diversity of actors who are “mutually interdependent.” The network approach stresses that actors are dependent on each other because they need each other’s resources to achieve their goals (Adam and Kriesi 2007). In this sense, a network approach can be useful in understanding how the emergency food subsystem and the local food subsystem interact and influence one another and the wider food system in order to meet policy goals that could not be achieved singularly.

2.2 Food Insecurity, Health Disparities, and the Need for Equitable Local Food Access

Food insecurity is a serious public health problem in the United States. Studies demonstrating a relationship between poverty, poor nutrition, and chronic health problems are cause for concern about food insecurity (Hanson and Olson 2012; DeMarco 2007; Olson 2004; Stuff et al. 2004). Existing research effectively demonstrates the relationship between nutrition, exercise, and overall health, and connections have been repeatedly drawn between a healthy diet and physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Research also substantiates the preventative effects good nutrition and health can have on chronic diseases including heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, and cancer (Downs et al. 2012; McCullum-Gomez et al. 2006; Shepherd et al. 2006; Kubik et al. 2003). Hunger and food insecurity put individuals at higher risk for diet-related health conditions, but these conditions also have economic implications as well. Studies have shown health factors such as chronic illness, mental health issues, and disability can make working or holding a steady job more difficult, often resulting in unemployment or under-employment (Olson et al. 2004). Inadequate

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employment results in lower incomes; moreover, lower incomes and under-employment or unemployment are related to food insecurity (DeMarco 2007; Edwards and Weber 2003). Additionally, food environments dominated by fast food and diets filled with highly processed foods are increasingly linked to the rise in obesity and diet-related diseases (Koc et al. 2008).

In recent years, increasing interest has been given to the American diet and food environment due to rising rates of these diet-related diseases in the United States and has aided in a growing discourse around “local and “organic” foods (Onozaka et al. 2010). Consumer demand for local food has contributed to an increase in farmers’ markets in the last two decades (Holben 2010). Farmers’ markets have the potential to improve access to and utilization of fresh, local produce by communities and bring food issues to the attention of policy makers and advocacy groups (Holben 2010). However, fresh, local foods are often more expensive in price and limited in availability in low-income neighborhoods (Nonini 2013). Broad social, economic, and political forces influence food supply, nutrient quality, and affordability, and have significant impact on the types of foods available, particularly in low-income communities. Moreover, many factors cause people of lower socio-economic status to have poorer health outcomes, including limited availability to healthy foods, such as fresh fruits and vegetables (Neff et al. 2009). Local food environments that are not conducive to eating healthy may worsen the effects of food insecurity (Kirkpatrick 2012), and lower-income individuals often have difficulty accessing healthy foods because of the absence of supermarkets and grocery stores in low-income areas (Aguiar et al. 2011). Eleven and a half million low-income Americans live more than one mile away from a supermarket (Amuda 2010), and many low-income households reside in food deserts with little or no access to
fresh food sources (Kirkpatrick 2012). Lacking reliable transportation can increase the likelihood of households to experience food insecurity (DeMarco 2007; Garasky et al. 2006). While the health and economic implications of food environments and diet patterns affect the entire population, research documents links between lower socioeconomic status with greater risk of obesity as health and economic disparities between high- and low-income populations are becoming more marked (Neff et al. 2009).

Growing awareness of disparities in healthy food availability and health outcomes has created much support for more equitable access to organic, fresh, and local foods (Nonini 2013; Alkon and Mares 2012), and local food markets are increasingly being seen as an approach to increasing access to healthy, fresh, and local produce in low-income neighborhoods (Amunda 2010). Local food movements are increasingly working to expand access and make local food distribution more equitable. Hence, partnerships with food banks and other anti-hunger organizations are integral in representing and reaching low-income populations.

2.3 Local Food Movements: Collaborations Toward “Food Justice” and the Importance of Food Banks in Creating “Community Food Security”

Through the growing local food movement of the last decade, “institutions that ‘shorten the links’ between producer and consumer have developed through a diverse collaboration of many social sectors (Starr 2010). According to Freudenberg and colleagues (2011), the people and groups that participate in food movements and the reasons they engage in such movements are diverse:

“Food movements include parents who want healthier food for their children at school; chefs trying to prepare healthier and more local foods; church-goers for whom
food charity and justice manifest their faith, immigrants trying to sustain familiar, sometimes healthier food practices, food co-op members longing for community as well as fresh food; food store workers wanting to earn a living wage while making healthy and affordable food more available; residents of the city’s poor neighborhoods who want better food choices in their communities; staff and volunteers of food advocacy organizations concerned about food security; health professionals and researchers worried about epidemics of diabetes and obesity and the growing burden of food-related chronic diseases; elected officials, agency staff, and policy makers who want to seize opportunities to improve food; and gardeners and farmers who like to get their hands in the dirt and eat the food they and their neighbors grow.”

With such varying interests and diverse actors involved in food movements, it is no surprise that there are varying perspectives on the best approach to food sustainability and food security. Freudenberg and colleagues (2011) depict community verses policy approaches. Proponents of the community approach—urban agriculture, farmers’ markets, food co-ops, and community gardens—claim successes in creating new food distribution models while bypassing bureaucracies. Critics of this approach support a policy approach and argue that community approaches only reach a portion of the population and overlooks the deeper roots of inequitable food access, maintaining that policy approaches such as reducing federal subsidies for unhealthy foods, eliminating barriers to enrollment in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and improving school food are more effective strategies.
Regardless of the approach, food justice movements are a prime example of networks of organizations from diverse sectors coming together to work for social change through a diversified and multi-faceted approach (Levoke 2005). A major driver for local food movements is the idea that the global food system is increasingly unsustainable and unjust. Although there are many different ways of framing interests, most agree that the definition of food security must go beyond simply guaranteeing access to food. Since the 1980s, food banks have been the traditional response to feeding the hungry, primarily addressing immediate food needs and providing emergency food distribution through a “rights” approach. A “rights” discourse takes the perspective that food is a basic human right and focuses on individual entitlement to and provision of food without addressing the structural political or economic conditions that contribute to food insecurity. However, overcoming food insecurity necessitates addressing structural barriers and challenging the “systematic conditions that produce marginalization” (Alkon and Mares 2012)—something food banks and anti-hunger organizations have begun to attempt in moving beyond solely food distribution and into policy advocacy and promotion of a more just food system (Levkoe 2005).

According to Levkoe (2005), “food justice movements aim to promote a strategy of food security where all people have access to adequate amounts of safe, nutritional, culturally appropriate food produced in an environmentally sustainable way and provided in a manner that promotes human dignity.” This perspective endeavors to create a broader approach to food insecurity than a “rights” approach, emphasizing building local capacity for food production, ecological sustainability, and a strong social safety net for those in need. Food justice movements recognize that food insecurity is often considered an individual problem,
but that it needs to be considered as a community problem (Garasky et al. 2006). The goal of food justice movements is “community food security,” which combines an emphasis on sustainable, local production with an anti-hunger perspective (Alkon and Mares 2012; Levoke 2005). Community food security approaches food access as a social, rather than individual concern and emphasizes the role of the food environment and historical patterns of class-based inequities that produce disparities in access to healthy food (Alkon and Mares 2012). Food justice movements often frame hunger as an issue of poverty and attempt to solve structural issues of inequality through advocacy and lobbying in the policy-making process (Levoke 2005). In challenging inequalities in the current food system, food justice movements utilize local grassroots initiatives such as urban agriculture and community gardens, grocery co-ops, community-supported agriculture programs, and educational outreach programs to raise awareness of hunger issues, influence the decisions of policy makers, and build local and regional alternatives to the current food system (Alkon and Mares 2012; Levoke 2005).

Food sustainability and access issues, however, are difficult to solve because they are “politically complex, vast in scale, and spread across multiple sectors” (Koc et al. 2008). While local food movements are often successful in creating alternative markets for local food, issues of access for low-income populations remain (Alkon and Mares 2012; Leone et al. 2012; Guthman 2008; Levoke 2005). Even when fresh produce is available in their neighborhoods, the low-income populations that suffer from lack of nutritional food and related health conditions often cannot afford it, and cost has been cited as a major barrier to fruit and vegetable consumption (Leone et al. 2012; “Making fresh food a SNAP” 2009). Therefore, it is important that policy address issues of food accessibility such as cost and
neighborhood availability, in addition to exploring alternative streams of distribution outside of market channels, such as emergency food banks, in order to increase access to fresh produce and boost nutrition and health of low-income Americans. The participation of food banks and anti-hunger organizations in food justice movements is an important component in representing and meeting the needs of low-income populations and creating comprehensive community food security.

Local food movements and anti-hunger advocates alike frequently tout ideals of “food justice” and “community food security,” promoting more sustainable production of healthy foods to be available to entire communities (Alkon and Mares 2012; Levkoe 2005). More often, however, local food movements approach local food distribution through community-based methods focused on locally producing fresh organic foods to be distributed through traditional market channels (Alkon and Mares 2012). The local and organic food movement of late has focused primarily on developing alternatives to the conventional system, yet has failed to pay attention to questions of privilege. Alternative food institutions are likely to cater to relatively well-off consumers, partially because the marketing of organic food as a niche product and partly because alternative food markets have been planned and located to secure market opportunities and good prices for farmers (Guthman 2008). In this sense, local food movements appear to be primarily a response to market demand by upper-middle class consumers, and the high price of local foods often exclude low-income consumers from enjoying the benefits of locally produced foods (Nonini 2013). Farmers’ markets can serve as a resource for fresh, affordable produce, however, they are often less accessible to low-income consumers (Leone et al. 2012). While local food movements are often beneficial in promoting local farmers and the production and sale of local foods, utilization of traditional
market channels does not fully address the larger structural economic and political systems behind inequitable access to healthy food and often fails to address issues of access (Levoke 2005). Successful local food movements actively link accessibility and food security along with sustainability (Koc et al. 2008).

Anti-hunger organizations and food banks have increasingly become involved in local food movements with increased access to healthy food becoming a growing part of their organizational missions (“About the Hub” 2014). The food bank network has evolved into a much more complex system beyond simply providing food. The emergency food network has begun including outreach, health and nutrition education, initiatives to equip farmers’ markets with the ability to accept SNAP benefits via electronic benefits transfer (EBT), partnerships with other organizations concerned with health and food, and expanded focus beyond only shelf-stable food to a mix of healthy fresh foods in order to meet not only immediate food needs, but short- and long-term health concerns (“About the Hub” 2014; Buttenheim et al. 2012). However, while the primary focus of these organizations has expanded beyond simply responding to the immediate needs of the poor through food provision via the emergency food network and filling gaps left in the emergency food safety net by the government (Nonini 2013), local food appears to be on the periphery of their organizational missions. Whether or not the foods provided through the emergency food network are locally sourced appears to be of secondary concern to most anti-hunger advocates (Nonini 2013). According to Nonini (2013),

Most food security activists…are not engaged in a practical withdrawal from the global food economy by participating in the local projects of sustainable farming activists… The global food system is usually not an object of overt critique, and in
fact, overt criticism is pretty much ‘off the table’ because so much ‘surplus food’
comes from food distribution retailing conglomerates [that] play central roles in the
globally sourced agro-industrial food system.

In fact, many food programs are so underfunded that they continue to rely substantially on
large corporate donations and surplus from supermarkets and manufacturers because the
demand for emergency food is so high (Nonini 2013). This donated food is often of an
unhealthy variety, although in recent years this is changing as many food banks have begun
thinking more critically about the sources food banks approach for donations and the quality
of foods accepted and distributed (Neff et al. 2009). In this regard, anti-hunger organizations
might participate in or support local food movements through community-based approaches
to increase supply of healthy foods in their communities, but advocacy for policy approaches
to changes in the larger industrial food system is a challenge. Regardless of challenges, food
banks are increasingly collaborating with other anti-hunger organizations and government
agencies to advocate policy approaches to end hunger.

2.4 Background and History of the Emergency Food Network: Food Assistance to
Advocacy

Since the development of a formal emergency food network in the 1980s, the primary
focus of food banks and anti-hunger organizations has been providing immediate food
assistance to those in need (Tarasuk and Eakin 2005; Wekerle 2004; Allen1999; Poppendieck
1994). While government is involved with the emergency food system at most levels, the
movement is primarily the focus of the private, voluntary, and nonprofit sector, and
especially religious organizations. This is a dramatic divergence from the social provision
model of the early half of the twentieth century. In the decades following the Great
Depression, anti-hunger and food provision programs were primarily a function of the federal
government, while movement of a growing network of professional advocates, sometimes
called the Hunger Lobby, sought to expand public benefits, remove participation barriers,
and protect the rights of food assistance program clients with general cooperation from the
cutbacks on welfare programs, however, forced anti-hunger advocates away from advocacy
into the charity realm, focusing on assisting churches and traditional charities in
institutionalizing programs that responded to the immediate needs of the poor to address
growing need (Allen 1999; Poppendieck 1994).

The shift from public to private responsibility for care of the poor has created a vast
network of food banks and anti-hunger organizations that provides food assistance to low-
income populations (Edwards 2012; Poppendieck 1994), and an increasing range of
community groups and organizations has emerged in attempts to fill holes left by a shrinking
government state (Alkon and Mares 2012; Wekerle 2004). This network of non-
governmental nonprofits is made up of a network of statewide and regional food banks that
provide emergency food, operate feeding programs, and work to expand community

It was not until the 1990s that lobbying state and federal policymakers to improve
deficient service and advocating for improvement of SNAP and other federally funded
nutrition programs again become a focal point of the anti-hunger network. Declining public
confidence in the “federal capacity to solve social problems and a consequent embrace of the
New Federalism, a political philosophy that advocates for more state and local governance in
place of some federal governance,” have created a greater role for nonprofits in the fight

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against hunger (Edwards 2012. The devolved responsibility to states has provided incentives for states to further delegate responsibility to nonprofit organizations; this opportunity has led to a more active role of nonprofit anti-hunger organizations in policy creation and implementation and an increase in collective decision-making and interdependent relations between state agencies and nonprofits in policy implementation and management of public programs. In addition, the growth of the nonprofit sector has expanded the level of professionalism and technical knowledge of advocacy organizations, and budget reduction of state agencies paired with a greater capacity of nonprofits has resulted in increased interactions between state agencies and nonprofit organizations as co-professionals (Edwards 2012).

Edwards (2012) found an enhanced collaboration between private nonprofit organizations and government agencies within the Northwest, including regularly scheduled consultations and institutionalized access for deliberation between nonprofit and agency leaders, however this trend could vary by region. Nonprofit leaders increasingly have authority within state agencies, acting as experts, specialists, and bridges between groups, while providing training, input on improving service delivery, and bringing connections to larger national think tanks that produce new knowledge and expertise. According to Koc and colleagues (2008), both government and private nonprofit organizations have much to offer each other, including “creativity, cutting-edge information, on-the-ground successes, political legitimacy, decision-making power, financial resources, and capacity.” Based on this research, there is good reason to anticipate continuation and growth of collaboration between state agencies and nonprofit organizations in fighting food insecurity (Edwards 2012). This increased access to state agencies has created a growing policy subsystem of anti-hunger advocates, food
coalitions, public health and nutrition organizations, and state agencies, and has improved the
capacity of nonprofit organizations to promote larger-scale policy changes to the food system
that address the underlying causes of hunger.

2.5 Collaboration of Nonprofit Networks and Government in Local Food Advocacy

Nonprofit and community organizations are increasingly acting as vital drivers of change
in the policy-making process, contributing to the implementation of various new initiatives,
acting as information sources, and filling gaps in service of public programs. Civic
organizations play a recognizably important role in social reform and movement toward
greater equity and sustainability in the food system generally has required involvement from
private and voluntary sectors (Koc et al. 2008; Augustine 2002). However, there are limits to
the functionality of nonprofit community organizations, including restrictions in nonprofit
jurisdiction and limited financial resources (Koc et al. 2008). According to Friedmann
(2006), local community food organizations have reached the limit of scale in both supply
and delivery of emergency food and cannot solve social problems alone, nor exclusively
support a transition to a local, sustainable food system (Berg 2008; Poppendieck 1998).
Additionally, government agencies are struggling to provide adequate resources to meet
growing need due to budget cuts and limited resources (Friedmann 2006). Therefore, it is
important for nonprofit organizations and government agencies to leverage infrastructures
and resources to create an advocacy network for food-related issues. These networks are
intricate webs that provide strategic resources, as well as opportunities to learn from one
another, and create a range of top-down and bottom-up initiatives that emerge from both
public and private sectors (Friedmann 2006). According to Neff et al.(2009), it is essential
that food advocates and public officials join forces in creating community approaches in the development of effective solutions and in ensuring that the right questions are asked.

For both public and private sectors, embracing a pluralist approach to policymaking will be essential to moving in the direction of a more sustainable food system and will require an “eclectic policy mix,” including traditional regulatory instruments and newer community-based approaches, necessitating improved cooperation between nonprofit organizations and the state (Koc et al. 2008). The formal policymaking system must embrace a network of “para-public” and private sector actors, including universities, policy research organizations, commodity organizations, farm organizations, marketing boards, agribusinesses, and agribusiness associations (MacRae 1999). According to Augustine (2002), “governments cannot operate in a vacuum, [but] must build collaborative, working relationships and partnerships to achieve objectives.” Furthermore, both government and the nonprofit sector must articulate expectations and goals in order to form long-lasting relationships in the policy-making process (Augustine 2002).

The establishment of food policy councils has been one effective strategy for addressing food systems more comprehensively. Food policy councils are partnerships between state, county, or city level governmental agencies and nongovernmental stakeholders joining to shape local policy and programs related to food, agriculture, and hunger (Neff et al. 2009). Toronto is notable for creating one of the first food policy councils. The Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC) was formed in 1990 for the purpose of partnering business and community groups together to develop programs and policies that promoted community development, equitable food access, nutrition, and environmental health. TFPC has grown into a significant network of small businesses, food activists, municipal agencies, and non-governmental
organizations that meld emergency food delivery with community development and environmental sustainability. The TFPC’s goal is to link long-term food security and sustainable agriculture to the rebuilding of local supply chains, finding creative ways to combine service to low-income populations while encouraging sustainable practices by local farmers. This context has allowed community and government organizations to converge on a focus linking social justice and sustainability through a “web of relationships allowing for a bridge between policy and activities orientations” (Friedmann 2006). Since the formation of TFPC, food policy councils have formed across the United States and Canada (Schiff 2008) and are good examples of civic involvement in food policy at the local and regional levels (Koc et al. 2008). Food policy councils are developing a variety of innovative approaches to food access issues, including changes to legal codes and policies for zoning, development, taxation, food assistance, and public health (Neff et al. 2009).

In response to challenges of scale, scope, infrastructure, and organizational capacity common to alternative food networks, innovative strategies are being generated through collaborative relationships between public and private organizations (Beckie at al. 2012). According to Beckie and colleagues (2012), “some of these initiatives are horizontal in nature, such as producer cooperatives and market circuits, while others, such as those involving organizational and infrastructure development, public procurement and expansion into other market options, depend on vertical linkages to public and private sectors.”

While research on local food networks demonstrates increased participation and collaboration of both public and private actors, including government agencies, nonprofit advocacy groups, farmers’ market associations, businesses, and agricultural organizations, food bank organizations appear to be less active in local food movements. This raises
questions concerning the accessibility of local food movements to low-income populations and the reasons food banks are not present in local food movements to a larger extent, as well as barriers to food bank participation in such movements.

2.6 Summation of the Literature

Existing literature has illustrated the growth of advocacy in and evolving focus of the emergency food network, as well as the increased level of collaboration between food-focused nonprofit organizations and government agencies. Research of food justice movements has also shown that food access for all segments of the population is a key emphasis of these movements, but that local food movements are primarily accessible on a large scale only to higher-income consumers. Little research, however, has focused on how food banks are participating in the networks of local food movements to improve issues of access or how food banks are representing the emergency food network and low-income families within local and regional food networks that focus on promoting local food systems. This study aims to understand the barriers to participating in local food movements for food banks, as well as if and how food bank organizations are involved in such movements. This paper attempts to fill the gaps in existing research surrounding food banks and local food movements through empirical examination of food banks in Idaho, Oregon, and Washington and their engagement with local food, as well as the collaboration between food banks and other organizations and government agencies in promoting policy change and supporting healthy food access. The data presented here can be used in supporting the involvement of food banks in local food movements and the development of best practices for food banks looking to support or become involved with local food issues.
3. METHODS

3.1 Sample

Study participants were identified through preliminary online research into food bank organizations in the states of Idaho, Oregon, and Washington and were initially contacted through e-mail. Additional participants were identified through professional contacts between the researchers and organizations, as well as through recommendations for other potential participants from interviewees. Each organization included in this study is a Feeding America member or partner agency. Feeding America is the nation’s leading domestic hunger-relief charity; a national network of more than 200 statewide or regional food banks. Feeding America works to feed hungry Americans through a nationwide network of food banks by providing leadership in program development, education, collaboration, and policy advocacy, as well as provide information and resources to its partner food banks. This network allows for these organizations to have access to resources and knowledge of other organizations across the country, sign on to larger lobbying efforts at the federal level, and coordinate services, food sourcing and provision. Feeding America provides action alerts, messaging around food and nutrition legislation, lobbies at the federal level, and encourages member organizations to participate in the policy process, but does not require member organizations to partake in advocacy activities. Participants from a variety of positions within these organizations were interviewed, including presidents and CEOs of the organizations, executive directors, agency relations managers, public policy directors and coordinators, program directors, and food resourcing managers. Qualitative interview data was then collected through ten (10) semi-structured, one-on-one phone interviews with public officials.
and employees representing four regional or statewide food banks in Idaho, Oregon, and Washington and one Feeding America Partner State Association in Washington:

1) *Feeding Washington*

Feeding Washington is a Feeding America Partner Agency that sources food from the agricultural community for distribution to both Food Lifeline and Second Harvest. Feeding Washington allows the two organizations to collaborate more, as well as to source more donations for distribution through their partner agency networks.

2) *Food Lifeline*

Food Lifeline serves Western Washington, working with the food industry to collect surplus food and redirect food from manufacturers, farmers, grocery stores, and restaurants to local food assistance programs that feed hungry people. Food Lifeline distributes food to 275 partner agencies through food pantries, hot meal programs, shelters, and after-school programs. Food Lifeline also works to provide education about hunger issues and influence policies affecting hunger and food security.

3) *The Idaho Foodbank*

The Idaho Foodbank is an independent nonprofit organization that works with more than 200 partner agencies in 39 of Idaho’s 44 counties to distribute free emergency food to individuals and families through emergency food pantries, soup kitchens, feeding sites, and direct service programs. From three regional warehouse branches, The Idaho Foodbank provides nutrition and cooking education programs, as well as aims to be an advocate for Idaho’s hungry through a network of community-based partners.
4) Oregon Food Bank

Oregon Food Bank distributes food throughout the state of Oregon and Southwest Washington through four organizational branches, 17 independent regional food banks, and more than 950 partner agencies that provide food directly to hungry Oregonians. Oregon Food Bank works to provide food and education through a statewide network of hunger-relief agencies and lead statewide efforts to increase resources for hungry families, as well as advocate for the state’s hungry people.

5) Second Harvest Inland Northwest

Second Harvest Inland Northwest brings community resources to people in need through education and partnerships with other community organizations, distributing food to 26 counties in Eastern Washington and five counties Northern Idaho. Second Harvest partners with more than 250 neighborhood food pantries and meal centers.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Verbal consent was obtained from participants for each interview, and each phone interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to one hour. Each interview was audio recorded, and detailed notes were taken during the interview process. Additional data was collected through online research of national anti-hunger organizations and the websites of the organizations being examined.

For the purpose of this study, local food is defined as food grown or produced in the Northwest region of the United States. Each interviewee was asked the same set of open-ended questions (see appendix A for a full list of interview questions). Questions were designed to:
1) Determine perceptions of the strength or weakness of community engagement in local food movements in the service areas of each organization;

2) Establish how food banks are working to source local foods and what types of programs food bank organizations are operating to help make local food accessible to low-income populations;

3) Identify the community organizations and state agencies with which food banks are partnering with in local food initiatives; and

4) Discover if and how these food bank organizations are connecting and collaborating with other organizations and state agencies to support local food initiatives and advocate policy change surrounding local food systems.

In analyzing the interview data, field notes and audio from the interviews were transcribed, and each interview was coded to identify common themes. Coding of the interviews was based on pre-determined themes identified through a review of existing literature of the emergency food network, local food movements, community food security, and network theory. Counts of the various codes were used to aggregate frequent themes from the interviews and the resulting data was compiled into one report for final analysis.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interview data reveal six important themes in understanding how food banks participate in local food movements and food advocacy: serving as hunger logistics coordinators, utilization of local food, advocating for food and nutrition policies and programs, educating policymakers, stakeholders, and the public, partnership and collaboration for increased capacity, and negotiating mission and interpreting scope. This coding scheme was utilized with each interview transcript, and each theme was counted and analyzed to identify the frequency of each thematic area in terms of the participation of food banks in local food movements.
4.1 Serving As Hunger Logistics Coordinators

The logistics of food distribution was one of the most salient themes throughout the ten interviews, being mentioned 27 times. One interviewee stated, “Our first responsibility is making healthy, fresh food available to low-income people. The biggest part of our job is making sure that there is a network of food pantries and kitchens across the state that are making sure people aren’t missing meals today... Our first priority is the programs that provide food directly to hungry people in [our state].” Six interviewees said that food sourcing and food distribution to hungry people is the primary role of their organization, and that services are provided through programs designed to target specific populations such as rural areas, high-need urban areas, children, and seniors. Nine interviewees stated that the role of their organization is to act as the central distributor in a statewide network of smaller, community food pantries and soup kitchens and to collect donations and redistribute those donations across their statewide networks for the ends of making more food available to more people; three interviewees used the term “hunger logistics organization.” According to one respondent, a hunger logistics organization works to break down barriers preventing hungry people from gaining access to the food they need, sourcing donations of surplus food from all sectors of the food industry and handling all of the logistics of getting it from manufacturing and agricultural facilities to hungry people. That includes bringing the food into the food bank warehouse and redistributing it to partner agencies by shipping it out through a transportation network to those various agencies. Another participant said, “Rather than talking about hungry people and saying, ‘we need to help them,’ we are starting to talk about hunger as a food logistics issue and the challenge is that there is food out there, but it is getting it to the people who need it when they need it in ways that make sense.” Based on
these interviews, the collection and distribution of food is the primary focus of the food bank organizations. Interviewees overwhelmingly believed that there is food available within the food system, but that the challenge is making that food available to low-income individuals and families, and it is the role of their organization to make those connections within the food system.

4.2 Utilization of Local Food

In terms of sourcing food for distribution through statewide networks of pantries and feeding sites, procurement and distribution of local food was less of a priority for each organization than the primary mission of distributing food to hungry people. Any sourcing of local food appeared to be done because of logistical decisions to allow the organization to maximize donations and quantity of food they are able to distribute through their network. One CEO said that their organization only purchases nine percent of the food it distributes; the rest is donated and all donations must be sourced from within their state per Feeding America Partner Organization rules. Therefore, the majority of food distributed is donated product and the donated fresh produce that the organization distributes is local from within the state, but because of logistical and regulatory reasons. One policy expert said the biggest area of opportunity for sourcing food for the organization is in agricultural products from farms, particularly focusing on farms located in the counties they serve and that are close to their warehouses, which allows the organization to reduce transportation costs. A food resourcing manager said, “In the past, food banks in general have been more focused on shelf stable food and agricultural products have lagged behind, but pretty much every food bank now is starting to focus more on the agricultural side of things because that’s where the food is.” Five interview participants mentioned a shift from shelf-stable food items to fresh
produce in food bank distribution. One interviewee discussed the quantity of food available from manufacturer’s verses agricultural producers, stating that historically food banks have benefited from manufacturing mistakes such as mislabeled or dented cans or production of surplus products. The interviewee continued on to say that if manufacturers continue to make mistakes, eventually they would put themselves out of business, so they have become more efficient in their production and there is less surplus. Therefore, relying on manufacturing mistakes for a food source is less consistent than being able to source food from agricultural producers.

Various methods of attaining fresh local produce were mentioned, including volunteer gleaning groups, partnerships with Community Support Agriculture programs, garden projects, obtaining surplus product from packagers, manufacturers, and shippers and coordinating pick up of post-dated, unsellable products from grocery stores. Most notable, however, is that all ten interviewees discussed procurement of local agricultural surplus that would otherwise be used for compost or feedstock. One program manager said, “We see it as our mission to see that no wholesome food goes to waste, so we are constantly working with everyone across the food spectrum including growers and local distributors to make sure that where there is excess it becomes available to low-income people.” Another interviewee spoke of the surplus of “Grade B” product that is not commercially viable: “It is a perfectly wholesome product, but looks funny in some way, such as misshapen fruit that farmers often take to the dump or must till under for soil compost.” Each organization of the five included in this study had food resourcing personnel who work to build strategic relationships with farmers and ask for donations of product that cannot go to the commercial market because it “isn’t pretty enough to go into a grocery store.” Each interviewee talked about the
agricultural market as a growing avenue for food sourcing and increasing the amount of food available to be distributed through the emergency food network, but intentionality of procuring local food in support of local food movements was less present. One CEO said, “We are not going to make a big difference in the economy of local farmers because we don’t purchase a lot of food, and the reason [for that] is because there is such an enormous amount of donate-able food that is available to us. And there is such a large gap between what we are able to provide and what is needed that our mission tells us we need to be as efficient as we possibly can and be good stewards of our dollars.” The same interviewee discussed the organization’s ability to distribute donated food for four to six cents a pound compared to wholesale at 75 to 80 cents a pound. “For us, purchasing food doesn’t make sense. There is only so much we can do, and we have to deal with the important stuff first which is getting food to the people.” Six interviewees discussed the importance of local food systems, but also referenced the promotion of local food being outside the mission of their organization. One participant described food access as an “industrial-sized problem” in need of an “industrial-sized solution,” mentioning that advocacy is an important component of food banking, but acknowledging that sourcing and providing food is “first and foremost.” Based on these interview results, food banks play an important part in the food system: rerouting useable food away from waste and to hungry people. Ideals of local food movements are not of major concern to most food banks at a statewide or regional level. Local food, however, appears to be increasingly utilized within food banking practices, but the reasoning behind its utilization is not necessarily in line with the motivations of local food movements.
4.3 Advocating for Food and Nutrition Policies and Programs

While the first two themes address the logistical challenges and opportunities in providing local food, food bank representatives also highlighted their roles in advocating for policies that help these organizations accomplish their missions. Three of the five organizations from which interviewees were recruited have active public policy departments that work to build and maintain relationships with elected officials and influence policies on food and nutrition related issues at the federal, state, and local levels. These departments have policy experts and lobbyists who work with lawmakers and government departments such as the USDA and other state level agencies, as well as create action alerts and policy messages to send to supporters. One of the organizations did not have an official policy department. However, the three interviewees from that organization acknowledged that the organization does advocate among policy makers and works to support state-funded programs that increase food distribution to low-income populations, but that they had to be more creative in their lobbying because of the political climate of the state. According to one of those interviewees, the organization “doesn’t even talk in terms of policy,” but works to educate people through their partner network about how existing programs like SNAP are working and to educate policymakers on hunger issues in their state. Another interviewee said, “When it comes to things like SNAP benefits and how they’re managed at the federal and state level, we tend to sign on to a larger group that is working on that issue, whether it’s an anti-hunger coalition or our parent organization, Feeding America.” Membership in the Feeding America network allows these organizations opportunities to participate in advocacy activities at the federal level, as well as encourages advocacy at the state level through providing resources and policy personnel to watch legislative activity, lead advocacy efforts,
and craft policy messages, however advocacy activities are not required by Feeding America and a focus on maintaining the emergency food network is a key pillar of the Feeding America mission.

Support of state and federal programs such as the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program (TANF), the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), Small Farmers Direct Marketing Farm to School and Farm to Table programs, farmers’ market incentive and benefit match programs for SNAP and Women, Infants, and Children Nutrition Program (WIC) participants, as well as ongoing requests for more funding of publically funded nutrition programs were all mentioned in interviews. Nine of the ten interviewees referenced some sort of involvement in making sure local farmers’ markets had the funding and equipment to be able to accept SNAP benefits through EBT cards, although the level of involvement varied by organization. One public policy director said the return on investment in supporting SNAP Incentive Programs for seniors at farmers’ markets through the Senior Direct Nutrition Program had been well worth it as 97% of seniors who receive farmers’ market vouchers in that state redeem them at local markets, allowing seniors increased access to fresh produce while also supporting local farmers. Two interviewees mentioned that their state was currently investing the minimum amount needed into the senior and WIC voucher programs in order to keep federal funding and that their organization was actively lobbying at the state level to increase the amount of funding for those programs.

Five interviewees referenced lobbying on tax policies to benefit food donors. One interviewee touted a recent success in the push to pass back into existence the Crop Donation Tax Credit that gives farmers tax credits for donating locally grown food to the emergency food system. Three respondents mentioned that potential changes to the tax donation code are

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constantly an issue on the federal level and could cause big impacts on people’s decisions to donate. One interviewee said that their organization has found that farmers who have donated in the past tend to have a loyalty to the organization and will donate regardless of a tax write off. The interviewee continued to say that farmers recognize the benefits of donating not only for the community, but also in saving on composting costs, but in encouraging farmers to donate it is helpful for the organization to be able to leverage a tax write off to offset the farmers’ cost of packaging, processing, and transportation. Another interview participant shared this perspective, “The challenge for farmers is that they have the food growing in their fields, but it isn’t free for them to get it out, so they need to recoup their cost of labor or packaging somehow if that food can’t be sold. We have worked to change the tax environment so that farmers can say it’s worth it for them to bring in two extra shifts to harvest product that isn’t commercially viable and give it to a food bank because they get a tax credit for it. We actively work to preserve the policies that are there, and there will be more considerations in the future of ways we can expand those policies.”

Two interviewees mentioned working with policies at the local level, such as city ordinances that prohibit backyard chickens or restrictions on food gardening in yards. These interviewees said it was important for them to be able to discuss local policies like that with the community and community leaders and that their organization plays an active role in facilitating such dialogue. While advocacy is not the primary mission of these organizations, it appears to be an important part of their work and plays an increasingly active role in supporting policies that promote utilization of local food.
4.4 Educating Policymakers, Stakeholders, and the Public

All five organizations examined for this study engage in some form of educational outreach. Each organization participates in research and data collection at some level with the end goal of “expanding research and aggregating information on hunger that is out there to better understand how we fit into the solution.” Part of the education process, according to one policy expert, is educating lawmakers and stakeholders about hunger: “They often don’t believe that hunger relief is needed. We work to educate them that hunger is a problem in some communities. They also don’t understand the logistics of food access and food distribution. Often food issues lag in the policy area due to lack of understanding and education.” In building relationships with lawmakers and in conveying the need for more funding and government support of nutrition and hunger programs, seven interviewees discussed strategic communication with lawmakers to encourage awareness of the challenges and issues around hunger and reinforce support systems. Another participant described strategic framing for lawmakers: “Lawmakers don’t see food banking from a human services perspective, but as an agricultural thing, so we try to bring those things together so that we don’t get forgotten when they are thinking about human services. The thing that is helpful is that everybody needs food, and everybody knows that everybody needs food. There is a difference sometimes in people’s perspectives about the government’s role in providing food, but even people who don’t think the government should take on that role don’t think that kids should be hungry. When we talk about local food, we can talk more about the multiplier effect of how [farmers’ market] voucher dollars go into our rural communities and how those pieces benefit the larger society and the logistics of food distribution, and we can get our more conservative members who will see the money side of things.” Another study
participant discussed the importance of educating lawmakers on how donating food benefits farmers economically, while also providing fresh food to hungry people: “We have good alliances and relationships with farmers, and they are willing to make phone calls to legislators and are willing to meet with them or give testimony as to how the program works for them, and they help tell the economic side of things, whereas we can give more the social services side of things. They can give the balance of, ‘I love to not have to plow this under every year or throw it into a landfill, and it also benefits me economically as well.’”

All ten interviewees mentioned the importance of building relationships with local farmers and educating them about the anti-hunger network. One participant described it in terms of educating farmers that their Grade B product is valuable to someone else: “There are a lot of people in the agricultural community that don’t know that the product they were getting rid of was of any value to anybody. We’ve exposed a lot of people who are major agricultural players in the state to both the need and the solution that they can be part of the solution.”

In addition, all ten interviewees believed that part of their organization’s mission was to help educate the public about hunger issues. One interviewee discussed the need for increased awareness of hunger issues and the need for support of private sources “such as ourselves” to fill the gaps left by the government. Each interviewee referenced the role of their organization in conducting marketing campaigns or educational outreach to make people aware of need and solutions and create consistent messages for hunger relief. Several interviewees mentioned partnerships with state human services agencies and other anti-hunger organizations to create and disseminate information on SNAP and “dispel some of the myths of food stamps” to help educate people on how to enroll, as well as educate the public.
on how the program works and who uses it. Four interviewees mentioned active campaigns to involve people who have experienced hunger personally to help spread information about hunger in their state and to help hungry people be advocates for themselves. A CEO said, “It’s really important to have the voices of low-income people heard in the community. We strive to make sure that those voices are heard as it is extremely important.” Another said it is imperative for the voices of people in need to “have their voices amplified and reach the ears of elected officials as they are making up their minds on how to vote,” as well as for the public to understand who is affected by hunger and how they can help.

Another form of education that was mentioned frequently in interviews was educational programs for food insecure populations. Six interviewees cited nutrition, cooking, and budgeting education programs and two interviewees talked about gardening education. One participant answered saying, “There is a real desire now for food banks to go into the long-term work because there is a bigger realization that we simply cannot hand out enough food to solve the problem. We also do education programs on gardening, cooking, and nutrition.” Another interview participant said, “We are in this new position where feeding people is starting to look like something different. We have to be working with other organizations to make sure that food bank clients can meet the needs that they have and make sure they have resources available to get what they need in addition to food.”

4.5 Partnerships and Collaborations for Increased Capacity

All ten interviewees spoke of partnerships with various organizations and state agencies, although perspectives and goals behind collaborations varied. Nine interviewees mentioned some level of collaboration on SNAP education or outreach with their state’s human services
or health and welfare departments (the agency that oversees the administration of SNAP varies by state) and on-going discussions about SNAP funding and program operations. According to one interviewee, that partnership has connected their organization with other state agencies such as the Commission on Aging and allowed them to collaborate in solving senior hunger. Additionally, interviewees mentioned working with state agricultural agencies, which provides the necessary connections to the USDA for dealing with issues with national implications, as well as working with state housing agencies and health districts. Connections with state and regional health districts were cited as important because of a growing realization that health and equity is tied to access to good food. One of the organization’s CEOs stated, “We are beginning to explore food as a health issue, and we see a lot of potential for partnership with public health [agencies] and opportunities for us to do research around public health impacts for the population we serve. These are new conversations for us, but we think there is potential for studies on decreasing obesity and diabetes.” Another respondent shared that it is important for their organization to be a part of those larger conversations and healthy community initiatives to bring a perspective and awareness of food insecurity and how it affects health.

Interviewees also commented on the importance of partnering with local communities and organizations and municipal governments. According to one participant, grassroots organizing and helping low-income people to organize themselves to be more politically active is important in teaching people how local food affects them and identifying opportunities for them to take steps in increasing food access. One organization’s CEO commented on the necessity for their organization to work with other organizations at the community and local level because of the political nature of the state: “The thing that is
pretty clear to me is that if you want to make change, it works better at the ground level, getting the grassroots change to happen and then making policy changes if needed. It’s not a top down state, its more grassroots up.” Another participant said, “In opening access up to local and sustainable food, city and county jurisdictions also play an important role, and if we are talking about locally-sourced food we have to bring it down to the local level, so we engage counties and cities.” One organization actively engages with communities in facilitating dialogue around community food security and local food systems with the belief that communities know themselves best and can work together to create local solutions at any level in their food system, including local agriculture, regulatory environments, market access, and with “everyone who touches the food system, which is essentially everybody since everybody eats.” One of the program managers said, “We envision food secure communities where people can be responsible for their own food supply and have access to healthy, nutritious food for a better lifestyle.” Six interviewees referenced the importance of building relationships within communities and networking within all levels of the food system, including other anti-hunger organizations, coalitions, and task forces. One of the five organizations included in this study is active in a regional food policy council that has representatives from all sectors of the food industry. The council works to develop recommendations to local governments and organizations that can help strengthen the food system and increase food equity and access of local foods. According to one interviewee from that organization, the food bank’s participation on the food policy council is important in bringing the issues and voices of their partner agencies and the individuals they serve to the table. Although connections with other organizations working on hunger issues are important, one interviewee said, “We try to branch out from our core competency to put a
more definitive voice out there in terms of what it means to be sustainable and support farmers.”

Four of the five organizations participate in supporting farmers’ markets, farmers’ market associations, or organizations that raise money for SNAP incentives at farmers’ markets, however, the level of involvement varied by organization. One of the organizations actively works to help start new farmers’ markets in communities that do not have them, while the other organizations lent support for organizations that advocate and fund SNAP acceptance and incentive programs at local markets, although the food bank organizations were not directly involved in building those programs.

A common theme among all ten interviewees was the role their organization played in connecting other agencies and organizations together. One participant responded, “One of the places that we are helpful is helping connect agencies with each other and helping them learn from each other around what they can do to work with growers in their communities and what has worked and also the challenges and benefits of it.” According to several interviewees, coordination with other agencies helps prevent duplication of services and increases the variety of foods available. Teaming up with other organizations also helps in gaining resources such as grants. A policy expert described their organization’s community partnerships: “We try to not work within our own box, so we work with coalitions that also advocate for anti-hunger and nutrition programs, including the United Way, county government, WIC organizations, senior nutrition programs, school districts, and we also include agricultural folks.” Three of the organizations surveyed cited working relationships with university extension offices in providing nutrition, cooking, and gardening classes. All
ten interviewees emphasized the importance of cultivating and maintaining relationships with the agricultural community, and four interviewees described these partnerships as “strategic.”

According to one participant, collaborative relationships with other organizations help food banks engage more actively in the food system: “We can have broader impact on food access and the food system than we could working solely by ourselves.” Interviewees also spoke of partnering together with other food bank organizations and anti-hunger organizations in their state to create legislative agendas allowing them to be “more effective” together. Another program director said, “We have tried to nurture and cultivate those relationships because we know there is power in collective voices that can line up around the same issue. As a result of collaboration, we have better opportunities to provide bigger breadth of service and less duplication of services and also the opportunity to identify pockets of need where we may not have services.” Another interviewee described it as a network of “putting up resistance” and sharing voices on hunger policies. Partnerships and collaborations with other organizations and government agencies seem to be key in the work these organizations do within their communities and service areas.

4.6 Negotiating Mission and Interpreting Scope

A common theme found in the interviews was the need for food banks to balance food distribution to meet immediate needs with the need to create long-term solutions to hunger. Seven interviewees discussed approaching hunger holistically, and strategies from community level organizing to policy level advocacy were mentioned. One policy expert said, “We have lots of tools in our toolbox we’re able to use, and we just want to take all the action we can to make sure we are helping people get access to the food that they need. It’s definitely a balancing act between getting food on people’s plates today and making sure
they don’t need to seek food assistance in the future.” Six participants believed that supporting local food movements is one method of increasing community food security, but it also presents challenges. One participant said, “It is really important for our communities to have local food systems, but that comes in more on the policy advocacy side. Ensuring that someone is holding up those pieces of the local food system is important to my organization, and someone needs to be doing it, and we are trying to be an active participant to build that, but spearheading it is outside of our mission.” Four participants talked about the scale of local food in terms of meeting the distribution needs of their organizations. One interviewee said, “When you’re faced with trying to feed 50 to 60 thousand people a week, you can’t spend a whole lot of time talking about organic beets.” Another discussed the impracticality of promoting local food for their clients: “It’s nice to be able to promote local when you can, but when we’re talking about budgeting and how to get the most bang for your buck at the grocery store, and decisions have to be made based on the amount of money you have available, local is not always cheaper, so having affordability be a part of that discussion [in our cooking and budgeting classes] is very important. You have to be able to tailor your shopping to your family’s needs at the time. So while we want to promote local, it can also be difficult.”

One interviewee described the solution as a “multi-layered approach,” saying, “We can’t truly end hunger without getting to the root causes. Food boxes will never end hunger so we have to find a way to improve the food system. It’s not a problem we can solve on our own; we have to build community around that. We have to be a part of a movement to rebuild food systems, and solving hunger is impossible without repairing what happens in the whole food system. We can’t just do it by feeding low-income people.” One CEO stated, “It’s important
to find where the balance is. We certainly appreciate that local food could be more accessible, and we need to focus on that and encourage that, but in my mind, we can’t only focus on local food. We need bananas and oranges and foods that are never going to be grown [in our state], so I don’t subscribe to [local food] as the solution to hunger, but as part of what we need to be looking at.” A third participant said, “One of the things we believe in is that in order to feed hungry people you need good programs on our side of things—getting food directly to people, but a big part of that is also the public-private partnership—leveraging what we do to make sure that those bigger programs [government assistance programs] work in tandem with what we’re doing from a food bank perspective.” Part of that balance is in working with other organizations that focus on hunger relief and signing on with bigger messages and providing a supportive role. One interviewee gave the example of community gardens, “We are not hosting community gardens, but we are promoting them. We are not the coordinator or the initiator of gardens, but we promote an online program called Ample Harvest that connects local food pantries willing to accept produce to home growers with a surplus. It connects local growers with pantries in their communities that can accept produce and distribute it in their communities more quickly than we can from our warehouse, and we promote that very heavily in our partner network.” Another agency relations director said, “At the food bank, we’re not out saying ‘your farmers’ market needs to have SNAP access, but as part of [our state’s hunger relief task force], one of the things they have focused on as a collective group is SNAP eligibility and local farmers’ markets. We have been involved in discussions about promoting EBT acceptance at farmers’ markets and barriers to that—our stance has been very supportive—but these programs aren’t our focus.” According to interviewees, scalability of local food provides difficulties for food
banks, and is currently not a reliable solution to food insecurity. Food bank organizations are in many ways dependent on the current food system and face a difficult dilemma in balancing food provision with support of local food and long-term solutions to hunger.

5. CONCLUSION

Many researchers argue that the current food system cannot provide just and equitable access to healthy foods and that alternative food systems and policy changes are necessary to eliminate inequality—a key goal of local food justice movements (Neff et al. 2012; Koc and Dahlberg 1999). Local food movements underscore a general opposition to the industrial food regime (Alkon and Mares 2012), however, food banks tend to rely on surplus from the industrial food and agricultural systems to distribute food to hungry people. While feeding the hungry and making food access more equitable is, of course, the aim of food banks, these organizations are intrinsically reliant on the current food system to provide immediate food assistance to the poor and receive a large amount of their product from food industry and agricultural surplus, as demonstrated by the interviews included in this study. According to Neff and colleagues (2009), in addressing disparities in food access and public health, it is critical to shift away from the current mainstream food supply. Yet, completely turning from the current food production system and private sector emergency food distribution model presents challenges for anti-hunger advocates. Although local food movements provide many opportunities for engagement and the development of community food security, they also provide challenges for food banks and anti-hunger organizations in how to best approach their mission of assisting hungry citizens.
While limited in scope, the interviews included in this study provide insight into the role nonprofit state and regional food banks play in local food movements and the difficulties local food movements present for food banks. All ten interviewees referenced some sort of support for the ideals behind local food movements—strengthening local economies, support for small farmers, environmental advantages, and health and nutrition benefits of fresh produce—however, felt that challenging the larger food system was outside of their immediate mission. Local food did appear to be important to each organization in terms of accessing large quantities of surplus agricultural products, but that importance derived more from logistical needs such as transportation, price, and quantity, than from ideals of championing local food movements.

Scale and price of local food appeared to be barriers for food banks in fully joining local food movements, as the organizations’ distribution needs far exceeded the quantity of food they could collect through only local sources, especially considering cost. While food banks did not actively pursue local food simply for the fact that it was produced locally, these organizations are still active in promoting local production through other means, such as policy advocacy and educational outreach.

Advocacy and outreach are important components for food bank organizations. While directly challenging the current food system and supporting local food are not typically central to these organizations, influencing policies having to do with government assistance programs and agricultural issues are important, not only in ensuring that the food banks themselves are able to receive product to distribute, but also in ensuring the strength of government programs. Nonprofit organizations are often intensively involved in negotiations dealing with the implementation of governmental service programs, as well as civic...
advocacy activities (Jenkins 2006). Based on interview data, food banks strive to work in tandem with government assistance programs, advocating policies to make sure those programs exist to provide a base of support for vulnerable citizens, and working to fill in the holes through emergency food assistance. Some researchers, including Berg (2008), Winne (2008), and Poppendieck (2000), question the charitable anti-hunger sector, arguing it fosters co-dependencies and an ideology of volunteerism opposed to a governmental obligation and commitment to the human right of adequate food. They believe that anti-hunger organizations and food banks should be more active on the advocacy side. Alkon and Mares (2012) argue that the charitable anti-hunger network “fails to challenge a neoliberal political economy in which services that were once the province of the state—such as provision of food to those who cannot afford it—are increasingly relegated to voluntary and/or market-based mechanisms” and believe that attempts to address environmental degradation, economic centralization, and poverty are instead led by community organizations and nonprofit groups that have taken the responsibility for the provision of food to low-income households—helping to justify the dismantling of entitlement programs. Moreover, these researchers argue that the public sector response to social problems is increasingly supplemented by an extraordinary private charitable effort (Poppendieck 2000) and nonprofits are increasingly being expected to replace an eroding welfare state (Koc et al. 2008). Neff and colleagues (2009) argue that the charitable anti-hunger network distracts the energy of those who could be working to change the root causes of hunger. While some could argue that emergency food distribution is a “band-aid approach” to larger food access problems, interview data presented here demonstrates that food banks are part of a larger network working to end food insecurity and play a very specific role within that network.
Each interviewee included in this study referenced the importance of partnerships with other community and nonprofit organizations and government agencies in accomplishing their mission and creating more equitable access to food. Food bank organizations utilize these partnerships in ensuring their involvement in discussions and policy decisions around government assistance programs, agricultural policies, and community health issues, all with the goal of increasing food access and eliminating food insecurity. The involvement of food banks in local food issue networks allows organizations access to resources and knowledge of other organizations, the opportunities to sign on to larger lobbying efforts, and coordination of services, in turn allowing them larger influence on food issues and food policy. This network allows food bank organizations to not only maximize their scope and resources, but also play an important role in the larger network. Within this network subsystem, food banks and other organizations coordinate mutual interests and share resources in order to meet policy goals that could not be achieved single-handedly, while still focusing on distinct missions and fulfilling essential functions in creating food security and a more equitable food system. Furthermore, the ties between nonprofit organizations and other organizations act as “bridges” between private entities and formal political institutions (Clemens 2006), allowing nonprofit food banks to amplify their reach and their voices. These networks are intricately woven and provide strategic resources, opportunities to learn from one another, and create a variety of top-down and bottom-up approaches from both public and private sectors (Friedmann 2006). As demonstrated by the data presented here, immediate distribution of food to hungry people is believed to be the essential function of food banks, however, involvement in food policy networks allow food banks to have greater influence and to advocate for policy changes, both directly and indirectly.
While local food production and consumption is believed to be a positive step toward challenging the increasingly inequitable and unsustainable industrial food system, it is not a practical solution to immediate hunger needs, and therefore, cannot be the major focus of food bank organizations at present. Advancement of current policies and programs that support the production and sale of local food within local and regional markets will continue to create positive change for local farmers and communities, and expansion of these programs will also benefit food banks through increasing the scale of local food markets, leading to greater local production levels and lower prices, making local food more accessible and more practical in meeting the needs of food banks. Additionally, policies that provide tax incentives for farmers to donate surplus product to the emergency food network are also important in maximizing donations for food banks and will further the consumption of local produce outside of traditional market channels, making local product more accessible to low-income populations.

The level to which food banks are able to shape policies such as tax incentives for farm donations, farm to school programs, and SNAP EBT acceptance at farmers’ markets appears to be largely dependent on the scale of the organization, its resources, and the political climate of the area in which the organization is located. Based on interview data, the food bank organizations included in the study focus their efforts and resources first on distributing food through their partner networks, and subsequently on advocacy. The political culture of the states in which these organizations are located could affect the level to which they participate in advocacy activities. Idaho is typically a Republican state and must work within a more conservative framework in supporting government assistance programs that are typically backed by the Democratic Party. Alternatively, Oregon and Washington are
generally known for their progressive social policies and are typically Democratic states, but must balance the duality of the more conservative eastern regions of those states. While each organization included in this study engaged in some form of policy advocacy, the level of advocacy varied from organization to organization, and many variables, including political climate, could affect an organization’s ability to participate in policy advocacy—increased resources would most likely supplement an organization’s access to the policymaking process. We might have expected food banks to be more directly involved in advocating for food and nutrition policies and programs, as well as promoting local food because of the growing awareness of inequitable access to fresh, healthy foods, but instead we find that food banks are primarily maintaining their traditional role of food provision. However, partnerships with other organizations appear to be an important strategy in increasing organizational access to resources and broadening the scope of food banks in advocating for local food policies and promoting local food consumption.

Because this study is limited to organizations in the Northwest region of the United States, which is typically known for more progressive social policies and strong local food movements, the generalizability of these results is limited. Varying political attitudes and regional differences in agricultural crops and economies could result in very different outcomes in terms of participation in local food movements, levels of advocacy, and the necessity for and availability of partnerships with other organizations oriented around food issues. Additionally, interview data was combined into one report and coded together before themes were counted, therefore, it is unknown whether the articulated themes were expressed broadly across participants or concentrated among a few participants. As a result, it is difficult to know if these ideas are common for each organization included in the study or ...
simply ideals emerging from a single organization. Future research should account for this in data collection methods to gain a better understanding of the breadth of these themes across organizations. Further research including organizations from different regions of the country is necessary for broader understanding of the participation of food banks in local food movements. Additional research should also be conducted to examine, and potentially quantify, the extent that food banks participate in advocacy activities. This endeavor would give a better indication as to how food bank organizations balance the need for immediate food distribution with the need for advocacy, either indirectly through network partnerships, or more directly through leading advocacy campaigns and supporting legislative agendas. Furthermore, future studies on this topic should also include other anti-hunger organizations such as food policy councils, hunger task forces, and food coalitions to give a better understanding of the role food banks play in local food movements and how these organizations interact with one another.

Criticisms of our current food and agricultural system, as well as the policymaking system that supports it, focus on how food insecurity has been created and how attempts to improve accessibility and sustainability are impeded (MacRae 1999). A viable food system must focus on the creation of food security through efforts specifically aimed at removing barriers that create or perpetuate disparities (Neff et al. 2012) and altering food environments to support agricultural sustainability, access, and affordability, without losing focus of those who need assistance now. These efforts necessitate alternative solutions, both from a policy level and a grassroots, community level, and must involve organizations, businesses, and agencies with varying perspectives, resources, and goals. While the solution to ending food insecurity is not necessarily local food, it often includes a local effort of a network of
organizations and agencies (Koc et al. 2008). Food banks have the knowledge and ability to reach hard-to-reach populations, and offer access into vulnerable communities, as well as opportunities to do more than simply provide food (“About the Hub” 2014) through partnerships with other organizations and government agencies. While food banks have been evolving and progressively becoming involved in advocacy networks, these changes are far from complete and will require partnerships and cross-sector collaboration to bridge the efforts of immediate food assistance with creating a more just and equitable food system.
6. REFERENCES


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7. APPENDIX

A. List of Interview Questions

1. What is your title and professional role within your organization?

2. Can you tell me a little bit about what you think is the main mission of your organization?

3. Please describe any local or regional activity related to promoting local or regional food.

4. How would you describe the strength of the local food movement within your community, service area, or state? Why do you describe it that way?

5. How does your organization incorporate local foods into its programs and service provision?

6. How is your organization working to make local foods available to low-income populations?

7. What are some of the policies, laws, and regulations that make it harder for your organization to utilize local foods in your service?

8. How does your organization work to influence these policies?

9. What organizations or state agencies does your organization partner with to promote local foods in your community?

10. Which organizations or state agencies has your organization partnered with in the past in promoting local foods?

11. How does your organization connect with other organizations working on local food issues?

12. From your point of view, how does this collaboration appear to affect local food issues and food security in your service area?

13. How does this collaboration appear to make local food more available to low-income populations?

14. How does this collaboration affect local policies? State policies?

15. What are some of the biggest achievements by your organization in terms of impacting food policy in your state?