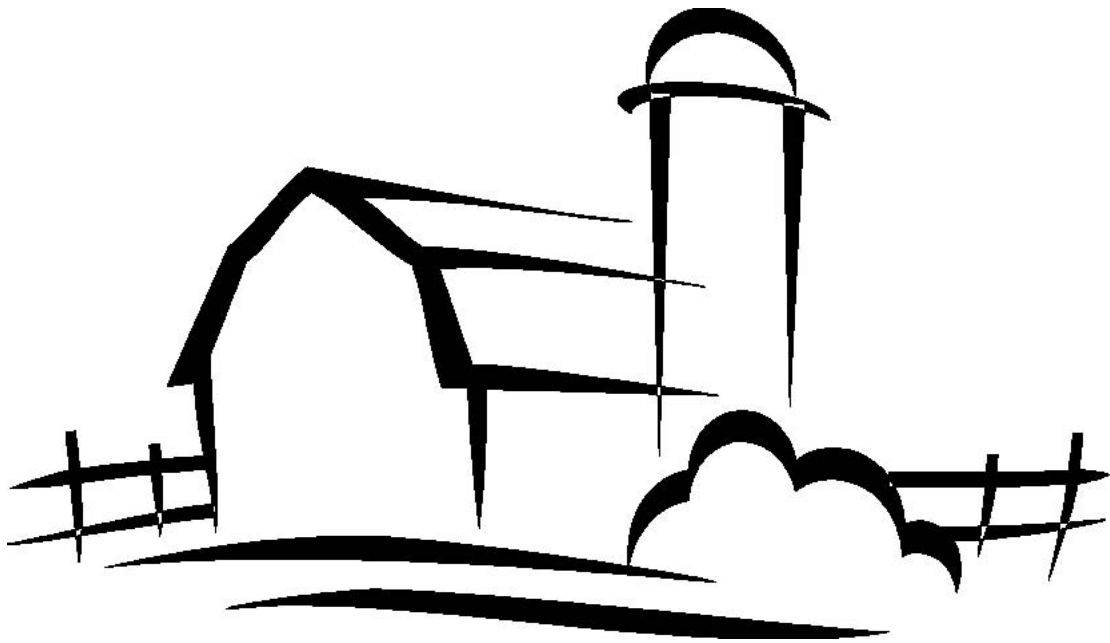


Buy Local

Food and Farm Toolkit



A Guide for Community
Organizers



Why Should I Care Where my Food Comes from?

Food isn't just about nutrition and taste. Food brings us to the table and allows us to share time together while nourishing our bodies. It is an integral part of our daily lives, whether we have plenty to eat, or none at all. Today, the food we eat is produced by a system that has become increasingly complex, a system that can negatively affect our health, our economy, our environment and our communities. As a result, food is taking on greater significance in our lives. More and more people are seeing food as a viable vehicle for social change. Our values can actually be reflected on our plates! It is important, therefore, to make sure that our food choices represent values of social equity and environmental sustainability.

This toolkit will show you how you can help shape our food system in ways that promote the production of safe, healthy food that protects the environment and bolsters local economies.



Figure 1 Two Farmers from Iowa

What is the problem with our food system now?

It begins with a journey, the journey of our food. Currently, much of the food consumed in the United States originates and travels within a food system that is global, not local, traveling an average of 1,300 miles from farm to plate. That's approximately the distance between New York and Dallas—for every bite! For every dollar spent on food, only a fraction—20 cents on average—goes back to the farmer. The rest of the money pays for labor, packaging, transportation, retail, and other costs associated with food production and distribution. This national system of food production creates an inequitable situation for many farmers while simultaneously harming our environment and local economies.



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

Figure 2 Distribution of Profits

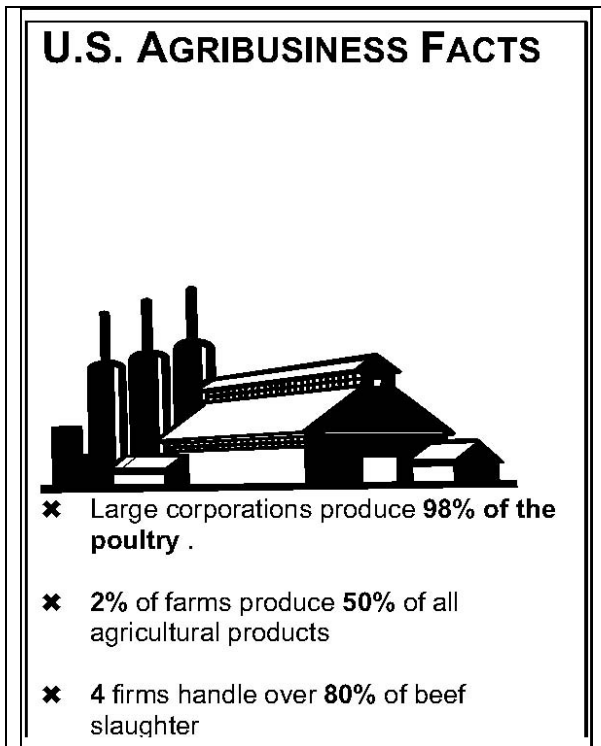
The Current State of the American Food System

So where does that other 80 cents go? Since the 1950's, the U.S. agricultural sector has been undergoing a fundamental transformation, resulting in an industrialized, monocultured agricultural landscape with centralized corporate ownership of more and more stages of food production. There is a shrinking number of agribusinesses and retail corporations that increasingly own and control all of the links in the food production chain, from chemical inputs like fertilizers and pesticides used on the farm, to grain milling and processing, to transportation lines that ship raw agricultural materials throughout the country, to grocery stores and supermarkets where food is purchased by consumers. Moreover, many agribusinesses are becoming *vertically integrated*, meaning one company owns all of these production stages outright. In poultry production, for example, one company usually owns the feed production, the breeding and hatching of chicks, the grow-out stage, and the slaughtering and packaging of finished birds. Both *consolidation* and *vertical integration* concentrate the majority of market power in the hands of a few companies, which means farmers have less ability to exert independence in the marketplace and end up capturing a shrinking percentage of the food dollar.

In addition to full ownership of the various stages of food production, agribusinesses may practice contract growing. In this system, a farmer signs a contract with an agribusiness to grow or raise a certain product (e.g. chickens or hogs) according to strict production guidelines outlined by the company. As a result of uneven bargaining power and few choices over the company with whom they contract, farmers are often faced with a business arrangement that leaves them little control in the operation of their farm yet most of the risk, overhead, and waste management responsibilities.

These corporate-controlled industrial farm operations not only present economic problems for farmers and the communities in which they live, they can also be damaging to our soil, water, and air. For instance, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has declared that large livestock and poultry production facilities, called *Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs)*, are one of the chief causes of water pollution in this country. An estimated 35,000 miles of river and groundwater sources in 17 states have been polluted by waste from hogs, chickens and cattle.

Industrial farms also use massive amounts of chemical herbicides, insecticides and fertilizers. Each year, farmers use 939 million pounds of pesticides. Shockingly, 90% of these chemicals eventually accumulate in the ground and surface water, killing fish, destroying habitat, and presenting serious health risks for people who drink contaminated groundwater.



The question you may be asking yourself is how is this happening? How can a handful of companies monopolize such an important industry and how can they damage the environment with relative impunity? Agribusinesses use their considerable wealth and political influence to promote domestic farm policies and international trade laws that give the largest businesses an unfair advantage. It is this advantage that allows agribusinesses to promote environmentally detrimental farming methods and exercise control over an important industry.

The dominance of agribusinesses is changing rural landscapes around the world, as farming families are forced to give up their homes, lands and livelihoods. In the United States, the number of farms dropped from 6.8 million in 1935, to just over 2 million in 2005. When small farms fail, entire communities suffer from the ripple effects: families move away, local businesses shut down, schools close and main streets become ghost towns. The very fabric of rural American communities changes irrevocably.

Figure 3 Percentages of Market Owned by Agribusiness

You Can Help: Think Global, Act Local

Don't let such a bleak outlook get you down, things are starting to change for the better. Small farmers are finding ways to survive by carving out their own niche markets; they are selling directly to consumers (like you!) in their local areas. Buying from these local farmers has many advantages:

- **Buying Locally is Good for the Economy:** Every dollar spent on locally grown food puts at least three dollars into the local economy. This contributes to the growth of strong small businesses, generates local jobs, raises property values and leads to strong health care, education, and recreation sectors. Research by the United States Department of Agriculture supports these findings, and indicates that farmers earn 37 percent more from sales at local farmers markets than they would if they sold to a wholesaler.
- **Buying Local is Good for the Environment:** Food produced and consumed locally uses less fossil fuel for transportation and requires less material for packaging compared to mainstream food production. Small farmers usually grow a diverse set of crops which are rotated regularly, while also raising livestock. This sustainable system of farming replenishes the soil, preserves the rural landscape and ensures the farms' viability for many years to come.
- **Buying Locally is Good for Your Pocketbook:** Locally produced food does not include the transportation, packaging, and marketing costs included in the price of supermarket foods. In addition to these savings, local farmers don't use as much chemical fertilizer or pesticides on their crops, (which is better for your health!) and they don't have to work with intermediaries to get their product to the consumer. In an extensive study of farmers markets around the country, the United States Department of Agriculture found that food purchased at farmers' markets is actually less expensive than foods at supermarkets.
- **Taste the difference!** Not only is there more variety with locally grown produce, but just-picked fruits and vegetables are also better tasting and more nutritious! Locally harvested produce ripens on the vine, whereas shipped produce is picked prematurely, and then injected with chemicals – which are added to ensure that the produce ripens during the long shipping and storage process. It is also important to note that nutritional value declines as time passes after harvesting. The longer produce sits in the back of a truck and in storage warehouses, the less nutritional value there is. Buying from a farmers market or fruit stand is the healthier option, since the majority of produce has been harvested within 24 hours of being purchased!

ACT Now!

Ok, so you want to help . . . now what?

What you can do today

- Make a decision to “eat with a conscience.” Find out where your food comes from and choose local food. You'll taste the difference!
- Go to your local market and ask the manager whether any of the produce comes from local farmers. If the manager says no or looks confused, let them know you would prefer to buy locally grown food and explain why.
- Spread the word! Talk to your family and friends about the benefits of choosing local. Prepare a meal with local foods and invite your friends to taste the



Figure 4

difference. The higher the demand for local foods, the more pressure on grocery stores and markets to offer them.

- Check out all the grocery stores and markets in your neighborhood. Which places have local food? Which places don't? Pass on this information to your friends and family!
- Visit your market and speak with local growers. Find out what creative methods they have used to market their crops and ensure a fair price.

What you can do this week

- Check out the nearby farm stand or go to the weekly farmers' market in your area. See what they have to offer. The diversity and quality of produce available may surprise you. It's not just fruits and veggies anymore! Farmers' markets have flowers, bread, cheese, honey and other homemade products, such as candles, quilts and toys.
- Not sure where to find a farmers' market near you? Check out the list of possible sources:
 - Community Message Board
 - Natural food stores
 - Local newspapers
 - Chambers of commerce
 - Local/county cooperative extension service offices
 - U.S. Department of Agriculture listing of farmers' markets @ www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets/map/htm
 - Local Harvest Website: www.localharvest.org

What you can do this month

- Join Community Supported Agriculture (CSA).
- Organize a fundraiser to buy CSA shares for a local food pantry or shelter. Everyone wins!
- Organize an Oxfam Hunger Banquet and serve local food and invite a farmer to speak at it. Go to <http://www.oxfamamerica.org/fast> on Oxfam's web site for a how-to's on Hunger Banquets.
- Join or volunteer at a local farm, urban agriculture project or community garden.
- Invite a representative from a local CSA to do a presentation for your congregation or business.
- Contact Oxfam field organizers in your region and find out how you can work toward agricultural policy that supports small farmers here and abroad
 - New England: Stephanie Demmons sdemmons@oxfamamerica.org
 - Midwest: Katie Danko kdanko@oxfamamerica.org
 - Southeast: Rasa Zimlicki rzimlicki@oxfamamerica.org
 - Great Plains: Jim French jfrench@oxfamamerica.org

Community Supported Agriculture, what's that?

CSA's are working relationships between farmers and consumers, allowing for a mutually beneficial relationship. Member, typically small groups or families, pay a farmer or farmers' cooperative an annual membership fee to cover the costs of production. In return, they receive produce from the farm on a regular basis, usually weekly, throughout the growing season.

Oxfam America Supports Small Farmers

Oxfam America's U.S. Program supports improved livelihoods for small and minority farmers in the United States, including farmers' cooperatives that demonstrate sustainable practices and innovative ways to sell directly to consumers. The U.S. Program also supports statewide and national farmers' associations pressuring lawmakers to enact fair agricultural policies.

--"The fight to save family farms isn't just about farmers. It's about making sure there is a safe and healthy food supply for all of us. It's about jobs, from Main Street to Wall Street. It's about a better America." Willie Nelson, President FarmAid

Additional Resources

Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture—A research center based out of Iowa State that promotes alternatives to our current food systems.

www.leopold.iastate.edu

The Food Routes Network—an organization that promotes buying locally, Food Routes Network seeks to link organizations and individuals committed to the cause of small farmers.

www.foodroutes.org

Oxfam America—on this part of the Oxfam website, you will be able to access articles dealing with small farm issues.

www.oxfamamerica.org/art2567.html

"A Time to Act for Family Farmers"—a film produced by the National Family Farm coalition. The film is half an hour long and analyzes America's small farm crisis.

Grub: Ideas for an Organic Kitchen by Anna Lappé—an exposé on our current food systems. This book also provides a how-to for those looking to set up an easy-to-use and affordable organic kitchen.

The Grace Factory Farm Project—The Grace Project seeks to eliminate factory farming, in favor of a sustainable and environmentally sound solutions.

<http://www.factoryfarm.org/>

