

From Food Charity to Food Sovereignty Through the Right to Food



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National Right to Food Community of Practice

The National Right to Food Community of Practice (NRtF CoP) is a membership-based national coalition of organizers and community-based organizations with boots on the ground, developing solutions at the intersection of food and agriculture, changing public opinion, and advocating for systems change in the places close to home to end hunger for good, and make food a human right. We believe the Right to Food is a useful framework for achieving the change we want to see in the food system.

What's at stake? The purpose of our food system should be to produce food, health, well-being, and a thriving planet. Instead, it produces more fuel and livestock feed than food for people, while reproducing racialized poor health outcomes. It erodes soil and pollutes waterways, exploits food and farm workers, and perpetuates food insecurity while offering food banking as the solution. Poverty, not lack of food access, is the root cause of hunger.

<https://www.righttofoodus.org/>

Purpose of the Food Systems Continuum Tool

- Explore how describing / defining the problems we're trying to solve affects the work we do to make change in the world
- Use the "Food Systems Change Continuum" tool as a way to dissect the "who, what and how" of different approaches to food systems change
- Explore the barriers and opportunities to adopting a rights-based lens to ending hunger by transforming the food system

The purpose of the Food Systems Continuum tool is to engage advocates, funders, communities and organizers in a process of understanding how the problems we're trying to solve affect the work we do, and the strategies we embrace to make change in the world.

What are the central questions we should be asking ourselves and our communities if we want to support a definitive shift in the way the emergency food system operates such that food banks and local food charities embrace the necessity of ***moving along the continuum*** from emergency feeding to food sovereignty?

For more than 50 years, there has been a lot of work in the United States to tackle, respond to and address the persistent and growing issue of hunger.

Food Banking: The Origin Story



John Van Hengel, credited with starting food banking in 1967.



St. Mary's Food Bank, independent of Feeding America, is still in operation today.

In 1967 John Van Hengel established St. Mary's food bank in Phoenix with a \$3,000 loan, donated warehouse space and a handful of volunteers. He convinced local businesses to donate their food waste to organizations that feed "the needy". In its first year, St. Mary's coordinated the gleaning of food waste from local grocery store chains and redistributed 275,000 pounds of food to 36 local food charities (LFCs). The concept spread and within 10 years 18 cities had established food banks that operated just like St. Mary's. It was at about that time that the federal government made a proposal to St. Mary's Food Bank to organize these food banks into a network that could develop standards, share best practices and negotiate collectively with large food manufacturers. This network eventually became Second Harvest and then Feeding America. This set the stage for the model of our current "emergency" feeding system and the one that is being exported around the world through the Global Food Banking Network.

Food Security in the U.S. Today

**47 million
people are
food insecure**

**14
million
children are
food insecure**

**49
million people
turned to
food
programs in
2022**

**100%
of U.S.
counties have
food
insecurity**

And yet we have the highest rate of food insecurity we have ever experienced in this country. As Feeding America writes on their website: “Everyone needs nutritious food to thrive. And, while people are working hard to provide for themselves and their families, approximately 49 million people—that’s one in six people in the U.S.—still relied on food assistance from charities like Feeding America in 2022.” It’s fair to say that after 55 years of providing surplus food to people in need, food banking will not end food insecurity. Yet food banks continue to occupy a mythic role in the popular imagination as the primary way in which needy people get food and the best way to help fight hunger, with more than 51 percent of all food access programs relying entirely on volunteers.

What did COVID do for our debates, conversations and understanding of how to end hunger in this country: Since the March 2020 outbreak of COVID in the U.S., we have witnessed the private charitable food system pushed to its limits. For the first time since the Great Depression, the issue of hunger in the U.S. arguably became discernible to all. News stories across the country showed miles-long lines of cars and people snaking around sidewalks and carparks to receive pre-packed boxes and bags of food. Food insecurity and its attendant issues, such as poor health related to racial disparities, were front and center in the public dialogue as growing numbers of “newly hungry” people during COVID found themselves accessing emergency assistance as a result of job loss – especially those who could not work remotely -- delayed stimulus checks and other disruptions to income.

<https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-America>

<https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/>

Contradictions and Challenges

Food banks have been in existence for more than 50 years and have grown in number and size.	The number of food insecure households has steadily increased, as has a racialized gap between the rich and the poor.
Dominant Narrative	Reality/Fact Check
Hunger will always be with us so food charity will always be necessary.	Charity alone will never end hunger. The root cause of hunger is POVERTY.
Food corporations have a major role to play in ending hunger.	\$85 million of the total gifted to food banks from Walmart was raised directly from their customers. And Walmart takes in the most food stamp dollars among retailers. Who is really supporting food banks?
Food Waste = feeding people and saving the planet -- "a win-win" for society.	Food waste is an outcome of the growth-driven market mechanisms which rely on government-incentivized overproduction to generate profit.

We have been over producing food as a commodity and trying to food bank our way out of poverty and hunger for decades, and it's not working. What are the contradictions in our current food system? What are the true and false narratives that have come to define the way we approach food insecurity? What happens when we pull the curtain back and look a little closer at some of our assumptions? And yet, we cannot dismantle food banks in the face of the staggering increase of food insecurity. AND we believe in our vision for a world without hunger that includes abundance for everyone where food access and sustainable farming are interdependent; where income is stable and rapid response mechanisms are in place for true emergencies; where people have self-determination and the earth can heal.

These contradictions (among others) became more palpable during COVID. It is precisely a temporarily strengthened social safety net in 2020 (Pandemic EBT, etc.) that accounted for the short-lived nature of the mid-2020 spike in food insecurity, especially among those who found themselves for the first time in need of emergency provisions due to the pandemic. Real time tracking from the Census Bureau throughout 2020 confirms that cash payments from the federal government directly to citizens in need softened the blow of a sudden stagnant economy that left many people already living on the margins and out of work -- giving credence to the analysis that poverty is indeed the root cause of food insecurity and that, when provided with cash assistance, needy families will spend it on meeting their basic needs.

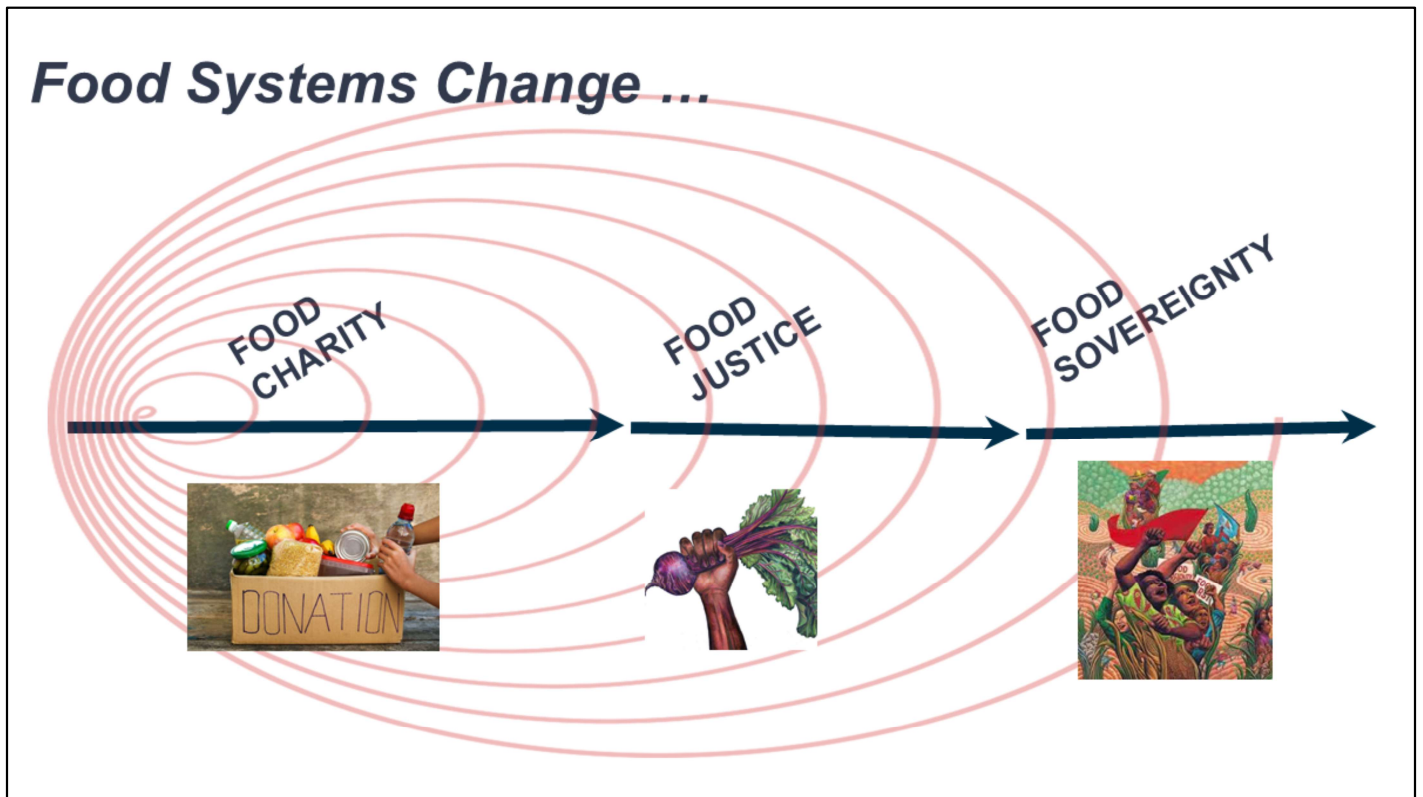
<https://blog.ucsusa.org/alice-reznickova/how-big-food-corporations-take-advantage-of-snap/>

<https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2020/05/new-household-pulse-survey-shows-concern-over-food-security-loss-of-income.html>

Joshua Lohnes, [The Contested Politics of Food Banking in the United States](#)

<https://wfpc.sanford.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2022/05/Survey-COVID-19-Pandemic-Impact-on-Hunger-Relief-Organizations-DukeWFPC-WhyHunger-April2022.pdf>

Food Systems Change ...

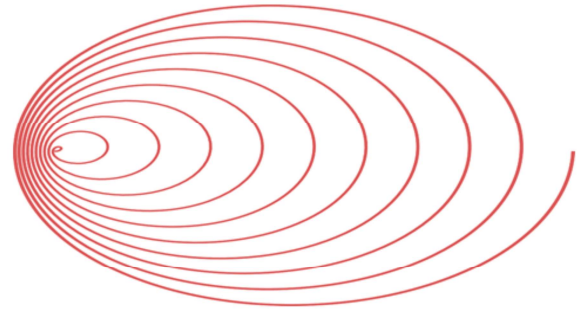


Many people working on food systems change, often times using different language and framings for their work. Many organizations and/or the people who work or volunteer for them express wanting to move from food charity models towards food justice models. Still others use the language of food sovereignty to describe their end goal and approach.

Food systems change is not necessarily linear, and our current socio-economic and political context suggests that we may need to be doing many of these things at once, employing multiple strategies. We're not all moving at the same pace in every community. However, this food systems change continuum is the journey that many people working on anti-hunger strategies are on, and it's important to keep challenging assumptions that keep us in a charitable model.

What are the central questions we should be asking ourselves and our communities if we want to support a radical shift in the way the emergency food system operates such that food banks and local food charities embrace the necessity of moving along the continuum from emergency feeding to food sovereignty?

Food Systems Change



FOOD CHARITY: Food is rescued, purchased, and then redistributed or donated (typically through food banks, food pantries and soup kitchens) to feed and/or nourish people who are food insecure.

FOOD JUSTICE: Achieved by removing the structural inequities that exist within our food and economic systems such that our food system is inclusive, community-led and participatory.

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A food system in which the people who produce, distribute, and consume food also control the mechanisms and policies of food production and distribution (as opposed to a food system that is controlled predominantly by corporations and market institutions and government policies that support those actors.)

Though mitigating food insecurity by capturing and distributing food waste is still at the heart of food banking, many organizations have expanded their strategies to include nutrition education, medically tailored meals, client choice, support in helping clients get access to government nutrition programs, gardening and food preservation classes, policy and advocacy to improve federal nutrition programs. And a smaller but growing subset are beginning to address root causes of food insecurity as part of their strategy to end hunger, such as low wages, poor working conditions, and structural racism. Still, many are beginning to engage more deeply with food sovereignty and food justice coalitions. And yet, others are still wary of politicizing their work for fear of losing access to resources essential to the smooth execution of their feeding operations. Many people working on food systems change, often times using different language and framings for their work. For the purposes of this tool, we offer the following definitions:

- **Food Charity** is a system where food is rescued or purchased, then redistributed or donated (typically through food banks, food pantries and soup kitchens) to feed and/or nourish people who are food insecure.
- **Food Justice** is achieved by removing the structural inequities that exist within our food and economic systems such that our food system is inclusive, community-led and participatory.
- **Food sovereignty** is a food system in which the people who produce, distribute, and consume food also control the mechanisms and policies of food production and distribution. This stands in contrast to the present corporate food regime, in which corporations and market institutions control the global food system.

What is the Problem? _____→

Who are the Main Actors? _____→

What is our Strategy for Change? _____→

What are the Outcomes / Results? _____→

The way we think about the problem we're trying to solve determines -> who we see as the most important characters / actors / people involved, which affects -> the way we think change will come about and the strategies we use, which affects the -> outcomes and results we're looking for.

What are the central questions we should be asking ourselves and our communities if we want to support a definitive shift in the way the emergency food system operates such that food banks and local food charities embrace the necessity of moving along the continuum from emergency feeding to food sovereignty?

Food Charity —> —> Food Justice —> —> Food Sovereignty

Problem	Hunger	Food Insecurity	Nutrition Insecurity	Economic Insecurity	Resource Inequity	Food is devalued (commodity) / food producers and eaters are disenfranchised and devalued
Main Actors	Volunteers / 'the poor' / private and faith sector	Private donors / public programs / children / education / agriculture	Public health / people with diet related and chronic disease	Labor / food chain workers / farmers / working poor	BIPOC / urban agriculture / youth / values-based markets	Social movements / eaters / food producers
Strategy for Change	Respond and react	Build and develop	Fix and maintain	Redevelop and reform	Educate and liberate	Dismantle and transform
Results / Outcome	Food access / hunger reduction / relieve moral safety valve	Pounds of food / number of people / \$\$ spent	Nutritious food / health outcomes	Living wages / fair market value / affordable food	Racial equity / land availability / fair market value	People who produce, distribute and consume food also control the mechanisms and policies of food production and distribution

Moving along from left to right, see how different problems affect who is involved, and what the strategies for change are. Changing the way we see the problem - the narratives we use for what the issue is - means we need to change the actors and strategy, which is likely to change the outcome.

Review the matrix and discuss: What does a shift from one point to another look like?

- (1) Desired goals/what's the problem/what are we trying to solve for
- (2) Main actors/who are the main actors/entities involved
- (3) Theory of or strategy for Change/ what needs to happen to bring about the change in the problem
- (4) Outcomes and results/ what are the indicators that our response is working

Where are we on the continuum?

For discussion

- What is the problem you're trying to address in your work?
- Who are the main people involved in this work?
- What strategies are you using for this?
- How is that affecting your results / outcomes?

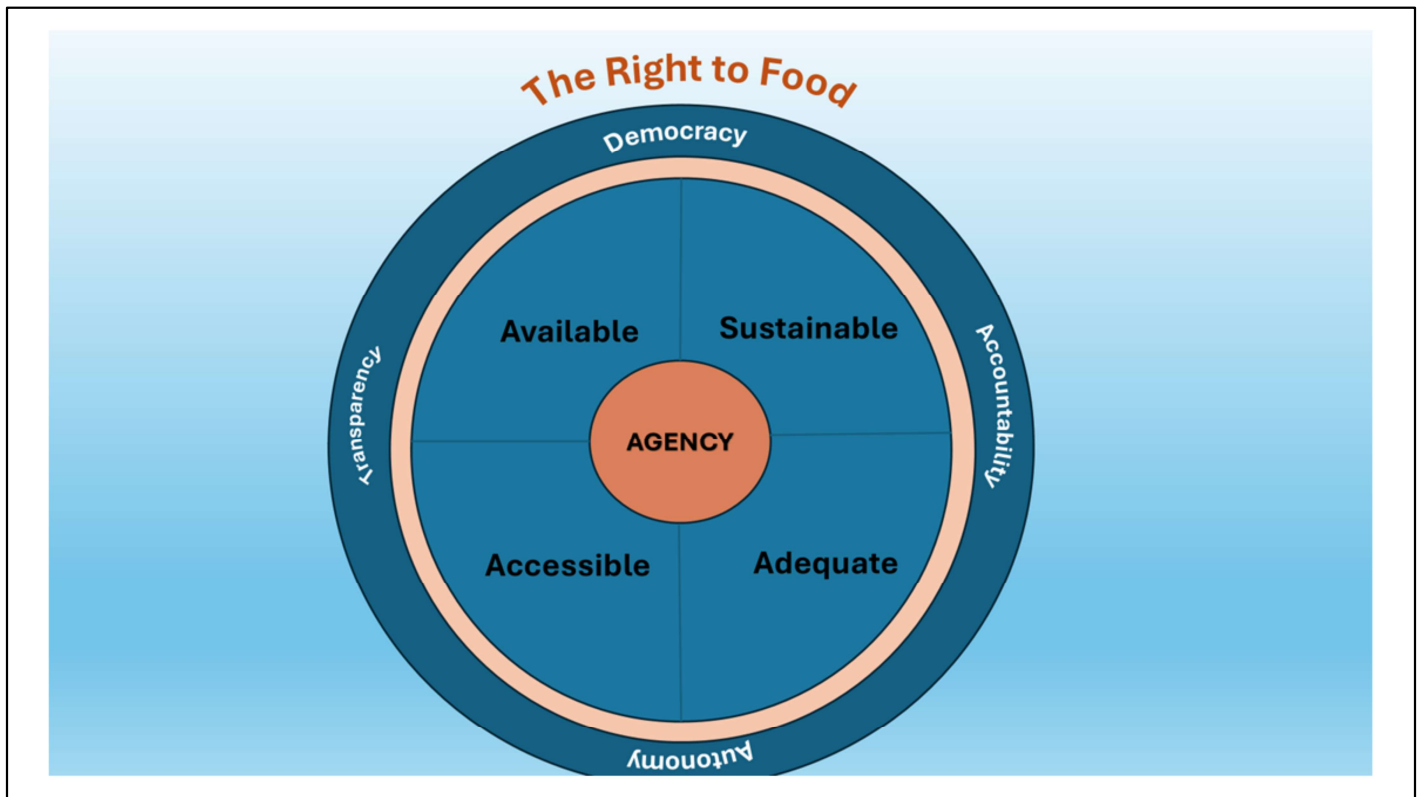
Vision

The purpose of our food system is to nourish people and the planet by producing food, health and well-being for everyone, now and in the future. – National Right to Food Community of Practice

“Right to adequate food is realized when [everyone], alone or in community with others, has physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement.” - United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment 12

Let's start with a shared assumption of values and vision: The purpose of our food system should be to produce food, health, and well-being. We see the Right to Food as a Tool for helping us move along the continuum of food systems change. The way we understand the Right to Food is rooted in the United National Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which the United States has signed but not ratified.

https://treaties.un.org/pages/viewdetails.aspx?src=treaty&mtmsg_no=iv-3&chapter=4



The Right to Food can be understood as the right to be free from hunger AND the right to have sustainable access to food through dignified means and in a quality and quantity that is sufficient to satisfy one's dietary and cultural needs. It is not either/or, it is both/and. The Right to Food is a holistic and the following four conditions are necessary and interconnected aspects of a food system that is rooted in human rights. To progressively realize the right to food, we must begin to transform the food systems such that:

- **Food is Available**
 - For purchase at stores or markets, or by growing, harvesting or producing food for yourself, family or community
 - This means: governments need to make sure policies and practices support people to access adequate food in their areas
 - For example, by building and maintaining good roads and transport routes
 - Supporting conditions for farmers, fishers and food producers to thrive

- **Food is Accessible**
 - Physically and economically
 - This means: people should have good enough incomes and working conditions, wages and assistance from government so that they can afford adequate food with dignity and choice.
 - It also means that food should be accessible to everyone, regardless of where they live or any physical barriers they may face

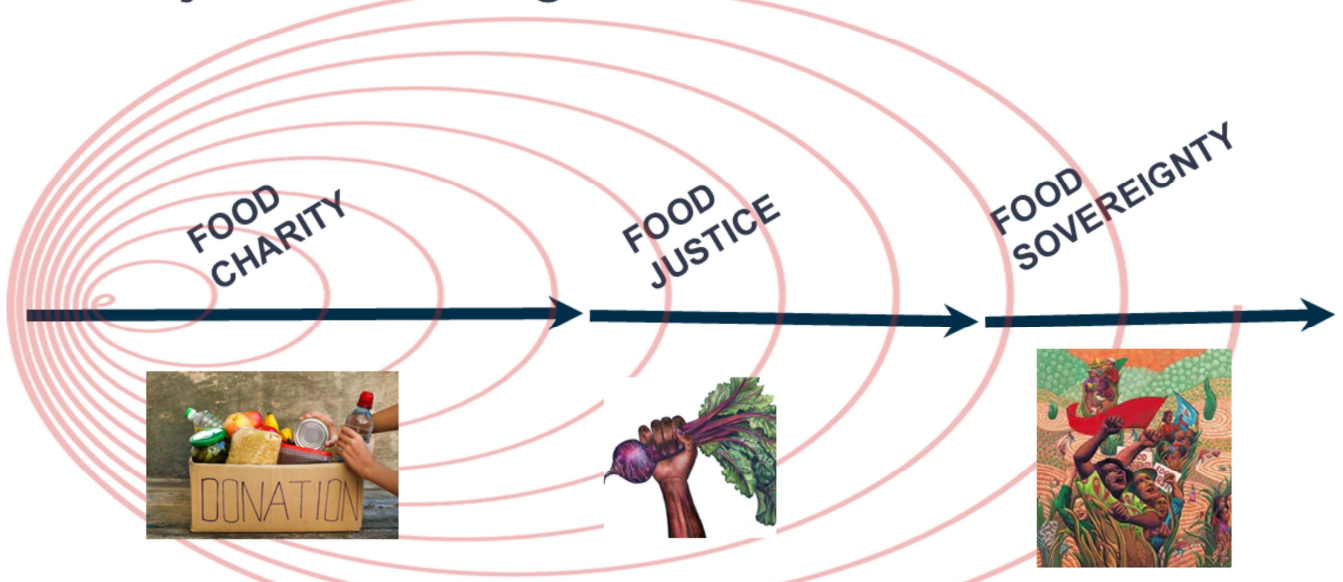
- **Food is Adequate**
 - Safe - free from harmful substances
 - Nutritious - for every stage of life
 - Culturally and socially appropriate - in line with our cultures and accessible in ways that are socially accepted in a particular culture
 - This means: the type of food we're talking about is food that supports our wellbeing - meets our needs physically, emotionally and culturally

- **Food is Sustainable**
 - Available, accessible and adequate for present and future generations
 - Food system should be designed in a way that is safe for the planet now and in the future
 - This means our current food production needs cannot outweigh those of the future

Underpinning values of human rights are in the outside circle, and at the center is Agency or Participation or Self-Determination.

- **Agency / Self determination** : Right we all have to be involved in deciding what the food system looks like, and who it benefits

Food Systems Change ...



Right to Food: Tool for Moving Along the Continuum...

We see the Right to Food as a Tool for helping us move along the continuum of food systems change.

Right to Food

Policies and laws lack coordination and intersectionality across food, agriculture, health, labor, and the environment

Problem

Social movements / people as rights holders / governments as duty bearers

Actors

Build anew and transform

Strategy

Food is available, accessible, adequate, sustainable and self-determined for all people at all times.

Outcomes

The Right to Food is a call to action and a legal framework for coordinated reform in food, agriculture, health, labor, and the environment. Looking through the lens of the Right to Food and using the Food Systems Continuum Tool, we identify the following:

Problem we are trying to solve for: Policies and laws lack coordination and intersectionality across food, agriculture, health, labor, and the environment

Actors involved in solving the problem: Social movements / people as rights holders / governments as duty bearers

Strategy for/Theory of Change: Build anew and transform

Outcomes we will see: Food is available, accessible, adequate, sustainable and self-determined for all people at all times.

Where are we on the timeline towards realizing the right to food?

Activity

Read each statement below and decide where they belong:

In my community/city/state...

- "This could be possible in the next..."
 - 1 year, 3 years, 5 years
- "This is not possible"

Choose 1-2 examples and discuss:

- What barriers / obstacles are preventing this from happening?
- If this is the outcome / result we are looking for, do we need to change...
 - The way we see the problem? Is it the actors involved? Is it the strategy we're using?

STATEMENTS:

People should be able to access food that meets their nutritional needs.

People should have access to food and ways of eating that are in line with their culture.

There should be well-maintained roads, production sites, warehouses, stores and markets throughout the country.

Food sold in markets and stores should be safe to consume.

Incomes (money from having a job and assistance from the government) should be high enough that everyone can afford the food they need.

People should be able to access the food they need close to home.

People should be able to grow, produce or source their own food from the natural environment, if they choose.

Priorities and Opportunities

Key questions to consider:

- Do decision makers in your community/state already support the right to food?
- What would be different if your community/state supported the right to food?
- Who needs to be involved in making these changes?

What are some of the strategies we can amplify, support and advocate for that will support a shift towards food justice, food as a human right and food sovereignty?

Actions we can all take

Take 2 mins to think about the Food Systems Continuum tool. Write down one action or change you plan to make.

Questions:

- What are some next steps you could take in your own work?
- What is one action or change you could take away from today?

Suggestion: Share your plan with a colleague - agree how to follow up in 6 months.

Building a Right to Food Community of Practice



We host spaces for shared learning and provide support and capacity building to help inform and coordinate food and farm policy and advocacy.

We are developing and implementing tools and campaigns for political education, narrative change and advocacy across our cities, towns, and states.

Our work is grounded in a human rights framework that seeks to transform the food system by addressing the root causes of hunger at the intersection of racial, housing, climate, land, and economic justice.

Become a member: <https://www.righttofoodus.org/participate-form>

Our members are organizing impacted communities and allies to transform the food system by framing food as a human right. This is a departure from the well-resourced and siloed efforts of private charity and those advocating for a larger slice of the inadequate social security pie. Americans have a track record in the U.S. of organizing around our civil and political rights but not our social, cultural, and economic rights. Our coalition is creating the building blocks for a broad-based social movement where grassroots power strengthens civil society, and solutions emerge to transform unjust institutions and systems. Our approach is multi-sectoral, bridges food and agriculture, income and public health, and puts people and planet first. We are not simply training or mobilizing advocates; rather, we aim to win hearts and minds and fundamentally change the food system to one that produces food, health, and well-being, while protecting the planet.

Together with our members, the NRTF CoP is developing tools for political education, narrative change and advocacy rooted in a human rights framework that addresses the root causes of hunger at the intersection of racial, housing, climate, land, and economic justice. We are **organizing and building power** by weaving together right-to-food initiatives at state and local levels to facilitate shared learning among organizers towards a national movement for the Right to Food. We are **shifting the narrative** by challenging the idea that charity is an adequate solution to hunger and climate change, and instead, lifting up justice and human rights as the “true” solution. We are **learning globally** by establishing linkages with social movements, networks, research institutions and human rights organizations to learn about and adapt tactics and tools to further efforts to enshrine the right to adequate food and nutrition in U.S. law and policy, and to contribute to the global struggle for the right to adequate food and nutrition.



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