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Executive Summary

Personal Background

My name is Alysia Jimenez and I was born and raised in Colorado. I studied Political Science and Philosophy and minored in Pre-Law at the University of Colorado. I was drawn to The Farmlink Project because I am passionate about how food relates to social justice and community engagement. During phase two, I mainly worked at the San Diego Food Bank where I helped build the Local Purchasing Initiative, assisted in several distribution events, and learned from industry experts. I also had the opportunity to work in Sonoma with a gleaning organization, Farm to Pantry. At Farm to Pantry I worked alongside producers who were feeding their community and I delivered fresh produce to wrap-around service organizations that support the holistic needs of recipients. This summer has been an immersion in understanding local food systems and has consequently been influential in my phase three research and project design.

Problem Statement

The U.S food system is faulty and does not sufficiently feed people because the distribution network is based on a national globalized structure that is built to benefit large industrial producers. Resource concentration has left the U.S. dependent on unstable oligopolic trade markets that are characteristically vulnerable to supply disruptions and continues to contribute to increased food insecurity in traditionally vulnerable communities.

Ex. Covid-19 exacerbated the pre-existing food insecurity in Native American communities by an estimated average of 20%-30%, emphasizing how underserved communities in the U.S are the most vulnerable to instabilities in the larger food system. During this time Tribal governments and Native producers were able to expand their work and provide food assistance to their
communities; which demonstrates how concentrating on supporting localized systems empowers communities and helps them own their resources and gain access to markets.

**Mission Statement**

Establish a stable food system that is equitable and sustainable by committing to community development projects and local empowerment initiatives.

**Solution Statement**

We need to create secure locally based systems that contribute to community empowerment and food sovereignty. In order to do so, we need to build an accessible partnership platform guide and demonstrate a theory of change that can educate communities, policymakers, and non-profit stakeholders the importance of expanding community ownership.

- Basic research and demonstrative points of action:
  - Highlight industry structure
  - Create policy guide
  - Outline theory of change
  - Establish partnerships (either through logic model or implementation)

**Introduction**

Having used food assistance programs and being from an immigrant labor background, I have gained a sincere appreciation for the effort it takes to navigate through food assistance and donation programs and understand how the current food system relies on exploited labor. I am deeply interested in
addressing the issues around food insecurity (like social and economic inequalities). Through Farmlink, I have tried to build industry knowledge and field research that focuses on building community and recipient ownership. My background has influenced my interest in learning how to establish initiatives and policies that encourage food sovereignty and individual agency. Throughout my personal experiences and my time as a FIELD Fellow I have come to realize that communities and individuals rarely have choice and stakeholdership within the food system; and that the industries and nonprofit partners who control food resources have a responsibility to create permanent change in the accessibility of food so that we do not continue systemic inequities.

Phase Two Description

Throughout phase two, it was important to me to develop a summer immersion experience that explored how creative hunger fighting solutions can have a positive impact on a multitude of issues (up-to and including: labor exploitation, recipient nutrition, sustainability, and economic development). My internships with both my industry partners focused on how organizations can better connect with local farmers in ways that support regional agricultural economies; and how nonprofit partners can contribute to community development through programs and policy advocacy. Phase two showed how Farmlink and other organizations can disrupt the traditional food system by increasing agricultural growth opportunities and community independence.

My immersion experience was unique in that I worked with two different organizations throughout Southern and Northern California. While at the San Diego Food Bank, I assisted several in distribution events, worked with a welcoming team of nonprofit experts, and helped develop a Local Purchasing Initiative. I also worked at a gleaning organization called Farm to Pantry, where I distributed food to service organizations across Sonoma county by
working alongside local farmers. It is through these two summer experiences that I’ve come to realize the potential of hyper-localized system solutions. It was incredible to see industry partners challenging traditional methods of food assistance by trying to support sustainable and local farms while fostering choice and agency for recipients.

While in San Diego and Sonoma, I tried to do informal and in-person asset mapping by visiting several markets throughout both counties, going grocery shopping in different neighborhoods, and exploring other volunteer opportunities. My goal in creating an immersive asset map experience was to explore different food resource options throughout city neighborhoods. This allowed me to learn more about what food accessibility looked like in different communities and to have a more in-depth summer immersion experience.
General Overview of Problem

The sweeping and broad issue that the following needs assessment works

within is that the national food
system is fundamentally designed to be inadequate and to exacerbate social inequalities. Food nonprofits and recovery organizations have built their mission around being a secondary (and oftentimes reactionary) industry to the primary food system; meaning that food nonprofits are built within the confines of the inequities of the pre-existing food distribution landscape. Food nonprofits and federal commodity programs do the important and necessary work of meeting the immediate needs of food insecurity; yet they have been unable to create permanent systemic change in the accessibility of food. Meanwhile, larger agricultural oligopolies continue to capture the majority of resources available; a list of which includes: an unfair share of the market, government grant and subsidy awardment, as well as technological and natural resources. The needs assessment’s goal is to analyze how we might be able to impact the agricultural and nonprofit industrial system in a way that helps establish an equitable food system that better serves people and creates consumer agency. If our shared goal is to create more equitable and functional food distribution practices than the solution is to invest in localized food systems that stabilize the agricultural system, promote principles of food sovereignty, and develop community growth opportunities (i.e. health, education, employment).

**Needs Assessment**

The disparity between the production and distribution of food across the U.S. has intentionally created a fragile and faulty agricultural system that increasingly contributes to food insecurity. The food system is designed to benefit large scale producers and suppliers (who are the biggest contributors to climate change, waste, labor exploitation, and resource hoarding) while also underserving urban and rural communities: the industry lacks local ownership and network investments.
The assessment outlines how organizations and institutions can pursue permanent and impactful change within the view of a large system context. Ultimately, the assessment focuses on how local initiatives have the potential to empower communities and create a more secure agricultural network.

Goals

Goal Statement: Create a partner policy guide that promotes a more sustainable food system that invests in communities that have been historically vulnerable to economic and environmental instability by establishing resource ownership and better economic initiatives.

This needs assessment aims to establish a disseminative policy guide and to create an applicable theory of change. In order to create stable and equitable food systems, distribution chains must be rooted in local food production and community health. Fundamentally, this assessment needs to explain how food nonprofit programs can connect to communities and producers in a way that contributes to food sovereignty principles. Community empowerment and food sovereignty are one of the same, and in order to create systemic change in food insecurity then we need to invest in these principles. The policy guide and subsequent theory of change will illustrate two key solutions in locally based systems: 1) regional resource ownership and 2) increased economic market access. The policy guide will be designed to help local actors, policymakers, and non-profit stakeholders invest in partnerships and practices that support community ownership, while the theory of change will demonstrate how the shift in system priorities encouraged in the policy guide will contribute to permanent food solutions.

The mission statements issued by nonprofits often state that their goal is to fight hunger and/or to put themselves out of business (meaning that there
would be no need for food assistance programs) and if that is true then the nonprofit community has a responsibility to create lasting change that establishes permanent solutions. It is important that communities and end recipients have proper stakeholdership in making resource decisions and in measuring success. In order to achieve food equity and to be impactful across the national food system then we must contribute to community empowerment. However; it is important to point out that the majority of U.S. food resources are siloed by large industrial agricultural companies and nonprofit organizations and it is difficult to challenge a system that supports these vested (well-intentioned or otherwise) interest groups.

Foundational Research

The data needed to address the issues brought up in the initial problem statement should include a broad demonstration of trends in the agricultural industry and a breakdown of food insecurity statistics; this will create economic and social cross analysis needed for the solution oriented project design. Research for this needs assessment focused on using industry reports and statistical data analytics.

Production/distribution industries and federal and state programs house four main interactive structures within the larger food system. The four main structures are:

1) Agriculture
2) Economy
3) Society/Civics
4) Environment

Inside these four main sectors there are three significant factors that are contributing to faults in the existing food system.
I. Industry consolidation

II. Climate change

III. Increased food insecurity

The three listed factors act as signifiers for the health of national food distribution. The layout of the U.S food system demonstrates the social, physical, and economic complexities within larger resource structures.

In tracking trends within industry consolidation, climate change, and increased rates of food insecurity an image of a weakening national food system emerges.

Statistics show that 85% of the beef packing market is controlled by four firms, over 90% of soda production is held by three companies, and that four grocery
retailers control 65% of the retail market. Furthermore, large scale family and industrial farms account for 5% of farms and 59.4% of production while small-scale family farms account for 89% of U.S farms and only 20.4% of production. These trends demonstrate widespread industry consolidation and serve as proof that the majority of agricultural production and distribution resources are held by few stakeholders. Consolidation means that few industry actors can contrail resource allocation and create market barriers.

Additionally, climate change can create disruptions in growing periods and will influence what, when, and how much we grow creating a shift in agricultural productivity. Extreme weather patterns can also erode soil and
deplete it of its nutrients, contribute to agricultural land loss, and create contaminated water runoff.

Most significantly however, rates of food insecurity continue to rise over the past few years. In 2019 an estimated 35 million people were food insecure while an estimated 45 million people experienced food insecurity in 2020. Globally however, there were 1.3 billion food insecure people in 2022 which is a 10% increase of 118.7 million people in 2021.

The three listed industry indicators above reflect a failing food system. And in response an array of nonprofits, state and federal agencies, and community organizations are all working to resolve the disparities created by our system. There are ~60,500 emergency food providers and numerous federal food assistance programs built to aid those experiencing hunger and food insecurity. During this summer I got to intern at one of the country's largest independent food banks, and had the opportunity to learn from an industry expert about the challenges and innovations of our hunger response services.

Kayla Thompson is the Procurement Manager at the San Diego Food Bank and she has industry knowledge on the food supply chain and nonprofit distribution systems. Within the nonprofit industry there is a multi-tier structure that outlines what kind of work each organization does. Kayla described to me how federal commodity programs and government purchasing agreements have a huge impact on the food banks, and that they determine what work food banks are capable of doing. On the food bank level, Feeding America is the largest nonprofit influencer in the industry, and they have long reaching relationships and research resources that smaller and local level organizations can utilize. Additionally state political and nonprofit coalitions/associations provide a resource network and platform for community voices.

In her experiences, the impact of food nonprofit work has been varied. She told me that historically, federal commodity programs have been culturally
insensitive and unhealthy, but have been the most effective in getting the most amount of people fed. And while large system response organizations tend to hold the most amount of funding, donations, and influence in the nonprofit space they are also better positioned to be advocates and supporters for smaller nonprofits.

Overall, she feels that there has been a positive change and movement in food nonprofit services, in that there is a federal and community interest in bolstering local economies. For her, food banks are investing more in better purchasing practices and reevaluating their long-term service goals.

The research and systems point of view provided by Kayla indicate the growing need for change and the nonprofit sector’s interest to invest in creative and permanent solutions.

**Solution Proposal**

While our current food system is built to be unsustainable and fragile, our national interest in long-term and equitable solutions have increased. Organizations and institutions are challenging traditional service methods and seeking ways to strengthen communities and economic independence for recipients and local producers. This summer I have seen nonprofits, state and federal governments, and community leaders work together to build better localized food systems. It is through these summer experiences that I have come to realize the potential of hyper localized collaborations and it has completely guided my solution proposal and subsequent project design.

Through this fellowship I have created a Local Policy Guide; and the goal of the guide is to provide a platform that helps different kinds of organizations and institutions intentionally seek closer economic and service relationships with community stakeholders and consumers.
In building the Local Policy Guide I utilized a strategic goal-setting outline structure to formalize the methodological use of the policy guide.

1. Objective 1: Explain economic and social industry background context for project design.
   a. KR1: Use research to summarize key factors indicated in the food system problem statement.
   b. KR2: Provide demographics that outline industry structures and stakeholder interactions.
   c. KR3: Provide community case study.

2. Object 2: Build a local policy guide for nonprofit stakeholders, policy makers, and community organizers.
   a. KR1: Build policy one-pager and initiative goals.
   b. KR2: Identify logistics, partnerships, and growth opportunities.
   d. KR4: Work with a policy mentor to evaluate and improve the program.

   a. KR1: Identify model key features
      - Inputs, Actions/Processes, Outputs, Outcome, Impact.

4. Objective 3: Establish partnerships (either demonstrated through a logic model or through partner implementation)
   a. KR1: Industry partner outreach and identify community.
   b. KR2: Design shared goals and collaboration interests/opportunities.
      - Identify 1-3 possible partnerships.
   c. KR3: Build a program that actionizes local policy goals.
If institutions build intentional and effective partnerships they can support and facilitate community growth and create a shift in what the food industry values. The current food system is built to protect large scale producers (who are oftentimes the biggest contributors to food waste, climate change, and unfair labor practices) and in doing this, the nationwide food structure exacerbates social inequities. Allowing the food system to prioritize regional production and distribution gives agricultural networks the opportunity to stabilize and empower agency. Stronger partnerships within food production would allow recipients to be less reliant on food assistance and for consumers to be more independent from the fragility of the current food industry. Furthermore, partnerships should be established to support organizations that contribute to education/job training, equitable funds/technology/information sharing, and resource reallocation as these services aim to address the circumstances around food inequities. Community empowerment and food sovereignty are one of the same, and in order to create systemic change in food insecurity then vested stakeholders across public and private sectors must invest in these principles.
Results

While reviewing the impact of local food structures I read the “Reimagining Hunger Responses in Times of Crisis: Insight from Case Examples and a Survey of Native Communities’ Food Access During COVID-19” case study. The article is a collaborative research report that
was issued by the Native American Agriculture Fund, Food Research and Action Center, and the Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative. The report explains how Native Americans disproportionately lack access to food, and that COVID-19 amplified these pre-designed structural inequities. The report includes survey results from 34 states throughout the country from a wide range of Tribal communities and demonstrates how American Indian and Alaska Native communities experienced high rates of hunger and poverty throughout 2020. The report also highlights how Indian Country relied on Tribal governments, community organizations, and local farmers to provide food assistance throughout 2020; while at the same time federal grants from the USDA and The Native American Agriculture Fund (NAAF) helped fuel local purchasing initiatives. The report concludes that having a local and community lead food system would strengthen Native American communities and leave them less vulnerable to systemic food insecurity.

There are five key takeaways that not only describe the structural backdrop of food insecurity but also provides a positive trend in local system work.

1. 54% of respondents reported experiencing food insecurity during COVID-19.
2. In 2020 food insecurity for Native American households with children was 6% higher than food insecurity with households without children.
3. Pre-pandemic food insecurity in Native American communities ranged from 25%-61% while the national average for food insecurity was set at 11%-12%.
4. Across Native American communities traditional food sharing and trading increased from 29%-39%.
5. Home gardening, hunting, sharing/trading foods, fishing, and foraging/seed collating were the most used form of local procurement during the pandemic for Tribal communities.

Appendix D3. Organizations Respondents Received Food Assistance from Before and During COVID-19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Before COVID-19</th>
<th>During COVID-19</th>
<th>Percentage Change from Before to During COVID-19</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(March 2019 - March 2020)</td>
<td>(March 2020 - April 2021)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>number</td>
<td>percent</td>
<td>number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tribal Governments</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tribal-Led Organizations</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Farmers</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith Based Organizations</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Community Programs</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The collaborative report demonstrates the fragility of the food distribution industry. Optimistically however, the report highlights how federal organizations and grants can strengthen the stability of the agricultural industry by contributing to locally based solutions that empowers community stakeholders. This case study indicates how COVID-19 shifted how communities and governments view the U.S. food supply network and gives evidence to that fact that localized systems create food sovereignty for traditionally vulnerable communities.

The research and case study above both demonstrate the faults within the food system and also illustrate the potential of systems charged solutions. The industry research outlines three key factors that are contributing to increased food instability and indicates a need to change the agricultural infrastructure system. The case study meanwhile; demonstrates the impact of deteriorating food distribution on communities already experiencing disparate
rates of food insecurity. Importantly however; the case study is also an example of how shifting our regional and federal concentration to support localized systems can empower communities to better address their needs and creates opportunities for regionally based production.

From the research above we can establish a policy guide that helps stakeholders intentionally invest in better food practices that allows organizations to contribute to an overall theory of change. The local policy guide is to encourage creative and diverse collaborations that will allow partners to identify the potential need for capacity adjustments and will subsequently empower others to be better service organizations in a noncompete manner. In improving locally based initiatives each organization and/or institution should seek to increase their resource, information, and funds sharing. Adopting a local policy initiative allows organizations to create communal action through strategic communication and cooperation.

Through the policy guide I have been able to help the University of Colorado Colorado Springs farm establish newer community programs and to connect the farm to Farmlink’s resource network. The University farm will provide an early education garden plot to elementary school students to not only introduce them to gardening but to teach them about sustainable agricultural practices. I have introduced the campus farm to Farmlink and I am creating the foundation to help Farmlink invest in local and educational partnerships. This project would not only be a demonstrative proof of concept for the Local Policy Guide’s goals but would also help Farmlink be a sponsor for a new generation of farmers and to support sustainable agricultural development. Additionally, I have built and maintained relationships with local system change actors not only through my immersion experience but also in my home-town community. These relationships have introduced me to creative solutions and to create a network of local changing making organizations.
The Local Policy Guide is fundamentally built to be applicable to the diverse work of hunger relief efforts. The case study demonstrates the potential that support networks and resource sharing can have for community development.

Conclusion

Throughout research and project design the greatest challenge has been impact metrics. The ability to accurately measure success for socially based initiatives is a challenge faced across the board in hunger-relief efforts. In some instances it is easier to track and account for the value of food system work by tracking the economic worth of federal commodities and food distribution. However, in larger system initiatives the amount and diversity of factors make it nearly impossible to evaluate the effect of system changes.

Despite this difficulty the chance to establish a stronger and more equitable food system should still be pursued. Long term and permanent success is seeing a decrease in the need for food assistance programs and a growth in local agricultural practices. The need to see a transformation in our national food system is increasingly important, and the hope is that the Local Policy Guide is a reflection of new innovations in the food space.

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