

Community Food Security and Florida Cooperative Extension Service¹

A.E. Lutz, N.T. Place and M.E. Swisher²

Introduction

The modern food system in the United States is a complex, internationally connected network of industries and markets that is continuously changing and growing to meet the needs of its consumers. Cooperative Extension Service educational programs work to meet the needs of both producers and consumers in food systems in the United States and around the world. Extension is constantly evolving, adapting, and improving its educational programs so that clientele are empowered to address their issues or problems. The United States Department of Agriculture, the federal partner of extension, recognized a specific need in the field of agriculture and food systems by adding the Community Food Security Act to the 1996 Farm Bill. The purpose of this paper is to define community food security and identify its importance for extension agents in Florida.

Community Food Security

Community food security is defined as “a situation in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice” (Hamm & Bellows, 2003, p. 37). There are seven concepts that are represented in this definition of community food security: food access, food safety, nutrition, sustainable agriculture, local food systems, culturally acceptable food, and social justice.

Community Food Security and Extension

Extension educators have an important role in working with their communities to build an effective food system through educational programming and stakeholder interaction. The concept of community food security deals with many aspects of the food system and with community involvement in the food system. Florida Cooperative Extension Service works with both the 11 National Focus Areas of USDA-CSREES and with the statewide goals for

-
1. This document is AEC 384, one of a series of the Agricultural Education and Communication Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Original publication date May 2007. Reviewed July 2010. Visit the EDIS Web Site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.
 2. A. E. Lutz, coordinator, Educational/Training Programs, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication; N. T. Place, associate professor, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication; M. E. Swisher, Associate Professor, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, 32611-0150.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function with non-discrimination with respect to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions or affiliations. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A. & M. University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating. Millie Ferrer-Chancy, Interim Dean

Florida for 2004-2007. Each of these statewide goals has an underlying focus area team. There are areas of association between the seven main concepts of community food security and Cooperative Extensions concentrations. Many of extensions focus areas, on both the national and state level, correspond with the seven concepts of community food security. Table 1 below illustrates the relationships between the community food security concepts in the first column, the national focus areas in the second column, and Florida's statewide goals and focus teams in the third column.

Implications for Extension

Community food security is an issue of concern in the United States. Extension services across the county are already engaged in addressing community food security issues. Based on the relationship between community food security and Florida Extensions goals, this paper suggests that agents explore two possibilities for improving community food security-based programs: inter-departmental or inter-organizational collaborations, and assessments for community food security needs.

Collaborations

The opportunity to build collaborations and inter-organizational partnerships between extension and other community food security organizations in the community is not only available, it is relevant and can help Florida Extension meet the needs and interests of its extension agents and its clientele. Florida Extension's responsibility is to allot resources and allow for opportunities so that extension agents can most effectively address clientele needs. Collaborations with outside nonprofit or other types of community organizations can be an excellent resource for addressing community issues, specifically in a community food security context.

There are many organizations in Florida that work to address community food security issues and community development. Farmers markets, food banks, community gardens, and educational outreach organizations are just a few examples. Extension educators also work toward community development, citizen empowerment and education for community

members so they can make informed decisions. Holland (2004) suggests that an integration of sustainability projects with community development efforts can facilitate both community participation and citizen empowerment. In addition, the Community Food Security Initiative of 1999 encourages collaborations between government and nonprofit organizations (Thomson, et al., 2004).

Florida Extension should explore the possibilities for partnerships with local and community organizations in order to assist extension agents in effectively addressing community food security issues. In doing so, Florida Extension can function not only to address individual issues, but also to improve the condition of the community in which it serves. Hancock (2001) suggests that collaborations on projects that focus on sustainability and ecology, such as community gardens would work to strengthen communities, both socially and environmentally. In this way, partnerships with Florida Extension could work not only to address community food security issues, but also to strengthen economies, ecologies, and social capital in their counties.

Needs Assessments

Needs assessments are one of the tools extension agents use to determine the needs, issues, and concerns within their counties and communities. Extension agents in Florida could conduct needs assessments in their communities to gain a better understanding of what community food security needs their clientele have. Needs assessments could help extension agents direct community food security programming toward community members that need it the most. Extension educators must not only be aware of the needs of their clientele, but must also be aware of their culture and background. In this way, a needs assessment would assist extension agents in utilizing their time and programming resources in the most effective way possible.

Needs assessments would allow extension agents to examine community food security in a geographical community or neighborhood. The agents would need to examine each of the seven components of community food security.

For example, agents would need to find out if community members were having a hard time getting to the grocery store, if there was a problem with spoiled or improperly cooked food in the community, if people were having a hard time getting culturally acceptable foods, or if workers in the food system were being treated properly by their employers.

Agents can conduct community food security needs assessments in their counties through focus groups, community forums, surveys, and listening sessions. These types of interactions with community clientele can also help agents improve existing educational programs by gaining a better understanding of clients needs and issues. Agents can learn about different groups in an area or county by asking questions and getting immediate feedback on issues clientele are facing.

Conclusion

Florida Extension agents routinely deal with issues that pertain to the concept of community food security. The purpose of this paper was to establish the strong links between Florida Extension's goals and the elements of community food security. Based on these links, extension agents can improve existing efforts to meet clienteles community food security needs two ways. The first way is to collaborate with other departments or organizations that are addressing similar issues within the community. These collaborations can enable extension agents to design more effective educational programs, or reach new or nontraditional clientele. The second way is to conduct community food security-focused needs assessments. These assessments would be designed to specifically target a communities food needs. These two methods are just two ways in which Florida Extension agents can help to reach Florida Extension goals and serve their communities in the most effective way possible.

References

Hamm, M. W., & Bellows, A. C. (2003). Community food security and nutrition educators. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 35(1), 37–43.

Hancock, T. (2001). People, partnerships and human progress: Building community capital. *Health Promotion International*, 16(3), 275–280.

Holland, L. (2004). Diversity and connections in community gardens: A contribution to local sustainability. *Local Environment*, 9(3), 285–305.

Thomson, J. S., Radhakrishna, R. B., & Inciong, L. (2004, May). *Extension educators perspectives on local food system issues: Implications for extension research and programming*. Paper presented at the 31st National Agriculture Education Research Conference, St. Louis, MO.

Table 1. Corresponding community food security concepts and extension focus areas.

CFS Key Concept	USDA-CSREES National Focus Area and Relevant Focus Area Concepts	Florida Statewide Goals and Focus Area Teams
Food Access	<i>Food Nutrition and Health</i> Hunger and food security	Goal 5: To Assist Individuals and Families with Achieving Economic Well-Being and Life Quality Goal 1: To Enhance and Maintain Agricultural and Food Systems FT* 1b: Awareness of agriculture's importance to an economy that ranges from local to global
Food Safety	<i>Food Nutrition and Health</i> Food safety	Goal 1: To Enhance and Maintain Agricultural and Food Systems FT 1c: Processing, distribution, safety and security of food systems
Nutrition	<i>Food Nutrition and Health</i> Nutrition Obesity/healthy weight	Goal 5: To Assist Individuals and Families in Achieving Economic Well-Being and Life Quality FT 5b: Nutrition, food safety, and health
Sustainable Agriculture (food production)	<i>Agricultural Systems</i> Organic agriculture Small farms Sustainable agriculture Natural Resources and Environment Environmental and resource economics Sustainable development	Goal 1: To Enhance and Maintain Agricultural and Food Systems FT 1b: Awareness of agriculture's importance to an economy that ranges from local to global Goal 2: To Maintain and Enhance Florida's Environment FT 2a: Water resources FT 2c: Environmental Education
Local Food Systems (community food systems)	<i>Economics and Commerce</i> Public policy Small and home based businesses <i>Family, Youth & Communities</i> Rural and community development	Goal 5: To Assist Individuals and Families Achieve Economic Well-Being and Life Quality Goal 6: Healthy Communities
Culturally Acceptable Food	<i>Food Nutrition and Health</i> Hunger and food security	Goal 5: To Assist Individuals and Families Achieve Economic Well-Being and Life Quality FT 5c: Nutrition, food safety, and health Goal 1: To Enhance and Maintain Agricultural and Food Systems FT 1c: Processing, distribution, safety and security of food systems
Social Justice	None	None
*FT=focus area team, national focus areas are in italics		