

BUILDING THE CASE FOR
**RACIAL EQUITY IN THE
FOOD SYSTEM**



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We all want a healthy food system where our children’s bellies are full, where we can access and afford fresh, nutrient-rich foods, and where people who work along the food chain from the field to the kitchen can live sustainable and healthy lives. We all want a food system that is fair, sustainable, and racially equitable and we see glimpses of this happening every day:

- Residents of Detroit are transforming vacant and blighted land into urban farms to grow fresh and healthy foods for their communities, building economic opportunities for those seeking work;
- Farmers, universities, hospitals, and healthy food advocates are working across states like North Carolina and regions like Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to build strong local-to-regional food hubs connecting consumers to farmers, keeping local farmers in business, and keeping kids healthy;
- Farmworkers from New Jersey to Florida are working together on a domestic fair trade certification program that guarantees safe and healthy working conditions and fair wages.

Unfortunately, these glimpses are overshadowed by our broken food system, in which many of us lose, particularly communities of color:

- Nearly 16 million children often go to bed hungry.¹ That’s one in six White children, one in four Latino children, and one in three Black children who experience what is known as “food insecurity;”²
- Over 30 million Americans live in places that lack access to healthy foods. This includes over 8% of rural families who live 10 miles or more from a grocery store – a concern highest among Native American populations in the West.³ In urban areas, the disparity continues for low-income families, with low-income families of color much less likely to have access to healthy food;⁴
- One in six Americans work somewhere in the food system, from the farm to the kitchen. Far too many take home poverty-level wages, with women, Blacks, and Latinos most likely to earn minimum or sub-minimum wages, some as low as \$2.13 an hour.

This food system works for some, but fails too many of us. Yet, we already have a glimpse of the possibility of a just and healthy food system. To get there, we must use a critical race lens to diagnose what is wrong with our current system, assess entry points for change, and determine ways that we can work together to build a better system for all of us. This report shares an analysis of what it means to build a racially equitable food system – from field to farm to fork – and lays out steps toward achieving that goal. In this report, we:

Describe how policies impact racial equity in the food system. Through the stories of two children, Brenna and Johnny, this report walks us through the structural race analysis along the food chain, highlighting how key policies shape opportunities for children, farmers, and laborers. We share how:

- *Housing and school policies* impact children’s opportunities to access healthy foods, especially urban children of color;

¹ Feeding America <http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/hunger-facts/child-hunger-facts.aspx>

² *Ibid.*

³ Bell, Judith, et al. 2013. *Access to Healthy Food and Why it Matters*. PolicyLink and the Food Trust. http://thefoodtrust.org/uploads/media_items/access-to-healthy-food.original.pdf

⁴ *Ibid.*

- *Land policies and institutional discrimination* have led to historically high rates of land loss for farmers, particularly Blacks and Native Americans, and people living in rural areas;
- *Farm Bill policies and vertical integration in the food industry* favor the production and distribution of unhealthy foods over healthy foods;
- *Social Security and wage policies* have set back advancement for laborers across the food chain, especially women, immigrants and people of color.

Identify potential policy solutions and strategic opportunities to create a more racially equitable food system. Building on our analysis, we identify policy and strategy entry points that can lead to a more sustainable and racially equitable food system from long-range efforts to immediate-term solutions. For example, we can:

- *Surface opportunities to craft broad, intersectional policy solutions.* The challenges we face are not singular and therefore require change on multiple levels across many different sectors. We must identify strategic entry points for multiple issues. Working simultaneously to address these is essential to longer term, transformational shifts;
- *Forge partnerships across urban and rural communities.* We must build power for more transformative change, such as leveraging government and institutional food purchasing practices to support production and distribution of healthy foods and to create new job opportunities for residents of these areas;
- *Support indigenous and community leadership through small business financing and community capacity building.* We must build on existing creative and innovative work happening in communities and ensure that work is sustained and led by those who are most impacted by our broken food system;
- *Advocate for labor rights and a more balanced ownership of the food system.* We must change wage policies to reflect true living costs, support community projects and participatory action research where the system fails to meet demand and need, and surface community land trust options;
- *Invest in immediate solutions in our communities, schools, and farms.* We must promote better land-use ordinances to support urban agriculture; improve access, affordability of, and transit to healthy foods; effectively implement the Affordable Care Act's community benefit requirement; increase reimbursement rates and provide better kitchen infrastructure to cook and process healthy foods on-site; and shift agricultural investments away from unhealthy foods to local farmers producing the healthy foods we need like fruits and vegetables.

Offer tools and resources to guide the creation of racially equitable solutions. Lastly, this report includes appendices to help readers apply the structural racial equity analysis to their own work.

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