Food safety approaches in community food security interventions

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Waterloo Region Food System Roundtable

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Outline

1. Objectives of community food security (CFS) interventions
2. CFS interventions in the context of the local food system
3. Food safety issues of CFS programs: examples in Waterloo Region and elsewhere
4. Discussion re ways forward: towards a productive community-CHI partnership
This widely-accepted definition of community food security goes beyond household food security and includes the context of the whole food system. However, it is focused on individual access to that food.

“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”

Local alternative food systems

... are a key part of community food security

“Collaborative efforts to build locally-based food economies that emphasize social health, environmentally sustainable practices, and economic strength through their food production and processing practices.”

- Public involvement is integral to the concept of local food systems

Lutz et al. 2007  http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/WC/WC06400.pdf

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To put community food security programs in context of the mainstream food system, we’ll start with a (simplified) overview of the whole supply chain.
A major source of data – talking to stakeholders in the food system, including health inspectors
Alternative small-scale enterprises by-pass or re-invent the conventional food supply chain to allow smaller-scale producers more fair profit.
See Foodlink Waterloo Region *Buy Local Buy Fresh* map  http://www.foodlink.ca/
This phenomenon has raised increased access to healthy food and farm viability, but also potential public food safety issues.
Several smaller farmers have improved their profit margins through on-farm processing, and small-scale processors have also grown in number, by-passing the regular distribution channels by selling directly to small-scale retail outlets.
This is a place where education and inspection are particularly important.
A third opportunity for local producers has been to sell directly to institutional buyers through longer-term contracts. Consumers here are people, young and old, whose daily consumption is in the public domain (hospitals, schools, daycares, meal programs, retirement homes). Here they can potentially benefit from healthier food, but also potential risks which must be minimized.
Local, small-scale food programs and enterprises
(c) Farm to institution

Produce
Meat
Dairy
Egg
Bread

Producers
processors
distributors
retailers
consumers

medium scale
medium scale

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Why the public interest in community food security programs and enterprises?

- Mainly, lack of trust in the conventional food system
  (food recalls, allergies, obesity, awareness of animal rights, social justice and environmental issues)

- Support for / trust in local farmers & producers

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Benefits of community food security programs and enterprises

✓ Healthier diets resulting from:
  - consumer awareness of the source and composition of their food
  - widespread urban food access to healthy food

✓ Support for the local food economy and viability of smaller farm & processing sector

✓ Environmental benefits of smaller-scale, more sustainable food production
Food safety problems with community food security programs & enterprises

Infractions of food safety regulations due to:

- Lack of knowledge
- Insufficient equipment and/or infrastructure – prohibitive cost
- Cutting corners to save money & time
- Belief that “farm fresh” is always better
- Attitude that “we’ve always done it this way”
**Issue:** Food & premises inspection is indisputably essential for public safety

**BUT**

- Instances of punitive, “policing” action sometimes occur

- **Result:** resentment, lack of trust in Public Health can become a barrier to local food related economic development and opportunities to improve health

- **Alternative solution:** take steps to develop rapport and positive interaction that respects the potential of small-scale food programs and enterprises, and can prevent infractions

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Five examples follow: some positive and some negative.
Example #1

Strategy: food safety education

Foodlink Waterloo Region

- Organized meetings between Mennonite farmers and processors and public health inspectors in local community where they felt more comfortable to ask questions and bring up issues
Example #2

Farm to school programs

Food Safety Recommendations for School Kitchens

- The Farm to School Salad Bar can improve the health of school children by providing locally grown, nutritious, safe, and culturally appropriate foods in schools.

- Farm to School Salad Bar coordinators are encouraged to consult with the local Health Protection office of their regional Health Authority, who have provided easy-to-understand salad bar kitchen food safety steps and guidelines.
  
  http://www.phabc.org/modules.php?name=Farmtoschool&pa=viewdoc&cid=16
Example #3

Case studies: Health inspectors curtailing operations because of potential food safety violations.

Q: How can this be prevented in the future?

- E.g. A small-scale rural (on-farm) canning kitchen, built according to specifications and inspected. Due to insufficient temperature practices and/or documentation, hundreds of jars of canned soup were ordered to be destroyed.

- E.g. A public soup kitchen that provided healthy meals for many low income and homeless people was required to source food from inspected facilities, but continued to accept individual food donations. After an inspection visit, PH inspectors ordered the food on the premises destroyed.
Example #4

The Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care
- Enable local food procurement of hospitals
  http://www.greenhealthcare.ca/projects/foods/project1

- Issue. Public institutions are not always aware of what to look for in terms of food safety qualifications of their local food sources.

- Contacts are sometimes made with operations that are not officially HACCP certified (cost is prohibitive) but that claim to follow all the HACCP procedures and are inspected.

- Funds can be requested for to help with equipment & infrastructure that enables food safety practices.

- Role of health inspectors here...?
Example #5

Issue: Common misunderstanding about the sale of eggs:
If direct farm sales are allowed, does that include farm stores?
Can they be advertised on the web?

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Role of inspectors to educate

- With community food security programs growing all over Canada, the education role of public health inspectors to educate is clear.

- Clear, lower-literacy written material is needed to make people “food safety literate”
  
  e.g. BC Centre for Disease Control 2009
  “Ensuring Food Safety: Writing your own food safety plan – the HACCP way: A Guide for Food Service Operators” (28 pages, centred around the top ten food handling practices that cause food poisoning, with a recipe example)

- Food handler training programs: free and offered in the community
Recent literature

Recent literature:


Research needed:

- How does scale of operations affect the spread of pathogens? Are large-scale or small-scale operations at higher risk?
Thank you!
Discussion

- What kind of food security interventions have you addressed in your work?
- What were the challenges?
- How have you responded?
- What do you need to feel more comfortable or effective?