



Reimagining Food Justice + Food Sovereignty

A Digital Toolkit Exploring Community Approaches to Food Activism and Advocacy

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introduction

The food justice movement is drawn in part from the environmental justice movement (EJM) of the early 1980s. EJM critiqued the elitism and whitewashing of mainstream environmentalism including its focus on wildlife and conservation while disregarding human communities experiencing environmental disparities (e.g. pollution and toxic waste proximity). The environmental justice movement extends to the environmental health, protection, and preservation of vulnerable communities especially when it comes to food.



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Food justice activism is centered on providing these communities with access to healthy food and ending systematic inequalities. Whereas the concept of food sovereignty was coined by the international peasant movement, La Via Campesina, in 1996. This international farmers' organization introduced this concept as people's right to define their own agricultural and food systems. Especially in consideration to health, sustainability, and cultural relevance.

Food sovereignty is used to empower communities to fight food injustices through grassroots activism and coalition building. Lastly, food justice recognizes how the food system is intertwined with the exploitation of marginalized communities and its connection with capitalist approaches to food production, distribution, and consumption.



On September 22, 1997, Black farmers protested across from the White House. The protest stemmed from allegations that the USDA denied black farmers equal access to farm loans and assistance. As a result, North Carolina farmer Timothy Pigford and 400 other black farmers filed the *Pigford v. Glickman* (Pigford I) class-action lawsuit against USDA in 1997. The USDA settled *Pigford I* in 1999. © USDA, Anson Eaglin.

definitions

food justice: noun

a multidisciplinary and grassroots perspective of the food system that views healthy, nutritious, and culturally competent foods as a human right while addressing the structural barriers and food insecurities to that right.

food sovereignty: noun

a food system where the people who produce the food are also in charge of the processes + policies involving its production, distribution, and consumption.

food security: noun

the ability to access enough food at all times in order to live a meaningful, active and healthy life.

food desert: noun

when a significant amount of low-income people of color are unable to access affordable healthy foods.

food apartheid: noun

when a community is denied equal access to nutritious foods through oppressive historical and institutionalized practices.

food swamp: noun

a geographic area with a high concentration of fast and junk food establishments.

grocery gap: noun

when there is limited access to grocery stores or healthy food retailers that provide low-cost fresh and nutritious foods.

IE's definition of food justice

Food justice means:

Acknowledging the intersections and influence of social factors such as race and class within the food system. In doing so, the food system can be understood as a problematic and exploitative institution that threatens humans and nonhumans' right to access healthy, affordable, and culturally rich foods without the threat of oppressive systems (i.e. capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, etc.)

In identifying that right there must also be a consideration for redistributing power when it comes to ownership over the land, the means of production, knowledge, recognition, technology, cultural traditions, distribution methods, etc. While reckoning with America's brutal history of colonialism, slavery, and xenophobia which has greatly impacted the development of today's food system and more.

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Food justice must be seen as an extension of the environmental justice movement in which marginalized communities have been systematically and actively denied the ability to fully participate and thrive within the environment.

From farm labor work to land disputes, to public policy, it must be reiterated how important it is to view food justice as a necessary approach to BIPOC liberation and freedom.

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historical context of food justice

The U.S. food system was built on the physical and economic exploitation of people of color (e.g. Indigenous people, African slaves, and Asian and Latin immigrant workers). Throughout history, racially motivated policies have sought to control these marginalized communities while fostering a culture of abuse. Here are two examples of food injustices within U.S History:

the stealing of indigenous lands

Since 1492, a large majority of U.S. farmland was stolen from Indigenous communities. Policies such as the Indian Removal Act of 1830, forcibly removed tens of thousands of Indigenous people from their ancestral lands. In an attempt to coerce Indigenous people into submission, the U.S Army supported efforts to exterminate the U.S. Buffalo which was a primary food source for tribes in the Great Plains. When the land was cleared, policies like the Homestead Act of 1862 were implemented to redistribute Indigenous lands to mostly white settlers at a low cost. The impact of this today has meant that Indigenous communities are still fighting for ownership over their ancestral lands and full recognition and rights from the U.S government.

The United States became one the most powerful countries on Earth in part because they stole Indigenous tribal land over the span of entire centuries. In addition to the fact that slavery became America's first big business. This allowed the U.S. as Edward E. Baptist explains it to shift from a "colonial economy to the second biggest industrial power in the world."

slavery, poverty, + Black farm ownership

For over a century slavery benefited businesses in both the North and South. This is particularly representative of forced Black farm labor on plantations and other agricultural lands which was the foundation of wealth building in the U.S. From the Civil War to Jim Crow laws to today African Americans have been experiencing unequal treatment and discrimination for decades. The abolishment of slavery in 1865 was followed by many former slaves and their descendants using sharecropping, or a legal arrangement in which a landlord/planter grants a tenant use of their land in exchange for a share of their harvest. This system was used as a way for newly freed Blacks to pay off their debts and make a living. For African Americans who could afford land, it didn't last long. Black farmers often had their land dispossessed due to the US Department of Agriculture's racist policies. These injustices have not only led to low rates in Black farmland ownership but also to today's racial wealth gap.



IE's first Earth Sessions event with panelists Leah Thomas, Kofi Thomas, and Tony Hillery speaking on food sovereignty. (April 2022, Brooklyn.)

POC-led resistance movements

POC-led Resistance Movements arose in response to food injustices. Here are some examples throughout U.S. history:



The food justice movement is inextricably linked to BIPOC communities' autonomy over their land and food. It is widely known that communities of color experience more health issues due to the lack of nutritious food and are more likely to be diagnosed with health-related issues such as cancer, hypertension, and high cholesterol.



During the Civil Rights Movement, Southern Black landowners would use their land as collateral to post bail for jailed civil rights workers.

© USDA



Fannie Lou Hamer, food justice and civil rights activist, advocated for collective farming through the Freedom Farm Cooperate which provided poor farmers and families with food to eat and land to work on.

©Jim Peppier Southern Courier Photograph Collection, ADAH



During the 1960s labor and civil rights activists, Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta brought together Mexican and Filipino workers through the National Farm Workers Association (est. 1962) which helped pave the way for legislation that secured basic worker rights for farm laborers.

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Large-scale movements for food sovereignty began in 1996 at the World Food Summit in Rome, Italy, and have continued to increase visibility for Indigenous communities in recent decades with the Indigenous Food Systems Network (est. 2006) and The Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance (est. 2013).

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The food justice movement is inextricably linked to BIPOC communities' autonomy over their land and food. It is widely known that communities of color experience more health issues due to the lack of nutritious food and are more likely to be diagnosed with health-related issues such as cancer, hypertension, and high cholesterol. Understanding the connections between these communities and their lifelong fight for liberation is necessary to create an equitable, just, and intersectional future.

food injustices in Black Communities

The phrase, "food justice is racial justice" captures the importance of redefining African Americans' relationship to the land from one filled with trauma and violence to one of empowerment and healing. Black people today disproportionately lack access to sufficient amounts of nutritious foods. Black communities are more likely to experience food deserts forcing them to travel long distances for fresh food, and they are twice as likely to be food insecure than white households. As a result, food deserts typically result in higher concentrations of food swamps, where there is no fresh food and only items that lack nutritional substance and value are sold.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Black communities experienced a dramatic decrease in food security. This can be attributed to the fact that Black people are more likely to live in poverty, work in high-exposure jobs, and have less access to quality health care and treatment, in addition to being less likely to have access to quality education, job opportunities, and knowledge of government assistance programs. When Black communities have been intentionally excluded and targeted by government policies (e.g. redlining, predatory housing loans, etc.) it creates food apartheid. These injustices are rooted in the continued legacy of institutionalized racism and systemic inequality toward Black communities

food injustices in Immigrant Communities

The vulnerabilities within the U.S. food system expose the difficult realities many immigrants face when living in America. The COVID-19 pandemic further revealed immigrants were more likely to avoid public and private food assistance programs for fear of deportation. Many immigrants come to America in search of more social and economic mobility, however, low wages for laborious and long-hour jobs make it difficult for these communities to survive. Poor working conditions in combination with a lack of affordable foods, physical and social isolation, and widespread distrust of many of the food assistance programs have created heightened levels of food insecurity in these communities.

Even when immigrant households are eligible for these programs, border patrol checkpoints, ICE, and ongoing detentions and deportations foster a hostile environment.

food injustices in Indigenous Communities

As for Indigenous communities, the necessity for food justice and sovereignty is centered on restoring Indigenous agricultural practices and culture which were dismantled by displacement and colonization; while reclaiming Indigenous people's health and relationship to the Earth. Most research regarding food security for these communities is in the context of reservations and Indigenous voices are generally excluded from studies and research on food injustice. A 2016 study done with 240 rural Indigenous households, and 210 urban Indigenous households found that 80% of urban homes were food insecure and 45% of rural homes were food insecure. Up to 85% of Indigenous people on reservations are a part of food assistance programs like the US Department of Agriculture's Food Distribution Program. These programs usually offer pre-packaged and canned foods that are high in sugar, salts, and fats while lacking micronutrients.

Another program, SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is only helpful when eligible grocery stores are within accessible distances. Because many Indigenous communities have high rates of poverty with low population densities due to historic discrimination and segregation this can lead to grocery gaps making the SNAP program effectively useless. These grocery gaps allow for the infestation of food swamps and deserts, one of the main impacts of colonization. As a result, food insecurity exacerbates health disorders such as obesity and diabetes, as well as residential environmental hazards, and institutional discrimination and segregation.



Food justice is racial justice.

Food sovereignty is used to empower communities to fight food injustices through grassroots activism and coalition building.

food injustices in Farm Worker Communities

For decades immigrants and migrants from Latin America have been at the forefront of the fight for farmworker rights and equal opportunity in the agriculture, food, and foodservice industries. Grassroots organizing is often led by Latinx farmworker groups who collaborate with immigrants from Africa, Asia, and across the globe. Their fight stems from ensuring equity and fairness for workers. Immigrants and migrant workers play a key role in food production, making up 73% of the U.S.'s agricultural workforce. Despite their contributions to our nation's food supply, food insecurity is widespread in the migrant farming community. A study in Northern California found that farmworkers, especially those who are undocumented, rely on emergency food as their main food source.

These workers face tremendous barriers to economic and social mobility, and they are often cast aside by powerful corporations and institutions that foster unequal and exploitative working conditions. Undocumented workers make up about 50% of the farm labor workforce and live under the constant threat of deportation, family separation, and arrest. The COVID-19 Pandemic makes it all the more difficult for workers in this position to navigate these dangerous conditions while undergoing the harsh impacts of climate change.

Listed here are some actions you can take in your community to promote food justice and sovereignty.

Support POC-led food justice organizations.

- You can use Soul Fire Farm's reparations map to find food and farm projects that need support nationwide or in your area.
- You can also support groups fighting for equitable land access like the Black Farmer Fund and Northeast Farmers of Color Network.

Advocate for policies at the local, national, and state-level that expand food access, defend workers' rights, and ensure equal opportunity.

The best way to advocate for policies such as these is to contact your local officials:

- The first step is to identify who your elected representatives are at the federal, state, and local levels. That can easily be done through websites like Ballotpedia.
- When writing or calling your local officials you can start by introducing yourself, describing the issues pertaining to the food justice that resonates with you, and making a specific request of the type of action you want them to take.
- You can also search through your state's legislative websites to find information on previous, current, or up-and-coming policies pertaining to these issues and mention them to your lawmaker.
- Remember that as public officials your representatives have an obligation to listen to their constituents so don't be afraid to be persistent and passionate.
- Another way to advocate for policies is to get involved with a political organization working towards these issues or potentially running for office yourself!

Organize + amplify community garden initiatives in your local area

- a. To find out where gardens in your area you can use the American Community Gardening Association's [interactive map](#)
- b. To create your own community garden follow these steps inspired by Kofi Thomas's story of the Good Life Garden:
 - i. Imagine the possibilities of what a public garden centered on food justice could look like in your local area.
 - ii. From there, plan and organize meetings with interested community members and create a formal planning committee to accomplish your specific goals.
 - iii. Compile resources about your municipality, and public + private land use, including what materials, tools, partnerships, sponsors, and/or land agreements may be necessary to move forward.
 - iv. Conduct research on empty sites that are near available water resources, get lots of sunlight, have a healthy soil composition, with accessibility, and choose one based on your findings.
 - v. Arrange and develop your site by clearing the area of any debris, and organizing, designing, and constructing the garden based on your community's needs.
 - vi. Define the rules, values, and mission of your garden in writing for participants to reference and keep signed copies. You may also need liability waivers depending on your circumstance.
 - vii. Make sure to communicate with your participants with consideration to accessibility. Combining a mix of social media, email, phone, and print forms of communication will help maintain a successful and informed group of participants.
 - viii. Evolve the garden's purpose to reflect the diversity of your community members such as providing educational programs for children, enrichment programs for seniors, a public space for arts and culture, or sharing the food in the garden with local shelters.



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Save and share seeds to preserve biodiversity.

- This can be done through seed banks and libraries such as the Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance and the Seed Savers Exchange.

Push for local farmers, supermarkets, and cafeterias to join the Domestic Fair Trade Association and to seek Food Justice Certification through the Agricultural Justice Project.

- These organizations ensure the fair treatment of workers and the environment. Some ways you can help expand their reach is to contact farmworker, farmer, retail, manufacturing, processing, marketing, and NGO organizations to join DFTA. You can also make non-profit organizations, farms, and food businesses aware of Food Justice Certified Standards while providing financial and/or educational support to stakeholders who want to have a more equitable and just approach to the food system.

Educate yourself on the intersections between race, food, and history by reading books such as:

- "Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants" by Robin Wall Kimmerer
- "Cultivating Food Justice Race, Class, and Sustainability" Edited by Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman
- "Food Justice Now!: Deepening the Roots of Social Struggle" by Joshua Sbicca



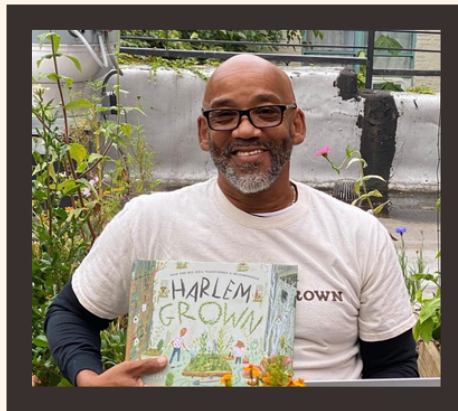
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Action Steps

Furthermore, champion intersectional food education and storytelling within your local community.

Drawing inspiration from Tony Hillery's Harlem Grown here are some ways you advance food justice through an educational lens:

- Donate and/or get involved with non-profits like Harlem Grown that allow you to volunteer and mentor youth on public farming and healthy eating.
- Encourage your local school board or library to include a curriculum that celebrates food justice + community gardening such as Tony Hillery's Harlem Grown children's book.
- Connect with your local government and universities to develop successful food distribution and farming models like Hillery's centered on education, mentorship, and partnerships.
- Create your own resources focused on the intersectionality and importance of food justice in your local area to share with community members.



© Harlem Grown

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References

We're excited to bring together resources and grow this platform so that IE can serve everyone in the sustainability community.

We hope you 'll continue to follow along as we dive into more topics that intersect with environmentalism.

Take the IE pledge today to bring these learnings into your own life - whether that's by speaking up and being an ally, or by following and promoting the incredible work of intersectional activists.

Thanks for your support in creating a more inclusive planet.



Sign the IE Pledge

Visit
intersectionalenvironmentalist.com/take-the-ie-pledge