

# Food sovereignty, urban food access, and food activism: contemplating the connections through examples from Chicago

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**Abstract** The idea of food sovereignty has its roots primarily in the response of small producers in developing countries to decreasing levels of control over land, production practices, and food access. While the concerns of urban Chicagoans struggling with low food access may seem far from these issues, the authors believe that the ideas associated with food sovereignty will lead to the construction of solutions to what is often called the “food desert” issue that serve and empower communities in ways that less democratic solutions do not. In Chicago and elsewhere, residents and activists often see and experience racial and economic inequalities through the variety of stores and other food access sites available in their community. The connections between food access, respect, and activism are first considered through a set of statements of Chicagoans living in food access poor areas. We will then discuss these connections through the work and philosophy of activists in Chicago centered in food sovereignty and food justice. Particular focus will be placed on Growing Power, an urban food production, distribution, and learning organization working primarily in Milwaukee and Chicago,

and Healthy South Chicago, a community coalition focused on health issues in a working class area of the city.

**Keywords** Food sovereignty · Food deserts · Food access · Food activism · Community organizing

## Introduction

Through a succession of highly publicized academic, government, and private reports, the term “food desert” has become part of the general lexicon of urban life in the United States. This is particularly true in Chicago. In one of many examples, a 2005 *Chicago Sun-Times* article on access to fresh produce in minority areas of the city begins: “The greens are wilted, with brownish edges. The oranges are bruised and yellowing. Bunches of bananas have started turning brown and spotty” (Fuller 2005, p. 10a). While this is not a pretty picture, the store described was one of the few with a relatively large produce section in the community, which had only one chain supermarket for 117,000 residents. The *Sun-Times* article reported on the release of a study called “The Challenge to an Apple a Day,” released by the Chicago Department of Public Health, discussing a series of community-based studies of food access in six neighborhoods in Chicago (Block et al. 2005). Later, a report by a local researcher, funded by LaSalle Bank (now part of Bank of America) received front page coverage and sparked a city commission and an annual Supermarket Expo (Gallagher 2006). The Chicago interest in food deserts reflects national trends. Similar reports to those mentioned above have been published around the country, in particular Philadelphia (The Food Trust 2001). There, a ‘food desert’ study supported legislation in Pennsylvania leading to tax breaks and subsidized loans to

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stores wanting to locate in underserved areas. This strategy has now been repeated, with funding from Robert Wood Johnson, in Illinois and New York. The federal government is also becoming a major player, with a federal fresh food financing initiative funded at over \$400 million (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2010).

The power of food access inequities to convey differences in the experiences of living in areas of high and low income was more recently put extremely starkly by *Chicago Tribune* columnist Mary Schmich. Schmich wrote on the experience of getting a call from a child health organization while walking through the aisles of the newly opened largest Whole Foods in the world, in the upper-income Lincoln Park area of Chicago. She describes the bounty and wealth around her even as she before she entered the store: “Under the May sun, I walked past bins of fresh yellow corn, past sweet Vidalia onions, seedless watermelons and a black Mercedes SUV nonchalantly parked in a spot reserved for alternative-fuel vehicles.” The organizer tells the writer that “A black baby in Chicago ... is 2 1/2 times more likely than the national average to die in the first year”. Schmich continues by contrasting the scene around her to what the activist is telling her: “One reason so many babies in Chicago die? The mothers are more likely to be sick. (Wine-and-cheese bar on the left). And one reason that the mothers are sick? They don’t have access to fresh food. (Probitotics on the right; bakery and sushi up ahead)”. Schmich concludes by advocating for programs to help bring supermarkets into underserved areas: “No city will ever offer equality of everything to everybody. But we live in a city where multitudes pay \$7.99 a pound at the Whole Foods salad bar. It’s time to help the other multitudes find a decent apple” (Schmich 2009, p. 6). Schmich’s use of food disparities to showcase societal inequalities and her final emphasis on food itself shows both the issues and the opportunities offered by food access. Food access inequities highlight how the experience of living in poorer communities is hugely different from the experience of living in wealthier ones and that these differences can even lead to increased death. However, their ability to highlight these inequities often leads to a public response that focuses on only food stores themselves, rather than a broader focus upon the broader inequities in economic investment, political and economic power, and health that the food desert issue highlights.

This article, written by two Chicago food activists and two community based researchers, considers whether “food sovereignty”, a global equity movement based originally in the peasant organization La Via Campesina, can offer a framework through which issues of community control of, and disparities in, access to food resources can be addressed in underserved communities in developed countries. We do this through a discussion and analysis of

two divergent types of data. First, we describe a portion of the results of a series of structured group interviews on food access from two low-income African-American communities of Chicago’s South Side. This analysis focuses on remarks made about issues of control, disparity, and racism, seen through the community food access landscape and how these compare and contrast to issues focused upon by the international food sovereignty movement. Second, we describe the work of two Chicago organizations, Growing Power and Healthy South Chicago, as they try to address issues of inequality and access through food. We conclude with a consideration of the usefulness of food sovereignty as it relates to urban food access issues in the US and a discussion of the role of food access activism in urban America. We begin with a discussion of current writings on US food projects and food sovereignty itself and, to frame the later material, a discussion of the condition of community activism in Chicago and the persistent importance of the work of Saul Alinsky in shaping Chicago activism.

### **Food deserts, community food projects, and food sovereignty**

Within the field of community food security, numerous organizations have initiated programs to bring fresh, often local food to ‘food desert’ areas. Many of these projects have involved community gardens, urban agriculture, or farmers’ markets and often pair environmental and community development goals through food growing and consumption. These projects have varied from small scale and community based, such as Oakland’s People’s Grocery produce van and numerous farmers’ markets and community garden projects throughout the country, to projects involving youth agricultural and job training such as Boston’s Food Project, to larger scale (and often less alternative) projects such as the Reinvestment Fund of Pennsylvania, which makes low interest loans to those interested in starting or expanding groceries in underserved areas.

As Alkon (2008) describes in an investigation of the West Oakland Farmers’ Market, these projects can encounter difficulties including lack of interest among community members and a disjuncture between project and community goals. Guthman (2008a) and Alkon add that trying to end food access inequities only through the creation of new sites for market transactions such as farmers’ markets or supermarkets does not address core poverty and disinvestment issues in these communities. There are a number of reasons for this. First, the economic interests of the farmers’ usually trump the access interests of the consumers the projects are trying to help. Solutions offered

are generally market-based and geared towards the changing of “individual consumption practices” (Allen and Wilson 2008) rather than collective action focused on changing the “injustices that underlie disparities in food access,” as Guthman (2008a, p. 443) describes. Second, as Alkon (2008) outlines, interactions based around race and class (the perceived “whiteness” of the projects and the food itself) may shape relations between those running the programs and the intended subjects, leading to misunderstandings and lack of interest of the products offered. Third, the focus of these organizations has often been on the promotion of the consumption of local foods. While there are culinary, environmental, and homeland security arguments for eating locally, local production does not guarantee ethical production, and the conflation of “local” with “good” takes attention away from structural issues present in the global food system at large (Anderson 2008).

Despite these many issues, the fact remains that food access is a potent symbol for inequities in services between communities and is an important issue in itself. When Chicago Congressman Bobby Rush looks out at much of the community he represents, he sees a food access landscape that, to him, symbolizes inequality and disparity. “Why is it that in some communities consumers can buy French fries but not fresh potatoes?” he wonders (Rush 2008). In US cities, inequalities in food access are often appear quite stark, and it is helpful to remember that the term “food desert” was coined by a resident of a Scotland housing project “to capture the experience of what it was like to live in a deprived neighborhood” (Cummins and Macintyre 2002, p. 2115). The focus of food access as an issue goes beyond the particular connections to health (although these are important) to be a way that issues of power, control, and inequality are written into the American landscape. Furthermore, food access issues themselves, as Janet Poppendieck points out well in her studies of the emergency food system, can bring together coalitions that would not otherwise work on poverty issues (Poppendieck 1999). As Guthman (2008a) eloquently states, “the focus remains on food, the area of concern which galvanizes a wide range of actors, from public health professionals, to sustainable agriculture practitioners, to community food security and environmental justice advocates” (p. 432). While this may backfire if the discussion never gets beyond food access to its root causes, the coalitions that may be built through the galvanizing force of food are not to be dismissed. As longtime South Side Chicago African-American environmental justice activist Orrin Williams writes, food is “as important an element for vigilance by the activist and academic communities as any other” (Williams 2005, p. 119).

We thus have a seeming dilemma that while food access brings many people as well as governments, researchers,

and business together to focus on an issue of disparity, overconcentration on food could lead to ignoring the issues that caused the disparities in the first place. Furthermore, the solutions offered, whether they are alternative, such as community gardens or produce vans, or conventional supermarkets, do not always fit the needs or desires of the residents and may be put in place without gathering resident input. In the worst cases, companies, organizations, and governments overlook the needs of residents and bring in a store or programs that do not fit community needs. Despite this, the fact that food access as an issue can unite so many disparate organizations and that food access disparities place focus on general inequities of society and the experience of living in poor communities makes food access an important subject of both research and activism.

### **The food sovereignty movement and US alternative food projects**

The food sovereignty movement organized originally as a reaction to the increasingly globalized and centralized food system promoted by the World Trade Organization, the United States, and major agro-food corporations. La Via Campesina defined food sovereignty in 1996 as containing the rights “of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods, respecting cultural and productive diversity....the right to produce our own food in our own territory”, and “the right of people to define their agricultural and food policy” (quoted in Desmarais 2007, p. 24). Canadian policy activist Wayne Roberts summarizes food sovereignty as “when food is of, by, and for the people” (Roberts 2008, p. 52). Unlike movements such as local food, food sovereignty is a distinctly political concept that is “a transformative process ... to recreate the democratic realm and regenerate a diversity of autonomous food systems based on equity, social justice, and ecological sustainability” (Pimbert 2009, p. 5). If successful, this process would necessarily transform the existing national and international food system and the power structures within it, including such processes as land reform, a transformation of international tariff systems, and national subsidies for industrial agriculture.

While these goals are large and global, it should be noted that at the local level food sovereignty implies particular rights of individuals and communities to define their own food system, to produce food in a safe manner, to regulate production, and to choose their own level of self-reliance, rather than these being set by larger national and international organizations. These goals imply a way forward that suggests “practical solutions” for projects and resistance as well as the need for, and possible political value of, local food production and distribution projects

(Pimbert 2009). A key, however, is how democratic and aware of local power inequities these projects are. As Allen (2010) states: “The achievement of social justice within local food systems requires an effective democratic process, including the empowerment of those who are most vulnerable and have benefitted the least from current arrangements” (p. 303).

The US could be fertile ground for applications of food sovereignty to local food projects, in opposition to the dominant food system. As Allen and Wilson (2008) describe, “American agricultural policy set the stage for and wrote the script of the agrifood system that is creating global misery and devastation”. Much of the alternative food movement in the United States has been focused on Buy Local food campaigns, promoting ecological sustainability, linking local, sustainable farmers to schools, farmers’ markets, and other institutions, and supporting changes in existing farm legislation to support such efforts. These projects certainly lie within the general goals of the food sovereignty movement, however in most cases they set up alternative food systems in which poorer consumers are not included. In addition, as Born and Purcell (2006) argue, just because food is locally produced does not mean it is ethically produced, and community control may simply reinforce existing class and racial divisions. For example, Guthman, in a study of the racial attitudes of California farmers’ markets and CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) managers, finds that they blame the overwhelming whiteness of their customers on education and culture, rather than issues such as income disparities between races combined with the costs of their products. “Specifically, managers portray their own values and aesthetics to be so obviously universal that those who do not share them are marked as other” (Guthman 2008b, p. 393).

By contrast, food sovereignty, as a global movement, is particularly focused on the concept that market forces are not always the best way to regulate food production. In addition, by concentrating on issues of control over economic regulation and planning and the right of groups to have sovereignty over these decisions, it also may serve to tie issues of control and economic disparity that occur in many cities throughout the United States and elsewhere to a global movement for food systems change. This is not to say that such a connection must be made through food. However, uneven development and differing access to resources can be seen both by residents and non-residents through differences in food access in ways that could make food access activism an excellent vehicle toward building more vibrant communities and more equitable societies. Specifically in Chicago, a city rife with segregation, structural racism, and top-down plans for improving the plight of the poor, issues of control over resources and land-use planning are important issues of community

struggle and issues of access to land and the control of property and land use plans are at the core of community-based food activism.

### Chicago activism, Saul Alinsky, and food sovereignty

Food sovereignty may apply particularly well in Chicago because many community-based action groups in the city are still rooted in the work of Alinsky (1971). Alinsky-influenced organizations work within the established democratic system, but focus on lobbying city elected officials and employees, often in creative ways, to demand services in their communities. At its root, this often abrasive method is designed to overcome equity issues in power and services between communities and between the desires of the city government and residents (Block and Peterman 2006). Followers of Alinsky, local activists Gale Cincotta and Shell Trapp, founded the National Training and Information Center, which continues to train activists from Chicago and around the country and works on national equity issues. They work to “Take back our power to use the government as our tool to promote the common good, correct the injustices of the past, and redistribute resources equitably and sustainably” (National Training and Information Center 2009).

While Alinsky based his work in an urban environment very different from that of the peasant and indigenous leaders of the food sovereignty movement, the focus on the right of people to shape their circumstances, in this case, the portions of the food system that most directly affect them, is similar. Like the food sovereignty movement, Alinsky’s trainings and recommendations were a set of political strategies and approaches that, while they often aligned with left-wing issues, focused on altering the concentrations of power (Alinsky 1971). The food sovereignty movement is similarly radical, generally works within established democratic systems (rather than being violently revolutionary), is similarly concerned with democratic control of resources, and often uses Alinsky-like approaches in its activism and is similarly focused on issues of local control.

The Alinsky strategy of working within the system but using pressure and personal appeals to address inequalities still is a hallmark of many Chicago community organizations. However, over the past 20 years many Chicago community organizations have weakened. During the administration of Harold Washington (1983–1987), Chicago’s first black mayor, many community organizations became an integral part of the Washington governing coalition. Following Washington’s death and particularly with the election of Richard M. Daley in 1991 this strength waned. Daley worked out a deal with the alderman so that,

in general, while the mayor controlled city-wide projects, the aldermen were responsible for what happened in their wards. The aldermen began to take on specific development tasks in the wards, as well as advocate for the interests of the ward in the city council. This appropriated one of the most important tasks of the Chicago community organization, community advocacy (Block and Peterman 2006).

Community organizations began searching for alternative tasks. Some closed. Many started or became primarily Community Development Corporations (CDC's). Some thrived with a more specific focus, such as providing family, child, or health services. More recently, groups around the city have turned at least part of their focus on food production, access, and nutrition. In some cases, these organizations were established ones for which food security is a new focus. For instance, the North Lawndale Employment Network, an organization that primarily does job training for ex-offenders, started a bee-keeping program which sells honey at local farmers' markets and other locations. In other cases, these groups were new. The Gary Comer Youth Center, a well-funded new project on Chicago's South Side, has a roof garden and a garden in a brown field site that it uses for youth development and calls itself "an oasis in the food desert". Many smaller, not as well funded projects exist throughout the city, such as "Food Desert Action", a West Side organization that recently opened a mobile produce bus. While these and other groups are attempting to collaborate through organizations such as the Chicago Food Policy Advisory Council and Advocates for Urban Agriculture, the food sovereignty movement, with its focus both on local power and national and international issues, could be an attractive structure for collaboration and a method of tying the food-based organizing that Chicago groups do to local, national, and international issues. This would be especially true if the local control that food sovereignty emphasizes, including local control over food resources and land, are relevant to Chicago communities and residents. This is explored, through an analysis of a set of qualitative group interviews, in the next section.

### **Power and respect: food access issues as seen by residents**

On the surface, issues emphasized by the food sovereignty movement such as land reform and control of trade might seem far from the focus of the residents of Chicago's food deserts. However, an analysis of a set of structured group interviews completed for the Northeastern Illinois Community Food Security Assessment between 2005 and 2006, reveals parallel concerns on issues of power, respect, and

the lack of control over resources including land use in their communities in the African-American communities studied (Block et al. 2007). In this study, qualitative group interviews were conducted to gain in depth insights of food access issues across thirteen food system sectors as a part of the larger project. Separate food sector interview guides and code books were developed and piloted for each food sector group (i.e., Community Members, Food Pantry Staff, Retail Food Store Owners/Managers, Food Advocacy Organizations). Interviews were conducted at both the community level and at the broader regional level. The community interviews were conducted in collaboration with local organizations within each of the case study communities. These organizations recruited participants and provided a space for the interviews, and a staff member from the organization was trained to conduct the interviews. All the interviews were audio-taped, transcribed verbatim, verified for accuracy, and coded into Atlas.ti qualitative software for analysis. The specific interview guide questions for a food sector guided the analysis. Community level reports describing the overall assessment, including the qualitative interviews, were produced and presented to community residents in each of the case study areas. This research was approved by the University of Illinois-Chicago Institutional Review Board (Block et al. 2008).

Two of the case study areas were predominately African-American and expressions of lack of respect and inequality were common in views of food security expressed by each community. Englewood, with its sister community of West Englewood on Chicago's mid-South Side, is over 97% African-American. In 2000, 54.1% of Englewood children and 43.8% of West Englewood children lived in poverty, far above the Chicago rate of 28.1%. Riverdale is an extremely isolated community surrounded by industrial land on Chicago's far South Side. Much of its population lives in Altgeld Gardens, a public housing project built for returning veterans after World War II, which is currently undergoing reconstruction. Riverdale was 96.6% African-American in 2000, and is the poorest Chicago community, with a median household income in 2000 of just \$13,178. Sixty-eight percent of children lived in poverty (Bocskay et al. 2007a). In addition, the communities show high rates of disease and negative environmental factors. In 2004, Englewood and West Englewood had the highest rates of positive lead tests (13%) among children of Chicago communities, and were two of the top three communities in all-cancer mortality rates, and two of the top four in homicide rates (Bocskay et al. 2007b). Food access in both the communities is low. Despite the opening of a full service supermarket in West Englewood in 2006, this is the only full service supermarket in an area with a combined population of about 85,000. The mean distance to the nearest large market from Englewood



addresses in 2007 was 1.41 miles. There were no full-services supermarkets in Riverdale and the mean distance to the nearest large store was 3.65 miles, by far the highest in the city (Block et al. 2007).

Disparities in food access and community development were described in several of the interviews and awareness of the disparities between their communities and other more affluent ones was evident across the community areas. A few examples illustrate this awareness of food access disparities and the responsibilities that community members have in improving food access. This first quote is from a Community Member discussion in the Englewood Community. There was a great deal of discussion, un-prompted by the interview facilitators, asserting that Englewood as a community has been discriminated against on a variety of levels over the years. For many years there has been a lack of investment in Englewood for core community resources which was particularly noted by the residents.

Female Voice: You don't have no theaters. We don't have anything. But I remember, like you said, we had all of this. We had them theaters, we had these South Town and all of that. And you had [Heelman], you had [Wiebolt's], you had [Al Fish], you had all of that...that kind of stuff that it's not in Englewood nor in West Englewood anymore, that that's the reason we take the money out of the community because we don't have anything in our community (Community Member (1), 2/27/06).

Further discussion indicated that community members had some responsibility in both the businesses leaving the community and in helping to improve the food access in the community.

Participants in another Englewood community interview also expressed awareness of the disparities between food access in their community and other neighborhoods. Several interview participants believed they get a better variety and better quality of food when they go outside of the neighborhood for groceries. This was discussed in the context that there is a general lack of compassion for Englewood and its community members are not valued by the city as a whole (Chavez et al. 2007a).

Female Voice: We just don't get proper food. They give us the bottom of everything.

Male Voice: It's like that because, as I said before, the stores in the Black community get worse food than the White community.

Female Voice: That's true. It's all true.

Female Voice: Have you ever been up north? The North Side stores don't have all of these stores that we have.

Male Voice: Oh, no.

Male Voice: They care about what they give them at those stores in the suburbs, but here they don't care. They think, "Oh, well. Give them whatever and they'll take it."

Female Voice: Yeah, that's it. "Give them whatever." They get greedy (Community Members [1], 2/27/06).

The participants also believed that being Link (Food Stamp/Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) participants contributed to the lack of healthy food access.

Female Voice: And I think, too, because a lot of people are on Link, they (store owners) don't feel that they deserve spending money. And we don't get the best.

Male Voice: And in fact that it's hard, too, for people on Link.

Male Voice: To shop in the area, in these stores.

Female Voice: It's like they're saying, "You don't have the money, so we're not going to put up a store."

Disparities between food availability in well to do and poor communities were aptly described by an Englewood Community Gardner and activist:

Respondent: Well, I'll give you an example. We went to a lecture north of downtown. On our way we saw a fancy grocery store. Now, that's some of the priciest real estate in the world, but bananas were the same price as they were in Aldi's on 62<sup>nd</sup> (a discount grocery store). And it's like people with money have many more opportunities to buy affordable food than poor people. And even though it was a small store, they had several different kinds of meat; they had lots of produce, lots of dairy, things that we really don't have.

Because of its geographic isolation, in Riverdale transportation was a major focus of the interview discussions, however, another focus was the lack of investment and respect received from the city about the community (Chavez et al. 2007b). A local community organizer noted the following.

Like I said, I think the city taking this area seriously, taking these people seriously. It's the biggest joke. It's the biggest slap in peoples' face. I still live in the city, but just because it – who cares about the [unintelligible] south side? (Community-based Organization, 4/15/05).

One of the most important things because we're not recognized or because we don't give the attention that is need to be recognized – and that's what we need to do as a community as a whole, is engage in this

whole process and talk about food security, transportation, health issues and that stuff from a community perspective. Because then that will change some. (Community-based Organization, 4/15/05).

These and other discussions imply that residents need to take some responsibility for changing their food access situation. Community members also discussed a possible boycott of the small grocery that served the community as a community action to get them more of the types of foods they wanted. The store has since closed.

Female voice: ...They don't have no understanding of what this community requires for them to sell because a lot - like I say, a lot of stuff you go to ask for, they ain't got it.

Male Voice: And not trying to get it.

Female Voice: It's supposed to be a neighborhood store out here in this neighborhood right here, but then you don't have what the people want, so, you know, right.

Female Voice: They don't even have stuff for the babies. You go in there and look for Similac, they ain't got Similac.

Facilitator: So what are some of the solutions to this, these barriers? Do you think our neighborhood stores should add more healthy foods, better access, sales?

Male Voice: Exactly....

Facilitator: Could you speak about that store in particular?

Male voice: Okay, but they have to been - they've been told several times by several consumers - me, myself, I know I told them, you know, that their food is substandard. You know what I'm saying? You have to take into consideration of your consumer and what it's probably going to take is for us to rally together as consumers and just say enough.

Female voice: Or quit shopping.

Female voice: Right. That's exactly what I'm getting to: enough is enough and just stop shopping there.

Female voice: Boycott it.

Facilitator: Boycott it? You think y'all force them to do better?

Female voice: I think it would force them to do better or it would force them out of the neighborhood (Community Members, 2/11/05).

The quotes from the two communities focus on lack of investment, lack of respect from the city government and others in power, negative comparisons between the food access situation in their communities and in wealthier areas, and, finally, anger at the current stores. Residents see the disparity between the food choices available in their communities and in others as evidence of structural racism

and their own lack of power and respect in the city. There is a belief that community residents deserve the same food access choices as other communities. However, there was also awareness that the communities and residents themselves had a responsibility in improving the situation, as illustrated by the following quotes.

Female Voice: We need quality stores in our community

Male Voice: We need to bring them stores [into our] community. (Community Members 2/27/06).

Female Voice: If we are going to support a black-owned store, then we need to make them accountable to us. That's what you have to do. Just insist that they get the proper food and the decent food that we need here in Englewood.

And finally, this quote emphasizes the community responsibility to improve food access. (The comment made below is very ethnocentric but does reflect general community member anger toward outside groups).

Female Voice: We can solve that problem right there. I believe those A-rab people need to be in their own community, making sure that their own people are being fed adequately with proper nutrition. We need to do the same for our own community. Put the mom and pop stores over here. Get people the resources to open up their own stores.

These few examples clearly illustrate that food desert communities such as these do recognize the disparities in food access and are not content to let others continue to decide their food access future.

While there was no specific derision of alternative food projects in these interviews, they generally were not very well known among the respondents except for those who were specifically involved in them. The conclusion of one of Guthman's students that "the insistence on alternatives may well reinforce a sense of exclusion and stigmatization—as if residents of food deserts are not even deserving of what others take for granted" (Guthman 2008a, p. 441) is similar to the feelings of residents about the stores they do have...as poor quality alternatives. In general, residents appear to feel a lack of control over the food stores they have, as well as somewhat lacking in the power to affect what stores might be present in the future. They often blame this on racism as well as their lack of political and economic power. The paucity of quality food in their communities is seen as evidence of this lack of power. A consumer desire for better food stores is very different from the producer-based local goals of the food sovereignty movement. However, feelings of lack of local control and exclusion from the larger economic system due to economic decisions made in seats of power are similar,

whether those underprivileged local groups are Honduran peasants or residents of inner-city Chicago communities. Seen this way, the ideas of sovereignty over community food choices and land use decisions link to the issues focused upon in the food sovereignty movement.

### **Food, community, and liberation: growing power and healthy south Chicago**

By working on food, through which residents see exclusion and lack of power, community food projects in Chicago and elsewhere have a chance to address these concerns directly and link residents to national and international groups working on similar issues. The two organizations profiled in this article, Growing Power and Healthy South Chicago, contrast in that Growing Power is a nationally serving non-profit focused particularly on community food systems and food security, while Healthy South Chicago is a community based collaborative focusing generally on improving the health of Chicago's southeast side. Both, however, have a focus on community uplift through improving of food access, and both serve lower income predominantly minority communities. Growing Power is a Milwaukee-based food security organization with a Chicago office. It is known particularly for its innovative food production techniques. The Milwaukee headquarters is an innovation center of green food production technology and also a community food center. In Chicago, Growing Power runs five urban farms. Three of these are community/neighborhood gardens that include both farms run by Growing Power itself and urban allotment gardens. In addition to these programs, Growing Power also runs job and life skills training programs for youth and now adults, a number of gardens at local public schools, sells food at farmers' markets, and runs a market basket program similar to a community supported agriculture project that delivers produce baskets to locations throughout the city including many underserved areas. The program includes both organic, local (higher-priced) and non-local produce (Growing Power 2009).

While many of Growing Power's programs are somewhat similar to organizations in other communities, such as the Food Project in Boston, Growing Power is distinguished in a number of ways. First, Growing Power is a leader in green sustainable agricultural technologies. It is also a pioneer in worm composting, the development of fish/agricultural "aquaponics" systems that recycle waste into fertilizer with both produce and fish as edible outputs. They also have teamed with researchers from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the study of biomass energy production. Second, from the beginning Growing Power has been particularly interested in equity issues both

between communities and within the food security movement itself. Growing Power sells two "market baskets", for instance, in order to provide a cheaper alternative to those in communities where getting any fresh produce may be difficult. This can be seen in food sovereignty terms. Growing Power helps people and communities towards becoming more in control of their own food procurement, whether that means growing food in the community or providing purchasing alternatives in areas that have few. The organization also promotes equity through policy, both at the local level through its leadership in the Chicago Food Policy Advisory Council, a coalition that works with Chicago city agencies to promote policies that support urban agriculture and addressing food access, at the state level through its membership in the "Illinois Local and Organic Food and Farm Taskforce" and at the national level through position papers and lobbying on specific issues. An example of the latter is a proposal for "Centers for Urban Agriculture", sent by founder Will Allen to Congress (Allen 2009). Third, Growing Power consciously views its work as not only being about the provision of food but also using food as a tool to accomplish broader goals of the reduction of racism and the reallocation of resources. As mentioned by geographer Rachel Slocum (2006) Growing Power was active in the Community Food Security Coalition's now defunct diversity committee and now hosts the international Growing Food and Justice for All Initiative (GFJI), which is "aimed at dismantling racism and empowering low-income and communities of color through sustainable and local agriculture" (Growing Food and Justice Initiative 2009). The coalition hosts a number of anti-racism workshops, and promotes the creation of the Growing Food and Justice chapters to form a national network of food security leaders with the ability to form multicultural alliances and collectively dismantle oppression. GFJI members organize and mentor one another via conference calls, internet connections and an international "annual gathering" that serves as a networking meeting between those working specifically on food and justice issue within the community food security movement. In September 2010, Growing Power and GFJI hosted a National and International Urban Agriculture Conference in Milwaukee at the Wisconsin State Fair grounds that had 1,500 attendees, many of which were interested in the intersection of social justice and localized food production.

Evidence of Growing Power's broad view of food access work and its connections to community uplift is a new program in the extremely isolated and poor Altgeld Gardens area. In 2010, Growing Power in partnership with public housing giant, Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) and social service agency UCAN established a 2.5 acre urban farm in Altgeld Gardens, an isolated and large housing project on Chicago's far South Side that is more



than 3 miles from the nearest full service grocer. Through funding from the ARRA (American Recovery Reinvestment Act), and an Illinois state program PITW (Put Illinois to Work), Growing Power was able to employ 150 previously unemployed adults and 40 youth from the public housing community. In the summer of 2010, members of the Altgeld community built environmentally safe food production beds, hoop greenhouses, compost bins, and 75 raised bed wood boxes for community allotment production, and also installed a chain link fence for the 2.5 acre perimeter of the site. CHA installed 2 water sources, lighting and electricity. This infrastructure will support the long term employment and food security for the community.

This project also provides a number of the key elements for successful community development. Residents are learning green technology skills that will make them highly employable in the food production sector both locally and nationally as the demand for skilled urban farmers increases. The Altgeld Farm began full production in the spring of 2011 growing culturally appropriate crops for residents and specialty crops to sell to local restaurateurs and farmers markets. The long term plan for this project also includes a Community operated food coop that sells produce from the farm and value added products developed by community members.

Compared to Growing Power, Healthy South Chicago has a much smaller geographic focus, Chicago's southeast side. The organization was founded in 2001 by the Chicago Department of Public Health through a grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. Healthy South Chicago was originally a pilot project for a set of "Healthy Communities" coalitions related to the health department. While they are connected to the health department, these coalitions are independent bodies, and are funded through grants and contracts arranged by the coalitions and their directors themselves. Although it remains focused on the South Chicago community itself, Healthy South Chicago expanded in 2007 to include the neighboring communities of South Deering, East Side, and Hegewisch, altogether Chicago's Southeast side (Healthy South Chicago 2009).

Chicago's Southeast Side is an ethnically diverse region that was once the site to a large number of heavy industries, in particular, steel. The steel industry is now almost gone from the city, and while the area still hosts a Ford Assembly plant, the employment base of the region has greatly declined over the past 30 years. The area is also somewhat isolated from much of the rest of the city. While there is a commuter train to the South Chicago community, it runs infrequently. There is no train rapid transit service to the region. The area, with a total population in 2000 of just over 89,000, is split into four communities geographically by industrial sites, train tracks, and the Calumet River.

Demographically, it is quickly changing. The South Chicago community, the most populous in the area, lies next to the former US. Steel plant. In addition to the oldest Hispanic community in the city and an African-American enclave, the community once housed a large eastern European population. Most of this population is gone, and the Hispanic community is shrinking, as Hispanics move across the Calumet River to East Side. South Chicago is now more than 70% African-American. South Chicago has the highest poverty rates and generally the worst levels of health in the area (Bocskay et al. 2007a). It also houses the region's primary commercial area, aptly named "Commercial Avenue", site to a large number of stores serving African-American, Hispanic, and African and Caribbean immigrant populations.

Despite its connections to the Chicago Department of Health, Healthy South Chicago is a community coalition of community residents, local service providers, agencies, and others interested in the health of the South Chicago Community. Since its inception, it has been organized and run by community residents. Healthy South Chicago is not specifically a food access oriented organization. However, a community assets assessment (completed by community members) mandated by the initial grant founding the coalition led to the quantifying of the lack of fresh produce available in the community and an increased concentration of stores selling fresh produce in this area. While there are no chain full-service supermarkets in the area, there are a number of smaller stores. The coalition worked with some of these stores to provide bilingual recipes for available produce through a "food of the month" program, where fresh veggie and fruit samples of a highlighted recipe were given free to grocery shoppers and got the local larger independent stores to donate a case of food a month to the smaller stores not carrying produce to use in the program. In 2004, the program had helped influence the number of stores carrying fresh produce in the community to increase from eight to fourteen (Block et al. 2005). Research projects were conducted with college interns focusing on the impact of fresh vegetable and fruit sampling, and also the marketing layout of vegetables and fruit at area stores. In addition, coalition members from a residents' association in the traditionally poorest area of the community, just outside the gates of the steel mill, began an interest in community gardens. Since this time, four gardens have been started by community based organizations, and community leaders have been asked to help set up gardens at sites all over the South Side.

Healthy South Chicago is interesting in that it is an independent coalition that has been able to remain independent despite its connections to city government. The founding grant and the city originally set up the organization and mandated that an assets assessment must be

completed and suggested the methodology. Yet, the particular focus of the assessment on food access came out of the work completed by the residents, as did the focus on gardening. Healthy South Chicago has been an active member of other community coalitions, including a larger McArthur funded planning process for the area. Significantly, however, Healthy South Chicago has not shied away from advocating against area development that ignored community concerns. Former executive director Dinah Ramirez even ran for alderman against an entrenched opponent. She lost, but this act was important in bucking the established leadership, even if it did lead to difficulties in getting projects approved by the very city government that helped set up the coalition in the first place. Healthy South Chicago is also a good example of the activism and community building around health disparities that has broadened the idea of what causes differences in health to include environmental causes such as differences in geographic and financial access to food, healthcare, and recreational sites. With Growing Power and others, they have also been part of the national discussion of the status of minorities in the community food security movement. Unfortunately, today, Healthy South Chicago is a totally unfunded group, without a paid executive director. The community gardens continue through their community based organizations and trained volunteers in agriculture, fundraising, event planners and recruitment. Some of the volunteers have been hired by Growing Power and supported by other community organizations. While grassroots organizations can and do survive in this way, the difficulty with securing funding points to issues with having a broad agenda and attempting to address existing power structure as Healthy South Chicago has.

In the cases of both Growing Power and Healthy South Chicago, food projects are both a tool to use towards general community empowerment and betterment and an end in themselves. By sponsoring community gardens or conducting a survey of local food choices and then working with stores to carry more healthy choices, these organizations link to an issue, food access, through which inequality is seen, but they also work to help empower local residents through control of land, growing food, and helping change food choices at local venues. These gardens aim to give hope to these community residents to try new things such as attending school, looking for jobs, running for local school councils and advocating for more programs/services. In South Chicago, there was also a perceived decrease in violence in and around the gardens. While these in themselves may seem like small changes, both groups work towards connecting these goals to larger power issues at the citywide and larger levels as well as building community solidarity. At a similar project in Toronto, Levkoe (2006) found that “participants in the

community garden continually express a heightened sense of self esteem gained from sharing knowledge and skills with each other” (2006, p. 96). Such community connections can, in some cases, lead towards participation at the larger levels. In this sense, the organizations’ work parallels both that of the food sovereignty movement, as well as the approaches suggested by Saul Alinsky, who recommends addressing people on issues of importance to their own life situations, in order to build coalitions and power. Making this leap from personal issues to community issues and beyond is not always easy or successful, as the current condition of Health South Chicago suggests, however the work of both organizations shows that food access and food justice can help make this leap.

### **Discussion and conclusion: food sovereignty, alternative food practice, Saul Alinsky, and urban food access**

Food sovereignty in general has been a movement focused on peasant rights. It is geographically focused in Latin America, South Asia, and other developing parts of the world. In North America, activism has focused in Mexico. In Canada and the USA, members have mainly been family-farming and farm labor advocates, including in the United States the National Family Farm Coalition and the Border Farm Workers Project. Until recently, participation by urban First World activists has been mainly oriented towards support of the peasant-based goals, and has been particularly oriented around the anti-globalization movement in general, particularly at the Seattle WTO ministerial conference held in 1999. Focus has generally been on the role of First World residents as relatively wealthy consumers and the role of the United States in particular as a politically powerful country that often leads support for the WTO, GATT, and neo-liberal attitudes towards trade in general. US food access issues appear infrequently in food sovereignty literature and generally focus on “eating locally and sustainably” (Harcourt 2008, p. 441).

However, the potential for connection between residents and activists in urban and rural US “food desert” locations and global food systems issues through the food sovereignty concept may be great. As Allen and Wilson (2008) state: “In general, class and inequality have been invisible in the alternative agrifood movement in the US (p. 537).” Yet, the comments of the residents and activists quoted above focus around issues of inequality in the distribution of retail investment, and lack of power over local land use planning. Residents, or at least those interviewed (who may, admittedly, be a particularly aware group), saw inequality in the landscape around them, including lack of large supermarkets, the kinds of markets available, and the kinds of food available in the markets. The landscape they

describe is exactly the kind of outcome of uneven development that theorists such as Neil Smith have discussed for years and is an urban First World counterpart of the uneven development that results from international movements of capital (Smith 1984). In this context, the focus of residents on the poor retail food choices within their communities, and the issues of lack of control and concentration of capital that those within the food sovereignty movement concentrate on are not that far apart. Both are spatial expressions of inequities within the global food system seen from a local level.

Of course, the desire to purchase food from a global company and the desire for food systems reform that allows for peasants to choose production activities on land they control are very different goals. However, the fact that inequalities are often seen through food access issues and the connections of food to nutrition make food access a productive place for activists, as well as researchers, planners, and public health practitioners to work. Growing Power and Healthy South Chicago began from very different places. For Growing Power, food production was integral to the organization from the start as the key tool in its plan for community uplift. Healthy South Chicago, working in a specific community, came to food access through study and community interest, but the end goal, of community uplift, is similar. In neither case, is food production seen as an end into itself.

Saul Alinsky, in the (1969) edition of his classic *Reveille for Radicals* tells of his experience with representatives of the Students for a Democratic Society who challenged him that he was organizing the poor to get a “bigger, fatter piece ... of bourgeois values.” To which he responded that this is what the poor want (Alinsky 1969, p. 229). Alinsky’s point is not that a world where everyone is bourgeois is possible or desirable, but as he often states activists should start their work from what the community knows. His advice is to “never go outside the experience of the community” (Alinsky 1971, p. 127). Activists have often done so, to their peril, as the power relations that result between the activists and the community may not be very different from those that would result from a plan put into place by the city government without community input. A plan for a new farmer’s market, funded by a national foundation, promoted by local government, but not integrated into community planning as a whole is likely not only to fail but also to perpetuate the feelings of lack of power and distrust of outside activists, including food security organizations that are chronicled by Alkon (2008), among others. While Growing Power and Healthy South Chicago are established organizations which have certainly thoroughly thought over their core values, they are (or have been, in the case of Healthy South Chicago) also entrepreneurial organizations that respond as quickly as possible

to crises as well as opportunities, many of which are focused on community power. This may sometimes lead to mistakes or situations in which the community and the organizing organization do not fully agree. Certainly, not everyone in South Chicago eats more healthily because of the work of Healthy South Chicago, and not everyone in the Jackson Park community served by Growing Power has been affected by the allotment garden built there. However, the gardens are steps, they are doable steps, and are difficult for local power brokers to oppose. While seemingly small, gardens may be radical changes in themselves in that the community has come together to take control of land use within their neighborhood and put it towards something that provides food and possibly jobs to community members (assuming the garden is community controlled). A community working with their alderman to bring in a new supermarket or devising a plan for alternative community marketing of produce such as carts or kiosks, are steps that do not attack the existing US capitalist system. However, they also may involve a community organizing to ask and sometimes help plan for these sites, thus developing power and sometimes setting up an alternative to the established community power brokers.

Food sovereignty activists have been most visible protesting around global economic forums such as GATT. While in many cases they would like to rid the world of these global economic agreements, their tactics in working towards change are not so different from those utilized by community activists in Chicago: mobilize a large group of activists; publicly bring light to the errors of those in power; and demand change that positively affects their communities. They also consider their movement to go beyond issues of the global food system towards support for indigenous, peasant, and small farm culture. As Allen and Wilson (2008) state: “At its core, the food sovereignty concept challenges one of the key precepts of globalized capitalism: that all products, including food, are best regulated by market forces” (p. 537). While alternative food projects such as community gardens and produce carts may not seem to challenge the existing capitalist system, it does often involve the creation of alternative production to consumer connections (“value chains” or “value webs”) which can, if structured correctly, lead to community uplift and an increase in community control (Block et al. 2008a, b). In addition, an undercurrent in the food desert conversation is about community planning and the extent to which governments should guide a new store’s location. For those activists and community members working on such projects in places such as Chicago, the message and movement of food sovereignty, as well as the pragmatic lessons of leaders such as Saul Alinsky, may provide roadmaps towards more complete food systems change.

As the food sovereignty movement declares, to achieve food equity such change must involve transformation on all levels of society, including in the consumption and preparation of food. It may also involve a shift to local economies with an awareness and promotion of international fair trade for goods and services not available or accessible locally. The community or “good food” movement, of which Growing Power is a leader, sees alternative food system apparatuses, such as urban and rural family farms, community gardens, farmers markets, green grocers, and associated youth programs as means of addressing injustices in the current economic system as well as building community by providing spaces for public interaction, jobs, and youth training. In this role, the organization, ideas, and foci of the food sovereignty movement may provide inspiration, a template for change, and global connections.

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## Author Biographies

**Daniel Block** is professor of geography at Chicago State University and the director of the Fred Blum Neighborhood Assistance Center. He has a particular interest in inner-city food access issues. Most recently, he led the Northeastern Illinois Community Food Security Assessment, a large scale food access study funded primarily through the Searle Funds of Chicago Community Trust. He also coordinates Chicago Food and Fitness Initiative, a neighborhood-based plan bringing organizations interested in food security and fitness together in community projects. In an earlier project, he led a large food access study of the Austin neighborhood of Chicago's West Side. Dr. Block is active in the Chicago Food Policy Advisory Council, as well as community commissions on food access issues. In addition, Dr. Block has a longstanding interest in visual depictions of urban and rural spaces, particularly in the artwork surrounding maps. Dr. Block has a Ph.D. in geography from UCLA, where his dissertation focused on milk, public health, regulation, and the rise of the modern American food system.

**Noel Chávez** is associate professor of Community Health Sciences and Co-Director of the Maternal and Child Health Program in the School of Public Health at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her research centers on the health and nutrition status of Latinos and other underrepresented groups, particularly that of children and families. A related interest is the role of culture in nutrition and health and the changes in health and nutritional status that occur with migration, and the effects of these changes on health services use. She also has a research stream in the area of Community Food Security, and am working now on data analysis from the UIC portion of a large project

to assess the food system in the Chicago area. One newer project involves assessing the availability of fruits and vegetables in selected Illinois WIC vendors as preparation for new USDA regulations to authorize fruit and vegetable purchases for WIC clients. She am also an investigator on a NIH funded study to evaluate cultural and ethnic differences in survey responses in four ethnic groups. Dr. Chavez earned her Ph.D from the Center for Health Services Education and Research (now the School of Public Health) at Saint Louis University in 1986.

**Erika Allen** is Chicago Projects Manager for Growing Power, a nationally acclaimed non-profit organization and land trust providing equal access to healthy, high-quality, safe, and affordable food, especially in disadvantaged communities. She helps food producers of limited resources strengthen their farm businesses and work in partnerships to create healthy and diverse food options in inner city and rural communities. Erika and her father, Growing Power founder Will Allen, have recently received significant attention for their work, including a feature article in The New York Times Magazine. Erika is co-chair of the Chicago Food Policy Advisory Council, and was appointed by Governor Pat Quinn in 2008 to the Illinois Local and Organic Food and Farm Task Force. In 2007 she was honored by Family Focus for her work in community food systems, and in 2006 she received the Good Eating Award from the Chicago Tribune. Erika has a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and an MA in art therapy from the University of Illinois at Chicago.

**Dinah Ramirez, R.N.** is the founder and former Executive Director of the Healthy South Chicago Coalition. HSC is a coalition of over 150 agencies, CBO, residents, schools, and churches that work on public health issues such as food access by running urban farms, affordable housing, job searches, computer literacy and access, health care access and health promotion, capacity building through community projects, research on minority health issues thru Community Based Participatory Research. Ms. Ramirez's technical assistance is grounded in over 30 years as a registered nurse with experience in nonprofit management, program implementation, public health awareness, and health education with concentration in health disparities and diverse communities. Ms. Ramirez received her RN from South Chicago College in 1977.