Building a Better Food System:

A Community-Informed Approach to Understanding and Transforming Food Systems

Strong food systems are equitable, resilient, and sustainable. Our work helps communities understand how their food systems function today, and where targeted action can create lasting positive change.

What a Food System Is – and Why It Matters

Much of what determines whether communities can access nutritious, affordable food happens behind the scenes. Farmers, processors, distributors, retailers, and the policies connecting them shape what food is available, to whom, and at what cost. When those forces align, communities can thrive. When they don't, the result can be hunger, wasted resources, diet-related disease, and widening inequality.

Those forces are also part of something larger: a food system, which encompasses all the people, activities, and resources involved in producing, processing, distributing, and consuming food – and the social, economic, political and environmental conditions that shape them. Understanding where that system works and where it fails is what makes real change possible.

Engage Communities.
Build Shared Understanding.
Apply Data & Modeling.
Identify Priorities for Action.
Enable Ongoing Learning.

What We Do

Most food insecurity interventions treat symptoms without addressing what actually makes a system fragile. At the Global Food Institute, we take a different approach: we leverage interdisciplinary teams of experts across the George Washington University to work hand-in-hand with communities to understand and strengthen their food system from within. Through facilitated workshops, we bring together the full range of people who make food systems work to collectively map how their system functions. Combining local knowledge with data, we reveal where the system is strong, where it's vulnerable, and where strategic action can create the greatest impact.

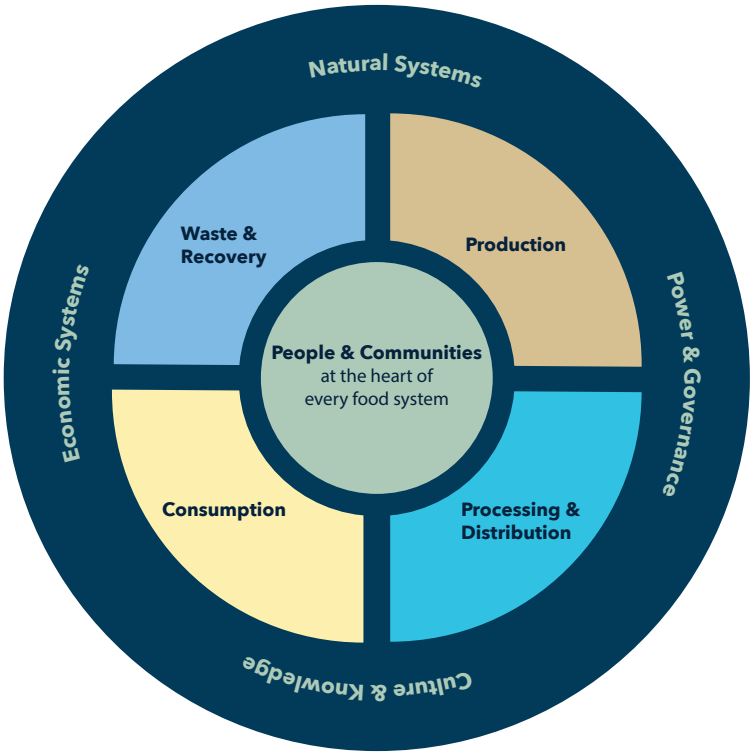
What Communities Walk Away With

Our process gives communities and policymakers something they can truly act on: a clear, shared picture of how their food system works, built from the expertise and lived experience of the people who depend on it. Communities gain a concrete understanding of their food system's capacity, constraints, and opportunities for transformation. Because local stakeholders help build the roadmap themselves, they trust it, own it, and have the tools and skills to drive change long after the engagement ends.

Our Work in Action

We have applied this approach across four continents: agricultural finance in Uganda, food security in Vietnam and Cambodia, healthy food access in Mississippi and Indiana, urban food resilience in Cincinnati and DC, public health in Puerto Rico, and school feeding in Haiti.

The Anatomy of a Food System



To learn about our full methodology or explore a partnership, see page 2.

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Food Systems Mapping: Methodology and Partnership

How We Work

Our process is sequential, adaptive, and designed to build on itself at each stage while remaining responsive to the specific context of each community and partner.

Methodology	Description
Engaging Communities Through Participatory Methods	Using facilitated group processes, we convene local stakeholders – including farmers, distributors, and community members – to collectively map how their food system works and where change is needed, building a foundation rooted in lived experience.
Building Shared Understanding Across Stakeholders	We create a clear picture of how a food system functions, mapping connections and establishing a baseline for measuring change over time. This builds a shared language among diverse partners and aligns them on challenges, opportunities, and desired outcomes.
Applying Data and Modeling to Deepen Analysis	We build models and simulations to test potential interventions before implementation. These insights help stakeholders turn community knowledge into evidence-based decisions.
Identifying Priorities for Action	With a shared understanding of the system and data-informed insights, stakeholders work together to identify high-impact intervention points. This collaborative prioritization ensures policies and investments target leverage points where change will be most effective.
Enabling Ongoing Learning and Self-Reliance	We equip partners with tools to monitor and adapt in real-time. As interventions are implemented, we track progress and evaluate outcomes, building the analytical capacity communities need to sustain long-term improvements in health, equity, and resilience.

What This Approach Delivers

Visual System Maps validated by local stakeholders, showing how and why food moves through the system; capturing relationships, dependencies, decision points, and flows from production to consumption.

A Prioritized Investment and Policy Roadmap identifying where resources and policies will have the greatest impact on system resilience, grounded in both community priorities and data analysis.

Baseline Metrics and a Measurement Framework that enable ongoing tracking of system performance – assessing whether the food system is becoming more resilient, not just whether program outputs were delivered.

Trained Local Capacity in systems thinking, mapping techniques, and data interpretation so partners can use skills independently to solve future food system challenges.

Our Partners

We collaborate with organizations seeking to understand complex food systems and create lasting impact. Our partners span government agencies shaping food policy, businesses optimizing investments and client outcomes, NGOs and nonprofits delivering programs on the ground, philanthropies investing in long-term resilience, and universities building analytical capacity.

Contact us at **globalfoodinstitute@gwu.edu** to learn more or explore opportunities to work together.