



Environmental Justice CSU Justice Roundtable Series

EJCSU Roundtable Brief #5: Food Justice for All

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This brief is based on the Environmental Justice Roundtable Series hosted by the Environmental Justice Working Group (formerly EJCSU), which is supported by CSU's School of Global Environmental Sustainability's (SoGES) as one of its Global Challenges Research Teams (GCRT). The series began on February 12, 2015. For more information about EJCSU, please visit their website at: (<http://environmentaljustice.colostate.edu/>)

This document is part of a series of roundtable briefs highlighting how environmental justice is conceptualized, discussed, researched, and put into practice locally, regionally, and globally. The purpose of these briefs is to highlight the variety of contexts within which environmental equity and justice (EEJ) frameworks are imperative. In particular, the goal is to emphasize the transdisciplinary nature of EEJ, highlighting common themes and differences of interpretation and application that emerge in the EJ community at Colorado State University and among additional colleagues in our networks. This particular roundtable brief is focused on issues of EEJ in food production and access.

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FOOD JUSTICE FOR ALL

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ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION



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This Food Justice Roundtable is the fourth of the roundtable series hosted by Environmental Justice CSU. We will address what it looks like to fight for social justice in conventional and alternative food supply chains. This is a great opportunity to discuss related issues and questions, foster research collaborations, and develop community projects.

Friday
OCT 30, 2015

3pm - 5pm

Old Town Library, Community Room

Hosted by Environmental Justice CSU,
a School of Global Environmental Sustainability
Global Challenges Research Team



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sustainability.colostate.edu/events/food-justice-for-all

Executive Summary

The 'Food Justice for All' Roundtable Discussion took place on October 30, 2017, at the Old Town Library and was the fifth roundtable event in the Environmental Justice CSU Roundtable Series. Panel members included Dr. Joshua Sbicca (Sociology, CSU), Dr. Jill Harrison (Sociology, University of Colorado - Boulder), Dr. Karina Cespedes (Ethnic Studies, CSU), and Dana Guber (The Growing Project). Joshua Sbicca introduced the group and moderated the discussion, which centered around issues of equity and justice in food production and distribution.

The panel discussion began with a welcome note from Dr. Tara Shelley, a co-PI of EJ CSU, followed by introductions from the panel members. Panel members drew from personal experiences and research findings about food justice to synthesize a multi-national and multi-scalar roundtable discussion. International and local efforts addressing food access and quality were discussed as the conversation moved through a number of themes. Josh Sbicca started the discussion by sharing his definition of food justice and his journey into the topic as an undergraduate in California and how those experiences inspire his research. Jill Harrison followed Josh by sharing her main research focus related to food justice, specifically, her research on pesticide drift in California. Karina Cespedes addressed issues of food justice on an international scale while discussing her work in Cuba on food sovereignty. Finally, Dana Guber shared her experience with community-based efforts to overcome food scarcity in Fort Collins and surrounding northern Colorado areas.

The discussion then moved to an open dialogue with all attendees. Main topics that arose in the dialogue included:

- 1) Alternative forms of food production,
- 2) The relationship between climate change and food production, justice, and sovereignty,
- 3) Social movements for greater food sovereignty and
- 4) More holistic approaches for working on issues of food justice and sovereignty.

Other themes that arose in the discussion included local efforts to realize food justice in Fort Collins, the politics of food production and distribution, consideration of animals and meat production, and governmental regulations for socially and environmentally responsible agriculture. Panel members and attendees drew from a diverse set of backgrounds to address these themes and more throughout the event. Important questions that arose within the roundtable conversation include:

- What does *food justice* mean? What does it look like?

- What are the most effective ways to address food injustices, outside of market-based approaches?
- What are the connections between food justice and food sovereignty? Where do they differ?
- Who has the right to public spaces and using them as they see fit?
- What strategies can be adopted to bring together different voices to address food justice related issues?
- How can we begin to prioritize community needs and wellbeing over the political agenda?

Event and Panelist Introduction

The event began with each participant sharing their perspective and experience with food related issues and how they are working to address them.

Dr. Joshua Sbicca—Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Colorado State University

Josh began the discussion by offering a working definition of food justice, providing a foundation for the open dialogue to follow:

Food Justice strives to eliminate exploitation and oppression and challenge structural drivers of all form of inequality within and beyond the food system. Food justice advocates for the right to healthy food that is produced justly, recognizes diverse cultural food ways and histories, and promotes equitable distribution of resources, democratic participation and control over food systems. This focus on social justice broadens the predominant emphasis on environmental sustainability within a lot of local and regional food movements here in the United States and in Canada.

Josh then went on to describe how he became interested in social and food justice as an undergraduate at Santa Clara University, immediately following September 11, 2001. He was very active in student movements, including a campus boycott in support of dining hall workers on his campus, work on bringing fair trade coffee to campus, and boycotts of Taco Bell and Coca-Cola. In graduate school, a heavy focus on issues of ‘environmental bads’ got him interested in ‘environmental goods’ such as green spaces, public transportation, food, and water, particularly food justice movements in low-income communities of color. This interest evolved into his fascination with social movements. His research has focused on organized social justice groups, including Food Not Bombs in Orlando and Planting Justice in Oakland. In his work, Josh highlights the links between food justice and social justice issues and explains the

importance of acknowledging these issues as structural problems, interrelated with other issues like mass incarceration and gentrification. He noted:

Anti-oppression work in this context meant that at the same time people sprouted urban agriculture plots around the neighborhood, that it was necessary to find solutions to structural problems. In short, food justice meant linking up to other social justice struggles. For example, if a neighborhood is gentrifying and the low-income people who formerly lived there can no longer afford to live there, we need to question the efficacy and equity of local supply chains linking up that neighborhood. Structural problems are first order problems that those who do food justice need to be aware of and work to resist if people are to realize the goals of food justice.

In his roundtable introduction, Josh elaborated on the work of Food Not Bombs and Planting Justice as well as a host of other organizations engaged in innovative ways to demonstrate grounded interpretations of food justice, approaches that accounted for structural inequality. While clarifying that food is not a panacea, he provided evidence on how food can be used as a tool for social justice. In closing, Josh encouraged participants to think about what food justice would look like on the Front Range in Colorado.

To see more about Josh's work, check out his profile on Colorado State University's Sociology department webpage [here](#).

Dr. Jill Harrison—Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Colorado-Boulder

Jill Harrison began by introducing her research and explaining how it is located at the intersection of food justice and environmental justice. In Jill's work, food justice essentially means environmental justice in agricultural communities. For over ten years, Jill has researched political conflicts over pesticide drift in California's Central Valley. Pesticide drift, she explained, is the '*airborne movement of pesticides away from where they are applied into some other place*'. This airborne movement can have important chronic health implications. She highlighted the way in which policymakers downplay the risks while individuals working in the agricultural industry, their families, and some graduate students and lawyers see much higher risks and more frequent exposures than policymakers suggest. Despite the commonality of pesticide drift into poor Latino neighborhoods and vulnerable agricultural labor communities, the health abnormalities linked to pesticide drift still remain contested illnesses.

Jill explained that poverty is a major barrier and can be a constraining factor preventing people from reporting or addressing health issues related to pesticide exposure. In addition to poverty and fear of job loss, immigrant farmworkers' legal status exists as a constraining factor in the United States agricultural system. Jill explained:

There are a lot of legal status issues. At least half of farm workers in the United States today lack the authorization to be in the United States, which presents a huge barrier for themselves, and the people they live with and know, to reporting pesticide exposure because they are afraid of interacting with law enforcement. We live in a racist world, which also delegitimizes, in many cases, claims that people make about pesticide exposure if they are not white. And then there is also just a broad regulatory culture of industries protection that I document in my work. So the lesson from all of that, and this is the main argument that I made in the book, is that we need stronger pesticide regulations to account for the social inequalities and social relations of group-based oppression.

Jill observed that social scientists researching pesticide drift can play critical roles in shaping evidence-based solutions, their research findings often helping “justify precaution-based restrictions on the use of the most toxic and drift-prone pesticides.”

There were two crucial arguments that Jill made. First, she asserted that many people ask the wrong questions about food justice, which center the conversation on market-based solutions. Jill challenged the idea of market-based solutions to food justice issues, suggesting it is “dangerous” to rely completely on this approach to solve food and environmental inequalities. She suggested that in addition to these types of solutions, we should be pushing for regulatory reform and not absolving government of all responsibility.

Second, Jill argued that we need to think “*critically and carefully about justice, and what vision of justice our actions and our arguments support intentionally or otherwise... We have to specify what justice means to us. It means different things to different people. It means really contradictory things to different kinds of people, with different kinds of consequences...So what I would like having conversation about today is what kinds of political commitments we could all participate in and help to strengthen, that could meaningfully pursue a vision of justice that takes equity and oppression seriously.*”

To see more about Jill's work, check out her profile on the University of Colorado Boulder's webpage [here](#).

Dr. Karina Cespedes—Assistant Professor, Ethnic Studies Department, Colorado State University

Karina began her introduction by defining the concept of *food sovereignty*, which she describes as ‘*meaningful structural redistributive reforms, including land, water, and markets that are in the hands of communities... [it] is really the right of sovereign peoples to determine their own food, agriculture, livestock, and fishery systems and policies*’. She went on to note that

The position of food sovereignty movements is that peoples’ access and control over their food has changed dramatically, not over the last 100 years but over the last 500 years. And it is really based on the history of colonization, indigenous extermination, slavery, imperialism, and neoliberalism. And engagement with food sovereignty requires a deep cultural engagement, historical knowledge, and a more complex understanding of how food informs community wellbeing.

She argued that while *food justice* and *food sovereignty* have many areas of overlap, they also have many differences. She explained that some of the strongest food sovereignty movements exist or have existed in Latin America, and she dove deeper through her colorful examples from Cuba – where her research lies at the intersection of food insecurity and informal economies.

Karina first described the approaches taken to promote food justice by the Cuban government, then explained the ways these systems conflict with the idea of food sovereignty. Despite the government providing access to food for all citizens, Karina explained, in many cases it is still not enough, which has led citizens to engage in informal economies such as sex work.

Building on food justice issues in Cuba, Karina also explained how food is being largely diverted into tourism, an industry that Cuba relies heavily upon. Karina noted that the tourism industry and food insecurities have shaped a population that now has to “*sell its culture, sell its talent, and ultimately sell its body in order to literally just secure food*”.

Karina posed the following questions:

How can we engage in more community-based participatory research in order to facilitate this connection between what is being revealed about hunger within this context and food insecurity within marginalized communities? And how can we simultaneously highlight the acts of endurance and of collective survival that are already taking place?

Essentially, she noted, “*within a food sovereignty model this is a severe problem that needs to be resolved by addressing larger issues of power and racism left unresolved by merely providing access to food.*”

She concluded with one example of how she is addressing this in her own work and teaching. On fieldtrips with her students to Cuba, Karina asks them to think about “pathways towards true sustainability and how can we mistake, you know, signs of sustainability with what looks like underdevelopment and the need for gentrification, agro-business, or free trade to come in? And instead, how can we draw closer to the survival strategies of local communities who are surviving whatever initiatives there may be regarding food provided by government programs who are surviving the lack of food?”

To see more about Karina’s work, check out her profile on Colorado State University’s webpage [here](#).

Dana Guber—The Growing Project

Dana Guber, the fourth panel member, is the Director of The Growing Project, a non-profit based in Fort Collins. She began with a brief description of food justice issues in Larimer County, where 14.5% of the population is considered food insecure. She defined being food insecure as a situation when a person “*does not know potentially where their next meal is coming from and does not have access to nutritious food.*” After sharing data to show the range in levels of food (in)security present in Fort Collins, Dana talked about the efforts that The Growing Project has made to address these issues.

The Growing Project aims to address food justice issues by increasing production on a community level to improve access to food. The Growing Project installs gardens in low-income communities, working closely with housing authorities, Habitat for Humanity, and the mobile parks on North College Avenue in Fort Collins. After conducting a community needs assessment, The Growing Project provides all materials and seeds for the garden and is as involved in the process as the community wishes. In addition to building community gardens, the Growing Project has a one-acre garden for educational opportunities and to produce food to donate to the Food Bank and FoCo Café.

The Growing Project offers many community involvement opportunities for kids, youth and adults. Dana shared a few examples, such as an eight-week youth program called Teens for Food Justice, volunteering opportunities for at-risk youth from the Boys and Girls Club, and their collaboration projects with La Familia, a low-income bilingual child care center. Dana was able to provide examples of current local movements to address food justice issues by sharing her experience working with the Growing Project.

To learn more about Dana’s work, check out The Growing Project’s webpage [here](#).

Open Discussion

After these introductory comments by each panel member, the Roundtable moved to an open discussion. Participants included students, professors, researchers, and community members with a diverse set of experience and expertise. Participants drew on a variety of backgrounds in Sociology, Agriculture, Political Science and Governance as the discussion moved through a number of themes.

The audience immediately focused on climate change and the threat that it poses to food production globally. A roundtable participant explained how the threat of climate change can lead to food and water scarcity, which can then lead to greater social injustices and climate refugees. Building on this comment, a participant shifted the conversation to talk about indigenous communities and Traditional Ecological Knowledge. They highlighted the fact that indigenous communities will most likely experience these problems first, due to the subsistence patterns and nature of their food production. Participants agreed that food systems should be challenged to adapt to climate change, and that more localized production systems would be more suitable to do so. In this, an additional challenge will be to develop adaptation strategies that are collaborative and procedurally just, allowing many diverse voices at the table. Participants also criticized news outlets for not acknowledging climate change as a root cause of other current problems, such as the instability in Syria.

Connections between climate change, food production, and carbon-intensive food transportation, regional food systems, land use, the treatment of animals and our meat consumption were discussed consistently by participants and panel members. For example, Josh noted that movement building cannot be isolated: *“The climate justice movement is as important to the food justice movement as this food justice movement is to the climate justice movement. That, really, we are talking about people’s livelihoods.”*

Melinda made a similar observation: *“We have this whole disruption of livelihoods and behaviors and we need to really think about how we can address the food issue. Water issues. Environmental issues. In a collective, holistic way. And I think it is a real hard nut to crack. But it is one of these things that we have to figure out, you know, what are those strategies that can bring different voices together at the table to address these very intractable issues?”*

Karina repeatedly described why intersectional forms of injustice should be considered. She suggested, for example, we *“consider the ways in which African American populations experience food insecurity, compared to other populations in this country and how that connects with not just poverty but with like police brutality. And what is our commitment as people committed to food justice, food sovereignty to the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement. Do we ever even think about what it means to engage politically with that kind of a movement?”*.

She went on to discuss the difference between okra, which is culturally significant, and government-backed genetically modified corn in the Caribbean, particularly in Cuba. She observed: *“We are going to end up with segments of the population being forced to produce a certain crop that they may not necessarily want to produce, need to produce, or find culturally significant to produce. And it leads to a certain kind of a different spiritual sort of starvation. You know? When you are forced to produce a crop like this versus one that has cultural significance. It leads to a certain sense of bondage for a lack of better word, you know?”*

A common theme throughout the discussion was the level at which food justice issues should be addressed. Opinions among the participants seemed divided, with strong support for community-level solutions from some and for others solutions at higher levels of government. Strong cases were made for both approaches. In addition, the group critically discussed the effectiveness of policy-based solutions, market-based solutions, and alternative solutions rooted in neither regulation nor in the market (generally these take the form of local food systems).

There were similar perspectives among participants on governance issues, such as big money in politics; however, some participants felt that despite these obstacles, the best approach would be to press government to strengthen environmental regulations and other regulations in place to protect society. Jill shared her perspective:

The kinds of projects I would implore you all to consider getting involved in would be around raising the minimum wage, fighting for stronger pesticide regulations. We have a minimum wage. We have a gigantic pesticide regulatory apparatus in the US. It is full of problems. But it doesn't mean that we have the right to abandon it and turn our backs on it.... We could talk about tax redistribution... We could also then, in terms of thinking about this with other countries, talk about international lending practices and priority in the structural adjustment programs that are imposed on other countries by virtue of being debtors in the international climate. So when actors take on the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank for the restrictions that they impose on borrower countries, those are your opportunities to get involved. Let's push for changes in the kind of restrictions that are put on other countries that push to downsize their labor regulations and labor protection and eliminate their environmental protections.

Participants who promoted community level solutions suggested working with people to develop grassroots approaches to food justice. These solutions could range from improving access to nutritious foods by establishing local gardens or actively redistributing food from

areas with a surplus to areas with scarcity. Building on community-level approaches, the topic of social movements arose. Josh made some crucial points about food justice and inequality:

It is illustrative to have conversations around justice, that if you want food justice, we can't just grow our own food to realize food justice. Because not everyone has access to the space to grow their own food, not everybody wants to grow their own food. Not everybody cares about the food that they are eating, but maybe they are working at McDonalds and they are getting paid shit wages and it matters to them that they are able to feed their family something other than McDonalds that they are schlepping to other people every single day. Then so the question of food justice for me is about what are we doing more politically and more collectively. Are we building social movements? And I think there is often times a lack of imagination of what are the means to build a social movement at this point. That we think, you know, the era of the civil rights movement is dead. Or the era of the 60s was the sort of pinnacle of movement building and somehow now we just buy our way to change. And I think the Occupy movement and the 'Black Lives Matter' movement are two really, really important examples of what movement building looks like right now in the US. And talking transnationally just for two seconds, La Via Campesina, and the transnational social movement for food sovereignty is a direct response to structural adjustment programs.

Other issues within the food production system were highlighted, such as mistreatment of animals and genetically modified foods. Participants presented the need for the inclusion of animals in the discussion of food justice. They reflected on the inhumane practices used in meat production and argued for stricter regulation and regulatory enforcement within these sectors of food systems. Energy and water expenditures within these food systems were also highlighted as problematic. Genetically modified foods were also addressed, specifically for the potentially negative financial, environmental, and cultural impacts they can have on agricultural communities.

A final thought addressed in the discussion focused on questions of access and procedural equity, especially rights to the city and who gets to make decisions. A participant presented the troubling reality, in that space for city development always triumphs over space for community gardens and agriculture on public lands. They offered examples such as the city of Denver approving the construction of middle-income apartments in the place of three community gardens, or in the case of the CSU stadium that was built on top of the University greenhouse. Dana reinforced this comment, mentioning that this was a common practice she has witnessed

while working with The Growing Project. This was also brought up in the context of food donations, and the limitations set where you can and cannot provide food to others.

The discussion ended with a final note from Dana about ways to get involved with food justice issues in and around Fort Collins. Her recommendations included getting involved with:

- The Growing Project (volunteers in garden, kids program, food transportation)
- FoCo Café (a donation based café in Fort Collins)
- The Gardens on Spring Creek
- The Larimer County Food Bank