

THE PLACE OF ALTERNATIVE AGRO-FOOD SYSTEMS:
EXAMINING FOOD ACCESS AND EMERGENCY FOOD SYSTEMS IN
MASON COUNTY, WASHINGTON

by

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ABSTRACT

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As a manifestation of broader structural violence, hungry populations are embedded into existing agro-food systems and are indicative of failures within these systems. This thesis seeks to ask if alternative agro-food programming increases food access to vulnerable populations who utilize emergency food networks by utilizing two analyses. A theoretical critique of alternative agro-food system frameworks identifies four traps in planning that further embed hunger in communities. This analysis is grounded in a case study of interactions between alternative agro-food programming and emergency food networks in Mason County, a rural community with high food inaccess in Washington State. Informants involved with Mason County emergency food networks participated in semi-structured interviews, and cited bartering and sharing, capacity, and specific vulnerable populations as consistent challenges in programming. Social networking was identified as the main organizational strength. A discussion of the role of agro-food system programming and perceptions of food access in the county informs recommendations for improving services and successfully incorporating alternative agro-food systems in emergency food networks within Mason County.

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This thesis is dedicated to the volunteer community of Mason County.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Hunger is a feature of communities with failing food systems. Individuals who are unable to access food sufficient to meet their basic needs are often at risk for negative health impacts and decreased social visibility. Global and domestic hunger has been consistently maintained since the mid-1960s; this period also marks the first major implementation by the United States government and citizens to help hungry individuals through global and domestic food assistance programs. Hunger in the non-industrial or rising industrial world is the common face of food inaccess; future economic and environmental conditions will create environments that exacerbate vulnerabilities for these existing hungry populations globally. Parallel to this, hungry populations in the United States have grown and shifted over the past century; they also reflect a changing economic, environmental, and cultural landscape influenced by global pressures. Migration away from agrarian, rural centers to metropolitan regions have increased need in both communities; urban regions have experienced a greater concentration of food assistance clients, while rural regions are increasingly vulnerable to decaying social services and isolated hungry populations.

Concurrent to the establishment of a hungry constituency in the United States, the rise of alternative agro-food movements has occurred against the backdrop of steady and omnipresent conventional agricultural production. These alternative systems have worked to counter conventional systems that are

popularly characterized by industrialized harvest and production, chemical fertilization and pest control, and corporate control of trade and genetic seed material. Alternative agro-food systems have used a variety of approaches to provide “radical” solutions to manage and ameliorate food system failures that have maintained and increased hungry populations in the United States.

Proponents and practitioners have created various narratives of agro-food production that run counter to the environmentally and socially destructive methods of conventional agro-food production; as of late, these narratives have been driven into a strict binary, pitting conventional and alternative against each other in the political and cultural arenas.

These frameworks have gained support from constituencies who have specific value-laden relationships with alternative agro-food models. Emergency food networks, which provide community food assistance in diverse ways, have increased their partnerships with these alternative models as their work or values overlap. With hungry populations being maintained or increasing and alternative agro-food models gaining political traction and buy-in from constituents, it seems clear that partnerships between emergency food networks and alternative producers may be mutually beneficial. This, however, is dependent upon shared values, goals, and missions between the two fields.

Alternative agro-food systems exist within “radical” narratives that emphasize outsider, grassroots values. By contrast, emergency food networks have been long-engrained in traditional values that transcend multiple constituencies. Examining if alternative agro-food models share similar values

and tactics with emergency food providers is vital for social service providers, food producers, land-use specialists, and economic developers. Food system planning is an interdisciplinary process that benefits from examinations of on-the-ground practices within theoretical frameworks.

This thesis asks if alternative agro-food models are effective at improving food access to vulnerable, rural populations. It provides a theoretical analysis of the effectiveness of alternative agro-food systems to increase access for populations vulnerable to hunger. This analysis will be drawn from existing food policy and agro-food literature; primarily, it will utilize “traps” as ways to identify fallacies in alternative agro-food policies, utilizing a framework developed by Born & Purcell (2006). Specifically, productivity, neoliberal, charity, and scale traps will be examined in the context of current, widely practiced alternative agro-food models that have taken root over the past two decades. To ground this theoretical analysis, a subsequent case study in Mason County, Washington establishes how these traps can be applied to challenges that rural emergency food networks and their clients face in accessing nutritionally dense and appropriate food. This case study uses interviews with key informants within the county's emergency food network to determine what challenges are faced by social service providers and their clients. Themes gathered from the interviews are then analyzed within the context of the theoretical analysis to determine if the traps identified are at work in Mason County's alternative agro-food networks.

Ultimately, this study asks the question: does alternative agro-food programming increase food access to vulnerable populations who utilize

emergency food networks? This question will be answered by applying it to a case study, which asks: what do emergency food networks look like in Mason County? What challenges do they face? Finally, what interactions do they have with alternative agro-food programming?

Healing the open wound of hunger in the United States is an ongoing challenge that will be met with a diverse set of solutions; determining the unique challenges of a food inaccessible community like Mason County faces in partnership with both conventional and alternative agro-food systems can better inform social service providers and decision makers as they shape plans to aid hungry populations now and in the future.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Study Methodology

Globalization, neoliberal trade policies, and increased volatility in global food markets have triggered important discussions about access to food, both domestically and internationally since the mid-1960s (Lock et al., 2009). Numerous bodies of literature have dealt with the complex interactions between producers, sellers, and consumers of food and the environmental, economic, and political structures within which they function. Food is a critical link for basic human health and a unique link between built and biophysical systems. As agricultural production has intensified and food trade has transcended local markets, traditional relationships between food producers, sellers, and consumers have become increasingly commodified (Peters et al., 2009). Acute fluctuations in food prices have increased costs for nutritionally dense foods while decreasing food access for the world's most vulnerable populations (Barrett et al., 2009). While the impacts of globalized trade and communication have amplified production, hunger has been maintained and increased in some communities. Populations suffering from chronic hunger or malnutrition are often in rural regions with decreased access to social, economic, or technological resources. The food crises of 2007-2008 and 2011-2012 show the serious impact that food access can have on political and social stability in these vulnerable regions (Barrett et al., 2009; Rosen & Shapouri, 2008).

Food access exerts serious pressure on human health, economic systems, and biophysical processes. Scholars and advocates have developed frameworks

within agro-food systems analysis to address the impacts of production, trade, and consumption shifts on the accessibility of food for all individuals, particularly those vulnerable to hunger. An overview of existing theoretical frameworks of agro-food systems and the historical and contemporary application of alternative food system frameworks provides a context for the state of global and domestic agro-food networks.

2.1 Picturing Food Systems

Food is unique in its ability to intersect the cultural, social, political, economic, and biophysical worlds. In the twentieth century, the intersection between agricultural production and food consumption has become a widely studied topic, reflecting upon both increases in agricultural yield and human population growth (Anderson & Cook, 1999; FAO, 2009; Goodman & Dupuis, 2002; Lockie & Kitto, 2000; Niles & Rolf, 2008; Peters et al., 2008). The interplay between food production, marketing, acquisition, and consumption is frequently referred to as a “food system.” Agro-food systems analysis draws on systems modeling, which incorporates different scales and levels of agricultural yield, trade, and purchase. A food system takes into account all levels of production, marketing, and purchase of food within a culture, community, or political state (Dixon, 1999). Additionally, the distribution, preparation, and consumption of food are contained within some analyses of food systems.

Food systems research draws upon the multi-disciplinary fields of agronomy, anthropology, geography, economics, political economy, human health and nutrition, and labor and population studies. The multi-faceted face of food

systems reinforces the vital link that food plays in the sociocultural, ecological, and economic landscapes of our world. Researchers have developed multiple theoretical frameworks from which food systems can be examined; examining these frameworks expands understandings of food and its relationship to ecological and human processes.

2.2 Conventional Agro-Food Systems

The conventional agro-food system functions almost exclusively within a capitalist framework; food is seen a commodity and is traded in multiple marketplaces. Conventional agro-food systems have been single-minded in their approach to yield increases and the application and implementation of emerging agronomic science and technology. Conventional systems are typified by their dependence upon mechanization and petrochemicals to power farms, which are frequently large monoculture operations (Story et al., 2008). Conventional agro-food cultivation has coupled with neoliberal trade policies which have resulted in immense global acquisitions of land for food production by multi-national agro-food corporations; additionally, genetic modification of seed material has brought about a host of legal and ecological concerns regarding biodiversity and intellectual property rights (Goodman, 2001).

The United States' unique social and natural landscapes have encouraged the growth of agricultural production by both individuals and larger corporate entities. The immigration of white Europeans to North America began the agricultural transformation of the United States; a patchwork of subsistence and expansive plantation farms in the Southeast were cemented early in the country's

history; other white immigrants pushed westward towards the Great Plains to begin tilling the seemingly endless topsoil for wheat and corn production (Cochrane, 1993). Expansion into the West cemented the role agricultural production played in shaping mythologies of the American economy and identity (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). Cattle, wheat, and corn provided not only sustenance to a growing domestic population, but established the United States as the model for robust production and distribution within international markets. By the mid-1950s, the United States was known as the “breadbasket to the world” and was supplying not only its expanding domestic population, but European countries recovering from the famine of World War-II (Lentz & Barrett, 2008).

Distribution of conventionally produced agricultural goods continues to be dependent upon food trade policies and practices, reinforcing the endemic economic underpinnings of the conventional food system. Despite the FAO’s report (2012) of a 170% increase in food consumption since the 1960s, increases in oil prices, biofuel production on land previously used for food crops, and decreases in soil productivity, water access, and genetic diversity are all potential factors that will continue to impact the conventional food system in the coming decades. Despite these potential challenges, conventional agro-food systems have utilized global systems of trade and communication to increase their capacity for shipping and cultivation of regional crops for international markets. Grocery stores in the United States are now able to consistently stock out-of-season products, as well as non-domestic products, year round.

The consistent availability of both non-regional produce and processed

food products has shaped the American diet and culture of eating; the spread of cheap, mass produced food is commonly seen as a significant factor in the rise of congestive heart failure, heart disease, childhood obesity, and diabetes in the United States (Blasbalg, Wispelwey, & Deckelbaum, 2011). The environmental impacts of decades of monoculture production on decreasingly productive farms, compounded by chemical fertilizer use and the controversial cultivation of genetically modified crop seed, have severe impacts on the health of agricultural landscapes (Pimentel et al., 2005). The Federal government has further embedded conventional production through financial subsidies that cushion risk for conventional producers and, on the whole, discourage innovation or alternative production (Marshall, 2000). The impacts of the dual cultural and environmental consequences of conventional agro-food production have inspired the implementation of alternative agro-food frameworks.

2.3 Alternative Food System Frameworks

The conventional food system has gained immense economic power over the past 50 years. Increased efficiency in industrial food production and management has been complemented by neoliberal trade policies and agricultural subsidies, allowing almost complete domination by transnational trade over regional production. Parallel to this increase in power, individuals have sought to right the ecological and economic injustices of the conventional agro-food system through the development and implementation of alternative food system frameworks (Kloppenborg et al., 2000; Koc & Dahlberg, 1999). These frameworks have been established by advocates, researchers, and decision makers

to determine how to improve aspects of the conventional food system. They present a radical vision of food production and access which draws heavily from social justice, sustainability, and political economy to address inequalities in the conventional food system (Qazi & Selfa, 2005). Here, five basic theoretical frameworks, which focus on one central motivating factor as a catalyst for the “alternative” worldview, will be examined: 1) sustainable agriculture, 2) food security, 3) food sovereignty/democracy, 4) food justice, and 5) the right to adequate food. Due to the multitude of terms and ideas that are used by scholars and practitioners of alternative food systems, it is useful to explore the different frameworks to find similarities and divergence.

2.4 Sustainable Agriculture

Sustainable agriculture presents itself as an **ecological** alternative to industrial, conventional agricultural production (Lichtfouse et al, 2009). While “sustainable” within this framework may apply to both economic and social sustainability, the roots of the system are based in models of agriculture that are low-impact, organic, and ecologically sound (Kloppenburg et al, 2000). Common methodologies include low or no-till farming, livestock-crop integration, cover cropping and other soil conservation techniques, and seed saving (Lichtfouse et al., 2009). Sustainable agriculture encourages small-scale and local production of food but focuses little attention on agricultural workers’ rights, relationships between growers and consumers, or implementation for social change (Fidler, 2012). This framework has heavily influenced the “back to the land” movements that saw growth both internationally and domestically in the 1900s, 1940s, 1960s,

and 2000s (Niles & Rolf, 2008). Sustainable agriculture is seen as the first foray into alternative food system theory, and underpins many of the subsequent schools of thought (Carolan, 2009).

Currently, sustainable agriculture focuses on organic education and certification. The rise of the organic movement has been driven by sustainable agriculture producers and buyers who have sought to streamline certification for producers (Marshall, 2000). Organic food has now grown out of its niche market and onto conventional grocery store shelves. While prices, particularly for organic livestock products, still remain higher than conventionally produced food, educational and marketing campaigns have increased organic sales (Born & Purcell, 2006; Qazi & Selfa, 2005). Certified organic production is still a minor part of net agricultural production in the United States. However, certain organic producers have managed to co-opt business models from conventional agriculture and successfully apply them to the marketing and cultural narratives of sustainable agriculture; this has expanded production to national and international markets on very large scales (Goodman & DuPuis, 2002). Organic agriculture has entered the national food dialogue as a touchstone for the divisive conventional-alternative agro-food binary, with proponents citing the numerous environmental and human health benefits and detractors labeling it “elite.”

Additionally, climate change impacts on agricultural production have strengthened the voice of sustainable agriculture advocates and supporters. Warming global temperatures have been projected to severely impact precipitation, and thus, water availability for crops (FAO, 2009; Fung, Lopez, &

New, 2011). Additionally, an increase in major flooding events, which are projected under future climate scenarios, could bring about further soil degradation on farms that have existing damage caused by yearly tilling and nutrient leaching.

While agricultural production in the Midwest and Southeastern United States are particularly vulnerable to climatic shifts, the Pacific Northwest will experience more complex impacts. Regional agriculture in Washington State will be severely impacted by sea level rise and ocean acidification, which is a major threat to the Puget Sound's shellfish production (Washington Climate Change Impacts Assessment, 2009). However, vegetable, fruit, and wheat production, the cornerstones of Washington state agricultural revenue, is projected to increase under current climate scenarios. Proponents of sustainable agriculture in the region are typically clustered in urban regions such as King County, with fewer sustainable advocates and producers seen in counties such as Yakima and Chelan, which have traditionally relied upon conventional agriculture as a cultural and economic base (Qazi & Selfa, 2005). Sustainable agriculture rhetoric focuses on "traditional", small scale, organic, and ecologically inclined production; it is the oldest and most well established alternative agro-food framework.

2.5 Food Security

Food security is a framework that focuses on **local** agricultural production as a means of increasing food access. The term was coined at the 1974 World Food Conference and has been co-opted by a large number of scholars and activists; to that end, its meaning is sometimes convoluted (Maxwell, 1996). On

the international level, food security is used as a measure of access to healthy diets and political participate in the food marketplace; it is most widely used by government entities, including the USDA, to define individuals with appropriate access to food (Carlson, Andrews, & Bickel, 1999).

Both domestic and international food security assumes that agricultural resilience comes from local and seasonal production of food (Hendrickson & Heffernan, 2002). Small-scale producers are highly valued in a food security framework, while large-scale, monoculture production is seen as a vulnerable market for food in emergency or crisis situations. Increasing worries about biodiversity and land and biotechnology ownership have propelled the food security movement in the United States (Goodman, 2001). Proponents of this framework are usually engaged with opening localized food markets to small-scale producers, who are often young or beginning farmers (Hinrichs, 2000). These alternative markets may include food cooperatives, community supported agriculture (CSAs), community gardens, and farmers' markets (Niles & Rolf, 2009). Recently, “food hubs” have become popular mechanism for local markets which are looking to expand capacity for producers; these hubs provide services such as processing and storage facilities which attempt to bridge gaps in food security at a regional level (Barham, 2011). Additionally, localized conceptions of food access, known as “foodsheds,” have been mapped to define boundaries of a local food system (Feagan, 2007; Peters et al., 2008).

Like other alternative agro-food programming, food security has lacked a solid theoretical framework from which policy can be derived (Anderson and

Cook, 1999). Some practitioners make use of the words “community” or “foodshed” to emphasize the idea of locally based agricultural production as a function of social support and resilience (Born & Purcell, 2006; Feagan, 2007; Peters et al., 2008). Critiques of “localization” as a method for social and agricultural change have been presented within the schema of alternative agro-food systems (Born & Purcell, 2006; Goodman & Goodman, 2007).

Regionally, Washington State has seen localized food security rhetoric encourage the creation of strong farmers' markets, CSA programs, and urban farming; food security programming has again been focused in areas with high community buy-in related to sustainable agriculture, specifically, in King and Skagit counties and the South Puget Sound (Selfa & Qazi, 2005). Food security is both the most commonly used framework for alternative food systems and the most diverse.

2.6 Food Democracy/Sovereignty

Food democracy and food sovereignty are linked ideas that conceptualize food access as a **political** process. Food sovereignty movements believe small communities or political entities have the right to determine their access to food through political decision making (Hassanein, 2003). This could take the form of genetically modified organism (GMO) labeling or bans, limiting distance to food sources, increasing the availability of grocery stores in a community, opening access to land, or instituting price controls on food commodities (Beuchelt & Virchow, 2012). This movement has seen traction within the international peasant movement, most famously with the international farmers' movement, La Via

Campeſina (Beuchelt & Virchow, 2012). On a ſmall ſcale, food democracy ſeeks to empower individuals through participation in local agro-food programming; this may include ſpecialized farmers’ markets, gardening programs, or groceries (Alkon & Mares, 2012).

Food democracy is a closely related concept, which focuses on the participation of producers, consumers, and retailers to work for political action and access to food. This movement encourages constituents to directly work with the democratic process or create processes of their own; food policy councils are popular community based tools that food democracy activists have used to promote direct participation in conversations around food ſystems (Harper et al., 2009; Hassanein, 2003). The moſt visible food democracy campaigns in the United States in recent months have focused on limiting conventional agro-food corporate influence in political processes. Popularly cited as the “Monsanto Protection Act,” Section 735 of the Farmer Assurance Provision of ſpending bill HR 933 has come under intense ſcrutiny on the part of food democracy advocates (Pollack, 2013). This provision, which allows conventional agro-food giant Monsanto and other producers of genetically modified ſeed to distribute its product before Federal approval of its ſafety, has become one of the firſt nationally organized food democracy campaigns in recent years. In Washington State, advocates of food democracy have moſt recently ſupported Initiative 522, a citizen initiative aiming to label genetically modified foods, to the November 2013 ballot.

Food democracy/ſovereignty attempts to provide increased points of

access for constituents with political power, but is limited by existing systemic injustices that prevent the full expression of political power by individuals in a community.

2.7 Food justice

The food justice movement incorporates elements of food sovereignty and food security with a central focus on **social justice**. Food justice believes that hunger is a result of institutionalized injustices, including racism, sexism, and classism. Those who participate in the food justice framework believe that agro-food systems should directly involve groups who have limited access to political and economic capital (Alkon and Mares, 2012). Food justice may incorporate elements of food democracy, but primarily functions in a way that minorities, women, and children have access to produce, market, and consume “good food” (Allen, 2010). The emphasis is not necessarily on direct political action, but on confronting existing systemic injustices, using food as a mechanism for change.

Food justice is seen as a relatively young social movement that has not yet laid a solid theoretical groundwork; however, many of the tactics used by food justice practitioners draw on the long history of community organizing and popular social change movements (Sbicca, 2012). Grassroots activists and community organizers have incorporated existing frameworks of communication and direct action into local agro-food programming; this may be manifested in specialized community gardens for marginalized groups, emphasis on low-income access to programming, and a strong rhetorical tie to radicalism through terms like “guerilla gardening” (Levkoe, 2006). Activists believe that including

marginalized groups in the food system can aid in creating a more just social system (Sbicca, 2012). As an alternative agro-food system framework, food justice is more closely aligned to elements of social justice work than hands-on food agro-food production; food as a mechanism for community connection is emphasized over the actual production of crops.

2.8 Right to Adequate Food

The right to adequate food (RtAF) is an alternative framework that views food access as a **judicial** issue. It contains “precise suggestions for measures and policies to be implemented by governments” to provide access to food by all citizens (Beuchelt & Virchow, 2012). A large amount of literature at the academic and institutional level has been written about the right to food. Currently, RtAF has been internationally acknowledged by 40 countries through the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) of 1966 (Riches, 1999). The United States has signed, but not ratified the ICESCR.

RtAF does not adjudicate the direct provisioning of food to citizens. Instead, RtAF is seen through a “positive rights” lens, in which opportunities must be given to citizens to procure food independently (UNCHR, 1989). The ICESCR dictates that states who have pledged to maintain the RtAF must provide economic and logistic access to food. In the event of disasters or acute events, the state may be required to provide food resources to affected populations. States that have ratified the ICESCR or who have constitutional provisions for RtAF may face legal repercussions at the domestic and global levels if this right is violated (Mechlem, 2004). Many scholars have noted the limitations of RtAF in

conjunction with other rights contained within the RtAF (Anderson, 2008; Chilton & Rose, 2009; De Schutter, 2009; Riches, 1999). Individuals may be limited in their access to legal services for a variety of reasons; additionally, those without legal standing as citizens in a state may not be protected. This extends to refugees, migrants, or undocumented individuals. Finally, the practicality of legislating access to economic or physical access to food may be difficult to apply on the ground (Chilton & Rose, 2009).

Advocates and researchers in the United States continue to examine how RtAF may be implemented in order to improve food access. However, unlike the previously discussed alternative food systems, RtAF has not been implemented domestically and is unlikely to be a major part of alternative agro-food programming in most communities.

2.9 Hunger within Agro-Food Systems

Both conventional and alternative agro-food systems incorporate individuals at all levels of food access; this includes hungry populations who experience little to no access to food. The systemic nature of hunger maintains or increases hungry populations according to the balance of power and privilege within a community. Hunger and malnutrition are a significant challenge to welfare and health of individuals around the world. Globally, there are 846 million people who currently suffer from malnutrition; the majority of this population is made up of women, children, and infants (FAO, 2009). Maternal and childhood malnutrition are a major impediment to cognitive and physical development; the impacts of malnourishment are often exhibited in comorbidity

factors such as chronic disease, mental illness, social isolation, and poverty (FAO, 2009). Hunger exists due to both human and environmental factors; historically, chronic hunger and famine have been viewed through a strictly environmental lens; however, it is increasingly clear that hunger is an extension of institutional injustices that may be embedded in a community or leveraged by those in power to control or subjugate a constituency (Davis, 2002). Hunger enters vulnerable individuals into nutritionally and socially fragile environments.

Hunger occurs in an agro-food system due to several systemic pressures. Economic shifts, as seen acutely during the 2008 and 2011 Global Food Crises, can cause food prices to spike dramatically, cutting off access to basic food provisions for individuals living in chronic poverty (Rosen & Shapouri, 2008). Price increases can amplify existing issues with the economic and political distribution and control of food resources, which are often reflective of both historic economic and political relationships and increased transnational control of food production and trade (World Institute for Development, 1990).

Hunger is often impacted severely by environmental determinants; seasonal droughts or flooding can create extremely tenuous situations for chronically hungry communities that are dependent upon subsistence or commodity agriculture for stability (Rukuni, 2011). Hunger is also a manifestation of other institutionalized violence that decreases the power of certain demographics within communities. Women, minorities, and other marginalized groups are more prone to hunger; geographically, individuals in large urban areas and isolated rural areas of the non-industrial world are

specifically vulnerable to food inaccess (Wu et al., 2012).

Agro-food systems analysis typically focuses on the conventional means of providing food to populations through commodity chains. Populations that are unable to participate in these channels of access are more prone to hunger, and are not given priority in food systems planning. Hungry populations' low visibility within food systems is both indicative of their power within a food systems and the intrinsic nature of hunger as a mechanism for subjugation (Davis, 2002).

Hunger in the United States wears multiple masks; it reflects structural violence that becomes embedded in communities at multiple scales. The cultural identity of the United States as a literal land of plenty has cultivated a sociocultural norm of bounty, leading to a marginalization of hungry individuals at the community level. To better understand the intricacies of community level hunger in the United States, a further examination of the characteristics of rural and urban food inaccess will be discussed.

2.10 Rural vs. Urban Hunger in the United States

While academic literature typically focuses on hunger in the non-industrialized world, hunger is an issue that is both widespread and normalized in industrialized nations. In the United States, urban and rural populations are seen as the most vulnerable to food inaccess, though numerous studies have shown that there are distinct differences in the way hunger is performed at each scale. As low-income individuals flee rural and suburban communities with increasingly limited economic opportunities, urban regions have experienced increased density of hungry populations. Individuals uninterested or unable to leave impoverished

rural regions of the United States are often isolated from services or are limited by cultural associations with utilizing government or social service food aid. Use of social service benefits is higher in urban areas, while hunting, gardening, and sharing food is common in rural settings (Smith & Miller, 2011).

In the United States, a vast collection of public, voluntary, and religious agencies work to deliver services to hungry rural residents; there is a large body of work, rooted in rural sociology and geography which addresses the unique challenges that domestic rural populations face when accessing food (DeMarco, Thorburn, & Kue, 2009; Goodman & Watts, 1994; Hinrichs, 2003; Mader & Busse, 2011; Smith & Miller, 2011; Smith & Morton, 2009).

2.11 Emergency Food Networks

In order to address food access vulnerability, almost all functioning food systems have “safety net” mechanisms used to address hunger. Emergency food networks (EFNs) in the United States encompass a wide range of programming at different scales. At the national level, the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, TEFAP, and welfare benefits such as SNAP (Supplemental Nutritional Aid Program) and WIC are all programs that distribute food to low-income individuals who have limited access to nutritional diets (Poppendieck, 1994). States have additional programming to aid these same populations; the Washington State Department of Agriculture and Department of Health provide distributional and educational capacity for programs such as TEFAP and SNAP. However, in all communities in the United States that have established EFNs, the bulk of emergency food work is done by non-profit, religious, or charitable

organizations that rely almost solely on donor funding and in-kind donations of food.

EFNs are plagued with chronic challenges; primarily, hungry populations rarely decrease. Non-profit organizations that distribute food facilitate the acquisition, repackaging, storage, and management of donations. This leads to the majority of food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens living on the edge of administrative extinction (Poppendieck, 1994). During economic downturns, such as the current recession in the United States, EFNs face further challenges as client bases increase while corporate and individual donations slip dramatically. Relying on the public and voluntary sectors to provide food to the most vulnerable individuals in communities can result in unjust and inefficient distribution. Donation-based frameworks for emergency food relief do not guarantee that food will be available when it is needed; additionally, it is less likely that the food will be nutritionally dense or culturally appropriate.

2.12 Agro-food Systems and Hunger in Washington State

This thesis focuses on a case study of food access within a rural, agriculturally productive county in Washington State that exhibits low food access. Washington State occupies a unique space in the agricultural legacy of the United States, and effectively shows the conflicts that arise within all agro-food systems that exhibit hunger.

The Cascade mountain range splits the state into two landscapes that have provided fertile ground for agricultural production and aspirations of Native

populations, Europeans immigrants, and migrant farmworkers. Westward expansion by white immigrants in the 19th century established the beginnings of conventional agricultural production in the region. Today, Washington is one of the top state producers of food and non-food agricultural goods, with approximately \$6.7 billion in agricultural revenue reported in the 2007 USDA Census of Agriculture, making it the 16th largest producer in the United States (2007). Table 1, below, shows revenue produced by significant and iconic crops within Washington State (Selfa & Qazi, 2005).

Table 1: Revenue and Rank of Significant Crops Produced in Washington (2012)

Agricultural product	Annual Revenue (\$1000) (Total: 6,792,856)	US Rank (16)
Wheat (grain)	2,096,350	8
Vegetables harvested for sale	343,787	3
Barley (grain)	223,598	4
Apples	165,215	1
Aquaculture	162,867	2
Christmas tree products	23,225	3

Conventional and alternative agro-food networks within the state leverage utilize the historic and contemporary agricultural history of the region as means for marketing, tourism, and development (Born & Purcell, 2006; Jarosz & Qazi, 2000). Logging and Christmas tree operations are included in the realm of iconic

industries that have emerged from the agricultural sector; coupled with apples and shellfish. These products have ascended the commodity chain to become a political, cultural, and economic touchstone within the state (Jarosz & Qazi, 2000).

Agricultural production within the state emphasizes the values of bounty, economic prosperity, and wholesomeness as the bedrocks of the state's varied agro-food systems (Born & Purcell, 2006). However, like all communities, Washington has maintained hungry populations for decades within these same systems. EFNs exist in communities across Washington to provide services to individuals who have low food access. These services may include food banks, food pantries, soup kitchens, and nutrition education. The Washington State Department of Health has outlined objectives to improve food access within these networks for hungry populations, which are presented in the Washington State Nutrition and Physical Activity Plan (Washington State Health Department, 2012). The plan states the following as primary objectives to rectify maintained hunger within communities.

- Access to healthy foods at school, work, and in the community.
- Enough money to buy the kinds of foods recommended in the guidelines.
- Knowledge about nutrition.
- Motivation to choose healthy foods.
- Confidence that they can cook healthy foods.
- Healthy foods in their homes and daily environments.
- Social, cultural and family support for eating healthfully.

-Eating patterns that include frequent meals with family and/or friends eating together (Washington State Department of Health, 2008).

These objectives guide goals for regional EFNs as they move to improve services to clients. These goals take into account the varied economic, social, and environmental challenges faced by individuals with low food access. While Washington State has begun to create more efficient and effective methods for providing direct food resources to individuals while increasing agency within agro-food systems throughout the state, hunger has been a feature of the region for decades and will be maintained in the coming years.

2.13 Food Access

The agro-food systems frameworks mentioned above use a variety of terms to distinguish their specific motivations and processes in order to provide new perspectives in agro-food systems planning. However, these frameworks and terms are typically one-dimensional. By contrast, this study utilizes the term “**food inaccess**” to refer to the state of hungry individuals; this term transcends many different challenges that may be faced by vulnerable populations in accessing food, and draws upon the groundwork laid by existing alternative agro-food frameworks holistically. Financial, environmental, and sociopolitical access are all contributing factors that prevent individuals from procuring adequate food or participating as autonomous agents in an agro-food system.

The majority of academic literature and government reports use the term “food security” to designate the state of individuals who suffer from hunger or malnutrition; this term, however, does not take into account the primary function

of hunger, which is lack of agency in obtaining adequate or appropriate food (Anderson & Cook, 1999). Current use of the term “food access” by the USDA refers to the distance individuals must travel to buy or procure food (Mader & Busse, 2011). Areas with low access are popularly referred to as “food deserts;” while this term is helpful in mapping one distinct challenge faced by individuals looking to access nutritionally dense food, it does not accurately reflect the multiple threads that prevent food from being procured by individuals. Food access, as used by the researcher in this paper, is a holistic term that refers to the multiple challenges that hungry individuals face. This term establishes a multidisciplinary rhetoric that will be reflected in the case study, discussion, and recommendations.

2.14 Methodology

This project uses two different methodologies to answer the research questions. First, a theoretical critique based upon a systemic review of existing publications, data, and practices will be performed. There is no cohesive theory that binds together alternative agro-food frameworks; many authors have called for such a framework to unite the varied programming that has emerged from the alternative movement (Anderson & Cook, 1999). The critique examines the history of the conventional alternative agro-food systems in the United States and their relationship with emergency food networks, and additionally determines the effectiveness of these systems at providing resources and support to vulnerable populations who utilize emergency food systems. The result of this critique will provide a theoretical perspective from which a case study will be examined.

While a new framework will not be introduced, a basic rubric of limitations in planning will be identified that can inform better food systems planning at multiple scales. A subsequent case study in Mason County, Washington, a rural community on the Olympic Peninsula, will be explored through the theoretical lens. The case study uses interviews with key informants who are involved with conventional and alternative agro-food systems through work with emergency food networks; the interviews are used to determine the challenges this network faces in providing services to individuals facing low food access within the county.

2.15 Theoretical Approach

Agro-food systems research represents a huge body of work that is challenged by the complexity and diversity of its academic intersections. Researchers examining domestic hunger and its role within agro-food systems have used various approaches to analyze the many threads that establish and maintain hungry populations. These have included approaches from the fields of political economy, anthropology, geography, economics, and agronomy. Various theoretical threads emerge from these analyses, but few have encapsulated the breadth and scope of the literature. Many calls have been made to determine a consistent theoretical approach to analyze agro-food systems effectiveness by researchers as of late. This paper will attempt to create a theoretical approach to determine the effectiveness of specific agro-food systems in ending hunger. It will utilize an approach developed by Born & Purcell (2006), which identifies “traps” in planning food systems. Born & Purcell focus specifically on scale as a

trap for planning food systems; this analysis argues that there are multiple traps that hold alternative agro-food systems back from reaching the goal of achieving radical changes in the way food is produced, marketed, and consumed in the United States. The analysis will identify each trap and examine how each one exists within alternative agricultural systems. These traps will later be examined in the context of the case study results to determine if alternative agriculture systems are succeeding in providing improved food access to county residents.

2.16 Case Study Approach

The theoretical approach, based in political economy and critical ethnography, will provide a framework for analysis for the case study. With a few exceptions, case studies of emergency food networks in North America have focused on urban areas that suffer from high rates of food inaccess and hunger. Fewer still have examined rural food inaccess outside of traditional agrarian regions, such as the American Midwest. Over the past decade, a handful of studies have emerged from Oregon State University and Wenatchee Valley College illustrating the intersections between alternative agro-food systems, emergency food networks, and food access in rural parts of the Pacific Northwest (Grussing & Edwards, 2006; Lawson, Jarosz, and Bonds, 2008; Selfa & Qazi, 2005). Other case studies have revealed insights into discrimination, service access, and sustainability of programs that have aimed to provide better care for hungry populations through EFNs (Gee et al., 2007; Mason, Jaskiewicz, & Christoffel, 2010).

The case study examines Mason County, a rural county in western Washington that exhibits chronic food inaccess, health challenges and poverty. Semi-structured interviews with informants who are members of the county's emergency food network are utilized. These informants are directors and volunteers of food banks, as well as social service providers and community members who work to distribute educational, financial, and in-kind food resources to the food banks. The case study identified fourteen informants and performed 10 interviews over the course of two months. Informants were recruited by the researcher, who has done previous work with alternative agro-food systems, emergency food networks, and nutrition education within the county.

A Human Subjects Review was conducted prior to the interviews, with general questions approved by The Evergreen State College (TESC) Human Subjects Review board. In addition, the board approved informed consent statements and participant observation consent forms, which were provided to all informants and subsequently signed. Informants stated that they were aware of the risks of the study, and that their responses would be kept anonymous.

These interviews were transcribed by the researcher and coded using key quotations that corresponded with specific themes. Keywords were used to identify themes; these keywords were then applied to overarching themes. Participant observation was conducted at three food banks (Saints' Pantry, Hood Canal, and Matlock); due to internal organizational issues, which will be discussed in Chapter 5, the North Mason Food Bank was not incorporated in the

interviews or participant observation. Themes gathered from interviews are then applied to the theoretical analysis to identify which traps, if any, are utilized by alternative agro-food systems within the county. Finally, the case study and theoretical analysis will inform recommendations that could be applied to county social service providers and alternative agro-food leaders to improve overall long-term food access for individuals and populations at risk of hunger.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Context of Hunger within Agro-Food Systems

“The role of commodity chain analysis in agro-food studies and related fields is to awaken the consumer to true political consciousness. Until consciousness is awakened, consumption which claims to be politically-based is, at best, ineffective and, at worst, reinforces accumulation and power” (Goodman & DuPuis, 2002).

3.1 Barriers and Failures in Combating Hunger in the United States

As previously examined, conventional and alternative agro-food systems have been embedded with oppositional visions of how food is grown, distributed, traded, and consumed. These worldviews are a product of industrialization, globalization, and external environmental and social factors that funnel food into streams of access that are increasingly narrow. Within these systems, individuals may perform multiple roles as a producer, distributor, and consumer; yet, consumption remains the single role taken on by all people in a food network. These consumers have varying abilities to purchase, access, or choose the food that they may eat. Hungry individuals have the least agency over their level of food access. Conventional and alternative agro-food systems incorporate individuals at all levels of agency within their bounds; yet, as Timmer, Falcon, & Pearson (1983) state, “[a] food system that contains many hungry people is a failure in at least one dimension.” The dynamic environment of global economic relationships, governmental policy on food and agriculture, and embedded frameworks of structural injustice establish significant barriers to food access; these barriers manifest themselves in food system failures.

In response to failures in providing equal and adequate access to nutritionally dense food to vulnerable populations, both conventional and alternative agro-food systems have developed mechanisms to provide emergency food assistance to hungry people. Hungry populations utilize a variety of services provided by non-profit, religious, and government organizations that provide direct and indirect access to food. The most prominent programs working to provide better food access to hungry individuals within the United States are grouped together as emergency food networks (EFNs). Their mechanisms provide financial resources or direct food aid to individuals who are suffering from malnutrition. EFNs exist at every geographic scale, and act as an extension of the economic, ecological, and cultural assumptions that are the basis of our agro-food systems. EFNs provide unique social services to individuals who are not able to participate fully as primary consumers in the food marketplace.

Institutional racism, sexism, and ageism play a significant role in embedding hunger in American society. These factors are amplified by economic, ecological, and sociopolitical barriers that have created landscapes that maintain hungry populations. Alternative agro-food systems attempt to provide new means for distribution and access to food for all levels of consumers; the frameworks that have been used to define these alternative ideas have been examined in Chapter 2, and are presented as “radical” alternatives in contrast to conventional systems.

However, careful examination of the intersection between the goals of alternative agro-food systems and the needs of hungry populations that rely upon

EFNs reveals how “traps” in planning and practice have prevented significant change. Practitioners and researchers who want to improve food access through EFNs in the United States must acknowledge that they function within established social and economic frameworks that exist within privileged landscapes of access that transcend the labels of “conventional” or “alternative.”

This theoretical analysis will examine the current failures that exist within agro-food systems which maintain chronic hunger with the United States. Additionally, it will define the specific “traps” that the alternative agro-food movement has embraced, which block the expansion of truly “radical” change to combat hunger in the US. Finally, it will determine potential avenues for change through multi-scale recommendations that will emerge from the theoretical critique.

3.2 Hunger as a Food System Failure

Timmer, Falcon, and Pearson (1983) state that agro-food models that maintain hungry populations represent a failure in food policy and food access. Examining how hunger becomes embedded in a food system can inform political decisions and effective services for hungry populations. Hunger is a global challenge that manifests on a community level according to unique vulnerabilities of local contexts. These local vulnerabilities dictate the level of food access for individuals, yet are not the sole factors that determine the level of hunger a community experiences. Systemic pressures at all scales impact the vulnerability of a hungry population. Sociopolitical, environmental, and

particularly financial capacities are the primary avenues for food access; each one is crucial for hungry individuals to improve their agency within their specific agro-food system.

Access to food represents one of the most basic entry points into fully expressed agency within a society; however, the commodification and politicization of food have reinforced social barriers that reflect structural violence. A key feature of hunger in all communities is its “normalization;” for many citizens and decision makers, the presence of hunger is assumed to be a problem that will always be present, and cannot be prevented. In this way, hunger becomes institutionalized, much like other injustices that are often present in populations who suffer from low food access. In most food systems planning, hungry populations are not given priority; instead, mid- to high-level consumers who have access to capital are the active players within these systems.

This cycle of power through food distribution can stagnate communities with low levels of food access, and in the worst cases, it can be leveraged to devastating effects by governments looking to control populations (Davis, 2002). Historically, deaths from hunger have been one of the most devastating results of violent conflict and political control in regions with low levels of individual agency. While these examples are extreme and not readily applied to contemporary communities in the United States, hunger is often an indicator of layered structural violence within a community. As food systems planners attempt to create more sustainable and efficient food systems, it will be necessary

to examine how elements of a food system are not working for the most vulnerable populations.

3.3 Constructing Participation in Agro-Food Systems

Concern over food system inequalities has driven major bodies of research towards the dismantling of inefficient systems (Niles & Rolf, 2008).

Traditionally, food system research has been based upon a neo-classical economic model, which examines food access within a market system. Within this system, food production functions as the main driver for hunger; hungry people are the result of low food availability and low access to financial capital. This framework for hunger prevention has spurred numerous programs aimed at increasing agricultural yield and trade in areas of high vulnerability.

People who experience hunger may have fluctuating agency within agro-food systems; this includes their interactions with the consumption, production, or marketing of food. Competition in the food marketplace is driven heavily by both consumer demand and production capacity. In a functioning conventional agro-food system, the majority of individuals participate in this “primary marketplace,” which allows them full expression of how to choose when and what type of food they consume. The primary marketplace is the central focus of producers and retailers of food products. Conventional producers who are able to respond to consumer needs while providing a desirable, affordable, and consistently available product are able to maintain existing products and potentially introduce new variations on established brands. Individuals are only of value to agro-food

producers and retailers if they have the ability to choose what they purchase. Dixon (1999) goes further, underlying the importance of financial capacity in terms of individuality; “it is now through consumption that individuals are identifying themselves.” Political identification through consumption drives much of the rhetoric between conventional and alternative agro-food narratives. Participating as a consumer in the conventional marketplace is a mark of status and power, and is deeply connected to perceptions of EFN use by clients.

Various solutions have been put forth to eliminate hunger in communities. It is assumed that increased personal income translates to increased food access; while financial capital is a key element of preventing hunger, is not a panacea. As Rose (1999) notes, “[a]lthough we see strong relationships between income and hunger indicators, and between poverty and likelihood of food insufficiency, a one-to-one correspondence between measures of food insecurity and measures of poverty does not exist” (518S). Complex systems of access converge to prevent individuals from fully participating in the primary marketplace as food consumers. Access to sociopolitical and environmental capital is equally important. As food systems manage barriers to access, looking beyond income will be crucial to end the cycle of maintained hunger within a community.

To measure the level of individual participation in a food system, it is helpful to show avenues of access that exist in the United States. As seen in Table 2, those in the primary marketplace have a variety of levels at which they may enter and participate as a consumer. As agency increases in tandem with increased capital, a person is able to purchase not only more food, but food of

their choosing. Defining what participation looks like for individuals within an agro-food system is not always clear. Hungry individuals occupy a tenuous space within agro-food systems due to their limited agency in participating as consumers.

Table 2: Levels of Consumer Participation and Access in Agro-Food Systems (US)

Marketplaces	Accessible entry into marketplace	Access level
Primary Market	Luxury Foods Specialty Grocers Conventional Grocers/Food Co-ops Discount and Conventional Grocers/Food Co-ops Discount Grocers and WIC/SNAP Food Assistance	High access
Secondary Market	Combination of WIC/SNAP Food Assistance and Food Bank/Food Pantry WIC/SNAP Food Assistance Food Pantry/Food Bank Soup Kitchens Illicit Behaviors/Foraging/Subsistence Growing	Low access

EFNs have a unique function within agro-food systems; they provide financial and direct food resources to individuals who have limited access to food or experience malnutrition. In the United States, the majority of food consumers have the financial and social means to purchase food of their choosing. Hungry individuals constitute what will be referred to in this paper as the “secondary

market”; this group of people have limited or no access to financial capital to purchase foods of their choosing. Researchers have proposed that EFN programming must be equally diverse as the challenge that clients face; this, in turn, may increase the available choice of food options to hungry individuals, increasing their capital within the primary marketplace (Maxwell, 1996).

As examined in Chapter 2, alternative agro-food claims to provide radical change to our food systems; this critique will examine these claims through the lens of planning challenges that have been identified in the literature. Additionally, a discussion will be presented that explores how conventional paradigms have been adapted by the alternative agro-food movement. This theoretical critique seeks to move agro-food planning in a direction that prioritizes hungry populations and the challenges that they face; it aims to guide alternative agro-food practitioners and advocates in a direction that creates real, practical change in food systems planning by utilizing the existing resources and felt needs of the communities in question.

3.3 Examining Limitations: Systemic Traps in Agro-Food Planning and Policy

Agro-food systems have attempted to address chronic hunger, a significant food system failure, through various emergency food assistance programs. EFNs are deeply embedded within the culture of food as a commodity, and often function in ways that mirror the broader conventional and historical agro-food system (Goodman & DuPuis, 2002). The goals of EFNs are uneasily aligned with the processes of conventional agro-food systems, as they exist as marginalized

institutions serving marginalized individuals. The culture of commodification brings a host of problems to networks that have little to no financial capital to provide food to hungry populations. Diverse forms of procurement have prevailed in North America; charitable institutions have arisen to meet the needs of hungry individuals in communities through the faith based organizations, independent non-profits, and local coalitions. These groups are staffed and financially supported almost exclusively by the private, voluntary sector. As food is funneled through conventional channels of production, retail, consumption, and eventual donation, EFNs often find themselves with food resources that have been deemed “inappropriate” or “unusable” in the primary marketplace (Tarsuk & Eakin, 2005).

It is essential to realize that the primary market takes precedence at almost all levels of food system planning. Hungry people who population the secondary marketplace are typically outside the realm reached by agro-food producers. They hold no financial or political power that would make them desirable audiences for growers or retailers. Food systems planning is typically focused on this primary market when devising methods for improved production and sales. Even holistic views of food systems planning focus primarily on the primary market as the leverage for change; opportunities for “empowerment” for disenfranchised individuals of the secondary market have not been consistent in their successes or sustainability (Allen, 2010; Dixon, 1999). This analysis contends that assumptions, manifested in systemic “traps,” have prevented real change from occurring. Despite rhetoric emerging from alternative agro-food

narratives that claim to provide oppositional opportunities for producing and marketing food, advocates of alternative agro-food frameworks utilize existing traps, which exacerbate challenges and prevent change in the agro-food sector.

A systemic trap functions as a “clever story” or assumption that prevents actual change from being implemented. Traps embed failing paradigms or mechanisms within frameworks that claim to bring about change. Four traps have been identified as barriers to change for alternative agro-food systems and emergency food networks; they include the scale trap, the productivity trap, the charity trap, and the neoliberal trap. This theoretical critique seeks to determine if alternative agro-food models fall into these traps when attempting to present a radical vision of improved food access.

3.4 Productivity trap

Increasing agricultural yield is a consistent focus of farmers at all levels of production. Small to mid-scale farmers traditionally stored excess food and seed material to prepare for lean years; however, as the growth of agro-business, particularly in the industrial world, has created openings for both increased production and risk on the part of farmers (Pimentel et al., 2005). Governmental subsidies have allowed growers to expand their production at unprecedented rates, introducing new elements of risk in the face of shifting economic and environmental climates.

Historically, government food policies have been built upon the idea that more food production will directly decrease hunger (Allen, 1999). In the face

growing malnutrition in the non-industrialized world, efforts to use agronomic science to improve yield capacity was exemplified by the Green Revolution, which was based upon the idea that genetically modified seed and the introduction of mechanized agriculture would have the ability to replicate the success that industrialized monoculture production in the US. However, the environmental, economic, and sociopolitical realities of this type of production were not successful, and in many areas of the world, created more reliance upon outside systems to maintain agricultural stability and resource access (World Institute for Development, 1990). However hopeful this approach was towards improving food access, its success hinged upon increasing yields and the logistical availability of commodities, and has created a host of environmental and political challenges for areas in the non-industrial world.

In 1986, economist Amartya Sen, who later went on to win the Nobel Prize in economics for his work, made clear links between food distribution and hunger, dispelling the neo-classical models in favor of distribution/access models (Anderson & Cook, 1999). Sen influenced the entire field of food systems research with his work, driving new policy approaches to conventional agricultural production. Sen put forth the idea of “entitlements” as a measure of food access; entitlements to social, political and financial capital all play a huge role in providing individuals with the agency they need to access food (World Institute for Development, 1990). The idea of entitlements is echoed in discussions of agency and participation earlier in this chapter.

Alternative agro-food networks typically work outside this trap; in fact, productivity and large-scale yield is typically held up as the antithesis of the alternative agro-food model. This may reflect the limited power that alternative agro-food has held within larger food planning conversations; as organic producers have gained traction and revenue, some successful alternative producers have co-opted models of industrial production while still maintaining the progressive rhetoric of alternative frameworks. Increased production by alternative agro-food producers may increase financial stability in the long term, but may undermine progressive ideals that reject neoliberal economic practices.

3.5 Neoliberal trap

Neoliberal economic policies have been the most significant driver of the conventional food marketplace in recent history. Neoliberalized trade has allowed previously untapped markets of regional food production to be leveraged by retailers or transnational corporations in domestic markets (Timmer, Falcon, and Pearson, 1983). Introduction into these markets has been hailed by some economists as a significant opportunity for non-industrial or emerging industrial nations to participate economically on the transnational level. Free market economic practices are assumed to allow competition between producers, driven by consumer pressures for particular goods. Capitalist assumptions of the role of food as a commodity have engrained this economic system globally.

The agro-food marketplace in the United States has seen the impacts of consumer desires for products that are not regionally produced; chocolate, coffee,

and bananas are only three examples of products that have emerged from colonial pasts with a heavy human rights and ecological impact on producer communities (Goodman, 1999). Small scale producers with stable trade relationships within regional markets are often unable to retain their independence as transnational corporations exert superior efficiency, capacity, and connections within the marketplace. This shift in economic practices has virtually destroyed regional markets in some parts of the world, leading to dependence upon foreign entities to provide a marketplace for regional goods, which often allows corporate dominance over smaller producers. Additionally, the importation of staple foods once produced by regional markets underlines further the unsustainable and narrow channels of access that are amplified by increased prices and monopolistic control of trade. Free market economic practices have narrowed the producer-supply chain immensely, aided by the productivity trap's dually efficient and destructive production measures.

Alternative agro-food policies have sought to counter neoliberal trade policies by promoting personal connections with small, regional producers. Additionally, fair trade policies have been trumpeted as ethical measures to participate in globalized food trade and consumption of non-regional commodities. At the local, domestic level, alternative programming emphasizes purchasing power as a means to better access food. Consumption of "good food" is encouraged through alternative markets such as farmers' markets and CSAs designed to incorporate marginalized populations. However, alternative agro-food systems utilize increased agency as a rhetorical mechanism, emphasizing

independence and freedom of choice that masks an existing context of production and consumption assumptions. Again, consumption is a mechanism for identity with a political narrative within this trap. Conventional and alternative frameworks are unable to provide increased access to food for vulnerable people through neoliberal measures of competition and purchasing power.

3.6 Charity trap

In the United States, emergency food networks rely upon a diverse group of donors and donations to provide food resources to clients. Donations to anti-hunger organizations are a popular means for local, private charitable contributions (Poppendieck, 1999). Individual donors frequently provide monthly or yearly financial contributions or in-kind food donations through food drives or direct contact with local food banks. Additionally, commercial businesses, particularly corporate entities, provide direct food donations of items that are reaching their expiration date, are damaged, or have been overstocked. EFNs may purchase food commodities from non-profit organizations or government programs, typically state agricultural agencies, to provide direct food resources to clients.

Emergency food systems rely heavily upon these resources to provide food to clients. This process is expedited through American cultural assumptions around waste; waste is seen as a direct positive feedback loop within food systems, embedding hunger with every meal left uneaten. In both conventional and alternative frameworks, wasted food is seen as a direct driver of hunger

within communities. Waste may be seen as a distribution issue (unused food that could be redistributed to hungry individuals) or an environmental issue (wasted food breaks the “closed circle” of production). At both the procurement and distribution points, food banks have uncertain space within this dichotomy. Food donated by individuals or retailers has been deemed unsuitable for primary market use, but bypasses the landfill for burial within the secondary marketplace (Poppendieck, 1999). Clients who utilize EFNs are not prioritized healthy, nutritionally dense food, despite having the greatest need for it within communities. Yet, within this process, retailers are able to claim a “sustainable” façade by emphasizing their charitable donation of otherwise unsuitable food that would typically be “wasted.”

There are significant issues that plague agro-food systems that are reliant upon charitable donations from the private sector to provide relief for hungry populations. Economic shifts create uneasy environments for funding and donations, as more clients utilize systems that have tenuous financial and direct food resource capacities (Andrews, 2010; Kaufman et al., 1997). Alternative programming emphasizes community connections to support marginalized populations, but rarely rises above conventional rhetoric of charitable giving into the realm of real empowerment through increased agency and autonomy over food purchase and consumption by hungry people.

3.7 Scale trap

Geographic scale is frequently used by alternative agro-food systems to break from the conventional narrative of globalized agricultural production and control. Since the rise of globalized trade and multinational agro-business, researchers and advocates have examined how shifts in agricultural regionalism could provide more consistent supplies of food for communities. Within this framework, it is assumed that local agricultural production creates more community resilience for food access, keeps financial gains circulating throughout the community, and has an inherent positive value at a local level. However, this idealization of the local has been cited by many researchers as an example of “defensive localism,” which emphasizes perceived borders of a community that may or may not exist (Hinrichs, 2003). Hinrichs explains, “[m]aking ‘local’ a proxy for the ‘good’ and ‘global’ a proxy for ‘bad’ may overstate the value in proximity, which remains unspecified, and obscure more equivocal and environmental outcomes.”

Alternative agro-food advocates have sought to establish local markets as a means to reestablish connections to the food production chain. Winter (2003) states that “local purchase becomes a totem of localism, with local foods performing the function of allowing people to ‘think’ their local social relations” when in reality, “in most cases, food purchasing habits are highly conventional.” The disconnect between radical narratives of alternative agro-food advocates and practitioners and the grounded reality of food purchase and consumption engrains the scale trap within alternative programming.

3.8 Radical Rhetoric in Alternatively Privileged Landscapes

Alternative agro-food practitioners and advocates propose a “radical” alternative to conventional agro-food systems, which contain inherent inequalities and challenges for individuals looking to participate as consumers, producers, and retailers (Goodman, 1999; Kloppenburg et al., 2000). Food access is privileged to those who have the financial, social, and political capital to choose their role within a food system. While alternative frameworks claim to provide opportunities for participation that break from the conventional system, this study suggests that the rhetoric used does not match the outcomes generated. Case studies have revealed limitations of alternative agro-food programming that doesn’t explicitly address systemic pressures that transcend value-laden labels (Alkon & Mares, 2012; Jarosz, 1997; Sbicca, 2012). The systemic limitations that exist within conventional agro-food networks also limit alternative programming, despite binary narratives of control versus autonomy or inaccess versus choice. The topography of these limitations is mapped upon the landscape of privilege that is exhibited at all scales.

Marginalized populations do not possess greater power within alternative agro-food programming based solely upon its perceived distance from institutionalized, conventional food production and consumption. Though alternative agro-food systems have built a strong opposition to conventional production by strengthening a political narrative that emphasizes progressive, grassroots, and traditional means of producing food., Born & Purcell (2006) discuss, an agro-food system’s values must be examined within their individual

contexts and outside of popular rhetoric. These narratives value alternative agro-food as a just, transparent, accessible, and wholesome choice in comparison to the conventional system, which is painted as unjust, opaque, inaccessible, and driven by profit. These values can be claimed or dismissed by various constituencies; however, it is crucial for food systems planners to recognize when implicit value is grounded in reality, particularly as it increases food access to hungry people. The existing privilege that is embedded within conventional agro-food systems is not absent in alternative frameworks; on the contrary, alternative frameworks do not exist within a vacuum, and are equally susceptible to structural violence the lays the foundation for hunger in communities.

In order to determine whether this rhetoric has produced results in shifting agro-food systems, it is essential to apply them to the most vulnerable members of these systems: hungry people. If alternative agro-food systems posit their frameworks as inherently just, what level of success must they achieve to claim this identity? To live up to the “good food” narrative claimed by alternative programming, traps in planning must be examined as in any conventional food system. Individual privilege within a food system is not dependent upon conventional or alternative frameworks; it is dependent upon how the actors within these systems work to end hunger in their respective contexts. The privilege of the primary market transcends political rhetoric in all food systems, and must be given theoretical weight as a mechanism for oppression and embedded, cyclical hunger.

Chapter 4: Context for Case Study in Mason County

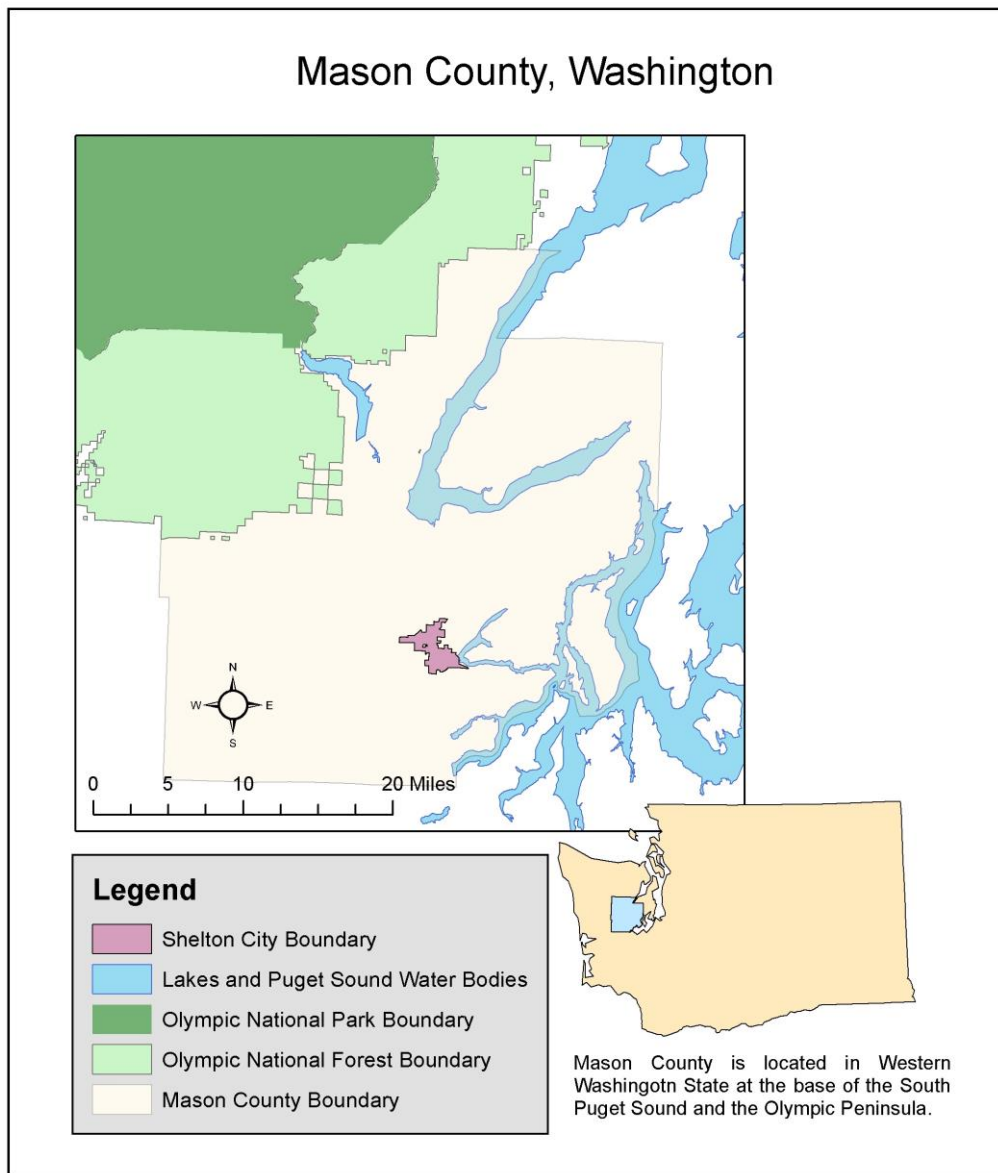
To ground the theoretical critique established in Chapter 3, a case study in Mason County, Washington was conducted. There is a dearth of qualitative case studies dealing with emergency food networks; this case study hopes to uncover the felt needs of emergency food network providers in a rural Pacific Northwest county suffering from high food inaccess. Appropriate indicators for food access will be explored within the county's context, with a brief discussion of the natural resource and agricultural history of the area informing a better view of the agricultural capacity of Mason County. Finally, a narrative of the various food banks featured in this study will be presented. Exploring the unique communities that make up Mason County sets the stage for discussion of case study results within the context of the particular needs and strengths of its EFNs.

4.1 Geography of Mason County

The "Gateway to the Olympics," Mason County lies at the base of the Olympic Peninsula; its unique natural, agricultural, economic, and social landscapes reflect its history as a major producer of natural resource extraction products and jobs. Geographically, the county's proximity to the Olympic Mountains and its intricate shoreline, the longest of any county in the state, is owed to the winding Puget Sound inlets and the deep cut of the Hood Canal. The county's landscapes shift between verdant farmland in the Skokomish Valley, vast plantations of Douglas Fir in the Dayton-Matlock region, to steeply rising

hills above the Ports of Shelton, Hoodspport, and Belfair. The varied physical features of the county have shaped its development; its cultural, economic, and agricultural history is strongly connected to the county's relationships with timber, shellfish, and specialty agricultural crops.

Map 1: Mason County, Washington



The Coastal Salish, Skokomish, Squaxin, and Nisqually nations were the first residents in the Mason County area; their populations were driven out by disease and encroachment by white immigrants in the mid-1800s; today, the Squaxin Island and Skokomish nations are found within the county boundaries (Vleming, 2012). Native populations were dependent upon natural resources in the region, particularly shellfish and salmon, to provide sustenance and support economic trade. Complex systems of shellfish production and harvest typified native settlements; floating production sites were used to maximize efficiency and continued availability of species.

White immigrants arrived in the area in the early 1800s; the development of small timber operations and homesteads lead to the establishment of the county as a center of agricultural and natural resource production west of the Cascades. The port of Shelton proved to be convenient location to export goods to regional markets such as Seattle. In 1854, the county was established as a part of Washington State, and maintained its position as the entry point for development on the Olympic Peninsula for the next century.

4.2 Food Access Indicators

To better understand how individuals in Mason County access food, it is helpful to examine specific elements of hunger. Population density, economic prosperity, logistical capacity, and environmental and physical health are proxy indicators of food access; these issues will be examined within a regional context for a more complete picture of the health challenges of Mason County.

4.3 Demographics

Mason County is home to 61,019 residents; the population has been growing consistently for several years (US Census, 2010). Per capita and median income are well below the state averages; the poverty rate within the county is at 16.3%, in comparison with the state rate of 12.5% (US Census, 2010). One sixth of the county's population lives below the federal poverty line (Washington State Department of Health, 2011). Per capita personal income (PCPI) in Mason County is \$30,345, as reported in 2011; the county ranks 36th out of 39 counties in the state for PCPI, a 12 rank drop since 2001 (US Department of Commerce Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2011). 64% of residents live in a rural part of the county, as reported by the 2013 County Health Rankings.

4.4 Health

Mason County residents suffer from high rates of health challenges. The 2013 County Health Rankings and Roadmaps survey, completed annually for each county in the United States by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, reports that Mason County ranks 33rd out of the 39 counties for overall health. This report takes into account prevalence of chronic health disease, health behaviors, access to health care, and environmental health factors. The reports finds that 31% of adults in the county are obese and 17% suffer from inadequate social support (Mason County Rankings, 2013).

The Washington State Department of Health also reports on significant health challenges for Mason County residents. Nineteen percent of adults in the county are reported to have unmet medical needs; only 79% of adults have medical insurance (Washington Local Health Indicators, 2011).

4.5 Food Inaccess

The USDA's Economic Research Service reports Mason County residents have high rates of food inaccess, termed “food insecurity” by the report; Food Lifeline reports that 1 out of five county residents suffer from food inaccess (2010). Additionally, individuals have high rates of government food assistance benefits. 18% of county residents utilize SNAP food assistance program, representing the 18th highest usage by county within Washington (Washington Office of Financial Management, 2011). All school districts within the county exhibit high rates of free or reduced lunch program participation by students; four out of six districts have higher than 50% participation, with Hood Canal School district reporting 100% of student participation (OSPI, 2012).

4.6 Economic Context and History

Mason County has relied economically upon natural resource extraction and non-food agriculture since the first white immigrants moved into the region. Logging and lumber mill operations grew in size and scale, with the Port of Shelton providing easy rail and water transport to regions around the Puget Sound (Vleming, 2012). Shelton, the county seat, boasts the moniker “Kristmastown, USA” due to historic Christmas tree growing operations that have defined small

scale farming for many in the county (Fredrickson & Scroggins, 1997). The first Christmas tree sales from the county were shipped by rail to California, where a new market for seasonal agricultural goods was cemented. Within Washington, Mason County is the third largest producer of cut Christmas trees (US Census of Agriculture, 2007).

Outside of seasonal tree growing, the timber and shellfish industries have remained employment strongholds throughout the county. Mason County is the second largest producer of aquaculture products in Washington, and the seventh largest county-level producer in the United States (US Census of Agriculture, 2007). Aquaculture sales totaled \$33,846,000, easily representing the largest agricultural market in Mason County. Taylor United Shellfish, one of the largest businesses in the county and the largest producer of bivalves in the United States, has sustained business in both regional urban markets such as Seattle, and internationally (The Nature Conservancy, 2012).

Historically, the county was home to active logging operations that grew continuously after the turn of the century. The Simpson Timber Company and its subsidiary, Green Diamond, were strongholds for living wage employment throughout the county (James, 1986). The Shelton-based company, founded in 1895, was once the largest employer in the state. Logging remains a key component of local culture and identity, as exemplified in local festivals (Shelton Forest Festival), high school sports teams (Shelton Highclimbers), and the \$50,000 restoration of Shelton's iconic Paul Bunyan statue that occurred in 1996 (Sanders, 2004). The natural resource sector provides jobs for individuals who

bring diverse educational backgrounds and abilities; however, the seasonality of the work can be a burden to those who unable to live on wages year-round.

Outside of shellfish and wood products, food crops and livestock make up a small part of the county's revenue. Overall, row crop and meat farms are outnumbered by farms producing non-food goods; woodland makes up 42.86% of farmland type within the county (US Census of Agriculture, 2007). Farm employment does not represent a large sector of the Mason County labor market. There are only 794 operators in the county; most farms are smaller than 50 acres, with a significant number smaller than 10 acres. Farm size has decreased by 22% between 2002 and 2007 county-wide. While 165 principal farm operators cite farming as their primary occupation, almost twice as many (306) have an additional source of primary income (US Census of Agriculture, 2007).

4.7 Food Banks

Food banks are the primary distributors of direct emergency food resources within the county. There are numerous informal distribution programs, usually run out of churches or faith-based organizations within local communities. The establishment of the food banks was cemented by significant shifts in economic activity and employment.

In the mid-1980s, the US Forest Service shut down many of the old growth logging sites in the wake of the Endangered Species Act listing of the spotted owl (Employment Security Department, 2012). Logging operations were dismantled, leaving thousands for former timber employees out of work and a

deficit of living-wage jobs in the county (James, 1986). Populations who had relied upon industry specific, seasonal work were left unemployed and unable to maintain their existing levels of financial agency in Mason County. Out of this growing community need, food banks and pantries that had previously been focused on homeless populations expanded to provide consistent services for households that were unable to regain employment.

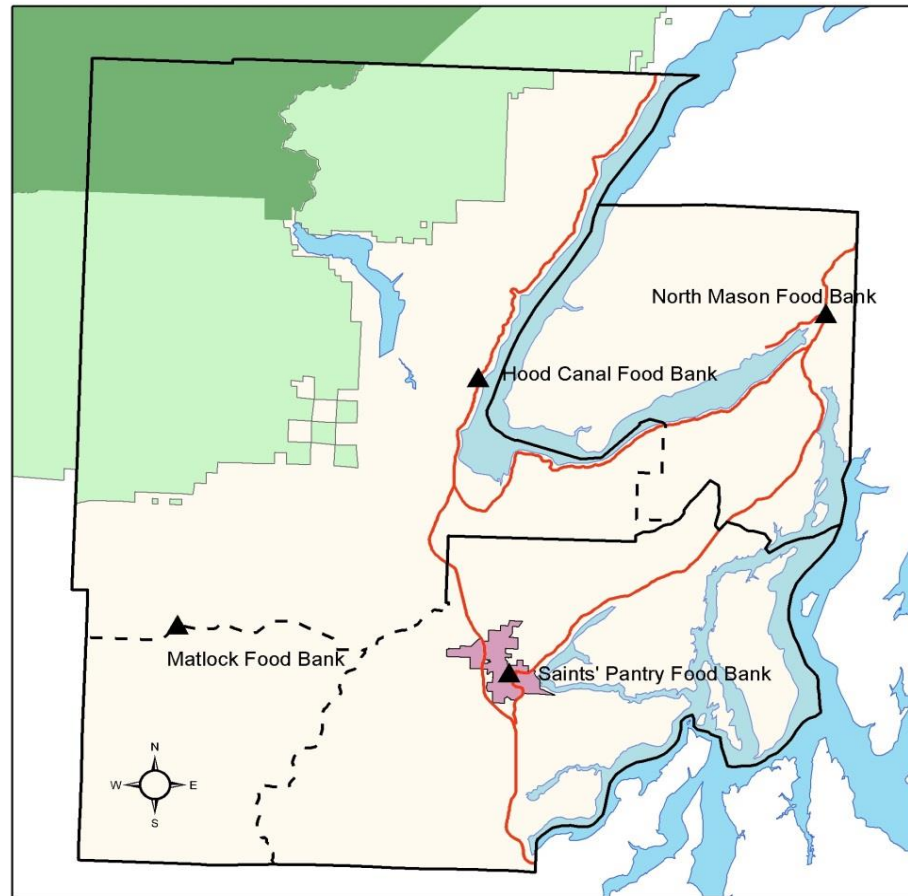
Today, multiple community partners work together to provide services to clients at each food bank. Communication and organization between partners is characterized by its informality; the Coalition of Churches, a local faith-based collaborative partnership, provides the main connection for all providers. Government organizations and non-profit entities provide commodities, nutrition counseling and education, information on government welfare programs, and specific services for seniors, children, and mothers who have low food access. The rural nature of Mason County dictates the informal connections between groups that are separated geographically and organizationally. These partners have mechanisms in place to provide improved services on short notice, but in general, individual organization work autonomously and are aware of emerging issues on a “need to know” basis.

Food banks in the county rely upon diverse groups to provide funding and direct food resources for clients. The four food banks included in this study represent four separate geographic communities in the county; these four providers work with regional non-profits to receive Food Assistance Program resources through the WSDA (WSDA, 2013). Specifically, these four food banks

are the only county recipients of funding through the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and Emergency Food Assistance Program (EFAP) programs, which respectively provide financial support for administrative overhead costs and direct food resources to food banks. The Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) is an additional program that specifically targets low income mothers or seniors, two populations particularly vulnerable to food inaccess and hunger. Finally, brokers such as Food Lifeline, Coastal Harvest, and Northwest Harvest provide donated and purchased food items to food banks who participate in their programming; donations are based upon reported client bases at each food bank.

There are four main food banks that serve specific regions of Mason County; they include Saints' Pantry Food Bank, located in Shelton, Hood Canal Food Bank, located in Hoodsport, Matlock Food Bank in Matlock, and the North Mason Food Bank, located in Belfair. These food banks operate independently of each other, but collaborate on several levels to provide food resources to hungry individuals. Clients access food banks that are within their region; individuals self-select for participation. The boundaries for each food bank service area can be seen in Map 2. Previous to 2000, all food banks were open to any county resident; however, concerns about duplication of client services throughout the county spurred the creation of boundaries.

Mason County Food Banks, Distribution Boundaries, and Transit Routes



0 3.75 7.5 15 Miles

The four main food banks that serve Mason County residents are located on the map above. They include Saints' Pantry Food Bank (Shelton), Matlock Food Bank (Matlock), Hood Canal Food Bank (Hoodsport), and North Mason Food Bank (Belfair). Distribution boundaries were determined in 2000, but are at this time still ambiguous. Dashed lines indicate where boundaries fluctuate. Additionally, Mason Transit Authority routes show no consistent routes in the southwestern region of the county; this specifically affects Matlock Food Bank clients.

Legend

- ▲ Food Banks
- Food Bank Distribution Boundary (known)
- - - Food Bank Distribution Boundary (unknown)
- Mason Transit Authority Routes
- Shelton City Boundary
- Lakes and Puget Sound Water Bodies
- Olympic National Park Boundary
- Olympic National Forest Boundary
- Mason County Boundary

Map 2: Mason County Food Banks, Distribution Boundaries, and Transit

Route

Each food bank is responsible for a designated area. Clients at all food banks self-identify as hungry, and are only required to bring in documentation, such as a lease or a piece of mail, that situates them within the food bank's distribution region. Additionally, clients must have some sort of documentation to confirm dependent status for their families. Individuals who cannot produce identification or documentation are provided food on their first visit, but are required to bring documentation for subsequent visits. Clients who are home-bound are able to receive food procured by family members or caregivers; some food bank volunteers are also able to perform site visits or speak with landlords in order to determine the status of a client's residency. Boundaries are drawn along a complex system of school district, zip code, and street centerline borders.

The four food banks featured in the analysis section were selected on their geographic location, their size, and their relationship with food networks outside the county. While there are many small food pantries throughout the county, usually attached to church ministries, these four entities are the only recipients of Washington Department of Agriculture commodities, which represent an extremely large portion of direct food resources for food banks throughout the state. Boundaries were determined by executive leadership of all four food banks; however, as will be examined in the Discussion section, the actual service boundaries are not universally known, even by current leadership at the food banks. Matlock, Harstine Island, Allyn, Grapeview, and Pioneer are specific regions where distribution designations vary according to provider. These same areas have very limited access to public transportation.

4.8 Food Bank Profiles

Saints' Pantry Food Bank serves the Shelton, Southside, and Oakland Bay area; it is the largest food bank in the county, and serves approximately 4,500 households each year. Saints' Pantry has the most diverse client base; specifically, Latino households who participate in migrant or seasonal work in the region primarily utilize this food bank. Saints' Pantry grew out of a literal pantry located in St. David of Wales Episcopal Church in downtown Shelton in 1981. The food bank historically operated out of St. David's, with support from other local churches. In 2009, the food bank became an independent non-profit agency. Its board of directors is made up of members of the local contributing churches; the board works under the leadership of the food bank director to purchase food, manage client data, maintain partnerships with other organizations, and distribute food to clients.

Saints' Pantry, with its high client volume, has the closest relationship with corporate donors due to its large volunteer and administrative capacity to pick-up, repack, and distribute donations. Saints' Pantry is the sole food bank in the county with a donor relationship with Walmart, one of the biggest corporate entities in the county, and one of the biggest commercial donors of direct food resources to the food banks. Saints' Pantry has contracted rights to salvage goods through Walmart; food resources are then distributed to clients or passed along to other food banks, particularly if the goods are nearing their expiration dates or are perishable.

Saints' Pantry is open for distribution two days a week, Tuesdays and Wednesdays, from 9:30am-12:30pm. Volunteers come on Mondays to set up for distribution; tasks may include stocking food, picking up donations, repackaging donations, cleaning and disposing of food, as well as administrative tasks related to reporting, fundraising, and client database management. Saints' Pantry is the only food bank in the county with integrated nutrition education programming, a CSO representative to facilitate participation in SNAP and WIC benefits, and Spanish-speaking volunteers who act as interpreters.

The **Hood Canal Food Bank** is located in Hoodspout; the organization takes in clients from the northwest part of the county along Hood Canal. The Hood Canal region has a unique demographic mix of clients; most are white seniors or retirees, single people with seasonal employment, and families. There are few to no minority clients from the Latino community or the Skokomish nation, which is located in the distribution region. There is no translator on staff for Spanish-speaking clients. The administrative structure of the food bank is strongly supported by volunteers from the nearby community, many of whom are retirees who were recruited from social clubs in the surrounding colonies and resorts.

Hood Canal's donation base is strongly typified by individual and community support through financial and direct food resources; year-round food drives are present at the local bank, credit union, and post office. Distribution occurs on the first and third Mondays of the month; clients are able to come between 12-2pm; in the mornings, volunteers meet to debrief the day, organize

food resources, check in with the volunteer coordinators, and clean the site. Hood Canal is unique, in that it supports a “shopping” model for clients. This model encourages food bank clients to have individual choice over the foods available to them. Additionally, there are special food sections available for those who are suffering from chronic illnesses that feature low-sodium and low-fat options.

The **Matlock Food Bank** is located in a small, unincorporated community in the western region of Mason County, approximately 20 miles away from any micro- or metropolitan area. Shelton, Montesano, and Elma are the nearest communities with access to grocery stores. Mary M. Knight, the local school district, draws students from both Grays Harbor County and Mason County; 53% of its student population is eligible for free or reduced lunch programs. Matlock is locally known for its geographic isolation, logging history, and role as an incubator for illegal employment. The timber industry has historically been the primary employer in the area, providing jobs in logging operations and mills. Simpson Timber and its subsidiary, Green Diamond, have been the primary logging operations working in this region of the county; the Grisdale logging camp, located outside of Matlock, was the last working logging camp in the country when it closed in 1985 (James, 1986).

The Matlock Food Bank can be found in a small building on the site of the Matlock Community Church. Historically, the church was located in a three story, all-purpose building that was a bunkhouse for loggers. Over time, the building was converted for various uses, including a tavern and a general store, until it was torn down completely to make way for the community church.

Distribution hours occur once a week; the food bank structure itself has extremely limited storage. Clients must stay outside of the building to receive food, often in cold or rainy weather. Inside, there are several freezers and refrigerators that have been donated by individuals and organizations in the county. There is no fresh fruit or vegetable donations due to unavailable storage.

Volunteers are drawn from the local church and outlying community; many of them are extremely elderly; as of late, several long-time volunteers have passed away, leaving many vital positions unfilled. Distribution boundaries for the food bank are vague, and generally disputed amongst various partners within Mason County EFNs. Currently, the Matlock zip code region is the general boundary, with clients arriving from Elma and Montesano, in addition to Matlock.

The **North Mason Food Bank** is located in Belfair, and serves the area northeast of Shelton. North Mason differs from other food banks, in that their client base has a higher concentration of seasonal agricultural workers, who are often undocumented. Additionally, there is a large number of individuals who are employed federally at the Port of Bremerton. There is some indication that the current federal sequester could increase the client load at the food bank. Little information is available about the food bank; at the time of this research, reorganization was occurring for the administration and the board of directors for the food bank. Currently, the South Kitsap Helpline Food Bank is helping restructure the organization, strengthen the board, and continue to deliver services to clients in the area.

4.9 Alternative Agriculture Programming

Mason County has a growing alternative agro-food network; small to mid-sized producers of food and non-food agricultural products exist within the county and market goods within the region. Local alternative agro-food programming also extends to the social service and health sector; increasingly, community groups have established partnerships between various entities to support these projects. Outside of formal farm operations, community gardening projects have been a significant alternative agro-food program in the county. These projects provide opportunities for individuals to have access to garden space, in addition to providing food for certain EFN distributors.

The Washington Corrections Center is the largest alternative agro-food program involved with county EFNs. Originally, the program provided produce to all food banks in the county, but since 2009, Saints' Pantry has isolated the relationship. In 2011, it is estimated that the WCC produced 18,000 pounds of fresh produce to Saints' Pantry. Locally, the Washington State University Mason County Master Gardener program and the Shelton Parks and Recreation department have recently started the Catalyst Park Community and Food Bank Garden, a public park that is maintained by the Master Gardeners to benefit Saints' Pantry. Food grown in the 2,500 square foot food bank garden is tended and harvested by Master Gardener volunteers; in addition, a 12 plot community garden within the park actively recruits food bank clients to grow their own food. Mason General Hospital, the Mason County Health Department, and Mason Matters, a local nonprofit organization, have worked together to establish the

HOPE garden, which aims to provide garden space for individuals with high levels of food inaccess. In Hoodspout, the local Kiwanis organization has established an informal garden space to provide fresh produce at the food bank during the summer, but has not been successful as of late due to environmental limitations, such as flooding.

Outside of gardening programs, local Extension agents work to provide nutrition education at Saints' Pantry and the Shelton Behavioral Health Resources center. These programs are also established in schools with rates of free/reduced breakfast and lunch programs above 50%. Nutrition educators provide onsite demonstrations of recipes and information on government benefits such as SNAP and WIC. Recently, efforts have been made to provide SNAP and WIC clients access at local farm stands and the Shelton Farmer's Market.

Chapter 5: Analysis of Mason County EFNs: Case Study Interviews

Interviews with informants from various emergency food network providers in Mason County revealed several themes related to the state of emergency food networks and alternative agriculture. These themes addressed challenges for both staff and clients utilizing services, in addition to mapping partnerships and practices between organizations. Key quotes are used to illustrate these themes; they will be analyzed in the context of the theoretical traps explored in the preceding chapters. Following this, a discussion on how food access challenges can be addressed by avoiding traps in planning and practice will be provided.

Themes identified in the interviews were consistent. Informants included food bank administrators, social service providers who administer WIC and USDA/WSDA commodities, and nutrition/SNAP-Ed educators working with local Extension services and county school districts. While there are four participating food banks in Mason County who work with these partners, the North Mason Food Bank, located in Belfair, did not provide an interview informant. During the researcher's field work, the North Mason Food Bank experienced organizational restructuring that prevented interviews from being performed. Some information was collected from collaborating stakeholders through personal communications. The use of the word "Belfair" in other interviews refers to the North Mason Food Bank. Generalized statements about

all four food banks represented takes into account information gathered about the North Mason Food Bank from other interviews.

All participating informants cited bartering and sharing, capacity, social networks, and vulnerable populations in their interviews. A brief summary of involvement with alternative agriculture and perspectives on food access will also be examined. These themes will be explored within the context presented in Chapter 4.

5.1 Food prices

The price of food for both clients and distributors was cited by multiple informants as a limiting factor in programming. Additionally, food prices were cited as a driving factor for poor nutritional intake by clients utilizing EFNs within the county. Low-income clients of EFNs typically do not have financial capital to purchase food of their choosing; when they do, they often choose low-cost, low-preparation foods. Multiple informants cited co-morbidity factors amplifying the effects of chronic poverty on food access for clients of EFN in the county. Mental and physical health, along with the logistical ability to access transportation, was frequently mentioned as possible barriers to accessing food.

INF 10: “I think some patients are depressed, and they are not always able to cook for themselves. Some people can’t necessarily prepare meals for themselves any more, or they just can prepare has to be quick stuff, which isn’t as good for them. And I think that there are some low-income folks, the cheaper food, is the food that cheap isn’t a good for you, and they tend to go for the prepackaged, cheap stuff.”

This tendency towards low-cost foods was seen as a choice by some informants; they believed that low-income clients of EFNs preferred food that is satisfying,

rather than nutritionally dense. There was little indication that preference of this type of foods may be dictated by multiple systemic pressures upon individuals, including proximity to fresh produce, personal income or welfare benefits, and psychological dependence upon food with low nutritional value. This perceived preference was derided by one informant, specifically.

INF 11: “They don’t really like the food, I get that from some elderly patients, from senior nutrition. I had a very obese patient, who, [sic] here had suggested Healthy Choice meals, and she cussed at me, because they tasted so bad. Because I had gone in to just reinforce that, to show her when there were sales, and she was very angry.”

Again, the same informant reiterated the idea that clients purchase low-cost “junk foods” because of their ease and taste. There was no acknowledgment of lack of nutrition education or lack of access to healthy foods as a potential contributing factor of low-nutritional intake.

INF 11: “People like junk food. (*laughs*) It’s easier to grab something than to make something yourself. And it’s yummier for them, if they haven’t gotten used, if you tell someone who is 500 pounds to eat a salad. (*laughs*) This country is junk food addicted.”

Within EFNs, food prices are a significant limiting factor for distributors. Food price fluctuations reduce the purchasing power of food bank administrators. As in-kind donations decrease according to local charitable donations, food banks rely upon strong relationships with food retailers and brokers to maintain a consistent level of resources for clients.

INF 7: “Uh, I think they kind of balance each other, in other words, commodities, because they are a non-perishable versus a perishable, they meet kind of that end, where we can focus more of our resources on, and we have to buy more than we have in years past, just as an

example, mac 'n cheese, that's like a dollar a box. But through Food Lifeline, we can get three boxes for a dollar. So, the money in some respects is equally or even more important than people providing food items, because we can make the dollar go farther than they can because of our contacts.”

5.2 Bartering and sharing

Sharing, bartering, or negotiating resources was a consistent activity that was cited by all informants as a significant part of maintaining distribution operations. Connections to donors and to direct food resources were shared between food banks; additionally, financial support was provided by community partners to bolster food bank buying power.

INF 13: “We might be short of one thing, and then we'll have a glut of it the next. Like I say, the things that we have to buy, like coffee, cereal, Top Ramen is another on that we have to buy, we buy chili we buy refried beans, and so, when we are requesting things from people, we bring these things that we have to buy out of pocket.”

Outside of government assistance, Mason County food banks rely heavily upon community financial and in-kind donations to maintain adequate food resources for clients. Seasonality affects donations, with greater need and greater donations occurring during the holiday giving season (between Thanksgiving and mid-January). Holiday food drives and fundraising outreach increases during this period to support increased client need. Summer brings new clients to food banks throughout the county; families with children that depend upon free or reduced breakfast and lunch programs begin to utilize food resources at food banks as school ends. Single male clients frequently find seasonal work in the spring and summer, which decreases their usage of EFN programming. While seasonality may affect both food and financial resource flow at the food banks, all informants

expressed concern for managing a sufficient amount of appropriate food at all times.

INF 1: “... so we can get things coordinated a bit and so we can know who to refer people to. Otherwise, everybody's out there, we're trying to avoid duplication, which is very expensive, and nobody has any money, so we're trying to solve that problem.”

Corporate donations are another significant portion of food and financial resources at all four food banks. Walmart was a commonly cited partner, in addition to other corporate franchises with local franchise stores, such as Fred Meyer, Safeway, and IGA. Discount stores such as Grocery Outlet and Big Lots are frequent donors or partners, providing discounts on goods purchased by food banks. Saints’ Pantry has an exclusive contract with Walmart, which is located in Shelton.

INF 13: “We are the only food bank that receives food from Walmart. The other food banks get basically what we get in accordance to how many people they have, they allot it by the numbers. But then, they don't get the opportunity to get things like eggs from Walmart.”

Hood Canal, Matlock, and North Mason food banks are prevented from receiving donations from the retailer, even if redistributed through Saints’ Pantry.

INF 1: “Well, there is one thing we’re participating with that’s helping us out a lot, and that’s the grocery rescue plan, from Feed America, and locally it’s done through Walmart. And every day, we go up to Walmart and go pick up groceries and food items that would have probably been discarded. Uh, however, these are not items that are not still nutritious, still not, you know, they’ve reached, some of the items have reached their sell-by dates, which doesn’t mean that they’re nutritionally damaged or anything like that, but we get almost all of their fresh vegetables from them in the winter, various other items, eggs, meat, and they uh, take off the shelf for various reasons. Well, that’s a tremendous help to us.”

INF 2: “Originally, they were trying to get it so we, I guess, the three food banks could go in a couple of days and get food, but Walmart only wanted to work with one food bank.

INF 1: And since we’re the biggest, by contract, we work together, that’s contract. And there are certain restrictions in that contract, we’re not supposed to give it to anyone else, except what we give away here. But that’s just the nature of the beast.”

Walmart was seen as a crucial partner for the largest food bank in the county; their donations were seen as an extension of their influence in the community, as the largest non-government employer. Informants were extremely grateful for the donations, despite the fact that the food would typically be destroyed and is not deemed appropriate for the primary market consumer.

INF 13: “You’ve got to hand it to Walmart, I’ll say this, Walmart opened their doors, they used to throw everything away because they thought if they were giving it away, they were competing against themselves. Then, when the times got tough, they opened their doors to food banks.”

Donation partnerships with alternative agro-food programming in the county do exist, but is not a significant part of consistent food resources. The longest and most extensive relationship cultivated within the county in relation to alternative agriculture is the Washington Corrections Center garden, which provides produce during the spring and summer periods to Saints’ Pantry Food Bank. Originally, this partnership was shared by both Hood Canal and Saints’ Pantry; however, the prison only works with Saints’ Pantry to streamline transport and communication. This results in trades between food banks when there is no capacity for storage or distribution at Saints’ Pantry.

INF 1: “We would still rely upon corporate donations. Uh, because, the uh, quite honestly, it's not enough. We, give you an example, we would go out, we will get a telephone call from the prison out there,

they've got stuff for us, and we'll go out there to pick it up, and we'll go to the commercial side to go pick it up, and right up underneath the tower, and you're libel to get two big pickup loads of things, and we'll get it and bring it back and bag it up and do whatever with it, process it, and you may have two or three *tons* of produce, and it will be gone in two or three days. So, uh, we still have to have any support we can get. One of the things that we do here, is, uh, if we have an abundance of things like that, and we can see, for example, that we have two truckloads full of tomatoes, and we're not going to get rid of two truckloads full of tomatoes. So what we'll do is, we'll look out around us, and we'll try to find other people like us, and we'll help them with it, we'll help the other food banks if we have enough.”

Financial bargaining was a key component of procuring and managing food resources at each food bank. Limited financial resources and fundraising capabilities require food providers to negotiate discounts with individuals who represent local retailers. Financial resources are leveraged using personal connections and donor relationships with conventional and discount grocers and producers. Without discounts on goods, financial resources are not able to cover the purchasing needs of the food banks.

INF 13: “But [sic] is a good bargainer. Since [sic] has taken over [sic], he probably saves about 40% from buying from, ... we used to get it all from Red Apple, I mean, the guy was a nice guy, but gosh, when you can go out and get this same stuff at Costco or Walmart of some store like that, and get it for 40% less, that is not a good way to run a food bank. And he and [sic] really shop around for what they can get.”

Bargaining between food banks is another common practice. Due to contract limitations with some donated food items, some goods are not allowed to be traded outside of the recipient food bank. Northwest Harvest, a large nonprofit organization that procures and donates food to food banks in Washington, donates

food resources according to the number of clients that are reported by each food bank. These food resources are not allowed to be traded or used by outside food banks or soup kitchens. Additionally, Walmart's grocery rescue program contract with Saint's Pantry prevents donations from the retailer from being distributed to other food banks.

Regardless, food resources are traded among food banks in the county to prevent perishable food from being wasted. Capacity limitations, specifically freezer and refrigerator space, limit the amount and type of food that is stored at each food bank. Fresh produce, eggs, milk, and proteins may be shifted to other locations that have more storage or a greater client need.

INF 1: "For example, I will get a call from [sic], or I will call [sic], or when [sic] was out there at Matlock, and now it's [sic]. So I will call [her] up, or vice versa, and we'll say, I've got a gazillion of this stuff, and I'm not going to be able to get rid of this. Do you need some? Well, yeah, and while I got you on the phone, I've got a bunch of this, so I said, ok. So, she'll bring down, what was it, someone closed down an adult daycare center, and they had a bunch of diapers, so I said, hey, we'll take 'em, we'll find a place for them. And right now, I've got a bunch of this stuff (probably eggs), do you need it? So, you know, you got some now. So we help each other."

Specifically, the Matlock food bank has no refrigeration capacity to store fresh produce, and is therefore dependent upon donations from other food banks on distribution days. The negotiations and bartering are informal and take place between directors, usually over the phone. Additionally, food drives that are held at local schools and retailers are frequently designated for specific food banks or split between them, depending upon the location and goal of the fundraiser.

INF 13: "I try to help him out in accordance, if we have a glut of eggs, I'll give him those to take over there, if we have some extra salmon, we'll give him that to take along."

INF 12: “Hoodsport, mostly with Hoodsport, because we work together, if we have extra stuff, we divided it up, and if they have food drives, we kind of divide it up. And um, like, uh, sometimes she has an area where they're picking up milk, and we'll divide it up, so we work together. As far as Saints' Pantry and Belfair, they're up that end, so they work together or something, I don't know.”

5.3 “Take what you can get”

INF 1: “We don't turn down anything, and we can never get enough of everything we need.”

The inconsistent nature of donations, client use, and financial resources can put significant strains on EFN providers. None of the informants interviewed indicated that they were in a comfortable place financially; on the contrary, all providers reported that their most consistent task as a food bank director or volunteer is procuring food and financial donations.

INF 7: “[I]t's an ongoing thing, it's not just, well gee, I donated money, I donated food items, that's great, we appreciate that, but it's ongoing, it's 24/7, it's not just, there will always be a need out there, that's just the way it is.”

Providers indicated that “there would always be a need” in communities; hungry individuals will always be present and represent a consistent presence at the food bank, sometimes for decades.

INF 12: “What we give out, people will take, and whatever we get ... [sic] ... I just don't know how to put it, but at any rate, whatever we get, we give out, it's gone. Uh, as far as my thinking, should we get more of this, should we get more of that, no what we do, we kind of even it up, give it out evenly, that way we're not giving out too much of one stuff and not enough of the other stuff.”

The month-to-month nature of resources puts a significant strain on both staff capacity and resource availability at EFNs. Food banks within Mason

County frequently compete for, regional and county funding resources, particularly through community grants sponsored by United Way. Competition between providers requires further cultivation of relationships with other administrators to maintain a balance of resources at each food bank. Overall, providers feel little control over resource availability, and are constantly working to maintain existing partnerships and develop new avenues of funding and collaboration.

INF 1: “It’s like beating a dead horse. We need food, we need money, we’ll take it from anyone who wants to give it.”

5.4 Transportation

INF 9: “I would say transportation is a huge road block for some folks. Especially since a lot of this area is rural.

INF 8: And our buses don't go everywhere.

INF 9: So that can be an issue of access for folks. I notice there are a few little communal groups that come down to the food bank, and they share that car, they have to get very coordinated so they can all come down together and get their box.

INF 8: ... I mean, it's a pretty big county and the bus is pretty limited.”

All informants cited transportation as a major barrier for clients in accessing food bank and food assistance services. Mason County Transit Authority (MTA) provides public transportation along the Highway 101 and Highway 3 corridors. Routes within the county are free to all individuals; routes outside of the county cost \$1.

INF 3: “For some people who don’t have transportation that could be an issue. It’s a large county, it’s so spread out. A lot of people use public transit. All the transit is free, throughout the county. Dial-a-Ride, too. I think we’re the only county that’s like that. It’s only a dollar to get to Olympia, to cross the county line.”

Individuals, particularly those who live west of Highway 101, may utilize MTA’s Dial-a-Ride bus, which provides free pick-up and drop-off from any location in the county. This service requires a two hour call in advance to schedule a pick-up or drop-off. In October of 2011, MTA established an additional Dial-a-Ride service known as Link Routes; these routes were established to serve populations that were previously cut off from regular transportation services. Rural areas in the eastern part of the county, specifically, Harstine Island, Lake Limerick and Mason Lake, and Cole-Arcadia-Lynch roads, are able to access this service Monday through Friday. Pick-up and drop-off is still required to be scheduled by phone at least two hours in advance. Some informants did not seem aware of these services for clients, but knew that finding appropriate transportation was a serious issue for some individuals.

Public transportation to area food banks can require clients to spend 30 minutes to 2 hours one-way to arrive in time for distribution. This is a significant challenge for elderly individuals and extremely rural residents, who were cited as specific groups that have difficulty in accessing both transportation and food bank services.

INF 2: “We work quite a bit with Mason Transit, too, we had a secretary call us the other day and asked if there was a gentleman who was way out close to Elma, and it's a three hour, if they were to go out and pick him up and take him to the food bank at Elma and wait for him and take him back, that's about a three hour trip, and so

because they were out in Elma, he wouldn't be considered a client here, but they asked if we could accommodate him, and we said yes, and that has happened quite a bit. They call us quite a bit.”

INF 1: “And we know that there is a need out there, that there are people out there that can't get in on the bus, and they use the Mason Transit as their transportation, and some of them are very elderly, and they have trouble getting their food on the bus, and some of them have trouble scheduling to get in here on time for our hours, and so we know that that area is in need of having someone help them out there.”

INF 2: “Well, for example, out at Pioneer, we cover a huge area, we go all the way to the Thurston county line, we go way out to Matlock, then up towards Union, then out towards Grapeview, as so, gosh, that's a really large area, and one of those areas is the Pioneer area, and um, out there, we have 267 head of households in that area, that's way over a 2,000 individuals in that area, just in Pioneer. And we know that there is a need out there, that there are people out there that are can't get in on the bus, and they use the Mason Transit as their transportation, and some of them are very elderly, and they have trouble getting their food on the bus, and some of them have trouble scheduling to get in here on time for our hours, and so we know that that area is in need of having someone help them out there. And there's a food bank out there now. It's a big need.”

Clients carpool, hitch-hike, or plan trips around food bank distribution.

This is a particular challenge in the southwestern area of the county, where there is no public transportation, save for Dial-a-Ride services. Community members work together to provide transportation for those that live in isolated areas, particularly in the Matlock food bank region.

INF 12: “Transportation, a lot of them'll catch Mason Transit, there's a bus that'll come, they catch rides with neighbors, we have some volunteers that come in and they've brought in people, and when they leave, they wait to bring the people home with them, when they finish volunteering, we have taken people home, if they've walked and it's

raining or bad weather, we will take them home. But we haven't really had a problem with transportation too much, very little.”

INF 12: “We used to have people from Dayton, people from Dayton would come up, they would ride the ride bus, the Dial-a-Ride, they would dial them up and pick them up, but that's kind of stopped, I guess nobody's asking for it, so they – we used to have 3 or 4 people come on the Dial-a-Ride and then they'd have to wait for the Dial-a-Ride to pick them up.”

For low-income rural residents, budgeting gas is a major task. Gas stations can be very far away from households, and clients in rural areas of the county may own larger, older vehicles that are appropriate for the rough terrain of logging roads; unfortunately, this means that most vehicles get very poor gas mileage. Many food banks work with partners to provide gas vouchers to clients who are otherwise unable to access sufficient gasoline to make the trip to the food bank; these vouchers are distributed through two organizations run out Olympia, WA and are extremely limited (recipients may only receive a \$20 voucher every three months).

INF 12: “Some of them come in with others, relatives, and we give out vouchers from the Salvation Army – propane and gas. That helps them out with the gas situation, because a lot of them don't have enough gas to come up. And they don't come up every week, probably some of them will come up every week, others will, depending on whether they need food or not.”

INF 12: “Well, it doesn't make any difference, because no matter where you are, it's 22 miles to Elma, or Shelton, or Montesano. So, where ever they go, it's still 22 miles. Of course, what a lot of people do, I'm sure, is they buy just enough gas to get them into town, buy whatever they have. If you stay at the store, you know what a country store is, out here, it's much higher than what you would pay in the city, so even the gas is expensive, so. But that's why we give out gas vouchers. When we give out the gas vouchers, the young lady that

takes care of it, we have to have three months in between before you can get another one. There's so many of them, she has a list, and she goes through that, because otherwise, they'll be back every week. And you can't do that. A voucher is 20 bucks. And that has to be limited, too.”

Homebound residents are a vulnerable population that are unable to access services due to poor access to sufficient transportation, poor health, or few community connections. Delivery services are utilized informally in the Hood Canal distribution area, but this is not a common practice at any of the food banks.

INF 1: “See, we don't have the capability to do delivery service, and we know that there are a lot of people out there who need that. But we don't have the time for that, the money for that, the capability to do that. And it's a sad, sad thing. So we try to reach out to everybody we can, whether that's a church or another food bank, or any way we can try to help people, and someday maybe there be a solution to that.”

Transportation within the county is an extremely limiting factor for low-income clients of EFNs in Mason County; this challenge is compounded by the additional hardship of limited hourly distribution by the food banks, which does not align well with existing transportation options.

5.5 Capacity

Interview informants consistently cited capacity as a significant challenge for food banks and food access outreach. All four food banks have grown in size since their inception in the mid-1980s, usually emerging from an expressed need in the community due to economic stagnation or downturn. Since this time, client bases have increased while the capacity of the food banks has lagged behind.

Challenges with staffing, storage, refrigeration, and hourly availability were cited as consistent problems that existed at all food banks.

5.6 Staff

Both logistic and staff capacity are stretched by emergency food networks in the county; programming is primarily provided by volunteer support. Food Lifeline reports that 37% of food banks in Western Washington have no paid staff; on average, food banks in the region employ 2 paid staff members and maintain a consistent volunteer base of 30 or more individuals (2010). In Mason County, food banks typically employ 1-2 staff members full or part time. Volunteer support was consistently mentioned as an essential element of operations; volunteers with the physical ability to move heavy loads are particularly coveted. Volunteers bring varied skill sets and interests to emergency food networks; the vast majority of volunteers are retirees or seniors, some of whom are clients of the food banks. Administrators are heavily reliant upon these volunteer to provide day-to-day operations.

INF 7: “The beauty of volunteering is that you're putting something into the community that you live in, which is great.”

The ability to pay staff members is extremely limited; most paid employees of food banks in the county are employed part time, but put in full time hours procuring food, maintaining storage systems, developing community partnerships, and finding financial support. Volunteers usually represent individuals with few time and financial limitations, although some volunteers are also clients of the food bank. These volunteers work closely with non-recipient staff and receive food before or after distribution hours.

INF 5: “It’s something that we’re kind of committed to that we want them to be able to do it, because we understand that some people don’t want to take food unless they’re doing something.”

5.7 Storage

Storage is a significant challenge for EFNs; all food banks have extremely limited availability to refrigerate, freeze, or store dry goods at food banks. The Hood Canal Food Bank has worked to develop partnership in Hoodspport and Shelton to improve storage availability. Food resources may arrive at inconvenient times; having access to storage that is both sanitary and dry is essential.

INF 5: “And then the biggest deal in recent years has been Mason Transit. With our being able to rent, we started with commodities, but then we ended up using them for all the food banks, and they charge us rent, but it's minimal, and that's a really, really big deal. Storage is one of the hardest things, you know.”

Food bank administrators expressed need for more accessible, convenient, and expansive storage, but were limited by food bank space. Some food banks, such as Hood Canal, utilize storage at outside locations. Others, like Saints’ Pantry, have worked to rent space that adjoins the main distribution area. The Matlock Food Bank has extremely limited storage; the entire structure is housed inside a converted trailer with no window and no walk-in refrigeration or freezer space.

INF 6: “Well, I’d like to have a bigger storage area, but I don’t think that’s possible, I mean out here, out here, we have a bigger storage area in Shelton, but um, I don’t know how we could expand on this here, there’s no room to add on, um, that’s the only thing that would be nice to have.”

5.8 Refrigeration

Saints’ Pantry and Hood Canal food banks recently received grants from Green Diamond, the local corporate timber entity, to build walk in refrigerators

and freezers. This has greatly aided the two food banks; previously, multiple freezers and refrigerators were used to house donations, themselves donated items. This leads to inconsistent and insufficient storage for perishable items. The Matlock food bank currently has little capacity for refrigeration and freezing; multiple appliances are utilized for dairy and protein products. During the time of fieldwork, a freezer had broken during the weekend, leading to a loss of frozen meat for the upcoming distribution.

5.9 Hours

A significant challenge for clients of food banks in the county is accessing services during formal distribution hours. Distribution times are dependent upon staff capacity and the number of clients utilizing services. Distribution times are based primarily on the availability of volunteers, which is usually during weekday work hours. Weekend and evening distributions are not currently occurring at any food bank; additionally, Saints' Pantry is the only food bank in the county with weekly distribution. Hood Canal and Matlock have bi-weekly distribution times.

INF 8: "Well, it would be nice if some of the food banks were open more days than just two days a week, you know, some of the, it's all volunteer run, but it's hard if it's just those two days."

Distribution hours at all food banks are during the workweek and in the mornings; distribution hours are typically 2-3 hours long, with time spent for set-up and break-down by volunteers. Unfortunately, accessing distribution at the food banks can be difficult for clients who work or are not able to utilize public transportation.

Attempts have been made in the past to provide alternative hours for clients that work during weekday distributions. This, however, was not something that was embraced by all staff members of the food bank in question; eventually, the weekend distribution was stopped.

INF 13: “But, uh, there, I would say, the bad situation is that we are open Tuesday and Wednesday 9:30-12. Whereas we have so many people who can't come in at that time because they're working, maybe at a minimum wage, and they can't get away from the work to get the food, and I told them, why don't we open up on Saturdays, and I- and his bunch came down from his church, and, but the other [sic] wouldn't let them advertise it, he says, “word of mouth.” Well, we started on a Saturday, and we had nine people, and that came in for food, and we had 13 behind the counter, setting up, and you know ... and so, after about six weeks we did this, and it only got up to about 15-16 people, so they cut it off again. And so, that's something that I think we should make an effort do, the working poor.

KEW: Why do you think that Saturday distribution was encouraged as word of mouth only? Fear of too many people coming?

INF 13: I think that was it, it was idiotic, but it was his theory. Consequently, after six weeks, it shut down.”

Informants were very aware of the issue of distribution hours for clients.

Additionally, challenges for the working poor, a specific vulnerable population identified by informants at all food banks, were of particular concern. This quote illustrates a specific example of a client, employed by Walmart (both the largest donor to the food banks and the largest retail employer in the county), who experienced difficulties in accessing food, both in spite of and because of her current employment situation.

INF 14: We had one woman who came in here who does work, and she was able to come down because she was on medical leave. She was having a hard time getting help.

INF 13: We have a lot of people, I mean, you think it's the homeless, but it isn't that, a lot of people just don't get the advantage of coming down here simply because we aren't open.

INF 14: I mean, the only reason she could come down was because she was on medical leave. I mean, they don't make that much wages down at the Walmart.”

5.10 Social networks

A significant strength that emerged from informant interviews was cultivation of and reliance on social networking for food distribution and communication. The low population density of the county isolates certain individuals and, to a certain extent, organizations themselves. Mason County has no centralized anti-hunger coalition, and must rely upon relationships between providers to maintain resource and service continuity. Direct work with clients requires that providers have personal connections with individuals using services at food banks. This is especially important for those who are living in areas that are not accessible by public transportation. Aging populations in this area are of particular concern, as they may become more susceptible to being homebound or unable to communicate with other individuals in the community, much less access vital social services.

The importance of social networks cannot be understated in agro-food systems analysis; entire frameworks have been developed around the premise that social connections are the actual links that move food within a community

(Jarosz, 2000). Informants cited various ways that social networks are maintained and utilized within their respective communities and the county at large.

INF 6: “I think more communication, like through the paper, Hood Canal communications provides excellent service to us with their spot announcements, where people can get assistance, so I think it’s adequate in terms of up, people themselves are really our best spokespersons in terms of learning something.”

Some informants believed that these social networks encouraged clients to utilize services and for food banks to become a solid part of a community’s EFN.

INF 5: “So all the people started coming to our food bank because they liked ours, and so that's why we have such a strict set of boundaries, because we're such a small community, to try to get enough money for our food bank is what we have to do. Really, it's very similar, because the community hasn't really changed. They're always very excited when they get a job, they'll tell us that they have a job, so there are other people that are trying to get jobs, and there are older people that wouldn't be trying to get jobs, and they have been with us and will be with us for their life.”

Social networks at the food banks are significantly driven by volunteer commitments. Often, volunteers at the food banks have worked at their location for decades; the vast majority of volunteers are retirees who have existing strong community relationships through local churches, businesses, government agencies, or social clubs. These connections help foster donation and volunteer partnerships within the community by leveraging long standing relationships. Informants cited friendly competitions between individual volunteers in communities to raise money for the food banks; in another case, a local medical marijuana dispensary and a retired port commissioner worked together to provide up to \$300 in fresh produce for a specific food bank. Volunteers consistently and enthusiastically emphasized that working at the food bank with other people who

shared similar values and community networks was the most enjoyable part of being a part of an EFN. Friendships between volunteers were cited as a huge driver of consistent participation.

INF 6: “I think that, it's very, very good for a community of this type to be able to reach out to everybody in the community, and people do that. And people know that we care, and they make come for something else, because I happen to be at the church too, and over the years, that has been helpful. It was helpful for me to able to minister to kids in the tribe, there's something about being able to help someone in need, they see you in a different light. They see you as a person that's like them. I think, that's the way I think. So, and, hopefully, and I say to some people, you know, they say, I've never done this in my whole life, they're in their 60s, and I say well, that's what we're here for. We're here for you when you need food, we're here for you. And I said, you probably helped other people throughout your life. And, so that's what we're trying to do, you know, I happen to have time, so I come and do this. So, um, it's a, giving is a good thing.”

Social networking is not limited to institutional or business connections; Mason County’s rural networks require that all individuals, whether they are clients of the food banks or not, maintain strong connections to neighbors and relatives to maintain communications and services during periods of inclement weather or other disruptions. Informants discussed the importance of families and neighbors coming together to make sure that all individuals’ food needs are taken care of. In some cases, this might be as simple as calling and checking in with a regular client who has not been coming to distribution days. This may extend as far as setting up deliveries or rideshares for clients.

INF 6: “I think one of the things in terms of access is that since we’re so into the community, there’s like this gal who goes around and ask about her neighbor, people are kind of keeping an eye out for the other people and they know that we’re here. So they know that we’re

here to donate to, they know that we're here if they need food. And I think that's a big part of the success."

However, social networks become more strained as communities become more isolated between households and from general services. Matlock and Pioneer were cited as two regions that have poor access to communication and transportation. Individuals involved with the Matlock region expressed the difficulty of maintaining social networks in the most rural part of the county, even while emphasizing informal connections that are maintained regularly throughout the community.

INF 12: "I'm not out in the area as much as I should be because I'm tied in with that, also tied in with the church, so I have my neighbors, in fact, I have a neighbor that I take care of, so between all that, I'm not out in the community, so once in a while, they'll have things going on at the school, ... so we'll do that."

Education is another area where community connections are leveraged in order to share skills and knowledge about nutrition and social services in the county.

Currently, nutrition education is only available at school districts in the county with free/reduced lunch rates higher than 50%, Saints' Pantry Food Bank, and the Shelton Behavioral Health Resources center. These opportunities for education and connection are seen as a way to educate entire families or communities. This type of social networking is more formalized, but it based upon a similar belief that creating connections with individuals will help change behaviors and encourage empowerment through nutritional education and future participation in welfare programs.

INF 8: "Now the biggest thing is we're going to do our approach differently, we're using more of a social ecological model. So in the past, we've been more on the individuals level, we've been giving

information to individuals, and now we're trying to get out to make a difference in policies, and in the environment, and social norms and culture. So we're going to try whole school approaches, we're going to start piloting these next year, having parent newsletters available in three different formats, so electronically, paper copies, ... But we're doing a whole school approach, a whole community approach, so it will be the same message given to everybody, in different ways, trying to bridge it from the individual to get bigger changes county wide."

INF 9: "[T]hen just talking to people! Talking them up and getting a feel for their personal life and nudging them towards making better choices, you know, emotionally engaging them, you know, just getting into their life first and then getting the conversation directed towards what we're featuring that week, that nutrition topic, and it's great, because over time, we have people sharing their ideas, and changes that they're making, and you know, they're really pleased to share that back with me."

Social networking may be the most important asset that EFNs possess within Mason County; it is unclear if formal channels of communication would improve these existing connections, but it is certain that maintaining personal relationships with both clients and other EFN partners is a vital aspect of retaining funding, developing trust, and establishing transparency within distribution regions.

5.11 Vulnerable populations

EFNs in Mason County work with vulnerable populations that experience marginalization on multiple levels; this is often expressed in decreased agency and reliance upon emergency food provisions for basic nutrition. Informants cited specific populations that have special food access needs; these included seniors, students eligible for the weekend backpack supplemental food program, and the working poor. Additionally, each food bank cited specific groups of clients that have been utilizing services for decades ("regulars").

INF 9: “Um, well, we're always working with a diverse crowd, there's always the regulars every week, and then there's the ones where it's their first time, or they're just moving through, transients just moving through the community, and the way its' set up that they pass by our table, you only get a few minutes with them, so it's like, how do you get the most of those few minutes. And, most of the crowd I receptive to what I'm doing, you know, it's food, I jazz it up and make it fun, and you know, I'm very engaging and friendly, and then as they get to know me, as they're regulars, we have all this personal conversation and go around, but you know, you get a few folks in there, that, there's so much stress in their life that they can't, they just can't be in that space for that education They're worried about where they're going to sleep tonight, you know, their car's broken down, how are they going to get their food box home? You know, that sort of thing, so that's a challenge.”

5.12 Seniors

As previously discussed, Mason County has a significant population of retirees and seniors. This demographic represents both a niche for volunteers and clients. Seniors are a significant population that utilizes food banks, as well as one that is growing at certain locations. Despite special programming through Meals on Wheels and the Senior Nutrition Program that run throughout the county, older clients are still in need of direct food resources. Several informants cited rising healthcare and medication costs as a barrier to food access for seniors.

INF 1: “One thing that we are seeing are more senior citizens, more people that are retired and are living on social security and pensions, because they aren't going as far anymore. And after the recent financial crisis, things aren't going as far anymore.”

Illness and injury at food banks are of particular concern, as food bank volunteers must lift and stack extremely heavy loads during set-up and break-down. One informant, a senior himself, noted that his involvement with the food bank was a direct result of volunteers passing away.

INF 12: “And from there, one of the persons there died, so I started from the ground floor, so to speak, and we had one fellow who did the pick-ups, but he got sick, so I had to take over his part, and then one of the fellows dies, and then made some extra work.”

Seniors, particularly those who are in need of caregivers or live alone or in isolated parts of the county, have difficulty access services, often due to physical limitations.

INF 6: “Well ... I suppose the hardest thing for me, and this is just my opinion, and we haven't dealt with it too much, but I know that, there may be shut-ins that aren't being helped, and how exactly we can handle that, I don't know. Basically, we allow a caregiver to go around as if they were the person.

KEW: Is this a unique situation to this area?

INF 6: I think it isn't, but I think when you're in a smaller community, it's more obvious.”

5.13 Youth

Youth enrolled in local school districts who participate in free/reduced school breakfast programs are specific concern to EFNs within the county. These students do not typically interact directly with EFNs outside of their schools. Instead, they rely upon their family’s ability to procure supplemental food resources. Unfortunately, these youth often suffer from lower food access during the weekends and summers when school breakfast and lunch programs are not available. The “backpack program” that is run through Saints' Pantry and Hood Canal was cited as a critical function of the food banks to address this problem. Youth facing food inaccess are eligible to pick up backpacks that are filled a

weekend's worth of food; these youth are eligible or participating in the free or reduced breakfast and lunch programs in their school district.

INF 1: "It's also by the free lunch program, that's one of the key elements, but also by the counselors and teachers weigh in on it. There's a scale and there is a, [sic] would know better, but there is a scale that is used to determine it.

KEW: The food is intended for the individual or the family?

INF 1: Well there's the rub.

INF 2: There's the rub.

INF 1: We know, because it's been reported to us, we received a whole bunch of letters, thank you letters, that we have on the wall now. And some of the letters were from the parents, thanking us for the food, because it was a basis for their food as a family for that weekend.

INF 2: I know there were a couple of, it was a child, and they said, thank you for helping my family, it helps my mommy and daddy until we get our food stamps.

INF 1: So, it was an eye opener for us, you know, we're not that naïve that we didn't think it was helping other people, but when you have a child thanking us because it's helping their family, and this child is probably 8, 9 years old, it's quite an eye opener. We knew of one instance, for example, where the family was actually living in their car, and living off the food we were giving them through the backpack program. [The school representative] will come in on Wednesday afternoon to pick them up, and they bring them to the school, and they'll distribute them to the students on Friday."

The backpack program is currently only available to students in the Shelton School District, which is a significant issue for students in outside, more rural districts that have equally high or higher free/reduced breakfast and lunch rates. Need in the Shelton School district was only made known by a representative of

the middle school in recent years. The program aims to be discreet, but distribution practices have prevented students in need from taking full advantage of the program.

INF 9: “They get together and they bag up specifically a weekend's worth of food because what happens is the kids are eligible for the breakfast and lunch programs, so Monday through Friday, they're getting at least two meals a day, but on the weekends, for whatever reason, they don't have access for food. And sometimes this food is not just feeding the child, it's also feeding the parents, or whatever other adult guardian is in their life. Some of the kids are homeless, they bounce around, the older kids, they some of them bounce around from couch to couch, they live in cars, they live in parents' cars, they live in tents in the woods, you name it. Others, they call it the backpack program because on Friday, they line the bags up in the hall on Friday, and the kids go by, and they can choose to pick up a bag and put it in their backpack. The problem is that some of the kids have a social stigma, and they won't pick up a bag of food, and they're worried that other people are going to be making fun of them and stuff like that.”

Even while the backpack program remains a crucially needed and chronically underfunded program within the county, distributors are unclear as to the program's intent and goals. This can cause problems as school districts attempt to build partnerships in especially low-income school districts with less food bank capacity.

INF 12: “No, we don't have a backpack program. I don't know why they started that backpack ... then, what do you put in it, you can't make sandwiches, we don't have an area to make sandwiches. The only thing we have is canned food.”

5.14 Working Poor

INF 2: “The working poor, we've noticed that a lot of families, not just individuals who are homeless or are in a shelter.”

Informants cited the “working poor” as a group of individuals who were in need of increased food access within the county. These individuals may be working full time, but do not have enough income to cover the costs of food for themselves or their families. These individuals may be the head of households or single people who are engaged in seasonal work. Difficulties accessing food during normal distribution hours was cited as a barrier to access for this specific demographic.

INF 1: “As I go around in the community here, as I purchase food and various other things from the food bank, I've been approached several times by people who are gainfully employed on how they can get food, whether it's from the largest retailer here or the smallest. We're you know, people are hurting, all over the place.”

Barriers to distribution for employed individuals with low food access were acknowledged by informants at all levels of participation. EFN partners understand that individuals working full time might not be able to access government benefits or direct food resources due to their work commitments. Nutrition educators see their work with students in schools as a way to communicate with families who have low food access and low visibility within EFNs in Mason County.

INF 8: “And so trying to get them through their children, trying to get them at the CSO office and DSHS, but you know, people are busy, I mean, it's hard to manage when you don't have enough food to eat and you've got to jump through hoops, I mean, an hour a week for four weeks, it's tough.”

INF 8: “They want to work so they can buy their food and take care of their own food instead of negotiating and navigating through the whole system that you have to do, it's a full time job, and some of the paperwork you have to fill out, I don't know how some of the people do it, because it's very complicated.”

The systemic nature of food access within the county was not discussed by many informants during the interviews; most indicated that hunger was an inevitable part of the local agro-food system, with one informant claiming it was “the nature of the beast.” However, one informant who has spent several years working as a nutrition educator at Saints’ Pantry gave illustrated the general trends and attitudes that clients were expressing, particularly in light of the recent economic recession.

INF 9: “Well, some of the things I hear down at the food bank is more and more growing frustration with folks, because the lines are getting bigger and longer, and more and more people are coming down to use the food bank, and you know, some of these folks it's their first time ever having to come to a food bank, and more and more of them are in their late 40s, early 50s, so they've spent the bulk of their adult life working, and because of the economy in this area the past few years, that there's layoffs, people losing their jobs, losing their homes, etc., and it just spirals downwards, and I think people are embarrassed coming to the food banks, so that's what's great about our little demo station, is that right away we welcome them and we have this caring and personal relationship with them, you know, because everybody deserves to have integrity and be treated with honor and respect, and people are getting really frustrated, because you know, because they feel like, this is great, they're so thankful to have the food bank, they're so thankful for the churches and the volunteers, but they're frustrated because they're also in need of other assistance services, and you know, they're just treated like a number, they have to spend a lot of time in line, and forms, forms, forms, and they feel like nothing is really being done to address the real issues, the real issues of why they do they need food, they can't afford food, you know, not just having access to food, it's just ... go back even farther, why do so

many people need food, what's going on with our economy, and people are getting really frustrated with the government, not just local, but the Federal, you know, the whole US system, you know, and there's just this real growing depression and real growing concern, just this ennui that's sort of forming. People feel like they're getting poorer and yet they're working harder.

INF 8: And they feel like there's no way out.

INF 9: Yeah. They feel like the government's broken and our social system is broken. Because these people don't want to need food, they want to work.”

5.15 Discussion of Results

The above case study revealed many challenges and benefits that exist within Mason County EFNs. While capacity and resources are scarce and transportation is limited, strong social networks attempt to bridge these gaps by creating opportunities for collaboration between members of EFNs. Two main points are revealed from the case study; alternative agro-food programming is not a major component of EFN resources or partnerships, and perceptions of food access do not reflect the actual need in the Mason County community. A discussion of these unique characteristics of Mason County EFNs will be followed by a brief connection to the theoretical analysis provided in Chapter 3. Examining the challenges presented by interview informants can help identify areas where planning traps are being used; subsequently, they may be avoided in an attempt to efficiently and effectively decrease hungry populations in the Mason County community.

Mason County EFNs reflect conventional frameworks of procurement and distribution of food, which is based upon government, corporate, and individual

donations of financial and food resources. Alternative agro-food programming does not play a significant role in providing food or opportunities for further access. The existing capacity with the food banks is extremely limited; from the perspective of informants, most alternative agro-food programs were seen as experiments or extra opportunities for volunteer enrichment. Food bank gardens and alternative donation partnerships were exclusively initiated and organized by volunteers who had special interest in growing food or access to additional time or land for such projects.

The only alternative program given priority within Mason County EFNs is the organic garden at the Washington Corrections Center. The success of this project is an excellent illustration of the requirements for alternative programming to be maintained and successful; inmates and prison administrations need opportunities for work. Access to a low-paid work force, financial support with sustainability initiatives through the Washington State Department of Corrections, and equipment and land are three main reasons the Washington Corrections Center has been successful in producing greater yields than other citizen initiated alternative agro-food programs in the county. The ironic use of prison labor to supply food bank clients, all of whom are marginalized and prone to food inaccess, is a significant finding that bears further research and examination by alternative agro-food activists and ethicists.

Other alternative agro-food programs that interact with the county food banks have had difficulty in gaining the same amount of traction, influence, and sustainability. The food bank garden associated with the Hood Canal Food Bank

has experienced significant setbacks; flooding, followed by a year of drought, prevented harvests from being completed for the past three years. Additionally, the HOPE garden, located at Mason General Hospital and aimed at high risk patients who suffer from food inaccess, was not identified as a potential mechanism for change by social workers associated with the hospital. Limitations of the part of clients were cited as a major block for success.

INF 10: “I see that gearing more towards young families, families with young kids. I don’t think I would refer a 70 year old who is using a walker to go out and get a garden if they have never done that before. But I think a young mom, that would be a real benefit to her if she can get a plot and learn how to garden.”

Catalyst Park, a unique partnership between the local Extension office, the City of Shelton, and Saints’ Pantry Food Bank, has not had success in recruiting food bank clients to participate in its community garden program. Despite the fact that the garden is located above downtown Shelton and less than a mile away from the food bank, transportation and time limitations have been cited as barriers to client usage. Gardening and nutrition projects are not given support, outside of limited financial help from some food banks, by providers. This may be due to the fact that capacity, interest, and volunteers support exists at a consistently low level for providers within their own organizations. They may be unable or unwilling to entertain projects that require oversight, daily maintenance, and community organizing experience that has not been traditionally associated with food bank services. Overall, alternative agro-food programming was often more indicative of volunteer desires and capacity than expressed need on the part of the clients.

Another important factor limiting the success of programming in the county can be attributed to EFN perceptions of need. All interview informants were asked the question, “Do you feel there is sufficient food access for all hungry individuals in Mason County?” at the end of each interview. Out of 14 informants, only two, who hold administrative positions at a single food bank, answered ‘no.’ The 12 other informants answered ‘yes’ or ‘yes’ with some qualifiers (i.e., more transportation is necessary, or further outreach into the schools). These informants are acutely aware of the need facing the county; each one cited both specific anecdotes and a broad knowledge of the pervasive challenge of hunger in their communities. Yet, access was not seen as a problem for clients. There are several realities that may be feeding this perception, even for those who are on the front lines in the fight against hunger within Mason County.

First, providers may be satisfied with providing enough food for the clients that are coming to the food banks; they may not be concerned with issues that clients face that they are unable to directly change. This was indicated indirectly by the fixation on pounds of food distributed as a measure of success at all food banks, despite the fact that increasing amounts of food distributed also indicates increasing client loads. Challenges that clients face in accessing food were perceived as chronic and intractable. Providers did not readily provide recommendations for change within their food banks, outside of increasing storage and refrigeration capacity. This also may be an indicator of the strength of social networking as a measure of food access; close relationships with

volunteers and clients of the food bank may be unconsciously valued above decreasing services by decreasing overall hunger in a community.

There were few ideas for systemic change, outside of opening up transportation options. Mechanisms for increased access outside of systemic change were generally alternative in nature, and focused on grant money that would be able to fund projects for further research or capital costs on new gardens or greenhouses. These projects have been implemented on and off over the past five years, but suffer from an inconsistent funding environment that exhibits increasing requests for money and decreasing donations to be distributed throughout the community. In summary, providers that indicated there was enough access in the Mason County community for all hungry individuals measured access solely by amount of food distributed to clients. If all clients were able to equally receive a significant amount of food at each distribution time, access was not perceived as an issue. Clients were praised for their ability to find ways to work around limitations that existed at the food banks.

INF 12: “You know, there's a lot of people out there that just don't get enough food, and that's why they come back every week. And then there are other people who are working, and can afford to buy extra stuff, and they do ok. And you know, we have children that are not fed as well as they should be. So that, you know, we'd have to ... and I think you'll have that no matter where you go. As far as we're concerned, there aren't too many of them.”

Before coalitions may be built to improve access at Mason County EFNs, the extent to which clients are vulnerable to hunger must be universally acknowledged and internalized by providers. Until this occurs, hunger is maintained in communities through the continued presence of agro-food systems

planning traps that are embedded in both services provided and general attitudes towards the seemingly “wicked problem” of hunger.

Traps in planning were exhibited at all levels of provision within Mason County EFNs. Informants, who have the power to shape policy and planning within county agro-food systems, showed preference towards certain traps. The production trap, as illustrated in the “take what you can get” and bargaining and negotiating themes, was emphasized by informants. More food was perceived to reduce hunger, despite the fact that pounds of food are neither indicative of quality nor correlated rhetorically with increasing client bases. The neoliberal trap was briefly touched on by informants who expressed the need for clients to take responsibility for their state of food inaccess through self-directed purchasing or choice of foods within EFNs. In reality, this agency is either extremely limited or nonexistent for most clients of Mason County EFNs, and does not reflect a realistic mechanism for shifting hungry populations into the primary marketplace. Neoliberal policies were acutely felt by providers who struggle to maintain appropriate amounts of food for clients due to fluctuating food prices and the continuing economic recession, which has also driven new demographics of clients into county EFNs.

Strong social networks and relationships with donors hold a curious position within the charity and scale traps; while private charitable contributions are generally unsustainable in the long run, they also maintain essential personal relationships between community members concerned with poor health and poverty rates in their neighborhoods. This trap is transformed into a boon for

EFNs, much as the perceived “localization” of fundraising efforts. Local food was framed in a relatively alternative way by informants, but interestingly, was almost always purchased conventionally through local corporate grocery franchises. Perceptions of what constitutes local food is an interesting point of discussion that should be explored further to better understand how the scale trap becomes embedded in agro-food systems.

All traps in planning in present in Mason County EFNs; however, the charity and scale traps could be potentially transformed into leverage points for action to combat hunger by utilizing the strong community connections that embrace these traps as a means for personal enrichment and community cohesiveness.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

In order for agro-food systems to avoid failures in production and consumption, hungry individuals must be given priority when implementing planning and policies. Without strengthening the most vulnerable populations that fall within an agro-food system's bounds, systemic limitations that exist for all populations will never experience change. Alternative frameworks of access have provided the rhetoric necessary to begin mobilizing individuals towards action. Yet, until these actions are universally accessible within their community contexts, hunger will still be a major problem that undermines social service work of all kinds.

Understanding the privilege that is leveraged by progressive advocates of alternative agro-food means providing mechanisms for changing food systems that mirror the realities of the communities to which they are applied. Further research must be conducted to determine how EFN clients, specifically those that have been identified as particularly vulnerable to food inaccess, perceive their own place within local agro-food networks. The felt needs of the client community should be a primary source of research when conducting agro-food planning on multiple scales.

Reframing many of the narratives of alternative agriculture to reflect actual community need could strengthen both the goals of alternative agro-food advocates and the level of food access within a region. Assets such as social

networks are inherently localized, and may be incorporated effectively into political action through informed constituencies (Hinrichs, 2002). The Mason County Health Department has set the lofty goal of making the county the healthiest in the state; in order to do so, it is essential that increased food access is made a priority within funding and programming plans.

Recommendations for improved services to hungry clients are tailored to the needs of Mason County EFNs. While traps in planning may be generalized for alternative agro-food programming in the United States, their application to food systems planning must be contextualized to the community in question. All challenges faced by people existing within an agro-food network are unique to the communities they live in; therefore, these recommendations take into account the felt needs and the regional realities that are faced by individuals facing hunger or attempting to provide further food access in the county. Based upon the theoretical framework developed in this thesis and the information gathered and analyzed from informants, the following recommendations are made for increased food access in Mason County, Washington.

Recommendation 1: Establish a county-wide anti-hunger network for greater transparency and communication.

Currently, there is no formal opportunity for inter-agency dialogue between EFN partners. Providing a formal network that meets consistently and has open communication will increase the ability for EFNs to bargain, negotiate, and strengthen existing connections. This may also help organize clients within communities by sharing resources and information between food banks and

outside agencies. Increased transparency is key to maintain the existing integrity that has been built up within food bank distribution regions. This coalition should incorporate existing semi-formal partnerships that have evolved organically throughout the county. A single network may also decrease competition for funding and duplication of services and create more efficient avenues for funding distribution.

Recommendation 2: Provide more consistent opportunities for community education and participation in an attempt to “renormalize” hunger.

Informants consistently cited community members as the most vital aspect of EFN functions through financial and volunteer commitments. Reaching out into the community may diversify the funding and volunteer base that is needed to sustain EFN programming. Making the public aware of the need within their communities may serve to “renormalize” hunger as a part of all communities in Mason County, bringing it out of the seasonal giving sphere and into the quotidian. Again, further community involvement as a whole establishes “buy-in” and greater accountability for EFN providers.

Recommendation 3: Increase capacity at all food banks, specifically with refrigeration, hourly availability, and staff.

Clients who need direct food resources but are working full time need to have the chance to utilize EFNs. This may be accomplished through alternative hourly availability, particularly on the weekends. Matlock and North Mason Food Banks are in need of improved storage capabilities, particularly improved refrigeration. The Matlock Food Bank is also in need of an indoor distribution area for clients to stay out of the weather. Creating a space that is sanitary, safe,

and convenient for all clients is essential in providing respectful, efficient services.

Recommendation 4: Immediately improve client agency through opportunities for contact with CSO representatives at all food banks at least once a month.

By providing information and resources to clients about SNAP, SNAP Ed, and WIC at EFN locations, clients may feel more confident and comfortable applying for government food benefits, which adds to their ability to purchase food and fully express themselves as agents within the primary food marketplace.

Recommendation 5: Provide dedicated transportation options to isolated areas on food bank distribution days.

Limited transportation is a universal barrier to individuals who live in rural regions of the county. Providing dedicated routes through Mason Transit Authority could streamline access and decrease inefficiency with current Dial-a-Ride usage. Current close relationships between MTA and county EFNs make this partnership ideal.

Recommendation 6: Tailor alternative agro-food programming to the felt needs of the community and the resources available.

Alternative agro-food programming is currently underutilized and unsustainable for most food banks. Asking clients and providers for input and suggestions may increase the success of gardening projects and create more community buy-in. Successful programming should be sustained through serious planning for funding and staff capacity.

Recommendation 7: Leverage engaged social networks within the county to build a strong anti-hunger constituency at the county level.

Mason County EFNs are generally staffed by retirees with strong ties to the local community; formerly, many held political office or worked as prominent business owners. Decades of networking and personal connections may be able to transform EFN funding, visibility, and political influence in order to tackle the issue of hunger at both the distribution and institutional level.

The universality of food as physical, spiritual, and social sustenance for communities underlines its potential as a unifying banner for various constituencies looking for increased agency in sociopolitical and economic spheres of influence. Methods for uniting at the table may require serious thought on the part of alternative agro-food leaders to craft partnerships and programming that address both specific community needs and larger systemic changes that need to be made to end hunger domestically. Until then, EFNs in communities in local communities need to focus on strengths to address the challenges that are ever present within communities with significant hungry populations. Efforts to end hunger will need the implementation of creative, realistic solutions that harness the ideals of the alternative agro-food movement with the realities of globalization and economic pressures at all scales.

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