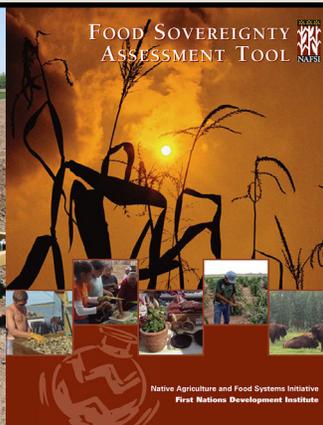


Conducting Food Sovereignty Assessments in Native Communities

On-the-Ground Perspectives



Acknowledgments

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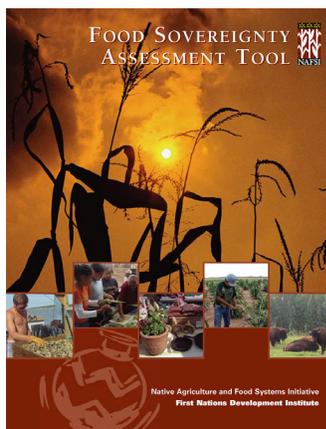
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I. Executive Summary

For more than 30 years, First Nations Development Institute (First Nations) has worked with tribes and Native organizations to restore Native American control and culturally compatible stewardship of the assets they own – be they land, human potential, cultural heritage or natural resources – and also to establish new assets for ensuring the long-term vitality of Native communities. Native food systems are an important asset of Native nations. However, like most Native assets, Native food systems have been altered, colonized and in some cases destroyed.

In 2004, First Nations published the Food Sovereignty Assessment Tool (FSAT) to demystify the process of food-related data collection in Native communities and to provide real-world examples of community-led food assessments. Over the past decade, many Native communities have used this tool as an initial step toward reclaiming local food-system control. This tool is intended to help Native communities begin to understand:



- Where did their food come from and how far did it have to travel to arrive in their community?
- How much do Native households and institutions in Native communities spend on food purchases?
- Can Native communities begin to develop market opportunities to capture food dollars locally?

These questions are important because they help tribal and community leaders evaluate local food sovereignty assets, including opportunities and needs, so that eventually they can identify strategies related to food sovereignty in their communities.

This collection of essays attempts to build on the FSAT and offer stories, experiences and assessment designs from individuals who have already conducted food assessments in their communities. We hope that sharing these experiences will encourage others to

conduct food assessments, and also hope that these stories can be learned and borrowed from.

Key Collaborators: This report reflects collaboration between First Nations and three Native American leaders and practitioners working at the grassroots level to reclaim traditional food systems. They are Vena A-dae Romero of the Cochiti Youth Experience project; Dana Eldridge of the Diné Policy Institute; and Vicky Karhu of the Mvskoke Food Sovereignty Initiative. A-dae, Dana and Vicky wrote the three essays included in this report, while Sarah Hernandez, program coordinator at First Nations, helped compile and proofread these essays.

Process: This report is a compilation of three case studies on conducting food sovereignty assessments in Native communities using, among other tools and approaches, First Nations' FSAT. These case studies, relayed in A-dae, Dana and Vicky's own words, offer three unique on-the-ground perspectives that have the potential to help others conduct food sovereignty assessments in their own communities.

Guiding Themes: The central questions addressed by this report are: how do tribes and Native organization conduct food sovereignty assessments in Native communities? Additionally, how can these assessments be used to advance vibrant and healthy Native communities?

The three case studies highlighted in this report point to four recurring themes:

- **Tribally-specific research.** Food sovereignty assessments examine a broad range of food-related opportunities and challenges. The most successful assessments are tailored to the specific culture, language and health needs of the community. A-dae, Dana and Vicky each customized and revised their assessments as necessary.
- **Community support and participation.** The community plays an important role in food-systems planning and policy. Initially, some tribal

members seemed reluctant to participate in interviews, discussions and surveys. However, A-dae, Dana and Vicky adopted several innovative strategies to increase community participation, including informal interviews and discussion groups; incentives such as gift cards, traditional foods and plants; stipends and other measures.

- **Youth involvement.** Tribal youth have the potential to create healthy and resilient food systems. Unfortunately, they may not always recognize the important linkages between culture, language, food systems and economies. Tribal youth mentorship and internship programs are a unique hands-on approach that will help engage tribal youth and introduce them to new careers in food and agriculture.
- **Data collection and analysis.** Collecting and analyzing data on a community's local food system can be a costly, time-consuming and arduous task. However, with careful planning and preparation, this process does not have to be overwhelming or intimidating. A-dae, Dana and Vicky offer several strategies for simplifying this process.

These four recurring themes are but a short summary of the advice, tips and practical solutions offered in the rest of this report. Again, we would like to thank A-dae, Dana and Vicky for their contributions.

II. Introduction

First Nations recognizes that accessing healthy food is a challenge for many Native American children and families. Without access to healthy food, a nutritious diet and good health are out of reach. To increase access to healthy food, we support tribes and Native communities as they build sustainable food systems that improve health, strengthen food sovereignty and increase control over Native agriculture and food systems. We provide much of this assistance through the Native Agriculture and Food Systems Initiative (NAFSI), a grant program designed to help tribes and Native communities build sustainable food systems and



support efforts such as food cooperatives, commercially-licensed kitchens, farm-to-school programs, and numerous other agricultural projects related to Native food-systems control.

The success of these innovative projects is often based upon thoughtful research and planning. Before starting any food-related project, it is important to gather information and data about the community's local food system. An easy and effective way to gather this information is by conducting a community food assessment. These assessments help identify strengths and weaknesses of local food systems and determine ways to support and strengthen that food system.

In 2004, First Nations, with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, developed the Food Sovereignty Assessment Tool (FSAT) to help measure, assess and alleviate food insecurity in rural and reservation-based Native communities.¹ The FSAT provides tips, guidelines and data-collection tools for conducting food sovereignty assessments. We have used the FSAT to provide numerous trainings to hundreds of individuals working to develop food assessments in Native communities.

Nearly a decade has passed since we first developed this tool. This report will start to examine how various tribes and Native organizations have adapted, modified and improved this tool since then. Specifically, this report examines how three leaders engaged in Native food-systems work have used the FSAT to measure the strengths, weaknesses, and potential of food systems in their communities.

In their own words, A-dae, Dana and Vicky explain their motivation and share their advice for success. They each designed and implemented successful food sovereignty assessments that were later used to plan innovative food-related projects. For example, A-dae helped establish a successful tribal youth-elder mentorship program that emphasizes traditional farming practices as a way to engage youth in positive life pathways. Dana helped launch a unique internship program at Diné College that encourages more tribal college students to participate in Native

¹ Bell-Sheetter, Alicia. Food Sovereignty Assessment Tool, Fredericksburg, VA: First Nations Development Institute, 2004.

food-systems work and also helped develop tribal food policy recommendations to further Navajo food sovereignty. For Vicky, her assessment has helped shape and influence a number of Mvskoke Food Sovereignty Initiative's food-related projects, including their community garden, farmers' market, nutrition classes and workshops, and more recently, commercial ventures.

The lessons and methods learned from these three case studies are an important and valuable resource to tribes and Native organization dedicated to improving the health and well-being of their local communities.

III. Seven Simple Steps for Conducting a Food Sovereignty Assessment

Since the publication of the FSAT in 2004, First Nations has provided training to hundreds of individuals interested in developing food assessments for Native communities. In recent years, First Nations has utilized Vicky Karhu as a lead trainer in areas related to food-assessment training. Vicky has outlined seven simple steps for conducting a food sovereignty assessment in Native communities:

Step One: Define your community.

- Consider geographic and governmental factors, age groups, ethnic groups, etc. There could be variations within reservation boundaries depending on different community context.
- Think about the available meeting spaces within the community.
- Can use your organization's service area, but may not be appropriate for the particular needs of your survey.

Step Two: Understand food sovereignty and what it means for your community.

- Study mainstream definitions of food sovereignty.
- Hold discussion groups and/or talking circles on the concept of food sovereignty in your community.
- List and agree on elements affecting food

sovereignty in your community.

Step Three: What information do you need to know?

- Think about what you need to know. Listen to your constituency and staff.
- You may want to conduct a pre-assessment survey to identify popular suggested activities.
- Study available tools including First Nations' FSAT.

Step Four: Design assessment tool(s).

- Study different types of surveys and questions, i.e. written, group discussion, dot survey, multiple choice, yes/no, etc.
- Create questions and discussion topics
- Consider time it will take to fill out surveys, hold discussion/focus groups and record responses.
- Work with order of questions/topics until it flows well.
- Other things to consider: ordering of presentation materials/meetings, who will lead discussions, will you offer incentives (after the meeting concludes), culturally appropriate nature of language or other protocol, consider doing a dry run.

Step Five: Publicize assessment

- Identify media outlets for target locations/ audiences
- Create publicity checklist and use it.
- Involve target communities in designing the publicity and in getting the word out.
- Explain why you are doing the assessment in public statements.
- Explain how community can access the results.

Step Six: Conduct assessment

- Schedule community visits or mail-out.
- Involve target communities in scheduling launch.
- Consider needs and capacity of your staff in scheduling.
- Have incentives ready.
- Have plenty of pens/pencils if written survey and all supplies ready and in a travel box.
- Have box ready to receive written surveys. You can just cut a slot into the top of a file box. Needs to be easy to use and provide confidentiality.

- Record results as soon as you have them.
- Keep all originals in a safe place and sorted by community or sub-group.
- Store dot surveys and flipchart sheets with each set of written surveys.

Step Seven: Compile and analyze data

- Record raw data.
- Decide how you want it all sorted.
- Create system where you will end up with percentages as results so people can easily interpret results.
- Compile and sort data according to your purposes for the assessment.
- Create an action plan based on assessment results.
- Back everything up and file carefully.
- Disseminate results

IV. Case Studies

The three case studies contained in this report provide illustrative examples of these seven simple steps. These case studies explore cutting-edge ideas and actions in Native-based food systems work to address the opportunities and challenges tribes and Native organizations face as they engage in this type of research.

Case Study #1: Cochiti Pueblo

Community Background: Pueblos are historically and primarily agricultural communities that have existed for thousands of years in the southwest. The southwest is one of the harshest climates for food growth. However, pueblos have perfected relevant food crops for the area. Unfortunately, flooding in the late 1980s altered this landscape. The flood was caused by a poorly constructed dam that was built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers over the objection of the Cochiti people. The dam saturated the land. For 10 years, the land could not be farmed.

During this period, many Cochiti tribal members had to migrate to large urban centers for jobs in the cash economy. The diets of the Cochiti people changed from local food crops to cheap alternatives like

unhealthy fast foods. Needless to say, within this 10-year period, the health statistics of Cochiti declined. Diabetes, obesity, heart disease and alcoholism increased among the Cochiti people. Furthermore, this movement threatened cultural values due to language loss, single-family homes, and violence committed by young people.

Traditionally, the Cochiti Pueblo believed that the land provided sacred knowledge. In 2010, Vena A-dae Romero (Cochiti/Kiowa) helped launch the Cochiti Youth Experience (CYE) to reinvigorate the Cochiti people and remind them of the power and potential they have to control their health and their social and economic institutions. However, to accomplish this goal, CYE realized that it needed more information about the needs and wants of their community. This realization compelled CYE to develop and distribute a simple one-page food survey to gauge what people were eating, how far they were traveling for food, and whether they were interested in revitalizing Cochiti food traditions. The valuable information yielded from these surveys prompted CYE to conduct a more comprehensive food sovereignty assessment. A-dae relays her experiences in more detail below:

Our Food Story

By Vena A-dae Romero, Cochiti Pueblo

When we first initiated our community food assessment, I didn't realize the journey would take us through our intimate community history, force us to evaluate our current and historical values, reveal our vulnerabilities, and compel us to define, as much as we could, our identity in the near and far future.

Introduction

I come from generations of Pueblo farmers. My fondest memories as a young girl were of harvest time. During harvest, the world was the most glorious with fresh corn, juicy watermelon and graceful chili. During this time, my family was at its strongest. My grandmother was busy preparing fresh meals. My grandfather was happily devouring melons like candy. Rows of drying corn draped in front of screened windows like eyelashes. As a little girl during harvest

season, I would watch my grandparents and aunts come together to husk tons of corn or wait anxiously for the two-day process of the roasting corn. It was those times that my family seemed the happiest. We were in abundance of food, family, laughter, history, and culture. More subtly, those were the times we were most thankful for the food produced by a combination of land, weather, and hard work and, in a special way, the land reflected its thankfulness to us by producing. When I watched the women sit and husk corn, that activity was one of the last breaths in a long conversation that occurs every generation and every harvest season.

One year during harvest, I noticed my eight-year-old nephew indifferent to the excitement. When I broached the subject of harvest, his reply was, “Why do we do all this work when we can buy better looking vegetables at the store? I like Hot Cheetos better anyway.” As hard as I tried to respond to him by explaining the importance of participating as a family member in these harvest activities, I could not explain the intimate connections between Pueblo people, our food, and our land. I could not convince him of the relevance of farming. My nephew was but one kid in a whole generation of youth who are disconnected from the land and agriculture of previous generations of Pueblo people.

Purpose of the Food Assessment

Although we, the board of Cochiti Youth Experience, Inc., had been witnessing the change from a traditional agricultural food system that connected religious, social, cultural and economic considerations to a more modern, grocery-store-based food economy, we wanted to be sure that was, in fact, the case. Our food assessment was, first and foremost, created to 1) establish a food profile of the community, 2) determine community perceptions about food and how those perceptions affect food choice, and 3) determine the breadth of farming families in the community. However, none of us had really developed or planned a food assessment, so we looked to other Indigenous communities for answers. The answers came from the Hopi food assessment team through the Hopi Foundation, Natwani Coalition.² The

² <http://www.hopifoundation.org/programs/natwani>



Natawani Coalition provided us with a template for beginning our food survey. The Southwest Marketing Network out of Colorado provided critical questions that helped develop a tailored survey for the Cochiti community.³ These two organizations were critical in developing a community survey that was “Cochiti” specific.

Major Findings

Cultural and Historical Findings

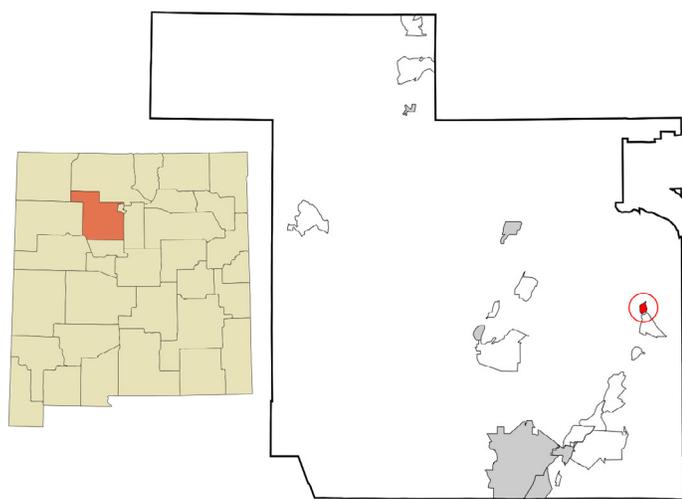
- Cochiti grandmothers and grandfathers spent much of their young lives in their family fields learning the ways of farming out of necessity.
- Pueblo people were some of the earliest growers of wheat and corn.
- Prepared foods at meals have changed drastically from the days of our grandparents when agriculture was the center of life.
- There has been a gradual movement away from homegrown traditional crops (corn, beans, melons, watermelons and so on) as central exchange items in cultural activities to the packaged, processed items that are easily bought in bulk from warehouse stores.
- Pueblo children spend more time per day at school, and prefer iPads and computer games to playing or being outside (with or without their families).

³ <http://www.swmarketingnetwork.org>

- Cost is the primary consideration when Cochiti people purchase food.
- The average household spends approximately \$1,500 a month on groceries.
- Over \$5 million is spent annually at off-reservations grocers.
- Over \$1 million is spent on items for baking bread such as flour, baking powder and oil.
- All but 0.7% of this money was spent off-reservation in urban grocery stores.
- More than 68% of the households are on government-assisted food programs.
- At the time of the survey, 1 in 12 people farmed or grew their own garden.
- 2 out of 3 respondents said they were interested in Pueblo agriculture programs.

Initiating the Food Assessment

In 2010, I was a part of a small group of women who were mutually concerned about the health and well-being of Cochiti children and began discussions about how to encourage healthier lifestyles. This included, for example, finding ways to battle gang violence, adolescent diabetes, alcoholism and drug abuse in our community. After much discussion, the women came to the conclusion that at the center of promoting healthy lifestyles was reclaiming our agricultural roots. So we embarked on our journey of “food reclamation.”



Map of Cochiti Pueblo, courtesy of Google Maps

In the winter of 2012 and spring of 2013, we began with a small survey that was distributed to all of the 235 households in the Cochiti community. The survey asked general questions about income, diet and food preferences. The primary questions were developed from several sources such as the First Nations Food Sovereignty Assessment Tool, the Natawani Community Survey used in Hopi, and a few questions that were specific to the Cochiti community such as the reference to the tribally-owned store on the reservation. We also disseminated the surveys at community health fairs, and offered incentives such as T-shirts and cupcakes for their completion for those households that did not turn in the surveys. Naturally, we received duplicate surveys for the same household, but only one survey was used per household.

From our survey, we developed a community profile, which reflected several important findings about our community. This data revealed that our community had lower incomes than the national average, ate fewer vegetables than previous generations, and all families commuted to nearby towns (the closest being 30 miles away, 60 miles roundtrip) to buy their food exclusively from border-town grocery stores. Few families maintained gardens or fields. The latter finding was especially worrisome because it pointed to an alarming outflow of economic resources that could remain in the community. To our surprise, the survey also revealed a community eager for a return to traditional

“Our survey was one of the first steps in completing a comprehensive food assessment.”

food crops and developing new young farmers. Little did we know that this pilot survey was what the Sustainability Alliance of Southwest Colorado recommends and calls “a community food assessment.” A community food assessment is a community information-gathering process that profiles a community’s food preferences, food availability, food waste, and develops a conscious plan about the community’s food future. It serves as the foundation for promoting and planning food-system change for

safe, nutritious, accessible and culturally meaningful food for a community. For us, it highlighted the desire to reclaim our Pueblo agricultural traditions and practices. It should be noted our survey was one of the first steps in completing a comprehensive food assessment. Other steps include research into past food practices and an analysis of present-day food habits.

Enriching Our Original Plan

Based on the community survey, we gathered valuable information about our community's food habits, preferences and perceptions. However, we felt this qualitative data really only provided a snapshot of our community and we felt we needed additional data to give a broader, expansive and historical view of our community. Any community looking to conduct a food assessment should understand that a community survey will really give a limited view. While surveys can give valuable baseline data, if communities want deeper understanding of change over time, they will need to conduct additional data-collection efforts with the input of the community or other secondary sources. For us, we decided to develop a broader two-pronged approach to gather additional quantitative data from our community. This approach was to 1) gather narratives of adults and elders in the community, and 2) create an index of useful historical or archival information.

Narrative Gathering

Our narrative inquiry research methodology was directed at gathering the stories of people of all ages within the community with a particular focus on the age group of 50+. We wanted to target this population because this is the generation that lived through some of the most significant changes in the Pueblo's social history and economy. Mainstream research would call this targeted conversation (typically unstructured) a focus group, but in our community we did not call it this. Instead we saw them as opportunities to learn more about the community and how we came to our current state.

At first, we tried focus groups of similar ages in order to listen to conversations about past events. However,

the group setting did not produce much information as one or two speakers usually dominated the groups. Second, we tried to separate the groups by gender in order to ease the controlled conversation, but the same phenomenon occurred. One or two speakers dominated the conversation even in gender-specific groups.

Our last attempt was to attend familiar and existing community gatherings and ask about food and community in small groups of two to five people. The attendance at familiar and existing community gatherings such as bingo, senior lunches and other cultural gatherings proved to be the best overall method for gathering narratives because the people were at ease, conversing with others in a natural setting, and did not feel like they were "in an interview." The small group gathering of information lasted four to five months before we compiled the stories and extracted important information about past behaviors regarding food and agriculture.

"Perhaps the most important lesson learned from narrative gathering is that the most valuable information will come from a comfortable setting which includes environmental and group dynamics."

Elders in Cochiti were more willing to talk in settings that included familiar people, routine activities, and during times when the least amount of schedule change was required. However, the greatest challenge during these occasions was attributing information to the appropriate speaker. These kinds of narrative gatherings should be done in pairs, where one person engages and talks while the other takes copious notes with the permission of those attending. Historical narratives are a powerful tool to get community-based perspectives on local food systems, change in food systems and causes for changes. Individuals have a wealth of knowledge they are willing to share if

comfortable and if done in a respectful way that values their participation.

“Individuals have a wealth of knowledge they are willing to share if comfortable and if done in a respectful way that values their participation.”

Historical Records

Our final stage of the community food assessment was to create an index of historical records made available in public or private archives. Many of these records included narratives from researchers who visited Cochiti or Pueblo people beginning during contact to present times. The vast majority of these records included photographs of Cochiti people during different historical eras. Fortunately, the Pueblo de Cochiti library has an extensive collection of historical materials that reference Cochiti in some form and has an entire database of old photographs courtesy of the New Mexico Archives and Historical Division.

The historical record portion of our food assessment provided a visual profile that could be paired with the personal narratives and current photographs that were gathered in the community during the narrative-gathering portion of the food assessment. These historical records gave us a broader view of how those outside our community viewed us and how they discussed our local customs and food system. In general, this process allowed us to look at how things like federal and state policy began to shape our local food system over time.

Synthesis

The final food assessment we conducted as Cochiti Youth Experience is a combination of 1) consumer survey, 2) narrative gathering and, 3) historical record index. An incredible amount of time and energy went into the synthesizing of information, but provided critical information that allows for a contrast of past

to current behaviors. The presentation of all the information, findings, and recommendations will be the final element of our food assessment and used for the community.

Conclusion

In seeking resources to develop and support Pueblo agricultural endeavors and programs, we were often directed to resources for “sustainable farming.” Yet, we were cognizant of the fact that “the word connects the world,” meaning that to maintain the integrity of our initiative we had to be selective in the way we describe it. For instance, “farming” reduces an entire Pueblo civilization, its lifeways, and heritage to a single noun. “Subsistence” farming is referred to as farming enough food to feed the individual farmer’s family which is descriptive of Pueblo farming in its most naked definition. Neither term captures the strength and beauty of the spirituality, society, growth, culture and sophisticated connections that clothe Pueblo farming practices. Neither term can capture the importance of food in relation to a community’s economic, social and spiritual capital. Obviously, the consumption of food is universally required, but the choice of food is highly related to our environment, social structures (relationships), and cultural preferences. Food tells the story of the community.

So what is the story of the Pueblo farmer? At its core, our land, our environment, our religion, our social system, our government system, and our economic system are tied in incredibly precise ways to our food. Our environment, our people, and our land are not seen as resources to be exhausted. Pueblo farmers have developed protocols to ensure our relationship with our environment is reciprocal. In short, Pueblo farmers are more than stewards of our lands, but for lack of a better term, they are relatives of the very land they work and of the food they produce. I wondered if my nephew knew about this relationship. If he didn’t know, how do I teach it to him and other young people alike? How do we tell a whole generation of Pueblo children about the historical struggles our people faced in order to continue farming? More importantly, how do you teach a whole generation of young people to farm? Luckily, we only have to look to our grandparents for answers.

At Cochiti Youth Experience, Inc., the focus then became on how to reinvent youth, social and economic programs that most closely mirrored traditional lifestyles. The survey revealed a need for “tradition” and an elder’s perspective that many agricultural traditions were being supplanted by other activities. The crafting of youth programs that included a critical “mentorship” component reflects a traditional Pueblo model where community elders are essentially the teachers of not just an activity, but a whole breadth of social and cultural values attached to certain activities. There have been several modern “adjustments” that we have had to make program-wise, with one of those being the payment of mentors. While payment is more symbolic than sustaining, a small stipend paid to the mentors reflects a value to outside agencies and people, funders and to the mentors themselves. The basic message of the small stipend is: “There is value in the knowledge that you possess.” This message is not necessarily reflected in other ways.

In most Indigenous communities, food reveals the conflict, struggle and resurrection of Indigenous communities and knowledge, and our fierce commitment to the children of our communities. In my Pueblo, food, specifically our traditional crops and the future contained in the dormant seeds, required the forethought and steadfast faithfulness of our grandfathers who challenged the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. government after flooding from a poorly constructed dam ruined Cochiti farmlands for more than 30 years. Our grandmothers and grandfathers fought for the opportunity for future Cochiti children to farm the lands of our ancestors, to learn Pueblo lifeways, and to ensure the continuum between generations was not broken by the loss of farmland. Although U.S. land grabs and unjust land confiscation as it occurred in Cochiti regarding the dam seem to be confined to the 19th and 20th centuries of U.S.-Indian relations, a new form of intellectual dispossession is occurring in the field of natural resources and in regard to the Indigenous knowledge of the natural world.

Although the food preferences of my 11-year-old nephew are seemingly insignificant, his food tastes reflect the incredible influence of an artificial and pervasive culture that is reflected in manipulation from

television and mass media. More importantly, it reflects attention diverted from a culturally-based agricultural system. His food preferences are a far cry from the locally interdependent system that has maintained and sustained Pueblo people for generations. His choice to opt for chips rather than two-day roasted corn means his “taste palate” has become accustomed to the many synthetic chemicals that are now used in the creation of mass-produced food products, and in many ways is not a choice at all, but rather the result of carefully crafted marketing. His choice is less of a nutritional crisis, but a wake-up call to a culture in need of renewal. In the same way our Pueblo ancestors cared for the plants in our fields, our children and their food and food choices should be cared for in much the same way.



Case Study #2: Diné Policy Institute

Organizational Background: In 2005, the Navajo Nation Council and the Diné College Board of Regents established Diné Policy Institute (DPI) to articulate, analyze and apply the Diné Bi Beehaz' áannii to issues impacting the Navajo people by educating, collaborating and serving as a resource for policy and research.

DPI is guided through the principles and values of Sa'ah Naaghai Bik'eh Hozhoon. DPI's applied research from Diné knowledge provides innovative solutions that address the social, economic and cultural well-being of the Navajo Nation.

In 2011, DPI began researching the Navajo Nation food system through primary research, meetings with Diné knowledge holders, community-based data collection, and literature and historical reviews under the Diné Food Sovereignty Initiative.

As a policy analyst at DPI, Dana Eldridge (Diné) helped coordinate these efforts. She even helped write and publish *Diné Food Sovereignty: A Report on the Navajo Nation Food System and the Case to Rebuild a Self-Sufficient Food System for the Diné People* [<http://www.dinecollege.edu/institutes/DPI/Docs/dpi-food-sovereignty-report.pdf>] Much of the information contained in the Diné Food Sovereignty report was gathered by conducting a comprehensive food assessment using First Nations' FSAT as well as other food-assessment tools and resources.

Dana relays her experiences in more detail below:

Diné Policy Institute's 2012 Community Food Assessment

By Dana Eldridge, Diné

Purpose of the Community Food Assessment

In the summer of 2012, DPI, housed at Diné College in Tsaile, Arizona, conducted an extensive community

Advice for Other Tribal Communities

1. Determine whether you are conducting a food assessment or a food survey? These are very different concepts and they require very different designs for analysis.
2. Always look to other organizations for advice. Don't be afraid to ask others that have conducted a food assessment for advice and tools for development.
3. Know your purpose. It is important to understand and develop clear thinking about why you are conducting a food assessment. This will help influence your questions, methods and the overall information you collect.
4. In small communities, in particular, the information/data collector is just as important as the information gathered. You want to make sure you have a person that most people are comfortable talking to.
5. If conducting community gatherings, ensure that conversation is done respectfully and acknowledges and values the contributions of those who are providing insights into the current and historical situation of your community. This kind of information gives experimental perspective on changes in the local landscape that altered the local food system. This information is invaluable to informing a food assessment.
6. Historical records are valuable tools to understand changes that have occurred in the food system and how others perceived your local community.
7. Decide what you will do with the data. Community ownership of data is valuable to each community. After all, it is the data of the community. Be respectful and cognizant of this when conducting an assessment.

food assessment in five communities on the Navajo Nation. This assessment was part of a larger Diné Food Sovereignty Initiative to better understand the Navajo Nation food system, lack of access to healthy foods, and how we could work to revitalize traditional foods and rebuild a self-sufficient, local food economy.

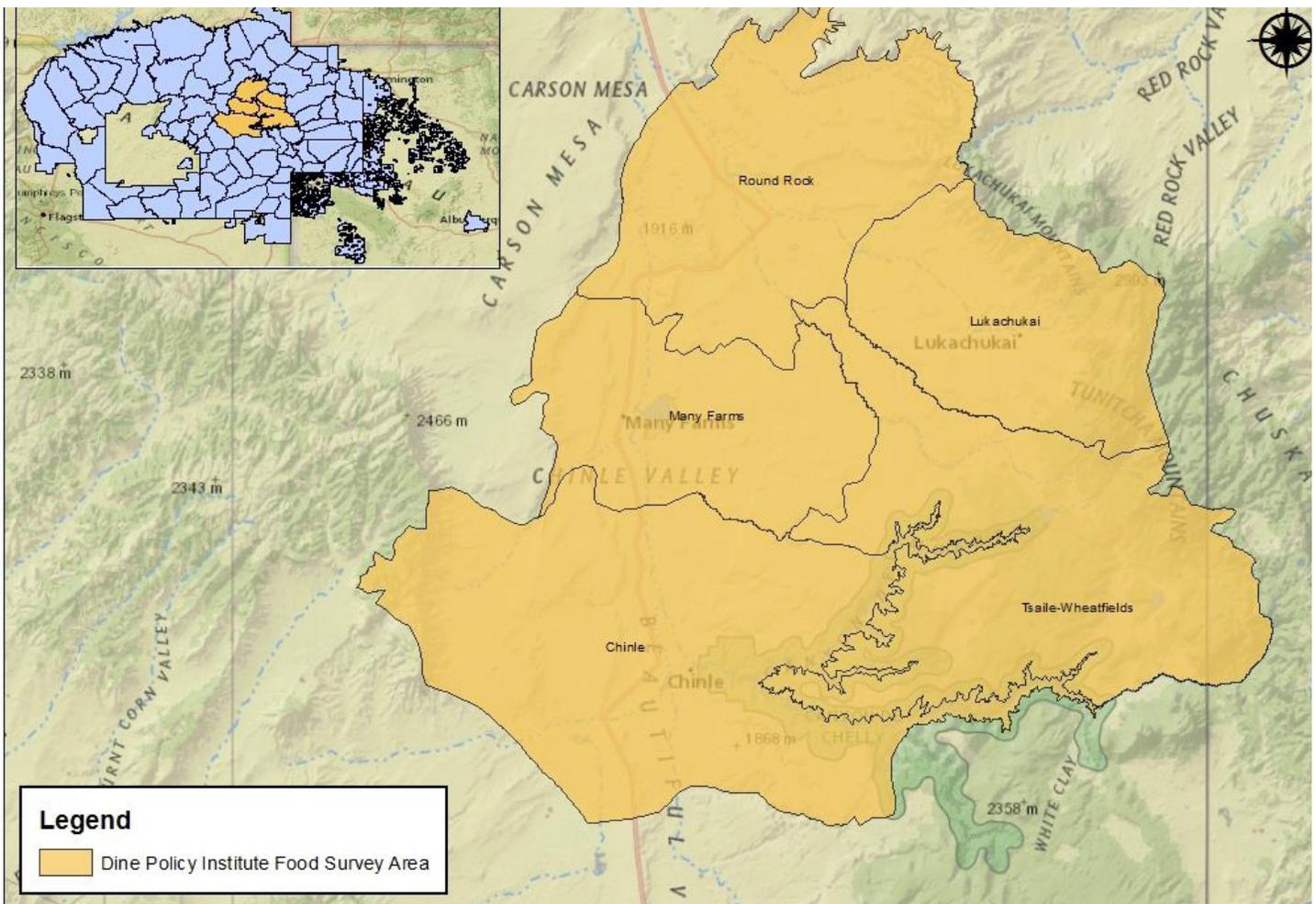
Study Area

The five communities included in the assessment were the Navajo Nation chapters of Tsaile/Wheatfields, Chinle, Many Farms, Round Rock and Lukachukai. These communities are in the Central Agency of the Navajo Nation and are within the Arizona portion of the Navajo Nation. These chapters were selected due to their proximity to Diné College, not only making the research activities feasible but also allowing DPI to contribute the research back to the communities where

the majority of Diné College students and staff reside. Although the food assessment was limited to these five communities, the intention of the assessment was to be a demonstration project that would begin to generate Navajo Nation food system data and which could later be replicated in other regions of the Navajo Nation.

Community-Based Participatory Research Methodology

In designing the research for the DPI and the community food assessment, a strong focus was placed on gathering community and local/regional input and perceptions through a Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) framework. Within food-system research, researchers can utilize CBPR to identify the most pressing issues in a community



Diné Policy Institute Community Food Assessment Project Area – Data Source: 2010 Census, ESRI Tigerline. Author: Mariah Tso.

and long-term, sustainable solutions for those issues, as the most meaningful, effective and appropriate solutions will come from the direct involvement of the community.⁴ Particularly for marginalized peoples and communities, including Indigenous communities, this method of research allows for their experiences and recommendations to be included where former formal scientific and historical studies have excluded them from the official record and issue analysis. In regards to food-system research, this approach helps to identify larger systemic and social factors behind a food system through this inclusion and validation of marginalized voices.⁵

Research that is intended to benefit the Diné people by informing the development of policy and programming on the Navajo Nation should include Community Based Participatory Research for good reason. Specifically, much of the existing academic literature on Diné people excludes their perspectives and ideas, while at the same time, the majority of Diné people have been largely isolated from the decision-making processes that produce major policies and programs that profoundly impact their lives. This has happened at the federal, state and Navajo Nation levels and continues today, resulting in policies and programs whose effectiveness and appropriateness are limited, and ultimately do little to address the issues prompting them. At times, these ill-informed policies have even further exacerbated issues.

Community Based Participatory Research provides a pathway for the voices of Diné people to be included in the decision-making process and the development of policies and programs with effective and appropriate solutions to issues facing Diné

“Findings from the assessment help to illustrate a picture of the on-the-ground realities related to food for communities and individuals on the Navajo reservation from a number of perspectives.”

communities today. Since the community food assessment was based on this framework, the findings from the assessment help to illustrate a picture of the on-the-ground realities related to food for communities and

individuals on the Navajo reservation from a number of perspectives.

Study Groups Involved in the Community Food Assessment

The community food assessment focused on four research groups – consumers (those who buy and consume food, which is everyone), growers/producers (those who grow food), local chapter officials, and Diné elders and traditional food experts. Before data-collection activities for the community food assessment, DPI sought approval from the communities through chapter resolutions in each of the five chapters in the project area.

Consumer Surveys and Interviews

The section of the assessment that focused on consumers included both interviews and surveys. For the survey, a 36-question survey was developed based on First Nations’ FSAT. After the initial survey was put together, it was reviewed by the research team to make sure it was appropriate and could be understood by the community after a few days of initial survey-taking. The survey included questions relating to income, budget spent on food, food-assistance programs, where food is purchased, general food access, food-system awareness and interest in traditional and local foods, among other topics. DPI also conducted a series of in-depth interviews with a number of survey participants who agreed to be interviewed. To give research participants incentive to do the longer process of a survey and interview, a \$5 Walmart gift certificate was offered. By including both surveys and interviews, DPI was able to gather both quantitative data (through the surveys) to generate

4 Stokols, D., Translating social ecological theory into guidelines for community health promotion. *Am J Health Promot*, 1996. 10(4): p. 282-98.

5 Minkler, M., et al., Community-Based Participatory Research: A Strategy for Building Healthy Communities and Promoting Health Through Policy Change: A Report to the California Endowment, 2012.

statistical data on the Navajo Nation food system, as well as qualitative data (through the interviews) to begin to answer “Why?” and “How?” through community perspectives.

The survey and interviews were administered by DPI personnel and seven research interns over a series of field data-collection sessions in summer 2012. Given the widespread and rural nature of communities in the community food-assessment study area, surveys were collected in public venues where people gather, such as flea markets, parking lots of stores and gas stations, and chapter houses. Before surveys and interviews were conducted, the research team informed the participants that they could stop the survey/interview at any point and could refuse to answer any questions they wanted. Also, consent for audio recording was obtained before interviews were recorded. The surveys and interviews were anonymous as no names were taken. Survey and interview participants were selected at random, but all were at least 18 years old. While a number of participants were bilingual, the survey was not translated into Navajo and therefore excluded any monolingual Navajo language speakers. In total, DPI collected 230 surveys.

Once data was collected for each community, DPI worked with student interns to compile data for each of the five communities, as well as for the study area overall. To provide analysis, DPI researchers and interns then reviewed the overall and individual community data and collaboratively identified significant response patterns as well as significant themes from the interviews, from which findings, discussion and recommendations could be drawn.

Community Grower Focus Groups

In order to gain the perspectives of community growers within the project area, the research team conducted community grower data-collection meetings in each of the five chapters represented in the study in the fall of 2012 and early spring of 2013. Flyers advertising the meetings were placed in the chapter houses and throughout high-traffic areas in the communities (gas stations, stores, etc.). DPI staff and interns also prepared a dinner of traditional foods, as an additional incentive for those who came to the

meetings, which was advertised on the flyers. During the meetings, data was collected through facilitated focus groups. The group was collectively asked for consent before the session was audio-recorded, and anonymity was ensured as no names were taken.

In these sessions, community growers were asked questions that addressed topics such as their reasons for growing their crops, challenges they face as growers and sellers of crops, laws and policies that might make it difficult to produce and/or sell their crops, and what might make it easier for them to grow and/or sell their crops. In addition, growers were asked what they would like to see happen in their communities related to agriculture. The grower responses to the facilitated questions were written down and reflected back to participants as the meetings progressed to ensure capturing of grower thoughts accurately. Notes were then compiled and transcribed by DPI interns, and the sessions were analyzed by the DPI research team to identify significant themes. Following analysis of each community’s responses, the research team identified the following major themes: Why People Grow, Challenges and Barriers to Growing, and Community Solutions (What Would Make it Easier to Grow Crops?).

Regional Food Policy Meeting

DPI hosted two regional food policy meetings, also in the summer of 2012. The local leadership invited included chapter presidents, vice presidents, secretaries and staff, farm boards/committees and community land-use planning committees from the five communities in the study area. The purpose of these meetings was to better understand the structure of the bureaucracy of the chapter system on the Navajo Nation and how local decisions and policymaking in regard to food and agricultural policy could be carried out within this structure. Specifically, a discussion was facilitated around barriers and opportunities within chapter bureaucracy for local policymaking. Each chapter was notified of these meetings and formal invitations addressed to each official were placed in their mailboxes at the chapter houses.

Advisory Circle with Medicine People, Elders and Traditional Food Experts

To identify traditional Diné perspectives on food, DPI convened an advisory circle comprised of four traditional Diné knowledge holders, elders and community food experts from across the Navajo Nation in the summer of 2012. The members of the advisory circle were selected because they were well-known for their work with traditional foods. Advisory circle members convened in a focus group format, and were prompted with various questions related to the topic of food. The conversation of the circle took place almost exclusively in the Navajo language. Their responses were recorded, transcribed and translated, and the DPI research team analyzed the session transcripts to identify the key points and themes that emerged.

Lessons Learned from High-Level Data Collection

One of the most important considerations in planning a community food assessment is to ensure that there is adequate time within the planned assessment period to collect all of the important data that needs to be collected. Our project was very ambitious, and it took much longer to organize all of the steps needed to collect data on each one of our study groups than we initially anticipated. Along the same lines, design data collection for a community food assessment while keeping in mind the number of people you have available to work on data collection. Essentially, in designing a community food assessment, it is important to be realistic about how much can be accomplished with the amount of time for the assessment and number of people to work on the assessment. Additionally, it would be helpful to plan for some free time within the assessment period in case data-collection and analysis activities take longer than anticipated.

It is important to not overlook the component of statistical analysis for the data once it's collected, particularly if quantitative data is being collected to generate statistics and graphs. Ensure that there is a person on the research team who has a background in



statistical analysis or plan for members of the research team to take training in statistics before analyzing the data.

For high levels of data collection, it is important to have a system to keep data organized once it's collected. This may seem like a simple consideration, but when you're trying to analyze hundreds of survey responses and dozens of transcriptions and meeting notes, the importance of organization becomes very clear. An organized and labeled filing cabinet dedicated solely to house data that is collected would be a good idea.

Advice for Other Tribal Communities

1. DPI's data collection was largely carried out through the work of student interns. Employing young people and students from the community is a great way to get the necessary numbers of people to do data collection (the more people out in the field, the more data you can collect) because it gives them an opportunity to not only earn a stipend or income were jobs might not be readily available, but also a way to engage with issues in their community. I would absolutely recommend involving young people and students in any way possible in helping with assessment, especially if it engages them with methods and subjects they are studying.

2. If data for the community food assessment is being collected through focus groups or gatherings where surveys will be administered, invest in advertising. We only advertised for our community grower focus groups through flyers, and in retrospect, we would have gotten a much higher turnout if we had invested in advertising through radio and newspaper. Social media outlets such as Facebook may be another way to recruit for your community food assessment, but this depends on your community and who you are trying to recruit. In our case, we were working with a rural population where engaging via social media and internet-based communication wasn't feasible.
3. There are many good tools out there to begin to design a community food assessment, such as First Nations' FSAT, but it is essential to tailor and customize these tools for the needs of your community, rather than just copy and paste. Take into consideration local language and lingo – avoid wording questions so that they sound like they are coming from an academic. The more the survey and interview questions can seem like a natural flow of a conversation, the better. This also helps to put your assessment participants at ease with answering questions. After a few days in the field with our initial survey, our research team and survey takers revised the survey to reword questions that participants were having difficulty answering and to take out questions that ended up being too cumbersome.
4. Try to get your survey time down to 10 minutes, or 15 minutes at the most. Beyond that, participants get restless and lose interest in answering questions.
5. DPI offered a \$5 Walmart gift card as an incentive to give people for participating in the longer consumer interview. While we rationalized that this would be a good incentive since so many of our communities members shop at Walmart, this ultimately did nothing to support our local economy or food sovereignty. In retrospect, we would have offered an incentive like some Diné heritage seeds, or locally-produced foods, such as blue corn flour.
6. Our biggest regret with the survey was not asking any questions relating to vehicle access. In the analysis process, it became very clear that vehicle access was having profound impacts on what kinds of foods people had access to, but we had no concrete data or statistics from our communities. Especially in rural areas, questions regarding vehicle access should be included in the community food assessment.
7. Think about the role of language. If we had the capacity and staff, it would have been great to translate our survey to get the perspective of monolingual Navajo speakers. They are often left out of data collection, but are some of the most marginalized people in the community regarding food access.
8. It is essential for the success of the community food assessment for the community to have buy-in to the project. While DPI sought community buy-in through chapter resolutions supporting our data-collection activities, our project could have been even more successful if we had hosted fun events for the community, not associated with the chapter system or local bureaucracy, where we could present the project and reach greater numbers of people.
9. If food is being served at community meetings, make every effort to ensure that there is healthy food and traditional food. One of the greatest parts of the project ended up being having the interns and staff learn how to cook traditional foods through trial and error. We came up with some creative recipes with traditional foods and got rave reviews from the community. Also, food and eating together has a way of putting people at ease, especially if they are participating in a focus group.
10. Before engaging in a community food assessment, particularly an extensive one, ensure that the research team is committed to being involved for the duration of the project. In our instance, several key staff of DPI left during the project period, resulting in very limited capacity, and this ended up creating a lot of obstacles in completing data collection and analysis. What should have taken six months stretched into a yearlong process.

Case Study #3: Mvskoke Food Sovereignty Initiative (MFSI)

Organization Background: Mvskoke Food Sovereignty Initiative (MFSI) is a grassroots, Native American-led organization located in Okmulgee, Oklahoma, capital of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. The Mvskoke people are Indigenous to what is now the southeast. For centuries, the Mvskoke maintained a successful agriculture-based culture that sustained large populations living in towns along rivers and creeks (so European settlers called them “Creek Indians”). They were accomplished farmers, raising huge fields of corn, beans, pumpkins, sunflowers (documented by early Spanish explorers in the mid 1500s) and gathering many berries, nuts, roots and wild greens. Their protein sources included wild animals – predominantly deer, fish and shellfish – from the clean and abundant rivers of the southeast. They maintained food sovereignty for millennia before being disrupted by the European invasions.

Today these cultures still exist as the Muscogee, Seminole, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Cherokee and Yuchi tribes. Their respective languages are still used by many and the ceremonial dances, songs and practices are still carried on. Growing, preserving and using traditional foods plays an important role in cultural activities. MFSI seeks to preserve the food heritage and traditions of these Indigenous peoples through hands-on classes, educational programs, intergenerational sharing and sustainable agriculture practices.

Vicky Karhu is the founding director of the Mvskoke Food Sovereignty Initiative and has worked with the Indigenous peoples of the southeastern U.S. for more than 30 years. In recent years, she has served on the boards of the National Family Farm Coalition, the Community Food Security Coalition and the Oklahoma Farmers and Ranchers Association, where she brought the voice of rural and tribal communities to the table. She is a founding and current member of the leadership team of the International Institute of Indigenous Sciences. Now in semi-retirement, she splits her time between gardening and seed saving in New Mexico, traveling to visit kids and grandkids, and working as a consultant to support Indigenous and

rural communities in achieving their food-sovereignty goals.

In autumn 2005, the newly organized MFSI began a two-year process of conducting a community food sovereignty assessment to introduce the new organization to the tribal communities, collect information and begin conversations about food sovereignty and its many implications for the Mvskoke people.

Mvskoke Food Sovereignty Initiative 2005 Community Food Sovereignty Assessment By Vicky Karhu

MFSI Mission Statement:

Mvskoke Food Sovereignty Initiative works to enable the Mvskoke people and their neighbors to provide for their food and health needs now and in the future through sustainable agriculture, economic development, community involvement, cultural and educational programs.

Our community food sovereignty assessment provided the foundation for most of the subsequent work of MFSI. Therefore, the development of the assessment and the early history of MFSI are completely intertwined. Here is a brief history of how they evolved together.

Based in the capital city of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation (MCN), Okmulgee, Oklahoma, the core group that founded MFSI became the organization’s advisory committee. This group, who had collectively named the organization and crafted the mission statement, included managers of the MCN Diabetes, Elderly Nutrition, Senior Services and Farm Programs, the MCN Diabetes Program dietician, representatives of the MCN Environmental and Cultural Preservation Departments, several MCN National Council members, the MCN planner, the development coordinator for the Farm Program, representatives from the chief’s (a farmer) and executive director’s offices, the IHS Sanitation manager (an avid hunter, fisherman and gardener), a Muscogee citizen personal chef, the grant writer for the Farm Authority, and

the USDA tribal liaison. This group appointed the founding, all-Native American board of directors. The new board appointed one of the core group members to serve as executive director (that's me, Vicky Karhu). I am sharing how we at MFSI designed and carried out our community food sovereignty assessment and how we all worked together to use the results for the benefit of the Mvskoke people and their neighbors within the tribal boundary.

At the first joint meeting of the advisory committee, board and early MFSI staff (volunteers at the time), it was decided that the first step that we needed to take was to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the food and farming situation in the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. The advisory committee champion for the assessment idea – Steve Wilson, who is manager of the MCN Elderly Nutrition Program and a longtime tribal employee/leader – became project director for the assessment. As executive director of this new organization, I was tasked with identifying samples of similar assessments, funding sources for such assessments, and creating the organization's work plan for how we would go about conducting it. As the project took shape and moved forward, I worked in close communication with the project director, the advisory committee and board to develop and implement our plan. This close, collaborative effort was key to designing a workable plan that was culturally appropriate, timely and would glean the information that we needed most to get our food sovereignty work started.

The first and most urgent task for getting our assessment underway was to simultaneously search for funding to conduct the work while developing our work plan, including articulating the need for an assessment, scope of work, implementation plan and how the results would be used to provide maximum benefit to our constituency. We needed a preliminary plan in order to create a budget and project plan to submit to potential funders for the work.

It is important to mention here that all of this

preliminary work was done with no funding, relying on volunteer time of the committee, board and MFSI staff. At the time, I was able to devote most of my time to organizing the project plan and writing it up in the form of grant proposals. Any organization considering conducting such an assessment should allow several months to create a good work plan to

use when writing funding proposals for the actual assessment work. This process cannot effectively be rushed if there is going to be a genuine cross-section of relevant input from community members and leaders working on the project design.

“Any organization considering conducting such an assessment should allow several months to create a good work plan to use when writing funding proposals for the actual assessment work .”

Planning and Funding Our Assessment

As mentioned earlier, the key to the success of our community food sovereignty assessment, referred to from here on as the assessment, was the team that worked together to design our work plan and assessment tools. The advisory committee, board and potential MFSI staff met several times during the winter 2005-2006 to create the project work plan and to decide what types of survey/assessment tools would be most appropriate for us to use in the Mvskoke communities. While face-to-face meetings were always productive and are our preferred way to work on the assessment plan, it was impossible to meet regularly with everyone due to the busy schedules of the tribal leaders involved with the project. We relied on email (this was pre-Google Docs/Google Drive) to share and discuss details of the project plan. My role was to summarize and write up the most recent ideas, email it to all parties for comment, and then circulate the revisions until we all agreed on the plan that would be proposed to potential funders.

Early in the planning process we learned about technical assistance available from First Nations Development Institute and took advantage of that by working with Jackie Tiller and Alicia Bell-Sheetter, who introduced me to First Nations' FSAT, published in 2004. The connections and advice from First Nations and the FSAT were extremely helpful and valuable,

and I cannot thank these two ladies, and First Nations, enough for providing guidance based on experience that helped form MFCSI. During the planning and implementation of our assessment, we attended workshops and trainings presented by Growing Power, Community Food Security Coalition, and Jesse Smith Noyes Foundation that contributed to the success of our project. Anyone beginning the process of an assessment in their community should seek out technical assistance, training and advice from those working in similar situations. Remember that many trainers and funders offer scholarships and you may be able to receive excellent training without spending much money, as we did.

The first step in creating our assessment plan was to define the “community” to be assessed. The Muscogee (Creek) Nation jurisdiction covers a large region, including all or parts of 11 counties in eastern Oklahoma. The population lives in a “checkerboard” of tribal and non-tribal lands sharing common food access, diet-related diseases and farming issues. While we knew we wanted to focus on traditional foods and the high rate of diet-related diseases in our Native American communities, we wanted to include our non-Native neighbors and farmers in the assessment as well. We had already discarded the idea of doing mass-mail, written surveys because none of us felt that was an effective way to gather information in our communities. We decided to define our assessment area as the MCN boundary and to hold our assessment meetings in the 23 MCN charter community centers located throughout the nation. These communities have meeting spaces, many including kitchens, and hold regularly scheduled monthly meetings. We decided that our assessment meetings would be open to the general public, advertised in both Native and non-Native media and public bulletin boards, to make it available to all.

By late winter 2006, we had our plan together and it was time to make proposals to fund the assessment. This is an example of the project goal and objectives that we all agreed on for the assessment:

Project goal: To create the first organized collection of data focused on the food, diet and traditional agriculture issues of the Mvskoke (traditional spelling)

people and their neighbors, and assess the food assets, strengths, needs and deficiencies of rural, low-income communities in the tribal nation.

Objectives

1. Meet with all 23 communities in the boundary of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation for the purpose of discussing the existing food system, health and diet situations of community members, and existing food-related needs, concerns and resources.
2. Identify community assets regarding food issues, including land and human resources, traditional knowledge and existing programs.
3. Conduct a survey on suggestions, needs, habits, concerns and food-related health problems, and other liabilities in the communities.



4. Explore economic development possibilities related to food production and marketing.
5. Develop a draft plan of action to address the food needs and suggestions collected from the assessment surveys and discussions.

In 2005, First Nations brought our attention to the USDA Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program. We decided to seek the “planning grant” under that program as our primary focus. Since the USDA funds had a limit of \$25,000 and required a dollar-for-dollar match in cash or in-kind services, we knew we would need more than one source of funds to implement our plan. I had also initiated a conversation with the Jesse Smith Noyes Foundation and we decided to pursue a policy-development grant from them as our secondary source for this project. During spring and summer of 2006 we wrote and submitted proposals to both funders. Since we were new and had no cash for the match requirement for the USDA grant, we counted the volunteer hours of the project director at his regular salary rate, valued the donated space that we had at our fiscal sponsor’s office, and counted the paid time of the fiscal sponsor’s administrative assistant that was devoted to our project. Don’t be afraid of matching requirements because there are many legitimate in-kind services and donated things that can be used if you do not have cash resources available. By November 2006 we had funding in hand from both funders to begin our assessment. We were a full year into our planning of our “planning program” grant work plan and we had just received the first funds to support that work.

Creating the Assessment Tools

Designing and writing our assessment tools was a collaborative effort with input from our advisory committee, board and staff, as well as professionals in the food movement and tribal community leaders in our area and others. Again, we relied on email to communicate, revise and refine our documents. We relied heavily on the FSAT for ideas about questions to ask. Our goal was to gather as much information as possible without making it a burden on community members and keeping the total time devoted to filling out written survey forms to a minimum. We also knew, from our own experience in meeting for a year and

discussing food sovereignty, that it was a concept that had not been introduced to our community members and that understanding of that concept was essential for our work. We decided to find a way to make a discussion of this concept the introductory part of our assessment.

The project staff researched community food assessments on the internet and discovered guides for conducting such surveys from the Community Food Security Coalition and others. We analyzed everything and created draft survey questions to be considered by all the project partners. Eventually, we decided to make several different types of surveys – written, oral discussions and dot surveys – to accommodate the different ways that people process information: kinetic, visual and auditory. We planned a format for presenting the materials and questions that would take approximately 30 to 45 minutes to complete. We decided to set the stage for the written survey components by having an oral discussion about food sovereignty and how it relates to the Mvskoke people. Since Mvskoke people have, until very recent times, always communicated by word-of-mouth, this was the most culturally appropriate way to introduce the concept of food sovereignty. In consultation with all project partners and using the same email communication paths that we had established during the previous steps, we came up with a list of “discussion topics” that would be used at each assessment meeting (See Appendix B Attachment A). After the discussion we would continue with the other survey components.

We conducted a trial run of our complete meeting at the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma’s “Gathering of Elders” weekly meeting to work out the timing and any kinks in our formatting. That went so well that we decided to include their responses in the overall results since we did not make any major changes to our format. Even though they knew they were our test group, they took it all seriously and had a meaningful discussion about food sovereignty. Today, eight years later, this same group of elders is raising a beautiful community garden at their center and many have started family gardens.



We gave each community the choice of having us 1) as part of their agenda, 2) meet before their meeting, 3) meet after their meeting, or 4) hold a special meeting for our assessment. We used all four methods at one time or another. The method that worked best was to hold a separate meeting for the assessment, while the one that was worst was to be after their regular meeting. While we hoped for 45 minutes to do our part, the time that we actually spent ranged from 20 minutes (far too little) to over three hours (a little long, but the community members were excited and did not want to end the discussions that were generated from answering the assessment questions). This meeting was at the Wilson Center where the members held a special meeting for us, served healthy snacks and stayed to talk for hours (See Appendix B, Attachment B). Later, Wilson became a model new farming community with a community greenhouse and large garden. Several community members began raising enough produce to sell at the farmers' market that MFSI established in Okmulgee and at a local market at the community center. They are still growing food for market today.

Conducting Community Meetings

We opened the meetings with the same group of discussion topics/questions. We always had two staff people conducting the meetings so that one could ask the questions while the other person recorded the answers on a laptop (that we purchased with funds from the CFP grant). This worked very well and provided us with tons of insight into the food and farming situation. We always opened the discussion with the exercise of asking everyone to close their eyes, imagining the plate of food they had for their most recent meal and then consider the first four topics/questions. This exercise was so successful that we continued to use it in a variety of settings.

Following the introductory discussion, we led a brief discussion about what “community assets” are and provided some examples to demonstrate that even though the communities may not have a lot of financial resources, or active farmers, they do have many things that will be valuable to the process of restoring healthy food and farming systems resulting in food sovereignty. After that discussion, we asked

Conducting the Community Food Sovereignty Assessment

We had all agreed to hold our assessment meetings at the 23 community centers located throughout the nation. We contacted the community centers' leadership, described our project and asked if we could conduct assessments there. Response was very poor to the letters that we sent out to all of the communities to schedule the meetings. After waiting a polite amount of time for responses, we had to start calling and trying to get meetings scheduled. We found a lot of reluctance to schedule the survey and discussion meetings. We concluded that the leadership in the communities was interpreting scheduling the meeting as a commitment to begin a community garden or take some type of action regarding food. We adjusted our approach to set them at ease and let them know that we are just holding discussions and collecting information that we will share back into the communities once it is all tabulated.

them to fill out the first written survey, a simple list of community assets that our project team had compiled and to circle the ones that were present in their communities. (See Appendix B, Attachment C) Originally, we had also asked them to circle ones that they had in their family, check mark ones in their community and to sign their names to that survey only if they were willing to share these family assets with their community. Early on, we discovered that the extra step was too complicated and quit using it. From then on we only asked them to circle community assets. All of the written surveys were filled out anonymously and placed in a closed box (a file box that we cut a large slit in the top) to protect the information.

At this point in the meetings it was time to take a break. We were always conscious that many of the community members at the meetings were elders and we did what we could to accommodate their needs. We always encouraged the host community leadership to provide healthy snacks for the benefit of those with diabetes, if the meeting was taking place between meals. During the break, we asked everyone to participate in a “dot survey” to demonstrate where their family gets most of their food (See Appendix B, Attachment D). As people arrived we had given them a strip of 3 red dot stickers, the type that you get to put prices on yard-sale items. Now they knew what the dots were for! We had large, printed dot survey sheets taped up in a convenient place for placing the dots on them and it seemed that everyone enjoyed this exercise. At the end of each meeting we had an instant graphic snapshot for each community of their food sources.

The second written survey that we asked for was another simple list of possible activities and services that MFSI could provide for the communities or help them establish for themselves (See Appendix B, Attachment E). Obviously, this survey was intended for us to use in strategic planning and to demonstrate need and desire in our communities for activities that we proposed in future grant applications. We found the results of this simple survey to be some of the most valuable information we got in terms of making informed decisions about the path that MFSI would take. The last 10 to 20 minutes of the meeting were



devoted to filling out the two-page, written general survey that had a variety of questions, all created and agreed on by the project team. Some of these questions were sensitive in that they asked about income, family health issues and tribal affiliation, etc. (See Appendix B, Attachment F). We re-emphasized the anonymity of the survey info and urged them not to sign their names, only their community’s name. We found that often people would almost automatically put their name at the top of the page, apparently from habit of filling out forms in other settings, so we reminded them to be anonymous. We were very happy to see that everyone seemed to take the survey very seriously and took their time answering the questions.

We had received a large donation of garden seeds from Heifer International and used these as a thank-you gift for the community members who completed all of the survey steps. As each community member placed their completed surveys in the box, we gave them the opportunity to select as many packs of garden vegetable seeds as they wanted. We know that

these seeds were greatly appreciated and they became lots of fresh produce on the tables in the participating communities. One lesson learned here was to always give out the appreciation gifts at the end of the session. We learned this after, on a beautiful spring Saturday, several potential participants got the seeds that we had set out, then left immediately to plant them.

Assessment Results and Plan of Action

The information gleaned from this assessment provided MFSI with the foundation for community food work from 2007 to the present. The revelations about diet, favorite traditional foods and foods that their families would buy if they were not so expensive, were especially interesting to us. For example, while several people answered the question of what they would buy if it were affordable with seafood and steaks, a large number listed fresh fruits and vegetables. We are also surprised that the top most-requested future MFSI activity was to publish a traditional foods cookbook. In a separate youth assessment MFSI conducted for the MCN Diabetes Program, we were surprised and glad to learn that the most popular drink for the 411 grade 3-6 students that we surveyed was water!

While we were always aware that our survey was not scientific and statistically perfect, we did our best to collect information that represented a cross section of the people living in the MCN boundary. Our compilation of data was done with simple percentages so that if 10 of 50 people surveyed answered yes to a question, our report showed that 20% of the people were positive about that thing, and so on. With the two questions that required written answers, we recorded all the various answers and created percentages of the total surveys to show the answers. We kept all of the surveys separated by community so that we could share the results with each individual community as well as having a comprehensive summary. We had planned to hold follow-up meetings in each community, but ran out of time and, unfortunately, were never able to find the time to do that for every community involved. We were invited to several communities' meetings to speak about food and

garden projects after the assessment meetings, and we always tried to go over their assessment results at that time. We also provided the results to the MCN Community Development Office, community leaders and the MFSI advisory committee members.

As the final step in the assessment process, the project staff produced a "plan of action" that was presented to the MFSI board of directors in November 2007, just over two years after we had started the process of planning and conducting our community food sovereignty assessment. The board suggested that we share the plan of action with the MCN National Council members and executive branch, which we did in a series of private meetings over the following months. We also put a copy of our report and plan of action in all National Council members' mailboxes. We were able to continue our advocacy for attention to food and farming in the MCN through funding from the Jesse Smith Noyes Foundation Diversifying Leadership for Sustainable Food Policy, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Communities Creating Healthy Environments programs.

An important milestone for our food sovereignty work was reached in September 2009 when the Muscogee (Creek) Nation Food and Fitness Policy Council (FFPC) was established through a unanimous vote of the MCN National Council. This was the first tribal food policy council created through a tribal legislative process in North America, according to experts in the field and our own research and networking. The FFPC continues to meet and is leading tribal efforts to improve and maintain food sovereignty for tribal members and their neighbors in the MCN boundary. MFSI continues to carry out educational and cultural projects, many still based on the results of the 2007 assessment (see Appendix B, Attachment G). Significant steps have been taken by the tribe and communities to improve access to healthy foods and the nation has passed a law allowing the tribal food service providers (Elderly Nutrition, Day Care, etc.) to purchase fresh foods from local growers. At the grassroots level, many community, church and school gardens are now producing food for the Mvskoke citizens and their neighbors. Several tribal and community members are growing commercial gardens

and selling at the new farmers' markets in numerous MCN communities. Traditional foods meals are being served at the diabetes summer camps and other area events. Local foods are on the table at several Elderly Nutrition centers with plans for expansion. Traditional foods and fresh produce are being grown in countless family gardens, and MFSI has partnered with several area farmers to explore commercial production of traditional corn and pumpkin varieties. These are just a few of the accomplishments that have been a direct result of the information learned during the assessment process. The assessment was the beginning and the foundation for most of MFSI's subsequent work. MFSI is proud of the work that is being done and has plans for even more projects to continue on the path toward the goal of strong food sovereignty for the Mvskoke people and their neighbors (see Appendix B, Attachment H).

Advice for Other Tribal Communities

1. Research food assessments. There is a lot of information online about conducting a successful food assessment. Do your homework and start to customize a plan that works for your community.
2. Develop a preliminary plan. Any organization considering a food assessment should allow several months to create a good work plan to use when writing funding proposals for the actual assessment work.
3. Don't wait for funding before you begin your work. Early on your core group can begin to articulate the need for a food assessment and plan your scope of work, implementation plan and how the results would be used to provide maximum benefit to our constituency. A preliminary plan can help you create a budget and project plan to submit to potential funders for the work.
4. Research funding opportunities. Once you've established your goals and objectives, search for funding opportunities.

5. Don't be afraid of matching-funds requirements for grants. There are many legitimate in-kind services and donated things that can be used if you do not have cash resources available. These can include volunteer hours, general donations and other items or funds.
6. Seek technical assistance and training. Many organizations offer scholarships for training and technical assistance. It is possible to receive excellent advice and training without spending a lot of money.
7. Gather as much information as possible without making it a burden on community members. Keep the total time devoted to filling out written survey forms to a minimum.
8. Conduct a trial run. We conducted a trial run of our complete meeting to work out the timing and any kinks in our formatting.
9. Revise your plan when necessary. We decided to make several different types of surveys to accommodate the different ways that people process information.
10. Don't be intimidated by data analysis and collection. We kept it simple by focusing on percentages.



V. Concluding Remarks

First Nations believes that sharing information and models is an effective yet underutilized tool in Indian Country. The information shared in this report suggests that conducting food sovereignty assessments is one of the first critical steps towards reclaiming Native food-system control. These assessments have the potential to increase awareness of a broad range of food-related challenges and opportunities. Furthermore, they enable tribes and Native organizations to develop solutions to food insecurity that are driven by and reactive to the needs of their own communities.

We would like to commend the three people highlighted in this report for their commitment and dedication to Native food sovereignty and for sharing their experiences with us. We hope the contents and recommendations included in this report will serve as a resource in Indian Country that will encourage other tribes and Native organizations to begin looking to one another to share ideas, models and best practices for reclaiming Native food-system control and creating healthy, resilient communities for generations to come.

VI. Appendix A: Biographies

Vena A-dae Romero (Cochiti Pueblo/Kiowa) was born and raised in Cochiti Pueblo, New Mexico. She co-founded and is executive director of Cochiti Youth Experience, Inc., a nonprofit organization that aims to create opportunities for Cochiti youth to engage in traditional Pueblo farming as an important process to create a healthy, sustainable and viable community. She graduated from Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs and focused on economic policy. She later attended the Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law at Arizona State University, where she received her Juris Doctorate. She also served as judge pro tem for the Karuk Tribe and the Hoopa Tribe. She received her

LL.M. from the University of Arkansas School of Law's Food and Agricultural Law Program.

Dana Eldridge (Diné) is a former policy analyst with the Diné Policy Institute. While at Diné Policy Institute, she headed the Diné Food Sovereignty Initiative among other duties. Dana attended Brown University in Providence, R.I., earning a B.A. degree in ethnic studies with a focus on Native American policy

Vicky Karhu has dedicated her life to preservation of farmlands, including southeastern Indigenous cultural sites, and advocating for the rights, protection and preservation of land-based cultures. She is founding director of the Mvskoke Food Sovereignty Initiative in Okmulgee, Oklahoma, and has worked with Indigenous peoples for more than 30 years. She serves on the leadership team of the International Institute of Indigenous Sciences (founding member) and is an independent consultant with experience in grassroots community organizing, grant writing and program management strategies. She is currently sharing her knowledge and experience with community-based, nonprofit organizations working to achieve food sovereignty in rural and low-income communities. In addition to nonprofit work, she earned her living as an organic farmer/market and estate gardener while raising four children in Chattanooga, Tennessee. She enjoys growing organic vegetables, seed saving, traveling and spending time with her children and grandchildren. She balances many hours spent on the computer with regular practice of Tai Chi.

VII. Appendix B: Sample Assessments

The following documents accompanied Vicky Karhu's essay. These are actual documents used to conduct her 2007 community food assessment. She explains in her essay how she uses each of these.

Attachment A

CFP 2007 Community Food Assessment MFSI

Discussion Topics

Think of the last meal that you ate. Do you know where any of the foods were grown?

How far do you think that the average item on the plate has traveled?

Was any of the food produced in your community? Could it have been?

Did your family produce any of the food? Could you have?

Can you imagine what would happen if I-40 was shut down for a week.

Do you think that there is still the knowledge in your community of how to produce, prepare and preserve foods?

When and how do you think that the Mvskoke people lost the ability to take care of their own food needs?

How much of your regular diet includes traditional Mvskoke foods?

Do you think there may be a link between the loss of traditional foods and some of the health problems in your community?

Do you think people would work together to grow and market food in the community?

What are some of the most serious health problems in the community?

Could these problems be alleviated through diet changes?

Is it possible that some of the problems are being increased by the processing, chemical treatments or additives in commercially available foods?

If locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables were available in your community, would you add them to your diet?

Agenda

March 1, 2007
Wilson Creek Indian Community Center
Community Food Assessment Meeting

Introductions

Community Leaders
Guests

Mvskoke Food Sovereignty Initiative
Project Staff
Board Members

Community Food Project

Goals
Objectives and Activities
CFP survey process

Open discussion

Uniform questions discussed at every community

Community Asset discussion and survey

Dot survey introduction

Break (fill out dot survey)

Discuss dot survey

Future activities discussion and survey

Written general survey

Adjourn

MVTO

Attachment C

CFP 2007 Community Food Assessment MFSI Community Resources and Assets

Name _____ (OPTIONAL)

Please CHECK MARK any resources/assets that exist in your **community**.

Please CIRCLE any resources/assets that exist in your **family**.

LAND RESOURCES

Tribal community center

Community kitchen

Church

Ceremonial grounds

Fertile land/garden spot

Pasture land

Water

Spring

Well

River/ Creek/Pond

Fish/game

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Youth organizations

Cooling equipment

Walk-in Refrigerator

Volunteers

Outdoor cooking facilities

Space for sorting/packing food

Grantwriter

Community leadership

Bank/ Chamber of Commerce

Tribal leaders

County extension agent

Farmers / gardeners

County fair

Unemployed family or neighbors

Garden club

Grants

Potential food customers

Schools

FAMILY RESOURCES/TOOLS

Elders with knowledge

Youth

Acreage

Sunny location

Time

Truck

Barn

Storage building

Greenhouse

Chicken coop

Pig pen

Warehouse space

Cellar

Tractor

Tiller

Mower

Garden tools

Shade cloth

Stakes

Fencing

Horse/mule

Pressure cooker

Canning jars

OTHER

Attachment D

WHERE DO YOU GET MOST OF YOUR FOOD?
(DUCK CREEK)

Grocery store

Discount store

Wal-Mart

Convenience store

Fast Food

Restaurant

Health Food store

Mail order/online/delivery service

Elderly Nutrition

Farmer's Market

Garden/Farm

Local Farmer

Roadside stand

Commodity Program

Food stamps

WIC

Attachment E

CFP 2007 Community Food Assessment MFSI

Future Activities

Please circle any activities or projects that you would like to see in your community.

- | | |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| Farmers' market | Community garden |
| Traditional food cooking classes | Bow making classes |
| Food preservation classes | Nutrition classes |
| Organic gardening classes | Fruit tree donations |
| Container gardening classes | Container garden donations |
| Garden tilling service | Community compost |
| Wild food edibles identification classes | Compost classes |
| Youth and Elder garden project | Grape growing classes |
| Native foods cookbooks | Berry growing classes |
| Food history and culture classes | Vegetable growing classes |
| Seed saving service and exchange | Food fair event |
| Seed donations | Community gardening/food library |
| Greenhouse | Natural beed production |
| Community food co-op | Natural chicken or turkey production |
| Monthly traditional meals | Natural pork production |
| Weekly traditional meals | Other suggestions: |
| Healthy alternatives for party foods | |
| Community fish farm | |
| Hunting classes | |
| Fishing classes | |

2007 Community Food Assessment
Mvskoke Food Sovereignty Initiative
Creek Indian Community

Who are the members of this community?

About you: Male Female Age ____ Mvskoke Creek Other Native American Non-Native

About your household: Number living at home ____ Adults ____ Children ____

How many are employed? ____ Are there grandparents caring for grandchildren? Yes No

Household Income: Below \$14,000 \$14,000-\$24,000 \$24,000-\$34,000 Above \$34,000

Married Separated Widowed Divorced Never Married

What foods do you eat?

How many times a day do you eat fruit and/or vegetables? 1 2 3 4 5 more than 5

Are most of the fruit and vegetables Canned Frozen Dried or Fresh?

What do you usually have to drink? Soft drinks Water Coffee Tea Juice Other

Does your family grow any of the food that you eat? Yes No

Does your family eat food produced in the community? Yes No

Would you prefer to eat food produced in the community? Yes No

Do you eat more meat than fruit and vegetables? Yes No

Are you concerned about the chemicals, hormones, etc. used in food production? Yes No

Would you like to know where and how your food is produced? Yes No

Are you concerned about the costs of food? Yes No

Are you concerned about contamination of food? Yes No

Are you concerned about the freshness of food? Yes No

Are you concerned about the nutritional value of food? Yes No

Name three foods that are a regular staple in the diet of your family:

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

Name three foods that you would consider to be "traditional" Mvskoke foods.

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

Name three foods that you would add to your diet if they were more affordable and accessible.

1) _____

2) _____

Attachment F (continued)

2007 Community Food Assessment Mvskoke Food Sovereignty Initiative

Creek Indian Community

Where do you get most of your food?

Grocery store	<input type="checkbox"/> Local	<input type="checkbox"/> 10-15 miles	<input type="checkbox"/> 15-20 miles	<input type="checkbox"/> 20 miles or more
Discount store	<input type="checkbox"/> Local	<input type="checkbox"/> 10-15 miles	<input type="checkbox"/> 15-20 miles	<input type="checkbox"/> 20 miles or more
Wal-Mart	<input type="checkbox"/> Local	<input type="checkbox"/> 10-15 miles	<input type="checkbox"/> 15-20 miles	<input type="checkbox"/> 20 miles or more
Garden	<input type="checkbox"/> Local	<input type="checkbox"/> 10-15 miles	<input type="checkbox"/> 15-20 miles	<input type="checkbox"/> 20 miles or more
Farm	<input type="checkbox"/> Local	<input type="checkbox"/> 10-15 miles	<input type="checkbox"/> 15-20 miles	<input type="checkbox"/> 20 miles or more
Fast food	<input type="checkbox"/> Local	<input type="checkbox"/> 10-15 miles	<input type="checkbox"/> 15-20 miles	<input type="checkbox"/> 20 miles or more
Restaurants	<input type="checkbox"/> Local	<input type="checkbox"/> 10-15 miles	<input type="checkbox"/> 15-20 miles	<input type="checkbox"/> 20 miles or more
Elderly Nutrition	<input type="checkbox"/> Local	<input type="checkbox"/> 10-15 miles	<input type="checkbox"/> 15-20 miles	<input type="checkbox"/> 20 miles or more
Farmers' Market	<input type="checkbox"/> Local	<input type="checkbox"/> 10-15 miles	<input type="checkbox"/> 15-20 miles	<input type="checkbox"/> 20 miles or more

Would you purchase at a Farmers' Market if one was nearby? Yes No

Would you join a community food co-op if available in your community? Yes No

How do you purchase most of your food? Cash Check/debit card Credit card Food Stamps Charge

When do you buy most of your food? Daily Weekly Monthly

Do you stock emergency foods? Yes No

Are you concerned about the consistent supply of foods? Yes No

Health and Traditions

Which health problems are present in your household? Diabetes Overweight Heart disease

Would better food impact better health for you and your family? Yes No

Are foods an important part of your church, grounds or community activities? Yes No

Would you be interested to preserve cultural food traditions? Yes No

Does your family grow a garden? Yes No Does your family have land/acreage? Yes No

Would you grow a garden if it was tilled? Yes No

Do you know how to plant, cook and/or preserve food crops?

Do you save seeds to use the next season? Yes No

Would you like to have a community garden nearby? Yes No

Would you help in a community garden? Yes No

Do you feel that agriculture and food traditions have been lost in your community? Yes No

Are there people in your community who have knowledge of food traditions? Yes No

Would you devote time and energy to learning about food traditions? Yes No

Would you be willing to teach food or gardening classes? Yes No

Mvskoke Food Sovereignty Initiative

Community Foods Plan of Action

Recommendations to the Board of Directors based on the Community Food Assessment conducted in 2007

November 1, 2007

MFSI has conducted written and oral discussion surveys in 18 communities this year. The results clearly show a concern about the quality, origin, processing and nutritional values of the foods that are currently being consumed by our citizens. Most people want to return to the tradition of growing and preserving our own foods, but lack the time, resources and expertise to take care of these things at the family level. The community and tribal leadership is not addressing these needs at this time. The tribe is not taking care of the food needs of the citizens in ways other than distributing institutional foods through the commodities and feed service programs. The one community that is growing a large garden will not cooperate with others. The local situation in almost all communities is that there is no farmers' market or other way to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables unless you happen to know someone. Many people would like to purchase local and/or organic foods, but can't afford to travel to Tulsa, the only place where they are available in any quantity. There are limited organic products available at Wal-Mart, but most consumers are leery of the quality.

Many community leaders, National Council Representatives and community members expressed that they would devote time to improving the food system and preserving the traditional knowledge. They expressed difficulty in being able to get transportation to programs in Okmulgee. They are willing to share resources in most communities, especially the southern, rural ones. Citizens have land that is not being used that they would like to see food grown on.

Steps we can take:

- ❖ Access resources that will stimulate local food production
- ❖ Identify resources for farming equipment, supplies and labor
- ❖ Provide a tilling service to families and communities
- ❖ Establish and assist communities in establishing community and family gardens
- ❖ Establish and assist communities in establishing farmers' markets.
- ❖ Take our programs into the communities, especially the rural ones
- ❖ Provide educational programs to teach organic gardening methods
- ❖ Create a native food cookbook to encourage using the traditional (whole) foods
- ❖ Provide cultural educational programs celebrating the Mvskoke food heritage.
- ❖ Record as much traditional knowledge as possible
- ❖ Host or assist communities in hosting monthly traditional meals
- ❖ Access resources that will stimulate local food production

Attachment H



MFSI Advisory Committee studies the CFP Planning grant application package



A typical community meeting



Community members select their "Thank you" gift packs of seeds



Community members carefully filling out written surveys



Community member doing the dot survey



Seminole Nation of Oklahoma Gathering of Elders garden



Wilson Community new farmers at Okmulgee Farmers Market



Wilson Community greenhouse going up



Eufaula Community garden at their Elderly Nutrition Center



Traditional foods growing again in the Muscogee (Creek) Nation's communities



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