IIRAH White Paper: Food Deserts and Hunger in Idaho

Food Deserts are often invisible to the general public. We can drive through one and not even know it. Since we don't notice food deserts, we may not think about them. Yet where they exist, food deserts contribute significantly to hunger and malnutrition.

This paper examines food deserts in the context of the overall food system and discusses the social and economic costs of food deserts in relation to the problems that hunger causes. It concludes with some suggestions for action to bring nutritious food back to food deserts.

The Idaho Interfaith Roundtable Against Hunger (IIRAH) has a special interest in efforts to eliminate hunger and its sources. This special interest is reflected in IIRAH's mission "… to explore the complexities of hunger by engaging diverse communities of faith and goodwill throughout the state in developing solutions to the root causes of hunger." IIRAH thus believes that the issue of food deserts is important to all Idahoans.

Our Food System

Idaho families bring food to their tables by some combination of three separate but overlapping food systems. We label these systems Commercial, Alternative, and Compensatory.

The Commercial food system.

The Commercial food system provides most of the needs of contemporary American families. It comprises everything that comes from industrial-scale farms, feedlots and processing plants anywhere in the world, is transported by ship, train, or truck to wholesalers and large grocery chains, and in the end is sold at retail grocery stores. The Commercial food system aims for efficient and profitable movement through these successive stages until the purchaser buys

the food and takes it home. The relationship between the consumer and the businesses engaged in food production and distribution is arms-length, with personal contacts limited to the final retail transaction. The food is assumed to be safe to eat and palatable to average tastes in the relevant market area. Competition between retailers tends to emphasize price.

The Alternative food system.

The Alternative food system represents an effort to retain the benefits of local and small scale and family production and marketing. The Alternative food system is characterized by family farms, short-distance hauling with pickups and farm trucks, and even direct marketing from farmer to consumer. It emphasizes nutrition and quality, "buying local," short distances from farm to table, and personal interactions between producers and consumers. These features add value, offsetting prices that are sometimes higher. In local areas, the Alternative system often involves face to face transactions between producer and consumer. Profits are of secondary importance, and intrinsic rewards such as personal relationships gain value for both producer and consumer. Examples of production in this system would include home gardens, family farms, and community gardens. Marketing includes roadside stands, farmers' markets, and subscriptions to Community Supported Agriculture (CSA's). Local butchers, community kitchens, and home kitchens provide processing in this system.

The Compensatory food system.

We commonly think of poverty and hunger as problems that arise from individual circumstances, such as joblessness, low income, illness, or incapacity, which hinder ability to obtain nutritious food. The Compensatory food system seeks to alleviate such problems at an individual or household level.

The Compensatory food system utilizes the production and processing facilities of the other two systems and exists to compensate for failures in the pattern of food distribution. The Compensatory food system does no marketing, does not compete with private businesses, and has no profit motive. Its purpose is only to sustain life for those deprived of the ability to participate in the Commercial or Alternative food systems because of insufficient income and/or access to nourishing food.

When families and individuals experience food insecurity they must turn to the Compensatory food system. That system consists of organizations and agencies, public and private, which alleviate food insecurity for those excluded from the other two food systems. These organizations include

1. Federal, state and local food and nutrition programs that provide financial assistance, supplemental food, and other food services to families. Examples are the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Women, Infants, and Children program (WIC), and school breakfast and lunch programs.

2. Charitable organizations that use donations from individuals and companies to provide emergency food assistance and other services. Idaho food pantries, food banks and community meals and direct feeding programs are examples.

3. Nutrition education programs that help people and institutions make better use of available resources and, additionally, create and subsidize more demand for nutritious food. The USDA Food Nutrition Service, the Idaho Food Bank's Cooking Matters program and Eat Smart Idaho are examples.

4. Advocates for humane principles and priorities in laws and programs. Examples are the Idaho Interfaith Roundtable Against Hunger, Mazon, Bread for the World, Food Research and Action Center and Catholic Charities.

5. Market-based approaches that connect local food producers in the Commercial, Alternative and Compensatory systems with low-income consumers, sometimes through or with subsidies from nonprofit or public agencies. In Idaho these include buyers' co-ops, farmers' markets that accept food stamp (Quest) cards, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA's), the Boise Mobile Farmer's Market and the City of Boise's match program for mobile market purchases using Quest cards.

6. Self-help and mutual aid, such as home and community gardens, cottage industry enterprises, small loan clubs, or benevolent activities of faith groups.

7. Coordinating bodies such as the Idaho Hunger Relief Task Force.

Food Deserts as Food System Failures

In Idaho there is no absolute shortage of nutritious food. The problem is that, for various reasons, the food we have is not getting to all of the people. This problem is especially severe in certain urban and rural areas that we call food deserts.

Food deserts are low-income urban and rural areas without ready access to healthful and affordable food. In other words, they are geographic areas where the buying power of consumers is limited and the food available makes it difficult to follow USDA nutrition guidelines.[1] Food

[1] The USDA recommends that lean protein, low-fat dairy, whole grains, and fruits and vegetables be considered "foods to encourage", or nutritious foods. "Foods to reduce" include foods that have trans-fats or saturated fats, high sodium or added sugars, which are often more common in food deserts.

deserts may be served by fast food restaurants and convenience stores, but they lack supermarkets, grocery stores, and farmers' markets.

What constitutes low-income? It is commonly defined in one of two ways. First, it means a poverty rate of 20 % or more in a population. The poverty rate is the percentage of a population living below a poverty threshold, as defined by the federal government. In Idaho the poverty threshold is defined as an annual income of $23,384 for a family of four, for example. The Idaho poverty rate is 15.6%. That is, 15.6 % of Idaho households have less income than the poverty level standard for their family size.

An alternative definition of low-income looks at individual families. A low family income is one that is equal to or less than 80% of the surrounding area's median family income. Median household income is the level of income at which half the population has lower incomes and half has higher incomes. In Idaho the median household income is $46, 783. A total family income below 80% of this, or $37, 426, would qualify as low-income.

How is "low access" determined? A low-access community is one that has at least 500 persons and/or at least 33% of its population living more than 1 mile from a supermarket or large grocery store (10 miles, in the case of non-metropolitan rural areas). Low-income areas are at risk to become food deserts, and the realities of the food desert in turn, increase the survival pressure on individual households within those areas.

By these definitions, there are many food deserts in Idaho. The USDA Food Access Research Atlas identifies the locations of food deserts.[2] Most food deserts are in Ada, Canyon, Camas, Clearwater and Idaho Counties, along with most of southwest Idaho.

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[2] See the USDA atlas at: http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/go-to-the-atlas.aspx.

Why are More Food Retailers Not Selling Nutritious Food in Food Deserts?

On the consumer side, residents of some neighborhoods simply do not have enough income. Prices of fresh and healthy food are high, even if available. And for those with full time jobs, getting and preparing healthy food at low cost is time consuming and burdensome. Using cheaper cuts of meat or getting adequate protein from vegetable combinations requires above-average cooking knowledge and equipment. In addition, patterns of taste develop over time into a culture that may not value the most nutritious food, and those who value it may not be able to afford it. The upshot is that consumers cannot generate sufficient demand for healthy food: wants and desires not backed up with dollars cannot create demand.

From the point of view of food retailers, especially larger supermarkets, that lack of demand is critical. While land rents and labor costs would be lower in rural food deserts as compared to urban areas like Boise, transportation and other costs would be higher. Fresh produce, meats, and dairy products have a short shelf life: they must be sold quickly and in quantity to maintain quality. Sales margins would be too low, therefore, to make it profitable enough for a supermarket to locate in a food desert. Grocery stores in rural food deserts may face further constraints in the form of infrequent deliveries from their suppliers. Even local food products may be unavailable for individual purchase or gleaning because they are delivered directly into commercial system warehouses.[3]

Food businesses that do see a profit in low-income communities and food deserts include fast food restaurants and convenience stores attached to gasoline stations. Both of these businesses tend to be located along heavily-traveled roads, attracting motorists who need only a

[3] Wheat grown in Idaho County, for example, moves by truckload and barge load to Portland for export, while health food stores in Idaho County sell wheat from Oregon.

quick snack or meal as they pass through the neighborhood. They do not depend entirely on local residents for their customer base. Local residents, however, may depend on these stores for most of their diet, as traveling the distance to full-service grocery stores is expensive and time-consuming.

What Problems Do Food Deserts and Hunger Cause?

In a food desert, the food system fails to deliver adequate nourishing food. This is especially problematic for families with children. Lack of nourishing food is known to impede physical and intellectual growth and development of children. Children are our most valuable national resource; our future well-being depends on them. Poor diets today will affect education, citizen participation, neighborhood engagement, military and national defense and employment tomorrow. In addition, hunger and poor diets increase risks of physical health problems such as obesity, tooth decay, high blood pressure, diabetes, some cancers and osteoporosis. The heightened incidence of these problems causes harm not only to those who suffer from them but also to everyone else. Physical ill health stemming from hunger and poor nourishment imposes upon the rest of the population higher medical insurance costs, higher taxes to pay for the increased dependence on government assistance, increased exposure to contagious diseases, and increased employee absenteeism.

Hunger and poor diets also increase the risks of mental health problems. Problem-solving ability and alertness depend on adequate nutrition. Poor diet can be a factor in depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and stress, which harm not only those who suffer from these afflictions but anyone who steps in the way of someone's anger or is affected by a suicide. Mental disorders reduce labor productivity and increase the burdens on public institutions such

as Medicaid mental health services and the court system. Teachers who look into the lives of inattentive, unproductive, and disruptive pupils often find that these children are distracted by hunger. Stress over obtaining the necessities of life has been documented as a factor in domestic violence.

To make matters worse, poor health and cognitive-emotional damage resulting from hunger and poor diets reproduce themselves from parents to children throughout the generations. In fact, malnutrition undermines a person's ability to function well in almost every aspect of life: in the workplace, parenting, citizenship, providing for their own needs and the needs of their families.

Food deserts are prime locations for all of these hunger-related problems. To the extent that they contribute to hunger and malnutrition, food deserts create very real costs that all Americans eventually must pay. These costs are both economic and social. An investment in reducing the number of food deserts would pay for itself by reducing the economic costs of hunger. Money and resources would be saved by not having to pay for public health programs that deal with diet-related physical and mental diseases. A healthier workforce would be more productive. Reducing food deserts would also yield quality of life benefits such as a higher level of engagement in civic affairs, healthier neighborhoods throughout our towns and cities, and a stronger social fabric.

What Does It Take to Eliminate Food Insecurity and Food Deserts?

The current Commercial and Alternative food systems focus on the production and delivery of food for profit. In these systems the maximization of wealth is more important than the maximization of human welfare. The human need for and right to adequate nutrition doesn't

become an issue until a failure occurs, in a food desert or elsewhere in the food system. This is where the Compensatory system comes in: to try to compensate for the failures of Commercial and Alternative systems.

In an ideally functioning food system everyone would have enough money and access to achieve adequate nutrition through participation in the Commercial and Alternative food systems. Reliance on the Compensatory system would be minimal. Every dinner table would offer the nourishment needed for individuals and families to lead healthy and productive lives. But this clearly is not the case. What can be done?

Options for Improving Nutrition in Food Deserts

There are many creative public and nonprofit programs in Idaho and around the country that address the food desert dimension of food insecurity. Among these are:

- comprehensive, system-focused plans dealing with the adequacy of food distribution patterns. An example is Blueprint Idaho.
- support and subsidies for local food cultivation and entrepreneurship, such as Global Gardens.
- expanded use of vacant lands for urban agriculture through lease initiatives, accommodative zoning regulations and building codes. Examples of such initiative can be found in Baltimore, Boston, Champaign (IL), Chicago, Cleveland, Milwaukee, New Orleans, Oakland and Providence.
- enhanced public transportation systems that provide fast and convenient access to healthy food sources in underserved areas. The city of Rock Island (IL), for

example, provides free bus service for residents of food deserts to shop at local supermarkets.

- non-traditional grocery retail options in communities lacking supermarkets and where families must depend on corner stores for food purchases. The Food Trust's Healthy Corner Stores initiative is one such approach.
- mobile trucks that bring healthy food directly to food desert communities and that simultaneously support local farmers. Boise's Mobile Farmers' Market is one example as are the Freshest Cargo program in the Bay Area and Fresh Truck in Boston.
- school, community and workplace gardens that influence food production and purchasing practices and that increase access to healthy and affordable foods.

Summary and Recommendations

A food desert is a failure in the food distribution system. Food deserts are not created deliberately but are instead the result of the natural operation of a market economy that measures success by profits rather than human well-being.

The characteristics of food deserts vary according to their location, and remedies must therefore be tailored to local conditions. They must take into account local resources and particular local needs, preferences, customs and tastes in the specific area. This requires dialogue among all stakeholders, first and foremost the people living within the food desert.

Most successful efforts to address the food desert problem involve partnerships among varying combinations of public, nonprofit, commercial, and individual initiatives. Individual

plans and strategies such as those itemized above need to be woven together into a comprehensive plan to create strong and well-nourished communities.

The Idaho Interfaith Roundtable Against Hunger stands ready to support and assist in organizing efforts to study, formulate and promote remedies for food deserts in Idaho. IIRAH urges food security advocates throughout the state to examine their own counties and neighborhoods and identify food deserts in their regions. IIRAH will share resources with any group that wishes to undertake such a study.

It is unacceptable that a state as richly endowed as Idaho should contain so many food deserts. With informed and coordinated efforts, Idaho's food deserts can be transformed into gardens. We all have a stake in making this happen.