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### Title

Alternative Food Initiatives in California: Local Efforts Address Systemic Issues

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## Alternative Food Initiatives in California: Local Efforts Address Systemic Issues

*This research project would not have been possible without the interest, support, and enthusiasm of the leaders and participants in California's alternative food initiatives. We thank the representatives of the organizations we interviewed for their generous contributions of time and thought, and for their commitment to improving the food system.*

People are increasingly concerned about food. Issues range from how it is produced and distributed, the health effects of industrially produced food, and the environmental consequences of chemically-intensive farming practices, to the political and economic implications of a concentrated and globalized food system. Consumers, activists, and farmers are challenging the existing food system and seeking to build alternatives through new initiatives and civic organizations, referred to here as alternative food initiatives (AFIs).

Some AFI groups act to reconnect farmers and consumers through farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture, and the reinvigoration of small family farms; their

goals are to develop community-based food systems grounded in regional agriculture and local decision-making. Others focus on organizing and empowering marginalized communities through projects such as urban gardens and food-based micro-enterprise or job training programs. And some engage in education about the food system and ecological agriculture for school children, growers, or the general public.

This research brief reports on a study of the remarkable range of California organizations that address alternative food systems issues and practices. We undertook this study in order to develop a better understanding of the contribution these groups are making to the development of sustainable food systems in California.

To provide the reader with a context for this study, we first briefly review the unique aspects of California's agricultural system that gave rise to the AFIs examined here. We discuss the way that the AFI movement has evolved over the last three decades as its focus changed from primarily farm-labor issues to an emphasis on urban, consumer, and small farmer/family

### Summary of Findings

- Large numbers of well-informed Californians are concerned about the state of the current food system in its environmental, economic, and social dimensions. Major concerns include—
  - the extent to which food production and consumption have become disconnected, e.g., the separation between farmers and consumers, and a lack of knowledge about cooking and nutrition;
  - the disempowering of producers and consumers in an increasingly globalized and standardized food system;
  - the limited availability of affordable fresh, nutritious food for low-income people.
- Interviewees tended to share a perception that these kinds of food-system problems have systemic rather than local or individual causes.
- Despite this analysis, California AFIs are much more focused on local issues and activities in which participants feel they can make a near-term difference, rather than on broad issues and large-scale actions.
- California AFIs are positioned to move the agrifood system in the direction of greater ecological soundness and social justice, thanks to the extremely high levels of commitment of those working on AFIs.
- California AFIs' efforts would be enhanced if they were able to work more closely, with a common purpose, while maintaining their particular and local activities.
- Developing a shared vision of a sustainable food system and the articulation of a menu of action items would greatly increase the collective effectiveness of California AFIs.
- The ability of AFIs to develop a shared vision is limited by the scarcity of funding available to support broad-based, collaborative efforts.

## Alternative Food Initiatives

farmer concerns. Based on our interviews with the organizations' leaders and participants, we then discuss the perspectives and activities of today's AFI groups. Finally, we conclude with suggestions for strengthening existing alternative food initiative efforts in California.

### HISTORY OF CALIFORNIA AFIS

In the 1970s new attention to the politics of agriculture in California gave rise to a range of challenges that involved both opposition to current practices and the search for alternatives. These challenges had two emphases. First was a social dimension—to recognize and address the implications of poverty and racism in both the production and consumption of food. Second, they had an environmental dimension—to control the human and ecological health impacts of chemical technologies in agriculture. In both cases, organizations worked to create changes through changing public policies and regulations while at the same time developing alternative practices that did not threaten the same harm to people, wildlife, and natural resources.

The earliest AFIs in our study (or their antecedent organizations) were formed in the context of national movements for social justice and environmental responsibility that were active at the time (table 1). Most of the attention during the Civil Rights movement focused on African Americans in the rural South and urban North, but across the Southwest, people of Mexican ancestry also struggled for justice. In California, one form this struggle took was support for farm worker organizing, leading to the end of the *bracero* (Mexican guest worker) program and creating the conditions for the successful inter-ethnic coalition that became the United Farm Workers (UFW) union. The UFW was successful in part because it was able to organize for justice among urban consumers as well as workers in the fields. Federal Great Society programs, beginning with the War on Poverty, provided support for organizing urban communities

**Table 1. Social movements of the 1960s**

In the U.S.	In California
Civil Rights Movement (leads, in Johnson Administration, to War on Poverty, Great Society programs)	Civil Rights Movement takes the form of farmworker organizing; also focuses attention on urban poverty, community empowerment
Environmental movement (from <i>Silent Spring</i> to Earth Day)	'Back to the land' movement includes environmental and social concerns in beginning of organic farming movement
'World food crisis' (NeoMalthusianism) supports growth of production agriculture	<i>Diet for a Small Planet</i> , <i>Food First</i> challenge Malthusian argument

around basic needs (such as food) and community empowerment.

The publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962 catalyzed the new environmental movement, encouraging the more rigorous regulation of pesticides and, through the search for environmentally benign alternatives, encouraging



**Dolores Huertas was a key leader in the development of the United Farm Workers movement in the 1960s.**

the movement for organic farming. National "productionist" agricultural policies focused on competition for world export markets and the international marketing of green revolution technologies were justified by claims of a looming "world food crisis"; opponents countered these modernization claims with books such as *Diet for a Small Planet* and *Food First*.

Eight of the organizations (or their antecedents) in our survey were founded between 1975 and 1980. For example, what is now the Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) began as the California Agrarian Action Project in 1978. Following a decidedly activist agenda, its first activities included demonstrations in support of farm workers and participation in a lawsuit intended to force the University of California to shift research funds from underwriting technologies for industrial agriculture toward improving the circumstances of farm workers and small farmers. In the 1980s the Agrarian Action Project fought pesticide poisonings, organized victims and, with allies such as the UFW, provided the political pressure behind strong new regulation of pesticides by the state. It helped organize the annual Ecological Farming Conference, and it joined other organizations in a lawsuit against the Federal government to force the redistribution of large landholdings that benefited from government irrigation programs.

Another example is the Interfaith Hunger Coalition, founded in 1978, which worked to meet the food needs of the urban poor, organizing inner-city farmers' markets in low-income communities. Several of the oldest farmers' markets in our study ("Heart of the City Farmers Market" in San Francisco and the Richmond Farmers' Market, among others) were begun to serve these unmet needs. Other farmers' markets, such as the Davis Covered Market founded in 1975, were initiated jointly by food cooperatives and local organic farmers.

The "back-to-the-land" movement, with roots in resistance to the Vietnam War, alienation from consumer culture,

## The Exceptional Nature of California Agriculture



**Migrant farm workers, including these Dust Bowl-era laborers, have played a key role in the development of California's export-oriented industrial form of agriculture.**

California agriculture has always differed from the family-farm agricultural structure that developed in many parts of the U.S. Large land grants (in both the Spanish and Mexican periods and the early years of statehood) created the conditions for an industrial form of agriculture dependent on landless workers. This industrial system of agriculture underlies California's historic orientation toward an agricultural economy dependent on exports: hides and tallow from Mexican ranches were replaced by wheat shipped to European cities, and then by wine and preserved fruits and nuts for urban consumers. In the 1920s, the development of refrigerated rail transport allowed industrial farms to begin producing enormous volumes of fresh fruits and vegetables for national and international markets. This system of production was made possible by the state's abundant natural resources, mild climate, and the subordination of waves of immigrant workers.

The most important characteristic of the state's production system has been its dependence on temporary and marginalized farm labor. Temporary farm labor is ubiquitous in California agriculture. Very few farmers rely primarily on family or household labor. Currently, California employs more than half of the nation's temporary farm workers, over 800,000 people, the vast majority immigrants from Mexico (Martin and Taylor 2000).

Although the focus of many who support alternative agriculture is on small farms, the California industrial pattern of use of farm labor affects them as well. Even former farm workers who become farmers, organic farmers, and Com-

munity Supported Agriculture projects are likely to depend on seasonal or temporary farm labor. The vast majority of farm workers receive low wages and suffer difficult working conditions. Many experience hunger, live in substandard housing, and are insecure and vulnerable in their employment and citizenship status. The issue of social justice for labor is always present in California agriculture, whether or not it is seen.

California agriculture is also particularly chemically intensive. The long growing season and lack of winter cold that allow production of a huge range of valuable fruit and vegetable crops also allow pest populations to grow. High levels of fertilizer and irrigation stimulate growth of leafy vegetables. Cosmetic standards for these crops also encourage intensive pesticide application. Californians for Pesticide Reform, using state data from 1999, reports pesticide application rates in intensively farmed areas from 15,000 to 200,000 pounds of pesticide per square mile. High levels of pesticide and fertilizer use raise concerns about the health of farm workers, nearby residents, and consumers, and about the survival and conservation of native animals and plants.

In addition, California agriculture is exceptional for its dependence on irrigation. Eighty-five percent of water diversion and supply in the state goes to support irrigated agriculture. Dams and water diversion have reduced flows on rivers, degraded habitat for anadromous fish, and reduced water quality. Groundwater overdraft is also a problem throughout the state, particularly in coastal areas where it triggers saltwater intrusion and salt contamination of groundwater.



**Pesticide use in California affects farm workers, rural residents, and wildlife, as well as soil and water resources.**

**Table 2. California agrifood issues in contemporary context**

Era	Key Events	Orientation of AFIs
1970s	War on poverty Environmental movement Farmworker organizing	AFIs frame issues as both institutional and political; social justice questions address production and consumption; environmental questions consider alternative practices and state regulation of hazards
1980s	Break between UFW, social movements Environmental, in agriculture, becomes "organic"	New AFIs emphasize producer and consumer education, food access, local connections, personal development—but lose link with political economy of agriculture, farm worker issues
1990s	1992 Rodney King uprising in Los Angeles 1996 federal welfare cuts	Community food security appears as a significant theme, but most AFIs are silent on social justice issues in production (except for some food policy AFIs)

and environmental concern, brought middle-class students into organic farming and environmental education through alternative agriculture education programs such as the UC Davis Student Farm and the UC Santa Cruz Apprenticeship Program. The same impulse led activists to add gardening to the activities of youth social services programs (Berkeley Youth Alternatives, founded in 1976) and community economic development initiatives in public housing (the San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners, founded in 1983). Even the typically production-oriented

University of California’s Cooperative Extension got involved, setting up an urban agriculture program for low-income communities in East Los Angeles (Common Ground, founded in 1978).

The seven AFIs we surveyed that began in the 1980s had similar agendas, but did not strongly oppose the political economic structure of agricultural production. For example, after 1980 new AFIs were less likely to address the problems of California’s migrant farm labor force (table 2).

The 20 AFIs formed since 1990, which make up the bulk of our study,

are urban in focus, following one old and one new theme. The old theme is food access; the new theme is gardening or farming as rehabilitative therapy and social development. The issue of food access emerged at this time as a consequence of two events: the 1992 destruction of the inner city food system in central Los Angeles during the uprising after the Rodney King verdict, and also the substantial cuts in welfare and food stamp availability in the mid 1990s. During the uprising, food markets (both small and large) were often targets. In the period immediately following, it was very difficult for Black and Latino inner city residents to get access to food. A study by students at UCLA (Ashman et al. 1993) examined the issues related to the food system of the inner city and suggested a number of social strategies to improve residents’ access to food. Out of this rose the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC), which has since provided regional, state, and national leadership to new initiatives for food access. Other AFIs arising during this period, such as Food from the ‘Hood, have used urban gardens and value-adding activities to teach entrepreneurship and micro-enterprise strategies, just as the San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners began to do a decade earlier. These more recent AFIs may be quite intent on social justice issues, but their constituencies are urban—the urban poor.

The second theme, rehabilitation and empowerment, intersects with some of this but focuses on training and empowering even more marginal populations: the homeless (Homeless Garden Project, begun in 1990), the substance-dependent (St. Anthony’s Farm), and those in jail (The San Francisco Jails project, begun in 1992). In each of these, education in organic production is combined with training in entrepreneurship and life skills to help people learn to function more successfully (and independently) in their everyday lives. These organizations are also some of the most innovative: the Homeless Garden project not only sells at farmers’ markets, but also supports



Nancy Vail, an instructor in UC Santa Cruz’s Apprenticeship Program, watches as Elizabeth Mukunga and John Bailey plant onions at UCSC’s organic farm. Developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Apprenticeship program continues to attract participants from across the U.S. and around the world.

Table 3. Types of AFI activities

AFI type— Their primary program	Number interviewed	Notes
Farmers' markets	6	Half of these provided education about ecological agriculture
Urban agriculture	6	An amazing diversity of purposes: education, micro-enterprise, small business incubation, nutritional outreach, food production
Micro-enterprise	4	Food production as a business: 2 work with refugees/immigrants and 2 work with disadvantaged urban youth
Rehabilitative agriculture	3	All work with people who have substance abuse problems or are at risk of homelessness
Agrifood apprenticeship and education	6	Rural and urban; NGO and school based; serving elementary through university levels
Local labels	3	2 market out of their region and 1 works to create links within its own county
Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)	2	But 5 other AFIs operate CSAs as an adjunct to other programs (education, apprenticeship)
Policy advocacy/ Food policy councils	7	3 are local food policy councils; 4 perform advocacy, and 2 of those also run programs

the Women's Organic Flower Garden and its craft shop; St. Anthony's farm runs an organic dairy of 200 cows; and the Jails Project provides transitional services and gardening employment to inmates leaving jail.

In this recent period, some of the older AFIs have modified their activities. The Agrarian Action Project, which combined with the California Association of Family Farms (a long-time ally) in 1993, to create the Community Alliance with Family

Farmers, emphasizes farmer-to-farmer education (in its Lighthouse Farms project), the Rural Water Impact Network (which seeks to protect water access for small farms), and its Biologically Integrated Orchard Systems initiative (which supports biological strategies for pest and fertility management in orchards) (Campbell 2001). Its urban manifestation is focused on alternative marketing pathways for small farmers, including farmers' markets, CSAs, and farm-to-school programs.

## TODAY'S AFI MOVEMENTS

### Study Methods

We identified 80 California organizations that could be characterized as AFIs, and categorized them according to the primary program that they run. These included organizations focused on: alternative agrifood education, therapeutic horticulture, local and regional food labeling, food-based micro-enterprise, urban agriculture and community gardening, food policy advocacy, farm-to-school provisioning, community supported agriculture, and farmers' markets (table 3). Many AFIs operate more than one kind of program or their organization's work spans more than one type of activity.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with leaders of 37 of the organizations, located throughout California (interview questions are listed on page 12). Through this process we learned about the organization's history, programmatic activities, and views on social justice and ecological soundness in the food system.

We then conducted nine focus groups with participants in selected AFIs. By participants, we mean volunteers, residents, students, apprentices, customers, or farmers attached to these organizations. The focus groups provided us with the opportunity to systematically listen to the motivations, stories, and visions of over 50 alternative food activists that participate in AFIs in California. Interviews and focus groups were transcribed, and data were analyzed using qualitative data-analysis software.

### Identifying Problems with Today's Food System

Respondents' perspectives on key problems in the food system were organized into three major categories—class, environmental, and populist—as shown in table 4. Over half of the total number of food system problems cited by organization leaders were those of alienation and concentration, what we term “populist” issues (table 5). Issues of this type were mentioned by over three-fourths of the organization leaders. Populist issues included



Homeless Garden Project instructor Patrick Williams demonstrates flower harvesting techniques for project trainee Jorge Ottaviano and volunteer Katherine Crowe. The project offers job training to the homeless in Santa Cruz County.

## Alternative Food Initiatives

**Table 4. Components of problem categories**

Problem Type	Component Issue
Populist	Lack of economic opportunities for farmers, food is too cheap Corporate control of food system, lack of democratic participation Globalization, non-local food system Disconnection from the land or source of food, food travels too far People are inexperienced in growing or preparing food Lack of knowledge about health, cooking, nutrition
Environmental	Urbanization, loss of agricultural land Overuse of agricultural chemicals Water quality and depletion Proliferation of GMOs
Class	Inequitable distribution of wealth and resources Poverty, low wages Lack of access to healthy food by low-income people

**Table 5. Types of problems cited by organization leaders**

Problem type	Percent of problem listed	Percent of organizations citing problem
Populist issues	49	69
Environmental issues	29	41
Class issues	32	48

people’s concern that the food system is controlled by others (primarily corporations), and that ordinary people have little decision-making power in the food system. Related to this was the perception that people have become disconnected both practically and socially from food production and consumption processes. Some leaders suggested that this missing knowledge about food, along with the lack of relationships between consumers and farmers, causes consumers to undervalue food and therefore be unwilling to pay its “true price.” They saw this as reducing the viability of small farmers, who cannot survive in a cheap food system.

Environmental issues were cited somewhat less frequently than populist issues—nearly a quarter of the responses were in this category. We classified concerns about pesticide use, water quality, loss of agricultural land, and the proliferation of genetically modified organisms as environmental

issues. Almost half of the organization leaders listed environmental issues as key problems in the food system, indicating that these kinds of problems are very much on the minds of those working in alternative food initiatives in California.

The kinds of problems least-frequently cited by organization leaders are those that we categorized as class or political-economic issues. Here we included inequitable distribution of wealth and income or lack of access by low-income people to fresh, healthy food. While class issues represented 17 percent of all the specific problems listed, we should note that 41 percent of those interviewed did cite these issues as pressing food-system problems. Many respondents indicated their respect, compassion, and support for small farmers, expressing sympathy for their struggles with concentrated markets, threats to tenure, and low farm gate prices. However, only two AFI leaders brought up labor issues as problematic in response to this question. U.S. society in general has shifted its attention away from social justice in production (such as unionization and health benefits) and toward increased consumer choice. This may in part explain why our respondents did not frame the issue of social justice in terms of worker issues.

There may be multiple reasons for the shift in the focus of AFIs away from farm workers to small farmer/family

farmer and consumer issues. In 1978 the UFW terminated their relationships with Anglo groups both within and outside the Union. The election of a Republican governor in California and president in Washington signaled and supported successful challenges from industrial agriculture and broke down government agencies that had provided legal support for farm worker organizing. As the UFW lost position (and contracts), farm workers became less visible. Even long-committed organizations like the Agrarian Action Project became less active in support of farm workers themselves, although this AFI continued to raise critical oppositional questions about toxic substances and concentration in land ownership until the early 1990s.

Another potential explanation lies in the continuing importance of temporary farm labor to all California farmers, even those that consider themselves family farmers or organic farmers. In the context of this dependence on non-family workers, often different from the farmers themselves in ethnicity, citizenship, and class, AFIs that raise the question of social justice in production can encounter tension



Efrén Avalos is a member of AMO Organics, a cooperative of former farm workers who now manage their own organic farms in the Salinas Valley. This AFI markets through outlets such as Farm Fresh Choice program and the Farmers’ Market in Berkeley.



Judith Redmond (right) is a partner in Capay Valley's Full Belly Farm. The farm's practices include efforts such as planting habitats for beneficial insects and wildlife. The majority of AFI leaders strongly support such ecologically sustainable practices.

with even the small or alternative farmers to which the alternative food movement seeks to connect. Though some suggest that farm workers are better off on organic farms because they are not exposed to pesticides, there is some indication that the workers themselves prefer to work for larger farmers when they are more likely to get benefits and sometimes better wages (Buck et al. 1997).

We are concerned that alternative agrifood initiatives may, through their silence about labor relationships in production, inadvertently assume or represent that rural communities and family farmers embody social justice, rather than requiring that they do so. This is an important area for consideration and future research.

### ***Envisioning an Ideal Food System: The Role of Ecological Soundness and Social Justice***

What do the leaders of these efforts hold as their visions of a better agrifood system? In this study we were interested both in overall visions of an ideal food system and in specific views on the roles of ecological soundness and social justice in this ideal food system.

There was strong support for moving toward a more ecologically sustainable agrifood system, even where the organizations were not themselves directly focused on ecological sustainability. Eighty-one percent of the interviewed leaders said their organization had a position on ecological soundness in

the food system. A few organizations said they supported ecological sustainability, but not if it meant making food less affordable or reducing farmers' ability to earn a living. For these organizations, ecological sustainability is a priority, but it is subordinate to the priorities of social or economic justice. This position was held by organizations working primarily with a low-income or small-farm clientele. Only 16 percent of leaders said their organization did not have a position on ecological soundness, or that there was a "diversity of perspectives" in their organization. The majority of organizations that responded in this way were those oriented toward marketing agricultural products. None of the organizations in the sample were hostile to the vision of an ecologically sound food system.

Similarly, the majority (72 percent) of the organization leaders said they

had a position on social justice in the food system. Of the organizations that had no position on social justice, many responded that they did not think in terms of social justice and injustice. However, some responses carried a tone of exasperation with the topic. Responses included comments such as, "We don't have time to get into that," or, "No, we're here for farmers." Some stated that the issue of social justice was too contentious for their organization to deal with. In addition, what people meant by the term social justice varied significantly. Half of the organization leaders that said their organization did not hold a position on social justice went on to explain activities that we define as social justice activities.

Responses on the meaning of social justice in the food system were fairly evenly distributed among five categories: economically equitable, relational or proximate, farmer-centered, healthy or environmentally sound, and accessible. Over 75 percent of the respondents described a socially just food system as one that was economically equitable for farmers, farm workers, and the general populace. Criteria they used to define economically equitable included fair compensation of labor, common ownership of land, and a food system in which everyone's basic needs were met regardless of ability to pay. Forty-three percent of the AFI leaders defined a socially just food system as one that was local, based on family farms and small businesses, or empowered or responded to community needs.

Students from Watsonville's Alianza School learn about seed propagation from farmer Tom Broz. Family farms such as Broz's Live Earth Farm are seen by many AFI leaders as critical to a socially just food system.





**Food-System Change: Shared Visions of Solutions and Methods**

In addition to their visions of a better food system, we wanted to get a sense of what California AFI leaders considered to be promising solutions to food system problems. Respondents were encouraged to not confine their answers to the activities in which their organization was engaged, but to think about the broader issues.

The majority of solutions proposed were local entrepreneurial initiatives, advocacy for alternative food policies, and education (table 6). Specific activities promoted included: developing local food systems, getting people to value fresh food and pay the true cost of food, protecting farmland from development and urban sprawl, educating people about nutrition, providing more outlets for people to get fresh produce, increasing the numbers of small-scale and/or organic farms, building more community gardens, and providing people with job skills. Few leaders mentioned solutions that focused on fundamental issues such as ownership and compensation.

Most California AFIs are developing alternative economic relationships that allow people to acquire fresher, more local food or helping farmers to become or remain economically viable. Looking at these activities in a framework comparing the relative emphasis on entitlement (e.g., as in a human rights approach) and entrepreneurial approaches to increasing food security (see Allen 1999), it is apparent

**Table 6. Solutions suggested by organization leaders**

Solution type	Percentage of total responses	Examples of this type of solution
Local entrepreneurial initiatives	37	Alternative economic models (farmers' markets, CSAs), neighborhood production (urban agriculture, community gardens), direct marketing
Advocacy for or implementation of alternative food policies	29	National policy reform, environmental stewardship incentives, local farmland protection initiatives, creation of city food policies, improvements in public school agrifood education and lunch programs
Education, outreach, consciousness raising	27	Popular education about the origins of their food and the power of their food choices, education of people in production of their own food, education about nutrition, food selection, health and diet

that market-based and entrepreneurial activities are predominant in California AFI programs and projects. Three-quarters of the organizations engaged exclusively in entrepreneurial activities such as creating niche products or expanding markets, and nearly all organizations engaged in entrepreneurial activities as part of what they did.

**Large-Scale Problems, Local Focus**

In general, California AFI organizations are focused more on the day-to-day operations of the business or technical aspects of their work than on formal or informal political activities or broader food-system change. While California AFI participants believe that changes in agrifood policies are needed at all scales of governance, they are rarely directly involved in

this work. Ten of the fourteen groups claiming policy advocacy as a positive effect of their organization act at the school board, city, or county level. Very few of the respondents suggesting policy initiatives as general solutions to food system problems referred to national-scale policy reform, even though the omnibus U.S. Farm Bill was being debated in Congress at the time of the interviews.

Faced with the choice between advocating policy change in distant legislatures and establishing and maintaining tangible programs in their locality, California AFIs are choosing the latter. Even though they are aware that political economic change is a critical part of solving food system problems, AFI leaders express greater enthusiasm for personal, relational, and entrepreneurial activities. They have more confidence in their ability to effect change by creating opportunities for local participation in the food system than through any large-scale policy initiatives.

Still, while Kloppenburg et al. (1996) claim that "neither people nor institutions are generally willing or prepared to embrace radical change," this is not the sense we got from California AFI leaders. While the solutions to agrifood system problems articulated by AFI leaders were partial, most organization leaders were very aware of this partiality and not particularly satisfied with it. For example, one



Members of Farm Fresh Choice sell produce at the Martin Luther King High School in Berkeley. The initiative supports small-scale organic farmers and provides fresh organic food to city residents.

interviewee said that their version of an ideal food system would be one in which land was owned in common, but quickly pointed out that they did not believe we would ever achieve that situation in the U.S.

Many leaders felt that the scope and depth of food system problems were beyond what their organization could address. Instead they sought out ways to do something that would contribute to a better food system, however they defined it. What the leaders expressed to us was more of a sense of being overwhelmed rather than an unwillingness to confront core problems and instigate deep, systemic changes. For many of the respondents, there was a general sense that people were doing what they could, where they could, within a context of overwhelming structural impediments to a sustainable and just food system. One focus-group participant said—

*For me, the problems and the solutions are just overwhelming. I mean, they're so huge that, as an individual, I feel a little bit powerless, but where I feel like I do have power is just working on a very local ... It's not maybe the fastest, on the large-scale policy level, but it's the level I feel comfortable with and that I feel I can be the most effective.*

AFI leaders cited numerous positive effects of their organizations' work, including education, political advocacy, and increasing access to food (table 7). Many leaders and participants expressed pride, or at least satisfaction, in being able to offer some food to some people from alternative sources, along with the hope that these admittedly

small actions would leverage greater change by provoking greater popular awareness about the need to reform the food system. Global trade agreements and national or state policy seem distant and inaccessible; promoting direct connections with farms, farmers, and gardens is tangible and can bring immediate rewards.

This preference for creating local alternatives instead of advocating directly for structural changes in the food system has an organizational logic as well. As a practical matter, most California AFI organizations cannot risk being too oppositional, that is, engaging in actions that challenge the fundamental structure of the agrifood system. Given their relatively fragile positions, it is safer to work in the realm of alternatives, that is, actions that seek pathways that do not fundamentally oppose the existing power structures of the dominant system. Many organization leaders said that they were almost always confronted with an uncertainty of funding. Related to this, particularly for organizations that had gardening or production components, was the lack of security in being able to use the land. Organizations in these situations often depend upon the cooperation and resources of more established and powerful organizations. AFI organizations are quite vulnerable economically, with over half of the AFIs reporting that funding is a major obstacle. Many AFIs are engaged in entrepreneurial initiatives because that is what they can find funding to do. In the current neoliberal political climate, organizations working in the food system find it much easier to obtain funding for

community gardens and CSAs than for policy initiatives.

### **Community, Networking, and Knowledge Transfer**

One of the objectives of this project was to better understand the role of community and networking in the work of alternative food initiatives. We are interested both in the initiatives themselves and their potential for creating networks that go beyond their individual scopes and actions.

California alternative agrifood initiatives tend to be both diverse and ecumenical. Participation in California AFIs is also quite diverse, engaging people of very different class backgrounds, occupations, educational levels, and cultural circumstances. This is certainly true when looking at the AFIs as a group, but it was also often the case within an individual organization. Several respondents marveled at the degree of class, cultural, ethnic, and religious cooperation that has emerged out of a number of AFI projects. The same range and diversity was found in the subjects addressed by the AFIs, ranging from farming to gardening, from globalization to local food systems, and including business practices, as well as basic ecology and agroecology.

Some AFIs embodied a kind of privatized redistributive system. For example, one organization sells expensive, natural foods in health food stores to predominantly affluent consumers. While little of the food is consumed in the low-income community that produces it, proceeds from its sale support scholarships for people who would otherwise have little chance of going to college. Similarly, another organization produces and sells high-priced organic foods to an elite market, but the purpose of these sales is to generate revenue to support programs for homeless people. Thus, even if they are not actively working toward basic structural changes designed to overcome poverty, AFIs are making a difference, day in and day out, to many who have been marginalized in the current agrifood system.

**Table 7. Positive effects of AFIs, according to organization leaders**

Positive effects	Number of responses
Promoting direct access to local food through farmers' markets, CSAs, direct marketing, community gardens	29
Educating students and apprentices (all age levels)	18
Promoting farming and economic opportunities for farmers	17
Doing advocacy (local, state, and federal)	15
Promoting or operating community gardens	10



Students from Hall District Elementary School sow pumpkin seeds at Triple M Ranch. This effort is part of the Community Alliance with Family Farmers' Farm-to-School program, run in conjunction with the County Health Services Agency and the Pajaro Valley Unified School District.

Community plays an important role in nurturing the participants' efforts to effect change. One focus group participant believed that their organization had been able to accomplish so much because they "created first of all a *community* around food issues." AFI participants' encounters with other people promoting alternative food initiatives persuaded them to make personal changes such as shifts in food purchasing and consumption patterns, seeking out local, high-quality foods, reaching out to neighbors and friends to raise their awareness of food and agricultural issues, and rethinking their work so that it is framed by food, agriculture, social justice, and environmental sustainability. The emotionally rich, personally supportive experience in AFI communities helped participants effect and sustain changes in their lifestyle and their social activism, and helps them manage the threat of being discouraged by problems with the food system. Participating in their AFI allowed those we interviewed to match components of their concern for social justice and environmental issues with the needs of a local group of like-minded people.

There is evidence that AFIs are also forming new relationships and increased levels of cooperation with more traditional institutions. One respondent remarked, "the city officials changed the designation of our zoning from a soccer field to a sustainable agriculture education park, demonstrating

their support of this project." Another said that the city in which they were working had "turned its attitude 180 degrees from being against community gardens to now actively finding land for us to use, and encouraging us to apply for grant money that is out there to get gardens started." It appears that government institutions at the city, county, and state levels are engaging the work and vision of California AFIs. Over half of the California AFI organizations in this study were connected to government institutions, with most government-AFI relations being on the local, regional, or state level as opposed to the national level. This intersection may work toward the long-term integration of the alternative agrifood initiatives' priorities and programs into public programs.

Still, working with traditional institutions can pose challenges. For example, in describing the difficulties in creating a farm-to-school lunch program, one respondent stated that their major obstacles were bureaucratic. Another person involved in farm-to-school programs described the situation of presenting themselves as the providers of a healthy lunch, which, by default, characterized the current school lunch program as unhealthy. As the interviewee put it, "This is really not a great way to approach school food-service directors." Trying to work within the system to change the system poses a real Gordian knot for many of the California AFIs.

The majority of California AFIs also work with other AFIs, agrifood, social service, religious, and environmental organizations on a regular basis. AFIs are much more well networked with other local organizations than national ones. The Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC) is the national organization most often named by the AFIs. Even though the CFSC does advocacy work in Washington, DC, the informants made it clear that they drew on that organization's expertise for help with programs, not advocacy.

### BENEFITS OF AFIS

The purpose of this project was to document the variety of alternative food initiative organizations in California, learn more about their origins and connections, and increase understanding about their potential as agents of change in the agrifood system. Committed people are working in many different areas in the food system to effect change, yet community-based organizations rarely have the opportunity to perform in-depth studies of their institutional efforts, much less to conduct comparative analysis of like organizations. This kind of analysis is crucial for helping groups to accomplish their goals and to minimize potentially contradictory outcomes (Allen 1999).

This research demonstrates the importance of California AFIs. Alternative agrifood initiatives seek to build often-local and accountable social relationships that allow consumers to choose in their purchases to support social relations and environmental practices that they value. AFIs also have effects that go beyond their practical programs, particularly through increasing participants' interest and engagement in food system problems and solutions. AFI participation helps people and communities to think about issues they may never have confronted or considered before. For example, in one interview, a young, "typical" environmentalist who said he had no position on social justice began to talk later about the problem of putting profits before feeding hungry

people. AFI participation also provides people with a vehicle for upholding their values and working together toward an improved agrifood system. One respondent said that through participating in their AFI—

*I can connect with people that I know that I can see face-to-face. To be that small seed, to germinate and to let those values actually come out into real-world practices, not just to be something I talk about.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Although many of the organizations are institutionally fragile, and highly dependent on extramural funding sources, California AFIs engage highly committed and motivated people. AFI participants are positioned to work together to move the agrifood system in the direction of greater ecological soundness and social justice. In order to bring this about, we have four primary recommendations—

1. California AFIs could benefit from a deeper understanding of the dimensions and scope of issues in the agrifood system. For example, while respondents were very concerned about economic opportunities for family farmers, they were essentially silent about opportunities for workers either on the farm or in other sectors of the agrifood system. Educational programs to deepen AFI leaders' and participants' understanding could help address this silence.
2. California AFIs would be stronger if they worked from a shared problem statement and agenda so each could play a role in a larger effort. One approach would be to work together to develop a vision of a sustainable agrifood system and articulate an action agenda that would work toward realizing that vision.
3. Even absent a shared agenda, we would advise California AFIs to develop expanded networks of related organizations to share ideas, information, and resources. While the majority of AFIs are networked with one or two other organizations, they

would all benefit from tighter coalition building. Ideally, this network would include consumer, farmer, environmental, animal rights, and worker organizations. The Community Food Security Coalition recently launched an initiative in California that may serve as or assist in building such a network.

4. The ability of AFIs to move in these directions is limited by the scarcity of sufficient funding to support such efforts. AFI leaders might consider working collectively to increase funding available for broad-based alternative food efforts. This may include developing a membership organization to lessen dependence on extramural funding. It will also necessarily involve working with private and public funders to establish funding streams that focus on systemic issues in the agrifood system.

## CONCLUSION

Our findings show that there are many Californians concerned about the food system, and that they share a perception that the problems with the food system have systemic and structural, rather than individual, causes. Despite this analysis, California AFIs are much more focused on local issues and activities than on broad issues and large-scale actions. Also, while AFIs in California tend to be well networked, the majority work with local organizations as opposed to national ones. Participants in California AFIs are deeply engaged where they feel they can make a significant difference—primarily on a local level.

California AFIs work to increase participation in the food system and to develop alternative social relationships that affirm the values of ecological soundness, reciprocity, trust, and social justice. For many who have otherwise been subordinate within or uninterested in the agrifood system, California AFIs offer people a chance to participate in the food system in ways and at levels that they may have never been involved before.

Through their participation in food-based activities, people engage with many social, political, and economic issues that have to do with everyday life—every day. This is potentially a strong and enduring path to agricultural sustainability.

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**Appendix**

**Questions for Alternative Food Initiative Interviews**

**A. Questions on AFI projects—**

1. What are the primary goals of your organization?
2. How did your organization get started? By whom?
3. What role if any did other organizations or individuals play in forming the organization and its priorities?
4. What do you think are the most pressing problems in the current food system?
5. What do you think are the best solutions for these problems?
6. Do you see any difference between “ideal” and “realistic” solutions? If so, why and what are these differences?
7. What are the primary solutions on which your organization is working? (Follow up to try to distinguish if they see their work as part of a palette of solutions or as the thing that needs to be done.)
8. What are your organization’s specific approaches and projects?
9. How did you chose these approaches and projects?
10. What have been the major positive effects of your work (accomplishments)?
11. What obstacles have you encountered in your work?
  - a. Outside of your organization?
  - b. Within your organization?
12. Does your organization have a position on social or economic justice in the food system? If yes, what are its components? Why are justice issues important to your organization?
13. Does your organization have a position on ecological soundness in the food system? If yes, what are its components? Why are environmental issues important to your organization?
14. Are there organizations with which you work regularly or from which you gather information?

**B. Questions for AFI individuals—**

1. How did you become involved in this work?
2. What are your primary motivations?
3. Are there specific reasons you are interested in working in the food system?
4. Who and what have been key influences on you? How have they influenced you?
5. Who and what do you think you have influenced? What do you think have been your main influences?
6. In your personal view, what would a socially just food system look like?



**The Community Alliance with Family Farmers’ Farm-to-School Project brings fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables into school cafeterias.**

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*This Center Research Brief is part of a series reporting on CASFS research efforts. For more information on the research covered in this Brief, or on the Center’s activities, contact us at CASFS, 1156 High St., University of California, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, 831.459-3240, [www.ucsc.edu/casfs](http://www.ucsc.edu/casfs).*