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RUNNING HEAD: JUST LOCAL FOOD VISION

WHAT DOES A “JUST” LOCAL FOOD SYSTEM LOOK LIKE?

VIEWS FROM WORCESTER IN A CHANGING CLIMATE

Marguerite Cawley

PIM 76 SD

A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for an MA in Sustainable

Development at SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, VT, USA.

May 2020

Advisor: Professor Udi Butler

## JUST LOCAL FOOD VISION

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### **Abstract**

Food and climate are closely intertwined, with the high-emissions U.S. industrial food system contributing to climate change, while a changing climate produces new food system vulnerabilities, which will particularly impact those of the least means. This research is premised on the need to transform our food system, and to define what this vision looks like at the local level, while centering questions of power, justice and rights. It explores how groups, organizations and individuals engaged in local food system change envision transformation and understand corresponding social justice concerns, in a changing climate. It looks at opportunities for food and climate work to intersect, and perceptions of a Green New Deal vision.

Using a case study, I explore this topic through the perspectives of food system stakeholders in one small New England city, Worcester, Massachusetts. The findings indicate that visions for a just food system and pathways for change interact with broader ideas about the influence of extractive capitalism, neoliberalism, and structures of oppression. Those who centered broader social and economic transformation in their food vision tended to talk about food, climate and social justice as an integrated whole and to highlight the role of social movements. I found commonalities in ideas for the landscape of change, belief in knowledge-sharing and collaboration, and desire for municipal prioritization of local food.

Recommendations include strengthening spaces to develop a more reflexive food justice approach, building collaborations that bridge food and climate, and heightening the municipal commitment toward a just, thriving local food system.

### **Introduction**

Food and climate are closely intertwined. As our climate changes, our growing seasons are impacted, extreme weather events cause flooding and crop damage, drought increases in dry regions, and new insects emerge. This has resounding impacts on human lives: what farmers grow, what consumers eat, the costs of eating, and food availability. On the flip side, our industrial food system is a major contributor to climate change. In the U.S., the industrial agricultural production that characterizes the corporate food regime (CFR) is directly responsible for at least 9.3% of annual greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, primarily in the form of methane, N<sub>2</sub>O and CO<sub>2</sub> (EPA, 2020). This does not account for emissions produced during the transport of this food to market, or the indirect impacts of land use changes. Nor does it take into account a host of interrelated social and ecological harms and injustices associated with the CFR – including exploitation of migrant workers, uneven trade relationships, concentration of land ownership and agricultural resources, poisoning of water supplies, and permanent damage to cropland. La Vía Campesina estimates that globally, across sectors, the food system is responsible for more than 44% of all GHG emissions (La Vía Campesina & GRAIN, 2014). According to one 2012 report, the food industry is “the most environmentally damaging of any sector” (as cited in Patel & Goodman, 2019).

Rethinking our food system in its various components can have a role in both mitigating climate change and in building cities and towns that are more resilient to the impacts of climate change. From the critical theory perspective that informs this research, questions of power and social justice must be central in defining this new vision for our food system, minimizing harm as climate change progresses, and tying food to the broader political and economic transformations needed to achieve a just transition. The CFR is the result of concrete policy

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decisions rooted in neoliberal ideology, and as such, this research is based on the premise that what food system transformation looks like is an inherently political question. This paper places significant focus on the U.S. food justice and global food sovereignty movements. Unlike some alternative food initiatives (AFIs), these movements employ a food system analysis and discourse that centers rights, power, and justice, though scholars have critiqued the work of some organizations that invoke food justice and food sovereignty as lacking this transformative focus.

The Green New Deal (GND) resolution released in February 2019 offers an opportunity to envision how changing our food and agriculture system fits into the big picture of social transformation that needs to be achieved as we face climate crisis. The aspirational framework, which proposes a mass mobilization of government resources to address our climate crisis while simultaneously addressing the social justice concerns inextricably linked to this crisis, is broad, vague on many points – especially as pertains to its vision for our food system - and has received a mixed reception both from the political establishment and from groups on the political left. However, it is a useful framework for considering how social justice and elimination of fossil fuels are intertwined in a just transition, and for imagining what the implementation of this vision looks like with regard to our food system in given localities.

A significant question both in the context of the vision and potential resource mobilization laid out by the Green New Deal and in the context of the overall climate crisis, is how food system transformation is envisioned and begins to play out at the local scale of governance. Food has been conceptualized as a vehicle through which we experience our daily lives. Understandings of our food system are tied to identity; they are not universal and thus solutions may look different across scales and communities. Food is also connected to many

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other resources we need to live, including land, water, and money; questions of control, and decision-making power over these resources are intimately tied to food system transformation.

This qualitative research paper explores perspectives on local food system transformation through the eyes of various food system stakeholders in one small New England city: Worcester, Massachusetts. I chose this research site as a place where I currently live and have worked on various food system issues and local political processes, and as a local food system that may share some common challenges with those of other small, gentrifying cities faced with significant social and economic challenges. The question driving this research is: How do groups, organizations and individuals engaged in local food system change processes envision food system transformation and understand and relate to corresponding social justice concerns, particularly in the context of climate change and the possible opportunities presented by a Green New Deal vision? Various corollary questions tie into this: What is a *just* food system and how does this relate to climate justice? How does “local” food system change relate to regional, national and global change? Who gets to influence food system discourse and practices? How are food and climate justice actors relating to each other or linking these two movements?

I find that visions of food system change and the connection to climate among Worcester participants differ in ways that loosely align with differences in food justice and food sovereignty perspectives, which plays into differing forms of engagement with themes of power, oppression and social control. At the same time, I find various points of intersection and convergence in ideas, and opportunities to build greater mutual understanding, break down siloes, and take a more reflexive approach to local food system transformation. I use these findings to offer several recommendations in the Conclusions section of this paper. I also have added reflections on what the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged and rapidly intensified as I was

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completing the final stages of this project, tells us about crisis, vulnerability and social justice, in the context of our food system and climate uncertainty, and how it might help us think differently about our collective approach to change.

### **Research Site Description**

Worcester's food system, like all food systems, is a complex and interconnected web of activities, people, relationships and resources that span the entire process by which food is grown or produced, distributed, eaten, and disposed of, as well as the interactions with human health, environment, society and power structures that happen along the way. In my short time living here, I have found that Worcester's food system is a place where many realities coexist, merge, and sometimes collide. Worcester is a place where many experience deep poverty and homelessness, and interact with the food system through pantry lines, meal programs, and shelters. It is also a place where upscale restaurants line the streets of the Canal District. It is a place where people from many countries and cultures showcase their cuisines in family restaurants. It is also a place scattered with fast food chains. It is a place where urban life is planted in the middle of a relatively rural County, and where regional farms are easily accessible for those with cars, time, and money. It is home to farmers markets with a mission to be accessible to people across the socioeconomic spectrum. At the same time, it is a place where fresh local foods remain inaccessible to many, where serious racial inequities exist, and where those living in society's shadows struggle to access food resources. It is a place of collaborations among non-profits, businesses, and officials and also a site of conflict, tension and exclusion.

### **City Demographics**

I consider it relevant to include some general background information and city demographics, since these play into equity and power concerns that are intertwined with food

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system change. Worcester, with a census population of around 185,000, is New England's second largest city. It emerged as an industrial manufacturing hub in the mid-1800s, and as such carries an inherited pollution burden, which particularly impacts lower-income neighborhoods where many renters live in old, unrenovated triple-decker houses (Downs, et al., 2011).

Worcester is one of 26 designated "gateway cities" in Massachusetts, which are "midsize urban centers that anchor regional economies" and face "stubborn social and economic challenges" (MassINC, n.d.). Over time, Worcester, which has served as a resettlement community and has experienced several waves of immigration in the past century, has grown into a diverse city representing residents from many countries, including Ghana, the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, Brazil, Albania and El Salvador (Goodman, et al., 2015).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau 2016 American Community Survey, approximately 22% of Worcester's population lives below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), representing slightly more than 38,000 people. A similar percentage reported using SNAP/food stamps in the past 12 months for the 2012-2016 period, which is nearly double the Massachusetts average (Central MA Regional Public Health Alliance, 2018). Across Worcester County, approximately 1 in 11 residents are considered food insecure.

There are significant differences in how poverty is experienced across race and geography. Although the largest proportion of residents experiencing poverty identify as White, the rate of poverty is highest among residents identifying as Hispanic or Latino, at slightly over 37%. The poverty rate is 33% for residents identifying as two or more races, approximately 23% for Black and African American residents, and approximately 21% for White residents. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). The homeownership rate for White households is more than double that

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of Black and African American households, and nearly three times that of Hispanic and Latino households (O'Brien, April 2019).

As regards the intersection of food geography, poverty and race, the highest rates of poverty are in the Census tracts concentrated in and around the center of the City and in two areas in the northeastern part of the city. In these areas the poverty rate is in some cases above 50% (Central MA Regional Public Health Alliance, 2018). A 2012 study by students at one local university found that larger and better-stocked grocery stores were more likely to be located in majority White neighborhoods. There are three zip codes in the city that belong to census tracts that fit the USDA definition of “food deserts,” where at least one third of residents live a mile or more away from a grocery store (Central MA Regional Public Health Alliance, 2018).

### **Overview of Food Work**

Some of the prominent organizations and institutions in the city that, in my experience, are influencing aspects of food system change at the time of this writing are listed below, along with descriptions of their work, based on both organizational descriptions and my own interactions and observations. This is not intended as a comprehensive list of organizations. The city is home to a patchwork of many organizations whose work intersects with the food system from varying perspectives - charity, legal advocacy, business development, local food policy, community organizing. As can be imagined, differences in approach and philosophy can at times produce conflict and divergent goals. Some of these organizations frequently collaborate with each other and work across sectors, while others are more siloed in their approach. All are part of the dynamic set of relationships that makes up the Worcester food system. The list below is reflective of the arenas in which I have interacted, and many of the interviews for this paper involved staff, leaders or people otherwise connected with these organizations.

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- Black Seed Farmers’ Market, a People of Color-led and primarily youth-run standing market, works to make foods from local farms available to a diverse clientele, empower the community through access to healthy foods, and support immigrant and refugee farmers and customers. The market is centrally located and run by Muslim Community Link.
- Central Mass Grown is a non-profit that focuses on encouraging local purchasing, supporting local farmers, and educating the public about local food and farming. The organization represents, provides branding, and facilitates market links for regional farmers.
- The Coalition for a Healthy Greater Worcester conducts community healthy assessments and facilitates implementation of community health strategies identified in the Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP) for the greater Worcester region. These strategies include increasing access to and consumption of healthy foods, with an emphasis on equity.
- Regional Environmental Council (REC), a prominent “food justice” organization in the city, works with community partners to maintain six urban farms, 25 school gardens, 36 community gardens, two standing summer farmers markets, and various mobile farmers markets sites in “food insecure” areas. REC also runs a summer YouthGROW program, where primarily low-income youth connect to the land while developing agricultural and leadership skills. Food justice leader Leah Penniman, and her husband Jonah Vitale-Wolff, whose work is discussed later in this paper, were instrumental in starting YouthGROW.
- Sprout Change is a start-up focused on promoting health empowerment, regenerative practices and social justice. The start-up provides individual consultations and organizational workshops on alternative medicines and natural remedies and offers community No-Dig Garden workshops.

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- Worcester County Food Bank, located in the neighboring town of Shrewsbury, is a charity that works with food pantries and community meal programs throughout Worcester County, including 23 in the City of Worcester. Additionally, the organization engages in policy advocacy to address some of the less surface-level aspects of hunger. This organization served as my practicum site during my reflective practice period.
- Worcester Food Policy Council focuses on programs and policies that impact equitable local food access. Council meetings are open to the public, but are mostly attended by steering committee members. Many members are leaders and staff from area food and health non-profits, including some of those listed below. The Council's priorities intersect with urban agriculture, regional farming, health equity, and labor issues. In my experience, the Council's meetings are spaces for program updates, policy advocacy action steps, building collaborations, and planning new avenues for change. Over the past year, conversations on how to create a more diverse, inclusive and intentional space have led to the implementation of quarterly community meetings, the first of which was held this past January.
- Worcester Regional Food Hub sources and aggregates products from regional farms and contracts to sell these products to local institutions, including the Regional Environmental Council mobile markets. The food hub also runs a commercial kitchen where beginning local food entrepreneurs can make "value-added" products to sell, and helps connect new entrepreneurs to markets, through mechanisms including "pop-up" markets.
- Worcester Roots now focuses largely on cooperative development, but has intersected with environmental and food justice in various ways in the past. These included the Toxic Soil Busters soil remediation program, and the Nuestro Huerto urban farm. The organization is a member of New Economy Coalition and the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance.

### **Ongoing City Developments Concerning Food and Climate**

There are several recent changes in Worcester that make an inquiry into perceptions around food system transformation and climate justice particularly relevant and timely. The first is the passage of an Urban Agriculture zoning ordinance in January 2019 which enables residents in more neighborhoods to grow and sell food on a small scale without having to seek a permit (Foskett, 2019). Since the ordinance was passed, I have not observed any widespread City outreach regarding the ordinance itself, and little additional information has been made available regarding what this means in practice for the City's vision for urban agriculture.

A second development is that following a petition by local climate activist groups and local non-profits, the City Council unanimously adopted a Resolution Endorsing the Declaration of a Climate Emergency in September 2019 (City of Worcester, 2019). Similarly to the GND, the resolution emphasized the interconnectedness of climate, equity and justice concerns (including food justice), and the need for frontline voices to be centered in solutions. It commits the city to a just transition and climate mobilization effort that will end citywide greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, but does not detail how this will be achieved. Following adoption of the climate emergency resolution, a working group has formed to further define a community-driven path forward for the work, while taking into account parallel efforts and solutions offered by the city's "Green Worcester Plan". This City plan, which was also developed in 2019, includes healthy food access and urban agriculture among its priority areas, but does not appear to emphasize social justice concerns or the role of frontline voices and leadership in the same way as the Resolution. The climate resolution working group was planning a community forum for April 2020, but had to postpone due to the COVID-19 crisis.

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A third development is that the city has signed a contract to move the Red Sox Triple-A team formerly located in Pawtucket, RI to Worcester. At the time of writing, the city is financing the construction of a giant new ballpark in a former “brown field”, while a private developer is building a separate high-end housing development and two hotels nearby. These developments are adjacent to a lower-income neighborhood, and many advocates are concerned about the displacement of homeless residents, low-income renters, homeowners, and small businesses as housing costs rise (Hibbett, 2019). Local advocates have been working to secure a Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) which would include stipulations for preferential local hiring, local food sourcing in new venues, living wage guarantees and green building (De Ramos, July 2019).

How the city management ultimately approaches the ballpark project, climate and sustainability efforts, and urban agriculture will interplay with issues of power, justice, rights and vulnerability in the city’s food system. It is my hope to be able to share observations and recommendations resulting from this research with those engaged in food system change work in this city. There are also elements of Worcester’s experience as a small, postindustrial New England gateway city undergoing an accelerating process of gentrification that echo processes happening in other cities in the United States. I hope that this small case study may provide some meaningful insight for food and climate justice advocates, activists and others in cities undergoing similar transitions across the U.S.

### **Literature Review**

The following literature review offers a look at the discourse and practice of the alternative food movement (AFM) as it relates to U.S. local food politics; how the U.S. food justice movement and the global food sovereignty movement – at least discursively - differentiate from other aspects of the AFM as progressive and radical forces oriented toward

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transformation rather than reform; and how both conceptually and in action these movements relate to the climate justice movement, just transition efforts, and the Green New Deal.

The purpose of this review is to establish a basis for understanding and analyzing local perspectives of the current food system and visions for the future, and how these relate to questions of justice and power that are central to the debate over our future on this planet. Search terms included “food justice,” “food sovereignty,” “food politics,” “local food system,” “climate justice,” “just transition,” “Green New Deal,” and various combinations and modifications of these phrases. I relied primarily on peer-reviewed journal articles, but also included, when relevant, perspectives from backgrounders from reputable sources like Food First, information from websites of climate and food justice organizations, and news articles.

### **Local Food Politics, Sustainability and Social Justice**

Scholars, activists and growers have called for transitioning our agricultural systems away from chemical-intensive, soil-degrading, monocropping practices and toward more sustainable and regenerative methods. On the market and consumer side, members of the AFM have placed much emphasis on buying and consuming local, sustainably-grown and organic foods, and encouraging buyers to consume consciously or “vote with your fork” (Myers & Sbicca, 2015). The dominant logic of the AFM in the US emphasizes the re-localization of our food system – reducing the distance between nature, producer, market, and consumer –and pre-assumes local food as something that will make our society healthier, more ecologically sound, and build democratic community engagement. This logic is reflected in many local food agendas (Myers & Sbicca, 2015; DuPuis, Harrison and Goodman, 2011).

The dominant thread of the AFM has been criticized for working through the same neoliberal lens and capitalist development logic that defines the CFR, putting the onus on

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individuals to buy their way out of our industrial food system by purchasing alternative foods according to a certain moral code based on a White agrarian imaginary. The movement is accused by critical scholars of ignoring the classist and exclusionary implications of this and failing to engage with racism and historical traumas embedded in our food system (Brent, Schiavoni & Alonso-Fradejas, 2015; Guthman, 2008; Holt-Giménez & Wang, 2011). Myers & Sbicca (2015) refer to a “secessionist wing” of the AFM that is “pro-farmer, pro-sustainability, pro-good food, and consumer and market centric” (p. 18), and focuses on creating alternatives that are available to middle-class consumers, rather than contesting neoliberal processes.

Community Food Security (CFS), a cross-sector local food system approach popularized in the late 1990s and early 2000s, takes a more rounded and integrated approach that addresses some of the inequalities in the food system, promotes a sustainable food system, and strengthens relationships between local producers and consumers (Heynan, Kurtz & Trauger, 2012; Levkoe, 2011). It aims to develop new local markets for small farmers, address hunger and nutrition, and increase community self-reliance. CFS goes beyond the conventional approach to food security, but has been accused of treating social justice as more of an additive property than a central concern, for treating sectors and issues in the food system in isolation, and for replicating an individualistic “ethical consumption” paradigm (Heynan, Kurtz & Trauger, 2012; Levkoe, 2011).

Various authors have pointed out that there is often an implicit or explicit assumption in local food projects that re-localization promotes justice; however, local does not necessarily equate to more just, and the word local is not itself void of political implications. As Iles & Montenegro de Wit (2015) ask, “What does ‘local’ mean, how is it bounded, and by whom?” (p. 482). The conflation of local with justice is problematic (DuPuis, Harrison & Goodman, 2011; Cadieux & Slocum, 2015; Robbins, 2015; Levkoe, 2011). Localism can be elite-controlled,

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defensive, exclusionary, and disempowering, and those engaging in the local food movement may have very different and conflicting vested interests that do not necessarily relate to justice or equity at all. Essentializing the local also can lead to tunnel vision, and a failure to think more holistically about how the local food system interacts with other scales of change and challenges of the broader industrial food system (Levkoe, 2011).

For those who do intend to engage with social justice issues surrounding food, different understandings of justice underpinning local food agendas often go unexamined (DuPuis, Harrison & Goodman, 2011). Tensions among communitarian, anticorporate, liberal egalitarian, and cultural conceptions of justice can produce a “pragmatic local food politics” (p. 293) that fails to fully engage any notion of justice in favor of working toward certain common goals.

Some scholars have called for a reflexive approach that rejects universals, accepts contention and differences in values in local food politics, and acknowledges contradictions within understandings of justice (DuPuis, Harrison & Goodman, 2011; Myers & Sbicca, 2015; Cadieux & Slocum, 2015; Levkoe, 2011). Levkoe (2011) refers to the need for reflexive practice to include a “transition to collective subjectivities” (rather than individualism) and a “whole system approach” that bridges social justice, ecological sustainability, community health and democracy-enhancing discourses and practice. In contrast to alternative food projects that seek to create alternative markets and consumption practices without contesting the existing food regime, Myers & Sbicca (2015) call for a more confrontational local food politics that simultaneously addresses economic justice, social mobility and health concerns.

Regarding how grassroots mobilizations engage with and influence justice concerns in this agenda, urban spaces can be important sites of contestation, visibilization, and social movement convergence. Urban food struggles can help heal some of the alienation produced by

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inequitable access to fresh foods based on geography and income, by the rural-urban divide that makes production-side decisions less visible, and by the fact that many urban food chain workers are among those receiving the lowest wages (Sbicca, 2013). According to Sbicca (2013), “The streets of major cities throughout the USA are ground-zero for recent struggles over access to healthy and affordable food” (p. 1). Myers and Sbicca (2015) point to the “Good Food Good Jobs” (GFGJ) mobilizations in New York City and Los Angeles that mobilized labor and food activists together in efforts to keep out WalMart, in recognition of the interconnected nature of living wage jobs, poverty, food (in)security and social justice. Another example of a more confrontational political food project is Food Not Bombs, which approaches hunger from a non-hierarchical, anarchist, solidarity and organizing lens and focuses on taking back public space to share food, mobilize, and give visibility to the social injustice of hunger (Sbicca, 2013).

### **Reform vs. Transformation: The Role of Food Justice and Food Sovereignty**

Two approaches that are more overtly critical of the inequities in our food system and raise questions of power and control are food justice and food sovereignty. The two have grown popular at different scales and in different contexts, and many scholars continue to see them as distinct concepts and movements with different degrees of transformative potential, but they nonetheless share some critiques and characteristics in common. I examine them in this section in order to differentiate them from the dominant AFM discourse and illuminate why I find it important to draw on these approaches in defining a vision for the future of our food system. I draw on the helpful framework offered by Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2011), which separates the “progressive” food justice and “radical” food sovereignty movements from food institutions belonging to the CFR, the latter of which include neoliberal food enterprise institutions and reformist food security institutions. This framework is helpful for distinguishing between

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institutions that aim to mitigate externalities of the CFR while retaining and reproducing its form, versus those that call for a rights-driven approach that challenges the existing system and takes a more oppositional or cautious view toward the State (Cadieux & Slocum, 2015).

The food justice movement has grown to prominence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in North America. It is particularly associated with U.S. urban settings. Gottlieb & Joshi (2010) define food justice as “ensuring that the benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown and produced, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten are shared fairly” (p. 7). The movement draws inspiration from the frameworks used by the Civil Rights and environmental justice movements (Clendenning, Dressler & Richards, 2016; Brent, Schiavoni & Alonso-Fradejas, 2015; Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011; Sbicca & Myers, 2016; Cadieux & Slocum, 2015). Food justice discursively emphasizes the role of institutional racism and oppression in producing inequities in urban food access and the disproportionate health impacts this has on low-income communities of color (Clendenning, Dressler & Richards, 2016; Alkon & Mares, 2012; Brent, Schiavoni & Alonso-Fradejas, 2015). According to Alkon and Norgaard (2009), “the concept of food justice contextualizes disparate access to healthy food within a broader and more historicized framework of institutional racism” (p. 292) and highlights racialized geographies, or the way institutional racism “shapes the physical landscape” (p. 290). In practice, food justice is often associated with small-scale and hyper-local projects, including buying coops, CSAs, urban farms, farmers markets, farm-to-school programs, and community gardening (Alkon & Mares, 2012; Clendenning, Dressler & Richards, 2016).

The food sovereignty movement has its origins in the Global South, primarily as an agrarian and peasant-led movement (Clendenning, Dressler & Richards, 2016). The movement grew to prominence through the global peasant activist network La Vía Campesina (LVC) in the

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1990s, and was originally posed as a response to the depoliticizing language of “food security”, structural adjustment policies, and uneven free trade agreements (Clendenning, Dressler & Richards, 2016; Patel, 2009; Alkon & Mares, 2012; Iles & Montenegro de Wit, 2015). As such, it grew up through a networked structure with an emphasis on mobilizing. Fundamentally, food sovereignty is about claims on rights, democracy and social control, particularly as concerns the rights of peoples to define their food and production systems and control the resources on which these systems rely, such as land, water and seeds (Clendenning, Dressler & Richards, 2016; Alkon & Mares, 2012; Patel, 2009). In principle, food sovereignty is radically egalitarian and is committed to eradicating racism, classism, sexism and patriarchy (Figueroa, 2015; Patel, 2009).

Over time, the food sovereignty movement has evolved and expanded, and new actors have begun using the language of food sovereignty, across various scales, geographies, and in different forms (Iles & Montenegro de Wit, 2015; Alkon & Mares, 2012). As this has occurred, the movement has gained some traction in the U.S. The formation of the U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance (USFSA), founded in 2010, can be taken as evidence of this. The alliance, composed of 56 organizations, aims to build a domestic food sovereignty movement in partnership with international allies (USFSA, 2010). In this process, there has been some blurring of the lines between food justice and food sovereignty, and some apparent convergence. Malik Yakini, a founder of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, considers the concept of food justice to be “embedded” in the concept of food sovereignty (Yakini, 2014). USFSA members include many initiatives that simultaneously fall under the food justice umbrella. According to Brent, Schiavoni and Alonso-Fradejas (2015), actors within the USFSA have taken an explicitly anti-racist approach to organizing, and have aligned with US food justice in emphasizing the role of institutional racism in land and food access in the U.S.

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However, many scholars continue to see the two movements as distinct. Various authors describe food sovereignty as more overtly and directly opposed to neoliberalism and focused on dismantling harmful structures and transforming the food system than the food justice movement of the Global North (Alkon & Mares, 2012; Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011, Fairbairn, 2012). Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2011) differentiate the “progressive trend” of food justice from the “radical trend” associated with food sovereignty, as advocating for more “practical” solutions and alternatives within the framework of the existing capitalistic food system, rather than on opposing and undoing this system.

Brent, Schiavoni and Alonso-Fradejas (2015) and others note that both movements face unique challenges to their transformative potential in the U.S. context due to the degree of corporate-held power they face and the centrality of racism in defining the landscape of U.S. food politics. Some scholars see potential pitfalls for both food sovereignty and food justice as including dilution of their transformative potential, blurring of their meanings, depoliticization, and even cooptation by mainstream actors, as these concepts are employed by new actors with varying ideas of what they mean in practice (Clendenning, Dressler & Richards, 2016; Fairbairn, 2012, Cadieux & Slocum, 2015).

Guthman and others have critiqued organizations that invoke food justice for often failing to differentiate themselves in practice from more mainstream “vote with your fork” AFM approaches, for working around rather than resisting neoliberal processes, for often maintaining primarily white leadership structures, for reproducing neoliberal subjectivities, and for failing to engage with social justice issues linked to food access, such as wage and labor issues (Alkon & Mares, 2012; Cadieux & Slocum, 2015). Meanwhile some authors have criticized the U.S. brand of food sovereignty as failing to bridge its agrarian rural focus with urban concerns or to place

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enough emphasis on the role of racism in defining U.S. food relations and related issues of rights and power (Clendenning, Dressler & Richards, 2016).

Scholars have also noted that despite the global and networked origins of food sovereignty, in the U.S. context both food justice and food sovereignty, like other AFM actors, have tended toward a “reification” of the local. In practice, food justice has tended to focus on highly localized solutions and to treat local as inherently more just (Clendenning, Dressler & Richards, 2016, p. 170; DuPuis, Harrison & Goodman, 2011). Similarly, U.S. food sovereignty organizations have tended to reduce food sovereignty to meaning local control of the food system (Cadieux & Slocum, 2015; Fairbairn, 2012; Robbins, 2015). Fairbairn (2012) notes that this is “somewhat ironic given that the frame was created by a global network and is intended to highlight the common struggles of food producers all over the world”.

The reflexive approach discussed earlier in this review can help both movements transcend these challenges by re-emphasizing the role of marginalization, inequality, exploitation, and race and class relations in shaping the food system and by resisting false dichotomies between local and global, rural and urban, and food and related social issues (DuPuis, Harrison & Goodman, 2011). A reflexive approach also allows for differences in how these ideals are put into practice. Cadieux & Slocum (2015) refer to “engaged universals,” suggesting that food justice and food sovereignty ideals can be shaped to a given context and can happen on a “continuum” (p. 13). Sbicca & Myers (2016) note that the food justice movement is “not monolithic” and that the tactics chosen by activists are shaped by local contexts.

Despite challenges and shortcomings, the transformative potential of food justice and food sovereignty lies in their explicit focus on power relationships and potential for social movement building. According to Herman & Goodman (2018), food justice could be harnessed

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to “demand action to transform agri-food systems at multiple scales and locations” (p. 1042). Robbins (2015) notes the importance of not taking a “reductionist” or “compartmentalized” approach to food sovereignty. Brent, Schiavoni & Alonso-Fradejas (2015) call for more convergence between food justice, civil rights and movements like #BlackLivesMatter as a way to “strengthen the radical tendency in the food justice movement” (p. 626). The USFSA is a space where they see food sovereignty, agrarian justice, and food justice as converging. Cadieux and Slocum (2015) argue for the need for food justice to address embedded trauma, communal exchange mechanisms, land access, and labor arrangements.

Some U.S. food justice groups are already doing this more radical work, “rejecting a depoliticized reformist approach” by framing food justice as part of a Black Liberation project that simultaneously opposes racism and capitalism (Brent, Schiavoni & Alonso-Fradejas, 2015, p. 626). Women of color activists including Leah Penniman, co-founder and co-director of Soul Fire Farm in Grafton, NY, and Karen Washington, co-founder of Rise and Root Farm in Chester, NY, have called out the racism in our food system by using the term “food apartheid” for what mainstream institutions have labeled “food deserts” (Penniman, 2018; Brones, 2018). Penniman also offers talks on how #BlackLivesMatter and food justice intersect and trainings on uprooting racism in our food system (Soul Fire Farm, n.d.). Soul Fire Farm and the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network are both members of the USFSA (USFSA, n.d.).

### **A Just Future for Food & Climate? Where a Transformative Local Food Agenda Fits In**

As with the food movement, there is no singular, monolithic “climate movement,” and there is a similar range of solutions, from those that fit within a neoliberal growth paradigm to those that are more radical and transformational in nature. The latter are represented by the climate justice movement, which calls out the roles of capitalism and extractive industries in the

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crisis we face, and the need for social and economic transformation to be incorporated into a decarbonization agenda, in the form of a Just Transition. The U.S. climate justice movement emphasizes locally-driven solutions that center equity concerns and frontline and fence line communities in decision-making (Climate Justice Alliance, n.d.). Prior just transition efforts involved the US labor movement and focused on protections for workers who would be impacted in the transition to a carbon-free world. The current just transition agenda emphasizes the broader social justice implications of a transition and takes into account questions of responsibility, entitlement, reparations, and decision-making power (Newell & Mulvaney, 2013).

As regards questions of resilience - how communities respond to the impacts of climate change that are already occurring – there is also a spectrum of approaches. Much dominant resilience discourse and strategy reinforces neoliberal subjectivities by promoting individual and community preparedness in the face of ecological devastation, while deemphasizing the role of the State. In contrast, Walsh-Dilley, Wolford & McCarthy (2016) call for an approach to resilience that aligns with food sovereignty in focusing on power relations and the structural conditions of vulnerability and emphasizing rights and equity. This approach supports local autonomy, but it emphasizes the role of the State in supporting and protecting rights.

In their article on the Good Food Good Jobs mobilizations of food chain workers in New York and Los Angeles, Myers & Sbicca (2015) pose the question: “Rather than merely uniting grocery store unions and urban AFM organizations, will GFGJ be broadened to bring together grocery store unions, farmworker, food processor, environmental justice, and immigrant rights organizations?” (p. 24). Various scholars similarly see movement convergence and the linking of social issues including food and climate justice as essential to successfully pushing forward a more transformative agenda. Brent, Schiavoni and Alonso-Fradejas (2015) argue that it will be

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essential for varied interests that make up the food justice, agrarian justice, and US food sovereignty movements to find common ground and establish alliances with other social movements, including immigrant and labor justice, if they are to be successful in making demands on the state. Tramel (2018) writes, “For radical movements, system change is a dominant master frame to challenge a neoliberal order rooted in capitalism, colonialism and empire, as well as an upswing in authoritarian populism. Two key components of this systemic focus are food sovereignty and environmental/climate justice” (p 1291).

In the concept of food sovereignty, there is already an embedded commitment to ecological and environmental concerns and to addressing these through a justice and equity lens. Various actors operating on food sovereignty principles have been in the past decade actively engaged in the climate justice movement. At the global level, LVC has helped push for more radical state commitments on climate change during recent Conferences of the Parties (COPs), including stronger commitment to the rights of those most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, and state policies to strengthen food sovereignty and sustainable peasant agriculture (Sbicca, 2016; Routledge, Cumbers & Derickson, 2018). The global food sovereignty and climate justice movements are also connected in their way of viewing and interacting with the State. Both have a largely confrontational relationship with the State and see a role for local, place-based solutions, but both movements also make demands upon the State and challenge institutional power relationships (Routledge, Cumbers & Derickson, 2018).

The U.S. food justice movement, though it draws upon an environmental justice framework in emphasizing the role of racialized geographies and marginalization in creating uneven distribution of goods and bads (Alkon & Norgaard, 2009), has tended to take a more siloed approach and hyper-local focus, with less emphasis on movement building or connecting

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to related social justice issues (Alkon & Mares, 2012; Cadieux & Slocum, 2015). Alkon and Norgaard (2009) argue that by posing food as an environmental benefit, the movement could establish clearer links with environmental justice and simultaneously push the sustainable agriculture movement to give more attention to the role of institutional racism and racialized geographies in our food system.

There is some evidence of food movement convergence with climate justice happening in the U.S. The Climate Justice Alliance (CJA), formed in 2013, unites 70+ frontline communities and organizations primarily in the U.S. to mobilize for a Just Transition. The US Food Sovereignty Alliance is a member of the CJA, and the CJA has a whole section of its “What We Do” page dedicated to food sovereignty. Additionally, the CJA includes several local and regional food activism organizations (Climate Justice Alliance, n.d.). The alliance has worked to articulate the links between food, agrarian, climate, racial and migrant justice (USFSA, n.d.). Groups including the Indigenous Environmental Network, which is a member of both USFSA and CJA, are also pushing for a just transition that melds the concerns of climate justice with food sovereignty (Cook, 2019; Tramel, 2018). Brent, Schiavoni and Alonso-Fradejas (2015) cite the National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC), the first US-based member of La Via Campesina and a founder of the USFSA, as working to bridge divides between movements.

Tangible examples of the melding of food and climate concerns rooted in goals of system transformation can be seen in projects like Soul Fire Farm, Cooperation Jackson, and the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network. While locally rooted, and focused on specific projects, these projects are treated as part of a broader intervention in systems of oppression and in extractive capitalism, integrate project-based work with specific policy demands, and are linked into broader networks like the National Black Food and Justice Alliance, the Northeast

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Farmers of Color Alliance, the USFSA, and the CJA. Soul Fire Farm has an entire page dedicated to “food sovereignty action steps,” which incorporates a policy platform, a reparations agenda, and an alliance-building strategy (Soul Fire Farm, N.D.) The policy platform shows clear intersection with migrant rights and anti-poverty issues, as well as linking climate justice, food sovereignty and food justice concerns.

The National Black Food and Justice Alliance, of which both the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network and Cooperation Jackson are a part, uses a “transformative organizing approach” to build a movement for Black liberation, and focuses among other things, on “self-determining food economies” and a land reparations agenda, coupled with building community institutions that circulate wealth back into the Black community (National Black Food & Justice Alliance, n.d.). The Detroit People’s Food Co-op, with a vision of “serving an urban, predominately African American, low and moderate-income community” is one such institution. Cooperation Jackson’s vision is to develop a “cooperative network” in Jackson, Mississippi, which will include an array of “interconnected and interdependent” cooperatives including a bank and a training center (Cooperation Jackson, n.d.). The work has been facilitated by the Jackson-Kush plan promoted by progressive left Mayor Lumumba. Cooperation Jackson’s mission of building economic democracy and a solidarity economy ties together racial justice, climate justice, and food sovereignty (Cooperation Jackson, 2020).

The Green New Deal (GND) resolution (H.Res.109/S.Res.59) released in February 2019 offers a new opportunity to explore prospects for convergence under a just transition framework, and the role of the U.S. government in mobilizing resources for this transition. The roots of the GND in the United States are not politically left; the concept was proposed back in 2007 as the financial crisis hit, by the centrist, free-market political commentator and journalist Thomas

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Friedman, drawing on the New Deal spending plan implemented nearly a century earlier under the FDR administration during the Great Depression. The GND concept was adopted by former President Obama, and promoted policies that worked within capitalism and neoliberal ideology, like cap-and-trade, tax credits to clean energy, and other incentives to big business to push renewables forward, while halting subsidies to oil, gas and coal (Kaufman, 2018). Separately, around this time, the United Nations began calling for a Global Green New Deal, and a group of economists in England called the Green New Deal Group developed a proposal adopted by the British Labor Party to establish a “government-run green investment bank to bolster renewable energy” (Kaufman, 2018). However, by 2010 amid economic crisis and a new wave of privatization and neoliberal rollbacks, these proposals came to a halt.

Following the energy sparked by the 2016 elections, the US left renewed and adapted the GND concept, resulting in last year’s resolution, which recognizes climate change as an existential threat to humanity and calls for a just transition to net-zero greenhouse gas emissions achieved through a “10-year national mobilization”. Proposed solutions include resiliency projects; infrastructure, transportation and building upgrades; reforestation and other “low-tech” carbon capture methods; ecological restoration; and a move to fully renewable power sources and sustainable agricultural practices. The GND calls for this to happen in a way that takes into account a host of social justice concerns and ensures “the use of democratic and participatory processes that are inclusive of and led by frontline and vulnerable communities and workers to plan, implement, and administer the Green New Deal mobilization at the local level” (H.Res.109, 2019). Frontline communities are defined as “indigenous peoples, communities of color, migrant communities, deindustrialized communities, depopulated rural communities, the poor, low-

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income workers, women, the elderly, the unhoused, people with disabilities, and youth” (H.Res.109, 2019).

Scholar-activist Eric Holt-Giménez sees a major role for the farm and food justice movements to support and build the conversation about the Green New Deal, while joining forces with other social movements, given the interconnectedness of food justice and climate justice concerns (Holt-Giménez, 2018). The GND framework essentially proposes a “new social contract,” but needs to build a broad base of support and more concreteness (Holt-Giménez & Kleiner, 2019). Patel and Goodman (2019) point to the need for alliance and movement-building – particularly across the labor, farm and food movements, bridging the urban-rural divide, and reckoning with the land theft embedded in our history, if a GND is to succeed. They note that the original New Deal showed us that such a massive mobilization of resources in the context of a divided country is indeed possible.

Various activists, farmers and others have cautiously endorsed the GND and expressed appreciation for its overt recognition of the need to repair injustices and include frontline communities in developing solutions. At the same time, major questions remain over what a GND would look like on the ground, who will really get to shape the agenda, and how this broad framework will build the support needed to succeed. Some farming groups have expressed concern that it doesn’t go far enough in addressing issues including the structural obstacles that exist for small farmers transitioning to more agroecological methods, the issue of concentrated farmland ownership, and parity pricing that enables living wages for farmers. Meanwhile, groups including the CJA, the Indigenous Environmental Network and CJA member Cooperation Jackson in Mississippi have expressed concerns over the ambiguity of language and elements of capitalist logic embedded in the document, which could ultimately open the way for big industry

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to continue profiting and exerting control over the solutions. These groups have called for a commitment to a reparations agenda and delegation of funding for local implementation of solutions (Holt-Giménez & Kleiner, 2019; Lazare, 2018).

### **Methodology**

This capstone research project is a critical case study that uses qualitative research methods and draws on a critical ethnographic framework of analysis. It describes the actions and understandings of key stakeholders in Worcester's food system regarding questions of sovereignty, justice and power, and visions for food system transformation in the context of our climate crisis. The purpose of using a case study is two-fold. First, by providing a window into how stakeholders interact with the food system of one small city, it can contribute to the local conversation about what food system transformation looks like. Second, I hope it can offer some observations and recommendations that may be relevant for urban areas that share similar characteristics, and for the broader conversation about how food and climate justice relate. I chose to explore a single case because of the embeddedness and time commitment this requires.

I chose Worcester's food system as my research site, as someone who has lived and worked in the city since October 2017, and who has been engaged in various aspects of food system change and anti-poverty work. These have included working on advocacy issues related to food access as an employee of the regional food bank, participating in the local food policy council, and more recently, helping manage mobile farmers markets and interning with a legal aid office focused on access to food benefits. During this time, I have developed a degree of embeddedness in and closeness to the community and to local food system work, which both facilitates and influences this research. I also find it important to highlight my identity as a white

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cisgender female with a middle-class background, originally from rural Vermont, in influencing my frame of analysis and understanding.

I chose key informant interviews as my main method of primary data collection because these offer rich and deep insight into the perspectives and belief systems of community members who possess different types of food system knowledge, engage in different aspects of the food system, and interact differently with institutional power structures. This approach enables me, the researcher, to weave a more complex narrative of Worcester's food system and of how stakeholders are connected to issues of justice, sovereignty and social transformation.

In selecting for interviews, I aimed to acquire perspectives from stakeholders who are working to change or transform the local food system in ways that based on existing literature and/or local understandings would be considered to intersect with the *alternative food movement* and/or the work of food *justice* or *sovereignty*. My sampling methods were a blend of convenience and purposeful. My approach was in part based on my preexisting knowledge of local organizations and projects related to food system change, access to some of the people working in these organizations, and additional research to select participants that fit the criteria. I also used elements of "snowball sampling," wherein earlier participants provided recommendations for additional interviews based on their own relationships in the food system.

I conducted a total of 13 interviews with participants closely linked to the Worcester food system. The majority of these were in person at participants' workplaces, homes, cafes, and in one less-conventional case, during a car ride. Three interviews were conducted over the phone, due to stay-at-home guidelines issued during the COVID-19 outbreak that began in early March 2020. Primarily, the interviews were with participants in current or former leadership positions of organizations doing significant programmatic or advocacy work around food access, food

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justice, local purchasing, farm-to-market links, urban agriculture, agroecology, holistic medicine, and cooperative farming. Perspectives associated with many of the organizations described in the Research Site Description were represented in the interviews. Several participants were part of organizations that belonged to, or were themselves participants in, the local Worcester Food Policy Council. Additionally, I interviewed a local college student who has been involved in farmers markets and worked on the Real Food Challenge and a local activist who has been closely involved with climate justice efforts in Worcester.

I conducted interviews that I felt would offer both urban (City of Worcester) and regional perspectives of the local food system, consumer-side and producer-side perspectives, and variable understandings of justice and rights. I was also fortunate to have one participant connect me with a consultant who has worked with an array of local food policy councils and the US Solidarity Economy Network. An email chain and brief phone conversation with this person helped me further contextualize and gain perspective on my own research in Worcester.

I used a semi-structured interview format in which I prompted participants with a set of questions regarding their relationships to and perspectives on Worcester's food system, their understandings of justice and rights as pertains to food and the food system, their visions for change and transformation, related challenges, and the intersection of food and climate concerns (See Appendix A). The interviews generally lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. My intent was to understand participants' perceptions of their work relative to issues of justice, rights and climate change; explore visions for the future; and identify patterns and differences in perspectives on local food system change and social transformation as we face a climate uncertain future.

In all cases, I received permission to record the interviews, which I later transcribed. I analyzed these interviews by assigning an ID to each participant, choosing categories that partly

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derived partly from the themes of the literature review and partly emerged during the transcription process, color-coding the text of each transcript according to these categories, transferring highlighted text into an Excel spreadsheet, and assigning code words to facilitate an exploration of patterns and divergences. The categories related to perspectives on the local food system, understandings of justice and rights in the food system, understandings of how our food system and climate change are intertwined, visions for change, and ideas for how change is achieved, including thoughts on the Green New Deal. I used this analysis to derive the themes discussed in the Findings and Discussion sections of this paper.

In addition to key informant interviews, I engaged as a participant observer in Worcester Food Policy Council meetings and took part in Climate Action Circle meetings and other climate activism-related events during the research period, which extended from September 2019 – March 2020. I also drew upon my prior experiences working in aspects of Worcester’s food system to shape my analysis. These experiences added context and richness to my interview process, giving me a better understanding of the landscape of Worcester’s food system, and existing points of collaboration, tension and conflict. It was through these prior experiences that I began to observe differences in meaning assigned to the term “food justice,” processes of inclusion and exclusion in decision-making spaces (who was “at the table” or not), and divergent perspectives on food system change. During the time period, I watched advocacy processes around Urban Agriculture, a Community Benefits Agreement, and the Climate Emergency Declaration unfold. My engagement in different aspects of food system work also facilitated my access to conferences, workshops, planning processes, and conversations that I would not necessarily have been aware of, able to pay for, or privy to otherwise. These cumulative

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experiences informed my research question and enabled me to form pre-existing relationships of trust that facilitated some participant interviews.

Limitations and challenges of the study included the number of participants, which did not allow for quite the breadth of local and regional perspectives I initially hoped for, including more producer perspectives, perspectives from a more diverse array of participants in the food justice arena, and an elected official or City Management perspective. I had also initially hoped to conduct interviews with members or leaders of organizations doing local food system work in other small cities, to contextualize my Worcester findings. These limitations were influenced both by time constraints on my end and by challenges scheduling interviews with participants. COVID-19 also presented its own unique challenges, in making it necessary to conduct some interviews over the phone, which does not facilitate the same richness of data as in-person interviews, and in adding a layer of unexpected stress, pressure and anxiety.

### **Findings**

Interview participants offered deep and thoughtful perspectives on Worcester's local food system; visions for a just food system, particularly in a changing climate; and ideas about how change could happen, including thoughts on the Green New Deal framework. Interviewees working across different aspects of the food system varied in the ways that they talked about local food, food justice and rights, climate change, and transformative change. However, there were also some common understandings and visions that offered insights as to possibilities for future collaborations and knowledge-sharing. The presentation of findings is divided into categories and themes following the exploration of the literature and the research question posed at the beginning of this document: How do groups, organizations and individuals engaged in local food system change processes envision food system transformation and understand and

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relate to corresponding social justice concerns, particularly in the context of climate change and the possible opportunities presented by a Green New Deal vision?

### **Local Food & The City of Worcester**

#### *Understandings of Local*

Overall, participants emphasized re-localization of the food system as a key part of their vision of change, justice, and climate mitigation and resilience. Words used to describe local food included healthy, quality, fresh, sustainable and good. Farmers markets and urban agriculture projects were named as “community spaces,” “spiritually nourishing” and “gathering spaces” that can help us reconnect to our food in an urban setting. Several participants highlighted how the local food system supports the local economy, by creating new markets for small regional farmers, and funneling money into local food businesses (P1, P4, P6, P8, P9).

Participants generally contrasted the development of a thriving local food system with an industrialized national and global food system characterized by big agriculture, commodity crops, unsustainable growing methods, overproduction, waste, and chain supermarkets. However, there were different beliefs about what re-localization needs to look like. Some participants saw conventional supermarkets and chain restaurants as alienating institutions embedded in the industrial food system (P4, P5, P9, P13). These participants emphasized the need for local business ownership, ranging from conventional small business models, to democratically controlled and cooperatively owned workplaces. Others saw potential for collaborations with supermarkets like Stop & Shop, and chain corner stores, like Honey Farms, as part of the equation of increasing local food access points (P1, P6).

#### *Attributes and Challenges of Worcester’s Food System*

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Key attributes of Worcester's local food system that participants highlighted were the city's size, which some felt enabled greater collaboration among local organizations (P1, P3, P6); an already thriving network of urban farms, school gardens, and community gardens facilitated primarily by the Regional Environmental Council (REC); a relatively high number of physical food access points; a proximity to many regional farms; existing farmers and mobile markets; and a network of food pantries and meal programs. Several participants pointed to the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP), a Massachusetts program that provides Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) customers with an additional monthly credit for fruit and vegetable purchases at participating farmers markets and farm stands, as an important driver of more equitable local food access and revenue for small farmers in the past few years (P1, P9, P6, P11).

All participants highlighted some challenges with Worcester's local food system. On the consumer side, many concerns related to affordability and access to local and healthy foods. In addition to price, accessibility concerns included challenges reaching physical access points, with limited walkability or public transportation options, limited farmers market hours that did not necessarily fit the schedules of working folks, and few standing locations prioritizing local products. More than one participant noted racial equity concerns in the HIP program with regard to who benefits as both consumers and vendors, while another noted that many immigrant members of the community are left out of this program altogether as they do not qualify for SNAP (P2, P8, P13). One participant highlighted that food access concerns go beyond price and physical access points: "It's the dignity of the person who is accessing the food, and also what does it mean for food to be good?... [it's also] the environmental and human impacts that it took to get the food to the table, and the cultural relevance of the food" (P3).

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On the production side, some participants, particularly those working to link regional farmers to the Worcester market, noted a disconnect in production costs versus food prices, as a significant challenge for small farmers (P6, P9). While recognizing that many consumers could not afford to pay more for their foods, these participants questioned how farmers could be better supported and make enough profit to stay viable. One participant asked, “How do you make up the price difference between what it takes for farmers to produce a bushel of apples versus what somebody can actually pay to eat it?” (P9). Another participant highlighted a lack of support for immigrant farmers and for a greater diversity of farmers to be able to link to markets (P13).

### **Conceptions of Justice and Rights**

Many participants initially associated “food justice” with consumer access and the urban food space, while “food rights” tended to evoke ideas about small farmer viability and land access. Several participants stated that people had a right to healthy food, or that food was a basic human right (P1, P2, P5, P8), but this was not always coupled with a deeper discussion of the factors that enable this right to be claimed or enacted. Many also mentioned “equity” as a key component of food justice, though understandings of equity seemed to be mixed. Some participants primarily highlighted issues of distributive justice or equity in resource access, while others discussed the role of access to decision-making power.

### ***Equity and Inclusion***

For some, equity had to do with reducing barriers to and disparities in access to nutritious, and primarily local, foods. Health disparities related to food access were also a concern that frequently emerged. Access was also mentioned in terms of pipelines for “good” food jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities, and the need to ensure a changing food landscape represented and embraced Worcester’s diverse population. Several were critical of a recent

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relocation of the local Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) office - which administrates SNAP benefits - away from the city center, as failing to prioritize accessibility (P2, P3, P7, P8).

Nearly all participants referenced inadequate wages as a key barrier to achieving equity in the food system. Some emphasized the limitations this places on buying power, while others discussed additional challenges faced by low wage earners, including transportation, time burdens and inability to front money for entrepreneurial activities (P2, P5, P8, P13). The inadequate wages of many small farmers was a common theme as well, with one participant noting that many small farmers can't afford to eat the food they grow (P6, P9).

### *Power, Agency, and Social Control*

Some participants more explicitly referenced issues connected to power, control and agency. One participant stated that food justice meant, "Having the freedom to eat like a rich person eats" (P8). This same participant called for the need to halt gentrification processes in the city that are harming low-income residents. Another noted that "It's not just food access, but it's long-term land access, it's long-term ownership issues" (P12). Another participant saw the best avenue for claiming rights as "owning our own access... by growing our own foods" (P7).

Some participants discussed decision-making access and power as a key issue related to food justice. One advocate expressed that low-income city residents are often not included in decision-making processes that impact them and should be entitled to "have access to a say" and "the right to know that you have a right" (P2). Another participant stated that "just being at the table isn't enough... there needs to be real collaboration, intentional support, and everyone doing the work needs to get paid" (P13).

While many participants mentioned wages, job pipelines, and local business development, a few participants linked justice and rights with issues of power and control in our

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broader social and economic structures. One food justice advocate noted “I mean, all of this still exists within the bigger systems of Capitalism, and the systems of who owns the land that farmers are producing on. And things like that that I think are just... bigger, deeper questions that are really hard to struggle with” (P5). Others who related their work with food sovereignty, cooperative economics and a just transition framework talked about the right to democratically control production and resources. One stated, “these critical resources should be under our control, we have a right to develop and produce these resources to benefit ourselves, collectively” (P11). Another noted, “I guess that’s important for the food justice arena, to really connect it to land sovereignty” (P12).

### *Undoing Structural Racism*

While many participants discussed diversity, inclusion, or racial equity, only some participants explicitly discussed structural and institutionalized racism as a theme. The conversations in which this was more explicitly addressed related to its role in shaping food geographies, purchasing power, access to decision-making, and access to resources to facilitate entrepreneurship. One participant expressed frustration that “There are concrete barriers in Worcester that are making it hard for People of Color to be in positions of power” (P8) and a couple explicitly noted the prevalence of White Supremacy Culture in local organizations (P8, P13). One participant said that People of Color often are tokenized at decision-making tables and aren’t listened to when they speak up about what solutions will work best for their communities (P13). A couple of participants highlighted equity concerns with the HIP program. One noted that it is “primarily benefiting White people. White farmers” (P2) and another pointed to a lack of emphasis on equity in determining who was granted status as a “HIP vendor” (P13).

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### **Connecting Food and Climate**

All participants identified a connection between climate change and the harms and injustices of the industrial food system. However, the discussion revealed different degrees of engagement and types of concerns. Several participants engaged with urban food access saw the intersection of food and climate as important, but didn't see the two as tangibly connected in their work. Some participants expressed more proximity to environmental justice work around soil contamination and air pollution. One stated, "I don't feel like I've come across a lot of people or organizations talking about these two things as intertwined here... when I do encounter it, it's always the farming community. You don't ever hear about it from the access side" (P5).

### ***Vulnerability and Resilience***

Vulnerability was a theme that emerged in multiple ways. There were several mentions of how changing weather patterns, and increasingly severe weather events, would impact crop loss and what crops farmers could grow, and how these ripple effects would be felt across the food system (P2, P5, P8, P9). Those whose work centered on producers and markets for local food expressed concern about the stability of the overall regional food system, with one person stating, "Our food system is at great risk right now. Even when farmers adapt... there are so many scenarios that they just cannot be prepared for" (P9).

Those working on food access and equity issues expressed concern that low-income community members would experience climate vulnerability most strongly. One noted that in the case of a weather-related disaster, "If I'm on SNAP... I can't plan ahead. I don't have enough money" (P2). Another stated that "frontline communities experiencing hunger will face the climate crisis more dramatically... because of simple things like heating costs" (P8).

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Most participants saw re-localization and the use of more sustainable growing practices as part of creating a food system that is more resilient to these vulnerabilities. One participant noted that she always sourced as locally as she could, and that more people should ask their local farmers to grow specialty items they needed rather than relying on a supermarket (P13). A couple of participants highlighted a need for less reliance on supermarket products from far away and more local food storage capacity. Some participants discussed ways that the Worcester urban food landscape could help mitigate harm and contribute to resilience, including more urban community fruit trees to provide food, shade, and carbon; more urban gardens to act as “cooling centers”; and the installation of rooftop gardens. Others highlighted the potential for small regional farmers to transform their production practices and be part of the solution to climate change, if provided the adequate resources, technical assistance and information (P8, P9).

### *Ecological and Regenerative Approaches*

Some participants took a more whole-systems and ecological approach to their understanding of food and climate, discussing the role of regenerative practices, such as permaculture and agroecology, the power of Indigenous knowledge and practices, and the need to build a green economy. One participant said, “The most important thing... is for people to become more conscious about taking care of the planet, because our food depends on it. We aren’t just trying to eat today, we are trying to eat for however long we live and for however long the planet sustains us” (P10). Another noted a need to continue building understanding of how our food system connects to “healthcare, human rights, and community welfare overall” (P7). Some participants directly called out extractive Capitalism as a driver of climate change (P4, P5, P10, P11, P12), and either saw solutions as rooted in a just transition framework or more generally requiring interventions in and disruptions of this system.

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### **Visions for a Just Food Future**

Participants expressed many ideas of what the future of a just food system would look like, along with perspectives on the drivers of change that would facilitate this. Common themes were the need to give more priority to local food, to scale up urban growing (in various forms), to more robustly address food access and related social justice challenges, and to build more inclusive and equity-driven spaces and development processes that honored the city's diverse population. Some participants, particularly those working most closely with regional farmers, highlighted the need to improve resources access and market connections for small farmers.

#### ***Expanding Urban Food Production and Access***

Several participants mentioned a desire to expand and scale up urban agriculture projects and community gardens (P3, P4, P5, P8, P12). These visions included more community garden infrastructure in public parks and community gardens that served as stronger “connecting spaces” (P3); more alternative growing and food-scaping practices including rooftop gardens, vertical growing systems, hydroponics, and edible forests (P1, P7; P8, P12); and more use of existing technologies, like freight farms at local higher education institutions (P4). Participants also highlighted a desire for a clearer and more expansive municipal vision for urban agriculture, following on the zoning ordinance passed in late 2018. Several emphasized that anyone who wanted to grow food should be able to, and pointed to vacant plots of land located around the city as potential growing sites that the city could facilitate access to (P3; P5; P8).

In terms of food access, there were several mentions of the need for farmers markets to continue to expand and address unmet need, as well as to enhance services like language access that could facilitate accessibility and cultural competency (P5, P8). Visions for standing locations varied, with some participants calling for more local food in existing supermarkets and corner

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stores (P1, P6), and others desiring more cooperatives (P12), locally-owned businesses (P6, P8, P9, P13), and new sites offering “healthy prepared food” (P8). Participants called for more institutional arrangements prioritizing local foods, in public schools, higher education, and area restaurants (P6, P8, P9). They also highlighted the need for wraparound services for low-income community members that “provide the services people need in a dignified way” (P8). Some mentioned the need to strengthen state-level supports, such as HIP and SNAP, and address resource needs for those whose immigration status didn’t enable them to access these supports.

Participants’ vision for regional farms called for long-term, stable, and more equitable land access, with a land trust mentioned as one possibility (P3, P8, P9, P12). Participants working with regional farmers also emphasized the need for farmers keep more of their food dollar, for stronger local purchasing arrangements with urban institutions and other forms of market access for farmers, and support for the gleaning and retrieval market (P1, P6, P9).

### ***Strengthening Inclusion, Equity and Anti-Oppression***

Many participants discussed the need to be highlighting and embracing Worcester’s diversity as part of the vision. This included uplifting new and diverse food entrepreneurs and facilitating access to the information and resources needed to succeed in this space, through efforts like the Worcester Regional Food Hub. It also included valuing and prioritizing immigrant and minority-owned food businesses, particularly in parts of the city that haven’t been emphasized as part of the “Renaissance” vision the city has been promoting (P2, P6, P8, P13). According to one participant, “We need to embrace diversity and invest in diversity. Because it’s who we are. But that’s not the story Worcester’s telling” (P8).

Participants called for more inclusive community spaces for developing and defining the vision for the food system and the path forward, as well as more knowledge-sharing. One

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participant stated of the Worcester Food Policy Council, “We’re not working with people who are directly impacted on the scale that we need to. We don’t have a strong enough vision for what we want” (P8). Another noted that low-income community members they worked with were being left out of the conversation and should have access to decision-making spaces. “Who can come to our Food Policy Council meetings? The people who work and get paid for it. Not people from the community” (P2). Another participant suggested the creation of affinity groups for People of Color to have the space to define collective statements and agendas and build leadership outside of White Supremacy Culture spaces (P13). Others discussed a need for more transparent conversations and access to information about existing food resources (P3, P4, P5).

For those engaged in cooperative development, climate justice and food sovereignty work, a vision for the future was rooted in developing more worker ownership in the food sphere, employing sharing economy and mutual aid practices, and deepening anti-oppression work (P10, P11, P12). It also meant engaging with questions of resource access from a rights-based perspective, including land access for farmers. One participant asked, “what would it mean to presuppose that people have a right to critical resources, have a right to the city?” (P11). This participant suggested neighborhood-based youth-led organizing teams, supported by the city, who would help build community awareness and power to address food and climate issues (P11).

### **Avenues for Change, Social Transformation and a Green New Deal**

#### ***Policy Change, Advocacy and Movement-Building***

Many participants highlighted the role of local policy change and resource allocation in achieving the desired vision. Suggestions for the City included incentives to institutions for local purchasing (P9), a commitment to putting in more urban agriculture and community gardens infrastructure (P3, P8), facilitating permit acquisition for new and diverse food entrepreneurs,

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investing in immigrant businesses (P6, P8), and brownfield conversion for urban agriculture. At the State level, some participants called for expansion of HIP and an increased equity focus (P2, P4), and for expanding grant and technical assistance availability to small farmers (P6, P9).

Some participants highlighted the role of advocacy and constituent pressure, with one stating “I think municipal government has to be responsive to pressure from constituents” (P3). One advocate noted that the city had a duty to listen to constituents, and contrasted Worcester’s efforts with Boston’s food access plan, noting that “the only reason they had the backing was because the Mayor was behind it” (P2). Others seemed disheartened by the city’s response to constituent pressure thus far. One participant said, “Part of me wants to say that it’s people coming together in the city, as residents, to demand this [change]. But... I think after living here for 10 years, it’s long enough to note that change doesn’t happen that way in Worcester” (P5).

Some participants talked about transformative potential in grassroots mobilization and linking to coalitions and movements (P4, P5, P7, P8, P10, P11, P12). According to one participant in the food justice sphere, “it’s really about building relationships to build power to demand our right to food” (P8). This same participant called for more anti-poverty organizing in Worcester, based on community relationships of trust, to “hold our food system accountable to being a just food system” (P8). One college student talked about building a “food justice movement” on campus to hold the college accountable to the goals of the Real Food Challenge (P4). Another expressed that she saw activism as part of her identity, and her organization as part of a grassroots movement for “solving food insecurity and climate change” (P7).

Participants who identified with food sovereignty and climate justice principles saw themselves and their organization or project as part of, or aligning with, a broader movement. One noted that “we’re organized at a global level... we are trying to put a stop to the mass

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destruction of our environment” (P10). Others noted that they used framing or principles from CJA and USFSA in their work (P11, P12).

### *Education, Knowledge-Sharing and Awareness-Raising*

Many participants called for increased education, awareness-raising, and cross-communication to facilitate change. Several participants mentioned the importance of sharing knowledge and best practices, at both the grassroots and institutional levels (P1, P3, P7, P8). A few cited a need for more easily available information to facilitate engagement in food system processes for those outside mainstream institutions (P4, P5). One mentioned the need to “break down the siloes between these different groups and see that they’re interconnected” (P8).

Participants focused on a regenerative economy, food sovereignty and just transition particularly highlighted the role of political education and consciousness-raising, including curriculum development around a just transition and anti-racist practice, in paving the way for new approaches and leadership (P10, P11, P12). One participant highlighted Indigenous knowledge and practices as a way to “change the attitudes and minds of the people... teach people to respect the Earth” (P10). This participant also noted, “the people are the ones who get the last word. But the people must be educated, must protest, must demand their rights” (P10). Other advocates noted that institutions with the most power and funding could leverage resources to move more non-profits toward a solidarity and power-building approach (P2, P5).

### *Potential for a Local Green New Deal*

Some participants had little to say about the possible role of the Green New Deal framework in defining a local vision for food system transformation. A couple stated that they lacked familiarity with the resolution, while others mentioned that it seemed high-level and disconnected from the day-to-day issues they were working to address (P2, P3, P5). One

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participant who worked with regional farmers was critical of the resolution, stating, “I would like to know what farmer they consulted with in writing the GND personally, because it is disproportionate, the cause and effect that they laid out as opposed to the benefit” (P9).

Others said they supported the concept, but had not thought deeply about what it would mean at the local level (P3, P6). Among those who saw potential in the GND framework, one participant stated, “I think it’s a very promising framework for a just transition... like anything else, the devil’s in the details... I guess I tend to think pretty abstractly at this point” (P11). Another participant was skeptical about proposed the solutions actually being implemented, stating, “They are good projects, but all of those solutions stay on paper” (P10).

A few participants expressed strong enthusiasm about the vision it laid out (P1, P4, P8, P13). One younger participant stated, “I know a lot of people think it’s really ambitious, but I think it’s really important to think really creatively about what could happen in the future... I think it’s genius. I’m really for it... things like the GND kind of remind me that we don’t have to accept that this is the way it is” (P4). Another local advocate stated: “The Green New Deal is an opportunity to think about racial equity, jobs pipelines, and redesigning an economy that doesn’t continue down it’s negative path of profiting from slavery and exploitation... It has the ability to bring together groups under a shared purpose... we can start to make the city think more about local food and local sourcing and holding the city more accountable to that” (P8). Yet another stated, “It’s about time! I love Ocasio-Cortez, she’s just amazing. Locally we can do the Green New Deal – we are already doing it: buying locally, hiring youth to grow food, build hydroponic systems, run the farmers market, and implementing green food transportation” (P13).

### **Mapping Community Perspectives**

Using the framework offered by Holt-Giménez & Shattuck (2011), I attempted to organize ideas expressed by participants in my Worcester interviews within the spectrum from neoliberal to radical. I did this for conceptions of rights and justice, visions of change, and views of the food system-climate intersection. The purpose is threefold: 1) to make it easier to visualize overall findings; 2) to visualize how ideas of change relate to understandings of power, social control, and political change; 3) to visualize how differing perspectives may intersect, or offer the opportunity for further exploring differences and opportunities for convergence.

I did not find that any participant perceptions or ideas aligned with the “neoliberal” politics or strategies of free market, consolidated corporate control of our food system. A few ideas expressed seemed to align with or work within reformist discourse and strategies. I found that most perspectives loosely aligned with the progressive/food justice or radical/food sovereignty areas of the spectrum. Some differences I noted in participant language, perspectives and ideas that I found differentiated between these two areas regarded:

- localizing the food system vs. democratizing food system
- racial equity vs. undoing racism,
- right to food vs. right to collective control of the food system,
- improving resource access vs. decommodification of basic resources,
- fair wages vs. democratization of workplaces,
- inclusive decision-making vs. frontline-driven decision-making
- building resilience vs. building a regenerative and restorative economy

While assigning categories in this way takes away the nuance and richness of what participants shared, this mapping exercise is intended as a broad and flexible framework to help visualize aspects of and glean additional insight from participant input.

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<b>Politics</b>	<b>Neoliberal</b>	<b>Reformist</b>	<b>Progressive</b>	<b>Radical</b>
<b>Discourse</b>	<b>Food Enterprise</b>	<b>Food Security</b>	<b>Food Justice</b>	<b>Food Sovereignty</b>
Local views of rights and justice		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role for charity and corporations in promoting improved food access</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to healthy, local food is a human right</li> <li>• Equitable, dignified &amp; culturally relevant food access</li> <li>• Entitlement to social safety nets</li> <li>• Fair, living wages</li> <li>• Inclusivity in decision-making processes</li> <li>• Improved access to resources – capital, land, transportation</li> <li>• No one shoulders disproportionate food system burdens</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to the city/ taking back the commons</li> <li>• Right to land</li> <li>• Right to be part of decision-making</li> <li>• Power is in the hands of the people</li> <li>• Freedom, agency and ownership</li> <li>• Regenerative economy</li> <li>• De-commodification of resources</li> <li>• Anti-colonial practices</li> </ul>
Ideas for local food system change		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bring local food into chain supermarkets, corner stores and restaurants</li> <li>• Expand niche versions of local and organic</li> <li>• Improvements to charitable distribution (facilitate gleaning and retrieval, improve fresh &amp; local food offerings)</li> <li>• More public-corporate partnerships to facilitate food access</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy change to facilitate land access for rural and urban production</li> <li>• Expand and increase equity in HIP program</li> <li>• Create more pipelines for “good food” jobs</li> <li>• Decrease barriers to entry for food entrepreneurship</li> <li>• Expand grants &amp; technical support for small farmers</li> <li>• More holistic services</li> <li>• More inclusion &amp; equity in decision-making processes</li> <li>• People are not tokenized &amp; are paid for contribution</li> <li>• Farmers markets with improved accessibility &amp; cultural relevance</li> <li>• Advocacy to facilitate policy change and hold government accountable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deepening work to undoing racism in the food system</li> <li>• More worker-owned cooperatives and democratic food workplaces</li> <li>• More regenerative and agroecological practices</li> <li>• Shared urban food – fruit trees, gardens</li> <li>• Reclaiming unused/ abandoned spaces</li> <li>• Linking agenda for change to national and global people’s movements</li> <li>• Decision-making driven by frontline/impacted communities</li> </ul>
Understandings of food-climate intersection			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Localizing food system helps produce resilience</li> <li>• Industrial food system is vulnerable and harmful</li> <li>• Supporting local farms reduces emissions</li> <li>• Concern for vulnerability of frontline groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ecological, whole-systems perspective</li> <li>• Capitalism is driving climate change</li> <li>• Need for regenerative economy</li> <li>• Prioritize respect for Earth &amp; people</li> <li>• Frontline-driven just transition</li> </ul>

### **Discussion & Analysis**

Participants all seemed to view re-localization of the food system as a good thing. However, there seemed to be some embedded assumptions regarding the idea of local in relation to justice, sustainability, and community, and only some participants spent time unpacking some of these nuances. Many participants expressed views of and ideas about the local food system that aligned with elements of dominant AFM logic (Myers & Sbicca, 2015; DuPuis, Harrison & Goodman, 2011, Guthman, 2008; Holt-Giménez & Wang, 2011). Improving market access, buying options, and purchasing power were frequent discussion points for those engaged in self-described food access or food justice work.

Views and experiences of some participants working for change within the urban food system to some degree related to critiques from Alkon & Mares (2012), Cadieux & Slocum (2015) and others, regarding a tendency in work associated with food justice to engage with food access and equity in a way that does not simultaneously address neoliberal processes, or engage with interconnected issues such as labor exploitation and structural and institutional racism. Many participants talked in the interviews about racism in terms of its symptoms or surface-level manifestations, rather than the implications of structural and institutional racism and its embeddedness in the food system.

Some participants focused more explicitly than others on the connection between rights, power, oppression and control. In alignment with Herman & Goodman (2018), Brent, Schiavoni & Alejas (2015) and others, these participants seemed to reject a depoliticized approach to food justice and see food system change as part of broader social transformations rooted in an agenda for liberation and justice, rather than treating food interventions in a siloed or surface-level way.

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Many critiqued or expressed concerns about the conventional model of addressing food security and emphasized the need for equity. Some, but fewer, participants talked about linking food rights and justice with decolonizing institutional practice, rights-based organizing and movement-building, or structural change of the sort discussed by Brent, Schiavoni & Alonso-Fradejas (2015). These participants tended to align more with the radical/food sovereignty area of the framework discussed by Holt-Giménez & Shattuck (2011).

While policy change was frequently mentioned, this was often in the context of improving access to tangible food resources, and less on the structural factors or broader demands for change in the agri-food system discussed by Herman & Goodman (2018). When it came to the cost of food, various participants did highlight a need for higher wages, or a gap between what people can pay and what food costs, but did not necessarily talk about broader considerations around labor rights and exploitation. Those who were involved in work around alternative economies and who aligned with a just transition or food sovereignty perspective tended to verbalize more emphasis on addressing oppressive power structures in workplaces.

When it came to their views on the climate, although many participants discussed vulnerability in terms of social justice implications, the solutions proposed similarly often did not delve into the “structural conditions” of vulnerability discussed by Walsh-Dilley, Wolford & McCarthy (2016) in their calls for a rights-based approach to resilience. Participants talked about their concerns over who would feel the impacts most strongly, and how they saw a more localized food system as more resilient to change, but fewer discussed transformation of broader social and political systems as part of or central to building resilience.

Those who self-described as aligning with a food sovereignty, just transition or climate justice approach talked about issues of social control and democracy as foundational to their

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work and described themselves as part of broader movements for social and economic transformation that tied together food and climate as part of a larger whole. This fit with the descriptions of US food movement convergence with climate justice in the US that I found in the literature, with the CJA and USFSA aligning and connecting their work, articulating links between different justice concerns and pushing for a just transition that connects climate justice and food sovereignty (Cook, 2019; Tramel, 2018).

With regard to perspectives on the possible role of the Green New Deal framework in local food system transformation, I had to some degree expected participants would have more to say, particularly those engaging from a food sovereignty and climate justice perspective. However, the limited degree of engagement with the resolution and its potential implications is not altogether surprising, since it remains at present a very broad, vague, and high-level framework. I did note a degree of caution in endorsing the resolution from some participants given current ambiguities in the framework and how it could play out, which seemed to fit with some of the hesitations of groups on the political left discussed earlier in this paper (Holt-Giménez & Kleiner, 2019; Lazare, 2018).

I thought it was a point of interest that some participants working from an urban food access or food justice perspective had not really engaged with the resolution or thought it seemed far removed from the current realities of their work. For those who expressed enthusiasm about the GND, there seemed to be a general sense that it would offer more opportunities for convergence of local efforts around food, climate and broader economic and social change, as well as a possibility for resources to be funneled to efforts to localize the food system while building an economy rooted in justice and democracy.

### **Additional Reflections in Times of COVID-19**

As noted earlier in this paper, I completed the last stages of this research project under new stay-at-home restrictions implemented because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This unprecedented crisis has not only shone a spotlight on the fault lines in our healthcare system, but has also highlighted the fragility of our exploitative industrial food system, and how this interacts with multiple embedded layers of ecological harm and social injustices. For this reason, I have included some reflections on what COVID-19 might teach us about our food and climate present and future, in line with critiques, concerns and visions presented in this paper.

COVID-19 has provided a small glimpse at the disruptions to our food supply that we can expect to occur with increasing frequency in a climate uncertain future under our current CFR. We have all seen firsthand the bare supermarket shelves and price spikes on staple items, spurred by a combination of panic buying and supply chain disruptions. Food pantries have been stretched in their already inadequate offerings, as corporate food donations have dwindled, while the need for food aid vastly expands. Perversely, we have nationally also seen dumping of certain farm products of which there is a sudden overabundance, as the usual institutional buyers have shut down shop (Charles, 2020; Huber, 2020).

Meanwhile, COVID-19 has made it extra hard to ignore *who* is most vulnerable and most disproportionately impacted in times of crisis. These people include:

- Black, Brown, Indigenous and Latinx communities, who have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 cases in many places;
- Frontline (sacrifice zone) communities, whose health has been compromised by air pollution;

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- Workers in low-wage food industry jobs, suddenly deemed “essential” but not offered hazard pay or adequate protective gear, including migrant farm laborers, fast food workers, workers in slaughterhouses and processing facilities, and supermarket employees.
- People ineligible for social safety net programs, including immigrant families (both documented and undocumented), and gig economy workers.

Frequently, the above factors intersect, creating a perfect storm. And the people mentioned above are, broadly speaking, many of the same people who are likely to most intensely experience the effects of climate change (Atkin, 2020; Rogers-Wright, 2020).

Outside of the vulnerabilities the crisis has exposed, the climate change-industrial agriculture-public health links are clear. Some of the same environmentally damaging land management practices that are helping fuel the climate crisis – including clear-cutting, monocropping, and concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) – have also been pointed to as creating prime conditions for virus spread (Huber, 2020). However, Congressional efforts to address the crisis have been piecemeal at best, and the opportunity has not been seized to push through climate measures (such as increased emissions standards in the travel industry) as part of the massive bailout packages that are being passed. Meanwhile, the federal administration has wasted no time using the distraction of the crisis to attempt to ram through new fossil fuel projects, limit the power of the EPA, and roll back important regulations, including wetland and stream protections (Atkin, 2020; Westervelt & Gertz, 2020).

In the HEATED podcast, which explores the intersection of the COVID-19 and climate crisis, climate journalist Emily Atkin asks CJA policy coordinator Anthony Rogers-Wright, “If we had a political system in which there were no failure of imagination and we were able to address multiple crises together, what would we see come out of Washington right now?” (Atkin,

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2020). His first answer is legislation to transform our food and agriculture system, with a focus on smaller scale, regenerative agriculture that heals planet and people (Rogers-Wright, 2020).

Here in Worcester, the challenges of COVID-19 have been met with an outpouring of community solidarity, in the form of sharing and trading of resources, a growing mutual aid fund, efforts to ensure undocumented community members have the resources they need, and offers to help with grocery purchases and deliveries for those unable to pay or leave their house. I have heard of similar efforts popping up in many cities across the US. I have also heard more talk of people wanting to grow their own food, and have seen increased efforts to purchase from local farmers, markets selling local foods, and small family owned restaurants.

These efforts offer a glimmer of hope for some of the visions for a new food future that various participants in this paper highlighted – a local food economy rooted in care and communal exchange, increased support for small farmers using sustainable production methods, more shared farm and garden spaces, and a thriving urban foodscape. What remains to be seen, is whether these efforts coalesce into ongoing momentum, collaborations and even a movement, to build this longer-term vision and locate it within broader efforts for a just transition and, potentially, a frontline-driven Green New Deal vision.

### **Conclusions & Recommendations**

This research paper has explored how stakeholders engaged in local food system change understand their relationship to food justice and food rights and envision the future of a just food system, in the context of a rapidly changing climate and a Green New Deal vision. It has taken Worcester, Massachusetts as the site for this exploration. I have found that participants' relationships with justice and rights in our local food system differ significantly, loosely mapping onto the spectrum of progressive-to-radical posed by Holt-Giménez & Shattuck (2011), as

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visualized at the end of the Findings section. I have also found that while participants broadly agree that our industrial food system is both a driver of climate change and has made our food system less resilient to its impacts, perceptions of the relationship between climate change and the vision for a just food system differ. Based on my observations and analysis, these differences seem to align with different understandings of food justice more broadly, as well as differing forms and degrees of engagement with questions of power, oppression and social control.

I noticed that those who described their work and relationship to the food system as aligning with forms of knowledge, understanding and practice that fall outside the dominant U.S. narrative, including an Indigenous perspective, international food sovereignty, and regenerative economics, tended to talk about the relationship between food and climate in an integrated, whole-systems way. These participants also described social justice as more of an embedded and foundational, rather than additive property, of change, and some described their identities and those of their organizations as intertwined with a broader movement. This seems to align with the discussion in the literature of movement-oriented approaches to food sovereignty and climate justice, and the discourse and approach of US coalitions like USFSA and CJA, which some of the participants intersected with in their work. Based on my exploration and research, I understand the approaches of these groups as grounded in a liberation agenda in which the path forward depends upon healing human and ecological traumas and undoing oppression.

The distinction of this way of talking about food system change, relative to perspectives that emphasized food access, distributive justice, and incremental policy change matters, because it indicates differences that influence change narratives and strategies. While some of these differences might not be overcome, they could be further explored through intentional dialogue to facilitate greater mutual understanding of how efforts *do* overlap and how issues that are not

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directly tied to “food” are still wrapped up in food system transformation. As indicated in my Discussion & Analysis section, the COVID-19 crisis may offer a window of opportunity for building these intersections and designing a new path forward rooted in solidarity and relationships of care. It has not only offered a glimpse at the cracks in the industrial food system and the need to build more resilient local foodways, but has also shone a light on how exploitation and oppression woven throughout various social and economic systems worsens crisis and leaves all of us more vulnerable.

Despite differences, there were several points of convergence in perspectives across most or all participants, including some of the tangible, physical manifestations of change that participants would like to see. These included an urban landscape that uplifted food and created more access points, through various urban growing projects and food businesses, both cooperative and otherwise. Numerous participants also expressed, in some form or another, a desire for more valuing of diversity, more support for urban and regional farmers, more sharing of knowledge, and a shift in prioritization of resources. Interestingly, despite different degrees of familiarity with the Green New Deal resolution, many participants saw it as a high-level framework, that was removed from their current reality or conception of local change. Based on these similarities and differences, I have identified some opportunities and recommendations that could help both enhance the sphere of urban food justice in Worcester and the interconnections among actors engaged in local social change.

The first of these, is for actors engaged in the local food system to develop spaces to deepen the conversation on food justice, engage with a more reflexive approach, and ensure that diverse community members have a clear say and stake in the outcomes. The Worcester Food Policy Council, as an existing structure, could play a role in this. The Council has already

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recognized the need for a broader cross-section of the community to be engaged in conversations about the future of our food system and has begun making moves toward this. It could continue to expand and deepen this work and prioritize the creation of more inclusive and accessible spaces, rooted in an anti-racist approach. This would additionally require a prioritization and resources – including time – put toward developing existing participants’ understandings of what an explicitly anti-racist approach and anti-oppressive approach means in practice and how decision-making power can be shared and leadership developed and transferred. The Council could also potentially benefit from more explicit engagement with regional farmers, to facilitate a more integrated perspective of the local food system that is part of a broader network of relationships of which farmers are a core part.

This first recommendation feeds into the second, which is to take a less siloed approach to food system change and build more connection and knowledge-sharing among the different grassroots and non-profit groups working on different social issues and from different social change approaches across the city. One particular area in which there seems to be room for greater connection, based both on what I heard from participants and on my own observations, is between groups working on food and climate issues. Given the processes underway in the city and the ways that COVID-19 could contribute to building conversations about the interconnectedness of these issues, there seems to be a window of opportunity for convergence of food and climate work from a justice lens.

Building these increased connections would likely need to entail efforts to embrace conflict, suspend assumptions, and delve into the complexities associated with different perspectives on how social change is achieved. The deeper understanding among food system actors of an anti-racist and anti-oppressive approach named in the first recommendation could

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help facilitate engagement with conflict and difference in this way. It could also mean bringing more individuals, groups and organizations engaged in transformative food system change processes in other parts of the United States into the Worcester sphere to offer dialogues and workshops, and ensuring that these were offered in spaces that could help bring in non-profit leaders, grassroots activists, and a broader cross-section of community members.

A third recommendation is for the City of Worcester to place greater prioritization on the local food system and allocate more resources toward developing a thriving and just food system as it moves forward in its vision for an urban “Renaissance” and the Green Worcester plan for sustainability. Among other things, this would entail deeper engagement with resource access issues faced by low-income community members; more emphasis on urban agriculture and facilitating access to urban growing for more community members – including building land access and uplifting and strengthening the organizations already doing this work; and more local purchasing agreements with businesses allowed to operate in the city. It would also mean transparency and accessibility of decision-making processes, in which the stakeholders impacted by city decisions about the food system and with deep knowledge about different aspects of the food system would be able to be at the table and engaged in city planning and decision-making processes about local food.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

### Understandings & experiences of Worcester's food system

- Describe a little about your role and why you got involved in this work.
- How do you understand your relationship to and impact on Worcester's food system?
- What/who has influenced your perspectives and ideas of food system change?
- What are some characteristics of Worcester's food system that are particularly significant to you?

### Food Justice/Sovereignty & the Local

- What do the words "justice" and "rights" mean to you in the context of Worcester's food system?
- How do you see your work relating to rights and justice?
- What is your vision of change for Worcester's food system?
- How do you think this change would be achieved, and who would need to be involved?
- From your perspective, and based on your experience, what are some of the challenges/obstacles to achieving transformative food system change, locally/regionally?

### Food & Climate

- What comes to mind when you think about the relationship between our local food system and the climate crisis?
- Are there tangible ways in which food and climate are connected in your work?
- What are your thoughts about the Green New Deal? Has this resolution or new activist movements like Sunrise, led you to think differently about your work?
- Are there any questions I have not asked, or information I haven't gotten at, which you think is important to consider in this topic?