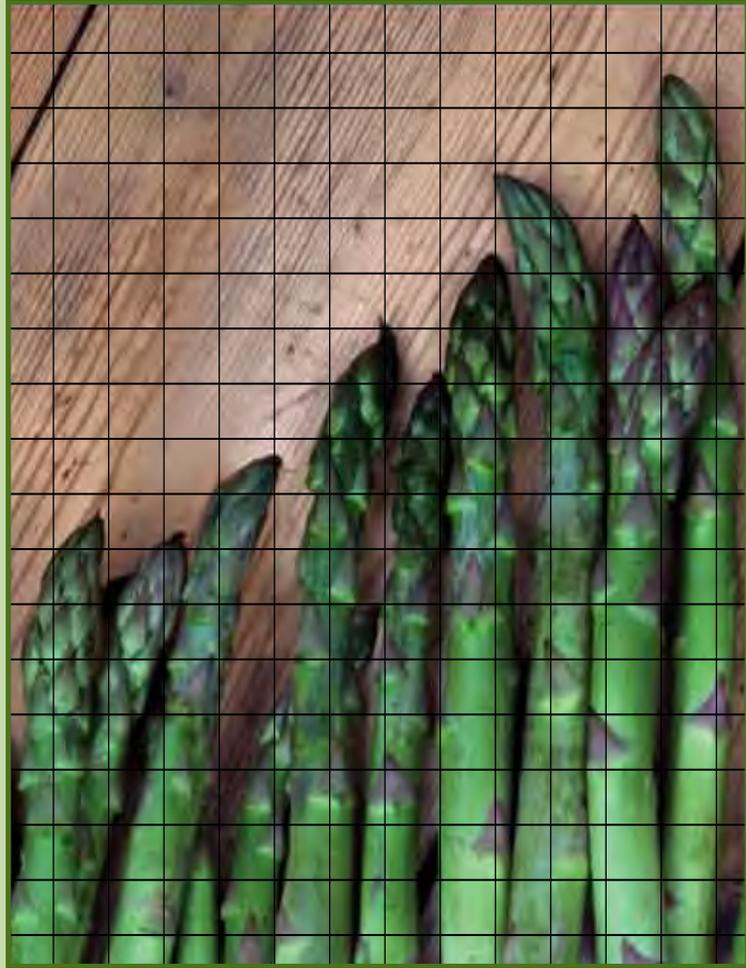


# THE RISING COST OF FOOD



*What is our food future?*



## WELCOME TO THE FORUM

Food is important to everyone and the rising cost of food places new strains on individuals, families, and communities. With the assistance of this Issue Guide, “The Rising Cost of Food,” we will explore this complex issue by working together to:

- Understand the issue better
- Look at multiple approaches and consider the benefits and consequences of each approach, as well as possible trade-offs
- Explore possible actions that might make a positive difference in our community

### *Community Forums*

Forums are held to provide an opportunity for people to come together to discuss the struggles and challenges facing their communities. The forums are based on the idea that in a democracy each person has a responsibility to work cooperatively to share through their common concerns, to discuss alternative actions, and eventually arrive at a consensus leading to public action. At each forum there are at least three alternative approaches put forward for public consideration and discussion. Each choice is considered in relation to how that choice would impact the issue.

The ideas that come out of these forums will be compiled and shared with organizations, concerned citizens, media, and policy makers. It is our hope that your experience in a forum will lead to further discussions and possible actions in your community.



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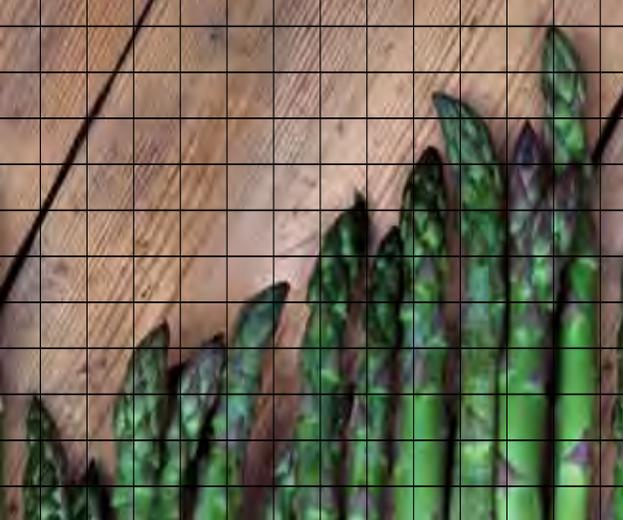
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For more information on community engagement and deliberative dialogue, go to: [www.msue.msu.edu/publicdeliberation](http://www.msue.msu.edu/publicdeliberation).



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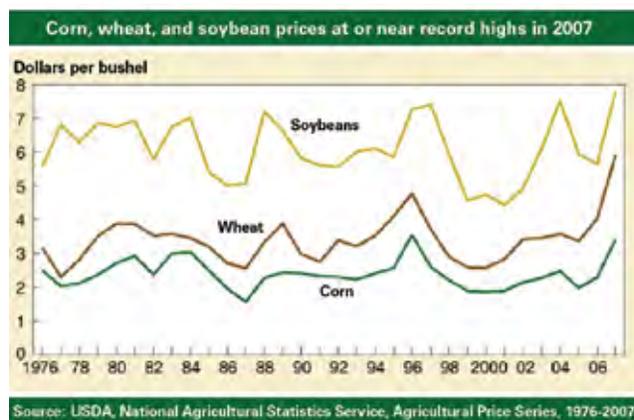


## INTRODUCTION

# THE RISING COST OF FOOD

Walk into any small neighborhood grocery store or big box supermarket retailer and you will see people taking a second look at the price of food, checking with the store clerk to verify that a favorite item has not been mispriced, or steering an under-stocked shopping cart into the check-out aisle. The price of food has soared recently. Michigan consumers are struggling to understand why they have to dig deeper into their pockets to purchase long familiar products. What is causing these changes? What, if anything, can and should consumers do in response?

Food prices in the U.S. rose 4.8 percent in 2007 (USDA, 2008). Commentators have offered up explanations that range from investment in biofuels, to increased global demand for energy feed stocks, to China's appetite for meat, to the declining value of the U.S. dollar, to price hikes in agricultural commodities such as basic grains, oilseeds, and other foodstuffs. Just in the past two to three years the prices of corn, soybeans, rice, and wheat have doubled and, in some cases, tripled. The price of corn, for example, has risen from less than \$2 per bushel in 2005 to \$3.40 a bushel in 2007. In late 2008 commodity prices dropped again but that has yet to translate into lower food prices. Given the widespread use of corn and high fructose corn syrup in much of the foods we routinely consume, as well in the feed rations of food animals, corn plays a prominent role in the American diet. The graph below highlights the upward trend of three basic foodstuffs. For many farmers the news of higher grain prices may signal a boom, but for consumers faced with rising grocery bills, higher prices may result in sticker shock.



### Feeding at the Trough

The rising cost of food has caught many Americans off-guard. We have become accustomed to inexpensive food. Over the course of the twentieth century food moved to the back-burner of the consciousness of many Americans. For most, it became abundant, inexpensive, more convenient, and perceived as relatively nutritious. As a matter of fact, Americans enjoy the lowest food prices in the world. We spend less than ten percent of our income on food (USDA, 2008). Most other countries spend considerably more. France, for example, spends 15.4 percent while Russians have to lay out 34.0 percent of their income for food. Table 1 compares U.S. food expenditures with a few other select countries.

The correlation between our legacy of “cheap food,” however, and our nation’s widening girth, or crisis of excess, has not been lost on food and nutrition professionals. This paradox of plenty, along with a national weight problem, gives us our first glimpse of why we have a growing food problem. Many of the hidden “costs” of our food, such as human health, are not factored into the sticker price.

### Distributing the Impact Unevenly

Despite the lower percentage of total household expenditures Americans pay for food, many are unprepared to absorb price hikes in our weekly food bill. For many, paying more out of pocket for food is out of the question. In the midst of an economic recession, rising food costs are even more devastating for the Michigan families who live below the poverty rate. Recent studies show that the Michigan economy is fairing much worse than other states. Data from the U.S. Census reports that “the only state in the nation where poverty actually increased was Michigan” (Roelofs, 2008b). The poverty rate in Michigan climbed to 14 percent last year, up from 13.5 percent the previous year, or an increase of 45,000 people. The percentage of families in extreme poverty – those who get by on half or less of the federal poverty line – grew from six percent in 2006 to 6.5 percent in 2007.

For those on food stamps, the sticker shock at the check out counter may require hard choices. One in eight Michigan residents receives food stamps, twice the number since 2000 (Eckholm, 2008). The number of food stamp recipients in the U.S. is expected to reach an all time high this year of 28 million. Emergency providers such as food banks and pantries are also feeling a pinch as higher food prices translate into fewer donations to stock the shelves for those in need. Food donations to Mel Trotter Ministries, a food bank in Grand Rapids, has dropped by 16 percent, forcing the agency to turn away 10 to 15 families in need daily (Roelofs, 2008a). The average daily lunch program at the Eastside Soup Kitchen in Saginaw has increased by 80 diners over the past two years (Long, 2008).

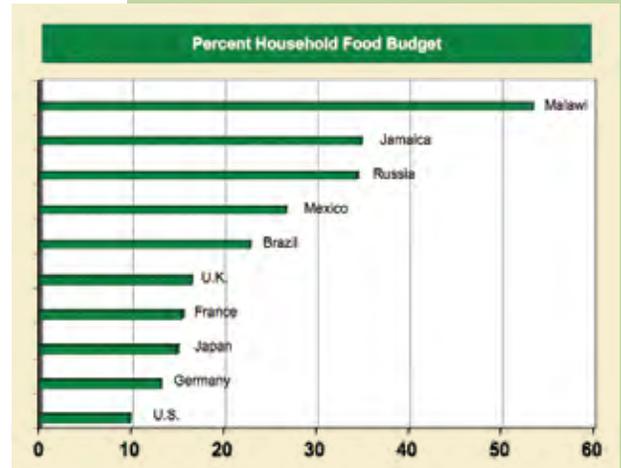


Table 1



Higher sticker prices in the grocery store are not the only evidence of rising food costs. School lunch programs are also passing the economic burden on to our children. A recent report by the School Nutrition Association found that nearly 150 school districts raised their lunch prices by 16 percent for the 2008-2009 academic year. Only 60 districts raised lunch prices the preceding year (School Nutrition Association, n.d.).

In Michigan, the number of children participating in free and reduced lunch programs has also grown. During the 2007-2008 school year, 649,802 children were enrolled in the program, an increase of 40,000 from 2004 (Annie Casey Foundation; CEPI, n.d.).

### *Dire Conditions*

Any increased financial burden in the weekly budget of consumers often means something has to give. Antidotal evidence abounds of elderly who are forced to choose between prescription medicine or food and a growing movement toward self-sufficiency through backyard gardening. Amy Rynell, Director of Heartland Alliance Mid-American Institute on Poverty, said “the rising number of those in extreme poverty [in Michigan] is sobering. These are people who are spreading out their food so they are only eating once a day. They are people who are living in houses that are unsuitable for living. These are really dire conditions” (Muskegon Chronicle, 2008).

### *Global Impacts*

Just as the impact of higher food prices is felt differently by consumers in Michigan, the impact is also distributed unevenly around the world. Globally, the rising cost of basic foods has led to collective action as citizens take to the streets to demonstrate their frustration. Food riots are an old form of social protest, and once again citizens in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Egypt, Cameroon, Uzbekistan, and other countries are demanding relief through civil means or violence. Food prices rose by 52 percent from 2007-2008 in much of the developing world, increasing the threat of food insecurity. But not all collective action is violent or public. Haiti is a good case in point. On the one hand, protesters have taken to the streets, blocked highways, looted stores, and clashed with local law enforcement to draw attention to their hunger and desperation. Other Haitians are more quietly tightening their belts and selling “dirt cookies – biscuits made of clay, salt, and oil” (Schuller, 2008). They are also practicing *youn ede lòt* – sharing what they have, looking after vulnerable kin and neighbors.

The outlook is particularly grim for import-dependent nations where the costs of corn, millet, and rice have skyrocketed. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Program responded by launching a \$21 million relief program targeting 54 vulnerable countries (Antonios, 2008). Food prices

have risen by five to seven percent among the original 15 members of the European Union, but new member states like Bulgaria and Estonia saw 21.8 and 17 percent price hikes, respectively (CEC, 2008). The Indian government has limited rice exports (BBC News, 2008) and the French are investigating potential price gouging on the part of producers and distributors (Crumley, 2008).

Rather than provide economic and/or political intervention, other countries have opted to take a cultural approach to the problem. The British, for example, launched a national campaign to combat the rising global cost of food by reminding citizens to clean their plates and warm up leftovers.

### *We're in It Together*

Rising food and commodity prices are social problems that cannot be solved in isolation. The global integration of the food system reminds us that we are linked together in trans-national supply chains that can determine how much those of us in rich industrialized nations spend in the check-out line and whether or not those in the developing world eat a protein-rich diet or "dirt cookies". This is a social problem that requires collective action, but before we act together, we must first talk to each other.

### *What Will We Do?*

How can food prices be lowered for everyone, including low-income citizens? How can families and households adapt to higher food prices? How can we be sure everyone eats an easily accessible and healthy diet, both here in the U.S. and in other countries? Should governments impose food subsidies? Should we go back to the land and grow our own food? What can our communities do at a local or regional level to increase the secure availability and affordability of food? Is it possible for farmers to receive a living wage for their investment and at the same time ensure that our legacy to future generations is not environmental and social degradation? These questions, and many others like them, require thoughtful and deliberate consideration.

### *Framing Our Food Future*

Here we present three major approaches, or choices, for addressing the rising cost of food. These options are not meant to be exhaustive; they provide a window into the critical issues we face and the tensions and challenges that accompany each course of action. Each approach is laden with diverse values and assumptions about human beings and social action that underpin their recommendations. Each approach also embodies tensions and struggles that draw our attention to the sacrifices that are required when we choose one path over another.





### *Approach One*

#### *Taking Personal Stock: Reassessing Lifestyle, Values, and Choices*

Supporters of this approach say that we have relinquished our responsibility to food and agriculture. We have turned our attention to other material comforts and in the process we know little about how to respond to the social, economic, and ecological challenges that underpin the rising cost of food. This inattention requires that we reconnect with food. We can begin by educating ourselves about food production, processing, distributing, retailing, and disposal. This will give us the vital information on which to make decisions that reflect our values as a society and curtail unintended negative consequences.

### *Approach Two*

#### *Local Matters: Re-embedding Food in Community*

Supporters of Approach Two say that food has become a commodity just like any other form of production, and along with the global deregulation of the food sector, unintended consequences wreak havoc on our environment and social relations. For example, the average American meal travels 1,500 miles to reach your plate. The expenditure of fossil fuels required to transport this global dinner produces greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to global warming. Local food—food grown in our community, region, or foodshed—can mitigate this negative impact. If communities put food security and sovereignty first as a citizenship right, it will also aid local economic development.

### *Approach Three*

#### *Increase Food Production: More People = More Demand*

Supporters of the final approach argue that what is needed to bring food prices down is more food. Supply and demand are out of balance. Growing longevity in the industrialized countries, population growth, and the changing diets of China and India from starch-based foods to protein-rich meals requires more food production to meet our global needs. To meet the growing worldwide demand of agricultural crops for food, fuel and other uses, we must boost production per acre by rolling back prohibitive regulatory policies that limit output and apply the latest science and technology to agriculture.

### *Understanding through Dialogue*

The purpose of this issue guide is to provide citizens with familiarity of the basic core arguments presented in scientific and popular culture circles that propose solutions to the rising cost of food. Using meaningful dialogue and deliberation, citizens can increase their understanding of this complicated issue and take a leadership role in forging the first steps toward a critical investigation of our food system, what is going wrong, and how we might turn this recent global crisis into an opportunity for sustainable food system development.

Even though we are all “eaters” and are affected by growing food prices in different ways, this issue guide will provide background information to help citizens take a fresh look at a familiar problem and at the values and assumptions we assign to problems. As citizens make decisions about what is in store for our food future, they will be making decisions about the fabric of public life. Will we make food accessible to enhance food security? Will we organize our food system to protect natural resources? What should be the relationship between human needs and markets? The only way to ensure a sustainable food system is to begin by nurturing food citizenship. Food citizenship is about everyday people—not scientists, governmental regulatory bodies, or transnational firms—controlling their food futures. This is a chance for Americans to take ownership of their food system, practice food citizenship, and advance a food democracy.



### **For Further Reading on Food**

#### **Democracy:**

The Citizens Network for Michigan Food

Democracy <http://www.mifooddemocracy.org/>

Small Planet [http://www.smallplanet.org/action/item/food\\_democracy](http://www.smallplanet.org/action/item/food_democracy)

Neva Hassanein. 2003. “Practicing Food Democracy: A Pragmatic Politics of Transformation.” *Journal of Rural Studies* 19: 77-86.

Michael Windfuhr and Jennie Jonsén. 2005. *Food Sovereignty: Towards Democracy in Localised Food Systems*. Warwickshire, UK: ITDG Publishing.





## APPROACH ONE TAKING PERSONAL STOCK: LIFESTYLE, VALUES AND CHOICES

When we visit the grocery store, the food is in neat, colorful packages and generally bears little resemblance to its original ingredients. This packaging and marketing has left Americans largely uninformed about our entire food system, from production to waste disposal. For decades, our food system has fostered a disconnection to our food. While produce may be labeled with the state or country of origin, we rarely have any idea where the ingredients in the processed food came from. Some labels—such as “free range,” “no added preservatives,” or “antibiotic free”—give sketchy indication of the history of food, but many labels are unregulated and misleading.

Until recently, not connecting to our food sources has not been perceived as a problem for the average American. However, proponents of Approach One argue that the current food system is under stress, and understanding that system is central—indeed critical—to understanding why food costs are rising. More importantly, according to Approach One, that knowledge provides the key to controlling those costs.

### *Food and Cultural Values*

Americans have historically thought of food in relative isolation—only as something we eat every day and purchase routinely. But, say advocates for Approach One, food is an integral part of our culture and the way we live. If we consider food in its full context and tie it to our values and lifestyle choices, we can help control the maddening pace of food-price escalation. As an added bonus, they argue, we will enrich our lives and our world.

### *Individual Empowerment and Choice*

Approach One supporters acknowledge that scientific advances in food production and structural change of our nation’s food system may lower the cost of food, but not soon enough for those citizens who need immediate relief from high prices. As families and individuals, we must combat the rising cost of food ourselves without depending on agribusiness, technology, or the government. The central position of Approach One is individual empowerment: Americans should take personal stock of our consumption habits, lifestyle, values, and choices, with an eye toward food. We must do so by educating ourselves about food and by being more intentional with our lifestyle choices. Those changes, they assert, will combat rising food costs without sacrificing our standards of living. Americans can eat high quality food, maintain a good quality of life, and do so without additional income or expenditures.

Best selling author Barbara Kingsolver dramatically lowered her food cost by eating locally and seasonally. In *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* Kingsolver documents her family's year-long quest to eat only foods produced where they live. "The biggest shock of our year," she concluded, "came when we added up the tab. We'd fed ourselves, organically and pretty splendidly we thought, on about fifty cents per family member, per meal—probably less than I spent in the years when I qualified for food stamps."



### *Adopting Alternative Food Systems*

Increasingly, Americans have enjoyed a food system that allows them to purchase inexpensive seasonal foods shipped from around the world. This system is dependent on cheap fuel. Now, with the escalating price of crude oil, transporting and growing that food is increasingly expensive and harmful to the environment due to damage done from burning fossil fuels.

Accordingly, our food system is under strain. Proponents of Approach One say it is time to consider eating foods whose cost is less dependent on fossil fuel. We must become more mindful of our present food practices.

Purchasing locally grown food through direct market venues such as from a farmers' market or as part of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is one alternative food system option. Quite simply, locally grown foods travel much less than food grown through traditional agricultural practices. Since conventional transportation adds up to 12 percent to the cost of food, locally grown food offers some economic advantages. And, because locally grown food is usually less packaged and less processed, we may eliminate a portion of the approximate 28 percent processing costs that traditional food carries.

### *Economic Advantages of Purchasing Locally*

To be sure, even with these advantages, locally grown food may not have significant or even tangible cost advantages to traditional agriculture. Among other reasons, this is because of agribusiness subsidies and economies of scale. Accordingly, locally grown food, at first blush, may seem more expensive than traditional agriculture. But, as the impact of transportation and production cost increases are felt, economics are shifting in favor of local food systems. Local fruits and vegetables and meat and milk from grass-fed animals have not increased in price to the same degree that conventionally raised products have, and it is now less expensive to purchase many items locally. Furthermore, local food is generally grown and raised in a manner that is environmentally sustainable, supportive of local economies, humane to animals and farm workers, and, many studies show, more nutritious than its traditionally grown and raised counterparts. Purchasing locally may, therefore, be better reflective of our values.

When foods are not in season and cannot be purchased locally, proponents of Approach One suggest either not purchasing them or purchasing them less frequently. We can choose to do without raspberries in January and grapes in March, and can instead enjoy them only seasonally—when the price doesn't reflect transportation, packaging, and other costs associated with food that is flown, shipped, and trucked in. Remember, our great grandparents ate seasonally! Eating foods that aren't just in season but are in peak season will lower food cost even more when supplies are plentiful. The first tomatoes of the season are more expensive than when tomatoes are ripening at all farms a month later.

## Home and Community Gardening

Proponents of Approach One argue we can reduce our food cost even further if we purchase and preserve fruits and vegetables in bulk during their peak season when they are the least expensive. Drying, freezing, pickling, and canning are much less complicated than many people think, and it will allow us to eat well throughout the winter when the fruits and vegetables available at the grocery store will be most expensive. Learning how to preserve food is as easy as a trip to the library, the local Extension office, or a few moments on Google.

Growing food in our own backyard or in a community garden is another proven way that many consumers significantly lower the cost of food. The W. Atlee Burpee Company reported a 40 percent increase in the sales of vegetable and herb seeds and plants over last year, and the owner of the company, George C. Ball, says a \$100 investment in a home vegetable garden will net a \$1,000 to \$1,700 savings off the average yearly grocery bill!

## Becoming Better Food Decision-Makers

We can also make choices to lower our food cost when still utilizing our traditional food system. We can check the newspaper advertisements for special sales or clip coupons to save money. In fact, University of Minnesota Extension claims that using coupons for coffee, prepared foods, cereals, flour, and other products can save you 10 percent! Be careful not to purchase a particular food just because it's on sale or because you have a coupon. Make sure it's something you would be purchasing already. Additionally, purchasing generic products are generally less expensive than their brand name counterparts, and may be comparable in taste and nutritional quality.

Food is part of our lifestyle. Proponents of Approach One argue that being more intentional with our lifestyle choices can lower our cost of food and allow us more money for food.

Americans waste food, plain and simple. Sadly, the average American household throws away 14 percent of its purchased food! Our rushed lifestyle may be partly to blame. After a hectic day at work and running errands, how many of us swing by the supermarket and purchase ingredients for the evening meal, forgetting about adequate groceries already in the pantry at home? Phil Lempert, of SupermarketGuru.com (a web site that tracks the grocery industry) says "Americans have forgotten how to food-shop. When we don't plan, we often buy the wrong thing, which causes us to spend more money." He suggests a weekly "use what you have" night. If we plan our meals and our grocery store visits around food we have, instead of food we need to purchase, we can cut into the 14 percent of food we regularly waste—and lower our grocery bills.



## What Can Be Done?

- Conduct a kitchen-cupboard food assessment of what your family eats
- Read about and talk to others about food
- Attend public events where food is the topic in order to learn from others
- Reallocate time in daily routines to mindful activities around food
- Identify your own individual and family values, and how they are linked to food
- Eat out less and cook and preserve food at home
- Get to know local farmers and buy locally produced food
- Investigate the lunch menu at kids' schools

## What Costs and Tradeoffs Should We Be Prepared To Accept?

### Likely Tradeoffs . . .

- New investments and infrastructure changes will be necessary to support more localized production and a less fuel-dependent lifestyle.
- Government subsidies and agricultural programs that currently support conventional agriculture will have to shift to support small farms which make direct marketing to consumers possible.
- The seasonality of growing cycles, especially in a state like Michigan, means less diversity of available fruits and vegetables.

### Concerns about This Approach . . .

- Critics of Approach One say it's unrealistic because very few Americans can utilize this solution.
- Purchasing locally at farmers' markets or CSAs may still be pricier for many consumers than purchasing food from a large chain grocery or big box store.
- People may be unable or unwilling to readjust their busy schedules or alter their lifestyles in order to slow down enough to garden, cook, preserve food, or bike.
- The "me-centered" focus of this approach hampers our ability to see larger structural problems with the food system.

## *Reducing the Carbon Footprint*

Proponents of Approach One also suggest that we drive less. We can choose one day each week where we do not drive at all. We can also plan each trip in our vehicle so that we run errands in the most fuel efficient way possible. We can eat at restaurants and visit stores that are closer to our homes. We can also choose to substitute walking or biking for driving. According to the Bicycle Transportation Alliance, one year of riding a bicycle verses owning and driving a car will save an individual \$8,000. Even if we don't only ride a bike, substituting a bicycle for our car on some trips can save us a significant amount of money – money that can then go toward food. Not only will biking save money, we will be healthier and reduce carbon and smog emissions.

Proponents of Approach One further suggest revisiting our pocket-books to see where we spend money, and determining if there is anywhere we can cut back in order to set aside more money for food. They do not argue that we need to make huge changes. Instead they advocate that minor changes will make a difference. For example, do we need to spend \$3 every day on gourmet coffee? Perhaps we can make coffee at home three days a week, and visit our favorite coffee shop twice a week. Maybe we start packing a lunch for work instead of visiting the local diner, or maybe we make pizza at home every Friday night instead of having it delivered.

## *Make Food Choices Empowering*

Proponents of Approach One argue that these options are empowering and are do-it-yourself solutions to the rising cost of food. They argue that we will feel the results immediately, whereas the benefits from other approaches will take years to realize. In the meantime, Americans would fall victim to higher costs and reduced lifestyles. Moreover, Approach One advocates argue that incorporating alternative food systems has added benefits, like enhancing the local economy and supporting other community and personal values. Driving less and biking or walking more will improve our health, and the health of our planet. Additionally, when we are more intentional about spending money and purchasing, growing, and preparing food, we can enjoy a richer quality of life.

Collectively, such actions will allow consumers to ensure a healthy food supply and exert autonomy over their food future.







MARKET

“Our system of producing, processing, and marketing food has jumped its tracks; like a runaway train, its momentum is out of control. Many observers from many different points of interest warn that, unchecked, this system will alter the foundations of life as we know it.”

(DiRamio & Cantrell, 2005)

## APPROACH TWO LOCAL MATTERS: RE-EMBEDDING FOOD IN COMMUNITY

“We all eat for a living. Food is essential to our health and well being and plays a central role in the social connections and cultural traditions that help define community. However, the connections between food and agriculture increasingly go unrecognized” (Hamm and Heller, 2004). Supporters of Approach Two argue, in fact, that communities have become disconnected from their food sources. Some say that the typical food on U.S. plates travels far more than the people eating it—an average of 1,500 miles from farm to fork. In Michigan, a state comprising two peninsulas surrounded largely by water, average food miles may be even higher.

### *The Farm to Fork Problem in a Global Marketplace*

According to a recent analysis, globalization has made the farm to fork problem worse. Deregulated international trade and finance have removed barriers limiting corporate access to resources, labor, and markets worldwide. Food is treated like just another commodity, transported back and forth across the world in search of profitable markets. Agriculture has become a factory operation, answering to a global economy that drives up the cost of food at every point in the food chain. Not only does a global food system tend to ignore social and environmental costs in favor of higher profits, but it renders food sovereignty—the ability to control one’s own food supply—difficult or impossible for most families, communities, regions, and countries (Mamen et al, 2004).

### *Reconnect Communities To Their Food Sources*

If communities have become disconnected from their food sources, proponents of Approach Two argue that we need to reconnect them. Food system issues should be an integral part of local community and economic planning processes. Many pressing issues faced by our communities today, advocates of Approach Two point out, “can be addressed in part by paying closer attention to our food—what we eat, where it comes from, how it is produced, processed and distributed” (Hamm and Heller, 2004).

Furthermore, re-localization of food sources is part of the solution to problems created by globalization of food markets. “Localization means shortening the distance between producer and consumer—simultaneously benefiting farmers, farmworkers, and consumers, protecting the environment, and improving the quality of food while lowering its cost” (Mamen et al, 2004).

## Essential elements of a community-based

### food system include (Meter, 2003):

- Local ownership of healthy, productive land
- Access to clean water and air
- Organized community support for a cluster of producers to assure local food access for residents
- Democratic leadership toward a broadly shared long-term vision
- Local credit/lending options
- Regular events and activities focused on food

## *An Integrated "Food System"*

Reducing food miles alone, according to Approach Two, is not enough. A "food system" describes the way we organize how we eat. It includes growing, harvesting, processing, packaging, transporting, marketing, consuming, and disposing of food. A "community-based" food system is one in which these processes are integrated to enhance the environmental, economic, social and nutritional health of a particular place. The word "community" emphasizes strengthening relationships among all food system components (Garrett & Feenstra, 1999). A community-based food system differs from the globalized food system in radical ways.

In community-based food systems, for example, achieving food security goes beyond providing calorie and nutrient needs to ensure that all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system. Various components of the food system are generally closer together, increasing the likelihood that lasting relationships and expectations will form among farmers, processors, retailers, restaurateurs, and consumers. Also, increasing the scale of food self-reliance—the degree to which a community meets its own food needs—is an important aspect of a community food system, although the aim is not total self-sufficiency. Finally, sustainability is increased when a diversified agriculture exists near strong and thriving markets. Sustainability refers to following agricultural and food system practices that do not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their food needs. Sustainability includes environmental protection, profitability, ethical treatment of food system workers, and community development.





### *Becoming More Informed Food Citizens*

Building a more locally based food system and economy requires both efforts to resist and reverse globalization and efforts to renew local food economies (Mamen et al, 2004). Although individual actions can certainly support a community-based food system, its essence is collective. Farmers, processors, suppliers, and consumers begin to see themselves, in part, as food citizens – eaters who take an interest in food beyond its affordability and availability. Food citizens are concerned about environmental sustainability, farmer and consumer health, justice for farm workers and the poor, and democratic participation in determining where our food system is heading (Wisconsin Foodshed Research Project, 2000).

### *A Food Citizenship Agenda*

Four strategies can help food consumers become good food citizens (Wisconsin Foodshed Research Project, 2000): First, buy food that reflects a commitment to local, sustainable, and democratically-run farm and food enterprises. This is a great start, but by itself it is not enough. So, secondly, join grassroots organizations that deal with specific aspects of the food system – food cooperatives, farmer marketing cooperatives, community kitchens, community and youth gardening initiatives, or others. Third, get involved in efforts to promote policy decisions that encourage sound land use planning and environmentally sustainable farming. This may mean joining the planning commission to assure that food production and processing are included as important land uses. It might mean advocating for government programs that support diversified farming, maintain farmland, or provide incentives for institutions to purchase local food. Lastly, build networks to share information, knowledge, and resources that improve the sustainability of the food system.

### **What Can Be Done?**

- Conduct a community food assessment
- Give more of every food dollar to a mix of local diversified farms — small, medium, large, producing a range of products — and encourage those farms to reduce their use of fertilizers and pesticides with potential to harm ecosystems
- Make healthy food more affordable by supporting local involvement in food stamp and Project FRESH programs
- Help neighborhood institutions buy more food locally
- Develop a local food policy council
- Involve local health care and educational institutions in promoting healthy, local food.



### *Initiate Change at the Local Level*

According to one expert, changing the American food system “will require systemic and systematic changes in every area of public policy impacting farming, agribusiness and food manufacturing” (Benbrook, 2003). Initiating change at the community level offers a realistic starting point for such change.

Some aspects of community-based food systems can be introduced at a relatively low cost with relatively high impacts. For example, in several Michigan communities, construction of hoop houses (unheated greenhouses) on several farms plus farmer education has helped local farmers’ markets to extend their season, increased farmer income and provided more fresh locally-grown produce for residents.

Collaborating with others in your community builds community pride and connections to place. If you include children, the values carry over to future generations. It helps everyone to learn more about where their food comes from and why that is important, creating more knowledgeable and involved consumers. Buyer/seller relationships broaden transactions to take in more than the bottom line. There is potential for increased margins when marketing locally, regionally, and more of the money circulates within the community.

Farms and other food businesses are generally tied to their place, especially if the business is marketing as well as producing and/or processing locally or regionally. Including food as an intentional part of local economic development can result in businesses and jobs that may be more likely to remain in the community in the long run.

### *Opportunities and Potentials*

Community-based food systems offer opportunities for people to reconnect with the place where they live and with others in their community. It offers potential for creating stable jobs, keeping more food sector returns circulating in the local economy, enhancing health, preserving and supporting local farms and farmland, reducing fossil-fuel use, and providing some degree of food sovereignty.



## **What Costs and Tradeoffs Should We Be Prepared to Accept?**

### Likely Tradeoffs. . .

- Michigan's short growing season means less year-round availability of local food. Bypassing out-of-season strawberries and tomatoes means narrowing some seasonal choices to potatoes, carrots, and onions.
- Farmers markets and local food are fine for produce, but what about meat, dairy, grains? While locally-raised livestock and poultry products are emerging at farmers markets, these sources are not likely to meet consumer demand.
- Approach Two creates only a few jobs at a time. A single local food enterprise has only a modest economic impact when compared to medium and large food ventures.

### Concerns about This Approach. . .

- There is no guarantee that a community-based food system will have better quality or be better managed than the global food system. If food production and processing occurs nearby, what is the likelihood of better or consistent oversight by local consumers and others to notice and deal with problems in quality or management before they go too far?
- Changing people's values and behavior is difficult. Many people have deeply ingrained "values" of busy-ness, convenience, and a fast-food lifestyle. Some residents may not care where their food comes from and may prefer the 24/7 availability and consistency of food provided by the industrial food system in its ability to provide "ready to eat" items that require little of its consumers.





## APPROACH THREE INCREASE FOOD PRODUCTION: MORE PEOPLE=MORE DEMAND

### Stresses and strains on global food supply and production include . . .

- Hunger affects more than 850 million people across the globe.
- We are facing a growing population. By the year 2050 world population is expected to reach nearly nine billion.
- Diets in developing countries are switching from starch-based foods to protein rich meats, requiring more corn and soybeans to feed livestock and poultry
- The falling U.S. dollar, coupled with rising demand from foreign markets, has led to record exports of American agricultural products

### *All the World's a Market*

The problems of rising food costs and declining food availability are serious, world-wide, and production-based. Large scale problems demand large scale, systemic solutions. Driven by increased prices, questionable availability in many parts of the world, and quality and safety, food has become foremost on everyone's mind. As a nation, proponents of Approach Three insist, we must ask ourselves how we got to this point and what we can do about it.

A flurry of world developments have brought huge changes to the world's food supply and production patterns. In just five short years, for example, America has dropped from the top user of fertilizer to third, behind China and India. In that short span, world demand for fertilizer has increased about 55 million tons as the rest of the developed and developing world is increasingly using fertilizer to boost production yields.

Use of seeds produced with advanced genetics and biotechnology has also expanded dramatically. For many, biotech is seen as a way to advance production, along with the use of pesticides to control weeds, insects, and disease. Improved crop management techniques have helped world food production increase in the past five years at a faster rate than at any time in recorded history.

The challenge, according to Approach Three, is that with earth's population growing at a rate of 75 million people annually, and those who are already here living longer, the number of mouths to feed is increasing at a rate faster than food production can keep up, thereby fueling skyrocketing food prices.

### *A Solution Must Recognize the Complexity of the Problem*

A complex mix of factors influencing global food demand—the value of the dollar, surging populations, and major diet changes—are the root causes, proponents of Approach Three argue, for significantly higher food costs in the United States. The solution, they claim, does not lie in approaches like increased production and consumption of locally-produced food or better citizen education and participation in the food system. While consumers committed to food system localization for their own and their families' use are passionate about that system, the vast majority of consumers, Approach Three reminds us, still buy their food from traditional grocery stores. Even with all the excitement about the local foods movement, more than 95 percent of all food is still marketed through traditional distribution and retail systems.

## What Can Be Done?

- Support and fund technological advances that boost production while supporting the environment
- Breed plants that are efficient users of their raw materials
- Conduct scientific analysis of food distribution system to maximize efficiency
- Increase public education of pros and cons of industrial agriculture
- Educate producers on how to take advantage of new technology
- Support national agricultural policies addressing land use, commodities, subsidies, food security, food safety, food access and nutrition

## *Changes in the Broader Food Sector Bode Well for Michigan Consumers*

A broader development akin to the local food systems movement, and supported by advocates of Approach Three, is that even commercial food processors are looking closer to home for the food they use, process, or manufacture. An example is a canning company that used to purchase their raw materials from Nebraska; the company is now attempting to source that material in Michigan because transportation costs to get the product from the west are six to seven times the cost of procuring the product from a Michigan supplier.

This trend bodes well for the agricultural sector in Michigan. There are other significant developments already underway in the state – for example, to enhance milk and potato production. One of the primary factors driving these developments is Michigan’s proximity to more than 50 percent of the U.S. population who live within a one-day drive from the state.

## *Future Food Trends*

All these trends and developments have combined to form what some are calling a perfect storm, tsunami, or even “the best of times and worst of times.” There are some things, however, that seem very clear.

Food prices in the U.S. are at a new high. They are unlikely to retreat to levels of past years. Prices rarely fall once the public is conditioned to the new levels. If commodity prices decrease, which they have recently, food processors will simply see increased margins.

Sourcing food locally will continue to be a niche market, but the vast majority of food, around 95 percent, will continue to be sourced from traditional grocery stores. Local foods are a great option for a limited number of people with the time and inclination to pursue goods in that fashion. Nevertheless, this shopping option is limited because the consumer must still make a time commitment and spend money on fuel to drive to farmers’ markets and similar locations that sell locally grown items.





Ethanol production from corn, sugarcane and other crops that divert acreage from food production will not go away in the face of those who oppose such production. The fact is that the use of these agricultural crops to produce fuel does make a difference in the price of gasoline and does reduce the demand for foreign oil.

### *The Bottom Line: Boost Production*

The greatest issue overall is the need for food production worldwide to grow. We need to boost production per acre through increased use of fertilizer, crop protection materials such as pesticides to control weeds, insects and diseases, and advanced genetics. To meet the growing worldwide demand for agricultural crops for food, fuel and other uses, scientifically sound production practices must be aggressively adopted. Advocates of Approach Three argue that failure to do so will mean that there will certainly be a food shortage, and prices will increase even faster.

### *Choice and Informed Consumers Are Our Best Allies*

Americans have an unmatched variety of foods to choose from. Historically, American food prices have been remarkably inexpensive when compared with the rest of the world. As world demand surges, Americans will be – and are being – asked to pay more for what they want to eat.

The challenge is to maximize food production, not promote niche production systems that appeal to a small fraction of the population, unless the people who want products produced in that manner are willing to pay the price demanded for foods that are purchased locally. From organic to “pasture” grazed milk production, there is less production per entity than in commercial production systems.

Public policy should be aimed at helping to create the conditions that will maximize food and agriculture production and distribution.

## **What Costs and Tradeoffs Should We Be Prepared to Accept?**

### Likely Tradeoffs . . .

- Small farms may be forced out of business, and those remaining will have more challenges marketing their products
- Critics of this approach fear that increased use of fertilizers and pesticides will erode gains we have made in environmental clean-up and protection if not managed responsibly
- Large scale production systems could facilitate large scale problems, such as making it more difficult to ensure food safety
- Large scale distribution compromises retail quality and freshness of produce
- Approach Three offers solutions so complex that change will not occur quickly enough to meet urgent needs

### Concerns about This Approach . . .

- Some worry that Approach Three’s emphasis on more technological investment in the food system will consolidate production and concentrate wealth in the hands of a few. This could lead to inequalities in food distribution and access, raising potential social justice consequences
- Some fear that large scale production solutions may put more upward pressure on food prices
- Encouraging more complex and centralized food production and distribution may bypass regional processors, distributors, and retailers and consolidate these firms into fewer owners





## THE RISING COST OF FOOD COMPARING APPROACHES

□

The price of food has soared, and consumers are struggling to understand where these price hikes are coming from and how they can respond. Some tell us it is due to a growing demand for energy feed-stocks, others suggest it is connected to changing diets around the world, while others contend that the rising cost of food is linked to the declining value of the U.S. dollar. This food cost explosion has caught many Americans unprepared to accommodate higher food prices. It is evident that differences of opinion regarding the reasons for the rising cost of food co-exist. Responses to this state of affairs also vary. Just as partisans for different viewpoints exist regarding the reasons for food cost increases, so do partisan positions regarding what is to be done.

The three approaches outlined in this issue guide have been presented to spark community dialogue over pressing challenges that confront the food system. Most will find that, taken in isolation, no approach fully addresses all of the problems with which we are faced. In the remaining pages, we offer a brief overview of the three choices for your review.



# 1

Local advocate, Barbara Kingsolver writes that “the biggest shock of our year came when we added up the tab. We’d fed ourselves, organically on about fifty cents per family member, per meal.”

# 2

Localization, says Katy Mamen, “means shortening the distance between producer and consumer—simultaneously benefiting farmers, farmworkers, and consumers, protecting the environment, and improving the quality of food while lowering its cost.”

# 3

2008 was a monumental year. For the first time in history, more people reside in urban areas than in rural areas. This demographic shift also changes diets and expectations about food consumption and access.

## Approach One

### Taking Personal Stock: Reassessing Lifestyle, Values and Choices

#### Key values, principles and assertions

- As citizens in a democracy we have an obligation to take part in developing a healthy, affordable food system. A do-it-yourself approach can lead to individual empowerment
- We must take personal stock of food consumption, our lifestyle, values, and choices that we make regarding food
- It is time to consider eating foods whose cost is less dependent on expensive fossil fuels
- A direct connection with one’s food can offset unintended negative consequences, foster a sense of personal responsibility for our food system, and improve individual decision making

#### What should be done

- Conduct a kitchen-cupboard food assessment of what your family eats
- Reallocate time in daily routines to mindful activities around food so your family makes food system connections
- Identify your own individual and family values, and how they are linked to food. Are your consumption habits reflective of your values?
- Eat out less and cook and preserve food at home
- Get to know local farmers and buy locally produced food
- Investigate the lunch menu at kids’ schools

#### Opposing voices

- Critics of Approach One say it’s unrealistic because very few Americans can utilize this solution
- Purchasing locally at farmers’ markets or CSAs may still be pricier for many consumers than purchasing food from a large chain grocery or big box store
- People may be unable or unwilling to readjust their busy schedules or alter their lifestyles in order to slow down enough to garden, cook, preserve food, or bike

#### Costs and tradeoffs

- New investments and infrastructure changes will be necessary to support alternative food systems and a less fuel-dependent lifestyle
- Government subsidies and agricultural programs that currently support large-scale agriculture will have to shift to support small farms which make direct marketing to consumers possible
- The seasonality of growing cycles, especially in a state like Michigan, means less diversity of available fruits and vegetables

## Approach Two

### Local Matters: Re-embedding Food in Community

#### Key values, principles and assertions

- Access to a healthy, affordable and culturally appropriate diet is an essential citizenship right
- Our current system of producing, processing, and marketing food has created tremendous social and environmental problems which we are forced to address. This includes a historic inability to feed the world's hungry
- Food is essential to our health and well being and plays a central role in the social connections and cultural traditions that help define community life
- Local food systems allow communities to more closely monitor environmental impacts of agricultural production, reconnect people to the source of food production, and provide economic development opportunities for local workers

#### What should be done

- Conduct a community food assessment to learn what your community is eating and growing
- Give more of every food dollar to a mix of local diversified farms – small, medium, large, producing a range of products – and encourage those farms to reduce their use of fertilizers and pesticides with potential to harm ecosystems
- Make healthy food more affordable by supporting local involvement in food stamp and Project FRESH programs
- Help local institutions buy more food locally
- Develop a local food policy council
- Involve local health care and educational institutions in promoting healthy, local food

#### Opposing voices

- There is no guarantee that a community-based food system will have better quality or be better managed than the global food system. If food production and processing occurs nearby, what is the likelihood of better or consistent oversight by local consumers and others to notice and deal with problems in quality or management before they go too far?
- Changing people's values and behavior is difficult. Many people have deeply ingrained "values" of busy-ness, convenience, fast-food lifestyle. Some residents may not care where their food comes from and may prefer the 24/7 availability and consistency of food provided by the industrial food system in its ability to provide "ready to eat" items that require little of its consumers

#### Costs and tradeoffs

- Michigan's short growing season means less year-round availability of local food. Bypassing out-of-season strawberries and tomatoes means narrowing some seasonal choices to potatoes, carrots, and onions
- Farmers' markets and local food are fine for produce, but what about meat, dairy, grains? While locally-raised livestock and poultry products are emerging at farmers' markets, these sources are not likely to meet consumer demand
- This approach creates only a few jobs at a time. A single local food enterprise has only a modest economic impact when compared to medium and large food ventures

## Approach Three

### Increase Food Production: More People = More Demand

#### Key values, principles and assertions

- The problems of rising food costs and declining food availability are serious, world-wide, and production-based requiring large scale production enhancing solutions
- Technology, especially the use of advanced genetics and other crop management techniques, can effectively solve our problems
- Population growth along with increased longevity demands responsive increases in productivity and yield to meet this global demand
- Most people purchase their food through traditional distribution and retail systems and will continue to do so into the future

#### What should be done

- Support and fund technological advances that boost production while supporting the environment
- Breed plants that are efficient users of their raw materials
- Conduct scientific analysis of food distribution system to maximize efficiency
- Increase public education of pros and cons of industrial agriculture
- Educate producers on how to take advantage of new technology
- Support national agricultural policies addressing land use, commodities, subsidies, food security, food safety, food access and nutrition

#### Opposing voices

- Some worry that Approach Three's emphasis on more technological investment in the food system will consolidate production and concentrate wealth in the hands of a few. This could lead to inequalities in food distribution and access, raising potential social justice consequences
- Some fear that large scale production solutions may put more upward pressure on food prices
- Encouraging more complex and centralized food production and distribution may bypass regional processors, distributors, and retailers and consolidate these firms into fewer owners

#### Costs and tradeoffs

- Small farms may be forced out of business, and those remaining will have more challenges marketing their products
- Critics of this approach fear that increased use of fertilizers and pesticides will erode gains we have made in environmental clean-up and protection if not managed responsibly
- Large scale production systems could facilitate large scale problems, such as making it more difficult to ensure food safety
- Large scale distribution compromises retail quality and freshness of produce
- Approach Three offers solutions so complex that change will not occur quickly enough to meet urgent needs

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# QUESTIONNAIRE

## THE RISING COST OF FOOD

Now that you've had a chance to participate in a forum on this issue, we'd like to know what you are thinking. Your opinions, along with those of others who participated in these forums, will be reflected in a summary report that will be available to all citizens, including those who took part in the forums, as well as officeholders, members of the news media, and others in your community.

1. Are you thinking differently about this issue now that you have participated in this forum?

Yes     No    If yes, how?

2. In this forum, did you talk about aspects of the issue you had not considered before?

Yes     No

3. Personally, what could you do to help deal with this food issue?

4. What could be done in your community to address the rising cost of food?

5. Are there any policies that we need to enact in Michigan to help curb the rising cost of food? Explain.

6. How many NIF forums have you attended, including this one?

1-3     4-6     7 or more     Not sure

7. Are you male or female?     Male     Female

8. How old are you?

17 or younger     18-30     31-45     46-64     65 or older

9. Are you:

African American     Asian American     Native American     White/Caucasian  
 Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

10. Where do you live?

Rural     Small town     Large city     Suburban

11. What is your ZIP Code?

Please give this form to the forum leader, or mail it to Jan Hartough, MSU Southwest, 3700 E. Gull Lake Drive, Hickory Corners MI 49060.

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