

Food Sovereignty in Worcester: Community Understandings and Possibilities for Action

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Introduction:

This research project on food sovereignty in Worcester was conducted in summer 2020 as part of a fellowship with A new Earth conversation at Clark University. I am a junior undergraduate and International Development major here at Clark, and I was inspired to undertake this research because of a class I took with Professor Morgan Ruelle in Spring 2020, where I learned about the concept of food sovereignty for the first time. Food sovereignty, in the simplest of terms, refers to the right of communities to control the means of their food system. When I think about food sovereignty, I picture an experience I had in the fall of 2017, when I spent a month living with a host family in northern Thailand. My host family had a small farm and produced strawberries, red and green peppers, tomatoes, mushrooms, cabbages, onions, and grapes. Yet, my family was subject to the prices and demands of a middle-man supplier who collected and shipped the crops by truck to the city of Bangkok each week. Because they couldn't afford to, my host family never ate the crops that they grew. Instead, they subsisted on a diet of primarily white rice, eggs, and boiled melon. On account of her poor diet, my host mom had diabetes. My host family's health and quality of life might have been so different if they had been able to set the prices of their crops, and if they were able to access and consume food that was more nourishing.

That story is an example of a community that could have benefited from having food sovereignty, or in other words, a food system that is controlled by and meets the needs of the stakeholders who participate in it. However, it is one kind of battle if you are fighting to control your food system as a farmer in rural Thailand, and quite another if you are a consumer in a city. After my experience in Thailand, I was curious about how the struggle for food sovereignty might look different in a city in the US. My own experiences of food-related advocacy in cities includes initiatives such as food pantries, urban gardens, and farmers markets, but I wasn't sure the extent to which these things were achieving food sovereignty. Because I am a Clark student who lives in Worcester for part of the year, I wanted to specifically explore what it would look like for Worcester to be food sovereign. I decided to explore this research question: "How do Worcester residents understand food sovereignty, and what would a food sovereign Worcester look like?"

Worcester, Massachusetts:

In order to understand what food sovereignty could look like in a city like Worcester, it's helpful to have an idea of the city's demographics, as well as an understanding of the existing landscape of food-related organizations. Worcester is the second largest city in New England, and has a population of 185,000 (Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, 2019). Worcester is what the Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth calls a "gateway city." Gateway cities are mid-sized cities that were home to industry and good jobs in the past, making them a "gateway" to the American dream. After industrial jobs disappeared, gateway cities such as Worcester struggled to draw investment. Yet, despite past (and current) economic challenges, Worcester is making a comeback (MassINC, 2021). In 2019, NPR named Worcester a "booming" city, with growing housing, retail, and restaurant space (Schachter, 2018). Worcester also has a diverse population. As of 2019, 21.9% of Worcester residents were Hispanic or Latino, 13.3% were Black or African American, and 7.4% were Asian American (United States Census Bureau, 2019). In addition, approximately 37,498 individuals living in Worcester are foreign born (Fabos et al, 2015). This amounts to a little over 20% of the population. These individuals are from 80 different countries, the top four being Ghana, the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, and Brazil (University of Massachusetts Dartmouth et al, 2015).

Levels of poverty and food insecurity are an important factor to consider when thinking about the possibility of food sovereignty for Worcester. As of 2019, 20% of Worcester's population lived in poverty (United States Census Bureau, 2019). Many struggle daily to put food on the table. In 2018, 68,460 of Worcester's residents (or 8.3%) were food insecure, and COVID has only exacerbated food insecurity (Feeding America, 2018). By the end of 2020, food insecurity in Worcester may be up to 13.1% (Carraggi, 2020). There are many non-profit and community organizations in Worcester trying to address the problem of food insecurity. According to a database run by the Worcester County Food Bank, there are 23 food pantries and community meal programs (such as soup kitchens) located in Worcester (Worcester Food Bank, 2020). In addition, the Regional Environmental Council manages 60 urban gardens in Worcester, which help combat the lack of fresh foods that is common among food pantries (REC Worcester, 2020a). Farmers markets around Worcester, including the Regional Environmental Council's mobile markets, and the Blackseed Farmers Market, help the issue of food insecurity by accepting Healthy Incentives Program (HIP) benefits (Department of Transitional Assistance,

2020). The activities of such organizations in relation to food sovereignty is something I will explore later on in my report.

Methods:

Over the course of three months in 2020, I interviewed 11 individuals connected with the Worcester food system. Some of these individuals worked at food pantries around the city, including the Mutual Aid food pantry, Mustard Seed Catholic Charities, and Saint John's Food Pantry. I also interviewed individuals connected with organizations such as the Worcester Food Policy Council, Regional Environmental Council, SproutChange, Many Hands Organic Farm, 350 Central Massachusetts, and the Regional Food Hub. I contacted participants via email and phone. I then conducted 45 minute semi-structured phone and zoom interviews with participants. My interview guide contained questions such as; *How do you understand the concept of food sovereignty, and how do you believe it is similar or different to the concept of food justice? What is the structure of your organization's leadership, and who holds decision-making power? Do you grow (or source) foods that have cultural significance to residents in Worcester from other countries? In your opinion, where lies the biggest potential for Worcester to have more food sovereignty in the future?* My study was reviewed and approved by the Clark IRB prior to starting interviews. My IRB protocol, number 2019-74, was approved under the exempt category: 45 CFR 46.104. My interviews were de-identified, transcribed, and coded by theme. I then grouped themes into 5 larger topic areas, which are summarized in this paper.

My objectives for this paper are first, to compare participants' understanding of the concept of food sovereignty to their understanding of the concept of food justice. In the world of food advocacy in the US, food justice is a more commonly used term than food sovereignty (Alkon and Mares, 2012). I decided that in order to document community member's visions for the Worcester food system, it was important to discuss their *own* definitions of these terms. Second, this paper will examine the extent to which Worcester nonprofits engage in activities that align with the movement for food sovereignty. Third, this paper aims to document some of the visions, strategies, and barriers associated with achieving a more food sovereign Worcester, as articulated by participants. Fourth, I will examine the opinions of Worcester residents on the role of Clark in promoting more food sovereignty in Worcester. Finally, I will discuss how my

participants see COVID's impacts on the Worcester food system. Throughout the paper, I will use supporting literature to further explain concepts brought up in the interviews.

Overview of Food Sovereignty:

Food sovereignty is a concept that was first developed in 1996 by La Via Campesina, the International Peasant's Movement. The International Peasant's Movement defines food sovereignty as the right and the freedom of people and governments to define their own food and agricultural policies ("Food Sovereignty," 2003). The food sovereignty movement arose in large part due to the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995 (Wittman, 2011). WTO policies have prioritized the interests of transnational food companies, by creating free trade routes and encouraging the production of cheap food via industrial agriculture (La Via Campesina, 2003). As a result, many small farmers have lost their livelihoods, and food insecurity around the world has been exacerbated (La Via Campesina, 2003). In response to WTO policies, the movement for food sovereignty strives to give farmers and local communities more control over what food is produced, what price it is sold at, who is able to own land, and what foods are consumed and accessible (Alkon and Mares, 2012; La Via Campesina, 2003).

One of the integral pieces of food sovereignty is the way it takes a critical view of food security. At a 1996 World Food Summit, food security was defined as "[a situation] when all people at all times have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (FAO Agricultural and Development Economics Division, 2006). A key component of food security is achieving food *access* for all, yet La Via Campesina argues that achieving food access for all is not realistic unless the power relationships in the global food system are reorganized (Clendenning et al, 2015). In the world of food security, hunger is seen as a symptom of inefficient production and distribution (Wittman, 2011, p. 92). The food sovereignty movement however, recognizes hunger as a symptom of corporate control and policies that prioritize corporate profit (Wittman, 2011, p. 92). Food sovereignty does not only demand the right of all people to food access. It goes beyond that, and demands the right of all people to have control over the means of that food access (Alkon and Mares, 2012). The particular way that food sovereignty unpacks power, control, and agency in the food system is critical to keep in mind when thinking of food sovereignty in terms of a city.

While the food sovereignty movement began as a peasant's movement in the global South, some scholars have begun to examine it in the context of urban communities in the global North (Alkon and Mares, 2012, Clendenning et al, 2016, Dickinson 2013). One of the challenges in taking food sovereignty to the urban landscape is that the individuals whose wellbeing is at stake both changes and expands (Dickinson, 2013). While the needs and rights of growers in a place like the US is still important, the needs of urban consumers is also central to the fight—an analysis that the original peasant's movement doesn't focus on (Dickinson, 2013). Sometimes, efforts to support local growers do not necessarily support the urban poor. For example, farmers markets and CSAs, while they may support local farmers, are often only able to reach wealthier, white consumers (Alkon and Mares, 2012). This outcome is due to a broader structural issue with food advocacy initiatives in the United States. Projects such as farmers markets, CSAs, and community gardens create “alternative markets,” but in doing so operate inside of a neoliberal logic which excludes those who cannot economically participate (Alkon and Mares, 2012).

An important concept to consider alongside food sovereignty is the concept of food justice. In US food advocacy, food justice is a more commonly used term than food sovereignty (Alkon and Mares, 2012). There are both similarities and differences between these two terms. One of the differences between the concepts of food justice and food sovereignty is that food sovereignty originated as a peasant's movement fighting for the rights of farmers (Clendenning et al, 2015). Food justice on the other hand, grew out of racial inequality in the US, and is more focused on food access from the perspective of consumers (Clendenning et al, 2015). Some scholars point out that while food *sovereignty* projects fight directly against neoliberalism in the food system, food justice projects have sometimes reproduced neoliberalism. (Alkon and Mares, 2012, Clendenning et al, 2015, Dickinson, 2013). For example, food justice organizations may emphasize self-help solutions for food insecure individuals such as a community garden, or they may emphasize market solutions for supporting the local food economy such as farmers markets (Alkon and Mares, 2012). While these solutions may help individual farmers or consumers, unlike the movement for food sovereignty, they do little to challenge the systems that produce marginalization for individuals or small farmers in the first place (Alkon and Mares, 2012). Some point out that Food justice has progressive, reformist tendencies, whereas food sovereignty is more radical and transformational (Dickinson, 2013). However, projects and organizations that work on food issues in the US do not necessarily fall under one category or the other. Many may

“straddle reformist, progressive and radical tendencies” all at the same time, and use diverse strategies for making change (Dickinson, 2013).

Community Understandings of Food Sovereignty and Food Justice:

Food justice is a more commonly understood term in the US than food sovereignty (Alkon and Mares, 2012). In order to document community members’ visions for a better food system, I wanted to see how they understood and defined these terms. While the participants’ understanding of these terms differed in some ways from the scholarly definitions, they also prompt new and creative ways of thinking about how we might achieve a better food system. This section outlines community understandings of food sovereignty, community understandings of food justice, and finally, comparisons the interviewees made between the two terms.

Food Sovereignty:

Some of the participants described food sovereignty as being related to agency within the food system. Within these participants, there was a distinction between those who viewed agency as being important at the macro level (i.e.; individuals having stakeholdership within the wider food system), versus those who viewed agency as being important at the individual level (i.e; self-sufficiency). One interviewee understood food sovereignty as encompassing both the macro and the micro levels of agency. She said, “Food sovereignty includes the ability to, on the micro scale, purchase and cook foods that are nourishing and culturally appropriate...But also on a bigger scale, for people to have ownership over the way that food is produced and transported and for that system to serve people and not profit” (Interview 1). Another individual described food sovereignty only in terms of the “macro” level of agency. This interviewee said, “My understanding is that food sovereignty is a lot more about the means of production...Really understanding that there are people in our food system whose work is essential, but whose work is not valued...And so I see food sovereignty as being efforts that are creating alternatives to our current food system, where the means of production and distribution of food are more wholly controlled by communities and by the people” (Interview 4). Finally, two other interviewees spoke about food sovereignty at the micro level, as being related to self-sufficiency. One talked

about food sovereignty in relationship to backyard farming she had witnessed members of the Cape Verdean community engage in. She said:

A good chunk of my early career was in Roxbury ... In Roxbury there are these tiny lots, three decker's where literally the side yard was five feet [by] five yards wide...And the Cape Verdeans would plant corn and then they'd wrap the peas so they grew up the corn, just to maximize every square inch of their property in terms of producing food for their families...And I think to the degree that different agencies can add that kind of ability for people to grow and own and be connected to their own food is an important part of that food sovereignty, if you will. (Interview 11)

Another interviewee related food sovereignty to sprouting the seeds for one's own container garden. She says:

I think even at a very micro level what I'm very passionate about in teaching my clients, is food sovereignty through "sprouting." You know, just like sprouting your legumes or sprouting seeds... and then you have these little superfoods [so] that if you can't afford salad greens, then you can at least sprout your own...And that I consider food sovereignty, because you are in charge of your food (Interview 6).

These two ideas, agency within the larger food system versus individual self-sufficiency, are not mutually exclusive. However, this distinction between system control and individual control is interesting to notice. It's one thing to have ultimate control or ownership over your food (self-sufficiency, subsistence farming), but another to have control and agency within a larger system, for example, a co-op where you are working with other consumers and with farmers to decide prices. The latter allows for the wellbeing of a greater number of stakeholders in the food system. If you have individual control and agency over your food, you may be able to achieve a healthy and secure quality of life for yourself. However, more macro-scale community control of the food system allows for the possibility of system-wide change.

There are also additional ways that participants defined food sovereignty. One interviewee pointed out that while food justice is a "helping hand" type model, food sovereignty allows directly impacted individuals to have more agency in changing their situation. This relates

to the theme of agency and control as described above. The interviewee who had this perspective said:

A lot of times, especially in the non-profit world, there's a big emphasis on food justice, which is, first of all, being aware of the injustice of our food system... But I think that...especially the non-profit world, it's co-opted by white people...and it's more of a 'helping hand' type of model... Many times it's people who aren't directly experiencing [food insecurity] that are trying to change that. And food sovereignty is just more emphasis on people having power over... those decisions and those systems (Interview 5).

Other participants related food sovereignty to the movement for local foods. They said that food sovereignty is “being as close to the food as possible, and not having it shipped from the Imperial Valley in California...three or four thousand miles” (Interview 11). Another participant described food sovereignty in relation to permaculture and “working with nature.” They pointed out that food sovereignty is “when you’re literally surviving with nature...Or like permaculture, where you're just trying to work with that ecosystem that you have, and try to imagine, 'okay, how do I work with all these micro ecosystems....so that I can bring in biodiversity, so that I can respect nature, so that I can replenish nature, so that I can balance the natural habitat of the area?’” (Interview 7). This final theme of food sovereignty as “working with nature” relates to the first theme of food sovereignty as having agency within the larger food system. If you are working in tandem with nature, and making the choice to sustain the natural environment, then you are acting with agency. If you choose to start a permaculture farm, you are developing control over not only how the foods you eat are grown, but also over how the production of this food will impact the environment and future generations.

Food Justice:

While interview participants most often associated food sovereignty with terms such as agency, control, and self-sufficiency, one of the terms most commonly associated with food justice was access. One interviewee for example, said that their organization defines food justice as “the belief that all communities, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, cultural background, income level, deserve to be able to access good food in a dignified way”

(Interview 4). This interviewee emphasized that if someone relies on a “social service program like a food pantry or soup kitchen, then that isn’t a full realization of food justice” (Interview 4). Another interviewee said that food justice includes not only access to food, but also making sure that the quality of that food is good (Interview 11). Other interviewees related food justice to the process of realizing injustices in the food system, and then acting on this knowledge of injustice. For example, one interviewee said that part of food justice is “being aware of the injustice in our food system,” and asking yourself, “why is it that some people can easily access healthy food and other people can’t?” (Interview 5). Another interviewee said that they understand food justice as *acting* on food system injustice through advocacy work. They said:

“Food justice, I see that as advocacy work. You know, you're lobbying, you're trying to pass a bill, you're trying to educate your constituents on their rights... that food is a human right, that water is a human right... I think food justice a lot of times, in politics...you're looking at the justice or the access....[to] SNAP or EBT benefits. You're looking at the justice of having food pantries. You're looking at grant funding to supply the economics for the food systems. You're looking at people in the community to donate food to the foodbank.... So that's where I see food justice...” (Interview 6).

Some interviewees emphasized that getting more local food on the table is important for food justice. For example, one interviewee said that if we could get “more of our locally grown produce onto more of the tables all across the board, you know, the restaurants, into the markets, into the bodegas...in Worcester and in some of the more disadvantaged communities.... that would be huge [for food justice]” (Interview 11). This interviewee however, pointed out that doing so would “require a lot of [government funded] subsidy, and redirecting subsidies” (Interview 11).

Relationship Between Food Sovereignty and Food Justice

While many of the participants highlighted the differences between food justice and food sovereignty, some also spoke of the intrinsic relationship between the two concepts. One way

that this relationship was interpreted, was that food justice contains the *parts* that make up the *whole* of food sovereignty. For example, one interviewee said:

I would think of food sovereignty as having to do with... maybe some of the issues of food justice, like when you think about access and food deserts, or, like labor justice for migrant workers who grow our food... justice for workers who work in transportation... So maybe each one of these things would be a food justice issue. But I think maybe food sovereignty takes a step back to a wider frame, so it's not kind of each of these issues and the way they have to do with food...but it's actually about people and our engagement with this broad system" (Interview 1).

In this way, one could understand food justice initiatives as a building block to achieving food sovereignty. However, one interviewee actually described this relationship the other way around, saying that food sovereignty is a means for achieving food justice. She said, "Food sovereignty is the basis of food justice...And I think one of the cures for...food injustice, is for people to take control of their food supply" (Interview 10).

I was struck by how the interviewees articulated their understandings of food sovereignty and food justice. In some ways, their descriptions matched the literature on these two terms. However, I was particularly interested by how some interviewees described food sovereignty as being on the level of individual agency (growing one's own food, or being empowered with knowledge for healthy eating), while some described food sovereignty as having agency within the greater food system. I agree that the former, being able to grow one's own food, can help one to have greater agency. However, I do not think you can define this as food sovereignty unless the power relationships in the food system are reorganized so that there is community rather than corporate control of food (Clendenning et al 2015). Until that time, the structural inequalities that define our food system will continue to marginalize people, regardless of whether they are able to lessen the impact slightly through growing their own food. The fact that some participants did not point out the community-control aspect of food sovereignty could be an example of how, as Alkon and Mares point out (2012), US food advocacy organizations often operate in a neo-liberal, self-help logic, rather than attempting to de-commodify food and establish community rather than corporate control of our food systems.

Are Worcester Organizations Achieving Food Sovereignty?

One of the key questions I wanted to explore in my research this summer was how the activities of Worcester organizations fit the framework of food sovereignty. To what extent were the organizations that I interviewed; the Regional Environmental Council, the Worcester Food Policy Council, the Worcester Food Hub, and some of the various food banks around the city, engaging in activities that promoted a more food sovereign future? Many times, non-profits are evaluated on their ability to reach a certain service provision goal, or achieve a particular policy, but we may not consider the way that they can (or cannot) play a larger role in transformative change such as in the movement for food sovereignty. Thus, asking whether an organization is promoting food sovereignty is critical if we want to move beyond band-aid solutions in our broken food system. Yet the question is challenging to evaluate, especially when there are no standard agreements for what it means to achieve food sovereignty in the US. In order to try and establish a loose framework through which to look at Worcester organizations, I turned to literature on food sovereignty in the urban US context. In looking at the literature, I identified several key components of achieving food sovereignty in a city.

Freedom of Choice and Stakeholdership:

Ramanathan (2019) lays out a useful framework for considering what it means for the urban *citizen* to be food sovereign. He explains that in order for a citizen to have food sovereignty, they first need to have the freedom of *choice* within their food system. That is, they must have access to a diversity of food options so they can choose what is best for their culture, their health, and the environment, and they must also have the financial resources needed to choose freely (Ramanathan, 2019). In the city of Worcester, there is a lot of possibility for food sovereignty due to the cultural diversity of restaurants and grocery stores that exist. However, if economic challenges prevent people from purchasing this food, then they cannot have true food sovereignty. Using Ramanathan's framing, there are several Worcester organizations engaging in activities that promote freedom of choice while *also* providing economic support. For example, with the financial help of the Healthy Incentives Program, lower income residents can buy locally grown and culturally relevant vegetables and fruits throughout the summer and fall at the Regional Environmental Council's mobile farmer's markets (Interview 4). Several of the organizations I spoke with are also trying to increase the availability of culturally relevant foods

in food pantries (Interview 6). For example, the individuals who run the Mutual Aid Food Pantry use some of their budget every week to get Asian grocery items from Mekong Market to give out to clients.

However, there are also ways that Worcester non-profits could do better in terms of providing citizens with choice. Two of the food pantries I spoke with in Worcester cited concerns with the large amounts of processed bread and sweets that get donated to their organizations (Interview 5 and 7). One of the food banks is rarely able to offer vegetables to clients, and at their soup kitchen, rarely are they able to serve culturally relevant foods. This may limit the amount of autonomy and choice lower-income citizens in Worcester have in their food system. One interviewee, who works at a soup kitchen, mentioned that they had experienced some individuals in the past come by with food allergies, who were not able to eat the meal prepared for the night. However, it is hard to truly assess whether or not soup-kitchen clients have the options they need or want, without doing a survey of clients. In the future, doing such a survey would be beneficial.

The second criteria that Ramanathan lays out for being a food sovereign citizen, is that citizens must have stakeholderhood and ownership within their food system (2019). Several of the organizations that I interviewed engaged in activities that promoted stakeholderhood and ownership. Sprout Change for example, is helping citizens to create sustainable, permaculture backyard gardens. This activity functions to help individuals have more stakeholderhood on the individual level of their food system. Sprout Change is also helping citizens of Worcester to have more stakeholderhood in their own health and wellbeing, by empowering them to use and grow medicinal foods and herbs. However, it is critical for citizens to have stakeholderhood in the wider institutions that deal with food issues and policies in Worcester. The closest any organization got to giving average citizens more stake and leadership within the wider food system was the Regional Environmental Council, through their YouthGROW program. YouthGROW employs 32-40 low-income high school teens year round, who act as leaders and help maintain the community gardens (REC Worcester, 2020c). These youth leaders attend weekly REC meetings and assist in decision-making processes for REC (Interview 4). This is an example of ordinary citizens having stakeholderhood in a local food NGO.

Several interviewees described the lack of stakeholderhood that lower-income citizens in Worcester have in food policy. For example, the Worcester Food Policy council has mostly

white leadership, and struggles to incorporate the voices of community members into their work (Interview 2). One interviewee also explained how the Worcester City Council does not include enough council members who come from diverse ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds (Interview 5). If councilmembers were more representative of the diversity of Worcester, this could amplify the needs and voices of a diversity of Worcester residents around food issues.

Education and Awareness Building:

The above examples are an evaluation of the food sovereignty of Worcester organizations based on Ramanathan's framing (2019). Other authors draw out different distinctions for what is required for urban food sovereignty. The First Nations Development Institute (2014) and Davila and Dyball (2015) point out that in order to have stakeholderhood in one's food system, education and awareness building are critical. Cities like Worcester cannot achieve food sovereignty unless community members are aware of the injustices in the food system, and develop capacities to achieve self-determination.

SproutChange engages in advocacy work to teach its clients about healthy eating and food production, which could be seen as a critical stepping stone in achieving food sovereignty (Interview 6). Many Hands Organic Farm also hosts educational programs with the public. They hold workshops on the farm for adults and students on how to cook food using more fresh ingredients, and how to raise food organically (Interview 10). REC also holds educational programs, such as teaching gardening to children in local schools and providing community training and events on food justice (REC, 2020b). While these activities are not "food sovereignty" by themselves, they act as building blocks for communities in the journey towards self-determination over the food system.

Policy Engagement:

As Morgagues-Faus points out (2017), if we actually want to see changes towards food sovereignty at a city level, it is critical that NGOs collaborate with local authorities. Without the support of the state or other authorities such as the public health sector, "most of what these NGOs and community groups might be trying to achieve would probably fall over once funding was removed" (Morgagues-Faus, 2017, p. 15). Other authors point out the importance of a renewed focus on the state for transformative change. In a neoliberal food system, small-scale

“solutions” such as NGOs or farmers markets often just exist side-by-side the corporate system and can unintentionally re-produce the inequalities associated with the neoliberal food system. For example, Alkon and Mares (2012) discuss a case study of the West Oakland Farmers market in California. Although the vision of the farmers market was to create a venue for local black producers to sell their food, it ultimately closed down, because locals were not able to afford the food. Thus, to achieve food sovereignty at the city level, it is critical for NGOs to also be working on government policy, especially around economic justice.

Policy engagement was not a subject that came up in every interview. However, there are several examples of organizations engaging in critical policy issues in Worcester. First of all, the Worcester Food Policy council has been fighting every year for the past 3 years to ensure the renewal of the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP), a statewide government program which reimburses SNAP participants 100% when they buy up to a certain amount in fresh fruits and vegetables from farmers markets, farm stands, and mobile markets (MA Food System Collaborative, 2020). Since its inception, the program “has helped 71,000 families purchase \$14.1 million in local produce” (Fritz, 2020). Some interviewees pointed out that this is a strong policy for achieving food sovereignty, as it supports both local farmers and urban consumers (Interview 2). However, contributions of HIP to community food sovereignty could be debated, as the government determines which foods qualify for HIP and which do not. For example, HIP recipients are not allowed to use their funds on dried herbs and spices, or fruit or vegetable juices, among other things (Mass.gov, 2021).

The Regional Environmental Council also does advocacy work for the Healthy Incentives Program. In addition, they have been partnering with the Division of Public Health (DPH) of Worcester. According to an interviewee, the DPH is “in the middle of a multi-year grant called Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health” (Interview 4). With the help of the grant funding, REC and the DPH have partnered to see how farmers markets can be an intervention for the massive health disparities experienced by the Latino population in Worcester.

Despite the importance of advocacy coalitions between the government and NGOs for creating food sovereignty, scholars point out that the relationships between NGOs and the government can create new elites, which is problematic for achieving food sovereignty (Clendenning et al, 2015). For example, if an organization is pushing the local government to pass food sovereignty legislation, but is not actively working with the local community and

representing their needs, then the community is not achieving agency in the food system. As Alkon and Mares point out, food sovereignty by nature should be a process of “strengthening local democracy,” and creating spaces of sovereignty where various nations, peoples, regions, and states craft their own food policies at different scales” (Moragues-Faus, 2017). One example of how a Worcester organization is strengthening local democracy is the way in which the Worcester Food Policy council has held community meetings where average community members can give input (Interview 2). However, the interviewee noted that this initiative is currently limited in its scope. In terms of food sovereignty, Worcester organizations could work more on making sure that they are not reproducing elitist power relationships.

Local Food:

Another aspect of urban food sovereignty that Ramanathan (2019) points out, is that “[food] sovereignty in the true sense can only be local” (p. 6). The idea of ‘local’ in food sovereignty is a contested point by scholars. As Kato (2013) points out, the push for local food has often manifested in the creation of hard-to-access farmers markets, which can exclude lower income-consumers due to prices and distance from city centers. Ramanathan argues however, that having a local food economy is the only way to create horizontal power relationships between different stakeholders, and also allow citizens true stakeholderhood in their food system. In order to not reproduce inequalities, Ramanathan says that producers, consumers, and other stakeholders need to come together in various forms and shapes including “collectives, forums...networks...producer companies...platforms and social businesses” (2019, p. 6).

The Worcester Food Hub is one example of an organization that is creating relationships in the local food economy. The Worcester Food Hub purchases produce from local farmers, and then re-distributes these local foods at affordable prices. Not only do they provide local food to restaurants and businesses in the area including Clark University (where I am a student), the food hub recently started selling food directly to customers out of the Greendale People’s Church in Worcester (Worcester Regional Food Hub, 2020). Finally, the Worcester Food Hub has a community kitchen where they provide hourly rentals for individuals who own small restaurants, food trucks, or food start-ups in Worcester. Often, these individuals would not be able to enter into food production without the low-cost kitchen option that the Food Hub provides them. The Food Hub’s community kitchen could be said to be helping forward food sovereignty, as it is

helping restaurant owners to have greater agency in their food system. Another food hub that an interviewee mentioned is Maker to Main, located in downtown Worcester (Interview 2). This organization sources food from 69 different producers in five states, (MA, VT, NH, ME, and NY), and sells it wholesale to chefs, breweries, schools, and businesses (Maker to Main Market, 2021). Just this year, Maker to Main opened a grocery store on Main Street in downtown Worcester, where residents can shop for local items (Bonner, 2020). Organizations like the Worcester Food Hub and Maker to Main are strengthening networks between local food producers, urban consumers, and restaurant owners, allowing for greater community control in the food system. Due to the high cost of local foods however, these food hubs will not be able to improve food sovereignty for lower-income consumers unless they are able to partner with programs such as HIP and SNAP. The Worcester Food Hub just started accepting SNAP after COVID (Interview 3). However, Maker to Main doesn't currently accept SNAP benefits, saying that they plan to "at some point" (Bonner, 2020). In order to have more food sovereignty in Worcester, it is critical to make sure Food Hubs and local food retailers serve low-income consumers, not just high-end restaurants or middle to upper-class consumers.

Food Waste and a Circular Economy:

While this was not a topic that came up in any of my interviews, reclaiming food waste is also an important part of having a food sovereign city. As Pimbert (2015a) points out, reusing food waste (whether that's surplus garden vegetables being donated to the local food pantry, or food waste being made into compost,) decreases the dependence of a community on external markets. Saving waste helps create a circular economy, in which "farm and energy inputs are sourced locally and food products are distributed locally, with few intermediaries being involved" (Pimbert, 2015b). If a local farmer can get access to free urban food waste for animal feed or compost to grow their crops, this decreases the financial burden of entering the market. Compost can also help sustain urban gardeners in the city. Finally, donations of reclaimed food can stock food pantries, giving low income consumers more control over their ability to access food. Organizations have to comply by strict rules to ensure the safety of such reclaimed food, such as making sure it is properly labelled, not damaged, and has not passed its expiration date (Food Recovery Committee, 2016). Altogether, creating a circular food economy through food

waste leads to food system stakeholders having more power and agency, which are key to food sovereignty (Pimbert, 2015a).

In some ways, Worcester is on the path towards having a more circular food economy. Massachusetts has a Commercial Organics Waste ban, where “Businesses or institutions that generate one ton or more of food material per week for disposal must divert that material from disposal to other uses” (RecyclingWorks Massachusetts, 2020). Since the ban was instituted, food donations in the state of Massachusetts increased 22%, and the collection of food for “things like anaerobic digestion and composting has gone up 70%” (Jolicoeur and Mullins, 2019). If organizations, particularly restaurants, grocery stores, and institutions in Worcester want to promote more food sovereignty, they should consider how they can divert even more of their food waste.

Overall, achieving food sovereignty in Worcester was not the *primary* goal of any of the organizations I interviewed. Yet, many of the organizations were engaged in one or more activities that are critical in forwarding the movement for food sovereignty including: educating the public about the injustices of the food system, helping low-income citizens to have choice and stakeholderhood in their food system, creating networks between different local food producers, and advocating for food-sovereignty policies in the government. These examples may be helpful for other food-related non-profits in Worcester who are trying to align their activities with the food sovereignty movement.

Theories of Change and Visions for the Future of Worcester’s Food System:

One of the things my interviews focused on was visions for the future of the Worcester food system. I asked participants what they saw as the greatest potential for achieving more food sovereignty in the future in Worcester. For interviewees who were not familiar with the concept of food sovereignty, I instead asked the question, “what do you think needs to happen in order for there to be positive change in the Worcester food system in the future?” Participants’ responses to these questions covered many different avenues for creating change. While these categories are not wholly inclusive, some of the main ‘spheres’ in which interviewees thought change needed to happen were within the government, within non-profit organizations in Worcester, and within consumer education and advocacy.

Government Change:

In the sphere of government, one thing that was brought up by many of my participants was the importance of continued funding for the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP). As mentioned earlier, HIP is a statewide program in Massachusetts which reimburses SNAP participants 100% when they buy up to a certain amount in fresh fruits and vegetables from (MA Food System Collaborative, 2020). One of the reasons why this program is so important, is it supports not only the wellbeing of low income consumers by giving them the ability to buy healthy foods, but it also supports the well-being of local farmers. As Dickinson (2013) points out, this is one of the main challenges with achieving food sovereignty in an urban context – meeting the needs of both farmers and consumers. HIP has also been very effective in garnering bi-partisan support, because it has created economic support for rural farming areas in Massachusetts that tend to vote Republican. One interviewee explained that they've been to “state Senate hearings where they have farmers who were on the brink of having their farms close, and then opening up a whole new customer base has been transformative for them” (Interview 4). HIP has also helped farmers to start growing and providing more culturally relevant foods, as farmers at markets are now seeing a more diverse clientele, and a demand for traditional Asian, African, and Latin American crops (Interview 2). However, many of the interviewees expressed frustration that there is not greater economic support or awareness building for this program (Interview 2, Interview 4). One interviewee explained that the program has been so popular that it has run out of funding every year since its launch (Interview 4). “We’ve had to fight for a supplemental budget [for HIP],” the interviewee said, “because that’s how many people want to buy local food” (Interview 4).

The same individual said that there may be a lack of public understanding for how HIP works (Interview 4). In addition, she said that many families might be scared to use SNAP or HIP benefits because of their immigrant status. “I think...that there is a lot of fear right now around SNAP in the Latino community because of the current administration's legislation around public charge, and so people are disconnecting from programs like SNAP because they live in mixed status families, and so they are fearful about...their family members,” the interviewee said (Interview 4). Public charge is a Department of Homeland Security rule established during the Trump administration, that can prevent immigrants from gaining citizenship. Immigrants are determined to be a ‘public charge’ if they are likely to need government assistance in the future.

Use of government benefits (including SNAP) within the past three years is a factor that is likely to determine an immigrant as a public charge (US Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2020). The interviewee expressed the importance of “drilling down” on this issue in order to further expand the benefits of the HIP program (Interview 4).

Frustration with lack of government action and economic support was a common theme throughout the interviews. For example, I spoke to one individual who started a small food pantry with friends to support immigrant populations when COVID started. When I asked her how she envisioned this work possibly being scaled up in the future, she said with a laugh, “I think ideally, you wouldn't just have a group of random volunteers feeding people! This would be a part of [something larger]... the city would take this on and say, ‘we should give free food to immigrants and refugees’” (Interview 5). This individual’s statement is simple yet profound. It begs the question of why we have a system in our country where tiny non-profits with limited budgets are the means by which low-income people are fed. Another interviewee had a similar sentiment. She said, “if we let the government off, which is what we’ve been doing recently, they’ll just say... ‘oh aren't you guys great, you’re figuring these things out’... But no, it’s really the government’s responsibility to come with local, healthy solutions” (Interview 2). This interviewee pointed out that “strong government response in relation to [food insecurity]” has to be a “big part of the solution” (Interview 2). One interviewee pointed out that the true problem is that people are not supported economically in our country. She said:

I don't think we need to have a million healthy cooking programs and unlimited food pantries. Not that that's not important work. You know, it's important to stop the bleeding and make sure that people have food where they're at. But....at the end of the day, programs that directly provide financial resources to people....with flexibility and economy and choice and no unnecessary restrictions and bureaucracy are [more] effective. And they're also cheaper (Interview 4).

If the government provided more direct economic support to Worcester residents, rather than relying on charities to feed people, then low-income individuals would have more agency in the way they engage with the food system, and be better positioned to make ethical and healthy food

choices. Coupled with education and awareness, government economic support could be an important way to achieve more food sovereignty in Worcester, according to my participants.

In terms of government support, one interviewee pointed out that the government could also provide more support for public transportation (Interview 11). The interviewee explained that many of the smallest farms in Massachusetts and Worcester county might have a stand at the end of their driveway (Interview 11). This makes them accessible only to individuals who have access to a car. It also makes it difficult for some small farms to compete in the market if they are not centrally located. One initiative that has worked to counter this challenge in the past, is the development of Central Mass Grown. Central Mass Grown was initially developed by the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission in 2014, and has since become its own organization (Interview 11). Central Mass Grown helps the issue of competing small farms through producing annual local food and farm guides that help restaurants, wholesalers, and the general public to connect to local food (Central Mass Grown, 2020). The Massachusetts Department of Agriculture also produces a “MassGrown Map,” where consumers can see the locations of not only farms around the state, but also the locations of CSA pickups in the city, farm stands, and mobile markets, as well as whether each location takes SNAP and HIP benefits (Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources, 2021). Increased public education about resources such as the MassGrownMap, as well as connecting public transportation to local food pickup locations, would be important to achieving more food sovereignty in Massachusetts, according to interviewees.

Because of all the different ways the government can support food sovereignty, such as through the HIP program, public transportation, and increasing awareness about resources such as Massachusetts Grown, some interviewees said that policy advocacy was a central tenet of achieving more food sovereignty (Interview 2, Interview 10). Beyond policy advocacy, some interviewees also expressed the need for officials in government who will represent the community better or be ready to champion the cause of food sovereignty or food justice (Interview 5, and Interview 9). Another interviewee pointed out that within both Worcester non-profits and Worcester City Council, there is a “very strong ‘old white’ network that is not very forward thinking and holds a lot back” (Interview 4). As racism is embedded in the food system, it is critical institutions such as the government and non-profits are also working to address

racism. “We have to fundamentally shift how we're organizing and who we're talking to in order to get that change,” interviewee number 4 pointed out.

Organizational Change:

Changing the leadership structure of Worcester non-profits was mentioned by some interviewees when I asked how we could make Worcester more food sovereign. One interviewee who worked for the Worcester Food Policy Council explained that her organization does not have enough directly-impacted people at the decision making table (Interview 2). She said that the Food Policy Council is “trying to move in that direction...[by] doing more intentional recruitment, having paid stipends...community meetings where...[they] pay for people’s time so that they can give input” (Interview 2). She said, “I think those efforts are helping... [but] I still think we have a long way to go” (Interview 2). The Worcester Food Policy Council does not mention the monthly meetings they conduct about food policy on their website. I was only able to attend one meeting after the interviewee connected me via email to a Worcester Food Policy Council employee.

Other interviewees also cited the need to foster more community involvement in some of their organization’s programs. For example, an individual from the Regional Environmental Council explained that while they do have programs that are very participatory in terms of the community, such as their youth grow program, they have struggled to incorporate community leadership in other programs like the farmers market (Interview 4). Community leadership in the farmers market program could help with making decisions such as where the mobile market should be placed. Yet, many community members do not have the time to fill out a survey or participate in a meeting with REC staff. “I think part of the barrier,” the interviewee with the Regional Environmental Council said, “is paying people for their time, and part of it is a lot of folks...may not necessarily be interested in having their relationship with us go beyond getting their food there” (Interview 4). The interviewee said that “there aren’t...many existing models on how to make that work,” but that funding from the Division of Public Health has helped REC to move forward on the issue (Interview 4). Food sovereignty encompasses community stakeholderhood and ownership at many different scales (Desmares, 2014). Thus, greater community participation in initiatives like REC’s farmer’s market is something that would increase food sovereignty in Worcester.

Modifying the services of Worcester food banks could also be a way to achieve more (micro-level) food sovereignty in Worcester. According to the US Food Sovereignty Alliance, one important aspect of food sovereignty is the right for everyone to have access to “sufficient, healthy and culturally appropriate food” (US Food Sovereignty Alliance, 2020). If organizations like food banks could prioritize not only stocking healthy and culturally relevant food, but also give their clients the ability to shop for which foods they need or want, then clients could gain more individual-level food sovereignty. However, food banks in the US are often stocked primarily with processed and unhealthy foods, and may not have a large selection of culturally relevant foods. Many pantries also limit the agency of their clients by handing out pre-filled bags of food. An alternative to this is ‘client choice’ food pantries, where the pantries are set up so that low income clients can shop for the foods they want and need (End Hunger in America, 2021). Client choice food pantries not only give low-income individuals more control over the food they access, they also reduce food-waste, as individuals likely won’t take things that they don’t plan to use (End Hunger in America, 2021).

In my interviews, the topic of ‘client choice’ food pantries was not discussed. However, one interviewee said her food pantry struggles to provide healthy food to clients, or give them the choice of culturally relevant foods (Interview 7). She said that the donated foods their pantry receives “tends to be a lot of pastry, a lot of bread...” and that they “rarely get nutritious food” (Interview 7). The interviewee attributed this in part to a prevalent mindset in our country around food donations. She said, “[people] might think what they’re doing is a good thing” but they may not consider the importance of donating healthy or fresh foods to a food pantry (Interview 7). Similarly, the interviewee said that churches and organizations that donate hot meals to the food pantry’s adjacent soup kitchen do not always cook things that are nutritious. “I’ve been trying to shift people into a new way of looking at things to say, ‘could we make this meal more nutritious?’” she explained. “But in general it’s sort of left up to them to decide what they want to do for a meal...[and] you end up with a lot of things like pasta” (Interview 7). Because soup kitchens serve large quantities of pre-prepared food, it may be hard to shift their operations so as to better support individual-level food sovereignty. However, food pantries could take steps to increase the food sovereignty of their clients, by emphasizing to donors the importance of donating fresh and healthy foods, and allowing clients to shop through the pantry for their own food. They could also seek out donations of culturally relevant food. For example, a volunteer

with the Mutual Aid food pantry explained that once a week, they will use donated funds to pick up bags of rice from Mekong Market, as rice is a staple of many of the immigrant families their food pantry serves (Interview 5). The more that food pantries can use strategies to increase client choice and client access to healthy and culturally relevant foods, the more they will be able to support food sovereignty in Worcester.

In order for there to be more food sovereignty in Worcester, interviewees also highlighted the importance of creating change through the existing advocacy organizations in the city. One interviewee pointed out that “Main South is a dynamic, rich neighborhood that is already very well organized in a lot of ways” (Interview 4). This individual also said, “One of the things I think is really important for the Worcester food system specifically, as someone who was born here and has lived here a long time and loves the city very much, is to have any kind of change be grounded in the existing resources and assets that communities already have” (Interview 4). Another interviewee echoed this statement and said that in order to have more food sovereignty, “there needs to be more support for the things that are already happening” (Interview 5). These statements provide an interesting complement to sentiments about how some of the organizational practices of Worcester non-profits might need to change. Yes, food banks and soup kitchens often struggle to find ways to distribute healthy, culturally relevant foods. Yes, many of the organizations lack community participation and the input of those most impacted by food insecurity. Yet, what these interviewee’s statements allude to is that to achieve food sovereignty in Worcester, we don’t need to reinvent the wheel. Rather, the already existing programs and organizations in Worcester can act as platforms to transform the food system.

One of the interviewees also thought that it was important for existing organizations in Worcester to increase their collaboration with one another. They pointed out that while there are many food-related organizations in Worcester, “they don’t talk to each-other... [there are] a lot of possibly duplicated efforts, but lack of coordination” (Interview 9). To contrast with this, one of the interviewees explained that their food bank collaborates with many other organizations in Worcester (Interview 8). Saint John’s Food Pantry has partnerships with two large corporations who supply their food, and they often have surplus, which they deliver multiple times per week to five other food pantries around Worcester (Interview 8). Sharing resources is just one aspect of collaborating. Another interviewee pointed out that the next step to creating food sovereignty in Worcester is for organizations to work together on long-term goals and strategies. She said

that in some ways, this is already happening. She said, “The charge I have for Worcester is to now ‘bridge it.’ Really bridge... [the work that different organizations are doing]... I think that’s now starting to happen... REC just got forty two thousand dollars in funding and they’re going to be collaborating with Worcester State [University]... and other organizations...[and] they’re going to be doing a K-12 garden-to-table curriculum” (Interview 6). Continued partnerships between non-profits and institutions in Worcester will be essential for achieving more food sovereignty in the city.

Consumer Awareness and Grassroots Advocacy:

Besides change via the government non-profits in Worcester, one of the other main avenues for creating a more food sovereign Worcester that participants mentioned was through consumer advocacy. Interviewee number 6 and interviewee number 10 supported this theory of change. When I asked interviewee number 10 what she thought was needed for there to be more food sovereignty in Worcester, she answered:

I think we first of all have to educate people that food is their health and that it's a priority. And we have to help people get off of the fast food... unhealthy food. You know, I don't think we're going to get Monsanto and company to start raising good, non-GMO corn unless people demand that (Interview 10).

Her perspective takes a bottom-up view towards changing the system. “Consumers, she says, have a lot of power” (Interview 10). In order for this power to be capitalized on, however, she says that there needs to be more consumer outreach and education.

Interviewee number 6 had a similar perspective to interviewee number 10. When I asked this participant what she thinks is the biggest potential for Worcester to have more food sovereignty, she answered: “I would say a revival that is consumer led.” She talks about how earlier in her life, she used to do government policy work around healthcare. However, she eventually moved away from this work because she decided that “the problem is that the consumers are completely disconnected” from their healthcare choices. She points out that “you can have laws in place” but that many low-income individuals or BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) might not even be aware that these policies exist. In relation to health and

healthy eating, she said that it is important to empower low-income individuals to grow and prepare living foods (Interview 6). Living foods are foods that are consumed in a way that is as close as possible to their living form (Lang, 2001). This interviewee does one-on-one health consultations and workshops with clients, in which she tries to help them cook traditional dishes but in healthier ways. For example, she said:

Sometimes you might have somebody who is of a certain culture, but they might have a disconnection with food altogether. They might not recognize certain ingredients... maybe they only buy the foods already pre-made... they don't really know the traditional recipe. And so my goal is just to get [people]...starting to become familiarized with 'why medicinal foods?' 'Why living foods?' (Interview 6)

Overall, this interviewee said that empowering people to be able to grow and prepare their own nourishing foods is to her the most promising avenue for achieving food sovereignty in Worcester.

One of the individuals I spoke with provides a critique on this perspective. She explained how there is a common myth that low-income individuals don't know how to eat healthfully, when oftentimes the issue is lack of economic resources. She described an experience she had several years back, where she interviewed some older Vietnamese American women in Worcester. She said that “[the women] were talking about how from their [home] country, they know of the importance of a raw food diet. They do a lot of juicing and salads...but it's really important to them that they know how the product is grown, that it's not grown with pesticides” (Interview 4). However, she said these women expressed that it was “not affordable for them to [eat in this way].” Interviewee 5 had a similar point to make about the knowledge of immigrants in Worcester. She said, “I know so many people who are from different countries and come here and used to live and work on farms, and would love to be growing their own food in some capacity. And so there's the desire...[but] not resources or support” (Interview 5). Considering the points of these two interviewees, education and awareness building alone may not be enough to give people in Worcester more individual-level sovereignty over their food. Rather, better economic support for residents is also needed. In addition, education and advocacy programs

should respect, and work with, the culturally relevant knowledge of food and farming that individuals may already have.

Clark University and Food Sovereignty:

Clark University, via its dining hall, campus operations, and students who purchase from local restaurants and volunteer at community organizations, has the potential to be a positive influence in the Worcester community. Yet, like many universities, Clark's participation in the food system is questionable. In this section, I will explore what a standard University relationship to the food system looks like, as well as what it looks like for a University to have a more just and sustainable relationship with food in their community. I will also explore the role that student activists can play (and have played) in achieving more food sovereignty. Finally, I will summarize interviewee responses to the question, what can Clark do to promote more food sovereignty in Worcester?

Dining Halls and Food Sovereignty:

Many Universities have a problematic relationship to food, due in large part to the fact that they contract with Food Service Management Companies (FSMCs), which run their dining halls. FSMCs do everything from source the food that the dining hall cooks, to hiring and overseeing dining hall staff (Brown et al, 2020). Clark's FSMC is Sodexo, one of the three main corporations in the US that dominate this industry (the other two being Aramark and Compass Group). One of the most problematic aspects of FSMCs is the way that they take advantage of "kickbacks" to source food for dining halls (Brown et al, 2020). Kickbacks are when a FSMC receives a rebate from purchasing a high volume of product from industrial food companies such as Tyson, Cargill, or Coca Cola. These kickbacks are problematic for a number of reasons. For one, companies such as Tyson and Cargill have large carbon footprints, and are well known for their labor rights and environmental rights abuses (Brown et al, 2020). Tyson for example, has reportedly sourced palm oil produced by child labor, and through their supply chains of palm oil has displaced 2.5 million indigenous people in Borneo (Schaefer, 2016). Tyson has also been accused of a number of labor rights abuses in the US, including not paying workers for overtime

and providing dangerous working conditions (Schaefer, 2016). These activities are the antithesis of food sovereignty, in which people are able to participate in the food system with dignity and justice.

Kickbacks are problematic not only because they encourage colleges to support unethical industries. They are also problematic because they essentially ‘lock out’ small and medium sized farmers, ranchers, and fishers from being able to sell their products to University FSMCs (Brown et al, 2020). At Clark, for example, Sodexo has a preferred vendors list that they use to source food from (Interview 1). In 2017, students campaigned for Clark to increase the amount of food that is sourced locally and sustainably. Because of Sodexo’s preferred vendors list however, students faced pushback from Clark on their requests (Interview 1). The current terms of Clark’s relationship with Sodexo is limiting the amount of sovereignty that students can have in their food system. It is also limiting Clark’s ability to bolster food sovereignty through supporting the local food economy.

It doesn’t have to be this way. There are a number of universities that have food systems that are more just, including schools in the northeast such as the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Bates College, and Williams College. For example, the University of Massachusetts Amherst has adopted a challenge proposed by Food Solutions New England to source 50% local food by the year 2060 (Umass Amherst, 2016). As of 2015, they were spending \$4.07 million dollars on local and sustainable food. UMass Amherst’s definition of local food includes three tiers. The first tier prioritizes local community-based farms. The second includes “regional food businesses and distributors that support a resilient and healthy local/regional food system,” and the third includes “other sustainable farms and businesses with certified humane, fair trade, organic, and other sustainability best practices” (Umass Amherst, 2016, p. 15). These tiers of sustainable food are interesting to think about in relation to food sovereignty. While some scholars point out that the easiest way to achieve food sovereignty is through local, farm/producer/consumer relationships, sourcing from further away can also be considered supporting food sovereignty. Food sovereignty is not *against* trade (as La Via Campesina has often pointed out), but it requires that communities and nations determine their own trade relationships (Burnett and Murphy, 2013).

The dining system at Bates College is also impressive in terms of how it supports a more food sovereign future. Bates college diverts 82% of dining waste from the waste stream (Morse,

2015). They divert this waste by recycling grey water, donating all food waste to a pig farmer, unbleaching and selling paper products to be composted at a local farm, and selling used cooking oil for use as biodiesel (Morse, 2015). The university also makes their food purchases from 32 local suppliers, and cooks with produce from their campus garden (Morse, 2015). Altogether, Bates sources about 30% of their food locally (Morse, 2015). Williams College, to give another example, purchases directly from 31 local suppliers (Williams Dining, 2021). While one interviewee said that sourcing a large amount of local food in New England can be challenging due to seasonality (Interview 3), UMass Amherst, Bates, and Williams colleges (among others) shows that it is possible. One of the ways that UMass Amherst adapts to the seasonality of food, is by tailoring their menus to the growing season. In the summer, produce such as tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, and spinach is served, as these crops are in season. In the winter, the UMass Amherst dining hall serves produce that is more easily stored, like carrots, beets, squashes, apples, potatoes, and cabbage (Umass Amherst, 2016). In their *How-To Guide for Foodservice Operators*, UMass Amherst notes that value-added products such as preserved vegetables and fruits, frozen fruit, granola, flour, and maple syrup can be sourced year round and in “relatively large quantities” in New England (Umass Amherst, 2016).

The Role of Student Activists:

Students have a role to play in getting their Universities to be more food sovereign. For example, it was students who in 2013 got the Chancellor of UMass Amherst to sign the challenge to achieve 20% real food (food that is sourced locally, sustainably, and fairly) by 2020 (Gerber, 2013; Real Food Challenge, 2020). These students, who were part of the Real Food Challenge campaign, started their work in 2012 (Gerber, 2013). Across the US, more than 80 schools have adopted commitments to source more real food due to the work of student activists leading Real Food Challenge campaigns (Real Food Challenge, 2020). The Real Food Challenge has since launched *Uprooted and Rising*, a BIPOC student organization committed to achieving food sovereignty in schools around the country (Real Food Challenge, 2018). This organization is operating a number of different campaigns around the country. One of the closest to Clark University is at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts.

In the past, Clark University students have organized to achieve more sustainable food. In 2013, the campus club *Food Truth* convinced Clark to be the first school in Massachusetts to sign the Real Food Challenge (Clark News and Media Relations, 2013). This could be seen as Clark students asserting their own food sovereignty. Yet, student organizers at Clark have faced significant roadblocks in getting Clark to purchase more local and ethically source food. For example, by 2017, Clark was not on track to meet the real food challenge and lacked accountability about where it was sourcing its local food from (Interview 1). Clark students in the Food Truth club had spent hundreds of unpaid hours sorting through Sodexo's food receipts in order to determine the percentage of real food that Clark was sourcing (Interview 1). Therefore, in 2017 the student group compiled a list of demands for Clark to include in their contract with Sodexo, which was due to be renewed in 2018 (Listen up Sodexo, 2017). As part of the demands, students asked for more transparency about what real foods (and other foods) Clark was sourcing, compensation for students who were continuing to do unpaid labor to track where Clark was sourcing food from, continuing the commitment to source 20% real food by 2020, and raising wages for food service employees to \$15 dollars an hour (Listen up Sodexo, 2017). However, according to a student alumni of the Food Truth campaign, Clark did not meet any of the demands when they renewed their contract with Sodexo (Interview 1). After 2018, student organizing around food issues at Clark slowed down, as students were frustrated with the bureaucratic barriers they were up against (Interview 1).

Clark's Role in Promoting Food Sovereignty in Worcester:

Changing the terms of Clark's relationship with Sodexo, (so that it's easier to source food locally and sustainability and so that students have greater sovereignty in determining the food provided at Clark), is one of the first steps that needs to happen for Clark to promote food sovereignty. However, I also wanted to document the opinions of individuals who work at local food non-profits. I asked participants how they viewed Clark's relationship with Worcester, and what Clark needed to do to promote more food sovereignty in Worcester in the future. While many mentioned the dining hall as a starting place, some of their answers included recommendations for students trying to volunteer in the Worcester community, as well as for students who want to do research.

On Campus:

One of the main themes that came out of this discussion was the need for Clark to change internally, particularly related to the dining system. One interviewee pointed out that Clark has the potential to support the local economy much more than they currently do. She said, “I think you...still have quite a bit of work [to do] in terms of your own, local Clark food system,” and that Sodexo, could purchase more local food and support local businesses (Interview 2). This interviewee had also heard “vignettes...around Clark dining and the quality of jobs for people,” and thought that wages and protections for Clark dining workers should be improved (Interview 2). Finally, this interviewee said that she doesn’t think students utilize the farmers market in Crystal Park enough, and that the University should be doing more to promote that (Interview 2).

Some of the interviewees pointed out the challenges in Clark sourcing more local food. One interviewee said that Clark purchases a small percentage of local food already from the Worcester Food Hub, but that it would be challenging to scale this up due to issues of seasonality of crops in New England. One way to combat this, the interviewee pointed out, would be if Clark could expand their facility so they have the ability to freeze or process fresh foods, and store them for later (Interview 3). Another interviewee said that she thinks the small farms around Worcester would have a hard time “meeting the needs of Clark” (Interview 10). However, she emphasized that it *can* be done if student activists get the Clark administration to make it a priority. This interviewee gave the example of UMass Amherst, which I have explained in depth above (Interview 10). Two interviewees mentioned that Clark could grow more of its own food on campus (Interview 2, Interview 10). Currently, the only food that is grown on Clark’s campus is in a hydroponics trailer owned by a Clark student startup, Freight Farms. The hydroponics trailer grows up to 500 heads of lettuce every 8 weeks, which are used in the dining hall (Quinn-Szcesuil, 2016). One interviewee mentioned that green roofs or edible design could be one innovative way to increase the local food that Clark sources (Interview 2). Similarly, another interviewee said that flower beds around Clark could be transformed into “food beds” (Interview 10).

In regard to supporting local food businesses, one interviewee (who worked on the Real Food Challenge campaign at Clark) mentioned that one of the ideas in their campaign was for Clark to contract with local Worcester restaurants so that students could use their dining dollars there. This would not only contribute to food sovereignty by supporting local food retail owners

(a key stakeholder group in our urban food system) but would also give students more sovereignty over their food choices and more access to culturally relevant foods (Interview 1). Another interviewee discussed a partnership that Clark has with the Worcester Food Hub, where they bring local chefs on occasion into the dining hall to showcase their product. The interviewee specifically mentioned Ugandan food as something that was made by one of the local chefs in the Clark Dining Hall (Interview 3). Scaling up this local chef partnership with the Worcester Food Hub would be one way for Clark to promote more food sovereignty in Worcester.

Finally, one interviewee mentioned that hunger among its own student population is something that Clark students should advocate for before they try and address food sovereignty in the Worcester community. Hunger is something that is very prevalent on college campuses. In 2016, according to a survey of 34 community and 4-year colleges across 12 states, 22% of all students were food insecure (Dubick et al, 2016). Currently, there are a few initiatives around hunger at Clark. One such initiative, the Ujima Food Pantry, was started by Clark International Students and Imrana Soofi, a local community leader who also runs Blackseed Farmers Market. This food pantry started at the beginning of the pandemic, as many international students were unable to fly home, could not work because of visa requirements, and weren't able to receive government assistance through programs such as SNAP (Shaner, 2020). Clark University Student Council also started a food pantry at the beginning of the pandemic, which sourced non-perishable items from students who were leaving Worcester to go home (Lynch, 2020). The pantry has continued to run throughout the fall semester, and is an example of a community-owned solution to food insecurity. As mentioned previously, part of food sovereignty is being able to choose foods that are healthy and culturally relevant (US Food Sovereignty Alliance, 2020). Clark students are able to 'shop' for the foods they want and need at the student food pantry, however the majority of foods available are non-perishable. One way that Clark University could help food-insecure students to have more food sovereignty, is by providing grocery vouchers to students in need, so that they could purchase fresh produce or other items that the food pantry does not have on hand.

Off Campus:

Beyond initiatives on campus, there are many things that Clark can offer to the greater Worcester community to better support food sovereignty. Many interviewees discussed the assets

that Clark has: students who are eager to volunteer, professors who can facilitate exchange of ideas, funding for research, and facilities that could be opened up more to the public.

Interviewees had particular ideas on how these assets should be used.

First of all, student volunteers have an important role to play in the Worcester community when it comes to food sovereignty. Many food-related nonprofit organizations such as REC rely on Clark volunteers in order to operate. Several interviewees pointed out, however, that students should take the time to truly learn from these organizations and work with them longer than just one semester or one year. One interviewee said she feels that there are “a lot of students who really care” and who “want to change things,” but that students need to be committed to “being in things for the long haul... relationship building, and all those things...[which] create a community” (Interview 5). Another interviewee said that a challenge her organization faces is that Clark students and faculty have too much of a “desire and energy to start new projects.” Oftentimes, she said, there “isn’t support from faculty for students to instead spend more time learning about the existing work in the community where [they] are situated. Even someone who’s really experienced in the field...the minimum amount of time...before you can do any kind of impactful work...is at least a year” (Interview 4). With regards to volunteering, an interviewee also said that there is a lot of romanticizing by students about things like activism and food justice. Sometimes what organizations really need is more behind the scenes work like making phone calls, fundraising, or doing research. “A lot of times that’s our work as white people...” she said, referencing both her and my positionalities, “doing some of that behind-the-scenes stuff” (Interview 5).

Other interviewees discussed how Clark’s resources (classroom space, money) could be used to foster conversations between community members, students, and faculty about food sovereignty in Worcester. One interviewee pointed out that there’s so much expertise in the Worcester community that students don’t even get to learn from (Interview 1). Another interviewee said she thinks that Clark should somehow “facilitate [conversations so] that people in the community...[can] teach other people” (Interview 5). This interviewee pointed out that Clark administrators, faculty, and students need to be serious about listening to what the community needs and the community’s visions for food sovereignty. “Listening to youth and learning from youth” in the community is especially important, she says (Interview 5).

Another interviewee said that research is one of the most impactful things Clark can offer the community in terms of food sovereignty (Interview 11). She said that specifically, research needs to be done around climate change resiliency planning. She gave examples of research questions, such as: “If the price of gas were to go through the roof, what would happen to our connectivity to the food justice system? If we hit another drought, what does that do to the water tables? If there was a days-long power loss in the region, could our cities maintain food supplies with emergency generators and freezers?” Specifically, she said, students and faculty at schools like Clark could do more research on the impacts of climate change on farms in Massachusetts. She suggested speaking to farmers who experienced the recent drought in Massachusetts, and exploring which regions in Massachusetts need the most help in terms of water (Interview 11). Related to the theme of research, another interviewee said that they have heard that Clark hosts “events with environment and climate organizations,” and that Clark should “continue that leadership,” and “continue spearheading in that direction” (Interview 6).

Food Sovereignty and COVID:

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, achieving food sovereignty is more critical than ever before. In many ways, COVID is showing how our global, industrial, and commodified food system is broken. First of all, industrial agriculture makes diseases like COVID more likely to develop in the first place (Galanakis, 2020). As livestock production pushes further into wild landscapes, there is more potential for domesticated animals to come in contact with diseases harbored by wild animals, and the squalid conditions of factory farms makes diseases much more likely to spread (Galanakis, 2020). This was how the 2009 swine flu virus arose (Batini et al, 2020). As one interview participant pointed out, “This crisis is a good example of what happens when we wholesale ignore nature and natural systems” (Interview 10). Smaller farms that use sustainable practices – a central tenet of food sovereignty—are less likely to tip the ecological balance.

COVID also reveals the health inequalities embedded in our food system. Because of the way governments subsidize cereal grains, some of the cheapest and most available foods on the market are also the unhealthiest (Dickinson, 2013). We see this reflected in food pantries that stock the surplus food of grocery stores in the form of white bread, cakes, and highly processed

foods. Because they are not able to afford anything else, lower income individuals disproportionately consume this type of food, and disproportionately suffer from diet-related illnesses like diabetes, heart disease, and obesity (Dickinson, 2013). The fact that individuals with diet-related diseases are more likely to succumb to COVID is a cruel reminder of the consequences of this flaw in our food system (Yang et al, 2020).

COVID has also shown the fragilities on both the supply and demand side of our highly globalized food system (Batini et al, 2020). On the supply side, outbreaks in food manufacturing facilities and restrictions on travel in certain countries have caused shortages in the food supply, especially of fresh fruits and vegetables to urban areas (Galanakis, 2020). On the demand side, COVID has caused shortages due to “panic buying” of certain goods at grocery stores (Power et al, 2020). This has exacerbated the challenges of food access for lower income families, as they may not have a car to go to the next closest store.

These are just some of the examples of the relationship between COVID and our globalized, industrial food system. When I asked interviewees about how they see COVID impacting the food system, there were a variety of different points they brought up. One interviewee pointed out the economic disparities that COVID has exacerbated. For example, people who are economically privileged have an easier time purchasing food to be delivered to their houses, or driving to stores that have senior hours. One interviewee said, “I'm 64, I didn't want to go in stores, so...I went looking for [other] ways to get food. But some people do not have the time, energy, resources, contacts, to do that. And so they're putting themselves at risk. You know, I choose what stores to go...[in]....on the basis of, ‘who has hours for seniors,’ and I'm tending to go farther afield for food because I have a car and I can drive there” (Interview 9). She also pointed out that “you become aware of resources as an entitled white person,” and that when COVID hit, she found a dairy that delivered because she didn't want to go into stores. Other people, she points out, those who could benefit most from these resources, often are not made aware of them (Interview 9).

If COVID has widened inequality between individuals within communities, it has also widened inequality between small businesses such as restaurants and corporate giants like Amazon. One interviewee pointed out that during COVID, we are “seeing Amazon and Walmart become even stronger and even more powerful...which is the exact antithesis of what we're trying to create” (Interview 2). This individual explained that in order to solve this, “we have to

be vigilant about coming up with local solutions, and then financial support... and not [let] charity just take over.” She emphasized the importance of pressuring the government to support local food systems. “Let’s be honest,” she said, “we underwrite Amazon and Walmart every day... [we can’t] let the government off, which is what we’ve been doing recently” (Interview 2).

COVID has also revealed things about our food system, such as the way we undervalue certain kinds of labor. One interviewee pointed out:

For folks who are actually growing and producing the food, in most cases [they] are not making living wages, in a lot of cases there are folks here on temporary wages, there is a lot of racism and discrimination..... And then I think you saw that in a different way, again with COVID. For folks who work in grocery stores. Really understanding that there are people in our food system whose work is essential, but whose work is not valued. (Interview 4)

Overall, COVID adds both extra layers of difficulty for the local food system, as well as new opportunities for growth. One interviewee pointed out that COVID has added extra layers of cost to distributors of local food, because of the PPE (personal protection equipment) and constant cleaning that is required (Interview 11). However, she also said that she thinks COVID has helped more people purchase locally and be more connected to their food. She said, “I’ve spent a lot less [time] in the Shaw’s market than I have with Lilac Hedge [farm]... in the last four, five months. So I think people are getting closer to their food, where they feel better about that” (Interview 11). This interviewee also said that COVID does create challenges, but in response to many of those challenges, “[people] create new ways of doing things that are probably better.” She said, “I think COVID is a great example of that” (Interview 11). Another interviewee who runs a local farm stated that COVID has actually helped their business. She explains:

It used to be a little harder to sell our food, I mean even after all these years. We were constantly on the pavement trying to get people to buy one way or another. And this year, that's all turned itself upside-down. Because people...don't know where to get food... There were a lot of people who felt that they likely weren't going to get any more food, or

that it was going to be very hard to get. And, I think a lot of other people just were kind of reminded...that in the face of a Pandemic, what should you be doing? You should be eating good food. A lot of people have come back to us. They were members years and years ago. There's been a lot of re-interest in taking good care of one's self, and where to best do that is to go to a local farm (Interview 10).

In one way, COVID might be a positive thing for the food system, because it is illuminating the inequalities in the food system. Since COVID started, there has been an increase in initiatives to address food insecurity in Worcester. For example, the Worcester Regional Food Hub has started making local produce available to community members on SNAP for the first time (Interview 11). A group of friends created the Mutual Aid Food Pantry when COVID arose, which serves mostly immigrant populations (Interview 5). In addition, two different food pantries have been created to address student food insecurity at Clark (Shaner, 2020; Lynch, 2020) At the same time, however, efforts that are primarily volunteer-led have their limits. Multiple interviewees described how their pools of volunteers have been shrinking as these individuals are increasingly staying home to avoid COVID (Interview 8, Interview 4). Overall, COVID seems to be testing the resiliency of our food system, and showing its breaking points. The more that the Worcester government, non-profits, and institutions such as Clark University can focus on efforts for food sovereignty such as I have outlined in this report, the stronger and more resilient the food system will be.

Conclusion:

It has been almost 30 years since La Via Campesina first coined the term food sovereignty. Yet, it is ever more urgent that we achieve food sovereignty in all areas of the world, rural and urban alike. The climate crisis and COVID continue to make food production more unstable. Rising temperatures and extreme weather events are impacting food production and distribution (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2008). Furthermore, COVID has impacted supply chains around the world, and has caused food insecurity to skyrocket (World Bank, 2020). The UN World Food Program estimated that by the end of 2020, there would be an 82 percent increase in acute food insecurity as compared to before COVID

(World Bank, 2020). Massachusetts is not spared from rising food insecurity. By the end of 2020, an estimated 13.1 percent of the population will be food insecure, as opposed to 8.3 percent before the pandemic (Carraggi, 2020; Feeding America, 2018).

Food sovereignty is incredibly urgent during this time for a few different reasons. First of all, food sovereign systems are more resilient. When communities control the food system, they have the advantage of being able to come up with more localized, situation-specific solutions when a crisis arises (Watson, 2018). Second, food sovereignty is urgent right now because industrial agriculture is one of the leading causes of the climate crisis. Small scale farms, when grown using sustainable methods, emit far less CO₂ and use less fertilizer inputs based from fossil fuels (Zinn, 2015). As the warming of our climate continues to accelerate, cities and rural areas alike must consider how they can better support small farmers. Having more food sovereignty, or community control of the food system, is important for supporting local and sustainable food economies.

The individuals I interviewed outlined some of the ways Worcester residents understand the concept of food sovereignty, which is helpful for understanding how Worcester can achieve a better food system. Some interviewees understood food sovereignty to be agency at the individual level (such as growing one's own food or being empowered with knowledge about healthy eating). Other interviewees understood food sovereignty to be agency at the community level, where communities more fully control their food systems.

If food sovereignty can operate at different scales, interviewees demonstrated that there are some things already happening in Worcester which support food sovereignty. For example, the Worcester Food Hub is connecting rural food producers, urban consumers, and restaurant owners to create a more community-controlled food system. The Regional Environmental Council's YouthGrow program allows teens to have leadership and agency in REC's food initiatives. SproutChange is helping Worcester residents to take ownership of their health and food choices by teaching them to grow permaculture gardens and cook nutritious recipes.

There is also much that still needs to happen if Worcester is to become food sovereign. The main spheres in which interviewees thought change needs to happen were within the government, within Worcester nonprofits, and within education and advocacy. Organizations like the Worcester Food Policy Council need to incorporate more leadership from underrepresented individuals in the community. Food banks like Mustardseed should explore

modifying their operations so that individuals can shop for their own food, and should prioritize sourcing fresh produce and culturally relevant foods. Individuals and organizations need to advocate for policies that support food sovereignty, such as the Healthy Incentives Program. Overall, Worcester has a rich network of food-related non profit organizations. If their efforts are directed in the right way, they can provide a strong platform for eventually achieving food sovereignty in Worcester.

The interviewees also spoke of ways that Clark University can promote food sovereignty in the city of Worcester. Some interviewees said that Clark can promote food sovereignty through internal change. Some said that Clarks' dining hall could purchase more local food, or that students should be allowed to use dining dollars at Worcester restaurants. Others said that Clark could promote food sovereignty through offering resources (e.g.; classroom space, money) for initiatives in the city to use. Interviewees also said that Clark students and faculty can plan a role in community-action research, especially around resiliency planning.

Finally, interviewees explained how they have seen the Worcester food system being impacted by the COVID pandemic. Some interviewees pointed out that COVID has exacerbated economic inequalities between individuals, as well as widened inequality between small businesses and restaurants, and corporate giants such as Amazon. One interviewee pointed out that for some local farms, COVID has helped business, as more people are avoiding grocery stores and instead signing up for CSAs. Other interviewees said that COVID is revealing. It has revealed how we undervalue the labor of certain stakeholders in the food system, such as grocery workers and farmers.

The reality of COVID means that it is urgent for Worcester to strive for solutions that will create more community control of food. While my interviews showed that there are many barriers to creating community control of food, there are also many things that individuals, non-profits, and even institutions of higher education can do to create a food sovereign system right here in Worcester. La Via Campesina has stated, "The time for food sovereignty is now!" (La Via Campesina, 2012). I hope that all of us who are stakeholders in the Worcester food system: students at Clark, community members, non-profit employees, business owners, and more, can continue to research and work towards food sovereignty solutions.

Ideas for Further Action Research:

Nearly all of the participants in this study worked or volunteered for food-related non-profit organizations in Worcester. In the future, it will be important to interview more residents who are directly impacted by food insecurity, and ask them about their understanding of food sovereignty and visions for the Worcester food system. In addition, there are many other categories of food stakeholders that I was not able to interview, who would be important to interview in the future. For example, restaurant workers, small business owners, grocery store employees, and dining hall employees at Clark University and other Worcester schools could all provide unique perspectives for how Worcester could achieve a better food system.

The conversations I had with my participants prompted many ideas for further research. First of all, some interviewees explained that it has been challenging for them to involve the leadership of those directly impacted by food insecurity in their work (Interview 4). In the future, participatory action research on how to better involve food insecure individuals in food policy and decision-making in Worcester would be valuable. Second, interviewees expressed different opinions on how much collaboration there is between Worcester non-profits. Some said that there is a lack of coordination between non-profits in Worcester and that they should work together more on long-term strategies (Interview 9). Other interviewees described networks of resource sharing and collaboration that already exist (Interview 8, Interview 6). In future research efforts, it would be beneficial to map the networks that exist between non-profits, small food producers, and restaurants in Worcester. Third, one interviewee said that food storage and processing capabilities are barriers that prevent Clark from sourcing more local food (Interview 3). For Clark students in particular, it would be important to research what physical infrastructure is needed in order for Clark University to source food more locally, and thus support food sovereignty. Fourth, one of the interviewees, who was a volunteer with the Worcester Mutual Aid food pantry, described how she was inspired by creative food-sharing efforts around the country. She spoke about her home city of Milwaukee, and a restaurant there that is cooking hundreds of free meals every day using food or monetary donations from the community (Interview 5). Both Worcester Mutual Aid and the restaurant in Milwaukee are examples of solidarity economies, where community members are working together to address community needs through redistribution of resources (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). Because they are based on community control of resources, solidarity

economies are a key component of creating more food sovereignty. Thus, another critical area of future participatory action research would be to document the activities of solidarity economy networks in Massachusetts (including those started during COVID). Finally, broader research on climate resiliency planning in Worcester, including examining how our food system will be impacted if there is an extreme weather event or power outage is also much needed (Interview 11). I hope that these ideas can be of use for other students or researchers who are interested in getting involved with participatory action research around food sovereignty in Worcester.

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