

## Case Study: Food Equity and Justice: Scientist-Community Partnerships

**Introduction:** Communities all over the United States are looking for ways to ensure that healthy food is available and affordable for all. Evidence shows that health effects of poor food access, affordability, and availability disproportionately affect communities of color, low-income communities, and tribal communities. The Center for Science and Democracy seeks to support local food policy efforts by strengthening access to scientists and public health professionals. This project followed the [Science, Democracy, and a Healthy Food Policy](#) forum that UCS organized in May 2014, where local leaders raised concerns about addressing food inequities in Minnesota's most disadvantaged communities.

**Purpose/Expectations:** Convene and connect food justice and equity leaders, members of the scientific and research community, students, and local policy makers to share their cultural and historical context and experiences from community-scientist partnerships in reforming policies and programs to secure healthy food. By highlighting a spectrum of community-scientist partnerships, the desired goal of the meeting was to inspire participants and local residents toward similar collaborations where science and scientists can support their efforts and further empower their voices to address the needs of the community.

**Implementation** (duration, structure, partner(s)/stakeholders, financial considerations, monitoring progress): The project took **a year** and the equivalent of a half-time employee to plan and implement. As a first step, we formed an **8-member advisory committee (AC)** of local community leaders and scientists. Except for two members dropping out due to time constraints, the remaining members stuck through the long process—at varying levels of engagement—through regular calls and email updates. The AC members were offered a nominal honorarium. Several weeks ahead of the meeting, with the help of local partners in Minnesota, UCS deployed a community survey to understand what local residents consider their assets and challenges in securing healthy food for themselves and their families. The survey also gathered their input on the kinds of local food policy reform they are keen on securing for their communities as well as their stance on partnering with researchers and scientists to achieve such change.

We split the convening into 1) an invitation-only 1.5-day working group where roundtable discussions of more than 40 community leaders, researchers, students, and policy makers aimed to ground the conversations in the context of the perpetuation of systemic and institutional inequities and injustices in the food system, and 2) a community forum where we shared survey results and highlights from the working group. We incorporated two novel elements for the convening: First, scientists and their community partners from across the country **co-presented their models** and food policy projects: what worked, what didn't, and what they learned from their partnerships. Informed by the community-researcher partnership illustrations, meeting attendees discussed existing frameworks for respectful and trusted partnerships that value scientific and community knowledge and experience as well as the challenges inherent in undertaking truly jointly-owned projects. Second, the community forum included a moving **theatrical performance** by community members, SOUL Food Monologues, which enthralled and inspired the audience on the importance of healthy food and environment.

**Outcomes and Impacts:** The meeting and community forum brought together community leaders, policymakers, researchers and students to share what it takes to forge trusted, equitable, and respectful partnerships to advance food policy reform. Survey results helped bring the issues home and provided a way to understand what community members identify as high priority programs as well as their desire to collaborate with local researchers—a finding that wasn't obvious at the outset. Even though the meeting participants were handpicked for individuals who are already undertaking a collaborative approach, everyone appreciated the new models and joint-projects and reform they heard about. They reported taking away hope, connections, potential collaborations, new ideas, refreshed/heightened awareness and appreciation for all participants.

### **Barriers/Challenges:**

**Time and capacity** constraints of community groups as well as for academics whose institutions typically don't incentive or reward community engagement.

Community leaders are often juggling projects and urgencies that affect them and their families every day. Despite their good intentions on working with scientists/researchers, this is not the highest priority for them unless they can see the **direct implication** and alignment.

### **Lessons learned:**

As a convener, the inability to identify and recruit a **local partner** committed to take the project on for the long term can derail and jeopardize the project.

**Providing a space for cultural and historical injustices to be voiced by communities** that have historically been politically and socioeconomically marginalized, and who often feel used by and distrust for scientists and researchers, is essential for authentic participation.

Identify and employ the **mode and frequency of communication** local groups are most familiar with and likely to use. Phone calls and texts can be surprisingly helpful.

Need to work on **timeframes** that work for the local groups, always building 1.5-2 times buffer for deadlines.

**Students** can be key allies in shaping and demanding the next generation of collaborative, co-designed projects and in bringing down institutional barriers imposed on such engagement.

**Future directions:** Beyond the immediate next step of summarizing the meeting discussions and making available all the presentations, materials and resources generated in the lead up to the meeting with participants, the following immediate-to-long term work will continue in partnership with our local partners in Minnesota:

Expand and cultivate UCS Science Network members – including scientists of color – who want to work with local communities.

Foster partnerships between scientists (identified above) and community organizations in Minnesota– including space for meetings, coordination, identification of partners– bring people together to form relationships, and to talk about what is going on locally, and out of this, identify research topics and policy levers to address.

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*This is one of a series of case studies written by scientists and community members responding to a survey in advance of the forum, [Community Connections: Bringing Together Scientists and Local Voices](#), held in Houston, TX on September 26, 2015 by the Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists. For more information, visit [ucsusa.org/scientistsandcommunities](http://ucsusa.org/scientistsandcommunities).*