Understanding Lived Experience of Food Environments to Inform Policy: An Overview of Research Methods

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Key messages

- Food environments represent the space in which people make decisions about food – what to eat, where to buy it, when and with whom to eat it., etc. By exploring the context into which policies play out in people's lives, evidence of the lived experience of food environments provides a unique source of knowledge on why policies designed to improve diets succeed or fail. Evidence into how people navigate their food environments in the context of their everyday realities can thus provide insights into how to design policies that more equitably and effectively improve diets, nutrition, health and wellbeing.

- A wide range of qualitative methods is available to provide evidence of people's lived experience of food environments, including in-depth interviews, photo elicitation, go-along tours, community observation, group model building, and co-design methodologies. Each method has different potential for gaining insights into how people interact with food environments.

- Despite the potential of these methods to generate evidence to inform more equitable, effective policies, the amount of research conducted using these methods remains modest compared to quantitative studies of food environments. Policy-makers should pay more attention to the evidence generated by lived experience research while also generating demand for it to inform their nutrition and health policies.

- Considerably more effort is needed to translate findings of lived experience research into concrete policy recommendations, and communicate them to decision-makers effectively. Researchers should engage directly with policy-makers to design and communicate lived experience studies to directly inform more effective and equitable policies.

Typology of methods to gather evidence of lived experience of food environments

- Group I: Exploring experiences, perceptions, beliefs and practices to capture people's lived experience of their food environments, e.g. with in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and photo elicitation.
- Group II: Observing practices in situ to capture people's lived experience of their food environment, e.g., with go-along tours or transect walks.
- Group III: Designing policy and interventions with people based on their lived experience, e.g. photovoice and group model building, as well as the Co-create and Co-design methodologies.

Introduction

With poor diets being the leading cause of ill-health in the world today, the imperative to explore how to leverage food systems for better diets has never been greater. Significant attention has been placed on how to improve one particular component of the food system: food environments. Food environments comprise the foods available to people in their surroundings as they go about their everyday lives and the nutritional quality, safety, price, convenience, labelling and promotion of these foods (FAO, 2016). By influencing the options people have when they make decisions about what to eat, food environments play an important role in shaping diets everywhere (FAO, 2016; Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition, 2017; High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition, 2017; Turner et al., 2018).

Knowledge of food environments has improved significantly as a result of valuable research on their quantitative characteristics, e.g., the price of food, the number of food service outlets, the amount of advertising, etc. This evidence has been used to inform policy development and evaluation. Fully understanding the role food environments play in what people eat also requires qualitative research into how people navigate and make decisions in their food environments in the context of their lived social, economic, and psychological realities (Turner et al., 2018). These everyday realities provides the context into which policies play out in practice. Evidence of lived experience thus has the unique ability to shine light on why policies designed to improve diets succeed or fail, and thus inform the design of more equitable, effective policies to improve people's diets, nutrition, health and wellbeing (Centre for Food Policy, 2018). This form of research also reveals the creative agency people display in how they make use of and co-shape the food environment and provides an opportunity to experiment with citizen engagement. In addition, since food environments are where people meet the food system, research in this area provides an entry point for exploring how policy could intervene more effectively in the food system (Hawkes et al, 2020).

Yet the generation and use of this form of evidence to inform policy is at a very early stage globally. To date:

- a relatively small number of published studies exists on lived experiences of food environments, especially when compared with quantitative studies;
- when it is generated, evidence on lived experiences of food environments is rarely focused on informing policy;
- while taking this people-centred perspective is common in the commercial sector to guide product development and promotional communications, it is not typically sought by policy-makers when developing policy; and
- studies tend to be carried out by researchers in isolation from each other. Until recently, there was no clear community of scholars engaging with each other to develop a shared body of evidence (Box 1).

Collectively this has undermined the power of this research to become a more legitimate and credible source of evidence for policy-makers; this represents a missed opportunity to inform effective and equitable public policy to address all forms of malnutrition and diet-related ill-health.

In this context, this Brief aims to improve knowledge and understanding of the different methods available to study lived experiences of food environments. While not entirely comprehensive, it identifies and categorises the core methods used to date. It also provides case studies of where and how these methods have been used, and describes their benefits and limitations. The Brief covers methods of data collection of the lived experience of citizens; it does not include the methods available to analyse the data collected, nor the lived experience of policy-makers.

Box 1. Approaches to understanding lived experiences of food environments: A Community of Practice

This Research Methods Brief is part of a global Community of Practice (CoP) on approaches to understanding lived experiences of food environments.

The CoP brings together researchers involved in generating evidence on the lived experience of food environments in different parts of the world to inform how to make policies designed to improve diets, nutrition and health more equitable. The ultimate purpose of this CoP is, through collaboration and engagement between researchers, to catalyse more and better research on the lived experience of food environments and to enhance the policy impact of research through exploring ways to translate and communicate findings to policy-makers more effectively.

The CoP achieves its purpose by:

1. Identifying methods and theories to provide policy-relevant evidence
- Provide a space to identify methods that (1) capture lived experiences of food environments relevant to policy, (2) complement quantitative data, (3) generate ideas for effective policy solutions and/or evaluate existing actions, and (4) engage people with lived experience in proposals for change.
- Explore the use of different theoretical approaches and how these affect the application of methods and findings.

2. Enhancing policy impact through evidence translation and communication
- Compare and contrast findings and discuss effective approaches to inform policy and enhance the value and legitimacy of these approaches.
- Provide a hub for practitioners and policy-makers engaging with this type of research.

3. Enabling collaboration within and across countries
- Provide the opportunity to identify partners across a variety of sectors to collaborate within and across country settings.
- Share and collaborate on relevant calls for funding and collectively advocate for this type of research to be better funded moving forward.

The methods were identified in two phases. The first mapped existing studies capturing the lived experience of food environments. This was undertaken by researchers at the Centre for Food Policy. During this phase, methods were categorised and relevant case studies identified.

Second, members of the Community of Practice (see Box 1) were consulted and provided feedback on the document. As part of the second phase, further edits were finalised before publication.

Methods for Generating Evidence on Lived Experience of Food Environments

A range of methods can be used to explore people's lived experience of food environments. They employ various terminology and often vary in their application across different studies and disciplines. This Brief categorises these methods into groups, recognising the key differences between them but also that they overlap and could be categorised in a range of different ways. Table 1 classifies these methods into three groups as follows:

Group I: Exploring experiences, perceptions, beliefs and practices, and social networks.

These methods draw on people's direct accounts in order to provide insight into how people experience and interact with food environments and the policies that influence them on a daily basis from an insider, or 'emic', perspective specific to their contexts.

Group II: Observing practices in situ.

These methods also explore experiences, perceptions, beliefs and practices, but with more involvement from the researcher, who directly witnesses the actions of participants. People's lived experiences are captured by spending time with the participant in their day-to-day routine, either observing as an outsider or becoming part of this routine for a short period of time. These methods capture the often unconscious and habitual actions of people in their everyday lives, which can then be explored further through Group 1 methods such as in-depth or intercept interviews.

Group III: Designing policy and interventions with participants, based on their lived experience.

The third group of methods places the participant at the centre of the research process and actively engages communities affected by policy decisions (at a neighbourhood, city, county, country level) in the research process. These methods encourage people to draw on their own experiences, expertise and knowledge of their food environments to think about and propose change, so that policies resulting from the research are relevant and context-specific, and as a result have the potential to be more sustainable.

In practice, researchers typically apply more than one method to suit the research context. For example, visual methods, diaries, mapping of everyday routes and routines and observation tend to be accompanied by individual or group interviews to provide a more in-depth exploration. Researchers also often combine one or more of these methods with quantitative methods. While all types of data play a critically important role to provide a comprehensive picture of how people experience their food environments, quantitative methods are not covered in this Brief. Decisions about which methods to select depend on the purpose of the study (i.e. guided by a specific research question), the local context, time and resources available, and the benefits and limitations of each method. Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the possibilities of using digital tools and technology as key facilitators for remote research.

Table 1: Methods for Generating Evidence on Lived Experience of Food Environments

Group	Methods
Group 1: Exploring experiences, perceptions, beliefs and practices and social networks	**Individual interviews** − Semi-structured and in-depth − Narrative (unstructured) − Dyadic − Intercept **Group discussions** − Focus group discussions − Natural groups **Visual methods** − Photo elicitation − Creative arts − Concept mapping − Timelines **Geospatial methods** − Spatial mapping − Geonarratives − Geotagged photography **Diaries**
Group 2: Observing practices in situ	**Observation** − Participant/community − Go-along tours − Transect walks − Non-participant
Group 3: Designing policy and interventions drawing on the lived experience of participants	**Photovoice** − Film essays / digital stories **Consensus panels** **Systems mapping** **Group model building** **Co-design** **Co-create**

Group 1: Exploring experiences, perceptions, beliefs, practices and social networks

Individual Interviews

Semi-structured and in-depth
Researcher interviews a participant with a flexible topic guide (a set of questions to guide the discussion).

Narrative (unstructured)
Researcher facilitates a discussion with a participant who is then able to tell a story with minimal interruptions or questions.

Dyadic
The participant is interviewed alongside a person with whom they have a close relationship, for instance someone they live with, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics in the setting or relationship, e.g. multiple generations in a household. This can be valuable for investigating intra-household and gender-based dynamics related to food acquisition and consumption practices as part of daily life.

Intercept
Participants are 'intercepted' at a point during or after certain action, such as food shopping, to ask questions to understand more about what they are doing / have done.

Key benefits
Enables in-depth exploration of the factors influencing eating practices, as participants are willing to share in a focused, 1:1 setting and can be tailored to each participant to enable conversations on sensitive topics.

Key potential limitations
Potential social desirability bias may mean that some practices are not mentioned. This can be mitigated by recruiting interviewers from the same socio-economic background and providing thorough training, or targeting the desired participants within a large quantitative sample (representative of the population studied).

Relevant case study - Individual interviews

Life in a time of food volatility project - Precarious Lives: Food, Work and Care after the Global Food Crisis (Scott-Villiers et al., 2016), Bangladesh, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Indonesia, Kenya, Pakistan, Vietnam and Zambia.

What policies and actions did the study seek to inform?
Interventions to mitigate the effect of food price volatility.

How?
Interviews over 3-6 years; key informant interviews; [total interviews over 400]; approx. 100 focus group discussions; data on local market prices, world food prices and national wages.

Key insights for effective action
Policy must consider ways to extend the scope and mandate of social protection to:

- increase job security;
- protect against long working hours;
- protect against inflation and price rises;
- emphasise local control of farming;
- protect children from advertising and marketing strategies that encourage poor eating habits from the early years.

Group Discussions

Focus group discussions
Participants are brought together to discuss topics guided by the researcher. This can also involve activities to sort themes or other information according to objectives or importance to facilitate discussions.

Natural groups
A discussion between a group of people who already know each other, unlike with focus group discussions, so as to gain more insight into a shared group culture, e.g. household interviews or social interest groups.

Key benefits
Enables an in-depth exploration of the factors influencing food practices, as participants can give individual perspectives, but in a shorter amount of time than individual interviews. Group dynamics can enhance discussions by giving insight into shared means and norms of the group and making discussions more focused on how policies and actions might affect a whole community.

Key potential limitations

More dominant voices and/or potential social desirability bias can make insights less representative of the whole group and resulting policies and actions less effective for individuals.

Relevant case study - Group discussions

A focus group study of healthy eating knowledge, practices, and barriers among adult and adolescent immigrants and refugees in the United States (Tiedje et al., 2014), United States.

What policies and actions did the study seek to inform?

Reducing barriers to healthy eating in refugee and immigrant populations.

How?

16 focus groups (4 per participating community). Topic guides included questions assessing 1) participants' understanding of a healthy diet, including soliciting descriptions of food, food environment, and dietary patterns; 2) participants' perceived barriers to eating healthy food individually, as a family and as a community; 3) differences in dietary patterns 'back home' and in the U.S.; and, 4) recommendations of how they could eat more healthily.

Key insights for effective action

Efforts to increase healthy eating practices in immigrant populations must consider how a range of factors interact simultaneously to act as barriers to healthy eating:

- Generational differences with adolescents eating more 'American' foods and adults still eating more traditional foods from their home country;
- The high cost of healthy food making it less accessible and cheaper, energy-dense 'fast-food' options more appealing;
- The cultural importance of factors such as large portion sizes and larger body sizes seen as healthier;
- Gender roles, e.g. women seen as responsible for the food in the family and serving food to please the father (filling meals with fewer fruits and vegetables) when children might want more fruits and vegetables and fewer carbohydrates and fat.

Visual Methods

Photo elicitation

Participants take photos of their local food environments, sometimes based on a stimulus or theme provided by the researchers. Photos are used as part of interviews or focus groups to facilitate discussion. This can include a ranking activity, in which participants rank the photos according to objectives / importance.

Creative arts

Participants create artwork, such as drawings, videos, theatre, that express their perspectives on given objectives, usually followed by a group discussion or in-depth interview.

Concept mapping

An individual or group describe their food environment and how aspects of it are interrelated in a pictorial form. Also known as 'mental mapping' or 'concept webbing'.

This can be facilitated by pile-sorting or ranking activities whereby participants discuss how to categorise or rank themes (usually presented visually on cards). The discussion itself between participants can be a valuable form of data collection.

Timelines

Researcher works with participant 1:1 to create a timeline of life events with a visual indication of the significance or meaning attached to highlighted events.

Key benefits

Improved accessibility and engagement for young participants, or where there are language barriers, as views can be expressed more directly without the need for rationality or logic. Participants may also be more willing to share information visually without 'interference' from the researcher and images can provide insights that may not have been accessible via specific questioning. This is also very useful in contexts of low literacy. Visual methods can challenge knowledge deficit models by acknowledging the expertise of communities and participants.

Key potential limitations

Visual data can be difficult to interpret in a way that fully represents the participant perspective, and there is a potential for photographs to be seen as reflections of reality, rather than subjective perceptions that provide insights into reality, or for participants to misunderstand the objective.

Photovoice could be included here as a visual method; however, photovoice involves community participation and the design of policy and interventions that make it better suited to Group 3 for the purpose of this document.

Relevant case study - Visual methods

Visual epidemiology: photographs as tools for probing street-level etiologies (Cannuscio et al., 2009), United States

What policies and actions did the study seek to inform?

Community-level actions to improve urban environments in relation to health.

How?

Photo elicitation in urban neighbourhoods incorporating three visual data sources: 1) 'outsider perspective' images gathered systematically by staff photographers on randomly sampled blocks; 2) 'insider perspective' images taken by adult residents during their daily routines, such as of food outlets; and 3) collaborative images taken by staff photographers in partnership with local participants; in-depth, walking/go-along interviews with photographs as prompts to elicit residents' health concerns and beliefs regarding urban environmental causes of good and poor health ("street-level etiologies"); researchers' field notes.

Key insights for effective action

- Not all food outlets affect health in the same way – counting them together as a straightforward measure can misconstrue exposure-health relationships and potential policy levers.
- Contextual factors such as crime and safety influence how people access their food environments – effective policy should consider these factors too.

Geospatial Methods

Spatial mapping

Participants, in groups or alone, create personalised maps that document their spatial knowledge of a specified area. This may include perceptions of food stores, daily routines and/or routes to and from places of interest. The resulting visual data then serves to facilitate further discussion in one-to-one interviews or focus groups and can also be used as a tool for advocacy.

Geonarratives

Participant movements are mapped using a GPS device that they carry with them to map activity spaces. The maps can then be included in follow-up interviews to understand how space and place are embedded within their everyday lives.

Group 1: Further reading

Bell, SL., Phoenix, C., Lovell, R., Wheeler, BW. (2015). Using GPS and geo-narratives: a methodological approach for understanding and situating everyday green space encounters. Area, 47(1):88-96.

Dennis, SF., Gaulocher, S., Carpiano, RM., Brown, D.. (2009). Participatory photo mapping (PPM): Exploring an integrated method for health and place research with young people. Health & Place, 15(2):466-73. 10.1016/j.healthplace.2008.08.004.

Harper, D. (2002). Talking about pictures: A case for photo elicitation. Visual Studies, 17(1), 13-26. doi:10.1080/14725860220137345.

O'Connell, R. (2013). The use of visual methods with children in a mixed methods study of family food practices. International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 16(1), 31-46. doi:10.1080/13645579.2011.647517.

Power, E. M. (2003). De-centering the text: Exploring the potential for visual methods in the sociology of food. Journal for the Study of Food and Society, 6(2), 9-20. doi:10.2752/152897903786769670.

Spires, M., Delobelle, P., Sanders, D., Puoane, T. (2020). Using photography to explore people with diabetes' perspectives on food environments in urban and rural South Africa. Health Promotion International, daaa035. doi: 10.1093/heapro/daaa035.

Geotagged photography

Similar to photo elicitation, participants take photos of their local food environments that are used as part of interviews and/or focus group discussions. However, the photographs are also geotagged to provide geospatial context to the collection of data.

Diaries

Participants keep detailed records of an aspect of their life, such as food shopping or meal preparation, that the researcher later analyses. These data can be qualitative and/or quantitative in nature.

Key benefits

Participant diaries can provide in-depth insights into individual perceptions and actions that are not restricted or shaped by the researcher's questions. These methods are particularly suitable for interdisciplinary research, especially between social sciences and nutrition/public health (e.g. contents of shopping baskets, associated spatial practices, social context of purchases, etc.)

Key potential limitations

Diaries can be difficult to interpret and generalise unless information is also gathered that explores the participant's actions, or clarification can be sought via an interview or group discussion. These protocols may require strong involvement of the participants. As a result, they can be onerous and even reinforce the selection/participation bias of households. Moreover, the tools proposed to implement these methods need to be easy to use to avoid abandonment or poor filling-in of diary templates.

Group 2: Observing practices in situ

Observation

Participant / community observation

Researcher observes participant behaviour and naturally-occurring actions in situ, talking to participants about what their actions and interactions mean to them. This can be in a setting where the researcher is embedded and involved in an activity, or where researchers are invited to observe alongside the participant during a certain activity, such as in go-along tours.

Researchers can also keep logs during data collection on aspects of the research (field diaries), e.g. the context in which interviews or observation takes place, which can help inform them later when analysing the findings from various methods together.

Go-along tours

Researchers accompany participants, e.g. a shopping trip, or 'shop-along', to elicit information on habitual practices through both observation and an interview to elicit verbal data.

Transect walks

As above, but also involves creating a transect map (a record of the location and distribution of local resources and constraints and opportunities in the local food environment).

Key benefits

Insights into the practical aspects of daily life and routines can be captured interactively with the participant and explored in more detail with further questioning. Power imbalances in research are addressed as participants take control of the research process.

Key potential limitations

Researchers' presence may impact how participants behave or move around spaces, for instance by influencing what they buy in a shop-along tour.

Relevant case study - Go-along tours

Understanding interactions with the food environment: An exploration of supermarket food shopping routines in deprived neighbourhoods (Thompson et al., 2012), United Kingdom.

What policies and actions did the study seek to inform?

Changes in supermarket environments to support healthier food practices.

How?

23 go-along interviews in deprived neighbourhoods - accompanied food-shopping trips. Opening question: 'Explain to me where we are going and why we are going there'. Participants were asked to narrate their food choices as they did their shopping and to explain how they made decisions around food buying, and who they were buying food items for.

Key insights for effective action

- Policy needs to come away from a 'one size fits all' approach that just increases physical access to food in low-income communities, as residents of deprived neighbourhoods do not have a uniform response to, or interaction with, their local food environments.
- When targeting interventions, classifying neighbourhoods as 'deprived' does not necessarily capture the complex interaction of factors associated with living in poverty and their behavioural outcomes in relation to health.
- Varied individual responses to the supermarket environment within low-income neighbourhoods are mediated by differing levels of individual agency, so interventions should include an emphasis on factors that increase agency in order to modify food purchasing practices.

Non-Participant Observation

The researcher observes the phenomenon of interest, with little to no interaction with participants, for example by observing shopping practices from a distance Whilst the researcher is often present during the observation, it can also be conducted by observing video recordings of the phenomenon. Non-participant observation is ideal when the aim is to capture empirical, observable detail, such as how people navigate a supermarket.

Key benefits

Insight into 'real' individual actions, such as shopping or eating practices, and cultural norms observed in situ, rather than relying on accounts alone, so that features of everyday life that may otherwise not be mentioned can be recorded and explored with further questioning. Researcher logs provide contextual insights that can explain practices from a more objective viewpoint.

Key potential limitations

Clarification of actions cannot be sought unless accompanied by an interview or group discussion, so the interpretation of the situation is reliant on the researcher's understanding and can be subjective. Also, the researcher's presence during the activities that he/she is observing may be an intervention by itself and may influence the outcomes.

Relevant case study - Non-participant observation

Identifying interventions to help rural Kenyan mothers cope with food insecurity: results of a focused ethnographic study (Pelto & Armar-Klemesu, 2015), Kenya.

What policies and actions did the study seek to inform?

Conditions in which infant and young children's nutrition practices are improved.

How?

Interviews (two phases); cognitive mapping; observation.

Focus areas: household behaviours including demographic and socio-economic status characteristics; a 24-h recall of foods consumed by the index child; food preparation and feeding behaviour; cultural values related to health and food; perceptions about factors that influence IYC feeding; perceptions about micronutrient supplements

Group 2: Further reading

CatComm Catalytic Communities. (2020). Community mapping through transect walks. Retrieved from https://catcomm.org/transect-walk/.

Gunson,JS., Warin, M., Zivkovic, T., Moore, V. (2014). Participant observation in obesity research with children: striated and smooth spaces. Children's Geographies, 14, 1. https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2014.971687.

University of Hertfordshire. (2018). Food in later life. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCFNoxEMcjg&feature=youtu.be.

Wertheim-Heck, S., and Raneri, J. (2020). Food policy and the unruliness of consumption: An intergenerational social practice approach to uncover transforming food consumption in modernizing Hanoi, Vietnam. Global Food Security, 26, 100418. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gfs.2020.100418.

and fortification of infant foods; estimated weekly food expenditure; and food and feeding-related problems, challenges and solutions.

Key insights for effective action

As a primary means for improving IYC nutrition, the impact of food insecurity must be considered. Recommended interventions to improve conditions that consider various aspects of food insecurity:

- Improve access to water;
- Introduce stoves that use firewood more efficiently;
- Develop better methods for safer food storage;
- Increase income-generation activities for women;
- Introduce safety-net programmes to address food insecurity;
- Develop a universal support system to ensure a basic diet for all during the dry season;
- Develop social welfare/economic support for high-risk food insecure households.

Group 3: Designing policy and interventions with participants

Photovoice

A community-based participatory method in which participants take photos of their local environment to document and represent their community in relation to a specific topic; process includes group discussions to analyse the photos and assign captions to them together. The photovoice process may also include photo exhibits at community, sub national and national levels, to further discuss the issues represented in the photos with key community members/ policy and decision-makers and identify potential solutions at the different levels.

Film essays / digital stories

In a similar way, projects can use videos instead of, or as well as, photos that are created by participants for the same purpose.

Key benefits

Photovoice can help outsiders view a specific topic from the perspective of those affected through the capturing and sharing of images. These images serve as valuable sources of evidence for researchers, participants and relevant decision makers and can play a key role in supporting further qualitative discussion and informing action. As a method, photovoice has the potential to be empowering and transformative for participants as it can not only develop skills and understanding, but

also support participants to communicate valuable perspectives.

Key potential limitations

Potential limitations include: the potential for images to misrepresent a situation or be misinterpreted by the viewer; in some instances, it may take some participants a while to understand the photovoice process; it can take longer and be more resource intensive when compared with other qualitative methods like in-depth interviews or focus group discussions; and unique safety and ethical concerns exist that need to be fully considered and managed. It is also worth noting that, although potentially effective in identifying and communicating valuable community perspectives on a given topic, it does not necessarily shift the power to decide or change relevant policies or associated actions.

Relevant case study - Film essays/ digital stories

VOICES FOR ACTION: looking at food and nutrition security through the eyes of the Maasai community (African Population and Health Research Centre (APHRC), 2017), Kenya

What policies and actions did the study seek to inform?

Use of participatory public engagement methods, working together with the community to identify their challenges with regards to food and nutrition security and explore possible solutions.

How?

Community members expressed themselves in a

participatory manner through participatory videos and photovoice. Community members were taught and provided with cameras to tell their stories, using pictures, words and simple videos to explain their own experiences with food insecurity.

Key insights for effective action

- Harsh environmental conditions (weather), economic challenges, gender disparities and socio-cultural factors all play a role in limiting food availability and access.
- Little arable land, frequent droughts, chronic water shortage, together with the pastoralist culture of the Maasai people, have hindered crop farming, leading to inadequate food in the community. Alternative food sources to supplement the pastoral lifestyle of the Maasai community, pursuit of drought-resistant crops and innovative approaches to aspects of farming, such as irrigation, through collaborative efforts between the government and communities were recommended as potential solutions.
- The disempowerment of women that inhibits their ability to make food and nutrition decisions also contributes to household food insecurity. Empowering, supporting and including women in food and nutrition decisions was recommended as a key strategy to address the food insecurity challenge.

Watch the participatory video/digital story here.

Consensus Panels

Researchers bring a group of community leaders and members together to set a research agenda and shape a research project outline or come to an agreement about an issue.

Food Systems Mapping

Participants from the local community (area, workplace, school, etc.) work together to map their local food system in order to identify feedback loops and potential areas for intervention. Similar to concept mapping (see Visual Methods), but focused on the local food system and leverage points for action.

Group Model Building

Community members, decision-makers, technical experts and researchers from a local community exchange their perceptions of a problem in or with their local (food) system. A facilitated process is used that includes several scripted group exercises to develop a visual depiction of the problem (e.g. a systems map) that can be used to guide policy and practice. This is usually the first stage, followed by a longer process to identify and evaluate systemic options for intervention, taking action, reflecting on the results and rethinking the problem in a new iteration.

Co-create and Co-design are methodologies that combine various methods and aim to share the balance of power and influence between academics/policymakers and research participants/advisors. This allows for shifting perspectives that improve research rigour and capture both 'doings' and 'sayings about doings'.

Co-Design

Participants cooperate in the design and development of one or more stages of the research process. Co-design plays an important role in the co-creation process, as it enables all stakeholders to become equal partners

in the innovation process. For example, you can co-design a survey instrument or research question, but the co-creation process comes from the people with lived experience being involved in collecting data, analysing data and disseminating results.

Co-Create

Participants (with lived experience) and researchers interact throughout the research process, from the exploration and articulation of needs to the creation and implementation of solutions, through interactive systems that entail active engagement and equal communication between researchers and non-researchers.

Key benefits

For all of these methods in Group 3, the 'hands-on' nature of research enables participants to generate information and share knowledge on their own terms. Outputs, such as policy recommendations, are created together with the participants to be effective in their local context following an in-depth research process.

Key potential limitations

These methods all run the risk of being perceived as tokenistic by participants if engagement is not meaningful and genuine.

Relevant case study - Group model building

A community-based system dynamics approach suggests solutions for improving healthy food access in a low-income urban environment (Mui et al., 2018), United States.

What policies and actions did the study seek to inform?

Healthy food access in low-income urban communities.

How?

Group model building with a diverse group of chain and local food outlet owners, residents, neighbourhood organisations, and city agencies based in Baltimore, MD. Eighteen participants completed a series of exercises based on a set of pre-defined scripts through an interactive, iterative process over a two-day community-based workshop.

Key insights for effective action

Action ideas were discussed for interventions to promote healthy food access. These included:

- Funding to support new stores that stock healthy food options;
- Building capacity for sourcing local produce in stores;
- Supporting families to foster a culture of healthy eating;
- Increasing knowledge of healthy foods, particularly among caregivers;
- Reducing crime and re-establishing trust among community members (including law enforcement);
- Engaging schools to promote healthy eating behaviours.

Group 3: Further reading

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The Centre for Food Policy at City, University of London, is an interdisciplinary unit working to shape food systems that improve the health of people, society, the environment and the economy.

We engage with people across the food system to uncover how it really works in practice. We use these insights to educate, influence, and to inform effective, joined-up food policy.

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