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Critical food literacy: Learning to challenge power in the food system

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As a derivative of the core concept of literacy, food literacy can similarly either empower or disempower people. For example, the meaning of food literacy can be narrowed down to knowing how to grocery shop and prepare a meal, resulting in obedient neoliberal consumers who never challenge the food system. However, given the problems associated with our current food system, adults need a broader, more critical understanding of food literacy to address issues such as human health and planetary sustainability. Using a Freirean analysis, this article explores how a new trend at the forefront of literacies in adult education – critical food literacy – can empower adults to 'read the world' through food in order to navigate, question and change the food system. It examines power in the food system, discusses both food literacy and critical food literacy, and illustrates how adults learn the set of skills, knowledge and understandings that can challenge power in the food system and open the door to more equitable and sustainable ways of producing and consuming food.

Keywords*: critical food literacy, food literacy food system, Paulo Freire, power*

Introduction

Literacy has represented society's most basic knowledge requirements, its highest aspirations, and many of its primordial fears for more than two centuries, thus rendering the 'simple task' of reading, writing and numeracy highly controversial in the field of adult education (Quigley, 2005). This controversy is exemplified in changes to the focus of literacy, from humanism and citizenship to an emphasis on economics (Taylor & Ghani, 2021). More recently, literacy has been used in the plural, with Holloway and Gouthro (2020, p. 2) noting that "the literacies that are required for individuals to participate actively in the workforce and in the wider community today are more complex than in the past."

One of these complex literacies is food literacy, which combines the ongoing human need for food with the evolution of reading, writing and numeracy activities. Food literacy, in its simplest form, can be understood as "a basket of knowledge, skills and behaviours whose specific contents will vary over the life-course in response to changes" (Vidgen, 2016, p. 63). However, in the face of larger issues associated with the global corporate food system (including climate change and poor human health), it is vital to develop an understanding of food literacy that can help people challenge power in the food system, with the aim of encouraging food system change. How can adult educators contribute to this understanding?

This paper will address this question by focusing on the concept of food literacy through the lens of adult learning and education (ALE). It will begin with a short introduction to ALE, followed by some background on food and food systems before moving to food and learning, and food literacy. Using a Freirean foundation, it will go on to explore critical food literacy as a tool for empowerment. The paper will then provide three examples of how adults learn critical food literacy – in the areas of globalization, sustainability and public health – before summing up in the conclusion.

Adult learning and education (ALE)

"The field of adult learning and education (ALE) is a very diverse, heterogeneous and complex one, as it covers all the issues related to the

learning of adults, from a lifelong learning (LLL) perspective, both for personal and professional development" (Sava, 2016, p. VII). Although often aimed at areas such as vocational or civic adult education, ALE is also highly appropriate for looking at food literacy, given the fact that all adults need to eat, and they experience that need throughout their lifetime. As Schreiber-Barsch and Mauch (2019, p. 530) note, the idea that ALE can be understood as a driver for social change has been explored extensively, with "far-reaching consequences for the concept of literacy".

In addition, international perspectives in ALE have recently become closely related to important social concerns (Sava, Nuissl & Lustrea, 2016). For example, Schreiber-Barsch and Mauch (2019) have linked ALE to sustainability through the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. A related social concern of growing importance is the negative consequences of the food we eat and the food system that delivers it to us.

Food

What is referred to as food varies around the world – one person's delicacy can be another person's nightmare. Given this variation, it is difficult to define food and, when it is defined, it can be very convoluted. For example, the Canada Food and Drug Act defines food as: "any article manufactured, sold or represented for use as food or drink for human beings, chewing gum, and any ingredient that may be mixed with food for any purpose whatsoever" (Roberts, 2013, p. 16). Based in the industrial paradigm, this definition reflects the changes that have happened to food, particularly after World War II. As Pollan (2008, p. 1) has noted, many of the products on grocery-store shelves today are not food, but "edible foodlike substances." Formally classified as ultra-processed foods, they are molecularly altered, laced with salt, sugar and fat, and heavily marketed because of their ability to override our long-established mechanisms of control, thus increasing corporate profits through their addictive qualities (van Tulleken, 2022). These ultra-processed foods make up what has come to be known as the Western diet, which has spread around the world, closely followed by a "predictable series of Western diseases, including obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and cancer" (Pollan, 2008, p. 11), resulting in poor diet displacing smoking as the number one cause of early death

around the world (Murray et al., 2019).

At the same time, food has been deeply implicated in climate change. Crippa et al. (2021) report that food systems are responsible for one-third of global anthropogenic greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. The largest part of these emissions comes from agriculture and land use (United Nations, 2024), although other supply-chain activities also contribute to GHG production (Crippa et al., 2021). These activities are increasingly controlled and intensified by large multinational food corporations in their endless search to boost profits. The negative effects of food on human health and the climate call for an investigation into the food systems that produce them, and the corporate power behind these systems.

Food systems

Food has always been about wealth and power (Friedmann, 1993), and under capitalism, such power is not evenly divided because of the unequal distribution of the ownership of the means of production (Johnston, 2000). Power in the food system at the global scale has evolved from British imperial power through its colonies, to growing American hegemony after World War I, to the current global corporate food system that scours the world for cheap and novel inputs, assembles them in one place, packages them in another and sells them for a profit in any country that can afford them. Power in this neoliberal food system has consolidated over time through ongoing corporate concentration (e.g., 20 global corporations control the food chain, Hitchman, 2023). Corporate power is often hidden from consumers by the process of commodity fetishism – seeing the commodity [e.g., food] simply in terms of the final product, while the process through which it was created remains obscured and, therefore, unconsidered (Hudson & Hudson, 2003). How can we pull back the curtain and challenge this power in the food system that is harming human health and damaging the planet? Learning is key to this endeavour.

Learning and food

From an ALE perspective, learning occurs throughout the lifespan and is central to human existence. Joining learning with food forms a dynamic combination that has fueled change over thousands of years. Despite

this, learning and food have seldom been addressed at the same time in the academic literature (Sumner, 2016). However, as Flowers and Swan (2012) remind us, food is not only an object of learning, but also a vehicle for learning. In other words, we can learn about specific foods (such as quinoa or avocadoes) but we can also use food to learn about larger issues (such as globalization, sustainability or public health), as the latter part of this article will illustrate.

Combining ALE and food to learn about these larger issues can expose power in the food system, such as who benefits (and who loses) from a globalized food system? As a vehicle for learning, food can serve up opportunities for developing skills, knowledge, understandings, critique and change – important outcomes for adult educators. This accumulated learning can be summed up as food literacy.

Food literacy

Since the emergence of the concept, food literacy has blossomed in many different disciplines, including adult education (e.g., Sumner, 2013; 2015). Given the interdisciplinary appeal of food literacy, it has no agreed-upon meaning. Some definitions are quite narrow, simply focusing on a few individual skills. Others are more comprehensive, such as Vidgen and Gallegos (2014, p. 54):

> *[Food literacy is] the scaffolding that empowers individuals, households, communities or nations to protect diet quality through change and strengthen dietary resilience over time. It is composed of a collection of inter-related knowledge, skills and behaviours required to plan, manage, select, prepare and eat food to meet needs and determine intake.*

The wide range of definitions reflects not only the appeal of food literacy, but also the struggle to control its meaning. Keeping in mind that "literacy that obscures the power relations inscribed in its construction ultimately disempowers" (Hamilton et al., 2012, p. 4), defining food literacy as narrowly as possible obscures power relations, deflects attention from the larger issues associated with food and restricts the learning associated with it. A case in point is the Conference Board of Canada, which produced a report that defined food literacy as "an individual's food-related knowledge, attitudes and skills" (Howard

& Brichta, 2013, p. 2) and linked it to three competencies: selection and/or purchasing of nutritious foods and meals; storage, handling, preparation and disposal of food safely; and planning and budgeting for food. Such a narrow definition does nothing to help people understand the rising rates of diet-related diseases or the connections between food and climate change, ultimately disempowering them. Unsurprisingly, the research for this report was paid for by some of the largest food and beverage companies in Canada in tandem with international corporate giants such as Pepsico and Nestlé (Sumner, 2015).

These definitions illustrate how ALE can "oscillate between two poles: adaptation on the one hand and empowerment to social transformation on the other" (Schreiber-Barsch & Mauch, 2019, p. 521). In other words, ALE can teach adults to adapt to the requirements of society, thus obscuring power relations – the example of the Conference Board of Canada's report on food literacy is a classic case of adaptation because its narrow definition of food literacy precludes larger systemic questions. However, ALE can also enable adults to critique and resist these social requirements, thus opening to larger issues and exposing power relations. While ALE exemplifies a broad range of practices between these two poles, it is important for adult educators to recognize this spectrum and understand whether a definition of food literacy is up to addressing the power of multinational corporations in the food system that are largely responsible for the negative effects of food on human health and the climate. The work of Paulo Freire in the field of adult literacy can give some guidance in this regard.

A Freirean framework for food literacy

From a Freirean perspective, food literacy has the potential to empower people to learn about larger issues such as the causes of poor health and climate instability. Speaking of his approach to literacy, Freire (1976, p. 71) noted that "as a creative act, learning how to read and write necessarily implies ... a critical understanding of reality." Supporting learning in the realm of food can result in a form of food literacy that opens a critical understanding of power in the food system and how to challenge it.

Freirean adult education uses a "subjective/objective dialectical approach to understand the relationship between human beings and the

world" (Torres and Yan, 2022, p. 653). For example, Freire saw literacy not solely as a mechanical process of acquiring reading and writing skills but also as "the relationship of learners to the world mediated by the transforming practice of this world taking place in the very general milieu in which learners travel" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 10). From his perspective, literacy should allow adults to read not only the word but also the world (Freire, 1976, p. 71). This dynamic reading of the word and the world highlights the fact that literacy can be a meaningful construct to the extent that it is viewed as "a set of practices that functions to either empower of disempower people" (Freire and Macedo 1987, p. 10). As a result, Freire and Macedo (1987) maintained, literacy could be analyzed according to whether it served to reproduce existing social formation or to promote democratic and emancipatory change, which illustrates ALE's oscillation between two poles.

Based on these ideas, Mayo (1995) declared that Freire was synonymous with critical literacy. In essence, the term critical literacy helps to unveil contradictions in today's world and identify the dysfunctional capitalist structures that shape people's lives (English & Mayo, 2021). It also raises the issue of power in adult literacies and exemplifies the oscillation of ALE, reflecting Levine's (1982 in Quigley, 2005, p. 383) argument that "the social and political significance of literacy is very largely derived from its role in creating and reproducing – or failing to reproduce – the social distribution of knowledge." In other words, who has the power to define and disseminate adult literacies, who benefits from that definition and dissemination, and how does this affect adults learning about larger issues, such as the connections between the global food system and poor health and climate instability? These questions play out in all types of literacies, including food literacy. From this Freirean foundation in critical literacy, the idea of critical food literacy was developed.

Critical food literacy

The concept of critical food literacy stands on the shoulders of scholars such as Freire and highlights ALE's oscillation toward the pole of empowerment to social transformation, while also incorporating what it means to be critical in food studies: examining evidence, unearthing values, questioning power and encouraging social change (Speakman et al., 2022). Whereas the concept of critical literacy is more than

thirty years old, critical food literacy is much newer, following the consolidation of food studies as an interdisciplinary field of study in the early 2000's. Classens and Sytsma (2020, p. 10) have succinctly linked the concept to a recognition of larger issues and raised the question of power in the food system when they define critical food literacy as:

> *a set of skills, knowledge and understandings that (1) equip individuals to plan, manage, prepare, and eat food that is healthy, culturally appropriate and sustainable, while (2) enabling them to understand the broader sociopolitical and ecological dynamics of the food system, and (3) empowering them to incite socioecological change within the food system.*

Mirroring Freire's commitment to a critical understanding of reality, this definition provides an entrée into how adults can develop this set of skills, knowledge and understandings that help them engage with larger social/political/ecological issues and challenge power in the food system. Overall, Freire's work has been instrumental in developing such definitions of critical food literacy. Even today, "we still have much to learn—and relearn—from Freire" (Apple, 2019, p. 370). His belief that literacy should help people to read the word and the world pushes adult learning beyond the immediate parameters of personal experience to the larger issues that shape that experience. In addition, "he repeatedly discussed everyday ... activity and experience as culturally rich and educationally significant and as an essential resource for critical education" (Finnegan & Cox, 2023, p. 604). Eating is an everyday activity and experience, and he legitimizes the study of this quotidian engagement as a springboard for critical education. His use of concepts such as praxis, conscientização and banking education resonate deeply in a world where corporate power is changing the climate and damaging human health.

Learning critical food literacy

In her work on food literacy, McKecknie (2016) has noted that learning processes associated with food and eating are ongoing and occur to varying degrees across the life course. This brings to mind the diversity, heterogeneity and complexity of ALE from a lifelong perspective and raises the question of how adults learn critical food literacy. Three important social concerns – globalization, sustainability and public

health – will illustrate how adults can learn critical food literacy.

Globalization

Globalization can be understood as a process or set of processes that encompass a transformation of both social relations and transactions that generate intercontinental or interregional networks and flows of activity, interaction and power (Jones, 2006). One aspect of these networks and flows involves food, the emergence of the neoliberal global food system and the power it wields over producers and consumers. Within this system, food is consolidated under corporate control and treated as just another commodity that is sourced from any number of places, processed in many other places and shipped to yet other places for sale and consumption.

This 'placeless' global food has spawned resistance in the form of the local food movement, a place-based social movement focused on local production and consumption. While the meaning of 'local' might be contested, the movement itself has developed into a "veritable knowledge hub" (Sumner, 2015, p. 95). For example, in her study of learning in the local food movement, Bailey-Davis (2013) found that participants in a community-supported agriculture program created instrumental, practical and emancipatory knowledge. Using a situated learning approach – a useful framework for investigating place-based resistance to the pressures of globalization – she also suggested that farmers could be recognized as teachers and their customers as learners exploring changes in orientations toward social action. Her work vividly illustrates what she describes as the hope of the local food movement, which is that:

> *through engagement with the local food system, customers will a) develop a deeper connection with the food beyond commodity perspectives, b) develop a social consciousness about the dominant food system (and their role within the system), and c) remain committed to foregoing the dominant food system and opting for the alternative (thus, sustaining the more ecologically sustainable local food system) (Bailey-Davis, 2013, p. 9).*

Although Bailey-Davis (2013) did not explicitly examine food literacy in her study, the vision of hope she describes dovetails instructively with

Classens and Sytsma's (2020) definition of critical food literacy, with its broad focus on food, its awareness-raising about the global food system and its call for action and change. Terms we have learned from the local food movement, such as food miles, the 100-mile diet and locavore (the New Oxford American Dictionary's 'word of the year' in 2007 (OUP, 2007)) reinforce this vision and point to how language and literacy are dynamic and evolving.

The critical food literacy enabled by this 'social movement learning' (Hall et al., 2011) continues to this day, as exemplified by the fierce resistance to a recent ad by a subsidiary of Loblaws, one of the largest food retailers in Canada. In July 2024, it put out a mass advertising text message encouraging customers to 'skip the line' at their local farmers' market and go to its stores instead. Sent two months after a massive boycott of the retailer in response to its soaring profits amid rising living costs, the message provoked a backlash from consumers, farmers' markets and small businesses (National Post, 2024) regarding the promotion of global food over local options. This backlash demonstrates the enduring effects of critical food literacy and its ability to reveal, rather than obscure, power in the food system.

Sustainability

As another important social concern that illustrates how adults learn critical food literacy, sustainability is one of those popular terms that is hard to oppose but difficult to pin down. However, without a clear meaning for this basic concept, it is difficult to explain and operationalize compound terms such as sustainable development. Sumner (2017) has argued that sustainability involves the provision of life goods, such as food, which binds food to considerations of sustainability. This is reflected in the concept of sustainable food systems, which has emerged from the sustainability debates. Following Sumner (2017), a sustainable food system can be understood as an interdependent web of production, processing, distribution, retailing, consumption and disposal activities that provide life goods, including food. One route to sustainable food systems is through food sovereignty (Anderson et al., 2019; Byaruhanga & Isgren, 2023), a concept developed by La Via Campesina – an international peasant organization that is the largest social movement in the world (Friedmann, 2017). Food sovereignty involves "the right of peoples and nations to control

their own food and agricultural systems, including their own markets, production modes, food cultures and environments" (Whitman et al., 2010, p. 2). Unlike food security, which ensures access to food, food sovereignty is a rights-based concept that goes far beyond access to ensure not only the right of farmers and peasants to produce their own food on their own territory, but also the right of consumers to decide what they consume, how it is produced and who produces it (La Via Campesina, 2003). As Desmarais (2022, p. 381) notes, food sovereignty "places those who produce and consume food at the centre of decision-making for agriculture and food policies."

In their study of social learning in the food sovereignty movement, Gontarska and Guimaraes (2022) followed Wildemeersch et al.'s (1998) understanding of social learning as a process that brings about emancipation among the actors involved and changes the power dynamics. They found that this learning process was "an integral part of the community building to create a common space for communication and critical reflectivity within the Food Sovereignty Movement" (198). The aim of this learning was critical global citizenship, which Mansouri et al. (2017, p. 4) argue

> *Can be approached at the level of a continuum ranging from knowledge-based processes (including critical understanding and self-awareness) and value orientation (personal commitment to egalitarian values and global ethics) to political and committed activism (willingness to challenge attitudes and behaviours within different social milieus).*

Although Gontarska and Guimaraes (2022) did not specifically examine food literacy in their study, this vision of critical global citizenship learned within a food sovereignty framework maps thoughtfully onto Classens and Sytsma's (2020) definition of critical food literacy, showing a common focus on food knowledge, an understanding of broader sociopolitical and ecological dynamics, and empowerment for change.

Food sovereignty is proving useful for Indigenous peoples around the world who are adapting the term to their survival and well-being. "While the language and concept of food sovereignty has only recently been introduced into communities and policy circles around the world, the living reality is not a new one in Indigenous communities" (Morrison, 2011, p. 97). In her work on sustainable food systems,

Morrison (2011) sees Indigenous food sovereignty as a model for social learning. McEachern et al. (2022) concur, finding learning circles that aimed to develop traditional food literacy as central to deliberations on food sovereignty. One group in the study learned to value local food and to work to increase its value within the community, while also being connected to a healthy food culture. Another group supported access to traditional and locally farmed foods through culturally appropriate ways of growing, harvesting, preparing and trading amongst schools and beyond, while promoting youth engagement and leadership in learning circles and aiming to "bring youth and Elders together to support knowledge sharing around food and stories" (p. 819).

Four main principles guide Indigenous food sovereignty (Morrison, 2011):

1. Sacred or divine sovereignty – the right to food is sacred; it cannot be constrained or recalled by colonial laws, policies or institutions.
2. Participation – the action and day-to-day practice of nurturing healthy relationships with the land, plants and animals that provide us with food.
3. Self-determination – the freedom and ability to respond to our own needs for healthy, culturally-adapted Indigenous foods.
4. Legislation and policy – the provision of a restorative framework for a coordinated, cross-sectoral approach to policy reform.

These principles share similarities with Classens and Sytsma's (2020) definition of critical food literacy in several important ways: they address the daily practices associated with food, they recognize power in the food system, and they aim for food system change.

Public health

A third important social concern that illustrates how adults learn critical food literacy is public health, which can be understood as "the science and the art of preventing disease, prolonging life, and promoting physical health and efficiency through organized community efforts" (Schneider, 2021, p. 3). Literacy itself is recognized as a significant determinant of health and, by extension, so are health literacy and food

literacy (Gillis, 2016).

In a study funded by Public Health Ontario, Desjardins and Azevedo (2013) investigated how youth at risk learned food literacy. Within the larger context of food deskilling, the authors conducted 85 interviews with at-risk youth at five different public-health units. They found that even in adverse circumstances, these young people learned a range of important skills, which "encompassed not only technical ability and knowledge for preparing food, but also the mental health components of confidence, social connectedness and resilience" (p. 6). This finding led the researchers to broaden their original narrow definition of food literacy and understand it as:

> *a set of skills and attributes that help people sustain the daily preparation of healthy, tasty, affordable meals for themselves and their families. Food literacy builds resilience, because it includes food skills (techniques, knowledge and planning ability), the confidence to improvise and problem-solve, and the ability to access and share information. Food literacy is made possible through external support with healthy food access and living conditions, broad learning opportunities, and positive sociocultural environments (p. 6).*

When questioned about their food literacy, the 85 young people responded that they learned these skills and attributes from parents or foster parents (56), a grandparent, sibling or relative (43), a community program (31), classes at school (27), the internet or tv (13), friends, partner, in-laws (11) and working at a restaurant (7) (Desjardins & Azevedo, 2013). The young people also offered advice about ways other young people could learn in the future.

The broadened definition of food literacy that emerged from the study has some thought-provoking affinity with Classens and Sytsma's (2020) definition of critical food literacy. While it does not specifically include learning about food systems, it does talk about larger sociopolitical issues, such as living conditions, learning opportunities and positive sociocultural environments. Like Classens and Sytsma, it points to food preparation skills, and it also emphasizes improvisation, problem solving, and information gathering, assessment and sharing, which are all important precursors to enabling change.

All three important social concerns – globalization, sustainability and public health – not only illustrate how adults can learn critical food literacy. They also show a number of other interrelated commonalities. First, they all address issues of power, reflecting Hamilton et al.'s (2012) assertion that literacy that obscures power relations ultimately disempowers. In terms of globalization, members of the local food movement learned to challenge power in the global food system by championing local food and shaming large corporations that tried to steer people away from it. With respect to sustainability, the food sovereignty movement is sharply focused on capitalist and colonial power, while turning the global food system on its head by promoting a radical democratic agenda to empower both producers and consumers. And when it comes to public health, the study of food literacy among at-risk youth found many examples of self-empowerment in that "the daily struggle to get meals on the table for themselves and others often became an exercise in empowerment as young people developed strategies and became adept at making ends meet" (Desjardins & Azevedo, 2013, p. 19). As a result, many of the young adults gained confidence in their "ability to manage with respect to food, and consequently with other life challenges as well" (ibid.).

Second, these important social concerns also reflect the work of Paulo Freire. For example, the learning processes within these examples are the antithesis of Freire's (1996) 'banking model of education' which refers to the idea of expert educators depositing knowledge in the heads of learners. In contrast, these examples reflect Freire's (1995) respect for the knowledge of lived experience, whether learning food literacy through participation in the local food movement or the food sovereignty movement, or through family, friends and networks. In addition, following Freire's (1996) problem-posing education, food in these examples can act as an open-ended text that can help adults to read the world. Eating local food can 'lift the veil' of commodity fetishism (Hudson & Hudson, 2003) to reveal the power of the global food system, as well as encourage people to look for choices closer to home. Working toward food sovereignty reveals the unsustainable power of global food corporations to dictate what we eat and the right of peoples to make that choice for themselves. Food for at-risk youth can be the key to greater confidence and empowerment.

All of this brings us back to Flowers and Swan's (2012) contention that

food is not only an object of learning, but also a vehicle for learning, which connects critical food literacy with the diverse, heterogeneous and complex field of adult learning and education. While ALE is not the only solution to global challenges, it can "provide fertile ground from which change can grow, which in turn fertilises the soil of a viable world" (Schreiber-Barsch & Mauch, 2019, p. 532). In the same way, critical food literacy is not the only solution to power in the food system, but it can provide the fertile ground from which challenge and change can grow.

Conclusion

The international adult education community faces a pivotal historical juncture, with the educational implications of climate change, environmental degradation and unsustainable lifestyles looming large (Benevot et al., 2022). How can adult educators respond to these threats in ways that resonate with learners who face an uncertain future? One form of response involves food literacy. Although just one of many literacies that are needed to function in the world today (Gillis, 2016), food literacy is unlike other literacies because it has no end-point of competence (Vidgen, 2016). As a form of ALE, it develops throughout the adult lifespan, as needs change, novel foods are introduced, and corporate power evolves. In a world marred by preventable health problems and anthropogenic climate change, we need a type of food literacy that is fit for purpose – not to obscure power in the food system but to expose and challenge it. Critical food literacy meets this standard by encouraging adults to develop Freire's (1976) critical understanding of reality at a time when it is badly needed. While this may seem unachievable, it is salutary to remember that food itself has power. As McMichael (2000, p. 21) reminds us, "the power of food lies in its material and symbolic functions of linking nature, human survival, health, culture and livelihood as a focus of resistance to the corporate takeover of life itself." Critical food literacy can unleash that power by encouraging adults to develop the skills, knowledge and understandings that can help them challenge powerful interests in the food system and work for food system transformation.

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