



FOOD INNOVATION NETWORK

The Food Innovation Network's mission is to enhance the local food system, increase access to healthy food, create pathways for success, and support resource- and idea-sharing that engages the diverse communities of SeaTac/Tukwila and South King County. Food Innovation Network (FIN) uses a collective impact model to address the health and economic disparities faced by low-income and immigrant communities. We encourage and support community residents to take leadership roles within FIN's governance and strategic planning, bringing an authentic community voice to our work.

FIN's Community Engagement Approach

Community engagement has been at the heart of FIN's work, and has continually increased and evolved since FIN's inception in 2014. Models of community engagement, such as [Arnstein's "A Ladder of Citizen Participation,"](#) identify various stages of participation, from informing, a one-way channel of information, to control, in which communities have actual decision-making power. FIN is committed to employing those forms of participation that genuinely redistribute power into the hands of the community.

The formation of FIN was informed by extensive outreach by a hired community leader who has deep relationships with many diverse cultural communities throughout South King County. (Read some of this leader's reflections about the community on page 4.) This provided the first legitimate step for the community to share their interests, needs and opinions that, in turn, informed FIN's overall vision and strategy development. Despite connecting with over 200 individuals, a single individual clearly could not cover the outreach needs. FIN needed to invest in expanding its outreach. Thus, in 2015, we created our [Community Food Advocate](#) program, which trains and provides stipends for residents, refugee and immigrant leaders representing South King County's diverse communities.

Initially, the Advocates did outreach by conducting surveys and inviting community members to community conversations that were similar to focus groups, but in a less-formal setting. These activities provided opportunities for the community to inform and influence the work. However, they fell short of our standard of making community central to decision-making and, ultimately, driving FIN's efforts. Recognizing this shortfall, FIN worked with the Advocates to create opportunities to engage them through all of FIN's work as representatives of their communities.

We asked Advocates to join FIN's Steering Committee and Working Groups, which up to that point had been made up of staff from network organizations. We also moved meetings to more accommodating times and locations, with childcare provided.

In addition, FIN has worked to build the capacity of the Advocates. We have invested in workshops (e.g. facilitation, advocacy, budgeting), created an Advocate cohort, and begun holding Advocate-led monthly meetings to ensure Advocates have the necessary space and supports in place to effectively participate in all our work.

Today, FIN works with each Advocate to identify their personal interests, and to help connect them with leadership roles. In addition to serving as committee members, Advocates hold leadership positions, including co-chair to the steering committee, budget support lead, and lead cooks. In developing Advocates' leadership, FIN has deepened connections throughout the diverse community and ensured that community has a critical role in decision-making.



Community-led Strategic Planning

FIN made necessary logistical changes (e.g. evening meeting times, providing child care and food, stipends, etc.) to better accommodate Advocates's participation in the decision-making process through our Steering Committee and Working Groups. Despite these changes, participation remained low until FIN essentially turned the strategic planning process itself on its head.

Before 2016, we'd asked Advocates to react to a draft annual work plan created by the Steering Committee which, up to that point, had primarily consisted of partner organization's staff. In 2016, FIN started our 2017 strategic planning process in Advocate-cohort meetings by asking Advocates two questions:

- What should community engagement look like in 3-5 years?
- How will we get there?

Advocates documented their conversations and, together with other FIN members, created a draft work plan that was vetted by the Steering Committee and Working Groups. Finally, the Advocates hosted the Steering Committee at their monthly meeting so all Advocates could vote on and approve the 2017 work plan and budget.

Advocates's leadership of the strategic planning process transformed our work. For example, the Advocates called out that while our mission noted that we strive to increase access to healthy foods, our effort was minimal. As a result, healthy food access was elevated as a priority, and we have since launched a successful farm stand in the community and hired a part-time Food Access Coordinator.

The Advocates have shared they feel empowered and know they are being heard, which is evident through their increased and ongoing participation.

“My experience being an Advocate for two years in FIN helped me to strengthen my communications skills. I feel that FIN is a bridge that connects different cultures through food. My favorite thing is that our opinions, ideas and voices are always heard.”

- *Jaqueline Garcia,*
former FIN Steering Committee Chair

Building Our Vision for an Equitable Food System

FIN's mission to address the health and economic disparities of South King County is rooted in the systemic inequities that cause these disparities. As a result, understanding inequities and how they affect people is part of FIN's discussion and decision-making around strategy development and program implementation.

To provide a common language and means to assess FIN's work with an equity lens, we have used the [Health Equity Assessment Tool](#) developed by the Healthy King County Coalition and the [Food System Equity Assessment Tool](#) by the University of Wisconsin Extension. These tools helped the Advocates create a guiding vision of an equitable community food system, and engaged the Advocates and organizational partners together to carefully consider racial equity at every step and the potential outcomes.

Our Vision for an Equitable Food System in South King County:

All people can get to good food

- Organic produce is affordable
- All people can access services and assistance (like food stamps) regardless of their citizenship
- Food is not about money

Everywhere a child is, there needs to be good food

- School food should taste good and be healthy
- Kids have opportunities to learn how to grow and cook food
- Prenatal care and breastfeeding education is shared

Money, regulations and bureaucracy don't get in the way

- There is funding and support for community advocates and leaders
- Permits and fees are affordable
- Rules are clear for starting and running a food business
- Rent is affordable - no gentrification

People have to time to:

- Learn how to cook
- Cook and eat meals together
- Learn about nutrition

People that grow our food are important

- Farmers are paid fairly for what their farm produces
- Farmworkers are treated well and paid well
- People can afford land to farm

This process provided a focused space and time to discuss how our work was striving to achieve equity or potentially maintaining an inequitable status quo. As a result, we reprioritized some of our work and reassessed policies such as advocate stipends. (We discuss this further in the "Acknowledging Obstacles to Advocates's Engagement" section.)

Creating Spaces That Foster Participation

FIN has been successful in large part because we've created an organizational culture and structure that provide the space, time and systems to build and support real community relationships. From a coordination standpoint, activities are held outside of the workday or after school, and include providing child care and refreshments. Monetary stipends are also provided to Advocates on a consistent basis, with clear deliverables or activities tied to the stipend.

Yet, the more critical components have been intentional awareness of how we communicate and facilitate, and willingness to change. Levels of English vary in our settings, and it's critical that everyone can participate in the conversation. Language barriers can limit effective communication, and create a sense of insecurity and fear for community members who are learning English and trying to navigate and participate in American business etiquette. We have moved away from meetings following a strict agenda, timing, and the standard "opening the floor for discussion" that typically brings out participation of those familiar and comfortable with that format. We have rotated facilitators, broken into small groups, and used tools such as "[gracious space](#)," a process that values inclusion and diversity. We have also had frank and open discussions on being aware of the words and terminology used in meeting spaces and written materials such as our work plan.

In addition, we've provided skill-building training (e.g. facilitation, budgeting) and hands-on experience to build the Advocates' confidence and capacity to more easily engage in this space. Through a community leadership training, the Advocates created Community Agreements that identified shared values of how we want to be together in our collaborative work.

Community Agreements

Shared values on how we want to be together...

Being Kind, Care for Each Other

Being Present

Feeling Welcomed

Being Helped

Being a Good Listener, Listen Deeply

Being Understanding and Open to Other Cultures

Respect Diverse Perspectives

No Judgement, No Prejudice

Learn to Make Mistakes & Learn from Others

Not Taking Things Personal

Having Empathy

Making Eye Contact

Sisters & Brothers (We Are Family)

Being Community Leaders: Collective Power, Helping One Another, Taking Action

Our organizational culture and values, combined with skill-building and identifying clear leadership roles for the Advocates, has led to increasing Advocate participation in the decision-making, and the broader community engaging in our work.

Acknowledging Obstacles to Advocates' Engagement

The most significant challenge is ensuring we create the space and time necessary to truly engage the community, and that they have a voice in what and how we do our work. The Advocates have demonstrated commitment to FIN's work; however, they and their communities face many challenges. Rising rent costs, lack of affordable child care, changes in federal immigration policies, and family health and medical concerns are examples of issues that impact people's capacity to engage in FIN's work on a regular, consistent basis. In addition, many of the Advocates and their communities, as immigrants and refugees, face challenges of trauma, isolation and trust in authority.

Reflections on Challenges Immigrant and Refugee Communities Face by Njambi Gishuru, FIN Community Engagement Specialist

Trauma

Refugees and immigrants have often gone through many traumatic experiences for an extended length of time prior to arriving in the United States. Some events that contribute to trauma are religious oppression, extreme fear and suspicion, rape, physical assault, loss of home and livelihood, and betrayal by leaders, family members and political systems.

Isolation

Fear and lack of trust can lead to isolation. Immigrants and refugees tend to live together in isolation from systems and resources they cannot navigate. They are fearful of any level of authority, ranging from government officials, to office managers, to teachers or anyone who seems to be in a position of authority, and prefer to depend on leaders from their own communities with whom they have built trusted relationships and share culture and language familiarity. For this reason, the leaders become exhausted because beyond their own extended families, they have an obligation to their community with no local skills to help them navigate the required systems. Often, these leaders are too overwhelmed and stop pursuing their own development to focus on their community.

Power distance

Power is a fearful force to refugees and immigrants because of violations of trust by people in authority at every level of government in their former countries. This fear keeps them from knowing their rights in their new country, and distances them from accessing political, social or economic relationships.

Culture and language

Cultural and language barriers limit effective communication and advancement to economic opportunity. They create a sense of insecurity, hinder productivity, and create confusion around the business practices of the host country. They can lead to low self-esteem and fear of trying to navigate the systems to access resources. Refugees and immigrants are intimidated to pursue higher economic goals, and can become isolated in their comfort zones, settling for low-end jobs at low wages.

Education

The hardships refugee/immigrants endure do not end on arrival to the U.S. Refugees have limited opportunities for education or skills training, both in refugee camps and their adopted host country. It is hard for the host country to comprehend their great needs and expectations, to immediately figure out culturally appropriate programs, and to track and address barriers to participation. Because children tend to learn language faster than their parents, they become the cultural system navigator-broker, and are often so overwhelmed that many of them don't pursue a college education so they can stay available to parents and community.

We have had to carefully consider expectations for the Advocate role, and the recruitment and onboarding of new Advocates. Initially these decisions were made by staff, but have transitioned to more dialog with the Advocates. For example, the Advocates raised the issue around stipends being withheld for missed activities, sharing that it was a hardship. As a result, we revisited the stipend process, and the Advocates created a policy that they determined was fair.

Hope for a More Equitable Future



When FIN first formed, the members were representatives from various established community organizations, local government and education institutions. This has significantly changed over time; a third of the Steering Committee members are now Advocates, and the Steering Committee is co-chaired by an Advocate.

Advocates have led our visioning and planning process, and Advocates have supported the successful launch of work such as our community kitchen dinners and farm stands, and recruited community members into our food business incubator program. Advocates are speaking up and sharing hard truths; equally important, people with power are listening and making changes.