Nourishing the Healthy Food Access System

The Story of the Healthy Food Community of Practice

November 2024

dream forward Community Wealth Partners by SHARE OUR STRENGTH + engage R+D

ARE YOU...

- **PROVIDING** funding support to improve healthy food access?
- **COLLABORATING** with others in the food access space?
- **INTERESTED** in communities of practice?

If you answered YES to any of these questions, then **THIS CASE STUDY IS FOR YOU.**

Engage R+D, a learning and evaluation firm supporting Community Wealth Partners in an evaluative capacity since 2022, developed this case study to tell the story of the **journey of the Healthy Food Community of Practice.**

INTRODUCTION & FRAMING

Food is not only essential for nourishment and health, but it is also how we connect with family and friends, carry forward our culinary and cultural traditions, and build community. Access to healthy food is just one part of an equitable food system that encompasses all stages of food production and distribution.[i,ii] Unfortunately, within the current food system in the U.S., access to healthy and affordable food remains elusive for many, as detailed in the data below.

Food insecurity in the U.S.

Food insecurity is a persistent problem for millions of people in the U.S. Food insecurity is defined as having limited access to enough food to lead an active and healthy lifestyle.[iii] Populations at greater risk of experiencing food insecurity include older adults, children, and some communities of color, as highlighted by the following statistics:

- 1 in 5 children in the U.S. experienced food insecurity in 2022.[iv]
- 5.2 million (6.8%) older adults faced food insecurity in 2020.[v]
- Black (22%) and Latino (17%) households were much more likely to experience food insecurity compared with all other ethnicities (11%) in 2020.[vi]

Working toward a more equitable food system

Overall, food insecurity is a structural challenge. Numerous social and economic factors contribute to food insecurity, including inflation, unemployment, low wages, lack of affordable housing, systemic racism and discrimination, and chronic health conditions. These complex challenges cannot be fully addressed by one organization or program working in isolation. In addition to federal support programs, hundreds of local, statewide, and national organizations work to improve access to and consumption of healthy foods. Historically, groups working to address food insecurity from different angles and within varied geographies have had limited opportunities to establish collaborative relationships with each other and tap into the shared knowledge and problem solving of a larger network.

The Walmart Foundation, which invests in efforts to increase nutritious food access and healthier eating, solicited input in late 2018 from its food access grantees on strategies for the future. Grantees expressed interest in a community of practice to learn and work together and strengthen practices related to program design and implementation. Walmart Foundation funded the Healthy Food Community of Practice from early 2020 through July 2024 and selected Share Our Strength through a competitive RFP to engage its subsidiary Community Wealth Partners, a social sector consulting firm, to facilitate the Community of Practice. While the Walmart Foundation provided funding for food access grantees to convene through the Healthy Food Community of Practice, the programs and topics the Community of Practice focused on were at the discretion of the organizations involved and not directed by the Walmart Foundation. The programs, findings, and recommendations presented in this report are those of Share Our Strength and Community Wealth Partners, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Walmart Foundation.

About the Healthy Food Community of Practice

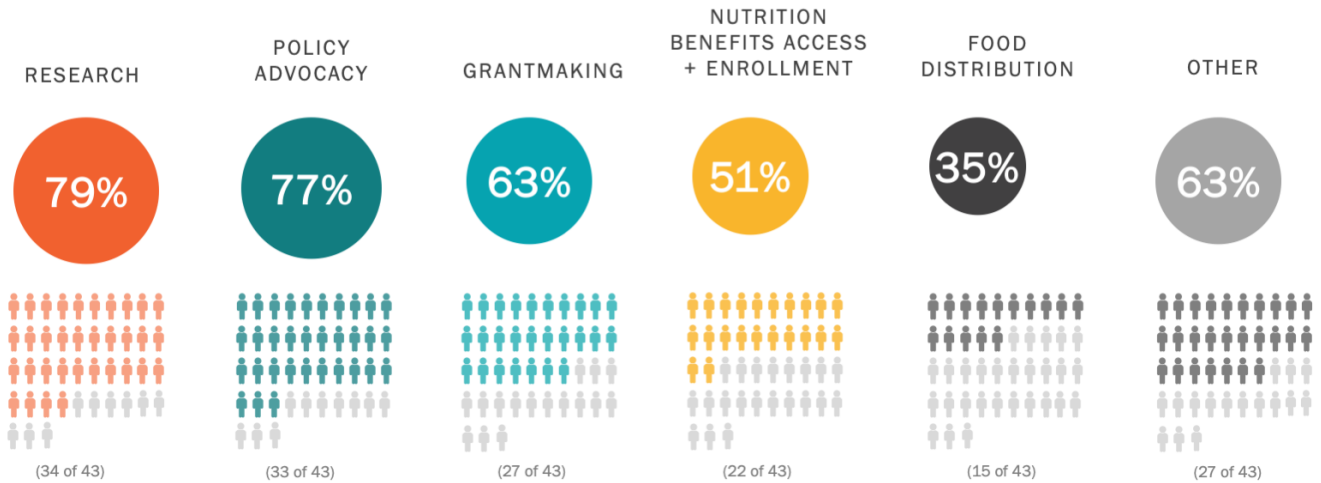
The stated purpose of the Healthy Food Community of Practice was to be **a convening and learning platform for organizations working to increase access to healthier foods and enable healthier food choices.** The Community of Practice was designed with an intentional theory of change that aimed to create impact in three areas:

- Fostering relationship and network building among participants
- Supporting changes in participating organizations' learning and capacity
- Sparking innovation and collaboration among participants

Together, changes in these three areas create greater coordination among a network of organizations working in pursuit of a common vision for a more equitable food system. Key activities of the Community of Practice—which will be described in more detail later in this case study—include virtual and in-person convenings and learning sessions, resource sharing and collaboration through small groups called "innovation pods", and participatory grantmaking.

Participation was open to any group working to expand healthy food access and consumption and aligned with the Community's shared goals, including prioritizing geographies and racial and ethnic groups with disproportionate rates of food insecurity. Based on grantee input, the Community focused on learning and capacity building as well as more equitable outcomes. Participation peaked at more than 100 individual participants representing over 50 organizations in 2023. The Community included a diverse range of organizations with national and regional scope, focused on diverse populations that have faced systemic barriers to healthy food, and playing a variety of roles to address food insecurity (Exhibit 1).[vii]

Exhibit 1. Participating Organizations' Roles in Addressing Food Insecurity, 2024 (n=43)*



*Percentages add up to more than 100 because participants could mark all the roles that applied to their organizations.

About this case study

The purpose of this case study is to provide an informative example of the formation and evolution of a healthy food community of practice, including success and challenges encountered along the way, outcomes achieved, as well as lessons that apply to communities of practice broadly. While the case study shares some of the Community's outcomes and accomplishments, the report—and the data collection supporting it—do not have the primary aim of documenting outcomes. Instead, examples highlighted in this case study should be viewed as illustrative examples of certain types of outcomes.

The remainder of this case study is organized as follows:

- **How the Healthy Food Community of Practice Pursued Change in a Dynamic Context:** Provides an overview of the Community's facilitation approach, governance structure, equity stance, key activities, outcomes experienced by participants, and thoughts on sustainability.
- **Insights and Lessons:** Offers broader insights on how communities of practice such as this one can contribute to systems-level change, common tensions that emerge in doing so, and lessons about how funders and facilitators can set communities of practice up for success.

Sources informing the case study

This case study by Engage R+D draws from a range of existing materials as well as recent interviews conducted exclusively for the case study, specifically:

Interviews conducted by Engage R+D in April 2024 with six Community Wealth Partners staff members who have been involved in different capacities with the Community.

Podcast interviews with Community Wealth Partners staff and community participants hosted by Collective Impact Forum in March and June 2024.

Systems mapping conducted by Engage R+D in early 2024 to identify the organizational roles of Community participants in advancing healthy food access.

Interviews and focus groups conducted by Engage R+D during 2023 with 19 Community participants, including several advisory council members.

Existing publications about the Community and by Community members.

Surveys of Community participants conducted by Community Wealth Partners.

Memos and other documents provided by Community Wealth Partners.

Throughout the case study, direct quotes have been lightly edited for clarity and brevity.

WORKING IN A DYNAMIC CONTEXT

How the Healthy Food Community of Practice Pursued Change

The Healthy Food Community of Practice launched just as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold and during a time of intense public scrutiny of systemic racism. Despite these external circumstances, the Community sustained high levels of participation and engagement. Factors that contributed to this include co-creating the design of the Community with participants, clarifying the Community's equity stance and goals for their work together, and prioritizing relationship building and learning.

Shared design and governance

From its start, the Healthy Food Community of Practice was developed through participatory and democratic practices. Community Wealth Partners, as facilitator, saw its role not as setting agendas, but as assisting participants in identifying and advancing their priorities as a community within the broad umbrella of working to improve access to and consumption of healthy foods. Community Wealth Partners brought flexibility and willingness to pivot as well as an ability to draw upon other resources as needed. The facilitation also modeled approaches participants could use to shift power in their organizations.

Facilitators struck a balance between sharing power and minimizing burden. Authority to take part in decision-making gives a participant power, but also requires time and effort that can pose a burden on top of day-to-day jobs. Community Wealth Partners brought experience and thoughtfulness to balancing participants' representation in governance with time commitment. Early in the Community's development, it was clear that a smaller subset of participants could more nimbly provide additional thought partnership that did not require pulling the whole group together. The advisory council emerged from this idea as a compensated position for participants that could rotate to give opportunities for leadership from different voices over time. A Community Wealth Partners staff member shared that the advisory council was formed to "help us move

> **"The advisory council had a significant sway in how the Community of Practice was moving forward."**
>
> **- Advisory Council member**

forward where there weren't clear-cut decisions that could be made in a group setting. [Decisions were] then presented back to the group. You could always give feedback [or] push back on anything."

At first, the group tried a six-month tenure for advisory council members but realized that serving as a member required more ramp-up time to build group cohesion. Thus, the cycle was lengthened to one year. In interviews, advisory council members from the early days, who had the six-month tenure, reflected that they would have liked to have had more time to work with the council. One member who joined later explained that serving an entire year on the advisory council allowed members to deepen their understanding of the Community processes and contribute more as a council member.

"I really love the collaborative style that was used with the Community of Practice and the advisory council," an advisory council member said. Another advisory council member spoke highly of their experience: "[I was concerned this would be an] extractive relationship. However, I haven't gotten that vibe at all from the Community of Practice (and the advisory council). It seems to be very mutually beneficial. That's something I really appreciate."[viii]

Participatory grantmaking allowed the Community to support meaningful local efforts. The Community's budget initially included in-person convenings, which could not happen at first due to the pandemic. Wanting to support local initiatives, members decided to repurpose that budget to participatory grantmaking. They stipulated that part of each grant go to a local community organization working directly with those experiencing food insecurity. But determining a decision-making process proved challenging. The group struggled with questions of how to discuss and rank projects to fund, and who would make final decisions. The process that they implemented started with Community members ranking their first, second, third, and fourth choices for which projects to receive funding. The advisory council played a significant role in the decision-making process. As one member explained, "if there is a tie, or if there's three highly ranked projects, but only two can get funded, that's where the advisory council has to take the lead with making the final decision on those matters, given the collective input of the entire community."

Ultimately, though, the Community successfully awarded over three years $500,000 in grants of up to $50,000, funding partnerships working on community-based solutions. Community participants spoke of the program's benefits on a March 2024 podcast.[ix] One advisory council member described, "We had a set amount of funds and we worked together to choose who those were awarded to. That was such a beautiful thing to see play out amongst a group of nonprofit providers… all of whom are pretty hungry for funds. We came together to look objectively at what would make the biggest impact." Another concurred, adding, "Unintended consequences [of the participatory grantmaking process] were that we built relationships with each other, and we got to live out the values that we were talking about and put them into action."

Relationship building and learning

Relationships and trust among participants are fundamental precursors to collaborative action. As a Community Wealth Partners staff member put it, "Relationships come first, and change happens at the speed of trust." In-person gatherings, more than virtual ones, can help people get to know each other. But while the pandemic made in-person convenings impossible for many months, it also increased

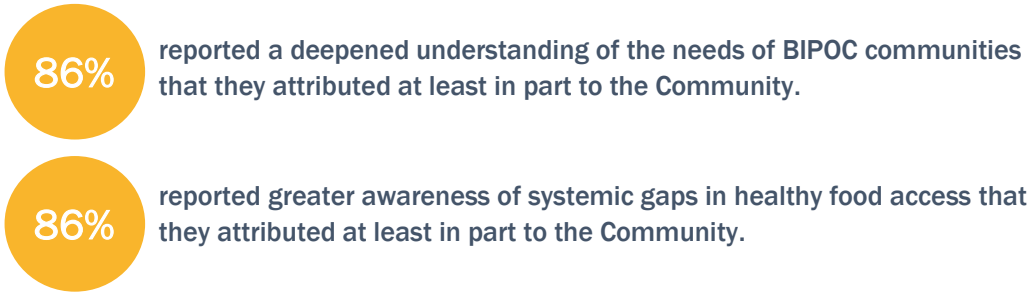
> **"The relationships built are absolutely priceless—having the opportunity to network [and] learn about other organizations' work."**
>
> **- Community participant**

participants' desire to connect and share information as they navigated the unprecedented disruption. Another staff member commented, "The crisis of the pandemic actually helped this Community of Practice connect and be open to sharing and learning together more quickly than other communities because it was out of necessity… Everybody felt like they were in it together." Engagement in virtual gatherings was high as Community members joined webinars, online learning series, and virtual convenings. In October 2022, the Community was finally able to convene in person in Santa Ana Pueblo, New Mexico, and similarly a year later in New Orleans. Through these convenings Community Wealth Partners facilitated learning and relationship building in a variety of ways.

Local stories helped bring alive participants' roles in a bigger system. Community Wealth Partners saw that learning opportunities could help national and regional organizations observe first-hand how communities were experiencing inequities and responding with local solutions. A staff member remarked, "We always had a goal and desire to get down to more local conversation centering those most impacted… We tried to find ways even if we didn't have as many local organizations in the Community of Practice. [One way was] when we had our in-person convenings, we went out into the Community and saw some of those local solutions that sometimes these organizations didn't have the opportunity to [encounter otherwise]." A participant confirmed, "At the convening in New Mexico, we were able to hear directly from community members… I was able to understand their needs, their perspectives." Another participant shared what they took away from this community site visit: "To get to go on the trip to the reservation and actually see where the food is being grown [and] hear them talk about what it means to the Community…That was so powerful."

Learning opportunities offered valuable resources during a period of racial reckoning. Community members, like many others, were considering their roles amid the racial reckoning in the months and years following George Floyd's murder. Through learning sessions and series that went increasingly deeper on racial equity topics, participants were able to reflect on and reconsider their individual

Exhibit 2. Key Community Learning, 2023 (n=46)



opportunities to make positive change and the roles of their organizations in perpetuating or shifting the status quo. By 2023, a vast majority of participants reported in a survey that during their time in the Community of Practice, they had deepened their understanding of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities' needs and their awareness of systemic gaps in food access (Exhibit 2). One participant shared, "The anti-racist work was next level for me, and I use new language with colleagues. Regarding food justice in particular, I've got a whole new vocabulary." Another commented that the Community had helped their organization take on more food justice work. Another said that a key benefit of the Community was "the growth of empathy and compassion and a deeper understanding and awareness of systems and structures. We… really dig in and [ask], 'So what are some solutions [and] how do we get there?'"

Indeed, in 2023, the Community collaboratively revised its goal to have a more explicit focus on BIPOC communities. Recognizing that a large, diverse group would have trouble reaching consensus, Community Wealth Partners adopted the concept of **consent-based decision-making** from Circle Forward Consulting.[x] To help the Community move forward on decisions without getting bogged down on trying to achieve total agreement, they worked to find proposals that everyone could live with. A staff member explained that the approach allows people to "still feel they have a voice and share consent without it creating a bottleneck where we can't make decisions or move forward." The same staff member noted that consent-based decision-making was effective and worthwhile, yet "not an easy process in terms of facilitating the dialogue and then getting to a decision… We were fortunate that this project was multi-year… There's a balance between wanting to see immediate impact and then the time it takes to engage in a process that allows all different voices to be centered and for folks to feel ownership." See the sidebar below, *Strengthening the Community's Equity Stance,* for more detail on how the Community pivoted to centering BIPOC communities.

Strengthening the Community's Equity Stance

The Community of Practice began with a broad focus on equity. The original goal was *to help people experiencing food insecurity—particularly those facing systemic barriers—to access and consume healthy foods.* Participant organizations focused on serving a diverse range of populations that have historically had inequitable access to healthy food, including children, the elderly, people in rural communities, and people in BIPOC communities. The focus on equity grew deeper over time, and in 2023 the Community, through a collaborative and iterative process, revised its goal to be race-specific: *BIPOC communities have access to and can consume healthy foods—doing this will also impact other communities who historically have not had access.* The following timeline describes how the Community deepened its equity stance over time.

A rushed start

The COVID-19 pandemic began just as Community Wealth Partners was conducting outreach to identify members for the nascent Community of Practice. Sensing that peer connections were urgently needed, Community Wealth Partners held a call with interested food access organizations to get input on structuring a community and how it could be immediately useful. Overwhelmingly, the organizations wanted the Community to start rapidly and consider later if and how to broaden participation.

Seeking diverse, community-based participants

Although delaying attention to participation felt necessary at the time, the group realized that the Community was comprised mostly of large, national organizations that were white led, and as a result important perspectives were missing from the conversation about creating a more equitable food system—specifically BIPOC-led and BIPOC-serving organizations, and organizations rooted in community. The community was able to attract more organizations over time, but it required effort and intentionality to engage a more diverse set of voices including from smaller, community-embedded groups.

Going deeper on equity

Starting in spring 2020, the Community held virtual learning sessions on topics including racial equity and the food system, equity-centered community design, and building a race equity culture. But as participating organizations became more numerous and community-based over time, many were interested in a deeper dive on racial equity. Community Wealth Partners responded by bringing in a third party to conduct a Racial, Equity, and Inclusion (REI) learning series that delved into power shifting, intersectionality, and movement building. The REI series had participation from a diverse range of organizations in different stages of understanding and practice related to racial equity. A participant reflected on what they learned through this series: "There are opportunities for us to go beyond naming identities and to really examine power structures that our organizations impose in communities."

The Community built in ample time for relationship building. Community Wealth Partners made sure that helping participants get to know each other better was built into everything they did, recognizing that trusting relationships were essential to collaborating effectively on shared goals. Their efforts aligned with participants' interests, and participants reported seeing benefits in building these relationships. In a 2023 year-end survey conducted by Community Wealth Partners, participants identified relationships with other organizations as the most valued element of the Community, with 90 percent of participants reporting their relationships as moderately or extremely valuable. In addition, similar surveys from each year showed an increasing percentage of participants reporting that they had started or had already built trusting relationships with other members of the Community (Exhibit 3). A participant shared: "I would say the relationships built are absolutely priceless—having the opportunity to network, learn about other organizations' work in this same space—that came through those networking opportunities."

Community members' relationships led to sharing, learning, and collaboration. Exhibit 4 shows how, in a survey, participants reported collaborating with each other in various ways through their participation. For example, two-thirds of participants (66%) reported sharing their knowledge and expertise with other participating organizations, and over one-third (39%) reported coordinating on actions with other participating organizations.

Moving from learning to action

Building the foundation of strong relationships, a shared vision, and shared understanding of systemic barriers among participants laid the groundwork for changes within individual organizations and collaboration among participants. The experiences of the Healthy Food Community offer a few insights about factors that supported participants taking action—both within and outside of their own organizations—and factors that made collaboration more challenging.

Trusting relationships and a shared vision helped the Community work together in pursuit of a more equitable food system. As members of the Healthy Food Community built

Exhibit 3. Outcome: Survey Data Show Participants Reported an Increase in Trusting Relationships with Each Other Over Time

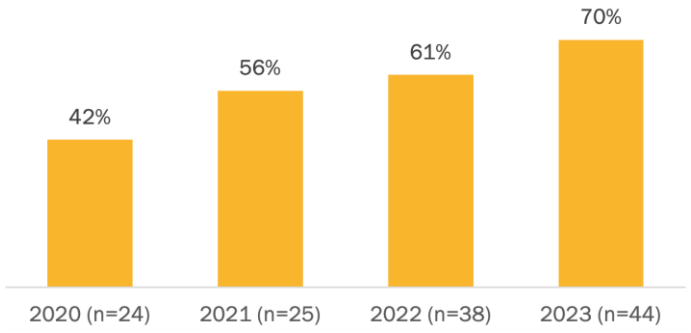
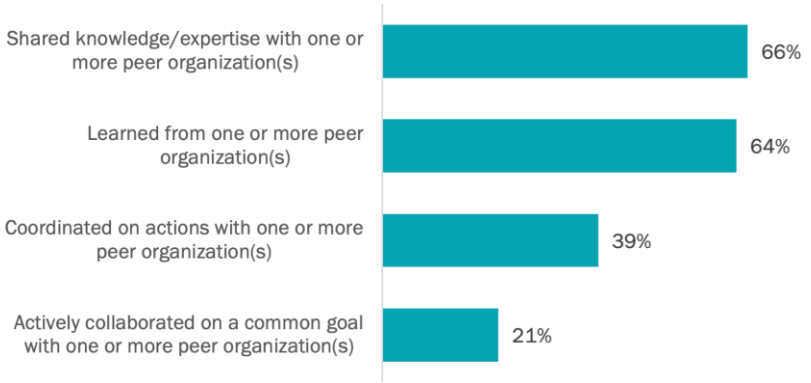


Exhibit 4. How Participants Reported Collaborating with their Peers throughout Their Time Together, 2023 (n=44)



> **"The beauty of a community of practice is driving collaboration between organizations, where normally we would be doing our work independent of each other… We're not duplicating efforts when we're collaborating."**
>
> **- Community participant**

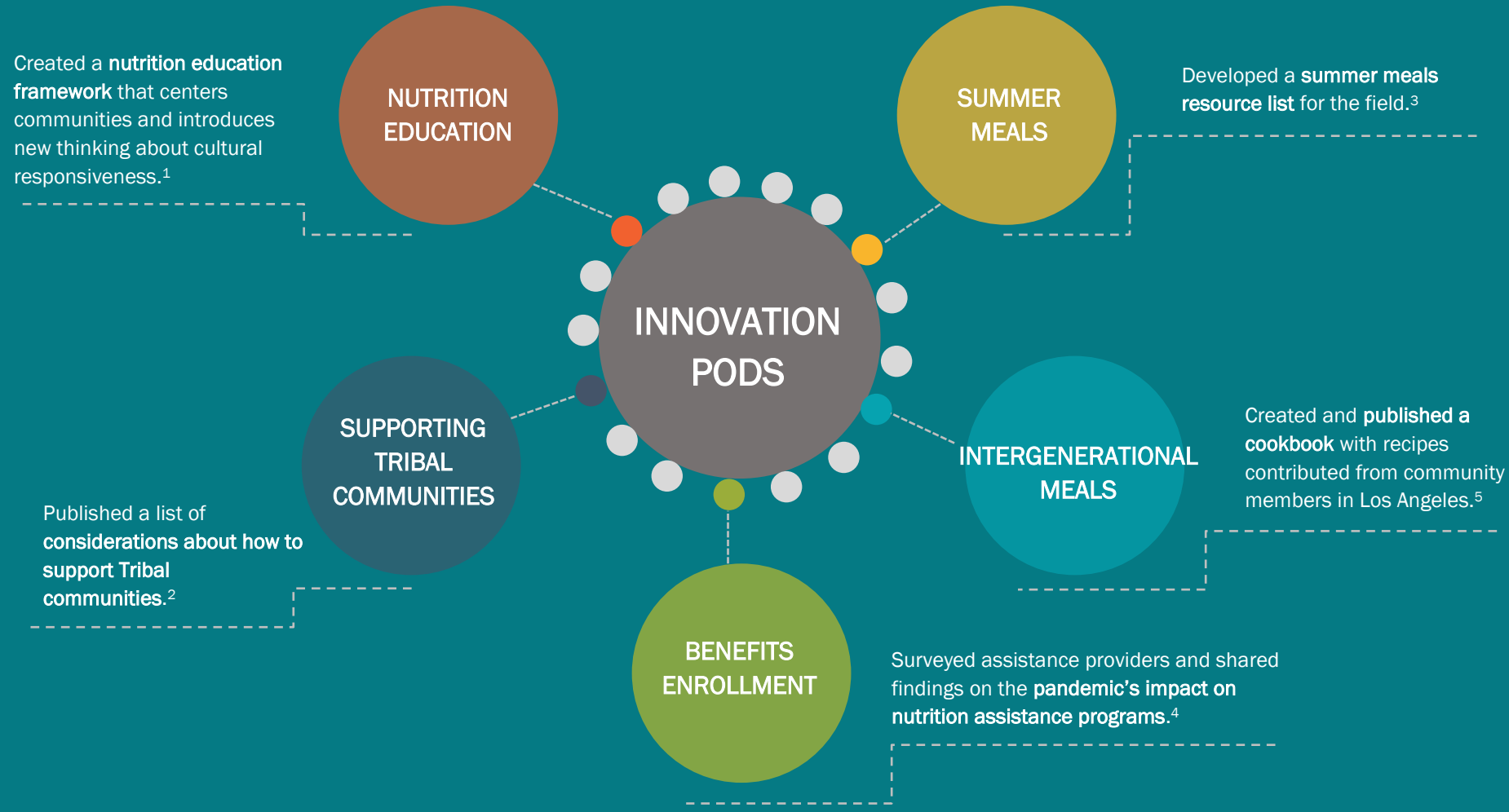
trust with one another, they were able to come together around collective actions that encouraged changes to the system of healthy food access. By 2021, the Community's advisory council was ready to take one such participant-driven action, co-authoring policy recommendations to expand access to healthy food.[xi] Separately, in 2022, the full community took collaborative action. That year, the White House announced a conference on hunger, nutrition, and health. After realizing the conference did not include the voices of people with lived experience in food insecurity, the Community organized listening sessions to include those voices. Based on the listening sessions, the Community compiled community-based shared recommendations to provide to the White House.

Smaller interest groups were successful in building relationships and fostering collective action. In addition to participants taking actions all together, they also organized smaller groups to focus on shared passions—groups referred to as innovation pods. Starting early in the Community's lifespan, the pods allowed participants to work on common interests, and in the process develop relationships, learn from each other, and break down silos. One participant described the benefits offered from the pod format, saying, "You meet someone at a conference, maybe you talk to them for an hour and that's it, but to work with people for 18 months [through a pod] to actually produce something… was incredible."

Community Wealth Partners staff observed pod members deepening relationships and trust, and participants reported working with other organizations because of relationships built through the pods. A participant described, "I don't think it can be emphasized enough that [the pods] really did provide a lot of connections that we might not have had [otherwise]. [They] helped strengthen our impact." Another added, "[The pod] allowed me a place to challenge my assumptions or hear from individuals in a deep way… There was a lot of learning that I'm really grateful for… It allowed meaningful opportunities to go so much deeper than you typically could." Although some of the pods were more focused on learning together than taking action, many created resources for the field (Exhibit 5). At the same time, the pods required more facilitation than originally hoped. A Community Wealth Partners staff member, echoing others, said, "The hope was that they would be a little bit more self-starting and that we wouldn't have to play as big of a facilitation role in them. That never quite came to fruition."

Senior leadership support was crucial for integrating concepts from the Community into organizational practice. In addition to catalyzing collective action, the Community also focused on supporting changes in participating organizations in areas such as centering culturally appropriate practices, authentically engaging community in the work, and building race equity and inclusion competency. Feedback from participants suggests the Community had some success in supporting organizational changes. For example, in a Community Wealth Partners' 2023 survey to participants, 60 percent said they made changes in their organizations since joining the Community, and that these changes were at least in part due to participation in the Community. At the same time, some participants reported having difficulty bringing about change within their organizations. Through interviews, participants reflected that support from senior leadership—either through direct participation in the Community, or overall support for the Community's mission and activities—was a key factor in supporting organizational shifts.

Exhibit 5. Examples of Actions by Innovation Pods



[1] Nutrition Education pod. Jun 30, 2023. Taking small steps toward culturally competent nutrition education. Blog post. Healthy Food Community of Practice. www.healthyfoodcommunity.org/post/taking-small-steps-toward-culturally-competent-nutrition-education

[2] Givens M. Sep 1, 2021. Interested in working with Tribal communities? Consider these 6 things first. Blog post. Healthy Food Community of Practice. www.healthyfoodcommunity.org/post/interested-in-working-with-tribal-communities-consider-these-6-things-first

[3] Summer Meals Pod. May 18, 2023. Summer meals resource list. Blog post. Healthy Food Community of Practice. www.healthyfoodcommunity.org/post/summer-meals-resource-list

[4] Community Wealth Partners. May 20, 2021. The pandemic's impact on nutrition assistance programs. Blog post. Healthy Food Community of Practice. www.healthyfoodcommunity.org/post/the-pandemic-s-impact-on-nutrition-assistance-programs-findings-from-a-survey-of-assistance-provide

[5] Alliance for a Healthier Generation. From my family to yours: A collection of multicultural, intergenerational recipes. https://www.healthiergeneration.org/campaigns/from-my-family-to-yours

> **"The Community of Practice started very broad. For the purposes of starting to break down silos and get through a pandemic, it worked really well. Now, a next evolution would need to be more of a segment of the community with similar needs."**
>
> **- Community Wealth Partners staff member**

While Community Wealth Partners made an intentional effort to engage senior leaders in various ways through the Community, the deep level of engagement and relationship-building it required sometimes made senior leadership involvement more challenging in practice. Some participants, who had varying levels of decision-making authority in their organizations, reflected that limited participation from senior leadership made it difficult to bring concepts and practices from the Community back to their organizations. As one participant noted, "Honestly, I don't get to talk to senior leaders in my organization. My leadership knows that I participate in the Community of Practice, [but] it's difficult for me to get to those senior leaders that would be able to affect anything on a larger scale." Another commented: "I know that the Community of Practice worked hard to get CEOs or senior leadership involved within the Community of Practice journey. [However], due to time constraints and conflicts, I wasn't able to get them involved. … some push from my boss, or my boss' boss [would've been helpful for] leveraging the resources and knowledge from the Community within my own organization."

Thoughts on sustaining the Community of Practice

While some participants expressed interest in finding ways for the Community of Practice to continue, overall participation levels decreased by early 2024, and a clear path for continuing the work together did not emerge from the Community. In early 2024, the Community shifted its focus to finding ways to sustain the impact of the Community of Practice rather than sustaining the Community of Practice itself. A few factors contributed to this shift.

The Community's needs shifted over time. Several members of Community Wealth Partners' staff remarked that although the Community served an important purpose, particularly through the pandemic, it would not necessarily continue to be the right solution for the diverse field of healthy food access and consumption. "This Community came at a time where there was a need for people to be together and they were feeling siloed," one staff member reflected, echoing others. "It was the pandemic. Food insecurity was at catastrophic and rising rates, and organizations wanted a time to be together. It worked that this was a broad place for so many people with diverse interests. As things have progressed and we're moving away from the pandemic catastrophe into other challenges, the time is different. We're seeing a need for… a new focus more targeted to specific types of organizations that are working in similar spaces… That tension was something we would have had to contend with more and more if this Community were continuing." Community participants also noted that any future iterations of this group would need to evolve to have greater impacts. One member reflected, "As I think about the Community of Practice and all these different organizations and everything that we do, it makes me think of where there could potentially be an opportunity for a single project that we're all a part of… The impact can be so much greater when you are pulling from everybody's areas of expertise."

The Community struggled to find new funding and continued backbone support. While some participants did wish to extend the Community, ultimately the group was not able to secure additional funding. Several Community Wealth Partners staff members noted that because this Community started at the beginning of the

pandemic, responding to highly dynamic situations, long-term sustainability was not an early focus, and future needs were highly unpredictable. As one staff member explained, it's hard "to be paying attention to [sustainability] parallel to running the Community and doing the work because it's so emergent." In addition, participant organizations did not have the capacity to champion sustaining the group. The Community Wealth Partners team initially hoped that participants would take increasing ownership of the Community—stepping in to drive planning and facilitation—but it became clear that participants did not have the capacity to take on the additional work.

As the Community wound down its time together, the focus shifted to sustaining the impact of their work together. Amid shifting priorities and the overall group preparing to wind down, certain aspects of the relationships, learning, and connections that came from the Community can endure and continue to create ripple effects in the field. During the Community's final months, Community Wealth Partners and a steering committee focused on sustainability worked to help ensure the impact of the Community endures. These efforts included using funds from the Community of Practice to support participants in becoming members of one another's organizations so connections could continue, and documenting insights and lessons learned for participants to share inside their organizations and across the field.

LESSONS FROM THE COMMUNITY

The story of the Healthy Food Community of Practice offers valuable lessons for those funding or implementing similar initiatives, including strategies for using communities of practice to drive systems change and ways funders and facilitators can effectively support these communities.

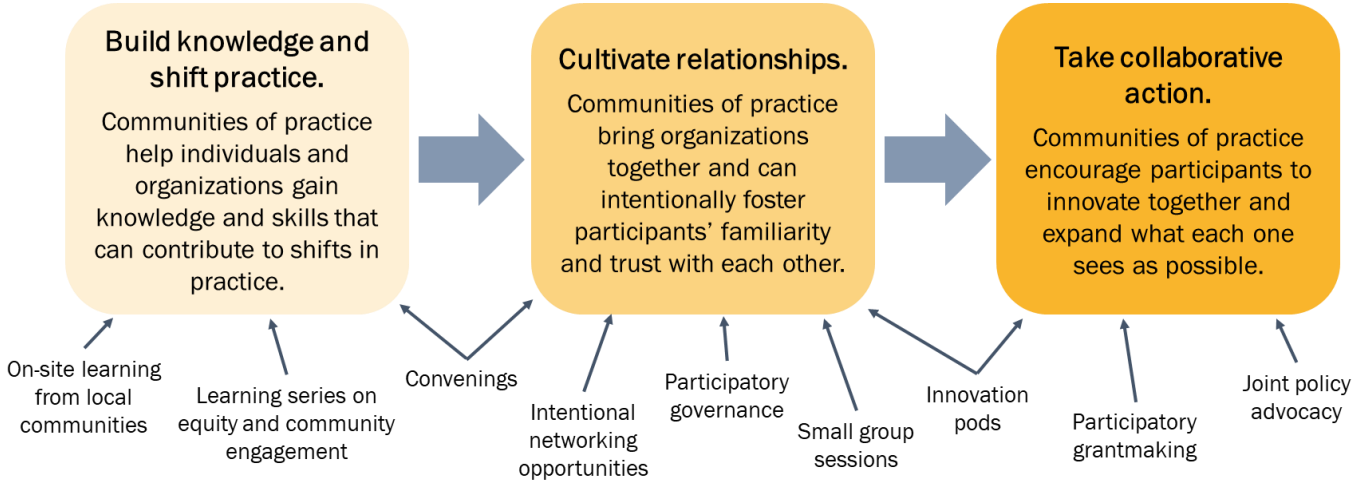
Lessons about using communities of practice to advance systems-level change

The story of the Healthy Food Community demonstrates potential for communities of practice to advance systems-level change by recognizing the fundamental work that precedes the change itself. As illustrated below (Exhibit 6), this case provides a clear example of the value of a community of practice to help organizations shift their own practices, build trusting relationships with peers who have overlapping goals, and in due course take collaborative action to improve the system.

Implementing a community of practice also involves managing tensions. The experiences of the Healthy Food Community brought to light the following tensions:

- **Common ground vs. deep interests.** Bringing together a diverse group under the same broad umbrella means emphasizing participants' commonalities and shared goals. At the same time, participants are unlikely to remain engaged without opportunities to delve deeper into their specific expertise or interests. The Healthy Food Community struck a balance in holding inclusive convenings and learning opportunities, while creating opportunities for deep-dive innovation pods on topics around which smaller groups of participants found shared passions.
- **Community autonomy vs. role of the funder.** The Walmart Foundation sought to give Healthy Food Community participants the autonomy to drive priorities and agenda within a broad community. Members deeply appreciated the funder's stepping back in this way to transfer power to the

Exhibit 6. How Communities of Practice Can Help Organizations Advance Systems Change



> **"We know that to achieve impact, we need people working together. Relationship building and taking time for that really matters."**
>
> **-Community Wealth Partners staff member**

Community. At the same time, participants and the Community Wealth Partners team reflected that there could have been opportunities to bring Walmart Foundation into the work so that the Community could leverage additional assets the foundation holds beyond just the dollars they provide. Drawing from these lessons, funders of similar communities would benefit from considering how they can serve as assets to the work beyond their financial support. For example, they can consider how to use their platforms to share what a community of practice is accomplishing and help disseminate knowledge and products for the field that come out of the Community. They can also provide thought partnership and broker relationships to assist with sustainability.

- **Time-intensive community participation vs. leadership engagement.** Communities of practice bring together representatives from organizations to build collaborative relationships—a process that requires time and mental energy. In some cases, this level of participation is better suited to middle managers with more capacity to engage deeply in the Community than organizational leadership. Middle managers, however, may have less authority to apply community lessons within their organizations. Learning from the Healthy Food Community, an opportunity for funders and facilitators is to think carefully about what the Community wants to accomplish and who should be at the table to accomplish those goals. In addition, facilitators and funders can take an active role throughout a community's lifetime of communicating with organizational leaders to secure their support for institutional change.

Lessons about how to best support communities of practice

Communities of practice build connections across diverse organizations that focus on different geographies, demographics, and approaches. They provide opportunities for learning, development of trusting relationships, and collaborative action that can have ripple effects throughout a field or ecosystem. Supporting system-levels change through a community of practice requires a departure from philanthropy's usual way of working. It requires funding to support collaboration, multiyear investments, and openness to outcomes that are emergent and that point to *contribution* rather than *attribution.* As a Community Wealth Partners staff member put it, it is important for funders to recognize they "are not going to change systems just by funding individual organizations to each do their own thing. A community of practice is saying, 'We need some disruption or innovation in this system,' or 'We need a new way of working in this system.'" Another staff member added, "Systems change is hard. It takes a long time. Anyone would be naïve to think that systems are going to change in even five years. It takes energy, commitment, and funding. If more funders were willing to fund this kind of work, nutritious food access and other fields would benefit greatly, but funders have to be willing to really change some of the ways that they fund, trust, and build their programs." The following lessons from the story of the Healthy Food Community of Practice offer takeaways for funders, facilitators, and participants engaged in other communities of practice.

- **Balancing flexibility with setting near-term goals is key.** Changing systems to be more equitable is generational work. Communities of practice need clear goals that are right-sized to the funding and duration of support they have and show how the Community's work together will contribute to systems-level change.

Flexibility on the part of the funder is paramount to enable course corrections, recognizing that both external and internal dynamics are unpredictable.

- **Community ownership takes time, but it matters.** Because collective action requires (at minimum) participants' buy-in, time commitment, and thought partnership, those involved must have a voice and a stake in the work. "When the Community feels like they have some ownership over the direction of the work, it matters and keeps them engaged," a Community Wealth Partners staff member emphasized. Democratic, equitable governance and goal-setting are essential, along with a recognition that moving a diverse group toward a shared goal in pursuit of more equitable systems takes time.
- **Flexible, multiyear funding is critical for success.** While it may seem that successful communities that provide clear value to their members will endure once relationships are cemented, communities like these are generally not self-sustaining. They continue to require substantial, time-intensive coordination by a funded third-party facilitator or a designated nonprofit. Participants expressed appreciation for the investment in facilitation support from Community Wealth Partners. "These types of collectives don't just happen naturally," a Community Wealth Partners staff member said. "There's a lot of value in having a facilitator or coordinator holding that whole vision and coordinating all the pieces of it."
- **Plan for sustainability from the beginning.** Certainly, not all communities of practice are useful indefinitely, and the Healthy Food Community was one that came to a close. In all cases, funders, facilitators, and participants can consider early in the life of a community of practice whether the community will be time-limited or something they want to last in perpetuity. Then they can engage in conversations from the beginning about what it will take to plan for its intended future. Lastly, when communities such as this one do come to an end, they continue to offer valuable lessons and insights for those interested in leading and supporting similar efforts. Our hope is that the lessons from this Healthy Food Community summarized in this case study and other resources the Community created will continue to endure well into the future.

Further Resources

For further information about the Healthy Food Community of Practice, check out these resources:

- Healthy Food Community of Practice website: www.healthyfoodcommunity.org/
- Celep A, Ramirez C. Mar 20, 2024. From chaos and competition to clarity and coordination: Four pivots for aligning coalitions to achieve equity. Blog post. Collective Impact Forum. collectiveimpactforum.org/blog/from-chaos-and-competition-to-clarity-and-coordination-four-pivots-for-aligning-coalitions-to-achieve-equity/
- Collective Impact Forum. Mar 20, 2024. Pivoting to build a stronger collaborative. Podcast. collectiveimpactforum.org/resource/pivoting-to-build-a-stronger-collaborative/
- Collective Impact Forum. Jun 23, 2023. Strengthening relationships through a community of practice. Podcast. collectiveimpactforum.org/resource/strengthening-relationships-through-a-community-of-practice/
- Ramirez C, Farley A. Feb 14, 2023. Secrets to success in engaging broad, diverse stakeholders for transformational change: Insights from the Healthy Food Community of Practice. Blog post. Community Wealth Partners. communitywealth.com/secrets-to-success-in-engaging-diverse-stakeholders/

ABOUT ENGAGE R+D

Engage R+D is dedicated to helping organizations achieve their greatest possible impact. We partner with leading foundations, nonprofits, and public agencies throughout the U.S. to help them design, implement, measure, and improve their work. We believe that creating social change and advancing equity requires bringing together good data, stakeholder voice, and field insights in creative ways to inform strategy and drive results. We approach our work with an organizational development lens, recognizing that people and relationships are central to this work. We also exchange ideas and share insights with the broader field so that together we can create a more just and equitable future.

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ABOUT COMMUNITY WEALTH PARTNERS

Community Wealth Partners is a social impact consulting firm guided by a vision of a world where all people have what they need to fully live into their potential, particularly those who are kept furthest from resources and power. We were created by the nonprofit Share Our Strength to partner with social sector organizations to figure out what works and share what we learn with others.

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END NOTES

[i] Equitable Food Systems Resource Guide. PolicyLink. https://www.policylink.org/food-systems/equitable-food-systems-resource-guide

[ii] Murray S, Gale F, Adams D, and Dalton L. A scoping review of the conceptualisations of food justice. Public Health Nutr. 2023 Apr; 26(4): 725–737. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10131151/

[iii] Definitions of Food Security. USDA. https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/definitions-of-food-security/

[iv] Hake, M., Dewey, A., Engelhard, E., & Dawes, S. (2024). Map the Meal Gap 2024: A Report on County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2022. Feeding America.

[v] National Council on Aging. https://www.ncoa.org/article/what-is-food-insecurity-get-the-facts

[vi] Food Security in the U.S., Interactive Charts and Highlights. USDA. https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/interactive-charts-and-highlights/

[vii] 'Other' responses included a range of roles such as technical assistance, innovation, and workforce development, as well as specific programs or initiatives.

[viii] Collective Impact Forum. Jun 23, 2023. Strengthening relationships through a community of practice. Podcast. collectiveimpactforum.org/resource/strengthening-relationships-through-a-community-of-practice/

[ix] Collective Impact Forum. Mar 20, 2024. Pivoting to build a stronger collaborative. Podcast. collectiveimpactforum.org/resource/pivoting-to-build-a-stronger-collaborative/

[x] Find more information on the Consent Principle at Circle Forward: https://circleforward.us/the-consent-principle/

[xi] Feliciano R, Ferguson K, Gepp A, Harris Q, Kater S, McDaniel S, Perry G. April 7, 2021. What we can learn from the pandemic to close the nutrition gap. Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity. https://spotlightonpoverty.org/spotlight-exclusives/what-we-can-learn-from-the-pandemic-to-close-the-nutrition-gap/