



Interview with Nadia Johnson, Policy and Advocacy Director, Just Food

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As Policy and Advocacy Director at Just Food, Nadia works to increase awareness and action around local food and farm issues through organizing community advocacy trainings, food justice workshops and conferences, and policy advocacy and campaigns.

What motivated you to get involved with food policy and to become a food policy advocate?

Everyone has a relationship with food, and policy is part of that relationship whether we like it or not, whether we're aware of it or not. For me, growing up we were on WIC for three years and we were on and off of food stamps throughout my childhood, but I never experienced hunger because of this safety net that my family needed. Still I wasn't thinking about the fact that policy kept food on our table. I actually became more aware as an adult when I was working with women's rights advocates from a number of countries. I really began hearing, seeing and understanding how US-championed trade and finance policy was dismantling small and mid-scale farming, which globally women of color particularly rely on for subsistence and income-generation. Policy definitely has power to advance food justice or exacerbate injustice. It impacts not only quality of life- whether you have food or not, whether the food you have is improving your health or destroying it- but even whether people live or die. This is why I work on food policy.

Can you briefly describe what distinguishes Just Food's work in the community?

Just Food supports community-led projects that increase access to healthy, locally grown food, mostly in underserved communities in NYC. Farmers markets, CSAs, farm-to-food pantry relationships, urban agriculture projects, you name it. We won't do work in a community unless community members want it and lead it. This is one of the things I love about Just Food... we don't run these projects but rather provide training, advocacy, education and other support to people starting and leading community-based solutions to food inequities in their own neighborhoods.

You have several important initiatives such as community food education, food justice, city farms, etc. Is there any one particular program you are most excited about at Just Food? Also, can you provide one important case study of the impact of this particular program?

In terms of food policy, our advocacy work aims to support the people leading food justice work in their communities. For example, when we kept hearing from our farmers market partners—who are in some cases the only ones bringing local farmers into their neighborhoods—that the city was charging them permit fees that cost most markets hundreds of dollars and in some cases over \$1,000 per season, we worked with them and elected officials to get most of the permit fees waived for markets operating in low-income communities. When urban beekeepers were served notices, required to attend hearings and were being fined for doing the vital work of supporting our food supply by keeping honeybees, we spearheaded a successful campaign to legalize beekeeping in NYC. We also developed and conduct an intensive food justice advocacy training for people leading community food projects, and do a lot of coalition-based advocacy on systemic challenges related to healthy food access, hunger and urban and regional agriculture.

What do you believe to be the greatest food policy challenges for New York City? And the greatest opportunities?

Fresh, healthy food for all. It's a challenge that goes even beyond food policy, as it's based on systemic inequities that stem from the growing gap between rich and poor, often along racial and gender lines. For opportunity, there has never been so much happening in NYC to expand healthy food access for all. The amount of thought and action going on is growing and awesome.

What is the one food policy change at the local (or state or federal) level that would have the greatest impact on health?

Universal free and healthy school lunch is probably the one single policy change that would impact the greatest number of people, in this case our kids.

What do you think are the opportunities for food advocacy in the de Blasio Administration?

The new Administrations' Office of Food Policy has been very accessible, very engaged and has expressed intent on addressing food equity. This is very encouraging for advocates working to advance food justice in NYC.

How does your organization think about the connections between hunger, food insecurity and obesity? What strategies do you suggest for better integrating the efforts to reduce these two food-related problems?

It's all a product of our insane food system. Rather than advancing health, justice, equity and sustainability, it perpetuates the opposite. We view healthy food as a human rights issue, everyone should have it. Not everyone shares this view, and often policymakers are more influenced by a handful of agribusinesses than by the masses of people that make up their constituents. For greater progress to happen, more people affected by food-based inequities must be active, educated and engaged in creating solutions and demanding change.

FACT SHEET

What's the last Food Policy book or blog you read: NSAC and FRAC blog posts -- I rely on a lot to understand what's happening in DC, it would be hard to grasp otherwise.

Current Location: Richmond Hill, Queens

Education: MA Sociology from CUNY City College, BA Women's Studies and Sociology from SUNY Buffalo

Favorite Food: Maple syrup melted on snow (I'm from Vermont)