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Transformative learning to promote transformative evaluation of food system praxis

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Evaluation ideally plays an important role in determining the value and impact of community food system initiatives and movements, providing recommendations for informed decision-making, learning, and programmatic adjustments. Given that community food system work is characterized by critical praxis rooted in deconstructing dominant epistemologies and addressing social and systemic injustices—including discourses and practices from agroecology, food justice, and food sovereignty movements—simple, technical-rationalist approaches to evaluation are inadequate and inappropriate. In parallel with recent developments in critical food system work, the field of evaluation has evolved toward more critical and transformative approaches—including Culturally Responsive and Equitable Evaluation, indigenous evaluation, feminist evaluation, all generally regrouped within the framework of the transformative evaluation paradigm. At the nexus of these trends, to meet the rising demand for critical evaluative thinkers ready to grapple with the complex, dynamic, and contested questions of community food system praxis evaluation, there is a need to equip emerging evaluators with the requisite knowledge of evaluation approaches. To be ready to be critically reflective evaluators, in food system praxis and beyond, the next generation of emerging evaluators must engage fruitfully and in practically wise ways with the complex and contested aspects of critical food system work. Reflecting on the burgeoning literature on evaluator education and evaluation capacity building (ECB), and given the centrality of critical praxis and transformation in both food system work and evaluation alike, we posit that transformative learning theory has a potential role to play in preparing evaluators to meet these challenges. As such, the purpose of this conceptual paper is to highlight the intersections between critical evaluation approaches and critical food system praxis, and propose transformative learning theory as one way to help emerging evaluators prepare to meaningfully grasp and engage with the complexities manifest at this nexus of critical food evaluation praxis.

Introduction

Community food security (CFS) is "a situation in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice" (Hamm and Bellows, 2003). Organized communities stand a better chance of addressing food insecurities despite the challenges and complexities associated with community food systems (Hamm and Bellows, 2003; Hall et al., 2019). A key concept of CFS is "the right to food" for all within a community (Hamm and Bellows, 2003). Food justice, also broadly translated as the right to food, encompasses "communities exercising their right to grow, sell, and eat food that is fresh, nutritious, affordable, culturally appropriate, and grown locally with care for the well-being of land, workers, and animals" (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). Food justice initiatives seek to enhance access to food for all regardless of location, societal class, race, age, or gender. Food justice leads to proportionate access to quality and nutritious food by eliminating systemic bias and negative social tensions. Institutional or systemic bias takes various forms, anchoring on race, socio-economic status, religion, ethnic group, clannism, and geographic disparities, among other factors. Such disparities disproportionately affect people of color and minorities (Hamm and Bellows, 2003), leading to starvation, indignity, and food access challenges, with little done to solve the ever-recurring problem.

Coupled with systemic food inaccessibility and indignity, global food systems are fragile. That fragility is not entirely accounted for by global instabilities, such as the fallout of COVID-19; the Food Agriculture Organization's (2020) High Level Panel of Experts' report found that food systems showed evidence of fragility even before the epidemic. "Climate change, loss of biological and agrobiological diversity, loss of soil fertility, water shortage and loss of water quality, and population growth" all contribute to the fragility of the food system at a global and local scale [(McIntyre et al., 2009), p. 2]. This fragility was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and political conflicts pitting major global food baskets against each other (Clapp and Moseley, 2020). For instance, according to an IPES-Food (2020), the underlying inadequacies and inefficiencies within the global food system regime brought forth by COVID-19 include, among other shortcomings, a near world-wide lockdown that affected food supply chains, disrupted market access, and slowed food production. The cataclysmic impact of the pandemic temporarily disrupted volunteer work among community members. That notwithstanding, local community members, mutual aid, and food access organizations played an integral role in the resiliency of low-income communities who were affected by the pandemic (Haynes-Maslow et al., 2020; Lofton et al., 2022). A recent study by Mould et al. (2022) found that, to a large extent, during the period of the pandemic,

mutual aid has been thrown into the limelight. This exposure has led to further appropriation by the states, who absolved their responsibilities of funding social welfare to the public. In order to reduce the harsh impacts of future pandemics and naturally occurring disasters on the food system, Mould et al. (2022) propose a community-focused approach, which includes collective responsibility, co-operation, and mutual survival. This is an approach in which "vulnerabilities are viewed less as static variables to be countered, but as spaces of radical emancipation from the injustices of capitalist systems that created the vulnerabilities in the first instance" (Mould et al., 2022, p. 875). To achieve this, food movements must advocate for a layered collaborative approach bringing together various stakeholders, including food system evaluators.

The community food system challenges described above are complex, leading to injustices, albeit at varying scales. Nevertheless, a "whole systems perspective" and "action that establishes alliances" as proposed by Levkoe (2011) seems like a viable solution to address food access challenges. A working model, as Alkon and Agyeman (2011, p. 6) postulate, is "to operate through grassroot community-based organizations" in collaboration with state actors, tertiary education institutions, local voluntary organizations for professional evaluators (VOPEs), and donor organizations (also see Figure 1 below). Meter (2006) advances a systems approach to community food systems evaluation, arguing against food commodification and commercialization which leaves communities without culturally appropriate or sufficient food. Food system evaluation should account for "multiple perspectives" (Meter, 2006, p. 150), stakeholder participation, and political narratives and epistemologies. As such, evaluation helps determine the value and impact of community food system initiatives and movements, providing recommendations for informed decision-making, learning, and programmatic adjustments.

Program evaluation is "an applied inquiry process … that culminates in conclusions about the state of affairs, value, merit, worth, significance, or quality of a program, product, person, policy, proposal, or plan" (Fournier, 2005 as cited in Mertens and Wilson, 2018, p. 6). A Center for Agroecology (2022), article on evaluating food systems outlines the need for evaluations that (1) highlight and document program impacts, (2) respond to food producers and community needs, and (3) improve programs. Evaluation, just like other fields and professions, keeps growing and enhancing its approaches to address emerging societal, environmental, and practical concerns. As such, Mertens and Wilson (2018) proposed an additional branch on the evaluation theory tree (i.e., a metaphorical and schematic representation of the theoretical roots of evaluation; Alkin, 2012), the social justice branch, under the transformative evaluation worldview. The transformative evaluation worldview "primarily focuses on viewpoints of marginalized groups and interrogating systemic power structures through mixed methods

FIGURE 1
The social context for transformative evaluation capacity building.
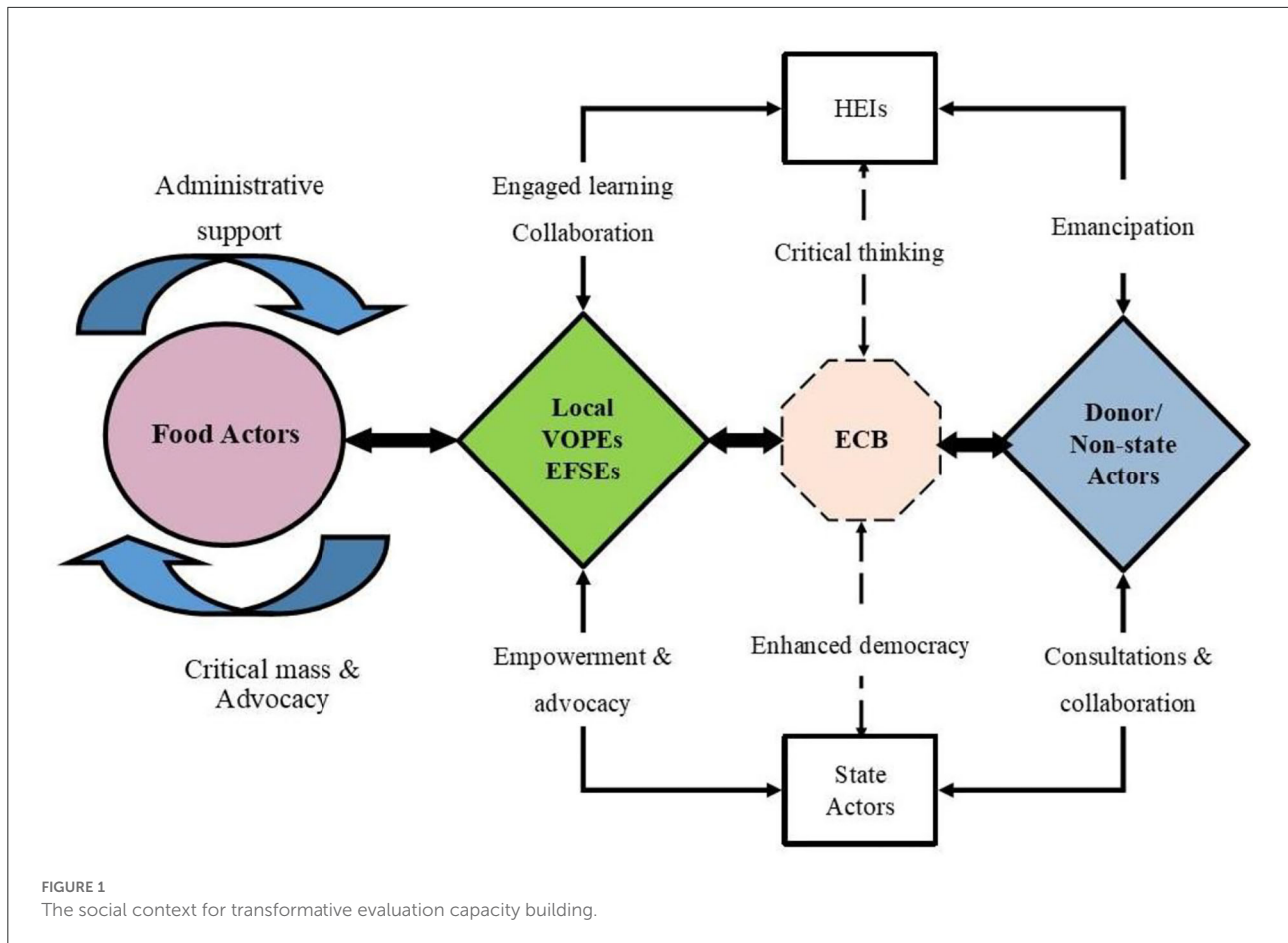
to further social justice and human rights" (Mertens and Wilson, 2018, p. 42). As we will explore in greater depth below, the transformative learning theory's features, such as reflexivity and critical consciousness, all align well with the transformative evaluation worldview.

There is still growing acceptance of evaluation in organizations due to the increased focus on evaluation capacity building and use. Local organizations, such as those leading and implementing community food movements, face myriad challenges including but not limited to: (1) lack of proper evidence for effective decision-making and ineffective institutions; (2) power imbalances and policy conflicts between donors and local movements (Blaser Mapitsa and Chirau, 2019; Masvaure et al., 2020; Chirau et al., 2021); (3) an accountability-learning conundrum (Christie and Fierro, 2012); and (4) cultural and geographical influences (Vo and Christie, 2015; Al Hudib and Cousins, 2020), which disproportionately affect minorities, women, youth, and children. These challenges make it necessary to engage in a discourse that explores the transformative learning needed to prepare emerging evaluators to engage meaningfully and fruitfully in the nexus of critical, transformative community food system praxis, and critical,

transformative evaluation, for the good of our rather vulnerable food systems.

The transformative learning theory helps build food systems evaluators' capacity to engage with contentious and complex issues and confront dominance by empowering local community food actors and local non-governmental organizations. Emerging evaluators have an opportunity to develop evaluation knowledge and practice among historically underserved communities to help raise local and organizational aspirations to champion better-suited food system interventions. This paper focuses on individual evaluators' interactions that collectively—through social interactions, reflexivity, consensus-building, and reflective discourse—make up elements of transformative learning. To meet the objectives for which they are established, food systems require responsive evaluation policies that crystalize and centralize evidence and feedback collection, ultimately leading to better decision making. Additionally, emerging food system evaluators (EFSEs) rely on existing political and policy agendas to inform their critical evaluation perspectives. The Food Agriculture Organization (2020, p. 5) High Level Panel of Experts calls for "critical policy shifts and support for enabling conditions that uphold

all dimensions of food security." We posit that these newly transformed emerging critical food system evaluators will be poised and well-positioned to use the conclusions of their evaluations to affect or even effect food system policy changes. In order to "facilitate multi-actor negotiations on food system sustainability by allowing diverse stakeholders to make sense of the complex adaptive nature of food systems" (Hebinck et al., 2021, p. 15), we advance a Multiple Streams Agenda-setting framework (Kingdon, 1995) that integrates the community food systems and evaluation agenda with existing political and community priorities to gain the requisite political traction and attention. Food system policy agenda-setting ideally involves multi-stakeholder dialogues and consensus building to determine policy goals (Hebinck et al., 2021). Emerging food system evaluators can rely on transformative learning theories to propose "reflexive and comprehensive evaluations" (Hebinck et al., 2021, p. 16) that inform policy agendas relevant to local food systems initiatives (Pothukuchi and Kaufman, 1999).

2. Food systems' evaluation guidelines – Options and implications

2.1. Building emerging evaluators' capacities for food systems evaluation

Evaluation capacity building (ECB) "is the intentional work to continuously create and sustain overall organizational processes that make quality evaluation and its uses routine" (Stockdill et al., 2002). Mezirow (2000, p. 5) defines learning as a "process of using past interpretations to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to future action". Based on this understanding, ECB's intentions to enhance organizations' abilities to conduct and use evaluation should involve learning dynamics. Based on Mezirow's definition, learning is the past and future experiences or interpretations that guide action or inspire adjustments. Likewise, ECB is a learning process that includes evaluators' and food actors' intentions to learn from the evidence and evaluation recommendations and use these learning experiences to establish a routine in food movements. In other words, ECB inspires evidence-informed organizational learning with evaluators taking on critical guidance and capacity-building roles.

Evaluation capacity building alone, however, is not sufficient to meet the ever-changing human and organizational needs. Evaluators need an enhanced knowledge frame to address a dynamic world. Food system evaluators are critical when determining the value and worth of food initiatives hence providing valuable recommendations. Emerging critical concerns in food systems foci such as agroecology, food movements, and alternative food systems, power dynamics

in community food systems, dominant epistemologies, emancipatory constructs, social and systemic injustices, equity and equality concerns, feminism, among others become vital concerns for community work. To meet the rising need for evaluative critical thinking and pedagogy, there is a need to equip EFSEs with requisite learning methodologies, theories, and frameworks. This conceptual paper anchors on critical learning theories because of the rising need to nurture better evaluators, who will engage with contentious issues, confront oppression and dominance, and empower local communities to raise their voices and take charge of their wellbeing. Further, local EFSEs ought to take on leadership roles in developing evaluation knowledge and practice to help raise local and organizational capacities to carry out internal and contextual evaluations instead of importing international or non-local food system evaluators.

The point of intersection between transformative learning theories (TLTs) and ECB is the Social Justice Branch of evaluation under the Transformative Paradigm. Transformative learning refers to "the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, and emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8–9). This definition places the individual and their experiences at the center of transformative learning. Collectively, communities work together to design programs and policies that best address their concerns through social learning and sustainable competencies (Rodríguez Aboytes and Barth, 2020). Community actors raise self-awareness and reflexivity (Harder et al., 2021), and critically place evaluation capacity building at the center of collective impact in an "attempt to democratize and share knowledge generation processes" (Niewolny and Archibald, 2015, p. 3). Among other theories, the TLTs form the basis for this transformative approach to practicing food system evaluations. The purpose of this article is to elicit prompt action from local food movements and actors and VOPEs to collaboratively advocate for a mind shift and possibly establish institutional structures that support transformative evaluation while situating food initiatives at the center of political discourses and agenda-setting.

2.1.1. Why emerging food movement evaluators?

According to EvalYouth (2016), emerging evaluators are individuals under 35 years old, who have <5 years' experience, are recent university graduates, and are development professionals with recent (<5 years) interest in evaluation. The interest in emerging evaluators is deliberate because of the years of neglect, particularly of competent women evaluators. This article aspires to correct this error by expanding the space for

more inclusive and diverse evaluators to equitably contribute to developing robust food systems. Emerging evaluators are now positioned as a new generation of advocates (Hoosen and Bennani, 2020) who will fill a shallow field of skilled evaluators. The focus is to raise and build the capacity of a new crop of critical evaluators who have a sense of agency and who would stand in the face of dominant epistemologies and advocate for local solutions to local problems. Cultural constructs, diversity of culture and languages, and indigenous knowledge might help form a critical context for food movement evaluation.

Other than the local VOPEs, local food actors and food movements offer institutional and possibly financial support to implement evaluation capacity building. For inclusive and participatory processes, government and non-governmental actors also play critical roles in policy adoption and enforcement. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are encouraged to take part since they can champion evaluator education and are important contributors to new knowledge. Furthermore, HEIs provide critical masses of young people and hence platforms for change. Figure 1 below illustrates the social context and the relationships among different evaluation capacity actors in a food systems context. While Gullickson et al. (2019, p. 20) calls for a shift from "what we are doing… to what we should be doing to educate evaluators", the central theme for this paper is to make transformational values explicit in evaluator education and practice. Gullickson and Hannum (2019), for instance, caution against evaluation training that focuses only on research methodologies at the expense of value systems.

2.2. The transformative learning theoretical framework

Rodríguez Aboytes and Barth (2020) identified four key features of transformative learning that are all instrumental for critical evaluation: (1) Transformative learning has gained widespread acceptance in cross-cutting fields, providing scholarly relevance to evaluation. However, the impending challenge is whether evaluators, including community actors, social change agents, policymakers, and development agencies, understand the need for critical explorations in transformative learning. (2) Transformative learning has a broad spectrum of possible learning outcomes. These learning outcomes are further enhanced by Mertens and Wilson's (2018) transformative evaluation paradigm that focuses on social justice, among other critical constructs. (3) Transformative learning shares the attributes of both social and experiential learning. Since learning is contextual, based on Mezirow's (2000) definition, experiential learning and social action are vital for transformation. Contexts shape frames of reference which ultimately influence an individual's epistemic cognition.

(4) Systems thinking and emotional intelligence also influence transformative learning outcomes.

While touching on other transformative learning features, our focus is on individual evaluators' interactions that collectively—through social interactions in VOPEs—foster reflexivity and consensus-building and ultimately lead to social learning. Mezirow (2000) identified two key learning domains—instrumental and communicative learning—that influence learning processes, outcomes, and conditions. Rodríguez Aboytes and Barth (2020) similarly classify learning domains as how people learn, what they learn, and support systems for learning. Communicative learning involves a critical assessment of one's assumptions, which include intents and taken-for-granted frames of reference. These assumptions justify norms, mental constructs, beliefs, and hegemony.

It is important to note that the TLT is not the only, or most relevant, framework guiding evaluation capacity building and practice. The choice of this framework was largely informed by its focus on individual evaluators or food systems actors. The TLT coupled with Mertens and Wilson's (2018) Transformative evaluation paradigm creates an amalgamated framework for critical ECB called Transformative Evaluation Capacity Building (TECB) (Cook, 2020) and practice. Mertens and Wilson's Transformative evaluation paradigm improves the TLT model because it adds the social justice, collective action, agency, and inclusivity angles to TLT's frames of reference, disorienting dilemmas, reflexivity, and diverse perspectives. Transformative learning is context-based and includes critical reflection that challenges individuals' frames of reference (i.e., beliefs and assumptions).

2.3. Contextualizing the transformative learning theory for food system evaluators

Step 1: Understanding critical consciousness

Evaluators seeking to contextualize transformative learning should begin by critically self-reflecting and acknowledging their social blind spots. Evaluators, like other humans, find it difficult to let go of their existing frames of reference, which can impede objectivity and the quality of recommendations for change. The difficulty to let go of dominant frames, as Hooks (1994) asserts, results from individuals (i.e., evaluators, in our case) feeling insecure about exposing their vulnerabilities, guiding thoughts, and methodological paradigms. In the wake of social injustice, evaluators should be able to empower communities and help strengthen their quest to question existing frames and participate in solving the problems they face. Evaluators can help breed disorienting dilemmas that push individuals beyond the tipping point to start asking critical questions. Given the challenges vulnerable groups face, there is a common mindset

to accept any aid or assistance offered. This mindset must be challenged. Local communities also have the choice to determine what approaches work in their context and which parts of the food system works in their contexts.

Step 2: Deconstructing dominant frames of reference through emancipatory learning strategies

Emancipatory approaches to learning and knowledge generation accommodate alternative and diverse methodologies. Diversity, as used here, is in the view that dominant ontologies are not necessarily the best and only available foundation for appropriate methodologies. A common point of epistemic conflict is the use of indigenous evaluation epistemologies vs. the dominant Euro-American ones. Often, indigenous knowledge, for example in Africa, is considered inferior to Euro-American knowledge that dominates practice, theories, and education curricula (Shahjahan, 2006). As such, young and emerging food system evaluators must decolonize their epistemologies and adopt culturally appropriate and critical ontologies that in turn impact their evaluation knowledge, methodologies, and policy. Food system evaluation policy should encourage the use and recognition of indigenous epistemologies. Further, for inclusion in communities' political agendas as proposed by the multiple streams framework (discussed later), food systems' evaluation must address local needs. In the current world of knowledge commodification and capitalism, local community food systems and evaluators might face exploitation for capitalistic gains by a domineering secular neoliberal mentality. Further, knowledge dissemination is skewed and the media for sharing evaluation reports and subsequent utilization is limited. Shahjahan (2006, p. 231) asks; "How can we have a message when the medium is not accessible to many?" We propose that such gaps could be addressed by robust evaluation policy and agenda setting frameworks.

Step 3: Curbing hegemonic social norms in community food systems

Fighting these hegemonic social norms requires evaluators' boldness and deliberately stepping up for social justice through intentional emancipation of such social practices. Understandably, an advocative/activism approach to social learning might be unpopular, especially in traditionally hegemonic societies; for example, communities where women are considered subservient to men, and all farm/agricultural and household labor designated to them or where someone is first seen by the color of their skin or the ethnic group to which they belong. Such practices are so ingrained that anyone fighting these norms is considered degenerate and a betrayer. Unfortunately, such excessive power imbalance disproportionately affects underprivileged or underserved sections of society. One strategy proposed by Fenwick (2003) is to name and speak up against the mechanisms of cultural power and ultimate resistance. This is an important step toward critical consciousness and reflexivity that food system evaluators ought to embrace in policy and practice.

Step 4: What works in one context does not necessarily work in another: Deconstructing one-size-fits-all

Generalization/homogeneity is the assumption that what worked in one instance or situation works in another. Lave (1988) further categorizes generalization in terms of people's thoughts and actions based on findings of an experiment. The one-size fits all go against the natural social order because it disregards the social nuances in community food systems, such as social identity issues, poverty, discrimination, historical injustices, inequity, inequality, among other social ills. Homogeneity is a precipice for commodifying food systems for profiteering. Commodification provides avenues for control by external forces; those who make decisions on behalf of community members while ignoring their plights and underlying needs. Ubiquity limits options available for community members from which they can choose. Often, local food movements lose control of their programs as the power to make decisions gets transferred. As mentioned before, generalization as per Lave (1988), promotes consumerism tendencies which glorify acquisition, commodification, self-gratitude, classification of people, and ephemerality. The individualism/consumer culture then informs the direction food systems take, including restructuring their program delivery and activism to align to market-based/capitalistic tendencies. Market-based approaches draw their features from hegemonic and capitalist tendencies that place social programs in trajectories of revenue generation, profit making and efficiency.

Social program dynamics are relational rather than acquisitional (Niewolny and Wilson, 2009; Perez et al., 2010). Food systems encompass heterogeneous intra-cultural variations that complicate the exportation of things that worked elsewhere into different contexts. Some food system evaluators talk about dissemination of best practices and replication of programs in other contexts. Evaluation should facilitate community-engaged program conception, design, inception, implementation, monitoring, learning, and evaluating. Evaluators are encouraged to debunk a one-size-fits-all mentality. The evaluators are expected to lead a semantic shift from "best practices" to "tentative best judgment" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 11) which is an epistemic and ontological shift toward transformative learning.

Step 5: Understanding evaluators' diversity of perspectives

The transformative evaluation paradigm acknowledges diversity and homogeneity as key components to understanding social justice. This is a guiding principle in the policy making and agenda setting stage as it ensures various perspectives are taken into account through stakeholder participation (Liu et al., 2010). To best understand the relationship between different stakeholders' perspectives and how to facilitate a heterogeneous and transformative space while maintaining individual agency, critical consciousness is vital. Figure 2 below shows a diversity of perspectives and frameworks and the evaluator's role in enhancing capacity

FIGURE 2
The diversity of perspectives model for evaluation policy process.
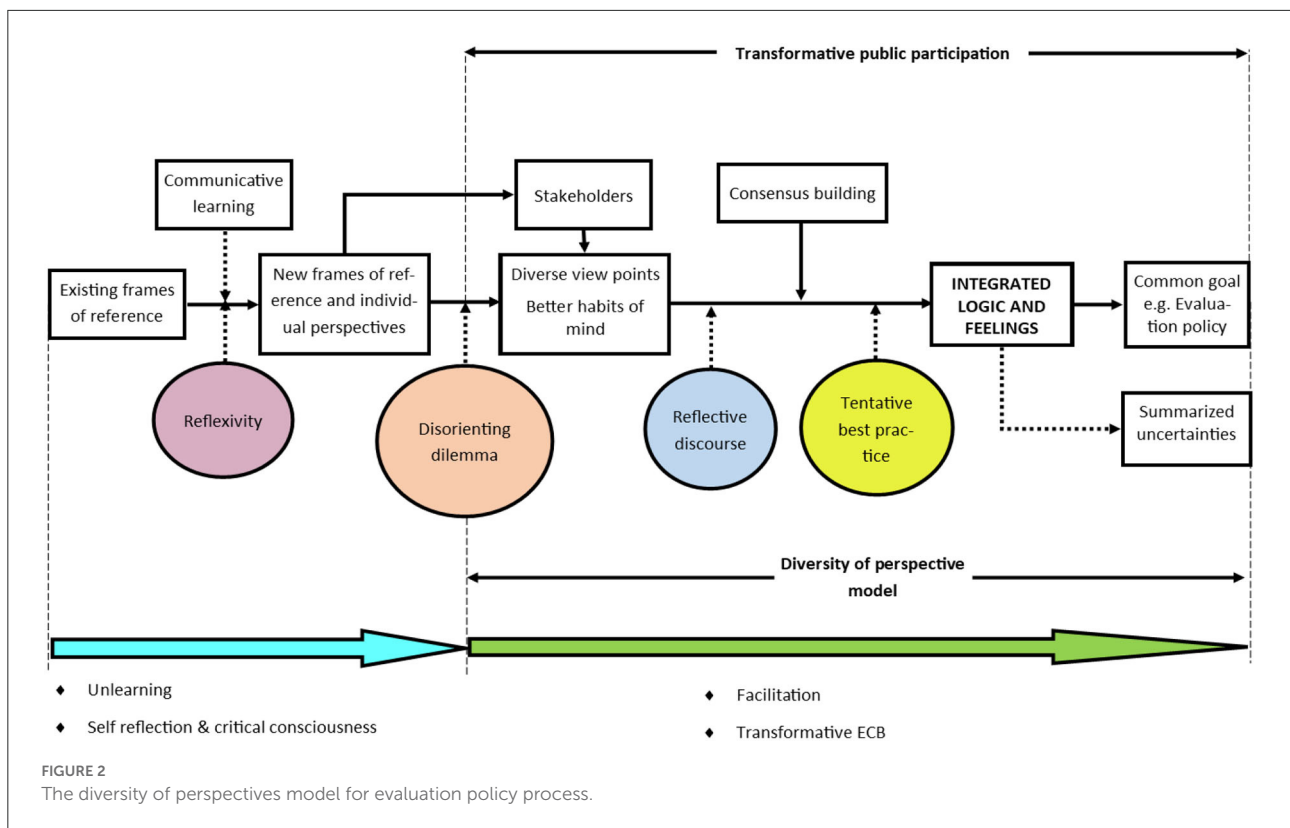
for public participation by promoting reflexivity and critical consciousness for evaluation. The framework also enhances the collection of diverse and individual evaluator and food actors' perspectives.

Step 6: Advocacy and social action

Collective action is critical in food systems because it enhances diversity, innovativeness, connections, sense of belonging, linkages, collective agency, and cultural sovereignty. Self-determination provides context for each of the collective action attributes discussed, based on the varying needs of minority groups. Diversity, for instance, provides an opportunity for food actors with varying backgrounds and cultures to come together to form a food movement. Food movements connect Evaluators, community members, and other social movements or cooperatives leading to cohesiveness, integration, and joint action. For instance, local VOPEs can come together to address social issues such as self-governance, collective economic gains, landlessness, political and economic autonomy, self-sufficiency through their own food production, raising consciousness and awareness among the people, designing strategies for liberation and empowerment, and disseminating evaluation findings.

Step 7: Evaluators taking a stand

To uphold the principles of power for all, common good, and equity, food system evaluators need critical approaches to policy and subsequently practice. Critical approaches to evaluation are developed through critical reflexivity, subsequent

transformation, and advocacy. Social action and advocacy call for debunking neutrality in the face of social injustices. This is not to say an evaluator should not be objective or fair in their work. Objectivity and fairness are integral to any evaluation practice. Geerts (2019) proposes a move from "playing safe" or trying to appease everyone by acting neutral when one should take a stand. With good intentions, taking a stand is not polarizing as some critics would argue. By taking a stand and not playing safe, Evaluators create tentacular learning environments where lived experiences, as opposed to traditional indicator and Euro-western-based constructs, are shared. Evaluators should encourage diverse perspectives and give room for program beneficiaries to voice their contradicting views and actively contribute to the evaluation outcomes. ECB should make it safe to debunk neutrality and let individuals see things for what they are, however uncomfortable such discussions could be. Engaging "troublesome knowledge" involves preparing to stay with trouble by accepting to handle divisive and problematic subjects. Branlat et al. (2022) identify five measures that can help engage troublesome knowledge and ultimately enhance tentacular thinking. Enhanced food system evaluation policy should invite critical perspectives (diverse frames of reference), demanding critical reflection (reflexivity), promoting participation and commitment (diffractive pedagogy), enhancing ownership (democratic movements), and destabilizing authoritarian management and evaluation methodologies (decolonization).

2.3.1. Critique

Transformative learning effectively occurs at the level of cognition. The conundrum, however, is to get food system evaluators to this tipping point to enable reflexivity, social action, and subsequent transformative evaluation policy. In other words, it is critical to determine and ascertain the cognitive or epistemic disruptions that push individuals to engage in critical assessment. Transformative learning ought to expand backward to an individual's state of mind before critical assessment and reveal the epistemic and ontological tensions before the critical assessment stage. Such deliberate moves will elucidate the meta and epistemic cognitive abilities of individuals by determining the limits and criteria for transformative learning. The process of being critically aware of one's own biases and assumptions is a pivotal point for transformative learning because this is when individuals become conscious of the context and implications of their actions. Therefore, critical reflection leads to critical consciousness and critical assessment.

Nevertheless, important questions as to what critical assessment entails still arise. We fear that transformative learning might fall victim to scientific buzzwords that water down the intended meaning of critical non-formal learning discourse. Action research and good dissemination could lead to a better understanding of transformative learning and subsequent buy-in. Transformative learning is the most researched (Taylor, 2007) theory of adult education, signifying its importance and relevance among educators. Additionally, the point of intersection between an individual's critical reflection and those of others is not well-expounded by the theory. This concern is pertinent because transformative learning ultimately leads to social learning and the overall good of the community. However, questions arise around how individuals' critical assessment joins those of others to generate overall social learning outcomes. Further, critics also argue that the transformative learning outcomes are difficult to measure (Rodríguez Aboytes and Barth, 2020). As mentioned in the theoretical framework section of this paper, one key shortfall of the TLT is its failure to focus on social injustices and its approach to an individual instead of a holistic approach to learning. This shortfall is addressed by the transformative evaluation paradigm that improves this model.

2.4. Reflexive evaluation and food system policy agenda setting

Transformative learning theory leads to reflexive evaluation (Hebinck et al., 2021), which alters existing frames of reference and subsequently diverse stakeholder views and can lead to consensus building opportunities (see Figure 2 above). Reflexive evaluation can present diverse policy alternatives and trade-offs based on reflective discourses and food system needs. We propose that these newly transformed emerging critical food system evaluators may be prepared and well-positioned to use the evaluation conclusions to effect policy changes in the food system domain. In particular, we propose the multiple streams framework for policy agenda-setting as a potentially fruitful framework through which they could do so. The multiple streams agenda-setting framework (discussed below) places reflexive evaluation outcomes in a political setting leading to their relevance in informing public policy.

2.4.1. Agenda setting

Food is important; without it, there is no life. Food insecurity and related ills such as high prices, inadequacy due to failing crops and prolonged droughts, and highly capitalized food distribution networks make it a wicked problem. Head (2008) identified complexity, uncertainty, and "divergence and fragmentation in viewpoints" (p. 103) as key wicked problem identifiers. Food systems are complex (Slocum, 2007; Godfray et al., 2010), highly uncertain (Patel, 2009; IPES-Food, 2020), and divergent (Slocum, 2007; Alkon and Agyeman, 2011); hence the need for meticulous policy agenda setting and inclusion in mainstream local political agenda. Local policy processes encompass five key stages, critical among them is agenda setting (Liu et al., 2010). According to Liu et al., agenda setting is the first and most critical stage for a policy process. Subsequent policymaking stages include "alternative policy considerations, policy formulation, decision making, and policy implementation" (Liu et al., 2010). Liu (p. 71) define agenda setting as the "process in which certain public problems are identified, recognized, and defined, and specific solutions or alternatives are generated, considered, and attached to these problems." Agenda setting helps identify and define social problems. A relevant framework for illustrating the agenda-setting process is the multiple streams framework.

Kingdon's multiple stream framework identifies key aspects of policy agenda-setting which are (1) the problem stream which attracts attention to the policy issues, (2) the policy alternative stream, and (3) the political stream. At the center of these multiple streams are policy actors or facilitators, who Kingdon (1995) classifies as government officials, experts and scientists (including evaluators), interest groups (food movements), the general public, mass media, and local political actors. Emerging studies place local/community policy actors at the center of policy agenda setting, bearing significant implications even for national level. Baumgartner and Jones (2009) as cited in Eissler et al. (2014) debunks the "simplistic understanding of states as laboratories of democracy". Instead, Eissler and others emphasize the bottom-up policy agenda setting approach, one where local communities and municipalities influence the state-level policy agenda which then impacts the national policy agenda construction process.

2.4.2. Working with stakeholders and public participation

Stakeholders, according to Bryson et al. (2011, p.1), are "individuals, groups, or organizations that can affect or are affected by an evaluation process and/or its findings". Bryson proposes four categories of stakeholders in evaluation processes: those who have decision authority over the program, those who have direct implementation responsibilities of the program, intended project beneficiaries (direct and indirect beneficiaries), and those disadvantaged by the program. Stakeholders may be organized into interest groups or act as individuals, depending on context and stakeholder group. Interactions between stakeholders can take many forms, ranging from relatively hands-off to deep collaboration.

In more deeply collaborative arrangements, evaluators can fill the critical role of facilitator. There is some concern that evaluators' professional contributions can be marginalized if stakeholders get too involved in and subsequently dominate evaluation processes. On the other hand, stakeholders typically have critically important local and situational knowledge that evaluators lack. The question is, where do we draw the line between stakeholder engagement and the weight of evaluators' professional opinions? These are questions subject to further inquiry.

Legitimate participation requires ongoing negotiations so that evaluation policies for food systems are accepted and adopted. Stakeholders influence movements' management and development foci, and can influence decision-making processes. Stakeholders can affect roles, relationships, policy focus, and policy effectiveness.

For food systems, proper analyses can help evaluators or concerned institutions to identify the range of stakeholders, their level of influence, and the roles they play. Proper stakeholder identification and analysis is the first step in mapping food systems. The identification process outlines the level of importance of the stakeholder, with the most important stakeholders occupying the central role, closest to the project (Bryson et al., 2011). However, caution should be taken not to wrongly assign importance/relevance based on premature assumptions. This can lead to wrongful conclusions where an actor occupies the wrong layer of the food actors' map. This analysis helps to streamline policy/program planning, implementation, and evaluation. Further, the food actors' analysis helps identify existing relationships between stakeholders and how these relationships can be leveraged to alleviate food problems or address policy gaps in communities. Stakeholder analysis helps determine the feasibility (technical and political) of community food initiatives and improves the chances of policies meeting their objectives.

Existing models of stakeholder engagement may be drawn from as food system evaluators design participatory processes. For example, the consensus-building approach (CBA) offers a structured model for facilitated stakeholder engagement based on the objective of reaching agreement that all parties can live with through deliberative dialogue (Susskind et al., 1999). The CBA and various other strategies for collaborative evaluation and governance are designed to bring together the range of perspectives and interests using discursive techniques to facilitate meaningful dialogue and ultimately generate better outcomes. Key to the success of these strategies is bringing together the full suite of stakeholders, some degree of interdependence between them, and facilitating "authentic dialogue" among them (Innes and Booher, 2018). Innovation and creativity are common features of these stakeholder engagement strategies, as groups work together to figure out what will work for all. Nevertheless, such co-creation can still be extremely challenging, not least due to lack of institutionalization; processes are typically *ad hoc* and often ill-equipped. Politicians and other powerful actors can also interfere with processes to unduly advance their personal interests. Other challenges include disparities in access to resources and capacity between stakeholders, the reluctance of parties to engage and failure to see the benefits and interdependencies, the potential to miss key stakeholders, and variability in the quality of representation provided by those at the table.

2.4.3. Policy implementation

Community food systems and movements' governance structures influence policy formulations, adoption, use, implementation, and enforcement. Governance is defined here as traditions, institutions, and processes that determine how power is exercised, how citizens are given a voice, and how decisions are made on issues of public or organizational concern. Food movements are about giving a voice to the people. Governance entails decision making processes, and answers the question of who gets involved in a decision or policy process. What is the existing framework or process for evidence collection, learning, and decision making? Further, it is crucial to determine the level and type of actors in a food system. Food actors determine successful implementation or success of policies in a system. Other important considerations if policy implementation is to be successful include questions such as who are the players in the policy process and how close to or distant are they from the center of activism? What influence do these players wield? For the success of a policy, the proponents of the policy must determine, in the governance structure, who wields what power and commands what level of influence. These are most likely the same people who influence those that make decisions. In most dispensations, it is these people with considerable power that determine the mode of governance in food systems and run the risk of using these privileges for their personal benefits at the expense of community members.

While in some food systems evaluation reports are genuinely used to improve services, in others, evaluation is meant to

identify what went wrong and create more control measures for evaluators (Molas-Gallart, 2012). Evaluation gives confidence to food actors that food initiatives are on course and that the intended objectives are being met. In some low-income countries, however, external/foreign evaluation professionals get imported to evaluate community food systems without much regard for existing community structures or cultures. Every food system exists in a context and culture which requires input from the locals and local evaluation experts who understand the cultural dynamics of the country. This is not to say that partnering with international professionals is less desired. In fact, we are advocates for cross-border partnerships and integrations. Our intention here is to promote local solutions for local problems and acknowledge local professionals. The focus is to cede power and let local actors take leadership and equally participate in knowledge generation. With local solutions for local problems, food movements should fully utilize evaluation recommendations that ultimately feed into the mainstream public policy agenda for greater good. We conclude by summarizing a handful of recommendations for practice and further conceptual and empirical research to extend these initial proposals further.

Recommendations

(a) Evaluation for policy making. We take cues from Bisoffi et al. (2021) who argue for science-based policy making. In this article, we argue for an evaluation-informed public policy agenda. We propose that enhanced food system evaluation should feed into local, national, regional, and ultimately international food policy agendas. Transformative evaluation that incorporates evaluators' reflexivity and their roles in advancing social justice can help unearth underlying social nuances in food systems for robust and comprehensive policy processes. These approaches save communities from abstract top-down policy designs devoid of community aspirations and needs.

(b) Design local solutions for local challenges. COVID-19 laid bare food systems vulnerabilities, challenging the over reliance on market-based approaches to food production, distribution, and consumption (IPES-Food, 2020; Bisoffi et al., 2021; Vittuari et al., 2021). Further, commercial and industrialized agricultural systems can negatively impact the environment, disrupting local ecosystems and contributing to the climatic challenges we now face (Whitfield et al., 2018). Local communities must take charge of their food systems and encourage local or own food production. We are in no way belittling trade or market-based solutions to food needs and we are in agreement with Bisoffi et al. (2021) who argue for the need for alternatives and shorter local and regional supply chains. We depart from assertions such as Olabisi et al. (2021) that argue for market-based solutions without

a single mention of "COVID-19" or even the word "disruptions" at a time when nearly everyone in the world faced uncertainties, including those who had enough money to buy yet shelves were empty. Vittuari et al. (2021) call for active citizen participation in food production and related community-based interventions for sustainable food systems. This clarion call transcends citizens and includes local professional and advocacy groups as well. For instance, the VOPEs can advocate for better program outcomes and improve their evaluation methodologies to include a stronger local voice in community programs. The ultimate goal is an inclusive public policy agenda designed to meet pertinent food access concerns.

(c) Build capacity for evaluation utilization and evaluative thinking. Evaluation policy helps to institutionalize evaluation utilization and evaluative thinking. These are strategies aimed at inculcating the desire to implement evaluation recommendations through policy and adjustments to improve program delivery and outcomes. Evaluative thinking on the other hand includes critical thinking, inquisitiveness, and deeper understanding of complex issues in the context of evaluation (Buckley et al., 2015). Evaluators must build food systems' capacities to utilize evaluation and develop the critical need for evaluation.

(d) Build local technical skills to evaluate and engage in policy advocacy. The recommendations by Fanzo et al. (2021) inviting enhanced rigor in evaluating food systems is welcome, although most evaluators could use further explanation of what this rigor might entail. This article attempts to address this by proposing enhanced evaluator's capacity to critically engage stakeholders and recommend actions for public policy intervention. HEIs, for instance, provide platforms for retooling local technical skills to evaluate and advocate for better food policies (Vittuari et al., 2021). The HEIs, through community-engaged higher education and action research, can impact the lives of emerging food system evaluators and ultimately improve local food systems' service delivery and program implementation.

Discussion and conclusions

The overall purpose of this article is to propose evaluation strategies to help establish viable, responsive, and just community food systems, which according to Hamm and Bellows (2003) entails different community actors coming together through multi-sectoral and layered approaches to solve food security concerns at the local level. Hamm further postulates that an organized community stands a better chance of mitigating challenging food justice and access concerns. In essence, there is a need to include all important stakeholders

in the food system. Multi-sectoral, and now multidisciplinary efforts, including evaluation and policy, is critical for a concerted and collaborative effort aimed at effective, responsive, accountable, and inclusive food systems.

For resilience, food system evaluators ought to advance collective activism against capitalistic tendencies and neoliberalism, which characterize global food systems. The global food system fragility confirmed the need to consider other alternatives to market-based solutions to food access and sovereignty. Market-based solutions neglect underprivileged and socially neglected groups while trusting that somehow the laws of supply and demand would put food on their tables. These institutional and systemic biases are solved through self-determination, community-based approaches, and collective action to address agricultural and food security challenges. Collective action is critical in food activism because it enhances diversity, innovativeness, connections, sense of belonging, linkages, collective agency, and cultural sovereignty. Diversity, for instance, provides an opportunity for evaluators with varying backgrounds and cultures to come together for a common cause. Further, divergent views enhance innovative solutions to wicked problems as addressed by social movements and sound policy structures. Food movements further lead to enhanced networks among educators, community members, and other social movements or cooperatives leading to cohesiveness, integration, and joint action. For instance, local social movements can come together to address social issues such as self-governance, collective economic gains, landlessness, political and economic autonomy, self-sufficiency through food production, raising consciousness and awareness among the people, designing strategies for liberation and empowerment, disseminating agricultural knowledge, and building institutions for agriculture.

Social movements are vital learning points, and they can be critical avenues for emancipation from dominant epistemologies. Our position is that the relationship between local and international food system initiatives should be mutually beneficial and respectful, with evaluation upholding social justice through focus on underserved communities and human dignity. For instance, food sovereignty (Niewolny et al., 2017) encompasses a democratic and participatory social agenda-setting process that results in social justice and the rights to make choices. There should be deliberate food system evaluation measures to bridge the social disparities while also addressing historical concerns (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011) and continually evaluate community food initiatives (Abi-Nader et al., 2009). The evaluation would lead to establishment of synergies in the food system and creating connections instead of groups working in silos. Giménez and Shattuck (2011) further emphasizes the need for social pressure as a means to effect policy change.

There is a need to unlearn dominant beliefs and practices in food systems. As mentioned, unlearning begins with critical self-reflection to resist dominance and give a voice to others community member and, educators through agency (Diduck et al., 2012). A review of one's purpose, beliefs, values, and meaning helps promote alternative, better, culturally appropriate views instead of those we assimilate or adopt. This paper transformatively outlines food system evaluation approaches and the local food system policy implications. Evaluators should be cognizant of individuals in the food system who might undermine hard-earned gains through labels and criticisms and ultimately derail food system collaboration, learning, and adjustment (CLA). The complexities and community food system dynamisms encompass cultures that still consider women and younger evaluators subservient to their male counterparts. These complexities call for critical food systems' evaluation approach, where different perspectives and viewpoints are considered when designing solutions. We acknowledge that it is not easy to stand against bigotry and dominance, save for when courage, strong value-systems, and empowerment (Geerts, 2019) are guiding principles to emerging evaluators.

Food system complexities include local political and policy agendas that now, in the wake of food system vulnerabilities, must feature public policy agenda for sustainability. We call for goodwill when designing and implementing food system evaluation and their implications for local political and public policy agenda. Emerging food system evaluators should read the room and rise above partisanship to lead an onslaught of change in the evaluation spaces while championing inclusion in public policy discourses. A clarion call for concurrence and unity among evaluators vide an enhanced public and evaluation policy framework for stronger and sustainable food systems.

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DO conceptualized and wrote the manuscript. KN, NN, TA, and TS contributed to food systems, evaluation, and policy frameworks. DO designed the theoretical framework in consultation with KN, TA, and TS. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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