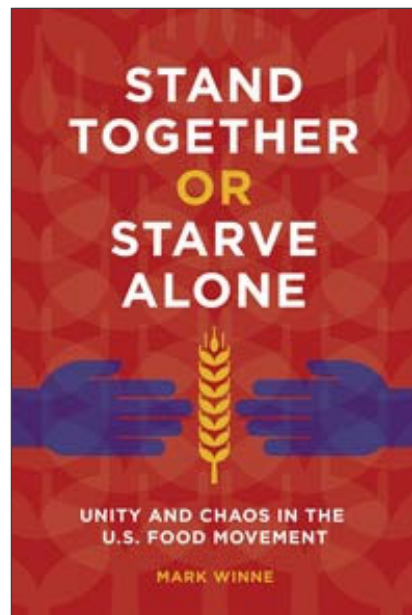


## Transformative change eludes the well-meaning but fractured food movement

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Review of *Stand Together or Starve Alone: Unity and Chaos in the U.S. Food Movement*, by Mark Winne. (2017). Published by Praeger. Available as hardcover and ebook; 178 pages. Publisher's website: <https://www.abc-clio.com/ABC-CLIOCorporate/product.aspx?pc=A5085C>



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Mark Winne may not have invented food policy councils, but he has probably done more than anyone in the U.S. to popularize them over his more than four decades of experience working in the food movement. In the last 15 years, Winne has traveled the country and the world, working with hundreds of organizations as a consultant and trainer. From this vantage point, in

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*Stand Together or Starve Alone*, he laments the failure of the food movement to achieve deep and lasting change, despite the growing momentum surrounding the food movement. Citing dismal numbers that show food insecurity only getting worse in the richest country in the world—while obesity has eclipsed tobacco use as the United States' most pressing public health issue—Winne asks why so little progress has been made in 50 years of the food revolution. His answer: both the food movement's inability to collaborate across sectors, and each sector's inability to look critically at its own assumptions about its role in the food system. He cites as an example the rise of the food bank as one of the most important nonprofit institutions in many communities, calling this a "dubious measure of success." Charity feeding programs have not

turned the ship around with regard to hunger or obesity in the U.S., partly, Winne argues, because they are working, like other sectors, without a “shared understanding of the causes of our food problems.”

Winne looks at the challenges that come with growth as organizations, information, and communications have proliferated in each of the system’s “submovements” (e.g. anti-hunger, local food, food education, food justice, farm-to-school). For instance, in 2005, he finds that there were 268 books published on food issues; ten years later the number of books on the subject ballooned to 1,672. And within this category of food issues, books on the topic of hunger also increased, from 148 in 2005 to 979 in 2015. Winne includes these statistics to illustrate not only information overload but also the increasing specialization within the food movement. At the same time, however, it has become much more difficult for a single book to have the kind of widespread impact that books like *Diet for a Small Planet* or *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* did when they were published.

Competition over scarce funding for food systems work causes much of the unwillingness to collaborate across sectors. Tension and disunity over the ethics of taking money from sources like Walmart add to these divisions because these sources are seen as contributors to the problems that food systems reformers are working to fix, such as a lack of living wages. Winne writes vividly and candidly about his regrets over accepting a grant from cigarette maker Philip Morris while running the Hartford Food System, reflecting that “as a person who spoke often and loudly about the need to promote healthy eating and lifestyles for everyone, especially the poor, it was more than a bit ironic that I was now guzzling the Devil’s booze and taking his bucks” (p. 58).

To this issue, he places blame at the feet of philanthropic funders, who often exacerbate the competition by all rushing to fund the latest issue (school gardens! food waste! underestimating the true cost of doing the work they want to fund, or requiring short-term deliverables that distract organizations from working on longer-term solutions. Federal funding can be a powerful force for food systems change, he says, but the effort

required to pass and appropriate food systems funding has also resulted in siloed programs and “program protectionism” that discourages, rather than promotes, connecting different sectors of the food system.

The concept of “community food security” offers a strong framework for moving past obstacles to coordination, cooperation, and collaboration that Winne has described. He delves into the theory and strategies of community food security, which emerged in the 1990s and combines approaches to ending hunger and food insecurity with a call for building local and regional food systems, and connects those to public health outcomes, healthy food supply chains, and other operational aspects of the food system. Community food security also prioritizes sustainability, social justice, and democratic decision-making.

While he looks at several current examples of community food security in action, the most compelling part of this chapter—and, to me, the whole book—is his insider account of the demise of the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC), which was the leading forum for organizations working in this ostensibly collaborative space from 1996 to 2012, and where Winne was a part-time staffer in 2012. As a participant in a couple of CFSC events and a subscriber to its very active listservs, I was among those in the food systems world shocked by the news in August 2012 that the CFSC was disbanding immediately and without explanation. Until I read *Stand Together*, I still had never seen an answer to the question Winne poses, “Why had an organization that had garnered so much support, attracted so many followers, and envisioned a profoundly new way of thinking about the nation’s food and farm problems suddenly closed up shop?” (p. 101).

In Winne’s telling, “the elephant in CFSC’s room was always race,” in addition to personality and ego clashes, and the perennial resource conflicts. There may be more to this saga than Winne has committed to the page, but what he does tell us is instructive for the mounting number of organizations around the country attempting to work collaboratively, share leadership and democratic decision-making, and create a more equitable distribution of power within the food systems

movement. He also provides an interesting contrast later in the book when he presents the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition as an example of an effective organization, capable of bringing together diverse interests under a big tent in ways that the CFSC could not. I found the tips and techniques Winne offers near the end of the book particularly valuable, in which he proposes ways to improve group dynamics and facilitate the successful performance of coalitions. These tips, like this book overall, provide a useful resource to anyone working on food policy councils, community food planning and security, or any coalition working across sectors and looking to have an impact greater than the individual members could have on their own.

However, by the conclusion of the book, it feels like race is *still* the elephant in the room of food systems collaboration. Winne quotes long-time activist Hank Herrera on the failure of leading organizations to include people of color in leadership or to grapple with structural racism, despite the rise of food systems organizations being led by African Americans such as Malik Yakini. Yet Winne then misses the opportunity to highlight the

work of Yakini's Detroit Black Community Food Security Network or others like it. He cites unsuccessful attempts to bring organizations led by people of color into existing coalitions, as well as the seeds of the CFSC's demise sown by the exit of several organizations led by people of color. Efforts led by and serving farmers of color, immigrant farmworkers and consumers, food service workers, and other marginalized communities have become a submovement of their own, one that arguably represents the real opportunity to create systemic change. But this sector is increasingly going its own way, rejecting what they see as too-little and too-late offers for "seats at the tables" where they have traditionally been excluded and not valued.

For the most part, the food systems activists Winne exhorts to stand together are not the ones who are going to starve if they don't, except to the extent that they may lose the funding that pays for their particular role in the system. Until the movement is being steered by people whose real-world food issues might actually be solved by unified collective action, the promise of systemic change may continue to elude us. 