

# Food-Forward Assessment Tool



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I. Introduction	65
II. Assessment Tool	70
→ Step 1: Proposal Definition	73
→ Step 2: Equity Assessment	77
• People	78
• Place	81
• Process	85
• Power	87
III. Stakeholder & Community Engagement	89
IV. Impact & Knowledge Sharing	93

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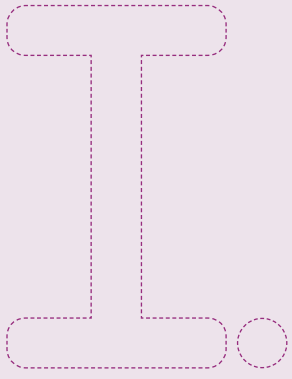
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# Introduction

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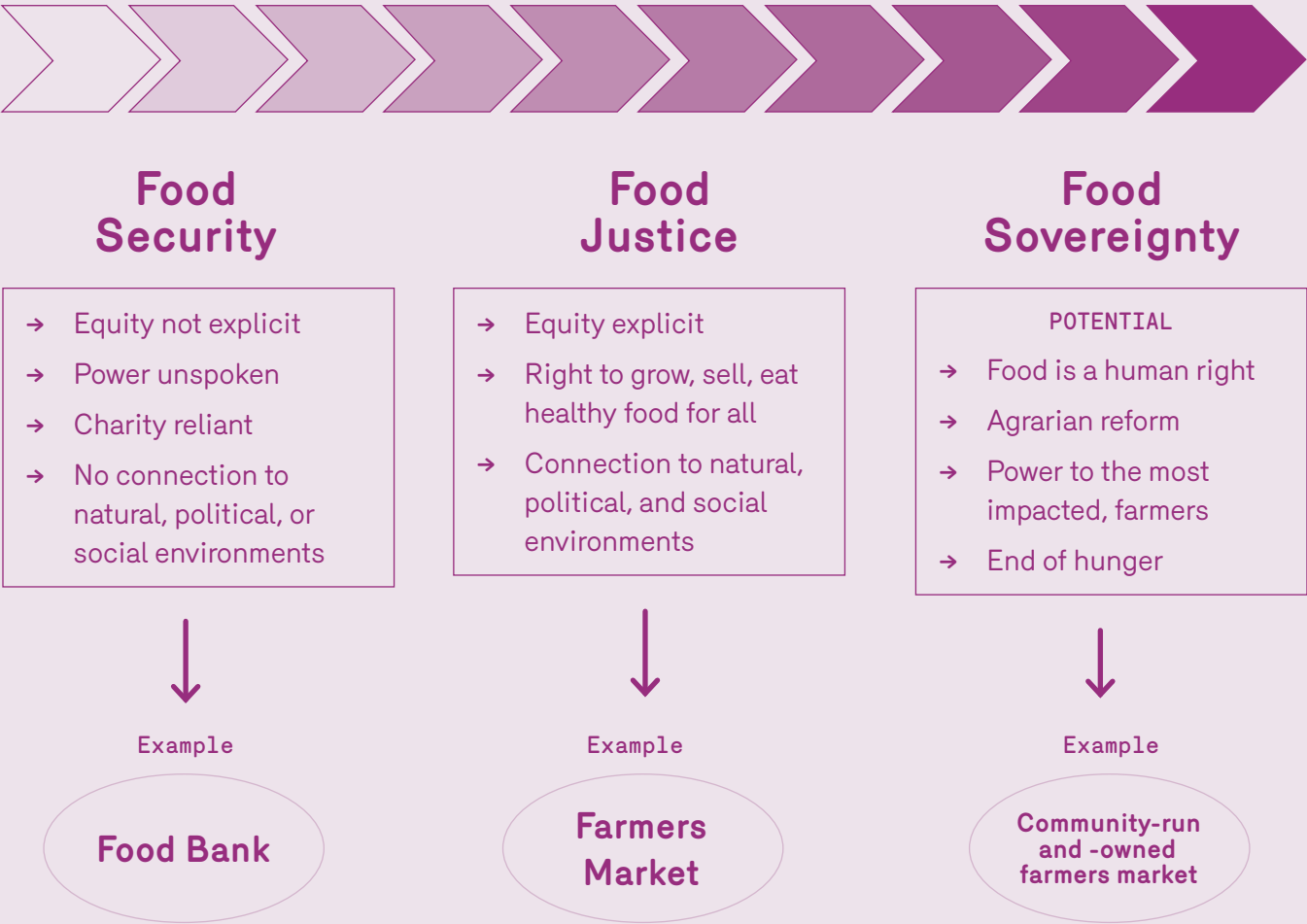
At the neighborhood scale, capital investments can expand food access, address systemic challenges in the food system, and support thriving communities throughout the five boroughs. This guide introduces an Assessment Tool to strengthen the equity impact of proposed investments in the food system through a series of holistic assessment questions. The tool can help government leaders integrate a more systemic approach into their projects and support community leaders in strengthening proposals for their own neighborhood. We envision users working through the assessment questions iteratively to develop proposals.

Just as important as the Assessment Tool itself is how proposal leaders engage community members in shaping a proposal, evaluate impact, and share lessons learned to build collective knowledge. This guide offers strategies on all three areas. Proposal leaders can cultivate community stewardship of proposed investments by convening Food Equity Advisors to ground the proposal in community needs. Proposal leaders can ensure that evaluation goes beyond common food security and capital planning metrics to track progress towards systemic change. Engaged city agencies and partners can commit to building shared knowledge about successes and challenges in projects that advance food equity.

Historically, a focus on food security has led to an overemphasis of emergency food programming, which addresses the immediate need for food rather than the systemic issues that lead to chronic food insecurity. This tool works to move the needle from a food security focus to one centered on food sovereignty, which aims to empower food producers, distributors, and consumers to define their own food system. Moving from a food security model to a food sovereignty model exists on a spectrum—not every project or program can fully embody food sovereignty, but this tool provides proposal leaders resources to work towards greater community decision-making power and ownership of the food system.

With this tool in hand, city leaders across the public, private and nonprofit sectors can direct action towards lasting, systematic change in New York City’s food system.

**SPECTRUM OF THE FOOD SYSTEM IN NEW YORK CITY**



This graphic is adapted from the work of Qiana Mickie, QJM Multiprise.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The Assessment Tool at the center of this guide examines how proposed investments can build equity in the food system. For the purposes of this project, we have developed 10 guiding principles that offer a working definition of food equity. Proposals should:

- Be grounded in a community's lived experience through engagement with local advocates and relevant city & state stakeholders
- Prioritize long-term systemic change in the food system beyond emergency or charity-based responses
- Examine and work to counteract the policies, frameworks, and investments that have led to and maintain systemic inequity in the food system
- Expand access to healthy, fresh and culturally-appropriate food
- Empower and amplify the voices of BIPOC communities and BIPOC-led food initiatives
- Advance economic democracy and non-extractive business models such as worker-owned cooperatives
- Dismantle barriers to employment opportunities based on language, race, education, citizenship status, and other factors
- Support local food production
- Support regional food production by connecting upstate producers and downstate consumers through value chain coordination
- Adapt food infrastructure to address increasing climate vulnerability and reduce the food system's negative environmental impacts, particularly in environmental justice neighborhoods

## WHAT IS THIS TOOL?

The Food Equity Assessment Tool is a diagnostic tool designed to be accessible to multiple audiences, so that community leaders can use it to strengthen proposals and government agencies can use it to assess the merits of incoming proposals. The Assessment Tool's framework of PEOPLE, PLACE, PROCESS, and POWER is adapted from the [Food System Racial Equity Tool](#) developed by Lexa Dundore at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

The tool takes a qualitative approach through a series of interrogating questions, rather than a quantitative "scoring" methodology. The tool is focused on capital investments, but is flexible enough to adapt to other programmatic or policy proposals. It should be used to complement existing processes for capital planning.

The Assessment Tool aims to achieve the following outcomes:

**Identify the strengths and weaknesses of a proposal from a food equity perspective**

**Uncover unintended impacts or hidden synergies between elements of a proposal**

**Identify opportunities for the proposal to have a broader positive impact on local communities**

**Identify opportunities for partnerships between the project leader, government, and the community**

This tool is not a means to measure food insecurity, nor does it propose a one-size-fits-all approach to food injustice. It will not quantitatively compare the incoming proposal to other proposals. Rather, this tool provides a robust and flexible framework to understand a proposal's potential role in the larger food system.

### Racial Equity Tools

This tool builds on numerous existing resources to foreground racial equity in planning and food systems work, including:

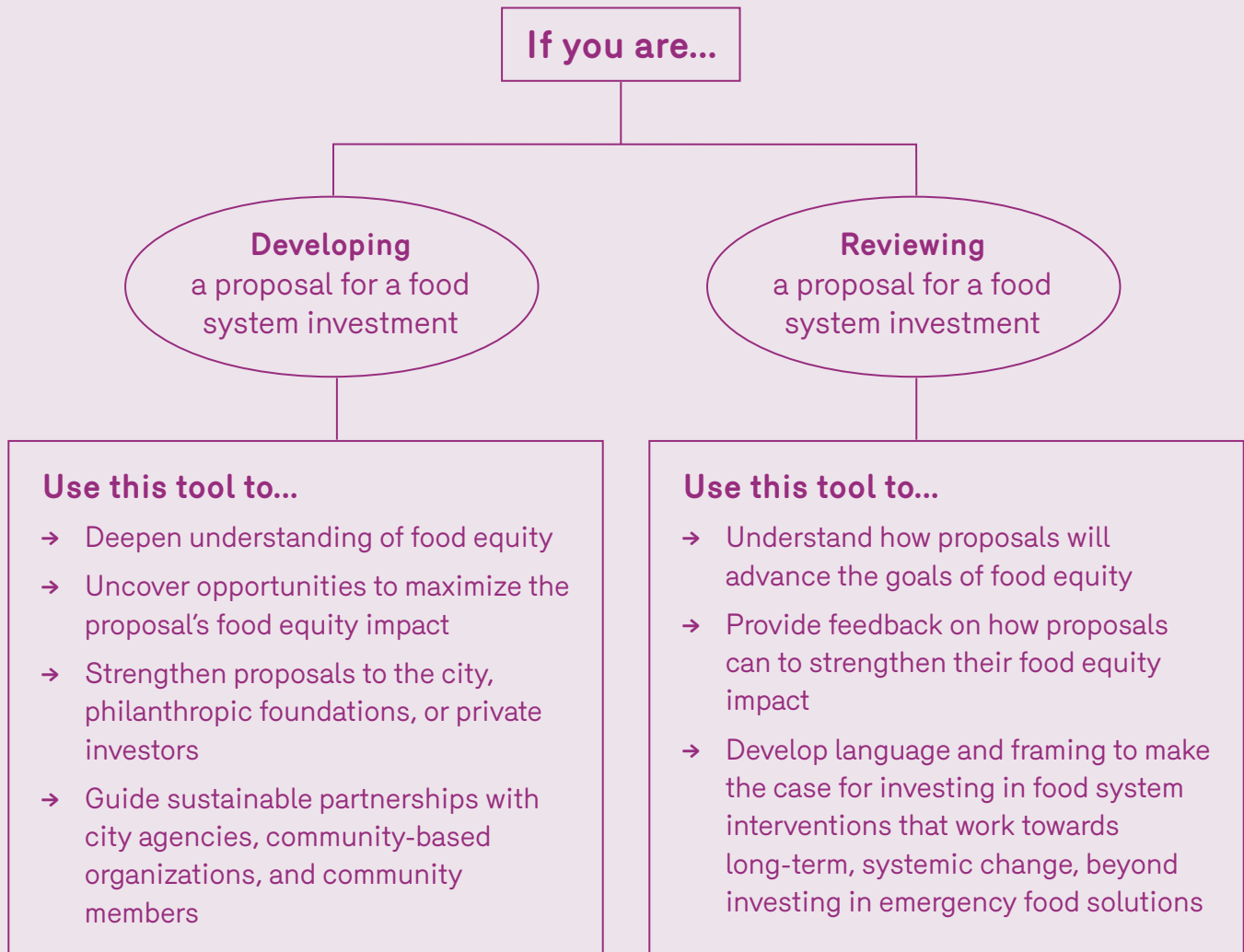
- [Racial Equity Toolkit](#), published by Government Alliance on Race and Equity
- [Racial Equity Tools for Food Systems Planning](#), Lexa Dundore
- [Equitable Development Data Explorer](#), New York City Department of City Planning

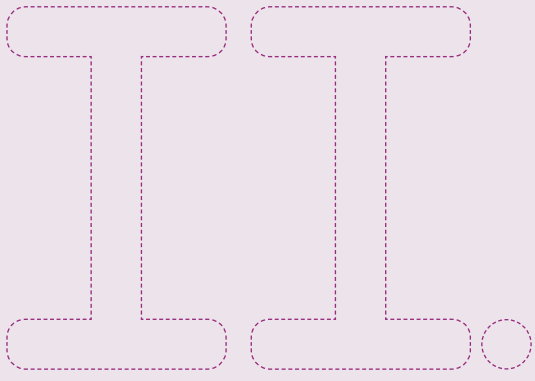
## WHO SHOULD USE THIS TOOL?

The Assessment Tool is designed to be accessible to many users, including city & state government, City Council, community organizations, local advocates and community members, and philanthropic organizations.

## HOW WE DEVELOPED THIS TOOL

This tool draws on the Forefront Fellows' research and field observations, as well as their experience working in design, government and food equity. The questions included in the Assessment Tool are not intended to be exhaustive, but serve as a starting point for interrogating food equity impact. We hope this tool will help spark conversations about community-driven food systems and place-based investments in food equity.





# Assessment Tool



## HOW TO USE THIS TOOL

This tool is designed to evaluate and strengthen proposals for community-based food infrastructure on the basis of their potential for advancing food equity. This tool **does not** replace or encompass traditional capital planning tools; rather, it should be used to complement existing processes. The tool is most powerful when used early on in proposal development, while there is flexibility to meaningfully shape the proposal.

The tool is a two-step process, which may be used iteratively to refine a proposal. If you are using this tool to evaluate or strengthen an existing proposal, you may start with Step 2.

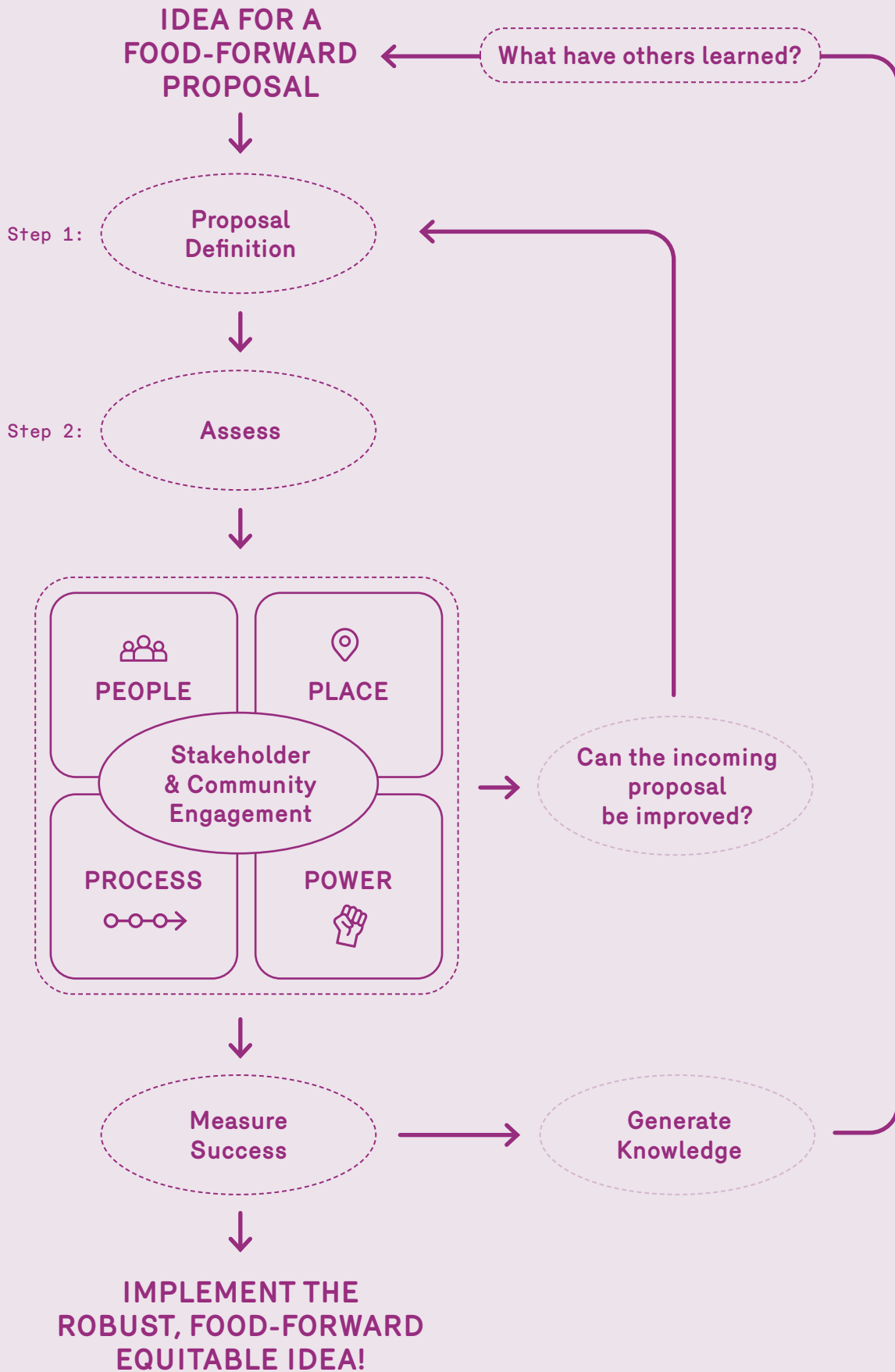
### → STEP 1: PROPOSAL DEFINITION

Establish a baseline plan and scope for the proposal, and identify what support is needed from City agencies or other funding or regulatory entities. This acts as a preparatory step to gather all information you may need for the following step.

### → STEP 2: EQUITY ASSESSMENT

Interrogate how this proposal can strengthen equity in the food system. Answer the questions based on the proposal definition and existing knowledge in as much detail as possible. These questions are not intended to be exhaustive, but provide a robust starting point for examining a proposal's food equity impact. Use these answers to communicate the food equity impact of the proposal to partners, funders, and community members. If the questions uncover untapped opportunities or proposal weaknesses, identify strategies to improve the proposal and reassess.

The framework of PEOPLE, PLACE, PROCESS, and POWER is adapted from the [Food System Racial Equity Tool](#) developed by Lexa Dundore at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.



# → STEP 1: PROPOSAL DEFINITION

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Use the following questions to define a basic project scope, then articulate the support required from city agencies or other funding or regulatory entities. This information will provide a baseline proposal to assess and strengthen using the questions in Step 2.

## PROPOSAL ELEMENTS

1. Is this proposal a capital project, pilot, policy, or program?

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2. What does this proposal aim to achieve? How does the proposal align with the city's stated goals for strengthening the food system in Food Forward NYC?

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3. What need in the food system does this serve? Who are the intended consumers/users?

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4. What phase(s) of the food supply chain is this proposal focused on?

- Production
  - Processing/Manufacturing
  - Distribution
  - Transportation
  - Retail
  - Consumption
  - Post-consumption
- 

5. Where is the proposal geographically located?

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6. Who is the proposal applicant?

- Will this entity also operate the space, or is an operating partner involved?
- 

7. Does the applicant own the proposed site?

- If not, what entity (private, public, other) owns the land? Is the land leased? If so, how long is the lease?

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8. What are the required physical plant and structural specifications?

- Overall square footage and use breakdown estimate
- Loading zone and location (e.g. on-site, on-street, or off-site)
- Current zoning designation
- Any zoning changes required to advance the proposal

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9. How much does the proposal cost? What financing sources will cover these costs (ie. city/state/federal funds, City Council discretionary funds, grants, tax incentives, philanthropic funds)? Define both:

- Capital costs & funding sources
- Operational costs & funding sources

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10. How realistic are these cost and financing estimates? What factors may cause cost overruns?

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11. What is the current phase of the project? What is the project schedule for bringing the proposal through the following milestones?

- Planning & Feasibility
- Schematic Design
- Completion of Design
- Construction

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12. How realistic is the timeline? What factors may cause delays?

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13. What other entities exist in the area that have similar goals or objectives to this proposal? How does this proposal seek to build on or differentiate from that work?

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14. Have others submitted similar proposals for this area? What were the outcomes of their process?

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15. Are there relevant precedents from New York City or other cities for this proposal?

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## PROPOSAL SUPPORT

16. Does the applicant require assistance in completing an M/WBE certification?

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17. What kinds of technical assistance are needed from city partners, other applicants, qualified consultants or knowledge-sharing networks to undertake capital project construction?

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18. Does the proposal fall within as-of-right development? If land use changes are required, what support does the applicant need?

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19. Which city or state agencies regulate operations of this project? What permits, etc. do they require?

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20. What resources or technical assistance are needed from city partners, other applicants, qualified consultants or knowledge-sharing networks to undertake long-term operations?

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21. What support is needed to advocate for regulatory or policy changes that would enable the proposal applicant to achieve or expand their mission?

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22. What knowledge sharing networks or platforms can city partners leverage to share lessons learned from this project?

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# → STEP 2: EQUITY ASSESSMENT

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This series of interrogating questions focuses on four thematic areas — PEOPLE, PLACE, PROCESS, and POWER — to examine how the incoming proposal can advance food equity. The goal of these questions is to uncover opportunities to strengthen the proposal’s food equity impact. These questions can be used iteratively to strengthen the proposal defined in Step 1.

# PEOPLE

## A. Applicant Qualifications

Desired Outcome: Establish applicant qualifications based on mission, experience, and capacity

1. Why is this applicant/organization the best suited to carry the project forward?

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2. Is the proposal applicant from a marginalized community in terms of race or ethnicity, religion or culture, gender identity, and/or age? Is the applicant designated as an M/WBE organization (either registered or qualified to apply)?

- If not, is there a similar proposal to consider from a historically underrepresented group in the food system?
  - If not, is there another applicant who is from a historically underrepresented group that could be considered as a partner for this proposal?
- 

3. Does the proposal applicant have a strong track record of working within the food system? Does the applicant have experience working with community-based food sovereignty efforts?

- If not, who are the partners or past applicants that could be paired with this applicant for knowledge sharing?
- 

4. Does the proposal applicant have the right expertise to take on this capital project?

- If not, what public or private entities could partner to provide capital planning expertise?
- What processes are in place to identify capital project technical assistance needs?



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5. Does the proposal applicant have the capacity to maintain and operate the proposed project?

- If not, are there local organizations or property managers who could partner on operations and maintenance?

## B. Impacted Groups

Desired Outcome: Address positively and negatively impacted groups

1. Who does this proposal positively affect? Who will gain the most from this proposal?

- How are they positively affected?
- Does this align with stated community needs?

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2. Who is negatively impacted? Who may lose the most from this proposal?

- How are they negatively impacted?
- What is being done to mitigate the negative impact this will have?

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3. How does this proposal uplift the most vulnerable populations, including those who receive public assistance and those who may not be eligible for such programs (e.g. immigrants, seniors, children, etc.)?

## C. Strategic Partnerships

Desired Outcome: Leverage strategic local, regional, and/or national partnerships

1. Are other local organizations or leaders doing work similar to this proposal?

- If so, how will the applicant collaborate with those organizations?

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2. What local, regional, or national partners will be involved in ongoing operations and programming? Some examples to consider include:

- Community advocacy groups
- Worker-owned cooperatives
- Incubation programs
- Workforce development programs
- Knowledge-sharing networks
- Technical assistance providers

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3. What support does this proposal have among local elected officials?

## D. Stakeholder & Community Engagement

Desired Outcome: Ensure robust stakeholder and community engagement

1. How has the proposal leader engaged key stakeholders, community-based organizations, and impacted community members in shaping the proposal?

- Who has been engaged?
- What format has that engagement taken?

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2. Is the engagement structured in a way to elevate underrepresented voices, those who will be positively and adversely affected, and voices that have not been heard from in the past?

- Who is missing in the process and how can they be engaged?

Note: See “Stakeholder & Community Engagement” section below for further guidance on engagement strategies.

# PLACE

## A. Neighborhood Conditions & History

Desired Outcome: Respond directly to unique neighborhood conditions & history

1. What is the history of food and racial equity in this community?  
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2. What is the current neighborhood food environment? (See [Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center Neighborhood Food Resource Guides](#) and [Data2Go NYC dashboard](#) as starting points.)  
-----
3. What is the socioeconomic context of the neighborhood?
  - Rate of food insecurity
  - Poverty rate
  - Population demographics by race, age, gender, immigration status
  - Environmental Justice Area designation-----
4. Are there recent zoning or land use processes that impact the built environment and community (e.g. rezonings, other planning processes, major developments)? How does the proposal take these processes into account?  
-----
5. How does the proposal build off of previous visioning or assessment efforts (e.g. neighborhood plans, assessments, [Community Board Needs statements](#), [NYC DOHMH Community Healthy Profiles](#))?  
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## B. Site Selection & Tenure

Desired Outcome: Ensure optimal site selection and long-term stability

1. Does the proposal include a clear rationale for upgrading existing spaces versus building new facilities?
    - Are there other existing spaces (underutilized buildings, vacancies, or open space) that could be viable for the stated purpose?
- 
2. Does the selected site provide suitable tenure security?
    - If leasing, does the lease structure meet operational needs? Does a long-term lease allow the proposed space tenure security, or does the space benefit from a flexible, shorter term lease?

## C. Food System Connections

Desired Outcome: Bolster local connections across the food system

1. Does the proposal address opportunities to co-locate different programmatic uses to support connections across the food system (e.g. manufacturing space, kitchen incubator space, retail, cold storage, compost, office space)?

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2. How does the proposal integrate into existing local, citywide, or regional assets to strengthen the local food system? Is there an opportunity to create new connections with and among existing infrastructure? For example:

- Bodegas
- Supermarkets
- Farmers' markets
- Pantries or soup kitchens
- Community gardens
- Urban farms
- Regional farms
- Distribution hubs
- Commercial kitchens
- Processing facilities
- Restaurants & cafes
- Street vendors
- Compost facilities
- Nonprofit organizations
- Senior centers
- Houses of worship
- School
- Vacant lots
- Other

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3. How does the site enable zero or low-emissions transportation (e.g. charging stations for electric trucks, cargo bike access, rail access)?

## D. Accessibility

Desired Outcome: Promote mobility and accessibility

1. In terms of mobility, how accessible is the site for workers and visitors?

- Is the site accessible by foot, on bike, by car, and by transit?

2. What is the quality of the experience getting from key neighborhood destinations to this location?

- e.g. Are there striped crosswalks? Is it possible to walk with a stroller? Does signal timing favor cars or people? Are the bike lanes protected? Would it be feasible to walk with a bag of groceries from this location to the nearest transit hub?

## E. Resiliency & Sustainability

Desired Outcome: Invest in climate resiliency and sustainability

1. Does the proposal include a sustainability and resiliency strategy for the site? For its role in addressing neighborhood-wide climate risks?

2. Does the project meet or exceed the City's goals for net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 (e.g. relying on renewable energy sources, minimizing carbon footprint, solar panels)?

3. Does this proposal include components to mitigate urban urban heat island effect, such as green infrastructure?

4. Is this site vulnerable to coastal, riverine, or inland flooding? If so, does the proposal include elements to mitigate flooding impacts?

# PROCESS

## A. Sustainable Funding

Desired Outcome: Ensure sustainable financing for capital & operational costs

1. How often will this investment be re-evaluated? How can the City ensure that this continues to be a good long-term investment?

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2. What is the timeline of the investment?

Is the applicant able to set up a sustainable funding source?

If this is a one time funding opportunity, what grants or funding opportunities might this applicant consider for a sustainable funding source?

## B. Timeline

Desired Outcome: Establish opportune timeline with community accountability

1. Is this the right time for this proposal, or should other investments be made before this proposal advances?

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2. What mechanisms are there for internal transparency and accountability to the project timeline among the project team & city agencies?

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3. What mechanisms are there for external transparency in project performance during capital planning and operations?

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4. What mechanisms are there for communicating internal and external progress reports throughout the project?

## C. Governance

Desired Outcome: Build equitable governance

1. Who are the decision makers in this proposal?  
.....
2. Who are the key advisors on the project?  
.....
3. Who are the key partners on the project?  
.....
4. Who will manage the project once it is implemented?

Note: Governance considerations should be informed by the questions answered in the PEOPLE section

## D. Barriers to Implementation

Desired Outcome: Plan for barriers to implementation

1. What are the barriers to implementation?

<input type="radio"/> Physical barriers	<input type="radio"/> Operational expertise
<input type="radio"/> Business plan viability	<input type="radio"/> Language barriers
<input type="radio"/> Access to finance & funding	<input type="radio"/> Community engagement
<input type="radio"/> Legal constraints	<input type="radio"/> Lack of buy-in
<input type="radio"/> Regulatory constraints	<input type="radio"/> No champions
<input type="radio"/> Technical expertise	<input type="radio"/> Other .....

  
.....
2. What flexibility is needed to implement the proposal? Are there regulatory barriers that could be lowered to allow for this proposal to grow in a sustainable way?



# POWER

## A. Redistribution of Power

Desired Outcome: Empower local residents to move toward food sovereignty

1. How is this proposal moving away from emergency food solutions and towards long-term system change?

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2. How does this proposal meet culturally appropriate food needs by promoting access to food that is desired within the local context and meets relevant dietary needs (e.g. kosher, halal)?

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3. How is the proposal shifting power dynamics and elevating underrepresented voices?

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4. How will the proposed operations be accessible to community members through language access, plain language and graphic communications, and other strategies?

## B. Wealth Generation

Desired Outcome: Generate wealth in the local economy

1. How is this proposal generating and maintaining wealth within the neighborhood?
  - Is this proposal creating jobs with livable wages?
  - Does this project support M/WBEs?

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2. Is there an opportunity for community ownership of this resource, such as through:

- Worker-owned cooperatives?
  - Member-owned cooperatives?
  - Community land trust?
- 

3. Is there an opportunity for professional development or mentorship for community members?

## C. Knowledge-Sharing

Desired Outcome: Build local capacity through knowledge sharing

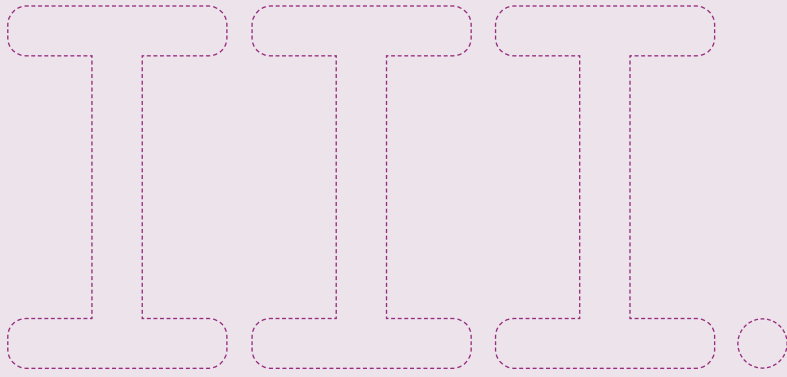
1. How will the project be assessed for feasibility for scaling or replication?

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2. Who will capture lessons learned or insights from this proposal process?

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3. How can this knowledge be shared out to inform future proposals and other efforts in the food system?



# Stakeholder & Community Engagement

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Meaningful community engagement is necessary to answer the questions posed in this tool. Leaders using this tool should develop a multi-pronged engagement strategy best suited to the particular proposal and community context.

Place-based proposals will benefit from high-level engagement with key stakeholders as well as deep, hyperlocal engagement with community members who bring relevant lived experience. Stakeholder and community engagement should ideally span proposal ideation, definition, and implementation to provide iterative input and guidance.

For high-level stakeholder engagement, proposal leaders should define a clear strategy to convene a wide array of local decision-makers, representing groups such as: places of worship, nonprofit organizations, food markets, major hospitals, educational institutions, local community groups that are advancing racial equity, local community groups that are tackling hunger prevention efforts, food business entrepreneurs, restaurant owners, and urban gardeners. Stakeholder engagement will help proposals achieve longer-term, system-wide change.

## Stakeholder Engagement Resources

- [City Region Food System Toolkit](#)
- [Local Food, Local Places Toolkit](#)
- [Camden Neighbourhood Assembly Toolkit](#)
- [NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene Community Engagement Framework](#)

For hyperlocal engagement with impacted community members, Food Equity Advisors provide a powerful model to complement this tool and ensure the proposal meets community needs. Food Equity Advisors are a group of people who can ground a place-based proposal in the lived experience of the community. This model has been used in [Baltimore](#) and [Salt Lake City](#) to create equitable food systems, and can be adapted to suit community-based food infrastructure projects in New York City.

## ENGAGEMENT SPECTRUM

Who are you centering in your engagement? Who has power?



# FOOD EQUITY ADVISORS

Food Equity Advisors can offer diverse perspectives on how the proposal relates to community needs, develop a localized understanding of food equity, help frame what the future of food equity looks like in this community, and advise on how the proposal can advance that vision. This unique approach will bolster a proposal's long-term impact and sustainability, but relies on a proposal leader's openness to community ideas.

## WHO

The Food Equity Advisors group should be made up of 5-10 people from a diverse range of perspectives who can speak to the lived experience of accessing fresh food in the community in question. The selection process should prioritize voices that have not been heard from in the past. Food Equity Advisors should be compensated for their participation, to encourage active engagement and recruit from a wider pool of participants beyond the same group of people who might typically volunteer. Food Equity Advisors may represent the following perspectives, as relevant to a given proposal:

- BIPOC
- Immigrants
- People with various racial and ethnic food cultures
- People with religious dietary needs
- Residents of low-income neighborhoods
- Single parents
- LGBTQI+
- Formerly unsheltered
- People with mental health needs
- People with medical dietary needs
- People living with diet-related illnesses
- People with physical disabilities
- HIV+
- 65+
- Adult Students
- Youth
- Veterans
- Formerly incarcerated
- Food justice advocates and organizers

## HOW

Food Equity Advisors should be identified early on in a project process to help shape the proposal and answer questions from the toolkit. The proposal leader should ideally engage a facilitator with expertise in food equity to guide the process. The strategy for convening this group should match the project and community needs, but should take into consideration the following goals:

1. Food Equity Advisors should be empowered to shape the proposal by building on local efforts and priorities
2. Each meeting should provide opportunities for co-learning about the food system, local challenges and opportunities, and the principles of food justice between Food Equity Advisors, the proposal leader, and other stakeholders
3. Each meeting should offer space for open discussion without strict adherence to established parameters and standardized questions
4. Food Equity Advisors can develop their own discovery questions and discussion points to engage with broader local stakeholders

# IV.

## Impact & Knowledge Sharing

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A more equitable food system relies on evaluating what works and what doesn't, then sharing lessons learned as widely as possible. Proposal leaders and city leaders should consider how to embed equity goals into impact measurement and how to disseminate findings from proposals that make use of this tool.

## MEASURING IMPACT

Beyond common metrics used to evaluate project impact for food investments—such as amount of food moved, cost of food, amount of productive land created, cold storage square footage created—qualitative metrics can track progress towards a more equitable food system.

There is no one size fits all approach to measure success. Success and impact should be defined with the input of the Food Equity Advisors and should always relate back to the lived experience of the communities impacted.

Data can be collected through surveys, focus group discussions with Food Equity Advisors, or local observations, as well as analysis of existing open data. To understand the impact of interventions on community-level experience of the food system, practitioners must engage with residents and neighborhood stakeholders to understand the impact of interventions. Measuring the impact of food system interventions in New York City cannot be done solely from desktop research.

## BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

This tool should not just benefit singular proposals — rather, lessons learned through the use of this tool should circulate widely and benefit future proposals. Strategies to build shared knowledge:

- Create a shared database which includes case studies and lessons learned of every proposal, summary findings, proposals by location, instigators and allied partners
- Embed the food and infrastructure needs of a specific neighborhood identified through a given proposal into other planning priorities
- Publish project highlights or an annual report cataloging exceptional proposals, like the [Community Stories](#) published through the U.S. Environment Protection Agency's Local Food, Local Places project
- Establish an awards program to bring visibility to exceptional projects, modeled off of the [Milan Pact Awards](#)
- Require an open solicitation of community comments after the implementation of successful proposals, and make these comments publicly available
- Convene proposal leaders to share lessons learned about policy barriers with key city stakeholders





**Neighborhood Fare: Tools for  
Connecting Local Food Systems**

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