

# The Politics of Food



Food is integral to life — shaping cultures, religions, and many aspects of our daily lives. As such, it's no surprise that food can be political as well. This exhibit will explore some aspects of the politics of food including food policy, food sovereignty, gastrodiplomacy, and gastronativism.

The **United States Farm Bill** is the primary agricultural and food policy legislation that directs federal oversight of how and what food is produced, provides nutrition assistance to low-income individuals, insures farmers against crop loss due to disasters, and incentivizes natural resource conservation efforts on farms, pastures, and cropland.



One of the most widely available assistance programs, the **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)**, formerly known as food stamps, is funded by the Farm Bill. SNAP provides food assistance to low- and no-income individuals to supplement grocery budgets and increase their access to nutritious and healthy food.



Another example of a widely available assistance program is the **Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)**. WIC gives federal grants to states to provide supplemental foods, healthy eating information, and health care referrals to low-income pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women; infants; and children up to age 5 who are at nutritional risk.

Food assistance programs can also take place at a much more local scale. An example is the **Flint Fruit and Vegetable Prescription Program**, a joint initiative of MSU and Hurley Children's Hospital, that aims to expand access to fresh fruits and vegetables for children living in Genesee County. At the end of each pediatric or prenatal medical visit, a \$15 fresh produce "prescription" is issued that can be redeemed at either the Flint Farmers Market or used to order a Flint Fresh fruit and veggie box. Preliminary findings show that this program has been effective for improving dietary patterns and food security among young patients.

## Food policy in the U.S. has emphasized food colonialism by:

### Disrupting Indigenous food systems.

Federal policies, such as the General Allotment Act of 1887, led to the forced removal of Native nations from their lands, disrupting traditional food systems. This displacement forced Indigenous communities to adapt to unfamiliar environments, often resulting in food insecurity and poor health outcomes.

### The provision of inappropriate food.

Historically, the U.S. government provided rations to Indigenous communities that lacked cultural relevance and nutritional value. These rations often included processed and unhealthy foods, contributing to long-term health disparities.

### Excluding Indigenous peoples from the decision-making process.

Indigenous peoples have been largely excluded from decision-making processes related to land and agriculture. Government policies have prioritized Western agricultural practices, undermining Indigenous food sovereignty and self-determination.

### Continued marginalization.

Modern food policies and programs often fail to adequately support Indigenous food sovereignty. Funding and programming are frequently tied to settler-defined goals and expectations, limiting the ability of Indigenous communities to develop and sustain their own food systems. These policies have perpetuated a form of food colonialism that continues to impact Indigenous communities today.

**The food justice movement** aims to address the root causes of food insecurity and inequity, advocating for universal access to nutritious, affordable, and culturally appropriate food. It focuses on disparities in food access for low-income communities and minority populations by questioning land ownership, agricultural practices, resource distribution, workers' rights, and historical injustices. Closely tied to environmental justice and sustainability movements, food justice and activism strive to ensure that everyone, regardless of socioeconomic status, has access



to healthy food. Activists work tirelessly to combat food deserts, where fresh produce and nutritious options are scarce, and to challenge the dominance of large agribusinesses that often prioritize profit over people.

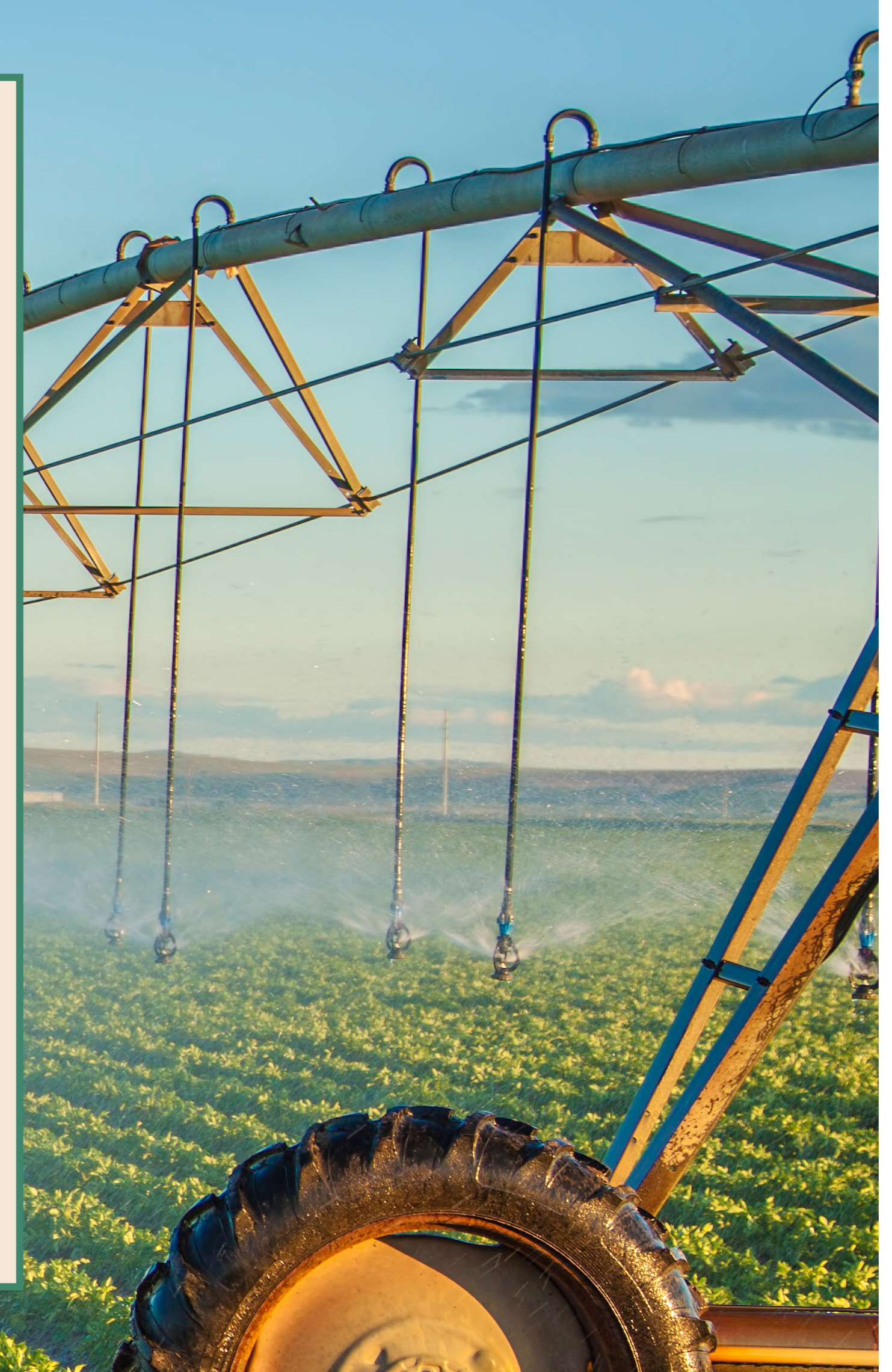
Community gardens, farmers' markets, and food co-ops are grassroots initiatives that promote food sovereignty and empower local communities. By advocating for policy changes, raising awareness, and fostering local food systems, food justice activists are paving the way for a more equitable and sustainable future.

Sustainable agriculture movements in Michigan are making significant strides in promoting environmental stewardship and resilient farming practices. One key initiative is the **Michigan Agriculture Advancement (MiAA)**, which focuses on improving soil health through diverse crop rotations, cover crops, and reduced chemical inputs. These practices help farmers cut costs, improve weather resiliency, and reduce economic risks.

Another important effort is the **Regenerative Agriculture Program** supported by the **Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD)**. This program emphasizes soil health and sustainable land

management tailored to each farmer's needs, incorporating methods like no-till farming and integrated pest management.

Michigan State University collaborates with local farmers through various programs to enhance sustainability. For instance, the **Climate Resiliency Program** aims to help Michigan's plant agriculture adapt to climate change while promoting efficient water use and environmental sustainability. These movements collectively work towards a more sustainable and resilient agricultural future for Michigan, benefiting both the environment and local communities.



Company marketing strategies and government food policy have significantly shaped a food environment where convenience and cost often trump nutrition. Subsidies for crops like corn and soybeans have led to an abundance of cheap, processed foods high in sugars and fats. These ingredients are staples in many fast and convenience foods, making them more affordable and accessible than healthier options. Additionally, aggressive marketing campaigns by food companies, often targeting children and low-income communities, promote these convenient, low-cost foods. This combination of policy and marketing has created a landscape where the easiest and most economical choices are frequently the least nutritious, contributing to widespread health issues like obesity and diabetes.

**Food labels** play a crucial role in this dynamic. While they are intended to inform consumers about the nutritional content of their food, they can often be confusing or misleading. Terms like "natural," "low-fat," or "sugar-free" can be deceptive, as they don't always mean the product is healthy. Moreover, the placement and design of labels can influence purchasing decisions, with healthier options often less prominently displayed. This labeling system, combined with the marketing of processed foods, further complicates efforts to make healthier choices.

