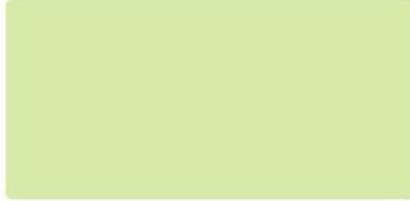




# LOCAL FOODS, LOCAL PLACES

## Technical Assistance Program



Strengthening the  
Local Foods System  
and Downtown  
Revitalization:

Actions and Strategies  
for Ajo, Arizona

December 16, 2015



## Community Story

Ajo is an unincorporated community in Pima County, Arizona, situated in a remote portion of the Sonoran Desert. The stunning desert, along with close proximity to Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument and Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, makes Ajo a destination for full- and part-time residents and vacationers from across the country. Additionally, Ajo is on the travel route from both Phoenix and Tucson to Puerto Peñasco—a popular beach community on the Sea of Cortez.



*Ajo Plaza, Ajo, AZ. Image credit: Jen Walker*

The Tohono O’odham Nation has lived in this portion of the American Southwest (extending into Mexico) for thousands of years, and continues to have a strong presence, preserving and utilizing the desert and cultural traditions. Native Americans, and later, the Spanish, have mined the land in and around Ajo for copper at a small scale for several centuries. In 1911, the Calumet and Arizona Mining Company began to mine and process copper at an industrial scale, building a rail connection from the Ajo community to the Southern Pacific Sunset Route via Gila Bend. Before that mine closed in 1985, the mining company employed nearly every resident for three generations and built roads, schools, and other civic infrastructure. Despite of being unincorporated and the mine’s closure (and the subsequent unemployment), Ajo has managed to position itself as a welcoming arts community and destination for people who share their love of the beauty, ecology, and traditions of the Sonoran Desert. Preserving and practicing traditional dry-land agriculture production techniques is a particular focus of Ajo community organizations, and involves active participation from the health, education, and tourism sectors.

The current population of Ajo is around 3,300 residents (or 4,400 for the 85321 ZIP code), with an additional estimated 2,000 residents during the cooler winter months. The International Sonoran Desert Alliance (ISDA), located in Ajo, has undertaken several projects that enhance the community since 2003. ISDA renovated the Curley School (Ajo’s public school built by the mining company in 1919) as Artist Residences and the Sonoran Desert Conference Center, creating a beautiful 21-room facility complete with a commercial kitchen, several conference rooms and desert-themed landscape managed by Ajo Botanical Garden. The Curley School Campus also hosts ½ acre Many Hands Urban Farm and Learning Center managed by the Ajo Center for Sustainable Agriculture (Ajo CSA) showcasing native, heirloom, and adapted desert plants, desert-adapted permaculture-based agricultural techniques, chicken coop and a food forest. ISDA also owns the central Ajo Plaza and is in the process of renovating the plaza park and surrounding arcaded commercial buildings. Hundreds of thousands of cars pass by the plaza every year, en route to Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument and Puerto Peñasco. ISDA is working with Ajo Chamber of Commerce to help create places and businesses that provide amenities and meaningful opportunities to these travelers as well as for Ajo residents.

The health of Ajo residents is a major concern for the community: high rates of diabetes, heart disease and obesity are present, and food insecurity—especially among children and the elderly—is prevalent. The Ajo community is interested and involved residents are willing to invest time, resources, and expertise to improve these economic and health outcomes in Ajo. Although there is a solid resource base—organizations, programs, initiatives, and stakeholders interested in diversifying and developing the local food system and increasing access to healthy food choices through a variety of means—because of the size of the community and the limited income of most Ajo residents, generating sustained financial support is a constant challenge.

In response to this need, the Ajo Center for Sustainable Agriculture (Ajo CSA) was founded in 2008 to generate awareness and action around food, environment, and social justice issues. Ajo CSA was originally created as a way for Ajo residents to purchase food through a CSA (community supported agriculture) model, but has since expanded in scope to include demonstration gardens, classes on food production and preservation, managing the Authentically Ajo

Farmers Market, and other food and health system efforts. In addition to Ajo CSA and ISDA, other organizations and individuals have contributed to community food efforts in various ways—the Ajo Community Garden Consortium (ACGC), which built two community gardens and currently manages one, and creates cross-sector partnerships for food access through DSCHC Behavioral Health Counselors and health care providers; Edible Ajo Schoolyard (EASY) managed by Desert Senita Community Health Center (DSCHC); the Kawyu Apedag Wapkial Oidagkam Horse Camp teaches traditional horse and ranching practices to youth; and local residents Gayle and Don Weyers started Loma Bonita Garden and Orchard as a community and teaching garden to educate and inspire Ajo’s residents and visitors to grow their own food. Other community partners include the Ajo Unified School District and Pima County Parks and Recreation.

In 2009, the Ajo Regional Food Partnership (ARFP) was created to coordinate and amplify existing efforts to address food insecurity, increase access to fresh, local foods, and to promote the cultivation and use of desert food crops. The Ajo CSA, ISDA, and other organizations named above are all active participants in the Ajo Regional Food Partnership. The starting conditions for Ajo Regional Food Partnership were desert: really poor soil with low organic and microbial content, high level of alkalinity and caliche (a hardened natural cement of calcium carbonate), as well as extreme weather conditions (freezing winter temperatures, summer averages over 110 F) and water conditions (about 4 inches of annual

## LFLP PARTNERS AND KEY STAKEHOLDERS

- Ajo Center for Sustainable Agriculture (Ajo CSA)
- Kawyu Apedag Wapkial Oidagkam (KAWO)
- Ajo Council of Fine Arts
- Desert Senita Community Health Center
- Edible Ajo Schoolyard (EASY)
- Loma Bonita Garden and Orchard
- International Sonoran Desert Alliance (ISDA)
- Ajo Community Garden Consortium (ACGC)
- Sonoran Desert Conference Center
- Ajo Chamber of Commerce
- Western Pima County Community Council (WPCCC)
- Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument (ORPI)
- Authentically Ajo Farmers Market (vendors)
- Ajo Unified School District (AUSD)

precipitation, delivered in the form of rare but strong monsoon downpours). There was no recent history of agriculture, composting, or recycling in Ajo, and the awareness of desert-adapted crops and sustainable agricultural methods (or local food system issues, for that matter) was very low.

Because of this, and Ajo's former copper mining town history, new gardens often require complete removal and/or remediation through cover crops, green manure, microbial treatments (EMs), and intentional soil building using permaculture methods such as an original desert-adapted version of "hugelkultur" raised beds. All start-up gardens require an enormous amount of compost, which is either brought in by the nearest all-natural facility 110 miles away, or made on-site (often including chickens or horse manure). Because of this, every square foot of agricultural surfaces matters, and the goal is to maximize the yield per square foot.

In six years of work, Ajo Regional Food Partnership has developed a distributed agriculture model. The model incorporates several types of agricultural areas designed to integrate as many people as possible into the local food system: family (or backyard) gardens (currently about 60), neighborhood gardens (2), community gardens (1), institutional gardens (3, including school garden), market gardens (4), and community farms (1). This model promotes small-scale, highly intensive, natural and desert-adapted food production through numerous growing options and locations, incorporates work-for-food programs, develops alternative distribution networks, reduces the time from soil to table, cuts down transportation time, distances and storage time, and provides numerous opportunities for the development of food-based micro-businesses, from growers to value-added product manufacturers (15 currently active at the farmers market). The growers are connected through a strong Ajo Regional Food Partnership and various members' activities such as outreach, capacity building, joint marketing, and strong farmers market. Growers are also supported through Ajo Gardeners Network headed by Ajo Center for Sustainable Agriculture. The resulting local food system is controlled by not any one individual or organization, but by a strong network of self-motivated, empowered individuals and families. Overall, we estimate that at least 350 households (1/6 of all Ajo households) are directly involved in the local food activities, either through food production and/or consumption, however, less than 100 of them are low-income.

In just six years, ARFP increased the agricultural surfaces through a distributed agriculture model from 10,000 square feet to almost 40,000 square feet, and increased local food production from 1,000 lbs/year to 8,000 lbs/year. It has also fueled the development and success of the year-round Authentically Ajo Farmers Market, which currently supports 39 local growers, including some from the Tohono O'odham Nation, and value-added producers, offers specific regional and cultural foods not available at the local grocery, has doubled the sales in 2015, and had over 5,000 customers. The market accepts WIC vouchers, and will start accepting SNAP benefits in January of 2016., including a Double Up Bucks program. The ARFP was awarded the Local Foods, Local Places (LFLP) technical assistance in the fall of 2014, with the stated objective of developing and implementing an action plan promoting local foods and fostering entrepreneurship in order to create an economically-vibrant Ajo.

The remainder of this report and appendices documents the engagement process, the workshop activities, and most importantly, the action plan and next steps for achieving the community's goals. A LFLP Steering Committee (see Figure 1) was created to help plan the workshop and guide the community's initial steps to implement the resulting action plan. Over the course of the three planning calls and workshop discussions, the community's goals evolved from those in the initial request for

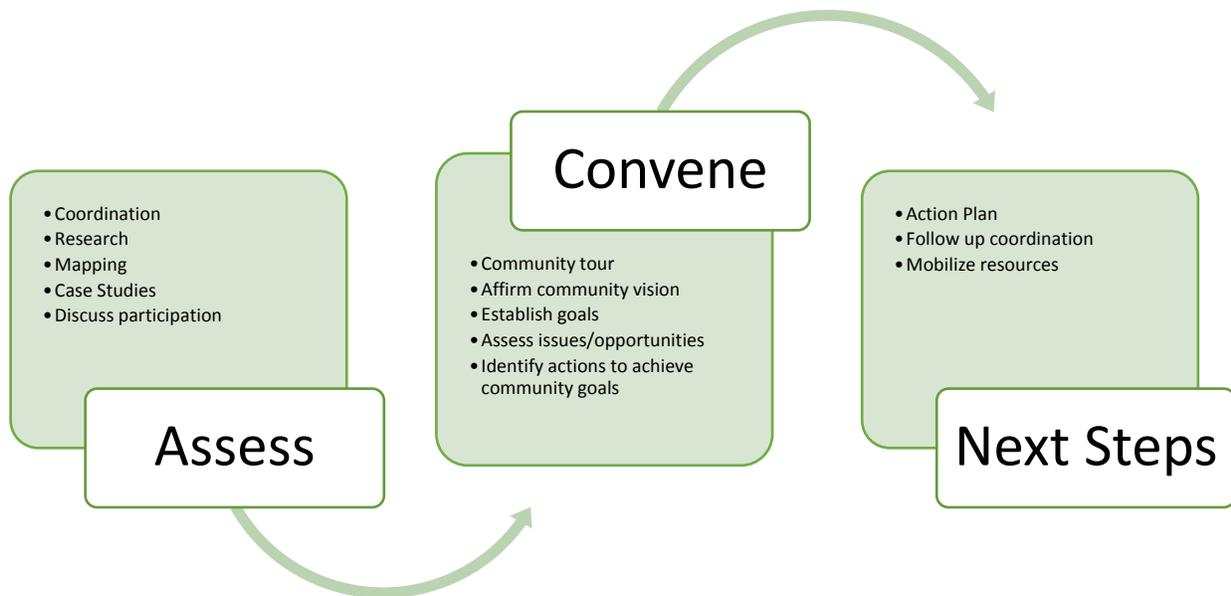
technical assistance to the six shown later in this report and in Appendix A, and reflect the holistic, collaborative approach to community development already underway in Ajo.

## Engagement

The technical assistance engagement process for LFLP has three phases, illustrated in Figure 1 below. The assessment phase consists of three preparation conference calls with the LFLP Steering Committee to establish the workshop goals, agenda, logistics, and stakeholder invitation lists. The convening phase includes the effort's capstone event—a two-day workshop in the community. The next steps phase includes three follow up conference calls as well as process reporting and documentation.



*Ajo CSA's Many Hands Urban Farm and Learning Center includes this garden and recently-completed chicken coop adjacent to the Sonoran Inn and Conference Center. Image Credit: Jen Walker*



*Figure 1 - Local Foods, Local Places Technical Assistance Process Diagram*

The site visit was conducted over two days—June 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015—with workshops held at the Bud Walker Community Center at the Pima County Parks and Recreation building (Day 1) and the Sonoran Desert Conference Center (Day 2). The workshop was well attended by key stakeholder groups, residents, and local leaders (attendance list in Appendix C).

## Community Tour

The LFLP Steering Committee organized a luncheon on June 9th with key stakeholders at the Conference Center to introduce the project and the local leadership committee, consultants, and federal agency representatives. Following the luncheon, the Steering Committee led everyone on a walking tour of the Ajo community including the ISDA Commercial Kitchen at the Sonoran Desert Conference Center, Ajo CSA's Many Hands Urban Farm and Learning Center, Loma Bonita Gardens and Orchard, the Ajo Food Pantry, the Ajo Community Garden Consortium (ACGC) garden, the Edible Ajo Schoolyard (EASY), and Ajo Plaza. The tour provided an overview of the challenges and opportunities present in Ajo, and allowed for informal discussions about the local food system. A number of the locations visited are shown in pictures here and in Appendix E.

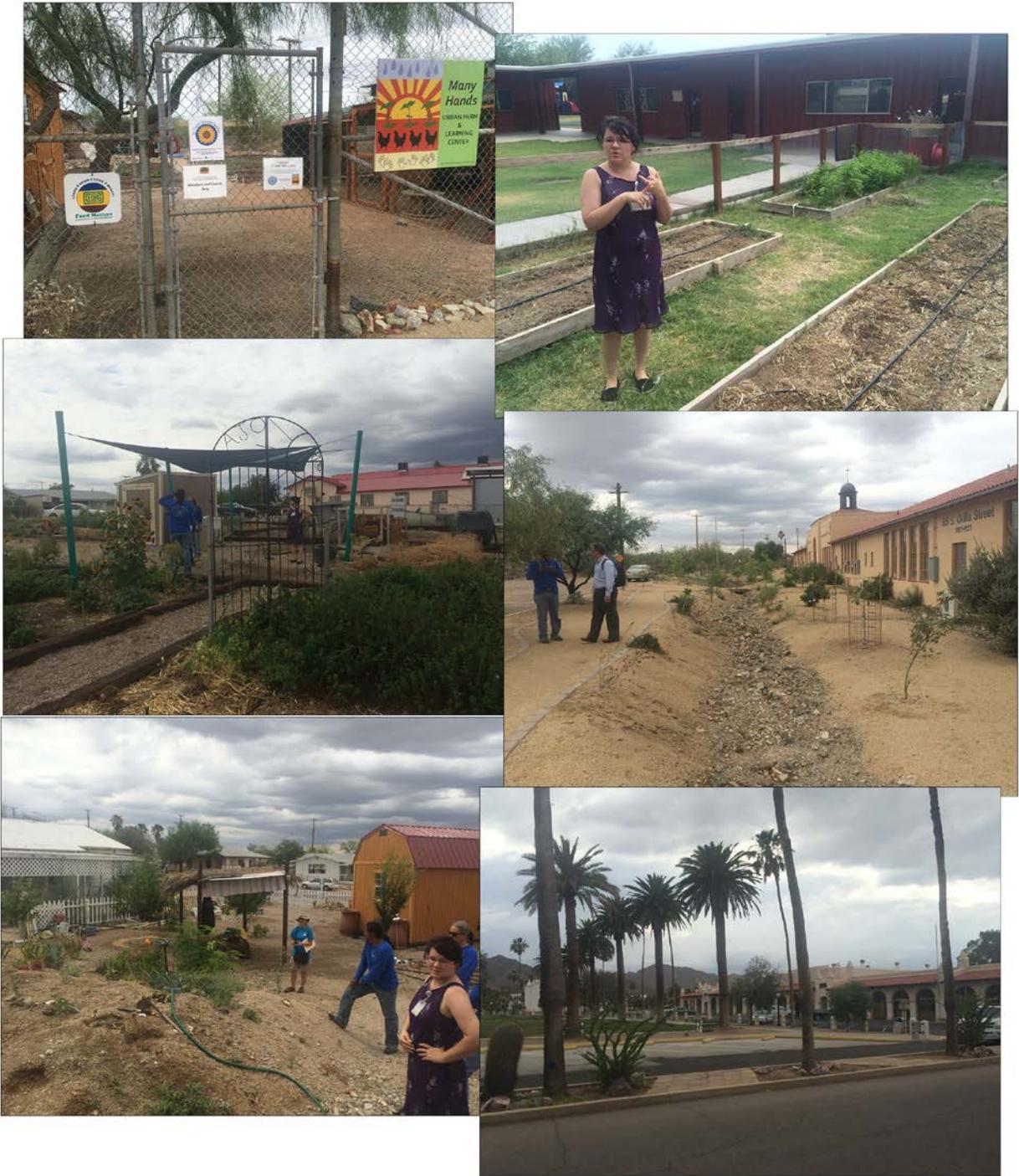


*Jane Canon (Ajo Community Garden Consortium) talks about the plants and people involved with the community garden adjacent to the Ajo Food Pantry during the community tour on Day One. Image Credit: Jen Walker*



*Collage of images from the tour.*

Local Foods, Local Places Technical Assistance Workshop



*Collage of images from the tour.*

## Vision and Values

The first night of the workshop was attended by over 50 local Ajo residents and began with welcomes and introductions. The consultant team introduced the topics and program overview with a short presentation. Afterward, the Steering Committee organized an informative presentation given by representatives from each of the community organizations who participate in aspects of the local food system, which helped to orient the community to wide variety of initiatives already underway (The presentation can be found at this link:

[http://prezi.com/klgdmh60msao/?utm\\_campaign=share&utm\\_medium=copy&rc=ex0share](http://prezi.com/klgdmh60msao/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy&rc=ex0share)).

This was followed by exercises in which workshop participants shared their perspectives around the challenges and opportunities facing the local food system in Ajo, which gave a sense of the values and perspectives of community members. Values drive aspirations for the future, and voicing these are key to paving the way to the more detailed work of action planning on Day 2. A summary of these responses are presented in the sidebar to the left and Appendix B.

The themes shared in the text box reveal many of the group's aspirations for economic revitalization, improved health, more robust local food system components, local food in schools and restaurants, community pride, increased activity and events, and more sustainable agricultural practices. It is against this positive, forward-thinking backdrop of values and visions for the future that the remainder of the workshop built upon. The first day concluded with a review of the workshop goals and discussion about the direction for action planning to follow the next day. These goals were further refined, evolving into the action plan implementation tables that are summarized below (full version in Appendix A). In addition to the creation of the action plan, day two included presentations of case studies by the consultant team covering food hubs, farmers markets, farm incubator programs, and other food system-related technical information (Appendix D).

## OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES

### Opportunities

- Increase in tourism and business opportunities at Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument and from Puerto Peñasco travelers
- Learning to farm will create new sources of jobs and businesses
- Community participation and awareness—there is existing enthusiasm and dedicated volunteers
- Available land
- Excellent growing climate and available water
- Existing Authentically Ajo Farmers Market
- Ethnographic resources endemic to the Ajo region
- There's room (demand) to increase the diversity and amount of local food produced

### Challenges

- Convincing people to buy local food, especially residents on fixed incomes
- Cultivating more youth involvement in farming and gardening
- Locating funds to start and continue projects
- Many people have forgotten or do not know how to grow food in the desert
- High cost of water and not much good soil
- Lack of restaurants and grocery stores that promote local foods
- Seasonal population—the number of residents fluctuates greatly during the year
- Divisions within the community along race and class lines
- Developing business skills among residents interested in starting a local foods business
- Small private yards, and no water source outside of town where there is more land

### *Opportunities and Challenges Exercise Results*

## Action Plan

The culminating product of the workshop is a strategic action plan to guide implementation. The plan is organized around six goals and includes actions the participants brainstormed at the meeting and during follow up calls that are designed to achieve those goals. The action plan matrix helps to further clarify, prioritize, and define roles and responsibilities for moving forward on these actions. The goals and actions that are part of this plan are summarized below and are contained in their full detail in Appendix A.

### GOAL 1: Increase agricultural production using replicable, small-scale models

Much of the conversation during the workshop centered around the need to increase agricultural production at all scales: home production for household use, community gardening, small-scale market gardening, and larger-scale farming. Because of the limitations of affordable sources of water and areas with good soils, the focus of Ajo CSA and other workshop participants is on creating and promoting small-scale sustainable models of agricultural production that can be easily replicated. The demand for fresh, healthy, local food can be best met through diversified production using a variety of indigenous and innovative methods. Getting more Ajo residents involved in growing food—especially youth—is a primary piece of this goal. To that end, workshop participants conceived of increasing agricultural production through not only farming and gardening, but also through ancillary activities such as building soils through composting, harvesting desert crops such as mesquite, and food processing and marketing. Workshop participants also identified job creation—even at the outset of projects—as an important way of engaging youth and other community members in pursuing agriculture as a profession.

- **Action 1.1:** Continue experimentation with desert-adapted food crops
- **Action 1.2:** Continue to build the Get Going, Get Growing youth internship program
- **Action 1.3:** Develop food products that can be marketed outside of Ajo
- **Action 1.4:** Build the local composting industry
- **Action 1.5:** Develop a mesquite harvest/milling/chipping initiative
- **Action 1.6:** Approach the mining company about an agricultural use water rate
- **Action 1.7:** Follow up with the mining company about the use of mining company land

### GOAL 2: Engender a community-wide consensus on food sovereignty for Ajo—improving opportunities for participation among all economic levels

Although Ajo residents who participated in the workshop are highly involved—often through multiple activities—many people in Ajo are not yet engaged with the opportunities that local foods provide to the health and economy of Ajo. Workshop participants defined food sovereignty as a condition in which all Ajo residents and visitors have access to locally produced food, regardless of income level or form of payment (cash, SNAP EBT, WIC Vouchers), and all residents who are interested can be engaged in the production and distribution of food in a way that builds their individual and household wealth (farming, vending, catering, processing, etc.). Food sovereignty goal for the remote Ajo also means that at least some percentage of food consumed is grown and purchased locally, and caters to the local cultural tastes. The ARFP and Ajo CSA have already made much progress toward food sovereignty through the distributed agriculture model, Authentically Ajo Farmers Market, the Get Going, Get Growing youth internship program, Ajo Gardeners Network and other initiatives, and this goal seeks to expand those efforts.

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- **Action 2.1:** Expand and improve upon the Authentically Ajo Farmers Market (incl. SNAP)
- **Action 2.2:** Expanding the school garden program
- **Action 2.3:** Expand Loma Bonita Garden and Orchard
- **Action 2.4:** Install a dry-land incubator farm
- **Action 2.5:** Create better access to the food pantry both for dropping off produce and for picking up items
- **Action 2.6:** Create better access to local fresh produce for Ajo Food Bank clients
- **Action 2.7:** Increase the number of backyard gardens / Ajo Gardeners Network.
- **Action 2.8:** Expand Ajo Community Garden

### GOAL 3: Develop educational programs for all aspects of food and farm development, including health, wellness, and business development

As noted throughout this action plan, Ajo has a lot of great things going on. However, one area that workshop participants felt could be improved is the sharing of innovative knowledge and resources around the development of various aspects of the food system. Examples include sharing information about the particular health benefits of many native desert foods, seed preservation and cultural knowledge of native desert plants, arid farming strategies, and entrepreneurial skills specific to food businesses. An “innovation hub” is one initiative that would serve as a one-stop-shop for curated information and resources, specifically organized to meet the needs of the Ajo community. Developing a broad set of educational activities will help support the first two goals of increasing small-scale agricultural production and engendering broader community engagement.

- **Action 3.1:** Coordinate and develop food and nutrition education activities
- **Action 3.2:** Develop training programs for value-added food producers and microbusinesses
- **Action 3.3:** Coordinate and develop gardening programs and support for growers
- **Action 3.4:** Collect and share seed stock and fruit trees, and preserve cultural knowledge about their cultivation and use
- **Action 3.5:** Develop culturally-appropriate educational programs in the field of traditional land usage, farming and ranching for local O’odham youth.

### GOAL 4: Engender organizational evolution and foster continued collaboration with a variety of local, regional, and national partners

The Ajo Regional Food Partnership was created in 2009 to foster collaboration among the various organizations in the Ajo area that work to promote food, health, and economic development initiatives. However, the Partnership would like to grow as an organization, capitalizing on their current support and engagement with a variety of partners. Because of the small size and relative isolation of Ajo, there is a limited amount of resources—both in terms of volunteers and funding. For this reason, it is crucial that the ARFP keeps collaborating and strengthening relationships both within and outside of the community. Building on current successes and ensuring that those successes are known by the wider community are two factors that were identified during the workshop as possible catalysts for evolving organization and collaboration. Additionally, even though Ajo is a small community, workshop participants stated that there is no way for most people in Ajo to know what is happening, who is doing what, and how to get involved. Therefore, developing mechanisms to share information with the community is a large part of this goal.

- **Action 4.1:** Develop new ARFP MOUs to strengthen collaboration within ARFP.
- **Action 4.2:** Clarify terms of use for “Authentically Ajo”
- **Action 4.3** Enlist the assistance of small business and non-profit consultants to further develop the organization and businesses.
- **Action 4.4:** Strengthen connections with town organizations such as the Western Pima County Community Council, Pima County Health Department, and church groups, as well as with the organizations from the Tohono O’odham Reservation
- **Action 4.5:** Collaborate with the registered dietician at the Desert Senita Community Health Center
- **Action 4.6:** Explore the creation of an Authentically Ajo cooperative store
- **Action 4.7:** Explore farm-to-institution in Ajo (local restaurants, market/store, and school cafeteria)
- **Action 4.8:** Determine requirements from the Pima Co Health Department for food sales and demos, and other regulations
- **Action 4.9:** Leverage the amenities at the Conference Center to attract researchers in the fields related to local foods, such as desert agriculture, ethnobotany, regional culinary traditions etc.

GOAL 5: Provide stewardship for the desert—for its resources and local knowledge.

Workshop participants shared their personal stories and passions about the desert throughout the workshop—what led them to Ajo and what keeps them here. A theme that emerged was the mutual love of the intrinsic beauty of the desert, as well as a respect for its resources, ecology, and the local knowledge of the indigenous Tohono O’odham people who have lived off of the spiritual and physical resources of the Sonoran Desert for thousands of



*Ajo CSA Demonstration Garden at the Sonoran Inn and Conference Center.  
Image Credit: Jen Walker*

years. It was agreed that coordinated stewardship of the desert is necessary to continue to preserve and share the ecological and cultural resources in a sustainable and ethical manner. This involves documentation of what is known, as well as the creation of projects and initiatives that will help other Ajo residents to better steward resources at a household level through initiatives such as rain water harvesting, enhanced recycling, and other practices.

- **Action 5.1:** Advance recycling activities throughout the community to protect the desert from waste accumulation
- **Action 5.2:** Promote water harvesting through the use of rain barrels. Create demonstrations and classes.

### GOAL 6: Add local food system elements to the existing sustainable tourism activities

Community members noted during the workshop that a large number of tourists from Phoenix and Tucson pass through Ajo on their way to Puerto Peñasco and Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, although most do not stop to shop or dine. According to ISDA, more than a million cars pass through Ajo each year, and other than for trip insurance and staples from Olsen's IGA, most do not stop to explore Ajo. Workshop participants would like to change this, attract tourist to the Authentically Ajo Farmers Market and creating and coordinating a menu of food-based things to do and places to visit for tourists interested in experiencing the authenticity of Ajo and Ajo's unique food movement.

- **Action 6.1:** Pursue the creation of creative, in situ wayfinding devices that showcases Ajo's food projects, and their connections to culture and environment
- **Action 6.2:** Develop a mechanism for information exchange about what is happening in the community regarding food.

### Implementation and Next Steps

Three post-workshop conference calls were held during June through September, 2015, following the workshop. The calls were held with the same LFLP Steering Committee as the pre-workshop calls, with a couple of additional stakeholders whose interest was cultivated during the workshop. They worked to refine the action plan and add clarifying language.

Additionally, in the time between the workshop and finalizing this report, the Ajo community has been busy with numerous projects and initiatives, including:

- The ARFP received the USDA Farmers Market SNAP Support grant (FMSSG) in the amount of \$223,530 and will be implementing procedures to accept SNAP EBT benefits from customers and conduct outreach and education. The Authentically Ajo market became registered with FNS to accept SNAP at the farmers market, scheduled to start in January.
- The ARFP also made major changes to the way of organizing the Authentically Ajo Farmers Market and Ajo Gardeners Network
- The ARFP also applied for several smaller grants, including Freeport McMoran Foundation's community investment grant, NAPECA (North American Partnership for Environmental Community Action) grant, and Smuckers School Garden grant (applied for by Desert Senita Health Center).
- The USDA announced RFA for Community Food Project grant at the end of October, and workshop participants are now working hard to apply.
- The ARFP successfully held an Arizona Small Producers Forum on October 14 in cooperation with Local First Arizona, with more than 50 people attending from all over Arizona, including Bisbee, Benson, Fort Apache, San Simon (Tohono O'odham), Gilbert, Phoenix, Tucson and of course Ajo. Following the forum, they had several requests to share their small-scale production and distributed agriculture model.

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- They also held a successful first-ever pomegranate festival, with speakers such as Gary Nabhan, pomegranate food tastings, pom-focused kid's activities and Authentically Ajo vendors. They estimated that about 100 people came (and considering it was held on Halloween weekend, they are very pleased with the attendance).
- The ARFP held several other events during this time, including workshops such as traditional Tohono O'odham Bean Harvesting and a chili workshop.

## Appendices

- Appendix A – Implementation Action Plan Details
- Appendix B – Workshop Feedback
- Appendix C – Workshop Participants
- Appendix D– Presentation Slides
- Appendix E– Workshop Photo Album
- Appendix F – Funding Resources
- Appendix G – References