

Local and Regional Food Systems

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Introduction

Local and regional food systems, sometimes referred to as “community food systems,” are collaborative networks that integrate sustainable food production, processing, distribution, consumption and waste management in order to enhance the environmental, economic and social health of a particular place. These networks reflect growing public interest in restoring the vital connections between agriculture, food, environment and health. Local and regional food system networks engage a wide range of community partners in projects to promote more locally-based, self-reliant food economies. Particular community projects and strategies vary, but most collaborations seek to increase resident participation to achieve one or more of the following goals (UC SAREP website: <http://www.sarep.ucdavis.edu/sfs/def>):

- A stable base of family farms that use sustainable production practices and emphasize local inputs;
- Marketing and processing practices that create more direct links between farmers and consumers;
- Improved access by all community members to an adequate, affordable, nutritious diet;
- Food and agriculture-related businesses that create jobs and recirculate financial capital within the community;
- Improved living and working conditions for farm and food system labor;
- Creation of food and agriculture policies that promote local or sustainable food production, processing and consumption; and
- Adoption of dietary behaviors that reflect concern about individual, environmental and community health.

While no local and regional food system can claim to fully embrace or embody all the articulated goals, this framework provides an animating vision that spurs and sustains local action. Pursuing diverse goals simultaneously creates a host of practical and ethical challenges. These challenges, described more fully below, include 1) finding price points that work for farmers while ensuring low-income consumers have access to healthy food and food system workers have decent wages and benefits; 2) confronting racial and class bias while forging practical solutions; and 3) reconciling the desire to stay true to deeply held values with the need to compromise in order to achieve incremental changes (Campbell, Carlisle-Cummins & Feenstra, forthcoming). Negotiating tradeoffs among various goals and competing values is integral to this public work.

History of the Local and Regional Food Systems Idea

The attempt to be holistic in conceiving and pursuing local food system work is intentional. It stems both from the effort of local communities to solve interconnected problems (rather than treating them in isolation), and from a desire to consider multiple values in designing food and agricultural systems, rather than elevating a single value—economic efficiency—above all others. Local food system promoters consider agriculture, food, health, and environment as inter-related aspects of a single system whose overall health requires intentional efforts to develop meaningful connections among all sectors. These ideas have deep intellectual roots and can now draw on lessons from decades of on-the-ground experimentation.

The concept of a sustainable, local community food system emerged both from intellectual criticism of the agro-industrial food system and from community-based efforts to promote environmentally-enhancing forms of economic development. Early roots can be traced to the 1960s and 1970s, when concerns began to be raised about the environmental damage caused by chemically-intensive agriculture. While organic or sustainable production practices were viewed by many as necessary alternatives, by themselves these changes did not deal with a range of serious social and economic issues also associated with conventional food and agricultural practices. To address these, scholars and activists began to critique not only chemical regimes but also the effects of increasing scale, concentration of power, over-reliance on

specialized experts, and accounting systems, which allow large firms to internalize profits while externalizing costs to the larger community. These costs included serious problems, such as pollution, waste disposal, added burdens on welfare services, and deterioration of local tax bases. Driven by growth imperatives and by narrow economic conceptions of value and efficiency, conventional agriculture and food systems were viewed as sacrificing other values and priorities: healthy rural communities, a connection to place, the pleasures and nutrition associated with good food, husbandry, good work, decent wages and working conditions, local economies, and appropriate technologies.

More recently, climate change concerns are providing a further rationale for local and regional food systems. These concerns include the environmental costs of shipping food long distances and the vulnerability of centralized production systems to climate shifts. For others, such as those in the food sovereignty movement, the primary driver of re-localization is the desire to maintain democratic control over the local food supply in the face of global commodification.

Increasingly, local and regional food and agricultural systems are being viewed as an important path toward creating a more sustainable future (Feenstra and Wilkins 2009). Beginning in the 1970s and continuing until today, scholar-practitioners from fields as diverse as economics (Schumacher 1973), agriculture (Berry 1977) nutrition (Gussow 1978), and sociology (Lyson 2004), along with many others, have articulated an alternative model for food and agricultural systems. At the core of many of these visions was an emphasis on building local connections between consumers and producers; between producers and communities; and between urban and rural areas. Many begin to see the work of building relationships and connections as the path toward greater community control over their economic destiny. For others, the motivation was to reveal the human dimension underlying economic interactions, the beauty and the wisdom embodied in the natural world, and the possibilities of preserving what is unique within local and regional cultures, including the joy of sharing locally grown and lovingly prepared food.

Examples of Local Food System Strategies

Spurred by the intellectual critiques, and in some cases inspiring them, community-based projects to develop local and regional food systems began to emerge. Many local leaders are promoting local food systems as an economic development strategy that supports local farmers,

protects landscapes, and provides consumers with access to healthy and nutritious food. Local projects have taken many forms; just a few are highlighted here to suggest some of the most widely shared activities and emerging institutional connections.

Many of the most well-known and widespread local food systems projects have involved developing new markets that more directly link farmers and consumers. These include farmers markets whose numbers increased nationally from 1,700 to more than 7,800 between 1994 and 2012 (USDA Agricultural Marketing Service website, nd), public food markets such as the Ferry Building in San Francisco or the Reading Terminal Market in Philadelphia, Community Supported Agriculture, and direct delivery options for institutions and retailers. Local leaders also created spaces for growing food such as community gardens or rooftop gardens, often in low-income neighborhoods where healthy food distribution was minimal.

In the late 1990s, nonprofits, school food service professionals, farmers and community members realized that public schools could be another avenue through which to purchase and educate young people about local, sustainable foods (Feenstra & Ohmart 2012). The concept swept the nation as hundreds of schools and communities bought into the concept of healthier foods for their children and more economic security for regional farmers. According to the most recent statistics, more than 12,400 schools in all 50 states are involved in farm to school programs with more than \$13 million in sales to regional farmers estimated (National Farm to School Network website, nd). The farm-to-school concept has now spread to other institutions such as colleges, universities, hospitals, prisons and corporate cafeterias.

Noting that local governments have departments for necessities like housing and transportation, but none for food, many communities have begun to develop local or regional food policy councils. These councils are a means to institutionalize and better coordinate the newly emerging local food and agricultural activities and programs (Clancy, Hammer & Lippoldt 2007; Harper et al. 2009). A number of cities, counties, and even states now maintain food policy councils or alliances (CDC 2010). The idea is that citizens want to participate more actively in controlling the policies governing their own food systems and help to plan for the future food security for their communities.

The private sector has played a major role also. Restaurants and cafes, inspired by Alice Waters' example at Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California, began searching for top quality, locally

grown, sustainable ingredients from regional farmers. “Foragers,” restaurant staff whose job it is to find local growers and ranchers, visit nearby farms and ranches and built personal relationships with the restaurant. The “Chefs Collaborative,” a nonprofit network of chefs that are “changing the sustainable food landscape using the power of connections, education and responsible buying decisions” (Chefs Collaborative website, nd) was formed in 1993 to support a growing group of restaurateurs committed to principles of environmental sustainability, seasonality, preserving diversity and traditional practices, and supporting local economies.

As one might expect with a movement that emphasizes locality, there is no single, overarching entity coordinating local food system efforts. However, in many states this work is supported by leading nonprofit organizations or university programs in the area of sustainable agriculture. In addition, local food activists have developed extensive national and international networks to share ideas and information. National professional associations such as Agriculture and Human Values, the Rural Sociological Society, the Community Development Society, the American Dietetic Association, and the American Planning Association now provide ongoing opportunities for discussing and analyzing local and regional food systems.

Internationally, the Slow Food Movement has emphasized building connections between the plate and the planet to counter the influence of fast food on society. The US affiliate, Slow Food USA, now has over 250,000 supporters, 25,000 members and 225 chapters nationwide. The organization advocates for food and farming policy that is good for the public, good for the planet, and good for farmers and workers (Slow Food USA website, nd).

While funding for local and regional food systems remains miniscule in comparison to the resources agribusiness can call upon, the past two decades have witnessed a significant uptick in both public and private foundation support. For example, the USDA has supported these efforts through agencies such as the Agricultural Marketing Service (farmers markets), the Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (regional research), the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (sustainable agriculture and food systems) and the National Institute for Food & Agriculture (research and outreach on sustainable food systems and food security). Foundations such as the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the California Endowment, the Jesse Smith Noyes Foundation and

many others have supported the development of local food systems and encouraged communities to work toward making them self-sustaining.

Key values and principles in developing local and regional food systems

As in other forms of community development work, staying on course requires grounding and deep commitment to underlying principles and values. Local food system leaders often cite their commitments to social, economic, and environmental justice and health, to democratic participation, to the importance of local wisdom and knowledge, to community spirit, and often to their own spiritual traditions. The challenge is holding true to these commitments to sustain work in tough times, while remaining open to those who disagree or need pragmatic accommodations that may involve some compromise or tradeoffs. Ultimately, this requires a form of public responsibility that can take many years to mature. While newcomers to communities can bring much to the table, there is no substitute for seasoned leadership with broad community connections, a nuanced understanding of local realities, and practical judgment. At the same time, it is important to continually broaden the circle to include the full range of community voices, taking advantage of previously untapped or underappreciated leadership.

A review of local and regional food system projects in California found that community leaders had to work hard to create new social, political, and economic spaces and connections (Feenstra 2002). In identifying key elements of successful work, local leaders mentioned three themes most frequently: 1) public participation, 2) partnerships, and 3) policy work. At their best, these processes become ways in which core values and principles are embedded in everyday practice.

Public participation

Local and regional food system projects often create new physical spaces where people can gather, such as farmers' markets or community gardens. But beyond and behind many of these visible spaces, they work by creating multiple opportunities for individuals to come together and talk about food systems concerns, visions, and activities. Gradually, participants in these discussions develop mutual awareness and trust, which can be difficult to build given the pull of competing values and priorities. Working through friction or around obstacles is inherent in most projects, requiring patience, persistence, and skill in group processes and good communication.

Some forms of public engagement are more immediately appealing, such as harvest fairs, school garden days, or other community events that create local celebrations. To stay engaged, the public must find the work not only meaningful but also fun and socially enriching. In all these ways, local food system leaders attempt to enact commitments to the value of democracy, sociability, and local culture.

Partnerships

Because food systems work encompasses a wide range of goals, core groups frequently need to reach out to other individuals and organizations with complementary expertise or objectives. This can include a broad range of community activists interested in sustainability or social justice, but also many mainstream institutions, including traditional agricultural organizations like the Farm Bureau or Cooperative Extension. Universities often are important partners, providing research, access to grants, technical skills, or facilitation. Universities can also provide a broader vision that helps locate local projects in a bigger picture, helping participant see their work as part of something larger. Partnership development is the way key values such as community are expressed, based on the importance given to expanding connections and relationships beyond typical boundaries.

Policy work

For values to have lasting impact, they must become embedded in policy and institutions. Local and regional food system projects address policy issues at multiple levels—from school districts to city, county, state, or national governments. For example, some local areas have inserted food policy into their county's General Plan, others have worked on farmland protection policies, or school lunch policies. This work sometimes involves community organizing efforts, such that youth or low-income workers or others are given an opportunity to voice their concerns in the democratic process. Many local areas find it important to articulate a compelling narrative that gives a rationale for emphasizing local food systems, while simultaneously working on better data to track the impact of initiatives.

Key Challenges facing Local and Regional Food Systems

Working with a team of faculty and graduate students at UC Davis, a bibliography of peer-reviewed articles on local and regional food systems was recently compiled focusing on

articles published since 2000 (UC SAREP website—community food systems bibliography). The rapid growth of this literature (over 1,600 articles were identified), mimicking the growth in community interest, is reflective of the surge in interest in this field. But considerable challenges remain. An initial analysis of this literature, covering over 500 articles, identified three persistent strategic challenges facing community food system practitioners: 1) an economic challenge rooted in the difficulty of finding price points that work for farmers while ensuring low-income consumers have access to healthy food and food system workers have decent wages and benefits; 2) a social challenge to confront racial and class bias while forging practical solutions, and 3) a political challenge of reconciling “insider” and “outsider” strategies, the former emphasizing incremental reform and the latter systemic change (Campbell, Carlisle-Cummins & Feenstra, forthcoming). These challenges resist simple solutions, posing difficult tradeoffs between competing values.

Economic challenge: simultaneously meeting the needs of farmers, laborers, and consumers

Research on local food systems brings into sharp relief the challenges and tradeoffs involved in meeting the needs of different food system constituencies. The first challenge is finding a price point high enough to provide a stable and secure income for farmers, but also low enough to ensure low-income consumers have access to healthy food. Even organizations that deeply believe in both these goals have a hard time achieving them simultaneously. By eliminating middlemen, farmer’s markets and other direct marketing schemes partially address this challenge. But research points to the need to supplement market based solutions with public investments (Allen, 2010; Campbell & Feenstra, 2001).

A distinct but related lens on economic issues (and in turn race and class) involves labor, focusing on pay and working conditions for those who are employed to grow, harvest, process, market, distribute, and serve food. Since its inception, the sustainable agriculture movement has included activists motivated by concerns for farmworkers. But it has also been critiqued by those who don’t feel the movement is making enough progress in addressing farm or food system labor issues. Local food systems initiatives face this same challenge, but also the broader challenges of providing sustainable wages and benefits for workers across the food system, such as those in food processing industries.

Among the motivations for re-localization of food is the preservation of small and medium-scale family farms. Yet this motive runs up against some evidence suggesting there are better working conditions for farm labor on large farms than on smaller, organic farms (Shreck, Getz, & Feenstra 2006). The larger point is that all farmers—big and small, organic or conventional, locally oriented or global—participate in the same economic system and face strong pressures to reduce labor costs and protect profit margins.

Social challenge: Confronting racial and class bias

Another persistent challenge identified in the literature on local food systems concerns racial and class bias. At issue is the degree to which re-localization reinforces or exacerbates existing racial and class privileges, rather than challenges or transforms existing race/class relations. Some question whether initiatives led predominantly by white, well-to-do leaders can effectively address the social and cultural concerns and ideas of non-white and poor individuals and communities. At the same time, when food activists—mostly white and affluent—seek to expand healthy food options in low-income communities, they have been criticized for imposing their preference for minimally processed, local, and organic food on the rest of the population (Guthman 2011). Transcending these tensions will not be easy, but in many urban areas social justice advocates have begun to demonstrate how people of color can take ownership of community food initiatives (Bonacich & Alimahomed-Wilson 2011).

Political challenge: reconciling diverse approaches to creating change

Local actors face additional tradeoffs as they forge political strategies to create, implement, and support local food systems. For example, a common question is whether to pursue an “insider” or “outsider” strategy in making change; emphasizing reform at the margins or more fundamental systemic change (Campbell 2002). Some advocates work within mainstream institutions in order to encourage incremental adoption of short-term objectives, compromising in the process and risking co-optation. Others seek deeper institutional change or work to build alternative systems that attempt to preserve movement values in their purest forms, even at the cost of short-term gains. Still others argue for middle ground solutions that weave together these approaches. Finding common ground amidst strategic differences can be challenging, but not impossible (Stevenson et al. 2007).

Another way the political challenge is framed in the literature has to do with the scale at which change strategies are focused. One approach emphasizes a bottom up approach using local initiative and action to carve out alternatives in light of existing constraints and opportunities (Campbell and Feenstra, 2001). A more top-down approach emphasizes political and economic reform on broader scales in order to create greater space in which local reform can advance. The skills and proclivities for working at these different scales are distinct, and while some local practitioners have succeeded in aligning themselves with larger coalitions, knitting the two together effectively can be elusive.

Summary

Local and regional food systems have emerged as one important strategy for restoring the vital connections between agriculture, food, environment, and health. They have emerged from local efforts to regain control over the relationship to the food and agricultural system, and as a response to the costs to communities of the agri-industrial model of food and agriculture. The projects emphasize public participation, partnerships, policy work, and the principles and values associated with sustainability, equity, and democracy. In pursuing these values and goals, local food systems projects must navigate persistent strategic challenges which often require difficult tradeoffs among values. These include finding strategies that simultaneously benefits farmers and low-income consumers, dealing with race and class issues given the predominant white and well-to-do constituency in many local projects, and striking the right political balance between incremental reform at the local level and pursuit of broader systemic changes. A growing body of research is tracking the work and more intentional partnerships between academics and practitioners are needed to capitalize on local experience to generate usable knowledge.

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Synonyms/ Keywords

Community food systems, Local food systems, Regional food systems, Sustainable food systems, Community-based food systems, Food economies, Civic agriculture, Community food security, Food democracy

Related entries

Civic agriculture, Environmental justice and food, Agriculture of the middle, Farmers markets, Local food procurement/Locavorism, Local and regional food systems, Race/racial identity and eating, Food and class, Distribution and market structure, Urban agriculture, Food security, Food and place, Community supported agriculture