



LEOPOLD CENTER
FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

Sustainability and community food systems in four Iowa counties

Abstract: Four Iowa counties (Benton, Marshall, Audubon and Johnson) were studied to determine how local food systems had developed, prospered, or struggled in the face of challenges from globalization and industrialization.

Question & Answer

Q: What lessons can Iowa learn from individual county experiences with the changing structure of agriculture?

A: There don't seem to be any "one-size-fits-all" answers and the needs and capacities of rural counties may differ significantly.

Background

Understanding modern agriculture and food systems requires looking beyond the farmgate to consider not only the inputs to farming, but also food processing, distribution, and consumption. In this sense, the distinction between conventional and sustainable farming, while important, only partially characterizes the larger food system. Increasingly, researchers and analysts have described changes in terms of the globalization or concentration within the food system.

This project theorizes that a more useful conceptualization of food systems centers on *community*, allowing consideration of how additional global and local considerations converge and modify one another in particular places. It also reflects a new interest in "civic agriculture" which focuses on how the food system can serve as an engine of local economic development, while enhancing the features of civic society.

Several analytical questions spurred this research. First, how do "global" and "local" relationships intersect? Second, how does the mix and character of community

food system ventures differ across rural settings in Iowa, and why? And third, in what ways are community food system ventures connected to other such ventures in other localities and with what effects?

Project objectives were to:

1. Describe and assess multiple and interrelated dimensions of four separate county food systems in a manner that is locally salient, empirically sound, and strategically useful for developing more sustainable community food systems, and
2. Document and analyze challenges and opportunities facing different types of food and agriculture ventures which potentially play roles in the transition to a more sustainable community food system.

Approach and methods

The first year's research centered exclusively on the development of rural community food systems. Three primarily rural counties (Audubon, Marshall, and Benton) were chosen for study based on their different patterns of population composition and change, proximity to urban centers, and forms of food system-related activity. Johnson County, with an urban center, was added in the second year of the study.

Community food system inventory and reconnaissance was the first stage of investigation. A wide range of secondary data on each county's food system was assembled, reflecting multiple levels of activity (global, local, conven-

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\$35,331 for year three

tional, and sustainable). Field assistance was required to collect data in the counties farthest removed from Ames.

Stage two of the study identified the universe of current food and agricultural ventures potentially important for developing more sustainable community food systems in each of the counties. The lack of more “alternative” ventures in some rural areas resulted in a search for other types of outlets that provided food for rural residents. Qualitative interviews focused on five categories of food and agriculture ventures, some of which have been studied less often in Iowa, but play a role in community food system prospects.

Stage three built on the first two stages to create an informational atlas about each of the county food systems that would have educational and organizational value for county residents (especially educators, organizers, and entrepreneurs interested in community food system development). The atlases included a narrative, graphs, tables, maps, and photographs. Working drafts of the atlases were shared with groups of nine to 17 county food system stakeholders at four “learning circles” conducted in 2002. Based on their observations, concerns, and critiques, the ISU researchers revised the atlases. Fifty final copies of each county’s atlas were printed and distributed to learning circle participants and county institutions and organizations.

Results and discussion

Four county atlases and three peer-reviewed publications are the primary formal products of the project. Beyond this, work continues on specific categories of food system ventures (such as farmers markets, food retailers, and small-scale meat lockers) and the factors that affect the interplay of “local” and “non-local” qualities in food system development in rural Iowa.

The project illuminated a number of factors differentiating rural places and their capacity for and approach to community food system development: distance, demography, agricultural dependence, social diversity, cultural diffusion, place distinction, social and material infrastructures, and civic culture.

Conclusions

Challenges and opportunities for developing community food systems are not the same in different regions of Iowa.

One-size-fits-all solutions are not likely to be effective. This is particularly true for rural areas because the label “rural” masks considerable diversity in local circumstances. Some rural areas are declining while others are dynamic.

In addition, the impact of the tide of agricultural globalization varies across the state. One county suffers from the effects of industrial concentration and consolidation into fewer units with a loss of farmers and population. But another county may experience an influx of new residents from other countries to work in meatpacking plants or other food processing operations.

A major finding of this project was the unexpected rural variability in local circumstances, local resources, and local prospects for community food system development. While they follow a common format, the county food system atlases ultimately present distinctive pictures of food system development and changes in rural Iowa.

Impact of results

The project investigation of existing and potential linkages between different facets of the four county food systems has, in some ways, fostered the development of additional linkages. The applied, action research approach has supported ongoing and emerging community food system development conversation and initiatives in the study counties.

- Johnson County—the research built on and reinforced the work of the Johnson County Local Food Systems Project.
- Benton County—the research prompted Benton County Extension to open discussions about multi-county food marketing collaborations and how they might mesh with existing work on value-added agriculture.
- Marshall County—groups used the Marshall County food systems atlas for a county conference on Alternatives in Agriculture in September 2003.

Note: these studies are available on the web site
www.soc.iastate.edu/chinrichs/foodsystems.html.

Inquiries about various aspects of the project (atlases and learning circles) have been received from six states (including Iowa) in the United States and from the Netherlands.

Linda Barnes, who participated in the Marshall County food systems learning circle, used that county's food system atlas in her successful campaign to persuade administrators to support development of the Marshalltown Community College program in Sustainable and Entrepreneurial Agriculture. The atlas helped her to make the case that there were need and capacity in Marshall County to operate such a program.

Education and outreach

Papers on the project results were presented at four professional meetings. Presentations and workshops were given at five conferences and local events. A master's thesis related to the project was written by Matthew Russell (2003) on Social Inclusion and Extra-Market Food Service Programs: Challenges for Community Food Security in a Rural Iowa County.

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