



Field to Family Community Food Project

Abstract: *Community-supported agriculture (CSA) is a local food system in which farmers provide fresh food, fiber, and related products directly to the consumers in their area. The Field to Family Community Food Project began in 1997 and was intended to support the Magic Beanstalk CSA project by forming partnerships with other local organizations such as churches, social service organizations, Iowa State University, and other community groups.*

Background

More than 1,000 communities in the United States have community supported agriculture (CSA) projects that strive to enhance the viability of sustainable agriculture efforts by addressing community food needs and by strengthening the relationship between local producers and consumers. The usual arrangement is that CSA members commit to pay for an entire season's supply of fresh food from one or more farms where the vegetables and other CSA products are grown using sustainable methods of production. In return, CSA members receive a box of fresh vegetables and other products weekly during the growing season, as well as an opportunity to participate in a variety of educational and volunteer activities on the farm. Local farmers benefit from a guaranteed market, volunteer labor support, and a chance to feel more connected with their communities.

The Magic Beanstalk CSA, Iowa's first, was started in 1995 by a group of farmers and consumers in Ames. Two years later, the Field to Family Community Food Project was formed as an offshoot of Magic Beanstalk to provide outreach and work with other religious and community organizations. The hope was that by increasing its local ties, the CSA would be more likely to thrive.

Linking with other groups allowed Field to Family to initiate new program components:

- Providing financial support to help low-income households join the CSA,
- Sponsoring monthly hands-on cooking classes using whole grains and seasonal vegetables,
- Organizing seasonal festivals and community meals,
- Planning activities for children on local farms and at the CSA distribution site, and
- Providing more in-depth newsletters for CSA members.

Four objectives were identified for the Field to Family Project in its first year and were the focus of project evaluation efforts:

- Increase community understanding, participation, and ownership in a local food system which builds bridges among sustainable farmers, consumers, and the communities in which they live,
- Improve community members' knowledge of sustainable agriculture through the CSA approach,
- Increase nutritional knowledge and use of fresh produce by CSA members, and
- Provide a source of fresh food to low-income members of the community.

The evaluation component of the Field to Family project was conducted as a part of the annual internal evaluation of the Magic Beanstalk CSA and Field to Family. The chosen format was an outside evaluation by the department of sociology at Iowa State University.

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Budget:
\$16,000 for one year

Approach and methods

A combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods was used in the data collection and analysis process. Staff of the Magic Beanstalk CSA and Field to Family project provided evaluators with program-related materials for review and met with them to clarify program activities and parameters.

Participation of Magic Beanstalk CSA shareholders was evaluated through use of a telephone survey. The total sample selected was 51 households (52 percent of all CSA shareholders) of which 41 were eventually questioned between November 12, 1997 and February 15, 1998. This represented 42 percent of all shareholder households; 68 percent of the shareholder households that received a subsidy for their CSA share cost and 35 percent of the shareholder households that did not receive a subsidy. Data was collected in four areas:

- Household information,
- Household experiences as a Magic Beanstalk CSA shareholder,
- Household experiences with the Field to Family project, and
- Respondent views on local food systems.

Two separate focus groups were held; one for Ames area social service providers and one for representatives of area faith service communities who had been involved or interested in the Field to Family project. The sessions were conducted in November 1997 by the project evaluators with several common areas of discussion:

- Personal and professional relationships with the Magic Beanstalk and the Field to Family Project,
- Field to Family project strengths and areas for change,
- Current types of local food and hunger programs,
- The organization's role in sustainable agriculture and addressing hunger issues, and
- Ideas for other projects, programs, or activities.

Results and discussion

It quickly became clear to the evaluators that simply examining household experiences with the Field to Family project based on share cost subsidy would not define the different experiences adequately. There were more pronounced differences in project experiences based on variables other than share cost subsidy.

Household characteristics Of the 41 households sampled, nine were headed by a single adult, 28 included two adult members, and four had three adult members. Twenty-eight sampled households had one or more children. The highest level of education attained by a household member for more than half of the shareholders sampled was a master's degree or higher, and more than three-quarters had at least a bachelor's degree. In 35 of the 41 households (85 percent) sampled at least one adult member of the household was employed. Just under half of the working adults were employed in managerial and professional occupations. There were only three individuals in what could be classified as "blue-collar" occupations.

Forty-one percent of the sample had an annual income greater than \$50,000, and 32 percent had an annual income of less than \$25,000. Forty-four percent of the Magic Beanstalk CSA shareholders had an affiliation (either faculty, staff, or student) with Iowa State University. For 81 percent of the sample, the 1997 growing season was their first experience as a Magic Beanstalk shareholder. Six of the responding households had a full share in the CSA, while 35 had a half share. Thirteen of the respondent households had their membership cost financially subsidized.

Respondent characteristics Household survey respondents ranged in age from 21 to 82, with a median age of 38. Thirty-five respondents were women and six were men. Most

respondents could be classified as long-term residents of the area, with 59 percent residing in mid-Iowa for more than 10 years. A comparison of respondents by subsidy suggests that households not subsidized through the Field to Family Project had a much shorter duration of residence in central Iowa; 21 percent had lived in the area for three years or less.

Reason for participation When respondents were asked their main reason for participation in the Magic Beanstalk CSA, answers were clearly different based on income, subsidy, and education. Food quality reasons (including a desire for organic produce) were cited more frequently by respondents with higher household incomes, higher household level of education, and whose memberships were not subsidized. Food cost reasons were cited more frequently by respondents with lower household incomes, lower household levels of education, and whose share cost was subsidized.

The greatest differences in responses appeared in food quality and food cost reasons by the subsidy variable. While 50 percent of the respondents whose share cost was not subsidized cited food quality reasons for participating in the CSA, only 8 percent of the respondents whose share cost was subsidized indicated this reason. Overall responses suggested that one-third of the respondents participated for support or belief reasons.

Most of the sampled households did not participate in educational or other Field to Family Project activities. Of those sampled households, the highest level of participation was at the Spring Festival (27 percent) with the lower participation at the Farm Field Day (5 percent). The cooking classes were perceived as valuable by most respondents.

Perception of Magic Beanstalk shareholders Respondents were asked to characterize the membership of the Magic Beanstalk CSA. This was asked in an open-ended format. Responses fell into three broad categories. The

largest group of responses identified CSA members as individuals concerned with the environment, healthy food production, and community issues. A second group of responses described members as having occupations that were professional or affiliated with Iowa State University. A third set described members in terms that appear to reflect positive interaction.

Sense of community Respondents were asked a series of questions to evaluate the sense of community among Magic Beanstalk CSA shareholders. Twenty-eight (or 68 percent) of the respondents indicated that there was a sense of community. Respondents from households with higher incomes and higher levels of education were more likely to acknowledge a sense of community than respondents from lower income, less well-educated households.

Respondents' knowledge of local agriculture and food systems Respondents were asked about the various factors that influenced their knowledge about local agriculture and local food systems. For more than half of the respondents, most conversations held at the CSA distribution site did not have an effect on

Cooking class





Family day at Onion Creek Farm organized by Field to Family with Leopold Center support

increasing their knowledge. Printed materials seemed to provide more knowledge about local agriculture than conversations.

Respondents' views toward local agriculture

The evaluators wanted to determine if the sampled shareholders had changed their personal views toward local agriculture and production. For most respondents, the indication was that their views had not changed, but more than one-third indicated that they had come to the CSA with a compatible set of views. Half of those who admitted that their views had changed said they had a greater understanding or belief in the CSA or alternative food production systems.

Other sources of fresh produce

Local food systems also include farmers' markets and home gardens. Respondents were asked if their household obtained fresh produce either at a farmer's market or by growing some of their own during the 1997 growing season. Households with annual incomes of less than \$25,000 were more likely to go to the farmers' market, while households above \$25,000 were more likely to raise their own produce.

Faith community focus group

Seven partici-

pants representing six congregations or organizations took part and indicated a desire for increased communication with the CSA. They understood that there were individuals who did not receive CSA subsidies in 1997 because of the lack of funds and that some produce was left unpicked because of a labor shortage. They indicated that their congregations could have provided help in both areas.

All congregations represented have historically been involved with food and hunger issues. Churches coordinate or operate local food pantries, and those who do not either provide food or monetary support for the other food pantries.

It was suggested that sustainable agriculture and food systems are a mechanism for faith communities to get more involved in local food issues. Cutbacks in federal funding will impact all communities, encouraging more local focus on food concerns. The Magic Beanstalk CSA was seen as a program for upper and middle income households, while the Field to Family project was a good way to integrate low income families into the CSA.

Social services focus group

Four participants from three organizations present supported increasing the number of cost share subsidies that are made available to low-income families. Focus group members felt that those who participated in the current season had benefited, and that this service should be open to a larger group. It was noted that even with the subsidy, some families were not able to participate because they were not able to provide the necessary additional personal funds.

The group discussed the potential of both the Field to Family Project and other community food programs. Specific attention was given to the nutrition education aspect of Field to Family, and it was noted that there are currently other programs in place that could be accessed rather than creating a new component in this topic area.

Group participants felt that the children's program were very good, and represented a possible model for adult programs. The cooking classes were perceived as too complicated, and the recipes (as well as those provided with boxes of produce) were too time-consuming. It was suggested that recipes be basic, quick to prepare, written in a manner that is easy to read with larger type and pictures, and that they be tested prior to distribution. Food preservation was discussed as a good way for participants to maximize the food they receive each week, with freezing seen as the easiest method. Suggestions also were given for improving the distribution site and increasing the sense of community at the site.

Historically, people come to service agencies with their food needs, but area food pantries have not been able to cope with increased demand due to welfare reform. Low-income households that no longer receive food stamps are not able to make ends meet and need to rely on emergency sources for food. It was suggested that the Field to Family Project is part of the spectrum of programs that need to be available to address hunger issues, and that providing more subsidies not only meets hunger needs, but also offers economic support for local agriculture.

The group expressed an interest in community gardens as a way for a hands-on connection between agricultural production and food consumption. The group also explored the use of both food stamps and farmers' market checks (vouchers) as ways for low income households to pay a portion of a CSA membership.

Conclusions

The Field to Family Project successfully increased the number of Magic Beanstalk CSA shareholders with low incomes. In addition to the 19 households with share cost subsidies, the survey sample suggested that additional households with lower incomes became share-



Carving pumpkins at Harvest Festival sponsored by Field to Family with Leopold Center support

holders for the first time during the 1997 season.

The greatest differences in household experiences with the Magic Beanstalk CSA and the Field to Family Project were based on household income and the education level of household members, not on whether a household received a share cost subsidy.

The diverse age and family composition of the survey respondents suggests that the CSA has reached all age groups including retirees and college students.

The letter included in the weekly box of food products appeared to be the most valuable tool for increasing shareholder knowledge about local agriculture and food markets. The requirement that households receiving a cost share subsidy participate in cooking classes or work in the farm fields was not well-received

and suggested a stratified membership.

Choice is an issue for many shareholders. Having greater choice of individual food items and the amount of each item they receive is important. Some shareholders have specific produce preferences and many use a combination of the CSA, farmers' markets, and their own gardens to meet their fresh produce needs. Share size and disparity between share sizes is a concern.

The evaluators identified a lack of project clarity. There appears to be an overlap in projects and activities of the Magic Beanstalk CSA, the Field to Family Project, and other community initiatives, which may result in confusion in project funding.



**Spring Festival
sponsored by Field to
Family with Leopold
Center support**

Impact of results

The ISU project evaluators made a number of recommendations after the 1997 growing season for changes in 1998:

Requiring households that received share cost subsidies to provide volunteer assistance was seen as a problem by the evaluators, although several of the granting agencies considered this important. It was decided to make a special effort to reach out to all CSA members to encourage volunteering.

The low turnout for many of the educational events sponsored by Field to Family, com-

bined with the number of members who, nonetheless, felt these activities were valuable, led to several changes. The cooking classes were cosponsored with Wheatsfield Grocery and advertised to the Ames community, resulting in much higher attendance. CSA members were asked to lead educational activities for children at the distribution sites.

Organizers learned that it was not enough to give people financial scholarships to participate in the CSA. Some recipients needed more direct support to ensure that lack of transportation or other problems did not prevent them from getting weekly food allotments. A support person was chosen to work with the scholarship families and assist them in collecting their food shares.

Data showed that Magic Beanstalk had several members with low incomes who did not request or receive a scholarship, some of these had incomes lower than those who did receive a scholarship. The ISU researchers suggested screening families more carefully based on need, but CSA organizers were reluctant to make the sign-up process seem more bureaucratic by screening for family income. This will be an important question to wrestle with in the future.

It was apparent that there were new partnerships and perspectives to be explored. Field to Family and a wide array of stakeholders prepared a proposal to the USDA Community Food Projects Program that received a \$137,500 grant to pursue a broader local food systems agenda.

Education and outreach

In addition to the ongoing communications efforts within the Field to Family group, there was a Local Food System Conference (held in December, 1997) and Summer Camp held in June, 1998 at the 4-H Camp near Madrid, made possible with Leopold Center assistance.

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