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# Developing a Vibrant and Sustainable Regional Food System: Suggestions for Community-Based Groups

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# Developing a Vibrant and Sustainable Regional Food System: Suggestions for Community-Based Groups

## **Abstract**

This report was the original concept plan for the Regional Food Systems Working Group. It outlines a vision for creating a vibrant, sustainable food system across Iowa.

## **Keywords**

Community-based food systems

## **Disciplines**

Agriculture | International and Community Nutrition

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# Developing a Vibrant and Sustainable Regional Food System

## Suggestions for Community-Based Groups

August 2006



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# Developing a Vibrant and Sustainable Regional Food System

## *Introduction*

Over the past ten years, Iowa and the nation have seen tremendous growth in the numbers of farmers and farmer networks that produce and sell food to local and regional markets. Through on-the-ground research and demonstration projects and the leadership of entrepreneurial farmers and farmer networks, we have learned a great deal about how to build local and regional food systems. Although there have been many successes in building these systems, significant challenges still remain.

One critical challenge for community-based groups that work with farmers and food businesses is making a clear, convincing case to local and state governments, business investors, and funders that local and regional food businesses and the projects that assist them will improve the health of our economy, natural resources, and communities. This guide, developed by the Regional Food Systems Working Group Subcommittee, is intended to help groups make that case. It provides suggestions for community groups as they: envision their food future, identify key elements that will make their regional food system more sustainable, and consider which indicators will best inform whether they are making progress toward their goals.

This guide is a work in progress. It will be revamped and revised as we learn more from each other about how to build vibrant and sustainable regional food systems. We look forward to your comments.

RFSWG Subcommittee - Rich Pirog, Gretchen Zdorkowski, Kamyar Enshayan, Christine Pardee, Ken Meter, Kory Beidler, Craig Chase, Sue Futrell, and Andrew Hug.

For more information, comments, or questions, contact Rich Pirog at [rspirog@iastate.edu](mailto:rspirog@iastate.edu)

# Vision For a Vibrant and Sustainable Regional Food System

(Draft vision statements for each heading are found on pages 3-4)



## Economic and social development

- builds health and wealth through regional networks
- increases capacity and connection for local residents
- is based on local vision framed by diverse community members

## Farm-based business growth and development

- is sustainable with respect to profit and environment
- connects history, place, and community
- is based on collaboration, communication and commerce

## Landscape

- maximizes diversity of crops and livestock
- utilizes perennial crops and polycultures
- realizes improvements to soil, water and air quality
- has riparian areas that provides wildlife and water quality benefits

## The workforce

- is healthy, respected, well-trained, and paid fairly
- contributes to overall community

## Processing, retail, and other food-related industries

- meet diverse value-added needs
- are geographically accessible and supported by federal/state policies
- provide assistance to connect food establishments with consumers, producers, and processors



## Storage and distribution infrastructure

- are readily available, efficient, economical, and geographically and culturally accessible
- are flexible in handling diverse products and quantities
- are ecologically sound and owned within the region

## Local government

- strengthens the regional food system by using economic development tools
- facilitates the expansion of local markets for local agricultural products

## Education and research assistance

- encourages, supports and assists regional food value chains and networks
- disseminates needed information
- is provided by state universities, community colleges, and NGOs

## Rural and city quality of life

- increases choices and opportunities
- increases ownership, empowerment, and relationships throughout the food system
- connects fresh, healthy, and local food to rural and urban citizens

## **A Vibrant and Sustainable Regional Food System – Draft Vision Statements**

**Using the draft vision statements** - A central element for a vibrant and sustainable regional food system is for a diverse group of community or region members to come together and develop a common and compelling vision of the system toward which they are working. These visions will vary from one region to another, reflecting the unique nature and diversity of the area's people and its resources. The draft statements below are meant to help stimulate ideas for groups that are working through the vision process. The statements are grounded in the principles of sustainable agriculture and can help groups bring up useful points as they work to build a vibrant and sustainable food system. These vision statements are not intended to be a proposal for a "one vision fits all" situation. Rather, each group must develop its vision by working in its own unique context.

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### ***Economic and social development***

Regional food networks build health, wealth, capacity and connection for local residents. Each network is built upon a local vision framed by a diverse group of community members.

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### ***Farm-based business growth and development***

Farms are diversified and sustainable with respect to both profit and environment, and connected not only to their own history and place, but to individuals and families through collaboration, communication, and commerce. The network of interrelationships and commerce leads to food and farm business growth and development.

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### ***Landscape***

Working agricultural lands support many diverse crops, with no single commodity dominating the cropped landscape. Reductions in soil erosion, pesticide use, and air and water contamination are realized. Perennial crops are grown on a significant portion of the working lands. The majority of riparian areas are heavily vegetated providing wildlife corridors. Wild flora and fauna thrive in high-quality habitat. These productive working lands are more aesthetically pleasing to people and this encourages them to populate the landscape.

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### ***The workforce***

A healthy, diverse workforce is respected, paid fair wages, and well trained. The workforce contributes significantly to the social, financial, and environmental well being of the community and the region.

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### ***Processing, retail, and other food-related industries (other than farming)***

Processing infrastructure meets culturally specific processing needs, is geographically accessible, enhances the opportunity to develop value-added products, and is supported by scale-applicable federal and state regulatory policies. Retail food establishments and other food related-industries have access to capital, technical assistance, and business assistance that facilitate the development of long-term connections with consumers, producers, and community-based food processors.

## **A Vibrant and Sustainable Regional Food System – Draft Vision Statements (cont.)**

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### ***Storage and distribution infrastructure***

Storage and distribution systems and facilities to connect producers and their markets within the region are readily available, geographically and culturally accessible, efficient, economical, and flexible. The storage and distribution systems are able to handle small-, medium-, and large-scale products, orders and shipments, and are appropriate to handling and special needs for fresh, frozen, chilled, processed and identity-preserved goods. The systems are energy efficient and ecologically sound, safe, and owned within the region.

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### ***Local governments***

Local governments agencies (city, county, and schools) play a critical leadership role in nurturing the development and stability of a local/regional food infrastructure. They use a variety of economic development tools as well as facilitating the expansion of local markets for local agricultural products in their region.

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### ***Education and research assistance***

Education and research assistance continually encourages, supports, and assists all levels of a regional value chain to match the community's needs. Research and education supported by state universities, community colleges, NGOs, and government organizations requires simple dissemination of information available to entire communities.

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### ***Rural and city quality of life***

Quality of rural life is altered by increasing choice and opportunities for: existing and new producers (by changing and developing production to serve local ecosystems and markets); providers of existing and new infrastructure (transportation, brokering, processing and lending, for example); attendant development of services and goods for farms and households; and community development and enrichment. The scale at which these enterprises are conducted offers more options tailored to communities and locales, and more options for increased ownership, empowerment and relationship at community and regional levels of the food system.

Town and city life experiences increases in the availability of fresh, healthy, local food; water quality; overall ecosystem health; and the recreational and aesthetic benefits provided by a sustainable and diverse agricultural landscape. Both rural and urban citizens benefit from linkages of accountability and trust, and by closer human and economic ties between city and countryside.

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# Key Elements for a Vibrant and Sustainable Regional Food System



See Page 6  
for More  
Information

# Important considerations

## Key elements in a vibrant and sustainable regional food system

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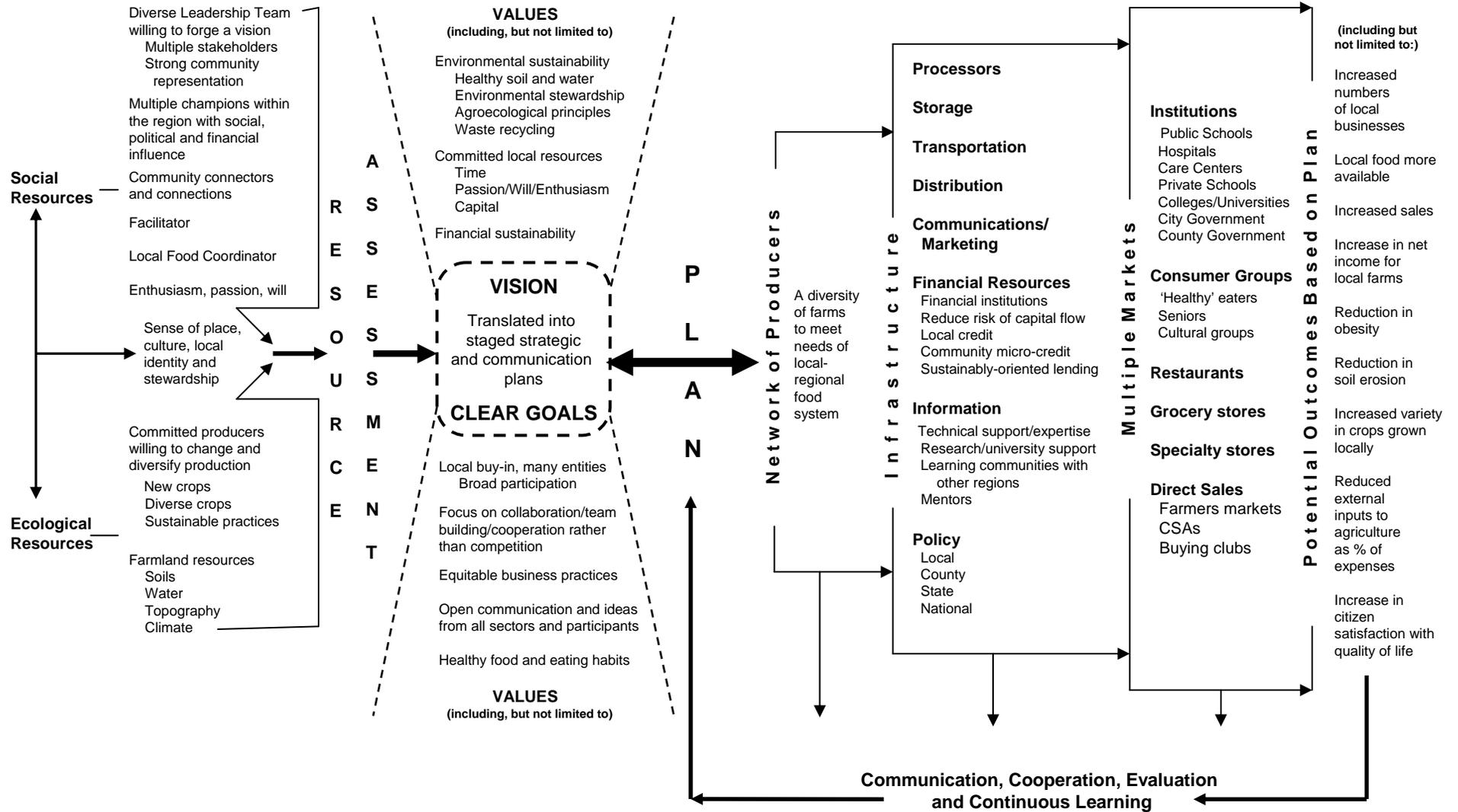
*One of the challenges in each locale is to understand what key elements are needed to bring success so that a solid foundation is laid for the future. The key elements offered on the preceding page\* of this document are meant to stimulate thinking about what is needed to build vibrant and sustainable regional food systems. This is not a complete list of elements; each group needs to determine what is critical for its unique situation. As you view these elements, please consider the following:*

1. People in any given community or region start wherever they are moved to start. There is no ideal element from which to start. Groups may see a need to add other key elements.
2. In many cases there are certain steps that need to be taken if subsequent steps are to be possible. These steps may be viewed as preconditions.
3. Regional food systems are complex and dynamic systems, and do not follow simple linear or industrial models. Addressing key elements need not follow a predictable chronological sequence.
4. Early steps to build local and regional food systems will create outcomes that may require local stakeholders to reexamine their assumptions and strategies. Communication, collaboration, integration, and continuous learning are critical throughout the process of building a vibrant and sustainable regional food system.

\* Page 5 of this document

# Overview of Process for Developing Vibrant and Sustainable Local/Regional Food Systems

This diagram is meant to help stimulate ideas by laying out an overview of the variety of resources, key elements and processes to build vibrant and sustainable local food systems. The elements included are consistent and build on the preceding key elements, framework, and draft statements. The document is based on collective experience and research by the RFSWG subcommittee. We appreciate all feedback to further develop and improve this flow diagram.



# **Indicators to Measure and Document Progress of a Vibrant and Sustainable Regional Food System:**

Prepared by the Regional Food Systems Working Group Subcommittee 2006

As you set out to strengthen the regional food connections in your community, it is useful to develop indicators that relate to your goals. Indicators allow communities and/or regions to quantify changes by using available measures. Indicators have at least three important functions. They help document baseline data showing community conditions at the start of the process. They help community members build a common understanding of what needs to be done. Additionally they help measure and document impacts of community efforts, which is critical in helping fine-tune strategies to stay on track and generate financial and technical support.

Here are a few considerations as you think about what indicators best measure the impact of your work:

- Relevance to your activities. Try to develop indicators that best measure what you have set out to do.
- Availability. It is critical that you develop indicators for which you can collect the data you need fairly easily.
- Practicality. Be sure to devote the resources it takes to collect the data needed for the indicators relevant to your work.

The following found in *The New Mainstream*<sup>a</sup> publication are examples of possible indicators:

- 1. Promotes food choices that lead to healthy eating**
  - a. Daily per capita servings of fruits and vegetables
  - b. Obesity rate in adults
- 2. Provides for meaningful livelihoods and opportunities for all food and farming workers**
  - a. Wages paid to farm laborers
  - b. Wages paid to food service and processing workers (compared to other industries)
- 3. Encourages eaters to know where, how, and by whom their food is produced**
  - a. Total direct sales per farm business, as percentage of total agricultural sales
  - b. Number of certified farmer's markets/CSAs and their total sales
  - c. Total direct farm sales to food retailers, food service, and eating/drinking establishments
  - d. Number of farms that offer agricultural tourism experiences
  - e. Number farm-to-school programs and their total sales
- 4. Supports deepening regional identities through food**
  - a. Number of counties and producers participating in "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" campaigns
  - b. Amount of local or county financial support for food businesses or groups supporting their efforts
- 5. Provides incentives for waste recycling, reduction of petroleum and other non-renewable inputs.**
  - a. Number of organic acres and number of organic growers in region
  - b. Tons of topsoil lost/year due to erosion