Naming and graphing entrepreneurial and community based agriculture linkages

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Recommended Citation
Smith, Carol Richardson; Huber, Penny Brown; and Russell, Matthew, "Naming and graphing entrepreneurial and community based agriculture linkages" (2007). Leopold Center Completed Grant Reports. 278.
http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/leopold_grantreports/278

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Naming and graphing entrepreneurial and community based agriculture linkages

Abstract
The project sought to document food- and community-related information available in southwest Iowa counties and to connect various sectors that might work together to add value to local foods and increase food commerce.

Keywords
Community-based food systems

Disciplines
Agribusiness | Rural Sociology
Analyzing local food systems for success: Naming and graphing entrepreneurial and community based agriculture linkages

Abstract: The project sought to document food- and community-related information available in southwest Iowa counties and to connect various sectors that might work together to add value to local foods and increase food commerce.

Question & Answer
Q: Can a clear description of current and possible food system linkages in a local area help farmers and other community stakeholders involved in local food systems development add value to that system?

A: Construction of a descriptive “map” provides a valuable systemic view that helps local people to focus on linkages, resources, and opportunities to find leverage and create alternatives for adding value, not just in their own sector but all along the food flow.

Background

The Iowa Network for Community Agriculture (INCA) has a particular interest in encouraging relationships that spur innovative development in local food systems. The National Catholic Rural Life Conference (NCRLC) sees this development as important to their Rural Community Support Program. The goals of this project united these interests with the Leopold Center’s focus on enhancing local food system linkages.

Project objectives were as follows:
• Describe local food systems starting with the farmer entrepreneur and the landscape of the farm and leading to the eater’s table and beyond in these counties, using mapping techniques based on participatory value chain analysis work;
• Add information from other identified sources to the map so a complete picture of the local system is compiled;
• Analyze the maps to gain insights, information, and systems issues for audiences interested in developing entrepreneurial agriculture and local food systems; and
• Document and evaluate the process for replication.

Approach and methods

Southwest Iowa was chosen as the project site because both INCA and NCRLC were involved in other entrepreneurial and food systems work in the area and additional development activity already was occurring there.

The principal investigator had research background and field experience with Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques such as “mapping.” A mapping process was chosen for the local food systems and citizens. It focused on gaining local understanding of entrepreneurial and community agricultural linkages from the farmer and the landscape of the farm to the eater’s table and beyond, and their potential to add value in a place (in this case, a county). Local food system stakeholders were asked to come together and describe their local food system. This process was followed by analyzing and interpreting the resulting “map” in a facilitated conversation for the benefit of farmers and others involved in local food system linkages.

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Budget:
$10,870 for year one
$12,170 for year two
Five maps were completed and analyzed in four southwest Iowa counties: Audubon, Cass, Greene, and Guthrie. Representatives from these counties held a roundtable discussion to consider common ground and possible multi-county action using information from the maps.

Results and discussion

Project outcomes included:
- Formation of local anchor teams in each county to support and continue the work;
- A wealth of descriptive information about how the community food flow works in each county for those teams to use in creating added value along the chain;
- Identification of assets, resources, and gaps related to food systems in the counties and in the region;
- New understanding about the importance and need for connections and linkages along the food flow to create added value for all participants;
- New ideas for such linkages;
- Creation of a multi-county roundtable to work on common issues, new markets and possibilities, and needs in all counties;
- Spin-off projects such as:
  1. Research on local food sales in convenience stores;
  2. Grant proposals for work on distribution gaps and extending regional activity;
  3. Formation of “Growing Food and Profit” communities of practice for farmers; and
  4. Creation of a steering committee to establish a community market for natural and local foods in Carroll.
- Leveraging grant funds to focus on obesity prevention in a project with the Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH) to map three additional counties. This project will also develop and include similar maps for community action systems.

Conclusions

Farmers who are interested in food system innovations are faced with the task of constructing both a new technical framework and social networks. Therefore, it is important for projects aimed at systemic understanding and intervention to find ways to clearly describe the food flow in communities and help farmers understand the food flow in social and technical terms.

Several recommendations emerged from the project:
- Finding ways to create the connections needed for innovations could be a very important step in fostering food system growth and farm diversification in Iowa.
- Continued focus on connections within and around the food flow is important for the success of food system projects.
- These projects need time to cultivate local contacts and build diverse local anchor teams.
- Those who want to extend work regionally must focus on common ground, even while acknowledging distinct local characteristics.
- Data from the mapping is important, but the true impact of the maps may lie in the conversations that surround them. These maps are one avenue toward common conversation, but not they are not the only ways to spur conversation. These maps offer one searching and gathering participatory tool, but they are not the only such tools that should be supported to provide a common conversation and a broad strategic outlook on food systems to communities.

Impact of results

Using food system “maps” based on participatory research to describe and analyze existing and needed frames for local food situations can provide a helpful description of local food flow. These maps draw on local knowledge, reveal local expertise, and help people identify both the resources and gaps in their local situation. They also create a vibrant local conversation that can begin building needed linkages for food system development.

Participants in the Audubon County map have been the core of a planning group for a community cooperative market which now has more than 50 members and is projected to open in Carroll in spring 2008.

A process for formulating strategic directions as a base for community planning now has been developed and added to the mapping processes for food systems and physical activity. This has been used in three additional counties in cooperation with the Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH). Communities are choosing projects to further the development of local food system projects in their planning for better health.
Additional projects with the Iowa Valley RC&D and in Marshalltown are resulting in adaptation of the mapping process for urban use and with immigrant communities.

Education and outreach

Presentations were made at two conferences on community vitality and food security. A portfolio of participatory tools for community assessment is available from NCRLC. A portfolio and poster on the mapping process outlined in this project will be used in training by INCA and NCRLC and for future mapping work.

Leveraged funds

The NCRLC has written a grant to the Community Vitality entrepreneurship initiative to extend IDPH maps and bring the farmers’ “Growing Food and Profit” group to three new clusters around the state in the next two years.

The “Cultivators” group formed as a result of the mapping exercise in Cass County is assembling funding for increased regional work. A grant was received from the Leopold Center's Regional Food Systems Working Group in 2007.

Communities in the IDPH project not only are planning for food system projects, they are committing funding for them as well. In addition, IDPH has asked that a proposal be submitted to them to expand the project to six to nine more counties over the next year.