

USING NETWORKS TO BUILD COLLABORATIVE AND EQUITABLE FOOD SYSTEMS

Community Strategies Group

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THRIVE RURAL FRAMEWORK

This brief examines some of the driving forces and conditions – building blocks – that determine Equitable Aims and Design, specifically achieving [balanced development outcomes](#), [valued rural stewardship](#), and [rural stakeholder equity](#). Local and regional food systems have the potential to transform engrained inequitable and unsustainable practices in agriculture and food production into equitable and sustainable stewardship of natural resources and fair worker and consumer policies and practices.

SUMMARY

This brief focuses on local food systems as vehicles for collaboration and racial equity among multiple stakeholders and networks. Local food systems are widely regarded as go-to examples for fostering rural-urban and farmer-consumer connections, but they require significant investments in stakeholder networks and the institutional infrastructure necessary to sustain and expand them. Examples of statewide, regional, and national initiatives are given to illustrate the power of networks to foster deeper levels of collaboration and reciprocity. The vital roles of Minority Serving Institutions and Cooperative Extension are highlighted.



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THE EMERGENCE OF LOCAL FOOD AS AN ECONOMIC STRATEGY FOR FARMERS

In 2020 there were approximately 2 million US farms,¹ down from 6.8 million farms in 1935. Mid-sized and small farms declined the most, as a result of falling commodity prices, razor-thin profit margins, and increased dominance of global supply chains in the marketplace.

Common survival strategies for small and mid-sized farmers in the 1980s included selling more differentiated food products directly to consumers or grouping together to sell those products through specialty retailers and food co-ops.^{2,3} These strategies converged with increasing interest by consumers to know more about the farmers who produced their food and where it was grown.⁴

With the growth of local food in the marketplace came a corresponding increase in local food programs coordinated by non-profit organizations, state agencies, and Cooperative Extension at Land Grant Universities. Grant-awarding foundations and the US Department of Agriculture began to support the local food movement, while universities offered courses and degree programs focused on food systems. Food systems comprise the players and interactions along the food supply chain, from input supply and production of foods to transportation, processing, retailing, wholesaling, and preparation of foods, to consumption and eventual disposal/recycling.

EVOLUTION OF LOCAL FOOD TO HELP ENSURE FOOD SECURITY, HEALTH, AND EQUITY GOALS

Lower-income families in urban and rural communities also were affected by the loss of smaller farms and food businesses and by consolidation in the food retail industry. Less profitable supermarkets in these communities closed, creating areas where residents could not easily access fresh, healthy, and affordable food. Lack of healthy food access is a significant contributor to poor health and chronic disease.⁵ Policies that led to disparities in housing, education, and employment opportunities made the loss of food retail especially severe in lower-income communities of color.⁶



As more on-the-ground local food system initiatives yielded important insights, they began to play a key part in programs to ensure food security goals.⁷ Increasing access to healthy local or regionally produced food has been documented as a policy strategy to increase food security in urban and rural communities.⁸ In the past ten years, the number of articles shining a light on the structural racism and misogyny present in the US food system has increased dramatically.⁹ A growing number of non- and for-profit organizations and foundations working in food systems have developed ambitious goals to build a more just and equitable food system for all.

RACIAL EQUITY IN THE FOOD SYSTEM

Food systems comprise interrelated processes that include various social, political, environmental, economic, and health interactions and outcomes, impacting diverse sets of individuals, businesses, and communities. Through a racial equity lens, these processes must proactively account for historically socially disadvantaged and marginalized communities. Fostering racial equity in the food system requires stakeholders to work collaboratively in developing practical strategies and solutions for inclusive and equitable food systems. These methods must be economically and socially beneficial and accommodating, and must provide opportunities for quality and nutritious food to be accessible, available, affordable, and acceptable to diverse communities.

Racial equity has long been a topic of discussion related to agriculture and food systems development. The lack of racial equity in agriculture and the food system has been a source of stress for many socially disadvantaged and marginalized communities that have often been recipients of harmful agriculture and food system outcomes. This source of stress can, in many ways, be linked directly to the historical connection between agriculture and Black and African Americans in rural communities.

While there are positive characteristics associated with agriculture's role in American society, the negative connotations often make it challenging to attract younger members of socially disadvantaged and marginalized communities to it as a professional field. Agriculture is historically recognized as an arena in which many minorities, particularly Black and African Americans, performed manual farm labor from slavery until the industrial age provided opportunities for employment.¹⁰ This historical perspective, in many ways, has left a legacy of socially disadvantaged and marginalized youth that perceive agriculture as an occupation involving manual labor with low pay and low prestige.¹¹

One of the biggest challenges facing agriculture and food system development is recruiting and retaining historically socially disadvantaged and marginalized students.¹² These students, particularly Black and African Americans, remain underrepresented in undergraduate agriculture and food system-based programs across the Land-Grant University (LGU) system when compared to other academic programs. This gap has longer-term impacts on the food system workforce and the diversity of people, thoughts, and ideas working to create inclusive and equitable solutions.

While there are historical challenges to addressing issues of racial equity across agriculture and the food system, opportunities exist to develop inclusive and equitable strategies to address the problems now and in the future. Practically addressing these issues requires valuing Indigenous approaches to food equity and engaging individuals with lived experiences in food systems. Agriculture and food systems development provide an intriguing opportunity for historically socially disadvantaged and marginalized populations. Specifically, it allows individuals to study and/or work in a field with the necessary skill set to return to their respective communities and be catalysts for sustainable food systems change.

While these food systems opportunities exist, they come with challenges. The historical connection to agriculture is one, but another comes from within the higher education system with its intra-university competition between agriculture and other academic programs for attracting socially disadvantaged and marginalized populations. Due to limited educational and employment opportunities in rural areas,



high-achieving individuals tend to leave home to pursue opportunities in more economically developed areas.¹³ Overcoming these challenges will require agriculture and food system stakeholders to understand the nature of the interconnectedness of food systems players and their relationship to the various social, political, environmental, economic, and health outcomes impacting a diverse base of individuals, businesses, and communities.

THE ROLE OF MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTIONS IN FOSTERING RACIAL EQUITY IN THE FOOD SYSTEM

The LGU system has played a critical role in agriculture and food system development for over a century. “1862 LGUs” were established by the Land-Grant College Act of 1862 (also known as the Morrill Act of 1862) and have played a critical role in United States food systems development through agricultural research and development and stakeholder outreach. “1890 LGUs” were created by the Agricultural College Act of 1890 (also known as the Morrill Act of 1890) and provided separate institutions for African Americans as, during that time, their admission was not welcomed at 1862 LGUs.¹⁴ The third set of LGUs was established via the Elementary and Secondary Education Reauthorization Act. The “1994 LGUs” gave land-grant status to Native American tribal colleges,¹⁵ which offered educational opportunities to many Native American people who otherwise would not be able to attend college.¹⁶

Today, Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), specifically 1890 and 1994 LGUs, hold a unique position related to agriculture and food systems development. They have direct access to and working relationships with socially disadvantaged and marginalized individuals, businesses, and communities and are instrumental in fostering racial equity in the food system. They serve as valuable coordinators of resources, information, and opportunities for agriculture and food systems development to individuals, businesses, and communities that have not historically benefited from these efforts. For example, their longstanding relationships with small-to-medium-sized farms in socially disadvantaged and marginalized communities are vital for equitably expanding local agribusinesses and food marketing opportunities.

ROLE OF FOOD SYSTEM LEADERSHIP IN FOSTERING RACIAL EQUITY

Significant interest has grown in developing local food system strategies to foster localized community economic development by enhancing local agribusiness viability and sustainability and addressing food access gaps. Historically, much of this work was driven by the LGU system, with specific efforts in coordinating this work within state boundaries. Recently, more robust measures are attempting to facilitate this work across state boundaries in an interdisciplinary way and include a wider variety of food systems stakeholders. As the rapidly developing food systems interests continue to emerge, more inclusive efforts are being made to foster collaborations with non-LGUs, non-profit and community organizations, local governments, and others. These collaborations aim to strengthen community capacity to create sustainable local and regional food systems effectively. This process of coordination and collaboration is the driving force behind food system leadership. Such efforts seek to accomplish goals such as reducing duplication of work across state lines and identifying gaps in efforts and missed opportunities to respond to local and regional food system needs. This work is done across disciplinary and organizational lines and without boundaries. These spaces also welcome a diverse spectrum of people, thoughts, ideas, and outcomes.



HIGH-FUNCTIONING NETWORKS ARE KEY TO ACHIEVING FOOD SYSTEM GOALS

Networks are critical for our survival; without them, we would have difficulty finding and buying food, clothing, and other goods and services we need to live our daily lives. Although networks have been present since the dawn of civilization, they have evolved and been dramatically reconfigured by recent advances in communication technology. The internet, smartphones, and increased social media have transformed how we network.

Networks differ in their design, structure, and implementation, and their ability to influence systems change. Vandeventer and Mandell¹⁷ characterize three types:

- 1 Cooperating networks** model and explain best practices, convene problem-solving sessions, and update each other on new projects. They share and work together to document problems. They model and explain best practices for one another. Cooperating networks involve low risk but lead to little, if any, systems change.
- 2 Coordinating networks** push organizational boundaries and engage in more interdependent activities that require mutual reliance. They carefully identify and pursue advocacy priorities. Coordinating networks negotiate time and resource commitments from participating organizations. These networks involve low to moderate risk and have a better chance than cooperating networks for achieving systemic change.
- 3 Collaborating networks** pursue fundamental, long-term system creation. They have methods in place to address and resolve conflicts. People in the network strive to redefine their roles within and outside their organizations and begin to reallocate resources across the network rather than just within organizations. They may share staff across organizations. These high-trust networks have the highest level of risk but the greatest chance for systems change.





NETWORKS, RECIPROCITY, AND BUILDING A STRONG COLLABORATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Participation in active, high-trust networks creates the conditions to increase reciprocity among its members. Reciprocity is the quality of an act, process, or relationship in which one person receives a benefit from another and, in return, provides an equivalent benefit.¹⁸ Networks are more likely to reach goals and influence systems change when they foster a culture that values *complex reciprocity*,¹⁹ which is best described as sharing information and resources with and assisting others without expecting direct reciprocation – helping others is the norm. Building, maintaining, and enhancing a strong *collaboration infrastructure* that values complex reciprocity has been an essential strategy in building food system networks to achieve important goals.

The following food system networks in Iowa, Michigan, the southeast US, and nationwide highlight the importance of building a solid collaboration infrastructure that values complex reciprocity to influence systems change.

Regional Food Systems Working Group. The Regional Food Systems Working Group (RFSWG) was one of three working groups created through a Kellogg Foundation-funded, Iowa-based initiative in 2003. RFSWG was coordinated by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University. Its purpose was to create an umbrella network for Iowans working in local and regional food systems. After three years, RFSWG evolved to a geographically-based approach that engaged partner groups working in specific regions of the state.

The Leopold Center used diverse funding streams to provide seed grants to these groups. After the first round of three seed grants had been awarded, decisions to award the remaining seed grants were made jointly by the Leopold Center and groups already funded. Each successful group made a presentation about its goals and desired partnerships at a quarterly RFSWG meeting. By spring 2011, RFSWG had grown to sixteen geographically-based groups covering 83 of Iowa's 99 counties.

This sharing of decision-making, combined with quarterly in-person meetings of all the groups created a culture where complex reciprocity became the norm and new partnerships flourished. Local food system groups brought their community leaders (mayors, city council members, county commissioners, and state representatives) to quarterly meetings. In 2010 the Iowa legislature requested that the Leopold Center use RFSWG to develop a Food and Farm Plan for Iowa. The plan's final version outlined a set of actionable recommendations to build Iowa's local food infrastructure, several of which were quickly adopted. In addition, the legislature provided state funds to make progress on other plan recommendations.

RFSWG underwent changes as key personnel left the Leopold Center in 2011 and after the Leopold Center was defunded by the Iowa legislature in 2017. Despite these changes, RFSWG continues to meet on a recurring basis because this network provides critical value toward a common purpose for its members.

Michigan Good Food Charter. Created in 2010 through a grassroots process involving hundreds of individuals and dozens of local and statewide organizations and agencies, the Michigan Good Food Charter²⁰ outlined a set of goals and agenda priorities to foster an affordable, healthy, green, and fair food system for all Michiganders. To facilitate progress on Charter goals and agenda priorities, several statewide food system networks were created, including the Michigan Food Hub Network, the Michigan Farm to Institution Network, and the Michigan Local Food Council Network. Other existing networks such as the Michigan Farmers Market Association played a key role. A new Michigan Good Food Charter²¹ was created in 2022, building on the progress of the 2010 Charter.



Michigan Local Food Council Network. The Michigan Food Policy Council was decommissioned in 2014, leaving the state's local food councils without a statewide venue to raise local food system issues and influence and inform state policies. The Michigan Local Food Council Network (MLFCN) was established in 2015 and coordinated by Michigan State University's Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS) to support existing and new councils, connect them to local and state government leaders and legislators, and fill the void left by the loss of the Michigan Food Policy Council.

MLFCN helped advance important Good Food Charter agenda priorities, such as the *10 Cents a Meal program*, which provides schools and early childhood education centers with up to ten cents per meal in match funding to purchase and serve Michigan-grown fruits, vegetables, and legumes. This program started as a pilot and eventually received state funding to operate statewide. During the COVID-19 pandemic, MLFCN coordinated information and resources quickly and fostered a culture of complex reciprocity across councils, food and health organizations, and state agencies. The network awarded seed grants to councils using a shared decision-making process. MLFCN also played a key role in helping rural and urban councils realize they were facing similar food and health issues. Although it functions primarily as a cooperating network, more intensive work within and across local councils has allowed parts of the network to operate in more of a coordinating fashion to address critical food and health issues.

Michigan Farm to Institution Network. The Michigan Farm to Institution Network (MFIN) was launched in 2014 to support institutions in reaching the 2010 Michigan Good Food Charter goal of sourcing 20 percent of food products from Michigan producers and processors. Institutional food service professionals, including those at schools and hospitals, are the primary audience for this network. One of the compelling features of MFIN is its tiered approach to engagement, allowing members of the network to participate at a level that works best for them. It operates as a cooperating network for those members looking for information on institutional procurement of local foods, while the advisory committee functions more as a coordinating network. MFIN developed and adopted a new operating framework in 2022 with a revised set of goals and values.

Using an inclusive leadership and tiered approach to engagement, MFIN has changed the culture of local food procurement at Michigan institutions by raising awareness of the benefits of local sourcing, creating a community of practice that values local sourcing, and educating stakeholders on how best to communicate and collaborate across sectors. With a statewide *10 Cents a Meal* program, more broadline distributors see the value of procuring, selling, and promoting local foods. Rural and urban school districts and early childcare centers have an incentive through *10 Cents a Meal* to participate in MFIN and reap the benefits of the complex reciprocity culture that it provides.

Southern Extension and Research Activity (SERA-47) started as a coordinating network of LGUs in the southern region of the United States. The group was officially established in 2016 through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Agriculture National Institute of Food and Agriculture and supported by the Southern Rural Development Center at Mississippi State University. The group aims to establish integrated multi-disciplinary, multi-state working groups to address high-priority local and regional food systems issues. Since its initial inception, the focus of these collaborations has been among academic faculty and Cooperative Extension educators at LGUs. Upon its renewal in 2021, the group expanded its focus to include non-LGUs, non-profits, NGOs, and other organizations focusing on food systems development. This expanded focus aims to increase inter- and trans-disciplinary collaborations and networking efforts among all food system professionals and become more of a collaborating network to address local and regional food system issues and priorities.



In the initial years of its existence, the group has generated several outcomes to assist with strategic and sustainable local and regional food systems development. Since 2016, the group has:

- Developed an interdisciplinary network of academic faculty and Cooperative Extension educators for multi-state collaborations, knowledge sharing related to emerging issues, and training related to local and regional food systems.
- Created a multi-state, interdisciplinary learning community to share knowledge and discuss emerging issues related to local and regional food systems.
- Identified high-priority issues related to the local and regional food system to be addressed by individuals interested in food systems development.²²
- Developed an online repository of local and regional food system resources, opportunities, and expertise across the southern region.²³
- Initiated the process of identifying various impact indicators to assist in objectively evaluating local and regional food system initiatives outcomes.
- Facilitated multi-state conversations between farmers, consumers, academic faculty, and Cooperative Extension educators related to new challenges faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic and strategies to address the challenges moving forward.

Racial Equity in the Food System Workgroup (REFS) is a national coordinating network of Cooperative Extension professionals and community stakeholders working to connect, learn, and collaborate to build racial equity within the food system.²⁴ The group is supported and facilitated by the Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS) at Michigan State University. Through monthly virtual planning meetings, this committed group of professionals has worked collaboratively to produce webinars, resources, and training that are civically focused, stakeholder-driven, outreach-based, and designed to promote racial equity across the food system. While separate but related, the CRFS annually produces *An Annotated Bibliography on Structural Racism Present in the US Food System*,²⁵ which serves as an invaluable resource to practitioners working to foster racial equity in the food system.

Food Systems Leadership Network (FSLN) is a national coordinating network of food system leaders and practitioners that seeks to “accelerate the realization of a just, equitable, and sustainable food system that generates good food, health, and opportunity for all.”²⁶ This network is supported and facilitated by the Wallace Center at Winrock International. This national network provides an exemplary model of how food system leaders and practitioners across the country can come together collectively to foster sustainable change. Virtual platforms and in-person gatherings are used to facilitate synergy across the network. Membership and participation in this national network highlight that effective coordination of food system leadership must include all food system stakeholders, including producers, consumers, LGUs, non-LGUs government agencies, non-profit organizations, and foundations.

LESSONS FROM THESE SIX FOOD SYSTEM NETWORKS

All six of the network examples shared in this brief have been successful because they share leadership and decision-making power to create and maintain collaboration infrastructures that value and foster a culture of complex reciprocity. Each of these networks has allowed multiple avenues for urban and rural members



to engage and benefit from the network, and to gain a better understanding of their shared challenges and collaboration opportunities, thus helping bridge the urban-rural divide.

MLFCN and MFIN's success can also be attributed to their commitment to advancing the goals of the Michigan Good Food Charter. The complex reciprocity fostered by MFIN and MLFCN is further enriched because some stakeholders belong to other Michigan networks with strong links to MFIN and MLFCN. These cross-network connections widen the circle to influence food system change.

SERA-47, REFS, and FSLN have each fostered regional and national collaborative thinking and relationship-building. Each has brought together a range of food systems stakeholders, including but not limited to producers, universities, government agencies, non-profit organizations, and foundations. The goal of each of these entities is to develop practical strategies and solutions that assist in developing food systems that are inclusive, equitable, and welcoming of a diverse spectrum of people, thoughts, ideas, and outcomes.

APPLYING FOOD SYSTEM LESSONS LEARNED TO ENHANCE RURAL RESILIENCE

Based on the lessons learned from these food system networks, we recommend the following actions for enhancing rural resilience through collaborative networks:

- **Provide adequate financial support for a strong collaboration infrastructure.** All too often projects with specific program goals are funded where partners have not yet developed a strong collaboration infrastructure. Funders must be realistic about providing adequate time and funds to build this infrastructure before expecting program results.
- **Provide equitable, sustainable funding to MSIs.** To further racial equity impact, funders must consider the role that MSIs play in fostering a sustainable food system and their impact on socially disadvantaged and marginalized communities. Targeted funding to MSIs, particularly 1890 and 1994 LGUs, expands their ability to provide support and resources to socially disadvantaged and marginalized communities related to food systems development.
- **Create the space for shared leadership and shared power** across participants, including multiple avenues for participation and multiple levels of commitment.
- **Foster a culture of complex reciprocity** where it is the norm for members to learn from and help one another achieve mutual goals. Rural community challenges are complex, and multiple solutions are often needed. A diverse network with a variety of expertise committed to helping each other achieve shared goals will create and arrive at better solutions than a network that lacks such a commitment.
- **Build in co-learning and accountability** to your network or project team. Transformative learning across organizations and individuals in a network that supports complex reciprocity will create more opportunities for collective action.
- **Facilitate space where rural and urban leaders can share and address mutual challenges** to help bridge the urban-rural divide. In a safe, power-sharing environment these leaders can discover and appreciate the mutual goals to develop thriving communities. This also calls for the convening of a diverse network of stakeholders to assist with the formation of relevant projects and provide objective feedback based on the best practices that are identified and those that are inclusive and equitable.
- **Create or designate a stable organization to serve as a foundation** that can regularly convene stakeholders to develop a long-term agenda and work collaboratively within the context of a common framework.



ENDNOTES

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Since 1985, the **Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group (Aspen CSG)** has been committed to equitable rural prosperity. We work towards a future where communities and Native nations across the rural United States are healthy places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives.

Aspen CSG serves as a connecting hub for equitable rural community and economic development. We design and facilitate action-inducing peer learning among rural practitioners, national and regional organizations, and policymakers. We build networks, foster collaboration, and advance best practices from the field. The foundation of our work is the **Thrive Rural Framework** – a tool to take stock, target action, and gauge progress on equitable rural prosperity.