

## Community Economics of Local Foods

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Development of the local food sector has become a popular strategy employed by a range of communities in the hopes of achieving sustainable and equitable economic growth and development. The term “local foods” describes a range of economic activities such as farmers markets, community supported agriculture engagements (CSAs), urban gardening, food hubs, and intermediated marketing channels. Despite its growing importance in the policy arena, the presumptions of the local food movement remain largely untested. Reading through the local foods literature, it is clear that many view the development of local foods as a panacea for a range of social ills. These social ills range from unhealthy lifestyles, diets, ecologically unsustainable production, withering social capital, food insecurity, and asymmetric economic growth and development and political power.

One of the fundamental problems with our understanding of how local foods may or may not be a viable strategy for rural community economic development is that much of the available evidence is more speculative than based on rigorous scientific analysis. As eloquently argued by Born, Branden, and Purcell (2006) there is a tendency within the local foods literature to presume that if global or large scale is bad then local or small scale must be good. They refer to this idea as the “local trap”. Despite the volumes of work written on local foods and community well-being there are as many unanswered questions as there are definitive answers.

This theme issue of *Choices* is composed of three articles that aim to help us better understand what we know, and perhaps more importantly, do not know about how local foods influence community well-being. In the first article,

### Articles in this Theme:

#### What Do We Mean by “Local Foods”?

Dawn Thilmany McFadden

#### What We Know and Don't Know About the Economic Development Benefits of Local Food Systems

David W. Hughes and Kathryn A. Boys

#### What Policy Options Seem to Make the Most Sense for Local Food?

Chyi-lyi (Kathleen) Liang

Dawn Thilmany McFadden addresses a fundamental question. If we are to better understand the local foods market and how it impacts local communities we must first come to a working understanding of what we mean by local foods. Perhaps more important, if we are to craft effective policies aimed at fostering local food markets we must have a working understanding of what local foods entails and does not entail.

In the second article, David Hughes and Kathryn Boys outline not only a framework to help us think about local foods within the context of community economic development but also point out some of the limitations to local foods as an economic development strategy. Hughes and Boys point out that the local foods and community well-being milieu can be both subtle and complex at the same time. For example, if we think of local foods as an economic cluster in the spirit of Michael Porter, we must

move beyond thinking about industrial linkages and begin to think about how positive social capital around local foods can reinforce the industry. This means we must think more broadly than just economics and rethink the culture of the community. Other elements like quality of life come into play and how local foods can enhance quality of life which can influence other business sectors. These are complex interrelationships that we are only now coming to understand.

If we elect to move forward with local food initiatives, what are the policy options available to us? Kathleen Liang attempts to provide some insights in the third article. Liang is clear to point out that communities must think deeper than simply promoting farmers markets and CSA farms. Policies must look at all purchasers of food including local schools, hospitals and even jails and prisons. Perhaps

most important is how local food producers market through traditional retailers like local grocery stores and restaurants. Using the Louisiana buy local initiative for restaurants, Liang identifies specific strategies that could be pursued at the local and even state level. Perhaps the simple identification of the challenges that local producers, consumers and communities will face is most telling. For example, the whole infrastructure of a distribution network needs to be rethought.

In the end, there are opportunities for local foods as part of the community economic development puzzle. For some communities the local foods movement could be a large piece of the puzzle and for others it will be a more modest piece. But if communities and policy makers are to move forward, it is important that they understand the strengths and limitations of local foods as a community economic development strategy.

## For More Information

Born, Branden, and Mark Purcell. 2006. "Avoiding the Local Trap Scale and Food Systems in Planning Research." *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 26,2: 195–207.

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